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NED KELLY,

A Tale of Trooper and Bushranger.

BY CECIL HAYTER.

CHAPTER I. The Stage Coach.

"**B**AIL UP!"

The command rang out sharp and clear above the swishing of the wind and rain.

Zzp—zzzp! crackled the lightning; and the long, jagged flashes revealed for an instant the figure of a solitary horseman in the centre of the track, the reins drooped loosely across his horse's neck, and the small black muzzle of a repeating rifle, an ominously persuasive argument.

Mike Sullivan, the burly stage-driver, jerked his team back on to their haunches in a bewildered, struggling mass, and with a quick sweep of his arm grabbed for his short-barrelled shot-gun.

Crack—ping! A bullet buried itself in the woodwork half an inch below the driver's fingers.

Mike withdrew his arm with a muttered oath.

"Come, none of that, my man! You're covered! Hands up!" said the horseman sternly. The muzzle of the rifle twitched ever so slightly, and Sullivan threw up his hands, palms outwards, fingers splayed.

The other occupants of the mail chose discretion as the better part of valour, and followed his example.

"That's better, gentlemen," said the horseman imperturbably. "Now, as you value your own skins, I would suggest implicit obedience to orders. I've no wish to cause unnecessary unpleasantness, but I warn you that at the first sign of disobedience I shall give my men orders to fire." And he nodded significantly to the dense, dark scrub on either hand.

"Now then, one by one—you first, Mike Sullivan—get down and stand over there. Turn out your pockets."

The big Irishman sullenly obeyed. With a grunt of disgust, he threw on the ground before him a roll of notes, some loose coins, a quid of tobacco, and an old-fashioned silver watch.

The little black muzzle swung slightly to the right till the sights aligned full on his broad chest.

"And the six-shooter which I see bulging out your hip-pocket, Mike!" continued the horseman, who was watching him closely. "Throw it down! Smartly, now! Thanks! Next, please!"

The other occupant of the box-seat was a young Englishman, a new chum, who, though holding his hands above his head, was nevertheless watching the proceedings with interest. He had heard a good many bushranging yarns since landing in Melbourne a month earlier, and now

on his very first up-country trip he suddenly found himself face to face with the real article. At the shout of "Bail up!" his hand had slid swiftly to his belt, and was as swiftly withdrawn. A brand new Colt revolver was in the holster at his hip, but he remembered with disgust that it was unloaded and useless.

He clambered down from his perch, ranged himself alongside the Irishman, and with a slightly contemptuous smile tossed the contents of his pocket in a small heap on the ground and folded his arms.

The bushranger gave him one quick glance, and signalled to the next man to dismount—a fat German, half mad with rage and terror. He, in his turn, disgorged some gold, a few notes, some jewellery, and a derringer.

"Take off your boots!" drawled his captor.

The German began to bluster, but a glance at the stern, set face quietened him with most surprising suddenness, and he complied.

From the leg of each boot rolled a thick wad of notes, and an audible grin arose from his fellows in misfortune. He was well known in Victoria and New South Wales as a money-lender, who made his fortune by robbing the unfortunate, and many a man had cause to hate him.

The next two victims were small squatters going back to their stations. Then came the agent of a big land-grabbing syndicate. The seventh, and last, was a police trooper, a brave man, but taken at a disadvantage, being unarmed.

"Much obliged, gentlemen," said the horseman gravely, in his quiet, rather drawling tones. "Now, I fear I must trouble one of you to bring me the mail-bags and the two cases which you will find in the wall of the coach. Oh, you needn't look surprised! My information is always accurate. Two thousand ounces is the exact amount. Here, you"—nodding to the second of the squatters—"out with them!"

The man indicated glanced at his companions, shrugged his shoulders, and with some difficulty did as he was bidden.

Just at that instant two men, actuated by very different impulses, did a very daring thing. The fat German, crazed with terror and maddened by the prospective loss of his beloved notes, stooped and snatched the derringer from the pile in front of him. Simultaneously, the trooper, staking his life on the chance, grabbed at a revolver disgorged by the land-owner, who was next him, hoping to secure it in the momentary confusion caused by the removal of the mail-bags. He was partially successful, for he managed to get his fist on the butt and take a snap shot.

The German fired wildly, and the bullet went humming harmlessly into the darkness of the woods. The policeman snapped the trigger twice in rapid succession; two sharp clicks followed, and he hurled the weapon to the ground in disgust. It was empty.

But even as he raised his arm the bushranger clapped a whistle to his lips and blew a loud, shrill call.

"If you move so much as a finger, your lives be on your own head. The first man that so much as winks gives your death signal!" The drawling, contemptuous tone had vanished, and his voice rang harsh and stern.

The effect on his captives was immediate. Each man stood rooted to the spot in the attitude he had assumed the previous instant. The police trooper, still with his body bent as though crouching for a spring, his arm outstretched in the act of throwing; the fat German helplessly clutching the still smoking derringer; whilst the bushranger glowered down at them, his rifle muzzle moving slowly and steadily up and down the line.

"Stay as you are," he commanded, "for if I whistle again, not one of you will have time to think!"

For a full minute he sat motionless on his big grey horse, with the seven men before him, still as so many statues.

Then he gave his orders—sharp and decisive.

“You, trooper, take three paces to the front—there, where the light falls. Now, you, you fat Dutchman, stand alongside him; the rest remain as they are!”

The two men obeyed—the trooper with the firm, precise tread of a man accustomed to discipline; the German with shambling footsteps and quivering lips.

He drew a coin from his pocket—a gold one—and tossed it to them.

“Pick it up,” he said to the German, “and toss. You, trooper, call; and mind you call right, for I’m going to shoot the loser now and here!”

The German, trembling so that he could hardly stand, fumbled with the coin, and balanced it on his finger and thumb. The trooper straightened himself up and clapped his hands behind his back.

“Toss!”

The yellow coin flickered for an instant in the air.

“Heads!” cried the policeman, in a clear voice, as the coin fell to the ground. The head was uppermost.

“You’re in luck, policeman. Stand aside!”

The man stepped back quickly, leaving the German alone in the open space.

A pitiful, trembling figure of avarice and cowardice, his clothes, soaked through with the drenching rain, clinging in sloppy creases to his fat body.

“Stretch out your arm—high, above your head! So! Now open your hand!”

Crack—crack!

The German dropped with a howl of pain and two small, neatly-bored holes through the centre of his palm.

The bushranger surveyed him for an instant with unqualified disgust.

“I hope that will serve as an example,” he said. Then, relapsing into his old drawl: “You, Mike Sullivan, pick up your revolver by the barrel and throw it to me here. Thanks! Now the other weapons one by one.”

The Irishman did as he was bidden with gingerly care; the German’s complaints were unpleasant to the ear.

“Now, then, pick up the rest of your things and put them in your pockets. I’ve no use for poor men’s earnings.”

Mike obeyed him with alacrity and a lurking grin; the sentiment pleased him as a son of the “distressful isle.”

“Now bring me the German’s loot, and place it on top of the mail-bags. Quick, my man! I don’t want to sit here all night in the rain!”

Mike’s grin expanded as he pounced on the fat rolls of notes and the diamond-studded watch.

“Now the landshark’s pile! And cut loose that near leader, and hitch him to the stump there.

“Gentlemen, the rest of you will oblige me by picking up your property. Your weapons, I regret to say, I must confiscate. Here, you Irishman, catch! There’s a fiver for your trouble!” And he tossed a crumpled note to Mike.

Suddenly he turned to the young Englishman.

“Is your name Mason?”

“It is. What then?”

“Slip off your coat till it’s down to your elbows. No fool’s tricks now! Sit down there by that stump!”

The Britisher Mason complied with a shrug. Circumstances were beyond his control for the moment; the best he could do was to accept the situation philosophically. For one fleeting instant the idea did cross his mind of risking a rush, but with his arms pinioned by his coat, and in the face of that unerring rifle, the attempt would have been simple madness.

"Now, gentlemen, to your places, please, and be off with you. I won't detain you longer."

The men scrambled back on to the coach—those who had got off lightly laughing, the German alternately moaning and cursing. Mike gathered up the reins.

"Shure, we'll be sadly behind time," said he, with a grin, "and me dhiving a disgraceful lopsided team of the like of this. Man dear, it's no harrum ye're maning to the young gentleman foreinst the tree?"

"Drive on, and ask no questions," was the stern answer. "Gentlemen, a pleasant journey!" And with a mocking salutation the bushranger removed his broad-brimmed hat and bowed.

The last rays of the stormy sunset glinted on his face, which hitherto he had kept in dark shadow.

Mike stared and stared again, till his eyes seemed bulging out of his head. Suddenly he cried:

"Begorra, bhoys, 'tis Captain Kelly himself that's hild us up!" And with a crack of his long whip he sent the remnants of his team racing along the rough track into the gathering darkness of the rain-swept night.

CHAPTER 2.

Dick Mason is Kidnapped by Kelly.

"CAPTAIN KELLY!"

Dick Mason was as reckless and free from fear as any other healthy youngster of his age, but in spite of himself the name sent a shiver of apprehension through him. Captain Kelly! Ned Kelly, the most notorious bushranger of the times! A man whose deeds had caused something akin to panic throughout the whole district from Euroa to the far side of the Murray River, and whose desperate raids were talked of with bated breath even in Melbourne itself. And here was he, helpless, unarmed, completely at the man's mercy, miles from any hope of assistance, and the night closing down on him with inky blackness!

It was barely a month since he had first set foot on the Australian continent. In accordance with his father's wishes, he had taken up the study of medicine with the idea of eventually helping the former in his practice, which was a wide and lucrative one, and with this end in view he had worked hard, and come through his examinations with considerable credit. But the cost had been great; for close study had temporarily, at any rate, undermined his health, and he had been compelled to knock off all study and brain-work on the very threshold of his career.

After long and anxious consultation it was decided that he must go for a sea-voyage, and no sooner had this decision been arrived at than by a lucky chance his father had received a letter from a Mr. Trevelyan, one of his oldest friends, who, though he had emigrated many years before, still kept up his correspondence with the Old Country. In this letter, which was to prove such an important factor in Dick's life, Mr. Trevelyan wrote that he was distressed to hear of the misfortune which had overtaken his old friend's son, and suggested that, if he must take a sea-

voyage, the best thing would be for Dick to come out to him and try his hand at sheep-farming.

"It's a grand country for a youngster to tempt fortune in—fine air, fine climate, any amount of sport, and plain, hard living. It's sure to put him right in no time. And as you say he's fond of an open-air life, and can stand roughing it, send him to me, my friend. Let him come out and have a look at the place for himself. This is no unselfishness on my part, for, I tell you, a doctor, even an embryo one, is a rarity hereabouts, and there are always plenty of cases going for him to try his 'prentice hand on."

The offer was jumped at with alacrity, and Dick, after a short stay in the city, was travelling up to the hospitable Mr. Trevelyan's, with his letters of credit and introduction, by the Benalla coach, when the appearance of the notorious bushranger, Ned Kelly, had suddenly played havoc with his arrangements.

The subject of his meditations had meanwhile dismounted, gathered up the spoils in the shape of notes and coin, which he coolly slipped into a breast-pocket, annexed a couple of the best revolvers and thrown the rest into the bush, and was busy with the mail-bags and the two cases containing gold-dust.

Of Dick himself Kelly seemed to take not the faintest notice, though every now and again the youngster fancied that he was favoured with a sharp, swift glance. Determined to test whether this was so, he gradually began to wriggle into his coat again, so as to free his arms for emergencies.

Kelly's back was turned to him at the moment, and the man himself was apparently intent on the second of the mail-bags, which he had ripped open.

Hardly, however, had Dick shifted his position a couple of inches when he heard the bushranger's quiet, drawing voice say:

"Shouldn't do that; might be—er—unhealthy. I shoot equally well with the left hand!"

Simultaneously, either by accident or design, Dick became aware of a revolver-muzzle protruding over the edge of one of the cases, and pointed with painful accuracy in the direction of his head. He concluded that to wait, and wriggle no more, would be safest.

Kelly broke open the gold-dust cases and drew from each a stout leather bag, carefully sealed and fastened, containing a thousand ounces apiece. These he strapped securely together, and fastened on the back of the horse which had been cut loose from the team. Then giving himself a shake to get rid of the superfluous rain, and clapping a bundle of papers under his arm, he approached Dick Mason's tree, leaving his own splendid grey saddle-horse to roam at leisure.

"There," said he, as he gained the shelter of the thick overhanging branches, and threw down the papers, "business first, pleasure afterwards. The business is, for the time being, finished. My name, as the genial Irishman informed you, is Kelly. Let me introduce myself—Mr. Mason, Captain Kelly; Captain Kelly, Mr. Mason. And at the same time, Mr. Mason, let me beg of you to do nothing rash. So foolish of you to move just now!"

Whilst speaking he was quickly gathering together a small heap of dry brushwood, which he set light to, and soon had a cheerful fire blazing.

Dick Mason glanced furtively across the dancing flames at this curious man, of whose exploits half the civilised world was talking, and of whom he now for the first time could get a clear view.

He had expected a great, coarse-featured, heavily-built, bearded ruffian, with a mouthful of foul oaths and slovenly, travel-stained clothes; instead

of which, the man before him was immaculately neat, with a wiry, slim-built figure promising great strength and endurance, small feet and hands, hair smoothly brushed and parted, a clean-shaven, clear-cut face, resolute and determined, but by no means devoid of a certain mocking humour, and a pair of shrewd, piercing eyes, which had a knack of growing cold and steely when he was angry. Absolute recklessness, combined with the pluck of a terrier-dog and a love of mischief—that was Mason's first impression. In his well-cut riding-breeches, high boots, and the shirt slightly open at the neck, he might have passed for a light cavalryman in polo kit. Yet, above all, the dark face expressed a sense of power and an inflexible will, and gave the impression that in anger he might be a terrible ugly customer to cross.

Kelly bore the scrutiny with an amused smile.

"Well, Mr. Mason, a bit disappointed in that notorious and hardened villain Kelly—eh? Bless you, man, I've enjoyed many a half-hour reading uncomplimentary accounts of myself in the papers! And as for the pictures, I don't set up for a beauty, but, upon my word, they're scandalous! Try a cigar? Oh, you needn't be uneasy; they, at least, are come by honestly—I have them up from Melbourne every month. Larrangas—not half bad. You won't? Well, there's no compelling little dogs to eat roast mutton."

Dick Mason was suddenly recalled to a sense of his position, and set his jaw grimly.

"If you fancy you'll get anything by holding me up, you're sold," said he, "and may as well shoot me out of hand. You won't get a farthing ransom."

Kelly waved his hand, and puffed a cloud of blue smoke.

"Nasty, sordid ideas you've got. Who suggested ransom?"

"Well, what the deuce do you want, then?"

"Pleasure of your company, for one thing. Good sort of folk round here; but—well, it's a treat to meet a gentleman for a change. Besides, there's another matter; but that'll keep. Care to see 'Punch'?" he added, tossing across a paper from the bundle he had just taken from the mail-bags. "I generally get most of the weeklies as soon as they arrive. I like to keep up with the news."

In spite of himself, Mason burst out laughing.

"You may be an unmitigated blackguard—I suppose you are," said he—"but you're certainly one of the coolest hands I've ever struck."

Kelly looked up from a two-months-old copy of the "Graphic" and smiled.

"And you, my dear Mason, have all the indiscreet frankness of extreme youth. But in future you will find it safer to leave my morals and manners uncriticised. Please notice."

He drew a silver coin from his breeches-pocket, and flung it in the air; then, snatching a revolver from his knee, he fired twice with extraordinary rapidity.

"Pick it up," said Kelly quietly, "and keep it as a souvenir of a lesson in deportment."

Dick rolled over on his elbow, and groped for the coin, which had fallen about a yard from him. It was dented and bent, and flecked with two broad lead splashes.

The man's skill was undoubtedly marvellous, but the cutting sarcasm of the words had most effect, and Dick held his tongue.

Kelly glanced rapidly through the papers, though his right hand never strayed far from his revolver, and having at last finished them, he rolled them up into a neat bundle, and tossed them on the mail-bags, which he had left in the centre of the track.

Dick noticed that he had touched none of the letters, though many of them probably contained notes to a large amount.

"What are you going to do with those?" he asked at length.

Kelly stared.

"Leave them, of course; the next coach will pick them up. You surely don't imagine that I should open another man's private correspondence? My dear Mason, you are a most surprising person."

"You don't hesitate at their purses!" growled Dick.

Captain Kelly wheeled on him in a sudden spurt of anger.

"You will oblige me by remembering that I left yours alone, and by glancing at the souvenir I just presented you with. I'll stand impertinence from no man!"

His eyes flashed, and the cold, hard, relentless light leapt up into them. The next instant it faded away, and he broke off with a short laugh.

"Here we are quarrelling like a couple of old women, and we ought to be five miles away by now. Up with you, Mason!" He paused, and laughed again. "Here's a fix!" said he. "What the deuce am I to do with you? I've got my own horse and the pack-horse with the gold to look after. I don't see how I can manage you as well, for we must travel fast."

Dick grinned.

"You can hardly expect me to help you."

"But that's exactly what I do!" said Kelly sharply. "You must give me your parole."

"I'm hanged if I do!" said Dick savagely.

"Look here, youngster," retorted the bushranger, "I've no time for foolishness. I've need of you, and come with me you shall. It's only a question of how. I give you my word that I mean you no harm. All I require of you is a simple service. I happen to have heard that you're a half-fledged doctor man, and new to the country."

"I have never been ten miles outside Melbourne till now, so far as that goes," said Dick. "I was on my way up to Mr. Trevelyan's station when you—er—well, when you interrupted, shall we say."

Kelly frowned.

"Mr. Trevelyan? Do you mean the man up at— Humph! Well, never mind. You see, it's this way. I am, as you have heard, called Captain Kelly. Well, as a matter of fact, I am captain—save the mark!—of a certain number of unlucky beggars against whom everybody's hand is raised. They are not entirely lambs as a whole—no; on mature consideration, I think lambs is not quite the word—but they are under me, and they obey my orders, so I feel a kind of responsibility for their ludes, you understand? Now, two of my men are down badly damaged, and you've got to patch them up, even if you do it with my revolver in your ear. How long it will take I can't say; but when you've done it you're free, and I'll see you're no loser. Now, give me your sacred word of honour not to attempt to escape, or hinder me, but to play a square game, and keep your mouth shut, and I'll put you across a good horse, and you may ride as you please. Refuse, and I strap you on the old pack-horse there, bound hand and foot, and take you that way, with a revolver-barrel screwed into the small of your back as a persuader. I've got the whip-hand absolutely. Now, which is it to be?"

"Why not give me in charge of one of your gang to look after?" said Dick, with a nod to the wood behind them.

Captain Kelly stared, and then threw back his head with a peal of laughter.

"My men! Ho, ho! Why, bless you, there's no man of mine within a dozen miles, so far as I know. They are, or should be, safely tucked up in the place I'm going to take you to. The little episode of the whistle was unadulterated bluff."

"Is that true?" cried Dick, in amazement.

"True? Bless your heart, of course it's true! Why, I've stuck up a gold escort before now all on my own brazen cheek!"

"I think," said Dick slowly—"I think I am getting an inkling of how you manage to terrorise a district half as large as England. You certainly have colossal cheek," he added, with a grin. "I'll give you my word, since I can't help myself; but, mind you, I'll have no truck with your—your business methods, and I rely on you to let me go directly I've snatched your beauties from a well-deserved grave. No doubt they'll be hung later."

"That youthful frankness again," said Kelly warningly. "Never mind, you've passed your word, and we'll shake hands on that."

Mason clapped his hands behind his back.

"Indeed, we'll do nothing of the sort, Captain Kelly!" said he sourly. "You have my word, and I have yours; for the rest, my visit is purely professional."

Kelly flushed, withdrew his outstretched hand, and bowed gravely.

"As you please," said he, and lapsed into silence.

CHAPTER 3.

A Hard Ride—The Police on the Track.

KELLY gave a low, prolonged whistle, with a peculiar catch in it. There was a rustling of undergrowth, and the magnificent grey horse which had so excited Dick's admiration came trotting up, and nuzzled the bushranger's arm. Kelly patted him, and spoke to him; then, taking the bridle over his arm, he unhitched the ex-leader of the coach team, across whose back were securely fastened the sacks of gold dust.

"This way," said he curtly to Dick. "We'll leave the fire. It's sure to delay the pursuit a bit whilst they sniff round it."

And, leading the two horses, he passed up a narrow pathway through the scrub.

The entrance was so overgrown that Dick had entirely failed to notice it. But after some fifty yards of roughish going they came to a small clearing, in which was another magnificent saddle-horse all ready for use, and hitched to a pine-stump.

"That's Caesar, a first-rate animal," said Kelly. "For the present he is at your disposal." He paused for an instant, and stood in the attitude of a man listening intently. "You can ride?" he asked abruptly.

"Mostly anything that can grow hair," responded Dick, a trifle boastingly.

He was proud of his riding, and, as yet, unacquainted with what Australian rough-riding meant.

"You'll need to to-night," said Kelly, with a suggestion of a smile. "Listen to that!"

Dick listened. At first his ear, untrained to the bush, could distinguish nothing; then far, far away he heard a faint, muffled, but rhythmical thud, the beat of horses' hoofs galloping over the soft, springy ground.

"Police!" said Kelly quietly. "They're coming up half an hour sooner than I expected. We must be off!"

He sprang into the saddle, and, without another word, swung away to the right down the narrow bush track, leading the pack-horse, with Dick on Caesar close at his heels.

The rain had practically ceased at nightfall, and the moon was shining brightly beneath intervals of driven cloud.

Not a sound was to be heard but the rustling of the wind in the higher branches of the bush scrub, the regular beat of the horses' hoofs, and an occasional deep breath or jingling of a bit.

In spite of the narrowness of the path and its winding intricacies, they were covering the ground at a good rate.

After about an hour of this work they arrived at a second small clearing, obviously artificial. Here they halted for a minute or two, then on again, till they came to the edge of the undergrowth and a vast, undulating plain, dotted here and there with bush clumps, lay open before them.

"Now, then," said Kelly, "let them go for all they're worth! We must be fifty miles off by daylight, and that, let me tell you, means riding. It's a full fifty from here to my stronghold—a wonderful place, Mason—a freak of Nature most admirably adapted to my requirements.

"You could conceal a couple of battalions there, and no one be the wiser. There are not a score of men in the whole country who could find their way to it, and even if some straggling prospector happened to chance along, it's a ten-to-one bet that he'd pass by without seeing it, though it lay right under his silly nose.

"I and my merry men can live there at our ease and snap our fingers at the police in the State; or, if it came to a bit of fighting, we could hold it indefinitely against six times their number. I tell you that if ever such a time should come, no police could ever set foot in it so long as one of my gang could stand on his legs and handle a gun. A wonderful place! But you shall see it for yourself. You would never find it again, even if you tried. Come along, and grip tight!"

The big grey bounded forward, and broke into a long, swinging, tireless stride.

The night was dark, though clear by now, and the rush of cool air whistling past his ears gave Dick a sense of exhilaration.

In the distance he heard the long, hooting call of the mopoke. It was repeated once and again—a drawn-out, dismal cry, akin to the weird, dreary landscape through which they were galloping.

At the third repetition Kelly held up his hand and slackened paco. Once again it came floating down towards them—"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!"—and the bushranger came to a standstill, signing to his companions to do the same.

Mason guessed at once that the cry was not that of a bird, but a clever imitation—a danger-signal.

Kelly was still smiling, but there was a puzzled look on his face, as though something unexpected had occurred.

There was a slight rustling, the faint movement of some stems of the thick grass on his right, and suddenly a dark figure appeared at Kelly's elbow. The man was a native tracker, the upper half of his body bare, the lower clothed in a discarded, ragged pair of breeches unfastened at the knee. His eyes were gleaming with excitement. He was panting, too, and fetched his breath in long, sobbing gasps.

"Well, Spider, what is it?" asked Kelly, in a low tone.

The black supported himself for a moment against the big grey's shoulder. "You no go longa there, cap," he whispered hoarsely. "Him perlice-

man one, two, four number. Him come longa that way. Black fellow he pass through scrub; crawl like um snake fashion. You no pass; him see you."

Kelly frowned.

"Four policemen? You're sure, Spider?"

"Me plenty sure. Perliceman belonga Benalla side. Me see um track."

Kelly turned back to Mason.

"We're in a bit of a fix, youngster," said he. "The police from Euroa are out behind us. Sullivan must have moved that coach along for them to have turned out so smartly; and now, by a piece of ill-chance, the Benalla police are out ahead of us, and we are between two fires, as it were."

"Him no chance, cap, me tink," said the black hurriedly. "Perliceman meet Mose Roon longa ten mile back. Him ride old horse toe turn in cow fashion. Him plenty talkee. Say you hold up stage back longa Burnt Ridge. Perliceman give him plenty note, and say him come longa you catch. Mose he say no. He take note, and make for gunyah across divide. Perliceman ride on, and me take um bush track longa you. See?"

Kelly's face set hard and stern.

"So," said he, speaking to himself, "the black hound has sold me for a handful of notes! We'll see!"

Mason sat silent, watching. He had given his word to follow Kelly, and not to hinder him in any way; but it seemed to him that there was every chance of his quickly being released from his parole in an unexpected fashion.

CHAPTER 4.

A Brush with the Troopers.

"**W**HERE are the horses, Spider?" asked Kelly abruptly.

"Way longa bush," answered the black, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "You want um?"

"You will," was the curt reply. "I'm going to head across the divide."

"Cap., you no go longa dat way this time. Perliceman search dem hill, sure."

Kelly took no notice, but turned once again to Dick.

"Mr. Mason," said he, "it's a bit outside our bargain, but I must ask you to follow me, even, if need be, through the police cordon. If we should be taken, I can clear you of awkward consequences with a word."

Dick nodded.

"But surely," said he, "you can break away to the right, and avoid——"

Kelly cut him short with a fierce gesture.

"I'll have my reckoning with that blackguard before the sun rises, if all the police in Australia stood in my light, so you will oblige me by keeping your tongue between your teeth! Now follow, please! Spider, you fetch them horses!"

With a touch of the spur he leapt the grey over a bush stump, the led horse following. Dick did likewise, and the next moment they had swung off nearly at right angles to their previous line, and were galloping over as breakneck a stretch of ground as Dick had ever seen. He had no time to think; it was all he could do to keep clear of the larger obstacles.

Presently Dick was conscious of a rush of hoofs coming up behind him, and risked a glance under his arm.

It was Spider, the black boy, standing up in his stirrups, and lifting his horse, a little, wiry chestnut, along in an absolutely reckless fashion that made Dick stare in amazement.

"Come alonga, you white fellow!" cried the boy, passing him like a whirlwind. "Perliceman he come dis way mighty quick!"

And in a flash he was up to and abreast of Kelly.

The pace was maddening, and Dick set his teeth and drove in the spurs. He had said he could ride, and whether he killed himself or not, he vowed that he would not let the others outstrip him.

Ahead of them lay a broken chain of hills, known as the divide, which were growing in distinctness with surprising rapidity. He guessed that the man Kelly was after, had, having received the price of his betrayal, endeavoured to seek safety among the gullies and ravines which traversed them in all directions.

At the pace they were travelling, he reckoned that they would be amongst the outer spurs in under half an hour.

Suddenly the black boy threw up his hand as a signal to slacken and, without waiting for his horse to stop, leapt out of the saddle, and ran along with the bridle across his arm. Twice he stooped hurriedly and scanned an uncovered patch of ground. Then, with a guttural exclamation of satisfaction, he regained his saddle with a single agile spring, disdaining the use of a stirrup.

"Mose Roon pass longa here!" he cried. "Him done up. He ride slow. No do more reach gunyah. Him one hour gone."

Kelly nodded, and edged a trifle to the right, increasing the pace.

They swung round the shoulder of a steep rise at racing speed, and the Spider gave a shout of warning. It was too late. Sixty yards away at most, and coming towards them, was yet a third posse of troopers, four in number, jogging leisurely along, but reconnoitring the ground carefully as they came.

At the sight of the trio they gave a yell of triumph, and shook up their horses.

Dick's horse Cæsar had by now got his head, and was racing neck and neck with the grey.

"Pull back, you fool! Pull back!" shouted Kelly. "This is no concern of yours."

Dick drew himself back and tugged hard at the reins, but he might as well have tried to stop a locomotive.

The horse and Kelly's grey had been in many a wild ride together, and where the grey went there Cæsar had made up his mind to go too.

Crack! Crack! Crack! came a spattering volley from the troopers' carbines.

Kelly raised himself in his stirrups with a laugh of defiance.

Then—crash. He and the black boy had ridden straight at the two leading troopers, and men and horses went to the ground in a struggling mass.

The grey staggered, recovered his footing, and leapt forward. The Spider's chestnut had caught the heavy troop horse's flank with his shoulder, and sent him reeling to the ground. Two men were out of action.

But two more remained. The black boy headed for the one on the left to repeat his tactics. The remaining trooper levelled his carbine straight at Dick's head.

Dick bent low in the saddle, and tried to swerve. He could see the grim,

set face above the gleaming barrel, and something shot past him like a streak of lightning. It was Kelly and the grey.

The bushranger, releasing the pack-horse the instant he saw Dick's danger, literally hurled himself between his captive and the trooper, and at that very second the man fired.

Kelly swayed a little in the saddle, and dropped his reins, steering the grey only with the grip of his knees; then, leaning far out to the right as he passed, he grabbed the collar of the policeman's tunic in his right hand, and with one terrific jerk yanked him backwards clean out of the saddle.

The pace was so fierce that to retain his hold was impossible. The tunic gave with a sound of tearing cloth, and the man went flying through the air, eventually landing on his shoulder two or three yards away. Dick heard him strike the earth with a terrible thump; but to pull up was impossible. So quickly had it all happened that he was already a good hundred yards away from the fallen man before the idea had even taken shape in his head.

Meanwhile, Spider had recovered the pack-horse which had stampeded in terror, and Kelly was hurrying the grey along, though Dick noticed that he now held his reins in the right hand, and that his left arm hung limp and useless.

When he managed to get alongside, he saw, too, that his teeth were clenched, and his face pale and drawn with pain and loss of blood.

"Captain Kelly," said Dick, "I fancy that I owe you my life. But for you I should be lying back there with a bullet through my head; and, what's more, I've cost you a broken arm, or something like it. I sha'n't forget. Pull up, man, and I'll do the best I can for you."

Kelly shook his head and gave a twisted kind of smile.

"Thanks—later," said he. "It's only a scratch. I can keep going a long while yet."

Dick glanced back over his shoulder. The troopers were left far behind, and in any case they were in no position to follow, having only one sound horse between them and two men pretty roughly handled.

CHAPTER 5.

Kelly Settles Accounts With His Betrayer.

THE gully through which they were riding came to an abrupt end, and they came into an oblong clearing, bounded on all sides by a dense growth of forest trees. It was perhaps a hundred yards in length by thirty wide, and at the upper end of it was a tumbledown hut or gunyah of rough thatchwork.

The rush of their horses carried them, maybe, half the length of the open space before they could pull up.

Then Kelly dismounted, and, leaving the grey loose, drew his revolver and waved the others back.

A horse, still saddled, and bearing signs of having been ridden hard, was hitched to a tree close to the hut.

Kelly's face was stern and hard as he strode forward; the pain of his arm and the fatigue of the long ride alike seemed forgotten in the accomplishment of a set purpose.

Thirty paces from the hut he halted.

"Mose Roon!" he called harshly. "Mose Roon, you black hound, come out and show yourself!"

There was a hoarse growl from the hut like the growl of a wild beast, and a huge, shambling figure, with great, humped shoulders and a filthy tangle of coarse red hair matted over the forehead, came slouching out, rifle in hand.

His eyes glittered wildly, and his great mouth worked with a convulsive twitching horrible to see. His face was inflamed and bloated, and it was obvious that he had been trying to drown his conscience by repeated pulls at the spirit-flask.

At the sight of Kelly standing there quiet and still, he shrank back, and for an instant he seemed to be meditating the chances of a wild dash for his horse; but he either thought it hopeless, or the drink still worked in him and lent him a kind of spurious courage, for he shook his fist fiercely, and burst out into a torrent of imprecations.

Kelly waited, immovable as a statue, till he had finished, and then he spoke, his voice cold, cutting, and pitiless.

"Mose Roon," said he, "where are the notes for which you played the traitor and sold me to the police? Ah!" The man's huge fist had moved involuntarily to the breast of his shirt, and in a flash Kelly's revolver was levelled at his head. "Throw them on the ground—quick!—or, by James, I'll shoot you like the dog you are!"

Taken unawares, the spy glanced shiftily to the right and left, and then, as though fascinated, his eyes wandered back to the little black ring of the revolver muzzle which covered him, unwavering and steady as a rock.

With an oath, he withdrew his hand and flung a small rolled packet on the ground.

"For years," continued Kelly, in the same hard, level tones, "you have been a bully and a coward, and now your time has come. Twice you have tried to sell me—once you tried murder—for the sake of the blood-money there. I warned you once, and I warned you again. I told you that if ever you crossed my path after that second time I would kill you. Now my patience is exhausted."

"Hang you, Ned Kelly! Hang you and your warnings!" shrieked Roon. "You think you've got the drop on me, do you? I tell you, it's you—you—you that's going to die! The police are after you now! They're all round! I've warned 'em! You're trapped—trapped like the best you are; and you'll swing for it in Melbourne gaol, for all your fine gentleman airs! Curse you!"

"Mose Roon, put up your rifle! I've never shot an unarmed man yet, and I never will. Put up your rifle and defend yourself if you can, for one of us will never leave this place alive!"

The traitor looked wildly round him, hoping for the help that was not to come; then, raising his rifle, he fired without warning or waiting for the signal. Kelly's hat moved slightly on his head. The bullet had ripped the brim!

Crack! A blue haze hung for a second round the revolver muzzle. Roon threw up his arms, turned half round and sprang into the air; he fell with a crash, and in the centre of his forehead, was a small, dark ring.

Kelly walked gravely over to the body and looked down at it. His face was stern, but all the anger had died out of it. Then, taking the bundle of notes between his forefinger and thumb, he wedged them in a cleft stick, which he stuck in the ground beside the dead man. As he did so, his keen eye caught sight of something which glittered dully in an opening of the man's shirt. It was a small half-circle of metal fastened round the neck by a piece of cord. The upper face of it was covered with

curious deep-cut engraving work. He started slightly, and, bending closer, gazed at it attentively for a minute or two. Then he turned away towards the spot where the others were awaiting him.

The grey horse came trotting up, and Kelly swung himself painfully into the saddle.

"Mason," said he, "that was a thoroughly bad man—a traitor to me—a traitor to the police—a murderer, and worse. What I have done was an act of justice. Now let us be moving."

Dick shuddered. The sight of a dead man—a man killed suddenly, and meeting his end with curses on his lips—was new to him. Yet instinctively he believed that Kelly spoke less than the truth, and that the man deserved his fate.

"Let me put your arm in a sling, anyhow, before we start," said he.

Kelly looked at him, and his face cleared.

"Much obliged, doctor, but we've no time; you can patch me up later, with the rest."

They started for the far side of the clearing at a slow trot, and had just gained the trees when Spider the black boy, who had been on ahead, came dashing back to them.

"No chance that way, cap. Perliceman he come longa wood—me 'mell 'im. You go bush path 'long Warra plain!"

Kelly glanced round him.

"That fellow did his work better than I expected," he said in a low tone. "They must have wired to every station in the district."

"I can hear nothing," said Dick.

Kelly smiled.

"Nor I, and I'm fairly good at bush work myself; but the Spider here has the instinct of a wild animal. You could stake your life on what he says. Warra plain be it, then. Come along!"

CHAPTER 6.

The Spider as a Decoy.

THE tree belt on the Warra side of the clearing was neither so thick nor so extensive, and a short canter brought them once more into open country. But now, owing to the zigzag course which they had taken, and to the unexpected presence of the several detachments of troopers, they were being forced to head back towards the main track between Benalla and Euroa—the same on which the coach had been stopped a few hours earlier, though they were aiming to strike it at a point some fifteen miles further north.

Even Dick, mazed and bewildered as he had been by the numerous twists and turnings they had made, began to get an inkling of this. Moreover, he had a shrew suspicion that, owing to Mose Roon's information, the police had managed to practically ring them in, and were now closing down on them from all sides.

Kelly, however, rode along in an unconcerned and careless fashion, as though he had not a care in the world—beyond his wounded arm. This was beginning to be a serious matter, and likely to add to their troubles, for, in spite of his iron frame and constitution, the loss of blood, which was considerable, and the pain were obviously telling. Every now and again he had to bite his lip to keep back a moan as an extra bad twinge shook him, and after a little he commenced rocking and swaying in his saddle.

Yet not a word of complaint escaped him, nor did he relax the pace, and Dick, watching him carefully, thought to himself that whatever else Kelly might be, he was most certainly and emphatically a man, and a brave one.

The Warra is a vast rolling stretch of open ground, dotted here and there with little conical-shaped mounds, thirty or forty feet high, like exaggerated mole-hills, and with patches of low scrub. The Bonalla road runs diagonally across it. The direction in which the trio were travelling was nearly due north, and away on their right the sky was already beginning to lighten.

Suddenly Kelly reined in, and swayed so that he nearly fell.

"Sorry, Mason," said he; "but I shall have to take a spell. This ridiculous arm of mine is most infernally painful. I've scarcely been able to see for this hour past, and have let the old horse pick his own road."

He clambered out of the saddle, and only with a great effort prevented himself from falling.

Dick was off his horse in a second, and, knotting a couple of handkerchiefs together, improvised a sling, and gave him a dash of brandy-and-water from his own flask.

The bone, he discovered, was not broken, but badly bruised, and it was a nasty wound.

The sling relieved the pain considerably, and Kelly nodded his thanks. The Spider, who had been looking on, restless and impatient, suddenly turned his head up wind.

There was no mistaking the sound this time—from no very great distance off they could hear it coming nearer and nearer.

The rhythmical th-r-ud! th-r-ud! th-r-ud! of horses at the gallop somewhere out in the darkness beyond.

Kelly, momentarily refreshed, was on the alert in an instant—cool and unfurried as possible.

With a few quick strides he reached the Spider's side, and gave him some orders in sharp, incisive tones, but so low that Dick was unable to catch the words. The black boy listened and nodded comprehensively, dug his heels into his animal's flanks, and was off like a whirlwind, the pack-horse galloping alongside. In a second the darkness had swallowed them up.

Then Kelly went to the grey, knotted the bridle short round his neck, and bade Dick do the same to Cæsar.

"Home, boy!" said Kelly, as the grey turned his head inquiringly, and gave him a resounding smack on the near flank.

The horse tossed his head, shook himself, and shot off after the black boy, with Cæsar hard at his heels.

Mason stared in amazement, and Kelly chuckled.

"A little strategy," said he. "They'll follow the Spider, and all the police in all Australia could never catch him with a five minutes' start. An aboriginal can do what no white man could even attempt. Besides, he'll leave a nice clear trail for them to follow for the next ten miles, and then lead them a dance over half the district.

"Now, if you've no objection, we'll just stroll up to the top of this hillock here, and lie quiet for a bit till these fellows get by!"

The sound of galloping was very close now—so close that Kelly and Dick had scarcely gained the top of the mound and thrown themselves down behind a clump of scrubby bush when half a dozen black moving blotches came into sight, resolved themselves into as many mounted troopers, swept with a thunder of hoofs over the very spot where, three minutes before, they had been standing and vanished again into the darkness.

