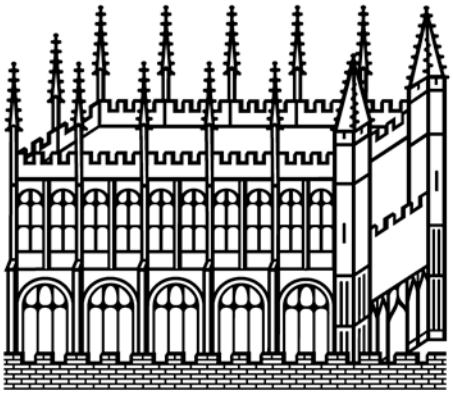

BENEATH THE SOUTHERN CROSS.

A STORY

BY

ROBERT RICHARDSON

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Beneath the Southern Cross

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BY

ROBERT RICHARDSON, B.A.,

AUTHOR OF "ALMOST A HERO;" "PHIL'S CHAMPION;" ETC. ETC.

"*Sidere mens eadem mutato.*"

EDINBURGH:
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1880.

Dedicated

TO

JOHN BLACK, Esq., M.A., Advocate,

IN FRIENDSHIP AND ESTEEM.

CONTENTS.

BENEATH THE SOUTHERN CROSS.

CHAPTER I.

WYANDRA.

THE house at Wyandra was a two-storied building of white freestone, with broad verandahs extending round three sides. Over the pillars of the side verandahs the passion vine trailed its glossy dark green leaves and big starry blossoms. It was a comfortable house, with few architectural pretensions externally, but with large airy rooms that were shady and cool in the warmest of Australian noontides, and wide French windows opening upon the verandahs. The house was handsomely furnished, with all the essentials, and most of the agreeable minor accessories which, but a little while ago, were regarded as luxuries by the upper ranks, and are now the necessities of middle class life.

The building stood on a gentle slope, in the midst of grounds of considerable extent. The prospect from the front windows, which faced the west, was over a rich and undulating country, diversified with

woodland. The ground immediately before the house was laid out as a flower garden, with broad spaces of smooth sward between the beds. Acaca trees, banana, and bamboos made the place shady, and darkling, and odorous, and at the foot flowed a quiet going river, whose waters shimmered and glinted in the sunlight between the English willows which lined its banks.

At the back of the house the land continued to rise slowly, and here there was a small vineyard, the vines carried in terraces up the slopes. The Wyandra estate included also a farm, which was, to a large degree, a model farm, though it made a return for the outlay upon it to the extent of causing it to be regarded as "keeping itself."

The possessor of this comfortable and pleasant property—for it was as pleasant an earthly resting-place as any man of moderate ambition could desire—was Mr Archer Vallance.

It is on a summer morning that I would desire to introduce the indulgent reader to the Vallance household. All the windows of the breakfast-room are wide open, and a soft air steals in through them, sweet with the mingled fragrance of the magnolias, passion flowers, and roses. Four persons are seated at the table, Mr and Mrs Vallance and their two daughters. Before Mr Vallance stands a handsome round of cold corned beef: conditions of climate usually make small difference in the substantiality of a healthy Englishman's breakfast; if cold viands are substituted for hot in the warmer clime, it is all the change that is made.

But the ladies do not exhibit the vigorous appetite of the head of the family, which is a thing of tradition and early associations as well as of nature. Fruits of half-a-dozen varieties are on the table, and with these Mrs Vallance and her daughters supplement their toast and coffee. A cluster of purple grapes, gathered not half-an-hour since, with the dew and pearly bloom still upon them, lies on Miss Vallance's plate, and a large slice of rock-mellon is engaging the earnest attention of her sister. There is a considerable interval of years between the sisters. Two children had come between them, both of whom had died in infancy.

Beholding Mabel Vallance as she now appears in her simple morning dress of muslin, there could hardly be two opinions about her being pretty. She is of the medium height, and, like most Australian girls, has a very graceful figure, slim, pliant, and shapely; slight almost to a fault, it might be, to some tastes. Her face is a short oval. She has hazel eyes, soft and bright, a small red mouth, a clear brown complexion with little colour, save when the girl is heated or excited, when a pink flush will rise in her face to heighten, perhaps, its charm. Mabel's nose is a little irregular, at least it is not typically Grecian, having a suspicion of an upward tip. Brown hair with a ripple, and a gold thread through it when the sunlight glints athwart it, is gathered in smooth coils, in a fashion I am not competent to describe in detail, around a small neat head. There is not a great deal of emphasized expression in Mabel's face —it does not "beam with intelligence," that is; yet

neither is it wanting in that quality. It is far from being either an apathetic or a doll face, and is bright and kind withal.

Lottie Vallance's appearance is not striking. She has not ceased growing yet, but is decidedly small for her age. A figure short and rather spare, a face irregular in outline, freckled, with little nose worth the mentioning, and a forehead a good deal too large and prominent for feminine beauty, according to all existing canons on this point. Lotty Vallance so far discredited the laws of direct heredity, in regard to looks, as to be like neither her father or mother, but had gone back to a plain uncle, whom she was thought to resemble closely. She had hair more like a boy's than a girl's, thick and short and curly, clustering round her head in wavy, straggling, unruly locks. Lotty's hair was her *bête noir*, her humiliation, the plague of her life—a point from which she was always assailable—a chink in her armour through which she was readily pierced. No amount of combing or brushing ever tamed Lotty's rough and stubborn tresses. They twisted and curled at their own will and pleasure, which was invariably opposed to those of their mistress. In fact, Lotty possessed but did not govern her hair, and at this stage of her existence it might be fairly regarded as her cross in life. The one really good feature in the girl's face, if you make no count of her well-developed forehead, were her eyes, which were really fine—clear, blue, large, inquiring eyes. The expression of the face was good, too—direct, fearless, and honest.

"How can you take so much salt to your melon,

Lotty?" said Mabel. "You seem to eat salt with almost everything. It is the strangest taste, and can't be good for you, I'm sure."

"Brings out the flavour of rock-melon, I assure you, Mab; just like pepper with strawberries," answered Lotty composedly.

"Nonsense; it's just a bad habit you've got into; and it's always foolish having odd ways, different from other people. You should correct her, mamma."

"If you're not more careful, you'll be turning into salt one of these fine days, Lot," said her father.

"You're mixing up your Scripture, papa; it wasn't Lot who turned into salt, it was his wife," replied Lotty.

"Don't be irreverent, child; it isn't funny. And don't make puns at all—ladies never do," said Mabel. "I can't think where you take the trick from. I don't think I ever made one."

"I'm sure you never did. To make a good pun takes—brains."

Mr Vallance laughed out.

"Your bump of reverence must be a hollow, Lotty," he said. "Where do you inherit your audacity from? I am not aware that a small sense of reverence is a characteristic of my side of the house at any rate. How do you venture to talk in such a style to your sister's face?"

"I think you should check her more severely, papa; Lotty is fast becoming a perfect irrepressible."

"I said nothing out-of-the-way. If Mabel has got all the good looks, its only fair if I have got a little of the—of the other thing."

"Well; if you are not the coolest young person—But what are you doing, child? Take another slice of melon if you want it, and don't eat down into the rhind like a little pig."

"That's a nice word from an elder sister to a younger! Lucky for me that I don't copy my big sister as much as some girls do—a fine example you would set me. But take care I don't imitate your weak points, though I miss your virtues, dear. You haven't much notion of your responsibilities, I don't think, Mab."

"Now, no more teasing, my dears," said Mrs Vallance. "I want to speak about what we were talking of yesterday. Have you settled what you would like to do on your birthday, Mabel?"

Mrs Vallance was a little woman, with *petite* features still bright and pretty.

"What do you think yourself, mamma?"

"Let us have a pic-nic," said Lotty before her mother could reply; "we have not had one for a good while."

Mabel was not averse to the idea of a pic-nic, though at this moment she was not prepared immediately to adopt any suggestion of the rapid Lotty.

"Will a pic-nic do, my love?" said Mrs Vallance.

"Yes, if we can make up a nice party. Several of the pleasantest people are away from Yodalla at present, you know."

"If we have about twenty, that will be enough. Shall we ask your friend Mr Denison, my dear?" The latter part of Mrs Vallance's sentence was addressed to her husband.

"I think we should. It will be a good enough

opportunity for you to make his acquaintance. I think I told you that it was Arthur Cartwright who mentioned him to me in his last letter, and I saw him the other day at the bank. He has come up to be manager of the Polynesian Bank, you know. He seems a gentlemanly young fellow, and is smart too, I fancy."

"Both at once; then he will be an acquisition in Yodalla," said Lotty. "What is he like?"

"Good-looking, I should say."

"Good-looking, and gentlemanly, and clever. Now observe, papa, that you have raised considerable expectations about Mr Denison, and if they are not fulfilled—you must expect to hear more of it."

"Lotty, you're far too young to talk in that way. You want someone always 'around,' as the American books say, to snub you, and it's a thousand pities I can't do it better," said Mabel.

"Mabel will be twenty on Friday, won't she, mamma?"

"Yes."

"Then you should begin to think of something else than snubbing people, especially your sister, and the only one you have too. I always think that twenty is the time when a girl should begin to take serious views of things. I am going to commence earlier myself; for the other day when Mrs Grimsteck was here, and went over all the Bishop's sermon again for us, she said that no one was too young to begin 'redeeming the time;' though I didn't quite understand her at first, for she spoke about redeeming time as if it were something in pawn."

"Mamma, this is too bad of Lotty; it is positively irreverent," said Mabel.

"My love, you musn't let your tongue wag so freely. That sort of thing isn't pretty, especially in young ladies. I hope you don't get it from any of your novels, or I shall have to set up a censorship of the press hereabouts, seriously," said Mr Vallance. He was the most easy-natured of fathers, but could let fall an authoritative word when the occasion required.

Lotty's face clouded for an instant. There was a small storm of conflict in her knitted brows. But the next moment it cleared again. She left her seat, went round to her father, and placed her arm affectionately round his neck.

"Don't put on your scolding cap, dear. I won't never do so any more—— if I can remember."

"Well, you can make up your list of people this morning, Mabel, and you might write the notes at the same time," said Mrs Vallance as she rose from the table. "Where shall we go to?"

"To the Falls, I think—or to Sassafrass Gully. Either will do," said Mabel.

"The road to the Gully is rather rough for the horses at present," said Mr Vallance. "Better make it the Falls."

And so it was settled.

Mabel sat down presently to write her invitations; Lotty came to her side.

"Of course you're asking Dr Herbert, Mabel," she said.

"I suppose so. But I'm leaving mamma to write

most of the notes to the men." Mabel bent her head a little lower over her paper. She was aware of her face growing the least thing hotter, and she feared Lotty's quick eyes.

"And then you must ask Dick Wedderburn. It wouldn't feel like a proper pic-nic without Dick."

"Very well, go to your music now, Lot, and let me finish these notes in time for M'Andrew to take them to the town."

CHAPTER II.

AN AUSTRALIAN WATER PARTY.

THE morning of the pic-nic—which was also Mabel Vallance's birthday—broke fair and bright; pic-nic days in Australia usually do. The guests arrived early in the day, some on horseback, others in vehicles, chiefly buggies.

The party were to go in boats up the river to the spot chosen for their camping ground. The Vallances had two boats of their own, and two others had been rowed up from Yodalla the day before. All four boats now lay moored alongside the little wooden jetty at the bottom of the garden.

The party filled the boats without crowding. All the men could handle an oar with more or less dexterity. Doffing their coats and waistcoats, they rowed up stream leisurely, for there was a four miles' pull ere their destination was reached, and the day was all before them.

The boats as they moved with their freight smoothly over the water, harmonised pleasantly with the landscape, and made a pretty enough scene. The soft gossamer dresses of the ladies, thrown into

brighter relief by the green of the river banks, looked very cool and fresh in the golden morning light. The oars made a musical little chime as they dipped and rose again, and the water dripped from them in liquid diamonds.

It was a perfect day for any out-door fête. The deep cobalt of the skies was flecked with silver-white clouds, floating like full-sailed frigates through a waveless tropic sea; a light wind just kept the air in motion, and prevented the heat from being oppressive.

As the boats moved up the river, and the banks narrowed, the vegetation on each side grew thicker and more luxuriant. The sharp fantastic cries of parrots and cockatoos every now and then broke the stillness, and the clear liquid note of bell-birds, like the treble in a carillon of silver bells from hidden depths of the forest, fell musically upon the ear. Now and then there was a sudden flash and glitter overhead, a scream, and a rush of wings, and a flock of parrots, blazing crimson, and green, and yellow, flew from one side to the other.

The spot selected for the pic-nicing ground was one of the most picturesque in a district in which there was much charming woodland scenery. A little creek, which just allowed the boats to pass up it, led to the foot of a waterfall, of no great height or volume, but almost perfect within its limits, bright and sparkling, and flashing a thousand prismatic tints from its changeful bosom. The little ravine in which the fall was situated, was cool and darkling with luxuriant vegetation,—ferns and

grasses, sassafrass and blackwood, and clumps of the graceful cabbage-tree palm, through whose feathery crests the breeze made a low rustling.

Soon after the party had disembarked, and had admired in company the fall and its surroundings for a little, they began to separate in twos and threes to explore the neighbourhood until lunch time. Mabel Vallance was desirous of securing fresh additions to her fern collection. Lotty announced her intention of aiding her sister in her search.

"Will you help us, Dr Herbert?" she said. "We shall be so glad if you will carry the basket, and you will be useful in reaching, if we come upon any ferns hidden away where Mabel and I can't get at them."

"I shall be very glad to do your stretching, Lotty," answered the young man.

The three set off together, and came, presently, upon a little sunken gully, unusually rich in the treasures they were seeking. It was one of those wonderful Australian glens which are the very home of ferns, where a score and more of different species may be found in close proximity, and half-a-dozen distinct varieties gathered in the space of a single square yard. Mabel, Lotty, and George Herbert were soon busy at work; but Lotty tired of it somewhat soon, declared that she was hungry, and must have something before lunch, and went back to where the baskets had been left, to hunt for biscuits. Mabel Vallance and George Herbert continued their quest for rare and choice specimens of maiden-hair and rock-fern together.

George Herbert was a man with clear grey eyes, a square forehead, rather marked cheekbones, an especially well-shaped and pleasant mouth, and a soft brown beard,—a grave face in repose, intelligent and attractive.

"I was too late in arriving to-day to give you this, Miss Vallance. It is a very small matter, but I hope you will accept of it; I wish it were something prettier."

George placed a small narrow box in Mabel's hand. She removed the lid, and took out a very pretty fan of sandal-wood—a marvel of fine and delicate fretwork.

"It is exceedingly pretty," said Mabel, with a flush and smile. "I am so fond of sandal-wood fans, though I have never chanced to have one yet."

"Then I am lucky in my choice, for it is not an easy matter choosing a present for a lady now-a-days, that is if you are not a millionaire. Don't you think one of the pleasantest things about having plenty of money is the power it gives you of making presents to your friends?"

"I daresay it is; but do you know, that is much more like a speech one would expect from a woman," said Mabel, laughing.

"Is it? That seems a doubtful sort of compliment to men though. But, perhaps, we may as often feel the same thing though we don't say it."

"Your present is very pretty and acceptable at any rate, and I mean it to be very useful."

"Take care, Miss Vallance; you will never reach that; you may fall over the bank. Let me get it."

Mabel was reaching forward to get a beautiful tuft of maiden-hair, nestling in a cranny half-way down a rather steep bank.

"I think I can manage it," she said.

But as she spoke, she slipped and began sliding down the bank. George bent down quickly on one knee, caught the girl round the waist, and supporting himself by grasping, with his disengaged hand, a thick tuft of grass, lifted Mabel lightly to the top of the bank again.

"Thank you very much," said Mabel. "How glad I am you were by. I should have had a horrid tumble on the rough ground and bushes down there, and that would have been an unpleasant way of signalizing one's birthday."

The slight exertion he had just had was hardly sufficient to account for the deepened colour in George Herbert's face. It seemed to him that every time his hand touched that of Mabel Vallance, it moved him with a keener thrill. As his arm supported her, and her face almost touched his, his pulse quickened and leaped beyond his power of control, and he knew that he was reddening like a schoolboy.

"Do you think you have got enough now? I fancy it is almost time we were rejoining the others," he said in a manner so abrupt, that a surprised look came into Mabel's face. It changed in a moment to one of amusement.

"Are you, like Lotty, getting hungry, and want an excuse?" she said.

"I am not aware of it; but I thought the rest

might be waiting, you know, and people at pic-nics are apt to get impatient if they are kept waiting for their lunch. Haven't you noticed that?" said George a little awkwardly.

"How thoughtful you are for people's little weaknesses of the flesh. But, of course, that comes from being a doctor. Well, I have got enough ferns I daresay. I see you are tired of the search. It is rather tiresome for one only secondarily interested."

"You are determined to misunderstand me. I am ready to continue the search as long as you like. If I have been of the least service to you, I am very glad."

"I shan't test your patience any longer at present, however. After lunch we shall see, perhaps. You will find yourself refreshed then for further efforts, if they are necessary. Men often feel off their equipoise, to use a fine word, when they are hungry, without knowing the real reason. Haven't you noticed that—being a doctor?"

"I shall begin to think your opinion of my sex not even averagely high. You have twice this morning paid us indifferent compliments."

"Would you wish to recover your character?"

"I would wish to stand well in your regard, Miss Vallance, always."

He thought she was speaking with serious intent.

"Then let me see what taste you have in managing a pic-nic lunch. You shall be my waiter-in-chief."

They went back again to the camping ground. Mr and Mrs Vallance were already unpacking the hampers.

"We shall have time to get everything ready before they are all assembled," Mrs Vallance said.

The tablecloth made a white cool gleam in the little green valley, and the contents of the baskets were soon arranged in tempting order. When a finishing touch had been given to the whole by the arrangement of a pretty group of ferns and wild-flowers in the centre of the feast, Mr Vallance made a great din with a hand-bell to summon the rest, who came dropping in by twos and threes.

The lunch proceeded with the talk and laughter which usually characterise such occasions, when all the conditions are as favourable as they were to-day. Warm it is, no doubt, but a delicious temperature for purposes of *idlesse*. Here, too, in this little gully, the sunlight has no power to glare and dazzle—only filters through the leafy screen above and around in broken gleams and angles, while the waterfall hard by cooled the air by its very sound.

A cheerful noise of tinkling glasses and popping corks rose to the accompaniment of the talk and merriment. The brisk Burton creamed in the glasses of the men, while for the ladies there was the flask of Reisling that had been cooling for an hour back in the creek.

Arnold Denison made himself very active and agreeable during lunch. He had in an enviable degree the gift of making himself quickly at home in whatever company. And, to be sure, why should he not have felt at ease on the present occasion? Though a stranger to all present, it would have been odd if a man of the world, who had seen men and

manners in many lands, had felt otherwise in any colonial society.

Arnold Denison was a handsome man, but with a handsomeness of a common enough type—one that is found, with slight variations, in men of various nationalities. He was dark, and a rich dark red glowed in his cheek. His features were perfectly regular, but his lips were a little too full to be quite agreeable. His eyes were bright and flashing, with a somewhat shifting and changeful light. When Denison spoke or laughed, he had that trick of showing a quick sparkle of white teeth, which so many men with fine teeth possess, that one speculates whether the habit is natural or acquired.

Arnold Denison exerted himself to please and to make merriment for the company with such effect that Mrs Vallance felt quite grateful to him. She felt he had been really an acquisition to her party, and in her heart admired his unconstrained flow of talk, his *aplomb*, and the assured but well-bred ease which marked his every action.

When the lunch was over, a wish was expressed to go still a little further up the river in one of the boats. The desire came from a pretty fair-haired girl, and was echoed by a younger sister. "I'll tell you what you'll do, Carry," said Mabel. "You and Kate and Ella will go in one of the boats, and Mr Herbert and Mr Wedderburn and Mr Carey will row you. You can fancy yourselves a sort of exploring party, and bring back a report of what the river looks like higher up. None of us have been much farther

than this, and you might discover some charming spot available for future pic-nics."

"Yes, that will be capital," answered Carry Turner. "Oh, I may go too, mayn't I, Mabel—mamma?" exclaimed Lotty.

"Yes; but don't tumble into the water, as you did on your last boating excursion, when your mother's eye was off you," said Mabel.

"What a shame, Mab! It's horridly spiteful of you to remind me of that now. I was much younger then. I was only twelve—now I'm thirteen."

"It was just four months ago," said Mabel.

"At anyrate be careful, my dear. Remember we have no dry things for you here," said Mrs Vallance.

"Mamma, you're worse than Mabel," cried Lotty, in a storm of exasperation and shame, shaking back her tangled locks. "Who is going to need things? I do believe if you had crossed the Red Sea with the Israelites, you would have been for making them all put on dry clothes."

There was a general laugh at Lotty's exhibition of her outraged feelings, and at her flight of rhetoric.

"I think, little one, your Biblical knowledge is rather loose, however. If my memory serves me, the children of Israel went over on dry land," said Denison.

"It's no matter. They must have been pretty well splashed if they had a mountain of water on each side of them," retorted Lotty sharply.

"Well, you had better start, you explorers," said Mabel. "But mamma and I would be glad if any one would stay and help us to put up all these things again."

George Herbert had it on his tongue to offer his services, although he had been detailed for other work, when Arnold Denison said:

"Will I do, Miss Vallance? I shall be very glad to help you if I am not too clumsy."

"I daresay we might manage with you, Mr Denison," Mabel answered.

The party in the boat put off from the shore, the rest of the company betook themselves to various methods of whiling away the afternoon, according to their several tastes; and Mrs Vallance, Mabel, and Denison, were left to the task of re-packing the baskets. When this was accomplished, Mrs Vallance seated herself in the shade, *tête à tête* with one of the elder ladies of the party, Mrs Upshott, the wife of a wealthy building contractor, who had risen from small beginnings. This frank, open-hearted, garrulous lady had been patiently waiting all day for a favourable opportunity to unburden herself to Mrs Vallance on the subject of her new cook, who "really promises well, my dear; an Irish-woman, with not a great deal of experience, you know, and only been in one other situation before mine, but very anxious to please; and I am always so glad to teach them all I can if they are only willing, and you know Upshott always likes plain cooking best. He doesn't require a *chef-d'œuvre*, messing about with queer foreign dishes, I am thankful to say, though we might have a French cook to-morrow for the matter of that, as you know, my dear. 'None of your kickshaws and fal-de-lals for me, Sarah,' he always says. 'Plain roast and

boiled is good enough for John Upshott. I don't want any outlandish French mixtures—*ragoots* and *bullies*, and the rest; I like to know what I'm eating. Good English fare, and plenty of it. That's my style.' He is always so droll and good-natured, you know, though a little plain-spoken sometimes. And then I have always to get an Irish girl as cook, because they can all milk—that has always been a difficulty with me, to get a girl that can milk; that's really the only thing Upshott's a little particular about. He won't drink milk unless he knows where it comes from. He was reared, as a boy, in the country, you see. But, as I say, I am always glad to teach girls if"—and so on, and so on—to all which Mrs Vallance listened with an admirable patience.

Mabel had sat down on the bank of the creek, feeling a little tired after her fern-hunting and her duties as assistant-hostess at lunch. Arnold Denison seated himself on the grass near her.

"You pic-nic in Australia under most favourable conditions, Miss Vallance," he said. "I think it is one of the pleasantest features of colonial life,—the facilities there are for out-door amusements, I mean."

"Perhaps it is. Have you been to many picnics?" said Mabel.

"Not many; but such as I have been at, I have enjoyed greatly. I have been less than a year in Australia, you know. A year ago, about this time of the day, I was probably taking the autumn air in Piccadilly, or along the sunny side of Pall Mall."

"How pathetic!" said Mabel laughing, "to think that only a year ago you were in the very centre of

club-land and civilisation, and that to-day you have been helping at a pic-nic scramble in the heart of the bush primæval."

"Are you apt to be ironical, Miss Vallance? I should hardly have thought so."

