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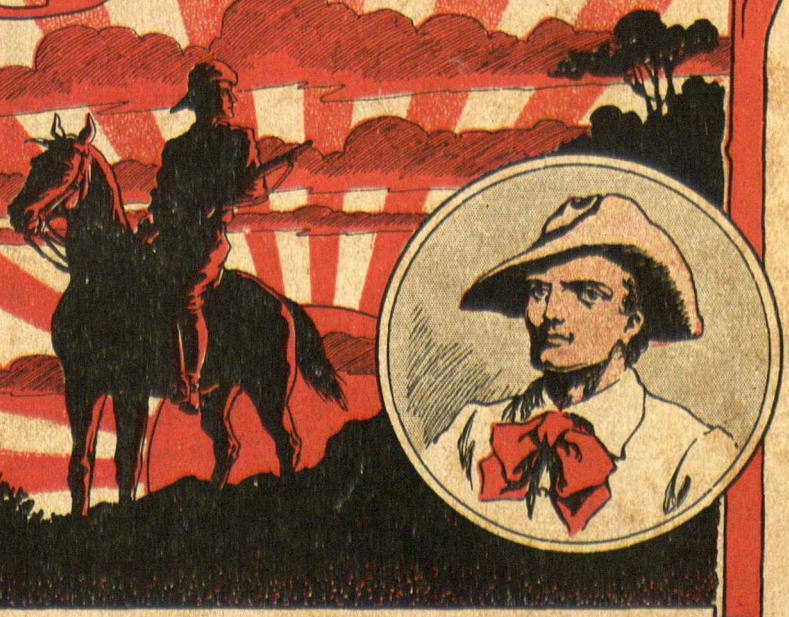
TROOPER AND BUSHRANGER



OR THE LAST DAYS OF NED KELLY

H.M.L.

THREE PENCE

TROOPER AND BUSHRANGER;

OR, THE LAST DAYS OF NED KELLY.

By CECIL HAYTER.

CHAPTER 1.

No. 43—The Escape.

THE rain came down in one continuous swishing sluice, and a strong easterly gale drove it slantwise with a force which stung like pellets from a twelve-bore. The sky was black as ink, and split asunder at half-minute intervals to emit a dazzling zigzag of forked lightning; whilst the thunder growled and banged overhead without letting up long enough to give one time to gasp for breath.

Half a dozen coasting vessels in the bay had parted their cables and were sagging hopelessly shorewards, sending up scared blue rockets for assistance; and her Majesty's cruiser Amphitryon was steaming frantically out between the heads, having slipped her anchors in the hope of riding out the gale in the open with plenty of sea room.

Melbourne Gaol, gaunt, sombre, and menacing, ugly as sin, grim as death itself, reared deserted, windowless walls to the full blast of the tempest.

Here and there an armed warder, in glistening macintosh cape and 'overalls,' cowered for shelter beneath the parapet or in the jutting angle of the guard-room, envying his luckier colleagues snugly ensconced below out of harm's way.

But the big yards and exercise grounds were deserted, the bare paving-flags glistening wetly in the darkness.

In the upper corridor at the north-east angle of the main building a warder, with a heavy bunch of keys dangling from a bright steel chain, was just opening the door of cell No. 43 on his final round of inspection for the night. Up and down the corridor two other warders paced unceasingly with soft, noiseless tread—they had rubber on their boot-soles—and a loaded rifle over the crook of the left elbow. Now and again one of them would check for an instant and peer through the narrow observation-slits in the wall, which gave him an uninterrupted view into the cell beyond.

Clang, clank! The heavy bolts shot back. There was a jingling of keys, a grating of the lock, and the narrow, massive door of No. 43 swung back.

It was a small, bare room, eight feet by ten, with a plain wooden bedstead screwed to the floor in one corner, a table, a chair, and a few tin pans. Everything was scrupulously neat and clean, even beyond the requirements of the official regulations. A couple of tattered books lay on the table, a privilege allowed to certain favoured prisoners.

And prisoner No. 43 was undoubtedly favoured by all the warders but one. He was civil spoken, cheerful, in spite of illness, punctual and prompt in obeying orders. Moreover, he had an air about him of one more accustomed to give a command rather than obey one. He gave no trouble, and his gaolers, almost to a man, treated him with respect and such leniency as the rules permitted.

The exception was a hulking brute of a warder named Macullan, a sullen, sour-tempered bully, with a doubtful record in the past—how he had obtained his post no one quite knew—and an extraordinary fund of petty spite which earned him the hatred of every prisoner with whom he came in contact.

Nothing gave him keener delight than to bully and goad some unfortunate wretch till he could hear the man's teeth grating with impotent rage, and see him go white to the lips. Then, with a coarse laugh and a foul insult, which his victim was powerless to resent, he would set him some perfectly undeserved and unjust punishment.

When Macullan, in the course of his duties, came across No. 43 he started his usual bullying methods, and found, to his astonishment, that he and they alike were treated with contempt. This spurred him to renewed activity, and he racked such brain as he could boast of for novel and ingenious methods of hazing.

These were received in the same dignified, contemptuous manner; but there was a belying gleam in No. 43's eye which would have warned a less dense man than Macullan that his victim was becoming dangerous.

As recently as that morning he had "taken a turn at No. 43," as he expressed it, with rather astounding results.

After five minutes or so of foul insult and abuse Macullan had ventured to raise his hand to the prisoner.

No. 43 whipped round like a knife, his black eyes blazing with such extraordinary ferocity, and with such an air of command, that the bully instinctively fell back a pace.

"Look here, my man," said No. 43 in a low tone, "keep your dirty hands off me, or you'll be sorry for it! And listen to a word of advice. If you go on as you're going on, one of these fine days you'll be killed! I can't call it murdered, for one does not murder vermin such as you."

Macullan, aghast and speechless with rage, was nevertheless unable to say or do anything so long as that meancing dark eye fixed him.

The utmost he could do was to bluster out something about reporting the prisoner for using threatening language.

"And, anyway, it won't be you what 'as the pleasure of outin' me, No. 43. You're going to be tried and 'ung—that's your ailment—'ung by the neck." With which utterly inefficient witticism he had taken himself off, vowing black vengeance in the future, and acutely conscious that there was something about No. 43 which made him feel at a disadvantage.

Jameson, the warder who now stood at No. 43's open door, was a very different type of man. He glanced in with a civil nod towards the figure on the bed, and instead of addressing him by number, as usual, slipped in an occasional sir.

"Feeling better now?" he said in a low voice.

"Much better, thanks, Jameson," came the answer from the bed. "The pain from my old wound has been pretty bad. Fancy it's the damp brings it on. Deuce of a night outside, isn't it?"

"Blowin' great guns, sir. Hope you'll be better to-morrow. The trial is fixed for the day after—Thursday."

"Ah, thanks! I'm glad they've settled the day at last. Ough!"

The exclamation was an involuntary one of pain.

"Care to see the surgeon? No? Well, good-night."

"Good-night—oh, and—er—Jameson, by the way, could you lower the gas outside in the corridor a little? It shines straight into my eyes, and prevents my sleeping. Thank you. Good-night."

Jameson lowered the corridor gas, as requested. The big door clanged to behind

him, the bolts were shot, and the warder, having completed his round of inspection, strolled away.

No sooner had the sound of his footsteps died away than No. 43 leapt lightly from his bed and stood a moment listening. His pains seemed to have vanished with mysterious rapidity, though that they were by no means wholly imaginary a sharp, involuntary facial contortion bore witness.

A terrific blast of wind struck the building with hurricane force till it shook from roof to foundation, and No. 43 was able to hear nothing but the general din and creaking. As it swept by, however, he distinguished the faint steps of the patrol drawing near, and seated himself on the bed till they should pass.

He gave a glance through the observation-slit into the corridor beyond. The light was very dim, thanks to Jameson having turned it down, and it was pretty certain that the patrol would not be able to see in if he wished to, which was unlikely; for No. 43, thanks to his good reputation, was little bothered.

The man passed and repassed, and still No. 43 sat motionless, for he knew that in a few moments the two warders would be deeply engrossed in a game of cribbage, with which is was their habit to while away the long, silent hours.

After a good ten minutes, through which he was quiet as a statue, he sprang once more to his feet, moving quickly and silently, and set to work.

His first act was to dive under the bed on hands and knees, and, groping with his finger-tips, pull up a small segment of board a foot square from the flooring. This had been most cunningly cut loose by persistent scratching with a small-pointed fragment of iron. From the receptacle beneath he dragged first of all a small package of banknotes; then followed a long coil of linen. This was in thin strips, twisted and knotted at two-foot intervals, forming a rope four strands thick. The strands for the most part had been torn carefully from a sheet; but some of them bore dark, ugly marks and bloodstains. These had been bandages, secreted one by one as No. 43 lay week after week in the hospital ward, and after hovering betwixt life and death, had gradually taken a turn towards convalescence. The fact that even then, when racked by the pain of healing wounds, and weakened by loss of blood and a constitution temporarily shattered, he had yet concentrated his mind on acquiring these bandages for future use, proved him to be a man of indomitable will and iron determination.

The notes he stuffed carelessly enough in his pocket, but the rope he went over critically knot by knot, testing its strength. In two places he even went to the trouble of untying, retwisting, and retying before he was satisfied.

Coil upon coil, it made a length of a full thirty feet, and at one end was securely knotted a strong iron hook.

Again he plunged his arm into the square hole up to the shoulder, and brought out three strong iron spikes, roughly made from the handles of cooking pots; these were for climbing, and having laid them gently on the floor beside the rope, he was compelled to rest a bit by reason of a sudden twinge of pain.

In a few minutes, however, he was up again and working with a will at the centre iron bar of the three which guarded the window at seven-inch intervals.

The upper and lower sockets of this were of solid masonry—good sound granite—yet at a touch the lower end of the bar moved. The granite had been carefully and painfully grooved towards the outer edge of the sill, and the hollow thus worn refilled by the dust of the hard stone worked into a paste with a little water. A wrench, and the lower end was free; two or three quick jerks to right and left—the bar itself acting as a lever—the upper socket lost its grip, and the bar came out, leaving a space through which a spare-built, active man might squeeze his way. No. 43 was both spare and active.

Once more he darted back to the thick glass of the observation-hole. Nothing was to be seen but the desolate, dim-lit corridor beyond, with its orderly row of

numbered doors. He left the slit, and bent down with his ear to the keyhole; there was nothing to be heard. The corridor was a long one, and the warders, intent on their game, were at the far end.

Returning, he bound two coarse handkerchiefs round the end of the iron bar and stealthily threw up the window. It moved noiselessly, and without a jar. For days past he had greased the sash with pieces of fat from his scanty meal and with vaseline from his still unhealed wounds.

Then, picking up his iron spikes, bar, and rope, he tiptoed his way across the floor. A final glance round his cell, an instant's pause as a deafening rush of wind made the building quiver, and then, with a swift, deft movement, he caught the rope-hook firmly on one of the remaining bars, slipped and wriggled through the opening, feet foremost, clutched at the sill, then swinging his weight outwards into the night, grabbed the twisted linen strands, and slid down hand over hand.

Five seconds—ten—and his feet touched ground. With a quick jerk of the wrist, he made the slackened rope wriggle like a snake, threw his arm upward at full stretch, then outward behind him.

The ruse answered. The hook detached itself from the bar above, and the rope came fluttering down through the driving rain. No. 43 caught the metal hook with his free hand before ever it could reach the stone flags with a tell-tale clink, and gathering up the coils, darted across the courtyard.

On the further side was a strongly-built wall, towering up and shutting him in from the outer world and freedom. This he had known and been prepared for. Many a long hour he had studied it and scrutinised it in all kinds of lights, from early dawn, when it was in shadow, till the last rays of the westering sun struck it slantwise. Twenty-three tiers high, it was of massive granite blocks one above another. That much he knew beyond all possibility of error, but the one factor he was uncertain of was the height of those blocks. Time and again he had tried to measure them by comparison with the size of some passing warder, but whether they were eighteen inches or twenty-four he had never been able to determine, and between those two small measurements when multiplied by twenty-three lay all the difference between failure and success.

If eighteen, well, then his rope would reach the top when thrown at full arm stretch, and sooner or later the hook would find a precarious holding-ground on the upper edge: but if twenty-four, why, then it would fall short by some nine feet, and he would be reduced to the double risky experiment of his climbing spikes, entailing time and noise.

He flung the rope. The weighted hooked end shot upwards, grazed the granite a good five feet from the topmost tier, and fell again. He caught it deftly, with a muttered exclamation of disappointment, and turned resolutely to the only possible alternative.

Taking the first of his spikes, he placed the point in the cement just above the second tier, and began tapping on the end with his heavy window bar, the noise of the blows being muffled by the handkerchiefs. It was tedious work, and more than once he glanced over his shoulder towards the angle of the wall away to the right, where a small light showed that an armed warder was keeping watch in his little square tower, from which he could overlook both the courtyard inside the wall and the dreary stretch of waste ground without.

But the gale was high, and the moaning of the wind, and the hiss of the driving rain, drowned all lesser noises.

Next, reaching as high as he could, he drove in another spike four feet or more above the first.

Gathering his rope over his arm, and taking his third and last spike, he swung himself nimbly upwards, standing on the lower, and supporting himself by the upper, whilst he drove the remaining one in as far up as he could reach.

The cement was hard, and his blows uncertain in the inky darkness of the night. When he struck the last blow a good half-hour had elapsed since he swung himself through his window. He was drenched to the skin, and dripping also with perspiration, for to a man in his weakened state the exertion was terrific.

Upwards again, and now his feet were on the second spike, his arm crooked round the topmost. Balancing himself thus, he flung his rope once more. It touched the top, held for a minute, and broke away, the hook striking the flags with a metallic clatter. No. 43, clinging helpless to his spikes, muttered a curse and waited. Apparently the sound had not been heard. Again he tried, and this time the hook caught the farther edge, and jammed.

He swung his weight on to it and swarmed up gingerly, a little bit at a time, for a sudden jerk might dislodge the hook and send him crashing on to the flags below.

He was tired. A wound in his shoulder had re-opened with the exertion, and his strength was failing him, but he gained the top, and sat straddle-wise across the wall, clinging with crooked fingers, for he felt sick and dizzy, and the force of the wind on that narrow perch was terrific.

Crouching down, he allowed himself a breather. Then, hauling up his rope, he re-attached the hook, and dropped the loose end on the far side. To swarm down was comparatively an easy matter, for which a few seconds sufficed. His feet touched ground outside the prison walls, and he freed the rope with a jerk. Even as he did so, a jagged lightning flash split the heavens across, making everything as light as day, and showed him the figure of Macullan, the warder, not three paces away, with wide-open mouth.

CHAPTER 2.

Kelly's Escape from Melbourne Gaol.

MACULLAN had been down into the town on leave of absence, and was returning an hour or more after lock-up time, having been delayed by the storm. He was in uniform—glistening waterproof cape and overalls—a dripping rifle-barrel protruding from under the cape, and his mouth was agape, partly in sheer amazement, partly from an instinctive desire to cry out, so much of a portrait was vividly photographed on No. 43's retina; and then the lightning snapped out, leaving behind a bewildering, confused darkness.

Whether Macullan did actually shout or no, it is hard to say, for on the heels of the lightning came a deafening thunder clap—earsplitting—terrible.

Ere it passed, Macullan was on his back, stunned into insensibility, for No. 43 had sprung at him and struck with the quickness of a wild-cat, and the hulking, bullying warder collapsed on the rain-sodden earth as quickly as a child going to sleep, an ugly bump from the iron bar on the side of his head, and his white face turned blindly upwards to the sluicing skies.

No. 43 stooped over him and surveyed him critically.

"Humph!" said he. "It strikes me, my friend, you'll bear the marks of that on your thick skull for many a long day. On the whole, I'm not sorry that you turned up just when you did. I've promised myself to give you a lesson in manners many a time—we'll call this lesson the first!"

With deft fingers he loosened the man's cape and overalls, and slipped into them, helped himself coolly to the revolver and some loose cartridges from the belt, and picking up the uniform cap placed it on his own head.

"Won't do for you to be coming round and squealing for an hour or two," he soliloquised. "I think—yes, I think it would be safer to truss you up a bit."

Taking the handkerchiefs from his iron bar, he thrust them, none too gently, into the warder's mouth, and with the linen rope, knotted him up with scientific

skill—to rope a man so that he is absolutely helpless and powerless requires practice. No. 43 was an adept. Having completed these little preparations, he rolled the body unceremoniously into the ditch at the foot of the wall, and hurried away through the rain.

"Six hours start," said he to himself, "six hours—perhaps, with luck, eight. I think—yes, on the whole I think that I shall not honour Melbourne Gaol with my presence again. I wonder if friend Macullan's revolver is loaded. Humph! No—I thought not, careless brute. We'll slip a few cartridges in, in case of accidents!"

It was midnight when No. 43 bade his final farewell to the prison walls of Melbourne.

It was just after four in the morning when Mrs. Mike Sullivan, a buxom lady, with a waist measurement calculated in yards rather than inches, who lived on a small settlement a long eighteen miles out of the town, was roused by a knocking on her front door, and, in consequence, lost some beauty sleep. Mrs. Sullivan was a lady of robust muscles and nerves, and when her husband—Mike—was away on duty driving the stage-coach to and from Benalla, had no qualms about being left alone to keep house and, incidentally, what was much more difficult to keep in order, several small Mikes.

She lay awhile listening to the knocking and the drenching downfalls of rain. Finally, she rose, dressed herself, and being a lady of method, took down a formidable-looking, heavy calibre revolver from a nail above the bed.

With this in one hand, and a lighted candle in the other, she leisurely proceeded to investigate.

The cautiously-opened front door showed her a strip of wet night sky seven feet by two, and it also showed her the figure of a man in a sodden waterproof leaning against the door-post.

"Pwhat is it?" she demanded peremptorily, accompanying the remark by an ominous click, as she cocked the revolver.

"Is this Mrs. Sullivan's?" came the answer in a slightly drawling voice, which was rather faint from weariness. "A thousand apologies for knocking you up at this unearthly hour, but is your husband in?"

"He is not!"

"Ah, on duty I suppose. What a pity. Well, Mrs. Sullivan, I'm drenched to the skin, very hungry, and tired to death. Would you mind my having a bit of a rest in your sitting-room?"

Mrs. Sullivan eyed him suspiciously, and then the candle-light falling aslant on the official cap and uniform cape, she fell back a step involuntarily.

"Hivins, it's the police! Say, now, sure there's nothin' happened to my Mike?"

"I assure you, my dear lady, that so far as I know, the excellent Mike is in the best of health—at least, he was when I saw him last," assured the stranger, stepping quickly in and fastening the door behind him.

Mrs. Sullivan gave back another pace.

"An' pwhen might that have bin, misther polisman?"

"To be accurate, my good soul, I should say about eight months ago, when I had occasion to meet him professionally. Since then, I've been detained on urgent business at Melbourne—Melbourne Gaol, in fact!"

Mrs. Sullivan eyed him more closely.

"Phwas it a polisman ye was sayin' ye were?"

The stranger held up a deprecating hand.

"The impeachment was your own," he said.

Mrs. Sullivan backed behind the table, and levelled the revolver.

"An' since pwhen, may I ask, have the polis of Melbourne worn a convict's dhress behoind their mackintoshes? Spake up quick now, or it's mesilf will be drilling a hole through the pair av 'em."

The stranger smiled.

"Mrs. Sullivan, it was you yourself who accused me of being a policeman, and never in my life could I bring myself to contradict a pretty woman when I saw one."

Mrs. Sullivan flushed, and her eyes twinkled as still waggling the revolver she softly ejaculated:

"Git away wid ye, ye lyin' blagyard!"

But the shot told, nevertheless.

The stranger smiled again.

"Had you asked me who I was I should have had pleasure in informing you that until midnight I was known officially as No. 43—that I got bored with the dull, official routine, and that—in short, I left the prison rather hurriedly. Now, my good soul, do for goodness sake put that revolver away, or you'll be hurting yourself or waking the children. I assure you I'm not in the least bit frightened. All I want is a rest, some dry clothes, a meal, and if you have such a thing, a drop of brandy—for all of which I am perfectly willing to pay. There"—he tossed a five-pound note on to the table—"you can buy yourself and the children some new ribbons, or whatever it is. Meanwhile, with your permission, I'll sit down. He removed his dripping waterproof, revealing the tell-tale convict's livery beneath and seated himself leisurely in a chair, still smiling, with an air of quiet self-possession and absolute ease.

Mrs. Sullivan eyed the note, and thrust the candle forward till its rays illuminated the clean-shaven clear-cut face of her visitor, with its well-chiselled features, dominating black eyes, and firm set mouth.

No. 43 did not attempt to budge or evade her scrutiny, but her face assumed an expression of blank amazement. For a full minute she stared, then put the revolver down on the table.

"Don't you think you'd better uncock it?" said the stranger pleasantly.

Mrs. Sullivan did so, as one dazed.

"'Tis a suit of Moike's own ye shall be havin', yer honour. There's brandy and a glass in the cupboard behint ye, and it's meself will be back in two shakes av a pig's-tail wid a morsel to eat. An' if ye think it's the loikes av Biddy Sullivan wud be takin' money for a thrifle av food, let me tell ye it's a big mishtake ye're makin'."

"Oh, but I insist!"

"Insist to blazes!" said Mrs. Sullivan indignantly; and rolled off to the back of the house, muttering: "Begobs, but 'tis him—'tis him himself! Many's the good turn he's done my Moike, and polis or no polis, he shall have the best Oi can give him."

Mrs. Sullivan was the soul of discretion. Not a question did she ask when she returned, though they were bubbling thick and fast on the tip of her tongue; and having watched her guest eat a hearty meal, and laid out a dry suit of clothes for him, she took her departure with a curt: "Maybe I'll be wid ye agin at six." But she left the revolver on the table, and laid beside it some brandy in a flask, and some thick sandwiches—for she was a true daughter of the "distressful isle."

No. 43 drew a chair before the fire, which she had stirred into life, and having changed into dry clothes, stretched himself out for a much-needed rest. But he took it with one hand on the revolver in his belt, and his senses never wholly left him. Twice he sat forward with a start, listening; and barely had the clock struck the half hour after five, than he was up and alert, seemingly as refreshed as though he had put in a good seven hours.

He picked up Biddy Sullivan's gun with a smile, and slipped it in his belt, laying down a second five-pound note beside the first. Then, doing up the tell-tale convict's dress in a bundle, he swung it under his arm, made his way quietly to

the door, and slipping the bolts, passed out. He had no mind that Mrs. Mi' should get into trouble on his account.

Leaving the settlement behind him, he headed north, stopping on his way ' fill the pockets of his prison dress with heavy stones and sink it in a creek.

Ten miles out his quick ear detected a faint rhythmical sound a long way off. but coming towards him. He stepped off the track, and was instantly swallowe up by the bordering fringe of bush, where he seated himself on a fallen stum to wait and watch.

The sounds drew nearer and nearer; the soft thud, thud of the horse's hoof on the damp ground, with now and again a sucking, squelching sound as the anima crossed a particularly swampy patch.

A quarter of a mile away horse and rider came into view. The first a fine chestnut hackney, with a white stocking on the near foreleg. The second, a square built man, clean-shaven, pompous, and a trifle flashily dressed, with a massive gold watchchain displayed across a loud check waistcoat, and immaculate breeches and gaiters, the whole finished off by a large white stock, in which was set a b' solitaire diamond pin.

His face was sour and sullen-looking, with a fixed evil scowl. He was evidently a man of vile temper, and had the air of one who had been drinking heavily the nigh before. Beside his horse was a trotting terrier pup, wire-haired, and well ribbe up, with a black patch over one eye.

No. 43 watched the man approaching with a grim smile. He knew him well- very well. He was an official of Melbourne Gaol, and a patron of Macullan's with whom he had much in common—a dissipated, truculent fellow of ill reputation. and, incidentally, in one of his semi-official visits to the prison, he had gratuitously insulted some of the prisoners, even going so far as to overstep the rules and strik one of them.

Just as he drew level with the ex-prisoner's hiding-place, the small terrier, fu of enjoyment of his morning exercise, made a playful dart at the chestnut's legs The latter understanding and entering into the spirit of the game, jumped aside swerving a little, and thereby nearly unseating his sullen rider.

With a savage oath the man brought down his heavy crop, the lash twining round the pup's body and cutting him badly. The next instant the whip was snatche from his hands and snapped in two, whilst a stern voice bade him get down.

He glared round, and found himself staring down the neat, round barrel of revolver.

"Get down, you brute! You're not fit to be trusted with whip or spur if there' an animal within a mile of you. Sharp now, or you'll be sorry for it!"

"Who the dickens are you?" roared the man. "I tell you what it is, you don' know who you are talking to, you scum! My name is Phillips. I'm an official of Melbourne Gaol. Drop that thing, or there'll be trouble. I'm riding into town on business for the sessions. Stand aside!"

No. 43 laughed.

"Riding in to the sessions, were you, you beauty? By James, it must nee colossal impudence for a man with your reputation to show your face in a cour of justice! Off with you, sharp! I've no time to waste arguing with such trash! Ah! You would, would you?"

No. 43 made a quick upward spring, and the next moment the pompous ma was on his back on the ground.

"Now, Mr. Phillips, put your hands up—so, that's better. March ove to that tree there, and mind you keep your nose glued to the bark till I give yo leave to move, or you won't know what's hurt you."

The man had no alternative but to obey.

Meanwhile, No. 43 hushed the small dog's whimperings, and tied the horse' bridle to a broken branch. Then he wheeled sharply.

"Strip!"

The word rang out crisp and clear.

Without daring to turn, the discomfited Mr. Phillips obeyed. Like all bullies, he was a coward when it came to the point, and he hadn't an ounce of fight in him.

When he was stripped to his shirt, No. 43 called out "Stop!"

Picking up the lash of the crop, he seized the man's wrists suddenly and bound them together, finally securing them across a branch just within reach in such a manner that, by stretching himself to the utmost, the man could touch the ground with his feet. The clothes he hung in a neat bundle on the branch above, and stuck the diamond pin through them conspicuously.

Without another word he flung himself into the saddle and cantered off, the terrier pup running along beside him.

Late that night he reached a large, prosperous-looking homestead, and, having noticed that all lights were out, and that everyone was asleep, he rode quietly up to the slip rails of the home paddock and passed in.

Dismounting, he gave the chestnut a good rub down and some water, and turned him loose to feed, with a farewell pat on the flank. The saddle and bridle he laid on the ground. Then he shared his last remaining sandwich with the pup, lit a pipe—a surreptitious present from Biddy Sullivan—and puffed luxuriously two or three times.

Then he raised his head and gave a long-drawn, low, peculiar whistle. It rang out on the still night air. There came a swish of trotting hoofs through the long grass, and a great, grey horse came up out of the darkness, sniffing anxiously, till with a little whinny of delight, it found No. 43's outstretched hand, and nuzzled against his shoulder.

Half an hour later a big grey horse, with a man swaying easily in the saddle, was heading northward, ever northward, through the night, and by its side ran a small, wire-haired pup, with a black patch over one eye, and his tongue out—tired, but happy.

At sunrise the next morning, the owner of the ranch, a Mr. Trevelyan, an elderly man, who had apparently been through a recent illness, strolled out to the paddock, pipe in mouth, accompanied by a youngster named Dick Mason, his new partner.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the latter suddenly. "Where's the grey? And, by Jove, yes, there's a strange animal in the paddock! Look, the chestnut over there, with the white stocking! What the deuce is the meaning of it?"

They drew near the slip rails, and a flutter of white caught Dick's eye. It was a piece of paper fixed to the woodwork. He snatched it up, looked grave for an instant, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

"See here, Mr. Trevelyan," he cried. "Listen whilst I read!

"'To Richard Mason, Esq.

"'Dear Mason,—Sorry to miss you, but was in a hurry. Got bored with Melbourne, so have gone up country for a bit. Thanks so much for looking after the grey, he's in fine fettle. I've taken him with me. Some miles back I came across an impertinent animal who said his name was Phillips — the chestnut with the white stocking is his. The saddle and fixings I have taken, and leave notes for their value. Please send these with the notes to the Phillips person. When I last saw him he was in rather an uncomfortable position. Still, don't hurry. Sorry not to have seen you and Trevelyan. However, time and tide, you know. Again thanks.—Yours in haste, NED KELLY.

"'P.S.—By the way, the Phillips man had a pup, which he was ill-using. I can't return it, for the little beggar persists in following me, and I won't insult the dog by offering money for him. Beastly place Melbourne, especially the gaol. The cooking is abominable, and the corridors draughty.—Au plaisir!'"

Meanwhile, all over the world the news was flashing across the telegraph wires: "Ned Kelly the bushranger at large again—escapes from Melbourne Prison on the eve of his trial—four thousand pounds reward—dead or alive!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Vultures—A Narrow Squeak.

NED KELLY AT LARGE AGAIN.
ESCAPE OF THE BUSHRANGER.
STRANGE NEWS FROM MELBOURNE GAOL.
FOUR THOUSAND POUNDS REWARD, DEAD OR ALIVE!!!

Such were some of the headlines in the "Argus" and the "Courier." East and west, north and south, the news flew—to England, to the States, to the sizzling northern coast the wires flashed it abroad, and busy telegraph operators listened to the ticking of their machines with anxious ears.

Meanwhile, far away up country, rode a man, still bearing some traces of illness, on a splendid grey horse, both of them deeply tired, and alongside trotted a small and rather exhausted wire-haired terrier, with a black spot over one eye, and a thick coating of half-dry mud on legs and stomach. His tongue lolled out, and every now and again he cast a wistful glance at the rider.

"Done up, old man?" said the latter, looking down, as he eased his horse over a particularly bad bit of ground. "If it comes to that, I think we're all pretty much in the same box. I wonder if this rain will ever stop!"

Shivering, he slid from the saddle, hooked one arm through the reins, and with the other gathered up the pup, regardless of his muddy coat.

He had made good going that day, in spite of the weather, and fifty long miles lay between him and Trevelyan's ranche. He had held steadily northward with the instinct of a homing pigeon, making for the Robbers' Roost by way of the Burra-Burra caves.

"Safest in the end," he murmured to himself, as he rode along. "Now, if young Dick Mason were here with the force I wouldn't risk it. But he's left, and I'm pretty sure he won't serve again, except under compulsion. The others are a wooden-headed lot, and the last thing that would occur to them is that I'd break straight away for the old roost. They'd think it too obvious and too risky. Anyway, go there I must, for I'm down to my last few notes, and money and some decently-fitting clothes are necessary."

A sudden driving squall of terrific violence swept down and blotted out the view, compelling him for the moment to give all his attention to keeping his course. The pup snuggled a muzzle beneath his sodden coat, and shivered.

"Cold, old man? Well, it's your own fault. You would come with a forsaken outlaw, instead of enjoying your bones in peace on the domestic hearthrug, with an occasional hiding from that brute Phillips thrown in. You must take the rough with the smooth, my man. I haven't even a biscuit left. Humph! Looks like a light over there beyond the scrub. Some new chum, or a squatter, I expect. We're in luck."

He pressed forward at a brisker pace, and soon drew up outside a small hut of rough logs, evidently of recent origin. Round about was an untidy litter of empty meatcans and rubbish, and a half-finished stock fencing completed the dreariness of the aspect.

He surveyed it with disgust and some suspicion.

"Dirty pigs!" he muttered. "Why the deuce can't they live with decency!

Well, here goes!" And, lifting the handle of his riding-whip, he hammered on the door.

The first summons brought no response, so he repeated it more vigorously.

From the inside there came a scraping of stool-legs on the rough boarding, a shuffling of feet, and the door opened a few inches, emitting a narrow streak of light.

Kelly's face darkened. Such a proceeding was most unlike the usual free-handed hospitality of the Colony. Without further comment he thrust his riding-whip into the opening, effectually preventing the door from being shut in his face.

"You've a quaint notion of welcoming a guest," he said, quietly staring intently at the crack.

A towsled head appeared, a mean, ragged-looking head, with cunning, shifty eyes.

"What do you want?" asked he at the door curtly.

"Want?" Kelly laughed shortly. "Why, I want food and shelter, and a little ordinary civility from you, my friend. It'll be as black as pitch in half an hour's time. It's raining cats and dogs this minute. I'm off the track, soaked through, hungry, and tired—especially of standing here out in the rain answering fool questions."

Whether it was his voice, or something in his manner, or whether the man had needed time to conceal something whilst he held his unwelcome visitor in parley, and had at length achieved it, would be hard to say. He opened the door at length, however, with a half-hearted attempt at geniality, which would not have deceived an infant in arms.

"Walk right in, boss! Step right in! I'm mighty sorry to have kept you waiting, but there are a pow'rful tough crowd round about this way, I'm told, and a man has to be kind of keerful."

Kelly shrugged his shoulders and stepped into the hut. There were three men in it—the fellow who opened the door, another, an almost unmistakable Cockney fresh up from Melbourne, and a greasy-looking individual, who spoke with a strong German accent.

All three looked ill at ease, and by no means glad of the intrusion. The hut stank of burning lamp-oil, and the rough-hewn table was littered with odd and end scraps of food.

Kelly, who had always been fastidious in his ways, shuddered with disgust; but, at any rate, the place was dry, and a big wood fire was burning on the hearth.

"I must give my horse a feed and a rub down first," he said; "and then, if you don't mind, I'll have a scrap of food, and turn in for a few hours by your fire. If you'll——"

He stopped short, for the man at the door was staring at him open mouthed in undisguised amazement, which as soon as he saw that he was observed he attempted to transform into an obsequious grin.

"You'll find us rough and ready, boss," he said, with a nearer approach to civility. "Humble but hearty is our motto. We ain't indulgin' in frills, but you'll give me your horse——"

"I'll come with you," said Kelly briefly; and, setting down the pup, he followed the man out into the darkness, with the grey's bridle over his arm.

The fellow led the way to a kind of lean-to outhouse, and helped to support one of the uprights with his back, whilst Kelly gave the horse a rub down and a feed, watching him closely all the while, his shifty, greedy little eyes travelling constantly from Kelly to the animal and back again, as though he would fix every detail of their appearance in his head.

The grey made comfortable, they turned and walked back to the hut.

"Here, you Orkins, clear out of that!" said the man. "Clear out smart,

my lad and let the gentleman have a seat by the fire, whilst I rummage around and make him up a dish."

"Say, wot the——" began the Cockney indignantly; but a glance from the shifty-eyed man silenced him, and he moved off grumbling and puzzled.

Kelly took out a five-dollar note and placed it on the table.

"I'm afraid I'm putting you to considerable trouble," he said, in his quiet drawling voice. "You must allow me to pay my footing."

The German snatched the note greedily.

"Goot!" said he; and then added, with a cunning leer: "Berhaps the shentleman would like a daste of something to trink."

He rummaged beneath a board in the corner of the hut, and produced a bottle of raw smelling spirit and a dirty drinking-mug, and placed them on the table.

Kelly stood drying his sodden clothes at the fire, and as soon as the food was ready sat down to it eagerly, for he was nearly famished. Yet, half starving though he was, he could not help noticing that the three men were eyeing him strangely.

He pretended not to heed them, but went on with his meal, pausing every now and again to give the terrier his share. He was placed too, either by accident or design, in such a position that two of the men were behind him, out of his direct line of sight.

Presently one of them rose, yawning ostentatiously, and grabbed an old bundle of papers from a shelf, in the contents of which he soon became deeply immersed.

Kelly could hear the rustle of the paper, as he turned over page after page, and somehow the sound put him on the alert.

The man was not reading, but was looking for something special.

Kelly continued his meal placidly, and the terrier gulped ravenously at every morsel handed him. It was while giving the dog a particularly tempting scrap that he made a sudden quick movement with his arm, as it hung beside him.

"Steady, old man; don't snatch!" he said, and withdrew his hand; the next moment his revolver was jammed securely between his knee and the underside of the table.

No one had noticed. Shifty-eye was busy stirring up the fire; the German and the Cockney were poring over the papers.

There was no sound save the continual rustle of the latter, yet the very silence seemed in itself suspicious, and Kelly scented danger.

Suddenly his eye fell on something thrown carelessly in a corner, and he understood it was a two-day-old copy of the "Argus," and on the half sheet uppermost was a row of screaming headlines, giving the news of his escape and the offer of the reward. He could almost read the words "four thousand pounds" from where he sat, and it was an easy guess that Orkins and the German were looking for a picture of him in the bundle of old illustrated weeklies.

He slipped his hand beneath the table and cocked the revolver, muffling the click by a well-timed cough. The men were "on the crook" themselves, of that he was certain—a low-down, sneaking cutthroat lot, who probably preyed on lonely wayfarers going up to the mines. But four thousand pounds! Why, they would have given him up, or cut his throat cheerfully for half as many shillings.

He smiled a little to himself, but he was uneasy. He was still weakened by illness, and though he had his revolver, they were three to one, and two of them kept constantly behind him.

He shifted his position a little, and even as he did so there came a half-suppressed cry from the German. He had found what he sought, and, marking the place with grimy forefinger, was comparing the likeness and the original feature by feature.

Again Kelly smiled, more grimly this time, and, preserving his cool, easy manner,

lit a cigar. A slight noise behind him made him turn suddenly, under pretence of throwing the spent match into the fireplace. Shifty-eye was heating a heavy iron bar. Things were certainly beginning to look ugly, and he fancied he could detect a glimmer of steel in the hollow of the Cockney's sleeve.

"Won't the shentleman have anything to drink mit his supper?" It was the German who spoke, leaning forward eagerly.

"Thank you," drawled Kelly—"thank you, Mr.—er——"

"Bernstein."

"Thank you, Mr. Bernstein; since you are so pressing, I will." He poured himself out a very small modicum of liquor, and raised it to his lips. As he did so he caught the men's eyes fixed on him with a triumphant leer over the brim of the cup. That alone, apart from the rank smell of the stuff, was enough to warn him that it was drugged.

For a moment he hesitated. If he had only got his old strength back, he would have driven the whole crowd out of the hut in a twinkling, and revelled in taking them on single-handed; but he was weak—deadly, helplessly weak—and he knew it.

The long day in the saddle had worn him down to the last ounce, and brought on the pains of his old wounds, which were scarcely healed. Moreover, the warmth and the food had brought an almost irresistible desire for sleep, which was rapidly overcoming him.

With the cup at his lips, he mentally calculated chances. The row had got to come; obviously the thing was to press it, and take what small advantage he could from a sudden surprise.

He lowered the mug.

"Your liquor is rank, Mr.—er—Bernstein," he drawled. "I know the smell of a faked dose too well to be caught. Taste it yourself." And, springing to his feet and aside at the same time, he flung mug, contents and all, straight into the German's grinning, expectant face.

It was the leap aside which saved him, for the red-hot bar came down with a crash on the table at the same instant, smashing the plate, from which he had been eating, to fragments.

Shifty-eye had aimed his blow a fraction of a second too late. In a flash all four were on their feet; Orkins and the German with ugly-looking knives in their fists, Shifty-eye, with the glowing bar, advancing for a renewed attack.

"Ned Kelly!" he yelled. "Bail up, or ye won't live to know what's hurt ye!"

Crack—crack! Quick as lightning, Kelly threw up his arm and fired. The first shot took the Cockney's fingers, and sent the knife, a shattered, torn remnant, spinning into the corner, whilst its late owner clapped his wounded fingers beneath his left armpit, and danced madly about the floor, cursing with pain and rage.

The second shot missed, for the light was bad; but the German, dazed and bewildered, dropped his weapon, half blinded by the blood streaming into his eyes from the cut on the forehead where the metal rim of the drinking-cup had caught him.

There was a third antagonist to be reckoned with, the most dangerous of the lot, too, as matters turned out. Shifty-eye, profiting by the confusion, made a savage lunge with his bar. It grazed Kelly's arm on the under side, which partially diverted its force. There was the sizzle of burning cloth and seared flesh, and the point caught him just behind the shoulder muscle, throwing him momentarily off his balance.

With a savage growl the man sprang forward to follow up his advantage, but he had forgotten one factor in the problem—small but important. A sharper growl followed close on the heels of his own, a slim, white, mud-bespattered body

streaked from the far side of the fire, and a set of sharp, white teeth bit deep into the tendon of his right ankle.

The pain for the instant was so excruciating and so unexpected that it spoilt his spring. He kicked out savagely, but the white teeth held firm, and he found himself suddenly staring down the business end of a heavy revolver barrel, which never wavered a hair's-breadth.

"Stand still, you fool!" said Kelly sternly. "If you make another movement, I'll put a bullet through you! Hold him, Jack!"

A low growl answered him, and a dark eye flashing upwards for a moment, signalled a complete appreciation of the situation.

"Now, then, you other two, face the wall, and hold your hands up. Sharp now! Closer to the wall, and don't attempt to turn your head, Mister—er—Bernstein; it's unhealthy. That's better; and I should really advise you not to move. Now, you"—turning to Shiftyeye—"do as I tell you, and step lively, my man. Drop that bar. Drop it! Do you hear me? So—let him go, Jack! Dead, old boy—dead!" The white teeth unwillingly relaxed. "Now pick up that bench and place it just behind those beauties there. That's near enough. Now get some rope; there's a good long piece hanging from the nail by the shelf there.

"You, Bernstein, and you, Cockney, sit down, but don't turn so much as an eyelid. Put out your arms behind you over the bench."

The two men reluctantly complied, the Cockney moaning over his damaged fingers.

Kelly turned on the man with the rope.

"Bind them," he ordered sharply—"bind their arms across and beneath the bench; then tie their feet together, and see that your knots hold, for if one of them is badly made, or I find I have to retie it, it will go ill with you, my friend. And whilst you are at work, recollect that my revolver will never be more than a few feet from your ear."

The man took the rope and slouched forward sullenly. He longed to disobey, for he had brute courage of a sort, but he dare not, and in less than five minutes his companions were trussed up neatly and scientifically. Kelly nodded his approval.

"Now, my man, down with you alongside them!" he said briskly.

Shifty-eye took his place beside the German.

Kelly, leaving his revolver within reach on the edge of the table, roped him up also; then, with a final inspection of the knots, he returned to the fireplace, took off his boots, and, placing his stockinged feet on a second chair, and his gun within easy reach, he proceeded to make himself comfortable.

"Watch 'em, Jack!" said he; and in a couple of minutes was sound asleep.

The three wretched men bound to their bench groaned and writhed; more they were physically incapable of doing.

At dawn Kelly rose, cooked himself some breakfast, saddled the grey, and came round on a final visit of inspection.

The men were cramped and sore, and in a bitter, black humour.

Kelly stood for a while staring down at them with his piercing black eyes.

"Well, my friends, you seem ill at ease. A sorry set of scoundrels, I must say, to tackle Captain Kelly! Why, as soon as I get a little strength and fresh air into me, I would take on a dozen such as you single-handed. You'll have plenty of time to meditate on things before you work loose; and if I were the police commissioner of this district—which, by the way, I don't happen to be—I'd keep a pretty sharp eye on you for the future."

He paused, frowning for an instant, and his keen black eyes darted this way and that, as though searching for something. Finally, they rested on the floor

beneath the table. The men, watching him over their shoulders, cursed impotently; and one of them began to whimper.

"Ah!" said Kelly slowly, with an indrawn breath, and stooped, his fingers busy with some loose floor boards. A tug, a wrench, and they came away, revealing a hollow space beneath; and in the hollow, amidst a litter of odds and ends—articles of clothing, watches, jewellery, and other stolen things—lay the body of a man, with an ugly knife wound in his chest.

Kelly bent down and inspected him more closely. He was quite dead. He understood now the delay there had been in opening the door the night before. They had been hurriedly concealing the traces of their crime before opening the trap to a fresh victim.

The man was one of the pedlar class, probably on his way back from the mines, with his pockets full of money to replenish his stock, and he had fallen into the vultures' grip.

Even in his prison Kelly had heard talk of the kind of men before him, who had sprang up in great numbers on the trail of the great mining rush, and who preyed on solitary travellers. His face grew hard and stern, and his voice rang out angrily.

"You curs!" he said. "You pitiful curs! And it was you who would have dared hand me over to the police for the sake of blood-money! Now, mark you, outlaw as I am, with a price on my head, I will send word into the nearest township in my own name giving information concerning this to the police, with such directions as shall ensure your arrest!" And, without another word, he turned on his heel and left them, securing the door behind them.