"Hot on the scent, aren't they?" said Kelly, with another chuckle. "Very

well, there'll be some tired horses and policemen on the Warra by to-morrow!" And he pulled out a cigar and bit off the end.

"I'm a helpless sort of creature, Mason, with this wounded fin of mine," he continued, spitting out the cigar-tip, "but I'd be awfully obliged if you'd dive for my matchbox. It's in the right-hand pocket under the sling here. Got it? Thanks, so much!"

Dick handed him the box as requested, and Kelly, propping it on his knee with his uninjured hand, managed, with some difficulty, and after one or two failures, to strike a light.

He held up the flaring match for a second or two to get it well alight, and then applied it to the cigar between his teeth. At the very instant the tobacco began to glow, there was a rustle and a gleam in the low bushes on either hand. Dick caught the glint of blued steel, and a stentorian voice shouted:

"Hands up, Ned Kelly! Hands up! We've got you safe at last! Don't move for your life!"

CHAPTER 7.

"Hands Up, Ned Kelly!"

THE words still rang in Dick Mason's ears, and his eyes were riveted in a fascinated stare on the business end of a Government carbine thrust through the bushes within a couple of feet of his nose. Two more barrels were in equally unpleasant proximity to Kelly, whilst a tall sergeant, revolver in hand, had sprung suddenly into sight, and stood, a dark, menacing figure, looming large against the first streaks of dawn in the eastern sky.

The bushranger alone remained unmoved—not a muscle twitched. His unwounded hand still held the glowing end of the match between forefinger and thumb; the elbow rested on his knee.

"Well, boys, it looks like a change in the game, doesn't it?" he said at last. "Don't mind me smoking, do you?"

One of the troopers grinned, and another burst into an audible guffaw; but they never took hand from rifle, or shifted their eyes from that still, quiet figure.

Kelly blew out a cloud of fragrant blue smoke.

"There is," said he, in his low, drawling voice, "a revolver with one chamber discharged in the right side of my belt; in the left, is another, loaded in all six—the makers' names, I fancy, are Neil & Adams; it's a new acquisition—otherwise I am unarmed. If one of you would care to remove them, you might, perhaps, feel easier in your minds. Only be careful of my left arm—it's slightly damaged, and my doctor has ordered rest and quiet. By the way, let me introduce him. Mr. Mason—Sergeant—er—What is your name, sergeant, by the way—Mills? Thank you! Mr. Mason—Sergeant Mills. Mr. Mason is attending me under somewhat peculiar circumstances, sergeant. I will explain later."

"Now, then, enough of your soft sawder, captain!" said the sergeant, striding into the little declivity where the two men were seated. "You're too slippery a customer to take any chances with. Keep him covered, boys, whilst I draw their stings. Fire if they so much as lift a finger."

He bent over Kelly and removed his weapons; then, turning to Mason, he stared at him hard.

"You're a new chum, I reckon, by the look of you. How the deuce do you come to be mixed up in a racket of this sort—eh?" He ran his hands over Dick with the practised quickness of an expert. "Humph!" said he.

"Brand-new belt and holster, and no shooter; not even a knife. I don't understand!"

"My good sergeant," broke in Kelly suavely, "there are many things you probably don't understand. As I have just explained to you, this gentleman is my medical attendant. We met a short while back on the Denalla road; he was on the box-seat of the coach. I persuaded him, with one of those serviceable revolvers, to—er—accompany me. He refused flatly at first, but in the end my arguments prevailed. That they did so, and that he is now here, is no fault of his."

The sergeant looked bewildered, as well he might.

"You ain't even bound his hands, though!"

"Mr. Mason was good enough to pledge me his word not to escape. I considered it the securer method of the two."

"Did you now?" said the sergeant. "Well, you are a rum lot! Anyway, we've got you safe and sound now; and as for this new chum, doctor or no doctor, we'll take him back to Euroa with us. If he is on the straight lay, I guess he'll be glad. If not—why, there's room for more than one in the gaol."

"As you please, sergeant, as you please," said Kelly. He still spoke in his drawling, nonchalant way; but the cigar had slipped from his fingers, and his voice had grown suddenly faint. Even as Mason looked at him, his eyes closed and his head fell back.

The sergeant surveyed him with amazement.

"Well, he is game, and no mistake!" he muttered. "Fancy his chipping me like that, as cool as a cucumber, and then going off! He must be badly hit."

Dick looked at the sergeant, and the latter looked at Dick.

"You are a doctor?" he asked doubtfully.

Dick nodded.

"Couldn't you bring him round, or do something? What's the matter with him, anyway?"

"Can I get up?" asked Dick.

"Yes; you're all right, sonny. I can trust you not to play the fool, by the look of you. And, if you do, it's your funeral."

Dick rose and crossed over to Kelly.

"Can you get me any water?" he asked.

The sergeant sent one of his men with a pannikin down to the creek a hundred yards or so away, and in a few minutes the fellow returned with a supply of clear, cold sparkling liquid.

Dick dashed some in Kelly's face, and dabbed his forehead and ears; then ripping up the sleeve of the wounded arm, he sponged it clean. The bullet had passed right through, grazing the bone and severing some of the smaller blood-vessels; the arteries, however, were untouched, and the damage was less than he had at first suspected.

"Well?" said the sergeant.

"He must have a bit of a rest and some food before you move him farther," said Dick. "It's only loss of blood and overtaxing himself; but if you try him further fever may set in, and I won't be answerable for the consequences."

The sergeant scratched his head.

"For the matter of that," said he, "we're all done up. Not a morsel of food or rest has one of us had for twenty hours, and most of that hard riding. Here you, Tim! Hobble those horses, and one of you start a fire and get the billy going. We'll call a halt for a few hours, and I'm hanged if we don't deserve it."

The horses, which had been concealed at the far side of the hill, were quickly hobbled, and inside ten minutes a fire had been lighted, and one of the troopers was busy with damper and billy. The other two and the sergeant lay round smoking their pipes, but for all that they kept a sharp eye on the two prisoners.

Kelly had opened his eyes, glanced wearily round him, and collapsed again. He seemed thoroughly worn out.

The troopers were a fine, well-set-up body of men. Their duty was to catch Kelly and others of his kind; but they bore no malice. In fact, they seemed to look on the whole matter as an exceptionally risky kind of sport devised solely for their amusement.

Having caged their birds, they were by no means inclined to be hard on them, and both Dick and Kelly—who had opened his eyes again—were offered a share of their food generously enough—an offer they gladly accepted. Kelly, on his part, contributed cigars to the entertainment, and Dick produced the flask he carried, which he passed round. The horses, too, were glad of the rest, and cropped leisurely at the short hillside grass—a coarse but sustaining fare.

The meal and smoke over, one man mounted guard, and the rest curled up for a nap beside their prisoners. As a precautionary measure Kelly's feet had been tied, and Dick had been placed between two troopers.

They were to saddle up at noon, and the intervening space was divided into three watches.

When his time was up, the first trooper drowsily roused his mate, and flung himself down in the vacant place.

The sun rose higher and higher in a cloudless blue sky, and still they slept the sleep of exhaustion; whilst the newly-aroused sentry nodded at his post, waking himself from time to time with a shake, only to nod again two minutes later.

Something moved amongst the grasses at Kelly's elbow, very faintly and very stealthily. Then inch by inch a black head was cautiously raised, and a black arm slid forward. Kelly's eyes opened quickly, but he never moved his position. The hand at the end of the black arm held a knife. Kelly took the weapon and slipped it in his shirt. Just then the sentry gave one of his customary shakes, and the black head disappeared out of view. A minute—two minutes—passed, and it reappeared again, but this time close to the troopers beside Dick.

Again the black arm slid out. There was a faint double click, and the arm was withdrawn; but now the fingers clutched a brass-cased Government cartridge. The performance was repeated with the second trooper's weapon. Then the sergeant's turn came. He had three revolvers in all—his own in its holster, and the two which he had taken from Kelly on the ground beside him. These last were speedily emptied. The sergeant's proved a more difficult task, for his arm rested on the holster-button; but patience has its reward, and before long he rolled over with a grunt.

The sentry, roused by the sound, glanced quickly round him, but satisfying himself that there was no cause for alarm, and that both his prisoners lay motionless, he relapsed into drowsiness.

Kelly opened his eyes and winked. Again the black arm wriggled forward like a snake, hovered for a second above the holster, and was once more withdrawn. This time the sergeant's fully-loaded revolver was in the grip of the black fist, and the holster contained the empty-chambered Neil & Adams.

A few moments' breathless suspense followed, and at the end of it the loaded revolver was in Kelly's possession. The Spider gave a grin of

intelligence as he slipped it into his master's hand. For the Spider it was, and no other.

"When make 'um bird cry, cap?" he whispered. Ned Kelly moved his head in sign of assent. "White fellow lib 'long you?"—pointing to Mason.

Once more Kelly nodded.

"White fellow him all same me yan; you speak black fellow longa Burra-Burra him pidney," he replied, in the same tone.

The black tracker held up a finger warningly, the grasses closed over his head, and he was gone.

The sentry roused himself with the conscious start of a man who has been to sleep and would indignantly deny the fact if asked, stretched himself, yawned, and satisfying himself that his time was up by a glance at the sun, strolled over and roused his relief by the simple process of prodding him with the toe of his boot.

The relief, who would be on duty till saddling-time, sprang up. He had had his good four hours, and was refreshed. His comrade took his place without ceremony, and dropped off at once into a sound slumber, ignorant of the fact that he was the only trooper present who possessed a loaded revolver.

Captain Kelly opened first one eye and then the other. Mason stirred restlessly in his sleep, and shook his head; finally he roused himself, leant on his elbow, and blinked lazily. Kelly watched him, and put his fingers to his lips as a sign of caution.

Their heads were scarcely five feet apart, and the sentry's shoulder was towards them.

Kelly bent forward and cut the rope which bound his ankles on the underside, so that to a casual observer they were still securely fastened. The significance of the action roused Dick to full consciousness.

"Which is it to be?" asked Kelly in a whisper, pointing first to the troopers and then to himself.

Dick hesitated. He need not break the letter of his word. He had but to lay still and refuse to budge, and Kelly was powerless to compel him to go. On the other hand, he had promised to deal squarely with the bush-ranger, and the promise implied that he would follow him to a certain unknown spot and attend to two sick men before demanding his freedom.

Kelly in custody in the strong grip of the law was one thing. Dick was certainly bound by no promise to follow the man to gaol. But Kelly unbound, with a weapon in his hand, and a chance of winning freedom, was another proposition. And Dick reluctantly admitted to himself that morally he was pledged to follow.

Kelly looked at him again with a smile.

"You have my word," whispered Dick, sourly enough. "If you get away I will do my best to follow; but I'll lay hands on none of these. That's outside the contract."

He meant to play fair, but he little knew what the decision would cost him later.

"Wait, then," signalled Kelly, and rolled himself over as though for another sleep.

Half an hour slipped by, and Dick wondered what on earth Kelly's plan might be; for plan he obviously had.

Suddenly, as he lay propped on his elbows, he heard once again the long-drawn, mournful cry of the mopoke—the cry which had proved the danger signal of the night before. The sentry, too, had heard it, for he turned his head away from them.

"Come!" whispered Kelly sharply; and, kicking loose his ankle-ropes, he wriggled through the grass over the ridge of the slope.

Dick, rising, was about to follow him. Kelly turned and pointed to the carbine of the trooper nearest him. Without a thought, Dick grabbed it.

"Throw it away!" whispered Kelly in his ear.

Dick swung it round his head and flung it far down the slope, where it fell with a crash. Instantly Kelly whipped out his revolver and pointed it at Dick, and the sentry wheeled round at the noise and raised his carbine.

The two men were rushing down the hill for the horses. He took a careful aim at Kelly and fired. The hammer fell harmlessly. The only loaded weapon was lying in the sand yards away, and, with a shout, he roused his fellows and gave the alarm.

The fugitives by now were a good sixty yards away. It was then for the first time that Dick, glancing backwards at the shout, caught sight of the revolver in Kelly's hand. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"Put that thing away," he cried savagely, "or I won't budge another yard!"

"You young fool!" panted Kelly. "Can't you see I'm trying to make things easy for you? They think I'm driving you along with it. Quick, man, pick up your legs and run before they can load!"

Dick saw the force of the argument, and ran ahead. Meanwhile, the sergeant and the other men had sprung to their feet. The trooper levelled his carbine, and the officer whipped out his revolver. Both pulled the trigger simultaneously, but, of course, without result.

"Tricked, by James!" roared the sergeant. "Come along, men! We must rush them!" And the four charged down the hillside.

But the start of the fugitives was too great. By the time the police were within twenty paces Kelly had unhobbled the horses, and thrown himself into the saddle of one of them. Snatching at the bridle of a second, Dick had done the same.

"Go on ahead, and ride for your life!" said Kelly, in a low tone. "I must keep behind you, for the look of the thing."

Dick drove in his heels, and the next moment he was flying over the open plain, the led horse galloping beside him; whilst Kelly, with the other spare mount, thundered along in his wake, the reins between his teeth, and his only available hand brandishing the revolver. Far away behind them were four little black specks capering over the ground and gesticulating furiously.

CHAPTER 8.

The Rendezvous.

AFTER a sharp burst of some five miles they reined up for a breather, and Kelly indulged in a chuckle.

"Nice fellows, those troopers! Didn't I do an artistic faint?"

Dick stared.

"Do you mean to say you were shamming?"

"Oh, the pain was very bad, and I felt a bit sick for the moment; but chiefly I wanted to gain time. You see, the Spider had spotted those fellows just as we were dismounting; they were about a mile away. From the direction it was pretty well impossible for him to dodge both their party and the fellows coming up behind us as well. So I told him to do a dart and lead the latter lot off the scent, whilst I held the others in check for a bit, and then to come back and help. I lit a cigar, you remember, and

took good care they should see the flare of the match. That was enough for them; the rest was merely a matter of time."

"Nice hole I'm in, all the same!" said Dick. "I was tossing up in my mind whether to come along or to throw you over."

"My dear fellow," drawled Kelly, "I knew you'd run the risk rather than break your word. For the rest, they'll be ready to swear that you came under compulsion. That's why I made such a show with the revolver."

All through the long, hot afternoon they pushed forward over open country, which got wilder and more desolate as they travelled northwards. In the far distance there towered a great isolated pinnacle of black rock, shooting up gaunt and rugged, like some lonely sentinel on the horizon, and towards this they headed.

Just as the sun was setting they rode into the edge of its cool shadow, and Dick heard once more the mournful hooting wail of the mopoke. Instantly, without word or warning, there sprang up from the low scrub all about them scores and scores of black, almost naked, figures, each brandishing a handful of slender barbed spears. Involuntarily Dick reined his troop-horse back on to its haunches with such suddenness that he was nearly thrown. But Kelly merely waved his hand, and, with the quickness of magic, the black forms sank back into the earth. Dick recovered his seat.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he asked angrily.

Kelly laughed.

"Sorry they startled you," said he. "They are a bit weird-looking, aren't they? I should have warned you. They are part of the Burra-Burra tribe, at one time, in the remote ages, one of the most powerful of the aboriginal stock. At present they form my intelligence department, and are the outposts of the outlaw's country. North of this, right up to the Murray River, I might say, with truth, 'I am monarch of all I survey.' They recognised the troop-horses, I suppose, and so turned out in force, thinking there was something amiss. They're a savage lot, and no mistake, but as faithful as dogs when once you get them to take a fancy to you."

The eastern face of the rock was perpendicular and so smooth that a mountain-goat could scarcely have found a foothold. Almost in the centre it was split in two by a huge crack, caused probably by a subsidence. At the base this crack was broad enough for a man on horseback to pass through, but overhead it tapered gradually away to a breadth of a few inches. At the entrance Kelly dismounted, and bade Dick do the same. He clapped his hands, and instantly two blacks came running up and took charge of the horses.

They walked for a few paces down the dark, tunnel-like passage, which turned abruptly on itself at right-angles.

Kelly pointed out this peculiarity.

"Fine place to defend, wouldn't it be?" he said musingly. "One man could hold it for days against a regiment. It's curious, too. I'm not an imaginative man, but I've a sort of feeling somewhere at the back of my head that one fine day I alone, deserted and in desperate straits, will hold that very place against long odds, and that— Ah, well, it's only a dream, and dreams are foolishness, especially for hungry men; and, by the smell of it, Spider and supper are not far distant. I told him that, all going well, we should be here about this time."

The surmise turned out to be a true one, for another dozen yards brought them to a cavelike opening at the side of the passage, lighted up by a blazing fire, on which was a steaming billy, and some food cooking in an

iron pot. Spider, the tracker, squatting on his haunches, was patiently stirring the latter.

In the far corner was a pile of brushwood and skins, which, with a couple of rough log stools and a few necessary utensils, formed the sole furniture.

The place was fresh and well ventilated, for the natural air shaft, formed by the crack in the rock, kept the place sweet, whilst at the far end, stream of clear cold water ran through a tunnel worn in the rock with soothing, gurgling noise.

"Eat well and sleep well," said Kelly, setting the example, "for we must be off at sun-up, with a long ride before us."

They ate their meal with the appetite of tired, hungry men, and turned in. Dick's last impression was of the dying embers of the fire and of the dark figure of the Spider curled up like a dog silhouetted against the red glow then he lost consciousness.

How long he had been asleep he could not say, but when he woke it was with a sudden start and a horrible feeling of nervous panic that sometime will attack the bravest men in the dark. He stared wildly round him. It was pitch-dark, and he could see nothing; yet he could have sworn that the sound which wakened him was a shriek—a shriek of agony—high-pitched and drawn-out like the cry of someone in the extremity of terror and pain.

He sat up and listened. All was quiet and still as death, the only sound the faint gurgling of the running water. He put his hand up to his forehead. It was damp and clammy with perspiration. Suddenly he leapt forward. There it was again, beyond all shadow of doubt—a long-drawn, wailing cry, horrible to hear, and blood-curdling in its utter despair. He shivered from head to foot. In such a place and in such an hour there was something hideous, uncanny about it, which drew him on in spite of himself. He thought of the native legends, of the ghosts of deceased warriors who haunted the scene of their death fights. How many thousands of bloodstained tragedies had that grim rock witnessed?

Then, angry with himself for the tricks his imagination played him, he slipped off his bed of brushwood, and stole forward into the darkness. The sound had seemed to come from below him, and further down the passage off which the cave opened. To the right he knew would lead him back to the open. His road, therefore, must be to the left.

Feeling his way cautiously along the rocky wall, he reached the corner and turned. The blackness was so thick, it felt as though it could be cut with a knife. He counted his steps as he went—thirty, thirty-five, forty. Then came another sharp turn. Whether the passage divided or not, he was unable to tell, but, keeping touch with his finger-tips, he followed the wall round. The ground under foot sloped suddenly downwards. Eighty, ninety, ninety-five he counted, and once again the horrible shriek rang out, a cat-like screech rather than a human cry, and nearer—much nearer.

He fumbled vainly in his pockets for a match, and stole forward another dozen paces. A faint red glow became discernible ahead of him, and a fetid, noxious smell, wafted upwards, made him catch his breath. He felt resolved now to push forward at any cost.

Another wave of heated, foul air came surging up. The smell of it sickened him, and he choked, spluttering noisily. Instantly a black form darted up before him—another, and yet another. He was conscious of an unpraised spear—a rush of air—as the weapon whizzed past his ear; and he hit out blindly, furiously.

His knuckles struck something hard, which gave under the weight of the blow, and the black figures closed in on him. He was unarmed, without

weapon of any sort, save his bare hands and such strength as was in him, but he fought like a demon.

Some touch of Berserk blood in him tingled through his veins, and he hurled himself at the point where the crowd seemed thickest. He was dimly conscious of a sharp, stabbing pain in his shoulder, and another in his left thigh, but he fought on blindly, his breath coming in great, sobbing gasps. But one man against a crowd! What could he do for a minute? A minute and a half, perhaps, he held his ground; then his legs were swept from under him, and he fell with a crash. At the same instant he heard the sound of running feet behind him, the snap of a revolver, and Kelly's voice raised high above the din. Then his senses left him, and he drifted away into a dream-land of his own.

When he came to he was back on the springy brushwood couch, and Kelly was bending over him, looking anxious and grave. Spider, the tracker, was there, too, with an earthenware vessel full of water, and they had relighted the fire on the floor of the cave.

"Where am I?" he asked feebly, for his head was still dizzy from the effects of his fall.

"All right, youngster," said Kelly. "You've only got a scratch or two and a nasty lump on your head. Here, have a go at this." And he handed him the water.

Dick took a long pull, and felt refreshed.

"That cry!" he said. "What was it? It was horrible!"

Kelly put down the water.

"Young 'un," said he, "you were never nearer death than when I came upon you a while back. What on earth tempted you to go down there, of all places in the world? You must be pretty sick of life to venture such a thing. I tell you, it was touch-and-go. I never expected to get you out with a whole skin. Why, even I should get short enough shrift if I poked my nose into such a place as that!"

"I heard a cry," said Dick, sitting up—"a horrible, beastly cry, as though some poor brute was being tortured, and I went to see!"

Kelly looked grave.

"Do you mean to say, youngster, that you had no idea where you were going?"

"None in the least."

"Well, you were intruding into the Burras' most sacred religious rites, which they guard so jealously that I verily believe they would be wiped out of existence before ever they let a white fellow get an inkling of them. Had you gone another half-dozen yards, no power on earth could have saved you."

Dick shuddered.

"Nasty brutes! I'll swear they were torturing someone, or putting them to death!"

Kelly shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe," said he. "They've been my firm friends now for some years, but never a syllable have I been able to get out of them on that subject. One has heard stories, of course—travellers' yarns—Ugh! Let's change the subject. Anyway, you've earned the distrust of every black man for a hundred miles round, and I warn you they can be nasty enemies. Now, you'd better get to sleep again. You're only scratched a bit, and we must be up in a couple of hours."

Dick soon sank into a profound slumber, and at dawn he, Spider, and Kelly set out once more on their journey. The troopers' horses had been discarded, and they were mounted once more on their own animals, while the Spider had managed to get conveyed there by some mysterious means of his own, after throwing his pursuers off the track. The pack-horse was there, too, with his precious burden, and before the sun was well clear of the horizon the Burra rock and its concealed horrors was a mere speck on the landscape.

The country, from having been fairly level and open, soon assumed more rugged and mountainous character. Great, boulder-strewn spurs stood out boldly on either hand, and the trail became steeper and steeper. By midday they had mounted a pass of considerable altitude, and a vast panorama lay spread beneath them.

Kelly reined up, and waved his arm from east to west.

"Here," said he, "is the outlaws' home. There are few who could find their way to it, fewer still who, having got in, could leave it alive without the aid of a guide. Even I myself only know a small portion of it. Still for your own sake, we must take precautions. If you don't mind, my dear Mason, I must ask you to bind your handkerchief tightly over your eyes for the next mile or two, and let Spider there lead Caesar."

Dick glanced questioningly at the bushranger.

"Do you think it necessary?" he asked. "I have given my promise."

Kelly reined alongside him.

"It is for your own safety, young 'un. My lambs down there are a rough crowd, and if they thought you had it in your power to, vulgarly speaking, give the show away, they might turn ugly. They are no believers in promises. And, though you and I can understand one another, it is better that they should see for themselves that there is no possibility of your becoming a source of danger."

These words were spoken in a low tone, so low that even the Spider was not able to hear, for, since the mishap of the previous night, he had given Dick one or two ugly looks.

Dick allowed himself to be blindfolded, and the tracker took his horse by the bridle and led him along.

For some distance further the way lay along fairly level ground. Then they began to proceed more slowly. Dick could hear Kelly's voice urging the grey forward, and the occasional click of a hoof, as one or other of the animals stumbled over a stone. It seemed to him that they were descending a path as steep as the roof of a house. Down, down, and yet down they went. Dick could tell that they must be traversing some deep, over-shadowed ravine, for the hot sunlight had left his face. This way and that they twisted and turned, till, after what seemed an eternity, they once more struck the level—thick, soft, springy grass, too, so far as he could judge by the feel of it. The horses cantered forward at a brisk pace, and suddenly he heard a deep voice hailing them, and the horses were pulled up short.

"Captain Kelly! Say, cap.!"

"Well, Jim—that you?" answered Kelly.

"No it is." Suddenly the speaker stopped, and gave vent to a prolonged whistle. "Say, who's the kid with the blinkers on?"

Kelly laughed.

"A new chum I collared down towards Euroa—sort of budding doctor. I've brought him along to attend to Pete and Matthews. Come, get a move on you! We've had to ride for it, and are hungry. I'll tell you the rest of the news later."

The man addressed as Jim looked grave.

"See here, cap.," said he, "as far as Matthews is concerned, it's a go. He was planted yesterday, and Pete's healed up some. Take my tip, and send the kid back where he came from."

Kelly stared.

"What ails you, man? I tell you he's a doctor! He'll cut the spare lead out of Pete, and patch up any of the rest of you who've managed to get into trouble."

But the other persisted.

"Don't you do it, cap. Listen! The boys are in an ugly temper, and ripe for mischief. They're savage enough with you as it is for not bearing a hand in the Trelawny run hold-up. They say you backed out; and, to make matters worse, they got pepper over it. There's some amongst them as goes so far as to say that you gave Trelawny's folks a hint. If on top of all that they find you taking this kid along, which is against the rules, he not being one of us, there'll be trouble, heap big trouble, you mark my words!"

"Oh," said Kelly sternly, "so that's the way the wind blows, is it? Now, look you, Jim Burney, I was against the Trelawny show from the first. The man has stood our friend before now, and I refuse to lift a finger against him to do him hurt, and if those who were fools enough to go got the worst of it, serve 'em right, say I! But, for the rest, I'm captain here, and my word is law. If any man disputes it, he'll have me to deal with. As for this man I've brought with me, the first of them that lays hands on him or grumbles, I'll shoot on sight. That's my answer to you, Jim Burney, and to those others. Now fall in behind! Mason, oblige me by taking off that bandage. Spider, let go of Cæsar's bridle!"

The man Burney fell back with a shrug. He was accustomed to Kelly's masterful ways, and in his heart acknowledged that there was no man amongst them who dare look him in the eyes when he was in one of his black moods.

CHAPTER 9.

At Kelly's Stronghold.

DICK removed the handkerchief, and for a moment the sudden change from darkness to light dazzled him, and he stared about him in a bewildered fashion. As his eyes got accustomed to the change, he discovered that they were riding across a large, grass-grown, arena-like space, roughly in the form of a horseshoe, surrounded on all sides by towering, rugged cliffs, almost perpendicular. Of the path by which they had come he could discern not a trace, nor did Kelly give him much time to look about him, for, with a sharp word, he broke into a smart canter towards the further side of the arena.

Nor would he so much as open his lips again, but rode some two or three lengths ahead by himself—a black, angry scowl on his face, his mouth set in a hard line, and his eyes glittering coldly. The small cavalcade swung round a projecting spur, and drew up at the mouth of a large cave, which it had hitherto concealed from view.

On the left was a large paddock, surrounded with stout post and rail fencing, in which a number of horses and yearlings were grazing, whilst before the cave itself were grouped about a dozen men, some playing cards,

some lying at full length on the grass smoking, others cooking over a brush-wood fire, whilst two at least, with a brandy-bottle between them, were the worse for liquor.

They were a strange, motley crew, of all ages and many nations. One thing only was common to all—they were all bronzed and hardened by exposure and strong exercise, and each man carried at least one deadly weapon in his belt. Some of the faces were young and fresh-looking, as though they were full of life and vigour, and had only taken to the life from sheer love of excitement and adventure; but more were heavy-browed, taciturn, sullen-looking brutes, with tangled, uncared-for hair and matted beards—a rough, villainous-looking crew indeed, and not a few of them bore the signs of acquaintance with leg-irons and the inside of a gaol.

Kelly dismounted, and beckoned to Dick to do the same. One or two of the younger men rose at the sight of him, and the fellow with the brandy-bottle gave a derisive crow. The majority, however, eyed their captain with a sullen, ominous silence, and a low growl went round as they caught sight of Dick close behind him.

Kelly passed through them with the same set look on his face, taking no more notice of them than if they were so many dogs; but Dick noticed that his right hand rested on the bolt of his revolver.

Not a man had spoken, and Kelly had already gained the cave entrance, when the fellow who had crowed rose unsteadily to his feet—a swarthy, black-haired, truculent-looking brute, his face inflamed with brandy and passion.

“Ned Kelly!” he called hoarsely. “You, Ned Kelly, a word with you. Who’s this sneakin’ pup you’ve brought home at your heels? Who is he, I say? It’s agin the rule for the likes of him to be here—ch, mates? He’s a spy, that’s what he is—a bloomin’ police nark. Here, let’s have a look at ‘im!”

He lurched forward and made a grab at Dick’s shoulder, but missed.

Kelly wheeled like a flash, revolver in hand.

“Stand clear, Nick Rowan!” he thundered. “Jump lively, you drunken brute! How dare you question me!”

The man staggered back in amazement at the fury smouldering in Kelly’s eyes; but, for all that, he had a dogged pluck of his own.

“It’s agin the rules!” he shouted. “What do ye say, mates? Who’s Ned Kelly that he should make one law for himself and another for us?”

Half a dozen others sprang to their feet with an angry murmur, and half a dozen hands flew to the ready holsters. Kelly faced them like a lion at bay, his revolver held steady as a rock. His voice rang out cold and hard:

“The next man that moves I shoot! The first man amongst you who moves so much as a finger dies!”

Kelly’s voice was cold and hard, and though the words were spoken quietly, there was a deadly menace in the tone which cowed the men even more than the threatening revolver. They were huddled together in a compact group, with shoulders humped like men waiting to dodge an expected blow.

Rowan stood alone a little apart, open-mouthed, his hand on his weapon, his eyes smouldering with sullen fury. In his semi-drunken rage he was by far the most dangerous of the crowd.

Kelly at the cave entrance, with Dick Mason a couple of paces behind him, waved imaginary patterns slowly over the group with the revolver-muzzle, giving each man the impression that he was being singled out from his fellows for punishment. Suddenly he turned it full on the ringleader.

"Nick Rowan," he called sharply, "undo your belt!" The man shifted his hands towards the buckle reluctantly. He would have given anything to make a quick grab for his weapon, but in the face of instant death he dare not. Even in the midst of his rage he recognised that long before he could draw it a bullet would have crashed into his brain. He loosened the fastening, and held the two ends of the belt clutched in his great hairy paws.

"Throw it down!"

The belt and its heavy armoury went clattering to the ground. Kelly nodded.

"Now step backwards five paces—so! That's better, and far healthier for you, Rowan, let me tell you, than attempting to get the drop on me as you did just now. You will do well to bear that fact in mind for the future. You others, take your fingers away from your holsters—take them away empty, mind, if you want to live—and fold your arms across your chests! Line up alongside, Rowan. No, not in a crowd, singly—man by man, in order—so!"

The men did as they were bidden obediently enough. They had been full of fight and ready for mischief so long as they thought to have had Kelly at a disadvantage. But his reputation for marksmanship and fancy shooting, together with his resolute air of authority, crushed the fight out of them, and, though they were more than eight to one, they feared him as no schoolboy with a bad record ever feared a headmaster.

Kelly lowered his revolver, though he kept it handy for use.

"Now then," said he, "what's all this talk I hear of the rules, and what you are going to do, and what you are not going to do? I'll tell you what, my men, the only rules you need obey in this outfit are my orders, and you'll find it convenient to obey them at the run. I'm captain here, and what I say 'goes' every time. You elected me yourselves, and I told you plainly enough then that the only condition on which I would associate with you and your fellows was absolute and implicit obedience to any word of mine.

"Here's another fact for you, since you are clamouring for rules. The first rule I made was that the punishment for mutiny or disobeying orders should be death. What have you got to say to that, Nick Rowan?"

"There's not a man amongst the whole crowd of you that can rule himself, let alone others. The moment my back is turned, and my eye is off you, you set about something in your own bungling fashion, and you come to grief. You try and tackle a simple affair like sticking up Mr. Trelawney, and because I am not on hand you make a muddle of it, and are driven off like a pack of whipped curs. You lose your heads, and when a sane man comes amongst you—a man who can tell you what kind of fools you are—you try to round on him. What you need is driving by a man who's handy with the whip. That's what I'm here for, and, by James, I'll drive you, or I'll know the reason why! So understand me. We'll have no more of this foolery!"

The men murmured, and began glancing uneasily at one another. At last one bolder than the rest called out:

"That's all right, cap! Don't rub it in too hard. I guess you're about right when you talk about our making goats of ourselves. We're feeling a bit sore still, and you handing round the cayenne-pepper so free don't help a great deal. If you want to do any of the judgment and execution racket, why, just wade in and get it over. There's more edge to your tongue, mayhap, than you think."

Kelly grinned sourly.

"I'm doing the talking at this meeting, Horne," said he. "If you want to do a little speech-making on your own account, I think you'd better wait till I'm through. Meanwhile, just step across to that pack-horse which Spider is holding, and fetch over those two sacks slung over him. They contain the gist of my argument."

The coloured tracker had stood motionless by the horses from the moment when Kelly had entered the cave. When Rowan and the others had become threatening, he had noiselessly unslung Kelly's rifle and covered the captain from behind, for he was imbued with a wild infatuation for the captain and had fully determined to share his fate if the worst came to the worst. Now, however, seeing that the men were cooling down, he replaced the rifle and, with a broad grin, aided Horne to unlash the sacks.

The two of them were a heavy weight, and Horne, strong man though he was, fairly staggered under them as he carried them back towards the group.

"Put them on the table, there," said Kelly, pointing, "and rip them open." Horne did as he was bidden, and a flood of gold-dust spread over the rough boards. "There, boys!" cried Kelly. "There lies seven thousand and some odd sovereigns. That's my argument. You go out a dozen strong and come home empty-handed, with a charge of buck-shot spread among you. I go out by myself and bring back gold to the tune of seven thousand pounds, to say nothing of a doctor to patch up any of you who are damaged. Better that, and I'll resign. But till you do, I remain captain, and I allow no man to lift his voice against mine."

There was a moment's hesitancy, and then the sight of all the gold and two shimmering piles won the day. A voice from the back of the crowd rang out:

"Three cheers for the captain, boys! Three cheers for Captain Kelly!"

A wave of enthusiasm ran through the rough, desperate gang, and the mutiny, at any rate for the moment, was squashed.

Kelly nodded his acknowledgments. He knew well how to handle the men, when to drive them with biting words and an ever-ready pistol, and when to give way to them, and let them have their heads for a bit.

"Well, there you are, boys! Help yourselves—share and share alike and since you've had a bit of bad luck, I stand out of the deal and throw in my lot with the rest. Enjoy yourselves whilst you can, for I've plenty of work coming on for you soon."

Again the men set up a cheer; for Kelly, as captain, was entitled to a third of the spoil, and his refusal to claim his due made a considerable difference to each man's share.

Nick Rowan alone remained apart and scowling. He realised that Kelly had turned every man against him, and that his temporary reign was over. A sudden heartiness which he was far from feeling, he crossed over to where Kelly was standing.

"Euchred me that time, cap.," said he. "I guess you're right, though and that you've made a better show for your own hand than all of us put together, and I'm sorry I spoke up so rough. But, seriously, how about the kid you've brought along? What's to prevent him rounding on us at giving the show away?"

Kelly ignored the outstretched hand, but he answered quietly and genial enough:

"This gentleman—Mr. Mason—is a doctor, and knowing Matthews and Pete were in a bad way, I brought him along with me in order that he might have a look at them and do what he could. Unfortunately he

Matthews, at any rate, he is too late. For the rest, he and I have a private arrangement between us which prevents the possibility of his giving information about us. Besides, he has no notion of his whereabouts, for when he came here he was blindfolded. You can set your mind at rest on that point, and I myself guarantee that he does us no harm. Now, off with you, and get your share of the loot! We'll go and see how Pete is, and then have some supper."

Kelly led Dick into the deeper recesses of the cave. It was of great extent, with branches burrowing away into the cliff-side in all directions. Indeed, as Dick ascertained later, no man—not even Kelly himself—had fathomed more than a fraction of those mysterious passages.

At some remote period it had been the habitation of an aboriginal tribe, for here and there on the rocky walls were rude carvings representing hunting scenes and fights. But since Kelly and his gang had occupied it they had made many alterations in such portions as they used.

The main cavern, of which the floor and walls had been artificially smoothed, was used as a general dining-hall and living-room. It was fairly comfortably furnished with benches and tables, and at one side stood a modern cooking-stove. The outer entrance, too, could be blocked by an arrangement of sheet-iron—a kind of loopholed screen, perfectly bullet-proof, which, in case of attack, would render it impervious to anything short of artillery, so long as the defenders' supplies and ammunition held out.

From the inner end of the main cavern two long corridors branched off, penetrating into the bowels of the earth. That on the left formed the men's sleeping quarters. Artificial hollows had been excavated at intervals in the walls of the corridor, making a series of cubicles capable of containing from one to three men apiece.

The sick man Pete lay in one furthest up the passage. They found him stretched on a camp-bed with piles of rugs, his head wrapped in a blood-stained bandage, and his face drawn and pinched with fever and pain. Mason bent over him and made a hasty examination. The wasting feverishness had left him weak enough, but the man had an iron constitution, and his wounds were healing wonderfully.

With practised hands Dick cleansed the wound on the head—a nasty, ugly-looking cut—and put on new bandages. The only really serious damage was from a bullet-wound in the thigh, which was badly inflamed. However, after a painful quarter of an hour's probing, Dick succeeded in removing the bullet, and having found some soothing ointment in a medicine-chest which Kelly had brought in—looted some weeks previously from a squatter's homestead—he was able to put his patient much more at ease, promising him that a fortnight would see him out and about again.

Then the captain's own turn came, and by the time Dick had finished with the wounded arm the men were gathering in for supper. After the meal, worn out with fatigue, Dick was glad enough to stretch himself on a pile of rugs in the outer cave. For a few minutes he blinked sleepily at the sentinel by the entrance, who was seated on a boulder smoking, with his rifle across his knees, and the next thing he remembered was the morning sunlight flashing in his eyes.

The bushrangers were, most of them, already up and in the horse-paddock. Dick sprang from his rugs, feeling rather stiff and sore, and made for the creek which passed the cave entrance a hundred yards away. A plunge in the clear, cold water soon refreshed him, and, not seeing any signs of Kelly, he strolled over to the paddock and watched the men at work.

Amongst the rest were some young unbroken horses, which Spider the tracker and a couple of assistants were schooling; whilst half a dozen more

men were seated on the rails smoking, and laughing whenever a colt showed fight and got out of hand.

One especially, a beautifully-shaped, light chestnut horse, was giving bad trouble. Again and again he shook himself free, often dragging his trainer with him, and lashing out wildly in all directions. He was not a biter, nor particularly vicious, but he was scared and full of fight.

Amongst the men on the fence was Rowan, who was jeering louder than all the rest.

Finally the youngster who was struggling with the animal, and whose name was Roper, got angry.

"Look you here, Rowan, you may think yourself almighty smart there, sitting on the fence guffawing like a great ape! Suppose you come down off your perch and show us what sort of a hand you may be at the game."

The big, black-bearded ruffian knocked out the ashes, stuffed his pipe in his pocket, and clambered slowly down.