"No, I think not. That little thing Lottie, who is but thirteen, will say thrice as many sharp things in a day as I could in a week, if I were to try."

"The young lady has something of a—"

"Temper you mean to say. Yes—a little—what some people now-a-days call, in children, 'moods;' but she is a good little soul for all that. Do you find the colonies a great change after England, Mr Denison?"

"I have only seen Sydney, and I find it, in most respects, very much the same."

"Strangers say that the people are freer in their ways and life here, pay less heed to forms and ceremonies—you know what I mean; and when that is said I am not always sure whether it is meant as praise or not, especially in so far as it applies to women."

"I think I understand what you mean. The thing seems to me simple enough. Is it not entirely a matter of climate? The more northern, darker, and colder the climate, the less people can live in the open air, the more form and ceremony, etiquette and punctilio you will find in social life; the more southern and warmer the climate, the less. The two things are inevitable, natural, and therefore right and appropriate results of climatic variations. The very people who are inclined to be hard and fast in their

code of etiquette in England, will quickly relax their rigidity when transplanted to a southern and more genial clime. I declare I have delivered quite a small lecture, and I am sure have said nothing but what you know already, Miss Vallance. I beg your pardon."

"I think you have put the matter very fairly, Mr Denison," said Mabel. "I have resented it a little when I have heard it said that people in the colonies were less conventional, and all that. It seemed sometimes as if it were only a polite way of saying that we were faster, which I don't think is really the case; what you have said shows me in what sense the charge is true, and why."

"To put it briefly and practically," said Arnold, "I find the ladies of Australia, if you will permit a compliment, as charming in every way as those of my native land, and I will yield to none in my reverence for Englishwomen as the first of their sex. The compliment is plain to clumsiness, but, believe me, it is sincere."

"I am quite ready to think so. I never find it difficult to believe pleasant things."

"Have you ever been in England, Miss Vallance?"

"Yes, when I was a little girl. We only made a short stay, much shorter than papa and mamma intended. Mamma fell ill, and the doctors ordered her back to Australia. It was very unfortunate, but I hope to visit England again some day before very long. Papa is a Devonshire man, and I should dearly like to see the places he knew so well when he was a boy, and about which he has so often talked to us."

"Did your father never think of returning to England for good?"

"No; he will never do that, even if we could be sure of mamma's standing the English climate. Though he remembers with affection all the places of his boyhood and schooldays, he has long got to prefer Australia to England to live in. He left his home when a very young man, you see, and Australia has done everything for him. It would be wrong if he did not feel grateful to his adopted country and like it. I would not care to see him want to return to England for good."

"Was your father a younger son?"

"Yes, the youngest but one of a large family. The family property went to the eldest son, and the others were not left a great deal each at the death of my grandfather, of course. Papa brought a little money to Australia with him, but he had to work very hard at first."

When the boating party had returned, it was deemed time to get the tea ready. A fire was quickly kindled with the dry wood that lay scattered plentifully about, and a rude gipsy tripod of stakes erected over it, from which the kettle or "billy" was suspended. Soon, an incomparable kettle of tea was brewed; for when is tea so good as when drunk in this *al fresco* gipsy fashion.

The sun was dropping behind the line of hills that were etched in deepening purple against the crimson sky. For a moment, the quivering orb, throbbing with golden light—a globe of molten fire—rested its lower rim upon the hill tops. In another moment

it had disappeared, leaving a broad sky of uniform crimson extending the whole length of the visible horizon, in which innumerable clouds of silvery-purple hue, but with a narrow coast-line of pure gold, hung suspended between sky and earth, like islands of every quaint and fantastic shape and outline floating in a charmed fairy sea.

The pic-nicers lingered a little while over their fire. The moon would be up presently to light their homeward journey, so that they had no occasion to hurry. A huge log was thrown upon the fire. The scene was not without a tinge of the picturesque. The twilight was stealing over the land, the shadows gathered ever closer about the bivouackers, the fire leaped and crackled, threw wavering phantom shapes over grass and tree, and lit up the faces and forms gathered round with a flickering, fantastic light, as the flames rose and fell.

The moon was lifting a golden rim above the hill-tops as the party embarked. There was little need for rowing now. With the rudder kept in proper position, an occasional stroke of an oar to aid the helm was all that was required. The even-flowing current took the boat steadily and smoothly on.

Scarce a sound broke the hush of the evening. The light breeze stirred amid the gums and the she-oaks with a fitful rustle. The stream washed and rippled among its reeds, with a soft, cool sound, like the kiss of a river naiad. Now and then a brown water-rat, belated by mischance, or addicted to late hours, dropped into the stream with a plunge that startled the affronted echoes. The moonlight fell

upon the water, and turned it, as by the touch of a magician's wand, to a shimmering stream of silver flushed with gold, in which the reflections of the stars twinkled, and vanished, and re-appeared.

They sang a chorus in the boats, raising the familiar, always sweet and tuneful "Canadian Boat Song;" and then it was discovered that Arnold Denison had the chief gift of music among the men. He had a rich, melodious baritone, that had been carefully trained and nurtured, and which he could use with admirable effect. He sang the charming little melody, in which Schumann has so happily caught and interpreted the spirit of Shakespeare's ballad, "Who is Sylvia?" and the mellow notes floated and lingered on the stillness, and added to the dreamy glamour of the hour and scene. Then Arnold sang a duet with Mabel, who possessed a pure, fresh voice, and sang with sympathy and precision.

When the boats reached the landing-place, and the pic-nicers had disembarked, all confessed that the home journey had been the pleasantest part of a thoroughly enjoyable day, and Mrs Vallance had to receive a little salvo of congratulations and thanks, at which she was not above being gratified.

A few of the party lingered a while at the house. Among the last to take their departure were George Herbert, Arnold Denison, and Dick Wedderburn. They had wished good-night to their entertainers. Herbert and Denison were standing together in the stable-yard at their horses' heads. Wedderburn had forgotten his whip, and had gone back to the house, where he had left it.

"Do you know, Dr Herbert, I can't get over the impression that we have met before," said Arnold Denison. "This is the third time I have seen you, though we have never spoken until to-day. I saw you a morning or two ago at the bank, when you called to do some business with the accountant, and on another day when we passed each other in the street. Each time I have seen you your face struck me as being familiar, and now to-day the idea has strengthened. But for the life of me, I can't recall where I have seen you before. Can you help me? Have you the same feeling on your side?"

"I have not," replied Herbert. "I really think you must be mistaken, if you will excuse my saying so. I don't recall your face in the least."

"Might I have seen you before in Sydney without your having seen me?"

"Impossible. I believe you have only been in the colony a year, and it is nearly two since I was last in Sydney."

"Well, I must be mistaken, of course. But it is the oddest thing, for I rarely or never forget a face I have once seen. It is a sort of small gift with me, and a point I have rather prided myself on, which must be my apology, Dr Herbert, for what may seem a little inquisitive and persistent on my part, considering our short acquaintance."

Dick Wedderburn came up as Denison ceased speaking, and the three young men mounted their horses.

On arriving at Yodalla, Denison separated from his companions. Dick Wedderburn accompanied George Herbert home, to smoke a pipe with him.

CHAPTER III.

GEORGE AND DICK.

GEORGE'S sitting-room opened upon a verandah which overlooked a little garden. In the verandah the two young men sat and smoked their pipes in the cool night.

Dick Wedderburn was of middle height. His figure inclined to stoutness; a loose, rolling, haphazard sort of figure that was the despair of his tailor. His face was round and bare, save for a small, scrappy, light-coloured, unimpressive whisker. Dick's face had the average amount of expression revealed in a dozen faces which one meets daily; but you could not look at it long without feeling pretty sure that its owner possessed at least two qualities—honesty and good-nature.

"We've had a jolly day on the whole," said Dick.

"Quite," said George.

"Denison contributed something to the sum total of its success, especially coming back, don't you think."

"Decidedly."

"What do you think of him?"

"Is handsome, and seems smart."

"Sorra a doubt about his smartness, as Pat would

say. I never saw a man of that style of facial architecture that wasn't. But that's speaking of him rather in the abstract. I meant how do you like him?"

"It's hazardous forming an opinion on a single meeting."

"Cautious as though you had quitted your native land but yesterday, old fellow. But people's methods of gauging their fellows vary. For myself, if I don't get a tolerably correct notion of a man or woman on a first or second acquaintance, I rarely get to know them rightly at all. Well now, to put it to you shortly, I don't feel myself especially 'drawn towards' Denison, to use a phrase a good deal in fashion with the present novel writers."

"Your reasons, Dick, if you can give any. You people who put so much faith in intuition, and instinct, and impressions, and the rest, in judging people, can seldom formulate your notions."

"Of course not. It is always difficult to bind what is essentially of the soul and spirit in the dull fetters of speech. But I will condescend upon particulars if I can manage it, and give you reasons, though not 'on compulsion,' sir, as the fat knight used to say. Denison strikes me as abominably self-sufficient. He is one of those men who are never off their equipoise, not so much from natural coolness of temperament—though no doubt he has that too in a very considerable degree—as from a perfect self-opinion which nothing can disturb."

"He has a rather enviable gift of making himself
ckly at home with people; that is what you chiefly

base your analysis upon, I suppose. But I don't think he does it offensively, quite the reverse," said George.

"No, he has no small tact, I admit, and is a thorough man of the world. But suave and delightful as he showed himself to-day, if I am not mistaken he can show another side sometimes."

"I really cannot think what there was in his conduct, to-day at least, which warrants you in thinking that, Dick."

"Well, I will confess that I am not now speaking entirely from intuition, as you call it. I have something more tangible to go upon. I saw a little more of Denison than you. While you were fern-hunting with Mabel Vallance, he and I got attached somehow to Carry and Ella Turner, who had their sketch-books with them, and presently got to work at some old stumps, and a bit of the fall. We talked and chaffed with the two girls for a little, but they by-and-by got so engrossed with their wattle stumps and the rest, that it became not very lively work keeping up a conversation with them, especially as the two fair artists didn't seem particularly to care whether we stayed any longer by them or not,—seemed rather to want to be let alone at their work. So Denison and I strolled off and fell to talking on one thing and another, and it was then that I discovered that there is a strong dash of superciliousness and priggishness about the fellow, calculated to be rather irritating to the average temper."

"Now that you get more personal, new light begins to break upon me, Dick. I begin to see where the

shoe nips. I always credit you, however, with a rather more than average temper."

"Will you allow me to finish, George? . Denison did not show anything of this at lunch or in the boat, did he?—never will, I fancy, in the company of women. Well, to make talk—for I didn't find that we had many subjects in common—I asked him if he had seen Madame Létoile in Sydney—the French woman, you know, at the 'Prince,' who has been creating quite a *furore*, and is really fine, despite that she is no longer in her golden prime exactly. What do you think he said?—that he had seen her years ago at the Adelphi, and had not the same *antiquarian* tastes as we seemed to have out here. If that wasn't the remark of an innate prig, perhaps you will give me a better instance."

George stretched himself back in his chair and laughed loud.

"Confess, Dick, that that one little episode has been the chief factor in determining your opinion of Denison."

"No, I won't! I felt a little rough for the moment, but I don't think I showed it. I don't take back anything of what I have said."

"I sympathize with your feelings at the moment, of course," said George, with the remains of a laugh in his voice and face; "but not being native born, of course I can't appreciate the full sting of Denison's irony. There, my pipe's out. I'm a little sleepy. We won't light again."

"If we are to become more intimately acquainted with our Pall Mall Crichton, as seems likely, I will

give odds that you find much of what I have been saying verified," said Dick.

"Maybe," said George.

"Do you know that he is living at your old quarters, with Mrs O'Hara?"

"No."

"He has taken her lodgings until the alterations in the bank premises are completed, which will be some time yet."

"While you were gone for your whip, he told me that he thought we must have met somewhere before. He is mistaken, I think; at least I don't recall his face in the least. He half apologised for seeming a little curious on the point, and said that he had been puzzling to try and recover the dropped thread in his memory, or words to that effect, for that he seldom or never forgot a face once seen."

"Another of his many gifts, no doubt. His strong point is clearly omniscience."

CHAPTER IV.

ARNOLD.

WHEN Arnold Denison reached his lodgings, he also betook himself to the fragrant weed, lighting a choice Havanah—he had a faultless discrimination in this direction—and settling himself into a comfortable cane easy-chair.

As Denison sat now in the privacy of his own chamber, a very much more thoughtful expression came into his face than that which it had worn during the day. It is necessary to glance back at the young man's history, prior to the time at which he is introduced to the reader.

When Arnold Denison left Cambridge, he began studying for the bar; but the offer having been made him of a remunerative position in a mercantile house, he deemed the opening too good a one to let slip, and abandoned his law studies in its favour. He soon proved himself to be clever and cool-headed, a dexterous financier and administrator. He quickly won the admiration and confidence of his superiors; and, while still a young man, was occupying a responsible position in the house, and in the receipt of a handsome salary.

Arnold had a strong taste for all that is agreeable

and luxurious in life. He had now ample means for indulging this temperament, and it must be confessed that he used his opportunities to the full. He had to a considerable degree the æsthetic nature, which in theory always goes with delicate susceptibilities—a keen sense of honour and other fine attributes, which worships the true as reverently as it does the beautiful. Arnold Denison respected all his æsthetic instincts, and lived a life of refined luxury, as well as one of fashion and enjoyment.

Strange as it may seem, the same financial abilities which Denison employed with so much success in the business of his house, did not seem to serve him so well in the management of his private affairs. By-and-by he discovered in himself an inability to live within his income. His æsthetic tastes did not exclude a fondness for horse-racing. He betted heavily, unknown to his principals. He was not successful in his turf speculations, but, instead of being warned in time, was led on deeper and deeper into the quicksands. The end came at last, as was inevitable. All had to be made known to the heads of the house, and Arnold was compelled to resign his situation. His elegant little villa in Kensington, the very *beau ideal* of a bachelor's residence, went to the hammer, and the young man emerged from his embarrassments with fortunes so shattered, and a reputation so dimmed and tarnished, that he thought it expedient to quit England altogether.

But despite his disasters, he took with him to Australia such credentials of his business capacities as quickly obtained for him a post in the Polynesian

Bank in Sydney. His life now differed, in many respects, from that which he had led in London. He was obliged to practise an economy that was alien to all his tastes and inclinations. His business abilities were, however, not long in being recognised, and he might have prospered well enough but for one thing. While managing tolerably well to keep in abeyance most of the luxurious habits contracted in the days of his affluence, he had not thoroughly conquered his love of betting, and the facilities afforded him for the indulgence of this propensity were not less in Australia than in England. He began dabbling again in turf transactions and private bookmaking. Fortune still refused to be compelled, notwithstanding calculations laid upon the most unerring principles. Before a year was out he had lost nearly the whole of the year's salary, was in debt, and only just managed to prevent his practices from reaching the ears of the bank authorities.

At this juncture he was asked to take the managership of the branch office of the Polynesian Bank at Yodalla. Residence in a country town was a prospect which Arnold Denison would have once regarded with something like a shudder of disgust, or perhaps contemplated with a feeling of speculative contempt. But now he saw advantages in it—before all, the recommendation, not of expedience merely, but of necessity. In a country town the opportunities for spending money must be fewer. He could in such a place as Yodalla more easily retrieve his position, and make a fresh start. He had full confidence in his own ability of one day rising to a prominent post in the bank.

Such was Arnold Denison's position when he came to Yodalla. It will now perhaps be more readily understood why the young man's face settled into a thoughtful look as he sat alone, and meditated over his cigar to-night. His thoughts turned on various points.

"There cannot be a doubt, I suppose, that the girl's father is rich,"—thus his reflections ran. "All report says so—the manner of their life shows it. She is as nice a girl as I have met for a long while in or out of England, pretty and well-mannered, and fairly intelligent—not a simpering, white-and-red, blue-eyed bit of china, at anyrate, nor yet a nineteenth-century Hypatia, with the jargon of South Kensington, a smattering of all the ologies, and a mission to reconstruct society. What a shapely little head she has! it's her strongest point, I fancy; quite a *spiritualle* head, as fine as a nymph's by Canova, or a Derby winner's. I like her. She's a girl any man might fancy; why shouldn't I bid for her? It would suit my book completely. The bulk of the father's money must go to the two girls, and, egad! if to be needy is in itself a passport to charity, there are few who have a clearer right to look for a rich and charitable father-in-law than I. Yes; success in this direction would rid me of all my difficulties, and set me beyond the fickle winds of fortune for ever. And the more I think of it the greater the chances seem in my favour. The running seems clear; or, have I rivals? It can hardly be that none of the youth of Yodalla have had similar thoughts to mine on this matter. It can hardly be that they are

all so cold as not to be tempted by beauty and gold. But is it probable that I have any very dangerous rivals? I take it that I saw the flower of the Yodalla youth to-day, and I cannot honestly say that I was conscious of any feeling of eclipse in their presence. The doctor made decidedly the best show among them. Ah, the doctor! perhaps he deserves a little more leisurely consideration. Let me try to add him up with judicial impartiality. Fairly good-looking, without doubt, and carries himself like a gentleman; a steady, cool-headed fellow, and staunch as steel at a pinch, I judge him. Fairly informed in the common highways of knowledge, but nothing more—exactly the calibre for a successful general practitioner in a county town. No finer threads in his intellectual fibre. Somewhat slow-brained, not excelling in address, not the quickest to use his opportunities—a man with some admirable ethical qualities, I make no doubt; but when all is said, somewhat of a dry stick of a Scotchman, like most of his nation. He seemed on very good relations with the Vallances, however—on a footing of familiar intercourse. It is possible that I may find a rival in the doctor, and if so, he has certainly got the start of me. But that usually counts for little in a race of this sort. I shall be as much at home at Wyandra in the course of a month or less as he. And thinking of this Herbert, awakens again the idea in my mind that we must have met before in some other country. His face is not exactly one of that sort of which the novelists say: 'To have seen it once was never to forget it;' meaning thereby that it is either superla-

tively handsome, or intellectual, or striking in some way. But neither is it the reverse. It is a fairly memorable face, sufficiently so to make me—who have a knack of remembering faces—think it an odd thing that I should fancy I had seen it before and be mistaken. But this time I must be mistaken, I suppose, for I cannot recall any circumstances, and he declares we have never met. Then too, to-day, while at one time his face seemed familiar, though always in a vague way, in other aspects it seemed much less so. The real fact must be that I have met some one like him somewhere or other. It's a little curious, though, that so trifling a matter should have kept running in my mind so long—a man I have as yet not the faintest interest in. But now that I am sure I must be mistaken, the idea will disappear."

Arnold was at the end of his cigar. He threw the stump out of the window into the street, where it burned for a moment—a spot of bright crimson in the dusky night.

"Soothing, encouragement, hope—all from just two and a-half inches of the gracious weed," said Arnold, rising. "Where will you find a medicine for body and spirit so gentle, so certain, and so cheap?"

"The blissful fields threw wide their portal
To wearied men, sweet Master Raleigh,
When first you found the weed immortal
In some Virginian valley."

CHAPTER V.

ENDING WITH A SCENE.

ON the morning following the pic-nic, the talk at the breakfast table at Wyandra naturally turned upon the events of the previous day.

"I think it went off pretty well on the whole," said Mrs Vallance. She really thought the day had been a marked success.

"Most of the young people appeared to enjoy themselves. At anyrate they told you so, my dear. Some of them seemed quite effusive in their compliments."

"We must certainly credit Mr Denison with a share of the general success," said Mrs Vallance. "He is certainly a capital man for such a party, and so ready to make himself helpful and agreeable. I declare I felt quite grateful to him; I thought it very nice his making himself so pleasantly at home among us, and without anything like forwardness."

"I thought he had a full share of confidence at anyrate, considering he was almost a perfect stranger," said Lotty.

"You are hardly a fit judge of such matters, my dear. I saw nothing the least presuming in Mr Denison's manner."

"He thinks he's very clever, I'm sure; but I don't

see he's anything so wonderful. He sings nicely, no doubt, but that isn't a sign of genius, rather the reverse, I've noticed. People don't sing from their heads, except when they've got colds in them. I didn't think Mr Denison's conversation so very Gothic."

"Gothic! what do you mean, child?" said Mabel.

"Well, pointed, if you prefer it. Miss Trayner told me the other day that Gothic meant that—like the cathedrals, you know. I was only using what is called a synonym, Mab. Synonym is a Greek word, Mab, meaning—"

"There, that will do, Lotty," interrupted Mabel.

"I didn't know you knew, Mab. Girls have to learn so many more things since you were at school," said Lotty, with a face of malicious demureness.

"I don't know what you mean by pointed, Lotty," said her mother. Mr Denison's talk was just easy and natural, and often very much to the point, as of course was to be expected from a young man of his education, and the advantages he has enjoyed."

"After my saying I thought him smart, did you expect him to scintillate, Lotty?" said her father.

"He is perhaps like a jewel in one respect, at any-rate, papa."

"How?"

"I fancy he can show different faces."

"My dear, you really must not give your opinions of people so freely. You surely cannot know what an ill-natured and unwarrantable thing you have just said. How can you allow yourself to pass such judgments on people you have only met once?" said Mrs Vallance.

"Do you like Mr Denison, Mab?" said Lotty, who felt that she had gone a step too far, and desired to turn aside the current of the conversation as much as possible from herself.

"Yes," said Mabel in a decided tone.

"His manner is very bright and attractive, and he has so much good common-sense besides," said Mrs Vallance. "He talked to me so sensibly about the respective advantages of town and country life, whether in England or the colonies, showing clearly how the balance inclined towards the country."

"Why, mamma, that is for all the world like a bit out of an essay. It might have been written by Dr Johnson, or Lord Macaulay—it is so sententious."

"And he spoke very nicely to me too, upon a different subject," said Mabel.

"What, Mab?"

"That is of no importance, Lotty."

"Why has Mr Denison come to Australia, my dear?"

"He had a capital position in a commercial house in London—Hurst & Middleton—a well-known firm. But he was obliged to give it up on account of his health, and the doctors advised him to come to Australia. Of course it has been a great sacrifice for him, in a money point of view, for he has to a certain extent to start afresh here."

"Why, he looks anything but a delicate man, papa," said Lotty.

"The voyage out, and the short time he has been in the colony, have already done wonders for him. He says he is another man from what he was the day he left England."

"He looks like a person who had never had a day's illness," said Lotty.

"There are several complaints which make little change in the outward appearance, my dear," said Mrs Vallance. "Mr Denison may have been threatened with some kind of heart complaint, for which a warmer climate was beneficial; or he may have had some form of throat affection, in both which cases there may not have been any marked difference in his looks—not more, at anyrate, than a change of climate would remove."

"He looks as if he might shake health from his beard, as Samson must have done," reiterated Lotty.

"I hope he will get on quickly in the bank," said Mrs Vallance. "It is hard, when a young man is well established in life, to have to begin afresh again in a new country."

"I have little doubt he will do well enough in the Polynesian. I think he is the sort of man to turn his abilities to the best account. I have discovered one thing, however, that he does not know so well as he supposes."

"What is it, papa? It is quite refreshing to find a flaw in the diamond. I already begin to feel more in sympathy with Mr Denison," said Lotty.

"Yesterday morning I took him round the stables. He came early on purpose, as I learned from some little conversation with him in the town the other day that he was fond of horses. I believe he is fond of them, and he has a sort of smattering knowledge in regard to horseflesh; but it has mostly been got at second-hand, the sort of knowledge which a man who

has lived all his life in towns picks up from the *Field*, and an occasional run with the hounds, mounted by a country friend, supplemented by attending the Islington shows and Newmarket. There is nothing practical about his information, as quickly becomes plain. He has just the degree that may prove dangerous if a man relies upon it in a bargain, or in connection with the turf; for if there is anything in which a little knowledge is dangerous, it is in regard to horseflesh. I don't know if Denison has ever trafficked in turf schemes, but he must certainly have been used to study the racing column of his newspaper pretty closely; and if his knowledge of a horse itself was as accurate as his memory for the winners of the chief events in England for a dozen years back, I myself would have to stand cap in hand to him."