Sure enough, at midday that day a black boy came riding into Benella on a bareback pony, which had been hard pressed, waving in his hand a folded scrap of paper, addressed to the commissioner in charge.

But Kelly and the grey and the small white terrier were many long miles away, heading always northward.

CHAPTER 4.

Back to the Roost—Trapped.

SKIRTING the Burra-Burra rocks, beneath whose shadow he had so nearly met his death in that great final stand, he swept onwards in a wide curve towards the roost.

He glanced at the gaunt black spur in the distance and smiled to himself.

"Never again," he said—"never again will I mix up with a crowd like that. I'll fight by myself for my own hand, come what may. I'm a lone wolf, with every man's hand against me now, and every dog in the countryside on my trail. Well, so be it; brains, a little dash, and a good horse may go far—mayn't they, Jack, old man?—so we'll play the game for ourselves till the last stake is on the table and the last card is turned."

A long, gently rising slope brought him to the edge of the roost, the great semi-circular hollow which in former days had been the headquarters of the famous gang, and which had eluded the sharp eyes of all the best police scouts for so long.

Springing from the saddle, he took cover behind a dense clump of bush, and made a cautious survey of it from the cliff edge.

Not a sign of a human being anywhere. He could see the old paddock rails, now gradually rotting away, neglected, and the long, luxuriant grass—that was all.

With eyes and ears alert, he moved along the cliff edge to the secret path, the

grey's bridle over his arm. In the same fashion he made his way down into the hollow, and crossed to the mouth of the cave which had seen the break-up of the gang.

Here he off-saddled, and turned the grey loose to roam at will. It was already growing dusk, and there was small fear of his being seen.

Kelly himself, with Jack at heel, vanished into the cave. This branched, after a short distance, into two; the left-hand portion, which had been the men's sleeping quarters, ran inwards for about fifty feet, and ended abruptly. The right-hand one led to a narrow door of strong iron plating, beyond which lay Kelly's old quarters.

The door was rusting on its hinges. Kelly thrust it aside and entered, striking a match. Not a vestige of his once luxurious surroundings remained. Beyond, on the farther side, was yet another door, leading to an endless unexplored labyrinth of caves beyond.

Kelly groped along the rocky wall with his hands till he came to a projecting knob, unnoticeable to anyone unsuspicious of its presence. It yielded to his touch, and he laughed softly.

"What a thing it is to look ahead! Fancy my being energetic enough to lay by a store against a rainy day. And yet—well, I always did believe in preparing for trouble. I have Rowan to thank for that—he's dead and done for now, poor chap—but he was a truculent rascal, always waiting for a chance to get the whip-hand; and many is the night I've expected to have to barricade myself in here and keep my end up against the whole gang, though they never knew it. Let's see what we've got. Candles! Good; they're the first requisite."

He broke open a box, and lighted four of them, standing them on a slab of rock. Next he pulled out a small square black tin box. In this lay a bundle of banknotes, some handful or so of loose sovereigns, and a photograph. The latter he looked at for a moment and quietly replaced.

Again he thrust his arm into the small cavity.

"A box of cigars—Larranagas—the öld brand! Good! Sardines, potted things, biscuits, and fixings; and, as I live, a dozen of claret—no, port, and not half a bad wine, either! Jack, my son, to-night we feast royally. You shall have biscuits and pate de foie gras. I would offer you bones, my friend, but bones is 'off,' wherefore be content."

Jack wagged a stumpy tail and grinned sympathetically. Suddenly, however, his manner began to bristle, and he gave a low growl.

Instantly Kelly wheeled round, dashed out the lights, thrust the notes into his pocket, and whipped out his revolver.

Stealthily as a cat he moved across the cave to the entrance and peered out. A patch of steely blue sky was still visible through the opening, and silhouetted against it at the top of the cliff was the solitary figure of a mounted trooper.

Another growl from Jack, louder this time and fiercer, brought him darting back. He stooped low, peering through the gloom, with set, tense face and revolver held ready.

Suddenly there came the clink of a pebble from the remoter side of the cave, and for an instant he caught a glimpse of a dark, moving object advancing towards him.

He sprang forward, throwing out his arm as he did so, ready to shoot on the rise.

"Hands up!" he cried sharply. "Hands up!"

The words rang out tense and clear; and Kelly, peering forward through the gloom at the uncertain, shadowy figure, kept his finger crooked on the trigger. A touch and death was certain, for his marksmanship was beyond all question.

In the second's hesitation which followed he realised that the report, if he fired,

must inevitably reach the ears of the mounted trooper on the cliff at the far side of the roost; but the nearer risk was the more imminent. He was cornered, and would take it, if necessary.

"Hands up! Quick!"

Another fraction of a second, and the heavy bullet would have gone crashing home.

The shadow threw its hands over its head with commendable alacrity, and came a pace or two forward.

"Don't shoot, old man," said a laughing voice. "You're too blessed accurate to take any chances with. Upon my word, I was half-afraid you would snap off at me without asking questions first; and, hang you, I still have a pain in my arm when it rains from your last little effort!"

"Who are you? Who's that?" asked Kelly hoarsely, lowering his weapon, but still keeping on the alert.

The gloom and the memories of the place were thick upon him. Not thirty paces away from where he stood he had seen man after man shot down, and he himself had escaped death a hundred times by a narrow margin. The least superstitious of men as a rule, he felt his nerve momentarily shaken.

"Who are you?" he repeated fiercely. "Speak, or by James I'll drill a hole through you!"

"Steady, old man—steady!" cried the voice. "Since you are so blessed touchy all of a sudden, permit me to introduce myself. Mr. Richard Mason, at your service. I got your note."

"Dick!"

Kelly's tones rose almost to a shout.

"Quiet, you fool!" came the answer, in a tense whisper. "There are a couple of troopers on patrol on the far side of the hollow. If you yell like that, they'll hear you, and the game will be up!"

"Dick Mason!" said Kelly, half to himself, as though dazed. "Here, let me get a light!"

He hurriedly relit the overturned candles, and, as their flames gradually flickered up, he saw Dick before him, broadened out and bronzed from a year of healthy ranche life.

"I suppose I may lower my paws now? Deuced tiring this attitude!" he said grinning.

"You always were a bit of an ass, Dick. Drop 'em—hands that size would tire any man's arms—and jam 'em in your pockets; or, at least, if——"

He paused.

The other flushed slightly, and strode forward.

"Shake, old man!" said he. "Do you think I'd be here if I was going to act the goat? But for goodness' sake keep quiet! Here, wait till I shut that door. One of those chaps may catch a glimpse of your illumination."

"Mason," said Kelly, "you're a brick; and—oh, hang it, what's the use of talking? I'm a convict, an outlaw, and all the rest, but I fancy we can drop explanations of that kind. And now, troopers or no troopers, let's have a bit of dinner. That port is pretty decent; I can't offer you anything else. You came across me just as I was rummaging my private emergency cache. I stocked it in the old days, when I was always expecting a mutiny in the gang. Quaint sort of life, that. I fancy it was the excitement of it which tickled me. It was rather like sitting on a powder-barrel, and using it as an ash-tray at the same time. You never could tell when things would eventuate. I guessed your men would miss it when they came fooling round. Do you, know, Dick, if it hadn't been for you, Captain Kelly and his gang would still be living a life of ease and immoral comfort. No, lad, I bear you no grudge; you only played the game, and played it fairly.

But without you there wasn't enough brains in the whole force to have done the trick. Try some of that foie gras—the biscuits are in the tin on your left—and now tell me how, in the name of all that's impossible, you happened along here just now!"

Dick Mason laughed.

"Well, it was this way. I got your note, and found the grey gone. Then, of course, the news came buzzing and humming all over the place. 'Sensational escape!' 'Daring outbreak by the notorious Captain Kelly!' and the rest of it. I had a stroll round the paddock, and figured things out for myself.

"Granted you had got clear away, of course, it was obvious enough you'd break for here. It was the one reasonable move most likely to baffle the police, because it was the last thing they'd expect you to risk. I guessed that, in all probability, when we had left off sweeping up here, we'd miss something. I wasn't here myself, you see, to superintend," he added, with a grave smile. "Naturally, you'd want money, clothes, and things. By the way, you're a perfect scarecrow now. Where on earth you got that rig-out, I don't know. Equally naturally, if you'd got anything left, you'd be after it hereabouts, where it was easy to get at.

"I got on with my figuring so far, and had already made up my mind to light out—by the way, I rode Cæsar, your old second horse—when up came a couple of troopers, brim full of your escape, and asked me to ride with them.

"I refused point-blank, and told them I had left the force, and didn't intend to worry myself about their business.

"But one of them had a spark of common-sense, and argued that they were sure that the best place to look for you was at the Roost. Well, as you may guess, that fairly bothered me—for my ideas were very much the same suit—so I thought the best thing was to drop in with their ideas, and, if possible, wade in ahead of them. As an ex-commissioned officer, of course, I took command, and they will obey me implicitly. But fair play is fair play all the world over, old man. I'd hate to see you collared again; that's why I'm here. But, at the same time, you must be off. Vamoose—savvy! And I can't let those chaps up yonder kick their heels for ever.

"I've got a kitbag here with some odds and ends, in case you need 'em; and then, my friend, take a friend's advice, and clear out to a new country. I'm decently off, with prospects of more to come; so if it's a question of dollars, take what you want—as a loan, if you won't have it any other way. And, say, old man, I hate to preach, but why not try a turn on the straight?"

"Dick, you're a real good sort," said Kelly; "and, betwixt you and me and the gatepost, I've had it at the back of my head for some time to light out from here and try a turn at the goldfields. As you rightly guessed, I've my own little private bank here, so I won't have any use for money; but this kit is the very deuce, and I'll accept what you have brought gratefully enough. It may sound faddish, but, do you know, I never feel myself unless I've got a respectably cut outfit on. Your gaiters, by the way, old man, are abominable, though one shouldn't look a gift-horse in the mouth.

"Now, turn to and feed, whilst I change; then we'll discuss. First of all, however, allow me to introduce you. This is my friend Jacko. I refer to the gentleman in the wiry and rather mud-bespattered white coat. Jacko—Mr. Dick Mason. And oblige me by not gnawing pieces out of his boots."

Kelly began hurriedly changing, whilst Dick made a very welcome meal, and threw an occasional titbit to the pup, who eyed him in a friendly fashion.

As soon as Kelly was through, he also seated himself, looking much more like the Captain Kelly of old days, in his breeches and gaiters, and a respectably cut coat. He fell to ravenously, for he had been hours in the saddle without food.

Afterwards each man poured himself out a tumbler of the deep red wine and lit up a cigar.

"Time presses," said Dick apprehensively. "Those fellows on patrol up above will be getting restless."

Kelly waved his cigar.

"All right; I'll be off soon. But when a man has lived for months on Government fare, you must allow him a little relaxation. I've made up my mind—I and friend Jacko here and the grey are to vanish. I shall be off within the hour, and cut clear away for the diggings. I've got a bit of capital in a small way, saved out of the wreck. I'll buy up a claim, or do a bit of prospecting on my own, and work the show myself."

"What about the police?"

"The police! My dear Dick, do remember that I have brains. The police will have valuable clues. They will follow me up with assiduity and blundering earnestness—and they won't find me. But a certain Mr. Viner of my acquaintance, fresh out from England, with a small sum of ready-money and an entire ignorance of everything Colonial, 'dontcherknow,' will appear at the diggings."

Dick laughed.

"Well, then, as soon as Mr. Viner is comfortably established, I think I'll come and look him up. I've always had rather a hankering to have a month or so at the mines, just to see what the life is like, and——"

He stopped dead, for the small terrier had suddenly started up, every hair erect and bristling, and was growling softly and expectantly.

Dick reached out a hand and dashed out the candles nearest him. Kelly did the same, and the pair of them were left listening in the darkness.

"Here, boy—here!" whispered Kelly. "Lie down!"

The terrier reluctantly obeyed, mumbling intermittently to himself.

Ah, something was moving in the outer cave beyond the door! Footsteps again!

Dick leant forward and whispered:

"It's one of those infernal troopers! He's disobeyed orders, and come to do a bit of exploring on his own account, instead of remaining up above. If he finds the door we're done. What's the best move?"

The footsteps drew nearer.

"Even if he misses the door, he's bound to catch sight of the grey in the home paddock. If I were alone of course, I—— Dick, lad, it never occurred to me—you must be off at once. It would never do for you to be seen with me by that man. Quick, off with you, and leave me to take my chance! Quick, I say! He may blunder in any second now. Go to the caves at the back; you know the way. Later you can come out and play the injured searcher."

Dick frowned, nodded, grasped Kelly's hand, and vanished silently into the darkness beyond, where a narrow opening led to a series of caves stretching for miles.

Kelly, too, could have gone, but the things strewn on the floor and his horse would inevitably have betrayed his whereabouts, and the troopers had only to wait at the entrance and starve him out.

The footsteps drew nearer still. Kelly finished his wine, hid Dick's kitbag under a pile of rubbish in a corner, closed his secret cache, and waited for the rush, revolver in hand. The cigar-smoke alone, he reflected, was bound to tell its tale to even the most obtuse trooper; wherefore, instead of throwing his away, as he had been inclined to do at first, he kept the butt of it between his teeth, and puffed luxuriously.

There came a stumble and a muttered curse, and the fellow blundered against the small iron door.

Kelly, cool as ever, darted forward, relighted one of the fallen candles, and placed it in such a manner that the glare would fall full in the new-comer's eyes.

A clang of metal, and the door swung back. The trooper entered, with a gasp of astonishment, and a carbine held at the ready. What he saw, in place of the rough,

weather-stained, travel-worn convict he expected, was a smooth-shaven, sleek-haired gentleman, in immaculate riding-kit, cigar in mouth, one glass in eye, inspecting a glass of wine, which he held to the light betwixt the forefinger and thumb of his left hand. In his right—though this the trooper did not see—was a long-barrelled revolver.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said the trooper, keeping the carbine ready.

"Possibly, my friend—possibly," retorted Kelly. "I hope the process isn't painful. But, at the same time, I should like to know what you are doing here with that very formidable-looking weapon."

The trooper stared.

"Who the deuce are you, anyway?"

"I, my man, am a—what I might call a prospector. I search for gold. I am told that there is gold in these hills and cliffs, and the formation is most interesting."

Kelly was talking lightly and at random, with the sole object of gaining time, and so save Dick Mason from becoming involved.

The trooper eyed him doubtfully and sullenly. He had never seen Kelly, but he had seen pictures of him, and he was eyeing him, comparing the features. He hitched forward the carbine a little, and there was a click as the hammer pressed back.

"Prospector or no prospector, you'll come along with me, my buck! You're too much like Ned Kelly, if I'm any judge, for it to be healthy for you to be wandering here alone. So come on out of it sharp, now. We've a long ride ahead of us. D'ye hear me?"

"My good man," drawled Kelly, "not being deaf, I naturally hear you. But let me observe two things—first, that your manners are abominable; secondly, talking of health, I should put away that carbine of yours. I object to it."

"Oh, that's your tone, is it?" said the trooper. "Up you get off that box. Sharp, now, and I'll keep you covered till I call my mate to run over you!"

"My man"—the words rang sharp and hard—"put down that carbine—quick!"

The trooper swung up his weapon, either as a threat or meaning to fire; but he did not realise that he was in the presence of the quickest shot in all Australia.

Before it has half-way to his shoulder—even as he swung it round from off his arm—Kelly's hand shot forward, and the revolver spoke three times in quick succession.

The first shot caught the lock just above the man's trigger-finger and wrecked it.

The next two caught the barrel and woodwork, jerking it this way and that, and sending splinters flying in all directions. The carbine was no more than a shattered wreck, and the man dropped it at his feet, dazed and confused, shaking his tingling fingers.

"Geo-whiz!" said the trooper, in almost ludicrous dismay.

"Put your hands up, and back against the wall yonder," said Kelly curtly. "My friend, I gave you warning. Now I will teach you a little lesson in manners, and the proper way of addressing your superiors. If you value your life, stand still!"

The trooper—who, to do him justice, was no coward—braced himself against the wall, with splayed hands and hard-staring eyes, and took a deep breath.

Crack!

The wind of the bullet fanned his right ear, and splintered the rock just behind it.

Crack! again; and this time his left ear was grazed so close that the skin fairly burned.

Crack! once more. Something rippled along the top of his scalp, and a few hairs came tumbling over his face, as Kelly laid the smoking revolver on the case beside him

The man's mouth was open in sheer amazement. Never in his life before had he

seen such skill. Kelly seemed to take no further notice of him. Gradually the amazement gave place to a cunning leer. The revolver was empty, and almost out of Kelly's reach. His own carbine was a wreck. But he was a powerful man, broad of shoulder and lean of flank. If once he could get to hand-grips! He slid forward a foot. Kelly remained motionless, seemingly lost in thought.

The other foot slid forward. He had gained a yard. Two more strides, and he would be within springing distance.

Again the foot moved, and Kelly turned on him in a flash.

"I have another gun!" he snapped significantly.

And the man collapsed and fell back. He was brave—he was doing his duty—but to go on in face of certain death was absurd, and the masterful man opposite cowed him in spite of himself.

Still Kelly seemed lost in thought, and again a leer spread over the trooper's face. Those shots—they must have been heard, and even now probably his mate was hurrying to his assistance. And there was Mason, too—where was he all this time?

Kelly seemed to guess what was going on in his brain, for, reaching over, he grasped the empty revolver, and began reloading it in a leisurely fashion. When he had finished, he spoke in his usual drawling tones:

"If anyone comes to your assistance I shall be compelled to shoot to better purpose. I use either hand."

The trooper shifted uneasily, and again hope sprang up in his heart, for behind him, further down the passage, he had caught the sound of footfalls creeping closer and closer.

Slowly, stealthily, they came on. He could picture to himself his mate creeping forward with rifle at the ready, peering anxiously through the darkness, moving as a man moves when he knows there is danger ahead, and cannot tell at what second or from what direction to expect it.

He waited with tingling, jumping pulses. A few yards nearer, and then he would risk it—a quick shout, and a drop to avoid the coming bullet.

Closer, closer yet; and then he took a deep breath, and braced himself for the crisis. It was a brave action beyond all doubt.

He glanced once more at Kelly, with something between a suppressed sob and an oath. He didn't expect to live through the next five seconds. Then he raised his voice in a shout: "Here, Roberts—here! Look out! He's waiting for you!" and dropped on the words.

Kelly sprang to his feet, and a heavy carbine bullet came whizzing and droning through the air close to his head. He raised his arm. He had no wish to shoot either man.

His finger hung reluctantly on the trigger. There was a quick rush of feet behind him, and he was seized in a grip of steel.

"Trapped!" cried a voice; and then a whisper in his ear: "Keep quiet, you fool; it's the only chance!"

In an instant Kelly took in the situation. It was Dick Mason's voice. But he struggled like a wild-cat, as the two troopers flung themselves at him, and finally secured him.

"Neatly done, Mr. Mason!" panted the last-comer—"neatly done! I was wondering what had become of you. Fancy your getting round and taking him in the rear like that! I rather guess we both owe you our lives."

Dick laughed.

"Not bad, was it, Roberts? But, you see, I know more about the rabbit-warren than most people; and also I know that there's a poor chance for any man to take Ned Kelly and live—so long as Kelly knows he's coming. So this is the second time we meet here."

He spoke to Kelly in the cold, formal tones of an officer.

A faint smile flickered across Kelly's face—almost imperceptible, but Dick saw it.

"The fortune of war is with you," he replied. "But for your interference, as my worthy friend there says, he would probably be on the road to heaven by now."

Dick nodded.

"Bind his hands, Roberts. I'll see to the things here; and you"—to the other trooper—"go and round up that grey horse I saw awhile back in the paddock. We shall need another mount. And then we must be hurrying back to Benalla, if we want to make it before the dawn."

The men obeyed his orders at the jump, and soon Kelly and Dick were left alone momentarily.

"What's the game, Dick?" whispered Kelly.

"It's the only way, old man. I saw the fix you were in, and you can't run straight by shooting a trooper; it would double the hue and cry after you. That's why I stepped in. I'm unofficial, so can do pretty well what I please, and no one can haul me over the coals if you get away later.

"Obey all the orders I give, and when we off-saddle later on I'll see you get your chance. Head straight for the Burra-Burra as soon as you're free, and leave a message for me there. I'll get you such a start they'll never catch you!"

Kelly, his hands bound behind his back, allowed himself to be led quietly along. Dick carefully refrained from any further speech with him—in fact, studiously avoided him—giving orders with set formality. It was by his instructions that one of the troopers mounted the grey, and placed Kelly on a slower troop-horse between himself and his comrade, whilst Dick rode ahead by himself. He smiled a little as he rode, quite satisfied that his was the one feasible solution of the dilemma in which the policeman's zeal had placed them.

He was responsible to no one directly for his actions; he fully intended to let Kelly get free, with a fair start and a chance to run straight, rather than hand him over to the authorities; and he also wished to shield the policeman from any blame in the matter. So far all had gone excellently well; but it was a delicate affair to handle, and he wanted time to think.

Obviously, the first thing to do was to keep the troopers from being suspicious. His action in personally arresting Kelly told largely in his favour; besides, his past record stood him in good stead. The next, to engineer the actual escape so that it should seem a natural sequence of events, and this was the harder problem.

Already the chill, dark hours before the dawn were on them, and that which was to be done must be done quickly or not at all.

After covering another five miles he called a halt.

"We'd better ease up for an hour or so here," he said curtly. "Off-saddle, and turn the horses loose; there's a long ride before us, and the ground just ahead is very rough. We don't want to risk laming one of the animals. You, Ned Kelly, keep alongside me. I don't want to make matters rougher for you than I can help; but there's a gun in my holster this minute, and I shall use it on the first sign of any monkey tricks, so remember. Roberts, you take first watch, will you? I'll relieve you in half an hour's time."

The trooper nodded, and, with his carbine over his arm, took up his station. He was as alert as he could be, but unsuspicious, and he had spent many long hours in the saddle.

His mate, glad of a respite, curled himself up, with his rifle beside him, and dozed off instantly.

Kelly threw himself down, as bidden, close beside Dick; and the horses, after a roll to refresh themselves, cropped luxuriously at the grass.

Dick waited, shamming sleep. Five minutes—ten—passed, and then the watching trooper began to nod. He wasn't asleep, but he was in a sort of waking dreamland of his own, and his thoughts were far away.

Very slowly and cautiously Dick drew a case-knife from his belt, and slid out an arm. Kelly, watchful and quick to understand, rolled half over on to his side, turning his back to Dick.

A quick slash and his hands were free. Then he rolled back to his former position, his arms beneath him.

Dick slid a spare revolver, the one taken from Kelly in the cave, across to its rightful owner, who promptly grabbed it, with an almost inaudible ejaculation of thanks.

Next he took the sleeping trooper's carbine, and gave it a jerk which sent it slithering into a tangled grass tussock, from which it would mean the work of precious seconds to extract it.

Then, raising himself slightly on one elbow, he whispered to his prisoner:

"Butra-Burra; take the grey; I'll look after the rest. Leave word, and be ready to jump for it when I cough."

A faint "Thanks, old man," barely reached him.

Dick sat up, stretched himself lazily, and yawned:

"Roberts," he said drowsily—"Roberts!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Relieve guard. I'll take your spell now. Get what rest you can; I can't give you more than half an hour."

The trooper, nothing loth, flung himself down, and soon dozed off in stern earnest. But he was a careful man, and there were rewards and promotion in the air, wherefore he slept with a hand on the stock of his weapon.

Also, he was keen on his profession, and slept as a dog sleeps, with ready eye and ear. Dick hesitated. A lucky chance shot, and the whole scheme might easily become a fiasco or a tragedy.

Presently, however, he evolved a plan, and acted on it. He gave Kelly a premonitory touch with his foot, then coughed.

In a flash Kelly was on his legs and half-way to the grey. A low whistle, and the great horse raised his head and came trotting forward, his bridle hanging loose.

Roberts the trooper woke with an oath at the sound, and Dick, with a blood-curdling yell, half entirely imaginary pain, half surprise, leapt to his feet, caught an ankle in a thick, grassy hummock, and fell, with nice calculation, right across the trooper's carbine.

Roberts tugged. Dick lay as one stunned, his further hand clutching the barrel tightly to prevent mishaps. Given ten seconds, and Kelly once on the grey, saddle or no saddle, there was no man in all Australia who could catch him. Meanwhile, the second trooper, aroused by the uproar, was groping frantically for the carbine which should have been beside him.

"After him, you fools!" yelled Dick, recovering his voice. "Why don't you fire, you dolts! He's off!"

Kelly had leapt on the grey's back, another whistle, a dim streak of white, and the wire-haired pup was after him.

Dick staggered to his feet, with an artistic groan.

"Quick, men—quick! I'm wounded!" And lurched towards Cæsar.

Roberts, full of zeal, was already scrambling on to his heavy troop-horse, his mate grabbing for the bridle of his and wrenching his carbine free.

It came out with the final tug, and he levelled it at the fast vanishing figure. Swift as lightning Dick dragged himself and Cæsar across the line of fire, and the fellow threw up the rifle.

"Clear out, sir; clear out, for my sake!" he cried.

"Fire, you idiot!" yelled Dick, and dodged aside too late by half a dozen seconds.

Roberts was mounted by now, and giving chase. Dick sprang on to Cæsar's back with a grip of the mane and a clean vault, and they were off helter-skelter.

Roberts had a lead of half a dozen lengths, going for all he was worth; but Cæsar pressed to cover five lengths to the other's four, and the grey was the best horse in the country."

A quick burst, and Dick overhauled his man—a wrench at the curb, and the two horses cannoned violently. Cæsar staggered, stumbled heavily, nearly unseating Dick, and recovered; but his powerful shoulder had caught the troop-horse fair and square, and sent him a floundering sprawl, from which no recovery was possible.

Down he went with a crash, pitching the trooper clear. Dick yelled something inarticulate, and shot past him as though continuing the chase. Kelly, as a matter of fact, was now far out of sight, heading for Burra-Burra; but Dick, to make matters doubly sure, swung off the line for the caves in a gradual, ever-widening curve, till at last he was pursuing a course very nearly at right-angles to Kelly's real direction.

The other trooper, having by now come up, and Roberts having regained his horse, as was only natural, they followed up Dick, whom they could hear riding ahead of them through the darkness.

As the eastern sky began to lighten, Dick threw up his hand as a signal to halt.

"It's no good, men," he said. "With Kelly once started on the grey, we didn't stand a chance. We must be off the track, besides. We'd better be getting back to camp, and pick up our saddles and kit."

And so it came about that, some hours later, three very solemn-looking and downcast men rode into Benalla high-street to make a report of their doings.

Dick himself went to see the commissioner and Captain Wyatt, and gave an account of the occurrence.

Officially, Captain Wyatt was vexed, annoyed, and generally upset by the distressing circumstance, whilst attaching no blame to anyone; but, on rising to bid Dick good-bye, one could almost have sworn that his left eyelid lowered for a fraction of a second. Of course, officials don't wink; but still——"

Curiously enough, too, when Dick reached home, and told Mr. Trevelyan, the latter listened to him gravely till he had finished.

"You must have lost some of your old quickness, lad," he said, with a quiet smile. And then, as their eyes met: "Did he take your kitbag with him in the hurry? I see you've left it somewhere."

Whereupon they both were compelled to laugh, and in the future the subject was evaded.

. . . . . .

Three days later Kelly, under the pseudonym of Captain Vyner, was seated in a first-class compartment of the Eastern Railway, being hurried along to the terminus, which was at that date some forty miles from the centre of the mining district.

He was dressed in the height of fashion as a British sportsman, fresh out from home—immaculate breeches and gaiters, check tweeds, a sleek, well-groomed head, carefully-trimmed moustache, a big cigar, and an eyeglass; beside him, a litter of sporting papers, gun-cases and a dressing-bag, all conspicuously new, and all bearing a steamship label. Curled up on the seat was the terrier pup Jack, and in a special van behind was the famous grey horse. Opposite to him, also enjoying a cigar, was no less a person than the sub-commissioner of the district, conversing animatedly with the "new chum."

For Kelly, with his rather languid drawl, his conspicuous newness, and his guileless interest in his surroundings, was a typical Britisher. The sub-commissioner—Hayes by name—was absolutely unsuspicious. He was travelling up to the mines to settle some disputed claims, and to enforce law and order.

"Deuced tough crowd we've got there, Captain Vyner," said he. "I tell you

they need a tight hand; and, by gad, sir, they'll find they've got something to kick against when I arrive! I'll soon show them their places and rub order into them. This new certificate system is causing a heap of trouble, and the reports show ten or a dozen murders a week. But that's not the worst by a long chalk. This is in confidence, of course; but I've private information that a blackguard called Kelly, an ex-convict, who escaped from Melbourne a short time ago, is heading for the mines, and likely to give trouble."

The pseudo Captain Vyner took a long pull at his cigar.

"Er—Kelly? D'you mean the bushranger feller who—er—was talked about such a lot—desperate sort of chap? Eh—what?"

Commissioner Hayes frowned, and nodded savagely.

"Desperate sort of blackguard!" he said, scowling. "If I'd had the handling of that affair, it would have been a very different story, I can tell you! I'd have shot the brute out of hand, and ended the matter. I've no patience with all this sentimental rot. Give me the good old days when, if a man gave trouble, he was strung up to the triangles and lashed into sense!"

"Er—quite so. Bit hard on the brutes, though—eh?"

"Now, see here, Captain Vyner, don't you go getting that sort of rubbish into your head. You're fresh out from home, and you don't understand. Men like this Kelly are born wrong 'uns — coarse, treacherous brutes — fellows who'll stick at nothing—cut your throat or sneak your purse as soon as look at you! You'll see how I deal with that kind pretty soon, I can tell you; and if I lay hands on Kelly himself, I'll string him up before the whole camp, and give him a hundred lashes—as a warning and example—and then hang him out of hand!"

Captain Vyner, otherwise Kelly, smoked on imperturbably; but, if the commissioner had been less heated or more observant, he would have seen a light in the shrewd black eyes which should have warned him.

Kelly knew the man well—a notorious blusterer and bully, who had for a short time been connected with Melbourne Gaol. A coarse brute of a man, who alternately cringed to his superiors and was harsh and unjust to his inferiors—a truculent swaggerer, about whom more than one ugly story was afloat.

He was glad enough to toady the pseudo Captain Vyner, whom he took to be a man of position and influence from the home country; for he was a shrewd scoundrel in his way, with a keen eye for the main chance. Captain Vyner's credentials, which he had been allowed to get a glimpse of, were unimpeachable, and he realised that a good word from such a man might mean much in the way of preferment, if spoken opportunely at Government House.

Apart from his brutality, he had two notorious vices—the man was an insatiable gambler, and over-fond of the brandy-bottle.

Kelly, though outwardly imperturbable as ever, was longing to teach the man a lesson; also he suspected him of being a coward.

The train ploughed along through the endless waste of scrub and acrid land, and conversation languished.

Kelly yawned two or three times, ostentatiously opened his silver-mounted dressing-bag, and rummaged for a book to pass the time away. In the course of rummaging, it chanced that a silver box of playing-cards, with conspicuous crest and monogram, fell open, and one or two cards dropped on to the floor of the carriage.

Commissioner Hayes eyed them greedily.

"By gad, sir, the very thing!" said he, stooping to pick one up. "Why not have a game to pass the time? What do you say to a little ecarte?"

The pseudo Captain Vyner yawned again.

"As you please," he drawled languidly. "It's deuced dull, as you say—oh what?" And he produced the box.

In the twinkling of an eye the commissioner had grabbed the cards with feverish fingers, and arranged a makeshift table out of a spare cushion.

Now, ecarte is, above all others, a game of skill and finesse, requiring a cool head, and Kelly was a notoriously lucky and skilful player.

The game began, and Hayes, fancying he had a raw hand to deal with, suggested rather high stakes. Captain Vyner nodded a languid assent.

"Anything you like. We generally double those points at White's," he drawled, and produced a fat and well-filled pocket-book.

The sight was too much for Hayes's prudence.

"Let's double 'em, then. I'm game!"

Captain Vyner nodded once more, and play began.

At first the luck ran entirely in the commissioner's favour. His beady eyes glittered with greed and avarice, and his red face became still more flushed and swollen. Here was a pigeon to be plucked—a rich pigeon—and the plucking was in his own hands.

"Double you again!" the commissioner said, with ill-suppressed excitement.

Captain Vyner nodded.

"Make it more excitin'—eh, what? Very well."

And he added a pile of notes to those already on the table.

Again the commissioner won, and his vulgar jubilation knew no bounds. Presently, however, the luck changed. Captain Vyner played with scrupulous fairness—languidly, nonchalantly—yet he won, and again and again. Fickle Dame Fortune seemed suddenly to have changed her mind, and the pile before the commissioner grew quickly and beautifully less.

And as the pile diminished, so did the commissioner's burly form shrink and dwindle. In a way—though this neither player knew at the time—the game was symbolical of that greater game, the game of life, which was to be fought out between them in the near future. Here the stakes were a pile of crisp banknotes or yellow sovereigns; there, in the game to come, the wager was one of life or death—not their's alone, but other men's as well.

Kelly, or Vyner, played on with the same bored air of indifference; yet, for all his seeming carelessness, he was on the alert, cool and wakeful. Twice, when the stakes, already high beyond the ordinary, were raised yet further, he detected a suspicious movement of finger and thumb on the part of the commissioner; and once, when the score for the game stood at three all, the commissioner's sleeve rubbed heavily across the marker, and he increased his score by a whole point.

Yet Kelly said nothing, pretending not to notice, and, relying solely on his skill and superior play, came off a winner again, though barely, and the pile of money before Hayes was reduced to a handful of notes and a few loose coins.

Then the languid Captain Vyner roused himself.

"I will play you the next game for all the money before you on the table," he said curtly.

Hayes was a cautious man, but he had the true gambler's weakness.

"Yes," he gasped thickly, the veins on his forehead swelling with excitement.

The stake was made, the game played, and the commissioner lost again.

His face went ashen colour. He had lost not only all his own money, but a substantial amount of Government funds as well.

Captain Vyner yawned.

"Shall we go on?" he drawled.

Hayes burst into a rage.

"Go on!" he almost shouted. "Of course we'll go on! Do you think I'm going to stop at a—a trifle like that? See here!"

He pulled out a flat black pocket-book, and threw it violently on the table. It contained Government notes for over two thousand pounds.

Kelly's eyes gleamed for a second. The man, his sworn enemy, was delivering himself step by step into his hands.

Again they played, and again the official lost—money which was not his, but his employers'; again and again, until once more the table on his side was swept bare. Kelly had made about six thousand pounds, in addition to his own money back.

The commissioner glowered at him.

"You've a flask in your bag," he said huskily. "I—I've lost heavily, but I'll go on. Oh, yes, I'll go on, if you don't mind my having a drink first!"

Kelly handed him the flask.

"As you please," he drawled. "I never drink myself when playing."

Hayes took a long gulp.

"Go on!" he cried.

Kelly paused, and lay down the cards.

"Excuse me—er—stupid sort of thing to say, but you've no stake on the table."

Hayes gasped.

"I'm cleaned out," he said hoarsely—"cleaned out till I can get to my quarters. I'll give you notes-of-hand, of course. Deal, man—deal; we're wasting time!"

Captain Vyner—or Kelly, which you please—laid a forefinger on the pack.

"Excuse me," he said quietly; "but, except among friends, I never play unless for ready-money. Saves bother, y'know—eh, what?"

And he fixed the commissioner with his eyeglass.

"Heavens and earth! You don't mean you're going to back out? I must have my revenge, I tell you—I must have it!" The fellow's voice rose almost to a scream. "I—I—it's necessary, captain, I assure you. I—— The fact is, this heavy loss will put me in a predicament—yes, it's a predicament. I—I can't afford to lose so much!"

Captain Vyner waved his hand. Somehow, a strange transformation seemed to have taken place in him. He was still slow and deliberate as ever, but when he spoke it was with a certain air of authority.

"Major Hayes," he said quietly, and there was an unexpected air of grimness underlying the tone—"Major Hayes, you have been playing against me with money which is not your own, and you have lost it. Now—er—at home in the old country we—er—call that sort of thing by rather an ugly name; and, if you put it in plain words, I refuse to go on playing with you unless you can match my stake on the table, money down. But, since this money, which you have no right to, has been lost, I may, on certain conditions, give you a chance of winning it back. First tell me for what reason you were entrusted with it."

The commissioner stammered and blustered over the accusation, but in the end, grown desperate at the other's cool demeanour, he owned up.

"Well, sir, since you press me, and as between gentlemen, I have, in fact, temporarily borrowed a sum entrusted to me for the running down of that same blackguardly scoundrel Kelly we were talking of! Of course, the moment I arrive, and can get into touch with my bankers, I shall——"

"Quite so—quite so," interposed Vyner blandly. "No need to say any more. Now, I'll give you this chance. I hold here close on six thousand pounds of your money, in addition to four thousand of my own, making roughly ten thousand in all. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. We always settle these little matters at White's by a sporting gamble to save unpleasantness. I'll take four to two in thousands that we meet this—er—Kelly man before we leave the—er—railway; and a level six thousand you don't catch him the first time you come face to face; or, if you like, I'll waive the odds, and lay you the ten thousand I've got here that you meet Kelly, and are afraid to face him before our train reaches railway head. If I lose, I hand you the ten thousand. If I win, you give me a signed note for your further debt—eh, what?"

Major Hayes's face grew clammy with perspiration. The odds were all in his favour, but the sum involved was enormous. Moreover, something about his opponent—his absolute coolness, his quiet, drawling manner—affected him most unpleasantly. In the end he consented, half reluctantly, half eagerly.

Captain Vyner produced a silver-mounted betting-book, in which the wager was duly entered, and signed by both.

At eight o'clock the train halted for an hour at a wayside station to enable the travellers to dine; at ten, Captain Vyner retired to his own compartment to rest.

He was curled up comfortably in blankets in his bunk. All around lay a littered confusion of toilet articles, and, conspicuous above all, in the open dressing-case on the opposite seat, lay a small despatch-box, a leather-covered affair, containing the notes which he had won that day at play and his own four thousand.

The lamp was turned low—so low that there was barely light to distinguish things by. And Captain Vyner, to all appearances, slept the sleep of the just, for he snored atrociously.

A little silver clock marked the hour at half-past seven, and the partition door between his compartment and the next gave a slight creak.

Captain Vyner, still snoring vigorously, opened one bright eye, and slipped a hand beneath the pillows till it gripped a revolver.

The door creaked again, more loudly, and slid back a little in its groove, and the red face of Sub-Commissioner Hayes appeared in the opening. Very cautiously he wormed his way through the narrow gap, and stood gazing down at the sleeping figure.

Then he ventured a step forward, and peered round him, trying to get accustomed to the semi-darkness.

Another step; and a dull glint showed that he carried a weapon half concealed by his right sleeve—a stout-bladed knife.

He was close to the sleeper now, and, bending down, he listened to the deep, regular breathing. As he stooped there was a convulsive movement amongst the blankets, and, though he was blissfully unaware of the fact, a revolver was covering him from beneath the pillow.

He stood up again, and waited uncertainly. The breathing still went on uninterruptedly. With a quick, silent movement, he wheeled, and his eye lighted on the small despatch-box. In a twinkling the heavy-bladed knife was out of his sleeve and the point inserted under the lid just by the lock; a wrench, a faint, muffled snap, and the flimsy affair was wrenched open. His large, red fist shot out and grabbed the notes. A glance sufficed to show him that they were what he needed. Ten seconds later the carriage was empty of all save the sleeping man, and the partition-door slid to. Then silence.

Half-past two—a bare three hours to dawn, six to the journey's end, and Commissioner Major Hayes tossed feverishly on his couch, and turned over with his face to the wall, hoping for sleep.

Again he tossed and turned, staring with wide-open, vacant eyes at the opposite seat, rubbed his eyes, stared again, and snatched for the heavy Service revolver which dangled in the belt overhead.

For in the dark shadows of the far corner was the figure of a man, sitting grim and watchful.

"What the blazes——" began Major Hayes, tugging at his holster.

"Lie still!" said a low, stern voice. "Lie still, or I'll put a bullet through you!"

Something about the clear-cut, quiet tones, and the dull, black mask which covered the speaker's face, struck a note of terror in the bully's heart.

"Who are you?" he muttered, dropping his hand.

The revolver of his strange visitor never quivered, but pointed with deadly menace straight between the commissioner's eyes.

"Who are you?" he muttered again. "I'd have you know, you scoundrel, that I'm the sub-commissioner for the district, and that if you fancy you can intimidate me, I'll have you flogged, sir—by James, I will, soundly flogged!"

"You whimpering sneak—thief!" said the voice behind the mask. "Speak civilly when you speak to a gentleman. Up with you, sharp, now, or——" The revolver-barrel moved forward a fraction of an inch, and Sub-Commissioner Hayes, white with fear and passion, slid off the seat. "Now, down on your knees! Quick, man, if you value your life!"

"Who the deuce——Yes, yes; I will!"

And Hayes flopped on the carriage floor.

"Now, then, my friend, you will hand over to me the ten thousand pounds you stole from your friend, Captain Vyner! Oh, don't trouble to deny it; I saw the whole thing! Ah, would you? Please remember that the first time you open your mouth or try to give the alarm in any way, I shoot. You've a man to deal with this time, you hulking bully—a man who would hold up six of you single-handed, for all your blustering!

"I'll go through the introduction in style. You are Major Hayes, sub-commissioner for the district, who has stolen money belonging to the Government, cheated at cards, and robbed the man you played with—a swaggering rascal, not fit to live! I am Captain Kelly, at your service; and, if you move hand or foot unless I give you leave, I'll shoot you like a dog! Now, then, Major Hayes, those notes, and be smart about it!"

Kelly, revolver in hand, looked down on the grovelling form beneath him with contempt.

"You snivelling cur!" he said disgustedly. "Get up and sit on the seat over there like a Christian, if you can. No, you cannot get at the communication cord; nor can you raise your voice and call the attention of your British pigeon, Captain Vyner. I've seen to that! You'll sit quiet and still, with your hands before you on your knees, till I give you leave to make another move—unless, that is, you prefer a quick death by lead poisoning. Now, I've heard a good deal of bluster and talk about what you would do with Ned Kelly when you found him. Oh, yes; I heard it all. Never mind where I was. Well, here's Ned Kelly before you, and you're not exactly a picture of daring and competence, are you?"

"Now, Major Sub-Commissioner Hayes, or whatever you call yourself, you used pretty hard words about this same Kelly, a while back. It seems to me you're a fairly low-down sort yourself. Here are you, a Government official, coming out to take up an important post. The first thing you do is to start gambling with this Vyner man, lose all your own money, and a tidy sum of Government funds into the bargain. You needn't gasp—I know all about it! On the top of that you do a bit of healthy pilfering into the bargain. Having paid your debts of honour—save the mark—under compulsion, as it were, you try to recoup yourself by stealing from the dressing-bag of the very man you played with and lost to. Fascinating story, isn't it? It would look nice in type in the Melbourne papers, with big screaming heads on top.

"I can see the Governor's face, as he reads it over the breakfast-table. 'Serious charge against an official,' and all the rest of it."

The eyes behind the black mask seemed to drill holes into the abject, grovelling man—accustomed, as he was, to play the bully's part.

"Listen to me," the coldly contemptuous voice went on. "How much Government money have you lost—gambled away? Speak the truth, if you can; it will be better for you."

The major shifted uneasily on his knees.

"Two—two thousand five hundred, odd. I—I don't know the exact figure he stammered.

Kelly took the bundle of notes and loose gold, and held them out under the feeble light. He didn't even think it worth his while to keep Hayes covered, the man was such a rank coward, and the rocking and swaying of the train made counting difficult. He selected notes for the specified amount, and separated them from the rest.

A wolfish, sneaking look stole into the major's eye. He was a coward, but he was a powerfully built man, and Kelly's back was turned. It was worth risking something.

Stealthily he slid one foot forward, then the other; waited an instant, gathering himself, and sprang.

Even as he did so he realised that he had made a mistake; for all Kelly's apparent carelessness, he was not unprepared.

He pivoted round on his heel like lightning, and a straight, swift drive from the shoulder caught the commissioner squarely in the face as he was in mid-air, and he went down with a crash in the corner of the carriage, bleeding profusely from the nose, and moaning.

The black mask stared at him imperturbably.