"Don't you be so free with your lip, you young hound!" he growled. "And give us a hold of that halter!"

The rest of the idlers looked on curiously. Roper was known as a good man with horses, and what he could not manage very few amongst them would have cared to tackle.

Rowan grabbed the halter, and the horse backed, reared, and struck out wildly with his fore-feet. Rowan was a very powerful man, and no fool, but try as he would, either by force or coaxing, he could do nothing with the unmanageable animal. And Roper, who was looking on and watching him keenly, began to chuckle derisively.

"Stick to it!" he cried. "Anyone can see you've got a clinch on him! Guess these railings are comfortable enough for me. I don't want to interfere none. Oh, no!"

Rowan scowled darkly, and rapped out an oath. He tried to throw the horse; but again the chestnut was too quick for him, and in the struggle he got a nasty rap over the instep. That thoroughly roused him, and, seizing a heavy picketing stake, he began to belabour the poor brute unmercifully. Thwack, thud, came the heavy stake against the chestnut's ribs and flanks, maddening the poor brute with pain. But Rowan seemed seized with a kind of blind fury, and redoubled the blows.

Several men cried "Shame!" and called to him to stop; but the interruption came finally from an entirely unexpected quarter.

Dick, furious at seeing a dumb animal tortured in such a fashion, vaulted lightly over the railings. Thud came the stake again, and the chestnut staggered and trembled under the weight of the blow. Up it flashed, and the next instant Dick had wrested it from Rowan's hairy paw, and with a quick jerk sent it flying through the air.

The bushranger let go of the chestnut's halter, and turned on him with a roar of fury.

"Who the blazes——" he began, and stopped in open-mouthed astonishment. "Oh, it's you, is it, you mealy-mouthed, spying little brute! What in thunder d'ye mean by laying a finger on me, you interfering little snake?"

Dick was white with anger, but it was in his nature to keep cool. The blood was tingling through his veins, and he was conscious of but one desire, and that was to smash the ugly face glaring into his, yet outwardly he was calm enough.

"My man," said he, "you're no better than a hulking brute of a coward to treat a horse in that fashion! And if you try it on again

"I'll give you a taste of the same treatment across your own back! So I warn you."

The men on the railings were silent enough now. Few of them would have dared to tackle Rowan single-handed, and five out of six of them put Dick's interference down to simple ignorance.

Rowan stood glowering at him evilly for some seconds from under his shaggy, bristling eyebrows.

"You cursed young whelp!" he cried hoarsely.

And, quick as lightning, his hand slid to his belt, and there was a sudden flash of steel.

But Dick was watching him closely, and before ever the warning cry of "Mind his knife!" rang out, there was a swift, catlike movement, an oath, and the knife was spinning harmlessly through the air, whilst Rowan was wringing a strained wrist.

"Fight fair, if you want to fight!" said Dick breathlessly.

Rowan rubbed his wrist in a dazed fashion. He was gaining some new experiences. What had happened to him he could scarcely tell; but there had been a wrench at his wrist which deprived it momentarily of all power, and had come near to breaking it.

"I'll pay you out for this!" he bellowed. "You wait a bit, and I'll make you sorry you ever saw daylight, you cub!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Rowan," said a quiet voice behind them. "We'll have no more of your beastly dago knifing work! You'll just stand up to Mr. Mason here with your bare fists, and do what you can. The boys and I will stand round and see fair play, and, personally, I hope he'll give you the very deuce of a hiding!"

Dick turned, and saw Kelly, immaculately got up, a cigar in the corner of his mouth, clean-shaven, clean clothes, and an eyeglass in his eye. He had strolled up just in time to see the end of the knife episode.

He nodded pleasantly to Dick.

"Morning, Mason! Think you can teach our friend here a few rudimentary manners? We should all be much obliged, I'm sure. He's a tough subject, so don't be over gentle with him. Stick to plunking him over the heart, and watch for a foul!" he added in a whisper.

"I'm quite ready to do my best to lick the brute," replied Dick.

"Off with your coats and shirts, then!" cried Kelly. "You, Rowan, strip. Come along, boys; form a ring!"

The onlookers obeyed with alacrity, and, word having got abroad that there was to be a fight, two or three more of the gang came running from the cavern.

"Now, then," said Kelly, "are you ready? When I give the word, you can wade in and do your best till one of you drops. There'll be no fancy arrangements; you can just fight until one of you is on his back for a full thirty seconds. But, mark you, Rowan, no kicking, no gouging. If you try it, I'll break you! Ready? Time!"

Rowan was a man of herculean strength, with a great, hairy chest and enormous knotted muscles.

Dick, white-skinned below his shirt, with a fine depth of chest, giving his lungs plenty of breathing room, broad, well-hung shoulders, with the swelling slope from the neck which means strength, and the curve of muscle behind the shoulder-blade which spells hitting power. He lacked two stone and over of Rowan's weight; and, perhaps, an inch of his reach. Both were

hard-conditioned, but the springiness and quick movement were all in Dick's favour.

Rowan took his stand head down, and arms held almost level before him, his body squared after the style of the old-fashioned professional pug.

Dick circled round him, lightly poised, each movement carefully balanced, and quick as a cat.

Suddenly he bent forward with a slight swinging motion; there was a sharp, ringing smack, smack. He had landed a couple of swift, telling blows on the mark—just over Rowan's heart, and sprung clear before the heavier man could touch him. The bushranger gave a little sobbing gasp and a grunt, and a big, dark blotch appeared on his swarthy skin; but he stood firm as a rock.

Again Dick repeated his tactics. Rowan let drive at his head with a blow that would have felled an ox; but Dick slipped it easily with a twist of his head, and got in a third half-arm blow on the point before breaking away.

Rowan was losing his temper and his head, and was making wild rushes, in which he suffered severely. But, at the same time, he hit with the force of a kicking horse, and one blow which got home squarely on Dick's left shoulder sent him staggering back half a dozen paces, his arm momentarily useless.

That made Dick wary, and he fought cautiously for a minute or two till he recovered. Both men were considerably knocked about, but Rowan's appearance was terrible. He was bleeding heavily from a blow on the mouth, which had cost him a torn lip and a couple of teeth; one of his eyes was nearly closed, and his nose, originally vulture-like in appearance, was swollen to twice its normal size. He was dripping with perspiration, and every time a blow landed on the livid bruise above his heart he winced and gave a short moan of pain. It was clear that he was nearing the end of his tether.

Dick had a lump on his forehead the size of an egg, and one or two angry-looking blotches on his body. His knuckles, too, were badly cut when he dislodged Rowan's teeth; but he was sound in wind and limb, and there was a sort of grim, fixed smile on his face that boded ill to his antagonist.

Suddenly Rowan lowered his head, and made another of his bull-like rushes. There was a warning shout from Kelly, and Dick tried to stop him with two sharp smacks full in the face. The man meant mischief, though, and he took the punishment without winking. Out went his great arms, and he flung himself on Dick bodily, and gripped him round the waist with a force that nearly cracked his ribs.

Dick gave a long gasp for breath, and dropped a dead weight. It is an old trick, but a sure one. Rowan tottered, lost his balance, and, of course his grip as well. Dick slipped under his arms, and hit upward with all his force, springing forward at the same time.

The blows caught Rowan full under the chin with terrific weight, the man's head jerked back, and he threw up his hands, clawing wildly. Smack, smack again, with the sharp, crisp sound of a snapping hurdle Rowan swayed, tottered, and fell backwards with a crash; the back of his head touched the ground first, and his great limbs lay spreadeagled and limp. It was a clear knock-out; he was, to all intents and purposes, dead to his surroundings. Dick stood over him, breathing heavily. Kelly counted the passing seconds.

"Time!" said he at length, and closed the watch with a snap.

Rowan had to be carried to his bed in the gang's sleeping quarters, and

y a curious irony of Fate, it was on Dick himself that the task devolved of bringing him back to consciousness and generally patching him up.

It had been a fair fight, and Dick, for his part, bore no malice. Rowan, however, was sullen and morose when he came to, and, ignoring Dick's and, had turned round with his face to the wall, and refused to utter a word. He was feeling bitter and sore. For months he had been held in secret awe by the rest of the gang. The only man who could hold him a check had been Kelly himself; and now he had been put on his back by a raw new chum before them all.

Dick, finding him so impracticable, turned on his heel, and promptly dismissed the matter from his mind. He came near paying for his carelessness later that very same day, for, whilst strolling along in the hour before dusk alone on a tour of inspection of his immediate surroundings, he was suddenly surprised by the whirr of a bullet, which came so near to accomplishing its object that he felt the wind of it flicker through his hair, and his hat went fluttering to the ground.

A second later he heard faintly from the cliff above him the sharp crack of a rifle. He snatched up the hat—the crown and brim were both ripped through—and began clambering up the cliff-side as hard as he could go, without so much as thinking of the risk. He met with scant reward for his pains, however, for all he was rewarded with was a glimpse of a flying fire some hundred feet above him, which quickly vanished in the gathering gloom.

Still, that one glimpse had been enough to make him feel sure that it was Rowan, and, to put the matter beyond doubt, he made his way quickly level ground again, and raced for the cavern, which was a short quarter of a mile away. Rowan's bed was unoccupied; he had apparently slipped unobserved by the others, and, shadowing Dick, risked a snapshot.

At first Dick made up his mind to tell Kelly of the occurrence, but, on thinking it over, he concluded to keep his own counsel and watch developments.

One of his chief reasons for doing so was that, on his return, it was clear that some sudden decision had been arrived at amongst the members of the gang; in place of the general air of indolence and carelessness, everything was orderly bustle. The men, in groups of twos and threes, were busy overhauling their kit, examining girths and saddles, furbishing up pistols and revolvers, and portioning out supplies into small bags, each containing food for one man for a period of three days, and capable of being easily slung on the saddle. They talked in low tones amongst themselves,

Dick noticed that whenever he approached their voices sank into whispers, or they observed a discreet silence.

Kelly himself was nowhere to be seen, so Dick, feeling that his presence was unwelcome, curled himself up against a pile of boulders not far from the cooking-stove. In this position he not only got a certain amount of some warmth, for the evening air struck chill, but he was in deep shadow, unlikely to be seen or disturbed—a fact he was glad of, for he wished a little time in which to review the conditions of his own case.

It was already three days overdue at Mr. Trevelyan's run, and he had no doubt that the story of the coach hold-up and his capture would have reached them by now, and that search-parties would be out. Kelly had promised him release from his parole as soon as Pete was on a fair way to recovery, and that, he thought, was in reality the case. When he struck with this idea, he was just on the point of rising to pay his patient a visit, when he heard footsteps approaching, and instinctively he sank down

again into the shadow. They were two of the older members of the gang and had been foremost amongst the mutineers of the previous night.

They sat down not six feet from him, and began talking in low tones.

"What I want to know is, what's to be done with the kid toted along buck Pete up?" said the first.

"Well, he can't be left here whilst we're on the Trevelyan lay. C Ned's almighty keen on the job, and he means mischief—says he owes old man a grudge, or something!"

Dick sat forward a little, listening with all his might. He was beginning to get an inkling of the bustle and stir.

"True for you," retorted the other. "He can't be left here with away, and he can't be let loose—he knows too much. I've been row amongst the boys, and they're all pretty well of my opinion. Either must be scragged for our safety, or he must come along, and bear a hand with the rest of us—then he wouldn't be able to split—and he must lo off a gun at one of Trevelyan's crowd for his own safety. That's how I the rest figure on it."

"Me, too. And if he don't take to the notion kindly, why, there's always some bullets go astray in a scrap at night, and you and I could lay up and make a sure thing of it one way or another. What does the cap. say

"He's regular got his rag out—snapped my head off when I spoke, and ordered me to quit sharp. I did, too. I've no use for stroking Ned Kelly fur the wrong way."

The other man laughed.

"Case of lead-poisoning and a cheap funeral, I guess. What are orders?"

"Saddle up at daybreak, and go easy by different routes. Meet at Black Tree Stump at dusk, and that's a thirty-mile stretch; from there Trevelyan's is, maybe, as much as six more. We're to attack at once; old Trevelyan is to be left to Ned himself—he wants to take it out of some, I reckon. For the rest, we can do as we like; and there's known to seven thousand pounds in notes and gold in the old man's safe for us to our fists on. Oh, there'll be some lively times, you bet!"

"And some quick shooting. Trevelyan's crowd are no slouches—they be considerable scrapping. Black Tree Stump it is, then! That's the lightning-struck tree on the knoll, due east, I reckon."

"That's it. Well, I'm off to grease up some." The man rose and tapped out the ashes of his pipe, and moved off. A minute or so later Dick heard the second bushranger stride away, and after giving the time to get clear, he slipped out of his hiding-place.

His face was white and set. Almost from the first words his mind had made up. The gang were going to attack the ranch of Mr. Trevelyan—father's friend—the man who had so generously offered him a start in a country. They were going to rob him of a large sum of money, perhaps even probably after what he had heard—to murder him! And Dick, that, at all costs and all risks, he would do his utmost to prevent them.

He strode rapidly down the length of the cavern, and, passing the hand passage which led to the men's room, plunged boldly down that to right, which he knew formed Kelly's private sanctum.

At a point a few yards down the walls suddenly narrowed till were barely three feet apart, and here was fixed a door of sheet similar to that at the entrance. He fumbled for the latch, and, after

difficulty, found it, and threw the door open. It gave on to an almost circular cavern of considerable size, and furnished with a certain amount of luxury. There were two or three armchairs, a bookcase, a couple of tables, and a stove, some camp-bed furniture, rifle-racks, and a sofa. The floor, which had been carefully levelled, was carpeted, and round the walls were hung some heads of animals and other trophies and a few pictures. Kelly himself was seated in one of the chairs before the stove, a reading-lamp on the table beside him, and a book open on his knees. He had a cigar in his mouth, at which he was puffing luxuriously, and he was smiling meditatively at the glow of the stove—but there was an evil glimmer in his eyes.

"Who the deuce——" he began angrily, starting up at Dick's abrupt entry. Then, seeing who it was, he sank back into his chair again. "Ah, Mason, you is it? Take a chair. This, as you seem to have guessed, is my own particular snugery. I fear our mutual friend, Rowan, is suffering from a sore head after the pasting you gave him this morning. Sit down, man—sit down. How's your patient?"

"I'll not sit down again with you, Ned Kelly," said Dick sternly. "I've come to tell you that, whether you like it or not, I take back my parole from this moment, and I demand that you fulfil your promise and set me free."

"Ah," said Kelly drily, "now I wonder what the real meaning of all this may be? Have some more of my beauties out there been trying to put your back up?"

"Don't you bother your head about my reasons. I have fulfilled my part of the contract—now you do yours."

"How about your patient?" said Kelly, with a sneer, his face darkening.

"I've dressed the man's wounds and done the best I can for him. If he has sense to keep quiet, he'll be all right in a few days."

"To-morrow, then, my dear Mason, you shall be at liberty to go where you please—since you find your surroundings uncongenial."

"I'll go to-night," said Dick stoutly. "To-morrow will be too late."

The next minute he could have bitten his tongue off. The words had slipped out unawares, however, and the mischief was done.

Kelly never moved from his chair, but, before Dick could shift hand or foot, the muzzle of a revolver slid over the edge of the table, and Dick was covered.

"So that's the game, is it?" said Kelly quietly. "I half guessed as much. You've been playing the spy, my young friend, and you've stumbled across a piece of news which surprises you, eh?"

"I've overheard enough to give me an insight into your blackguardly schemes, if that's what you mean?" said Dick. "I heard two of your men discussing a plot to rob and possibly murder an old man whom, although I have not yet seen him, I regard as my friend, and whom you, for reasons of your own, seem to have a spite against. I tell you, Ned Kelly, I've no further use for your acquaintance. I've fulfilled my side of the bargain, and now I expect you to fulfil yours to the letter—if you don't, you're a bigger fraud than I took you for. Anyway, I take back my parole, and you choose to turn nasty, I'll fend for myself, and maybe you'll find you don't hold all the cards."

"You seem to forget one thing," sneered Kelly. "Permit me to observe at this revolver is in a direct line with that rather thick skull of yours, and that my finger is on the trigger. I should be sorry if there was an

accident, but the hectoring tone you have seen fit to adopt, makes me nervous—and when I'm nervous my fingers waggle. The inference obvious."

Dick looked at him unflinchingly.

"You can shoot if you choose. I don't care a hang for you or your revolver either."

Kelly shrugged his shoulders.

"Surely we're arguing in a circle! Of course I can shoot if I choose and, of course, you're not afraid; but don't you think these heroics are a shade away from the mark? If I shoot, you die—in which case you dear friend Trevelyan is no better off, and I no worse. In fact, your sudden demise would be rather popular, and would certainly save a great deal of inconvenience."

Dick stuck to his point doggedly.

"Will you keep your word or won't you? I wish to go free to-night Yes, or no?"

Kelly surveyed him thoughtfully, a black scowl on his face.

"You know I've a prejudice against shooting an unarmed man," said he at length. "If I let you go, will you swear on your honour not to go Trevelyan's run for forty-eight hours, and to give no information to him or to anyone else concerning—er—what you chanced to overhear?"

"No," said Dick, "I won't. If by risking certain death, I could war him, I would, and, what's more, I'll have no further truck with you! I think yourself a kind of tuppenny coloured, revised version of Claude Duval. I'll tell you what you really are—a low-down blackguard, who's no better than any sneak-thief or cutpurse in a Melbourne slum. By James, only you hadn't a wounded arm, I'd take my hands to you, and try knock you into something recognisable as a man. Now, then, I've eased my mind, and you can do what you hanged-well please—and, mark you, the first ghost of a chance I have to break loose and make things warm for you, I'll take."

"If you'd played fair, I'd have held my tongue, except so far as Mr. Trevelyan is concerned; but you've tried to trick me, so look out for yourself. My turn will come."

"Your skull is remarkably thick, Mr. Mason," said Kelly, with a quiet sneer. "You say I do not keep my word. I've passed my word to my men, the men who trust me, that you would reveal nothing in any way harmful to them, and I'll keep it in a way you won't fancy!"

He clapped a whistle to his lips, and blew it twice, shrill and loud. Immediately there was a sound of moving feet, and half a dozen men came bursting into the room.

"My men," said Kelly, "for once in a way, I made a mistake. You were right, and I was wrong. I thought that fellow there was to be trusted—he isn't. Seize him, and we'll attend to him on our return from Trevelyan's. Quick, you fools, before he has time to rush you!"

The last remark was due to the fact that Dick, with a sudden sweep of his hand, had dashed out the lamp and made a leap for the midst of the crowd by the door.

In a second all was darkness and confusion. Kelly alone kept his head. He dared not shoot, but with a spring like a cat, he hurled himself the entrance and closed the iron door with a clang, slipping down his own secret fastening. Captors and captive alike were caged.

Dick hit out right and left; twice he broke clear away, but the darkness

which at first had helped him, now proved his downfall, for he lost his bearings, and, catching his foot in a chair, came heavily to the ground. In an instant three or four men were on him, pinning him down. He was half stunned—crushed by the weight above him. A hand at his throat was slowly strangling the life out of him. Suddenly, above the din and confusion, he heard Kelly's voice ring out sharply: "Stand clear!" and a dazzling light flashed in his eyes.

CHAPTER 10.

A Prisoner.

DICK TUNNED, dazzled, and pinned helpless on the floor of the cave, Dick Mason's last recollection was of Kelly's voice ringing out sharp and clear above the din and confusion. Then everything around him seemed to surge and rock to and fro in a grotesque, unreal fashion, and his senses left him.

When he came to himself, it was to find a man standing over him with an empty bucket of icy cold water, the remainder of which he was continuously pouring over his face.

The immediate result was that Dick, half suffocated and gurgling helplessly, tried to put an end to such an unpleasant means of restoring consciousness. Yet, struggle as he would, it was quite impossible to do so, he was securely bound hand and foot.

His tormentor put down the now empty bucket with a grin.

"So you've come round at last, have you, you beauty? A nice lot of trouble you gave us before we trussed you up, I can tell you!"

"Where am I?" asked Dick, still a trifle dazed. "Where are Kelly and the rest?"

"You're in the cave, my son, and there you'll stop. As for the captain, and the rest of the boys are just saddling up to be off on a little tour of their own. You not having received an invitation, I'm deputed to look after your creature comforts and play the giddy watchdog. They'll attend to your trouble after the ball, so to speak."

Dick struggled into a sitting position.

"Kelly gone!" he muttered savagely. And in despair he tried to fling himself at the man's legs. His gaoler was too quick for him, however. He sank back, and raised the iron bucket threateningly.

"None of that now, you young fool," he growled, "or I'll draw this over your face."

Dick sank back.

The gaoler stood over him, brandishing the bucket, with a grin.

"That's better," said he, at last. "You take your gruel lying down, maybe I'll come and have a chat with you later, and bring you some

"So long, my buck; pleasant dreams." And, with an ironical bow, went off, whistling, leaving Dick cold and dripping from head to foot, nothing but the bare rock to lie on.

How long had he been unconscious? That was the first thought which assailed him. It might have been minutes or it might have been hours.

His original intention had been to start on the raid at dawn. So much of the plan he had overheard. But then his own sudden revolt might have led them to alter their arrangements, and set out considerably earlier.

He lay there, staring up into the darkness, busily revolving various schemes in his head. The time seemed passing with horrible swiftness.

Each time he turned his face towards the current of fresh air which over him from the right, he expected to see the faint, grey light dawn stealing in. How long he had lain there when he first became conscious of a strange, shuffling, groping noise he could not tell.

It was the noise of a heavy body being dragged cautiously and pair over the uneven floor. Sometimes it would continue for a minute or at the stretch; then would follow an equally long pause. Of one thing was he certain, and that was that it always approached, never receded. Nearer, nearer yet it came. Dick glanced this way and that, as if his bonds would allow him to turn his head, but could see nothing, so was it.

Presently, in spite of himself, he shivered from head to foot. Some had touched him—something crawling from out of the blackness.

He felt the weight of a hand on his legs, and, by a supreme effort of self-control, he lay motionless.

Then a voice whispered in his ear:

"Say, doc., is that you? It's me—Pete. Don't you go for to me now."

Dick turned his head towards the whisperer.

"Yes, it's I," he answered, in a low tone—"trussed up hand and all and as helpless as can be. What do you want?"

"I know, lad—I know. They've played it a bit low down on you. I ain't forgot what you have done for me—no, sir—and, as I lay bunk, I heard 'em talkin' and talkin'—all about Trevelyan, and how was afeard you'd split—and, thinks I, he's been good to me, and soon as I get a chance I'll have a shot to serve him same fashion. I didn't know where they'd put you, but I guessed as it would be some along here. I've seen many and many a poor chap lying where you that's never seen sunlight again. And, listen; I heard that black-beard brute Rowan say he'd come back and lay you out. That's what decided I ain't against the captain, mind, not me—what the cap. says is good for Pete—but Rowan, he's a fair hazin' terror. So I just waits till I'd 'em clear out, and then I crawls out of my cot, and brings you this. I hold of it—it's a knife. I dursn't do more; but I reckon with t' your fist, and a few hours' clear start, it should do."

Dick grabbed the knife by rolling on his side, so that he could work his fingers.

"Thanks, Pete!" he whispered. "You've given me the very thing I longed for. But you oughtn't to be out, you know. You make tracks to your bed. I shall manage all right. Oh, by the way, hang on a moment. Where is Black Tree Stump? How can I find my way there?"

"You ain't never going there, surely, doc?"

"I am, though," said Dick, "thanks to you. If I can beg, borrow or steal a horse, I'll warn Trevelyan, if I can find my way there in Kelly and the rest of them will have to hide up during the day, we can ride right through. There's a good fighting chance for it, even if they have got a start."

Whilst he spoke he was already sawing clumsily at his wrist ropes with the blade. He cut himself pretty badly at the first attempt. The better by no means as easy as he had imagined, and after a while he was compelled to give it up for a bit.

"Pete," he whispered—"Pete!"

But there was no answer. He waited, and listened intently. There was not a sound to be heard.

"Pete!" he called again, a little louder this time.

Still there was no answer. He dare not raise his voice, lest the man with the bucket, who was somewhere in the outer cave, should hear him.

It was plain enough what had happened. Pete—a weak, good-natured man, grateful for what Dick had done to relieve him—had brought him the knife rather than let Rowan murder him in cold blood; but, so soon as Dick had announced his intention of trying to warn Trevelyan, the man had become scared, and had crawled back to his bed, lest he should be accused of conniving at the escape.

That this solution was the true one, Dick soon had proof, for he heard the sick man's voice calling to the man on watch—Dick's gaoler—to come and help him cover himself up, obviously trying to give the impression that he was too bad to move unaided.

Dick smiled grimly to himself, and sawed away again at the ropes in desperation.

After some ten minutes' hard, painful work, he at length managed to free his left hand. The rest was simple, and a second or two more found him on his feet, unbound, chafing his wrists and ankles to restore the circulation.

He was stiff and sore, his head was aching, and, above all, he was desperately hungry. He picked up the knife, thrust it in his belt, and felt his way carefully down the dark corridor.

Very cautiously he crept along, feeling his way by the rocky walls, and testing each footstep lest he might disturb some loose boulder.

After advancing in this manner for about twenty yards the passage took a sudden turn, and he saw that which made him easier in his movements. The head of him was the great arched opening of the main cavern, and as yet there was no sign of the coming dawn in the blue night sky. Between him and the entrance was light from another source—the lamp of the sentry, which had been disturbed by Pete's call.

Dick peered round the projecting ledge. Pete was once more in his bed, and the second man was pouring out some hot, steaming tea, with his back turned to the passage.

On tiptoe Dick slid past—neither man had noticed him—and gained the open space by the cooking-stove. There was sufficient glow from this to enable him to distinguish objects at three or four paces distant; and, to his great joy, one of the first things which his eye fell on was the revolver of the sentry. The man had evidently been in the act of preparing a meal when he was interrupted by Pete's summons. The weapon lay on the table, fully loaded in every chamber, and in a second Dick had snatched it up and hidden himself in the deep shadow cast by the movable iron door.

Before long he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. The fellow was returning, bringing his lamp with him, for Dick could see the dancing rays reflected on the cave roof.

He set the lamp on the table, and turned to the stove. His hand had barely touched the handle of the pan in which he was frying some bacon when Dick had him by the scruff of the neck, with the cold ring of the muzzle screwed tight against his ear.

The man struggled for a second, but a slight extra pressure of the chill metal convinced him that it was no use.

"Stand still!" said Dick, in a firm, low voice. "Don't move, or I'll fire! I'm going to search you!"

He released his grip on the man's neck, and ran his fingers lightly over his chest, feeling for a concealed weapon. The only thing he discovered was a pocket-knife, which he jerked into the stove.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Holland," answered the man sulkily.

"Very well, then, Holland, a little while back you had the whip-hand. Now the tables are turned, and the sooner you make yourself useful the better for you. First of all, turn out some of that bacon, and get me square meal. Look slippy about it, and remember there's a fairly heavy bullet waiting for you if you make a mistake!"

Dick retreated to the table backwards, keeping the revolver levelled, and his eye fixed on the man. There he seated himself, and ate with avidity the food laid before him, using his left hand only, and never allowing the fellow to come within springing distance of him.

He was not long over his meal, and before he had well swallowed the last mouthful, he rose and literally drove the bushranger before him to the horse paddock.

"Saddle two horses," said he. "That old grey first, and then Cæsar whom I see grazing over there, and bring them both up to the gate."

"That's the captain's spare horse," said Holland surlily.

"It was—it's mine now, until I come across its rightful owner," snapped Dick.

The horses were saddled accordingly. Dick bade the man stand back whilst he vaulted into Cæsar's saddle.

"Now, then, up with you!" he cried, pointing to the grey.

"What for?" said the man.

"Because I choose, my friend," retorted Dick. "And I suppose you're not such an idiot as to question my ability to give orders under the circumstances? There's no need for you to get scared. Do as I tell you, and you come to no harm!"

Holland mounted, and looked about him uneasily.

"Now," continued Dick, "you'll lead the way, keeping just two lengths ahead. It's no use your trying to bolt, for Cæsar here can overhaul a animal amongst the crowd of you except Kelly's black. He told me so himself, and I suppose he ought to know."

He felt his spirits rising at the thought of action, and the hearty meal had refreshed him.

"Where am I to lead to?" asked Holland.

"To the quickest and easiest way out of this infernal place, of course—and mind you don't make a mistake, for if you do, it will be your last."

The man turned and looked at him with an ashen-grey face.

"I daren't do it!" he muttered hoarsely. "I tell you I daren't do it! They'd kill me on sight if I did! Man, I'd be just signing my own death warrant!"

Dick cocked the revolver with an ominous click.

"I'll give you a couple of seconds to decide. I know nothing about your death-warrant, and, to tell the truth, I care precious little either. What I do know is this—that either you show me the path now, and lead the way in case of—er—an accident, or you come tumbling off that grey as dead as a doornail. I'm in no mood for civilities, and I've no time to listen to your private grievances. On the whole, I should say it would be a deal safer for you to show me the way, and then light out across country for the border, and try an honest life amongst new surroundings for a change. Now, then, which is it to be?"

The man hesitated. He was evidently half scared to death, and in his mind to risk a refusal. In the end, however, he gave in, and rode slowly ahead. Dick on Cæsar followed, ready for emergencies.

They crossed the level green floor of the amphitheatre, until at last they arrived at the foot of the opposite cliff. Dick scanned it eagerly, but no vestige of a track could he distinguish.

Ahead of them was a narrow gully, or, rather, split, in the rocky surface, barely four feet wide at the base, and tapering away into a mere crack as it ascended. Into this Holland forced his horse. Dick reined back for a second, fearing some trick. However, hearing the sound of the grey's footsteps slowly and steadily advancing, he pushed forward again, and at once the secret became clear to him. The mass of rock which he was facing was in reality a huge, isolated fragment which at some remote period had become detached from the cliff proper, though this fact was undiscernible at a few paces distant.

Between this mass and the cliff was an ascending ledge some six feet wide, and screened from observation on either hand. The crack through which they had entered was thus transformed into a rough, natural gateway to the hidden path. The grey was already plodding his upward way, and Dick made haste to overtake him.

Up and up wound the ledge, now turning at sharp angles, now edging slantwise along the cliff surface, but at only one point was it possible for people to catch sight of anyone passing along it, either from above or below. and a troop of police might have passed within twenty feet of it without suspecting its existence.

It was a steep work for the horses, for the path in places was like the roof of a house, and here and there falls of rock had taken place, and they were compelled to pick their way with care. Not a word passed between Dick and his companion, and, save for an occasional "Come up there!" they made their way to the top in silence. The first glimmer of grey was just spreading across the horizon as they emerged on to the flat plateau land. Looking backward, there was no vestige of the track by which they had ascended; even the hollow itself was invisible, owing to the low fringe of bushes which capped the cliff edge. A more ideal spot for a hiding-place could not be imagined.

Holland, on the old grey horse, sat moodily surveying the landscape.

"What next?" he asked at length.

"That depends on yourself," said he. "If you choose to ride with me, and play a square game, I'll guarantee you come to no harm, and it may be you'll get a fresh start, and be able to cut this 'hold-up' business."

"I'll play square right enough, if it's made worth my while. My life ain't worth the toss of a coin at this moment."

"Very well, then, we'll see what can be done. Now, which direction does Black Tree Stump lay in, for that's where we're bound?"

The question was put carelessly enough.

"Black Tree Stump?" said Holland. "Why, over there, of course. Anyone could tell you that much!"

And he stretched out a grimy forefinger, turning his back on the dawn.

"Oh, it does, does it?" replied Dick drily. "In that case, my friend, you'll just ride fifty yards in that direction! So much for your playing square. When you've gone fifty yards you'll halt, and if I see you turn, I'll take a potshot at you! I think this pistol of yours looks good for the distance. I'm going to Black Tree Stump, and I'm going east. You can go any kind of forsaken way you choose when I'm started. I've no further use for you, and that old crock of yours will never live for a mile with Caesar, so I'm not afraid of your overtaking me. Clear out!"

Holland's face dropped. He had not guessed that Dick was so well up in the lie of the country. With a muttered oath, he turned and rode the stipulated distance.

Dick's parting glance showed him a solitary, motionless figure, black and sombre against the clearing sky. Then he shook up Cæsar, and cantered off on the first stage of his long, desperate ride.

By noon he was forcing his way through some dense undergrowth, heading always eastward, so far as the nature of the ground would allow him; but over and over again he had been compelled to make wide detours, and more than once an impassable ravine had stretched itself athwart his course, and he had been obliged to ride round one end or other of it. Consequently, he had got somewhat mixed as to his bearings, and with every mile he was getting more and more anxious. A horrible thought crossed his mind from time to time that he might be curving round in a circle.

He had heard tales of men being lost that way—gruesome stories of solitary travellers getting "bushed," and winding round and round till eventually they dropped from sheer exhaustion, and perhaps starved to death not a hundred yards from their jumping-off point.

He fixed his eyes resolutely on an outstanding clump of trees on the eastern horizon, and pushed forward. The scrub was growing higher and denser. At times he was afraid that his solitary landmark would be hidden from view.

The midday heat was terrific, and his progress painfully slow. He had calculated on reaching Mr. Trevelyan's station well before dusk, in which case his journey would be robbed of at least one of its difficulties, for during the hours of daylight Kelly and his men were sure to lie up in hiding, and rest themselves and their horses.

But he had no means of gauging how far he had come. The whole stretch of country was new to him, of course, and he grew terribly anxious. However, dogged pluck and determination were his strongest characteristics, and he spared neither himself nor Cæsar. The sun passed its highest point, and began sinking slowly, remorselessly, lengthening out his shadows before him whenever he came to an open patch.

He came to a water-hole at last, little better than a slimy pool; but the sight of it put new life into him. Kneeling down, he scooped up some handfuls of the muddy liquid, and drank eagerly. It tasted acrid and bitter, but it was like nectar to his parched throat. The horse Cæsar, too, drank his fill, and after a short rest they pressed forward again. Already, dark shadows were stealing into the sky; his landmark he had long ago lost sight of, but whether it was abreast of him or behind him, he could not say.

Suddenly, without warning, the undergrowth thinned, the individual bushes became dwarfed in height, and he rode out once more into the open. He scanned the rolling stretch of undulating ground eagerly. Far, far away in the distance on his right was a slight mound, no bigger to look at than a good-sized ant hill, but it was the only one of its kind in sight. It was the knoll on which stood Black Tree Stump, without a doubt, but he had made far too much scouting, and at a rough guess it was a good eight miles away.

Time was growing desperately short, and at any moment now he might ride unawares straight into some of the gang lying in ambush.

He went forward at a smart canter, casting keen glances on every piece of broken ground which might shelter a man or a horse, and for a time

went well; but between him and the knoll there lay a narrow belt of scrub, which he regarded with uncasiness. It seemed so likely a hiding-place that at last, thinking of the old proverb—more haste, less speed—he determined to ride round it rather than risk a passage through, for if there should be some of the gang lurking there, at least he would have the benefit of open ground if they gave chase.

When he was within a quarter of a mile, therefore, he swung off to the left on a long slant. He had already gained the end of the scrub belt in safety, and was heading in once more for the lightning-struck tree, now already visible, standing gaunt and stripped on its lonely eminence, when a cry from his right warned him that he had been discovered, and simultaneously two horsemen broke from the undergrowth.

For Dick to hit off the trail to Trevelyan's it was absolutely necessary for him to pass close to the tree, the distance from his position at the moment being, he reckoned, about a mile and a quarter. His pursuers, however, taking a direct line, so soon as they guessed his object, had necessarily a shorter course by some hundreds of yards, and they rode like madmen, hoping to cut him off.

Dick drove his heels into *Cæsar*, and the horse responded nobly. He was good for a prolonged gallop, in spite of the long journey, for most of it had been slow, tedious work rather than tiring, and he broke into his long, springing stride, covering the ground at a surprising pace. Dick, who knew he was to be trusted, let him pick his own course, contenting himself with keeping him in the general direction of the mound.

At the start his pursuers were a full four hundred yards on his right, but, he being forced to ride on a slant, was compelled to gradually close in on them, for which same reason *Cæsar's* superior pace barely enabled him to hold his own.

By the time he was half-way to the mound, the distance between them had decreased to little more than a hundred yards, and they were nearly abreast.

He could see clearly now that one of them was a younger member of the gang—a light weight and a fine rider; his companion was a heavy-bearded man, mounted on a big dappled horse, but his face was unfamiliar. Apparently they had not yet recognised him, but took him to be one of Trevelyan's men.

The hundred yards decreased to fifty, and Dick ventured to take a slight pull at *Cæsar's* mouth, for the old horse was forging slightly ahead, and going for all he was worth. This did not suit Dick's views, for two reasons. First, he wanted to have a bit in hand at the critical moment; and, secondly, he preferred to keep the men abreast or slightly ahead of him when they should come to within shooting distance.

Closer they came, and the younger man let up a yell.

"By glory, it's *Cæsar*, the cap's own horse!" he shouted. "And the new chum, the pillbox kid, on his back, by all that's wonderful! Shoot, man—shoot; but mind the horse!"

A bullet whistled past Dick's head, and again a second, but further off. Revolver practice from a galloping horse is apt to be erratic in any light, but at dusk, and with the extra disadvantage of having to fire across their own bodies, it would be more by luck than judgment if they hit their mark. At least, so Dick thought, and he drew gradually up to them, with a grim smile on his face, reserving his own fire.

The younger of the two adversaries, who had already fired three shots,

and was forging ahead, now turned half round in his saddle, and blazed away point-blank. Dick felt a stinging, scaring pain between his bridle arm and his side, and another bullet whizzed so close to his ear that he could feel the wind of it as it passed. At the third shot the youngster's horse pecked, caught his forefoot on the edge of the low boulder, and came down with a crash, throwing his rider heavily.

Dick was by now so close up that Cæsar had to make a sudden swerve to avoid the struggling animal. By so doing he undoubtedly saved Dick's life, for the bearded man, who had reined in, took a steady aim on the crook of his elbow, and fired twice in rapid succession. They were not ten paces apart, and, but for that sudden dart aside, it was almost impossible that he should have missed.

Before he could fire again Dick raised his revolver and took a snap-shot, pulling on the rise, a trick he had practised. The big man threw up his arms, swaying wildly in the saddle, and fell backwards, his head touching the horse's back, and his knees still retaining their grip. The frightened animal reared and bolted madly over the uneven ground, the reins flapping helplessly in the dead man's grasp.

But Dick was by no means certain that he was clear of the gang yet, so with a pat on the neck and a word of encouragement, he sent Cæsar along at an easier pace, ready at any moment to sit down and ride for his life at the first alarm.

However, he passed the lone, gaunt tree unmolested, and turned into the trail which led to Mr. Trevelyan's run.

Half an hour brought him to a fence and slip rail, and the station lights began twinkling in the distance.

He rode up to the entrance of the house, and hitched up Cæsar to the verandah post. It was a low-built, comfortable-looking structure of one storey. The verandah ran round two sides of it, and, glancing through an open window, he could see Mr. Trevelyan seated at dinner with his overseer.

A dog barked at the back of the house, and as Dick, spent and breathless, mounted the shallow stairs, a servant came running out.

"Mr. Trevelyan!" he gasped to the man. "I must see Mr. Trevelyan at once! I am Richard Mason, and I bring terrible news! This homestead is about to be attacked by Ned Kelly and his gang!"