"I should not take him for a man whose tastes lay at all that way—I mean towards horse-racing," said Mrs Vallance, with a slight cloud in her face.

"Another little crack in the gem. I know mamma dislikes horse-racing," said Lotty.

"You think the young fellow too cultivated and æsthetic in his sentiments for that sort of thing, eh, my love? But there you show a slight disregard of precedents. The highest culture is sometimes found co-existent with a weakness for horse-racing. You must surely be aware of that. Premiers of England, who are at the same time connoisseurs in the fine arts, have found relief from the cares of State in a turn round their paddocks, are complaisant to their trainers, and studious to their grooms and jockeys,

and count it a glory to possess a Derby winner. So don't make any hasty generalizations in regard to Denison from anything I have just said."

"I declare papa is developing a vein of elaborate irony," said Mabel.

"Well, I shall leave you to divide upon the question of our new friend's merits, if you wish to. I have contributed all I can to the discussion," said Mr Vallance, rising and leaving the room.

"Well, you have certainly all been praising Mr Denison to the stars."

"I have done no such thing," said Mabel.

"You didn't contradict anything mamma said at any-rate; and you distinctly said you liked him besides."

"That is a different thing from praising him to the stars."

"What I was going to say when you interrupted me, Mabel, was that I don't think so much of Mr Denison as I have already hinted. He has a know-everything, self-sufficient kind of manner sometimes —when he is off his guard, perhaps—that seems to have escaped you all. The idea of his calling me 'little one,' too, as if I were still in brown Holland and aprons; and he a perfect stranger!"

Both Mrs Vallance and Mabel broke into laughter.

"That lets the whole secret out," said Mabel.

"That at once accounts for your moderate opinion of Mr Denison. Confess, Lotty, that that little wound has been galling you ever since yesterday. The presumption of any one's calling a person of past thirteen 'little one.' But it wasn't like your usual shrewdness, letting that out, Lot."

"Well, I don't care for once; I stick to all I've said. Mr Denison isn't half so nice as Dr Herbert or Dick Wedderburn."

"There's no necessity for making comparisons of that kind, Lotty. No one was speaking of Dr Herbert or Dick Wedderburn."

"Dr Herbert is getting into a very good practice in Yodalla; isn't he, mamma?" asked Lotty.

"I believe so."

"And old Dr Brooke is giving over nearly all his work to him?"

"Yes."

"They say that the old doctor is very fond of George Herbert, and wishes nothing better than to see him filling his place."

"Yes; I understand that they have always got on very well together."

"Have you any guess at what George Herbert makes in a year from his practice, mamma?"

"I really couldn't say exactly, my dear."

"Five hundred pounds, perhaps, do you think?"

"Yes, quite that, I should imagine."

"Five hundred a-year is a nice little income; isn't it, mamma? And, of course, it will increase in a prospering district like Yodalla."

There was a pause in the talk. Mrs Vallance and Mabel had each taken up some work. Lotty had a book, upon which her eyes were turned, but which she was not reading.

"Mamma," she said with sudden abruptness, looking up; "we all like George Herbert, I am sure; and Mabel knows she does. He is always so nice; and

there is no one papa likes to see better. He has been going about the house for quite a long time now. Why doesn't he propose to Mabel?"

Lotty's speech fell like a bombshell. Mabel started up from her seat. Her face was crimson. Her eyes flashed, but flashed through sudden tears. She was trembling, and her voice shook.

"Mamma, this is shameful. Lotty does not know what she is saying. You must order her from the room this minute, or I must leave it."

Mrs Vallance was both frightened and bewildered. She looked from her elder daughter to her younger helplessly, without speaking.

Lotty's face was like a sheet. Her eyes stared in terror. Her short thick curls stood up around her head. Mabel was, in truth, a terrible little figure, as she stood with flashing, tear-sprent eyes, and erect quivering form. Lotty stood hesitating and trembling for a moment, and the next had rushed forward to her sister's side, and flung her arms passionately about her.

"Oh, Mab, dear Mab! what have I said!" she cried, with a sob in her voice. "Forgive me, dear; say you forgive me. I did not mean anything; indeed I did not. You know what an impetuous little fool I am. Tell me you forgive me, and that you will forget all about this. Kiss me, Mabel, and I will go away this minute."

Mabel's anger, mortification, shame, dissolved. She bent over her sister, took her in her arms, and kissed her, while the tears, which she had at first striven hard to keep back, fell in a little rain on Lotty's head.

"There, Lotty, I forgive you; and I think you really need forgiveness," she said softly. "Try and not be so foolish again. You do not know what your words mean sometimes, I think."

Lotty returned her sister's embrace with passionate fervour, spoke no word in reply, broke from Mabel's arms, and left the room.

"Be patient with her, my darling," said Mrs Vallance, greatly relieved by the turn things had taken. "But you are both patient and forgiving. She is a strange child at times, but you know she was always something of an *enfant terrible*."

CHAPTER VI.

ARNOLD IMPROVES HIS OPPORTUNITIES.

AS Arnold Denison himself anticipated, it was not long before he was on terms of pleasant intercourse with the household at Wyandra. By nature and by family tradition, Mr Vallance was a hospitable man. And this quality in his character was allowed free play as far as his wife was concerned. The family practised a frank and generous hospitality, without ostentation or cumbrous display.

Arnold Denison found his way over to Wyandra after bank hours very often, and the pleasant greeting which always awaited him might have encouraged a young fellow who needed encouragement in this way far more than Arnold.

The young fellow's musical gifts were a bond of sympathy between Mabel and him. At the frequent evening gatherings at Wyandra, the duets between the two became a great attraction—"quite a *pièce de résistance*, my dear," as Mrs Upshott phrased it to Mrs Vallance. The worthy woman never shrank from hazarding her fearful French. She had the idea, in common with many much more cultured people, that a compliment was doubly a compliment in French.

Of course, these little musical displays of Mabel

Vallance and Arnold Denison were not altogether extempore. They necessitated some amount of preparation and rehearsal, and it became a common thing to hear Arnold's mellow, well-trained baratone mingling with Mabel's fresh soprano, as the two tried over their duets together in the drawing-room at Wyandra in the cool of the afternoon.

It was very agreeable to Arnold—to what young man would it not have been?—to have a pretty bright girl, with an intelligent appreciation of music, and no mean power of interpreting it, submitting, almost invariably, to his judgment and taste. For Mabel was too quick not to discover, and too generous not to acknowledge, Arnold's larger experience and greater cultivation.

So Arnold chose duets for Mabel, told her much curious and interesting information about famous composers and equally famous artists, of which sort of knowledge he had great store; gave her many useful hints in regard to execution, which Mabel was not at all above profiting by, and, in fact, became to her in some degree a tutor. On these occasions Mrs Vallance sat by and worked at elaborate fancy work, and interrupted the young people very little. Arnold's horse became so common a sight in the Wyandra stables that Driscoll, the groom, came to feel towards it the same personal and affectionate relations which he had for his own, the more so, it may be, that Arnold had proved that he held liberal views in the matter of tips.

Mr Vallance and Arnold Denison got on remarkably well together.

Like most men who have passed through a stirring and successful colonial life, Mr Vallance was not disinclined to reminiscence, and appreciated a good listener. Arnold Denison was early to discover this, and Mr Vallance found in him a model listener—attentive, intelligent, and sympathetic.

On the first occasion of Mr Vallance's taking Arnold over his vineyards, showing him the various processes of wine-making, and the appliances and improvements which he himself had introduced—"one or two little details, my own ideas," as he said, with the modesty of an inventor—when he descanted upon the progress which the cultivation of the grape was making in Australia, and the prosperous future which was unquestionably in store for this branch of colonial industry, he found a most interested and sympathetic audience in Arnold.

"Without wishing to boast, Mr Vallance," said the young man, as he held up to the light a glass of Hybla, as Mr Vallance had styled his wine, and eyed it with the half-closed eyes and puckered mouth of criticism, which partly helped him to conceal the wry face which the liquor almost wrung from him, "I may say that I should have some slight knowledge in wines. I have been a good deal in Germany and France in holiday times, and I know pretty well the best reputed of the vintages of both countries. I speak advisedly, and with no thought of flattery, when I say that, in my humble opinion, this wine requires but a little age to make it equal to anything that grows between Bonn and Mayence. It is the merest thing crude, as it must needs be from its

comparative youth, but it has all the qualities of the best Rhine wines."

Mr Vallance was gratified, and scarcely avoided showing it. Few men in New South Wales were better judges of stock than he, or knew better the practical management of a sheep station. As a vine-grower he was merely an amateur, but an eulogium on his merits as a wool-grower would have gratified him infinitely less than did such a compliment as Arnold Denison had just paid him.

"You understand these things, Denison; few of the people about here do," he said. "I have given much time and thought to my vineyards of late, and hope one day to produce something better than this. But as you say, it is a sort of thing that takes time. This Hybla does want a little mellowing, I admit. I have just got hold of a German fellow who knows all about these things, and who, I feel sure, will prove invaluable to me. But there are few of the people about here who have had the opportunities of learning anything about wine that you have enjoyed. The first time George Herbert tasted this wine he was frank enough to tell me that he found it sour, and I notice that he hardly ever drinks it."

"I wonder at that. I should have thought his professional knowledge would have made him a less hasty judge, even if he has no technical acquaintance with the subject. But it is a constant mistake which the uncritical fall into, as you must have observed, to call an acid in a wine, a sour. This now is a pure natural fruit-acid."

"To be sure," said Mr Vallance delighted.

"And in three or four years' time it will be at its prime," continued Arnold.

This conversation took place in a little cool stone arbour, which Mr Vallance had built hard by his wine presses, and in which he always kept a few bottles of his Hybla for the refection of his visitors, and in order that he might obtain the opinion of strangers upon the wine, after the process of its making had been contemplated. The two men now walked back towards the house.

"To speak of a rather different subject, Mr Vallance," said Denison, "your family are the Devonshire Vallances, if I am not mistaken?"

"Yes; pray how did you learn that? Who told you it?"

"No one. I happened to notice your crest and motto in one of your books, which at once informed me."

"You have some knowledge of heraldry, Denison?"

"The merest smattering. It needs no great acquaintance with the gay science to be able to recognise the arms of the Devonshire Vallances, or to be aware of the place the name has always held in the history of their county and country," said Arnold.

Mr Vallance inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement of Denison's speech.

"I am not, I think, a proud man, Denison," he answered. "If I ever was, the rough realities of a pioneer's life, such as mine has been, have driven it out of me long ago. Still a man cannot altogether forget his antecedents, nor is it either a meritorious

or a seemly thing to affect to ignore them; and I would fain believe, that the thought that I am descended from a house whose chief glory has been its integrity to itself and its country, has been a motive power with me,—has had some little influence upon the conduct of my life."

When Archer Vallance spoke of his family and descent, which were, in fact, honourable, it was noticeable that his speech took on, probably without the speaker being fully conscious of it, a tone of formality and circumstance that was a curious contrast to his ordinary frank and hearty speech.

That day Arnold Denison might fairly congratulate himself on having, to use a convenient colloquialism, "killed with both barrels." His knowledge of heraldry had been got up that morning from an old Debrett.

When the two men re-entered the house, they found a small party assembled, George Herbert among the rest. The party had met, by invitation, for croquet; it was when the game was in its palmiest days, and feared no rival as an out-door recreation for ladies.

"If Mr Wedderburn were here, we could begin. There are just the number for two sets, with papa," said Mabel.

"He is always late, generally about half-an-hour," said Lotty.

"You will not have seen the last part of the English *Punch* yet, Mr Vallance?" said George Herbert, taking the paper from his coat-pocket. "A friend generally sends it to me from Edinburgh. There are

some rather clever things in this part. But perhaps you have already seen it?"

"No; not yet."

"Are you an Edinburgh man yourself, Dr Herbert?" asked Denison, a little abruptly.

"Yes," replied George.

"And studied at its University, I presume?"

"Yes. I took my degree as Bachelor of Medicine there."

"A charming place your native city, Dr Herbert; almost perfect but for its tyrannous winds, and the consequent increased uncertainty of life from showering chimney-pots. I know the grey capital a little."

"Here is Mr Wedderburn," said Lotty, who was near the window.

The sound of a horse's feet was heard on the gravelled approach, and next moment Wedderburn rode up in front of the house and dismounted.

"I am afraid I am rather late again," he said as he entered.

"Well, never mind," said Mr Vallance. "You may depend upon it you'll get a wife who'll be especially sharp with you in the matter of punctuality. Outraged time invariably revenges itself in some way or other."

"The fact is, some letters and papers from Sydney came in a little before I started, and I got rather absorbed in a report of a murder that has just happened in Melbourne. Have any of you heard of it yet?"

"No; it isn't likely, as you must have the last Sydney news," said Mrs Vallance.

"I haven't any great liking either for reading or

talking about this sort of thing. But this is rather a curious affair, and I must admit I got interested in the account of it. The whole circumstances have not yet come out, and there is a good deal that still needs clearing up. But the main facts have been ascertained. However, I don't wish to go into details. It will all be in the *Chronicle* to-morrow. The perpetrator of the crime is a young man in quite a respectable rank of life, a clerk in the Melbourne Treasury, and his victim is a fellow-clerk. The two seem to have been fast friends until within recently, and that is where the curious and mysterious part of the affair comes in—namely, what was the motive for the crime? There are several other odd and conflicting circumstances in the case, and yet there is little doubt that the prisoner is the guilty man. Whether there is sufficient evidence to bring the deed home to him in a court of law is another matter. The murdered man was shot."

While Wedderburn was speaking, the attention of all was turned towards him; but as he ceased, Mabel's glance by chance fell on George Herbert, who was standing a little behind the rest.

"Dr Herbert, what is the matter! are you ill?" she exclaimed suddenly.

All eyes were turned immediately upon George. His face was strangely white, and his lips quivered visibly. His right hand grasped the back of a chair with convulsive force, or it seemed as if he must have fallen. Mrs Vallance and Mabel were at his side in a moment. Mabel's face had suddenly blanched almost as white as George's.

"What is the matter, Dr Herbert? You look dreadful. Let me give you a glass of wine. Archer, get some, please," said Mrs Vallance.

George took the wine and drank it.

"Thank you," he said. "It is nothing—a mere faintness, which I cannot account for. I fear I must seem very weak and hysterical to you all; but it has quite passed off now."

The blood came back to George's face, and in a few moments he seemed much as usual, but the recovery of his self-control cost him a greater effort than any one present was aware of.

"Perhaps you don't feel inclined to play just yet; we can wait a little," said Mrs Vallance.

"By no means. You mustn't make me out such a valetudinarian as that comes to. It might prejudice my practice if it got abroad," said George, with a slight laugh. "I am quite ready for our game now. Let us begin at once. I have caused you to lose time already."

"Yes, let us begin. It will take away the taste of Mr Wedderburn's painful story, I hope; and perhaps it will be found that the young man isn't guilty after all," said Mabel, with a slight feeling of irritation in her heart towards Dick. Dick himself had a vague sense of personal responsibility for events. He had seen George's strange perturbation with much concern and perplexity, for he held his friend very near his heart.

During this brief episode, Arnold Denison's eyes had been fixed on George Herbert, furtively, but with a curious intentness, which had in it, at the same time, a mingled look of perplexity.

The party proceeded across the garden to the croquet ground, which was at the side of the house. While the hoops were being arranged, Arnold Denison took up a position close to Dick Wedderburn.

"Dr Herbert looks a man in perfect health. You never heard of his having any tendency to heart complaint, Mr Wedderburn?" said Arnold aside to Dick.

"Never, and I'm pretty sure he hasn't," answered Dick a little brusquely.

"So I should think," said Denison composedly.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HERO OF THE HOUR.

IT was with a growing feeling of disquietude that Dick Wedderburn regarded the increasing intimacy between Denison and the Vallances. It seemed to Dick that all the family were equally well-inclined towards Arnold—captivated by his handsome looks, effective manners, and agreeable accomplishments—with the exception of Lotty. In regard to her, he could have no doubt that the sentiments with which the girl regarded the brilliant and versatile Arnold were akin to his own—that they were dashed with a strong though somewhat undefined feeling of distrust and suspicion. A firm friendship and excellent understanding had always existed between Dick and Lotty. In the matter of likes and dislikes, tastes and prejudices, they had much in common; and this inability of theirs to appreciate Arnold Denison at his real worth, as others did, seemed likely to be a new bond between them. It was a striking example of the power of prejudice over minds not guided by strict logical principles—this refusal to recognise what was so manifest to others—especially in Lotty's case. Towards her Arnold was never anything but

bland and courteous, though his manner may sometimes have exhibited a tinge of condescension, or a dash of playful badinage. There was nothing surprising in a man of Arnold's years adopting this tone to a young lady of thirteen; but nevertheless Lotty resented it, and perhaps it was this which largely determined her feeling towards Arnold. Yet she may have had other motives at which the writer can only conjecture—perceptions and intuitions too vague to formulate; for the mind of a maiden of thirteen is possibly as complex as that of a philosopher. At anyrate, Lotty's position at this time was one which cannot be logically upheld, any more than Dick Wedderburn's, and both were old enough to have shown a less hasty and reckless judgment.

Meanwhile Arnold Denison continued to make steady way in Mr and Mrs Vallance's favour; and the fact that Lotty was the only one at Wyandra with whom he did not seem to make such rapid progress, caused Arnold not a great deal of disquietude.

Mr Vallance, as has been said, found no one who made such a good listener as Arnold, whenever he felt in the vein for discoursing about sheep and pastoral matters; for though his connection with squatting in a pecuniary point of view had ceased, Mr Vallance had still a lively interest in all that pertained to the staple industry of the colonies. Except when he had friends from Sydney staying with him, he did not often find so patient and interested an audience as Arnold; for the population of Yodalla being concerned in agricultural rather than in pastoral pursuits, most of Mr Vallance's guests were

more ready to listen to him upon that topic; so that Arnold was doubly appreciated whenever the ex-squatter desired to revert to the subject which he knew most thoroughly, and, after all, liked best to talk about.

Thus, when he discoursed upon the important changes that were gradually taking place in the system of sheep-farming in Australia, and upon the necessity of its being conducted on increasingly scientific principles; when he unfolded his ideas about wells and reservoirs for the conservation of water against dry seasons; upon farming, and "ring-barking;" upon the best methods of improving the native pasture by artificial grasses; upon the respective virtues of the various grasses—rye, and couch, and prairie, and cocksfoot, and the rest—and the adaptability of each for different kinds of sheep-country: when he discoursed with much animation and great knowledge upon these and a dozen kindred topics, Denison listened with wonderful patience and an admirable show of interest. And is it not a signal triumph of courtesy, a canon of manners which, no doubt, Lord Chesterfield has enforced, a grace of minor ethics little short of a Christian duty, to appear interested in what our elders are saying, when we are not deeply so?

In this respect George Herbert compared very unfavourably with Arnold Denison. When Mr Vallance began the subject of pastoral improvements—upon the rival advantages of growing a strong, coarse staple, and plenty of it, and a finer and higher-priced wool; on the limit of stock which the finest country

should be made to carry, and the rest—George's thoughts, to say the truth, were apt to slip away from his host's subject, and get running upon his own professional pursuits,—upon the cases which were most occupying his thoughts at the moment; and while Mr Vallance was dilating on the superiority of rye grass to prairie for a sandy soil, George was running over again in his mind the points of a diagnosis made that morning, or speculating what sort of a day little Kitty Brown was having who was down with colonial fever, or wondering whether old Mrs Johnstone, a crotchety and impracticable patient, was taking her bromide of potash and gentian mixture regularly; so that when Mr Vallance came to a period, and made a pause which demanded some sort of recognition on George's part, the answer which the young man gave was sometimes a sufficiently vague and irrelevant one, such as Mr Vallance might be excused for feeling slightly piqued and irritated at.

Thus, as Arnold Denison rapidly advanced in Mr Vallance's favour, it is pretty certain that at this time George Herbert fell away, all which discomfited and mortified honest Dick Wedderburn greatly. Nor was he at all re-assured by the thought that George himself either was not fully alive to the state of matters, or if he was, showed no sign of being disquieted by it.

There was to be an afternoon riding-party at Wyandra, which Wedderburn and Herbert had promised to join,—the latter provided he had no professional engagements to detain him. George got

through his round of visits in time to accompany Dick Wedderburn to Wyandra.

When they reached the house they found they were in good time, none of the invited party having yet arrived with the exception of Arnold Denison. Arnold was with his host examining a small oil-painting which Mr Vallance had had purchased for him by a buyer in Sydney.

"Let me have your opinion upon this, George," said Mr Vallance, as George and Dick appeared. "I have little skill in these matters; but you know I am fond of a pleasant bright picture or two about one's house. The old masters I have not the necessary knowledge to be able to appreciate, even if it were possible ever to see them in this country; but something like this gives me genuine pleasure."

The picture was a small landscape with figures,—a charming rural scene, steeped in the dewy light of early autumn morning.

"It is said to be an original. I bought it for such at least, and paid a fair price for it. It belonged to Geoffrey Vertue, of Sydney. You must have heard that he is a bit of a *connoisseur*, and that he has one of the few good collections in the colony. He has been parting with a few of his pictures, however, for some reason, and I gave a buyer in Sydney instructions to secure me something. Now whose work should you say this was, Doctor George?"

"I really could not hazard a guess," answered Herbert. "Like yourself I am fond enough of pictures, but I know little or nothing of the respective styles of painters, whether ancient or modern. I

think I might recognise a Turner, but couldn't go beyond that."

"Why, Denison here told me at once!" said Mr Vallance.

"It is a Corot beyond question," said Arnold. "You may know his work anywhere, and, indeed, such small skill is easily picked up, for an artist of any individuality whatever leaves his sign-manual plain upon his work. This delightful little bit has all Corot's characteristics—the dreamy linelessness, the light airy handling, combined in a marvellous way with the most delicate finish, and the refined sentiment pervading and harmonizing the whole."

"To be sure, to be sure," said Mr Vallance, highly gratified; "but we have very little opportunity for studying these things out here you know, Denison. You must not be surprised at our ignorance upon such topics."

"Not at all, not at all; it would be wonderful if it were otherwise. But you are to be congratulated, Mr Vallance, on having become possessed of a work by the incomparable Frenchman, Jean Corot, perhaps the most charming interpreter of the ideal-pastoral that ever mixed colours."

Again Arnold had undoubtedly scored, and Dick Wedderburn could not gainsay his triumph. But though he knew as much about Art as he did about Aristotle, Dick yet felt sure that Denison's honour had been cheaply gained, inwardly chafed at it, and laid another stone to the little cairn of resentment against Arnold that was raising itself in his heart.

Mr Vallance and the three young men returned to

the drawing-room where the rest of the party were now assembled. They rode away down the carriage drive in couples. Why did not George Herbert perceive the little look of invitation in Mabel Vallance's eyes, which could mean nothing if not a signal to him that he should ride by her side? Apparently he was blind to it, for he took his place beside Carry Turner, in the rear of the little cavalcade, and Arnold Denison rode next to Mabel.

Pretty Carry Turner, to say truth, was glad enough that George Herbert should be her cavalier, and if her heart quickened a little and the soft pink deepened in her cheeks, it was nothing but natural. Most women liked Herbert. His kind grey eyes inspired trust. George had always in his heart the image of a mother who had been in his eyes an ideal among women, and the memory of her graces, which were in part real and a little the creation of a devout filial imagination, had always a powerful influence upon his bearing towards women. Until that memory should fade away, George could never be anything but kind and courteous to all women, with a courtesy that was a union of dignity and gentleness. He might not be so handsome or so brilliant as Arnold Denison, but it could be imagined how there might be some women who would prefer him as a companion during a ride, or for life's longer journey.

Dick Wedderburn rode between the younger Miss Turner and Lotty Vallance. Dick's trio was decidedly the noisiest of the party. Dick exerted himself to amuse his companions, entertaining them with stories in which the fun was a little obvious, but per-

haps all the more suitable on that account for a riding excursion along a road that knew naught of Macadam and his principles.