"You fool! You sneaking, blundering fool! Hadn't you even horse sense enough to see that I could watch you in that strip of looking-glass on the compartment wall there? Do you think, Major Hayes"—with ironical politeness—"that I'm the kind of man to turn his back on a snake or a jackal without taking precautions? Don't you attempt to touch me again with your dirty paws, or you'll be sorry for it, in real earnest.

"Now, then, see here, and take the lesson to heart. There on the seat are notes of two thousand six hundred—Government money, mark you. Pick them up, and be thankful you're being let off so easily.

"Remember that they are Government property, and that your reputation, such as it is, has been saved. If you tamper with that money again I shall hear of it, and, as sure as I'm alive, I'll show you up as the swindler you are. If not, I'll keep my mouth shut; but as I deal with you now, so deal mercifully with any poor beggar brought before you for sentence up yonder in the goldfields.

"A minute or two back, I'd have let you off with no other punishment; but you want a sharper lesson to remind you not to tackle a man behind his back. Open that door!"

The major rose to his knees again.

"No—no! What do you mean to do—you won't murder me?"

"Murder you, you fool! I wouldn't soil my fingers with such as you! Open that door—sharp, now!"

"I can't—I daren't—I'll be killed!"

"Rubbish! The trackside is soft enough. You'll only get a bruise or two and a sixty-mile walk. We're not doing ten miles an hour on this up-grade. Jump, or I'll kick you out!"

The bully began to whimper, and made a half turn.

"I'll give you exactly the time it takes me to count three. If you don't jump for it on the word three I promise you you'll leave on the end of my boot."

"One—two——"

The sub-commissioner shuddered, groaned, gave a final despairing look, and leapt outwards and forwards into the dark. He landed asprawl in a thick clump of scrub, breathless and shaken, but unhurt; and the train went rattling by.

Kelly, with a half-disgusted laugh, and a shrug of the shoulders, closed the door again, tore the black mask from his face and the broad-brimmed hat from

his head, pitched them out of the opposite window, and resumed his role of the languid, drawling Captain Vyner.

When the train reached Railway Head, in the small hours of the morning, the attendant came to rouse him, and found him fast asleep in his bunk.

A few seconds later there was consternation and uproar, and news flashed along the train that the Britisher Captain Vyner had been robbed during the night of some thousands of pounds, and that Sub-Commissioner Hayes was nowhere on the train. Either he had fallen out, or more probably been thrown out by the perpetrators of the robbery, and search-parties were at once despatched down the line.

CHAPTER 5.

Captain Vyner at the Diggings.

THREE weeks later the "Britisher," as Captain Vyner was generally spoken of, was already a popular and familiar figure at the diggings, and had won almost universal respect.

At first they had been inclined to chaff him, and resent his slow drawl and his eyeglass; but they soon found that they had a man to deal with, and when he administered to Gullion Dick, a notorious bully, the soundest thrashing which that worthy had ever received—in the high-street of the camp, at the busiest hour of the day—his reputation was assured.

Sub-Commissioner Hayes—who had arrived in camp in a sorry plight, three days late—had also taken Captain Vyner under his wing; and at the inaugural dinner at the commissioner's house the Britisher had kept the table in a roar with his account of the robbery on the train, whilst the fact that he could laugh over the loss of so large a sum as six or seven thousand pounds made everyone regard him as "a warm man," whose goodwill was desirable.

At the same time, much sympathy was expressed for Hayes, who, according to his verson of the affair, had been overcome and half-murdered by the notorious Kelly and three others, after a desperate resistance.

The Britisher also proved himself a worker—as strenuous, if not as skilful, as the oldest miner in the place; and he, with the proverbial new chum's luck, struck it rich from the very first.

Two days after his arrival he was sauntering round, "having a look at things," when a hard-bitten Yankee from Dakota way, who had staked out a good claim was being hauled up by a policeman for being unable to pay his mining and registration fees—a tall, gaunt, keen-faced man named Jake Simpson, full of ripe experience, who had mined all over the world, and had at last, in his own phraseology, "struck it rich." But the expenses of travelling up-country and food and outfit had reduced him to his last dollars.

He accepted his reverse of fortune philosophically; but there was a stony look of dull despair in his eyes as he walked along quietly beside the policeman, knowing that the next few minutes would see the forfeiture of his claim and a month's hard development work.

Kelly—or rather, Captain Vyner—had seen him pass, and, accustomed to read men on sight, had tipped the police-sergeant liberally and asked for a few moments' private conversation with the American.

They retired out of earshot, and in five minutes the whole thing was settled, and some notes changed hands. The fees were paid, and Captain Vyner and Jake Simpson became partners in the Good Hope claim.

In less than a fortnight news leaked out that the Good Hope, which had been

discarded some months before as "worked out," had proved itself a regular bonanza. Jake Simpson's experience and the Britisher's money and energy worked wonders. A rich lode was discovered, and within the month the Good Hope was pouring out ounces to other people's pennyweights or less.

There was little grumbling, and the better crowd of miners heartily congratulated them on their success.

The Britisher and Jake, side by side, clad in clay-stained overalls, were hard at it at sun-up, and when the day's work was finished they repaired to their small tent beside the claim, and ladled the day's takings into the strong-box under Jake's bed.

The American could never do enough for his pard.

"He's a real hustler from way back!" he'd say to an admiring audience. "Yes, siree, I tell you the truth! He has sand, an' when he starts to wade in he don't grow mouldy neither, and the Good Hope—she's a fair clincher!"

The pile of shining, yellow nuggets in the box grew heavier and heavier, and the partners began to wait anxiously for the coming of the gold escort, when they could place their pile in safety.

Both were agreed that the local bank was no catch. It was a flimsy affair of matchwood boarding; and, though the manager was as fine a man as ever stepped, and handy with his gun, the bank had been robbed three times in as many weeks, and the last had left the manager on the office floor with a shattered leg, and another bullet-wound in his shoulder.

Crime was rampant all through the camp, in spite of the best efforts of the police Scarcely a day passed without a shooting or knifing case, and robberies were things of hourly occurrence.

Of course, the one black crime—the blackest, ranking above murder even, in camp law—was sluice, or gold robbing, and the man convicted of that was lucky if he died quickly.

Therefore, the increasing pile in the strong-box was a source of anxiety to the Britisher and his partner. Both were dead shots—indeed, the Britisher's marksmanship had astounded the camp not a little—but men can't work all day from sun-up to dark and then keep awake half the night on guard.

Besides, after a long spell in the diggings, a little relaxation was only natural, though one of them always remained in camp. The thing which they had expected and feared came on a Thursday night, two days before the escort was due.

They had had an unusually stiff day of it, and both men had turned in, so dog-tired and worn out that they had scarcely energy enough to eat their supper.

The Britisher's bunk was on the right of the entrance of the tent; a bath and a dressing-table—concessions to the Britisher's extraordinary yearning for cleanliness—were on the left. Beyond, a cooking-stove, a table, and a couple of rough chairs, guns, cigar-boxes, and some odd books; and, lastly, at the back of the tent the American's bunk, and beneath it the famous strong-box, now nearly full.

Kelly had gone fast to sleep, bone weary, and Jake was snoring heavily under the blankets.

It was a pitch-dark night, with a cold drizzle, and, except in the high-street, where the saloons and gambling dens held high revel till sun-up, not a light was to be seen anywhere in the camp.

Suddenly, with an old habit born of the bush, and strange vigils round the Robbers' Roost, the Britisher sprang into full wakefulness, and, even as he woke, his hand slid beneath the pillow and gripped his revolver. He was alert, and instinctively realised the presence of something unusual—a prescience of danger.

So dark was it that he was unable at first even to distinguish the rough, familiar outlines of the washhandstand opposite. Listening, he could only hear the whining drone of the wind and the heavy snoring of his worn-out partner. Yet there had been a sound—a sound of quite a different character; of that he was certain.

He listened again; then faintly, very faintly, there came to him a soft, quick, ripping sound.

He knew that well. A keen-bladed knife was cutting through the canvas of the tent, though on which side exactly he was unable to distinguish. Once again he heard the soft rip, r-ripp, but in a different quarter. There were more than one of them then; it was to be an organised attack. In an instant he had slid out from under the blankets and was on his feet, revolver ready.

A faint—a very faint—glimmer of light showed itself immediately over Jake's bunk—scarcely light so much as a bluing of the darkness in a long, oval-shaped patch—then darkness again, as some moving object interposed itself betwixt him and the night sky without, followed by a flash of steel. Crack! A white spurt of flame streaked out, and a scream of pain told him that his aim was true, and then the sound of a heavy fall outside the canvas—he had judged the man's height and attitude to a nicety. A heavy grunt came from Jake as a knife grazed his shoulder and sliced its way into the muscle.

The next instant two sinewy hands grabbed Kelly's ankles, and plucked them from under him. That was the outcome of the second ripping sound. He fell, but broke his fall by clutching at his bunk; a heavy weight hurled itself on top of him, and a knife cut the fingers of his outstretched hand sharply. Again the blade rose and fell, but this time it was parried by the cylinder of the revolver.

A muttered curse came out of the darkness overhead. The robber, whoever he was, had made so sure. Little did he think that he has tackling a man whose name was a terror throughout Southern Australia. He hacked again savagely, hoping to make an end; and, as he did so, a mysterious thing happened to him. He felt a wrenching, agonising pain in his wrist, as fingers of steel closed round it, and the small bone gave with a snap, and, before he could bite back the scream which rose to his lips, he was hurled half across the tent, and an ominous cold steel ring pressed insinuatingly against his left temple, as a voice drawled out:

"You'll be safer lying still. I'm deuced careless, and the thing might go off!"

The sound of the shot by this time had roused all the neighbouring camps, and there were shoutings and hoarse cries as men stumbled blindly over obstacles in the darkness.

Jake came rolling out of his bunk, his shoulder bleeding freely, and managed, with some fumbling, to strike a light. He took in the situation at a glance; but before he could act a chorus of yells—"Hustle, boys! Jump for it; it's the Good Hope!" "Get a move on, we'll catch the blackguards yet"—and a sudden stampede into the tent nearly swept him off his feet.

The men stopped dead as they caught sight of the two figures on the floor—the Britisher, revolver in hand, sitting calmly on his captive's chest, his left hand gripping the fellow's throat—the slit canvas above either bunk flapping idly in the wind, and the bloodstained shoulder of Jake's shirt.

They needed no words to explain. With a cheer and a whoop of delight, they swooped down on the Britisher, and lifted him gently but firmly off his captive, with words of praise. Some ran for a rope, others seized the prisoner, with gruff oaths, and others yet ran for more lights, and in so doing stumbled across the body of the man's dead confederate at the back of the tent.

A big Australian-born named Johnstone took upon himself to command. He strode up to Kelly, and shook him warmly by the hand.

"Britisher, you're true grit, that's what ails you; and, in the name of the community, I'm right glad you're here amongst us! Boys, I vote for one cheer more for Long Jake's pardner; and then we'll proceed to the necktie party!"

The cheer was given heartily, and the captive was led out. Already busy hands

had slung a noosed rope over a sluice box, supported by two piles, and the prisoner was hustled roughly out.

The Britisher smoothed his hair, leisurely selected a cigar from the dressing-table, lit it, and strolled out after them, his revolver still in his hand. He went up to the big Australian, who, as leader, was presiding over the arrangements in the midst of an admiring circle.

"Excuse me," he began politely, in his slow drawl, "but might I ask what the idea is?"—with a wave of the hand towards the rope, the noose of which was already round the prisoner's neck.

"The idea! Well, I should smile! Hang the varmint—that's about the size of it! We've had trouble enough already; and now, thanks to you, we've laid hands on the brute, we will proceed to give an object-lesson in the treatment of men like this!"

"Excuse me," continued the Britisher, still drawling. "I hate to spoil sport, boys, but this man's my meat! I've no use for him hung. One's dead, and that's enough. I'll treat this chap my own way!"

A fierce growl of dissent went up on all sides.

The Britisher stepped swiftly forward, jerked the noose off the man's neck, and faced the crowd, swinging his revolver carelessly on his forefinger.

"My man, boys!" he said again. And then, as a renewed volley of growls rose on all sides, his manner changed. "I'll have no hanging!" he snapped. "And if you think there's one among the crowd of you big enough to take him from me, let him stand out! Now, then, who's coming?"

There was an uneasy movement in the crowd, and some muttering; then Jake Simpson moved quickly to his partner's side.

"I'm in on this deal, boys! Right or wrong, I stick to my pardner. I reckon he saved my life to-night; an' if any of you are on for a bit of a shootin' scrap—why, let the game begin!"

The American's quiet, simple manner turned the scale, and the mutterings turned into a hoarse roar of laughter.

"Let 'em have him!" cried Johnstone. "Guess if they want to keep him for a pet they can!"

Kelly nodded.

"Thanks, boys," said he. "I call that kind and reasonable."

Then, turning to the prisoner, he gave him a tremendous kick, which sent him flying into an irrigation ditch.

"Get out!" said he. "If I see you here again, I'll shoot on sight!"

The man picked himself up, nursing his wrist, and vanished into the darkness.

CHAPTER 6.

The Pocket of Gold.

THE affair of the gold robbery attempt caused a great stir in camp. Not that robberies were by any means unusual; but to rob the gold-chest of a mining outfit is the one black sin against mining camp law.

You may knock a man down, jab him with a knife in a saloon row, skin him of all his possessions down to his boots with loaded dice, even lay up for him with a gun behind a sluice-box in the dusk, and get off with an explanation—but to lay unlawful fingers on a gold-dust cache is above and beyond all the unforgivable crime, and the penalty is death of the most sudden order.

Jake Simpson and the pseudo Captain Vyner were the most popular men in camp—moreover, they were known to have struck it rich—yet their action in

voluntarily allowing a gold robber to escape was a subject giving rise to much grumbling and not a few black looks.

Major Hayes, the new Commissioner, though wishing to stand well with Vyner, was also considerably incensed, for he was a man who revelled in inflicting severe punishments, and had already earned for himself the title of Bully Hayes.

The two partners, however, paid little attention to all this; they had sent their gold down by the mail, and were busy from morning to night digging, panning, and washing up.

The Good Hope was a fine property, and they were both of them hard workers. They were both of them pegging away in the day-shift, after a hurried lunch of cold bacon and cheese, when Jake Simpson stood up and straightened his back.

"Say, pard, seems as if this ought to be mighty good pay dirt in this new level. Just look at her, now! I reckon you can see the little nuggets a-shining in the sunlight!"

He picked up a double handful of the bluish-grey clay as he spoke, and let it dribble gently through his fingers. Every now and again a minute, heavy lump of dull yellow passed through with the rest into the cradle, and hundreds of small flake-like specks glittered in the freshly-turned soil.

Later, the water from the sluices would wash away the lighter soil, leaving behind as a residue in the riffles these lumps and flakes of heavy virgin gold.

"Mighty pretty colour. Yes, sir," said the American.

Kelly, otherwise Vyner, nodded and drove in his pick. He seemed to have struck on soft earth, for the pick sank in right up to the head. He tugged it out with some difficulty, and a second blow sank in a little deeper even than the first.

Some crust earth fell inwards, and a miniature landslip, starting with a small rivulet of rubble, slid down the bank to his feet, revealing a deep hollow, or pocket, as it is termed.

Kelly plunged in his arm to the shoulder and groped about inside. His fingers grasped a huge, rugged, greasy feeling lump of great weight; another and another, and yet more, smaller, but of considerable size. Cool and unperturbed as he was by nature, in spite of himself a dull flush rose to his face and neck.

He gripped the biggest lump of all and dragged it out with a shout. It was a dull, lustreless yellow, pure virgin gold throughout. With a feeling akin to amazement he stared at it a while, and then flung it on the earth at Jake's feet.

"Look, man, look!" he said thickly. "By James, it's the biggest find ever made on the diggings, and there's more in the hole there!"

The big American turned, and went grey as ashes under the tan.

"Gee whiz!" he muttered; then, dropping on his knees and throwing away his shovel, he picked up the lump in his two hands. "Pard," he said gravely, and his voice shook, "this is the most almighty, gol-darned bonanza in creation. I've mined and I've mined ever since I was a pup—California, Deadville, all around the face of this 'ere little earth—and I never see the like. No, sir."

Kelly, meanwhile, was flinging out nugget after nugget frantically, restlessly—large and small—but none so small that they wouldn't have made the eyes of the richest man on the diggings bulge out with envy; and there were twenty-seven in all. But the big one—the giant of the find—the "Good Hope," as it was afterwards named throughout the mining world, as the news flashed across the wires, was equal to any four of the others piled together. That one lucky stroke of the pick had driven straight into the heart of one of Nature's strong-rooms and wrenched her hidden treasures free.

For maybe a couple of minutes the two stared in silence, unable to believe their eyes—shaken, dazed by their extraordinary fortune. Then Jake sprang

to his feet, whipped out his revolver, and fired three shots in the air in rapid succession—the miners' signal that something unusual was up—and his voice rang out in a shrill "Coo-ee-ee!"

With a quick pattering of feet, banging of shovels, shouts, laughter, and stumbling, the crews of all the neighbouring claims rushed up; and as the news spread of "somethin' doin' at the Good Hope," those further off joined in the race.

"Say, boys, excuse me," said Jake; "I can't say nothing just now, but my pardner and me have struck it, and if any man here has seen the like, he's a better liar than me! Yes, sir. Jump right down, boys, and look for yerselves!" And he waved his hands to where the nuggets lay piled in a heap, the great Good Hope on the top of all, gleaming dully in the sunlight.

The crowd gazed, gasped, and, with a yell that could have been heard three miles away, swept down into the claim.

"Twenty-seven in all there is, an' all every man-jack of 'em out o' that there durned little hole!" gasped Jake.

Sheer amazement held the ring of miners silent, as carefully, almost reverently, they picked up the Good Hope and passed it round from hand to hand.

"Twenty thousan' pound, if she's worth a dollar!" said an old forty-niner. "And as much again for the little uns! Here, boys, hold me up, or I'll throw a fit!"

Two big men named Johnstone and Macgregor came shouldering their way through the press, the richest and most consequential men on the fields, and in their train a man named Bernstein, a dealer for some big companies and syndicates in Melbourne.

"What's all this hubbub? What's up, Britisher?" asked the former.

Kelly pointed silently, and the big man started back a pace.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "Here, boys, gimme hold of that! I'm no slouch myself, but I'd die uneasy unless I could say I'd handled the biggest bonanza on earth!"

He and his partner took the Good Hope and examined it critically as experts, Bernstein joining them. Then Johnstone came forward and shook Kelly's hand.

"Captain Vyner, I congratulate you; you and your partner deserve success. You're just the type of man we want here on the fields. I don't know exactly what to value this at—it's beyond anything I've come across—but I should say eighteen thousand pounds, not dollars—eighteen thousand good British yellow-boys—would be a conservative estimate."

"I will give twenty-one thousand spot cash, and write you out a cheque now," snapped Bernstein; "and if there's a man here who can accuse me of giving more for a thing than it's worth, I'll stand drinks round!"

A huge shout of laughter went up, for Bernstein was known as a hard dealer, who would not give a shilling if he could make elevenpence do, and always undervalued claims; though he was popular enough, and had the reputation of being a real straight man, who would make a bargain and stick to it faithfully.

"Twenty-one thousand spot cash, and twenty-three more for the other twenty-six lumped together. You come away up with me, Captain Vyner, you and your mate, and we'll settle the deal. And what's more," he added, lowering his voice, "if you care to sell out now right dead on the top of this find, I'll give you a long price for your claim. There may be another pocket, or there may not. I know you've been doing pretty well, without counting these beauties here. That's the look-out of the mugs who put up the money when the thing is floated and the public let in; but it's a sure good thing for my syndicate, and I'll deal handsomely if you sell."

Jake Simpson nudged Kelly in warning. If Bernstein was so ready with offers, there were better to be had elsewhere.

Kelly nodded and laughed.

"Very good of you, Bernstein," he drawled, "but I guess where you offer twenty another man would spring the price a bit. We'll see later. Come along, boys, the whole crowd of you, and name your own poisons; this is a thing that needs celebrating. I and my partner here buy up the Miners' Rest saloon for the day. Let every man order whatever he wants, and the racket is on us. We'll bring the nuggets along and have them weighed."

"Three cheers for the Britisher and the Yank!" yelled someone from the back of the crowd; and they were given over and over again with rousing enthusiasm and without a trace of envy, for what is one man's luck to-day may be another's to-morrow.

A sudden rush was made for the two lucky ones, and, laughing and protesting, they were raised high on the shoulders of the crowd, whilst Johnstone, Macgregor, and Bernstein led the way, carrying the precious nuggets.

These were taken straight to the registration head office and solemnly weighed in the official scales and the weights recorded.

"Well, Captain Vyner, at the present price per ounce that works out at twenty-five thousand eight hundred and sixty pounds odd for the big nugget alone," said the official coldly. "Silence, please!" as some of the crowd cheered. More weighing and rapid calculation ensued. "The remaining twenty-six tot up to twenty-seven thousand three hundred and thirty. Making fifty-three thousand one hundred and ninety in all. And I shall be very glad, if it suits you, to take charge of this wonderful find, and to give you my receipt for the same. I shall wire our head office in Melbourne at once."

An irrepressible yell of delight greeted the announcement of these enormous figures, and derisive cries of "Bernstein!" accompanied by shouts and laughter.

The little dealer pushed his way forward, not at all abashed, and shook both partners by the hand.

"What's ailing you, boys?" he said, turning to the crowd. "I ain't here for my health! I bet you drinks round that I never offered a man more than a thing was worth! Well, I didn't! I fancy the laugh's on my side, and I'll collect those drinks at intervals during the coming year."

The crowd laughed again, and surged up in a noisy throng to the Miner's Rest.

Here the find was gravely toasted in bad champagne, and Kelly, having intimated to the boss and the barkeeper that whatever anyone called for was to be put down to him, edged his way towards Jake, and the pair of them wormed their way through the crowd to get away. Hands were stretched out on all sides to stop them, offering them more liquids of various hair raising names, but they refused.

"You must excuse us, boys, really," pleaded Jake. "When a man makes a pile like that in the morning, he's no use for liquor; it would be the death of him, sure! See you later."

And the lucky pair broke away and left the noisy, kindhearted crowd behind them to enjoy a vicarious hospitality.

Naturally, the news spread far and wide. Major Hayes sent down a special messenger with congratulations and an invitation for the following day; and other quieter men ropped in at their tent from time to time; but so far as possible they denied themselves to everybody.

The night broke wet and stormy, and they turned in early, but Kelly was unable to sleep. It's a very nice thing—uncommonly nice—to pick up fifty thousand pounds, but if one happens to be an escaped convict, it brings in its train a most unpleasant notoriety, and it was this which Kelly was pondering on. His appearance was altered by a trim moustache, it was true; and his frame had broadened out a bit with the hard work on the claim; no one but an expert, or a man of very

suspicious temperament would have dreamt of connecting Captain Vyner the Britisher—the popular and lucky part owner in the Good Hope—with Ned Kelly, escaped convict, on whose head there was a price of four thousand pounds. And yet the situation was a delicate one.

It might be wiser to take Bernstein's offer and sell out of the claim. On the other hand, it was a splendid gamble to remain and brazen it out. A gamble needing ready wit and cool resourcefulness, just such a game as Kelly loved.

The one disturbing factor, the one thing that haunted him was a glimpse of a face which he had seen in the crowd that morning. It was the face of Macullan the sour-faced, bullying warder of Melbourne Gaol, whom Kelly had knocked down on the night of his escape. The man bore him a grudge he knew; also, he was a friend of the commissioner, Major Hayes—a toadying, sneaking protege. What was he doing on the goldfields?—that was the point.

For hours, so it seemed to him, he lay tossing about feverishly. He had no wish to fall back into the old ways. Yet if, as he strongly suspected, the man was dogging his footsteps, sooner or later the truth was sure to come out.

Macullan was not a clever man by any means. He was a mean, bullying creature with a low type of brain. Yet, in common with his kind, he was possessed of a good deal of vulgar cunning which stood him in good stead.

"Well," muttered Kelly to himself. "I've played up against long odds before now, why shouldn't I try my hands once more? At the worst I can bolt sooner instead of later. Ah-h!"

The exclamation was barely audible but significant, and Kelly slowly and cautiously raised himself on one elbow. Outside the tent, above the driving rain and moaning wind, a sound had reached his ears, a sound so faint that most men would never have heard it. Yet to him it was plain, unmistakable—the sound of someone groping cautiously round the tent walls in the darkness, searching stealthily for an opening.

Kelly's hand slid beneath his pillow and gripped his revolver, listening intently the while. This was no common robber. Besides, it was notorious throughout the camp that all the Good Hope gold, together with the great find of the morning had been handed over to the authorities.

He slipped from beneath the blankets and stood waiting in the darkness. The movement was on the far side of the tent, and he pivoted round on his heel. He had a pretty shrewd idea of who the midnight prowler was, and his heart beat a trifle faster. Twice he raised his revolver to fire as the man stumbled over a guy-rope or brushed the canvas with his shoulder, and each time he refrained unwilling to shoot except in the last extremity.

Finally, he took a swift step backwards, gained the tent flap, and slid out into the darkness.

The man was on the far side of the tent, moving round it away from him. Kelly immediately gave chase, and so round and round they went in slow circles, the spy quite unconscious of his pursuer.

But, as bad luck would have it, before they had gone far in this way, Kelly, intent on the man before him, missed his footing and stumbled heavily. Instantly there was a flash and a report, and a bullet came whizzing by close to his head; in reality it was the fall that saved him. Had he been in an upright position he must inevitably have ceased to take any further interest in his surroundings.

A second shot, fired at random, ripped the canvas and sped away into the black night. That was Jake's work, newly aroused from sleep. Kelly fired as he lay, and rolled aside. He also missed. Then, picking himself up, he dashed round the tent in a reverse direction and ran straight into the arms of the midnight prowler.

The shock threw both men off their feet, and they came hurtling to the ground, grabbing desperately; whilst Jake from within was frantically struggling with the lamp.

Kelly gripped the man by the throat, and hung on. But he was a fellow of resource, for he had managed to get out a knife, and with this he slashed and hacked at the guy-ropes. They had fallen on the weather side of the tent, and the wind was blowing with the force of half a gale. With a tremendous effort he wriggled aside from Kelly's grip, and, using his foot as a lever, wrenched out another peg. The loosened canvas flapped wildly in the wind, and the tent-pole swayed and tottered. The next instant a sudden chance gust caught it fairly with terrific force, and the whole thing came tumbling down about their ears, involving all three in a common ruin.

Jake, being still inside the tent, was the worst off, for the heavy pole struck him on the head as it fell, partially stunning him.

The rest of the slack, rain-sodden and hampering, wrapped itself round the bodies of Kelly and his antagonist.

The principal thing which added to the peculiarity of the situation was that Macullan—for he was the interloper—was as desperately anxious to avoid recognition as he was to make sure of his suspicions.

Both men had dropped their revolvers in the struggle. Kelly was entirely unarmed, and Macullan had his knife, with which he slashed wildly but ineffectually, the sodden canvas preventing him from getting any force into his blows.

Overhead the storm raged and the rain came down in torrents, adding to the confusion.

Kelly groped, slipped, and rolled. Again and again his fingers clutched at the throat or wrist, but these, rendered slippery by the wet, eluded him; and again and again Macullan hacked at body or canvas alike, and failed to reach his mark, whilst Jake, slowly recovering consciousness, fumbled for his gun, and blazed at the struggling mass.

Kelly sent up a yell of warning as a bullet came through, searing his arm, and Jake, recognising the voice, desisted.

So loudly did it rain and the wind beat down that the sound of the firing failed to rouse those in the neighbouring camps.

Z-z-z-p! crackled the lightning, throwing a ghastly blue glare over the wild scene. Macullan's one aim was now to break away. He was a powerful man, but he realised that his antagonist, though of a slighter build, was more powerful still, with muscles and sinews of steel, and that he was being gradually worn down.

Kelly, on the other hand, was thoroughly roused, and meant mischief. The man was a spy. Had attacked him wantonly, and, moreover, he had a knife graze on his ribs, and Jake's bullet had grazed him in a manner which smarted more than a little.

But for an accident it would have fared ill with Macullan. Kelly was at his throat again, in stern earnest this time. His iron grip held firm; slowly but surely he was squeezing the man's life out beneath his fingers, heedless of the knife and the struggles growing fainter and fainter.

Suddenly there came a rending, tearing sound, and a portion of the canvas tore loose, wrapping itself round Kelly's head and dragging him back. His grip momentarily loosened, and Macullan broke away.

Both men struggled to their feet, panting and gasping.

Z-z-z-p! came the blue glare of the lightning, and Kelly had a momentary vision of Macullan's face, ghastly white, turned over his shoulder as he ran blundering through the night, racing for his life, then darkness snapped down again and blotted everything out.

CHAPTER 7.

How Kelly and His Partner Came to an Understanding.

MACULLAN fled for his life as a bullet came singing after him through the darkness. Then the lightning snapped out, and Kelly, throwing away the useless revolver with an exclamation of rage and disgust, turned to help his partner Jake Simpson to straighten matters up.

But he said nothing about having recognised his assailant, nor when the big American "surmised" that the man was "jus' a low-down, or'nary prowler, did he enlighten him.

He was not sure, but he was practically certain, that Macullan had recognised him. Nevertheless, he determined to bluff the thing out for all he was worth.

The next morning, whilst they were taking a spell off their broken night's rest Kelly called to his partner:

"Look here, old man," he began, with unaccustomed seriousness, "we've pulled together pretty well, you and I, and we've certainly had bang-up luck. But I'm a restless kind of animal. I can feel a fit coming on me now. One fine day I may take it into my head to go off on a jaunt, and, if I do, it's long odds I'll not come back. I want you to go right down to the registration office and take over my whole share in the claim, and all the gold lying on deposit in our joint names. See here are the papers already signed; and then, if any time I want to quit, why I can always send you up a message from wherever I am to mail me on my stuff. For I know I can trust you right through, and that you would play fair under any circumstances. Will you do it?"

Jake Simpson looked at him shrewdly out of his keen grey eyes.

"Put her there, pardner; you may trust me all the time, whatever happens. Say," he added, after a little pause, "I ain't huntin' any trouble, and I ain't gathering other folk's troubles to keep as pets—they ain't no consarn of mine—but as you was speakin' of takin' a jaunt into the country, and lying off a bit—well, it's real fine to-day, kinder suitable fer a ride. I'm not saying that, if agreeable to you, I might not come along a piece. We might give out as we meant prospectin' around some."

Kelly stared, a trifle coldly.

"What are you driving at?" he asked sharply.

"All right, pardner; no need to git your hair riz. It was only a kinder suggestion on my part. I've been in Texas and round about, and in the bad lands; and right thar its most understood that questions is dangerous, and lead to quick shootin'—mighty quick. I reckon any gentleman is entitled to rope his cattle his own way. But this 'ere little tent is a heap small place, and now and agin a man may sleep uneasy-like, and talk a piece of—of things he's heard and read about. Maybe you've said a word or two careless like between snores; that's no consarn of mine." He turned and laid his hand on Kelly's shoulder. "Captain Vyner—pard—don't you cut up rough, but I kinder make out there was a man called Kelly you was pretty intimate with; and"—lowering his voice—"I'm not saying but I've noticed a man, a slab-sided sort of chap, a new chum, who's takin' a deal of side interest in your health and movements. Personally, I've heard a deal of good about this same Kelly; and if so be he was a friend of yours, why, siree, I guess I count him one of mine, too."

Kelly took the proffered hand and wrung it; the shrewd old Yankee had let him see how the land lay without committing himself to any definite statement.

"Thanks," said he shortly, with the suspicion of a smile; "I'll think things over a little and let you know. Anyway, I'd be awfully obliged if you'd take over these papers." And there the conversation ended.

That afternoon Captain Vyner and Commissioner Hayes met in the main street of the camp. The latter, who had half a dozen men with him, hailed the Britisher.

"Hallo, Vyner! You're just the very man I want. Here's Trevor here who says he'll back a horse he's got against any other in the section for any stakes over two miles across country. I know you're fond of a bit of sport; why don't you try and get hold of an animal to take up the challenge. You've just made a pile, and can afford it."

"Ah, yus, that's a deuced good animal of Trevor's—deuced good!" drawled the Britisher.

"Just what I say," interposed Hayes; "and, as a matter of fact, I'm open to bet anyone a level five thousand they can't produce his better within ten days from now."

"Er—well, if you come to put it that way," came the languid, drawling answer. I'll take your five thousand and produce a horse to beat Mr. Trevor's chestnut inside twenty-four hours."

Major Hayes hesitated an instant. He had been plunging heavily of late, and was in sore financial straits; moreover, he had not expected to be taken up so quickly. However, not liking to back out, he nodded.

"It's a bet, then—a match to be made and run over a two-mile course within twenty-four hours; and if your nomination loses, I'll trouble you for a cool five thou.," he added, with a coarse laugh.

"Precisely," drawled the Britisher, "and vice-versa."

Hayes winced.

"I'll take you another five if you like," said Trevor. "Of course, it's understood we each ride our own nominations?"

"Owners up, of course," replied Kelly. And something like a grin of satisfaction spread over the faces of Trevor's backers; for he was a noted cross-country rider, and, like all Australians, they had a fine contempt for British horsemanship, and imagined that Captain Vyner would prove himself no better and no worse in the saddle than the ordinary cavalry officer.

This in itself they considered would be a handicap greatly in their favour; also they knew Trevor's horse well, and believed in him firmly, whilst hardly a soul in camp had seen Kelly's famous grey, which he kept in a stable three or four miles away.

So the course was settled then and there—a long, looping curve, over pretty good going, with half a dozen stiffish jumps, and, last of all, a quarter of a mile from the finish, a broad irrigation ditch—a big jump in itself, with a slightly rising take-off; but to make it stiffer, at Trevor's suggestion, a brushwood fence was erected in front of it.

Kelly only smiled quietly, and nodded acquiescence. He was quite sure of the grey, but he was by no means certain of Trevor's animal, especially if there was anything like a close race up to that point. From the water-jump the track swept away smooth and level to the winning-post.

"At ten to-morrow morning, then, if that suits you," said Trevor.

"Er—yes, ten. If you care to, we might double our little bet; make it a bit more of a flutter. Eh? What?" drawled Kelly.

Trevor started a little, and for the first time had a suspicion that the Britisher had got a good thing up his sleeve. However, he was certain of his own horse and riding—on a course like that good jockeying would tell—moreover, he was quite half a stone lighter than his opponent.

"Very well; tens if you like," said he curtly, though he caught his breath a little sharply, for the sum was a great deal more than he could afford to lose; in fact, it would pretty nearly break him.

The news spread like wildfire throughout the camp, and wagers were made in haste. At first the betting was as high as four to one on Trevor's horse; but gradually it leaked out that the Britisher had done a bit of racing in the old country,

and that he had a real good thing in the way of horseflesh which he had been keeping dark. As the report spread the betting quickly dropped to evens.

At ten the next morning it would have been hard to find so much as a dog in the deserted diggings. Everything on legs was streaming out to the course, and lining it at the most interesting points, the greater part of the crowd hanging round the water-jump and the space betwixt that and the finish, for it was there and on the rising ground just before that the fun was expected; and more than one would-be expert prophesied a darned almighty smash.

Jake Simpson, when he heard the news, looked grave, and ventured a hint of remonstrance, which Kelly answered merely with a "Couldn't seem to help it, old man. Never refused a challenge yet, and Hayes practically forced it on me. Anyway, it's a sure thing; you can put your boots on me."

Whereupon Jake Simpson, who was a thoroughgoing sportsman and a bit of a gambler by nature, went off to get the best odds he could, though with a sense of heavy foreboding; for Macullan was sure to be hanging round the course, and at any moment his partner might give himself away.

Kelly had been up at daylight, and fetched the grey, giving him an extra good grooming and a good gallop over the open. The horse was in fine condition, and hard as nails, for in intervals of work Kelly had always run over to see him two or three times a week, and the black boy in charge had kept him fit.

At ten sharp he was on the course, in breeches and boots, with a crimson-and-white sash over his shirt as a distinguishing badge, and walked the grey up and down, with the bridle hanging loose over his arm, the black boy in attendance.

Just on the hour Trevor rode up on a spare horse, his famous chestnut being led behind by a groom, eliciting a great shout of admiration from the miners as he came on the scene. Kelly and the grey had purposely kept in the background as much as possible. But such of the crowd as were nearest were scanning the latter keenly, and in more than one spot the odds rose slightly in Kelly's favour.

He and Trevor shook hands, then both mounted and cantered off to the start, just as a waggon-load of late arrivals drove on to the course.

These new-comers had only just arrived at the diggings, and, finding them deserted, hurried on to see the fun. They were evidently people of importance, for they drove straight up to where the commissioner and other shining lights had taken their stand, peering through their glasses—such of them as possessed any—at the little group by the starting-point.

Suddenly the old familiar cry of "They're off!" rang out, and immediately the small group in the distance began a helter-skelter race of their own across the narrow neck of the big, curving loop, hoping to be in at the finish.

Meanwhile, the two competitors were left to themselves to fight out the initial stages alone—Trevor's purple-and-yellow in front, the Britisher's crimson-and-white waiting in close attendance.

It had been Trevor's design to press the pace from the first, recognising in the grey a dangerous antagonist, and misjudging his staying powers. For at first glance the grey looked much lighter than he really was, and Trevor made up his mind to trust to the two final jumps and the rising ground to bring him home a winner. If, he thought, he could once get the grey run pretty well to a standstill, even if he had to punish his own animal heavily to do it, he could still keep a little in reserve for the final scurry and the water-jump.

But he little suspected that the grey for endurance was the finest horse in all Australia, and that the rider on his back was a man who many a time had covered his hundred miles in the twenty-four hours.

Trevor shoved the chestnut along, using his spurs once or twice; and Kelly watched him with a quiet smile, riding easily, and keeping the grey back a little.

He saw at a glance what Trevor's game was, and knew that, barring accidents, the race was his for certain.

The first jump they took almost together. Trevor, finding he was unable to get away as easily as he had expected, used his spurs again, and touched the chestnut with his whip. The big horse seemed to leap forward, and those watching by the water-jump saw two clear lengths of daylight between the horses. The pace was tremendous, and a shout went up that the Britisher was beat.

Kelly heard it above the thundering of the hoofs, smiled to himself, and gave the grey his head.

Trevor risked a glance under his arm, and to his amazement the grey was once more back in his old position, his head just overlapping the chestnut's flank. A feeling of misgiving seized him, and he sat down to ride in earnest. Thwack, thwack! came the heavy, cutting whip, and the chestnut, maddened with the pain, made a dash for it.

Trevor tried to steady him for the second jump, failed, and the chestnut crashed through the top of the fence and fell heavily. A less expert rider would have been thrown; but Trevor picked himself and his horse together cleverly with a wrench and a jerk, and they flew forward again.

Then, if ever, he expected the grey to come up with him, for the stumble had cost him a good length; but, to his astonishment, this did not happen. He risked a second glance backward, and saw the grey a good three lengths behind, and saw Kelly lurch and sway in the saddle. Evidently something was amiss; but there were ten thousand pounds at stake, and Trevor lifted the chestnut along, with the light of victory already in his eyes.

What had happened was this. At the second jump Kelly, using a little extra pressure on his irons in steadying the grey, suddenly felt one of the leathers—the left—give like a piece of rotten thread.

He was momentarily thrown completely off his balance. He recovered himself with a great effort, and negotiated the fence in safety; but he had lost ground, and would have to finish the race with a single stirrup.

He saw Trevor's backward glance, and guessed that he realised the situation, for he made desperate endeavours to increase his advantage.

For the first time Kelly touched the grey lightly with the spurs—a mere graze, no more—but the horse understood, and a gasp of amazement went up from the crowd, who had considered the Britisher beaten sure. The gap between the two horses diminished, as though the chestnut were doing no more than an easy canter; and then, as though content with his effort, the grey took up his old position once more, just on terms with his opponent.

Trevor set his teeth, and his face grew white, glistening with sweat. The mischief was in that infernal grey and his smiling rider. That they could have passed him and passed him easily, he no longer dared to doubt; and yet they hung there just on his flank, going freely and easily. Half the distance covered, and already the roar of the crowd swept down wind as they watched from afar what they regarded as a neck-and-neck race.

Again and again he plied his heavy, cutting whip—thwack, thwack, smack!—and great weals rose on the chestnut's skin, but not a yard could he gain; and now, though he still ostensibly led, it was in reality the grey who made the pace, pressing and pressing it till the gallant chestnut was stretched to his uttermost.

"Hi, come up—and over!" The fifth jump flashed beneath him, and the chestnut reeled and staggered a little on landing.

Slowly the grey drew abreast, and both men and horses gathered themselves for the homeward rush. Already the ground sloped slightly upwards.

Then Trevor, crouching in his saddle, and lifting his horse along by every means in his power, saw his opponent bend forward and speak to the grey. Neither

whip nor spur did he use, but, with a low muttered "Come along, old man!" the grey horse fairly gathered himself together, and shot past like a streak, the Britisher still smiling, and sitting well down in the saddle, with so perfect a balance, notwithstanding the broken stirrup-leather, that his weight seemed a help rather than a hindrance.

Trevor drove in his heels, and forced the chestnut into spurt on spurt; but steadily, seemingly without an effort, the grey forged ahead, and now there were a clear three lengths' daylight between them again. But the positions were reversed, and the crowd were shouting madly "Britisher wins!" "Britisher wins!" "The chestnut's beat!" "Four to one on the Britisher!" "Here, I lay this week's washing-up on the grey!" "I vill gif a tousand bounds to von hundred on der grey!" a big German shouted.

Only Commissioner Hayes and those immediately about him stood pale-faced and silent. They had backed the chestnut heavily almost to a man. Two of the late-comers, however, were exempt from this panic—one, an elderly man, with a carefully cropped grey beard; the other, a clean-built, powerful-looking, bronze-faced youngster, who stood at his side, staring hard at the leading horse.

"It is!" he muttered. "By James, it is, I'm positive! I know his seat so well, and I know the horse. Great Scott, what nerve! Here, you"—turning to a man who was an ardent Trevorite—"I'll give you ten to one in fivers on the grey!"

The elder man, with a quick glance, turned round.

"And the same here, if you care to take it!"

"By Jove, look at that—just look at that!" exclaimed the youngster excitedly. "Do you mean to tell me there's another horse or man in all Australia who could do it? Trevelyan, I'll lay you a level fifty it's he!"

The elder man shook his head with a smile.

"No, you won't, my son. I'm not making you any presents this morning."

And down amongst the crowd by the last jump stood Macullan, grim and silent. He had suspected before, now he was sure.

The grey was gaining steadily, but not so fast as before, for his rider was easing him up the rise. Ahead lay the water-jump, a nasty thing to tackle for a fresh horse, with such a take-off, and a slip might well mean a broken leg or back, for the water was deep and the far bank steep and perpendicular, with a slight fall on the drop.

"Steady, old man—steady!" muttered Kelly, as he pulled the grey together. "Gently does it—so—so, lad! Now, then!"

He gave just a touch to the reins—a hint, no more—a graze of the spur, and the grey shot upwards and forwards, clean as a greyhound, clearing the far bank by six feet or more; and then, for the first time, the spurs went home, and the grey streaked along the final scurry to the winning-post, a quarter of a mile away, with a long, springy stride, in no way distressed, as though willing and anxious to show the crowd what he really could do if put to it.

But from behind came the sound of a nasty snap, a cry from the onlookers, and a fall, the sounds drowned by yet other and louder cries from the crowd, as they saw that one of the Britisher's feet was stirrupless, and that the iron was missing.

The grey shot past the post alone, in the midst of a great yell of delight; for the miners were true sportsmen, and appreciated a pretty piece of work to the full. Kelly, instead of pulling up, indulged them in a little piece of fancy riding; for, feeling that the grey was going strong and fresh, he wheeled him sharply, and galloped round at full speed in a double eight; then, dropping his whip, swooped off in a wide circle, and, leaning low in the saddle, picked it neatly off the ground on his return, and pulled up before Hayes and the group of officials amidst a salvo of cheers.

Up the last of the course a chestnut horse limped along by himself, badly strained, and his rider lay beside the water jump, stunned and with a broken collar-bone.