CHAPTER 11.

Preparing for the Fray.

MR. TREVELYAN and the overseer had by this time left the table, hearing voices, and come out into the main hall of the building.

The owner of the run was a tall, handsome-looking man, of nearly fifty, with a kindly, rugged, bronzed face, and a powerful frame.

"Come in—come right in!" he cried, with cheery hospitality. Then, catching sight of Dick's face, he stepped back, and his expression became a trifle hard and stern. "Who's this?" he said. "Surely you are Mason—Richard Mason? But this is extraordinary! I've been expecting you for the past four days, and yesterday a police-sergeant came to the station and told me that you had been seen in company with that infamous scoundrel Kelly! You are the son of my old friend, that I can clearly see, but you

must admit that your conduct requires a little explanation. The man Kelly is my bitterest enemy, and I confess until things are cleared up a little I—"

Dick held up his hand in protest.

"One moment!" he cried.

And he lurched heavily forward. The strain of the past hours had been greater than he thought, and his strength was failing him.

The overseer dashed back into the dining-room, and returned with a tumbler of wine.

"Here, man, put this in your inside! There'll be time for talking in a minute or two!"

Dick did as he was bidden, and the stimulant put new life into him.

"Mr. Trevelyan," said he, "I have ridden since an hour before dawn to bring you warning, and every mile of the way I've prayed that I might not be too late. See here"—he pointed to a dark patch of ripped cloth under his arm, still moist and bloodstained—"and here"—pointing to a red splash on his shirt-sleeve—"take those as proofs of my honesty, if you need proofs, for they are the marks of Kelly's men! And now, in Heaven's name, call up every available hand in the run, and get out every rifle and gun you have about the place! There's not a moment to be lost! I tell you, Kelly and the whole gang may be along any minute. They'll know by now that I have broken through them, and given the alarm. For the rest, my explanation can wait."

Mr. Trevelyan fixed his keen eyes on Dick's for a moment, and strode forward with outstretched hand.

"None are needed, Dick Mason. I should have known. I beg your pardon. But, you see, I had reports from two sources that you left the Benalla coach with Kelly after the hold-up, and that you had subsequently been concerned in an affray with the police. However, enough of that now. I'm right glad to see you! And you'll find me grateful for the warning. You are sure of your news?"

"That's Kelly's own horse at the post there. And their outposts fired on me, as you see. They know you have a large sum of money in the house, or they believe so. And Kelly himself seems to owe you a bitter grudge. I tell you they may be here at any moment, and they'll not leave a living thing on the run if they catch you unprepared."

Mr. Trevelyan's bushy eyebrows contracted in a deep frown, and McIvor, the Scotch overseer, rapped out a broad oath.

"Thank Heaven, all the women folk are away! Here, you, Dick, dart down to the men's quarters and rouse 'em out sharply, now! Tell 'em to bring up their packs and every gun they've got amongst them. Send the black boys to round-up the horses in the home paddock, and drive them to the out station as quick as they can. You, Mac, take all the rifles from the racks, break open a couple of ammunition-cases in the store-room. And Mason and I here will look to the shutters and barricade the windows."

"The horse," said Dick, pointing to Cæsar.

"He can go with the rest. The boys will give him a rub down and a good feed, never fear. Come along, we'll give these gentry a warm reception."

The alarm-bell at the men's quarters was already ringing, and the hands came trooping out, making for the house at the double. There were only five of them all told, for, by a piece of bad luck, most of them were absent at the outlying stations or taking cattle down to the nearest railway head for market. Kelly had chosen his time well, and his information was evidently reliable.

The five men threw their bundles down. They had already heard the news from the servant Jack, who had ridden on on Cæsar to rout out the blacks.

Before they had barricaded more than half the windows, and had piled some furniture against the back door, he returned breathless and panting.

"Quick, boys! Quick, Mr. Trevelyan, sir!" he gasped. "They're closing in on us fast! I saw half a dozen of them gallop up to the far fence not a minute back. And there are more out by the east water-hole. They're all round us."

It was obvious to Dick that Kelly had received reinforcements since leaving the Roost, for then they had not been more than a dozen strong. He remembered, too, that the face of the bearded man he had shot was unfamiliar. Clearly the little garrison would have to fight against long odds. They were but nine all told, but they were trustworthy men, tough and hard, and most of them had done their share of fighting both against outlaws and blacks in earlier days. And they set about securing the windows in a workmanlike fashion under Mr. Trevelyan's orders, and each man placed a supply of cartridges in a handy pocket. Nearly all were armed with Winchester, and of that class of ammunition there was plenty.

"McIvor," said Mr. Trevelyan, "you, Jack, and two of the blacks will take the back of the house and the east side. From there you ought to be able to cover the station buildings; they may try and fire them. I rely on you to prevent it. Mason here, and I, with the other three men, will look after the verandah on the north and west. We'll have all lights out, please, except one lamp in the dining-room. If any man is hit let him be carried there. Now, men, to your stations, and I'll give a hundred pounds to the man who shoots or takes Ned Kelly."

"There's no need to tell you to do your best. For, as you well know, this will be a fight to the finish, and the man who—"

Crack! Ping! A rifle-shot rang out from the plantation immediately in front of them, and a bullet spattered harmlessly against the house wall.

"Back, men, all of you, sharp! To your posts! They're on us!"

Crack Crack! Two spurts of flame showed up against the sombre background of the trees, and a station-hand immediately behind Mr. Trevelyan threw up his arms with a coughing grunt, and pitched headlong on to the verandah floor boards.

CHAPTER 12.

Defending the Homestead—A Hard Fight.

BACK! Back into the house for your lives!" shouted Mr. Trevelyan, as a second volley rang out from the woods; and stooping, he caught up the fallen man and staggered with him into the entrance, heedless of the bullets which spattered round him.

The two remaining station-hands also sprang for the door, heads ducked and shoulders humped like men trying to avoid a blow. But Dick held his ground. Flinging himself down full length behind one of the verandah uprights, which gave him a certain amount of shelter, he waited, rifle in hand.

Immediately before him lay the open clearing, and he glanced cautiously from point to point in the hopes that one of the gang might be rash enough to show himself beyond the shelter of the trees. One figure, above all others, he was looking for—that of Ned Kelly himself. He, at any rate, was no skulker, and disdained the shooting-from-behind-a-hedge business.

But rash though Kelly was by nature, foolhardy even, he was not a man to play into his enemies' hands, and Trevelyan and those with him had an unholy reputation for marksmanship.

Twice more rifles spat viciously from amidst the dark trees, and on the second shot Dick fired at the flash.

Rip, rip, came the bullets amongst the verandah woodwork, but Dick's shot told, for there was a scream, and a crashing of undergrowth, and one rifle, at any rate, was silenced.

Then, for a few minutes, hostilities were suspended. Kelly's gang had, of course, depended largely on a surprise, and had hoped to carry the homestead at the first rush. But, thanks to Dick Mason's desperate ride, their plans had been frustrated, and Mr. Trevelyan had been warned, if only in the nick of time.

The house door behind Dick was cautiously opened, and Mr. Trevelyan himself stuck his head out.

"Come in, lad; come in!" he whispered. "It's madness to stay out there any longer; they're closing in on us at the back, and they'll be trying a quick dart in a minute."

But Dick shook his head.

"I'm all right," he answered, in a low tone. "I'm not going to move from here till I've spotted Kelly himself. I'll jump in quick enough if I find it getting too hot for me."

The moon was well up by now, and all the open clearing was bathed in white light, which intensified the black shadows of the woods beyond.

However, he had not much time for thought, for suddenly the bush immediately in front of him parted, and Kelly, alone on his grey horse, rode out a few paces and sat there motionless, his repeating rifle held carelessly across the crook of his arm.

He must have known that he was an easy mark for every rifle on that side of the house, but he seemed quite indifferent to the risk he ran; though Dick could hear one or two of the men calling to him to come back into cover.

For a full two minutes he sat there, his keen eyes intently watching the house for any sign of movement; then he slung up his left arm, palm outwards, making the peace sign.

Dick could see every clear-cut feature showing out distinctly in the bright moonlight.

"Trevelyan, Trevelyan!" he called. "Come out, man, I want a word with you!"

Mr. Trevelyan stepped into the dark shadow of the doorway immediately behind where Dick was lying.

"Well?" said he sternly.

"Oh, you're there, are you?" said Kelly, bending forward in his saddle, and trying to discover his enemy in the gloom of the verandah.

"Come out, man! Come out into the open and let's end this between us; you and I with rifle or revolver, mounted or on foot, just as you please. There's a fine light for quick firing, and the country isn't big enough to hold the pair of us."

"And your men?" said Mr. Trevelyan.

Kelly laughed.

"Oh, they're out for plunder; the house is surrounded, and sooner or later they're bound to bag your crowd! But you and I have an older quarrel to settle, and on other grounds."

Mr. Trevelyan stepped forward to the verandah edge.

"Ned Kelly," said he, "I have you covered at this present moment, my finger is on the trigger, and I'll give you just so much time as it takes me to count ten to get back to the woods and your herd of thieves and criminals. You've no longer the right to expect an honest man to risk his life against yours in a fair fight. Now, be off, for I fire on the word ten!"

Kelly's face darkened, and for a moment Dick thought that he was going to risk all in a single-handed dash for the house. He checked himself, however, with an effort.

"You shall pay me for that insult, Trevelyan," he said quietly. "I have a good memory, and when the day of reckoning comes between us, you shall pay me to the uttermost farthing."

"One!" said Mr. Trevelyan, and hitched his rifle forward.

Kelly laughed harshly.

"As you will," said he, and wheeled the grey horse swiftly; but instead of heading back to the woods, he drove in his spurs and was off in a flash, galloping in a long, sweeping curve round the house.

Dick saw him take the rails of the home paddock lightly and easily, and the next instant he had vanished round the angle of the verandah. Dick sprang to his feet, and he and Mr. Trevelyan darted back into the house, closing the heavy door behind them. Even as they did so, four or five bullets came splattering on the thick timbers.

The firing soon became fast and furious on all sides; the house itself was filled with the stinging reek of burnt powder, and the floor at each man's feet was littered with a little pile of empty brass cartridge-cases. Now and again would come the tinkle of falling glass as a bullet shattered a window-pane or a picture on the walls, and wherever one of the defenders fired, a quick phut, phut of answering bullets would come rapping in close succession in the immediate vicinity of the flash.

At the back of the house, MacIvor, the overseer, had a seared cheek, and Jack, the boy, a slight flesh wound on the upper arm, besides having had his rifle hit no less than three times.

The sides had come off comparatively lightly, for there the range was longer, and the cover thinner.

But Dick, Mr. Trevelyan, and the two others in the front were kept very busy; hastily improvised barricades of mattresses had been placed over most of the windows, leaving spaces here and there to fire through, and to a certain extent they had an advantage owing to the deep shadow cast by the verandah. Still, the exposure of wrist or elbow, or even the protrusion of a barrel, instantly called forth a concentrated fire from four or five invisible rifles from the wood.

"This is too hot to last," said Mr. Trevelyan coolly, reloading his magazine, and showing a couple of lead splashes on his Winchester. "They're simply burning ammunition, and we've knocked out at least four of their men."

"I think they'll be trying a rush before long," said Dick. "I've noticed for the last few minutes that all the firing this side is coming from one or two isolated points. I fancy they've just left a few picked shots to keep us on the jump, and have withdrawn most of the men to the back for a regular assault."

Mr. Trevelyan looked anxious.

"The back door is only a flimsy arrangement at best," he replied; "a couple of men could burst it in easily. I think——"

The sentence was never finished; for the remainder of the words were drowned by a yell of defiance from the other side of the house, and the crashing of splintering woodwork rising above the sharp, crackling volleys of the repeating rifles.

"By James, they're at it!" shouted Trevelyan. "Come along, Mason, you two men stick to the front and hold them off in case they try to break cover."

Dick grabbed a handful of cartridges from the open box on the floor, thrust them loose into his pocket, and dashed after his host, jamming spare shells into the magazine as he ran.

Down the passage which divided the house in the centre, sharp round to the right, and he found himself face to face with a struggling confused mass of figures.

It was the kitchen of the house, a large room with a big, heavy table in the centre, at which the station hands usually took their meals. On this were set a couple of lanterns, and behind it stood McIvor and the coloured boy, Jack.

Both fired simultaneously as he burst into the room; the back door was in splinters, and through the wreck of it a dense wedge of bushrangers were trying to force their way.

On either side stood two of the station hands, one with a clubbed rifle which he was making splendid play with, the other locked in a terrible grapple with the foremost of the besiegers.

Even as he looked he saw the bushranger free his arm with a wrench and a jerk, and caught a glimpse of flashing steel.

He steadied himself in his stride and took a snapshot from the hip. At any other time he would not have dared risk it; but his blood was up, and the madness of the fight was surging through his brain. The bullet sped true and found its mark, the burly ruffian gave a scream, his grip slackened, and he crashed heavily to the ground, whilst Trevelyan's man, dazed and half stupefied by his exertions, stood staring down at him open-mouthed. The next instant, with a shout, Dick drove forward into the thick of them; he had no time even to fire, but using the heavy rifle-barrel as a bayonet, lunged straight at the face of the man nearest him. The reeking burnt powder stung his face, and the flash of a point-blank discharge singed the skin. There was a crash as a bullet flicked out one of the lamps on the table; a second later the other also was overturned, and what followed was wild confusion.

He had a nightmare-like sensation of a seething mass of fierce, bearded faces, of flashing eyes glaring into his own, full of hate and frenzy, of lunging desperately, recklessly at everything before him; twice one of these hateful faces slipped from sight under muzzle or butt—he used either indifferently—and twice his foot trod on soft, yielding flesh, instead of the hard boards of the kitchen floor.

Trevelyan himself, McIvor, and another were beside him, fighting shoulder to shoulder; and then, in a flash, the attack dwindled away, and the bushrangers, or rather, the remnant of them, were dashing back to cover, scattered and disheartened, but firing as they ran.

It was one of these stray shots that bowled over McIvor with a shattered forearm, but the assailants had left four men dead or senseless on the threshold, and two more badly hurt and unable to drag themselves away. Whilst out in the moonlight another figure was plainly visible, crawling—crawling slowly towards the wood with a strange, helpless sideway movement, and even as Dick watched it flung up an arm in a last gesture of

menace and defiance, collapsed, and lay still, casting a little splash of clear-cut dark shadow.

McIvor meanwhile had scrambled to his feet, cursing; his face was drawn and racked with pain, but his spirit was as high as ever.

"Back with ye, Trevelyan! Back with ye, man! They'll be trying the front next. Now, boys, bear a hand with the table—so! Up-end it, that's right, and drag it athwart the door! We'll give the beggars beans yet! There's a good two inches of hard wood for 'em to waste their pellets on!"

CHAPTER 13.

How Dick Crawled Into the Outlaws' Camp.

BUT Dick had other schemes in view than fighting any longer from behind shelter. He was aching in more places than one from a shrewd rap with a rifle-butt or revolver, his head was singing, but his brain was clear enough, but the excitement of the struggle had him in its grip.

One quick glance over his shoulder assured him that Mr. Trevelyan was already hastening to the front of the house. The rest were busy under McIvor's direction dragging the heavy table across the battered doorway, the moonlit space before him lay open and bare, save for the one motionless figure lying so quiet and still and the dense shadow of the pines on the left. If once he could gain those, he would try and turn the table. He would no longer be attacked but attacking. In a flash his mind was made up. A couple of quick strides took him to the threshold; no one had noticed.

He stepped lightly over the bodies of the fallen men and slipped into the narrow band of shadows cast by the building.

Now or never was his chance. He took a deep breath, and, stooping low, made a dash for the nearest trees.

He gained them unobserved; no warning shout, no crack of a rifle gave notice that his movements had been seen—and the next moment he was cowering behind a rugged stem amidst the dense blackness of the woods feeling very much cut off and alone.

The sensation of loneliness, however, was only momentary. He realised the increased danger of his position fully, but he was none the less determined to carry out the plan which had gradually been forming at the back of his head.

The first attack had failed, but Dick knew well that Kelly was not the man to be turned from any object which he had in view by a single reverse; it would tend rather to make him doubly resolved, and Dick was pretty sure that the gang had only withdrawn temporarily into the deeper shelter of the woods to renew the attack probably at dawn, when the small garrison would be worn with fatigue and watching. He guessed that one or two men would be left on sentry duty to observe the house, and that the rest would be summoned to a council of war to discuss a new plan of operation, and it was not long before his guess was proved right.

He was advancing cautiously into the wood, meaning to make a wide detour. Moving carefully and noiselessly, his rifle at the ready, when in the dim, uncertain light he fancied he could detect a dark object leaning against a tree-trunk a few paces on his right.

He slid behind a sheltering bush and waited; a second or two later

heard a scraping noise, and there was the flicker of a match. The scent of strong, coarse tobacco came floating towards him.

He peered through the screen of leaves. The man struck a second match; apparently his pipe was not properly alight, and Dick caught a glimpse of a heavily-built, bronze-faced man leaning with his back against a pine-tree, his rifle propped up by his side, and a rough bandage wound round his upper arm. He could even see a dark stain on the white of the linen, and then the match went out again. Dick dropped flat on the ground and wriggled himself forward inch by inch, nor did he dare rise to his feet again till the sentry was a good twenty yards behind him.

Then once more he moved forward, gliding from stem to stem, making a short halt at each, and peering round him through the darkness to satisfy himself that the coast was clear. He knew that he was literally carrying his life in his hands. A false step, the crackle of a piece of dead wood, or the unexpected meeting with one of the bushrangers' outposts, and he would not stand one chance in a thousand. Nevertheless, he kept doggedly on, leaving the homestead further and further behind him.

"This ought to be about far enough," he muttered after one of his halts, having made a careful scrutiny of the wood in his immediate vicinity. "I think I can risk a turning movement now. I ought to be well behind their line of sentries."

He bore off sharp to the left, following as near as he could a long, sweeping curve. In this manner he hoped to work round towards the front of the house once more, but at a point well behind that at which he had seen Kelly; for where the captain was, there he was pretty certain the main body would be discussing the plan for the next attack.

It was slow work, and more than once he lost his direction in the dark. At last, however, he saw a glimmer of light before him—the red, uncertain light of a camp wood fire, and, with the utmost caution, he began to approach.

As he drew nearer, the pine stems stood out black and solid against the glare. Then they began to open out until at last he was able to see a group of men sitting round smoking and drinking, whilst a little apart sat Kelly by himself on a pile of saddle-cloths, scowling and moody. Evidently he was in one of his sour, black tempers—his brows were knitted in a deep frown, and every now and again the knot of whispering men round the fire glanced at him apprehensively over their shoulders, and made significant gestures.

From deeper in the woods beyond came the occasional uneasy stamp of a horse.

Dick threw himself flat again, and edged gradually closer, trailing his rifle after him, and crawling snake-like in the dense bar of shadow thrown by a big tree-trunk.

Luckily for him he was to windward of them, and low though their voices were, the sound drifted towards him.

Rowan was there, the black, hulking bully, and Roper the roughrider—all the men whose faces he had seen in the robbers' Roost, and others besides. It was clear that the gang had been reinforced.

Two men on the side of the fire nearest him were badly hit, one of them lying on a heap of brushwood, moaning from time to time, and calling out for water; the other, his arm in a sling and his head bandaged, trying to dull the pain by frequent pulls at a bottle of raw spirit.

"Two of the beauties we winged from the front," was Dick's mental comment.

Two more he knew had been killed outright, and there were seven knocked out of time in the attempt to rush the house from the back making eleven in all. And yet, not counting Captain Kelly himself, Dick was able to reckon up no less than seventeen men gathered round the fire all still full of fight, and one at least was sure to have been left in charge of the horses. Allow, say, four more for sentry duty at various points round the house, and there were twenty-three or twenty-four men matched against the pitifully reduced little garrison in the homestead. The odds were terrific, and for a moment Dick's heart sank; it was almost impossible that the next attack should prove unsuccessful.

When Dick first slipped out of the house and determined to run the gauntlet of the woods, it was with the vague, half-formed idea of taking the besiegers in the rear when they made their next attack, hoping by a searching fire from the shelter of the woods to create a panic amongst them—that, and the chance of trying conclusions with Kelly himself face to face, was as far as he had thought matters out. But then he had expected to deal with eight, or at most ten men. The discovery of their great increase in numbers rendered such a scheme almost impossible. For the rest, his rifle was in his hand, and Kelly sat there before him as an easy mark. But to shoot the man down in such a fashion was not to be thought of, and as he lay there behind the sheltering trunk he racked his brains for some scheme by which to aid the hard-pressed little garrison.

His thoughts were interrupted by Kelly himself rising from his pile of blankets and crossing over to the fire. He walked slowly, his eyes fixed in a gloomy scowl, his hand on the butt of the revolver in his belt.

The men glanced at him uneasily. It was plain to see they feared him, and equally plain that not a few amongst them would have held out against him if they dared.

But his was the master mind; absolutely fearless they knew him to be, and there was not a man of the crowd with sufficient courage to cross Ned Kelly when the black mood was on him.

He stood gazing at them fiercely with hard, cold eyes, and the whispering and muttering ceased. They were like a pack of schoolboys when the master comes upon them unawares.

"You white-livered curs!" said Kelly, in a dangerously quiet voice, the scorn of which bit far more deeply than the coarse anger of the biggest bully amongst them. "Listen to me, and the first man of you that shows so much as half a sign of disobedience I'll shoot where he sits! Man did I say? There's not the making of a man in the whole crowd of you. Trevelyan yonder is a man, and fights like a man; and you, you blustering refuse, turn tail and run from him if he so much as lifts a finger! Let yourselves be whipped by him and a handful of jackeroos, and come yelping back to your kennels! But mind you this there is another man whom you have to reckon with, and his name is Captain Kelly, let me tell you! So long as I lead you, my word is law, and by James, the first man who dares dispute it will drop before he knows what's hurt him! I'll take the whole crowd of you on single-handed before I'll allow you to upset my plans by playing coward. Now, attend to what I say. We'll have no more of this skulking in cover; we've a man to fight, and we'll fight him in the open. When I give the signal—which will be by this whistle here—every man-jack of you will break for the veranda of the house; and mark you, the quicker you go the less your chance of being hit. Once you've got there, we shall have them cornered. Throw down their barricades and fire through the windows. Don't waste time and get yourselves hurt fooling with the door. Short and sharp's the

word, my men, and there's a fine lump sum in hard cash to split up amongst you; but mind no man lays hand or draws trigger on Trevelyan but myself. He and I have an outstanding score to settle, and if one of you shows the white feather a second time he'll have to deal with me. Trevelyan's men may miss, but I sha'n't. I'll give you twenty minutes—no more—and then I blow the whistle!"

He scowled on them again, glancing from man to man, and each man's eyes dropped before his. Satisfied apparently with the impression he had created, he turned shortly on his heel and walked back to his seat.

Dick had heard every word distinctly, and, with a growing sense of desperation, he saw at a glance that Kelly's plan was a sure one. Two or three, it is true, might be hit in the helter-skelter rush across the open, but once on the verandah the defenders' loopholes would be used against themselves, and they would be shot down like rats in a hole, whilst they would be utterly helpless to reply.

These thoughts flashed through his mind as he lay there behind the tree, his ears strained to catch the slightest sound.

No sooner had Kelly returned to his place than low whisperings and mutterings arose amongst the men. It was clear that they were not a little disheartened by their losses and by the obstinate resistance they had met with. Left to themselves, they would undoubtedly have cleared off; but Kelly's eye was upon them, and Kelly's hand was quick to shoot. There was not a man amongst them dare face him or disobey his orders in his present mood. Yet grumble amongst themselves they did, and that in no measured terms. More than once Dick heard his own name mentioned, accompanied by oaths and curses, for the news had leaked out of his escape and his dash through their line to carry the warning to Trevelyan, and one and all attributed their failure to him, and vowed vengeance on him in terms which made his blood run cold.

Ten long minutes passed in this way. Dick, watching eagerly, saw the men pumping fresh cartridges into their exhausted magazines, whilst those who had been slightly damaged in the previous attack readjusted bandages or dabbed their wounds with handkerchiefs soaked in water from the pannikin.

Suddenly a horse whinnied from way back in the woods, and at the sound an idea sprang up complete in Dick's brain—a daring, desperate venture, but with just that dash of recklessness in it which held out a faint promise of ultimate success.

Noiseless as a cat, he rose to his feet, and still moving carefully in the line of shadow cast by the tree-trunk, retreated step by step till the fire was a mere glowing speck in the distance. Then once more he began making a detour; not so wide a one this time, for every moment was precious. He had only sound to guide him—the occasional muffled sound of a restless horse—but it served his purpose. In less than three minutes he saw large, dark forms moving in front of him, slowly, leisurely, plucking now and again at the scanty, coarse grass, and stumbling occasionally as the forefoot caught in the trailing bridle, an old stockman's dodge to prevent the animals from roaming far afield.

He crept up to the nearest, fondled him a moment, and, catching the bridle, drew it over the beast's head again, and knotted it short; then the next and the next, till he had done the same to a dozen or more of them; and all the while he was on the alert, watching for the man whom he was sure must have been left in charge.

Yet, in spite of all his care, it was the man who saw him first. He was

stooping down to seize another trailing bridle when the fellow spoke to him from a dense patch of shadow not three paces away.

Dick's heart gave a great thump, and he gripped his rifle, but in the darkness the fellow evidently took him for one of the gang.

"How's things, matey?" he whispered hoarsely. "I ain't getting none of the derved fun back here. Cap., he seems mighty riled."

Dick pretended to fumble for a moment with a girth, and grunted in reply.

The man drew nearer.

"What's up?" said he. "Surely you ain't never going to do a dart, and leave the boys? Here, drop that there girth, and give us a straight answer!" he added suspiciously, and took another step forward, laying his hand on the animal's off shoulder.

This was the chance Dick was waiting for. He dropped the girth, slid under the horse's belly, and, grabbing the man's ankles with a quick, plucking motion, jerked them from under him. The fellow came down flat on his back with a dull thud which shook the wind out of him, and before ever he could recover enough breath to shout with, Dick was on top of him, with a hand on his throat. It was no time for niceties. Whipping a heavy, horn-handled knife from the man's belt, he seized it by the blade and brought the hilt down crashing on his adversary's skull. The big muscles quivered and relaxed, and the head rolled over. The man was knocked out, stunned or dead. Dick had no time to think which; the main point was there had been no noise.

The horse threw up its head, trotted away a few paces, and turned round to gaze inquiringly. Dick rose to his feet. He had cut his fingers a little with the blade of the knife, and he flipped the blood angrily from them.

Throwing off his hat and coat, he slipped on those of the unconscious man, and also helped himself to a heavy revolver fully loaded; then he caught the horse, and swung himself into the saddle. The time was getting perilously short. He rounded up as many of the other horses as he could, turning and wheeling them till he had got them bunched, and then drove them cautiously towards the outer fringe of the wood on the far side of the fire. He dare not move fast for fear of stampeding them, and he did not wish to do that yet."

Barely had he got them clear of the thicker trees than Kelly's whistle sounded shrilly—the signal for a general and last attack.

Dick, bending low in his saddle, peered forward under the branches. Immediately before him was the confused, restless knot of horses, already nervous and uneasy—ears back, nostrils quivering. Beyond them again lay the open, moonlit stretch of clearing round the homestead, the house, dark, silent, and menacing, on the right, on the left the irregular, curving sweep of the wood; and even as he watched, from this last came darting a swarm of dark, running figures in groups of twos and threes—swift-moving, scattered, but all converging on the verandah steps.

For half a minute, maybe, Dick waited; then crack! crack! came the lash of the stock-whip amongst the nearest of the horses. Terrified and startled, they sprang forward, the panic spread, and in an instant they stampeded. Dick, driving in his spurs, dashed forward on the right, and turned a few who were trying to break in that direction. Crack! crack! again, and like a whirlwind the maddened animals flashed down straight on to those swiftly-running groups.

Dick stood up in his stirrups, and, throwing away the stock-whip, snatched out the revolver and began firing wildly.

"Police! Police!" he yelled. "Run for your lives!"

The startled bushrangers heard the cry. Checked and turned, they saw the panic-stricken animals sweeping down on them—and there was death beneath those trampling hoofs. They saw, as they thought, the man who had been left in charge of the horses riding for life. For one fleeting instant they hesitated, and then, with one accord, they broke and fled. But most of them were half-way to the house, with no chance of escape from that maddened rush. Screams and curses rose on all sides as man after man went down. Others more lucky reached the woods, and a few of the boldest managed to seize an animal as it stumbled over a fallen body, or reeled and staggered from cannoning against another, and swung themselves anyhow into the saddle in the temporary check.

In less than twenty seconds the whole thing was over—men and horses alike scattered and flying in all directions, the men as panic-stricken as the animals themselves, for they had heard that warning shout of "Police! Police!"

Five were left stretched and stark in the moonlight, two of them never to move again, trampled and broken by that terrible charge. Dick wheeled his horse at the edge of the wood, unable to stop it, and, after galloping down the far side of the clearing, he was at length able to pull up. His hat was gone, the empty revolver had slipped from his grasp, and white and shaken he slid out of the saddle.

For a moment he was so dizzy he could hardly stand. The strain of the effort had been terrific. Time and again he thought he must have gone under. A slip, a stumble, a sudden swerve, and death would have been inevitable. The world seemed to spin round with him, and he felt himself falling. There was a quick step behind him. Instinctively he stretched out his arms, and the next instant he felt himself seized in a powerful grip, and the cold rim of a revolver muzzle was pressed behind his ear.

The shock revived his failing senses. He knew instinctively whose grip it was that held him in a vice, whose quick, light footstep it was that he had heard. He made no movement, no attempt to turn; his strength had not come back to him.

"Well," said he dully, "why don't you fire?"

Kelly laughed harshly.

"I scarcely see how it would help matters if I were to scatter your rather foolish brains over the ground. Besides, I pay my debts in my own way and in my own time, and you have mounted up the score between us pretty heavily."

"I warned Trevelyan, and I've done my best to damage your gang of unhung scoundrels, if that's what you mean. I think I've been fairly successful. They bolted like rabbits—those of them that could."

Again Kelly laughed, but there was an ugly ring in the laughter, and no trace of merriment.

"I have got all those points duly scored up to you, and I sha'n't forget them; but, as I said before, I bide my time. Of course, if I chose, I could shoot you where you stand, but in that case the penalty would be clumsy and inadequate."

"Precisely what I thought when I had you covered at twenty short paces a little way back in the wood there," answered Dick.

Kelly lowered his revolver, though without moving his grip.

"Did you, though?" said he; and there was a faint note of surprise in his voice. "Well, now, listen to me. You may think you've bested me this time. In a way, there's no denying that you have. Those curs were in

such a state of funk they would have run from their own shadows. But my good Mason, don't fancy that this is the end, and take my advice, don't meddle in things which don't concern you, or you'll get hurt. Trevelyan and I are sworn enemies. We—well, never mind the reason—one of us will, to use the native, picturesque phrase, 'die in his boots,' and I rather fancy it will be Trevelyan."

"Mr. Trevelyan is my father's friend, and mine," retorted Dick. "I stand by him. And listen to this! You'd better shoot now, whilst you have the chance; for to-morrow, if I live, I ride to Benalla and join the police, and I'll hunt you down, Ned Kelly, if it takes me five years of life. Your men rough-handled me with their filthy paws, and you stood by and let them do it. I gave you my parole, and you abused it. Now, then, shoot if you like; I'm not afraid." Dick's face was pale and set, but he meant every word he said.

Kelly looked at him with a grim smile.

"To do you justice, I don't think you are," said he; "but you are certainly ingenuous. It's a pity we can't get on together, Mason. There's something refreshing about you that I like. Besides, you're a gentleman, and the quaint part of it is that you can't help liking me, in a way. Well, well; at least we can be enemies frank and square, for I suppose that's about the size of it."

"It is," said Dick shortly.

"Very well, then—here's a challenge for you. You're going to turn policeman. What's the date? The 15th, isn't it? I promise you, on my word of honour, that on the 22nd—a week from to-day—I will hold up the Benalla Bank in broad daylight, and I defy you and all the police in the district to stop me."

"We'll see," said Dick grimly.

Kelly laughed again, released his grip on Dick's arm, and whistled softly. The grey horse came trotting quietly out from the trees behind them. The bushranger swung himself into the saddle.

"I must be off," said he, "for there is the excellent Trevelyan and a couple of his friends who might not have scruples about shooting. The 22nd, then; it's a challenge. Shall we shake hands on it?"

"I refused your hand once before, if I remember rightly," said Dick.

Kelly glanced down at him and drew a glove from his belt.

"Lest we forget!" said he, and flicked Dick smartly across the face with it. The next moment, swaying easily to the grey's movements, he had disappeared amongst the trees.

CHAPTER 14.

Dick Mason Joins the Police Force.

DICK MASON felt his cheek burn where Kelly had flicked it with his glove; the insolence of the action stung him to the quick.

"Benalla on the 22nd," he muttered. "We shall see."

And he turned towards the house, in front of which Mr. Trevelyan, the boy Jack, and a couple of the hands were busy carrying in the fallen bushrangers.

The grey of dawn was just showing in the sky. So busy were they that Dick was almost upon them before they noticed him. Mr. Trevelyan saw him first, and, with an exclamation of pleasure, shook him warmly by the hand.

"It was splendidly done—splendidly done, lad! In the confusion I didn't even know you were missing until you came sweeping by with the horses, and

your hat fell off. It was a mercy it did, too, for I was about to fire. We were just going to send out Jack and one of the hands to search the woods. I was afraid you might have been thrown or damaged. By Jove, you put the fear of death into those fellows! Now, come and bear a hand, like a good chap. We've got four men clipped here and there, and poor McIvor's arm wants looking to; whilst as for these men of Kelly's, we're crowded out by them. I've sent a messenger for a police escort for them and a waggou."

For three long hours Dick worked amongst the wounded, and at last, utterly worn out, he dropped off to sleep on a sofa in the dismantled and half ruined sitting-room.

When he came to himself again, the sun was well overhead. It was mid-day, and the police contingent had arrived to take over the prisoners.

Mr. Trevelyan, McIvor—with his arm in a sling—and the police commissioner were seated at a table, making a meal amidst the wreckage.

Dick refreshed himself with a wash and a change of clothes from McIvor's wardrobe, and joined them.

After it was over, whilst the police officer was busy taking down depositions, Mr. Trevelyan led Dick aside.

"Look here, lad," said he, "I'm no hand at talking, and when I want to thank a man I believe in deeds before words. Now, there's no getting away from the fact that, under Providence, we all of us owe you our lives twice over last night. You're new to the country, of course, and you've got to feel your feet yet, but you've shown that you've got real grit. In any case, I intended to give you an opening, for your father's sake; but now I've got another proposition to make, and that is that you should come in with me as partner. Of course, you'll be under McIvor at first, to learn the work; but you'll soon pick it up, and in time to come you'll be able to take some of the responsibility off my shoulders, and I'll put you down for a third share in the whole concern."

Dick flushed, and tried vainly to express his thanks; but he hesitated. Mr. Trevelyan noticed this, and asked him the reason.

"Well, sir," said Dick, "the truth is, though I'm deeply grateful to you, I—there is something else I mean to do before settling down. This Kelly and I are at daggers drawn. There is a heavy score between us, and I sha'n't rest until I can call quits. He's your enemy, too, sir—that I know. He means to do you mischief if he can."

"He's my bitterest enemy on earth!" said Mr. Trevelyan, with a sigh. "He means to be the death of me if he can. He meant it last night; for I am the one man in the colony who knows his secret. No, I can't tell it even to you; but it is a secret which is at once my shame and his. What is it you propose?"

"I want to join the police," said Dick; "and if you, sir, would put in a good word for me, I—"

"Say no more," interrupted Mr. Trevelyan—"say no more. It's the finest training you could have. Afterwards, you can come back to me. I will keep the offer open for you; and, as for the rest, the commissioner is a great friend of mine, and a word from me will, I fancy, carry some weight. We will go and see him about it now."

And so it came about that when the police contingent rode back to Benalla that night Dick rode with them—not as a prospective trooper, but, thanks to Mr. Trevelyan's recommendation, with the promise of an immediate commission, and an understanding that he was to enter on his new duties at once; and as he rode he told the commissioner of Captain Kelly's challenge.

His senior received the information with a frown.

"On the 22nd, you say. Confound it! There's nothing that fellow doesn't know; he seems to have spies everywhere. As bad luck will have it, the bank will have a large sum in gold and notes on deposit just then. A day or two earlier or later wouldn't have mattered so much. Well, forewarned is forearmed. And so you have actually seen this robbers' Roost, of which there is so much talk?"

"I have," said Dick.

And he described it fully.

"And that is their headquarters—you're sure?"

"Dead certain. But, mind you, after leaving the Burra Burra caves I have no idea of the direction in which the robbers' Roost lies. Kelly and I are fighting this out strictly on the square. I have given him due warning, and he has as good as told me that there'll be bad trouble next time he can lay hands on me."

The commissioner nodded in silence, and they rode forward at a steady pace.

The little town of Benalla was reached by nightfall, and Dick was ordered to get himself a room at the Wallaby saloon, in the main street.

"You'll find us a rough-and-ready lot," said Captain Wyatt, the commissioner. "We're here for use, not ornament. A pair of breeches, a shirt, a good gun, and a sure eye are about all you'll want in the way of uniform yet awhile. Get a good night's rest; you look as though you needed it. I'll look you up about noon. You can kick your heels till then. So long!"

Dick saluted, and rode off to the Wallaby.

He was up bright and early next morning, and sauntering through the town site. It consisted of little more than the single street, in which were the town hall, the bank, some half-dozen saloons, and a few shops. It was quite a new, raw town, which had sprung up, mushroom-like, with surprising rapidity, and as yet the mail-coach was its only connection with the nearest railway.

On his way back he met Captain Wyatt, who took him over to the police barracks, and gave him an outline as to his future duties.

"For the present, however," concluded Wyatt, "I shall put you on the special duty list. That will save you all the ordinary routine work, and enable you to devote all your time to keeping an eye on Kelly & Co. I shall also place two thoroughly good men, who know the country, entirely at your disposal, and I should advise you, if possible, to try and borrow Mr. Trevelyan's boy Jack. He is trustworthy, and has the reputation of being the finest tracker in the district. I have just had a wire from headquarters, by the way. This affair at Trevelyan's has stirred them up with a vengeance, and they have cabled back doubling the reward. They now offer four thousand pounds for Kelly, dead or alive, and they are sending up three detectives for extra duty. If you succeed it'll be no end of a feather in your cap, and you will be a made man throughout the colony. Somehow or another, do you know, I believe you will. Superstition, I suppose. Still, my money is on you all the time. You certainly have special advantages in your favour. You are the only man, so far as I know, not connected with the gang who has seen the inside of the robbers' Roost and lived to tell the tale; and not only that, there isn't one man in a hundred who knows as much of the gang's methods and movements as you do. For instance, I myself have never even had the luck to set eyes on Kelly, though I have been after him this twelve months. I've only got a sort of general description to go by."

As they talked they were strolling back towards Dick's hotel, the Wallaby.

The small street was pretty busy, and small stock-owners, overseers, and station hands were constantly passing and re-passing. Nearly everyone knew Captain Wyatt by sight, and he was constantly nodding or waving his hand to one or other of them.