Arnold Denison was calling on all his resources in order to make himself agreeable to Mabel this afternoon. Mabel was at first somewhat reserved and uninterested, which did not escape Arnold, though he was at a loss to conjecture the cause. But presently she brightened, and showed herself more appreciative of her companion's conversation. She was a girl always willing to be pleased, and grateful to those who exerted themselves to please her.

"You will find our riding parties a little different from those in England, Mr Denison, and we shall not gain in your estimation by the comparison," she said. "This is hardly such an easy course as Rotton Row. But we have really many better roads than this, and we shall soon reach the foot of the hills, when we shall have a splendid stretch of grass land."

"Which is infinitely to be preferred to any high-road in England," said Arnold. "No, Miss Vallance; riding in Australia does not compare unfavourably with that at home. They may have better roads, but the greater sense of freedom and space here far outweighs that. Even in the most remote districts of England you cannot have the same feeling in anything like an equal degree. You can seldom rid yourself of the hampering sense begotten of wire-fences, and quickset hedges, and sign-boards breathing legal threats. When you ride across country, steeples and the smoke of chimneys are ever in your horizon. Here all is different. Now as we approach the hills

one might readily imagine oneself amid American prairies, so complete is the feeling of space and remoteness; and who has not wished at some period of his life to feel his horse bound beneath him over the limitless prairie, where the sky-line is broken by no sign of human life, through leagues of silence, in a land perhaps, '*where no one comes, or hath come since the making of the world?*' Here one has very much the same sense; and I thank fortune for giving me an emotion which I have many a time longed to know, when I have been a little tired and bored by the dead-sea stagnation and breezeless monotony of London life."

"You probably felt that only when the season was at ebb, and you were getting a little jaded and hipped, and needed the tonic of the Scotch moors or Ryde," said Mabel.

"Even then I would have chosen the sort of ride I am enjoying now, had it been in my choice," said Denison, who could condescend to a verbal quip. "But I assure you there is no time conceivable like the fag—or rather fagged—end of a London season, when thoughts about an over-ripe civilization present themselves so strongly; no time when the life of newer worlds, say that of the Australian settler or the American backwoodsman, appeals so powerfully to the imagination. I speak from considerable experience."

Between Piccadilly and Yodalla you would with difficulty have found a man who would have been so loath to adopt the life of a pioneer as Arnold Denison, at any period of his existence.

"I think you are liking Australia better the more you see of it; at least it has struck me so," said Mabel.

"It may be that my human interests in the country, as I may say, are deepening, Miss Vallance. I did not make many friends in Sydney," said Arnold, his voice slightly deepening in earnestness.

"You are always so fair. You hold the balance so justly between England and Australia," said Mabel. The girl was a little bit of a patriot, and was pleased and proud when she heard her birth-land well spoken of.

Arnold inclined his head and smiled gaily. They had reached the spurs of the hills, and the party were now riding over a stretch of prairie land, gently undulating, and clothed with short thick grass, the firm but elastic turf making an excellent footing for the horses. On one side stretched a belt of forest, on the other the line of hills, wooded to the peaks, the broad strip of grass land lying like a natural race-course between.

The dark green of the forest was diversified by bright spots of colour every here and there, gleaming out amid the gums and wattles. The waratah lifted its gorgeous crimson cone on its straight slim stem; the lovely native rose spiced the wind with a perfume whose richness was rarified by distance; and the acacias—the glory of the Australian woods—bent beneath their weight of bloom, their boughs hidden in as it were a canopy of bloom;—golden white, like snow flashed with southern sunlight, just accentuating the air with a delicate subtle scent of almond. Grass-

trees everywhere shot up a single tall stemen from a clump of spikes, and fern trees spread wide their graceful plumes, a cool and leafy tent direct from Nature's hand.

Flocks of parrots flashed amid the green—one moment a glittering rain of ruby, and emerald, and sapphire, to vanish the next in the twilight of the forest.

The cries of the laughing jackass accompanied the party as they rode on. First a low cackling laugh, slowly rising louder to a wild, prolonged, exultant guffaw—the mirth of a jackass mimicked to a marvel; then an uproarious peal of laughter, elfish, eerie, half-human, half-demoniac—wonderful, baffling description, dying away at last in a smothered, sardonic, Mephistophelian chuckle.

A sudden turn and an upward ride of half-a-mile through a cleft in the hills brought the party to their proposed destination. The scene which opened before the riders from the summit of the hill was a singularly striking and beautiful one. Beneath them yawned a wide basin, scooped out of the heart of the mountains, filled with a bright but filmy mist, as a cup brims over with golden wine. Sheer perpendicular walls rose all around, whose ledges were thickly clothed with wood, drooping with hanging garlands. The bottom of the chasm was one dark mass of wood and luxuriant undergrowth, no spot of bare rock or earth being visible from above. Straight across from where the little party were standing, a slender fall dropped from the cliff,—a mere ribbon of silver water which hung from the lip of a rocky bowl, and seemed to

wave in the light breeze, which scattered it in a mist of spray-foam long ere it reached the depths below. The radiant afternoon sunlight smote athwart the chasm in oblique shafts, flushing the wooded summits, but leaving the ravine all dim and dewy-dark. Beyond the great basin the hills rose again, tier behind tier, wooded to their peaks, showing delicate gradations of colour; in the foreground a dark green, shading off into a misty light green, which again melted into soft blue, until mountains and horizon met and blended into each other.

"Well, what do think of this, Denison?" said Mr Vallance. "This is one of the lions of the district, of course; I may say of the colony."

"It is wonderfully fine. A glittering blue lake down there, and a snow-capped peak or two against the sky line, and the scene would surpass anything I know in the Swiss Alps," answered Arnold.

"You can't have everything, you know, and I am not sure how a snow mountain would harmonize with this glowing southern landscape. I think you are a little out there, Denison. For my part, I want no hyperborean adjuncts to chill the warmth of this scene."

"I acknowledge my error. All such comparisons of scenery are both idle and impertinent."

It was like the young man's luck, that by this frank confession of mistake he left a more favourable impression on the minds of hearers than if he had never uttered his first opinion.

"It recalls to me more than one line in Tennyson's *Œnone*, could I but remember them; does it not to

you, Miss Vallance? I know you are familiar with the Laureate," said Arnold.

"I cannot trust myself to quote, however; at any rate, not from *Œnone*."

"One line I remember," said Arnold—

> "The swimming vapour slopes athwart the glen."

Might he not have been describing the very scene before us? And see there!"

Arnold pointed to a flat rock a few yards off, on which a silver-grey lizard lay perfectly motionless in the sunlight.

"The details fall in as though at the touch of a magic wand," continued Arnold, laughing.

> "Quiet holds the hills,
> The grasshopper is silent in the grass.
> The lizard, with his shadow on the stone
> Rests like a shadow, and the cicala sleeps."

"The cicala sleeps up here, certainly, but it is lively and loud enough on the levels, worse luck," said Mr Vallance.

"Don't you rail against our locusts, papa," said Lotty. "I have often heard you say the sound was quite a cheerful one when you are accustomed to it, and that you would miss it ever so much."

"Possibly. I suppose you think, missy, that the grasshopper[1] may be a chorus without being a burden?"

"That is the joke clerical. For shame, papa, to

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[1] What usually goes by the name of locust in Australia is really a *cicala* or grasshopper.

pun upon ecclesiastics. It is only clergymen who are allowed to take such liberties with Scripture."

The little cavalcade now turned their faces homewards. When they had proceeded for a little distance, the riders struck off from the open into the bush, and rode in its shadow, following a sandy track. Denison and Mabel Vallance were still riding together, but were now in the rear instead of in front, as previously. Arnold did not find his companion so attentive a listener as in the earlier part of the ride. He set it down to her being tired. Mabel was rather tired, but it did not arise altogether from the physical exercise she had gone through, for she was healthy and hardy enough, and could stand a great deal of riding. She was feeling a little sad, and it had its effect on her face, giving it a rather weary look.

Dick Wedderburn and his two companions were not the only merry ones among the party. Little wafts of laughter came back to Mabel from Carry Turner and George Herbert, who seemed to her to be enjoying each other's society wonderfully. In reality, most of the laughter came from Carry, whom it did not take a great deal to make laugh at any time, and who was ready to take the wit of her male companion pretty much for granted, and to accord it the admiration of her smiles. But Mabel was not in the frame of mind just now to discriminate. What was quite clear to her was that Carry was enjoying George Herbert's company greatly, from which it was natural that she should argue that George was doing his best to please and gratify Carry.

As Mabel rode on by Denison's side, with an attention to his talk that flagged more and more, she kept taxing her memory as to the past relations between George and Carry, trying to remember if she had ever noticed anything in their manner towards each other that "meant anything." Young women, it is supposed, are capable of a marvellous degree of ingenuity in self-torment of this description, and Mabel Vallance is not set forth here as possessing any ideal superiorities over her sex. But though her memory was being pricked by the spurs of a newly-awakened jealousy, and her judgment was somewhat twisted, she could not tell herself that she had ever remembered noticing anything in George Herbert's bearing towards Carry Turner indicating more than friendly regard. But what of that? Had he ever shown more to herself?

More than once Mabel made an effort to throw off her pre-occupation, and to answer Arnold in his own vein. But she was not very successful, and Arnold thought she was tired; and in sympathy with her, quite satisfied with the degree of success he had already attained during the afternoon, fell into longer intervals of silence. And if Arnold could have known Mabel's real heart, he would have learned that she felt more grateful to him for his silence than for all the apt and pretty things he had said that afternoon.

They were riding along thus, conversing at intervals only, when Mabel suddenly checked her horse, and at the same moment swayed sideways on her saddle.

"Something has given away about my saddle," said she quickly. "I felt it going just in time to pull Aileen up, or I should have fallen."

Denison had dismounted in a moment, and was at Mabel's side.

"Yes, it is your saddle-band," he said. "You must dismount, I am afraid, and I must lift you down, for your stirrup is of no use. You would only drag the saddle off if you leaned on it."

He lifted her lightly to the ground.

"Is it broken?" asked Mabel.

"No, fortunately. I thought at first the strap must have parted from the leather, but it has only got unfastened. The groom must have buckled it carelessly."

"It was perhaps Harry, the boy. Driscoll sometimes lets him saddle the horses to teach him these things, but I must see that papa is a little stricter with master Harry, if he is to stay with us."

"I shall not be a minute fixing it. The others will not know anything has gone wrong before you are in your saddle again. You have been riding with rather loose girths."

Mabel sat down on a fallen tree that lay by the road side.

Arnold had just finished fastening the saddle-girths, when a shrill cry from Mabel startled him. He was immediately beside her.

"Miss Vallance, what has happened!" he exclaimed.

Mabel had started up from her seat, and was standing in a shrinking attitude, her face blanched dead

white, her eyes fixed upon the fallen tree in a gaze of startled terror. "Look! Look!" she exclaimed.

Arnold turned his eyes in the direction of Mabel's pointing hand, and beheld a short, dull-coloured snake lying upon the tree; its flat head slightly raised, its forked quivering fang thrust out, and slowly oscillating from side to side, a horrible green light in its eyes.

Without a word Denison stepped two paces nearer the tree, raised his riding whip, and brought it swiftly down across the reptile's back. But the blow fell too low, striking the adder a little beneath the middle. Hurt, but not disabled, the snake turned, raised itself, and sprang at its antagonist. Arnold moved swiftly aside, and the snake fell upon the sand, close to Mabel, who started back with another cry. Again Arnold struck at the reptile, but the blow was hurried and badly judged, and fell short altogether of its objeet. But before the snake could turn again, Arnold had stooped, seized it by the back of the neck, squeezed its life almost out in one convulsive grasp, and dashed it against a tree. The adder fell to the ground stiff and dead, its head crushed, its back broken.

When Arnold looked round again, he beheld Mabel lying in her father's arms, rigid, and with closed eyes. She had that moment fainted. Mr Vallance had just come up in time to catch her as she fell. In another moment the others were pressing around with faces of amazed alarm.

"The snake is dead, Mr Vallance. There need be no further alarm on that score," said Arnold.

"But Mabel, Denison! My God, is she bitten? Do you know what that snake is? It is a death-adder. Its bite is certain death—death before the sun sets."

"I did not know it was an adder; I did not think much about it. But I do not think Miss Vallance is stung."

George Herbert was bending over the fainting girl. He had spoken no word yet. His face wore a look of dread and anxiety.

"Give me your flask, Mr Vallance," he said hurriedly. "I think you always carry one when riding."

"Yes, here it is."

George took the spirit-flask and put it to Mabel's lips.

"If we only had a little water," he said. "Will you chafe her hands, Mr Vallance?"

All watched with faces of intense anxiety the effect of the spirit upon the unconscious girl. Presently the white lips quivered, the eyes opened and closed again. Herbert poured a little more of the brandy between the half-opened lips. A faint colour fluttered back into Mabel's face, and she stirred. In a little more she was conscious, and raised herself in her father's arms.

"Mabel, you are not bitten, my darling?" said Mr Vallance.

"No, I am sure I am not bitten," replied Mabel, faintly; and the shadow of dread passed from every face as she spoke the words.

"Thank God!" exclaimed Mr Vallance, fervently.

"I did not see it until I had sat down on the tree —not two feet from it—it was so like the colour of the wood. It was the greatest wonder I was not bitten. But I was so terrified by the very narrowness of my escape, and by the cruel look of the creature, that I could neither move nor speak. But for Mr Denison, I don't know what would have happened. I think the adder would have sprung upon me in another moment. Mr Denison seized it in his hand, and dashed it against something, and then I felt myself fainting. It was very foolish, but I could not help it; those death-adders are such dreadful cruel-looking creatures."

Mr Vallance pressed Denison's hand.

"God bless you, Denison! You are a brave fellow," he said.

"I never saw an adder before, and it is my first encounter with a snake of any kind," said Arnold; "so I was rather new to the work, and managed it clumsily enough. My first blow hardly maimed the creature, and the second missed altogether."

"Yes, I see you struck too low." Mr Vallance was looking at the dead snake. "Always aim a little below the back of the neck in dealing with these rascals."

"Yes, I knew that you should do that. But, to say the truth, I was just a little flurried. The novelty of the situation to a town-bred man like myself is all that I can plead in excuse."

"You did wonders, sir," said Mr Vallance. "The most experienced bushman could not have acted more fearlessly."

It was quite noticeable the different aspect which Herbert and Denison's faces presented at this moment. Arnold, who had passed through the critical moments, and had had his nerve and self-possession put to the test, had now returned to his usual equipoise of manner. His face wore its normal expression of assured ease,—there was no trace of excitement in his voice.

In curious contrast was George Herbert's aspect. A strong agitation had been visible in his face during Mabel's swoon. A sudden pallor had overspread it, his hand shook as he applied the spirit-flask to Mabel's lips, and his voice trembled when he spoke, all which signs only slowly disappeared when Mabel recovered from her faint, and announced herself unhurt.

George's agitation did not escape Denison, and a curious look came into his own face, an expression of mingled perplexity and suspicion; and once more the thought returned to him, vague and undefined, like the memory of a half-forgotten dream, that he had seen George Herbert before ever coming to Yodalla.

When Mabel had fairly recovered from her faint, she declared herself able to mount her horse again, and the party continued on their way, Mr Vallance now riding by his daughter's side. The party broke up soon after reaching the house. It had been intended that all should pass the evening there; but Mabel was visibly a good deal tired, and considering all the circumstances it was thought well to relinquish this plan.

CHAPTER VIII.

DICK WEDDERBURN IS PERPLEXED.

AS George Herbert and Dick Wedderburn rode home, side by side, under the clear southern moonlight that made their path brighter than many a northern noon, George was unusually silent, and Dick did not try to force conversation. Perhaps George was conscious that he had been but a dull companion on the road. When they reached the town, he said:

"It's early yet, old fellow; come and smoke a pipe with me."

And Dick accompanied his companion home.

"This may be regarded as a day of stirring events —for Yodalla. Shouldn't wonder if they have it all in the *Chronicle* to-morrow," said Dick, as he lighted his pipe.

"Hardly likely. Who can tell them?"

"Who tells a country editor everything? Who tells him that the Jenkinsons are getting a new Broadwood direct from London; or that Mrs Peachy has been remarkably successful in her preserves this season; or that 'our accomplished fellow-townswoman,' Miss Tremulow, is about to make some stay in Sydney for the purpose of perfecting her fine vocal talents under Herr Seecleff? Nobody tells him. He

finds out. It becomes a sort of intuition, I suppose. It's part of the 'compensation balance' of nature, to prevent country editors from going crazy from paucity of items. But take my word for it, the snake will be in the *Chronicle* to-morrow, full-length, a garbled account it may be, with what embellishments the editor's nature will."

"I hope not. Denison will not report it, I feel sure."

"I credit him with more shrewdness than that would mean," answered Dick. "The Vallances would care very little for seeing the affair figuring as a sensational paragraph in the *Chronicle*."

"Denison behaved admirably. It was coolly and cleverly done, and he deserves the more credit as it was a novel sort of thing to him."

"I don't wish to deny him his due in the matter. I don't think he wants courage."

"I am sure he doesn't."

"I wish he hadn't had the chance of doing this, all the same," said Dick. "I wish you had done it, George."

George paused before answering.

"Why, Dick? I could not have managed it better; perhaps not so well."

"I have no doubt that you could do all that Denison did, or could do."

"The main thing was that there should be some one on the spot to protect Mabel Vallance, and that, thank God, there was. It matters little who did it."

George shuddered slightly, so slightly that it nearly escaped Dick's notice.

"All the same, I wish Denison had not been the man to do it. But he seems to be one of those infernally lucky men one meets occasionally."

"You have taken up a strange prejudice against Denison, Dick; you whom I have always regarded as an eminently good-natured fellow. Excuse the seeming flattery; I mean it."

"There is no need for excuse. My vanity is curbed by the knowledge that it is the world's fools who get credited with the monopoly of good nature. Perhaps it is another affinity of mine to the same class that I seem to notice things that escape shrewder people."

"You speak in riddles, Dick."

"It isn't a fault of mine, I think. Are you blind, George?"

"Again, what is it you mean, Dick?"

Dick rose, paced the breadth of the room, turned, and faced his comrade again.

"Do you not see, George, the sort of relationship that has already sprung up between Denison and the Vallances? Do you not see how fast he is making the running?"

"You mean, I suppose, that he is very good friends with Mr Vallance and his family, and that they all like him?"

"Yes, that's about what I mean—with one exception, perhaps. I haven't noticed that little Lotty has quite the same admiration for him as the rest."

"Lotty is a young lady somewhat uncertain in her likes and dislikes."

"On the contrary, she is uncommonly certain on these points. She knows exactly what she likes

or dislikes—and expresses it too, generally. But that's a little apart from what I was going to say. Don't you see how determinedly Denison is going about to ingratiate himself with Mabel Vallance—doing the very best he knows, in a word, to win her love?"

George paused again before he answered.

"No; I have not noticed all that."

"Then, George, what is it that blinds you? Is it the time-old cause that is credited with power to blind the sharpest eyes? But perhaps you will see things clearer now when I point them out to you. Denison is determined to leave no stone unturned—and trust me he knows every move in the game—to win Mabel Vallance. How he stands in her regard I do not pretend to guess, but that he is already well established in the favour of both father and mother, is certain."

"And why shouldn't he be, Dick?"

Wedderburn looked more narrowly at his companion, but George's face was no index to his feelings. It was fixed and calm, but it cost him some little effort to preserve his outward impassiveness. His heart was really beating quicker than it had done five minutes since.

"You take it more coolly than I expected," said Dick, with a note of disappointment in his voice. "Can I be mistaken after all, George? I fancied you liked Mabel Vallance."

"So I do."

"Would you like to see another man win her? Would you like to see Denison win her?"

"If I knew him an honest man and worthy of her, yes," said George.

"Ah! there it is. If he is an honest man and worthy of her! How do we know that? I have known the Vallances for a long time, you know, long before any of us came here; I can remember Mabel in pinafores, and I would sincerely wish to see her well and happily married to some good fellow. Now, putting aside all personal feeling in regard to Denison, what do we know about him? Absolutely nothing. He comes among us here without any credentials of any kind. He was only a year in Sydney, and in London he had a good position, they say, in a mercantile house. Beyond that we know nothing."

"He is a man of education and accomplishments—that he has proved. He took an Oxford degree, I believe," said George.

"That is a certificate *artium* not *morum*, I take it. But let that be. Why did he give up a remunerative situation for a clerkship in a colonial bank?"

"On the score of health, I understand."

"I believe he is as sound as a bell from top to toe. But anyhow, and granting him all his endowments, I should like to know a little more about the antecedents of the man who marries Mabel Vallance."

"Surely you may trust that to the parents?"

"I don't know. Parents are sometimes blind enough in that way. Mr Vallance is evidently captivated by Denison."

"You are rather exacting in regard to Denison, Dick. You didn't search so closely into my forbears when we first became acquainted."

"Your case is quite different. You had already been some time in the colonies, were known, and if you had been going to turn out a bad lot, would have begun earlier—besides, I do know a little of your past."

"Only as much as I chose to tell you. You have never shown a wish to cross-examine me on the matter, as you would apparently like to do in Denison's case."

"I trusted you, George; and I don't wish to pry into any man's past. But I can't bring myself, somehow, to trust Denison, it is a fact; and that's the sum of the matter. But you have disappointed me, George, by the cool way you are taking all this. I had other ideas; but it seems I have been mistaken."

Dick was silent for a little. Then he laid his hand with a gesture of affection on Herbert's shoulder, and looked him straight in the face with his honest blue eyes—"George, I thought you yourself loved Mabel Vallance, and to-day I was strengthened in the idea. If ever looks showed love, your's did, as you bent over the girl in her faint. Doctor as you are, your hand shook as you held the flask to her lips."

George turned his head hastily from his friend's steady gaze.

"I do love Mabel Vallance," he said.

"Then I have not been mistaken, after all."

"But as certain as I love her, so certain is it that I shall never marry her," said Herbert.

The gravity of his tone caused Dick to look at him more narrowly than he had done yet.

"What makes you say that? Why shouldn't you marry Mabel Vallance?"

"There has never been anything but friendship between Mabel Vallance and myself. You have never noticed anything to lead you to believe that I had other thoughts, have you, Dick?"

George put the question in a tone of such manifest anxiety, that Dick was puzzled.

"No, I cannot say I have exactly," he replied. "Not when she was present, at least. My impressions have been drawn chiefly from our private intercourse. But I had imagined that more tender passages might have passed between you when alone. The idea that you loved her has grown upon me gradually, and, on your own confession, I have not been mistaken."

"No such passages as you refer to have ever passed between Mabel Vallance and me, Dick. I have never made love to her, consciously, by word or look, as Heaven is my witness."

The increased earnestness of Herbert's tone almost startled his comrade.

"And yet you love her?" he said.

"And yet I love her."

"You perplex me, George. Is it a question of money that is the stumbling-block with you?"

"No; in time I may make such an income as would entitle me to ask Mabel Vallance's hand."

"So I think. Mr Vallance is the reverse of a grasping man, and would not stipulate for equality of gear in his sons-in-law. Is it a question of birth, then? I am aware that Mr Vallance sets some store by his, but it is mainly a thing of sentiment with him. It would have little influence with him as a motive of action—seldom has with anybody, I believe, out of fiction. And you yourself can show a fair enough bill in regard to antecedents, I know. Archer Vallance comes but of a line of squires, a tolerably long line, no doubt, and a reputable one. Now you can run off a longish roll of grandfathers, can you not?"

"Only yeomen, one and all. I never had an ancestor who owned the patch he tilled. The family held the same farms for some centuries back, until the present representative of the race forsook the plough for the scalpel. That is my sole patent to respectability."

"And an honourable enough one. Archer Vallance's grandfathers hunted the country while yours harrowed it. That is the main difference between them, it seems. If there is a choice, yours were probably the more profitably employed. But is it this that daunts you? Do you fear that Mr Vallance would not think you are socially equal to his daughter? If that is your idea, I think you are mistaken. I believe Mr Vallance would give his daughter to any man whom he knew to be an honourable and true gentleman, and who loved her and could work for and protect her."