That afternoon was an anxious time for Commissioner Hayes. He had lost five thousand pounds of money not his own, and in the evening he had a big dinner-party, at which both the Britisher and Trevor were to be present.

To him at midday was brought a message that a man desired earnestly to see him, giving the name of Macullan. The man was instantly admitted, but what passed between them was made private.

At seven o'clock all the more important people of the camp began to assemble at the commissioner's house. The Johnstones were there, all the officials of the diggings, the new-comers, Jake Simpson, and, of course, Captain Vyner and Mr. Trevor—to the number of thirty or more all told.

Kelly—or, rather, Vyner—had from somewhere or other produced a dress-suit, and sailed in eyeglass and all, languid as ever, looking infinitely more important than Major Hayes and his staff, in their indifferently fitting uniforms. He was introduced to the new-comers, and dinner began.

It was just as dessert was begun that Macullan stepped forward and tapped Kelly on the shoulder.

"Beg pardon, sir, but I must ask you to excuse me," he said, saluting Major Hayes. "Acting under telegraphic orders from Melbourne, I must ask this gentleman to consider himself my prisoner, and to explain how he comes to be in possession of the horse of Ned Kelly the bushranger—the grey on which he rode and won to-day. I've just been round to the stable, and it's Kelly's horse beyond all shadow of doubt."

A hum of astonishment and disbelief rose on all sides. Only Major Hayes, glancing furtively round the room, remained silent, as though thinking.

"This is rather extraordinary, isn't it, Macullan, especially when the gentleman in question is one of my guests? You have orders from Melbourne, which you can show me, I presume?" he said at last.

"Yes, sir," replied Macullan.

"In that case, I can do nothing. You'd better—er—take your man away."

Cries of "Shame!" rose from all parts of the room. Hayes was palpably nervous, and played his part badly.

"Unless," he added hastily—"unless, of course, he can explain the situation."

Kelly, who had preserved his coolness throughout, was rising languidly to his feet, when another sprang up before him. It was the gentleman with the iron-grey beard.

"One moment!" he cried. "Major Hayes, I wish to state here at once that I consider your conduct most reprehensible in this matter. Gentlemen, I believe you all know me—Trevelyan. I say emphatically that that man there"—pointing to Macullan—"is a disgrace to the police force of this country. I know it—can prove it; and he knows that I can. Moreover, Major Hayes knows it too. Yet, without any demur, he allows a fellow like that to bring a charge against one of his guests—without a shadow of proof of anything wrong!

"Now, as a matter of fact, the horse Captain Vyner rode to-day is the horse of Kelly the bushranger. I know it, and my friend there, Mr. Mason, knows it, for the simple reason that we kept it for close on a year in our ranche; and, as you all know, Mr. Mason was largely the means of Kelly's capture. Captain Vyner had that horse from me and my partner, and later on in the evening I had intended to have a chat with him about it. The horse was our property to do exactly as we liked with; and why a discredited police officer should think fit to interfere in the matter, I cannot say. Gentlemen, that is all."

Hayes was livid, and Macullan obviously discomfited, at this sudden turn of affairs; but there was worse to come.

Captain Vyner rose leisurely to his feet, and silenced the cheers which greeted him with a deprecating hand.

"One moment, please!" he said. And for once his voice was hard and stern, with no symptoms of a drawl. "First of all, I wish to thank Mr. Trevelyan and Mr. Mason for extricating me from a most unpleasant position; and, secondly, I have, on my side, a grave charge to make. When I rode to-day against Mr. Trevor I rode against a gentleman and a sportsman, and that I won was merely the fortune of war, and the better horse. But I am sorry to have to say that my mount had been tampered with."

CHAPTER 8.

A Grave Charge.

A DEAD silence fell on the room, and every man looked at his neighbour, astounded.

Macullan, a picture of baffled rage and spite, stared blankly in front of him, choking with exasperation. Commissioner Hayes's florid face was ashen-grey with a secret fear. For the pair of them—master and man, commissioner and constable—had planned their coup very neatly, as they imagined, and now it seemed that it was not only doomed to failure, but was likely to become a complete reverse and recoil on their own heads.

When Macullan, appearing unawares, suddenly charged the Britisher with having won the race with the horse of the ex-bushranger, he was fairly certain that he would have his man at a disadvantage, and wring something in the shape of a confession out of him.

And when so well-known and widely-respected a man as Mr. Trevelyan got up and volunteered the information that, though the horse had certainly once been Kelly's, it had at a later date become his own property, and that he had parted with it to Captain Vyner—thus putting Macullan completely out of court—it was bad enough. But Kelly's—or, rather, Captain Vyner's—counter-attack was overwhelming disaster.

After a few courteous words of thanks to Mr. Trevelyan—words which that gentleman received with a twinkle in his eye and a scarce perceptible glance at Dick Mason, his partner—the Britisher, his low, drawling voice taking for a moment a crisper, sterner tone, discharged his bomb.

"All you gentlemen here, I presume, saw the race. So far as my antagonist was concerned, it was a good race, fairly ridden and fairly won. But from the second fence onward I was obliged to ride with one stirrup only. Why? Because the other had the leathers deliberately and maliciously cut partially through—so neatly had the thing been done that they were sure to give with a slight extra strain, such as some of the bigger jumps demanded—and there, gentlemen, stands the man who did it—Major Hayes! And, if you wish it, I have witnesses who saw him do it, whom I can produce!"

The last sentence came out with a snap, and was followed by an interval of dead silence, broken only by Jake's murmured, "Good for yew, pardner, but keep yer gun handy!"

The Britisher smiled in answer, and gave a reassuring shake of the head. At the same time, unobserved by the others, he slipped the revolver Jake had handed him under his coat-tails.

Then, and not till then, the pent-up feelings of amazement, indignation, and disgust broke forth in a regular uproar, and for some few moments it was impossible to hear oneself speak. In the midst of the crowd of excited men stood Hayes, a

quaint mixture of ungovernable rage and craven fear. Macullan close beside him, and on the far side of the table Kelly, self-possessed and immovable.

At last a small knot of the most influential men in the room came forward, and, after some little effort, obtained something like silence. Then they approached Jake's partner.

"Captain Vyner," said the spokesman gravely—and immediately uproar gave way to intense silence—"we have heard certain vague accusations brought against you by Macullan here, apparently with the connivance of Major Hayes. These, the testimony volunteered by so well-known a man as Mr. Trevelyan render absurd!"

The Britisher glanced across to the latter, and bowed. There was a glimmer of amusement in his eye, though none but Trevelyan saw it; and so these one-time bitter antagonists wiped out old scores. Both were men tried and proved, and, whatever their divergence of life and opinions, they trusted one another implicitly the big stockowner and the escaped convict.

"But," continued the spokesman, "you, in your turn, have brought a charge of the gravest order against Major Hayes, who is also our host. In common fairness, we must ask you to substantiate it."

The Britisher bowed.

"Gentlemen, what you have said is only just. I will do so. Might I ask that a messenger be sent for my black groom and for a miner called Jameson? I prefer that you shall question them for yourselves, without my appearing in the matter at all. Before you do so, however, I would call to your notice one point Major Hayes has noted in his pocket-book—a wager with me for the amount of five thousand pounds on the result of this afternoon's race. He has lost. Here"—producing some notes—"are my five thousand staked, which I will ask you to hold pending the inquiry. Major Hayes should, of course, do the same. If I fail to prove my accusation to your satisfaction, I am willing to forfeit my stake and forgo Major Hayes's debt."

A murmur of approval ran round the room. The commissioner alone, however, seemed to dissent, and finally began to bluff and bluster.

He hadn't the money on him—not in the house. Er—in fact, the truth was he was awaiting remittances from Melbourne.

"In that case, Major Hayes," broke in Kelly suavely, "I would suggest that you hand these gentlemen here your I O U for the amount, which you can redeem by telegraphing to-morrow, say, at four o'clock."

A hum of assent forced the major's hand, and he was reluctantly obliged to sign the document with trembling fingers, knowing all the while that nothing short of a miracle could save him from dishonour and disgrace within a few short hours.

The witnesses by this time had arrived. The Britisher carefully abstained from interfering by word or sign whilst they were being cross-examined.

Both told exactly the same tale—that is to say, that just before the competitors mounted for the canter down to the post, they had seen Hayes, under pretence of examining the grey, lift up one of the stirrup-flaps, and fumble for an instant with the stirrup-leathers; further, that they saw a glimmer of steel in his hand, and that no one but himself and his immediate circle had been allowed to approach so close to the competing horses.

They held strongly to their story in spite of severest cross-questioning, and their honesty was beyond all doubt.

"Gentlemen," said the spokesmen of the self-ordained court gravely, "I think we need no further proof of the truth of Captain Vyner's charge. I think it would be best if we all adjourned."

The Britisher now stepped forward again to the table.

"Only one word more, and I have done. As a possible explanation of the

accusation brought against me by that man Macullan there, I would point out that Major Hayes's trick having failed, there was still a chance, barring the lucky accident of Mr. Trevelyan's presence, that Major Hayes might have saved the inconvenience of parting with five thousand pounds, and that Macullan stood to win four—thousand, which, I understand, is the—er—price put on the head of the—er—bushranger—what's his name?—ah—er—Kelly—thank you, yes—of the——bushranger and ex-convict, Kelly."

Major Hayes was cornered, exposed, defeated—in all probability ruined for ever and, in sheer desperation, he assumed once more his role of bully.

"It's a—lie!" he roared; and glared at the Britisher.

Swift as a cat, Kelly strode across to him, and flicked him across the face with his handkerchief.

"Major Hayes," he said in a slow, stern voice, which few present had ever heard him use, "bully and scoundrel though you are, I see I shall have to teach you a lesson in manners!"

Major Hayes rubbed his face where the handkerchief had stung it, and, in involuntary obedience to the menace in the Britisher's voice, lowered his own tones.

"You shall pay for this," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I'll have your life for this insult, you charlatan adventurer!"

Kelly shrugged his shoulders, and turned away, coolly lighting a cigar.

"To-morrow morning—when you will," he said. "Mr. Simpson there will arrange any details for me."

Duelling, of course, was strictly illegal, and the parties concerned were liable to be tried for murder. Still, in those comparatively lawless parts it was openly winked at, and, so long as the affair was properly conducted, no questions were asked afterwards.

Shortly the preliminaries were arranged between the two seconds, and Kelly and the majority of the guests withdrew. Mr. Trevelyan and Dick, not wishing to be mixed up in the affair, had left even earlier.

The two principals were to meet at sunrise the next morning, and it was arranged that, to give equal chances to both men, they were to fight in the old American fashion. A mile from camp was a big copse, from which the miners obtained a good deal of their timber. This was a quarter of a mile or more across. The two adversaries, each armed with a fully-loaded magazine-rifle, were to enter the copse simultaneously from opposite sides, after which they were at liberty to do as they pleased, it being understood that the survivor was to bury the fallen man and conceal his body in the wood. In this way the seconds and others concerned were supposed to have evaded any complicity in the matter from a strictly legal standpoint. The subterfuge was, of course, mere nonsense, but in those days it served its purpose.

Hayes, though a bully and a coward, enjoyed considerable notoriety as a good shot. Captain Vyner in this respect was an unknown quantity to most of them. Nevertheless, as the news spread around the camp, excitement grew apace, and every man turned in with a fixed determination to "be on hand good and early."

The sun came up shortly after five, yet long before that a straggling stream of eager sightseers were wending their way out across the broken ground towards the copse euphoniously known as "Dead Man's Wood."

Hayes was very much the reverse of popular, and the good wishes, if not the hopes, of the crowd were all in favour of the Britisher.

Presently all heads were turned in a backward direction, for two small groups, walking separately, were discernible. The first consisted of the Britisher and Jake Simpson, the latter with a magazine-rifle across his arm and a grave face.

The second group, which was just emerging from the commissioner's house, comprised Hayes and his second, also carrying a rifle. The two parties converged slowly towards one another until they met at a point fifty yards or so from the edge of the copse; and the miners and onlookers immediately crowded round, quiet and orderly, but keen to view all the preliminaries, and see as much as they could.

Kelly drew off a little way, smoking a cigar, and Hayes also stepped back a few paces, regarding his adversary with an evil scowl. If ever there was murder in a man's face, it was in that of the sub-commissioner's that morning, and many a miner nudged his fellow and shook his head doubtfully over the Britisher's chances of living through the next hour.

Jake Simpson and the major's second drew together and carefully examined the rifles—tested them to see that the magazines were empty, and then scrutinised the cartridges to assure themselves that they had not been tampered with in any way, and that the bullets had not been cut or slit, so as to make them expand. Then Jake handed Kelly's rifle over, and watched Hayes's second charge the magazine with ten shells—one by one.

This done, he, in turn, took Hayes's rifle and jerked aside the magazine lever.

"Seven—eight—nine—ten!" he counted, and threw the lever back into position with a snap. The two men then compared watches, and Jake, producing a coin, tossed up.

"Tails!" cried the other, in the midst of a breathless silence. And a score of heads craned forward to look at the coin as it fell.

"She's a head!" drawled Jake. "Sir, I reckon you an' the major had better step round to the far side of the copse. I and my man will remain here. When you come up against the dead pine, the point right opposite, you will bid your man head straight for the copse, you and I, it is understood, not approachin' within fifty yards of the wood till—till it's all over."

Hayes's second nodded, and, picking up the rifle, prepared to move off to his principal.

Jake called after him:

"It's now just twenty minutes after five. Shall we fix a quarter to the hour? That should leave you plenty of time to get into position."

"At a quarter to six precisely," replied the other with a stiff bow, as he and Hayes departed, and were soon lost to view round the corner of the wood.

The crowd gave a sigh of expectancy, and shuffled their feet uneasily. More than one voice growled out a gruff:

"Good luck to ye, Britisher!"

"Get a bead on the skunk, and shoot smart—he means to out you!"

"Looks mighty cool, considerin'."

"Yes, sir, he has sang considerable, but that there Hayes is a darned clean shot," and so on.

"Silence there, please, boys!" called Jake. "There ain't anythin' ailing my man. No, siree. But you an' me is outer this show; we're only here to see fair play. An' may the best man win."

Going up to Kelly, he added in an undertone:

"I've done the best I can for you, pardner, old hoss. Hayes has the walk round to shake him up, and the light's a shade better this side, comin' over the left shoulder. Don't you go tryin' any fancy, high-falutin' shootin' in the air nonsense. Hayes means business. Yes, sir, he means death an' murder, fair or foul. Give him half a chance, an' he'll shoot you down in cold blood. Get a fine sight, old man, and drop him as soon as you can. Time's gettin' on. Shake, pard, just in case. We've pulled together real fine, you an'

I. I'm glad to hev known someone as was er—intimate with that there Kelly, and don't yew forget it."

Kelly took the outstretched hand, and gazed for a second straight into the humorous grey eyes, now clouded with doubt and anxiety.

"Thanks, old man," he said. "Don't you worry. I'll tell Kelly when I meet him."

A grim smile flickered across Jake's face for an instant, and he handed him the rifle.

"She's half-cock, and there's a shell in the breech ready."

Kelly nodded, chucked away his cigar-stump, bit off the end of another, and coolly lighted it; then he took the rifle over the crook of his left arm. A little murmur of admiration went up from the crowd at his calm nonchalance. He looked more like a man going to a pheasant drive than to play a game at long odds with death.

Jake glanced at his watch; the minute-hand pointed exactly to the quarter.

"Time!" said he sharply. And, with a nod and a wave of the hand, Kelly strolled across the intervening space, smoking placidly, and vanished in the outer fringe of the copse.

"Now, I call that real, solid grit," said a miner in the crowd. "Men can say what they like, but blood will tell in horse, dog, or man, and the Britisher's clean bred every inch.

"The pluckiest, toughest proposition I've ever struck against," said Jake. "And now quiet, please, boys!"

Having entered the wood, and left the crowd behind him, Kelly, still smoking, strolled leisurely forward. His heart may have beat a trifle faster, but there was nothing visible to betray the fact. He puffed luxuriously at his cigar, and his rifle still balanced carelessly on his arm; but, for all that, his eyes were keen and alert, noting every possible point of vantage. Hayes meant murder, and he was perfectly well aware of the fact, only he had not the smallest intention of allowing himself to be murdered.

It was a strange, nerve-trying ordeal, that old-fashioned American duel, for the attack might come suddenly from any unexpected quarter of the compass. The two adversaries were in the wood; they might follow any device they chose, the general understanding being that each was to find his man and endeavour to kill him as he deemed best.

It was a contest in which a quick wit and an iron nerve often came out on top of superior marksmanship; but in this case Kelly was not only possessed of the two former; he was also probably the finest and quickest shot on the whole Australian continent. Having penetrated some fifty yards or more into the wood in a direct line, he turned off sharply at right angles for ten paces. For his quick eye and knowledge of woodcraft enabled him so select the exact spot best suited for his purpose. This was a good large cyprus-tree, with a trunk fully capable of sheltering a man's body behind it. On two sides of it was bracken, and a little way in front, and five or six yards to the right, a thick, low clump of scrub.

Into this he threw his hat carefully and accurately, so that it hung suspended with the crown uppermost, and just visible; then, with one or two extra puffs, to ensure its keeping well alight, the cigar followed suit and fell below the hat, smouldering dully, emitting a thin, almost imperceptible upward curl of blue smoke and a fragrant odour.

Then he sat down, with his back to the tree, his rifle across his knees, in such a position that he could just glimpse the hat sideways. Once or twice he glanced regretfully at his cigar-case, shook his head, and finally compromised by biting off the end of a weed and putting it between his teeth without lighting it. Whilst waiting developments he made a rapid mental calculation. The wood was full

quarter of a mile across from point to point. Hayes would advance slowly and cautiously after the first fifty yards or so, and probably had just enough brain and woodcraft to follow a bee-line through the undergrowth. It would take him perhaps twenty minutes to reach the place.

The silence was intense. Even the very birds were hushed and quiet, and the sun was rising higher and higher, filtering through the leaves overhead.

Presently from away behind him—he was facing down his own trail—there came a faint, stealthy, crackling noise, so faint as to be almost inaudible. But Kelly pricked his ears, and his hand slid negligently down to his rifle. Then a pause, and again the sound became audible, nearer this time, and slightly over his left shoulder; then once more silence.

"Crack!" A sharp report cut across the stillness like a knife, and was followed by two more in quick succession. Kelly smiled grimly to himself, but never moved an inch. He knew well what the sound meant. The silence and suspense were playing havoc with Hayes's nerves, and he had fired wildly at some imaginary object. Another five minutes of it, and a moving shadow would be enough to call forth a regular fusilade.

The footsteps drew stealthily closer, more careless of the noise they made, and coming in short, pattering rushes, followed by intervals of inaction. Kelly could picture the man to himself—grey-faced, bedewed with sweat, breathing short through his nostrils, back hunched, darting from tree to tree, crawling nervously on hands and knees through a tangle of undergrowth.

Bang, bang! One whirring bullet chipped the bark of a young tree twenty paces away and a good ten foot from the ground; the second flicked the crown of Kelly's hat as it hung on the bushes, and sent it fluttering down out of sight. The ruse had worked. Kelly shook his head disapprovingly. "Nerves all joggled up; firing high!" was his mental comment.

Bang, bang! again. Two more bullets fired at short range, sent up a spurt of earth close to where the hat had fallen.

Hayes, believing his man to be badly wounded, was wasting cartridges recklessly. Seven of his ten already gone!

Kelly waited an instant, and then, with all the skill learnt of black trackers, slid from view amongst the bracken noiselessly as a snake.

He was working round behind his man for a purpose of his own. He glanced for a moment at Hayes, ashen faced and gasping, his eyes protruding with a very real horror, as, realising that his fire had been drawn by a trick, he went blundering on. His head was ducked down, rifle thrust forward, shoulders humped as he darted furtive little glances this way and that, knowing that his invisible enemy must be somewhere close at hand, and that any instant a bullet might come crashing into his heart or brain.

Kelly let him go; then, having worked round behind him, and always keeping him in view, he dogged him yard by yard to the fringe of the copse. Here he paused for a moment, and would have turned. Instantly Kelly raised his rifle and sent a bullet whistling by his ear. That was too much for Hayes. His nerve was broken, and without even attempting to return the shot, he took to his heels and bolted out of the wood for dear life.

A derisive shout from the watching miners greeted his appearance, followed by a hasty stampede, for Kelly, following quickly, had appeared at the wood's edge, and they were possessed of an overwhelming desire to get clear of the line of fire.

Crack! Kelly's rifle spoke again, and Hayes's hat went fluttering off his head as he ran. Crack! again, and his leather belt dropped away from him, neatly sliced by a bullet, just as a third kicked up a spurt of earth between his feet.

A gasp of astonishment went up from the crowd, for they realised that the

Britisher had no intention of harming the man beyond frightening him near to death; but such marksmanship was unholy. With a last remnant of courage or desperation—the jeers of the crowd may have done it—Hayes checked, swung round on his heel, and raised his rifle.

Crack! And before he could set finger on trigger, another of those deadly bullets splattered against the lock, and the weapon flew out of his hands, leaving him unarmed, wringing his fingers with pain, and cursing foully, white-faced with terror.

Kelly, his unlighted cigar in his mouth, his rifle over his crooked arm, sauntered into full view.

And a great roar of welcome for the Britisher rang out from the crowd as he walked leisurely towards his adversary.

CHAPTER 9.

The End of the Duel.

THE crowd swayed forward, eager as schoolboys, to where Major Hayes stamped and cursed in a mixture of rage and pain and terror, his wounded hand clapped under his armpit, the shattered rifle at his feet.

Kelly strolled up, still chewing his cigar-end, and was greeted with a salvo of cheers. But of these he took not the least notice. There was a grim, set look on his face, and his voice when he spoke cut like a whip-lash:

"Major Hayes!" The injured man stopped his cursing for an instant, his face convulsed and distorted—"Major Hayes, you've long been known as a bully—now you've proved yourself a coward in the face of the whole camp. I should be well within my rights if I shot you down like the vermin you are!

"You will apologise to me now publicly before all these gentlemen; you will sign a confession that you, in conjunction with Macullan, tried by a trick to evade payment of your debt to me; and you will write out a cheque for five thousand pounds, dated three weeks hence. If that isn't met when presented, I shall know how to deal with you. Lastly, you will at once resign your appointment here and exchange to some other district."

The words fell cold, clear, and distinct, and a murmur of approval arose from the miners who had been listening eagerly.

"You infernal, impudent scoundrel, I'll see you hanged first!" roared Hayes, mad with rage. "I'll sign nothing!"

"You refuse? Very good! As I said before, I have a right to shoot you as you stand; but I can't fire on an unarmed man. Can someone lend me a couple of revolvers?"

Half a score were instantly proffered. Kelly selected a couple at random, glanced at them to see they were fully loaded, and tossed them on the ground.

"This is the alternative then. Take your choice of one of those, and step back ten paces. I will do the same. As you are wounded and flurried, I shall shoot only with my left hand. The firing will continue until one of us is dead or disabled. And"—with a sudden spurt of anger—"if you don't do it, by James, I'll horsewhip you out of the camp with my own hand! You're a disgrace to the Queen's uniform!"

Hayes glowered evilly, and glanced at the faces of those around him, in the hopes of seeing some sign of encouragement. But every man there was regarding him with cold disgust.

Hayes snatched up a revolver with his uninjured hand, and stepped back. At the ten-pace mark he halted, and Kelly did the same.

Kelly wheeled sideways, and raised his weapon in his left hand, the barrel pointing skywards. His face was emotionless, as though he were waiting his turn to shoot at a mark; only the dark eyes had a strange look in them, and this time if his adversary fired, he meant to fire, too, and kill him.

"Will you give the word, or shall I?" he called. "You'd better stand a little further to the right; you are up against a patch of light background, and I wish to take no advantage of you."

Hayes shifted his position hurriedly, opened his mouth as though to reply, and then, seeing Kelly's stern, pale face, flung down his revolver with an oath.

"I'll sign, curse you!" he said savagely. "But I'll pay you out for this some day—soon—mark my words!"

Kelly shrugged his shoulders, and, strolling forward again, restored his weapon to its owner.

"As you please," said he. "Jake, you might be good enough to act as witness on my behalf, and perhaps one of you others will do as much for Major Hayes."

A miner's account-book was produced, and, someone else handing up a pen and a little travelling inkpot, the thing was done and Hayes and his second left the field in the midst of a dead silence.

"Three cheers for the Britisher! Three cheers for Captain Vyner!" rang out a voice from the back of the crowd. "Come on, boys—altogether! Let her rip!"

And they did.

"Say, Britisher, that was mighty pretty shootin' of yours," said one of the Jamesons. "Closer'n anything I ever see, save once. I know a man down Melbourne way who reckoned to drive in a nail on a board at eighty paces. I saw him do it, too, five times out of six."

Kelly nodded.

"Yes, I know the trick. I've seen something of the sort myself."

"Suppose you couldn't do it, eh? This being a sort of a half-holiday, I thought we might have a sort of shootin' match—sweepstake affair. Some of the boys are pretty smart, though I guess you'll have to be handicapped!"

Kelly smiled and nodded. Miners work hard—uncommonly hard—whilst they're at it, but when they take a holiday they're just like so many schoolboys. The proposition was hailed with enthusiasm by such as had overheard, and some ran to fetch boards and square-headed nails, whilst others staked out the ground and looked to their rifles.

Finally a dozen entered, at five dollars a head, in the pool. The Britisher was handicapped twenty yards, and Jake, who was reckoned the next best shot, fifteen. The others, who were all to fire from the eighty-yard mark, opened the game with five shots apiece. All went within a few inches with some of their shots, but only three hit the nail fair and square. On shooting off the tie, Jameson, the proposer of the scheme, was left in, with a record of two hits out of his five shots.

Jake came next at ninety-five yards, and whether from nervousness or a faulty cartridge, his first attempt missed clean. The old Texan smiled grimly, shook his head, and sighted long and carefully.

Crack! And a shout announced that the nail had gone in to the head. The next again a hit, and the last also found its way home, knocking the nail sideways.

"Three and a graze!" called the umpire. "Jameson, old man, that wipes your eye. Mighty pretty shootin', Jake! Britisher, you'll have to be pretty spry to lick your pard."

Jake looked at Kelly with a solemn wink.

"Fine, old man," said Kelly to him, with a smile, and stepped back five yards to his place.

A new board was put up, and the nail driven half home in its centre. Bets were hurriedly made in whispers, and then, amidst an almost breathless silence, Kelly

raised his rifle. He hardly seemed to take a sight—he hadn't even removed his cigar. The lean rifle-barrel twitched slightly, moved through a tiny arc, and steadied. Crack! The board quivered a little, and a neat round splash of lead covered the nail.

"One!" roared the umpire.

Kelly did not so much as lower his rifle. A jerk, and a click of the ejecting lever; an empty brass shell tinkled on to the ground at his feet, and as the new one took its place in the chamber he pressed on the trigger again. Crack! a second time. Again the board quivered, yet only the single splash was visible.

"Two!" called the umpire again, from his post near the target. And a shout went up from the crowd as they realised that the second bullet had exactly covered the first.

Crack—crack—crack! three times in quick succession. At each impact the target jerked, yet as the last report died away there was the white board untouched save for that single mark, and that was no longer a bullet-driven nail, but a clean hole bored right through to the daylight on the other side by the five successive shots.

"Five!" yelled the umpire at the top of his voice, "and all plunk through the same hole!"

Before the crowd could realise what such wonderful accuracy meant, Kelly, with a smile, snatched a rifle from the hands of a man who was standing next to him, balanced it a moment, then, swinging it up, fired in seeming carelessness as fast as ever he could empty the magazine.

Up from the centre hole, a straight, bullet-packed line ran up slantwise. The crowd watched it grow mark by mark. "Seven!" said a man in an awed whisper.

Without a pause in the firing, the rifle muzzle deflected a trifle, and a similar line sprang up slantwise on the right, from the centre outwards. "Seven!" muttered the man again.

Kelly threw down the empty rifle, and then at last, as the crowd realised the truth, they gave a frantic yell of admiration and surprise. For not only had Kelly sent his first five shots exactly in the centre, but, using the hole as a starting-point, he had with the second rifle made an initial "V," for Vyner, seven bullets in each arm of the letter, and each bullet placed with such deadly accuracy that the distances between any two scarcely varied by a hair's breadth.

The crowd raced up to the board to examine this miraculous shooting more closely, but Kelly only laughed, and, sweeping up the pool, took his way off with a cheery "Drinks on me, boys! Call for what you want when you get back!"

Before he had got far, however, Jake came striding after him.

"Wiped my eye finely, didn't yer, pard? Gee whiz, I never seen such shootin' in all my life. Still, it kinder makes for notoriety, don't it? What about that little ride we were goin' to take—you and I?"

"You're right, old man," said Kelly gravely. "There's going to be trouble hatched for me if I stay here. That little brute Hayes means mischief for one; so does Macullan. But there's no point in your getting messed up in it. I'll ride off on my own for a piece—in fact, I've half a mind to do a little prospecting in stern earnest. The life suits me, and the country isn't touched away to the north there. I'll be off to-night, but I'll go by myself."

"Shucks!" said Jake briefly. "I ain't so stuck on this yer mud-heap. We've done mighty well out of it, and made a good fat pile. I shall upstake and come along. Yes, sir. I'll go and spread the news around. I don't want 'em to think we kinder sneaked off. What's wrong with meeting an hour after sundown? I'll have my swag packed by then, and we can pick up the horses out on the farm."

"Very well, old man," said Kelly. "And jolly glad I shall be to have you along to talk to; but I hope no harm will come of it." And, with a nod, he strolled down to their tent.

They had already sold out their claim in the Good Hope to a syndicate for a large sum, so, after packing his small bundle of necessaries—a bag of food, a pannikin, etc—his preparations were pretty well complete. He paid a visit to the bank manager, another to the big hotel—where he kept what Jake called his store clothes—and spent the rest of the time bidding good-bye to his many friends. He looked everywhere in the hopes of seeing Mr. Trevelyan of Dick Mason, but they had vanished, and the news getting about that the Britisher and his partner were off up-country prospecting, he was kept too busy to go and hunt them up.

Late in the afternoon Jake and he, followed by a noisy, laughing crowd, went down to their tent with the idea of holding a mock auction of it and its contents—the rough furniture, the heavier tools, sluice boxes, and so on. Some of these were good—especially good—as things went in that primitive place, and would, in all probability, have fetched a good round sum.

Jake, who, like all Americans, could be fluent enough when need be, was already jestingly praising the stock up to the skies, with some flowery eloquence anent the wonderful quality of the material, and so forth.

"D'yew see that thar tent, boys? D'yew see that thar patch on her nor'-east and most picturesque curve? Waal, now, I reckon some folks would be darned fools enough to consider that thar patch a defect. But I surmise it's nothin' of the kind. No, siree, not by a long sight. That thar patch is a fair Golconda. That thar patch comes out of the hinder end o' the Britisher's pants—the very pants he wore when he sat right down on the famous nugget, the Good Hope, the largest nugget ever yanked out of these or any other diggings. An' that thar patch has rubbed shoulders with close on forty thousand pounds' worth of virgin gold, fresh from the bowels o' the mighty earth. Gentlemen, the price of this yer tent, includin' that thar patch, is raised ten dollars."

"I'll go five better!" called a laughing voice.

"Guess I'll raise you ten and call," drawled the Britisher. "All right, boys—all right, Jake, old man! I buy the whole lot in as it stands. I don't want to spoil fun, but we've had a good haul of luck out of this show, and maybe it'll bring luck to the next man, and I see one of the crowd yonder who could do with a bit. If he'll do me the honour of accepting the outfit as a gift, we'll call it a deal."

He nodded, and all eyes turned towards a poor little Melbourne cockney, with a consumptive cough, who was lingering on the outskirts of the crowd, and whose conspicuous ill-luck had made him the laughing-stock of the whole camp. His name was Hunt.

Tears filled the little man's eyes as he glanced at the Britisher, as though he half suspected that he was being made the victim of some new hoax. But Kelly stepped forward and slapped him on the shoulder.

"The sticks and things are yours, little man, if you'll take 'em as a parting gift." And, unnoticed by the rest, he managed to squeeze a few notes into the man's hand.

The poor little cockney coughed and stammered, "Really, sir, you are too kind! I—I——" He broke off, and stammered worse for want of words.

"Rot! That's all right, old chap, they'll bring you luck." And Kelly turned hurriedly away.

The rest of the crowd, with a murmur of approval, also filed quietly off—all save a few of the leaders, the senior Jameson amongst them.

"Britisher," said he, "you're a darn good sort, and I'm real sorry you're leaving us. I guess you've about saved that small chipmunk of a man from foolin' round with the wrong end of his gun one of these dark nights. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Why, yes, there is, if you'll promise to keep quiet about it. You know that five thousand I dragged out of Hayes this morning? I'll leave the cheque with you. He'll pay up all right when it falls due—he daren't do otherwise, it would break him. When you get the money I want you to use it for helping lame dogs of that kind"—with a jerk of the head towards Hunt—"over their own particular stiles. I've known what being down on one's luck is myself, and I've a sort of weakness for other poor wretches in the same catalogue."

Just at dusk, Captain Vyner—alias the Britisher, alias Kelly—turned his back on the camp, and, carrying his swag, set out to meet Jake. The latter, by arrangement, had driven out earlier to the farm with the saddles and heavier gear.

The Britisher was deep in thought. He had thoroughly enjoyed his spell at the diggings. He had improved physically and mentally. He had won himself golden opinions on all sides, and, incidentally, he had made a very respectable fortune.

As he tramped along, with eyes fixed on the ground, he was comparing his condition with what it had been a year or eighteen months before, when every man's hand was against him. There had been more wild excitement, true, and there had been considerable fascination in holding his rapscallion gang in check—in the constant fights, the chase, the ruses, and the long night rides. But some of his old, fierce, restless spirit had left him, and he was looking forward to his solitary expedition into unknown wilds, with Jake as his only companion.

"H-st!" The sound, low, sibilant, and menacing, came from out of the dusk to one side of him.

"Who's there?" he answered, in a low tone.

"It's me, sir—'Unt. Speak low, for yer life's sake!"

"Come along, then, Mr. Hunt—what's the trouble?"

A small, thin figure rose out of the dusk a few paces away, with a stifled cough.

"They're laying for you, sir, the 'ole gang of 'em—Macullan and a crowd of toughs—four or five, I couldn't see—just beyond the old workings as you top the rise. I 'eared them talkin', though they never noticed me."

Kelly's eyes gleamed in the gathering darkness, but he laid his hand kindly enough on the other's shoulder.

"Little man," said he, "there's an old saying that one good turn deserves another; but you're in a mortal hurry to cry quits. I'm much obliged to you. How many did you say there were—four or five?"

"Yes, sir; five, I think."

"Are they armed?"

"I believe so, sir; but I 'eard Macullan say somethink about 'ow there was to be no row—no shootin', for fear they'd rouse the camp."

Kelly was silent for a moment. "Just as one comes to the rise, eh? Little man, I very much fancy that you've saved my life. Thanks, old chap! Now, cut along; you can't do any more good—unless, that is, you've got a gun on you. You haven't? No, I rather fancied not. Cut along back, and say nothing of this to anyone. Good-bye!"

Kelly stumbled over something in the darkness, and stooped to pick it up. It was the haft and part of the head of an old broken pick, which had been thrown aside.

He swung his new-found weapon tentatively once or twice to test its balance, raised himself quickly at an unexpected sound, and saw five figures rushing at him from diverging points through the dusk.

They were attacking on all sides at once. He swung up the broken pick and waited for them.

CHAPTER 10.

One Against Five.

KELLY swung up the broken pick and waited for the rush—five men coming at him from all points of the compass. He was fairly trapped, beyond all shadow of doubt.

"No shooting, men!" he heard Macullan whisper hoarsely. "We don't want any row or fuss made! Collar him alive—not too much damage—and it's two five pound notes apiece! Now, then, jump him—smartly!"

Kelly cast a quick glance over his shoulder. There was no cover available; but a few yards away to the right was a steep bank of earth, a remnant of some old diggings. If he could gain that, he could at least protect himself from an attack in the rear. One of his assailants—a big, raw-boned, loose-jointed man—was swooping down on him from that side, and in a second or two more would inevitably cut him off.

Neglecting the others, though they were almost upon him, he turned swiftly on his heel and dashed straight at the tall man—the shock as they met sent both men reeling backward—but Kelly, thrusting out his hip on the impact, an old football trick, swung his antagonist off his balance, and, before ever he could recover himself, the haft of the pick crashed down on his head, and he dropped with a grunt, losing all further interest in his surroundings.

The Britisher leapt over the prostrate body just in time to avoid a whistling cut at him from behind, and, gaining the gravel bank, wheeled round.

Macullan and his three remaining assistants didn't give him much breathing space, but drove at him altogether.

Kelly lunged straight at the face of the man directly in front of him, the ragged end of the haft caught the fellow, fair and square, on the jaw. His arms jerked upwards and he fell back with a yelp of pain.

"Two!" said Kelly grimly, parrying at the same time a blow aimed at his side, which, had it caught him, must have broken his arm.

The man on his left, however, more cunning than his fellows, was hovering about, stooping low, feinting here and there, watching his chance to dash in and close.

Macullan noticed this, and in order to give the man his opportunity, rained down a hail of haphazard blows to distract attention.

Kelly saw the ruse, and saw that in the end he was bound to be taken, barring miracles. He set his teeth. At any rate, if he was taken he would leave his mark on one more of them first, and that one should be no other than Macullan.

Bending down, with knees crooked, he made a circular sweep, the pick-handle whistling through the air and compelling his assailants to give ground a little; then a quick jab at the man on the left by way of warning, and, springing suddenly upright and forwards, he hurled himself straight at Macullan.

Something or someone caught him a resounding thud in the ribs, but he paid no heed to it. Macullan was what he wanted and what he meant to have a go at, for good or ill, whether two or twenty men stood in his way.

To do him justice Macullan was just as ready to close. The man was a bully, but, unlike his superior officer, he was by no means a coward.

Whack! Thud! Another blow caught Kelly on the arm, momentarily paralysing it and loosening his grip on his weapon. With an exclamation of rage he flung it at the head of the man who had aimed the blow, and drove at Macullan with his left.

The warder half dodged the blow, but it shook him, and Kelly, recovering the use of his other arm, caught him by the throat and hung on with the tenacity of a bulldog.

In vain the big warder tried to shake him off, and in vain his followers battered

at Kelly's defenceless head and back. For, quick to take advantage of the dim light, he contrived to swing Macullan round, using him as a kind of shield, and more than one shrewd knock, intended for the Britisher, came tapping on the roof of Macullan's skull.

But the unequal contest could not last long. Macullan, it is true, was fast losing consciousness, yet Kelly dare not relax his grip; and the others were all about him once more, trying to pull him down.

At last one man, who had previously been hanging round waiting his chance—dived down and flung his arms round Kelly's legs from behind. A quick upward jerk took the Britisher's feet from under him; a wrench, which nearly took his arms from their sockets, followed, and with a crash he, Macullan, and the third man came to the ground in a heap. Instantly the rest flung themselves on Kelly's back and shoulders, pinning him down, helpless and exhausted.

Macullan staggered to his feet with a groan.

"Got you at last, you play-acting hound!" he growled thickly, fingering his swollen throat. "Truss him up, boys, and see you truss him good! He's as slippery as an eel, and we ain't taking any chances this bout. I sha'n't feel happy till I see him strung up to the triangles in Melbourne Gaol!"

One of the men produced a long strip of raw-hide thong. Macullan grabbed it savagely, and with vindictive ferocity began to bind his captive. So tightly did he tie the first few knots, that the raw hide cut deep into the flesh and at once stopped the circulation. Kelly set his teeth hard, but said nothing. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of knowing that they had power to hurt him. Even when Macullan gave him a brutal kick as a hint to be still.

They were all intent on their work, for darkness had fallen, and time was precious.

Suddenly there came a sharp crack, and a bullet whizzed between the heads of Macullan and the man next him, followed immediately by the sharp, crisp command, "Hands up!"

The interruption was so startling and demoralising that the men sprang to their feet in bewilderment, peering uneasily into the night.

"Hands up, sharp, or ye won't know what's hurt you!"

This time the voice came from quite a different point of the compass. Instinctively they wheeled, and instinctively their hands went up above their heads—at full-arm stretch, fingers splayed.

"So that's healthier!" drawled the voice. "Now move off ten paces to the right, and let each man keep a clean yard from his neighbour, if he has any use fer livin'! The first feller that waggles a finger'll see some exhibition gun practice, an' I guess it's the last thing he will see this side of the pit! Now, little man, wade in with yer knife and cut Captain Vyner loose!"

The diminutive form of Hunt loomed up suddenly out of the darkness, stooped over Kelly, and, with a few deft strokes, cut the thongs.

"You are right, Britisher, old pard?" sang out the voice.

"Yes; thanks to you, Jake, barring a bruise or two." With Hunt's aid he scrambled to his feet, swaying slightly.

"Hold up, old hoss!" said Jake encouragingly. "Stretch yerself a piece, an' then come and catch a holt of these yer guns while the little man and I attend to this bunch of scarecrows!"

Kelly lurched towards the voice, steadying himself as the circulation was restored.

"Hand 'em over!" said he. "You turned up in the nick of time, I fancy. The brutes set upon me all at once, and I was heeled."

"Gee whiz, but there must be some darned rough characters about the camp!" drawled Jake. "I thought most of the toughs had been cleared out of this yer section. Pity it's so tarnation dark, we might have had a look at the beauties. However, it's no use wastin' time, I reckon. I guess we'd better just rope 'em

up an' leave 'em to cool. I'll show yer a pretty trick of ropin', pard, one I learnt out Texas way. Keep 'em covered an' comfortable to prevent unpleasantness. Air yew right!"

"Let one of them so much as wink, and I'll show you!" said Kelly, taking the revolvers.

As a matter of fact, he was one large ache, and rocking on his feet from exhaustion, but this they couldn't tell, as not only was he in the dark, but behind them, and they dare not turn their heads.

A moment's pause ensued whilst Jake fumbled for a long coil of rope which he had brought with him. Then a voice came out of the darkness.

"Stop this foolery, I say—you, Jake Simpson! Stop it! I'm Macullan, Government official—Warder Macullan, acting under the orders of Commissioner Hayes."

"Shucks!" said Jake genially. "There is a Warder Macullan, up at the diggin's, shure enough. I know him, and a mighty bad egg he is at that. But I reckon this show is just simple highway robbery, with violence, an' Macullan ain't come as low as that yet, so far as I know; Hayes, he's bust, an' don't count, anyway. That yarn won't go, sonny, so shut yer head and be thankful me and my pard can't waste time taking the crowd of yer back!"

"Stand by, pard—and you, little man, get a move on you an' help me with the ropes."

Again Macullan raised his voice, but this time Kelly cut him short.

"If I hear another syllable," he said sternly, "I'll shoot before the word's complete, and I'll shoot to kill!"

One by one the men passed under Jake's skilful hands. A slipknot round the neck, a few deft turns, and the job was complete and the men as helpless as trussed fowls.

Macullan was served first, then the rest.

"Come right here, Britisher," drawled Jake, "an' I'll show you somethin' real artistic! Never mind the guns; yew ain't no use for them now. Look at here, ain't this a beauty? That's ropin' that is! A cinch on the neck, hands back to back behind with a couple of hitchers, legs bent up from the knee and tied smart round the ankle-bones. Funny lookin' coves, ain't they? I've seen a man roped that fashion faint from cramp inside two hours, an' if they kick or struggle it just tightens the slipknot on the neck and they nigh strangle 'emselves. Not wasteful, neither; seven foot of thin cord apiece does. The boys'll find 'em some time after sun up, and give it easy. Waal, I reckon we'd better get a move on us! Get yew away to home, little man. Come, pardner!"

Leaving the warder and his men in the first stages of discomfort, Jake and the Britisher vanished into the darkness, and were soon out of hearing.

"Old man," said Kelly, "that was a nearer thing than you thought. I owe you a pretty big debt already. This'll have to go on the bill with the rest. I suppose it was Hunt who brought you word?"

"That's so," replied the American gravely. "Here are the horses, I fancy. We'd better bustle along. That Macullan fairly gets me riz; I ain't got no use for him."

They rode all through the night, and on till a couple of hours after sunrise the next morning, making a wide circle to the north round the camp, and then heading north-west. By that time they reckoned that they had covered close on sixty miles all told, and off-saddled in a clump of bush for a well-earned rest, leaving their horses free to roll at will.