Presently Dick, chancing to glance ahead, noticed a quaintly dressed, shabby-looking old man coming towards them. He had somewhat the air of a professor. He was clothed in a suit of rusty black, shining at the seams from hard wear, and his long, scanty white locks hung down almost to his shoulders. He carried an enormous baggy cotton umbrella under one arm, and a well-thumbed volume in his right hand, his forefinger between the leaves to mark the place. On his head was a shabby old tall silk hat of a bygone shape, rustier and more seedy even than his coat, and he peered at the passers-by from beneath shaggy grey eyebrows through a pair of old-fashioned, horn-rimmed spectacles of the kind known as goggles.

But, in spite of his somewhat ludicrous appearance, there was a something about him which denoted the scholar and the man of learning. His voice, too, was low, with a trifling hesitation in the speech, but clearly that of an educated man.

He bowed to Wyatt with an old-fashioned grace in reply to the latter's salute, and, blinking at Dick through his goggles, pottered along on his way.

"Rummy old chap!" said Dick. "Who is he? He looks a regular character."

Wyatt laughed.

"Oh, he's one of the pillars of Benalla! You mustn't say a word against him here, or there'll be trouble. He's one of our oldest inhabitants, and we're very proud of him. He came here when the town consisted of some half-dozen houses, and has been here ever since. Betwixt you and me, I think he's a bit of a crank—harmless, you know, but a little soft-headed. His mania is geology. He goes off for weeks at a time prospecting out at the back of beyond. He has a notion that one day he's going to strike it rich; but till then, luckily enough for him, he has sufficient money of his own to live on. He has a nice little house, and a deaf old woman, who looks after him, and now and again he lectures a bit at the town-hall. Dobson's lectures on popular science are quite the rage, and he'd make a bit of money that way if he chose. But he always says that knowledge should be free to all, and refuses to take a penny. I fancy he's only just back from one of his lonely exploring expeditions. I haven't seen him for three weeks or more."

The two of them turned into the lavishly gilt bar of the Wallaby saloon for a sandwich. At the upper end of the room a group of some half-dozen men were standing throwing dice on the counter.

"No end of a tough crowd in here sometimes," cautioned Wyatt, "especially just after the shearing season, when all the extra hands are turned off, and come swarming in with their pockets full of money. That's when we have to keep our eyes open. The place is simply alive with sharpers, swindlers, and worse than; and more often than not the boys, when they catch one, take the law into their own hands and start a 'necktie' party. Of course, we stop it when we can, but often they're one too many for us. Hallo, there's the sheriff! Excuse me! I want a word with him."

And Wyatt darted out through the folding-doors.

Dick, left to his own devices, stood munching his sandwich, and watching the group at the far end of the room. It was soon evident to him that even on that quiet morning there were sharpers about, for, of the six men,

two were evidently fleeing the rest, and notes were quickly transferred to their pockets at each throw of the dice.

Dick watched more closely. One of the two—the taller—seemed strangely familiar to him, and yet he could not tell where he had set eyes on the man before; he had a rough crop of carrot hair and a straggly beard of the same colour. Suddenly he chanced to look up, and his eyes met Dick's fair and square, his jaw dropped, the dice-box fell from his fingers, and he cast a furtive glance over his shoulder. In an instant the recognition was complete. Dick knew his man at last—the eyes had betrayed him. Dick's hands flew to his belt, and he whipped out the Service revolvers which Wyatt had given him only an hour before.

"Hands up!" he cried. "Hands up, Nick Rowan, or I'll let daylight through you!"

There was an oath and a shout of surprise, and men dived right and left for the nearest shelter—under the bar—anywhere, to get out of the line of fire as quickly as possible.

Rowan alone stood rooted to the spot, his hand half-way to his hip, glaring savagely at the covering weapons in Dick's hands.

The bar-keeper behind the counter watched with bulging eyes and open mouth, a half-filled tumbler in one hand, a bottle in the other.

"Hands up! Sharp now!" cried Dick again. "Quick—before I count three! Keep your fingers off that gun!"

Slowly and reluctantly the red-headed man's hands stretched upwards, fingers splayed. He would have dearly loved to risk a swift grab at the weapon in his belt, but Dick's eyes never left his, and he saw that to do so would mean death of the most sudden description.

"Now," said Dick, "take off that wig—take it off, I tell you, and throw it down!"

Off came the shock of red hair, and fluttered to the ground, revealing Nick Rowan's black stubble.

"The beard next!" said Dick.

Rowan plucked at it, but it was gummed on with spirit, and stuck close. He winced as it tore his skin.

But Dick had no mercy.

"Off with it, I tell you!"

With a jerk that made his eyes water, Rowan plucked it away, leaving an angry patch of skin and a few stray tufts here and there. Curious heads peeped furtively from behind posts and corners, at the transformation. Rowan's name was well known by everyone as one of Kelly's toughs.

"Curse you, you cub! Curse you!" growled the bushranger. "If you hadn't got the drop on me, I'd wring your neck with my bare hands!"

"You had a try at that once before, Rowan," said Dick quietly. "It wasn't exactly a success either. You've got some of the marks I gave you still. I suppose you've been down here trying to fix things up for the 22nd, eh? Your little picnic party at the bank? Well, as far as you're concerned, that will be a failure, too—for you're my prisoner!"

Dick took a step forward as he spoke, and at the same instant there came a warning shout and the sharp crack of a revolver from behind the pillar on his right front. It was the bar-keeper who had given the shout, but it was Rowan's confederate who had fired the shot, for which he had been watching his chance. The bullet grazed Dick's ear, drawing blood. He fired sharply twice in reply, and the next moment all was confusion, and firing was indiscriminate.

For so long as the affair was purely a personal one betwixt Dick and

Rowan, by the unwritten laws of the community, it was no man's business to interfere—in fact, such interference would have been resented as contrary to fair play; but directly Rowan's confederate broke those unwritten rules by firing at Dick, and, above all, by firing from behind a post, the more law-abiding citizens of Benalla felt justified in joining in also—with the result that each man, weapon in hand, was doing his best, and using such shelter as he could.

Even the bar-keeper had snatched a heavy calibre revolver from its hook behind the counter, and was taking his part in the fray. Dick, seeing how matters stood, leapt for the shelter of a pillar near the entrance—and only just in time to save himself, for Rowan, profiting by the confusion, had snatched his gun from his belt, and was firing rapidly and carefully, backing meanwhile, and feeling for the side entrance behind him with his left hand.

Dick, unwilling to let him escape, and at the same time not wishing to kill outright, aimed for his legs, in the hope of disabling him. The bullet sped true, but at the instant Dick pulled the trigger, Rowan pushed back the swing-door with his elbow, and darted through. A splintering white groove showed where the bullet struck the woodwork, and, a second later, Rowan's confederate, emptying his weapon at hazard in one final, furious discharge, vanished after him in the midst of the smoke.

"Quick, boys!" yelled Dick. "Don't let 'em get away!" And he charged straight for the door, the bar-keeper and a couple more at his heels. Rowan and his companion, who had their horses tethered in the lane at the back—possibly prepared for some such emergency, were already in the saddle, and urging the animals along with whip and spur. Three shots were fired after them, but without result, and the next instant they had vanished round the corner.

"Back to the front!" shouted the bar-keeper. "The lane sways into the High Street just beyond! We'll have 'em yet!"

The baffled pursuers darted through the saloon, and out into the dusty road—two rapidly moving specks were flying along the track three hundred yards away—just as Captain Wyatt and a couple of local ranch-owners came cantering up to the door, followed by a mounted policeman.

"What's up? What's the trouble?" asked Wyatt.

"Rowan!" gasped Dick. "Rowan and another of the gang; there they go!" And he pointed up the road.

Wyatt gave a shout of surprise.

"By Jove, we'll have 'em this time! You, Donovan"—to the trooper—"dismount! Off with you, man! Mr. Mason will take your horse! Now, gentlemen, come along, and don't spare the spur—we must ride for it—they're not more than a quarter of a mile ahead!"

The little party of four dashed forward, scattering the crowd which had collected right and left. Indeed, they narrowly escaped riding down the old geologist, Dobson, who had come pottering out, alarmed at the uproar. As it was, they were compelled to rein up as best they could, for the old gentleman became confused in the rush and scurry—and the momentary check cost them another couple of hundred yards.

Wyatt swore lustily, but in a couple of minutes they were clear of the town, and out in the open, sitting down to ride in stern earnest.

Behind them they could hear the thud-thud of other horses, as men, hearing the news, hurried forward to join in the pursuit, and even the sheriff himself, a tough, wiry, little man—a light-weight, magnificently mounted, came galloping up behind them.

So far, the robbers had, if anything, been gaining slightly on their pursuers, for their horses had already warmed to the work, but, as minute after minute passed, they failed to increase their lead further, and at a point, where they had to breast a steepish incline, they actually lost ground. Dick, riding neck and neck with the sheriff and Wyatt, saw Rowan in the saddle and glanced back over his shoulder as he topped the rise. He shook his fist at them in defiance, and a yell of wild triumph came faintly to them on the rush of the wind.

Four hundred yards more, and they topped the incline. Before the country lay clear and open, a rough, rugged expanse, fringed in far distance by a low-lying line of bush. Once let the men gain that, pursuit would be hopeless. Half a mile in that dense scrub, and no man but a black tracker would be able to follow the trail.

The robbers knew this well, and were evidently making every effort to gain it. It lay, perhaps, some three miles away from them at the present point.

"If they've got sense, they'll separate," panted Wyatt. And even the words left his lips, Rowan swung off to the left at an angle to the track, whilst his fellow, after holding on for another couple of hundred yards, began to bear away to the right.

"I'll take Rowan," yelled Wyatt. "You, Mason, and the sheriff and head off the other fellow—he's better mounted and lighter!"

Dick nodded, and the little sheriff gave a grunt of acquiescence as the pair of them drew gradually ahead of the rest of the party.

The track lay straight ahead of them. To the right was broken, boggy ground, with here and there patches of low, stunted scrub, and at a point in the low bush line, some half a mile to the right of the track, rose a clump of tall trees. It was for these last that the robbers were heading.

"Keep right along, and then work in gradually!" cried the sheriff. "Cut across country, and try and head him off. I think my mare has the heels of him." And, driving in his spurs, he lifted the animal with tremendous bound clear over a wide patch of scrub, and raced away across the broken ground on a long slant.

The bushranger was now some two miles from the tree clump, the sheriff maybe, three hundred yards behind, but he was travelling a more direct line, and it soon became evident that he was covering the ground fast.

The fugitive, hearing the pursuit closing up on him, risked a backward glance under his arm, and saw his danger. The sheriff would reach the trees as soon, if not sooner, than himself—and he edged back a little towards the track—but here, again, Dick was coming up hand over hand on the troop-horse, a powerful animal, with a big stride, racing along, stretched, and body low, with all the advantage of better going. The sheriff was between the two lines, and all three riders were pretty well abreast.

Both the sheriff and Dick would inevitably lose ground in closing up on him, as to head him off, but they were forging gradually ahead, and it was touch and go—a race for life. He risked another swift, backward glance—a fraction of a second merely—but it proved his undoing—for, in turning, he involuntarily tightened the reins, his horse, checked and hampered by its stride, shortened, stumbled, and fell heavily. The man threw him clear with the skill of a first-class rider, and was on his feet in an instant, weapon in hand, and turned to face his pursuers.

The sheriff was momentarily delayed by a piece of unusually difficult ground, and it was Dick, after all, who came up to him first.

"Hands up!" he cried. "You are my prisoner!" The man, white-faced and desperate, raised his weapon. Dick's own revolver was empty, but he never stopped to think of the risk.

"Keep back, or I'll drop you sure, you police spy!" said the bushranger. Dick kept his eye steadily on the man, and rode forward. He saw the unwavering black rim of the muzzle—the skin of the man's hand whitened on the knuckles as he gripped to press the trigger more surely, and then, Dick as thought, he hurled his own empty weapon straight at the man's head. The movement was so swift, so utterly unexpected, that the fellow was disconcerted—his aim was spoilt; there was a crack, a spurt of flame, and the next instant Dick had wheeled straight at the man and ridden down.

"Pluckily done, sir," shouted the sheriff, galloping up—"most plucky! I was afraid the skunk had bagged you for the moment, and I couldn't get a bead on him over that last stretch."

He slid from the saddle and Dick did the same. The man lay on his back senseless—he was bleeding at the nose from the shock of the concussion, and his left arm was doubled under him in a way which showed the bone had snapped.

From far away over the undulating stretch of ground the sound of half a dozen shots in quick succession drifted faintly towards them. They were answered by a single shot in reply. Rowan, craftier and more lucky than his companion, had gained the bush and escaped.

By the time Dick and the sheriff had managed to fix up a temporary splint for the man's arm, and had brought him round, Captain Wyatt and the rest came galloping up.

"We lost our man, worse luck," said the commissioner. "It was touch and go, but he was too fast for us, and knew the ground well. I'm glad you bagged your chap. Put him on a horse there, some of you—he, at any rate, shall sleep safe in gaol."

Half an hour later the little troop re-entered Benalla with their prisoner in their midst.

CHAPTER 15. Kelly's Wager.

NOT a bad start for you, Mason—eh?" said Wyatt, as they rode side by side down the main street. "One of Kelly's gang a prisoner on your first day in the force. I'll mention it in my report, you may be sure. Hallo, Tom, what do you want?"

The bar-keeper of the Wallaby was approaching them, holding an envelope in his hand.

Note for Mr. Mason, captain," replied the man. "Feller came into saloon and left it twenty minutes back."

Dick took the note and opened it, thinking perhaps that it might be from Mr. Trevelyan, but as he read the contents his eyes opened wide with amazement, and finally he threw back his head with a great shout of laughter.

"Well I'm hanged!" said he. "Of all the brazen impudence, this beats attention. Upon my word, it's a thousand pities the man's such a lackey. Listen to this:

"Captain Kelly's compliments to Mr. Mason, and he begs to remind him the arrangement for the 22nd holds good. The hour fixed for the

entertainment is three sharp. Captain Kelly requests the honour of Mason's company. Should Mr. Mason be inclined to risk a small amount on the event, Captain Kelly will be glad to lay him two to one in favour—and encloses a ten-pound note. In the probable event of Mr. Mason's loss, his stake, Captain Kelly will collect the amount in person on that date.

Wyatt stared, took the paper from Dick's hands, read it and re-read it. Then the two laughed.

"Hang it all, Mason, the chap can't be as black as he is painted. He's a good sportsman, blackguard or no. They say he was a gentleman and upon my soul I believe it!"

"I am sure of it," said Dick, "though he did play me a dirty trick. I'll take his bet anyway, and we'll see who wins."

Suddenly Wyatt turned to the barkeeper.

"What kind of man was it who brought this, Tom?" he asked.

The barkeeper shook his head.

"Couldn't say, captain. Or'nary kind of loafer. Said a man give a dollar to bring it. So he done it. Shouldn't know him again, any more."

During the ensuing few days, both the commissioner and Dick were on their eyes in work, and they neglected no precautions which seemed to be necessary for safeguarding the bank.

It was a curious fact that no one thought for a moment of trusting Kelly's threat as a mere piece of bluster. Throughout the length and breadth of the country he held the reputation of being a man who never promised what he did not perform, and even the authorities in Melbourne were seriously perturbed.

It was necessary for business purposes to send up a large consignment of specie and notes on the day before Kelly's proposed attempt. This was unavoidable, as there were heavy payments to meet on the day, and the ordinary resources of the bank would have been insufficient. This being so, special steps were taken to assure its safety.

On the evening of the 21st a gold-waggon drove up to the door of the building in the High Street, accompanied by an escort of twelve police troopers, and a specially authorised official from the head office at Melbourne, who was to take over the management temporarily—Mr. Raynor, a portly old gentleman in a white waistcoat, with gold-rimmed glasses, and a large expanse of heavy gold watchchain, grave, steady speech, and business-like.

The money was transferred to the bank safe, and the troopers encamped on a piece of waste ground just outside the town. Captain Wyatt had already been informed of their coming by wire, and had made this arrangement, the Benalla barracks being incapable of holding more than the ordinary complement of half a dozen.

Mr. Raynor shared the quarters of the local manager over the bank itself.

By nine o'clock next morning, when the doors opened for the business of the day, every arrangement was complete.

Mr. Raynor, who was responsible for everything, had discussed the matter with Captain Wyatt and Dick overnight.

The six Benalla troopers, whose faces were, of course, known to the neighbourhood, were picketed at the south end of High Street, six of the draft contingent at the north end, the remaining six in the rear, which ran at the back of the bank itself. In this way every approach to the bank was guarded.

Mr. Raynor, who ostentatiously displayed a bulky-looking revolver, mounted guard in the manager's office, accompanied by the local manager. The two clerks, each also armed, were at their posts in the outer office. Dick, for further security, was to remain in the building; and Captain Wyatt was in command of the troopers, ready to issue orders when necessary.

The little town was agog with excitement and curiosity. Some of the more timid inhabitants had even left their houses for a few days, fearing a riot. Amongst them was Mr. Dobson, the old geologist. Those who remained kept their doors securely locked, and prepared to enjoy the fun from the safer position of the upper windows. A public notice had been issued to the effect that the bank would close its doors to customers at one o'clock on that day, instead of the usual hour of four.

This was done accordingly, and, barring the troopers, not a living soul was to be seen in the streets, though from every window on the first floors two or three anxious heads were thrust, and the Wallaby saloon did a roaring trade among the more daring of the sightseers. Benalla was practically in a state of siege.

At half-past one, Mr. Raynor, the manager, the two clerks, and Dick, partook of a hasty meal in the inner office, two of the troopers from the back being called in to mount guard meanwhile. At two o'clock Dick and the clerks returned to the outer office, leaving the two seniors to discuss a bottle of port.

The two policemen still kept guard, seated motionless on a bench, one each side of the main entrance, stolid, impassive, but alert. The office clock ticked drowsily along as the minutes sped by; the half-hour struck, and the minute-hand began crawling leisurely up the staring white dial—a quarter to, and still nothing.

Dick began to get restless and apprehensive; the stillness and the lack of movement and bustle got on his nerves. Five minutes to—three minutes—one minute.

The door of the inner office opened, and Mr. Raynor, swinging a bunch of keys in his hand, beckoned to Dick.

Glad of any excuse to be up and doing, and so relieve the strain of waiting, Dick opened the wicket of the counter, and hurried to the inner sanctum. He flung open the door, which had been left ajar, and the first thing which his eyes fell on was the body of the local manager, stretched out on the floor, drunk or drugged.

He stared blankly, and at that instant the clock in the outer office struck three. He was conscious of a swift, lightning-like movement, a snake-like coil of rope hovered above his head, was jerked tightly, and he was thrown violently to the floor, his arms pinioned to his side, helpless. He heard the third stroke of the clock in the outer office, followed by a quiet chuckle.

Something seemed to have gone amiss with Mr. Raynor's hair, he thought in a confused way, and then he distinctly heard Kelly's voice saying quietly:

"I'll trouble you for that five, Mason! Lie still, you fool, or you're a dead man!"

CHAPTER 16.

The Bank Robbed.

" 'LL trouble you for that fiver!"

Dick, bound, helpless on his back on the floor, dazed by the suddenness of the attack from a wholly unsuspected quarter, heard the words and Kelly's mocking laugh as one in a dream. Mr. Raynor, the respectable bank-manager, the trusted emissary of the head office in Melbourne, had vanished. The iron-grey hair, with the bald patch on top had given place to Kelly's own smoothly-parted, sleek, dark head. The gold-rimmed spectacles were swept aside, and Kelly's keen, dark eyes stared mocking down at him. The grizzled fringe of beard on the chin came away, disclosing Kelly's square-cut jaw. Only the heavy, bowed shoulders the expansive white waistcoat, and the official black broadcloth coat, the outward sign of commercial respectability, remained.

Dick watched the transformation with wondering eyes, and then, with an effort, collecting his scattered senses, he opened his mouth to shout and give the alarm. It was that which made Kelly end his sentence with the threat, "Lie still, you fool, or you're a dead man!" The words, too, were followed quickly by action, for Dick, bitterly ashamed of the trap into which he had fallen, would have risked death a hundred times if by doing he could have ensured Kelly's detection and capture, and this the bushranger's quick eye noted.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he flung himself on Dick and rammed a handkerchief into his mouth, effectually gagging him. Then he deftly and quickly ran the loose end of the rope over Dick's way and that till he was trussed up as securely as a spring chicken.

Meanwhile, the local manager lay on the floor, drugged and senseless, not likely to recover consciousness for hours to come. Poor man! He had merely drunk a single glass of port with his imagined superior, but it had proved sufficient, and the bank keys were jingling in Kelly's hand.

In the outer office things had gone much the same on the stroke of three. The moment Dick's back was turned, the two troopers by the door had risen like two automatons, and presented two drawn weapons at the heads of the clerks. They, poor fellows, were no heroes, but just ordinary, underpaid, hard-worked servants of the bank. Wisely, they made no resistance and in less than two minutes they also were bound and gagged.

Mr. Raynor—or, rather, Kelly—came out with the keys, and unlocked the big safe. Each trooper produced a pair of stout canvas sacks for behind his tunic, into which were quickly shovelled gold and notes; if they would hold no more. Burdened with these, they passed out quietly by the back door, and were immediately replaced by two more, also with sacks. The filling process was repeated, and they in turn gave place to the last two of the little troop of six who had been stationed at the back.

It was clear that every detail had been most carefully thought out, and Dick, gagged and helpless, watched the smooth execution of the plan fuming and choking with shame and anger. He remembered how Kelly himself had suggested, in the character of Mr. Raynor, that on no account and for no excuse whatever, unless actually attacked, should the patrols the north and south end of the High Street move from their posts until the clock struck four. That meant that a clear hour must elapse at least before the truth was discovered.

Meanwhile, the six sham troopers, each with two heavy sacks of gold and notes slung either side of his saddle, were slowly filing away through the

ne at the back, making for the open country and the bush trails to the northward. There was not a soul to see them go, for all eyes were concentrated on the main street at one end or other of which Kelly's men were expected to appear.

Even had some chance person observed them they would have aroused suspicion, and would merely be supposed to be carrying out some order to make a reconnaissance. Kelly, having seen them safely off, and noted that his grey horse, carefully faked, was tethered and waiting for him, closed the back door, and, seating himself at the inner office at the manager's desk, began writing industriously on a large sheet of double-bleed paper. Now and again he broke off to read what he had written, and chuckle over it. It was just striking the quarter when he threw down his pen finally, with a sigh of satisfaction. Then he began rummaging the desk-drawers, but apparently was unable to find what he wanted, and turned to Mason.

"I say, where the deuce do they keep the wafers in this place? Oh, I've got; you can't speak! Well, then, listen to this. I think it's rather neat."

He held up the big sheet of paper, and read:

"To the good people of Benalla—

"NOTICE.

"Captain Kelly wishes to thank the citizens of this town for the kind and cordial reception afforded him. He and his men are much flattered by the preparations made to welcome them. He deeply regrets that his notice is of necessity so brief; he has, however, availed himself of the opportunity to temporarily depose the bank-manager, and to remove the contents of the safe, as per yesterday's gold-mail, to a place of greater security. On his journey to this prosperous and flourishing centre of civilisation he witnessed a curious phenomenon of unusual interest. Fifteen miles back along the trail, at a point known as Burnt Ridge, a bridle-track bears off to the right. Half a mile along this, bound to a tree, he came upon a splendid elderly gentleman, in a disgraceful, almost indecent, state of rhabdism. To be brief, he was simply and airily clad in a flannel shirt, and his language when spoken to was not such as is customary in polite society. Ranged round him in a semicircle were twelve unscrupulous men, whose language was beyond description. They asseverated, with many necessary oaths, that they were troopers in Her Majesty's police force. Each was bound neatly and separately. Each also was attired in a flannel shirt, simple and unpretentious. Four of them, Captain Kelly regretted to see, were damaged. He recommends them to the hospitality of Benalla, and its noble citizens, in the assurance that they will meet with a hearty welcome."

Calculated to meet the case—eh, Mason?" said Kelly. "I wonder where those confounded wafers are? I want to stick this on the bank door in style. Ah, by Jove, here's a box full!"

He writhed and tugged at his bonds in impotent rage, but to no purpose. Kelly gravely adjusted his wig and glasses once more, brightened his beard, and became again the pompous Mr. Raynor.

At the stroke of four he flung open the bank door, and affixed the notice. Several curious heads were stretched from the windows across the road, and Captain Wyatt came cantering up.

"Well, Mr. Raynor," he called out, "the blackguards have the better of it, and fought shy of— Hallo! What the deuce—"

His eye fell on the notice, and he bent forward to read it.

"The blackguards have not thought better of it," said the pseudo Raynor with a bow. "The bank was held up at three precisely. Permit me to introduce myself. Captain Kelly, at your service!"

Wyatt groaned out an oath and a "Tricked, by James!" and, whirling out a revolver, fired at Kelly twice point-blank. A woman in an open window screamed, and everyone looked to see the man drop. The bullet had hit him fair in the chest, the range a short five paces. But, to utter amazement, Kelly only laughed, waved his hand, and, with a long, Wyatt!" slammed the door to and dropped the bolt.

Quick as lightning he darted across to where Dick lay, and plunged his hand into his pocket. He pulled out a roll of notes and selected two, his own for ten pounds and another for five. The rest he tossed back.

"That makes us quits, I fancy," he said coolly, "and I'm sure you can't complain that I haven't given you a run for your money."

The next second he was out of the back door, had swung himself into the grey, and was cantering leisurely northward. The main street was now in an uproar, and a dense crowd began to collect before the bank. Suddenly Kelly cantered into sight again, three hundred yards away, turned in his saddle with another wave of the hand.

"After him, men!" roared, Wyatt, trying to force his horse through the crowd, but both he and the six Benalla police were now cut off from the fugitive by a dense mass of people. Furious and in despair, Wyatt turned himself in his stirrups, and shouted to the six men guarding the north approach:

"After that man there! Take him, alive or dead! It's Kelly! you dolts! Ride like blazes!"

The troopers wheeled and gave chase; in less than a quarter of an hour they were up with him, for Kelly never quickened beyond an easy, canter.

"They've got him!" yelled someone. "They've got him, sure!"

But Wyatt, sitting his horse in the midst of the crowd, bit his lip, and said:

"Why didn't the man ride for it? Kelly was never a man to allow himself to be taken tamely without a fight."

The troopers were up with him—all round him; but there were no signs of a struggle. Wyatt waited; then "Tricked again, by thunder!" he roared, bringing his fist down with a thump on his knee.

"They're his own men rigged out as troopers! Look! They've fallen behind him, and we're done! Here, out of the way, there—you, Do Sturgis! Clear the crowd back! Clear them out, I say!" And, under the increased pressure of the struggling mob, the bank doors burst open, revealing to their horrified gaze the safe, open and empty, three figures, and the manager drugged and senseless. Several men rushed forward, Dick and cut him loose, whilst another outside read aloud Kelly's name amidst jeering, heaving, and roars of laughter from such as had been to lose.

So great was the confusion that immediate pursuit was out of the question. A short investigation was held, and messages flashed along

wires giving the news, and demanding picked black trackers to be sent on at once, whilst police from Euroa, Wangaratta, Breckworth, and Myrtleford were ordered to hold themselves in readiness for orders. In the midst of the hubbub, Mr. Trevelyan rode into the town, accompanied by McIvor, with his arm in a sling, and Jack the black boy. It was discovered that, in all, the bank's loss amounted to over fifteen thousand pounds, and something very like a panic ensued.

Dick caught sight of Mr. Trevelyan, and immediately made his way towards him; and shortly he, Wyatt, and the ranch owner were closeted in a small private room at the back of the Wallaby saloon. Their object was to discuss the possibility of an immediate following-up of the gang—not so much with the idea of capture, for they had not an adequate force, but in the hope of tracking them and locating them, till an expedition could be despatched of sufficient size to deal with the gang as a whole.

"If," said Dick, "Mr. Trevelyan could spare us Jack as a tracker, I don't see why he, I, and Donovan shouldn't light right out, and then we could keep in touch with you here at headquarters, sir."

Captain Wyatt laughed.

"Don't you be so greedy, my son. Why should you have all the fun, and leave me out in the cold? I'm your superior officer, remember, and it's just like your impudence to suggest that I should stay here to kick my heels. Not a bit of it! If anyone goes, I go. We've all been nicely fooled over this, and I'm just itching to get to grips with Kelly. I tell you, I sha'n't feel comfortable till I do!"

"For my part," joined in Mr. Trevelyan, "you can take Jack and welcome. I'd give a good deal to come with you myself, for, as Mason here knows, I've got a score to pay on my own account. But now McIvor's knocked up, I must stay at home and look after things for a while."

Captain Wyatt looked up suddenly.

"How soon can you start, Mason?"

"Ten minutes, sir," said Dick.

Mr. Trevelyan's eyes twinkled.

"By the way, you remember that splendid horse you rode the night you brought us warning of the raid?"

"What, Caesar! Kelly's own horse, Caesar!"

"That same. I had him rounded up, and brought him in with me, in case you might want him. It seems to me it would be a bit of poetical justice to ride Kelly down on his own cattle—if it is his own, by the way, which I very much doubt."

"It's the finest horse going barring his favourite grey," cried Dick, "and I'm hanged if I won't ride him!"

"Good!" said Wyatt. "Off with you! Tell Donovan to be round here in ten minutes with my horse. Hurry up the black boy, and have three days' field rations put up for the four of us."

Half an hour later the small party was well on its way. A sergeant and the remaining four policemen were left in charge of the town, and with Jack on a small, wiry horse of Mr. Trevelyan's leading them, they were following hot-foot on the robber's trail.

By Dick's advice they neglected that of Kelly himself and the men who went with him, and stuck to the route followed by the six sham troopers who had carried off the results of the bank robbery.

For, to begin with, these men, heavily laden, would travel more leisurely; and, secondly, their tracks would be easier to follow.

However, they had not allowed sufficiently for Kelly's cunning and knowledge of tracking. Ten miles out the line they were following was crossed, recrossed, and almost obliterated by the second party under Kelly, who had made his men industriously "blind" the trail.

A white man would have been hopelessly at sea in no time, but Jack had not earned his reputation as a track-reader for nothing. He had picked a horse belonging to the treasure party with two nails missing from "near fore shoe, and with this to guide him, he was never at fault, but read the tangled maze of hoofprints as an ordinary man might read a page printed words.

"Here him make 'um plenty scatter," he said at one spot, pointing. "One—two—seven ones—all in a breakaway to bush, but no longa sa ways. Other six keep longa track yonder. See him near shoe?"

Dick scanned the ground carefully, but could make nothing of it. However, Jackie seemed perfectly pleased and satisfied with himself, and under his guidance they swung off to the left, cantering sometimes as much as a couple of miles without the black boy doing more than take an occasional glance at the track. Twice they came across stretches of rock-strewn ground and each time Jackie picked up the trail again on the far side without hitch.

Suddenly Dick reined alongside Wyatt's horse.

"I've got it!" he said in a whisper. "You remember what I told you my first ride to Kelly's roost, after the holding up of the Burnt Ridge coach?"

"Yes. What then?"

"Why, we were compelled to break the journey at the Burra-Burra Cave and from there it was a good day's ride across broken country to journey's end. Now, these chaps who looted the bank must have a pretty good weight of specie to carry, and their horses will tire. Even supposing they're provided with remounts, they won't be fit to stand a long chase. I'll bet you what you like they'll head for the caves; lie up there, perhaps, meet others of the gang, who will form a relief, and then off again to robbers' Roost. Now, I haven't the vaguest notion as to which direction the Roost lies in from the caves. All I know is, that it is a full day's ride. But Jackie here is sure to know the lie of the caves themselves. There plenty of black fellows there—friendly to Kelly, it's true. I think, though that once there we should pick up the trail again for certain, and it might save time."

Wyatt called the black boy to his side.

"You know dem Burra-Burra Cave? Heap plenty black debbil sit down longa there."

Jackie scratched his head, and looked a little uneasy.

"Yes, me know 'um, cap.; but black fellow him mighty bad. Him let you pass longa there, you kinny?"

Wyatt nodded.

"Yes, I understand, you black imp! But which way do they lie from here?"

Jackie lifted his snub-nose and sniffed up wind for a moment, then moved his outstretched arm across the horizon in a wide sweep, brought it to sudden stop, pointing as nearly as they could guess north-west.

"Cave him lib longa dere, cap.," he said.

"And that is the direction the trail is curving into," said Wyatt. "Mason, my son, that head of yours might be more ornamental, but, up-

my word, I believe you suffer from occasional glimpses of sanity. We'll make a line for the caves, and chance it."

The little party swung off the trail and headed away on a straight line of their own.

"If this turns up trumps," said Wyatt in a low voice to Dick, "we should cut their tracks again somewhere this side of Burra-Burra, and we shall save several miles in distance. If it fails, we can always hark back along our own route and start afresh. Get along there, and give that four-legged scarecrow of yours its head!"

Jackie turned, with a flash of white teeth, and with a wave of the hand he drove his wiry little beast forward.

Darkness came down upon them suddenly, and found them still pressing along at a great pace. At nine, by Captain Wyatt's watch, a halt was called, and they off-saddled for an hour so as to give the horses a good breather and their tired riders time to enjoy a pannikin of tea and a good square meal, for they had no means of guessing when they might get another.

By ten o'clock they were off once more, and held along on a bee-line till nearly an hour after midnight.

Taking advantage of a steep rise, up which the horses were allowed to walk, Dick filled his pipe, and was about to light it. Jackie, who happened to be riding next him at the time, instantly stretched out his arm and arrested Dick's hand, at the same time shaking his head violently.

"Him no good do that," he whispered. "Black fellow he not very far; he 'mell 'im. Then he come crawl, crawl longa scrub, and—phoo!—spear him come all a time. You no smoke just longa yet. Jackie, he ride on first, make look, see?"

Dick nodded, and thrust his pipe back in his pocket, whilst Jackie, after a word to Wyatt, vanished noiselessly into the darkness ahead. The wind had shifted round with the sunset, and was now blowing directly behind them—a great disadvantage, but one which could not be helped.

The three white men rode anxiously forward, peering about them on all sides, for the Burra-Burra blacks were, as they knew, Kelly's spies, and at any moment some of the gang, warned of their approach, might take them by surprise amidst the dense scrub through which they were passing.

Presently Dick gave a low cry of recognition. They were on the top of a considerable slope, and far away ahead of him he could just dimly make out the vast, precipitous, isolated rock which marked the site of the caves. It was, as near as he could guess, some four to five miles distant; but its shape was unmistakable, rising, as it did, grand and solitary from amidst a sea of dense scrub.

He had scarcely distinguished it when Jackie came hurrying back, not riding in the truc, reckless black boy fashion, but walking carefully with soft tread, and leading his mount.

"Me seen plenty black fellow," he whispered, laying his hand on Wyatt's saddle. "Him hold big coroboree, and him sit down longa there—two-three hundred. 'Nother black boy—him talk, and talk wild talk to them; then they go away and make war-paint. Him no good, I thinka. We no pass onga there. Scrub very thick."

"Rubbish!" said Wyatt. "I'm not going to be scared off by a handful of black boys and gins. They all know a trooper's uniform when they see one, and have a very healthy respect for it. They'll bolt like rabbits when they see us. Still, we'd better be prepared for trouble in case of accidents.

Donovan, is your carbine-magazine charged? Good! And your revolver? And you've got plenty of spare shells, Mason? That's right. Well, keep 'em in a handy pocket. It's better than any bandolier, and— Heave! and earth, what's the imp been up to?"

The exclamation was due to the fact that he had suddenly caught sight of Jackie's face. With a few daubs of paint, of which he always carried a secret store, Jackie had transformed himself into a diabolical a looking specimen as could well be imagined. Cheeks, forehead, and chin were liberally smeared with alternate streaks of white and vermilion, giving his usually cheerful face a most bloodthirsty aspect, and, to round it off, he began crooning to himself some strange, long-forgotten, tribal war-song.

For a moment they were all inclined to roar with laughter; but Wyatt, who knew a good deal of the aborigines and their ways, became suddenly grave.

"I don't quite like it," he confided to Dick. "I know these fellows pretty well, and they never put on war-paint unless they mean serious business—generally a fight to the death. I'm afraid, after all, that perhaps Jackie was right, and that we should do better to ride round in a bit of a detour instead of pushing straight ahead. I don't quite catch on to that bit about the black fellows speechifying to the others and stirring them up. It looks to me like mischief."

Donovan also, a man of considerable experience, was obviously ill at ease. He rode with his carbine ready on the crook of his arm, and scanned the scrub on either side of him intently.

"They had barely traversed another half-mile before Jackie, who was striding, checked suddenly and held up his hand. Then noiselessly sliding from the saddle, he crept forward and disappeared from view.

In a couple of minutes the black tracker was back again.

"Black fellow all round," he whispered. "Heap, plenty black fellow Him creep through scrub." And he pointed with outstretched finger. "Him very bad man. Him mean kill and kill, but first he creep a longa round."

"By Jove," said Wyatt in low tones, "they mean to surround us, and in this scrub they can get right up before we can see to shoot! We must break back for a piece of open ground; we sha'n't stand a chance here. Back with you! You first, Donovan, and don't spare the horses. A little noise more or less won't matter now they know we're here."

The little party wheeled and started off at a gallop. A little way back along the trail there was a patch of thin bush, and it was this spot that Wyatt determined to make a stand in. Already they could hear ominous rustling and noises in the dense growth on either side of them, and they rode for all they were worth. They reached the opening in the nick of time. A little to the right of it was an isolated rocky boulder. Throwing themselves off their horses, they got their backs against it just as the first shower of spears came hurtling through the air. It was very dark, and there was no moon, and for the moment it was impossible to discover their assailants' whereabouts.

Dick, clutching his rifle, peered forward, trying to penetrate the gloom and mistrusting each ugly dark bush which might shelter a hidden black. The spears so far had fallen short, but soon one or two, and sometimes half a dozen at a time came whizzing past him and splintered against the rock behind.

As his sight got more accustomed to the faint light he was able now and again to catch a glimpse of a pair of glistening eyeballs, but so quick

stealthily were their movements that it was almost impossible to get in a snapshot. Donovan, who was next him, plucked his sleeve.

Look at the eyes of them, sorr, the nasty, crawling brutes!" And as he spoke he lifted his carbine and fired.

There was a scream and a shriek of pain, and a dark object, which Dick taken to be a patch of scrub, suddenly sprang into the air and fell.

Wan," said Donovan, coolly pumping in a new cartridge.

Then Wyatt fired, and almost simultaneously Jackie, who, for a black was a remarkably good shot.

In a minute the four rifles were spitting venomously, and cries and yells all sides proclaimed that they were doing good execution. Dick got a graze on the ribs, and one of the unfortunate horses suddenly flung its head and dashed off wildly into the darkness with one of the slender spears hanging from its shoulder.

Native fighting is much the same all the world over. Foiled in their attack and losing men rapidly, the blacks drew off a little. No native considers an expensive victory as worth the cost. A surprise, a cheerful rush and quick slaughter is what they like, lacking the grit to stand long under punishing fire.

They're beat!" cried Dick. "We've knocked the stuffing out of them the time!" And he dropped his hand from the heated rifle-barrel.

They'll be at us again, sorr," said Donovan warningly. "Kape yer eyes med for quick shooting, or ye'll be capering round with the bizness end spear in yer innards."