"Yet if there were any blot or stain on that man's

name, he would never bring himself to accept such a one as a suitor to his child."

"Perhaps; but what is that to the point, George? Why these hypothetical cases? If you had any ideas about disparity of birth being a possible barrier between Mabel and you, I have convinced you they are groundless, have not I? Then, my dear fellow, again what is your difficulty? George, I have loved you as a brother. I regard Mabel Vallance as an old playmate who is associated with many of my boyish frolics and pastimes. I am getting gushing; but what I want to say is, that nothing would give me so much pleasure as to see you Mabel's accepted husband."

"It can never be, Dick, never;" answered George, hoarsely.

"But why," persisted Dick, either disregarding or blunderingly unobservant of the look of trouble and pain every moment deepening in Herbert's face.

"Don't press me, Dick. Some day—I cannot tell —I may explain all."

"What is your mystery, George? Can you not trust me? I could you with anything. What is our friendship worth else? I hate everything like mystery—never could read anything that was to be continued in our next. I always look at the last pages of a novel first, like a school-girl."

"I would trust you, Dick, before any man; but I cannot tell you what you would know, not now—don't ask it."

"There has always been a something about you, George, which I cannot put into words," said Dick,

perplexedly. It is the merest shadow, which would have escaped any but a friend's eye. You, who are frank and direct in all your ways, have sometimes moments of reticence, constraint, and almost moodiness. I have known you break off abruptly in an ordinary talk over a pipe, and turn suddenly silent and pre-occupied, your face over clouding and saddening, so that I had nothing for it but to take the hint and depart. I have never spoken to you of this before, but now things have led up to it, somehow."

"Did you ever notice that unmannerly trick of mine in the presence of others?" said George.

"No, I cannot say I have. It was only when we have been alone together, which makes it not the less curious, if it is an unconscious habit you have slipped into."

"I probably exerted more self-control in general company. We were friends, and I could trust you to pardon such solecisms."

"I used sometimes to think that your thoughts had got running upon your patients. But now you seem to have some sort of difficulty. Can I not help you? If you think I can, you know you may rely upon me to the furthest."

"Dick, Dick, you are giving me real pain. If you love me, as I know you do, you will not press this matter further now; you will not return to it again unless I speak of it myself—some day I may—may tell you everything." George Herbert bent forward and pressed his hand against his head.

Dick Wedderburn looked upon his comrade in

wonder, now as much disturbed as perplexed. At last it had occurred to him that he had touched some tender spot in his friend's history,—had opened afresh some secret wound.

"Pardon me, George—I am a clumsy boor," he said. "I have been blundering on like a blind fool; forgive me. I thought you were in some strait about money or something, and must needs thrust in my officious help. Forget the impertinence; and—I think I had better go."

Dick rose, and George made no motion to stay him. He accompanied him to the door, pressed his hand with a warm grasp, and wished him good night. He watched the retreating figures of horse and rider down the quiet moonlit street; then returned to his room, and seated himself in his former attitude, his head leant forward, his face hidden in his hands. His strong frame was quivering now like a wind-shaken tree.

"Absent and pre-occupied, and saddened-looking, sometimes, am I? I thought I had forgotten the habit. But do such recollections ever entirely fade? And now I have fresh cause for perplexity, and fear, and anguish. Yes, I love her. Oh, Mabel, my darling! I do love you! Your sweet beauty and kind heart have made me love you. But I thought I had concealed it. And so I have, I believe, from all but Dick. He has seen me in more careless moments, in the unheeded talk of friendship, when the mask must have been lowered for a little. But I did not suspect he was so quick. In honest truth, I can say I wish I saw Mabel Vallance married and happy—to this

Denison, if he is worthy of her. Dick is manifestly prejudiced against him. He is handsome and clever, and brave. Alas! if this love grow—but it cannot grow—it is at its height. If it threatens to master me, there is but one thing for it—I must leave the place. The world is against me. When I am in a fair way of doing useful work here, and the money reward for it contents me, I am obliged to abandon the field and begin all over again elsewhere. But I will do it rather than play the coward and the traitor. God help me in my resolve. It cannot be that, if I were to tell all to Mr Vallance, he would accept me as his daughter's suitor. A man with less claims to birth and lineage would shrink from the idea. And Mabel? Can it be true that she in any degree reciprocates my love? Dick seemed to hint as much, but I have never thought so. Kind and friendly she has always been, but that she is to nearly all. And have I not been at all times heedful in her company, kept a restraint upon myself that was almost pain? I must watch her, and if I think she seems one degree more kind towards me than to others, that will decide me in quitting Yodalla for ever. And after all, that will be best, perhaps, in any case. I shall be as well working anywhere else as here. Whom have I to work for but myself? But I shall leave the place with regret. I have had happiness here; was happy enough until my love for this girl began; but now the battling with it is becoming an agony that will overmaster me unless I retreat before it. Flight is my only sure safety."

George Herbert rose, and walked out through the

French windows into the little garden—into the still bright night to cool the heat of his throbbing pulses. His face looked pale and haggard in the moonlight; the moisture stood upon his brow; his eyes were sad and clouded as a woman's with long weeping.

CHAPTER IX.

ARNOLD TAKES THE TIDE AT THE FLOOD.

ON the morning following the events of the last chapter, as Arnold Denison sat at breakfast, his landlady handed him a letter just delivered by the postman. Philosopher as Arnold credited himself with being—of a mingled Stoic and Epicurean school, probably—the letter somewhat spoiled the rest of his breakfast. It was from a Sydney firm of solicitors, whose services Arnold had had occasion to need more than once during his brief sojourn in the capital. The small sum of money which he had succeeded in rescuing from the wreck of his fortunes had enabled him to meet his debts of honour incurred at the Spring and Autumn Randwick meetings of the Australian Jockey Club; but this strain upon his exchequer had left him next door to bankruptcy. He had tradesmen's bills, to meet which he had had to borrow money immediately before leaving Sydney. This morning's communication from his lawyers informed Arnold that the firm of money-lenders which had been obliging enough to accommodate him at

twenty per cent. were winding up their affairs preparatory to withdrawing from business, and that all outstanding debts due them were being called in. Messrs Flaw & Lupin had been applied to in regard to their client's liabilities to Messrs Levi & Molyneaux, and now begged to know if it would be convenient for Arnold to remit the necessary sum, or, if not, what steps they were to take in the matter. It was not convenient for Arnold to forward to his solicitors the required moneys, very far from it—it was impossible.

The young man's face darkened as he read the letter and pondered his position.

"All this vexation and annoyance for the amount of a few tradesmen's bills," he reflected. "But it presses as hard upon me now as though it had been thousands. But the matter is not so desperate after all, perhaps. It may be stayed off. If I can gain time, that is all I want. I have still by me a few trifles—flotsam from the wreck—whose value is patent to any expert. They will almost cover the amount. I was loath to part with them before. But, pshaw! what tattered scrap of sentimentality was that? and I shall replace them with others as pretty some day, I believe. The tide of my affairs is again approaching flood, unless I deceive myself. Let this go—and this."

Arnold drew from his hand a handsome ring, set in diamonds and emeralds, and another from his neck-scarf, more massive and handsome still. He turned them round in his hand for a few moments, contemplating them.

"Yes; with one or two other like trinkets, they will do the business. How to get them properly disposed of in this out-of-the-way place, that is the only difficulty; but I have no doubt it can be managed."

Arnold replaced the rings in their accustomed places.

"But this affair has determined me on one thing," he continued to reflect. "I must hasten on matters at Wyandra; I must play out my hand at once. And could there be a better time? I cannot feel certain that Mabel Vallance loves me, but I believe she is well inclined towards my humble self. That much, I think, I may conclude without vanity; and now when I have, it appears, on the admission of all, saved her life, could there be a better opportunity to bring matters to a crisis? She is a generous-hearted girl, easily touched to sympathy and gratitude. If I have inspired her with any feeling of liking—a thought stronger than friendship—the events of yesterday may have quickened it into something deeper still. Now, while the act is fresh in her thoughts, this is surely my opportunity. Further waiting may not strengthen my position. So fair a chance may be long in occurring again. It is an ungenerous advantage to take of Mabel, and of my fortune, would say the moralist. Pshaw! 'all is fair,' &c., says the distich. I have proverbial morality on my side, anyhow, and I cannot afford to be scrupulous about such nice points of minor ethics. I am simply taking the tide of my fortunes at the full. I have come to love Mabel Vallance well enough, at the least

I like her well enough to warrant me in the belief that our mutual affections would, after marriage, develop into a very good practicable work-a-day sentiment; and what more has one a right to demand? My day of hot love was a brief one—in fact I cannot remember it. Once more let me consider the circumstances in my favour as calmly and dispassionately as I can, and letting vanity bias my calculation as little as possible. I think I have played the game as skilfully as most men would have done in the circumstances. I have succeeded in concealing my art. I certainly stand well in the father's regard; he makes no secret of his liking for me, or of the pleasure he derives from my companionship. That I consider I have honestly earned, at the cost of many an hour spent in listening to his prelections on subjects in which I have no earthly interest. He told me the other day that I might fairly hope eventually to become manager of one of the Polynesian's head offices, which he no doubt meant as an indication of the estimation in which he held my business abilities. The head manager of the Polynesian is about a match for anybody's daughter, short of the Governor's, in Australian society. Then I have inspired the old gentleman with an agreeable impression of my birth, without committing myself on the point; and, to say the truth, there isn't much amiss with the main stock of my family tree. It's some of the later shoots that may be doing it less credit. I may fairly count upon Mr Vallance's placing no obstacle between Mabel and me, and I feel pretty sure that I may reckon on Mrs Vallance as an ally also. She has

always shown herself entirely kind and complaisant towards me, and has seemed to be pleased that there should be free intercourse between her daughter and myself. If Mabel herself is consenting, I anticipate little difficulty on the part of the parents; and if Mabel knows that her father and mother are disposed to favour our union, she is a dutiful daughter, who, I am sure, would shrink from running counter to her parents' wishes, when it could by any means be avoided. Making all deductions, I say, for a man's personal vanity—which is always a misleading factor in such calculations—I think my chances of success are good—as good as they will probably ever be. I have no rivals now. Stop, is that quite so? I can hardly tell. Sometimes I have thought the Doctor might be a rival, but the impression was so faint as hardly to be worth the considering. But how is it that I never think of that man but the same idea presents itself? I thought the fancy would die out, but instead it seems to strengthen. I seem to associate little incidents, that, separately, have no significance, but which appear to group themselves together of their own accord. There was his mentioning that he was an Edinburgh man, and studied medicine there. That laid hold of my imagination in a curious way. The mere fact that I know a little of the city cannot be sufficient to account for this. Then, on the same day, there was his turning so suddenly white and faint when Wedderburn was speaking of the murder—a man as healthy-looking as I am; that again, though a curious thing in a man so strong, seemed, at the moment, to have a significance

in my mind which the mere incident hardly warranted. And then yesterday, when his face became so strangely agitated before we knew whether Mabel was bitten or not, once more the feeling that I had seen his face before came back upon me more vividly than ever, and at that moment I could have almost sworn in a court of law that I had seen him before ever we met here. There is some puzzle or mystery in the thing, I feel certain; but I am no nearer as yet to the clue. But why should I puzzle about it? Can its solution concern or profit me? Not as yet, perhaps; but one day it might; there is no saying. Meanwhile, this is a little apart from the matter in hand. It will be as well, considering yesterday's events, to allow a few days to pass, and then I shall be prepared 'to put it to the touch.' I feel hopeful—I may say confident—*fortiter occupa portum!* And, by my faith, it is a pleasant haven I am seeking to enter. Of course the place will come to Mabel, with its fragrant acacia bowers and shadowy alleys—a harbour such as any man might be content to cast anchor in."

Arnold looked at his watch and saw that it was time he was at the bank. He rose and left the room. He had begun his soliloquy, it has been indicated, with a somewhat clouded brow, and with thoughts to correspond; but the course his reflections had taken had wrought an agreeable change in his feelings. Long before he had finished, his face had cleared, and he had almost entirely forgotten the open letter before him, the origin of his temporary disquietude; and now, when his attention

was again turned to it, it had no fears for him. He re-read its contents calmly, placed it in a small letter rack, and left the room for the office. The *aplomb* and abounding self-trust, which were among the young man's most enviable possessions, had quite returned to him.

CHAPTER X.

LOTTY IS CONTENT.

ARNOLD Denison allowed three days to go by before putting his purpose into execution. On the afternoon, which he trusted was to decide matters in his favour, he bestowed some extra care upon his attire —he was a careful dresser at all times, as might be supposed. This will not lower him in the opinion of the charitable reader, especially if he has any acquaintance with male human nature. Is it not true that a man never supposes a woman so intelligent and intellectually superior as to be uninfluenced by the fashion of her lover's coat? He may believe his mistress the cleverest as well as the most high-souled of her sex, one far above all considerations of clothes in the abstract; yet, when he comes to woo, he is exercised about his neck-scarf and collar. It may be taken for granted that the suitors of the wise Queen of Sheba—whoever they were—were anxious about the fit of their tunics, and whether their turbans sat well and becomingly. It seems to be a rooted belief in the masculine mind, that a woman retains an eye for the harmonies in the most momentous position in which she is ever

supposed to be placed—when a man is offering her the empire of his heart.

Arnold Denison, to be sure, was not greatly disturbed by doubts and fears in regard to his *toilette* to-day, for he had too implicit and well-grounded a reliance on his judgment and taste in such matters to allow of that. Still he did give a little more heed to details than usual.

He rode over to Wyandra in the cool of the day, passed round the side of the house to the stables—a road that had grown so familiar by this time, that it seemed to wear a look of welcome, and gave up his horse to the charge of Driscoll, from whom he learned that Mr and Mrs Vallance had taken the buggy for a drive, Mr Vallance himself driving. This fitted in with Arnold's purposes well enough.

At the house, one of the maid-servants informed him that Miss Vallance was somewhere in the garden. She offered to seek her, but Arnold said there was no occasion—he should, no doubt, easily find Miss Vallance. He stepped out into the garden, across the verandah, followed by a look from the girl half-inquisitive, half-significant.

"Well, he is a handsome young man, for certain, an' the loveliest dark eyes, an' a figure like a sergeant's, and manners most gentlemanly. Sure, Miss Mabel might do a deal worse," was Norah's reflection.

Arnold found Mabel among her rose-beds, holding in her gloved hands a large pair of scissors with which she was trimming the bushes. She did not unbecome her occupation by any means. As she

stood amid the splendid bloom of the flowers,—softly blushing moss roses, and dark yellow cloth-of-gold,—in a light-coloured muslin of plain fashion, that fell from waist to feet in simple flowing lines—the level rays of the setting sun steeping all her figure in a clear mellow light, and deepening a little the golden thread in her hair, which escaped from beneath her broad-brimmed hat in stray curls—Mabel Vallance harmonized very prettily with her present environment. Arnold thought he had never seen her to greater advantage. Her work had kindled a sparkle in her brown eyes, and a flush in her cheeks as softly delicate as that of the moss roses themselves.

Mabel did not notice Denison's approach until he was close beside her. She held out her hand to him.

"I am glad to see you so evidently recovered from all effects of our little misadventure the other day, Miss Vallance," said Arnold.

"*My* misadventure rather. You had only to do with setting matters to rights. I was quite well next morning; but I did get a little fright, I must confess. But why have you not been over before this to let me thank you for what you did? I am sure I did not do so sufficiently on Tuesday. But I was too startled and taken up about myself, I am afraid, to think of anything else. Accept my sincere thanks now, Mr Denison."

"Don't say anything more about it now, Miss Vallance, please. I did but what any one would have done."

"You saved my life. Everybody says so," said

Mabel in a lower and more earnest tone, and with a slight tremor in her voice which did not escape Arnold. He took it as a good omen.

"I am glad to think so," he said.

"I wish papa and mamma had been at home," resumed Mabel. "They feel both so grateful to you. But you will wait till they are back, will you not?"

"I am not sure. I did not come to see your father and mother to-day especially, Miss Vallance —it was to see yourself. The reason I have not been to Wyandra before this will perhaps surprise you—it has been something very like fear—doubt and hesitation at anyrate."

Arnold was speaking more rapidly than his wont, in the low tone that always displayed to advantage the quality of his rich musical voice.

"Fear, doubt; what can you mean?" said Mabel, with genuine perplexity in her face and tone.

"It was a doubt and fear for which I would fain hope there is no cause," replied Arnold. "Miss Vallance, we have not known each other for very long, but long enough, I trust, for mutual understanding and sympathy—long enough at anyrate for me to have learned your kind heart and loving generous spirit, and to have yielded to their influence—long enough for me to feel my whole soul and being drawn towards you. Do not think these the trite words of a lover's passion. I am little skilled to suppress my feelings when they are deeply stirred; and believe me, my words but faintly speak my love. Mabel, can you give me a little love in return? Can you love me enough to be my wife?"

Arnold was watching Mabel's face intently. A look of pain and mingled surprise was revealed in it, but it betrayed only a slight agitation.

"Oh, Mr Denison, you have made me very sorry," she said. "I did not think—I did not know—we have been such good friends, and I have felt so deeply grateful for what you did on Tuesday; but—I never thought you had any other feeling than—I cannot"—

But Arnold caught her hand.

"Mabel! do not say you cannot love me. My whole heart, my whole love are yours. I have never before spoken to woman, as Heaven is my witness, as now I speak to you. I have fancied—surely truly—that we have sympathies, tastes, aspirations in common, and on this thought I have built up hope. You will not crush it utterly. Say that you will not. I will not press you now. But in time you may come to love me a little. When we have known each other longer, and you better know the strength of my devotion, you may come to love me well enough to be my wife. Give me this hope and I shall be content."

He was looking eagerly in her face, a kindling light in his dark eyes. An onlooker would have said that never lover pled more eloquently or honestly than this. And Mabel Vallance, seeing Arnold's face, believed the same, and the feeling of sorrow in her heart increased. She felt genuinely sorry for the man before her.

"Oh! I cannot, I cannot, Mr Denison. It would not be honest in me to raise false hopes in you," she said hurriedly. "Cannot we be friends as before,

and forget all this? Leave me now, Mr Denison, please leave me."

"Your father and mother are not averse to my suit, I think," said Arnold.

"Have you spoken to papa and mamma?" answered Mabel quickly.

"No, not definitely; but I have fancied that your father was disposed to regard me favourably as a suitor for his daughter's hand."

"I do not know, but it can make no difference. They would never try to influence me in any such way."

"I never had such a thought. You wrong me, Mabel. I only meant that it was the belief in their approval that helped to give me hope," said Arnold.

"They both like you, I am sure. Can you not be satisfied with being our friend? I think you had better leave me now."

"Not until you tell me I may still hope. Can you not imagine it possible that your feelings towards me may deepen as our knowledge of each other increases? That the friendship for me which you say you have may one day become love? Tell me that I may cherish this hope, and I shall be content."

"I cannot. It would not be right or honest towards you."

Arnold paused a moment before he spoke again.

"Will you then tell me one thing—and even that will give me hope. Have I any rivals in your affections?"

The whole expression of Mabel's face changed.

The sorrow and pity disappeared; a deep flush mantled on her face and brow, and her eyes kindled with something that was very like indignation and anger. She drew herself up in a proud little attitude.

"You have no right to ask me such a question, Mr Denison. I think you have forgotten yourself a little," she said.

Arnold at once saw that he had made a mistake.

"Forgive me, Miss Vallance," he said. "When a man feels as I do at this moment, he has rarely complete command of his speech, and may utter words prejudicial to the cause nearest his heart. Forgive my hasty words and forget them."

The little storm of displeasure and pride passed again from Mabel's face. She held out her hand. Arnold took it and kept it in his for a few moments.

"I do forgive you readily, Mr Denison. And we part as good friends, do we not?"

"Friends always, I trust, Miss Vallance; but I go away with a brighter hope, and I must keep alive that hope a little longer at least. The depth of my love justifies, and, if you will pardon the word, compels it."

"You really give me pain when you repeat that," said Mabel.

"It need not. Trust me, I shall neither embarrass or weary you with the importunity of my love. Meanwhile, I hope that nothing that has passed between us to-day will disturb the old relations between us."

"Nothing, as far as I am concerned. As I said, we part friends—exactly as before."

Mabel emphasized slightly her last words. Arnold pressed her hand, turned, and walked up the garden path back to the house.

Of this passage there had been a witness of whose propinquity neither of the actors had any suspicion. Lotty had witnessed the whole scene. Early in the afternoon she had sought, a book in her hand, a favourite study-place of hers—a perch amid the twisted boughs of an old willow tree, which grew near the spot where Mabel and Arnold had been standing. She had been there some time before her sister began her task of pruning the rose bushes, but she was a girl who usually became engrossed, heart, soul, and imagination, in the book she was reading, so that, on this occasion, although she saw Mabel come out from the house and engage herself among the flower-beds, she had made no sign of being in the vicinity, nor given any further heed to her sister or her occupation.

But the sound of Arnold Denison's footstep on the gravel caused her again to raise her eyes from her book, and then her whole attention became riveted on the two figures. Not the interest of her enthralling romance could rival that of the scene that was being enacted before her eyes. There was no chance of her being seen where she sat, nestled in a fork in the very centre of the tree, amid a bower of foliage. But she could easily peer out through her leafy screen, and she had no scruples of conscience in taking full advantage of her position. She could not

hear what the speakers said, for they spoke in low tones, but from their manner and gestures she made a near guess at the nature of their interview.

Arnold was hardly out of sight when Lotty slid rapidly down from her perch, and the next moment had presented herself to her sister's astonished eyes, flushed and excited, the impersonation of tangled hair and freckles.

Mabel's first feeling was one of anger.

"You have been listening, Lotty. How dishonourable of you!" she exclaimed.

But Lotty had her arms about her sister's neck.

"Stop, stop! Mabel," she said. "I couldn't help it. I really couldn't. I was in the old willow before you came here, and I couldn't help seeing you both; but I didn't hear a word of what you were saying."

"Then you don't know anything of what Mr Denison has been speaking to me about?"

"I didn't hear, but——I think I guessed. Oh, Mabel! Mr Denison has proposed to you; that is it, isn't it? And you've not accepted him, have you dear?—Say you've not accepted him."

"Lotty, you've no right to ask such questions, and no right to be so prejudiced against Mr Denison. He has always been pleasant and kind, and we all like him very much, except you. It is most foolish and ill-natured of you to set your opinion against papa's and mamma's, and everybody's."

"I know all that, Mabel; please don't go on any more about that," exclaimed Lotty impetuously. "But tell me whether you have accepted Mr Denison or not. Mabel, you cannot refuse to answer me

that question. Have you given Mr Denison any kind of promise? Answer me like the honest girl I know you are."

"No, I have not, Lotty."

"That is, you have refused him?"

"Yes."

"Then that is all right, and I am so glad."

And Lotty again caught Mabel round the neck and kissed her.

"I guessed you had done that," she said. "Because if you had accepted him, I thought he would have——done something different from what he did, you know. But I couldn't feel certain about it; but now it is all right."

"You are a foolish, prejudiced little thing, Lotty. I am very sorry for Mr Denison," said Mabel, as the two sisters walked towards the house together.

"So am not I; but it is all right," answered Lotty in a contented voice.

CHAPTER XI.

ARNOLD'S REFLECTIONS.

AS Arnold Denison rode home, his train of thought was not of an agreeable character. The philosophic stand-point, which it had always been an aim of his to cultivate in regarding the chances of fortune, had received a somewhat severe strain, and had been hardly equal to the occasion. He had reasoned himself into too large a measure of confidence in regard to his suit not to be disturbed by its failure more than he would have cared openly to admit.

His pride was not so great as his vanity, which chiefly consisted in the confidence he had—a confidence justified by many facts in his past life—in his power to accomplish that which he took in hand; but both his pride and his vanity had received a shock to-day. He felt chagrined, baffled, angry; and these feelings sadly trampled upon his philosophy, as they have done with many a first-rate philosopher before him; and Arnold was only a second or third-rate Stoic, in whom the tough old fibre of the school had become somewhat thin and flaccid under the influences, it may be, of modern civilization.