They intended making a fresh start just before dusk. The middle of the day was too hot for travelling, and, quite apart from the fact that they and the horses were dog-weary, a long halt was really a necessity.

Their position was well chosen, too, for the ground they were on was a high plateau, from which they could command a wide view.

By dusk they were well on their way once more, still heading north-west. The bush, however, was getting denser, and their going was necessarily slower. Once or twice in especially thick places they were compelled to halt and make a détour.

It was at one of these points that Kelly who always possessed an instinct equivalent to an eighth sense, swung sharply round in his saddle, and stared backwards over the route which they had traversed.

The light had not quite died out, but lay low and level, casting long, distorted shadows, but enabling him to see clearly for a considerable distance.

Beyond the outer edge of the scrub stretched a long, undulating plain of short, wiry grass, which reached to the skyline, and which they had traversed on the previous night.

He shaded his eyes with his hand, staring long and anxiously; then he dropped it lightly on Jake's arm.

"Old man," said he quietly, "this is where you and I break trails. You choose your way, and push right ahead. I'll go off by myself for a bit. We may meet later."

Jake stared in dismay.

"Why, what the blazes——"

Jake paused, and in a flash he understood.

"I guess not, pard. The one trail is good enough for both of us. What is it—trackers?"

Kelly nodded.

"Macullan and Hayes must have laid their plans better than we gave them credit for. Look back there. The men must have been laid on some time during last night."

Jake looked, and now, on the far side of the grass plain, silhouetted against the glare of the afterglow, he could see a knot of little figures bobbing up and down and moving fast. In front of them rode two others by themselves, and occasionally one of these, without pulling up, would fling himself from his horse, glance at the ground as he ran, holding the bridle, and then, with a dexterous vault, regain the saddle.

Jake needed no further explanation. His keen eyes could read the situation at a glance. The two foremost figures were black trackers. Those behind were police troopers. They were not more than four miles away, though it is true their horses were tired, whilst his and his partner's were fresh after their long rest.

"So long, old man!" said Kelly once more, holding out his hand. "This is my show, and I'm not going to drag anyone else into it. I dare say I can win clear on the grey, and find you out later."

Jake shook his head.

"No, siree; that bird won't fight. First of all, I don't see why Macullan, or a dozen Macullans, should have the blank impertinence to lay black trackers on the heels of Captain Vyner; and, anyway, I'll undertake to lead all the blacks in this yer country by the nose, if I've a mind to."

"But, hang it, man, you know that I——"

"I don't know nothin', pardner, an' I don't ask no questions. I guess ignorance is bliss right enough sometimes. Meanwhile, you slip off your horse right now, and break for the bush, an' I'll show you somethin' to make you laugh. Quick, pard, they're closin' up smart! What's ailin' you? They can't do nothin' to me, I reckon."

For an instant longer Kelly hesitated; then he slipped out of the saddle, wrung Jake's hand, and dived into the bush.

Instantly Jake slipped the bridle of the grey over his arm, and set out at a smart

canter, keeping to the more open ways of the scrub. Sometimes he even broke into a short gallop, so as to cover as much ground as possible in the time.

He wanted to get a clean lead before the moon rose, after that he would be far enough away to have hidden Kelly's tracks, and then the sooner the troopers came up the better.

An hour after moonrise he called a halt, loosened the girths, let the animals go with their bridles trailing, in case he might want them in a hurry, and began to leisurely prepare himself a bit of supper, to which end he kindled a good bright fire. The meal finished, he sat down with his back against a tree, and smoked.

He glanced up at the moon to judge the time.

"Guess they're about due," he murmured to himself, with a grim smile, and slipped a revolver from under the blankets.

Ten minutes passed, a quarter of an hour, and then he heard a stealthy rustling away to his right. A little later, and it was repeated on his left also, and he smiled again, for he knew what would shortly follow.

His eyes were now fixed on the track by which he had come, and which was in the full glare of the moonlight, whilst he himself was in the deep shadow.

At last it came—the sight he had been waiting for. Three troopers, their carbines over their arms, were working through the scrub abreast.

Jake waited till they were almost on him; then, raising his revolver, he cocked it and challenged: "Hands up!"

CHAPTER II.

Lost in the Bush.

JAKE drawled the words out in his usual leisurely fashion, but there was a grim menace behind them; and a heavy-calibre revolver, held in a steady grip, provided the other part of the argument.

The troopers stood stock still, and, recognising the voice, threw up their hands.

"Right you are, Jake, old man. Go slow!" a sergeant called out of the dusk "It's not your scalp we're after, so stow your gun and make yourself comfortable. All we want is your partner, the Britisher—Captain Vyner, as he calls himself. Take your finger off the trigger, and I'll come forward and show you the warrant."

Jake, with a quiet smile, lowered his weapon, and the sergeant stepped into the circle of the firelight.

"Here you are; see for yourself, all square and above board. I guess I've got no down on the Britisher; but orders are orders, and there's no going against 'em. Hayes and Macullan are responsible for this little job, so your partner had better step out from wherever he is and look pleasant. We know he's with you, because Jacko the tracker's fixed his horse-prints, and we'll handle him soft."

"See here, sergeant," said Jake, "I'm real sorry you an' the boys have wasted so much of your val'able time; but I guess you're huntin' up the wrong tree for that ther' possum. Thar's the Britisher's horse, true enough, and hyar's me. But there ain't no Britisher around anywhere's here—no, siree—and, what's more, I ain't seen him this while back!"

"Oh! Pitch us another, Jake!" said the sergeant. "You and the Britisher are as thick as thieves—we all know that. There's his horse. My men and the trackers are all around you. Give your partner a hail, and tell him to come out and be good. Otherwise, there'll be shooting for sure; and, though some of us may be damaged, we're bound to hook him in the end, once we begin hunting."

"I surmise you'd better start right away," drawled Jake carelessly. "I got him in my pockets, I tell you straight, and for the rest you'd better wade look for yourselves. I ain't in a mood for hustlin', or I'd join the picnic!"

The sergeant gave a sharp answer, and, dismounting, sat with his back to a and his rifle across his lap, whilst his men scattered and searched.

Jake smiled at him sourly, and, as though by accident, hitched his rev into a handier position.

The sergeant looked like trouble, and Jake had a liking for being prepared.

"See here," said the policeman at last, as the troopers came in singly an twos and threes to report their non-success, "give me the straight tip, as ma man. It ain't natural for you to go back on your partner, I'll allow; but this may spell promotion for me if it pans out right. Give me your word he here, and I'll quit foolin' around, call my men on, and start in somewhere else. then, is he, or ain't he—straight truth?"

"You've got brains—that's what's ailing you," drawled Jake. "Si bustin' with brain—that's it—only you somehow don't seem to kinder use the If my partner ain't here, why should I give you the tip to go an' look for him s where else? An' if he is here—waal, I guess I can sit an' smoke right along till found."

"Oh, you do, do you?" retorted the exasperated sergeant. "We'll soon alter idea, my man. If the Britisher ain't found inside ten minutes, I'll run you to camp to explain how you came here with his horse and outfit, leading us a dan like this!"

He raised his voice purposely, on the chance of being overheard, and, there himself missed hearing an ominous warning click.

"Sergeant!"

The trooper turned with a start, and found himself staring straight down the black muzzle of Jake's revolver.

"Six chambers," said the latter, with a significant nod, "all plum loade and my finger's on the trigger! Don't you shout again! I'm nervo jumpy as a kitten—an' this yer trigger's a fair terror. There ain't police enc in this section to tote me anywheres, unless I choose. You ain't got a show aga me at all. I'm tired, an' I'm going to sleep; but if you or one of the trooper much as speaks above a whisper, I'll wake. And when I wake I shoot first, explanations follow later. Good-night!"

Saying which, Jake lay down amongst his blankets by the fireside, and, with finger still on the trigger, refused to say another word.

The sergeant raved, cursed the trackers, the Britisher, Jake, and the univ at large. The only answer he received was a snore.

The trackers, meanwhile, having come in to report, and announced a blind trai viz, one which went no further—the small police force remounted, and filed silc away into the darkness.

Jake, through half-closed lids, watched them go, then uncocked his revolv and waited, listening.

An hour later he was retracing his own trail, leading the grey.

It was a dark night, and twice he overran the point at which Kelly had made the bush, though he had marked it well. In fact, the undergrowth hereabouts so dense that, once a man had left the track and penetrated five yards into scrub, he would never have found his way back again without considerable kn ledge of woodcraft.

Jake found the spot at last, a tall clump of trees serving him as a cross-bearin but even then he was uncertain how to act.

He had agreed on three revolver shots as a signal; but those he dare not fi

the police, travelling slowly, could not be more than two to three miles ahead, d sound travels far in the bush, though direction is hard to locate.

Still, some means of communication he felt he must have, for in the dark—or, for matter of that, in full sunlight—it would be impossible to track Kelly for a ndred yards.

He racked his brains for a device till, curiously enough, an old, half-forgotten agment from a newspaper report flashed across his mind.

On his first arrival in Melbourne he had wiled away a spare hour in reading an count of the doings of the Kelly gang, and remembered that one of their warning gnals was the mournful cry of the mopoke. In spite of his assumed ignorance, he, course, was perfectly aware of the Britisher's real identity; and—well, desperate uations require desperate remedies.

To an old hunter and trapper of such experience as his, bird calls come as simply talking.

He made one or two low-breathed attempts, so as to get a fair semblance to ature, in case one of the troopers might hear it in the still night. Then he threw ack his head, and the long-drawn, wailing notes rang out—mournful, ominous as ne notes of death itself. A pause, as the last sound reverberated through the empty ilence; then twice, and thrice again it was repeated. Then once more silence.

Jake waited, patient but anxious, for the answer; yet nothing came. Kneeling, laid ear to the ground, and amidst the thousand-and-one minor noises of the ark hours—the little sounds which go to make up silence—he heard faintly the casional click of a horse's hoof against a stone, and the measured thud, thud of the oper's animals at the walk.

He gauged the distance, and judged it at four miles or more. It was worth isking another call. Again his head went back to give the signal, when, like a aint echo, there came the answering cry from a point to the northward of him.

Instantly he was up again, and in the saddle, once more retracing his steps, the ey following quietly behind; and so for three long hours the game went on. very now and then he would pause and call; and the answering call would come ack, now loud, now faint, as the distance between them grew greater or minished.

At length an hour before the dawn, more by accident than anything else, the two nen drew towards each other and met.

Kelly came striding out of a dense clump of bush from exactly the opposite rection to that in which Jake had been expecting him. His face was streaming vith perspiration, and he was pretty well exhausted.

"Where did you learn that cry?" was his first question.

Jake looked at him with a grin.

"I guess I don't 'xactly remember. Maybe you told me as how your friend elly used to use it; so I'sized up that it would about meet present requirements. ay, do yer know anywhere about where we are, pard?"

"Yes," answered Kelly grimly, "I do. We're bushed—badly bushed—and I ancy we've been travelling round each other in circles all through the night. I ell you, old man, I've been suffering my first attack of bush-fright. It's awful nesome in there all by yourself with the bull-frogs. Look at me; and my nerves en't much to grumble about as a rule."

He stretched out his arm as he spoke, and his fingers quivered like an aspen-eaf.

"We're in a bad fix, old man—the deuce of a bad fix! I've heard stories—es, and I've seen men, too—poor chaps at their last gasp, and after it, raving mad, rved, and tortured by thirst, with their feet nearly worn off their ankles, and very strip of clothing gone, and I've heard them scream. Jake, old man, I never ard the like before, or since, to the screams of a bush madman. They're just

bestial—brute man gone way back to his primitive brutishness. If I thought to-morrow or the next day would see us like——"

"Say, hold up, pardner!" interrupted Jake sharply. "This yer kind of pal won't help any. I guess we've got more sand than to go and scare ourselves a lot of old woman's tales—like kids in a dark room on a winter's night! got to get out o' this mighty sharp—yes, sirce—but I reckon, for all that, we'll sit down in our tracks an' wait fer daylight. Yew can put in some time sto a handful of grub under yer belt; yew look all tuckered out."

Kelly assented, with a nod. Man of iron nerve though he was, he spoke more than the truth when he said that a touch of bush-fright had shaken him. man who has not experienced it can ever guess at the utter terror which se upon even the strongest men when they realise that they are indeed lost in the bu It is, as Jake said, like the nightmare terrors of small children intensified a thousan fold.

Silently they ate and rested, waiting for the coming of the dawn, and gathe their strength to face the ordeal before them.

The last, long-drawn quarter of this period of suspense they passed in maku plans as to the best method of procedure, and hazarding guesses as to whic direction the east lay in.

For, once a man is fairly bushed, he loses all sense of the points of the comp and, as a matter of course, almost invariably moves in a circle. Some beli that this is due to the right leg being longer and freer of movement than the so that by always taking a longer stride with the right, and lacking landmarks which to correct it, the course diverges further and further leftwards, out of straight line, until, sooner or later, a wide circle is described. Be the explanat what it may, the fact remains that in the bush, in snow, or in heavy mists, a once lost will always walk in a circular direction from right to left.

Both knew this well, and the knowledge only added to their apprehensi Northwards and all around them lay a practically unexplored region, stretchin for no man might say how many miles, and reported to be bush country of unusual denseness. By the way they had come originally, the belt of bush perhaps no more than six miles wide. Yet in their wanderings of the previc night they had lost all idea of their original route—or, at least, could only ma wild, conflicting guesses. At last the sun came up above the horizon, and its fir level rays glinted on the highest twigs above their heads and behind them—very last point which they expected.

"Say, pard, figgering on that thar," said Jake, pointing to the rapidly-reddeni tree-tops, "I surmise we're facing due east, as near as no matter. If so, all got to do is just to walk right away into the face of the sun. Foller our nos as it might be, and we're sure bound to hit the perlice trail. And there can't be an mistakin' that, fer it's as broad as a cart-track where they rode abreast, an' bush'll all be broken down, anyway. Come along, and let's get a move on us ah the blessed old sun starts shifting around. You shove right ahead, and keep eye fixed on that thar broken-down branch yonder. When we've fixed that w take another mark. I'll keep right along behind yer, so's it yew go wanderin' off plumb-tree line I can hail yew back."

Kelly nodded again in silence, for this was the plan they had decided on befo the sun rose.

With a glance at the tree in question some hundred yards distant, he rose his feet and plunged forward. Instantly branches closed above him and arou him, shutting him in and obscuring his landmark. But behind him came Jake, an it was scarcely likely that they would both get off the line.

The dense foliage overhead prevented him from judging his whereabouts, b having come approximately a hundred yards, he chose another mark, and, keepin

his eye rigidly fixed on it, plunged forward again. And so it went on for a full couple of hours, alternate halts to choose a mark, and then a quick dash forward and the choice of another.

"I reckon we were dead sure right to wait for daylight," said Jake, "'stead of joolin' around in the dark. We ain't goin' to have a pile of trouble in strikin' the trail this gait."

Even Kelly, who had not yet shaken off his previous terror entirely, regained a certain amount of confidence, and pushed ahead cheerfully.

Half an hour later they struck what they had so ardently desired—a broadish trail, which they came upon at a slanting angle.

Kelly stooped down to examine it. It was clear that quite half a dozen horses passed that way quite recently, to say nothing of the footprints of men walking.

Jake, too, examined the ground with a critical eye, and rose with a smiling face and a shout of joy.

"We've hit it pardner! Bully for us! Now we'll just get a hump on us an' streak for the open. I ain't comin' bushing again without a compass—no, sir. See, there's been four horses right along here, sure enough, riding two an' two through this yer narrow part. Yew can see whar the second lot has messed up the prints of the first. And right yonder a couple more has left the main trail and stched out round the far side of the big bush, leading their horses. They'll have been the black trackers, I'm thinkin'. Wonderful little chaps, them black fellows! Go as straight as a die anywhere."

"Yes; there isn't a patch of bush grown that'll puzzle a black. It's a sort of instinct, I fancy. Shove ahead, Jake, old man. The trail leads south, and that should be our nearest way out. I'll follow, and lead the horses a bit. By James, you don't guess what it is to get the scare of the last few hours out of my mind!"

Jake resigned the horses and set off down the trail at a brisk pace, pulling at his pipe contentedly.

Six, or at the most eight, miles would see them once more in the open, and they asked no better for the moment.

Slowly the sun rose in the sky, until it was nearly straight overhead, and still the interminable bush hemmed them in. The heat was stifling, and myriads of insects swarmed about them, but they took no heed. Every now and again one or other of them would pause for a moment to wipe a dripping face, and mop away the perspiration; but, though they had tasted no food since before dawn, they were far too impatient to think of their hunger. They yearned for wide, open, wind-swept plains, where they could see for miles, instead of having to peer at a leafy screen not six feet from their noses.

"Gosh, we must have come a deal farther than we thought for!" said Jake, with a backward glance over his shoulder. "I reckon we must have come a good ten miles since we struck the trail again."

There was no answer, and they trudged on for the best part of an hour in silence.

Suddenly Kelly spoke, and his voice sounded harsh and shrill.

"Jake—Jake, how is it all the trails are outward bound? Why don't we hit by marks, either our own or theirs, heading north?"

"I guess we wandered round a piece comin' in, and they naturally followed. Them blacks 'ud take a shorter route home."

The explanation was simple and logical enough, yet the uneasy silence once more prevailed, and as the time went on became more and more impressive.

The two men, by a kind of mutual feeling, instinctively avoided each other's eyes. If Jake looked back, Kelly kept his head bent down, as though intent on the trail. If Kelly stared on ahead, Jake never turned, though he must have felt that his partner's eyes were glued on the small of his back.

The haunting fear of the bush was soaking into them. Though no word had

passed, each knew that they had travelled twice the distance needful to bring th into the open had they been following a straight trail south. Yet each refrain from speaking, lest he should impart to his friend the secret terror which haunting himself.

At last, however, a sudden exclamation from Kelly brought the American all standing.

"Look!" he said harshly—"look there! It's no good keeping up this fa any longer. Heaven help us, we're off the trail, or the troopers have lost th trackers and got bushed themselves! Think we started south with, at the outsi eight miles to cover, and now, after close on fourteen hours' trudging along, ther the sun setting over our right shoulders."

"Then we're still heading south, pard?"

"Yes, after doing a good thirty miles. And why? We may as well face it n as later, because, without noticing, we've struck off on a cross trail, and ha been moving northward in a circle all day long, instead of going south, as thought. And, what's more, I can tell you——"

"Don't, pard—don't, old man—don't say it yet!" broke in Jake, his voic tailing off into almost a whine. "Let's shove on just a leetle further first; may come out all right yet."

"As you please," answered Kelly curtly.

They hadn't gone half a mile, however, before they stopped again, and thi time it was Jake who called the halt.

Kelly hurried up with the horses, and found his companion shaking as with ague white-faced, his cheek muscles working convulsively, staring at the foot of a tr in the midst of a trampled space. There, by the fast failing light of the sun, could distinguish a dingy white object, an empty piece of torn sacking, which ha contained their meal, eaten before dawn that very morning. They had returne to the exact spot from which they had started fourteen hours before!

Jake stretched out a quivering forefinger and pointed.

"It ain't true, pard—I'm dreamin'? Say it ain't true! I—I'm a bit dazed. The voice trailed off into a whimper unmistakably this time.

Kelly laughed harshly, hysterically—the laugh of a man whose nerves are wor to the verge of mania.

"True! I knew it hours back. We never followed the police track—neve saw it, even. The track we've been on since dawn was the one you'd worn goin round and round in the night. That's why the horses always went two and tw and why there was always one man leading them. We're done, both of us, an the fault's mine. There's one way out, and only one—those screams are in m ears now. This is the way!" And he plucked his revolver from his belt.

"Bushed—hopelessly bushed!" said Kelly hoarsely. "It's no good, o man; we may as well face the thing now as later. We may go on wanderin and looking till we drop; and then will come the madness and the horrors, unt something in the brain goes snap! I've no use for ending my days a gibbering screaming maniac. The game's played, the stake's made, and there's only on decent way out. So here goes!" And he plucked his revolver from his belt.

The tough old American watched him with scared eyes, dazed and pitiful; th nerves of both were jangling and broken.

They had hoped against hope, deluded themselves, tricked themselves into pretence that there was yet a chance. But after all those long hours of stifling bone-racking march, to find themselves where they started was the finishing touch. and in a flash delusions and pretence were swept away, and nerve and strength snapped under the prolonged strain.

Jake lurched forward, reeling like a drunken man, and gripped Kelly's wrist.

"Don't, pardner—don't do it—not yet!" His voice, which quavered, was no

more than a thin, hoarse whisper. Already their tongues were swollen with thirst and their lips cracked and of a horrible congested purple colour. They had not tasted food or drink for close on twenty-four hours. "Don't do it, pardner," he croaked again; "we may win through. Yes, sir, I guess we'll pull out all right."

The sentences were dragged out with long, husky wheezings in between. He was making a supreme effort to choke back an hysterical gulping in his throat, There is no terror like the bush terror!

Kelly turned on him sourly. He also was fighting for a last tattered remnant of self-control.

"Leave go, Jake Simpson! Let go my wrist, I tell you! Have you ever seen a man die in the bush?"

"No, pardner; but——"

"No; well I have, and that makes all the difference. If I thought there was a fighting chance I'd fight till I couldn't stand; as it is, I prefer a decent death. After all, it's little enough to make a fuss about. Death in itself is nothing; the manner of it everything."

Jake let go the wrist, and stood swaying and rocking on his feet, blinking uncertainly.

"I tell you, pardner," he said thickly—"I take leave to tell you that, though you've more sand than any man I've ever ran up against, you're a blame coward at the end of it all." He paused, and then flung out his arms sharply. "An' I'm worse—I'm a durned sight worse, for I dursn't do it. I tell you, man, I dursn't!" And, without any warning, he suddenly collapsed on the ground, with a choking sob.

The collapse brought Kelly up with a round turn, and he lowered his revolver. The lonesomeness of the place was awful, and it was hard to tell whether the blackness of night or the pitiless glare of the sun was the worst.

His anger against his companion flickered out, and he only felt a sort of dull compassion. What did it matter, since the end must come, whether he used his last resource now or a few hours later? He stuck his revolver back in his belt, and shook Jake by the shoulder.

"Get up, old man; we'd better be moving!" he said shortly. And, without another word, Jake rose to his feet; and they began to plod warily forward again.

Kelly watched the trail carefully. There to the right was the fresh one they had broken at dawn leading due east, and from this they had turned astray into the interminable circlings.

He took his bearings by this, and, hazarding a guess at north, set his face resolutely towards it. If he could keep only moderately straight, this would at any rate keep them clear of old tracks, and so prove less confusing.

Moreover, he made up his mind that for every half-mile traversed he would head out eastward at right angles for a couple of hundred yards. In this way they would diminish the risk of circling, and make a trail somewhat like a badly-made staircase laid on its side.

Jake followed listless and dumb, the bridles looped over his arm. As darkness fell they halted, waiting for the moon; but before doing so Kelly made a deep mark in the ground to indicate their direction, lest in turning round whilst seated or lying down they should lose their bearings.

Slowly, majestically, the moon slid up in a clear sky, tinging everything with silver. It touched the topmost bush twigs, throwing fantastic black shadows. Higher yet, and it let a flood of light into the little open space where they camped. Yet neither man stirred. Utterly worn out, they slept like dead things, in spite of thirst and hunger. The sun was full above the horizon before they woke, with sore-rimmed eyes and aching bodies, to face another day of torture.

Stiffly they dragged themselves to their feet, and eyed with loathing the remnants

of dry food still left them. Starving though they were, eating was a sheer impossibility without so much as a drop of water to moisten their tongues. The horses too, poor brutes, were in nearly as bad a state, and maddened by the flies.

Kelly took his bearings as before, corrected them as far as possible by the sun and pushed forward sullenly and despairingly.

But they had not gone fifty yards before a sudden cloud of flies rose buzzing angrily from a spot a little to the right of the trail, and a minute or two later a huge black crow flapped lazily away, scared but resentful.

"Say, pardner, somethin' in the bush there!" croaked Jake through his cracked lips.

Kelly nodded dully. His thoughts were far away, and he was lost in a strange dreamland of his own. Nevertheless, almost mechanically he turned and broke through the bush towards the spot indicated.

An instant later a harsh cry—half terror, half amazement—reached Jake, and he plunged after his partner.

Kelly clutched him by the arm and shook it fiercely.

"You've never seen a man die in the bush. Now, then, look for yourself! Look for yourself and you'll understand!" His eyes glared fiercely, and his face was blanched white beneath the tan.

Jake looked, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. At first he could see nothing—nothing but yellow, brownish dead leaves and—— Ah, he saw at last—saw with horrible, ghastly clearness!

Almost at his feet, and burnt by exposure to the colour of the leaves, was a nameless, shrunken thing, the face mercifully hidden on a bent arm—a thing that had once been a man—a young man, from the build of him. He was naked, not a rag or stitch on him, for—and this is perhaps one of the most curious features of the last stages of bush mania—its victims, in their delirium, become possessed by a frenzied desire to rid themselves of the hamperings of civilisation. First go belt or boots, then trousers, shirt, everything, till they are stripped to the last shred and the flies and the blistering sun does the rest.

The poor fellow had apparently been wandering for days before the end came, his skin was shrunken on to the bones. He was in the last stages of emaciation and must have starved for long before death gripped him.

With a great effort they pulled themselves together, and prepared to do what little they could. And that was little enough. Too weak to lift him, without implements of any kind, they could only pile leaves on him where he lay, and in some measure protect him from the attacks of noisome insects.

It was whilst in the midst of this that the true inner horror of such a fate was revealed to them, and almost sent them reeling away never to return, with the task half completed. A chance movement dislodged the dead man's head from its resting-place, and the arm beneath showed to what dire straits delirium and agonising fear can drive the human mind.

"Come on!" whispered Kelly huskily a last. And they turned once more towards the trail. As they did so Jake's foot struck against some hard object.

He stooped, groped blindly, and picked it up. It was a coarse canvas sack of small size, tied round the mouth with a piece of raw hide thong, but without name or means of identification. Evidently it had been the last thing with which the dead man had parted. They undid the thong with much fumbling, and discovered inside a couple of double handfuls of superb fire opals in the rough.

"Poor beggar!" said Kelly. "Mighty hard lines to die of starvation with fortune in your hand. It's no good leaving 'em, and it's no good taking 'em, as far as I can see. Still, there's a bare chance, and we may find out—— Oh, come along, anyway!"

Two hours more—three—and Kelly, after stumbling heavily through a particularly dense patch, paused, breathless and shaking, supporting himself against a branch. He rubbed his eyes, stared, panted, and stared again. A short half-mile ahead a thin column of smoke was rising idly in the hot air—a thin blue spiral barely visible.

He pointed with outstretched hand, which shook as though he had an ague, and tried to force articulate words from his swollen tongue in vain.

Jake saw it too, and nodded, too far gone for speech. One of the horses dragged its head up wearily and sniffed.

With a mighty effort Kelly managed to ejaculate huskily:

"Bush camp—water!"

Again Jake nodded, and flung an arm across his horse to save himself from falling.

Inspired with a new hope, they reeled, staggered, and at times crawled along. The bush began to thin out before them; it was evident that they were coming to some sort of clearing, an oasis in that leafy wilderness.

A faint reek of wood fire came to them across the still air. There was a pale-coloured glimmer between the lower branches, and both horses sniffed anxiously. Instinct told them that they were near water.

At last through the foliage they could see the sheen of it, a fair-sized lake. And utterly regardless of possible danger, maddened by the sight of that for want of which they had been suffering agonies, men and horses alike jostled and tramped a way to its edge and flung themselves down, drinking savagely immoderately, as only those dying of thirst can drink.

The lake was irregular in shape, about a mile long, by a third of that distance broad. The camp-fire, the smoke of which they had seen, was on the far side, hidden from view by the tall grasses which grew right down to the water's edge. Before they had drunk their fill, however, and, to a certain extent, revived their failing senses, a terrible din sprang up from the other side of the lake—howlings and shriekings, shrill yellings, as of a host of maniacs.

Before they had reached the lake and moistened their parched and swollen lips they had been utterly reckless of danger—they would have tried to rush the water in the face of concentrated machine gun fire—but with the edge of their craving dulled, caution returned, and they made haste to get their horses and themselves under cover, uncertain whether they had been observed or not.

The din continued, rising at times to an almost deafening pitch; and Jake, who was gnawing voraciously at a piece of dried biltong, paused to listen. There was something eerie and blood-chilling in the sound something positively uncanny.

"Say, pardner, what d'ye make of that caterwauling?" he asked, in a whisper.

Kelly had been listening attentively, and his carbine lay across his knee, though he had barely strength to raise it. Their eyes were aching and red-rimmed from want of sleep.

"I fancy we've fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire," he said thickly. "I know something of blacks, and unless I'm much mistaken there's devilry of some kind going on yonder. They sound to me like bad blacks, and they're holding an extra special corroboree about something. I've heard of something of this sort before; lots of fellows pitch yarns about bad tribes in the bush who hold the most ghastly festivals and indulge in all the primitive horrors of the old tribal traditions. It's precious seldom that a white man drops across them, and still less sure that he gets away with a whole skin to tell the tale. We'd better take alternate spells of sleep, and try and freshen ourselves up a bit whilst we have the chance. They'll be too busy to worry about us yet awhile, providing we haven't been spotted already."

"Say, what should they be wanting our scalps for? We ain't harmed any o' them."

"We are in the bush, for one thing, and they regard the big bush belt as theirs. You'd better turn in for your spell now. I'll rouse you later. We must have sleep."

Jake grunted acquiescence, too fagged out to argue the point, and dropped off instantly into a deep sleep, whilst Kelly propped his back against a tree and tried hard to pinch himself into wakefulness.

All through the long day they slept, turn and turn about. At nightfall they crept down to the water's edge, drank, and, stripping off their clothes, cooled their blistered skins in the lake shallows. Then once more they crawled cautiously back to their hiding-place and slept again.

The din in the camp had died away gradually into silence, and no sound was to be heard but the hum of myriads of insects and the occasional stealthy rustle of small bush animals.

Once on the far side of the lake a horrible shriek rang out, the shriek of a black in the grip of a loathsome nightmare; and once over the still waters there was borne a scuttling of feet, the quick grunting interchange of blows, a thud of something falling, and a stifled moan—the only evidences of a hidden tragedy.

It was inexpressibly eerie, and the long hours dragged out towards the dawn.

With the first lightening of the eastern sky, Kelly, whose turn it was to sentry, touched Jake lightly on the shoulder.

The big American woke quietly and instantly, as men learn to wake who have slept in the open surrounded by danger.

"There's something moving through the bush behind us," whispered Kelly, his mouth close to Jake's ear; "and a quarter of an hour back I saw a cloud of birds rise at the far end of the lake. They've spotted us, for sure—winded us, maybe, you know their extraordinary powers of scent—and are working round to cut us off."

"Say, pardner, it kinder looks as if it were up against us, an' our name was Dennis. Hawses ain't no durned use in this hyer bush, an'——"

"Jump for it! Jump, man; break for the water!" yelled Kelly suddenly.

Jake leapt on the word; a streak of light flashed past his ear, and a light reed throwing spear quivered in the ground a few paces ahead.

Crack! Kelly's carbine coughed, swung round a little, and coughed again. Two stunted figures fell forward.

The next instant the two partners were racing and stumbling to the water's edge, amidst a cloud of spears, their one anxiety to get the lake at their backs before the rush came; and already the outer fringe of the bush was swarming with stealthily moving, fierce-eyed little men, eager as terriers, waiting for the signal.

"Hold steady, pard!" whispered Jake, lying full length and squinting along his rifle. "Hold steady! I guess there's a hornets'-nest full of the black imps—yes, siree—an fer any sakes we mustn't let 'em get behind us, or we're gone coons!"

Kelly, or, rather, Captain Vyner, nodded, and dropped his back sight to point-blank range. The undergrowth was thick, and the blacks were moving up in short, scampering rushes, taking every possible advantage of the cover.

Simpson raised his head as a knot of five of them darted across his field of view—bodies bent nearly double—clutching their reed-hafted throwing spears.

"Keep down, man—keep down!" said Kelly hurriedly; and, as though to emphasise his words, a shower of barbed, pointed, slender missiles came whistling and droning all around them.

"Lie flat and work backwards, as I do; and keep on till your feet are right

in the lake water. 'If they try to cut us off, then we shall hear them and be ready."

Without a word more Kelly, working with elbows and toes, proceeded to vanish backwards into the undergrowth. He scarcely seemed to move; not a leaf or grassblade stirred around or above him, and not a rustle betrayed his whereabouts. Yet, even as Jake watched he suddenly vanished from sight as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up. The last glimpse of him Jake had, was limited to the ominous blue-ring steel of the muzzle of a rifle. The American stared, rubbed his eyes, and stared again; but the only remaining sign of a human presence was that here and there a fallen leaf had been overturned or a tuft of grass pressed slightly downwards.

"Waal, I'm darned!" he muttered, in amazement, and set himself to follow as best he could, though hardly with equal success. When he once more gained Kelly's side he wiped the perspiration from his face with his shirt-sleeve and regarded his companion with awed amazement. "Say, Britisher," he whispered at last. "I've been out scalp-huntin' myself—Crees, Apaches, Blackfeet, and sichlike—and I kinder surmised I knew soomethin' about movin' through bush trails an takin' cover, but I never see the Injun yet you couldn't give points too. Say, whar did you larn them tricks?"

Kelly grinned.

"All longa black fellow," he answered, in the samo cautious tones. "I had a boy once—kind of groom—he was the artfullest thing I ever clapped eyes on—he taught me. Dead now, poor chap! Look out!"

There came some stealthy, almost imperceptible movements on their right front, and half a score of throwing spears stuck, quivering, amongst the scrub at the very spot they had just vacated.

The blacks had located it, as they fancied—after some difficulty—and seemed surprised at drawing no answering fire.

"Shifted just about in time," said Kelly shortly, hitching forward his rifle and bending aside a twig. "I fancy some of those would have stirred us up unpleasantly. Hallo! sounds as if some of the beggars were working round on the far side. Lucky we've the lake behind us now."

"Say, pard; how about the horses?"

Kelly shrugged his shoulders.

"I pity any boy who tries to meddle with my old grey. He'll be lucky if he gets off with no worse than a bad shaking and a bitten shoulder. And where the grey goes your animal will follow. If we can stand these chaps off, a whistle'll bring 'em back. They won't stray far, and——"

"Crack!"

Kelly's rifle jerked slightly upwards and a reek of burnt powder floated slowly down wind. Twenty yards away a black boy lay on his face, clawing at the ground convulsively in his death agony. Bolder, or more curious than his fellows, he had crept on ahead of them to do a bit of scouting.

A yell of defiance answered the shot, and the bush all around became suddenly alive with stunted, dark little bodies, darting this way and that, shrieking and gesticulating, but as yet afraid to draw nearer.

At the head of them was a grizzled, tufted-bearded ruffian of about fifty, standing a bare five foot high, but with a scarred, muscular chest and a peculiar, clay-filled, tribal mark on his forehead—a cruel, vindictive-looking scoundrel, with little piercing, narrow-set beady eyes. He was evidently a man of importance.

Crack! again—imprudently he had exposed himself too freely and paid for his carelessness. The heavy bullet caught him just under the left breast, and he sank back quickly in a sitting position with his back against a tree, stone dead, still clutching his reed spears and grinning horribly. Jake, turning quickly on

his side, managed to secure a snapshot at the foremost of a small party who were trying to outflank them, and the rest promptly dived back into the bush.

Then came stillness—a stillness so intense that one might have heard the buzz of a gnat's wings.

Kelly glanced round him uneasily.

"I don't half like this," he muttered; "it isn't natural. By all the rules of black warfare they ought to be trying to rush us now. I don't understand this hanging back business; there's something wrong somewhere. Now, what in the name of all that's wonderful, is that?"

There was a flutter of white in the brazen sunlight, the waving of a ragged piece of linen on a spear shaft above the bush, and a long, droning cry rang out. Both men kept their fingers on the trigger, and raised their heads cautiously. Then suddenly, straight in front of them, not ten paces away, the figure of a black boy emerged from the bush, weaponless, his hideous warpaint smeared away, arms outstretched, and empty, splayed palms.

"You no shoot a black a man! Him longa right pidin. You no bang-bang! Him belonga you; him berry good boy!"

Kelly held up his hand and made the answering peace sign.

"You boy lib longa there? What for this palaver? Me no pidin" (understand).

"Him longa peace palaver," answered the ambassador gravely.

Kelly, with a muttered warning to Jake to keep the man covered and fire at the slightest sign of treachery, stood up and advanced a couple of yards.

"You black boy, come longa here," he said.

The man—a tried warrior by his scars and tribal marks—advanced quickly. Kelly took him by one shoulder, his sinewy fingers gripping him like a vice.

"You call dem boys longa bush, drive in dem horses, then we talk peace palaver—see?"

As a matter of fact Kelly had suddenly remembered that most of their spare ammunition was in Jake's saddlebag; and fearing treachery, he gave this order as a test.

"You talk a straight talk, horse him come, so good. You talka crooked talk, you die longa quick; dem follow in bush die, too!"

The black jerked his head as though in agreement; then, lifting his voice barked some short sharp commands in the vernacular.

Kelly listened attentively, he could stumble along in four or five native dialects and had been in the habit of conversing freely with the Burra-Burra blacks; many of the words seemed similar, and had a familiar ring.

He tried a sentence, and the man answered him, faintly surprised to come across a white man who could speak his own tongue, however badly, and for five minutes they held an animated conversation, the gaps filled by gesticulations and a sort of pidgin English.

At the end of that time the horses came trotting through the bush sniffing uneasily, for none of the black fellows had dared attempt to touch the grey, and the scent of blood made both animals restless and ready to take instant alarm.

The grey, however, seeing Kelly, gave a low whinny of recognition and nuzzled his shoulder. Jake called the other to him with a low whistle, and the two standing men resumed their talk, the grey watching them with lustrous patient eyes, though still obviously on the alert.

At last Kelly made a signal of dismissal, replaced his revolver and picked up his rifle, which he had let fall.

"Rummy beggars!" he exclaimed. "All right, Jake old man, you can put up your gun. Seems we've dropped into the midst of a little domestic trouble. There's the deuce of a tribal row on between these fellows and their next-door neighbours, and as we chanced along from the south they got scared and mistook us for someone

else. I can't get the exact hang of it, but the other tribe apparently have invoked the aid of a couple of low-down, half-caste whites, and these chaps mixed us up with them.

"However, now they want to bury the hatchet and rope us in to have a hand in local politics. They say that it was quite their own fault that they got a man or two killed—all's fair in love and war sort of idea—and that if only we'll back 'em up and help 'em paste the other johnnies, good and strong, they'll be most eternally grateful and do anything they can.

"Of course, I told 'em we were heap big chiefs—regular ghingi men—and would only do it as a great favour."

"Say, wot's ghingi, anyway? I'd kinder like to know what fool part I've got ter play."

"Ghingi him heap big devil—alla same bunyip water-devil—lib in large hole," laughed Kelly. "They'll make you a war-chief for the asking."

"I guess I'd darned sooner have a good square meal under my belt," said Jake hungrily. "I don't hanker after politics any on an empty stomach."

Kelly nodded.

"I figured it out that way. Feed the brutes, was a terse form of my ultimatum. So come along to the far side of the lake. I pumped the old chap all I knew, and as far as I can make out they've collected every man of their tribe all through the bush, and have been holding a big corroboree, and built a stockade to await developments. They've got their warpaint on, and that means serious business. If you see a black boy painted up to the eyes you can lay your last dollar that he's going to fight or bust. There'll be no scooting and living to fight another day. They've just had a scout in from the north to say that the other chaps have got a move on 'em and are working through the bush for a surprise party at dawn to-morrow, with pretty heavy odds in their favour. Incidentally, by the way, I found that there is close on fifty miles of dense bush country the other side of this pond before one strikes the open trail again. Beyond that is the Akani gem district. Any amount of payable ground. Sapphires, white and blue; small diamonds, topaz, opal, and what not, but practically no water. I expect that's where the poor chap we found had come from.

"I've made it a definite clause in the treaty that when we've taught the other chaps how to behave, we are to be piloted through the bush, and provided with guides and water-carriers. Come on. I think they're to be trusted for a time, at any rate. They're dead keen on getting us to help 'em, and, as a rule, a black boy sticks to his bargain."

Jake rose leisurely, stretched himself, and, leading their horses, the two of them followed their guide.

"I guess," said Jake solemnly, "I'd give a hatful of sapphires, pink, green, or star-coloured, for just one large steak and chipped potatoes right here." And he patted his belt.

As a matter of fact, there was no need to sacrifice this prospective wealth, for, their guides having led them into a well-built and strong stockade, the first man who could speak English of sorts, and who had doubtless spent some considerable time in civilisation, cooked them a good square meal.

Kelly asked him a few questions, and learnt that, by the latest intelligence, an attack was to be expected anywhere between dusk and dawn, and that their own tribesmen had flung forward a screen of scouts in the bush beyond, to prevent a surprise.

Kelly and Jake, after a smoke and a rest, strolled round to examine the defences. They had been most cleverly arranged to prevent anything in the nature of a rush, and backed on the lake on the opposite side to that on which they had first struck it.

The main fort was a stout palisading of hard, rough-hewn timber, seven feet

high, and projecting from this, on the inner side, ran a rude lean-to roof, as a protection against a dropping cross-fire. The stockade was semi-circular in form, the two wings touching the lake edge, with small, angular, projecting corners, from which the defenders could pour in a raking fire.

Outside the stockade proper were three bristling rows of sharp-pointed stakes, hardened in the fire, and set at an outward slant, with six-foot intervals between the rows, an obstacle which would cost any enemy dearly to carry at the spear-point.

Of food and water there were plenty, and, as a last resource, it would be easy to escape by swimming the lake, whilst a chosen and devoted few held the stockade to the last moment.

The expected invaders belonged to the Makiri tribe, and outnumbered the defenders by roughly two to one, but the thing which seemed to cause most alarm was the presence in their ranks of the two renegade white men, armed with "fire-sticks"—guns being little known there at that time.

Kelly and Jake made one or two trifling alterations in the disposition of the forces, and quickly decided that they would be most useful on the wings at the extreme horns of the semi-circle, for here they could not only rake the enemy with an enfilading fire along pretty nearly the whole line of defence, but also these were undoubtedly the weakest points, for under cover of a determined frontal rush it was quite possible that two flanking parties, wading or swimming, under cover of darkness, might gain a successful footing within the stockade before their presence was discovered.

At dusk, just as they were in the midst of an evening meal, the outer line of scouts came creeping in, having had orders to fall back without fighting at the first alarm, and reported that the enemy were closing up on three sides, and were even more numerous than had been expected.

Then the darkness snapped down with sub-tropical suddenness, and the camp-fires were extinguished. Twenty minutes later the rest of the scouts came hurrying back, helped over the stockades by willing hands, and closely followed by a shower of barbed arrows, which did little or no damage.

Then came a lull, and a long-drawn hour of anxious waiting and peering into the black night.

Suddenly, at the end of that time, without word or warning, with horrible, screeching yells, the Makiri delivered their assault. They had crept up yard by yard, stealthily and noiseless as so many ghosts, to within twenty feet of the outer defences.

But they had calculated without the sharpened stakes, and, becoming badly entangled amongst these, writhed and struggled under volley after volley of the deadly fish-head arrows from the stockade, the defenders reserving their heavier artillery, the throwing and stabbing spears, for closer quarters.

The slaughter was appalling, for at such short range the light arrows were nearly as effective as a bullet.

The Makiri came of a fighting tribe, however, and their second and rear ranks poured ruthlessly over dead and dying comrades in a reckless charge. A dozen or more even gained the stockade itself, and came up and over it like wild cats only to be killed off by twos and threes; but they managed to do a bit of damage on their own account and the defenders lost a little of their confidence. For a full three minutes the issue hung in the balance. Kelly, rushing forward, seized on one or two of them and bade them throw lighted torches over the stockade on either flank. This they did, and the flaring, resinous wood, blazing up, cast an uncertain light on a scene of indescribable confusion. But it had the advantage of exposing the enemy, whilst leaving the interior of the stockade in darkness.