His words were hardly out of his mouth, when from the bush beyond came the sound of a weird, eerie, droning chant in a minor key, which swelled into a roar of defiance, dying away again into a plaintive wailing, only to swell out once more.

"Twill be a bizness trip this time, and no error, sorr," said Donovan. He will be surprised if we're not turned into pincushions before the hour; the war song of the tribe, the nasty thune they're howling. There will be some mortal strong reason for 'em to risk another scrap so soon; mainly they'd have held off till dawn. I'm doubting there's some shievious beggar busy twisting the tails of them."

As if to prove the truth of his surmise, the war chant came to a sudden end in one last defiant shout, and on every side the bush swarmed with dark, lithe, almost naked figures charging forward on the devoted little spears, with heads lowered, leaping, bounding over the low scrub bushes, carrying a bundle of thin, throwing spears and the short, stout-tipped, broad-bladed stabbing weapon for close quarters. At their head came a wild, ragged figure on horseback.

Spider, by James!" yelled Dick; and raised his rifle.

The tracker threw himself on one side till he almost disappeared behind his horse, and the bullet flew wide.

A terrific shower of spears answered the shot, and Captain Wyatt staggered and fell against the rock, transfixed in two places.

"Keep it up, lads! Keep it up!" he cried; and then, with a groan added: "I'm done for!" and sank to the ground.

Dick emptied his magazine into the thickest of the crowd, and, lea Donovan and Jackie to hold them off for a minute or two as best could, bent over Wyatt anxiously.

"How is it, old man—bad?" he asked.

Captain Wyatt set his teeth and tried to repress a groan.

"I've one in my right side here, and another through my leg. mind about me. Ride for it, you three! You may be able to through; don't worry over me, I'm done!"

"Shut up!" said Dick gruffly.

"I'm your superior officer, and I order you to do so, Mason!"

"You're my patient; I'm a doctor, and if you don't dry up I'll you a bad time of it," answered Dick. "Gently; now slip your arm over my shoulder—so! That's it!"

Very carefully he raised the wounded man and dragged him fu under the shelter of the rock, where he would be partly protected the spears.

"Now, then, let's overhaul you! I wish it wasn't so infernal Phew! Yes, that's a nasty job! Wait a minute, though; we can pat that damage!"

As he spoke, he ripped up his own shirt from the neck downwards, with a quick slash of a knife hastily improvised a couple of rough bands. With these he managed to stop the bleeding from the leg wound, usin broken shaft of a spear as a tourniquet. The head of the weapon he dare not withdraw from the wound for the time being.

"These beggars don't poison their weapons as a rule, do they?" he anxiously.

Wyatt moaned a little, and shook his head.

"We're all right, then, so far. Ah, this one in the side isn't so b it feels! It's grazed a rib and bruised the bone, but it's only a sur wound. Look out, now, I'm going to hurt!"

With a quick, deft wrench he tore the weapon clear; and poor W in spite of his stoicism, gave a cry of pain.

Just at that instant there came a warning shout from Donovan, Dick, snatching up Wyatt's rifle, which was still partially loaded, wha barely in time to check the rush of three men who had been stealin to him unperceived.

He fired rapidly from his hip. There was no time to aim. But, luc the bullets found their mark. The two foremost men dropped, and third, finding himself isolated, turned tail and bolted.

Both Jackie and Donovan had meanwhile been keeping up a deadly accurate fire. And the blacks had lost heavily, the ground round being literally strewn with dead and dying; whilst others, badly had managed to crawl away into cover.

Twice Dick fancied he caught a glimpse of the Spider, but each time the apparition had vanished before he could get a fair shot.

The three of them continued fighting desperately; their rifle barrels were scorching hot at times. Each man had been grazed in half a dozen places, and once the blacks had come to such close quarters that they had literally driven them back at the point of their revolvers.

But the night was slipping by. In a moment's breathing-space, Dick, blackened and powder-scorched, desperately jamming shells into his magazine, noticed in one swift, anxious glance that the sky to the eastward was already lightening—the first herald of approaching dawn.

Donovan, too, noticed it, and he knew what Dick did not—namely, that it was against all principles of native warfare to risk an attack in daylight, except in the very thickest of dense scrub.

"Look out, sorr!" he called cheerily. "They'll be for makin' wan more rush, and thin they'll draw off, so let's give it 'em hot!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before they were verified.

There came a perfect hail of throwing spears from all sides. Three distinct and orderly volleys, and then, in one last desperate effort, the blacks charged home.

The rifles spat and spluttered, the men dropped fast, yet still they pressed on, yelling their war chant. Half a dozen of them in a compact group made straight for Dick. He whipped out his revolver, and fired point-blank. Three of them fell, but three more held on; he saw dimly two round blood splashes on the black chest of the foremost, yet the fellow never wavered. Dick hurled his empty revolver into the devilish, distorted face, and clubbed his rifle for one final struggle. The two remaining men were almost on him with upraised, stabbing spears.

He swerved slightly, and the first thrust grazed his shoulder. Suddenly, from behind there came a crack! crack! twice in quick succession.

It was Wyatt's revolver that had spoken. The wounded man had contrived to prop himself on one elbow and fire upwards under Dick's arm.

"Thanks, old man!" yelled the latter, brandishing his rifle. "That was a close call!"

But Wyatt did not hear; he had fainted.

Already it was light enough to distinguish dark, scurrying figures fifty paces away. The rush had failed, but they were still swarming on the edge of the scrub, or crawling from bush to bush, taking advantage of every scrap of cover.

"Once more, boys!" cried Dick, slipping in a few of his remaining cartridges. "Give it 'em sharp—we've got 'em beat! Blaze away!"

Donovan grunted.

"I'm down to me last half-dozen!" he gasped. "If they come at us again, we're done!"

Simultaneously, from nowhere in particular, the long-drawn, wailing mopeke cry broke on the momentary lull—mournful, sinister as a death-note. But its effect was magical. Within a couple of seconds there was not a living black to be seen anywhere; they had vanished as completely,

as though the earth had swallowed them. Only the dead remained in thick, clustering heaps to bear witness to the severity of the struggle.

Donovan wiped the great drops of sweat from his brow, and subsided against the rock with a grunt of sheer exhaustion.

Dick was still idly fingering his rifle, when from out of the woods beyond came the crack of a shot, and a bullet passed whizzing by overhead, missing him by a bare foot. An instant later, and the wild, ragged figure of the Spider, still on horseback, dashed across a stretch of open ground with a yell of defiance, waving a still-smoking pistol in his hand.

Mechanically Dick raised his rifle and fired. The yell of defiance shrilled into a cry of pain, the Spider reeled heavily in his saddle, recovered himself, and dashed once more into the scrub on the far side.

Dick threw down his rifle, and collapsed on the ground in a heap.

Half an hour later, Jackie, the black boy, having fetched water from a neighbouring stream, they all refreshed themselves with a copious drink, and Dick turned his attention once more to Captain Wyatt.

There followed a gruesome interval; but at the end of it the spearhead lay on the ground, and Wyatt himself, pale and shaken, but cheerful, was properly bandaged up; and the worst of the bleeding having stopped, Dick was able to pronounce him out of danger, if treated carefully.

They improvised a kind of sling side-saddle for him on Jackie's horse—his own had been speared—and started off slowly back to Benalla, the tracker walking and leading the commissioner's mount.

They had left the scene of the fight seven good miles behind them, when Jackie suddenly checked, and held up his hand in warning.

The others listened expectantly, and soon they, too, could distinguish, faint and afar off, the thud of approaching hoofs.

Donovan glanced at Dick and cocked his rifle with an ominous click.

CHAPTER 17.

The Professor.

THE thud of horses' hoofs drew nearer and nearer, and at a sign from Dick, the trooper Donovan moved a few paces ahead, his rifle at the ready, his eyes and ears alert.

Dick himself, meanwhile, reined Cæsar back so that he could cover the wounded man, Captain Wyatt, in case of need, and at the same time leave himself fighting-room.

Jackie—on foot, in charge of the led horse—sniffed up wind with his snub-nose, dog-wise.

They were, as Dick knew, well within the outskirts of the stretch of country which Kelly spoke of as his own, and he was determined to neglect no precautions which it was possible to take.

The sound, though muffled, was distinct, and grew momentarily clearer; and Donovan increased the interval betwixt him and the rest of the party. For just ahead of him the bush track through which they were riding made

sharp turn, almost at a right angle, and it was obvious that if he made stand just at the corner he would be in a position to take the advancing man at a disadvantage should it prove necessary to do so; for though he was going leisurely at a jog-trot he might, for all they knew, prove to be an advance-guard of some of the gang.

The rider drew closer—closer yet. Suddenly Donovan raised his rifle, and challenge rang out:

“Hands up!”

There was a slight scuffling noise, the nose of a sorry-looking, jaded nag poked round the projecting angle, and the trooper lowered his weapon with a guffaw of laughter.

The next instant the rusty black form of Professor Dobson, the Benalla dentist, hove into view, rusty old black hat and all! His trousers had poked up well above his ankles by the movement of the saddle, his long white hair and flowing coat-tails straggled out behind him, his horn-rimmed goggles were damp with perspiration, and in front of him was strapped a much-worn old valise.

“Don’t shoot, gentlemen—for mercy’s sake don’t shoot!” he quavered. “I have nothing of value, I assure you. Look for——” He stopped abruptly catching sight of Donovan, blinked at him, through his glasses, and lowered his arms.

“Surely,” said he—“surely you are the police trooper from the town?—and the young gentleman, good Mr. Trevelyan’s friend. And what—Commissioner Wyatt, too? Wounded, I’m afraid. Bless my soul, what a sight you all gave me. Gentlemen, I assure you for one moment I thought I was in the hands of that scoundrel Kelly. I have but just come from the town, which I reached last night, and found it in a state of uproar. They told me there had been a robbery, and scenes of violence, and that the bank had suffered a great pecuniary loss. I am, as you know, gentlemen, a man of peace; but such things are an outrage—a positive outrage.”

“Where are you off to, Dobson?” asked Wyatt, who had partially recovered strength.

“My friend, I was about to start on a little prospecting venture of my own.” He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. “There is gold out there, you know. I—— Oh, yes, there is gold! I have information—most valuable information—but I will say no more; mum’s the word. When I return I shall be a rich man.”

“When you return—if ever you do—you will return feet foremost, Mr. Dobson,” said Wyatt gravely. “I tell you, man, I should not be doing my duty if I allowed you to proceed further on your journey just at present. The bush beyond there is just swarming with black fellows, and they’re in a vicious ugly mood, too. We’ve laid out I don’t know how many of them, but they’ll be simply itching to get their hands on the first white man who comes along, and take it out of him by way of revenge. You’d better make your mind to turn round and come back along with us. To go on just now would be simple madness.”

The professor blinked through his spectacles.

"Bless my soul," he stammered, and the slight impediment in his speech became more marked than ever—"bless my soul! To think that but for you I might have ridden on quite unsuspectingly! I had always regarded the aborigines as a harmless and fascinating study. In fact, I have long purposed bringing out a small volume on the subject—a mere pamphlet, you understand—of my own individual views and researches."

Wyatt grinned feebly.

"In that case, in the interests of the community at large, I must certainly ask you to turn back, for otherwise the book would never be written."

The old fellow took no notice of the commissioner's bantering tone, but assented with an old-fashioned bow, and wheeling his apology for a horse reined up on the far side of Wyatt.

"I am really greatly obliged to you," he said gravely, "and assure you that I am most grateful for your protection in these unruly times."

Owing to Wyatt's condition the party were compelled to travel at almost foot's pace, which, in a way, was lucky, as the professor's mount looked capable of doing little more.

The old fellow was full of chatter, with all the garrulousness of old age.

"This man Kelly, now," said he, blinking through his glasses. "What is he like? A coarse-looking scoundrel, I suppose—eh?"

Wyatt shook his head.

"You are out of my region there," said he. "I've only seen him once, and that was in disguise. Beyond that and the usual inaccurate official description, I've nothing to go on. My friend Mason is the best man to tell you about him."

The professor wrinkled his brows.

"Indeed! I beg your pardon, sir, but I understood that you were new to the country?"

Dick laughed.

"In a sense I am, certainly, but I believe that by a slice of good luck am in a position to know more about Kelly than most people. He's far from being the usual coarse, lawless blackguard people imagine. He's a well-educated, refined-looking man of good manners, and, blackguard though undoubtedly is, there's something about him that one can't help liking. He's a born leader of men, to begin with, and as for fear, I don't believe the word has any meaning for him."

"Indeed!" echoed the professor. "Well-educated, and yet a—a criminal! What more do you know, Mr. Mason?"

"Well, I've seen his home—the robbers' Roost, as it's called."

"Fancy that! And yet you escaped! Could you describe it now? You know where it is?" The question was put a little eagerly.

"Oh, I could describe it well enough, but as to where it is, that's another matter."

"Ah!" The interjection was short and almost inaudible, but it caught Dick's quick ear, and he glanced at the professor in surprise.

"I said," he repeated slowly, and in a changed tone of voice, "that didn't know where it was, but during the last few days I've got the hang

the country better, and I believe that with a little difficulty I might be able to find my way there. In fact, I may say I'm sure that I could, and I mean to try."

As he said these last words he shot a quick glance at the professor. Somehow or another he was beginning to mistrust the man, for all his venerable appearance.

"Not a trace of emotion was visible on the old man's face, however, as he replied:

"You are a brave young man, sir. I should have thought that, having once escaped, you would be cautious how you ventured into this Kelly's clutches again."

"I shall be," replied Dick curtly; and relapsed into sudden silence.

The professor turned to the commissioner.

"And what do you propose doing, Captain Wyatt? I suppose stringent steps will be taken, and every effort made to recover the money stolen from the bank. I myself am an investor in a small way—quite a small way, of course—but you can understand that I am anxious."

"Oh, you can depend on us doing everything in our power," said Wyatt. "Directly I get back I shall send out troopers to Euroa, Wangaratta, and the other towns. Donovan here will go straight to Melbourne with despatches, and we shall organise a regular expedition in force. Mason here and I have already located the loot, I fancy, or at any rate, it's——" He stopped abruptly. Dick, leaning out of the saddle, had contrived unseen by the professor to press Wyatt's arm in warning.

"You were saying?" queried Mr. Dobson, staring straight ahead.

"That we shall spare no efforts," replied Wyatt, reassuring Dick by a slight movement of his head. "My side's a bit painful. Excuse me if I don't talk any more for the present."

They rode on for the next few miles in silence, but Dick every now and again shot furtive glances of mistrust at Dobson.

A little after midday, under pretence of readjusting Wyatt in the saddle, he contrived to whisper to him:

"Wait a bit, and then, when I cough, ask Dobson there what time it is."

Captain Wyatt stared, but, evidently realising that Dick had some hidden motive, nodded acquiescence.

Shortly afterwards Dick coughed. He was then riding just abreast of the professor.

"By the way, anyone know the time?" said Wyatt. "What do you make it, Dobson?"

The old man fumbled, and produced his watch.

"Half-past two exactly."

"We ought to be in by five, then," said Dick carelessly; and began to whistle. The professor replaced his watch. For an instant his forehead contracted in a frown, and he darted a keen, swift glance at Dick from behind his spectacles. The next moment his face wore its usual placid and benign expression.

They reached Benalla at half-past five.

CHAPTER 18.

The Magic Lantern Show.

 NE of the first people whom they met in town, after a long and fruitless chase of Kelly, was Mr. Raynor, the bank's agent—the real man this time, whom Kelly and his gang had left stripped and tied to a tree. He was in a great state of excitement, and fuming with rage.

A glance was sufficient to show Dick that Kolly's counterfeit presentment of the man had been a miraculous piece of artistic make-up. Placed side by side, undoubtedly there would have been visible differences; but seen after an interval of a few hours, it would have been impossible to detect the sham from the real. The return of the scouting party and Wyatt's wounded condition aroused great excitement, and they were soon surrounded by an eager crowd, questioning and clamouring for news.

In the midst of the confusion the professor, with a farewell wave of the hand, ambled off to his own house.

Dick, in his capacity of doctor, refused to let Wyatt be bothered, and had him taken as quickly as possible to his quarters. There he re-dressed and re-banded his wounds, and left him for half an hour, comfortably propped up in a long cane deck-chair, whilst he himself went and got a much-needed bath and change of clothes.

The skin of his chest was severely burnt by the sun, for he had ripped open the front of his shirt just after the fight to stop Wyatt from bleeding to death.

On his way back to his patient he had the good fortune to meet Mr. Trevelyan, who had not yet returned to his ranch, having been detained in the town on business, and hauled him off, nothing loth, to the commissioner's quarters.

They found Wyatt looking a little pale and exhausted, but cheerful.

"Well, youngster," he cried, as they entered, "I've disobeyed orders! Hallo, Trevelyan, glad to see you! Sit down; there's 'baccy there on the table, and you'll find something to drink in the cupboard!"

"How do you mean 'disobeyed orders'?" asked Dick, laughing.

"Well, I haven't moved out of my chair—for you, as doctor, forbade me to do anything but rest! But, as a matter of fact, I've done a jolly good half-hour's work. I've sent off Jarvis and the other troopers helter-skelter with messages to the various towns where any of our fellows are quartered, and Donovan is riding as hard as he can pelt for Euroa with despatches for the chief at Melbourne. He will train at Euroa, and ought to be back with a couple of picked trackers and a score of police by to-morrow night. How's that—eh? Pretty good for a man on the sick list! And, what's more, the authorities have raised the reward to eight thousand pounds—just think of it!—and another thousand ahead for Rowan and a man called Mose Roon! I don't mind telling you in confidence that the latter is a blind. Roon is really a spy in our pay. He's been pretty useful, and the reward is simply a bluff to avoid suspicion of the real truth."

Dick's face became grave. His first act was to cross the floor quickly and lock the door. His next, to feel his patient's pulse. Then he asked abruptly:

"Can anyone overhear us here?"

"What the deuce——" began Wyatt, and stopped. "Not a chance!" he continued. "Fire away, young 'un, with your palaver! I see you've something simmering in that skull of yours."

Dick nodded.

"I have. First, the reward for the man Mose Roon is unnecessary—he's dead. I saw him shot!"

"Great Scott! When—by whom?"

"Kelly himself. His treachery was found out. Oh, it was fair enough—he had a show for his life; but Kelly shot him, and took the notes—the price of his treachery—and stuck them in a cleft stick beside the body, and— By Jove!" He brought down his fist with a thump on the table.

"What now?"

"Nothing; or, at least, I'll tell you later. How many troopers have you left in the town?"

"Not one! I sent 'em all flying to save time. Why?"

"Does anyone else know of this?"

"Oh, hang it all, youngster—hold on with your infernal questions!" cried Wyatt, a trifle irritably. "Remember, I'm your superior officer. I don't want to rub it in, of course; but for goodness' sake let's know what you're driving at! I'm all muddled as to that, I confess. As to the troopers, I suppose every dog in the place knows; there was no secret made of it."

"Sorry, old man," said Dick, "I fancy it's my fault! I should have talked first and asked questions afterwards. Now listen, both of you, please! I saw Raynor—the real Raynor, I mean—as we rode in. Kelly's imitation was first-rate, but Kelly himself is a slight man. Raynor, though about the same height, is inclined to be fat; in fact, he's well on the stout side. Now you, Wyatt, told me that you fired twice point-blank at Kelly on the bank steps, that you are sure your revolver could not have been tampered with; and yet Kelly, as Raynor, did no more than stagger slightly and laugh at you. I believe—and I've been puzzling over it for some time—that Kelly got that appearance of increased bulk by wearing some form of bullet-proof armour under his clothes—or, rather, under Raynor's borrowed plumage."

His audience stared in surprise.

"By Jove," exclaimed Wyatt, "I believe you're right! The second bullet, at any rate, hit him fair and square in the chest; I saw the mark of it. And now you remind me, there was a sort of hollow, metallic sound as it went home! What then?"

Dick lowered his voice to a whisper.

"This Professor Dobson—no, don't laugh! I know he's one of the main props of Benalla, and all that, but he's very much the same sort of build as Raynor—and more. You remember my asking the time as we rode along. You do? Good! I'll tell you why. The man had on Kelly's watchchain, or its twin-brother. At the end of that chain dangles a half disc of gold, curiously carved—so had Kelly's. When he pulled out his watch, it was Kelly's watch. I have good reason to know it, and remember it. It has a monogram and a crest on the back. I recognised it at once; and what's more, the man Dobson suspected that I did. Again, when I said I thought I could find my way to the robbers' Roost, I was watching him closely, and I'll swear he gave a start—it was just for a second, but he couldn't help it."

"Oh, come off your perch, young 'un! Dobson may not be all he pretends—precious few of us are; but that he and Kelly are one and the same is absurd!"

Mr. Trevelyan shook his head.

"I've known old Dobson for six or seven years off and on," he said. "Why, it's not long ago he came out and stayed at my place to examine some curious ferns in the neighbourhood!"

"How long ago?"

"Why, let me think, about a week before the attack on the ranch, I should say."

"And Kelly knew almost to an hour when you would have a big sum of money in the house! Come, Mr. Trevelyan, surely that's an argument in my favour! And you, Wyatt, do you remember how he tried to pump you a little while back as to the steps you intended to take in following up the bank robbery?"

"That's true enough," assented Wyatt reluctantly. "But, to tell the truth, I've been accustomed to the old chap so long, and my side hurt so infernally, I wasn't thinking much about it."

"Mr. Dobson was out of town on the day of the bank raid," continued Dick; "but he was in town on the evening of the day we tried to stick up Rowan in the Wallaby. It was he who got in our way and lost us three or four hundred yards when the chase started because we could not ride him down, and he had been absent from home for some days previously—when Kelly was hustling me round the country, and on the night of the attack on Mr. Trevelyan's. If all this is coincidence, it's mighty curious coincidence! And what better device could he have for obtaining information than by settling in a town like Benalla and listening unsuspected to all that is going on round about him? I tell you that I bet you Kelly and Dobson are one and the same man! If I could see his eyes I could be certain, for there's no mistaking those eyes of Kelly's. And, what's more, I fancy Benalla has about seen the last of him, for he knows I'm suspicious, and he'll be vanishing on one of his prospecting trips to-night or to-morrow."

"But, hang it, Mason! Supposing there's any truth in what you say, how do you get over the fact of his coming up behind us—meeting us on our return track after the fight with the blacks—when we know for a fact that Kelly and his gang were ahead of us?" said Wyatt triumphantly.

Dick thought for a moment.

"Spider—Kelly's shadow—was egging on the blacks. I saw him, and pointed him out to you. They drew off in answer to the mopoke cry, the signal of Kelly and his gang, but only when pursuit on our part had been rendered hopeless; we were all exhausted. Kelly's object would have been achieved. He had gained an extra five or six hours' start for his treasure-bearing party. There's no reason to suppose that he would wish us polished off by the beggars; from what I know of him, I should say quite the contrary. But once his object gained, he would whistle them off; and then what could be easier for him than to hurry back, transform himself into Dobson, and cut our trail again ten miles away. It seems to me to fit in as easily as a child's puzzle. Anyhow, I know one way by which I can prove the truth of it or otherwise."

"When Mose Roon was shot, he had slung from a string round his neck a similar half-disc to that of Kelly's. Kelly himself noticed it. I saw him looking at it, and he seemed surprised. Further, once when I questioned him about his own half, he told me that it was part of a very ancient and unique ornament, and added, laughing, that he had found it very useful—that it was like the talisman in the old Arabian Nights stories. Now, if Kelly and Dobson are one and the same, the other half of that disc is still hanging round the neck of the dead man Roon, and that I intend to find out. If I am wrong, then someone must have found Roon's body and taken the thing, subsequently giving it or selling it to Dobson."

"I'll have the proof one way or the other before I'm many hours older. Mr. Trevelyan, I should be much obliged if you would ride with me to verify my statements. We can take Jackie to guide us. We could go and return under twelve hours."

"Very well, my boy. I'll be ready at eight sharp to-morrow. And now, if I were you, I'd turn in and rest; you must be fagged out!"

At eight sharp, Dick, having given Wyatt a final visit, was in the saddle, and cantering leisurely out towards the meeting-place, about a mile from the town; for he had thought it unwise that he and Mr. Trevelyan should be seen starting out together. Yet, in spite of this precaution, his departure had been noted by one keen pair of eyes from behind the crack of a shutter. Five minutes later he was joined by Mr. Trevelyan himself and Jackie, whose ugly black face was one vast, expansive grin, no longer adorned by gruesome stripes of war-paint. All three were fully armed.

"Well, my boy," said Mr. Trevelyan, laughing, as he rode up, "your calculations are out on one point, at any rate, for as I left the town the Wallaby and several other buildings were being plastered with huge notices, wet from the printer, to the effect that Professor Dobson invited all and sundry to a lecture in the schoolhouse, at 7.30 sharp, and further announcing that the entertainment would be added to by a display of unique magic-lantern slides, specially made for the occasion. That doesn't look much as if your theory would hold water—eh?"

Dick shrugged his shoulders.

"We'll know soon," said he. "If we hurry along we may be back in time for the fun. Jackie, you know dem gunyah longa big divide you makee that one time?"

Jackie grinned wider than ever.

"Me know um. Me take you all a right pidney!"

And, driving his bare heels into his horse, he set off at a long, loping canter.

Meanwhile, in the main street of Benalla, a mile away behind them, small knots of people were eagerly reading the big placards which announced the forthcoming entertainment. There was a specially large and talkative group round that one which was posted on the wall of the Wallaby saloon, amongst them the sheriff himself, Tom the barkeeper, and several other prominent inhabitants, who were discussing the prospect amongst themselves.

Amusements were few and far between at Benalla; a dog-fight even was a thing to occupy conversation and stop business for a clear hour. A magic-lantern show, therefore, as may well be imagined, was an almost unheard-of luxury to people so easily amused and pleased. But the thing above all which riveted their attention, and which Mr. Trevelyan, in his hurry, had failed to notice, was the subject matter of the lecture, which was announced in bold red lettering:

"The story of the notorious bushranger, Ned Kelly, and his gang, with an account of their doings. Absolutely authentic. Accompanied by curious and lifelike photographs, and a startling denouement.

"Professor Dobson assures the patriotic citizens of Benalla that he is in a position to lay before them facts hitherto unknown about this extraordinary man, and actually has in his possession a photograph of Kelly, which, in the course of the evening, will be projected on a screen fourteen feet by twelve. Special interest attaches to the fact, owing to the Melbourne authorities having recently increased the reward for his capture to no less a sum than eight thousand pounds! Come one, come all. Don't miss the chance. You may win the £8,000!

"There will be no charge for admission, but owing to the large outlay

involved in obtaining the photographs, and in securing the assistance of an expert manipulator, a small collection will be made at the end of the evening.

"At 7.30 sharp. Doors open at 7. No children admitted!"

"Waal, I call that a real smart business proposition!" drawled a Yankee in the crowd.

"Good old Dobson!" yelled another.

And just at that moment the professor was seen pottering out of his house, and was greeted with a chorus of "For he's a jolly good fellow!" accompanied by a burst of good-humoured laughter, as he turned and shuffled back, with a bow and a wave of the hand, as though unwilling to face such a warm reception.

"Come along, boys," said the sheriff. "This little spree must be celebrated. Drinks on me, Tom, and each man name his own poison!"

All day Benalla was suffering from suppressed excitement, and by seven o'clock all the male population, carefully washed and brushed, were patiently waiting at the door of the schoolhouse, which lay about a quarter of a mile beyond the town. Womenfolk were scarce in Benalla, and such few as there were were kept busy by household duties.

Consequently, when Professor Dobson mounted the platform on the stroke of the half-hour, he faced a serried mass of faces, representing every able-bodied man in the place. The town itself was deserted, save for Wyatt, sick in bed, some busy womenfolk, whose work kept them indoors, and a few children.

It may have been owing to this fact that no one even saw a small cavalcade of four, who rode silently up to the schoolhouse shortly after the half-hour had struck, and who took up their stand, two at the front door, two at the back, each couple leading a spare horse, and waited there, grim and silent as ghosts, in the empty streets.

Behind the professor, stretched on a frame over the end wall of the schoolhouse, was a large white sheet; to his left stood a small, bare deal table, with the usual water-jug and glass which a lecturer is always supposed to need, and which he never uses; and beyond this, again, lay a small back door.

At the far end of the room, facing him, but behind the audience, was a magic-lantern, rigged on a temporary platform, composed of two planks resting between a couple of step-ladders; and beside it, close to the main door of the building, stood a tall, dark stranger, the manipulator, as the professor explained in his opening sentences.

"And now, gentlemen, I will for a few brief minutes demand your attention."

Instantly a hush fell over the room, the whispering and shuffling of feet ceased as though by magic, and the men settled themselves in their seats.

The lights of the room were turned to their lowest, and the first slide was thrown on to the screen, containing simply the one word "Welcome" in large red letters. This was greeted with a low, appreciative hum of applause, and the lights were turned on again.

Professor Dobson was undoubtedly an excellent lecturer, and spoke clearly and well, in spite of an occasional slight hesitating manner in his delivery.

He began with the early history of Kelly and his gang, as collected from the various lurid newspaper reports which had appeared from time to time, and, where facts were lacking, he filled up the blanks with highly-coloured

detail, whilst from time to time the pictures of the scenes of the gang's various exploits were thrown on the screen.

The audience were fascinated—enthralled. Nothing of the sort had ever been seen in Benalla before. Photography, it must be remembered, was then in its infancy.

Gradually he led them on to the hold-up of the coach at Burnt Ridge, accompanied by pictures of Mike Sullivan, the coach itself, and a view of the road. All three, being well-known objects, were received with loud applause.

"Here," continued the professor, "it will be remembered that this notorious bushranger, this desperado, not only held up the coach single-handed and robbed the boot of some two thousand ounces of gold, but he actually compelled one of its occupants, the young Englishman Mason, to accompany him as a prisoner. This gentleman has been recently appointed to the police force in this city, and from him you will be able, if you wish, to corroborate the truth of my story. Mason eventually escaped, much to Kelly's annoyance, and was later instrumental in frustrating a raid on the ranch of our esteemed fellow-citizen, Mr. Trevelyan."

Photo of Trevelyan and the homestead shown.

"And now, gentlemen, I come to the last exploit but one of this man Kelly. I refer to the hold-up of the bank here. One can hardly avoid a certain admiration for the skill and daring with which this was effected. On a certain day he caused a challenge in writing to be placed in the hands of the police, announcing that he would hold up the bank at three in the afternoon precisely of the day in question. In this way he gave the authorities ample opportunity to defeat his plans. Meanwhile—and this, I am sure, will surprise you—he himself was actually residing in your midst, here in this very town, up to the very day before the robbery!"

Tremendous excitement followed this statement, and it was a full minute before the professor was able to resume:

"Gentlemen, I assure you that I know this to be a positive fact, and before the evening is over I will prove it to your entire satisfaction. I repeat, he was here in our midst, and did not quit the town until twelve o'clock on the day before the robbery. Some miles out he met the men of his gang, and a trap was set for the gold mail and its escort. The trap was completely successful. The escort were overpowered, stripped, and their uniforms assumed by members of the gang. The bank official was similarly treated, and Kelly himself was made up in his likeness. The rest of the story is too fresh in your minds for me to dwell on it further. I will now cause to be thrown on the screen a bona-fide likeness of Kelly himself, taken on that occasion."

The lantern beam shot out across the room, and an excellent likeness of Mr. Raynor's pompous features flashed out. A gasp of surprise went up, and there was some murmuring. The professor checked it at once.

"Don't misunderstand me, gentlemen; that is a genuine photograph, taken from life, of the notorious Kelly disguised as the bank's agent." (Loud cheers.)

"And now," continued the professor blandly, "for the startling denouement I promised you. A moment ago I referred to the bank episode as the last exploit but one, so far, of the man Kelly. The last to date, I happened to know, is fixed for to-night. I will now show you an actual and recent photograph of Kelly himself."

The lights were turned down, there was a moment of breathless suspense,

and then there flashed up before the gaze of the astounded audience a most striking likeness of the lecturer, Professor Dobson himself. For quite a minute, so still was the room, one could have heard a pin drop. The audience were spellbound, and unable to make up their minds whether the whole thing was a gigantic hoax or not.

The spell was soon broken, however, by a quiet, full voice, quite unlike the professor's rather shaky tones, exclaiming:

"Good portrait, isn't it? Bail up, you fools, and don't let a man move, if he values his life! You're covered before and behind!"

The lights flashed up once more, and the amazed audience saw, to their extreme dismay, the usually meek form of the professor stern and erect before them, a heavy-calibre revolver in each hand, steady as a rock.

Each man felt that those menacing barrels were covering him in particular, and he also felt an uneasy sensation that a second pair, unseen, were covering him from behind, which was indeed the case, for the lantern manipulator was similarly armed and ready. The complete and utter surprise of the situation shook the nerve out of them, though they were a plucky enough crowd.

"Now, boys," said Dobson, or, rather, Kelly, in his usual tones, "we've had a pleasant evening, and I'm much obliged for your attention. I promised you a bit of a startler, and by the look on your faces you've got it. Abe Ransom, if you so much as turn your head again, you'll be dead before you know it!

"There's just one other little item on the programme. I mentioned a voluntary contribution. Each man in turn will step up to the table there and deposit ten dollars in the bag which I have placed there for the purpose. If any man hasn't got ten dollars, he must put in what he has, and the next must make the amount good. You can square accounts amongst yourselves afterwards.

"Now, boys, step lively! Pay up, and look pleasant, and for goodness' sake don't play the fool! These are hair triggers, and I never know when one of the guns mightn't go off and hurt someone. That's better. Quickly, now! What's that, Johnson, only three dollars for a show like this? Very well; I want seventeen from the next man. You can pay him back later."

And so, as the men filed by—some sullenly, but, truth to tell, most of them with an amused grin as they found they were to get off so lightly—Kelly kept up a running fire of chaff; but his eyes were everywhere, and he noted everything.

"Simpkins"—to a man who had just come up in turn—"I fancy I owe you eight dollars for firing. We'll call the account square."

Shortly afterwards another meek, worn-looking little man came up. Kelly glanced at him.

"No, Joe Lane, I don't want any gate-money from you. Your wife's sick, I hear. Take thirty dollars out of the pool. Go on, man, do as I tell you! Ah! Sheriff, as a representative of law and order, this should be an object-lesson to you. I'm afraid I must trouble you for fifty dollars. I couldn't let you off with less."

The little sheriff, who had the pluck of a bull-terrier, grinned sourly.

"I bet you another fifty I take them back off you with my own hand inside the month, Ned Kelly," said he, and threw a hundred-dollar bill into the bag.

"Now, sheriff, you're a real sportsman," drawled Kelly. "I don't like

to take a mean advantage of you by betting on a certainty, but the truth is, I've a round of country visits to pay throughout the next month, and my usual business address won't find me. Make it two months, and I'll go you double or quits."

A guffaw of laughter greeted this sally, for the major part of the crowd were by this time inclined to treat the whole thing as a most astounding joke, and cheap at the price. Not all of them, however, for one man, the last, when his turn came, threw in his ten-dollar bill with one hand, and attempted to draw a gun with his other. Kelly's quick eye noted it at once. Without apparent aim, almost without movement, he pressed his left forefinger on the trigger. There was a sharp crack, a yell of pain, and the man withdrew his hand from his holster, wringing it with the agony of a smashed finger. The bullet had crashed through the joint and shattered the revolver butt beneath them.

"Go back, you fool!" said Kelly sternly. "If I hear so much as a whimper from you I'll stop it with another bullet. It wasn't pluck that made you try that little game. There are men here in the audience who'd take on half a dozen like you with one hand. It was downright meanness. I know you!

"Sorry, boys," he continued. "Don't like to disturb our pleasant entertainment, but I can't stand a mean skunk like that."

There was a low murmur of applause, and someone called out:

"Serve him right."

Kelly took advantage of the incident to give a low, shrill whistle. Instantly the lights went out, and there flashed on the screen, in great crimson letters, the words:

THANKS.

GOOD-NIGHT, BOYS.

N. K.

Under cover of the darkness Kelly, in two swift strides, swept the bag from the table, gained the back door, slipped through it, and locked and bolted it behind him. Meanwhile, the lantern manipulator, having pocketed the key of the gas main to prevent the crowd from turning on the lights, had slipped out by the front and secured it firmly. The windows were fastened with strong iron bars, so Kelly, who had laid his plans carefully beforehand, reckoned that it would take a good half-hour for the crowd to break out. He joined the two men waiting at the back, handed the bag to one of them, and swung himself lightly into the saddle. The trio cantered silently round, and joined the party in front on the main road.

Kelly reined up, and questioned the leader of these.

"You saw Mason and Trevelyan, and followed them as I ordered?"

"Yes, cap. Spider got on their track early. They headed straight for the gunyah. We lay in wait half-way, and shadowed them on their return journey. They reached town half an hour ago, and are now in the police commissioner's quarters."

"Good!" said Kelly curtly. "Rendezvous at the old place, at dawn to-morrow."

Three men turned, and cantered off up the main track. Kelly and the two remaining men moved forward silently in the direction of Wyatt's quarters.

Kelly was a length or two ahead by himself, his forehead puckered in a black frown, an evil smile on his lips.

"At last," he muttered, "the hour of our reckoning has come—at last, Trevelyan, and you shall give me quittance in full. By Heaven you shall! And then—and then—"

CHAPTER 19.

Trevelyan's Journey

MR. TREVELYAN and Dick, with Jackie the black tracker, had left Benalla at eight o'clock on the morning of the day which afterwards became famous as the day of Ned Kelly's lecture.

It was a gruesome enough errand on which they rode; but to Dick's mind, at any rate, it was positively necessary; he was convinced that success or failure depended on the finding of that small half-disc of gold on the dead man's body.

They followed the Benalla coach road southward for the first two hours, and then struck off to the right, across the Warra; the going was rough, but their horses were fresh enough and fit for anything. A further fifteen miles brought them close to the hill on the top of which Dick and Kelly had been surrounded by the police immediately after the hold-up of the coach.

Dick glanced at it as he passed, pointing it out to Mr. Trevelyan.

"I little thought as I lay there," he said, "watching Kelly with his bandaged arm smoking his cigar and chaffing the police troopers, that within a fortnight or so I myself should have become a member of the force, and, thanks to you, with a commission into the bargain. My one anxiety then was to reach your ranch, and I remember thinking that you must be wondering all the while what had become of me."

Mr. Trevelyan laughed in his turn.

"I certainly was; and when later I heard that you had not only been seen with Kelly, but had actually been concerned with him in riding down a couple of troopers, I admit I felt—well, more than uneasy."

Jackie, who had been riding ahead a good quarter of a mile, taking his own line across that puzzling country with an unerring instinct which, in a black tracker, is a sort of eighth sense, slowed down suddenly and began looking anxiously about him. Presently he slipped from the saddle, and, leaving his horse loose, began to peer at the ground on all sides.

"Hallo!" cried Trevelyan. "I wonder what's up! It means something out of the ordinary in the way of trails when Jackie has to read them afoot!"

They spurred up their horses and were soon nearly abreast of him.

"Well, Jackie, what's the trouble now?" called Dick.

The tracker looked up and showed his white teeth.

"You know um black fellow on horseback, him you saw with other black fellow when we shoot big fight bang, bang, along towards Burra-Burra."