Yet Arnold's feelings, after his rejection by Mabel,

were by no means those of despair. Though he felt a good deal disappointed, mortified, and angry, he had no thought of abandoning his plans. He was made of stronger stuff than that. His refusal by Mabel, having stirred in him the emotions already indicated, had also the effect of confirming him in his purpose, and strengthening in him the resolve to succeed. He was aware now of a new motive for effort, which stimulated him to renewed endeavours.

"One thing I feel pretty sure of," he reflected, as he rode slowly back to Yodalla, "and that is, that I have a rival. She did not deny it; and the way she fired up at the suggestion puts it almost beyond a doubt. It could not have been affectation, or coquetry, or anything of that sort; she was very much in earnest throughout. And she is genuinely sorry for me, is she? Egad! it's something to have excited even pity in so nice a woman. But her pity must change to some other feeling by-and-by. There must have been something wanting in my love-making hitherto, and I fancy I have the clue to the matter, which will enable me to correct the error. I feel a new interest and zest in the siege, of which I was until now unaware, and which I suspect is essential to success in this instance—perhaps in all such. By Jove! how pretty she did look, too! I never thought her so near being handsome. But about my rival. Who is the man? Who can it be but Herbert?" And again the mention to himself of the name led Arnold's mind into the train of reflection which it almost invariably followed when the thought of George Herbert presented itself. The suspicion, which was

now nearly a certainty, that George was his rival in Mabel Vallance's affections, now had the effect of concentrating his thoughts more intently than ever on the ideas that had so frequently exercised his mind. Never did he meet Herbert without the same impression recurring to him. Once again, to-day, he began piecing together the few facts he knew regarding Herbert, with an increased persistency and reiteration which he himself could hardly have given a satisfactory reason for. The abiding impression which he had of having seen Herbert before coming to Yodalla was grounded chiefly on the power he knew himself to possess of recollecting faces; on the circumstance of Herbert's being a native of Edinburgh laying so strong a hold upon his mind, quite out of proportion to a fact so simple in itself; on the strange manifestation of feeling which Herbert had shown when the details of the murder were read aloud; and on the circumstance that Herbert's face, under strong agitation and suspense, as it had been on the occasion of Mabel Vallance's fainting fit, had seemed more familiar to him than ever. These few facts Denison's mind dwelt upon and pondered over, turning them this way and that, always with a strange sense of perplexity which never drew near a solution. The thing exercised an attraction over his mind which was little short of fascination.

This afternoon he became so deeply engrossed in this train of reflection that, by the time he reached Yodalla, the thought which had pressed upon his mind as he left Wyandra had passed entirely away. He had started homeward at a somewhat quick and

impatient pace, for he was feeling, as has been said, a little heated and ruffled; but when he reached the town, he had become oblivious of the leisurely pace into which his horse had fallen.

"Well, if it is as I suspect—if he is my rival—it shall go hard but I shall find some means of damaging his cause. I seem to be feeling my way, as it were, to such a result already, though everything as yet is so vague and undefined in my mind."

This was the thought with which Arnold Denison closed his reflections as he entered his lodgings.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EAVESDROPPER.

"HARRY has just got back from the town. There is only one letter; it is from your Aunt Bella to me," said Mrs Vallance, as she entered the drawing-room where Mabel and Lotty were sitting.

"Any news, dear?" asked Mabel.

"Yes, this. We may expect Nelly to be with us in a few days. She has not been feeling so well lately, and wants a change; so your aunt writes to ask if it will be convenient for us to have her here for a week or two."

"We shall be very glad to have her," said Mabel.

"Of course. Nelly is always so nice and merry," said Lotty.

"I shall write at once and ask them to name the day we are to expect her."

"We must have a dance while Nelly is with us, mamma. We must do something to entertain her, and that is what she would like best, I am sure," said Lotty.

"Nelly isn't coming to us exactly for gaiety, dear—rather for quiet. She has probably had quite enough of ball-going at home."

"She mustn't be dull, mamma. A dance couldn't do her any harm—it's quite different from a ball; and our hill air will soon set her to rights again," said Mabel.

"When Nelly Beauchamp is past enjoying a dance she will certainly be on her last legs, like that droll Irishman we saw in the comedy," said Lotty.

Nelly Beauchamp duly arrived at Wyandra—a fair, bright-eyed girl, with a sprightly manner. She was certainly looking a little pale and "wilted," but she averred that there was nothing the matter with her except a little languor produced by the summer heat in Sydney, and laughed at the idea of her taking any harm from the proposed dancing-party.

The night on which the party was to come off was presently settled. The house at Wyandra lent itself very well to an entertainment of this kind. With their canvas curtains drawn, the broad verandahs made a very pleasant promenade for the dancers, while the garden was immediately accessible on all sides, down the low flights of steps which led to it from the verandahs. No more grateful retreat from the light and warmth of the dancing-room could be desired than the cool dusky alleys of the garden, fragrant with the breath of the acacias and magnolias, and a gossamer shawl thrown over the shoulders amply sufficed to protect the fair votaries of Terpsichore against any risk from the soft night air.

MacAndrew, the head-gardener at Wyandra, was an invaluable man on an occasion like the present. He could display a great deal of taste and skill in making the house look pretty and effective, having a

gift of arranging groups of palm leaves, ferns, and flowers, and of distributing coloured lights and lamps amid the garden shrubbery.

"MacAndrew is quite a genius, I assure you, Mrs Vallance," Arnold Denison took occasion to remark to his hostess early in the evening. "He shows a feeling for arrangement and colour which reveal the true artist. A commoner spirit would have flooded the garden with light and colour, but he has kept everything in perfect subjection and harmony. There is just the right amount of light for brightness and effectiveness, while too much of the garden is not revealed, and so an air of dreamy vagueness is secured, which is just what one feels to be appropriate to the scene. The garden has really quite an Eastern look. One could fancy oneself walking through a garden in Bagdad, in the golden prime of Harom Alraschid."

"MacAndrew ought to hear your appreciative criticism," said Mrs Vallance, who was herself greatly gratified by Arnold's somewhat elaborate eulogium.

"I am afraid he would understand too little of it fully to appreciate it, however, born artist as he may be," said Lotty, who had come up to her mother's side with Mrs Upshott, and had heard the greater part of Arnold's speech.

"Mrs Upshott wishes to speak to you about something, mamma,—jam, I think; how much sugar you put to your quince jelly." And Lotty left Mrs Upshott with her mother.

"Ah, yes! you may well admire the garden, Mr

Denison," said Mrs Upshott. "Everybody's saying it's just lovely. It's for all the world like one of the Arabian nights, don't you think? not that I've ever seen an Arabian night myself. I call it quite a master-stroke on MacAndrew's part—quite a *coup-de-soleil,* as the French would say. And now, my dear, I want to speak to you about your guava jelly—it was guava, not quince, as your Lotty said. Mr Denison will excuse you, I am sure. You know you always promised me your receipt, and nobody's is ever so nice and firm as yours." And Mrs Upshott led away her hostess to a quiet corner.

The dancing was kept up very briskly—as briskly as though the thermometer had been standing at zero instead of at 80°, and the dancers were waltzing to keep themselves warm. But is it not the universal experience of dancers, that conditions of temperature make very little difference?—a fast waltz stirs the pulse about as quickly danced in Stockholm as in Calcutta.

Mrs Vallance had to rely for music upon her friends; but there were half-a-dozen of the young ladies who could rattle off the latest waltzes and galops in sufficiently good style; and there was Arnold Denison, who could play the most delicious things of Strauss and Coote in a way that kept the dancers' feet in time as by a spell. Arnold was a host in himself, and Mrs Vallance always knew where to turn whenever she was in any difficulty about the next player.

"He is a most amiable young man, my dear, to be sure," said Mrs Upshott. "It is almost as good

as having a professional person. That is what one misses in a small country town; you can't have the same little conveniences as in Sydney. It is all very well having a number of girls who can play—and they are mostly very obliging, I must say; but you feel that it takes them from their dancing, and you are so much more independent with a professional person. When I lived in Sydney, before Mr Upshott took it into his head that he would like a country life, I always had a young man to play. Of course those people are a little peculiar and capricious—so many professional people are, you know—but I always found that if you gave them plenty to eat and drink at supper, it kept them quite sweet and good-tempered. And it only cost two or three guineas the night, you know, my dear, and that isn't worth the mentioning if it adds to the *tout-à-fait* of your evening. That was the way I always looked at it: what does a few pounds here or there signify, if it adds to the *tout-à-fait* of your evening? And I am bound to say that Upshott always takes the same view. 'Polly,' he always says, in his droll, homely way; 'Polly, my love, don't spoil the church to save the mortar.' I must say I miss these little conveniences very much in Yodalla, where, of course, we can't hope to have them for many a day yet."

"It is very pleasant when one has such an admirable amateur as Mr Denison, however, and who is so obliging," said Mrs Vallance, fain to check, or at least divert, the current of her guest's talk.

"To be sure; that is just what I was saying. He

is a most good-natured young man. I assure you I have been quite taken with him ever since I first met him here. Such an eloquent talker, and such a fine soft accent! Anybody might tell he'd been brought up in London all his life. And his talk so fluent and clever—never takes back a word—for all the world like a dean or a bishop; and so amusing too, —he is what I would call quite a *jeu d'esprit*, I am sure—quite a *jeu d'esprit*."

"Just look at Mrs Upshott cornering mamma in that way. What a shame!" said Lotty, who was standing on the other side of the room, speaking to her cousin, Nelly Beauchamp. "I must do something to get her away. She was bothering her about jelly a little ago, and now she is upon some other equally amusing topic, I'll be bound. I can't think how a person who could never have had a French book in her hands at school, can have the boldness to fling about her topsy-turvy French phrases at people's heads in the way Mrs Upshott does. She must have been born without the slightest sense of the ludicrous. It is wonderful."

"She has the courage of her acquirements, Lotty," said Nelly, laughing.

"Well, the things she says are sometimes funny enough, if you don't get too much of her. Last week she gave a dinner, and a day or two before, she came over to consult mamma about something. She was telling all the things she was going to have at dinner, at her usual length, and she said, 'I intend just having two *entre-nous*, my dear. First I thought of three; but I think two *entre-nous* will be sufficient.'

It was all I could do to keep from laughing right out. But I must go over and rescue mamma before this quadrille begins."

Beholding Arnold Denison that evening, no one would have dreamed that any such passage as that in the garden had passed between Mabel and him. His manner towards her was as free from constraint as it had ever been. He asked her for just as many dances as he would have done had no such episode occurred between them. Mabel granted him all the dances he asked. Remembering the young man's recent passionate words and gestures, she could not think that the feelings which he then expressed had already been entirely subdued and conquered, and so she wondered a little at the self-command which Arnold had attained. But she was relieved and set at ease by his manner.

After supper the dancing gained fresh verve and spirit, as is usual and natural. Arnold had of course been introduced to Nelly Beauchamp, and Nelly had found him a dancer very much to her mind. She was accustomed to good dancers, and Arnold's quality as a waltzer was not the less appreciated because it brought into painful prominence the performance of some of the partners—country-bred young men—with whom she had been obliged to complete her programme. Dick Wedderburn, for instance, whose name appeared more than once on Nelly's card, waltzed with an absolutely plantigrade foot from heel to toe, as might a seal or a platypus, in a way that was very trying to Nelly, whose artistic sensitiveness was only prevented

from finding expression in speech by her good nature and her good manners.

Arnold and Nelly had danced the second waltz after supper together. They had passed out into the garden for a little. They were talking gaily together, for the two had become very good friends in the course of the evening, when they heard footsteps approaching. Nelly looked at her card.

"Yes, I thought so. It is Mr Wedderburn's dance. I must go. Mr Wedderburn is the worst dancer in the world, I do honestly believe, but he is such a good fellow in many ways, that I have had to give him more dances than is exactly a pleasure; for you see he doesn't dream but that he is an average sort of dancer. However this is only a quadrille—I tried to keep him to the square dances as much as I could."

"I think I am down once more on your programme before the evening is over?" said Arnold.

"Yes, for the last galop."

Dick Wedderburn came up and led Nelly away, and Arnold was left standing alone in a part of the garden farthest from the house. He looked at his card and found that he had no engagement for the next dance. He had left more than one of his square dances free, for they distinctly bored him.

He was standing on a terrace which led, in a succession of low, smooth-grassed steps, down to the river. Behind him, and on one side, the shrubbery was thick and high, and immediately below him there was a little summer-house, hidden in a bower of greenery and trailing creepers.

Arnold walked up and down along the terrace, and presently took his cigar-case from his pocket, lit a cigar, and wished that no one from the house might disturb him during the quadrille. What with his services at the piano, and dancing with more than one wall-flower during the evening, he had, he considered, really done a fair night's work.

"By Jove! if success waits upon endeavour, I deserve my reward by-and-by, according to every law of moral economy," he said. "I do hope, though, they'll let me finish this cigar. What a glorious night it is, to be sure! It reminds me of Como in July; but I think it is almost more perfect. These colonials have something to boast about in their nights, there cannot be a doubt."

It was a perfect night. Hardly a breath of wind was abroad, only now and then a little wandering breeze came up from the river and stirred the drooping acacias, and shook out from them their fragrance. But there was a sweet, delicious coolness through the air, that came without wind. The stars hung in thick clusters, trembled like rich tropical blossoms moved by the wind, and seemed as though just dropping from their place. The constellations were so thickly sown that the overflowing radiance from one seemed to mingle with that of its neighbour, so that a soft dim mist of light suffused large spaces of the heavens. There was a magic glamour in the night that steeped the senses in a dreamy intoxication, and held the imagination in a spell.

The influences of the hour and the scene were quite such as a nature like Arnold Denison's was

susceptible to. His spirit was at once in harmony with the dreamlike sensuous beauty of the night.

Presently the idea occurred to him to go down to the bank of the river, and finish his cigar there. There would be still less chance of his being discovered and disturbed. He walked forward to the north end of the terrace, where the descent to the next step was least high. At this end the summer-house stood, some yards below. As he was stepping down off the terrace, he thought he heard a sound of voices from the summer-house. He paused and listened.

The voices were low, but he thought he recognised them. He stepped down quietly upon the next terrace, walked to the end of it, and was now close to the summer-house, still a little above it. He could now hear the voices distinctly, and distinguish the words spoken. The speakers were George Herbert and Mabel Vallance, as Arnold had thought. He could not see them, nor was there any chance of their seeing him. Still he was careful to stand well back in the shadow.

"Have you been purposely avoiding me all the evening?" were the first words Arnold heard. "And you have been coming less and less to see us lately; what is the reason? We are always glad to see you. I am sure you know that."

"Have I seemed to shun you to-night?" replied Herbert in a constrained voice. "I did not do so willingly, believe me, but—you seemed to have plenty of partners."

"That excuse won't serve you for a moment."

"It is no excuse—I have no excuse," said George. "If I have kept away from you to-night, Miss Vallance, it has been with no little effort that I have done so."

"What do you mean? There has been nothing on my part to repel you; or if there has I am ignorant of it."

"No, no; nothing. You have always been kind—you cannot be anything else; you speak and act but as your heart directs. It is that which has conquered me—which keeps me here like a charm, when I should have gone long since."

George was speaking rapidly, with rising excitement. Arnold Denison drew a little nearer, and peering through the thick screen of greenery that covered and roofed the summer-house, could partly see the two figures within.

"Dr Herbert, I don't understand you. Gone! Where from? Do you mean from Yodalla? Why should you leave it?"

"Yes; for ever. But again and again, when I have resolved to go, I have hesitated, and put it off, and shrunk from the going like a coward. Oh! Mabel, I am miserable and heart-broken. Mabel, it is you who keep me here; it is love of you. My darling, I have loved you for long."

He drew her suddenly to his arms, and pressed the lips that were not withdrawn.

"Oh! George, I always thought you loved me," she said.

George released her from his embrace, started back. His face was pale, his eyes had a

strange, part passionate, part wistful, and wholly sad look.

"Oh! Mabel, my love, what have I done?" he said, in a voice of such extreme anguish, that a sudden tremour shook Mabel's frame. "I have undone in a moment all that I have striven against for months. I have struggled—none can ever know how hard—not to speak this word; and now my bitter soul-struggle has gone for nothing—in a moment. Would I had never come to-night, as I had resolved! Mabel, I hardly know what I am saying. I have spoken what I should never have. Will you forget my words—you must forget them. Do not think I am cruel or mad—though I am nearer that to-night, I think; but try and forget what has passed between us, and forgive me. And yet it will for ever be my dearest thought to remember that you did love me."

"George, George, you speak in mysteries," said Mabel hurriedly. "If you love me, why do you wish to leave Yodalla?"

"Do not press me for an answer, Mabel. I cannot give you one. It was wrong, it was the act of a coward to speak as I did—to say I loved you. But ever since we became friends, your kind heart and your kind eyes have drawn me on like a spell to love you—have won my heart against my will. And now—to-night—I have been madly led on to tell you all. But you must forget it, Mabel; again I tell you, you must forget to-night, and forget me. I shall not be long in Yodalla; and Time is a gentle god, Mabel. He heals most pains, and blunts

most memories. After a little, you will forget me, Mabel."

Again George held both Mabel's hands clasped in his. There was no excitement or passion in his voice now, only a deep and tender sorrowfulness, and in his eyes the same.

"Forget! Oh, George, how can I forget you?" said Mabel, her voice breaking, her eyes trembling with tears. "I love you as I believe you love me. Is it not cruel of you to keep me in this mystery? Will you not explain?"

"Do not say cruel; do not think I have been intentionally cruel, or you will break my heart utterly. I cannot explain—not now at least—not here. We can never be anything to each other but friends—and try and forgive me for whatever pain I have caused you to-night. It cannot possibly equal that which I have to bear."

A vague but terrible suspicion flashed across Mabel's mind. Why could they never become anything but friends? If he loved her, as he said, why ——but Mabel shrank from pursuing her thoughts further.

"Say that you forgive, and will try and forget what has passed between us to-night," said George. "Can you not promise me that, and"—he was not allowed to finish. He had taken Mabel's hand again in his, and was gazing into her face with an almost pleading, beseeching look.

"There is some one coming—some one to look for us"—said Mabel hurriedly. "We must not be seen thus."

"But promise, Mabel—we part in kindness? You have no hard feelings in your heart against me; say you have not."

"No, no—let me go. There is Lotty."

George dropped her hand, turned, and faced Lotty, as she stood at the entrance of the summer-house.

"You have found us out, have you?" he said. "Your sister is engaged to me for the next dance, but we had decided that it was pleasanter here for a while; it is such a lovely night."

"Splendid," said Lotty slowly, with a puzzled, questioning look in her face. "But we have been looking for you everywhere. If Mabel doesn't dance this time, I expect she will have to play, unless Mr Denison does, and he must be out in the garden too somewhere, for he is not in the house. I was sent to search for you Mabel, and of course looked here among other places. But I can say that Dr Herbert and you are all right, and would like to stay out here a little longer, if you like. Perhaps they have found Mr Denison now, and he is playing."

"No, no; we will go in now, Lotty. It is quite my turn to play again, and Mr Denison has already done more than his share."

Mabel took Lotty's arm, and walked with her rapidly towards the house, and George Herbert followed slowly. Arnold Denison drew farther back into the shadow, and stood there until he thought the three had entered the house. Then he emerged from his ambush and followed them.

By this time the party had begun to thin. A few

enthusiastic ones stayed, as usual, till the last dance. George Herbert took his leave immediately after entering the house. Arnold remained to fulfil his engagement with Nelly Beauchamp, and then bade his host and hostess good night also.

CHAPTER XIII.

EUREKA.

WHEN Arnold Denison reached his lodgings, his landlady was, naturally, in bed. He found his lamp turned low in his sitting-room. He laid aside his evening coat, drew a dressing-gown about him, seated himself in his wicker easy-chair, and lit a cigar. Then he noticed a letter on the mantelpiece, which had arrived during his absence. He rose, took it, and resumed his seat.

"From Ralph; so the English mail is in," he said. "It is some time since I heard from him, yet I shall defer opening his epistle for a little. It is a pleasure that will wait. Ralph is well that he writes, no doubt. I was not mistaken, then—Herbert is my rival, though my rival *malgré lui* to some extent, it would appear. But another link in this chain-puzzle has certainly been placed in my hands to-night. What is the key to the scene I have just witnessed? Why can he not allow himself to love the girl—to become her acknowledged lover? Why can he not marry her? It must be some very strong reason which makes him give up a woman for whom he evidently has an attachment, and who is so good a

match for him in a worldly view. He says as much as that he is about to quit the place. I wish to Heaven he may. That would remove the difficulty from my path at once. But I don't think he will go —or not immediately, at least. He will linger in the place a while yet, like a moth round a flame. What is it that impels him to tear himself away from the place and its influences? Ah, that is the clue to the whole matter. If I knew that, I should hold the key to the riddle. Can it be that the man is already married? That is what occurred to me towards the close of the scene between them. I wonder if the same thought struck Mabel Vallance? If that is the answer to the mystery, the ground is again clear before me as regards rivalry. But that supposition does not seem to fit in somehow with the other parts that have been piecing themselves together in my mind with such curious reiteration. His being married or not married seems to explain nothing. I feel sure that to-night has brought me a step nearer a solution of matters, and yet I want the key-piece to the puzzle. Then—to consider another aspect of the question—supposing my rival withdrawn from the field, either by his voluntary retirement on account of having an incompatible wife somewhere, or by my discovering some other equally cogent reason why he should quit the place—what would be my chances? Not absolutely certain, perhaps, but good at the least. It would only be a matter of time then. She would forget him by-and-by, especially if it turned out that something in his past life rendered him unworthy of a true woman's love, or made it impossible that they

could ever have been married. Time is a gentle god, as he remarked. I wonder if he knew he was quoting? She would forget this little episode altogether, and if I play my game carefully, as I think I can, my time will again arrive, and I shall win yet. If I could but discover the clue to this puzzle. But patience. I am surely getting near the solution. It may be lying at this moment hidden away in some dusty shelf in the storehouse of my memory, and may come to light some day when I am least expecting it. And now for Ralph's letter."

The writer of the letter was an old college companion and London friend of Arnold's, Ralph Phillips. The epistle was one of some length, and contained chiefly gossip relating to common acquaintances, with enquiries as to how Arnold was faring in his new life. All this Arnold read, but with a languid interest. He was rapidly drifting away from his old life, now that all the ties of self-interest were broken. But presently, as he read on, he reached a paragraph which quickly riveted his attention. It was almost at the end of the letter, and ran thus:—"I can think of only one other item of news in the least likely to interest you. You haven't forgotten Laura Wilding, I suppose? We met her first, you may remember, at that Christmas gathering at my uncle's place in Surrey, on which occasion you expressed a decided admiration of her somewhat demure style of beauty —the 'pretty Puritan,' they used to call her in those parts. You may remember, too, that she was one of the belles of her season, and that we never could quite understand why she hung fire so long. Well,

she has gone off now, and quite satisfactorily. She was married the other day to a Scotchman, a Mr Leslie Norman, to whom she became engaged while on a visit to some Scotch cousins. He is a leading Edinburgh advocate. Perhaps you may recollect his name in connection with a Scotch murder case of a number of years back. It excited a good deal of attention at the time, and first brought Norman prominently into notice. He was senior counsel for the prisoner, a man named Dumaresque."

Arnold almost leaped from his chair as he read the name.

"*Eureka!*" he exclaimed, and brought his hand heavily down upon the table beside him. "The whole thing flashes through me in an instant. I see it all before me as though it had happened yesterday."

Arnold rose, opened a small sideboard, and taking from it a decanter, poured himself out a glass of sherry. His hand almost shook with the excitement, that cost him an effort to restrain, as he raised the glass to his lips and drank the wine.