Crack! crack! crack! spat the rifles on either side, and a pitiless stream of lead swept along the outer defences.

The Makiri hadn't expected this, and it was evidently more than they had bargained for.

Crack! crack! came answering rifles from the woods, and a bullet splattered on the stockade within a couple of inches of Kelly's head.

He held his own fire, and peered through the loophole. A torch a little way to the right flared up suddenly, and he caught a glimpse of a red shirt behind a tree-trunk. He waited, and the owner of the shirt incautiously exposed head and shoulders for another shot.

Crack! A white spurt of flame, and Red Shirt dropped on his face, rolled over, and lay still.

From nearer the front another rifle rang out, and a black boy a few paces away flung up his hands with a shriek and reeled towards the middle of the stockade. Kelly looked and looked, but not a glimpse of the man could he obtain. Crack! again. A tongue of flame cut across the dark background of the wood, and he fired at the flash. A cry and a curse told that the bullet had found its billet, and a wild wailing from the Makiri ranks heralded their leader's fall. Panic gripped them in its chill fingers; they hesitated, delivered one more futile volley, broke, and fled. In an instant the defenders were up and over the stockade in full pursuit, and the throwing-spears did their gruesome work.

Kelly and Jake, fearing a sudden rally or an ambush, yelled to them to come back. But the blacks' fighting blood was thoroughly up, and no power on earth could have held them. They hunted the flying Makiri as boys hunt a terrified cat, and the sounds of the fight died away, growing fainter and fainter as it receded into the bush. Only the dead and wounded and a handful of the steadier men remained.

Jake strolled across to Kelly, ramming new cartridges into his magazine.

"Waal, pardner, kinder brisk while it lasted, eh? See anythin' of them johnnies with the guns?"

Kelly nodded.

"Caught them both—the second by a sheer fluke. Come and see."

With rifles held in readiness, and followed by a black boy carrying a torch, they waded waist deep round the corners of the stockade, and headed for where the first man lay. He was stone dead, with a bullet-hole in the centre of his forehead.

Jake bent down and looked at him.

"Kinder half-caste," he said thoughtfully. "Pretty shot, pardner, considerin'."

The other, a big, swarthy man, with a tangle of black beard, lying thirty or forty paces further away, was not dead when they reached him, but sinking fast, shot through the lungs and gasping for water.

Kelly bade a boy fetch some—it could do no further harm, and might ease the poor chap's suffering.

"Anything I can do?" asked Kelly gravely.

"I ain't complainin'," said the man, between clenched teeth. "I'm 'under dog, and I know when——" The torchlight flickered on Kelly's face, and the man's jaw dropped in amazement. "Captain Ned, by James!" he gasped, and, with a long stare of incredulous bewilderment, which, under other circumstances would have been almost comic, his head jerked back, and he died before the water touched his lips.

Kelly stooped and looked into his face.

"Nicholson, by Jove—Black Nicholson, one of the old gang, and here! Poor chap! If I'd known——" Then suddenly he recovered himself with a bit of a start, and glanced at Jake.

The latter was regarding the scene with an absolutely blank face, though he must have heard every word.

"Say, Vyner," he ejaculated, with a slight emphasis on the name, "guess we'd better make tracks back. Some of our lambs are returning."

Kelly looked him square in the face, and, in spite of himself, burst out laughing. Under all circumstances, on one point Jake was immovable. To him his partner was Captain Vyner, sometime of the British Army, and never even to himself would he admit that Kelly and Vyner were one and the same man.

"Reckon it's none of my business. Kelly's a kinder intimate friend of my pardner's," was the utmost limit he would go to.

"As you please, old man," said Kelly; and they strolled back.

The next morning at sunrise the victorious blacks, true to their promise, detached a party of guides and bearers to escort them northward through the bush. All that day and the next they pushed forward. Left to themselves, they would have been helpless, and lost irretrievably in the first five miles. But the blacks, with unerring instinct, took them in a bee-line.

At noon on the third day there opened out before them a vast arid plain, with here and there volcanic outcasts and a few patches of sparse vegetation. They were on the almost unexplored Akani gem belt. Four days they spent in prospecting. On the fifth, cutting a cross shaft into the side of an old volcanic mound, they struck it rich. The gem stones were there literally in plenty, mostly, it is true, of a low grade, and comparatively valueless, but with a fair sprinkling of fine sapphires, topaz, some first-rate fire opal, and here and there a few undoubted diamonds of small size but good colour.

Before dark they had staked out a two-man claim, four hundred yards by fifty, and after preparing rough maps and sketches to identify the locality, it was settled that Jake, with one guide, was to ride into the nearest township, a hundred and forty miles away, and register their claim formally, returning with tools, provisions, and other necessaries, Kelly, with a few blacks, meanwhile to hold the ground in case of anyone coming along and trying to jump the claim, whilst the rest were sent back for water, their stock running perilously low by this time.

For the next eight days Kelly busied himself developing their exploration tunnel and sinking a shaft, piling up the gem-laden earth to await washing and rocking on Jake's return.

On the ninth, Jake arrived with a light cargo of gear, and accompanied by half a dozen prospectors, eager to share in the good luck.

The first thing he did on his arrival, however, was to seize Kelly excitedly by the shoulder, and dragging him on one side, shove a grimy paper, six days' old under his nose.

"Say, pardner," he grunted excitedly, "figure on this. Seems it might kinder interest you, seein' you know the feller."

Kelly stared at the great headlines in amazement, utterly unable to comprehend Across two whole columns ran big notices as follows:

"NED KELLY AT HIS OLD TRADE AGAIN.
HORRIBLE DISCOVERY! BANK HELD UP AT EUROA! MANAGER SHOT AT HIS POST!
WHOLE DISTRICT TERRORISED!
KELLY WEARS A SUIT OF IRON-PLATE ARMOUR!
FIVE THOUSAND POUNDS REWARD—DEAD OR ALIVE!"

Kelly dropped the paper, scowling heavily, an angry flush creeping up under the tan, but bewildered beyond words.

"Pardner," said Jake, recovering the paper and pointing with a stubby forefinger, "you will take notice that thish yer paper is exactly six days old, an' that thish yer Kelly was at that date rampagin' most obstreperous around Euroa, seven hundred miles from here as the crow flies. You and me hev been here just on fourteen days. Will yew hev the goodness to figure on that? It's clear away above my weight."

Kelly stared in blank amazement at the crumpled newspaper in his hand, whilst Jake beside him pointed out the headlines with a stumpy forefinger.

"This yer's a kind of monkey puzzler, pardner," he said. "See, now, there she goes—'Kelly at his old trade again'—all printed fair and square across the page. 'Bank held up at Euroa. Manager shot down at his post. Whole district terrorised!' An' mark this, too. 'Kelly wears a suit of ironplate armour.' Waal, now, this sure beats cockfightin'! I guess thar's trouble around for someone. Say, as yer used ter know him kinder intimate, how do you figure the bizness out, anyway?"

Kelly stared, frowned, shrugged his shoulders helplessly, and read the close-typed columns.

It was all set out in detail, and had lost nothing in the telling at the hands of the reporters, eager for sensational news.

At half-past three on the afternoon of the previous Tuesday there had suddenly appeared at the cashier's counter at the bank the strange apparition of a man whose head was completely enveloped in a kind of rude iron helmet, with slits for eyeholes—his body and arms being protected in the same fashion. With revolvers levelled, he had called on the scared clerks to "Bail up!" The manager, hearing something of the scrimmage, had dashed out of his private office, firing as he ran. The heavy bullet struck the marauder fair and square in the chest, but failed to penetrate the armour. By way of answer, the man merely laughed harshly, and returned the fire at point-blank range, killing the manager on the spot. The other clerks, unarmed and intimidated, had not dared to offer further resistance, and allowed themselves to be driven into the inner room and secured, whilst the safe was looted. A paper subsequently found on the counter contained some insulting remarks, and was signed "Ned Kelly."

There was a further rumour to the effect that twelve hours later a daring attack had been made on a prominent ranche owner, thirty miles south of Euroa, also by a man in bullet-proof armour, answering to the description of Kelly; and that the latter, after brutally ill-treating the man and his servant, a black boy, had robbed them of a considerable sum, and ridden off to the eastward, leaving them for dead.

That was the gist of the news, bereft of its sensational setting and comments; and even as Kelly read his frown deepened, and his eyes grew hard and glittering. Finally, he threw the paper down with a smothered oath, and ground it into the earth with his heel.

"I shall ride south to-night," he said shortly, in answer to Jake's glance of inquiry. "There's black, ugly work going on, which I don't understand."

Jake threw an arm round Kelly, and held him tight.

"I guess you'll do nothing of the sort, Captain Vyner," he drawled, with an emphasis on the name.

Kelly struggled to free himself.

"Let go, confound you! Take your hands off me sharp, or by James I'll do you an injury! Let me go! Do you hear?"

"Easy does it, pardner—easy does it," said Jake, tightening his bear-like hug. "I've got a word or two to come off me chest afore you make a blame fool of ourself!" With his free hand he whipped out his revolver. "See here, old

man, are yew goin' to stand good and firm till I'm through? Fer if not, I ta my oath I'll plug a hole in yer shoulder right now which will keep yew on yo back for a brace of weeks. Say, is it a go?"

Kelly glared at him fiercely, and looked for a moment as though he would r everything on the chance; but the heavy muzzle was screwed tight home unde his collar-bone, and he saw that Jake would be as good as his word.

"All right, fire ahead," he said. "I'll listen."

The American nodded, and replaced his revolver.

"See here, pardner, this yer so-called Kelly, this fake artist, seems no end of low-down, mean sort, an' he's rampin' round considerable. I guess it'll fair an' square if he foots the bill for his little jinks. Yes, sir. Now, supposin yew, Captain Vyner, go burstin' into the middle of things down thar, all hot an starchy, thar's dozens of men to come forward an' swear yew an' Kelly was prett thick some time back. They might even stick out as you was Kelly. An' befor yew knew whar yew was, yew'd be payin' for the other feller's fun—see?

"As it goes now, all yew've got ter do is ter sit tight apiece, till the fake artis plays his next move; then Captain Vyner can move south, an' wade in with big, wholesome kinder alibi at his back, an' all these fellers right here to swe to it. Savvy?"

Kelly shook his head, thought for a minute, and then held out his hand.

"Jake Simpson, you're a white man. By James, you've got a head on yo shoulders, too! I see what you're driving at, and I see my way clear. I'll sta for four days, if that suits your book, and on the fourth you and I will ride sout and see the matter through."

"That's her," said Jake. "Say, you fellers thar, care to see the paper I brough down? Ned Kelly's on the rampage again—reg'lar busted out bad. I was jus showin' it to Cap'n Vyner here. Catch hold; thar's some mighty fine readin'!"

The men crowded round, and studied the crumpled paper eagerly—after whic the tactful Jake turned them off to survey the new property, and peg out claims for themselves.

Four days later Jake and Kelly, with a black boy to act as guide, rode out o camp southwards; also—though of this he made no mention to Kelly—he prevaile on three of the new-comers to accompany them, on the plea of wanting som special drilling tools.

The black boy was a first-rate tracker, and took them by an easterly route which saved them a good three days in point of distance.

On the Wednesday night they arrived, fagged and dusty, at Benalla, an under Jake's guidance, as nominally head of the party, made straight for the Wallaby saloon.

They found it crowded by miners, ranche owners, and townsfolk, all in a state of wild excitement. That very afternoon news had come in that a big run had been held up fifteen miles away, the owner, the overseer, and one of the hands shot down in cold blood, and the buildings ransacked and fired.

No one paid much attention to the small group of travellers, and they sat in a corner by themselves, listening to the latest scraps of news and gossip. All the troopers for miles round had been summoned by messengers and telegraph, and the whole country was being scoured.

Jake, very much on the alert, kept his ears and eyes open, picking up a sentence here and a sentence there, and watching each new-comer who turned into the saloon with the latest news.

The bar-tender, always a personage of importance, was describing in a loud voice how Kelly used to come and smoke and chat in that very room, and how he couldn't "kinder get the hang of things," for Kelly had always played fair in

the old days. "He was a gentleman through and through, he was," he explained almost tearfully, "with a sort of well-my-man-you-go-to-the-deuce sort of air about him. Free-handed, too, and whenever he did a bit of business it was always neat, with a sort of flip to it kinder made you laugh. But this time he seems to have bust out in a new place—regular low-down, bloodthirsty kind of brute. Never—no, never in all his experience, had Kelly been known to shoot an unarmed man till now. In short, he couldn't make head nor tail of things, 'cep' Cap Kelly had gone 'loco,' or took to the drink, which was never a way of his."

Meanwhile, all unknown to them, the real Captain Kelly, alias Vyner, alias the Britisher, was sitting in their midst, quite unperturbed by the uproar around him, smoking a cigar and sipping a glass of Vermouth, though he held a revolver wedged between his knee and the underside of the table, and his back was to the light.

Jake ordered food and rooms for the party—he, at least, was unknown in Benalla—and, being pretty sharp set, they were about to fall to when the swing doors flung open, and a young, well-built man came striding in, booted and spurred. Behind him followed an older man with a grizzled beard. Both looked anxious and had evidently been riding hard.

Kelly set down his glass quickly, and Jake heard him give a sharp, hissing intake of breath.

"Dick Mason and Trevelyan, by James!" he muttered; and slipped his hand beneath the table for a second.

The younger man, Dick Mason, swung into the crowded room, and suddenly, almost as though he had heard the low, tense whisper, turned on his heel sharply and checked. For a fraction of a second he stared straight at Kelly, who returned the look. Then, with an almost imperceptible start, he recovered himself and strode on towards the upper end of the saloon, where he was instantly surrounded by a crowd clamouring for news, for everyone recognised him as the man responsible for the capture of Kelly and the break up of the Robbers' Roost gang two years before.

He answered the questions glibly enough, and carelessly, as though he wanted to be left alone, but every now and again he darted a swift glance at the group by the door.

Jake noticed this after awhile, and puckered his forehead trying to think where he had seen him before.

Presently he leant across to Kelly. "Say, pardner, who's the cuss over there? I've seen him before—tumbled to him at once, but I guess I can't fix him, somehow. He seems mighty int'rested in you, anyway."

Kelly nodded.

"We are old—er—acquaintances. I saw him the moment he came in, and he saw me; for the rest, I know no more than you do. Ah, as I thought; he's coming over to speak. You remember him now—Dick Mason, Trevelyan's partner. They were both at the big dinner up at the diggings, when Hayes and Macullan played me that trick over the race."

Dick Mason was, in fact, gradually edging his way nearer them, without any apparent haste or design, but surely and slowly.

Presently a sudden movement of the crowd brought him almost up to the table, and he and Kelly exchanged a quick glance. The next instant he was out of the doors and in the street.

Kelly rose to his feet and prepared to follow. Jake laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Say, pardner——" he began. But Kelly cut him short.

"It's a risk, but it's the best way," he said hurriedly, in a low whisper. "Mason's to be trusted, and will play square, whatever course he takes. Keep our crowd together. I don't want them or you to be dragged into any of this bother." And, without another word, he also slipped out of the saloon.

The night outside was pitch dark, and after the glare and glitter it was hard to distinguish things in the dimly lighted street.

Kelly fancied, however, that he could make out a dark blur in the deep shadows ten paces away to the right, and moved towards it accordingly.

"Well?" said Mason curtly, as he drew level.

Kelly looked him square in the eyes.

"Well, Mr. Mason, what is it—peace or war? Here I am in the midst of Benalla. What do you intend to do?"

Mason was silent for a moment.

"Ned Kelly," said he at last, "you and I have known one another under many different circumstances. We have eaten together, fought together, and faced death in various ways. I have known you as an unscrupulous man, with his hand raised against everyone, and his back to the wall; and I have known you risk your life time and again to save others; but I never thought that I should have cause to call you a cowardly hound, and that's what you've proved yourself in the end—you who used to make a boast that you had never drawn trigger on an unarmed man, or killed save in self defence!

"You cur! When I saw you in the saloon back there, I had half a mind to shoot you on sight! I had you covered through my coat pocket, and my fingers fairly itched on the trigger. It would have been no more than you deserved."

Kelly bit his lip. His face was white as a sheet, yet he restrained himself by a tremendous effort.

"Have you finished?" he asked quietly.

"No, I've not!" snapped Mason. "I haven't begun to tell you what I think of you. When, back there by the Burra Burra caves, we ran you down, and you faced us alone, wounded and desperate; you were a man, and a brave one, and I was bitterly sorry that I had had a hand in your undoing. Later, when you broke Melbourne Gaol and won clean away, I was glad—so glad that, when I saw you up at the diggings running straight and winning the good word of all around you, I aided and helped you by a half truth rather than let Hayes and Macullan trap you. And I would have gone further, if need be.

"But now you've sunk lower than ever you sank before. The man I knew fought, and fought square, and his word was to be trusted as well as another's.

"He wouldn't have murdered men in cold blood, or shot down an unarmed station hand because he tried to do his duty. But there's worse even than that behind. I'm just back from Robertson's ranche, and it may interest you to know, Mr. Murderer Kelly, that the poor woman who was injured died three hours ago."

Kelly gave vent to a sharp exclamation, quickly stifled.

"And you propose?" he asked quietly.

"I propose to do my duty. Even now I can't shoot you down as I ought. But I am going from here straight to the police barracks to take up my commission again, apply for a special warrant, and then, with half an hour's law, look out for yourself. I give you thirty minutes by my watch to clear out if you can. Then I'll hunt you down like a rat, and, by heavens, the next time I clap eyes on you, the man who shoots quickest will drop in his tracks! Keep your hands off that belt; you're covered now."

Kelly eyed him straightly and a little sadly, but he took no heed of the ominous bulge in Mason's pocket. Slowly, deliberately, never shifting his glance, he

slipped his right hand to his belt, and laid hands on his revolver. He heard the warning click of a trigger, muffled through the cloth, but he never paused.

Drawing the weapon, he slid his fingers along the barrel, and, so holding it, passed it over, butt foremost, to Mason.

"If you want to, shoot now," he said quickly. "I have no other weapon. But it might be as well to hear what I've to say first. Let me ask you a question. What was the date of the hold up of the Euroa Bank?"

Mason stared.

"The 22nd," he said curtly.

Kelly nodded.

"And this ranche affair—Robertson, you say the name is."

"Last night at midnight. What foolery is this?"

"Simply that on the 22nd of last month I was nearly five hundred miles from Euroa; for days previous to that I myself was at the point of death from thirst and starvation, having been badly bushed. Then I rode into this town from the north two hours ago, having made seventy miles since sun up, and having been riding hard for the last eight days, with one purpose and one only—to see you and Trevelyan, and to find out for myself this man who pretends to be Ned Kelly, and shoot him on sight for an impertinent impostor, who has dared to besmirch the name I once used by as foul a series of crimes as I ever heard of.

"I'm not accustomed to have my word doubted, as you know. Still, in there are four men who will vouch for the truth of what I say—Jake Simpson, whom you knew up at the diggings, and three others. Besides, there are our horses and a black boy. That's all, Dick Mason."

Dick stared in blank amazement; then his whole face lighted up, and he thrust out his hand.

"Forgive me, old man! Shake! I had hoped—I—— Bah! What a fool I've been! I should have known it all the time. Shake, old man, and let me take back my hard words. But I was feeling bad about it. Look out! Quick, get behind me! There's that little beast Hayes. If he spots you you're done."

CHAPTER 12.

Back to Benalla—Kelly Meets Dick Mason—The Riot.

KELLY, acting on Mason's hint, stepped quickly back into the deeper shadows, and pulled his hat well down over his eyes. The street was very dark, and it was unlikely that the commissioner would recognise him unless his suspicions were aroused.

When Mason first gave his whispered warning Hayes was perhaps ten paces away—no more; and behind him walked a couple of troopers with carbines over their arms.

He came rapidly up, strutting in a pompous, aggressive manner peculiar to him when acting officially.

He saw Dick, and promptly hailed him.

"Hallo, Mason!" he cried. "You're the very man I wished to see. Here are your orders, commanding you to take up your active commission in the police again. They've just been cabled from Melbourne. I have information from a private source that Kelly is somewhere in Benalla, and call on you officially to help in the search."

Dick stared him straight in the face. C

"I am Mister Mason to you, please," he said contemptuously, "and I take no

orders from a man of your stamp! If there is an official wire I should be glad to see it, and, in any case, I shall require Captain Wyatt, who is in command here, to confirm it before I take up my commission again."

Hayes fumed, and looked for a moment as though he were going to burst into a fit of vulgar rage. However, he managed to control himself.

"Then, Mister Mason," he said acidly, "I should recommend you to cast your eyes over this." And he thrust forward a crumpled cable form.

Dick took it.

"I will see Captain Wyatt this evening some time, and, if he confirms it, will report for duty."

"Who's that?" asked Hayes sharply, catching sight of Kelly. "I am calling on every able bodied man to help in the search for this blackguard who murdered poor Robertson."

"This gentleman is a friend of mine," replied Dick curtly. "We were discussing that very same subject when you—er—intruded."

Hayes scowled and passed in.

"Narrow thing that," said Dick Mason, with a stifled laugh. "I thought he had spotted you for sure. As it is, it's a hundred to one he goes on to the Wallaby and catches sight of Jake Simpson, in which case he'll smell a rat."

Kelly nodded moodily. Hayes presence had sent him into one of his sullen black moods.

"Right or wrong," he said, "I swear Hayes shall never lay hands on me alive. I'll shoot him like a rat first, and leave you to clear my name from any association with this murdering brute who has seen fit to adopt my personality. By the way, have you any idea who it might chance to be?"

"Not the faintest," replied Dick. "You see, old man, until we met a little while back, I thought—er—that is, I——"

"Quite so. But now you know you're wrong, has any other solution occurred to you?"

"No; none."

"Well, it has to me. I won't tell you what I think now, but I'll do this: If you care to make a sporting bet of a level fiver, I'll write the name on a scrap of paper and hand it to you in a sealed envelope. When we catch the chap, open it, and if I'm wrong I'll hand you over the stake. Do you agree?"

"Seems an easy way of earning money," said Dick, laughing. "I'm on. But, meanwhile, I'd like to remind you that Benalla High Street is not quite the safest spot for you just at present. Look here. I'll tell you what. Remember Trevelyan's old rooms? You do? Good! Well, he's staying there now, and I'm digging with him. Go straight there, tell him you've seen me, and explain matters. I'll follow on as soon as I can with Jake Simpson and the rest of your crowd. It's the last place in the whole town they'd ever think of searching."

"That's so. I'll take your advice. One question more first. Is this—this Hayes person in command here?"

"Yes, very much so."

"Absolute boss—command over Wyatt and the troopers, and all that?"

"Absolute, though I believe they've cabled for some big bug from Melbourne to come and take things over. Cut along, old man; every second adds to the risk. Ah! Look, there's one of the troopers who were with Hayes coming out of the saloon door. In a hurry, too, by the look of him. See you later." And, without another word, he was gone.

Kelly watched him disappear, then, following the line of the deeper shadows, made his way quickly to the well remembered lodgings of Mr. Trevelyan, his

hand ready on his revolver butt and his eyes diligently scrutinising the road before him, for at any moment he might expect to hear the call of "Hands up!" and the whistle of a bullet about his ears.

Yet, in spite of his immediate and pressing danger, his mind was also busy with a problem which he had set himself to work out. Hayes was in command of the whole district—so much Mason had assured him. Hayes, with all his faults, was no fool, and yet—well, and yet with plenty of troopers and armed men well mounted at his command, Hayes had failed to so much as even glimpse his quarry. This was no matter of catching the notorious Captain Kelly and his gang in their prime—a set of daring and skilful men, with an unerring knowledge of the country, a long head to plan and direct their movements, and one out of every two isolated squatters staunch partisans, ever ready to give them timely warning—but merely an affair of the apprehension of an awkward, murderous criminal whose methods horrified and alarmed rich and poor alike, and who had for trade purposes adopted Kelly's own name—a very mangy jackal in a lion's skin.

Arriving at Mr. Trevelyan's, he found, as was usual, and as he expected, the door on the latch. He opened it cautiously, and, with even more caution, ascended the stairs. For all he knew, Trevelyan might have company, and the explanations he had to offer would be hard to give in a crowded room with half a dozen revolvers pointed at his head.

With a jerk he loosed his own weapon from the holster, and slipped it into his coat-pocket, keeping his hand on it. Then he listened. Not a sound anywhere. But through the crack of the door above him he could distinguish a gleam of light, and the faint, fragrant aroma of a pipe.

He tiptoed forward and tried the handle. It yielded easily to his touch, without even so much as a click. If there were strangers in the room they were extraordinarily quiet. But, then, a man who spends long months at a stretch on lonely sheep stations cultivates a habit of quietness, and talks but little over his evening glass and pipe. There was a possibility, and possibilities were things which just then Kelly could not afford to risk; there was too much at stake.

He tried the door again, shoving it forwards a few inches, and caught a glimpse of the interior of the room at its near end. An empty armchair, a smouldering log in the grate, and the corner of a table on which were a litter of papers were all that he could see.

He pulled himself together, prepared to face the worst, if need be, and, opening the door wider, stepped swiftly in, closing it behind him. He found himself face to face with Mr. Trevelyan, the one man whom he wanted to see, and Mr. Trevelyan was fast asleep.

Kelly laughed softly to himself, pulled a cigar from his pocket, lighted it and sat down in the empty armchair. From outside, through the half-open window, he could hear a noise and shouting in the direction of the Wallaby saloon. Evidently there were stirring times there. Then, crisp and clear, a revolver-shot rang out on the night, followed by a sudden silence, and Mr. Trevelyan woke up.

He woke as a man accustomed to a healthy, outdoor life awakes—as an animal or a savage—wide-eyed and alert in the fraction of a second, with all his senses keenly strung.

The first glance showed him his visitor, and recognition was instantaneous. His first thought, in the light of recent events, was that the intruder meant murder, short, sharp, and deliberate, and that in all probability, he had not ten seconds to live. He was unarmed, seated, helpless, and, in all probability covered, yet not a muscle of his face twitched, and his hands remained deep thrust in his pockets; his half-empty pipe lay on the front of his coat unheeded.

"Well?" he said at length, seeing that Kelly neither moved nor spoke.

"Evening, Trevelyan!" answered the latter affably, beaming over the glowing cigar. "Feeling a bit tired? Nothin' like an after-dinner nap. Sorry to intrude, but I'm expectin' a few friends of mine round in a minute or two."

Mr. Trevelyan, still without moving, stared him straight in the face.

"Don't waste time," he said coldly. "If you mean shooting, shoot and have done with it! I know I've got no show, and you know, or ought to, that I'm no sort of a coward."

Kelly nodded gravely.

"No man who isn't a liar could call you that."

"Well, why not shoot, then? If you want to talk first, or anything of that sort, forgive me, but I really must ask you to let me relight my pipe. I give you my word of honour I am quite unarmed, and will make no attempt to rise from the chair; but argument always tires me. The matches are by your elbow on the table. Thanks!"

Kelly gravely handed over the matches.

"I think," said he slowly, "that you and I, Trevelyan, know one another well enough to dispense with compliments; at the same time, I should like to say I think, and always have thought, that you are one of the most fearless men I have ever met—and I've met a good many in my time. Here, take this. I haven't the smallest idea of shooting you, I assure you." And, uncocking his revolver, he handed it across by the barrel. "Now we shall both feel more comfortable. That"—with a nod at the weapon—"was only in case of emergencies."

Trevelyan also nodded; he did not even trouble to pick the gun off the table. He knew his man too well to doubt his word.

"To what, then, am I indebted? What do you want—money? If so, I'd better tell you plainly you can shoot and be hanged before you get a single dollar. A while back I offered you money, any you might want within reason; but then Robertson was alive, and the Euroa bank floor hadn't been turned into a shambles. Moreover, the offer was made to a certain Captain Vyner, for whom I had considerable respect, not to a tuppenny-ha'penny felon who goes in for indiscriminate murder in a clanking suit of bullet-proof iron, the device of a coward."

Kelly puffed at his cigar, and leant back.

"I quite appreciate the fact; in part, it is the reason of my being here. Come, Trevelyan, time's short, don't let's fence any longer. You said just now you would have offered this Vyner money—helped him, in fact. Now, this same Vyner comes to you, not for money, but for help—the help of your good word in an emergency. No"—holding up a protesting hand—"don't interrupt, please; listen to what I've got to say first. I'll begin by a statement, the truth of which you can prove afterwards at your leisure. I—Kelly, Captain Vyner, whom you please—never saw Robertson in my life, never set foot in Euroa or within twenty miles of it during the past two years, and am here for one sole purpose, and that is to catch or kill the man who has dared to usurp my old—er—name, and——"

Mr. Trevelyan sprang to his feet with a bound.

"You're no liar, Ned Tr——"

Kelly stopped him sharply.

"No names, please! Kelly or Vyner, at your service. That other we agreed to forget long ago, at the foot of the Burra-Burra rock. What I have told you is the absolute truth. Since the day you and I parted at the gates of death, as it were, I have harmed no man save in self-defence, nor have I committed any action of which you yourself need feel ashamed. As I tell you, so I told Dick Mason not half an hour ago, and I have four good men here in Benalla who can prove me innocent. I only learnt of these affairs by pure chance from a newspaper a week old when I was hundreds of miles north of this above the bush country."

Mr. Trevelyan thrust out a hand.

"You were wild once, Ned, and there was bitter hatred between us, but then, as now, I need no proof of what you say. I believe, and gladly, and when I saw you up at the diggings there, I'd have given you a helping hand if you'd let me. Now you've told me the truth I'll do all that lays in my power. What's the trouble?"

"The precise trouble is that Hayes and a posse of troopers are scouring Benalla for me at the present moment, and that if Hayes finds me and I don't shoot him on sight, it's a dead certainty that he'll shoot me, and listen to explanations afterwards. He owes me one or two little things, you know. Secondly, and mainly, if I'm not to shoot Hayes, I want you to persuade him to keep his paws off me for a day or two. Lock me up, if you like—I don't care. You're a magistrate, and all that. And also I want you to work the oracle with the High Commissioner. Make a sort of bargain with him that if I collar this brute in the tin suit for him, alive or dead, that Captain Vyner, alias the Britisher, of unblemished reputation, shall be allowed to go free and unmolested, and live respectable. Oh, yes, I know it's no end of a big contract, but you can do it. I've thought it all out, and, unofficially, your words will have as much weight with him as the rest of the crowd put together. You understand? If I, Captain Vyner, mine-owner, etc., and so forth, produce this so-called Kelly within one week, then I am allowed to go free and unmolested, to live as honestly as I can. If I fail, then Captain Vyner merges once more into ex-convict Ned Kelly, and pays the extreme penalty of the law, without resistance or complaint. Ah, what's that? Sounds like Mason and my crowd stampeding for here in a hurry."

There came a quick scurrying of feet on the stairs below, a sharp exclamation from Dick Mason, and Jake's voice could be heard urging the others on.

"Hustle, boys! The durn little skunk is stealing after us like a mad coyote with his tongue hangin' out, and fairly howlin' for blood! Hark to 'em! Thar's a lot more joined in—some of the Wallaby crowd, I fancy. Thar'll be scrappin' before long, I'm layin' the odds."

"Come in, gentlemen—come in!" cried Mr. Trevelyan. And they trooped into the room, Jake in the rear.

"Say, pardner," he drawled, with a nod to Kelly, "this yer Hayes is on a business trip, I guess. Your friend Mr. Mason yanked me an' the boys out just as the fur was beginnin' to fly. An' look here, gentlemen all, thish yer, as yew know, is Britisher—Captain Vyner—my pardner, and, as you may or may not know, he was someways a kinder pal of Ned Kelly—Captain Kelly, the real article. An' now Hayes and his gang are tryin' to rope my pardner in.

"Now, all I want ter say, gentlemen, is this: My pardner here, Captain Vyner, has no kind of call to be interfered with on account of doin's around here, for he never so much as heard of 'em till I showed him a week-old newspaper. Him and I had been travellin' together, got bushed, and were doin' a bit of prospectin' seven hundred miles away when the Euroa bank job was put up, and for the last ten days or more these boys and myself have been ridin' alongside of him day and night, headin' south to put matters right, seein', you see, as how the real Ned Kelly's been a kinder pal of Captain Vyner's. Therefore, gentlemen, I intend to do a bit of fancy shootin' rather'n stand by and see thish yer Hayes take the wrong man, and if those present don't agree, why, I guess I can clear out with my pardner, an' we two can face the music alone."

Mr. Trevelyan clapped Jake on the shoulder.

"I know you right enough, Jake Simpson, and I know—er—your friend, Captain Vyner, here, and I'm quite convinced that neither he nor Ned Kelly have anything to do with these last affairs. If Major Hayes tries to interfere with him on those grounds, I, as a magistrate, shall prevent it. If, however, Captain Vyner is required

as an—er—associate, shall we say—of the ex-convict, Kelly, I am afraid that I can do nothing. You understand?"

"Yes, sirree," said Jake emphatically, and for a moment there was an intense silence in the room, broken after a pause by a dull murmur from the street below, which gradually swelled into a hoarse, raucous shout.

"That's Hayes and his crowd," said Dick Mason, listening intently. And, with a significant movement, he loosened his gun.

There came a pounding knock at the door. Mr. Trevelyan stepped out on to the staircase and called:

"Who's there?"

There was a slam, and a tramping of feet in the passage-way by way of answer, and Hayes called out:

"That you, Trevelyan? I've a word to say to you. Robertson's murderer is in your house, and we've come to fetch him out."

"I shall be glad if you'll step upstairs and explain, Major Hayes," said Mr. Trevelyan, with quiet emphasis. "No need to bring the whole of Benalla at your heels; my rooms are small. You yourself and a couple of others will suffice—the rest of you stand back there, please. If the man is in my house, I assure you I will make it my personal duty to hand him over."

Hayes, a police-sergeant, and a truculent-looking plain-clothes officer stepped up and entered the sitting-room, to find themselves confronted by Trevelyan, Dick Mason, and Jake. In an armchair, still placidly smoking, was Captain Vyner, and at the far end of the room, by the window, stood three other men, strangers to him.

"Now, then, Trevelyan, hand him over! That's my man!" exclaimed Hayes, who had caught sight of the Britisher. "That's the chap who has set the whole countryside in an uproar, and been responsible for the deaths of half a dozen better men!"

"Allow me to remind you, Major Hayes, that you are in my private room as a guest, at my invitation. If you refer to another guest of mine, Captain Vyner, I beg to inform you that he has nothing whatever to do with either the Euroa bank or the Robertson affair—facts of which I have positive proof—and that, as a magistrate of this section of the country, I definitely refuse to allow him to be molested in any way on such absurd charges, because of petty personal spite. You seem to forget that I was at the diggings when Captain Vyner not only won from you a large sum of money, which you tried to evade payment of, but subsequently called you out and proved you, in the face of the whole camp, to be a liar, a trickster, and a coward, while he himself carried generosity to an almost absurd point of quixotism. If you have nothing further to say, I must request you to leave my house, taking with you my word of honour, backed by irrefutable proof, that Captain Vyner is entirely innocent of the charges brought by you."

Hayes grew purple in the face with rage, and his eyes protruded from his head.

"I tell you what it is, Trevelyan, you go too far!"

"Mister Trevelyan," insisted the latter suavely, "to folk of your kidney."

"You go too far, I say!" spluttered Hayes. "You shall answer for it to me! You call me scurrilous names, and trump up a lot of unseemly scandal, and all the while you know you are sheltering an impostor and defying the law of the land. I shall report this to the commissioner."

"I am on the point of sending out a mounted messenger, informing him of the facts of the case."

"You are, are you? Well, then, I hope you will also inform him that Captain Vyner so styled is none other than Ned Kelly, the bushranger!"

Mr. Trevelyan shrugged his shoulders.

"Your proof!" he demanded curtly.

Hayes's jaw dropped. He had none. Without Macullan he could no more prove that Vyner and Kelly were one and the same than he could fly; and to persist in the accusation in spite of Mr. Trevelyan—a man revered and respected throughout the country—was too risky even for him. He was beaten, and he knew it.

"Proof—proof be hanged!" he stuttered. "But I'll warn you of this much, that outside there in the street are a couple of hundred men clamouring for justice against this fellow, and unless you give him up, by Heaven, we'll take him by force!"

Kelly started up from his chair with an oath, but Mr. Trevelyan waved him back.

"If you dare attempt such a thing, I shall not only resist to the uttermost—and I would have you notice that there are seven of us here, all well armed and tried *men*—but I will indict you for opposing the law, which here in Benalla I represent under the High Commissioner's own warrant. Now go, or I will have you thrown down the stairs, and if any man amongst your following loses his life over this, as sure as I am a living man, I'll have you brought up and arraigned in the Benalla courthouse. Go!"

Hayes scowled vindictively, wheeled sharply, and left the room.

A hoarse roar from the streets greeted his reappearance.

Mr. Trevelyan passed out.

"Stand back, the rest of you. That fellow means mischief. If they attack we can't hold out for a quarter of an hour. They're in an ugly temper. I'll try what I can do to make them listen to reason. Don't suppose it'll be much good, though."

And, without another word, he stepped out on the balcony, and stood gazing down on a sea of upturned faces, which seemed to grimace and mock at him, whilst an angry roar surged upwards.

His face was pale, but set and hard, as he watched, and his finger was crooked over the trigger of the revolver held negligently at his side.

His keen eyes searched the crowd carefully. One man possibly out of every three was known to him—he himself was a familiar figure to all—and yet he found it hard to recognise those he knew amidst features distorted by passion, and convulsed by an almost hysterical excitement.

Word had gone round—had been passed round by stealth—that the murderer of Robertson was somewhere in the room behind him; and the crowd were momentarily, at any rate, beyond reason, ravening for their prey. Lynch-law was what they wanted, and lynch-law was what they meant to use.

Even as he looked and listened, he saw Major Hayes and his small knot of followers elbow and shove their way into the thick of things, and noted that from time to time during his progress Hayes paused and said a word to men here and there, who in turn passed it on to their neighbours.

Behind him in the room were Jake Simpson and his three men, Dick Mason, and Kelly himself, all armed and resolute.

In the street below were close on three hundred men ripe for mischief. There was trouble ahead—big trouble; of that he was practically certain. But, all the same, if possible, he meant to temporise. It was a man's life which he was fighting for—a man innocent, at any rate, of those crimes for which the crowd were claiming his blood.

Twice Kelly had stepped forward, and offered to go down alone and take his chance, rather than drag his friends into trouble, and each time Dick Mason and one of the others had pulled him back almost forcibly in the nick of time.

Suddenly, above the roar of the crowd, came a distinct shout and organised cry of half a dozen voices, prompted by Hayes.

"Give him up! Give him up, or we'll pull the house down!"

Mr. Trevelyan smiled grimly, and held up his left hand for silence.

But the crowd paid no attention.

"Come on, boys!" shouted one. "Let's have the brute out an' string him up! To blazes with your gaols and warders! A long rope and a quick drop'll do the trick!"

Again Mr. Trevelyan held up his hand, but they shouted him down. For a full three minutes he stood there patiently; then, sharp and short, without warning, he whipped up his revolver and fired twice in the air in quick succession. The two sharp, smacking reports rang out, and, as if by magic, the crowd were silenced. No man could quite understand what had happened, and therefore shut his mouth and opened his ears to find out.

It seemed as though every man had suddenly been aroused from a delirious dream, and found himself standing on the brink of tragedy. They had been shouting sudden death briskly a moment before, but not one man in ten realised the grimness of reality.

Mr. Trevelyan saw his chance, and took it at once.

"Well, my men, what is it you want?" he asked in a calm, level voice, stepping forward a pace, and resting a hand on the balustrade.

"Robertson's murderer!" answered a man immediately below. "And if you don't hand him over we'll come and fetch him!"

"You want Robertson's murderer, eh?" responded Mr. Trevelyan coolly. "Well, you have my sympathies. I and these gentlemen in here are in need of that very same man. No, it's no use you jeering and trying to shout me down. You, Major Hayes, bid those men of yours be quiet, or, by James, I'll give the whole crowd a hint or two as to why you left the diggings! Now, look here, you fellows! You most of you know me. I was here settled in the country ten years and more before the greater part of you ever set foot on Australian soil. I'm magistrate for this section, and there's not a man amongst you who can accuse me of playing him a dirty trick or breaking my promise.

"Listen to me, then. I give you my personal word of honour, both as a man and a magistrate, that Robertson's murderer is not in this house—never has been, so far as I know; and, what's more, I've never seen him. I and my friends are busy now—or were until you interrupted us—trying to devise a means for his taking, and I will hereby make an offer out of my own private purse of a reward of two hundred pounds for his capture, dead or alive. Have you any more to say?"

There was a mingled outburst of cheers and groans.

Some—most of them the older and more staid inhabitants—cheered, and there were shouts of "Good for you, Trevelyan!" "What Mr. Trevelyan says goes!" "We'll take your word against any man's!" "I'll pouch that two hundred!"

On the other hand, the raw youngsters and the rowdy element, who were out for excitement, and had been worked up by Hayes's agents to a mischievous and dangerous pitch, groaned and hissed loudly.

Mr. Trevelyan glanced back into the room.

"Better get ready, you chaps," he muttered over his shoulder. "They mean to be nasty, beyond all doubt, and we shall have to damage some of them. Shoot carefully, and pick out the noisy ones when the time comes."

There was a momentary lull, then Hayes's voice rang out:

"Trevelyan—Trevelyan, d'ye hear? Hand us over Captain Vyner, as he calls himself, and let's make an end of it! If you don't we'll come and fetch him for ourselves, and some of you'll be hurt in the process!"

"Then the responsibility will rest on your head, Major Hayes," answered Mr.

Trevelyan quietly. "Captain Vyner is here as my guest, and the first man who attempts to molest him in any way, or who dares to set foot across my threshold uninvited, I will shoot down as a burglar! And, mark you, the law is on my side. You talk pretty loudly. If you have the strength of your convictions, try it on yourself. But, once more, I solemnly warn you that I shall shoot you as I would a dog before you had two feet over the mat. There are, as I have already said, seven of us here. We shall fight from behind cover, and if any of you others"—he raised his voice—"are foolish enough to follow that man"—pointing to Major Hayes—"all I have to say is that you do it at your own risk, and I won't be answerable for the consequences!"

He turned sharply on his heel, and left the balcony; and at the same instant, by a preconcerted signal, the lamp on the table was extinguished.

Hitherto, Mr. Trevelyan's tall form had been clearly silhouetted against a background of light, but with the snapping out of the lamp he was invisible to those below, and the whole house seemed to take on an aspect of grim, resolute silence.

From the fringes of the crowd small knots of men began to melt unostentatiously away, for the most part the elder and more self-restrained ones, who had had experience of night-fighting, and knew that in the house before them were at least three men with a great record for marksmanship.

But the younger and more turbulent spirits, egged on by Hayes and his followers, were ripe for mischief, and amongst them were the usual smattering of bad men, fellows who always welcomed anything in the shape of a fight or riot for the chances it might yield of paying off private scores and robbing better men than themselves.

It was a knot of these who opened the ball. With cries of "Have him out! Lynch him!" a dozen or more made a simultaneous rush for the house door, and began battering on the flimsy woodwork. The house itself was only a frame-built affair of timber, as were most of the houses in those early days of Benalla—and in under five minutes the tattered and splintered fragments of a door crashed inwards bodily.

But the next barrier which they had to surmount was a very different kind of thing. Before them lay a dark, narrow hall, from the far end of which led the stairway. All was black as pitch; but from somewhere up above Mr. Trevelyan's voice rang out, crisp and clear, above the din:

"Remember, men, the first man who crosses the mat, I shoot; and I've the law behind me! It's your own risk!"

As though in answer to his warning, there came a sudden, surging rush from the street. Those in front pressed back, but their fellows forced them on, and the leading ranks jammed and wedged one another shoulder to shoulder in the narrow passage.

Crack! crack! crack! Three times a revolver spat through the darkness from half-way up the stairs. The confined space was filled with the acrid, stinging reek of burnt powder; and from below came the shrieks of the wounded, as they tried desperately to struggle back into safety.

One man dropped, and was trampled underfoot; another, shot through the leg, was jammed against the wall, moaning piteously, till another rush from without swept him from his place.

Crack! crack! again, and this time the harsher smack of a rifle mingled with Mr. Trevelyan's revolver. That was the work of one of Jake's men, and at such short range the heavy driving-power of the bullet penetrated the front rank two, and even three, deep.