"By Jove, he means Spider! Kelly's shadow!" exclaimed Dick.

"Right-ho, Jackie, me pidney! Black fellow belonga Kelly one time. Me shoot him bang, he ride away!"

Jackie nodded.

"Him bad black fellow, no good, yet him come 'cross our track one, two, four times. Me know um horse. Look, Massa Trevelyan!" And he pointed to the ground at his feet.

The two white men stared and stared, but not a vestige of a sign could they see.

"Jackie's sure to be right," said Mr. Trevelyan, in a low voice. "But what the deuce does it mean, I wonder? According to your theory, this Spider fellow was badly wounded when you fired at him!"

"Well, I certainly thought he was, but the light was uncertain, and we were all pretty excited and worn out at the time. Anyhow, I can swear I saw him reel in the saddle. Which way do the tracks lead, Jackie?"

"Longa back. Him make for town, him old track. Now him go same way longa us him track fresh."

"How long since he passed this way?"

Jackie held up a black forefinger, and held a finger of his other hand midway across it.

Mr. Trevelyan gave a whistle of surprise.

"Only half an hour! I don't like this, it seems to me to spell mischief, Dick!"

Dick nodded thoughtfully, bending down. Suddenly he sprang upright, and drove his fist into his open palm.

"By Jove, I've got it! Supposing, for a minute, that Dobson is Kelly. He knows that my suspicions were aroused by the sight of the chain, and what dangled from it. He knows that I saw him stooping over Roon's dead body, and he has guessed my chain of reasoning. The Spider made his way into Benalla sometime during the small hours of the morning, and Kelly alias Dobson has sent him scurrying off to the gunyah to forestall us and rob us of our best chance of establishing the identity of the two men. We must mount and ride for it, if we would be in time. Our last chance is that the black boy is probably faint and worn out, and we may be able to outride him. On with you, Jackie, for all you're worth!"

Straight as a die the trio headed for the ruined gunyah, where they expected to find all that remained of Mose Roon, the traitor. Jackie, in spite of the pace they were travelling, kept an eye to the trail, and at a point some five miles from their goal raised his head with a sniff of satisfaction, and reined back alongside Mr. Trevelyan.

"Black feller him leave track now. Him ride longa there"—pointing to some dense scrub on their right. "No want us catch him. Horse go lame."

"Thank goodness!" said Dick; and in half an hour more they entered the clearing, at the far end of which stood the ruined hut, fast tumbling to decay.

A cautious survey assured them that nothing had been touched. That no foot had visited the spot since Dick had ridden that way with Kelly.

It was a horrible, gruesome job, but he did not flinch; and approaching on foot, he bent over the dead man's body. The cord still hung round the neck, and from it dangled a something which glittered dully. The other half of the gold disc. He severed the string with his knife, and holding the trinket in the palm of his hand, returned to Mr. Trevelyan.

"I was right, you see," he said quietly; "the chain worn by Dobson is Kelly's chain, and the two men are identical. Come, let's get back, and we may collar him yet, if all goes well!"

"By Jove, Dick Mason," said Mr. Trevelyan, "you've done more in your short time in the colony than all the forces, military and civil, put together. Succeed to-night, as I hope we shall, and the whole of Australia will ring with your name. You'll be the best-known man throughout the continent. Meanwhile, however, we must give our cattle a breather before we start back; they've travelled fast and well. If we overpush them we shall have

them foundering before ever we see Benalla again, and then good-bye to our plans."

They off-saddled under the shade of some trees on the edge of the clearing, and let the horses have a roll and a graze whilst they themselves had a bit of food and smoked their pipes.

An hour later they were ready to start.

"Half a minute," said Dick, when Mr. Trevelyan was already in the saddle. "I'd clean forgotten those notes yonder are Government property. I suppose I ought to take them and hand them over to Wyatt."

He strode across to the cleft-stick near the body, took from it the wad of notes, and thrust them into his breast-pocket. He had already turned to retrace his steps when, from the wood beside him, rang out the sharp crack of a rifle, and a bullet seared his side beneath his right arm like a hot iron. For an instant he was too dazed and staggered to move. The next, with a shout, he had drawn his revolver and was charging headlong for the woods.

He heard a rustling a few yards ahead of him, and fired. The rustling ceased, and he approached the spot cautiously; but he was too late, and the bullet had gone wide. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark, lithe figure flitting noiseless as a ghost from tree-trunk to tree-trunk, thirty full yards away, and then even as he raised his arm to fire again it vanished in a dense patch of scrub.

Pursuit would have been worse than useless, for the Spider, with his wonderful gift of woodcraft, could travel ten yards to his one through that almost impenetrable scrub. So, replacing the weapon in his belt, he returned to the others.

There was not a moment to be lost; they had a long ride before them. The pseudo-professor's lecture was announced for half-past seven. Therefore, unless the whole thing was merely a blind, it was imperative that they should reach the town by half-past eight at latest, for they dare not count on longer time.

Gallop, gallop, gallop. Horses sweating, saddles creaking, mile after mile flew beneath them and was left behind.

Tired they were and nearly mad with thirst, but only once did they draw rein to walk their animals up a long, steep incline, and let them regain their breath and rest their quivering limbs.

Then on once more, mile after mile, over scrub and plain, till they swung into the main coach-road. Twice Jackie had held up his hand and signified that he could hear other horsemen riding parallel with them. But there was nothing to be seen, and they recked little of it, determined to push on at any cost.

At exactly twenty minutes after the hour they were racing down the sandy, main street of Benalla.

"To Wyatt's first!" gasped Dick; and Mr. Trevelyan nodded assent. His throat was too parched for speech, as, stiff and sore, they swung themselves out of the saddle at the door of the commissioner's quarters, leaving their horses to Jackie.

They found Wyatt still confined to his chair and fretful at his enforced inactivity.

"Well," he cried, "what news? Any luck?"

For answer Dick flung the golden half disc on the table, and seizing a water-jug, drained half of it in one long, cooling draught. Mr. Trevelyan also mixed himself a drink.

"I think that about proves my case," said Dick, emerging from the jug. "Mr. Trevelyan, here, will bear witness that I took that from Mose Roan's

dead body, and, as a further corroboration, here are the roll of notes given him by the police as the price of his treachery. Where is this man, Dobson, now—still lecturing?"

Wyatt nodded, and busied himself with a pen and an official-looking slip of paper. Writing was a difficulty to him in his recumbent position, but at last he completed his task.

"There," said he, throwing the paper across the table—"there is your warrant, made out in due form, for the arrest of Ned Kelly, alias Professor Dobson, of Benalla."

Dick seized the paper and thrust it in his pocket.

"Good," said he, "I'll go and rouse out the men and——" He stopped in blank dismay. "Great Scott, I'd forgotten we haven't a single trooper in the place. If I try it single-handed, he'll get away for sure. I must rouse out the sheriff and Tom and any of the rest of the boys."

Wyatt shook his head dismally.

"No good, young 'un, you won't find a single able-bodied male in the whole town. Every man jack of them is at the schoolhouse, and do you know what this fellow has had the blazing impertinence to choose as the subject of his lecture—neither more nor less than the life-story of Ned Kelly, illustrated by lantern-slides."

In spite of themselves the two hearers could not repress a roar of laughter. "Well, of all the infernal, cold-blooded cheek!" began Dick; and the next instant he was grave again. "And he knows that there isn't a trooper in the place."

Wyatt nodded.

"Sure to! There seems precious little he doesn't know!"

"I'll tell you another thing he knows—where Trevelyan and I have been to-day, and our object in going; and, by Jove, by now I expect he's heard the result! You remember Jackie swore he could hear men riding level with us all the last half of the trip—those will be Kelly's men. By heavens, he'll give us the slip yet! Here, Wyatt, lend me a spare gun! I'm off up to the schoolhouse. I'll try and get a quiet word or two with some of the boys before the show's over, and then we'll slip out and surround the place. He can't get away then."

Dick had risen as he spoke, and his hand was already stretched out for the belt which he had taken off to ease himself, when the door was flung open and three men appeared on the threshold with levelled weapons.

Foremost of the three was Kelly, still masquerading as Dobson.

CHAPTER 20.

Prisoners.

"GOOD-EVENING, gentlemen!" said he, in his quiet, drawing voice. "Sorry to intrude! My dear Mason, you look uncomfortable. Do sit down, and do take your hand off that belt; you must be tired after your long ride. Sit, you fool; there are three guns covering you! You, too, Trevelyan. Captain Wyatt, at your service. I hope you're better. Nasty little brutes to handle those black fellows."

The three had been so utterly taken by surprise and off their guard that resistance for the moment was hopeless. Dick, the only man who had a weapon of any sort within reach, had his back turned as they entered. Wyatt was, of course, incapacitated, and Mr. Trevelyan's rifle stood in the far corner of the room.

"Very pretty plan that of yours, my dear Mason," continued Kelly

suavely. "Unfortunately, it was so obvious—so very painfully obvious, I might say—that I took the liberty of forestalling you. You went to get proof that Dobson and Kelly were one and the same individual. I took advantage of your absence to demonstrate that fact to the male population of this charming town by means of a most instructive and highly imposing lecture. At the same time, I took leave of Benalla and buried my lamented friend, Dobson. It was an immense success, I assure you. In fact, I was unanimously presented with a small testimonial from all the leading citizens—it took the form of filthy lucre—ten-dollar bills to be accurate. I think I shall invest them in a handsome piece of plate suitably inscribed."

Dick shifted uneasily in his chair and grated his teeth. If by sacrificing his own life he could have insured Kelly's capture, he would have done so cheerfully rather than sit there listening to that slow, insolent, drawling voice, which mocked him and jeered at him as an incompetent muddler; but he knew only too well that to stir from where he sat would not only be his own death-signal, but probably that of Wyatt and Trevelyan as well, without the slightest possible chance of effecting any good.

"I should be extremely glad to add a two-ounce bullet as my contribution to the testimonial, Captain Kelly," he said, choking back his anger as best he could.

"My very dear Mason—what barbaric taste," said Kelly. "You know you really haven't improved one little bit since we first met. I'm afraid you're dropping into our rough Colonial ways. However, pleasant though our little chat has been, I'm afraid I must cut it short. Time flies, as the cold, classic phrase so happily puts it.

"Clarke—Jarvis, oblige me by binding up Mr. Mason securely—very securely—for I will do him the credit to say that he is rather a slippery customer. I want no repetition of our former experience."

The two men advanced and laid their hands on Dick's shoulders. It may have been that their touch roused him. It may have been a supreme act of bitter, desperate disappointment. But the instant he felt the grip on his arms he suddenly leapt from his seat, and with a shout of anger literally flung himself on them. For the first brief instant of the struggle they were so taken by surprise that the advantage lay all with him. Moreover, they were unable to use their weapons at such close quarters. One man he succeeded in flinging against the wall, and was already grappling desperately with the second, but after the first shock they were both on him again, twining, writhing, and struggling in one confused mass.

Mr. Trevelyan, too, who was of herculean build, sprang to his feet, but Kelly with one stride clapped a pistol to his ear and forced him back. Wyatt, weak and wounded though he was, made a desperate effort to rise and struggle towards the revolver in Dick's belt on the table, but it was beyond his strength, and he fell back with a moan of pain; his wound had opened afresh.

Kelly, though keeping a watchful eye on Mr. Trevelyan, surveyed the scene with a quiet smile. He liked pluck, and Dick's last effort pleased him. It was but a last effort, however, and the whole thing was over inside a couple of minutes. Dick, dog-weary with his long ride, was no match for his two captors.

The odds were too unequal, and soon he was hurled to the ground, and bound hand and foot till the ropes cut into the skin, and his wrists grew numb with the pain. They turned their attention next to Mr. Trevelyan. He was an older man by far than Dick, and though brave as a lion, the blood

did not pulse so feverishly through his veins. As they approached him he rose, and, with an air of great dignity, stretched out his hands to be bound.

"There is no need of a scuffle," he said quietly. "I am ready. Do what you wish."

Kelly regarded him with a black scowl; superior as he thought himself to others, yet, do what he would, this one man always proved himself higher still.

"Bind him fast!" he ordered curtly, and turned away.

Wyatt in the meantime, after his one desperate effort to help his friends, had fallen back in his chair, with his eyes closed. He had fainted.

Though his limbs were tired and useless, Dick's brain was cool and clear enough after the momentary heat of the struggle.

"You're a fool, Kelly, to play this kind of game unless you play it thoroughly. Do you imagine you can cart us through Benalla main street like this?"

"And why not, oh, most ingenious youth?" was the reply.

"Because the moment I am outside, I shall yell the place down, and you and your men will be collared in a jiffy! Oh, yes! You can shoot me the next instant, but you'll have every human in the town on you. Better gag me, man, and get it over!"

Kelly laughed.

"Most simple of youths, you may yell to your heart's content, an it please you! You may publish my misdeeds from the housetops. I'm sure I don't care! Let me explain to you that at this present moment the entire male population of the town are securely fastened by bolt and bar inside the schoolhouse. It will take them at least half an hour to break a way out. Therefore your melodious voice would be wasted on the empty night. But now, as a considerable portion of that half-hour has already elapsed, we will move."

The two men, Clarke and Jarvis, each took a prisoner by the arm and led them away, Kelly following, watchful and alert. Within three minutes the small cavalcade was leaving Benalla far behind, Trevelyan and Dick each astride a led horse, their hands tied behind their backs, their feet beneath the animals' bellies.

The moment they were out of sight of the town one of Kelly's black moods seemed to descend on him.

"Look you here, Mason!" he said sternly. "This is going to be no child's play or picnic-jant like our last ride. I warned you, and if you thought fit to fight against me—now I hold the winning cards—think of what you choose as you ride, but make the most of your time, for the end of the ride is death."

CHAPTER 21.

Doomed to Die.

DICK'S only answer to the bushranger's threat was to set his teeth and stare straight in front of him. But his heart sank a little. He knew the score between them was a heavy one, and he knew only too well that when Kelly paid his debts he paid in full. Now and again he and Trevelyan exchanged glances, but from the moment they left Wyatt's quarters not a word passed between them. They knew they were doomed men, and each was busy with his own thoughts.

That ride was like one horrible, prolonged nightmare to their tired, bruised bodies. The ropes cut and burnt like heated irons, and their tongues were dry and swollen with an intolerable thirst, their minds dulled with pain.

Sometimes they made brief halts. Twice they were met with relays of horses—the first time at dawn, and again at midday on the following day. Kelly alone seemed tireless, as though formed of refined steel. For the most part he rode ahead, a solitary, lonely figure, swaying easily to the motion of his favourite grey, but riding with bowed head and puckered brow, scowling blackly. Their troop was now swelled in numbers by the men who had waited for them with the remounts.

For hours they rode forward through a blinding rainstorm, which drenched them to the skin and chilled them to the bone; but the human brain can only record a certain definite number of impressions in a given space of time, and merciful Nature has ordained that exhaustion in its extreme shall soothe as an opiate.

How they reached their goal, or by what path they descended into the vast hollow of the robbers' Roost, neither prisoner knew; they rode, heedless and unerring, in a dreamland of their own. It was night-black and rain-swept; beyond that they were conscious of nothing till they were flung, still bound, on a pile of horse-blankets in some dark inner recess of the cave.

Dick's next recollection—and, for the life of him, he could not tell whether it was hours or minutes later—was receiving a violent kick in the ribs from a heavy boot, which bruised his ribs sorely and knocked the breath out of his body.

He leant upon his elbows, dazed at first, and with a moan of pain which he was unable entirely to suppress. All around him was still darkness, but vaguely far away he was conscious of a glimmering greenish-grey light, and realised that he was in one of the remoter cubicles of the cave which the gang inhabited, and that somewhere beyond, out under the sky, it was broad daylight. A second kick, even harder, thoroughly brought him to his senses, and though he winced with the jar of it, he bit his lips till they bled rather than utter a sound.

"Now, then, stir yourself, you cub!" growled a hoarse voice, which he recognised at once as Rowan's. "Come on, get a move on you, or I'll take the toe of my boot to you again! The boys are outside waiting to see you give 'em a bit of sport. Git up, you malingering whelp!"

Dick lay down again in a fit of sullen obstinacy.

"I can't, Nick Rowan, bound as I am; and that you know perfectly well, you infernal, hulking bully! I've thrashed you once, and, by James, if ever I get the chance, and my hands free, I'll thrash you again!"

Rowan growled out a fierce oath.

"You would, would ye? We'll see about that! Say it again, and I'll smash yer face in! Come on, up with you!"

And with a savage jerk he yanked Dick on to his feet. He swayed heavily, and would have fallen from sheer weakness and dizziness had not the hard

rock wall prevented him. As it was, he struck his head violently against it, making the blood flow freely from an ugly gash, whereupon Rowan laughed harshly, and, taking him by the coat-collar, literally ran him down the long corridor into the open, and flung him headlong on the bare ground outside, in the midst of a group of men who were lounging about at the mouth of the cave.

As soon as Dick had recovered from the sudden dazzling effect of the sunshine, and was able to see distinctly, he discovered that Mr. Trevelyan was already there, haggard and gaunt, with great dark lines of fatigue under his eyes, bound and helpless, but with a strange, almost commanding, air of dignity and superiority. He was standing quite alone, apparently oblivious of his surroundings, gazing abstractedly towards the south, where his home lay.

A derisive jeer greeted Dick's appearance, and Rowan, with a coarse jest, hauled him once more into an upright position, as he did so striking him across the mouth with the back of his hand.

"Rowan!"

The word rang sharply and crisply in the morning air. The bully swung round. Kelly, immaculate as ever, with spotless linen, clean-shaven, and with his sleek, smoothly-brushed dark hair, was standing in the entrance of the cave; but his face was stern and set, and there was a hard glitter in his eye which the coarser ruffian could not face.

"Rowan," said he again, "I warn you for the last time. My patience is exhausted. The very next time you transgress my orders by so much as a hairsbreadth I'll shoot you on sight! Now, my men, sit round, and place the two prisoners in the middle. I've a few words to say to you all.

"A short time ago I brought the younger of the two prisoners here, blindfolded and on parole, in his capacity as a doctor, to attend to two of your number who were sick. Some of you at the time thought I was acting unwisely. Had my orders been strictly obeyed, this would not have been so; but owing to the carelessness of one of your number—Holland, I mean—who allowed the prisoner to escape, and who has since paid for so doing, my schemes have been hampered, and I myself have suffered considerable inconvenience.

"The younger prisoner it was who immediately on his escape gave warning of our intended raid on Trevelyan's ranch. The elder, so warned, was enabled to make preparations, as a consequence of which we lost several members of the gang, for whose deaths the prisoners are directly responsible. I could bring forward other actions of theirs, but this one instance will, I think, suffice. I now leave you to decide the matter for yourselves."

A hoarse murmur of mingled anger and approbation rose on all sides, mingled with cries of "String 'em up, cap'n!" "Shoot the beggars!" whilst one or two of the more brutal members suggested other means too horrible to repeat.

Kelly glanced round him slowly from man to man, and finally let his gaze rest on the prisoners.

"I understand," said he slowly, "that you consider them both condemned

to death? Very good! I, as your leader, give my assent. But I claim the privilege which is mine by right of dealing with the elder—Trevelyan—myself in my own way."

Instantly there rose a storm of dissent and disapproval.

Kelly held up his hands for silence.

"It is my right!" said he sternly. "I claim it. And if a man here dares gainsay me to my face, let him stand out now, and we will see which of us is the better! Now go. I wish to speak to them alone. Four of you remain within call."

The men dispersed silently about their various duties, four only remaining at the mouth of the cave ready to answer Kelly's signal.

The two prisoners stood side by side with heads erect, proudly defiant. Kelly, seated on an upturned store-box, surveyed them moodily. With the departure of the gang he had relapsed into one of those strange black reveries which seized on him from time to time. For full three minutes he sat there silently, now and again impatiently flicking the ash off his cigar with his left hand. In his right dangled the long-barrelled revolver, which he had drawn on first emerging from the cave. His well-marked brows were puckered in a gloomy scowl, and his eyes glinted with a hard, steely light as he glanced at them.

"So," said he at length, speaking, as it seemed, more to himself than to them—"so this is what it comes to, after all. And yet—and yet I had a dream, a strange dream, in which things were otherwise. I dreamt that I stood alone, with none to help me, and that I——"

His voice sank so low that the rest was inaudible, but by the movements of his lips they could see that he still muttered to himself. Presently his mood changed, and the old vindictive look leapt up once more in his eyes. He roused himself with an impatient shake and strode across to them.

"You young fool!" he cried, glowering at Dick till his black eyes seemed to be literally smouldering with hidden fires—"you accursed young fool, why wouldn't you be warned in time? Why must you needs poke your meddling fingers into this business, pit your strength against mine, like some mischievous puppy? Why couldn't you leave me and mine alone and go your own way? Bah! What's the use of ranting? You've had a run for your money, and now you must pay the penalty."

"As you will soon, Ned Kelly!" answered Dick firmly.

"Maybe; but, at any rate, you will not have the pleasure of assisting at the ceremony, my good Mason." He paused, and looked round him as though in uncertainty for a moment; then he bent forward, and spoke hurriedly in a low tone: "Hist! Listen, lad, but make no movement! I'm of a mind to give you one more chance. We've no particular quarrel, you and I; it's been a fair fight and no favour. At present I hold all the trumps; but that's a poor reason why you should be stuck up against a wall and shot down like a dog by my gang of unwashed ruffians. By Jove, but it would be a fine game to yank you out of this in spite of the whole crowd of them! And, somehow, it goes against the grain with me to—— Pah! I'm talking rauk sentiment. Come, lad, what do you say? You'll

have to fight for it, and fight hard. But say the word, and I'll stand by you just for the sheer sport of the thing."

"And Mr. Trevelyan here?" Dick asked quietly.

Instantly Kelly's face resumed its black, evil look.

"That's another matter entirely. My quarrel with Trevelyan is purely personal; he stands outside this game altogether."

Dick looked Kelly straight in the eyes and yawned expansively.

"Don't you think all this rigmarole of yours is rather tiresome? If you can't talk sense I'm off back to the cave. By the way, when does the shooting-party begin?"

Mr. Trevelyan looked at him, and smiled.

"Good lad!" he murmured through his beard.

"Mr. Mason"—the words came out icy-cold and quiet as death—"you may go back to your kennel now. The shooting-party, as you facetiously call it, is, to suit my better convenience, timed for sunrise to-morrow. Till then I have more important matters to attend to."

Dick had hit him on the raw—he knew it, and he had meant to—for Kelly's suggestion that he should abandon his friend under any circumstances whatever had made him very angry. He took no further notice of the bush-ranger, but, turning, with a nod and a "So long, Trevelyan!" he strolled back towards the cave whistling.

Kelly watched him go, watched him till he disappeared amidst the shadows of the dark opening, and then wheeled in a flash and held his drawn revolver at Mr. Trevelyan's head.

"Listen!" said he. "I hate you! You know I hate you, and you know why! You are the one man in the colony who knows my story. We have been enemies all our lives pretty well, and, so far, you have always had the upper hand. Now my time has come to demand a reckoning. I have longed for it for years past. Over and over again I could have shot you, taken you unawares; but that was not what I wanted. Now you shall fight me for your life on equal terms! Come, choose your weapons! What shall it be—rifle, revolver, or the knife, with belt buckled to belt, till one of us drops? Your life against mine! Kill me, and I pledge my word you shall pass from here unharmed. There are some half-dozen men I can trust. I will give you them for escort, and they shall swear to me to hold you harmless and see you safely on your way. But one of us has got to die, and we will fight to prove which of us is the better man in the end. Name your weapon!"

Mr. Trevelyan gave him glance for glance.

"I told you once before, Ned Kelly," he said sternly, "you have forfeited your right to stake your life against that of a honest man! I'll fight no duel with such as you!"

A terrible spasm of rage convulsed Kelly's dark features.

"Well," said Trevelyan, "why don't you shoot?" Kelly glared; his face was almost that of a madman. "I am bound and helpless, and you daren't shoot, you coward!"

"You are right," said Kelly. "I cannot shoot an unarmed man, though

never was I so sorely tempted." With a jerk he sent the revolver flying a dozen paces away, where it fell with a dull thud on the grass. "Go!" said he hoarsely. "You will die at sunrise to-morrow with Mason!" And, without another word, he stalked moodily away.

Trevelyan looked after him with a half smile and a sigh.

"There," he muttered to himself, "but for some trick of Fate, goes a man who should have been great among men."

CHAPTER 22.

The Escape.

THE prisoners were fed at midday, and again at nine in the evening. All through the long hours in the dim twilight of the cave they had sat side by side talking in low tones.

No guard was mounted over them, for their hands were still bound, and the cave entrance and the platform about it were crowded throughout the day; whilst, as Dick well knew, the sentries were always posted there at night and relieved every three hours. All hope of escape that way was clearly impossible. Nevertheless, his mind was constantly busy searching for a way to safety. He ran over the general plan of the cave as he remembered it. First, there was the main entrance, a large outer cavern, used as a general living room and storage place; from the inner end of this branched off two corridors—one to the right, the other to the left. This latter, which came to an end some forty feet up, had small chambers hewn out of the rocks at intervals, which the members of the gang used as cubicles or sleeping compartments. He and Trevelyan were lying on a pile of blankets at the farther end of this; on either side of them and behind them lay nothing but the bare, solid rock. Evidently no hope lay in that direction.

On the far side of this cave, to which the only access from without was the narrow passage, lay a heavy iron door, hidden by a curtain. This, as Kelly had once told Dick, led into a series of ramifying passages which penetrated for miles and miles into the bowels of the earth, and of which no man knew the extent. The space just beyond Kelly's room was used as the treasure-house of the gang. Dick gradually formed the desperate notion that if once they could gain access to the passage they might be able to escape. But of this all through that long day he said no word to Mr. Trevelyan.

When the evening meal came their hands were untied, and a man stood guard over them whilst they ate. As soon as they had finished he rebounded them and took the plates away. It was at this moment that Dick had an inspiration. He saw a bundle of loose cigars bulging in the man's shirt pocket, and he also noticed that the fellow was one of the quieter members of the gang. Just as the man was moving off he looked up.

"Say, partner"—the man stopped—"you might spare me one of those weeds. There can't be any harm in it, and I sha'n't be in a position to enjoy one so much this time to-morrow. I haven't had a smoke all day."

The man grinned.

"You have got sand, youngster, I do say." And with a nod of acquiescence he pulled one out and put it in Dick's mouth.

Dick deftly bit off the end and spat it out.

"Sorry to bother you, but you might give me a light, my valet is off duty to-night." He mimicked Kelly's slow drawl.

The man laughed, scraped a match on his breeches, and lighted it for him. Dick puffed vigorously, but kept his head well down, lest the fellow should catch sight of the excitement which was gleaming in his eyes.

"Thanks," said Dick, when he had got the end well aglow.

The man laughed, took the plates, and strolled off.

Dick listened intently to his retreating footsteps, and as soon as they had merged into the general clatter at the end of the cave where the men were supping, he bent across to Mr. Trevelyan, who was apparently lost in thought.

"Quick, man—quick!" he whispered. "Roll over on your face and keep still. If I burn you a little just bite your tongue, and, above all, don't cry out. Keep a strain on your wrist-ropes."

Mr. Trevelyan, uncomprehending, did as he was bidden, and Dick, with the cigar clenched between his teeth, jammed the glowing end of it against the cords and puffed for all he was worth. Before the cigar was half finished his hands were free and Dick half choked.

"Now undo mine."

Mr. Trevelyan had a small pocket-knife in his waistcoat. A little sawing of the blade, and Dick, too, was free.

"Now lie still and pretend to be asleep," whispered Dick. "Mind you keep your hands behind you. Those fellows out there will be all asleep or drunk in half an hour."

The tumult gradually subsided; men crept or staggered drowsily to their bunks; the fire at the entrance died away into dully-glowing embers; soon only the sentry was left, silhouetted against the night sky, his rifle on his knee.

"Now," whispered Dick softly, "slip off your boots and follow me."

The latter, like a sensible man, obeyed at once unquestioningly.

"Now," said Dick, rising gently and cautiously, "keep close—better catch hold of my hand, for I know the way—and, for Heaven's sake, be careful where you tread! There are sleeping men all round us, and one false step will be our death-signal."

Very gingerly they rose from their pile of blankets at the inner end of the corridor. Between them and the main cave lay a stretch of forty feet, with cubicle-like hollows full of sleeping men on either side, the passage itself a bare ten feet across, and every inch of its length fraught with danger.

The darkness was intense, their only light such faint rays as reached

them from the arch of the main entrance, where they could still see the sentry silhouetted against the night sky as he sat, rifle on knee, a small, deep red speck marking the glowing bowl of his pipe when he took a deep breath.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, they stole along on tiptoe, the darkness round them filled with the sounds of heavy breathings and the rustling of men moving uneasily beneath their blankets.

Once, as they paused, a man called out and muttered in his sleep, and once a drowsy voice hailed them with a "That you, Dick?"

Dick grunted surlily in answer, fearing that silence might arouse suspicion, and swaying a little in his walk, passed on, his heart in his mouth, but the ruse succeeded, and, at length, after what seemed to them hours of unendurable suspense, they stood side by side in the upper end of the main cavern. But now they were approaching the most difficult and dangerous part of all. The second corridor had still to be traversed, and at the far end of it lay Kelly's own room—isolated, it is true. But Kelly, as a rule, was the lightest of sleepers—watchful, fearless, full of resource.

They paused a moment to steady themselves and get breath, but every minute was precious; they could never tell if some member of the gang, unable to sleep, might not take it into his head to go and see if they were all safe, and, finding them missing, raise the alarm.

They turned back along the corridor which led inwards to the point which was to decide their fate—ten steps—fifteen—in stockinged feet, and trodden delicately with bunched toes, and Dick, groping with his finger-tips, touched the outer of the two thick curtains which shut the leader apart from his men.

Very softly he raised it, Trevelyan close behind him. Between the first curtain and the second was the space of as much as a foot; the breadth of the passage was here narrowed down to a bare three, and beyond the second curtain, as Dick knew, lay the heavy sheet-iron door.

With beating heart, he stretched out his arm, his fingers grasped the thick, soft folds, and he moved them slightly—ever so slightly—and stopped—for here was at once good news and bad. The door was not closed—so much was certain, for a faint crack of light showed between the curtain edge and the rock—but if there was a light, Kelly was probably awake and reading.

He listened, holding his breath. At first, all was silent—silent at death. Suddenly a faint, muttering sound reached him, broken—incoherent—uncertain—now rising, now falling. Now it would flow along in an incessant stream, rapid and continuous—now break off rapidly, and dwindle away into nothingness.

A vague feeling of awe crept over him, a feeling that he was listening to something not meant for his ears, but, above all, the pressure of his need and an irresistible desire to know egged him on. He raised the curtain more—more yet—and then it dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"We're done!" he whispered, with dry lips. "He's awake—but Heaven alone knows whether the man is sane or mad!"

Mr. Trevelyan pushed past him, and, in his turn, raised the curtain. For a full minute he stood, staring intently. Then, beckoning to Dick, he raised it still more, and passed through. Mason followed him, and this is what they saw.

Earlier in the evening, Kelly had evidently thrown himself fully dressed on his camp bed—a small reading-lamp beside him, and a book in his hand. Tired out with fatigue and with reading, the book had slipped from his fingers to the floor, and he had fallen asleep. But now he was sitting bolt upright on the bed, his eyes wide open, with a curious, blind, vacant expression in them, staring straight at Mr. Trevelyan and Dick; his lips moving rapidly, and every now and again his mutterings breaking out into formed words.

His voice sounded harsh and strained, though never rising above a whisper, and his face wore a strangely drawn look.

"He'll see us—he must see us!" said Dick, shrinking back; but Mr. Trevelyan laid a hand on his arm.

"H-s-s-h!" said he, very low. "He's asleep! He doesn't know we're here!"

Suddenly Kelly's voice broke out again:

"It's not true!" The words came in a hissing whisper. "It's a lie, I tell you! The thing's no forgery! A court-martial do you say, colonel? I tell you, man, it's a lie—a lie—a dastardly lie! I defy your proofs! For my honour—and the honour of the regiment—for my honour——Tush, man! You've no proof! I swear it on my honour, sir—no man loves the regiment more than I do!"

His head sank a little. Suddenly he raised it high, and his voice rang clearer.

"Three squadrons? Yes, sir! We'll make it do! Sound the advance! Trot—steady, men—steady there! Don't break line! Keep back, I say! Now, then! Charge for God and the Queen! Who's down, do you say? Sergeant Roques? Quick, fool! Where! Show me! Out of the light there—curse you! Up with you, man! Lean on me—gently! Ah! There's one for you, my friend, clean to the shoulder. Come, man, make an effort! Give me your arm, and put your foot on mine, so—that's better! We'll pull it off yet!"

The light died out of his eyes again, and the mutterings faded away once more into incoherency. Dick stared in blank amazement.

"He was recommended for the V.C. once," whispered Trevelyan, by way of explanation. "Come, where is the other door? Quick, man, quick!"

Dick slipped the bolts of the inner door leading from Kelly's room to the maze of passages beyond. Mr. Trevelyan extinguished the lamp, and very soon they were outside the outlaw's stronghold, and, mounted on two of Kelly's horses, they reached Benalla some hours later.

CHAPTER 23.

Dick Takes Charge of a Patrol.

AT nine sharp the morning after their return, in response to an urgent summons, Dick found himself in the presence of a grim-faced, white-haired man, with a skin of a rich mahogany colour, and a pair of eyes which bored into you like gimlets. The most powerful and influential man in all the colony—the High Commissioner in person.

"Lieutenant Mason?" he inquired acidly, looking up from his coffee-cup.

Dick bowed.

"Recently from England. Joined the force on Mr. Trevelyan's recommendation a week or so ago. Mentioned by Captain Wyatt in despatches on two occasions?"

Again Dick bowed, flushing slightly.

"I understand, Lieutenant Mason, that you know this man Kelly, and have spent some time in his company as his prisoner?"

"Yes, sir."

"That on two separate occasions you have actually visited the robbers' Roost, as they call it, and that on each occasion you have managed to effect your escape?—I should like to hear the story in your own words, and as briefly as possible."

Dick gave a brief outline of the events, to which the commissioner listened with close attention, interrupting him now and again with shrewd, curt questions.

"Very good, sir—very good," he said testily, when Dick had finished. "Now then, listen to me. This thing, this outlawry, has become a positive scandal throughout the countryside; neither life nor property is safe. There have been complaints from the authorities, and I mean to put a stop to it once and for all; there shall be no more shilly-shallying or half measures. I have come up here, and here I stay to superintend operations until the gang is broken up, and Kelly, alive or dead, is in my hands. I have already established a cordon of police patrols in the form of a ring stretching from here to the Murray River in the north. Somewhere inside that ring it is an absolute certainty Kelly and his gang are at present located; and should they try and break through to new ground they can be observed and followed. I am no stickler for red tape and convention, and I am about to take a most unusual step—with Captain Wyatt's hearty concurrence. In spite of your juniority and short service, I order you at once to take over command of such force as remains at my disposal; to enter the police cordon, and to, if needs be, exterminate the gang once and for all. I give you no more detailed instructions, which might only hamper you. You will enter the patrol ring, taking such stores and provisions as you think needful. You will keep up communication with me by means of relays of despatch-riders, and if you need reinforcements, I will see that they are forwarded on to you with the least possible delay. But—mark my words—under pain of my severe displeasure, you will not leave the area of country bordered by those patrols until you bring me Kelly, or his dead body, and an assurance that the gang, as a gang, no longer exists."

"My reasons for choosing you for the post are—first, that Captain Wyatt is still unfit for a prolonged spell of hard work by reason of his recent wounds. Secondly, by careful inquiry, I find that you are one of the few, if not the only man, who has personal acquaintance with the locality of this roost of bushrangers. It is a position of great responsibility, and you will be blamed or praised according to your deserts; but I

am a man who has no use for failure and excuses. That, I think, is all. You may make your own arrangements as you please. When can you start?"

"In an hour's time, sir," said Dick.

The ghost of a smile flickered across the grim, bronzed face of the commissioner, and he held out his hand.

"I needn't detain you any longer, then, Lieutenant Mason," said he.

"And, unofficially, I may add that I think I've hit on the right man for the right post. Good hunting! I wish from the bottom of my heart I could come with you, but my work keeps me chained here. Good-bye, and good luck!"

"Thank you, sir," said Dick, wringing the proffered hand, and flushing again with excitement. "I will try to deserve your good opinion."

He at once sought out Captain Wyatt, whom he found in his quarters, chatting to Mr. Trevelyan.

The former rose, and greeted him with a cheery slap on the back.

"I see you've heard the good news, young 'un, and I for one heartily congratulate you."

"I feel beastly mean about it," said Dick; "it seems like taking an unfair advantage of your being on the sick list. If you'd just say the word that you feel fit for duty I'll go back and resign right away."

Captain Wyatt laughed, and put his head on one side, regarding Dick critically.

"What an ass it is—eh, Trevelyan? And yet it has brains—undeniably it has brains."

"Oh, dry up!" said Dick. "All I meant was——"

"All you meant was," cut in Captain Wyatt, "that you're a jolly good sort, old man, so don't get ratty. I'm not fit for work yet, and I don't grudge you your chance one little bit. But a word in your ear, Dickie. If you don't take me with you as a volunteer, I—by Jove, you young black-guard, I'll court-martial you when you get back."

And all three of them laughed in chorus.

"Me too, Dick," said Mr. Trevelyan. "I'm not so young as I was, but I can sit in the saddle as long and shoot as straight as many a younger man, and I don't mean to be left out in the cold. When do we start?"

"An hour from now. I'm off to pick the men. Keep me some breakfast, will you? I'm famishing. Oh, and by the way, we must have Jackie as a tracker; those special fellows they've sent up may be tiptop men in their way, but we know Jackie and his methods—and, above all, we know that he's to be trusted. So long!"

Donovan and a squad of twenty troopers were waiting in readiness outside the police barracks, and with them as many volunteers from the country round about—fine, well-set-up men, for the most part splendidly mounted, clear of eye, steady of hand, stern of face; and nearly all of them had at one time or another suffered at the hands of the gang.

Mike Sullivan, the stage-driver, was there, and greeted Dick with an expansive grin; Tom, the barkeeper of the Wallaby saloon, who had handed

over business for the time being to his understrapper, besides many others, whose faces were more or less familiar to Dick. They raised a cheer as he rode up on his horse Cæsar, which had been brought round for him, and he made his arrangements rapidly.

Half a dozen of the lightest weights were selected, and set aside as despatch-riders. The three black trackers from Melbourne way were mounted, and told to hold themselves in reserve, and orders were given to issue to each man four days' field rations and a plentiful supply of ammunition from the Government stores. It had originally been Dick's intention to take a small force, as being easier to handle, and he was already mentally weeding-out a man here and a man there when Donovan wheeled alongside him, and addressed him in a low tone.

"There's been a leakage somewheres, sorr, Oi've heard! 'Tis not ivery man that has his hand against Ned Kelly, and there's many a man amongst the squatters that would do him a service, if they could! Anyway, the news av our little picnic-party has got abroad, and Oi'm tould that last night there was a dale of bush-signalling goin' on amongst thim hills yonder! Kelly will be warned by now, and not a few av the shady characters round about will have gone in to join him! Ye'll not be after laving any av the men behind, sorr—ye'll have work an' plinty for thim!"

Dick nodded.