"How strangely things happen! Surely my star is again in the ascendant. But what a curious piece of luck. Here have I been puzzling over this enigma, and the solution lying all the while at my elbow. I deferred doing the very thing which would in a moment have placed the key to the whole in my hand. But I need not pursue the matter further to-night. Upon my life, I hardly feel up to it. But that I can now put all the pieces together I am convinced. I have been vaguely feeling like a man on

the eve of a discovery all the night; and now that my intuitions are verified, my sensations are hardly those of a man 'when a new planet swims into his ken,' perhaps, but rather the satisfaction of a detective when he has followed out his train of reasoning to a successful issue; scarcely so noble a feeling, doubtless, but one that serves my purpose quite as well."

Arnold lit his bedroom candle, extinguished the lamp, and left his sitting-room.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST LINK.

IT required some little exercise of will on the part of Arnold Denison to prevent the speculations of the evening from intervening to withdraw his attention from his duties at the bank next day. When mid-day arrived, at which time he allowed himself half-an-hour for lunch, his thoughts turned again, as it were in a flood, upon the subject which was now absorbing the whole energies of his mind.

A few minutes' walk brought him from the bank premises to his lodgings. He found his table unprepared for him—an unusual circumstance, for his landlady was a punctual woman. His mind was so busy with his thoughts that he waited considerably longer than he would have otherwise done before ringing the bell. Mrs O'Hara entered the room somewhat flushed and out of breath.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I know I'm a thrifle behind wid your lunch to-day," she said. "I didn't know it was so late at all. But it's been a clanin' day wid me; and another thing kep' me back, too. I was just ——"

"Well, never mind now, Mrs O'Hara," interrupted Arnold; "you'll not be very long now, I suppose?"

Mrs O'Hara was an excellent landlady in many ways—as civil as she was capable; but she was fond of an excuse for an occasional gossip.

"I'll be ready wid your chop in five minutes, sir," she said.

In not much more than that space Mrs O'Hara had Arnold's lunch, and he was seated at it.

But the landlady did not immediately leave the room. She was anxious to exonerate herself from any charge of dereliction of duty which might be lingering in her lodger's mind. Moreover, her thoughts were full of another matter, the natural outlet for which was speech.

"If you'll excuse, sir, I was just going to say that it's not only the clanin' that has delayed me this mornin'; sure, I would have got through wid me work the same as any other day—more be token that a colleen's been helpin' me all the mornin'; but the queerest thing happened. You know, sir, that Doctor Herbert was me last lodger—an' a finer, honester gentleman I would never wish to serve, barrin' present company, sir, of course. Well, a day or two before the doctor left me, when he was putting together his things, he missed a book—an ould Bible—a worn and shabby little thing, by the same token, that I had noticed lying on the drawers in his bedroom, but never givin' much heed to it. Well, the book wasn't to be found at all, an' the doctor seemed to be put out about it in a way ye would hardly believe; an' seeing he set such store by it, I searched high an' low for the book, but sorra a sign of it could I see at all. The whole matter had clane gone out

of me mind by now; but to-day has cleared up the mystery, so to spake. Ye know, sir, I kape a board over the fireplace in your bedroom, never needing a fire in it in such winters as we have, an' it kaping dust an' that from the room. When the doctor was wid me I had the drawers forenenst the fireplace, afore I moved thim to where they stand now. To-day I was removing the board, lest the grate might be getting rusted—though sorra a bit do I know why I have a grate there at all, only that it's in the house anyhow, an' as well out of the way there as anywhere else;—an' whin I took away the board, there, lying quiet in the grate, was the little ould book, an' thin I saw in a moment how it got there. The board had got loose, laving a space of some inches at the top. The doctor had always some books on the drawers, which, as I said, stood right up against the board, an' the Bible must have slipped down behind the drawers into the crack, between the board and the wall—as it could asy do—and so fallen into the fireplace. Well, sir, I took the little ould book straight away to Dr Herbert, found him in—a wondher at that hour, by the same token—an' gave it into his own hand, an' I assure you he was as glad to get it again as he had been vexed at losing it. But I came nearer to understanding why he prized the book, when he told me that it had been given to him by his mother a little afore she died, and was one of the few things he had that had been hers; an' I only thought the better of the young man for setting store by it. Seeing there had been so much ado about the book, I naturally looked a little closer at it on my way to

the doctor's; but, of course, I could see nothing in the book itself why it should be so valued. Half of the first leaf was tore away, an' part of a name wid it, only laving the surname, an' that was not the doctor's. Of course, now I can guess that it must have been the mother's."

Arnold's interest in Mrs O'Hara's narrative, it may be supposed, had at first been small, but before she had finished it was very much the reverse.

"A rather curious affair, certainly, Mrs O'Hara," he said. "It was his mother's name in the book, no doubt. I think I have heard it mentioned somewhere—at Mr Vallance's, probably. It was rather an uncommon name—Dumaresque, was that it?"

Mrs O'Hara shook her head.

"No, sir; that was not the name. It was rather a quare name, as you say; a sort of foreign look I thought it had, but it has quite gone out of me head at this moment. I didn't pay much heed to it, but it will come back again to me by-and-by, I daresay."

Arnold paused a moment in thought. Then an idea flashed upon him.

"Stay one moment, Mrs O'Hara," he said. He took a sheet of paper, and wrote upon it with a pencil, in a large distinct character, the name

Dumaresque.

"Is that the name?" he said, handing the paper to Mrs O'Hara.

"Yes, sir; that is it,—Doomaresk," answered the landlady confidently. "A little like what you said at first, isn't it? You just caught it up a thrifle wrong, maybe, when you heard it at Mr Vallance's."

"No doubt; or perhaps there may be a slight difference in the way we each pronounce the word," said Arnold with a smile. "But it is more than time I were at the bank again."

"I hope you'll think I hed a sufficient excuse for being late wid your chop, sir."

"Quite, quite; don't say another word on the matter, Mrs O'Hara," said Arnold graciously, as he left the house.

"If I had wanted the last link in the chain, here it is," Arnold reflected, on his way to the bank. "I hold the excellent doctor's reputation beneath my thumb. A breath, and I shiver it to fragments."

It was a very hot afternoon; a windless, breathless atmosphere,—a blazing sun in a hard blue sky, without the shadow of a cloud. The air quivered and palpitated with heat. A sultry film of heat hung over the river, brooded over the forest beyond, and dimmed the prospect.

Ere he entered the door of the bank Arnold Denison turned and cast a glance over the landscape. He could see a stretch of the river, and the distant forest where it fringed the sky-line.

"It is the hottest day, I think, since I have been in the country," he said. "But there are not a great many such days—one must put against them the long stretches of perfect weather. The climate suits me. I like its luxurious warmth. Other things being equal, who would choose a northern climate to this? I have always had a desire for a sun-land—a land where it is always afternoon. With one's tent pitched in such a spot as Wyandra, one could bid

defiance to occasional days like this. They say the average of life is somewhat shorter here than in England. What of it? Was there ever a more pitiful way of regarding life? What are a year or two less compared with the greater enjoyment which life offers here while it does last? Climate is happiness. Better a year here than a cycle in the Hebrides. In one year here a man lives as long as an Orcadian does in ten. That is the only true way of reckoning life. Who counts it merely by its tale of years is a starveling all his days, and a pauper at the end."

CHAPTER XV.

A TETE-A-TETE IN THE VERANDAH.

SOME hours later that same day, Mr and Mrs Vallance were seated alone in the verandah at Wyandra, that being the coolest part of the house, if any part could be so called. They had been talking together with some animation.

"Have you no idea where her affections lie?" said Mr Vallance.

"No definite idea, Archer."

"It must be towards one of the young men, I suppose."

"I think so."

"You are very cautious, my dear. You speak as though you were resolved not to commit yourself, though I must confess I don't quite see your reason," said Mr Vallance.

"I have no secret from you, my dear, be sure. I do not know Mabel's real mind. She has not, as yet at least, made me her confidant. Of course I have my ideas."

"Then I wish you would trust me with them, Charlotte."

"They have not been arrived at all at once," answered Mrs Vallance. "But perhaps I had better

tell you something which chiefly confirms me in my impressions. I have not mentioned it to you before, because I was doubtful whether Mabel would care that it should be known at the time, the circumstances being such as they were. But now I think you should know it. It is simple enough."

And then Mrs Vallance told her husband of the little episode between Mabel and Lotty, narrated in an early chapter.

"It was no doubt a tell-tale display of feeling, to use a plain phrase," was Mr Vallance's comment. "Well, I suppose I have been mistaken, but I rather thought that our girl's affection had been running in the other direction. It seemed to me that Arnold Denison stood well in her favour."

"Probably he does."

"You know what I mean, my love. I thought he might stand first. But a man is always blind when he tries to guess these things. Who indeed shall fathom the ways of a woman?"

"Men would do it so much more easily if they did not presuppose that we are unfathomable. You often waste a deal of ingenuity on what you have persuaded youself is a riddle, but whose meaning lies on the surface."

"Perhaps; but to return to the concrete, Charlotte. To put it plainly, which of the young men would you yourself prefer as a son-in-law; or have you any preference?"

"It seems to me you speak in at once a hasty and a cool manner of the matter, Archer. It may not be a question of that kind at all."

"But on the supposition that it is; you do not pretend that you have never speculated on such a thing as I have hinted at, my dear?"

"'Hinted' is a mild term for the way you put it. Well, on the supposition that it is, I like both the young men. I always liked Doctor Herbert. He is honest and kind-hearted, and admitted to be clever in his profession. I like Mr Denison. None could fail to be pleased by his attractive manner, his agreeable accomplishments, and the unvarying good-nature with which he is ready to employ them for the entertainment of others—a quality which does not always go together with the large knowledge of the world which there is no doubt Mr Denison possesses."

"He is certainly clever, and a capital business man. He is bound to rise in the bank. He may hope to be in the receipt of a thousand a-year some day. A thousand a-year is a comfortable income in the colonies in itself. With what I can give Mabel, it should be more than sufficient for anyone. It will be some little time, I suspect, before Herbert makes so much."

"It seems to me that the one has about equal chances with the other. I think you are overleaping the years in Mr Denison's case rather too rapidly. George Herbert might be some time before he made that amount yearly in Yodalla, but it is very likely that by-and-by he may remove to some larger place. If he becomes known as an able practitioner, it is not probable that he will be content to remain in a country town; and you know that that clever operation he performed on the sawyer, who hurt

himself so dreadfully, was much talked about among the medical men in Sydney. I should say that he was as likely to reach your one thousand a-year as soon as Mr Denison."

"I am not advocating the claims of one against the other, Charlotte," answered Mr Vallance slowly. "I always liked George Herbert."

"So I thought."

There was a short pause.

"Denison is of a pretty good family," said Mr Vallance in a reflective tone.

"I shouldn't wonder. Have you been comparing genealogies?"

"Not very minutely; but I have gathered that what I state is the case, my dear," said Mr Vallance, a little awkwardly.

"Did you feel safer with Mr Denison afterwards, Archer?"

"You are laughing at me, I believe, Charlotte; but you are welcome to. It is not the length of being a weakness with me, as you know. All that I should seek in a son-in-law is, that he should be an honourable and true gentleman."

"All which qualities I think you have in both George Herbert and Arnold Denison," said Mrs Vallance.

"I think so," replied Mr Vallance gravely.

"And you would be content that either of them should be your son-in-law?"

"I think so—yes."

"And so should I, Archer," said Mrs Vallance, in a voice of quiet seriousness akin to her husband's.

"Of course we have been assuming throughout that Mabel's view of the matter is one with our's—that she has ere this made choice of one or the other. Should it prove quite otherwise, our speculations or wishes on the subject must go for nothing—as if they had never been spoken between us."

"Yes."

"Mabel is entirely free, is she not? We do not wish to influence her in any way, do we?"

"Of course not, Charlotte. And, to be sure, I don't want to lose my girl at all. I shall find it hard work at first reconciling myself to the man who takes her from us, whoever he may be."

"That hardly agrees with one or two things you have said."

"It is the truth, however. Then I was considering the matter in a calculating spirit, which it seemed to require for the moment. Now I speak as a father. Be the day as distant as may be that robs us of our girl!"

Mr Vallance stepped from the verandah out into the garden, and took a few slow paces up and down before the house. Presently he came back again, and stood on the steps.

"We are going to have a change, if I know the signs of the weather at all. We shall have rain before many hours—and heavy. It will not come too soon. I couldn't have kept even the garden here green much longer—all the tanks are very low. But we shall have rain to-night. Isn't it a little odd how nearly all the signs which foretold rain in Virgil's days hold good here? It's very little of my Virgil

that I remember, but a few scraps of the Georgics have always stuck in my memory—not so much the text, however, as its meaning—and among the rest, the description of the approach of a storm. Now mark how all the same weather-signals are repeated here, a couple of thousand years later, in a land as far remote from old Maro's as one land can be from another. The 'swifts' skim the ground; the cows over there, if we were near enough to see, are snuffing the air with wide nostrils—and hear how they are lowing in what you can fancy a plaintive manner; the frogs are uttering their old complaint—croaking with a combined power, as though imploring the rain; and see that army of crows (ravens it stands in Virgil) sailing across the sky, with close crowded wings and hoarse cawing. It does not need the change that is beginning in the sky itself, the clouds banking up along the horizon there, to certify us of the approaching visitor—who will be as welcome as he is late —coming."

CHAPTER XVI.

MANY WATERS QUENCH NOT LOVE.

THE rain came that night, and fell as though it had a mind to make up for lost time, and as it is apt to fall in Australia—a perpendicular down-pour—not so much like rain as like a constantly falling sheet of water, with a lashing, thrashing beat upon the earth, like the sound of a waterfall. It had no thought of staying for breath. It rained straight on with "no break, no pause between," all through the night; and by morning the river had risen many feet.

The water came pouring in on all sides from the hills to fill the river. Here and there about the plains, what had been broken chains of waterpools on the previous day linked themselves together, and became suddenly, rushing, foaming, yellow torrents, and all made for the river.

It was raining with extraordinary force, even for Australia. The "oldest inhabitant" could not remember such rain. By mid-day the river was level with its banks; a few hours later high above them, and one of the two bridges gone,—swept away and borne down the current, a shattered wreck. The water rose and rose, rolled in upon the town in long

yellow waves, and flooded the streets; and still the rain fell without a pause.

Everything like business of any kind, of course, ceased. Nothing was thought of but the rising waters, and the anxiety and dread in every heart was as to the limit of the flood—how high the water would rise. Everybody was intent upon the securing of his own property, while it could be secured. As night fell, the water was in the ground floor of all the houses except those on the higher ground at the back of the town.

Next morning the whole population of Yodalla were in their second storeys, while many who occupied small houses, immediately contiguous to the river, had been forced to abandon them altogether. And still the rain fell in an unbroken column of water. Every boat in the place was in active service, conveying the people from the lower to the higher quarters of the town, securing furniture, goods, and as far as possible live stock, from the fast-rising waters. Every man who could handle an oar, or render assistance in any shape was in requisition, and every man who was himself secure in regard to life or chattels, worked with all his strength for his weaker neighbours.

Towards evening of the second day of the rain, George Herbert and Dick Wedderburn sat in the former's bedroom.

The house which George occupied was one of the highest in the town, but the water was only about two feet in the ground flat. The two men had just finished a somewhat hearty dinner of potted viands

and damp biscuit, washed down with brandy and water, and were smoking. They had been hard at work for the past two days in the boats, and both were somewhat tired. They smoked their pipes in comparative silence.

Presently George rose rather suddenly from his seat, faced his companion, took his hands from his pockets, and his pipe from his mouth.

"Dick, have you ever thought how the Wyandra people may be getting on through all this?" he said, in a grave voice.

"No, I can't say I've thought much about it," answered Dick. We've been so tolerably busy that there's not been much time for thinking of anything but the immediate work in hand. But I should think they were safe enough. The house stands well back from the river."

"Not so very high, though, when you come to think of it," said George. "The slope from the river is very gradual. Making a rough calculation from the state of things here, by Jove! I believe they will not be much better off than the majority of the people in the town."

"They have good boats," said Wedderburn.

"If they have really come to that, Dick, then they are in a pretty desperate case. Who is to man the boats? You know Mr Vallance seldom rows, and Driscoll and the two gardeners must be pretty poor hands at it, I fancy. There's a good lot of women folk about the place, and very few men—none, I suspect, except the three I have mentioned. There are the farm people, but they all

live at some distance from the house, and will probably have enough to do looking after themselves. By Jove! Dick, we have been very careless. We should have thought of this before. The Vallances have as great a claim upon you and me as any of the people we have been helping, and greater. But there's no time to be lost. We must find a boat and get up to Wyandra to-night. Are you game for it, old man? Don't come if you don't feel up to it; I shall have no difficulty in picking up a crew at the 'Emu.'"

"I'm quite ready, George," said Dick, quickly. "You are right. We should have thought of it before."

They procured four men at the Emu Hotel, all of whom they knew to be good rowers, and a large boat, the property of the landlord. The men had been working hard all day, but upon George and Dick offering a sufficient remuneration for their services, readily agreed to accompany them.

It has been already stated that Wyandra lay up the river, and in making for it the party in the boat followed the course of the stream. Had it been during the day, time might have been saved by taking a cross cut, but there was not sufficient light now for such a course to be judicious. It was still raining, though not quite so heavily as earlier in the day, and the black, low-hanging heavens seemed as if slowly settling down, lower and lower, upon the waters.

On every side, as far as the eye could penetrate in the gloom of the evening, the waters extended, league

beyond league; not a slowly heaving expanse of water merely, but rather like so many turbulent rivers, mingled confusedly together, and all rushing past with a great roar, as if threatening instant destruction to anything and everything that opposed them.

The current of the main river was exceedingly strong, rendering pulling a matter of great difficulty. Two hours had passed before Wyandra was reached. Dick Wedderburn was steering and George Herbert rowing. As the boat drew near the house from the front, it was quickly seen that the ground floor was completely submerged, and that the water had reached the second storey.

"It is worse than I feared," said George; "the water is more than a foot deep in the drawing-room. But how silent everything is."

There was indeed an ominous stillness everywhere —no sound but the lapping and washing of the rising waters. It was with a vague but dread misgiving that George and Dick entered the house, wading up to their knees. They went from room to room, and at length ascended to the two small attic rooms; but no trace could they discover of the inmates.

"Great heavens! where are they? What can have become of them? Are they all?" ——

George shrank from putting his fear into words.

"No, no, George; that is impossible," said Dick. "Think! They had these two rooms to fall back upon before what you mean could happen. You forget the boats. They may have taken to them."

"The boats," repeated George. "If they are in

them, God help them. Why, in that case, have they not reached the town before this?"

"George, keep cool, like a good fellow. We may need all our wits."

"I am cool, Dick. Have no doubts on that score. But can you suggest anything — what course we should next follow? You have had experience of floods before, I think."

"Wait a moment, and let me think," said Dick, and added, almost directly: "but do you hear! they are calling to us from the boats. Perhaps they have discovered something."

The two men descended and reached the boat again.

"What is it?" asked Dick.

"Why, sir, we all of us fancied just now that we heard a halloo!—twice we have thought so."

"In which direction, Pringle?" questioned George.

"Thereaway, sir," said the man, pointing with his hand. "Hark! there again; don't you hear it, gentlemen. It was plainer that time."

"Yes, I heard it. It is some one shouting, there cannot be a doubt," said George.

"And whoever it is cannot be far away, to be heard at all above this awful din of waters. Quick, my good fellows, and pull your best. Every moment may be precious. Dick, you stay at the bows, and keep as keen a look-out as possible."

The men pulled with all their strength in the direction whence the faint halloo had come. Presently they heard it again, now still more distinct. The men had not been rowing for more than ten minutes, when Dick exclaimed quickly:

"Easy, my men—easy all; there's something ahead here."

"What is it, Dick?" said George, with suppressed excitement.

"I can't tell exactly yet; but we shall know directly. As steady as you can now, lads; we mustn't knock up against it, whatever it is."

A few more strokes of the oars, and a low dark object emerged into sight from the darkness—another stroke and the boat was alongside it, and George and Dick had already made out a group of figures huddled together upon it. They both leaped out from the boat upon a rude raft, and the next moment found themselves grasped by the hands of Mr Vallance.

"My dear boys, you are just in time," he said.

"Oh, George—Dr Herbert—is it you?" broke from Mabel Vallance, in a voice that shook and faltered.

"Mr Vallance, what does all this mean?—why do we find you here?" said George, hurriedly.

"We were afraid to wait any longer in the house, lest it would be too late to construct a raft at all; and then I feared that the house itself might be undermined and washed away, with ourselves in it. I may have been mistaken, but I judged it safest to take to the raft. I did not hope to be able to navigate it, but thought to make fast to a tree, as you see we have done, and wait till help came. I thought that when those in the town who were in danger had been looked to, some one would think of us—and I have not been mistaken."

While Mr Vallance was speaking, they were busy getting the women into the boat.

"Your plan was, perhaps, the safest on the whole. But about the boats?" said George.

"I didn't much fancy trusting to them, to say the truth—they are such light skiffs of things, and none of us understand much about the management of boats."

Driscoll the coachman, MacAndrew, and the other gardener followed the women into the boat, and then Mr Vallance. George Herbert and Dick Wedderburn still remained on the raft. The boat seemed quite full. One other person it might contain, but not possibly more.

"What is to be done?" said Dick to Herbert, in a low voice.

"Just one thing, Dick—I must stay behind."

"Not while I go."

"Now, Dick, listen to reason," said George aside, in a quiet but decided tone. "There are not two sides to the matter. Both of us can't go, and one of us must. You must, for you are by far the best steerer, and it will take the best, you know, to get back with that heavily-laden boat through such a sea of waters. I know you would do what I am doing, but I am sure you see that I must be the one to stay in this case. The lives of all in that boat may hang upon your going."

Dick saw the stern force of George's words. It seemed imperative that he should go in the boat, and it was impossible that George could go too.

"I see it must be so," he said; "God grant that we may be able to get back for you before ——"

He broke off abruptly, and took his place in the stern of the boat.

"Oh, Dr Herbert! you are coming with us too—you must come! We can make room for one more, papa—surely we can," broke in a sudden and pained cry from Mabel's lips.

"No, no, Miss Vallance. The boat is already fuller than is quite safe. Don't be alarmed on my account. I shall be all right till the boat returns for me."

George was wonderfully calm.

"Give me your tobacco-pouch, will you, Dick? I haven't mine with me," he said. "Are you all right now? Push off, lads."

The boat lurched forward into the tumbling sea of waters. Dick looked back at George, and for a moment saw a pale, calm, resolute face turned towards him—in the next it was swallowed up in the enshrouding darkness.

The boat was again in the current of the river, which was now with the rowers, the progress made being consequently much greater than previously. But the course was more dangerous, from the turbulent violence with which the current was flowing, and from the boat being so heavily loaded. Steering was extremely difficult, and it was only with the greatest effort that Dick Wedderburn could keep the head of the boat straight.

When the town was reached, and those in the boat as comfortably accommodated as circumstances permitted—Mr Vallance and his family in George Herbert's house, and the servants in other quarters—

Dick Wedderburn again steered the boat for the "Emu." Of his present rowers one agreed to return with him to Wyandra—the other three declared themselves unfit to be of any further service. But Dick succeeded in obtaining other three men in their place.

Back over the dark, rushing, eddying flood, the boat made slow way. The rain was still falling less heavily than during the day, but stormy masses of cloud were yet sweeping across the low heavens, looking as though there were nothing to prevent them from descending bodily and overwhelming the boat and its crew in black destruction.

Dick Wedderburn sat at the tiller, straining his eyes out into the darkness with an ever keener gaze as they drew near Wyandra and the spot where George had been left on the raft. When they were sufficiently near for him to have been able to distinguish the raft, with a cold thrill of the heart Dick saw that it was gone. He called to the man at the bow oar:

"Do you see it, Pringle?—it's not gone?"

"It is gone, sir, sure enough," answered the man sadly. "The rope that moored it to the tree has given way. I half feared as much. We have seen the last of the doctor, Mr Wedderburn; may God give him the reward he deserves for his brave deed and his brave death!"