The passage was becoming a veritable shambles. So tightly were the assailants

wedged that, wounded and whole, were crushed together in a compact mass, and no man could get at his weapon to use it with effect.

Again and again they attempted to break back out of range of the pitiless bullets, but ever those behind and in safety hurled them forward.

In response to a shout from Mr. Trevelyan, Dick Mason, revolver in hand, leapt to the balcony.

"Back, there—back, you fools!" he yelled. "Hayes, call your men off! Hayes, where are you? Call 'em off, I say! The stairway passage is packed with wounded, and there'll be worse to come!"

But ex-Commissioner Hayes, like a prudent man, had broken cover the moment firing began, and was now securely ensconced under the balcony, out of range, whilst his dupes bore the brunt of the fight.

Seeing that all his efforts were unavailing, Dick summoned a couple more of the defenders out on the balcony alongside him—Jake and another.

"Take all the cover you can," he said, "and fire when I give the word. It's the best we can do to save them from themselves."

"Now, then, below there!" he yelled aloud. "Break away, or I give you fair warning we shall blaze down into the crowd of you!"

A spatter of lead on the walls and a tinkling of glass as a bullet bored its way through a window-pane, were the only answer.

"Ready, Jake?" he called. "Then fire when I count three. One—two—three!"

The shots rang out almost as one, and an ominous gap appeared in the crowd outside the door, while the fusillade from below was redoubled, and a bullet seared Jake's shoulder, whilst another threw a fountain of splinters against Dick's cheek.

"Give it 'em again, boys!" he called, brushing them aside.

Crash! crash! The white flame-spirts flickered and danced, and the gap by the door resolved itself into a ragged hole in that crowd of faces—a hole in which sorely wounded men writhed and clawed at the dust of the street. Then, once more compelled by the pressure from behind, the dense, packed mob surged forward.

Dick Mason emptied his revolver with a grunt of disgust.

"The fools!" he said bitterly. "This is terrible, and that man Hayes will have to foot the bill. Still, it's shoot or be shot, and there's no help for it. Here, have any of you chaps got any more shells handy? Ah-h! That was a close call!"—as a bullet ripped the cloth of his coat-collar. "Another half-inch and it would have caught the jugular. That was the work of that fellow in the slouch hat. I saw him and Hayes whispering together five minutes since. Well, Mr. Slouch, look out for yourself! I'm going to give you a month in hospital with a sore shoulder!"

He fired as he spoke, and the man in the slouch hat, who had been in the act of taking careful aim, fell back into the arms of the next in the rear.

Meanwhile, Kelly, who, at Mr. Trevelyan's express command, had taken no part in the fight, stood leaning against the open window-sash, coolly smoking, and gazing down at the crowd, quite unperturbed by the bullets which every now and again droned and whizzed past his head.

Suddenly he turned and listened attentively; his trained ear had caught a sound which the others had missed.

Kelly took a step forward and laid a hand on Mason's arm.

"Dick, old man," he drawled, "no wish to interfere—hate to spoil sport, an' all that; but some of 'em have worked round to the back, and are breaking in. I fancy I'd better go and look after them."

Mason nodded.

"Yes, do. They'll be trying another rush here in a minute, and we shall have our hands full."

Kelly drew his revolver, jerked open the breech to assure himself that it was full in every chamber, and strolled back into the room. A stray bullet passed him so close that the wind of it fanned his cheek, but he never altered his stride.

At the head of the stairs he halted and explained the situation to Mr. Trevelyan, and the latter had no choice but to acquiesce, for all the defenders by now were kept on the jump, and the situation was growing critical.

With a nod, Kelly, no longer leisurely, darted into the back room, whence the sounds had come, just in time to see the lower half of the window-sash fall inwards with a crash, and a man throw his leg over the casement. With a leap like that of a wild cat, Kelly was on him; his sinewy left arm flung out and caught the intruder by the throat, stifling his cry of surprise; a quick thrust, an uplift of the knee, and the man, losing his balance, went flying backwards, head foremost, on to the top of those watching him from below. Almost before he had reached the ground, with a dexterous twist Kelly jerked the ladder sideways, and a couple more men lost their balance, and, still clinging frantically to the rungs, toppled over, one of them coming to earth with the snap of a broken leg.

Kelly laughed grimly. He had been an involuntary spectator for some time, and now, in the moment of action, the lust of fighting was growing on him apace. Standing full square to the window, and disdaining cover of any kind, he faced down on the crowd, and waved patterns across them with the black revolver muzzle.

But at that moment, above the din of shouting and the crackle of firearms, a bugle-call rang out shrill and clear. Those in the front had a glimpse of a squad of troopers coming up the main street at the trot in an orderly, compact body; and, even before the word to charge could be given, the rioters, realising that the game was up, scattered and fled in all directions. Even some of those badly wounded managed to limp and stagger away into a place of safety.

What the coming of the troopers so unexpectedly might signify, they couldn't say, but they saw the men shortening their reins and closing up to clear the path, and that was enough.

Mr. Trevelyan, too, saw them, and shouted out, for he alone of all those there knew and understood that somewhere riding in their midst was the high commissioner in person, the most powerful official in the whole continent, and his own very good and trusted friend.

The words of command rang out curt and distinct. The troop reined up opposite the shattered door and dismounted. Every fourth man took his comrade's horses in charge.

The high commissioner himself, a stern, grave-faced man of close on sixty, with a grey, carefully-trimmed moustache and imperial, wiry and active of build in spite of his years, and a superb horseman, rode up, dismounted, and, throwing his reins to the orderly who came hurrying up, made his way carefully up the half-demolished stairs.

"What, in Heaven's name, is the meaning of all this, Trevelyan?" he exclaimed angrily, with a wave of the hand. "I come up here at your request, ride half through the night, and find the town in a state of siege. Has madness broken out here, or are two-thirds of the population drunk? What about this Robertson outrage? In short, what the deuce does it all mean?"

"It means, sir, that a lot of the youngsters, headed by a crowd of roughs, have got out of hand. They are all pretty excited and upset about the Robertson affair and the Euroa Bank, and a rumour got spread around that the perpetrator of both crimes was in my house, and they determined to lynch him. I refused flatly to hand over to them a man whom I knew to be innocent, and who was, moreover, my guest; and, in any case, lynch law is not admissible. In spite of my warnings, and my pledged word as a magistrate, they persisted. So I swore to shoot with my own hand as a burglar the first of them who dared set foot across my threshold.

They broke in the door, and I did so, and the riot became general. If there is any blame, sir, I beg to accept the entire responsibility. The man in question, who is still my guest, goes by the name of Captain Vyner. I have positive proof of his entire innocence of the recent outrages, which I shall be pleased to bring before you, and, if you will allow me, I should like to have some private conversation with your Excellency concerning him at an early opportunity."

The commissioner nodded his head.

"As you know quite well, Trevelyan, I accept your version of the affair without hesitation. There will, of course, have to be an official and formal inquiry, but you acted quite rightly. I will not have these lynching parties, and I'll take severe measures to put a stop to them. Nine times out of ten the wrong man gets punished, or they are made to serve as a cloak for private animosity. Besides, they are strictly against the law, and so long as I have anything to say in the matter, they shall not be allowed. Now, if you can give me something to eat and drink in another room, we'd better have our talk at once. My time's short, and I've come up here specially to see the matter of this bushranging business brought to a close. Kindly order some of your fellows to see to the billeting of my men, and give the officer in charge orders that the town is to be strictly patrolled."

Mr. Trevelyan nodded.

"Certainly, sir; it shall be done at once. And I can give you some kind of a supper in the far room."

He gave a few hurried instructions to Dick Mason and Jake, and shortly afterwards joined the commissioner at his frugal repast.

For the next hour those in the outer room could hear the murmur of their voices in an incessant stream. Now the curt, incisive tones of the commissioner, again the lower, fuller notes of Mr. Trevelyan. It seemed that there was an argument in process—an argument hotly contended on either side. Then the voices sank lower, and became more monotonous.

After awhile Mr. Trevelyan put his head out and beckoned Jake and one of his men. Their questioning lasted but a minute or two; then Mason was sent for, and finally, just after he was dismissed, Mr. Trevelyan came out himself, looking worn and fatigued and very grave, though his manner was kindly.

"Captain Vyner!" he called sharply, his voice hoarse with much talking, "here, please! His Excellency wishes a word or two with you."

Kelly rose from his seat, threw away the fag end of his cigar, and, with a slight uplifting of the eyebrows, passed into the inner room. He was perfectly well aware that his whole future trembled in the balance, yet his manner was as cool and nonchalant as though he were merely going to have a quiet chat with an acquaintance.

The door closed softly behind him, and Mr. Trevelyan spoke again.

"Dick, have messengers sent out at once all over the town, bidding Major Hayes attend here at once. His Excellency desires to see him, and desires him further to understand that unless he is here within twenty minutes he will be relieved of his office, and cease to hold service under the Government."

CHAPTER 13.

Kelly's Interview with the High Commissioner.

THE high commissioner—the man whose word was law, and who could at will set in motion or divert the whole machinery of the Government—faced Kelly in the private room, and the two men eyed one another steadily.

"Captain Vyner," said the commissioner, at length. "Mr. Trevelyan, whom

I esteem and trust beyond most men I know, has laid before me positive proof that in this instance, at any rate, you are a much-wronged man, and are absolutely innocent of any complicity in these recent outrages. Further than that, he has given me his personal assurance that you, in company with your partner the American, have for the past eighteen months been living a life of honest industry, gaining for yourself both friends and reputation, to say nothing of a considerable fortune. I understand, Captain Vyner, that you are at the present moment a rich man. Is that so?"

Kelly bowed.

The commissioner stroked his chin pensively with his forefinger.

"So much the better," he muttered to himself. "So much the better. It would prevent the danger of a relapse into—er—— Well, well, we can speak of that later. Now, Captain Vyner, you and I are here to talk, as the French say, 'between four eyes,' and what we may say to each other is strictly confidential.

"I know the circumstances of your case thoroughly. Mr. Trevelyan, you must understand, was quite frank. I know that you have held commissioned rank at home, and a coveted decoration. That later there was a—a scandal; and that during the early portion of your life in this colony, your name—or, rather, the name of your adoption—was notorious throughout Australia. We will say no more of that.

"I am here, under her Majesty, for the good ruling of this young and raw country, and I enjoy large discretionary powers—powers which at home, or in a more settled state of affairs, would be impossible. On this occasion I intend to use them to a very full extent on certain terms.

"First, will you give me your oath—your solemn word of honour—that under no circumstances will you revert to your previous mode of life? I refer to the period previous to your—shall we say official visit to Melbourne?"

The commissioner's eyes twinkled faintly.

"You have my word for that, sir," said Kelly quickly.

"Good! Now, the position is this. There is a man at large in this section of the country who, under the name and guise of Ned Kelly, has perpetrated the most abominable outrages—murder, robbery under arms, and other crimes. There was a man of that name, not so long ago, on the official lists of the convict inmates of Melbourne Gaol—a red mark against it signifies that this man escaped and is still at large.

"This bushranging and lawlessness I intend to put down with the utmost rigour. These are my terms. Bring me this man, dead or alive—the former for choice—and you, Captain Vyner, are at liberty to live as you please without fear that your past record will be raked up against you; and so long as you live up to your promised word you will have a friend in me. Fail to bring me this so-called Kelly, and I shall be forced to remind you that that red mark still remains uncancelled on the convict list.

"All very unconventional and out of order, isn't it? But that's where my powers of discretion come in. Mr. Trevelyan assures me, and I judge for myself, that in you the colony possesses a man capable of much useful work—a man who would be invaluable, shall we say? in keeping order in some of the wilder and more unruly of the mining camps, if backed up by an official position. Yes, Captain Vyner, that's the kind of work I shall expect from you in return for anything I can offer. To put it bluntly, I can't afford to waste a man with your powers of leadership and organisation, and with—er—your unholy reputation for markmanship. This is all grossly irregular. I'm not at all certain if it's even legal, and I don't particularly care. I'm no believer in lawyers and their tangled masses of words, and I don't believe in hitting a good useful man when he's down and under. Now, you know my terms. Do you accept?"

"With pleasure, sir But I would like you to know, that with you or without you, I intended to ride this fellow down for my own private satisfaction. He's a coward and a bully, and he has dared to do things, under cover of the name of Kelly, which will besmirch it as it was never besmirched before. That's my affair, not yours nor the Government's, and he shall pay me for it with his life. After that, sir, I am very much at your service."

"Hush! Captain Vyner, no indiscretion, please! I object to things I wish not to see or hear being thrust under my notice. However, my object is yours, though our reasons may differ."

"I am afraid things diplomatic are out of my line," said Kelly grimly.

The commissioner smiled.

"Well, you seem confident enough of getting your man, and that's my chief concern. Now, Captain Vyner, you are under my orders. You will ride tonight. Here is an order giving you powers to commandeer such men as you think needful, and take such steps as may be necessary. Kindly give the word to those outside that I wish to see Major Hayes."

The two men shook hands, and Kelly bowed himself out.

Five minutes later Hayes was ushered in, but of what transpired in that small room no man knew, though not a few could hazard a guess when Hayes staggered out with wide, staring, unseeing eyes, and a face of chalk. No one spoke to him. Hardly a man spared him so much as a pitying glance as he groped his way through them and down the stairs into the darkness beyond.

Twenty minutes later a bugle-call rang out on the night—harsh but musical, the call for boot and saddle—and Kelly, at the head of half a dozen troopers, rode out of Benalla on the last long chase, Dick Mason on his right hand, and a couple of black trackers, riding barefoot, in front.

The high commissioner heard it in his room, and heard the sharp, curt words of command. He glanced at his watch.

"Quick work!" he muttered. "I chose rightly. Heap good man that! Heap good man! Only wants careful handling. Proud as Lucifer, too! Wonder what the real inside story is? He'll be governing a big district before long, if I have anything to say to it. Lor, but I'm tired!"

CHAPTER 14.

The Pursuit.

MEANWHILE Kelly was riding out into the night on his quest. In the brief interval which had elapsed, whilst men and horses were being got ready and forage-bags filled, he had gleaned all the latest scraps of information and heard the reports of the various scouts. Kelly, so called—the fake Kelly, the man in armour, after the outrage at the ranche, had headed due north; with him were four others—new recruits—desperate men all. Ready for any deed of violence or murder.

Kelly the Britisher—the true Kelly—pondered the situation in his head. He knew the country, as no other man knew it. Not a turn, a ravine, nor a bush-path was there in all the broad region ahead but which he could have found his way along blindfold. He was in his own domain; and, as he rode, the memory of many a wild night and quick stretching gallop came back to him. He remembered crossing the upper gully and covering forty miles of bush and scrub betwixt sunset and dawn with a bullet hole in his shoulder and a gash in his thigh, with the police hot on his track, until his black boy led him off on a false trail, and he,

blinded with rain and reeling in his saddle, reached the Robbers' Roost. But the police were at his beck and call, and in his coat pocket lay the signed order of the governor, empowering him to do whatever he might think fit for the better furtherance of justice and the keeping of the peace.

"Where are we heading for?" asked Dick Mason, after a prolonged silence, as they rode knee to knee.

"Out across the divide to cut the trail ten miles north of Marshall's. They'll be bound to follow that route to make their break for cover. They daren't turn aside, east or west, because of the patrols. I shall leave a couple of men on picket duty there, then you and I and the rest we'll head after them at the best pace we can. How many days' rations did you order the men to bring?"

"Four. We can pick up remounts, if necessary, at Harrison's farm—a new squatter since your time. His homestead lies a bit back from the trail, five miles on from where you propose to cut it."

Kelly nodded.

"Four's ample. With luck I hope to be back in Benalla in under the forty-eight hours. What's this man Harrison? Will he be with us, or will he be likely to hang out bush 'signals'?"

"With us. He's a steady-going chap, fresh out from home. Yorkshire kind, so I've heard. Fine big chap, with a wife and a youngster. Knows something about his work too."

Kelly turned in his saddle, and gave a sharp order, and the trot at which they had been travelling broke into an easy lope, which covered the ground at a good, steady pace.

They cut the trail under the hour, and Kelly ordered a couple of men to detach themselves for picket duty, or to act as despatch riders in case of need. There was a little murmuring at this, as each man wanted to be in at the death, and was unwilling to lose his share of the fun, together with a chance of promotion.

Kelly wheeled on them in black lightning-like fury.

"I'll have no talking in the ranks there! What kind of a crowd have the police degenerated into! Fall out there you, and you! The next man who opens his mouth, without my leave, goes straight back to Benalla, and he'll have me to deal with on his return! You, sergeant, close up and see that your men don't let their accoutrements jingle. By James, this isn't a circus! Haven't you learned to ride yet?" The bewildered sergeant had let his horse stumble heavily in the darkness. "Here, you! What's your name? You look, at any rate, as if you wouldn't fall out of the saddle."

"Private Donovan, sorr."

"Well, Private Donovan, you will replace the sergeant there, who seems half asleep, and see you keep your crowd of idiots well in hand!"

The sergeant gasped. Private Donovan grinned and saluted, and a frozen silence fell on the little knot of troopers. This was a man, who had been put in command of them—a man whose orders would have to be obeyed at the jump, and almost unconsciously they stiffened up. Kelly in his black moods was not to be trifled with, a fact they were quick to realise.

The small troop swung off to the right down the trail and pushed along briskly.

"How far to Harrison's?" asked Kelly, in a whisper.

"Five miles, or thereabouts," responded Dick Mason, in the same tones. "We shall be there in half an hour."

A few minutes afterwards Kelly beckoned to Donovan, and ordered him to send a man out a quarter of a mile, on either side, with injunctions to report immediately anything suspicious, and to fire on sight, if need be. The two trackers

he sent on ahead to take duty, turn and turn about, or both together, in the worst places, and on stony ground, for the night was black as pitch.

"You see, Dick," said Kelly, in explanation, "this is the way I figure on it. Either these chaps have broken north, to lie up for a bit and let things blow over—in which case we shall come upon them sooner or later—or they have gone north just as a ruse to distract attention, and are circling round for another quick dash somewhere round about here."

"From what I've heard of them they seem more likely to do the latter—for two reasons. Firstly, barring myself and, to a certain extent, yourself, there are precious few men who know their way about the country yonder between this and the old Robbers' Roost, and they would be afraid of getting into difficulties if they pushed ahead too far; and, secondly, they seem perfect gluttons for their detestable work, and, so far, have followed one outrage up by another, without giving themselves time to hide up. There is yet another reason, by the way. You remember that envelope which I gave you? Well, I am convinced that the name inside it is the name of the leader of the men we're after, and I know enough of him and his ways to guess fairly accurately at what he's likely to do. Mark my words, I prophesy that we shall hear news of him before long—or, at any rate, such telltale messages as the bush leaves for those who can read and understand them."

As though in confirmation of his words, before they had gone another half-mile one of the black trackers came galloping back and reined up sharply.

"Bad man—him pass longa there," he said, saluting, and pointing into the darkness ahead. "Three—four—five bad mans; him ride fast. One horse him forefoot turn in so fashion. Him trail longa four hours' old. Me think him make camp longa topside divide. Pidney, boss?"

Kelly nodded.

"All a-right, Jacko; me pidney. You keep dem trail longa Harrison's." And, with a flash of teeth and an upward thrown arm, the tracker wheeled and vanished on ahead.

"That should be Harrison's, somewhere over there the far side of that tree-belt," said Dick Mason suddenly. "The road to the farmstead leads off on our left."

A little way further on they struck it and turned off. It was at least possible that the Yorkshireman might have information of value, and, seeing the isolated position of the place, Kelly determined to leave a tracker there as a safeguard and in case of emergencies.

The house—it was little better than a hut—was timber-built, with a verandah in front, and was only one storey high.

A sudden exclamation from one of the trackers arrested Kelly's attention.

"Hallo!" he whispered to Mason. "What the deuce is the meaning of this? The slip-rails are down. Don't see any horses in the home paddock, either. What about those remounts we could have got—eh? I think we'd better be prepared for squalls! Sergeant Donovan, take two of your men, make a circuit round the house, and come in on it from the back. Carefully now; no noise. I'll give you five minutes' grace to take up your position. Mind your fellows are ready to shoot smartly if need be. You"—to the fourth trooper—"close in on the right front, there. Dick, you and I will take the rest of the house on this side. Come back, you black limb! You and that other chap stay in the rear till you're wanted!"

Donovan and his men cantered silently off. Kelly and the others waited to give them time, and then advanced slowly.

The house was all in darkness, and might have been deserted for any signs of life which it showed.

Twenty paces away Kelly dismounted, and gave the grey's bridle to one of the black boys. Dick Mason did the same, and side by side they advanced, with their carbines ready.

It was hard to tell what they might expect—the Harrisons soundly asleep and safe, or a sudden, murderous fusillade from the black, caverny shadow of the verandah.

Suddenly Kelly slipped slightly, stooped, and sprang erect again, holding the fingers of his left hand close to his face.

"Come on!" he cried aloud. "There's been trouble and black work here!" And he broke for the house at a run.

At the verandah steps they both checked. A man's body lay limply, face downwards, across the boards.

"A light, man—a light—quick!" said Kelly.

Dick struck a match as they turned the body over. It was the Yorkshireman—Harrison himself—stone dead, and with half a dozen bullet-holes in him, two at least of which must have proved fatal. Beside him lay some empty cartridge-cases, and the woodwork all around was stripped and splintered; but of a weapon there was no sign. His murderers had taken that with them.

Kelly passed on. The house door stood open, and a window on the right had been riddled. They groped for a candle, and after some difficulty found one. Then they stood staring aghast at a scene of wanton destruction. Furniture had been smashed, cupboards wrenched open and ransacked of their contents. The remains of a meal lay strewn about the floor, amidst broken glass, empty bottles, and a huddle of clothing. In a far corner a couple of gold coins lay where they had rolled and escaped notice; and, worst of all, half-lying on, half crouching against the battered remnants of a sofa, lay the inanimate forms of the two other victims. The pitiful story was easily read. Stray bullets through the shattered window had done their deadly work. Perhaps—who knows?—the brave woman had been attempting to come to her husband's rescue when she was hit; perhaps she had been vainly attempting to shield her child; but in the end death had found them both, and the dealers of it had callously raided the house afterwards at their ease.

"The brutes—the utter brutes!" said Dick Mason hoarsely, as he gazed round him in horror.

Kelly said nothing, but on his face was a deep and scowling flush of bitter anger. As always, he was most dangerous when he was deadly quiet and deliberate. He stepped out again on to the verandah and called to one of the trackers.

"How many bad men bin longa here?" he asked, cutting short the boy's shrill exclamations.

The tracker bent down, examining this thing and that, took the candle, and went outside on to the ground in front of the verandah, and returned.

"Seven bad mens," he said. "See, boss, one man he stand longa there; dem others they no stand so close. Then door open, and Boss Harrison come out. Then they shoot heap plenty. See dem cases? Then all rush together longa house. Boss Harrison he fall down plenty much dead."

"How long since? Out with you sharp and pick up the trail! You see," he continued, turning to Dick, "they must have done what I said—worked north a piece, and then headed back. Two more blackguards have joined them—and joined them on the far side of here, or our trackers would have seen their tracks. Well, what do you make of it?"

The black boy had reappeared.

"Him trail not an hour old; him berry fresh trail. Him lead longa north yonder. Seven bad mens. Him all a ride fast; him got new mounts. Old horses him longa turn in foot lead longside pidney. Him ride berry fast."

"That's where our remounts are then," was Kelly's comment. "Luckily, our own brutes are pretty fresh and haven't been pushed at all. Come along, men!

You've got to ride for it to-night, if you've never ridden before. Ten pounds to the man who first sights them; and twenty to the chap who wings one of them with the first shot!"

The men answered with a rousing cheer, and, joining up behind Kelly and Dick, the whole band of them swept round in a wide, curving half-circle, and regained the trail, where the trackers were already spurring ahead, with eyes fixed on the ground.

Kelly had told them they would have to ride, and he spoke rather less than the truth. All of them, to the last man, were horsemen, but none save Dick Mason had known before what it was to keep in touch with Kelly and his grey when they were really moving.

The sergeant was the first to give up. He was a good man, a good trooper, and reliable to the last degree; but he was a slow mover, and neither nerve nor body could stand the pace over broken ground on a dark night. He was a heavyish weight, too, and before they had covered three miles he felt his horse swaying and rocking beneath him; for a mile before that he himself had been riding with set teeth, and more than once he had closed his eyes tightly, lest he might be scared by dangers which he could not see.

It was a five-hundred-yard stretch of boulder-strewn ground which finally broke his heart, and he slid out of the saddle to the ground beside his sobbing mare, her flanks heaving with distress.

Another mile, and a second man dropped astern. His horse had strained a tendon badly by landing on an uneven ridge.

Donovan, recently promoted, and Irish, grinned broadly, though even he was white to the lips beneath the tan, and drove home his spurs.

"Shure," he muttered, "'tis no kind av man I'm followin'—come hup, you brute!—and if anythin' gives, Hiven have mercy on the pair av us, for it's kilt we'll be! There's twinty golden suv'rins an' a royal spree to gamble on, an' it's little enough we'll be talking at fur the sake av that same."

Even Mason, who had been neck-and-neck with the grey in many a mad ride, had never seen the like. Once, and once only, Kelly spoke—or, rather, shouted—for the rush of wind in their ears prevented the sound from carrying; and Dick could only catch disjointed sentences.

"Robbers' Roost. Only way possible. Catch 'em. Two miles. If not this side. Lose a lot of men. Nasty place. Of old."

Crash! Another man down. Donovan reined up slightly.

"An' pwhat the jooce is ailin' ye, ye blunderin' ijiot?" he roared.

The man waved an arm vaguely to show he was all right.

"We'll be comin' back by the pass!" shouted Donovan over his shoulder, and raced on to catch up lost ground.

One of the black boys' horses foundered suddenly, and he pulled out to the right to prevent being over-ridden.

The small cavalcade swept by in a thundering streak—four white men and a tracker on the heels of seven of the most desperate men in all Australia. "Thrud, thrud, thrud!" the horses' hoofs boomed hollow over the springy ground, and just before dawn Donovan raised himself in his stirrups with a whole-souled Irish yell.

"'Tis ten quid ye're owin' me, yer honour, for there's the tail ind of a man scootlin' through the underbrush beyant the dip, sorr!"

Kelly and Dick Mason raced along knee to knee, the tracker, who rode a bare nine stone, galloping recklessly ahead of them, Donovan and one other trooper floundering behind, their horses already showing signs of fatigue.

But, tired though they were, the bushrangers were also suffering from over-ridden horses, and shortly after Donovan's view "Hallo!" it became evident that the pursuit was gaining.

The country grew wilder and more open, and Dick Mason could see the figures of the fugitives, like so many black dots, rising and falling rhythmically with the motion of their horses. They evidently realised that they were hard pressed, and made a desperate effort to retain their lead. For the next hour the distance betwixt the foremost of the pursuers and the last of the bushrangers did not change materially, and the ride became like a vivid nightmare—the kind of nightmare in which, in spite of terrible efforts, one remains helpless and inert as a log.

On and on they swept through the silence, the only sounds the thudding of the horses' hoofs, the hard, quick breathing of men and animals, and the occasional creak of a saddle.

Mile after mile they swept the ground behind them, heading always for the Robbers' Roost.

Now a long, rising slope would compel them to slacken a little, and, to their excited imaginations, ages seemed to pass before the summit was reached. Then would follow a thundering charge downhill on the far side, where men set their teeth hard, settled themselves down closer in the saddles, and hoped that Providence and a sure-footed horse would pull them out alive at the bottom.

As the dawn broke, far, far away to the west, a solitary black mass loomed up against the lightening sky. Kelly saw it, and flung out an arm.

"Burra-Burra!" he yelled; and Dick nodded.

It was there in the old days that he and Kelly had faced one another, weapon in hand, with grim, dogged determination, after just such another ride.

The great rock loomed up like some lone sentinel over the wild scene—silent, majestic, enduring—a thing beside which men and the passions of men seemed puny matters.

The bushrangers were well mounted, and for the most part old stockriders; but they had the finest horsemen in all the continent at their heels, and two at least of the finest horses ever foaled.

It was close on an hour after the first break of dawn that the black boy gave a yell of triumph. The bushrangers had tailed out a long line, and the hindermost of them came down with a crash, his horse completely foundered. For a moment he lay still, stunned or injured; then he picked himself up, crawled on hands and knees to his rifle—which had been jerked from his grasp—and flung himself behind the dying animal, prepared to sell his life as dearly as might be.

He fired his first shot as they drew up to the two-hundred-yard range; but the light was feeble, and he had been badly shaken. It flew high overhead, and Donovan answered it with a derisive yell.

Again he fired; but his nerve was gone, and the second shot was wider than the first. Before he could pull the trigger again they were up and on to him.

Kelly yelled to the black boy to pull out to the right, which he did; then he drove the grey straight as an arrow at the man, utterly regardless of his rifle.

There are few men who can stand the thundering charge of a horse without losing their heads, and, as has been said, the fellow's nerve was already broken. He hesitated, pulled on the trigger frantically, and naturally missing; then he scrambled to his knees, and tried to fling himself aside.

Kelly bent low in the saddle as the grey swept past—so low that all his weight was flung on to the right stirrup—then, whisking slightly on an inside curve, he swept down his arm and grabbed. He caught the man fairly by the back of the collar, jerked him off his knees, and, using the momentum of the grey's rush to aid his own strength, slung the fellow clear across the saddle, where he hung

limp, like a sack of potatoes. It was a wonderful exhibition of neatness and skill, for he lost no more than a couple of lengths, and the grey never broke his stride.

Still gripping the man's neck, he rolled him over, and stared down into his face; then, guiding only with his knees, he dropped the reins altogether, and ran his free hand lightly over the body.

"Broken leg," he called over his shoulder to Dick. "Can't get away. Pick him up as we come back."

With a jerk and a twist, he yanked the man clear, and dropped him to the ground as gently as he could without slackening.

The poor wretch set up a yelp of pain, and Donovan gave vent to a "Begobs!" of admiration. He had seen riding—thought, and thought justly, that he could sit a horse himself; but never had he seen riding—sheer skilful horsemanship—to compare with the riding of the slim, neat figure before him.

"Shure, he's a jool of a man!" he confided to his comrade. "'Tis enough to make hair rise on the scalp av ye, the way he has wid the grey! 'Tis divilry, that's what ut is! Begobs, the man wud ride into the mouth av the pit widout turning an eyelash!"

"Ough!" grunted the other trooper.

And the next instant his horse blundered at a boulder, and flung him a clear ten paces.

"How is ut wid ye?" yelled Donovan, slackening.

"Go on, Mick," came the answer. "Only a collarbone. I'll be in the final yet."

"Hivin prisarve us!" said Donovan to himself, and drove in his spurs.

The little jolting dots ahead were closer now, and clearly distinguishable—at any rate, the nearest ones, for they were strung out in a line over half a mile of country.

Slowly but surely they were being run to a standstill.

"Five miles more," said Kelly grimly. "Ah, there's our man at last! See him?"

Far ahead, three hundred yards or more in front of the next astern, was a big, powerful-looking man on a big black horse. Obviously a spare one, which he had changed to some time during the darkness—probably just before the dawn, for it was going freely, in spite of his weight.

Dick looked, rubbed the dust from his eyes, and looked again. There was something about the distant figure which he could not understand. Its shape seemed abnormal—unusual. At last, as the light got better, he realised what it was that had puzzled him. The whole of the upper part of his body was enclosed in a rough kind of armour or iron plating. His arms were similarly protected, and on his head was a cylindrical affair, also of iron, completely covering it. This was evidently the bullet-proof armour of which they had heard rumours, and, secure in which, the man had defied the police troopers firing at him at short range.

The pursuers now numbered three only, not counting the black boy. The fugitives were still six in number—the ringleader, he of the armour, and five others.

"Why don't the fools turn and fight!" muttered Kelly. "It's a long way their best chance. They haven't an ounce of pluck between them."

Again the chase led up a steep rise; the horses, even Cæsar and the grey, were feeling the strain badly.

Suddenly, without word or warning, two men—two of the fugitives, came to grief. One fell clear, the other was pinned down by his horse, unable to rise.

They were a bare three hundred yards away. The last man of all pulled round to avoid them, and, leaving them to their fate, spurred mercilessly to try and regain his more lucky or better mounted companions.

The man pinned by his horse threw up his hands in surrender. He was evidently badly damaged, and in no condition to fight or escape. Dick, glancing down as he rode past, saw his upturned face, all drawn and white with pain, and he was moaning faintly.

The other was on his feet, running for all he was worth, and loading his rifle as he ran. Kelly swerved out of the line in chase.

"Hands up!" he roared. The man only ran the harder. Again Kelly challenged him. In a flash the fellow pivoted on his heel and fired, almost at point-blank range.

The bullet must have passed under Kelly's bridle arm. It did not touch him, but it grazed Donovan's thigh, and chipped a bit out of his saddle.

Kelly rode straight at the man, who swung up his clubbed rifle; but he had a trained fighter to deal with. Kelly dodged, wheeled, and the next instant the heavy butt of his revolver dropped the man in his tracks with a cracked skull, as they found later.

They were only four to three now, or, counting the black boy, four to four. But the Robbers' Roost was very near, and if the fugitives could gain it even a hundred yards ahead, they would be able to hurl themselves behind the rocks at the top of the secret passage and fight from behind cover; and not only that, but have the additional advantage of compelling their pursuers to attack up a sharp rise in face of a withering fire.

Both Dick and Kelly knew this, for both of them were perfectly acquainted with every inch of the ground. It was on that very spot that Dick had fought his way to freedom, and made his famous ride to save Trevelyan's rancho.

The man in armour and two others were leading by nearly a third of a mile. The fourth man, he who had been last when the other two fell, not more than half that distance, spurring unmercifully, and every now and again casting an anxious glance over his shoulder. His horse was thoroughly spent, and failing fast, and they were overhauling him by two yards in every five.

Kelly glanced at Dick.

"We must rush 'em!" he cried.

The wind was humming past their ears, and the words only reached Dick faintly, but he understood and nodded. A spurt, if they could manage it, might mean the saving of human lives.

Kelly raised himself in his stirrups to ease himself, gave one quick glance to measure the distance, and settled himself well home in the saddle.

"Now ride!" he shouted; and for almost the first time in his life the grey felt the touch of a spur driven home, and leapt forward.

The humming of the wind rose to a whistling shriek, and the force of it dimmed their eyes for an instant.

As though by magic, they were up to and level with the last of the bushrangers; he pulled out a little, still spurring vainly, and flogging his poor spent brute like a madman.

"Your man!" roared Kelly to Dick, and swept by.

Dick gathered Cæsar together, fairly lifting him along, and drove his shoulder slantwise against the bushranger's sorrel. The force of the impact was terrific. Cæsar, who had seen the trick before, braced himself for the shock, and scarcely staggered; but the sorrel and her rider went down with a crash, and Dick heard another muttered "Begobs!" from Mike Donovan, who was almost at his elbow, followed the next instant by a yell of "He's down!"

Fortune turned against them just in the moment of success—when victory seemed to be literally within reach of their finger-tips; for the grey, stretching himself out for all he was worth, brought down a forefoot on a small stone, which rolled

with him and threw him out of his stride. He made a gallant effort to recover himself, lurched, staggered, and almost succeeded, but the pace had been too great, and he came down in a crumpled heap, slithering along the ground for several yards.

Kelly, feeling the grand beast sinking under him, kicked his feet out of the irons and threw himself clear. He knew how to fall as cleverly as the cleverest steeplechase jockey who ever flung his leg across a horse.

Had it been grassland and nothing more, he would have been safe enough, for even as he fell he let himself go limp and curled himself into a ball, landing squarely on his humped shoulders, and turned a complete somersault. But the momentum carried him on, and his head struck a piece of rock with a dull thud.

Dick and the Irishman pulled out to right and left to avoid him, and came circling back to the spot where he lay. Before they reached him or could rein up, the last of the bushrangers had vanished behind the rocks which concealed the entrance to the secret passage.

Kelly was lying on his back with closed eyes, looking very white and breathing suspiciously heavily, arms and legs outspread.

They knelt down beside him, and Dick laid a hand on his heart.

"Bad cess to it, 'tis concussion is the matter wid him!" said Micky. "See to that now, sorr." And he pointed to an ugly gash on the crown of the skull.

Dick felt the wound with his finger.

"Only superficial," he said, probing. "The bone's intact and the loss of blood may relieve pressure. You'll find a pool over there a little way to the right, Micky; go and fetch some water."

Mike bolted off, and came back with his hat brim full, and together they bathed Kelly's face and wrists. The grey had already picked himself up cleverly, and though sweating and considerably blown, was unharmed. He came over to the small group, his bridle hanging loose, and nuzzled Kelly's shoulder apologetically.

"Sheer off, old man," said Dick. "It wasn't your fault, you clever old brute; but you're no doctor man, and you're in the way."

At last Kelly stirred and opened his eyes. It was an anxious moment, for they fully expected him to be delirious, and at the first glance the keen black eyes were dazed and wandering.

"'Tis up aginst throuble we are, sorr," whispered Micky, and Mason nodded frowningly.

But, as by magic, the dark eyes cleared, and a light of recognition flashed into them.

"Got 'em, Dick?" he asked. "What's happened?"

"You've had a nasty spill and cut your head—how do you feel?"

"Bit shaken. I'll be all right in a minute or two. Where are your prisoners?"

"Didn't take any," said Dick grimly. "They've got away into the roost right enough."

Kelly struggled up on one elbow, looking so glum and savage that Micky involuntarily drew back.

"May I ask, then, Mason," said Kelly slowly, "what kind of a circus this is? What in blazes are you and that fool Patlander doing messing about here whilst you ought to be hanging on to the heels of those blackguards yonder?"

"Well, for one thing, we thought you were knocked out."

"I entirely fail to see that that is an excuse for a gross breach of discipline and negligence," was the acid reply. "You were sent out here to catch bushrangers, not to dry-nurse me. I can get along very well as I am, thanks, and I'll trouble you to leave off pawing me about!"

"Oh, as you please," said Dick drily; "but I should advise you to let us fetch you some more water—you're pretty white about the gills."

"What the deuce does it matter if I'm blue pink? You'll oblige me by obeying orders. You will both advance at once on the rocks screening the passage yonder, taking all available cover, and you will endeavour to locate those men. Then return to me, and by that time I shall be fit enough to join in the attack."

"Very well, sir," said Dick, saluting stiffly; he knew Kelly's black moods too well to take umbrage at his tone. Taking only his revolver, he signed to Donovan, and the pair began to work their way cautiously forward.

It was rather like walking up open-eyed in broad daylight to certain death; for the ground just short of the passage head was unpleasantly open—and so far as actual cover went, one might as well have looked for it on an English tennis-lawn as in that last two hundred yards.

Micky Donovan's face was set and grim. Kelly's words had bitten deep into his sensitive Irish nerves, and he gripped his revolver tightly. Underlying the word "negligence" he had read in an idea that he was accused of shirking—and Micky was a sorely angry man. So angry that he barely made a pretence of seeking any scanty cover there was, but stalked on erect, his eyes sharp and glittering, his one idea to get in a shot himself before the bushrangers got the drop on him.

Dick, who knew Kelly and his methods better, was pretty quiet and stern, too; for though he had no feeling of anger against his superior, he didn't in the least expect to live through the next five minutes. And thoughts of that sort make the bravest men deadly quiet—and also deadly dangerous. He glanced at Micky sideways.

"So long, old man!" he said under his breath.

"So long to yez, sorr—an' it's meself will be after takin' wan av thim blackgards along wid me before it's over!"

"Good luck, then. Get the brute in the stovepipe hat if you can. I'll sheer off and come up on their right, you take the left. It's no use hurrying, we're bound to let them fire first."

They separated, branching gradually outwards till they were forty paces apart. A small dip in the ground momentarily hid the passage-head from Dick, and he took the opportunity to make certain that his revolver was loaded in all its chambers, and that he had loose shells in either pocket, so that he could use right or left hand indifferently in case of a shattered wrist or arm.

He meant to throw away no chances, and so before topping the ridge in front, flung himself flat on his face and began to crawl. In front of him lay a stretch of smooth grass, sloping upward at a steepish angle towards those few grey-black rocks ahead which hid the passage entrance; and in all the eighty yards betwixt him and them, there wasn't so much as a tuft or bush or stone which could have hidden a jack rabbit. He slid forward inch by inch, always with his pistol-hand forward ready for instant use, every sense alert and strained, and his body flattening itself out as much as possible.

Now he could see the details of the rock surfaces in the strong glare of the sun—he even fancied that he could detect the grey splash of an old bullet mark on the nearest, when once before he had played the game of life and death on this self same spot.

Everything was deadly still—there was not so much as a breath of wind stirring—and he could see the small black ants creeping in and out through the grass beneath him.

But from the rocks, scan them keenly as he might, there came no sign. Every instant he expected to see a small dark ring of metal come sliding over one of them, or between some gap, and see the pale spit of flame which would spell death for someone—yet none came.

On his left Micky was stalking on slightly ahead of him, and disdaining any

attempt at concealment. Suddenly he saw him turn with a start, and flourish his arm wildly.

"Go back, sorr—go back to wanst—'tis not fit yez are for the loikes av this!"

Dick turned his head, and there, to his amazement, not ten paces behind him and half way betwixt Micky and himself, was Kelly, on hands and knees, gripping his carbine.

He was deathly white, and still so dizzy that he could hardly crawl; but he came on gamely enough, smiling as he swayed and lurched. He shook his head at Donovan's call.

"Drop to cover yourself, you thick-pated ruffian!" he answered faintly. "You're an awful fool, but you're too good to waste. Selfish brutes, you two, thinking you were going to leave me out at the finish!"

"Begobs!" said Micky to himself once more, and obediently dropped to earth, feeling no longer sore and angry.

The sight of that white-faced, crawling figure, with barely strength to support itself on hands and knees, swept him with a fierce rush of admiration for the indomitable pluck and will power which made the effort possible. A few yards further on Kelly momentarily collapsed—he struggled up again, however.

"Why don't the beggars open on us, Dick?" he called. "There's one thing, my hand is not over steady, so the shorter the range the more it will be to my liking."

All of a sudden Micky gave a startled exclamation—he had been crawling slightly in advance of the rest, owing to the formation of the ground, and the screening rocks themselves slanted a little towards him. Consequently, from his new vantage-ground he was enabled to see right along behind the rocks. He gave a second scrutinising, searching glance to make sure, and then let up a yell.

"Sure they've bolted like rabbits—there's not so much as the scent av wan of thim to be seen. 'Tis to ground they've gone!"

Dick leapt to his feet and raced forward. It was true enough. Either they were sick of fighting for the time being, or too badly winded, or fancied that their pursuers were closer on their heels than they really were. Still, whatever the reason may have been, they'd neglected their best chance, and bolted helter-skelter down the passage leading to the Roost. Dick flung himself on his face, hanging over the very brink of the precipice; and there, sure enough, just emerging on to the sweep of rich pastureland below, three small dots were toiling painfully along, heading for the cave which had once been Kelly's own headquarters. Dick returned with this news, and found Kelly resting with his back to the rocks, laughing weakly to himself.

"The fool!" he said faintly. "Dick, I always knew that man was a fool, and now he's proved it. He could have wiped us out five minutes ago without turning a hair, and instead he does a bolt."

"What man?" asked Dick.

Kelly pointed to Dick's pocket.

"You carry his name there in the envelope I gave you—but you mustn't open it yet."

And just then the last of the two black trackers came limping up with the horses.

CHAPTER 16.
Adventures on Old Ground.

KELLY was as near fainting as no matter, and both Dick and the sergeant were rocking on their feet with fatigue. Even Jacko the tracker was done to a turn, and his horse was so lame as to be useless.

"We must be getting on," said Kelly; "though what we'll be like when

we reach the bottom I don't know—the whole place is still going round with me."

Dick shook his head.

"No use, old man. We shouldn't be good for anything. We must rest up and wait a bit till you've got your head cooled some. Besides, we've got 'em trapped; they're down below, and so long as one of us can keep his eyes open and we camp out at the top of the passage here, they can't possibly get out. Besides, you must remember they're fagged out and done to a turn, too."

"But there's the other passage," said Kelly, with a twisted smile; "the one through which you and Trevelyan crawled your way when I was laying for you and was up again the law."