"Very well, Donovan; though there are one or two I would rather have done without," he said.

The police sergeant leaned over in his saddle and spoke in a still lower voice.

"There's wan or two I'd prefer to kape me eye on, sorr, if I was you! D'ye see the little bit av a man yonder—~~he~~ on the black horse—his wife's a cousin of that same Nick Rowan ye was talkin' av! I'll say no more, but kape yez eye open, sorr, or there'll be throuble!"

Dick glanced at the man quickly.

"Very well, Donovan, and thank you. I sha'n't forget. We start at half-past ten sharp, so hurry the boys along."

"Oi shall, sorr. And where may ye be thinkin' av goin' first?"

"To the Roost, by the straightest line I can make," came the answer, short and sharp.

Sergeant Donovan so far forgot discipline as to whistle.

"The devil an all!" he muttered. "There's goin' to be a most unholy spree whin we come rappin' at black Ned Kelly's front door!"

It was at this juncture that Dick had a most unexpected piece of luck, which had a direct bearing on the fate of the expedition. He was riding slowly along, racking his brains in a frantic endeavour to recall the details of that nightmare-like journey when he and Trevelyan, with hands bound and legs tied beneath their horses' bellies, had ridden out of Benalla in the dark, and headed for the robbers' Roost. Some parts of it he could recall with considerable clearness. He had got no further, in spite of all his brain cudgelling, when by chance his eyes rested on a black, huddled form

squatting on the doorstep of Wyatt's quarters, rocking slowly to and fro, and moaning as only a black in trouble can moan.

He stopped and looked down. It was Jackie, but Jackie without his usual responsive grin and flash of white teeth.

"What's the matter—what's the trouble?" he asked. "Wake up, you caterwauling imp! I've got work for you to do."

But Jackie persisted in his rocking and moaning till Dick, anxious to propitiate the boy, and knowing the hopelessness of attempting to deal with any native when in one of his sullen humours, threw him a couple of silver coins.

Jackie picked them up slowly, and rose to his feet.

"Look here, you black limb!" said Dick. "You ride longa me, you good boy; me give you twice ten," he held up his fingers—"all same those feller." Jackie nodded.

"Pidney," he muttered, to show that he understood. "You ride, and Massa Trevelyan ride, longa same track you ride t'other days longa Captain Kelly—so!" And he held his hands behind his back as though they were tied.

Dick stared.

"Now I wonder how this imp of darkness knows!" he muttered to himself. "Yes, Jackie, but me no able find um track. You find um, you get heap silver feller, and me gib you new gun."

Jackie shook his head.

"Me ride, Massa Dick, but me no want gun, no want silver feller. Me know um way when you ride longa—so!" repeating the gesture. "Jackie he follow longa behind. Look—see; then horse he go lame, and Jackie follow um track on foot. He knows um good!"

"By Jove! Do you mean to say you followed right behind us all that while?"

"Me know um," repeated the boy; "but no want silver feller. Me ride—show you"—he moved his arm through the air slowly in a semicircle, and came to a dead stop. "Then no more Jackie! All dark longa there—all dark! Jackie he done!"

Dick looked at him, puzzled. The boy was evidently in earnest; his face was unusually grave, and his lips were quivering. But Dick could make neither head nor tail of his rigmorole beyond the fact that he had followed them when they were taken prisoners, and knew the way. So, throwing the boy his reins, he dismounted and went in search of Wyatt and breakfast.

At the stroke of half-past ten, Dick, Mr. Trevelyan, Wyatt, and the Sheriff of Benalla, cantered up in a group to the police barracks, and put themselves at the head of the small irregular force waiting them.

The great march had begun, and, simultaneously, a small hand-mirror was flashing and twinkling in the sun on a hill-top five miles away!

CHAPTER 24.

On the March.

AFTER a further talk with Jackie, Dick was pretty clear as to the first part of their route, and, without saying anything to the others, sent the boy to the rear for reasons of his own. Meanwhile, the special trackers from Melbourne were set to work wherever a difficulty occurred.

For some unaccountable reason Dick felt suspicious of these men, and it was not long before his suspicions were justified; for he found that by slow degrees they were gradually—almost imperceptibly—leading the column away to the right of what should have been its true course.

He watched them carefully, letting them go on until the thing was beyond all doubt. Then he rode forward, gave them half a dozen lashes apiece with his riding-whip, and sent them back to Benalla bound, and in charge of a despatch-rider, with a note to the effect that they had been tampered with by Kelly and his gang, and were untrustworthy.

Jackie was now the sole tracker accompanying the expedition; but he, at least, they knew to be thoroughly reliable.

Late in the afternoon they had evidence of another piece of treachery. Dick had by no means forgotten Donovan's warning with regard to the man on the black horse, and had from time to time kept his eye on him.

Suddenly, however, he missed sight of him. The column was at that time winding its way through a series of undulating hills in a country fairly free from bush.

Dick was scanning the more distant of these through a pair of field-glasses, when he discovered perched on the crest of one of them a small squatter's hut. It was so insignificant-looking, and so much the same colour as its surroundings, that he might easily have overlooked it had it not been that the glasses revealed to him a fluttering patch of white, and the figures of two women rushing hastily out of the house with a sheet in their hands, which they began waving in a peculiar manner, and finally hung over some low bushes near by; whilst a third, standing by the doorway, was staring fixedly in the direction of the troop.

Dick realised at once that this was a bush signal from Kelly's sympathisers—probably the males of the family had joined the gang overnight. But the actions of the third woman puzzled him, until, chancing to glance back, he perceived that the man on the black horse had dropped to the rear, and was signalling to her by waving a white handkerchief.

Dick wheeled and spurred up to the man, drawing his revolver, whilst others looked on in surprise.

"Throw that thing down," he said sternly, "sharply, or I'll fire!" The man dropped the handkerchief sullenly. Dick reined up alongside him, plucked a revolver from his belt, and snatched away his rifle. "Dismount!" The man glared, but was forced to obey. "Stand clear of your horse! Now, right-about-face, and go to the deuce, or to your friends there! They're not more than seven miles away, and we've no use for traitors here. If I so much as catch a glimpse of your dirty carcass again, I'll shoot! Go!"

The man turned, shook his fist savagely, and limped off. Dick, beckoning a trooper, handed over to him the man's horse and weapons.

"Deuced smart of you, Dick," said Mr. Trevelyan and the sheriff, as he rode forward again. "Who ever would have thought it of the brute!"

"Not smart enough, though," answered Dick, frowning. "Donovan gave me the tip, but I was too late. Those signals will have reached Kelly by

now. I expect he knows our movements as well as we do ourselves. That infernal sheet may cost many a good man his life before all is over."

At dusk the men halted, and had a good square meal, whilst the horses rested and grazed or rolled to refresh themselves.

At nine Dick passed the order that there was to be no smoking or talking in the ranks.

At ten the night was inky-black, with a thin, driving rain. Jackie walked beside Dick's horse, twenty paces ahead of the column; and two men had been thrown out on either flank to guard against a surprise attack.

Dick rode, bending low in his saddle, and peering forward. The men behind him in double file, two and two, each with his rifle-butt on his hip.

Suddenly Jackie checked, and laid his hand on Cæsar's bridle. Dick pulled up, and raised his hand as a signal to the others to halt.

CHAPTER 25.

The Attack on Kelly's Stronghold.

THEY were on the very edge of the steep, rocky pathway leading to the hollow. There came a flash of steel, two writhing, twisting black figures reeled together in a confused mass, a moan, a yell of defiance, the long-drawn, ominous mopoke call—the danger-signal of the gang. Dick caught a glimpse of the Spider flying downwards through the darkness, but was too late to fire. And poor Jack the tracker lay limply beneath Cæsar's hoofs, a knife between his shoulder-blades, his life-blood gushing out on the short, coarse grass.

He had done his work, and paid the penalty. Dick thought of him as he had seen him that morning seated on Wyatt's doorstep, and recalled his words.

With that strange instinct common among the aborigines, he had foretold his death to the hour. Yet, having foretold it, he had done his duty unflinchingly—a fatalist, and in his own humble way a hero.

Two men rode forward and lifted the body aside.

"There'll be many more like him, poor chap, soon," said one of them. And even as he spoke the wailing mopoke cry echoed faintly from the far side of the hollow, and from the right and left of them. It was evidently clear that Kelly was well prepared for their coming, and that further concealment was useless.

Dick hastily summoned a council, consisting of Captain Wyatt, Mr. Trevelyan, and the sheriff.

"You see, it's this way," he said hurriedly. "I'm probably the only man here who has seen this spot by daylight. We are standing now at the top of a steep, rocky path which leads down into the hollow a couple of hundred feet below. So far as I know, this is the only exit accessible for a mounted man. The robbers' Roost proper—the cave, that is—lies out there in front of us, and between us and it there is a flat stretch of grass-land. The path

itself is hidden and protected by a spur of rock, and cannot be raked by rifle-fire from the cave; but once we have passed through it we shall be in the open, and unprotected, whilst Kelly and his men will be firing from under cover. Again, the path is so narrow that a few good men might hold it for hours against the whole crowd of us. I want a couple of volunteers to come with me and see if it is being defended in any way. Personally, I believe Kelly will rely entirely on the cave, for in daylight the path would be untenable if we had men with rifles lining these higher cliffs."

A dozen instantly came forward; but Dick would only take two, and with them he crept cautiously downwards, on foot, and with their fingers of their triggers, expecting at any moment to be met with a galling rifle-fire from round some angle of rock.

In a few minutes they returned. As Dick had expected, Kelly had not considered it worth his while to waste men on its defence, but had concentrated his whole force in the cave, where they could fight from under cover against a necessarily exposed enemy.

The rain-clouds by this time had been driven off in a southerly direction, and though a few rugged masses were still visible, the sky was almost clear, with a bright moon shining.

Dick hastily told off four men to hold the top of the path against emergencies, and himself led the rest of the troop down the narrow ravine to the broad plateau land below. The opposing cliff, in which was the cave-mouth, was in deep shadow—another factor against the attacking party.

As soon as they were all down, Dick gave the word for an advance in open order.

They had covered about half the intervening distance, and were sweeping on at a good pace, when—crash! thump!—half a dozen horses and men came down simultaneously.

Kelly had had the foresight to stretch a network of wires across the line of direct advance. Before they could rise or recover from their confusion—crash! crash!—a couple of withering volleys rang out from the cave, and three of the men fell, severely wounded.

Dick blew his whistle twice, loudly and shrilly. Instantly every man dismounted, and taking such shelter as he could, opened up a return fusillade.

Dick himself, meanwhile, rode up and down behind the firing-line, encouraging his men, and exposing himself recklessly. Several of those under his command begged him to desist, but he refused until he had ascertained that the cave entrance was fairly ringed by a semicircle of men, who fired slowly and methodically, not wasting ammunition or throwing away a chance. Then, and not till then, having had several narrow shaves, he flung himself out of the saddle, and handing Cæsar to one of the despatch-riders who was tending a bunch of horses a little bit out of the general line of fire, he crept forward between the little sheriff and Mr. Trevelyan, and, rifle in hand, began to take his part in the general fusillade.

The attacking force was gradually edging in closer and closer, moving forward unit by unit between intervals in the firing. A man would rise,

stooping low, make a quick dart for five or six paces, and fall prone again; whilst his next neighbour, who had been covering his movements by a specially rapid fire, did the same in his turn. In this manner the whole line had advanced to within a short fifty yards of the loopholed ironwork which closed the cave entrance, though not without loss.

"Well, we've run the fox to earth at last," said Dick to Mr. Trevelyan, "but it seems to me that it will cost us dear before we secure his brush. Ah, there's another poor chap hit! We're losing men too fast. This won't do!"

He lay there, firing at intervals whenever he saw a chance, but cudgelling his brains the while for some means by which the bushrangers might be drawn or driven into the open. So long as they remained behind their bullet-proof shield the odds were all in their favour.

Presently he turned to Mr. Trevelyan again.

"Do you remember the small door connecting Kelly's sanctum with the treasure-chamber?"

"I have some vague recollection of the sort," said Mr. Trevelyan grimly. "It's not one of those things one forgets in a hurry. Why?"

"Did you notice a small opening on the right which seemed to lead outwards, but to a separate entrance?"

Mr. Trevelyan nodded.

"I do. You pointed it out to me as a possible way of escape. What then?"

"Why, don't you see? Although it would have been worse than useless to us as a bolthole then, if our guess at its direction was a good one, it means the end of this game, for some of us could walk round through it to the rear of the cave, and compel them to make a rush and take their chances in the open. I'm going to have a shot for it! No, don't you come; you stay here in case anything goes wrong. I'll take the sheriff and Donovan—no more!"

"See here, sir," he explained to the sheriff, "we're dropping men too fast, and to no purpose; we've eight down already, and, so far as we know, they haven't lost a man. What we can't do by force we'll try by strategy. Follow me, and I'll show you some fun."

The sheriff left his place, and picking up Donovan from the far end of the line as they ran, they made a dash for the cover of the cliff, a hundred yards or more to the right of the main cave. Here they were completely screened from the fire of either party, and Dick briefly outlined his scheme.

"Of course, it may come to nothing," he explained. "At best it's only guess-work. But it's worth trying."

All along the face of the cliff was riddled with shallow depressions and crevices, some only a few feet deep, some running back for several yards. Again and again they tried, but drew blank. They had worked their way along by now to within twenty paces of the big cave, but being abreast of it, were invisible to the besieged, and safe from their fire.

Dick was almost in despair, and was on the point of giving up the idea,

when Donovan drew his attention to a small opening some little way up the rock, fifteen feet or more above their heads. Dick scrambled up, nimble as a goat, peered in, squeezed himself through the opening, and vanished, whilst the two men below waited in breathless suspense. In a minute or so, which seemed to them an age, he reappeared, and beckoned to them. Evidently at last he had found what they were seeking. Lying flat on his stomach on the ledge, he lowered his rifle to the full stretch of his arm, grasping it by the barrel.

Donovan swung the little sheriff up in his brawny arms till he could grip the rifle-butt, and with the aid of that and a bit of a scramble, he soon swung himself on to the ledge by Dick. Donovan proved rather a tougher job, on account of his weight, but after a stumble or two he arrived safe, but considerably worse off for skin.

Dick's eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"It's all right!" he panted. "I've been to the far end. It leads straight to their back door. Softly, now, and mind the loose stones!"

The trio groped their way blindly forward through the darkness. The passage slanted slightly downwards; a couple of dozen paces brought them to the end of it, which opened out into the treasure-chamber, from which again led the small door into Kelly's room. Here there was a lamp burning, but it was quite empty.

Dick passed through, and his two companions gazed about them in amazement at the carpets and chairs and the pictures on the walls. On again, on tiptoe over the soft rugs, until they reached the narrow passage communicating with the large cavern, and at the mouth of this they paused in wonder.

Midway betwixt them and the entrance a large fire was burning on the floor, round which sat four or five men drinking. Their faces and arms, grimed with burnt powder, made it clear that they had just been relieved from duty at the barricade.

Everywhere lay rifles and open cases of ammunition. To the side of the fire lay three figures stretched out quiet and still. It was evident that the besiegers' shooting had been more damaging than they had believed, for two more, wrapped in bloodstained bandages, were tending to each other as best they could—one clearly badly hit.

Several of the treasure-chests which Dick had seen before were scattered about, open and empty, the men having divided their contents in case it should come to a general bolt.

But what chiefly attracted the attention of the trio was the extraordinary figure presented by some of those at the barricade. At first it seemed hard to believe them human. Their bodies were completely cased in a kind of cylinder of sheet-iron or steel. On their heads were similar cylinders, only smaller, fastening at the neck, and with slitlike openings for the eyes and mouth. Their arms and the front part of the thighs were similarly covered. They had, in fact, reverted, after a rough fashion of their own, to mediæval days, when knights went into battle in full armour.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" muttered the little sheriff.

Dick remembered the day of the bank hold-up, when Kelly had been fired at at point-blank range by Wyatt, and escaped unhurt. He must have been wearing some such device, without the headpiece, under the broadcloth coat of the pseudo bank-manager, Raynor.

There were only half a dozen so attired—presumably the chief members of the gang. All, however, seemed confident and in high spirits, and there was a sound of laughter and shouting above the clatter of the riddle-volleys.

Dick touched the sheriff on the arm.

"Pick your men!" he whispered. "Are you ready? Then let them have it, boys!"

The three rifles rang out simultaneously, and two of the men by the fire sprang to their feet with a yell. The others had ceased to take interest in further proceedings: Donovan let up an unearthly screech, whilst Dick and the sheriff cheered lustily, and poured in a hot fire.

Instantly all was confusion. The sudden and unexpected attack in the rear took the bushrangers absolutely by surprise. Some dashed for the barricade, and tried to fling it aside. Some cursed and swore they had been betrayed. One or two flung down their arms and began screaming for mercy.

High above the din Kelly's voice rang out loud and strong. Dick recognised him easily, in spite of his armour, by the ease and grace of his movements. He saw him fell one man with the butt of his revolver for disobeying orders.

But the half-maddened crowd proved too much for him. Frantically they swept him aside, and as Dick and his companions poured in volley after volley, they tore down the barricade which had proved their salvation, and broke helter-skelter for the open. Here the work became short, sharp, and furious. Men flung up their arms and dropped, shrieking. Others, in a sort of sullen fury, charged forward, like maddened bulls, almost up to the firing-line, and then emptied their magazines at point-blank range. Both sides were losing men fast, but the bushrangers' loss was by far the heaviest. A good number of the more faint-hearted flung themselves on their knees and begged for quarter.

But in the mouth of the cave there remained one small knot of grim, silent men, each in that grotesque, home-made armour, cumbersome and unwieldy, but bullet-proof. And in their very silence there seemed to lie a certain dogged defiance. It was to be a fight—if need be, a fight to the death; but there would be no yielding or crying for quarter there. They were the picked men of the gang—coarse, evil-living brutes some of them, no doubt, but each with his full share of the grim, bulldog courage of the race.

Nick Rowan was there, noticeable by his huge stature, and Burney, Clarke, and Jarvis, Dick's gaolers of old, and in the van of all Kelly, silent, watchful, prepared to take any risk if it should offer the faintest hope of success.

They were cool enough—no flurry, no confusion—and the trio watched them, fascinated.

Barring that armour-clad group at the mouth, the cave was deserted by all save the dead and dying. Yet Dick and his two companions could not come out of the passage, for to do so would have brought them into the concentrated field of fire of their own men. Nor could they bring themselves to use their rifles on that silent group from behind.

So long as they were not attacked, they seemed, by a sort of mutual agreement, to refrain from attacking, but merely stood and gazed, fascinated and spellbound, whilst the final scenes of that grim drama were played out before their eyes.

There came a rushing hail of bullets from the besiegers. Several of the bushrangers were hit two or three times, but their armour prevented the bullets penetrating, though they reeled and staggered under the force of the concussion like drunken men. They replied to the fire calmly and coolly. Again came that deadly hail of lead, whistling all around and spluttering on the rocks behind. And so this strangest of all strange duels began. Again and again the bushrangers were hit and sent swaying and staggering back a yard or so; and again and again they came on, firing methodically and doing terrible execution at that short range. Half a dozen troopers were out of action, and many of the volunteers; it almost began to look as though Kelly and his men might yet win the day.

But a stray bullet found a weak spot in Jarvis's armour, and, penetrating between the thigh-piece and the body, buried itself in his groin, and he fell, with a clatter, screaming and tearing up the earth with his hands in his agony.

He was quickly avenged; but a couple of minutes later yet another man went down, his elbow shattered by a bullet as he was in the act of firing.

He struggled bravely up, and began using his revolver, but not for long; the bullet, after splintering the bone, had glanced upwards, tearing the big arteries, and soon, sick and faint with pain and bleeding to death, he fell, to rise no more.

There were but four left now—Kelly, Rowan, Burney, and another—and their case was desperate indeed.

Dick saw Kelly turn his head to the right and left, as though giving some last order; then suddenly he clapped a whistle between his teeth and blew two long calls, shrill and clear.

There was a pause of surprise, and the firing on either side dwindled away; then, from out of the darkness beyond, there came a rush as of a whirlwind—a mad, galloping rush, a flash and clatter of hoofs. Dick had a momentary glimpse of tossing heads and plunging bodies, the slim, dark figure of Spider silhouetted against the sky, a well-known grey horse, and the next instant Kelly's voice rang out in a sharp command. The four men swung themselves into the saddle. Again a pause, and again Kelly's voice rang out like a clarion—"Charge!" And the tiny band rode like madmen into the teeth of a hail of bullets—straight at the firing-line.

It was a magnificent sight—that last mad charge of Kelly and his little handful of survivors.

Four men against ten times their number! Yet the very recklessness of

it counted largely for success. Straight as a die they rode for the centre of that death-dealing semicircle which for hours past had been slowly but surely closing in on them—Kelly, on his wonderful grey horse, three clear lengths ahead; the others in line abreast behind him.

Men sprang at him from all sides, but the rush was as the rush of a whirlwind. With a dare-devil laugh and a shout of defiance, he swept through or over them, firing as he rode, a revolver in either hand, guiding the grey by the pressure of his knees alone, and headed for the entrance of the steep path leading to the heights above.

It was now that the real value of their armour showed itself. Seated in the saddle, they hardly presented a single vulnerable point. Half a dozen bullets struck Kelly almost simultaneously. He rocked a little in his saddle, steadied himself, and replied—two chambers with his right hand, one with his left—and three men dropped, wounded.

In a few seconds it was all over, and Kelly and his three men had gained the lower end of the pathway, where the Spider, who had swept round in a wide curve beyond the line of fire, rejoined them.

With a cry of dismay, Dick and the sheriff leapt forward and rushed from the cave, with Donovan at their heels. The whole thing had taken place with such nightmare-like rapidity that they had been held, as it were, spellbound, unable to move.

They gained the open just as Kelly vanished behind the rocky curtain which hid the upward path from sight. Dick raced across to where Cæsar was being held ready for him and flung himself into the saddle. Mr. Trevelyan was already mounted. The sheriff was up the next second, with Donovan and half a dozen more at his heels, and, sweeping across the open plateau, they rode neck-and-neck for the opening.

Captain Wyatt, unable to follow by reason of his injuries, took charge of the prisoners and wounded, and, reserving for himself a mere handful of men to act as guard, bade the rest follow after Dick as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER 20.

A Desperate Chase.

DICK had barely reached the far side of the hollow when the sound of a sharp interchange of shots warned him that Kelly had already made his way to the summit, and was in conflict with the four men he had posted there.

“If only they can hold him in check till we come up,” he muttered to himself, as he urged Cæsar along with voice and spur—“if only they can!”

That they were making a pretty brisk fight of it was clear, and Dick and the sheriff were more than half way to the summit when there came a sudden rattle of half a dozen shots in quick succession, a scream, a shout, and then silence. As they reached the high ground above there was already a gleam of grey to the eastward, which had been invisible to them down

in the hollow. A couple of riderless horses were scampering away towards Benalla and the south. Four men lay on the ground, one so badly wounded that he could only point, without speaking, and then fall back exhausted.

Dick followed the direction with his eyes. Half a mile away were four figures, riding for their lives—three bushrangers and Spider the tracker. The fourth lay dead beside the man who had pointed, though whether shot or by a fall Dick had no time to ascertain.

He stood up, stretching himself to his full height in his stirrups for a last look ahead; and then, sitting well down in the saddle, he drove home the spurs, and the great race began. Caesar was undoubtedly the best animal in the whole countryside, barring Kelly's grey; but the little sheriff was on a splendid horse, and rode three stone lighter than Dick. Mr. Trevelyan and Donovan, though both heavy, were also well mounted, as were a couple more of the troopers. But after the first sharp burst none of the rest were able to keep the pace, and they began to tail off in a long line, resigning the chase virtually to these six.

At first it seemed as though the bushrangers were managing to increase their lead. This indeed was so, for their horses had had time to get fairly settled into their stride, and, moreover, they knew the nature of the ground better, and so were able to avoid mistakes.

However, as the light grew stronger the pursuers were able to pick their ground better, skirting an extra dense patch of scrub here and there, yet never for an instant letting their quarry out of their sight.

After an hour it was evident that they were closing up fast, for some of the bushrangers' horses were beginning to tire, and the better mounted reined back to prevent getting separated. Their armour, too, was of considerable weight, and began to tell.

Gradually—very gradually—the sheriff and Dick crept up, stringing out a little from their own men as they did so. The half-mile was being gradually lessened to a quarter, the quarter to three hundred yards—to two hundred; but, at the same time, another three hundred separated them from their supporters.

Kelly had thrown away his headpiece—probably because of the weight—and Dick saw him half turn in his saddle and glance back. Quick as thought he raised his rifle and fired.

Now, to shoot at any kind of a range when galloping is difficult, especially when covering rough ground. Dick's bullet went wide, but, nevertheless, it found a billet, for the horse of the man riding next to Kelly reared violently, tried to recover itself, failed, and came down with a crash right on top of its rider.

Instantly the others pulled up short. Kelly leapt from his saddle, and bent over the fallen man. Seeing that the case was hopeless, he swung himself up again.

By this time Dick and the sheriff had closed up to within eighty yards. All four men fired simultaneously, and the little sheriff rapped out an oath,

forceful and to the point. A bullet had chipped his elbow, leaving a long, seared, red line on the forearm.

He held out his arm and wrung his fingers, and Kelly, looking back, laughed, and waved his rifle in the air derisively.

Dick escaped without a touch, though he was nearly unseated by the sudden swerve of Cæsar as the latter swung to one side to avoid the fallen bushranger. Dick got a glimpse of the face as he passed. It was the man Burney, and he was quite dead.

There were only three left, strange companions in misfortune—Ned Kelly, the Spider, and Nick Rowan the bully.

On, on again, down a long boulder-strewn hillside, with a loose rein—and Heaven help the man whose horse blunders!

Mr. Trevelyan and the others had caught up with them owing to their having steadied their pace to fire, and all six were now riding pretty well abreast; for Dick had come to the conclusion that it was endurance, not pace, which would tell in the long run, and so he ceased to urge Cæsar or press him beyond a certain limit. He saw a time coming when everything might depend on having a little bit in hand.

On and on again, across a bad bit of scrub. The pace was flagging a bit now, both pursued and pursuers reserving themselves for the long, steep rise which lay ahead of them a mile away.

Kelly reached it four hundred yards to the good; but no horse living could go any pace up such a killing hill.

They closed in on him rapidly again. He was barely half-way up, Rowan, whose horse had the heavier weight to carry, lagging some lengths behind, when he dismounted, patted the grey reassuringly on the neck, and opened fire. The trooper next to Mr. Trevelyan threw up his arms, and fell forward, wounded.

Crack! A second time the rifle spoke, and his mate, who had closed in to his assistance, gave a horrible gurgling scream, and rolled out of the saddle, severely wounded.

It was deadly marksmanship, but for the moment that was all they were to see of it, for it had served its purpose. Rowan and the Spider had now gained the summit of the ridge, and Kelly, coolly reslinging his rifle, soon rejoined them, and the trio vanished down the slope on the far side.

The pursuing party dropped behind again up the ascent, and when they topped the ridge they could see Kelly, Rowan, and the Spider nearly half a mile away, lifting their horses along for all they were worth.

Before them lay a long, sloping descent, with a gentle gradient, stretching away for a couple of miles, broken here and there by clumps of rock and patches of scrub, but on the whole good going; and, towering up against the skyline, five miles further still, a great gaunt crag, isolated and majestic.

Dick recognised it with a cry of astonishment. At last he realised whither this mad race was leading them. They were heading straight for the

Burra-Burra caves—the place which Kelly had always dreamt of as the scene of his final stand.

With a shout and a view halloo, the four men descended the slope. It was neck or nothing now, and they rode straight as a die, each man choosing his own line.

The pace was intoxicating, the rush of wind in their ears deafened them, the long, stretching action of the horses sent the blood racing through their veins, yet, yard by yard, they were slowly but surely riding their quarry down.

Nearer yet, and they could see the perspiration glisten on the Spider's half-naked body as he rode barefooted, using his stirrups with the big toe only.

Dick's companions dropped behind in a flash as Cæsar, gathering himself together, shot forward like an arrow.

Rowan's horse, lagging a couple of lengths behind, staggered slightly, but recovered. He was a good horse, but he was beat; the pace and the heavy weight he was carrying were telling at last.

Dick drew his revolver. Twenty paces—ten!

"Hands up, Nick Rowan!" he cried. "Hands up, or you're a dead man!"

Rowan risked a glance over his shoulder, which cost him another half length, and fired haphazard under his arm. The bullet flew wide. Dick raised his revolver-hand.

"Hands up!" he cried for the last time.

Rowan made a desperate effort to pull out.

Crack! Crack!

Dick fired twice in quick succession. The first bullet hit the bushranger's armour fair and square, making him reel in his saddle. He flung up his arms in an endeavour to regain his balance, and the second bullet entered the unprotected space by the armpit, penetrating the lungs, and horse and rider came down with a thunderous crash.

Dick, unable to pull up, swung clear, and was carried past. Kelly, also unable to check, curved round to the right in a semicircle to cover his fallen comrade, passing Dick as he did so.

He fired across his bridle-arm just as Dick, bending low in the saddle till his face was hidden in Cæsar's mane, swept by. The bullet chipped the back part of the saddle. Again he fired, and Dick felt as though his shoulder muscle had been ripped and torn by a red-hot iron.

He, too, fired at random, but, as luck would have it, the grey swerved inwards, and Kelly's bridle-arm dropped; the bullet had splintered the bone.

By this time Mr. Trevelyan, the sheriff, and Donovan came thundering up almost on top of them, and fired simultaneously. The shots rattled on Kelly's body-armour, but without doing any further harm.

Mr. Trevelyan slowed down, raised his rifle, and fired again. There was a rush as of a whirlwind, a flash of a dark body between Kelly and himself, and the Spider's horse raced wildly on across the plain, his dead rider fallen

backwards with outstretched arms, but still maintaining his grip by an instinct stronger than death.

Again Kelly wheeled the grey, using his knees only. There was a shock as Donovan and Mr. Trevelyan, converging towards the same point, cannoned and reeled apart. A moment's confusion, and, before they could recover, Kelly and the grey were racing onwards towards the great, gaunt rock—alone.

CHAPTER 27.

The Last Stand of Kelly.

ROCKING and reeling in his saddle, blind with pain and fatigue, the grey horse, grey no longer, but black with sweat and dust, and with heaving flanks and quivering limbs, Kelly held bravely on towards his goal. His face was drawn and haggard, but there was almost a smile on his lips, and his eyes, though dark with suffering, gazed ahead as unflinchingly as ever. Only a mile more—one short mile—and then the end. Come up, good horse! One last effort—one last output of your failing strength—the end is very near!

The long, oval shadow of the rock thrown by the early morning sun covered him. A few yards more—only a few yards—and the goal was reached. Kelly slipped from the saddle with a groan, staggered, fell, and rose again, supporting himself against the rock, and drawing his breath in deep, sobbing gasps, and so resting he waited for the end, his strength coming back to him little by little.

Louder and louder came the thud of the pursuing hoofs. A horse was down, throwing its rider clear—it was Trevelyan's. No; Donovan's. Slowly the trooper picked himself up, grabbed his rifle, and staggered forward on foot, lurching like a drunken man, leaving his horse where it lay. They swept round the angle of rock—three men in the saddle, and one afoot—against one lone, wounded man. Dick, on the big horse, Cæsar, still leading; the sheriff next.

Dick saw him first, and he, too, threw himself from the saddle, and stumbled forward, revolver in hand. If it was to be a fight to the finish, at least it should be fair.

"Yield, Ned Kelly! Throw down your weapon!" he croaked; but his throat was so parched and dry that his voice scarce rose above a whisper. Kelly heard him, and smiled. His brain was growing clearer, his hand steadier; but he had no eyes for Dick Mason or the sheriff close behind him.

"Trevelyan!" he called, and his voice rang clear and strong; a last spasm of vitality had come back to him in the supreme moment. "Trevelyan!"

Mr. Trevelyan heard him, and raised his rifle. The two shots rang out as one. Kelly staggered slightly; it was clear that he was hit. But Mr. Trevelyan's head jerked back, and, with a groan, he swung limply in the saddle for an instant, and slid to the ground in a huddled heap, his rifle dropping from his nerveless fingers.

Dick and the sheriff fired, and Kelly replied. The sheriff's horse reared, and came to earth with a dull thud. His aim was growing uncertain, and he sank on one knee.

"For the last time, Ned Kelly, yield!" cried Dick.

"You always were hard to convince, Mason," said Kelly, and fired again.

Dick's arm dropped; he snatched the revolver with his left hand, raised it, and pressed the trigger home. Kelly fell forward on his face, and rolled over.

In an instant they were round him, and Dick, setting his teeth, and forgetful of his own hurts, raised the dying man's head on his knee.

Kelly's face was white and haggard with pain, but he managed to screw up a smile.

"That you, Mason? Ah, the luck's turned at last—and my dream's come true! It was always so. Here alone, and you and Trevelyan——" He paused, and Dick wiped a trickle of blood from his mouth. "It was a grand ride—eh, Mason? And this is the end! Raise my head a bit, there's a good chap. Is Trevelyan—is he—does he still live?"

Dick nodded.

"He will recover, I think," he whispered. "It was the shoulder. Do you want him?"

Kelly seemed to be holding on to his strength by an effort.

"Tell him—tell him—I'm sorry," he said at length. "I—it was my fault all through. I—I'm not much of a hand at apologies, old man—never was; but tell him—tell him I'd be glad if he'd forgive me, and call it—quits!"

Dick beckoned to the sheriff, and whispered a few words in his ear. The little man nodded gravely, and crossed to where Trevelyan lay, with Donovan attending him. In a few minutes he was back, and Dick threw him a questioning glance. Their eyes met, and a message passed between them unspoken. Dick lowered his head. "It's all right," he whispered in the dying man's ear. "He has understood, and forgiven!"

Kelly was silent for a minute or two; then he spoke again, but more faintly:

"Send them away," he whispered. "Send them away! I want to speak to you."

Dick motioned to the sheriff to stand aside.

"Mason," said he, "I'm pegging out—booked straight through, for better or worse, and, on the whole, I'm glad of it; but I'd like to tell you—to tell you how I've made such a mess of things. If we'd met—well, under more congenial circumstances, I think we should have been friends. Lift me higher, like a good chap. So—that's better! Trevelyan—Trevelyan and I have always been like dogs quarrelling over the same bone. His father was my father, but by a second marriage, and he and I quarrelled. The old story, you know—a woman. She had common-sense, and preferred him. I think it was that which first started me running amuck. I was in the Army, and I took the quickest road to perdition—horses, cards, and the rest of it. Then came difficulties and troubles. I broke my father's heart they told me—but I was reckless and paid no heed. Then came

the final smash. I was hopelessly in debt. Trevelyan had married the woman I wanted. When the old man died, it was Trevelyan who came into the money, a share of which should have been mine by right, and which I had depended on. I was cornered—desperate—and I did the only thing which occurred to me in my madness. I forged. I disgraced my name and my regiment.

"Of course, it was all up with me, and I did a bolt. I came out here—still reckless, and vowing vengeance on the man whom I chose to suppose had ruined my life. He, on the other hand, placed his father's death and the family disgrace at my door. I—I—the wild life appealed to me, and the excitement,—they kept me from thinking, you see—helped me to drown remorse. And this—is the end!"

His head drooped forward. He was nearly gone. Dick wiped his mouth again.

Presently he moved a little, moaned feebly, and looked up.

"I'd be glad, old man, if you—if you wouldn't mind—you know the worst now—you refused before—will you shake hands now for the last time?"

Dick stretched out his hand, and grasped that of the dying man.

"It's the left," he said huskily. "You've put the other out of action."

Kelly smiled faintly.

"Thanks, old chap. I'm sorry. Hope I haven't hurt you much."

He gave one more convulsive shudder, and fell sideways, his head striking the ground; and the grey horse standing near by limped forward, and sniffed at him with distended nostrils—nozzling against his cheek, and eyeing him askance.

Round him stood a small group of three saddle-worn, haggard-eyed men, with bared heads and none but kindly thoughts. There was a strange choke in the little sheriff's voice as he took a step towards the unconscious, and, as they were fully convinced, dying man, and did his duty.

"Edward Kelly, I hereby arrest your person in the name of the law, and charge you with maliciously and feloniously interfering with the peace of her Majesty's subjects, and with highway robbery under arms. You will be taken hence to Melbourne Gaol, or such other place as the authorities may appoint, and at a date as yet unfixed you will be arraigned on these charges, and tried for your life.

"And that, I think, is the nastiest and dirtiest job I've ever done," he concluded informally. "Poor chap! It's little enough he'll ever see of Melbourne or a judge. He's booked for a higher court than any in Australia."

It seemed hours before the stragglers in the chase came up, and the long and painful journey to Benalla and the railway head was begun. Two men were despatched for surgical aid and carts, for there was hardly a man undamaged, and Mr. Trevelyan was too seriously injured, as also were three others, to be put on a horse. Tenderly he was lifted up and laid on the cart floor on a spring-mattress of brush shoots, and with equal care and

tenderness Ned Kelly was laid beside him—the two men who had been such bitter enemies sharing their couch of pain.

Slowly the cortege wound its way along, till at last, far ahead, through the gathering dusk, the town lights came in sight.

Dick managed to get his arm strapped up in splints and put in a temporary sling by a friendly surgeon, and, having seen Mr. Trevelyan safely ensconced in Wyatt's quarters, stumbled wearily into the presence of the high commissioner.

Of the once formidable gang, every member was dead, wounded, or a prisoner. The amount of property which had been recovered, too, was very considerable, and of this Captain Wyatt and an escort had charge, and were expected to arrive some time during the following day.

"You have done splendidly, sir—splendidly!" said the high commissioner. "I always flatter myself I can pick a good man for a job, and, upon my word, I think that this time I picked the very best. You are a made man in the colony, sir, young though you are, and I shall be glad to push your interest to the utmost. Of course, by the way, the Government reward is yours."

"Thank you, sir," answered Dick quietly, "but I'd rather it was divided up amongst the men. I'll touch no brave man's blood money, and for the rest I intend to avail myself of Mr. Trevelyan's kind offer, and join him in his farming. I should like to resign my commission as soon as you can make it convenient for me to do so."

The commissioner nodded.

"I think I understand," said he, "and I appreciate your decision."

Ned Kelly did survive, owing to his wonderful constitution and indomitable will, and as soon as it was safe to move him, he was taken off to Melbourne prison hospital, to be nursed into convalescence before being brought to trial. Meanwhile, in the home paddock of Mr. Trevelyan's ranche, in which Dick became a junior partner, in a quiet corner under the shadow of the trees, may be seen any warm summer's day two fine horses—a grey and a dark chestnut—roaming about at their leisure, and cropping lazily at the luxurious, sweet-tasting grass. Strangers passing, or stray visitors, point to the grey, and talk amongst themselves.

"See, that is *Cæsar*, the horse of Ned Kelly!" Then one of them, it may be, will call out sharply, "Hands up!" And the grey's ears will prick forward momentarily, and a pair of dark, soft eyes will turn towards the sound, looking wistfully for the master he loved so well and served so faithfully—"Ned Kelly the Bushranger."

THE END.

(Look out for the splendid sequel to this fine story, entitled "Trooper and Bushranger; or, the Last Days of Ned Kelly." It will be published shortly.)



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