"Hush!" whispered Dick. "Remember, there are only three or four of us who know about that, and they don't."

"By Jove, old man, you're right!" said Kelly faintly. "I'd forgotten. It's true enough they're trapped for the present. We'll rest up for a bit, and move on again at dusk. There aren't many twists and turns of the old place that we couldn't find our way along blindfold, eh?"

"I think I could follow the trail by my fingers," answered Mason, laughing. "Anyway, it isn't your fault if I couldn't. I'll take first guard, and drive a boot into Micky's ribs in a couple of hours."

"Just as you like to arrange it, old man," said Kelly wearily. "To tell the truth if I don't get a bit of rest, I sha'n't be fit for anything—I'm all shook up."

"Micky," said Dick, glancing at the sun, "when the shadow of that rock there begins to crawl across your tummy—that'll be in two hours as you're lying now, you'll feel my boot playing postman's knock on your old tin ribs, and the quicker you wake the less sore you'll feel."

"Sure, sorr," said Micky, and trailed off into a prolonged snore.

Dick returned to his post of observation, his chin resting on the tip of an eight hundred foot drop. Legs spread wide apart behind him. Down in the hollow, into parts of which the sun had not yet penetrated, small fleecy, woolly clouds were still flitting to and fro, as the draughts took them, and the shadows were a deep vivid purple.

But to the westward side the sun had dispersed the early morning mists, and shone brightly slantwise on the pastureland and the old, decayed stock-ride. Across this he could follow the course of the three fugitives.

The big man had taken off his armour, and was riding a bit in advance, his shoulders drooping with fatigue. Behind him came his two followers, the sole remainder of the band. But the range was too great to distinguish faces without the aid of a strong glass. They wended their way over the level, heading always towards the cave entrance on the far side.

When they reached it at last, Dick noticed that they did not turn their horses into the home paddock as usual, but hobbled them close to the cave itself, letting them graze at their leisure and water themselves.

"The brutes might off-saddle, at least," he said angrily to himself. "They might give their animals a rest after a ride like that—selfish pigs!"

A few minutes later he saw one man come out and mount guard, his carbine across his knees, whilst a little further in, in the shadow of the main entrance, two other forms lay a-sprawl, wrapped in heavy slumber. Soon the sentry himself began to nod, and in five minutes his dropping head showed that he, too, was fast asleep.

Dick, too, dozed intermittently—it wasn't in human power to keep going longer. Actual sleep he could fight off, but an occasional lapse into oblivion was more than he could help. When he next looked up the sentry had rolled off the rock on which he had perched himself, and was lying full stretch on the turf.

Dick roused himself with a shake, pinched himself on both legs, and finally made up his mind to see what a cold plunge would do for him. He strolled across to where he knew the pool lay, stripped to the waist, and plunged in head and shoulders. The sun hadn't yet had time to heat it up, and the cold shock of it woke him effectually.

He was still rubbing himself more or less dry with his handkerchief when, looking round at the sound of a sudden movement, he saw Kelly undergoing the same process.

"Fine thing, cold water," said the latter, in his usual drawling tones. "Puts new life into a chap. What about our friends the enemy, old man? To tell the honest truth, I don't think I can stand waiting till dusk. I really believe that if I had a good sluice round I should be fit enough to have a slap at 'em earlier. How are they going on?!"

Dick dropped his handkerchief.

"By Jove, you've hit the idea—that is, if you think you're really up to it. They're all dead beat—dead asleep, and the sentry as sound as any of 'em. It's worth risking. Are you fit, though?"

Kelly shook himself, stretched, and laughed.

"Fit, my son. I've got a bit of a singing feeling in my head, but if I'd a broken arm I'd be fit enough to fight those brutes. Go and tap Donovan hard in the ribs, and rouse up the black boy—we'll leave the horses with him."

Dick nodded, and applied a helpful boot to Micky's carcase.

"Rouse up, you snorting, woolly-headed Patlander!" he said, as Micky grunted and rubbed his eyes. "Rouse up, or you won't have a look in at the finish, and tell Jacko there to mind the horses. We start at once—on foot."

Micky was on the alert on the instant.

"I'm wid yez, sorr. But how's Cap'n Vyner's cocoanut? Shure me an' you cud manage the job between the pair av us widout botherin' the loike av him!"

"See here, Donovan," broke in Kelly, "don't you worry about my troubles, my lad. I'm good and ready, so here goes; and the first of you that makes a sound is going to have trouble."

He led the way gingerly over the ridge, dodging the skyline, and dropped down into the cleft of the hidden passage, the others following in single file. Half-way down he paused, and pointed to a queer-shaped rock.

Mason nodded.

It was there that Kelly had rolled off his saddle and collapsed, badly wounded in two places, whilst the old grey stood patiently by him, after one of the last of his famous raids.

Silent-footed, and taking infinite care of loose stones, they scrambled down the rough track till they reached the tall rock at its base, round the corner of which they would be compelled to come into the open again.

Kelly, still keeping the lead, crawled cautiously round this, keeping as low as possible, and then silently beckoned to the others to follow on.

Four hundred yards away they could see the man on sentry-go, still sprawled beside his carbine, and, more dimly, the other two in the cave entrance itself.

They took the first two hundred yards at a run, the soft turf giving no sound. Thirty seconds more, and they would have been on to their men, but again Fortune baulked them.

Dick tripped in a tangle of coarse grass, and came down with a dull thud, his revolver dropping from his hand, and, as luck would have it, clinking against a stone. It was only a small sound, and a townsman asleep would never have heard it; but to a man accustomed to rough border life and constant risk, it was like an alarm bell.

With what looked like a single movement, the sentry woke, grabbed his rifle, and rose, taking a snap shot at the three as he did so. The report effectually aroused his companions, and the next second all three had vanished into the cave, the big man lugging his armour along after him. They made no attempt to stand and fight it out, but bolted like rabbits.

"After them!" cried Kelly, and flung himself forward in pursuit.

It was only a short distance, and they covered it at racing speed, but before they had set foot across the threshold, the three men had vanished into the darkness beyond.

Kelly dashed into the left-hand branch of the cave—the old sleeping quarters of the gang—utterly heedless of the risk he ran; but it was empty.

Doubling back, he made a bolt for the other passage, which in the past he had reserved for his own private use. The shattered iron-plate door had been roughly repaired, and still worked in its grooves. It was partially closed, but a chink of it left an opening into his old room beyond.

He tugged and wrenched at it, but it stuck badly, and Donovan and Mason had to throw their combined weights on it before they could get it to move.

At last, with a loud creak, it yielded, and they dashed in. The big cave, once so luxuriously furnished, was in pitch darkness, and it was impossible to see their hands before their faces.

But, somewhere beyond, Kelly's quick ears caught a faint shuffling sound, and he stopped dead, at the same time touching the other two warningly.

The sound was not repeated, and for a full two minutes they stood there scarcely daring to breathe, lest they should call down on themselves a murderous volley from out of that yawning blackness.

At last Kelly tried a ruse. Taking a cartridge from his pocket, he jerked it far away to the right. It fell with a tinkling thud, which, in contrast to the death-like stillness, sounded like an explosion.

But there came no answering spirt of a revolver or rifle. The bushrangers, if they were still there, refused to fire; just as they had failed to take the opportunity offered them when the three were struggling with the iron door. Either their nerve was broken, or they had come to the conclusion that the old motto, "He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day," and had managed to steal away in the darkness, thinking it better to try and bolt, in the hope of eventually winning their way once more to the open and freedom, and make tracks to a new section of country, than to try conclusions, man to man, with three first-class shots.

They waited yet another couple of minutes; then Kelly gave a whispered order:

"Dick, you and Micky spread out right and left until you come in touch with the wall, then follow it up. Move as quickly as possible, and try not to stumble. The floor's not as level as it might be, remember; so lift your feet well. I know the place better than either of you, and will go straight ahead across the centre. Sixteen paces should bring me to the far side; we will meet up again there. If any of us hear a sound from a suspicious quarter, he must tap twice quickly with the toe of his boot on the rock before firing. If he gets one answering tap he will know that it is a friend; but if he gets none, let him blaze away at once. Off with you! I'll wait here until you get a start."

Silent as ghosts, Micky and Dick slid off through the blackness until they got in touch with the rock wall on their respective sides, and began feeling their way round by their finger-tips. They lifted their feet well at each step, and set them down again lightly on the toes.

Kelly stood motionless till he judged they must have about half completed

their course, and then he, too, started forward, keeping a bee-line by instinct, no easy thing to do in the dark. Though invisible to one another, they were moving along practically abreast.

Once Donovan's belt grazed a projection, and instantly Kelly and Dick challenged with two sharp taps. Micky, knowing his danger, didn't hesitate or stop to think before replying, and in this fashion they swept the cave, until all three joined up again at the small entrance at the far end, which led to the gang's old strong-room.

"I'd give fifty pounds for a bit of candle and a light," said Kelly under his breath.

"They're not here, that's clear enough; and they must be out in those winding passages beyond. To look for them there in the dark, though, would be like looking for a needle in a haystack on a moonless night. I suppose neither of you fellows have a match on you?"

"Oi have not, sorr," answered Micky; "but, by yez lave, fer all that Oi'm thinkin' Oi cud git a bit av a glimmer av light."

"You can? Good man, sergeant! But whatever you do, hustle! The longer we wait, the further those fellows can go burrowing into the passages, and the more trouble we shall have to find them."

"Oi shall, sorr!" said Micky again, and set to work.

Pulling a cartridge from his belt, he gripped the bullet with his teeth, and with a jerk and a twist wrenched it out. Then he poured the powder carefully in a little trailing heap on the floor and moistened it, except just at the near end of the trail, the position of which he marked with his foot.

The other two heard the rending and ripping of some material. Micky the ingenious was sacrificing his shirt and tearing it into strips. Then, when his preparations were made, he set his foot on the dry end of the trail of powder, and rubbed it smartly.

There was a flash of light, a hissing purr as the loose powder ignited, and a reek of smoke; but it had done its work. The damp powder caught and burnt slowly, with much spluttering, and in it Micky managed to set fire to two of his improvised shirt torches. They flamed for a second or two and then died down to a dull red glow, which charred away slowly and steadily. An occasional wave in the air or blowing on them kept them going well, and they gave out light enough to render objects distinguishable a couple of yards or so away.

"Good for you, Micky!" said Dick; "that's a deal better than this Egyptian darkness, even if it isn't exactly a Crystal Palace firework display!"

"'Tis a bit av a thrick Oi learnt off av a Chinkee house thafe at Melbourne, sorr. 'Tis the same he used for explorin' gintleman's bed-rooms for onconsidered troifles. Oi'll just set loight to the thurrud, so that we each have wan; and there's half a dozen more ready when these burn out."

"Come along, then," said Kelly; and taking his glowing strip, led the way through the narrow doorway into the strong-room.

Even with these extemporised lights, it was hard work finding their way, and there was the unpleasant certainty that, hidden in the numerous windings and turnings, the bushrangers would be watching them.

Slowly and cautiously they made their way forward, examining each yard of ground as best they could, spreading out in line to prevent the fugitives working round behind them if they could. It was difficult, tricky work, and they were compelled to trust to their ears as much as their eyes, or more.

Once Dick fancied that he heard the sound of low breathing on his left, but could find nothing. And once Kelly made a dash forward into the dark, and grabbed elusively; but he had been deceived by the flickering of his own light, which he had just blown up afresh, and mistook the moving of an uncertain shadow for a man's knee.

Suddenly Donovan stopped sharply.

"Whisht, sorr!" he whispered. "Oi'd swear Oi heard something or someone movin' behoind av us!"

They all listened intently; and Kelly, stooping, laid his ear close to the rocky floor.

"By Jove! Donovan's right, I do believe!" he whispered back. "Wait a moment; I'm pretty sure that——"

The sentence was never finished, for there came a sudden yell from Dick—a crash, an oath, and a dull thud.

Moving forward, he had, all unexpectedly, set his foot on something which wriggled and was jerked sharply away, and the next instant he felt a grip at his throat, and had hit out blindly.

Quite accidentally, as he advanced he had been driving one of the men back yard by yard, until he had cornered him against a blank wall, where he could retreat no further. The man had no wish to fight there and then, but finding himself cornered and discovered, he had no alternative, and being forced into it, he fought desperately, like a mad beast.

With the first shock Dick had dropped his torch, and it was trampled out underfoot. The bushranger, too, had succeeded in getting the better hold, for his fingers were locked on Dick's windpipe, and his back being literally against the wall, he could steady himself better in the darkness.

Dick felt his head being forced over by the man's thumbs, till he thought his neck must break; and lights began to dance before his eyes. He could barely gasp for breath, and his lungs seemed as though they were bursting.

Kelly and Donovan, hearing him cry out, tried hard to make their way to him; but he had wandered into a little blind alley screened off from the main passage by a curtain of rock. So though they located him fairly correctly by the sounds, they could not get at him.

He tried to trip his antagonist, but the effort imperilled his own balance, and nearly ended disastrously. At last, in desperation, he let his full weight come on the man's arms, though doing it nearly dislocated his neck. Then, as the fellow was drawn slightly forward, he hit out with all his force at the man's heart—five or six half-arm blows in quick succession.

The bushranger spluttered and choked and loosened his grip, and with a jerk Dick wrenched his neck from between those murderous fingers. Springing back, he drew a long breath and filled his lungs; then, gauging his distance, sprang in again. He was goaded and angry by now, and on his guard.

The man lashed out wildly, and caught Dick on the shoulder; but it was only a glancing blow, and failed to stop him. Stooping low, he collared him round the waist and thrust forward his right leg at random. The bushranger swayed and lurched and hammered windmill fashion with both fists. He was tremendously strong, but he lacked science.

Dick took the blows on his bent shoulders, and hardly felt them, for they were downward hits, and their force was broken. He just set his teeth and tightened his locked arms on the man's middle until he thought the ribs must give.

It was now his antagonist's turn to gasp. Dick heard his laboured breathing and the frantic, angry exclamations of Kelly and Donovan, groping blindly about, trying to come to his aid. Then, with a crash, he managed to throw him, and come

down on top. He shifted his grip, but in the dark missed with his right hand, and the next instant the man's teeth had met in his forearm and a pair of thumbs were gouging wildly at his eyes.

He drew up a little, shook his arms free, and grabbed again. This time one hand, at any rate, got hold of a thick shock of hair, and held. "When in Rome do as the Romans do," he thought grimly to himself. When tackling a man who fights like a wild-cat, the more rough horseplay you put in the safer for you.

He gripped the handful of hair tightly, and banged its owner's head on the rocky floor. The man must have had a skull like a nigger's, or he would have been stunned. As it was, the pain only seemed to exasperate him and give him renewed energy; for he wriggled himself partially free and set to work with his thumbs again.

Dick was within an ace of continuing his career minus a left eye, when a second bang on the floor momentarily quietened him. Neither of them had time or opportunity to use their weapons; but as Dick felt the form grow limp under his hands, he groped round for his revolver, meaning to give the fellow his quietus with the butt.

It was that which proved his undoing. The fellow, realising that though he might be the stronger as far as sheer brute force went, he was no match for Dick in skill and cunning, had been playing possum. Sorely shaken and dazed he certainly was, but not by any means unconscious; he had let himself go limp on purpose.

The instant Dick's grip loosened, as he groped about with one hand, the man rolled half on one side and brought up his knee sharply and viciously, catching Dick a terrible blow in the side. A horrible, excruciating pain shot through him, and in an instant he was sick, winded, and helpless; the next, the man had struggled to his feet, and was blundering and stumbling down the passage towards the exit as hard as he could go.

"After him!" roared Kelly; and he and Donovan started in pursuit, guiding themselves by the noise ahead.

But the bushranger had got too long a lead. In the light they might have caught him—probably would; but in the dark he drew further and further away.

Though the blow which had knocked Dick out was one which gave him agonising pain, its effects were only transitory, and in less than a couple of minutes he was on his feet again, and furious. He stumbled across his revolver, snatched it up, and set out after the others as hard as he could tear.

Cannoning into walls here and a projection there indifferently, he was intent on one thing, and one thing only—and that was, to come to handgrips with the man in daylight.

Just as the first glimmering of it reached him however, he heard, far away, the sound of a rifle-shot, and then another, and a third, in quick reply. He lurched out half blinded into the sunlight, and saw his late adversary four hundred yards away, with Kelly and Donovan in pursuit, but hopelessly far behind.

Right away on the far side of the hollow the shots explained themselves. The other two bushrangers, who had managed to slip out of the cave unobserved, had made a dash for the secret passage to the tableland above. But Jacko, the black tracker, had proved himself one too many for them.

He had seen them coming, and recognised them a good way off—so far off that he had had plenty of time to build himself a neatly loopholed barricade, behind which he could lie perfectly screened, and pick them off as they came, without even risking his black hide; though, to do him justice, he was brave enough.

The bushrangers had evidently found his fire too accurate for comfort; for they were pelting helter-skelter down the passage back to the open pasture-land.

Just as they reached it, the third man joined them. They were cut off from

their horses, but then so were Kelly and Dick, and the bushrangers had a long lead. They ran rapidly round the base of the cliff to a point where it shelved a little, and began climbing with frantic haste.

Dick, making a desperate sprint for it, caught up his two companions. Kelly was for heading straight after the fugitives, who were now well up the side of the precipice and continuing to ascend rapidly—so rapidly that it became evident that at some time they had cut artificial steps in the worst places.

"Bear away to the left!" Dick yelled. "It's quicker going up the old passage, and we shall be able to catch them at the top."

Kelly threw up his arm by way of acknowledgment, and swerved round, and side by side the three ran for all they were worth. That they could reach the summit first they had little doubt, but after that they had nearly a third of a mile to go to reach the point where the bushrangers would gain the cliff edge.

Panting, gasping, sweating, they toiled up the steep, slippery incline, till the veins stood out on their forehead like whipcords and their eyes were half starting out of their heads. The excitement and fever of the chase had them in its grip. Without it, what they did in the time would have been sheerly impossible.

Dick snatched a carbine from Jacko as they swept by his barricade. The horses were too far away to waste time over, and they started afoot once more on the last lap of the great race.

They were four hundred yards to the bad when the first two bushrangers crawled over the lip of the cliff and flung themselves down. A few seconds later the third followed, and even as he ran Dick could see that the leader was rapidly trying to fix himself into some metal casing, which glinted dully in the sun, and which he had been carrying slung over his shoulder. All three men were clearly too done to attempt further flight, and evidently meant to fight to a finish where they stood.

"Cornered at last!" gasped Kelly. "And they've got to fight this time."

"Short of ammunition, I expect," panted Dick, "or they'd have tackled us down below. It's the end this time, one way or another." And they spurted over the intervening space to close up for the last struggle face to face—six very exhausted men on a boulder-strewn stretch of ground on the brink of an eight hundred foot precipice.

As by a common instinct each man flung himself behind the nearest covering rock and opened fire. So great was the confusion that for the first few seconds no one could realise which rock sheltered friend or foe.

Donovan loosed off and chipped splinters from a boulder two inches above Dick's head, and one of the bushrangers took deliberate aim at the rock which shielded his fellow. Neither bullet did damage, however; and so they lay for a full five minutes, gasping for breath, and warily shifting themselves by fractions of an inch at a time into more convenient firing positions.

If so much as a finger showed on one side or another, it was the signal for a crackling fusillade.

The range was exceedingly close, and every man of the six was a shot of first-class ability.

Once Dick raised the rifle-barrel in changing his position; instantly thrup, thrup, thrup came three bullets in quick succession, and when he lowered it again the wooden casing was splintered, and three grey, lead splashes were dotted along the steel of the barrel.

Donovan incautiously exposed an elbow, only to roll inward behind his rock again, with a heart-felt Irish curse, and a hole through his upper arm. The man who fired the shot was less lucky; for a second—two, at the outside—he showed a tiny bit of forehead round the jagged edge of the stone, but, little as it was, it

sufficed. Almost before his finger had pressed the trigger home, Dick, who was waiting for just such a chance, sent a bullet crashing into his brain.

He half sprang to his knees, with a convulsive effort, and sank back in a huddled heap, with a curious spasmodic twitching of the hands.

Suddenly from behind the boulder opposite the gigantic figure of the bushrangers' leader sprang into full view. His head, as Dick could see clearly now, was encased in a big cylinder of iron plating, reaching to the shoulders; in it was a narrow slit for his eyes and for ventilation. The whole of his body and his arms were similarly protected.

Dick fired twice in quick succession, and Kelly once. All three shots battered against the head-piece, and caused the man to stagger to and fro in a drunken fashion by the sheer shock of impact, but his only answer was a harsh laugh. He was mad with the maddening fighting lust that comes over men at such times, and, secure in his protective armour, he was evidently bent on pressing matters, and driving Dick and Kelly from their cover. Revolver in hand—his rifle had been rendered useless by a chance shot smashing the lock action—he charged down on them, reckless, jeering, defiant, with full belief in the adequacy of his protection. Simultaneously his last surviving follower rose.

What followed was quick, sharp, terrible work. Donovan, firing as he lay and using his left hand only, dropped the unarmoured man with a bullet in the groin.

Kelly and Dick, accepting the ringleader's challenge, sprang to meet him—all three using revolvers only.

It may have been that the man's armour impeded him and hindered his aim. At any rate, he missed clean with the first two chambers; the third scarred Kelly's right arm from wrist to shoulder; the next, and last he fired, ripped Dick's coat, and glanced off a rib, causing him exquisite pain, and nearly dropping him. He set his teeth, however, and fired at the man's most vulnerable part, his legs. His first shot shattered the right knee-cap, and, with a shriek of pain, the fellow staggered and grabbed convulsively at a rock to steady himself. Kelly, utterly regardless of his own extreme risk, strode forward, took a quick, sighting shot, and fired. The bullet entered between the eye-slit of the headpiece, and the man came to the ground with a heavy tinkling crash of metal.

"Hurroo!" cried Donovan feebly, and promptly fainted.

Dick lurched forward, his rib hurting him considerably, and joined Kelly, who was standing, looking down at the fallen man, the revolver still smoking in his hand.

"Come here, Dick!" he said, gripping him by the shoulder. "I always had a premonition that I should one day be that fellow's death. It's come true at last; though many a time I have been tempted to forestall this minute. Have you got that envelope I gave you? Open it." Dick fumbled in his pockets and produced it.

"Read the name on the enclosed paper," said Kelly.

Dick read; stared, and read again.

"But surely——" he began.

Kelly waved to him to be silent, and, stooping quickly, undid the catch of the clumsy helmet, and drew it off.

"You can see for yourself," he said quietly.

It was the face of Macullan, the ex-warder, which stared up at them with unseeing eyes, with a bullet hole in the centre of his forehead.

"Good heavens!" said Dick, in amazement.

"I guessed it from the first," answered Kelly quietly. "He was Hayes' jackal—Hayes hated me—he was desperate—and all else failing, they went into partnership to loot for themselves and to blacken my name. That is why, so long as

Hayes was in command, this man here was able to do as he pleased, knowing that Hayes would put the police on the wrong track."

"I understand. And now those who plotted against you are hoist with their own petard; for here, by their own confession, is Ned Kelly, last of the bushrangers. And Captain Vyner is——"

"Is very sleepy and longing for a smoke," retorted Kelly whimsically. "Come along, let's patch up poor Donovan's arm, then we can rest and wait for the relief to come up. We've been through strange times and seen strange sights round this old hollow, you and I, young 'un. Donovan first, and then we'll go and take our last look at the Robbers' Roost, for, from now on, I'm a Government man, holding authority direct from the High Commissioner himself."

* * * * * * * * * * * *

The relief came up four hours later, having made prisoners of those of the gang left behind in that last desperate race.

Before long the news was flashing over the wires, north, south, east, and west, that Ned Kelly, the last of the bushrangers, was dead.

Only a few were in the real secret, and could have identified in later years the real Kelly—the daring rider, the free-handed, fearless leader of outlaws—in the trim, neat figure of Colonel Vyner, the commissioner who ruled the most lawless mining fraternity with a rod of iron and impartial justice, and who was known amongst them as the "Britisher"—"the man who doesn't know how to be afraid."

Mr. Trevelyan knew, Dick Mason knew, and a long, lithe-limbed gentleman, with an American accent, who became Mr. Trevelyan's partner, also know. As did a white-haired, careworn, high official in Melbourne; and last and not least there was a cunning, old grey horse, with a kindly eye, who knew best of all—far, far best—but neither they nor he ever betrayed their knowledge by word or deed. But, perhaps, when twice a year the old grey foregathered and rubbed noses with a splendid black answering to the name of Cæsar, in Mr. Trevelyan's home paddock, they winked at one another solemnly, remembering old times.

*** NOTE.—Hayes committed suicide on hearing of the death of his confederate. Photographs of the actual armour, which was worn in the final struggle, are still in existence.

THE END.

THE CASE OF THE OPIUM SMOKER.

A Complete Tale of Sexton Blake, Detective.

A Late Visitor—Sexton Blake Has a Clue.

STRETCHED in a lazy attitude in a big lounge-chair, with his favourite briar-root pipe between his teeth, Sexton Blake, the world's famous private detective, looked the picture of peace and comfort.

Suddenly the front door bell rang. The landlady answered the summons—she had not gone to bed yet—and a moment later, when she had rapped on the door and opened it, the visitor pushed by her into the room.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Blake," he said. "I hope I am not disturbing you?"

"Not at all. I recall your face now. You are valet to Sir Stamford Marrable, better known as 'Old Midas,' of Warwick Square, Pimlico. I recovered some stolen bonds for him several years ago."

"Just so. And that is why I have ventured to come to you, sir. I am here on my master's behalf, but without his knowledge. The fact is, that Sir Stamford's son returned from foreign parts lately, and—and I fear that he——"

The valet paused in confusion.

"Has anything happened to him?"

"No, sir; but—but I believe him to be an impostor!"

"An impostor!" exclaimed Sexton Blake. "What reason have you for believing that? Tell me the whole story as clearly as you can."

"There isn't much to tell, sir. Mr. Godfrey Marrable is an only son—he is now thirty-five years of age—and ten or eleven years ago, when his mother died, he drifted into evil ways, and quarrelled with his father, who sent him out to Hong Kong on a small allowance. There he contracted the opium habit, but he cured himself of it in the last year, and got a position in the Civil Service. Then his father forgave him, and wrote to him to come home. He arrived from the docks on Saturday morning, and as soon as I put eyes on him—I had known him since he was a boy—I felt that something was wrong, that he was not the real Mr. Godfrey. He had the same features, and he spoke freely enough of old times, but his face had grown hardened and sort of vicious, and he looks older than his age."

"He would have altered in ten years," said the detective, "and the climate of Hong Kong ages one rapidly. Have you spoken of this to Sir Stamford?"

"No, sir; and he wouldn't believe me if I did."

"Naturally. I see no foundation as yet for your suspicions, Parker. You are probably deceiving yourself."

The valet nodded.

"I'm a fool, that's what I am!" he declared. "Now that I've talked to you, things begin to look different. I got the idea into my head, and it

stuck there, though I should have known better, for here is proof that I must be wrong"—taking a plain white handkerchief from his pocket. "Smell this, sir."

Sexton Blake put the handkerchief to his nose.

"Opium!" he muttered. "The scent thrown off by the drug in burning!"

"Exactly, sir. It is familiar to me, for my former master was addicted to the vice; and if Mr. Godfrey has taken to it again, as this seems to show, of course he can't be an impostor. For the last two nights he has gone out—he has a latchkey—and hasn't returned for three or four hours, as near as I can judge from hearing him come in. Each morning I have observed the smell of opium in his room, and to-day I picked up the handkerchief under his bed."

"A few hours is a short period for an opium smoker to give to the habit," said the detective. "Does he show traces of the indulgence in the mornings?"

"No. He comes down to breakfast looking bright and fresh, and his appetite is splendid. Rather queer that, sir, isn't it?"

"Very queer! Tell me, when and where did young Mr. Marrable arrive from Hong Kong?"

"By a slow steamer that docked on Friday evening in the Thames somewhere below London Bridge. Mr. Godfrey spent the night at an hotel, and came home early on Saturday morning."

"To-day is Monday," said Sexton Blake. "Do I understand that Godfrey Marrable went out on Saturday and Sunday nights?"

"Yes, sir, and again to-night, which gave me a chance to slip away. He always leaves the house shortly after ten o'clock, when his father has retired to bed at that hour. Sir Stamford is getting old and feeble."

There was an eager gleam in Sexton Blake's eyes, for he was satisfied that he had found the clue to a case that promised to be worthy of his skill.

"I want to ask you a few questions," he said. "Does your master keep any valuables in the house?"

"He does, sir," replied Parker. "Sir Stamford is eccentric and miserly, and he keeps the family jewels in a safe in his bed-room, and usually a large sum of money as well. He owns considerable property in London, and when his agent brings him the rent each quarter, mostly in gold and banknotes, he puts the money in the safe, and don't bank it until a week or so before next quarter-day."

"Is Godfrey Marrable aware of that?"

"Yes, sir; his father mentioned it to him on Saturday, as I chanced to overhear."

"This happens to be a quarter-day, the 25th," said Sexton Blake. "When does the agent bring the rents?"

"Always on the 28th, as regular as clockwork."

"Where do you sleep, Parker?"

"In a room across the corridor from my master's, on the first floor."

"And Godfrey Marrable?"

"He is on the floor above," the valet answered. "Why do you want to know all this, Mr. Blake?" he added. "Do you think that I am right, after all, and that Mr. Godfrey is——"

"I won't tell you what I think now," Sexton Blake interrupted. "My advice to you at present is to keep your eyes and ears open, and not to sleep too soundly; but we will talk of that again. Come, I will walk part of the way back with you."

The two men left the house together, and when the detective returned half an hour later he was not inclined to say much.

"It is an interesting case," he told Tinker, "and it is quite possible that I shall let you help me."

Sexton Blake did not go down to Hampshire on the following day, as he had intended. He went out after breakfast, and did not return until nine o'clock in the evening, when he entered his sitting-room and handed a slipper to Tinker.

"Put that in your pocket," he said. "It belongs to Mr. Godfrey Marrable, and it was given to me by the valet. I have had a long day, and I expect to have a long night. The steamer by which Mr. Marrable travelled has sailed again, and I could learn nothing in that quarter. It makes no difference, however. And now, my boy, you can fetch Pedro."

"You are going to use him?" asked Tinker.

"Very likely," replied the detective, as he began to disguise himself. "I am going to shadow Godfrey Marrable, and as he may give me the slip, I want you and the dog to be within easy reach. I will instruct you further when we get to Pimlico."

Drugged—The Detective's Ruse—Tracked Down.

SIR STAMFORD MARRABLE, a retired merchant, who had made a fortune in the City, and had been knighted at the end of his year of service as Lord Mayor, had lived for most of his life in the gloomy old mansion in Warwick Square, Pimlico, though he could easily have afforded one in a more fashionable neighbourhood. At a quarter past ten o'clock a light shone behind the curtained windows of the father's bed-room, and five minutes later, as Sexton Blake had expected, the son left the house and crossed the square.

That it was a dark and cloudy night was to the advantage of the detective, who immediately took up the chase, with the knowledge that Tinker and the bloodhound were somewhere behind him, though he doubted if he would require their services. Godfrey Marrable walked straight to the District Station at Victoria, and bought a second-class return ticket to Aldgate. Sexton Blake did the same, and while he stood on the platform he made the discovery that Sir Stamford Marrable's supposed son was a clever forger who had fled from England eight years ago.

An East End train arrived almost at once, and it had started off, carrying the two men with it in different compartments before Tinker and the dog had put in an appearance. This had entered into the detective's calculations, and he was not disappointed.

"The lad will take the next train," he told himself, "and Pedro will do the rest. They won't be very far behind in case I should want them."

The two men got out at Aldgate Station, and in the fairly long route that they traversed, much of it by lonely thoroughfares, Sexton Blake took every precaution possible.

By the Minories and Tower Hill, Godfrey Marrable made his way to Upper East Smithfield, and thence down Nightingale Lane to the dreary and squalid region of Wapping, between the chain of docks and the river. He went steadily on by Wapping High Street. Here Sexton Blake lost him.

A few minutes later Pedro, the great bloodhound, leapt upon him with a whine of delight, and was licking his hand.

"Good old fellow!" he said, caressing the faithful animal.

"Ah, here you are!" exclaimed Tinker, who was with the dog. "I was afraid we would be too late. I described you at Victoria, and the clerk told me where you had booked to, so it was plain sailing as far as Aldgate. I got out there, and Pedro nosed his way along beautifully."

Sexton Blake took the slipper from Tinker, and held it to Pedro's muzzle.

"Hunt him up!" he urged. "Find him, old fellow! Don't fail us!"

There was no danger of that. Pedro sniffed the pavement, whimpered, and was off like a shot, with the detective clinging to his chain.

"If Godfrey Marrable is an impostor," asked Tinker, "what has happened to the real one? Has he been murdered?"

"No, he is alive," said Sexton Blake. "He is being kept out of the way. He is a prisoner in one of the vile opium dens of the East End, and Godfrey Marrable pays him a nightly visit to make sure that all is well. At any moment we may——"

He broke off with a low, eager exclamation, and by tugging hard on the chain he barely succeeded in checking the bloodhound, who was about to dash into the mouth of a narrow, foul-smelling alley, roofed over, that was half-way to the top of Bluegate Street.

"Is this the place?" whispered Tinker.

"This is the place, without a doubt," replied Sexton Blake.

"Are you going in?"

"No; to-morrow night for that. I have learned enough for the present. The next step must be carefully thought out, and carefully prepared for. Come along!"

Yen Sing's Opium Den—The Real Godfrey Marrable—In a Tight Corner.

DURING the next day, which was the 27th of September, Sexton Blake was in the best of spirits. Nobody could have supposed that he was planning an enterprise of the most dangerous kind—a daring venture in which he would take his life in his hands. He went out in the afternoon, meeting Sir Stamford Marrable's valet by appointment, and returned to Baker Street at seven o'clock. He dined with Tinker, gave him certain instructions, and left the house between ten and eleven o'clock, wearing a disguise that was especially suited to his purpose, and had not been used for years.

Late that night, at a few minutes past one o'clock, a lascar entered the alley in Bluegate Street, Wapping, to which Pedro had followed the false Godfrey Marrable. He was a tall, lean man, dressed in shabby sailor's slops, and his swarthy complexion and brown hands, his crisp, curly hair of glossy raven hue, concealed the identity of Sexton Blake.

Having groped the length of the alley, in almost pitch darkness, he came to a door at the end, and rapped upon it four times, in a quick, peculiar manner. The rap was a common signal, the passport of admission. Without delay a bolt was shot, and the door, opening noiselessly, closed behind the intrepid detective as he stepped into Yen Sing's opium den.

"You wantee littee pipe?" asked Yen Sing, with careless scrutiny.

"That's what I'm here for," Sexton Blake replied. "Let's have it, old yellow face!"

"Allee lightee. You pay first."

There was a door at one side of the room, and another at the farther end, as the detective observed while he was fumbling in his pockets for a silver coin. Then he threw himself lazily on the empty space at the end of one of the platforms.

Having rolled a pinch of opium into a little brown ball the size of a pill, Lo Fang, Yen's assistant, stuffed it into the bowl of a tiny brass pipe. He set the drug alight from a brazier, and brought the pipe to the disguised lascar, who placed the stem between his lips and stretched himself out full-length. Several minutes later, after a few words to his assistant, Yen Sing opened the door at the side of the apartment and vanished up a narrow staircase. He had gone to bed.

Silence reigned in the den of evil, save when one of the sprawling wretches muttered incoherently in his dreams. It was a weird, uncanny scene. The lamp, shining through the bluish reek, cast a ghostly light on the dingy room and its occupants. A quarter of an hour dragged by, while the detective, who was watching furtively, pretended to smoke as often as Lo Fang glanced at him. Then, with a drowsy yawn, the assistant squatted himself on a low stool beside the table, with his back turned on the supposed lascar. His head dropped on his chest, and soon, from his deep breathing, he appeared to be asleep.

"Now for it!" thought Sexton Blake. "I couldn't have a better chance."

Rising to his feet, and creeping forward as noiselessly as a cat, he seized Lo Fang around the neck with one hand in a stifling, choking grip. The man struggled for an instant, unable to utter a sound; and then, as his assailant hit him smartly on the skull with the butt of a revolver, his limbs relaxed, and he slid to the floor.

The sleepers had not stirred. Satisfied that the Chinaman was effectively stunned, the detective did not take the precaution to bind and gag him, as time was too precious for that. Having searched Lo Fang, and found a large key, he hastened to the door at the rear of the room and unlocked it. He entered a smaller room, and here, by the glow from a lamp that was burning dimly, he beheld what he had expected to see. On a bunk at one side was stretched a man with a fair moustache, with flushed features and dishevelled clothing and hair. This was the real Godfrey Marrable, and he was heavily under the influence of opium.

Producing two small phials from his pocket, Sexton Blake held one to the unconscious man's nose, and from the other forced a few drops of liquid between his teeth. Partly roused from his stupor by the strong antidotes to the drug, Godfrey Marrable opened his eyes, in which there was no comprehension. A tug brought him to his feet, and he lurched against the detective.

"Who are you?" he muttered thickly. "What d'you want?"

"I am a friend," Sexton Blake told him in a whisper. "You are in danger. You have been decoyed into this opium den, and I want to get you out of it quietly. Come, try to walk."

"Leave me 'lone," was the reply. "Let me go t'shleep."

The man was still dazed, unable to help himself or to realise his situation. There was only one thing to be done, and the detective did it. Fortunately his strength was equal to the task. Lifting Godfrey Marrable, and hoisting him over his left shoulder, he hastened to the outer room, where a startling surprise awaited him. Lo Fang, whose skull must have been a thick one, had recovered from his injury and was on his feet, leaning against the table.

"Yen Sing!" he shouted. "Yen Sing!"

He pluckily sprang forward, and as he received a blow from Sexton Blake's right fist, which sent him reeling, there was a yell from above, followed by a thumping noise on the staircase. The next instant Yen Sing burst into the room, and with that, as Lo Fang rushed to the attack again, the detective caught him between the eyes. He staggered back, upsetting the table, and as he fell his arm struck the swinging lamp, breaking and extinguishing it.

Some of the opium smokers were now half-awake, calling out in alarm, and above the clamour rang the snarling voice of Yen Sing:

"You rascal lascar! Me killee you click!"

It was a perilous moment. Sexton Blake had drawn his revolver, but he did not want to shoot the Chinaman if he could help it. Instead he tried

a ruse, firing one chamber in the air. The flash of the weapon revealed his position, as he meant it should, and for a brief second he stood his ground. As he darted to one side he heard Yen Sing's vicious rush, and then, turning at the platform, he hurried down the room, through the black darkness, with the yells of the awakened sleepers ringing in his ears.

Handicapped though he was, clinging desperately to his burden, Sexton Blake reached the door and fumbled for the bolt. He shot it back in the socket, and with that, before he could do more, his enemy plunged bang into him, and the three men came down together. Letting go of Godfrey Marrable, the detective grappled blindly with Yen Sing, from whose hand a knife fell with a clatter. For a brief time the two struggled, rolling over and over; and then, as shouts and footsteps were heard in the alley, the door flew open, and into the room sprang Sexton Blake's friend, Inspector Widgeon, followed by Tinker, Pedro, and two constables.

"We were just in time!" exclaimed Tinker, when the two villainous Chinamen had been manacled. "The pistol-shot brought us!"

From East to West—A Surprise Visit—Sexton Blake Scores.

NO time was lost. The detective and his companions, not forgetting Pedro, walked north to Commercial Road, and on to Aldgate, where they picked up a four-wheeled cab. The fresh night air had done wonders in the way of reviving Godfrey Marrable, and after a draught of medicine—a stop was made in the Strand while a chemist was knocked up—the effects of the opium were nearly dissipated, and he was able to tell his story lucidly.

Sexton Blake's explanation followed, and by the time that was finished the party had reached a street near Warwick Square, Pimlico, where they left the cab, and continued their way on foot. As they crossed the square, approaching Sir Stamford Marrable's residence, a dim light was seen on the first floor, shining behind the window curtains.

A moment later, the detective having noiselessly opened and shut the front door, the little party were inside the house. They traversed the hall and stopped to listen, but could hear nothing above. Pedro had been cautioned, and the sagacious animal well understood that he must be silent.

"Come!" whispered Sexton Blake.

The stairs were thickly carpeted, and without a sound, flashing his tiny electric lamp before him, and carrying a revolver in the other hand, he led his companions up to the first floor. They turned at the top, and a few yards brought them to a door that was slightly open. A dim light shone through, and from within came a crackling, clinking noise.

"Something wrong!" breathed Tinker.

"Be ready!" murmured Sexton Blake.

With that he pocketed the electric lamp, and pushed on the door, which swung silently on its hinges, giving a full view of the interior of Sir Stamford Marrable's bed-chamber, and revealing a startling sight. A shaded gas-jet was burning. Huddled on the floor, apparently unconscious, lay Parker, the valet; and Sir Stamford, his eyes rolling wildly, was propped up in bed with his hands tied and a handkerchief bound over his mouth.

Across the room, with his back turned, Godfrey Marrable's double stood by the open door of a safe that was built into the wall. Unaware of his danger, little dreaming that he was trapped, he was calmly removing and putting into a bag the contents of the safe—jewel-cases, rolls of gold coin, and packets of banknotes.

"That will do, Theodore Rakestraw," the detective said quietly. "I will trouble you to throw up your hands!"

The words were like the explosion of a bomb to the guilty man, who fairly jumped off his feet as he wheeled round, letting the bag drop with a crash. But he did not obey the command. He staggered back, and made a dash for the nearest window.

"Seize him, Pedro!" exclaimed Sexton Blake. "Lightly! Don't hurt him!"

There was a gruff bark, a flying spring, and Pedro landed on the chest of the impostor before he could draw the weapon for which he was fumbling. Down he went, with a yell of fright, not daring to move, while the hound stood over him with jaws nipping his throat, snarling in a low key.

"Have you had enough, Rakestraw?" asked the detective.

"I give in!" the man answered hoarsely. "Take the brute away, or I'll be throttled!"

Having called Pedro off, Sexton Blake clapped a pair of iron bracelets on the prisoner's wrists, and then helped to release Sir Stamford Marrable. When the latter had been untied, and the gag had been taken from his mouth—he had suffered no worse treatment—he gazed in bewilderment at the two men who looked so much alike.

"What is the meaning of this?" he inquired. "Which of you is my son?"

"I am, father!" replied the real Godfrey Marrable. "You have been deceived!"

"Thank Heaven!" said Sir Stamford, as he realised the truth.

"Yes. I am your son," Godfrey Marrable continued, "and I can explain in a few words what is a long story. It will be sufficient to say that this scoundrel, whose name is Rakestraw, sailed from Hong Kong on the same vessel that I did. He scraped acquaintance with me, no doubt meaning from the first to make use of the resemblance between us, and as he had winning ways I easily fell into the trap.

"By degrees, during the voyage, he drew from me all the information that he wanted, and as soon as we landed he persuaded me to accompany him to an opium den in the East End, where I have been lying in a stupor since last Saturday. I should probably have died there but for this brave detective, who rescued me at the risk of his life."

While Godfrey Marrable was speaking Parker had recovered—he was not much hurt—and in a short time he was able to tell what had happened.

"The agent came with the rent money this afternoon, a day earlier than usual," he said, addressing the detective, "and that put me on my guard. I would have sent word to you, Mr. Blake, but I had no chance to do so. I tried to keep awake to-night, but somehow or other I fell asleep, and the next thing I knew I was roused by a scuffling noise; then I got out of bed and crept to my master's room. I found the door partly open, and I had no more than stepped inside when I received a stunning blow on the head. I fell like a log, and that is all I can remember."

"You are lucky to have escaped with your life," said Sexton Blake. "Come, Rakestraw; these gentlemen will be glad to see the last of you. Run ahead, Tinker, and find a constable. Good-night, Sir Stamford!"

Sexton Blake was well paid for his services, and Tinker also received a cheque from Sir Stamford Marrable. Yen Sing and his assistant and Theodore Rakestraw were tried, convicted, and punished as they deserved. As for Godfrey Marrable, his experience had taught him a lesson. In a weak moment he had relapsed into the evil habit of which he believed he had cured himself, but he is not likely to do so again.

THE END.

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