"Hold hard, Joe; it mayn't ha' come to that—not as yet," exclaimed one of the men ere Pringle had hardly ceased speaking. "Look here! what's this?"

The man pointed with his hand to the tree to which the raft had been moored. Something dark

was seen wedged in, as it appeared, among the branches of the tree.

"Row close up, quick," cried Dick.

They rowed the boat up under the tree. The water washed and eddied among the lower branches. In another moment Dick had grasped a bough and lifted himself into the tree. The object wedged in between two forked branches was George Herbert. He lay with his head on one side of the bough on which his body rested, his feet on the other, supported in such a way that his head was just above water—the tide streaming through his hair and lifting it upon its current. The left arm of the unconscious man was bound to a smaller branch with a silk handkerchief.

Dick Wedderburn bent over the prostrate figure. George was quite insensible—his eyes were fast closed, his hands and face death-cold. Dick tore the handkerchief from his friend's arm, lifted the supine form, and with the help of the men, placed it in the stern of the boat, wrapping round it an opossum rug which he had brought with him, and which had kept tolerably dry in the locker. He poured some brandy between the white lips, and began chafing the ice-cold hands. For some minutes George gave no signs of returning animation, and Dick Wedderburn's heart sank within him. But, presently, there was a faint tremor of the lips, the eyes opened and immediately closed, and Herbert seemed to go off again in a swoon. But re-assured that he still lived, Wedderburn wrapped the rug closer about the rigid form, and bade the men push off.

Once again the boat was in the main current of the river, which rushed on with wild, headlong, terrible speed, and with a deafening roar like the crash of a Niagara. The rowers were using their oars less to propel the boat than to keep her steady, while it was being borne along with an uneasy lurching motion over the swirling flood. Every moment some dark object drifted past—now a dead horse, cow, or sheep; now a shattered cart, a barrow, hen-coop, cask, or ladder—waifs from many a ruined homestead. Once a haystack struck the boat sidelong, spun her round, and all but engulphed her in the black whirlpool of waters.

From time to time Dick Wedderburn bent over the prostrate form lying at his feet, and applied the spirit-flask to the white lips. It was all that he could do, for he had to give his undivided attention to the work of steering. When the boat reached Yodalla the men were all but exhausted. Like the rest, they had been working at the boats all day. The house of Dr Brooke, the senior doctor in Yodalla, was close to that of George Herbert's, and thither Wedderburn steered. Dr Brooke immediately accompanied Dick in the boat.

They placed George in his bed. Besides the doctor and Wedderburn, Mr Vallance was in the room. With anxious hearts the two latter bent over the bed, while the doctor examined the still insensible form of Herbert; but a few moments' examination satisfied the doctor that George still lived, and the three men immediately proceeded to apply such remedies as the old doctor's knowledge and experience

dictated. These proved more quickly efficacious than Dr Brooke himself had hoped for, and soon Herbert had slowly returned to consciousness and life. But he was not long sensible before he fell into a sound sleep.

"There's nothing to fear from that, and we might only do harm by meddling further with him," said the doctor.

When he awoke next morning George was almost completely himself again. All that he was aware of was a feeling of great tiredness and stiffness, but this wore off during the day, and Dr Brooke announced that nothing serious had resulted from the night's exposure.

Early that morning the rain ceased for a space, and the water subsided a foot in the main street of the town. But further on in the day the rain began again, the flood rose three or four inches higher than it had at any time been, and kept its highest point until past mid-day. Then the rain lightened, the flood turned and receded slowly till evening, when one-half of the town was once more above water. Then the rain ceased altogether. By next morning the waters had again receded within the banks of river—thus rapidly does an Australian flood begin and end.

But what a scene of ruin and destruction had the waters left behind them! Far and wide, the country that had a few days past been a smiling expanse of living green and waving gold, lay a dreary waste of wilderness—farms and homesteads, gardens, orchards, and vineyards; rich breadths of grain and grass land;

wheat, maize, and lucerne fields—stripped bare by the cruel waters, and left a shapeless, unlovely ruin.

With what a heavy and sad heart Mr Vallance contemplated the utter wreck which the pitiless floods had made of his beautiful property—the gradual perfecting of which had been the loving work of his latter years—needs not to be said. But he was not the man to sit down disheartened past action by the disaster which had befallen him. His early life in the colony had been full enough of vicissitude and struggle with changeful fortune, for such a state of mind to be likely to master him now. Keen regret he did feel, more at the loss of time and pains and skill which the devastation of his estate implied than for the mere money loss; but he wasted no time in vain or querulous reflections on its cause. He knew that his position was, for gravity, not to be mentioned with that of many of his neighbours—men who had lost the fruits of a year's industry in a single night. He at once turned himself to the restoration of his garden, farm, and vineyards, with resolute energy—with a heart that was somewhat heavy for many days, to be sure, but without complaining or irritation. What right had he to murmur, when so many around him had suffered the loss, not merely of beautiful and easeful surroundings, but of that on which they depended for daily bread? It would be some time ere Wyandra regained its former shape and beauty, but it would regain it, and with a comparative rapidity, thanks to the splendid recuperative power of the Australian soil and climate, that astonishes a stranger in the land.

CHAPTER XVII.

ARNOLD'S REVELATION.

DURING the two days of the flood, Arnold Denison, to do him all justice, had worked as hard as his neighbours—having taken his place in one of the most active of the boats. Of course the story of the rescue of Mr Vallance and his household was soon known throughout the district; and a fairly correct account of the circumstances, together with almost every other incident connected with the flood, appeared in the *Yodalla Chronicle.* It may be supposed that the story awakened in Arnold Denison no feelings of admiration or pleasure. He would not have denied that Herbert and Wedderburn had acted bravely and well; he did not concern himself about debating the matter on that head. He was annoyed that Herbert had been the man to do the work, when it might have been himself. He was mortified to think that he had missed such an opportunity. It had never occurred to him that the people at Wyandra would be placed in any such dire strait as had proved to be the case, and he could not conceal from himself that he had lost an opportunity which might have been fruitful in advantages to himself. Another, and that

the man he would have least desired, had done what he should have done.

Arnold never doubted but that he would have acted exactly as George Herbert had acted. Whether he overrated himself in this regard—whether, if he had been brought face to face with exactly the same crisis, he would have made the same sacrifice, placed his life in stake with as calm and resolute a front as his rival had done—is a little difficult to determine. He did not doubt it himself, and it is certain that he did not want for physical courage; but then it was his belief that the motive which would have actuated him was, with the majority of men, as strong a motive of action as that which influenced Herbert,—a belief in which he may have been mistaken. As Herbert stood upon the swaying raft, and watched the boat disappear in the darkness, and turned to face his lonely and perilous vigil, the strongest emotion in his heart was love. It would not have been so with Arnold Denison in the same circumstances; and yet Arnold thought that his motive of action would have been sufficient for the crisis, in which he may have been correct, or he may not; it is a question which no chronicler, however intimate he deem himself with the characters he is seeking to portray, could with certainty determine, and which only the event could have decided.

It seemed clear to Arnold that his rival had gained large advantages by his good fortune.

"If he is not a fool, which I do not judge him to be, he will try to turn this to account," he reasoned.

"It is a splendid piece of luck to have befallen him. The Vallances will feel that they are under a heavy debt of gratitude to him, and Archer Vallance is not the man to forget such services. Herbert knows this well enough, and will not let his opportunity go past. This affair will probably change his whole plan. If he ever really intended leaving the place, he will not now have the same doubt and hesitation as before, but will make a bold stroke for the prize. He will tell Mr Vallance as much as is necessary for his purpose, frame a plausible story, which will not be very difficult, state his hopes in regard to Mabel, and stand a fair chance, he no doubt thinks, of carrying the day.

"Is not that how ninety men in a hundred would act in the same circumstances? But I fancy I have it in my power to upset such a scheme as this in ten minutes' interview with Mr Vallance, and the time is ripe for playing my winning trump, and finishing the game. It may be that the doctor has already taken action, but even so, it will make little difference. I must win, or at any rate, he must lose.

"But what a consummate actor the rascal is! He has made quite a saintlike reputation in the place. One never hears anything but good of him. Apart from other motives, I declare I shall feel quite a righteous pleasure in unmasking such an accomplished hypocrite. And yet I don't know. The fellow might have played his game to the finish for me, had it not interfered with my own. He might have won and worn this brown-faced little girl, with her rural innocence and her tender conscience, had she

not been so comfortably dowered. Nothing less than my present miserable prospects, and so tempting a lure as the Wyandra estate, would induce me to fetter myself to this or any other woman."

That afternoon, which was about a week after the flood, Arnold rode over to Wyandra. He had been able to meet those small money liabilities formerly referred to. He had succeeded in disposing of the several articles of jewellery which he had resolved on parting with, and the sum thus obtained almost covered the amount of his debt. But to have been placed in such a position really chafed him a good deal. The miserable narrowness of his present circumstances was bitter and humiliating to him. The prospect of its continuance, the idea of remaining for much longer the manager of a branch bank in a dull country town, depressed him like an ugly dream in spite of his self-confidence, his faith in his own power to shape his fortunes, and the elasticity of his physical nature. Yet with all his impatience of his present mode of life, he knew that the game he was playing must be played with patience and caution; and thus he was determined it should be played. He knew that he did not hold it quite in his own hand —that the rout of his rival did not mean that the battle was immediately his.

Arnold rode up through the garden at Wyandra by the accustomed way, but through a very different scene. The trees in the garden were still standing, little the worse for the flood, which was a great matter. In other respects, the once beautiful garden was a dreary wreck, without form or meaning—an unsightly chaos

of heaped-up gravel and sand, and wasted shrubbery piled on all sides, with here and there deep channels tunneling the damp clayey ground.

Even Arnold, bent as his thoughts were in other directions, and little susceptible to sentimental influences of this sort, was aware of a movement of regret as he viewed the scene and remembered what it had been. Arnold had prepared with some care what he was going to say to Mr Vallance. Facile in speech and ready in invention as he knew himself to be, he had nevertheless been at pains to sketch out beforehand in his mind how he was to conduct the interview.

He was shown by the servant into the library, which served its owner as a business room also, and presently Mr Vallance came in.

The two men were closeted together for about half-an-hour. Then they came out from the room, and Mrs Vallance and Mabel from the drawing-room saw them walk round the house towards the stables, and presently beheld Arnold Denison riding down the carriage-way, or what had once been such.

"I feel sure that you will not misunderstand my motives in acting as I have done," Arnold had said in parting from Mr Vallance.

"Yes, yes. You could not have acted otherwise, Denison," said Mr Vallance, gravely and sorrowfully. His face was pale and agitated, and wore a strange look, in which sorrow, perplexity, and pity were all mingled. "You have done nothing more than your duty, Denison," repeated Mr Vallance. "But would to God you had never had it to do!"

And then Mr Vallance shook the young man's hand, with the same pained and distressed look in his face, and Arnold rode away well enough pleased with the success with which he had managed a difficult business. Mr Vallance walked slowly back to the house.

"What can it be that kept papa and Mr Denison so long together in the library, and why did he leave without so much as speaking to any one else?" said Mabel to her mother.

"Perhaps it was some piece of bank business that he has had to see your father about, and Mr Denison may have been pressed for time."

"Very unlikely, at this hour of the day. He had surely time to stay and speak a word. I think it quite strange."

At that moment Mr Vallance entered the room. Both the women at once noticed the disturbed expression of his face.

"Why, what is the matter, papa? Has Mr Denison brought you any bad news, and is that why he didn't care to stay?"

Mr Vallance paused a moment before answering.

"He did bring bad news—at least I think it such; the most unwelcome news I have heard for long. He"——and then Mr Vallance again hesitated. He was in painful perplexity as to how he should frame his words.

"Is it money, Archer? Have you had any losses of any kind?" asked Mrs Vallance quickly.

"No, no, not that; set your mind at rest on that score; and yet I would have willingly parted with a

considerable sum rather than have heard what I have just heard."

"Well, well, what is it, papa? do speak at once," said Mabel.

"It is about Dr Herbert."

"Dr Herbert! is he ill? I thought that terrible night left no bad effect upon him. He seemed quite well on Monday. And how is it that Mr Denison brings the news? Speak, papa," said Mabel.

"It's not that, Mabel. George Herbert is well at present, as far as I know; it is quite another kind of matter. Mr Denison has just told me a very strange story —a story that has come by chance into his possession, and which, once known to him, he could not but confide to me. It is so strange a story that I could not have credited it were not the proofs absolutely conclusive. Dr Herbert's whole position here has been from first to last a false one. He has been acting a part from first to last, ever since he has been in Australia. Herbert is not his real name, and he is not what he pretends——"

"What are you saying, papa? Do you know what you are saying?" broke in Mabel.

"My darling, be patient—let me finish. There is more to come that will try you more than this. I am telling the matter as gently as I can, but the facts are so hard that they will not take soft words. But restrain yourself, and hear me, Mabel. Dr Herbert's real name is Dumaresque, and he left his native city for Australia under very distressing and terrible circumstances. He was tried in Edinburgh for the murder of his friend, a Mr Fleming. I remember

the trial quite well, and the verdict in the case was 'Not Proven.' You know what that means in Scotch criminal cases—that he could not be legally proved guilty of the crime with which he was charged, but that the jury believed him to be guilty, and that he left the court with an everlasting stain upon his name. It seems that Herbert immediately quitted Scotland, changed his name, and began practice as a doctor in this country. It is needless to say what astonishment and extreme pain this discovery has caused me—the discovery of this awful fact in connection with one with whom we have been on such close terms of intimacy, whom we have all got to like, and who has just laid us under so great a debt of gratitude. But what can we do in the face of such terrible facts as these?"

"It is false: it is false!" cried Mabel. She was standing erect, gazing at her father, with a strange frightened horror in her look, and a face from which all colour had vanished.

Mrs Vallance caught her daughter by the hands. The look in Mabel's eyes frightened her, and she almost forgot her own emotions at her husband's revelation.

"Calm youself, dear," said Mr Vallance. "It is a dreadful thing for us all; but it cannot be false."

"It is false, papa—false as the man who told it to you!" cried Mabel, her voice quivering with intensity.

"My dear, it was Mr Denison's simple duty, having become possessed of the facts, to make them known to me. He could not have acted otherwise,

and it has been a painful task he has had to perform."

"If he said that, that is false too. How can he prove his wicked story?"

"His proofs are, I fear, uncontrovertible."

"Mr Denison dare not say to Dr Herbert himself what he has said to you, papa. I know he dare not."

"That is just what he will do, Mabel. Clear and convincing as Mr Denison's statements seem to me, I thought that it would be but justice that the accused man should be told everything exactly as I was, that he may refute this dreadful story if he can; and Mr Denison, though he must, no doubt, feel the painfulness of this course, has declared his willingness to meet Dr Herbert, and repeat to him what he has this afternoon told me. Dr Herbert is to be here to-morrow afternoon, as you know, to see Margaret; and Mr Denison and he will meet then. It will be an extremely painful matter, but your mother and myself must be witnesses to their meeting. That Dr Herbert will be able to clear himself of the charge —to show that he is not the man who was tried in Edinburgh for the murder of Walter Fleming, in the face of the proof which Mr Denison has to bring against him, I have not the smallest hope; but it may be that he can say something in extenuation of his subsequent course of action. Unless he can do that, his whole life here must be regarded as one long falsehood and deception."

"It is terrible—it is terrible!" said Mrs Vallance, in a voice of deep agitation. "I cannot bring myself

to think of it. Is it possible that a man like Dr Herbert could have done such a fearful thing?"

"And to think that we have been receiving and welcoming for so long a man who was the next thing to being convicted of murder—who is, in fact, a murderer," said Mr Vallance.

"Papa, papa, do not say that fearful word again! —it will kill me!" said Mabel, in a low voice of bitter anguish.

Mr Vallance took his daughter in his arms. "My darling, it will be best to say no word more about this sad matter till to-morrow. After that we will try and forget it as quickly as such a thing can be forgotten—forget that we have ever known such a man as this one. To-morrow's ordeal will be a trying one for us all, but it is necessary that it should be gone through. If Dr Herbert has nothing to answer to this charge, and if Mr Denison produces an absolutely flawless proof, you will no longer do him the injustice of suspecting his motives, and you will believe, Mabel, will you not?"

Mabel looked up at her father, with a face grown suddenly calm.

"Not until George Herbert confesses to the deed with his own lips, and I hear him, will I believe he did it," she answered.

"You cannot yourself hear him, Mabel. It is impossible that you should be present at the meeting between him and Denison."

"It is quite possible, papa. There is nothing that should prevent me—I must be present," answered Mabel.

"Consider for a moment, my darling," said Mrs Vallance. "The scene must be of a most painful kind. It will be no place for you. It would only pain you."

"I do consider, mamma; and I repeat that I wish to be present. I shall never believe that George Herbert did the terrible thing of which papa believes him guilty until I hear him say so with his own lips. When papa has said the things he has about Dr Herbert in my hearing, it is nothing but right that I should hear the matter to the end; and I demand that I shall be allowed to do so."

Both Mr and Mrs Vallance saw that Mabel was determined in what she said, and it seemed to them, in the circumstances, injudicious to cross her.

"Then let it be so, Mabel," said her father. "I would rather that you had not insisted on this. I think it would have been sparing you a most painful scene not to have been present. But since you seem so much to wish it, we shall say no more about it."

In her own room, Mabel lay down on her bed, and found relief to the conflict of emotions in her heart in a silent flood of tears. There was nothing hysterical in her weeping, though her frame shook every now and then with a convulsive tremor, as she pressed her face upon her hands and both upon the bed. Her mother suffered her to weep on, until the floodgates of her heart had eased its pressure a little. Mabel looked up at length with a thin white face, and sad wan eyes—a face like that of one who had passed through a wasting illness.

"Mamma, do you believe that George Herbert is a murderer?" she asked calmly.

"My darling, I cannot say. I know not what to think. But for my sake, Mabel, try not to think any more of this now," said Mrs Vallance, in a voice that seemed to plead with her daughter.

"I will not speak of it again, at anyrate," answered Mabel. "To-morrow will explain everything."

CHAPTER XVIII.

NOT PROVEN.

THE woman Margaret, to whom Mr Vallance had referred, was one of the domestics at Wyandra, who had been in the service of the family for a number of years. Not being a robust woman, her nervous system had received a severe strain on the night of her exposure, and an amount of physical depression had resulted which rendered it necessary that she should be under medical advice for a time, and George Herbert was attending her.

On the afternoon following that of the events just narrated, George arrived at Wyandra at the hour fixed by him. While he was seeing his patient, Arnold Denison reached the house. He was shown into the drawing-room, where he found Mr Vallance alone. After greeting each other, little conversation passed between the two men.

Presently George Herbert entered the room from the hall, and almost immediately afterwards, Mrs Vallance and Mabel, through a side-door from an adjoining room. Mrs Vallance bowed to both the men. Mabel, with her eyes fixed upon the ground, took a seat in a corner of the room. George Herbert looked greatly perplexed. He had, of course, made

a motion of greeting as Mabel and her mother entered the room; but Mrs Vallance's bow, and Mabel's inexplicable action checked suddenly his further advance. He looked from one to the other of those around him—then his glance became fixed upon Denison. Arnold was now looking straight at George too. He was seated near a small table; one hand leant upon it, carelessly toying with an ivory paper knife. But he lost no time. As soon as the two ladies were fairly seated, he rose from his place and closed both doors of the room.

"Dr Herbert," he began in a perfectly calm voice, and deliberate tones, "I am here to-day by appointment. I have a task to perform which directly concerns yourself. It is a grave and painful task for any man to have to perform towards another, but it had to be done. I shall be as brief as I possibly can for everybody's sake. Your position in Yodalla is one of deception. You are not what you profess to be. Your name is not Herbert. You stood your trial in Edinburgh for the murder of Walter Fleming, when the verdict returned was one of 'Not Proven.' You are Oswald Dumaresque. I was at your trial and have not forgotten your face to this day. I have other incontestible proofs of what I am saying; but perhaps you will not force me to produce them. It would be better for yourself, I think, and for all concerned, that you should at once admit the truth of what I allege, and take such measures, in regard to your future, as may seem to you most expedient. And allow me to suggest that the more quickly you do this the better."

George Herbert's face was pale. All the lines of his mouth had deepened and hardened while Denison had been speaking; his lips were tightly compressed, and there was a look of intense strain in his whole face. He had not moved from his seat while Denison spoke—had made no movement of his body—only the paling and hardening of his face revealed that strong emotion of some kind was agitating him. But when Arnold had ceased, George rose and stood erect. With one hand tightly closed upon the back of his chair, he faced Denison, and, looking him steadily in the face, began:

"I, too, shall try and be as brief as I can, but I cannot be as brief as Mr Denison, for I have much more to say. But I hope that I shall have the patient hearing of all in this room."

George paused an instant and looked towards Mr and Mrs Vallance. His glance lingered for a moment upon Mabel, then returned to Denison, and remained fixed upon him. He began in a measured tone, but it quickened rapidly as he continued:

"Eight years ago, one Oswald Dumaresque was resident in Edinburgh, beginning life as a medical man. He had a friend, by name Walter Fleming, a young artist, whom he had known from boyhood, and to whom he was much attached. One autumn the two friends took a tour together in the Western Highlands, Fleming for art purposes, Dumaresque entirely as a holiday, and that he might become better acquainted with that part of his native country. During their wanderings they fell in with a gentleman of means, who was the possessor of a

small country-house, in a secluded village in Argyleshire. Mr Raynor was an admirer and judge of the arts, and himself a clever amateur. He was a man of hospitable and genial nature, and made the two young men warmly welcome to his house. Mr Raynor was a widower with one child, a daughter, a young lady of beauty and accomplishments. Oswald Dumaresque and Walter Fleming lingered long in their pleasant but dangerous quarters, and both fell in love, or what they deemed such, with Maud Raynor. Dumaresque's nature was intense, susceptible, ardent. He was affectionate, impetuous, and somewhat headstrong. Fleming's character was lighter, easier, more genial, more common-place. To Oswald Dumaresque his feelings for Maud Raynor seemed, at the time at least, the outpouring of his whole heart. Probably Walter Fleming never regarded the matter in so serious a light; at anyrate no feeling of rivalry sprang up between the two friends. The time at length came when it was necessary that the two young men should bring their tour to a close and return to Edinburgh. On the day before that on which they were to start for home, the two comrades, who had occasionally varied walking and other expeditions by a day's shooting, set out with their guns along the shore, which abounded in sea-fowl. Towards the end of the day their conversation came round to the subject of Miss Raynor. Walter Fleming's talk was in a light and gay strain, which began to irritate Dumaresque. Observing this, Fleming became more reckless in his talk, passed into banter of his com-

panion, and out of sheer mischief, boasted of the regard in which he believed he was already held by Maud Raynor. Dumaresque's heart grew hot and hotter within him—his brow darkened; but Fleming noticed or heeded not the signs of deepening anger in his comrade. He was in a wild and extravagant humour, which he was careless to curb. At last he took the one step too far, uttered the one word too much. Dumaresque's smouldering anger flamed up in a sudden, uncontrolled blaze. He struck a wild blow at Fleming with the hand which held his loaded gun. Fleming raised his arm to parry the stroke—there was a sharp report, and Walter Fleming fell at his comrade's feet with a bullet through his head.

"In an instant Oswald Dumaresque's passion was gone. He stood for a moment riveted to the spot, gazing with transfixed eyes of horror at the prostrate form of his friend. His gun fell from his nerveless hand. He turned and rushed from the place, mad with horror, remorse, and anguish. He scarce knew what he did. Without returning to his lodging in the village, he proceeded to the nearest railway station, a distance of ten miles, and took the first train to Edinburgh, which happened to start immediately after his arrival at the station. From Edinburgh, impelled now by a vague terror as well as horror to place as great a distance as possible between himself and the scene of his deed, he took the night train for London, and there hid himself in a purlieu of the city. Had he been in a condition to reflect and consider, he would have seen that

what he had done was an unpremeditated and unintentional act, and that his best course was to surrender himself and state the whole circumstances. But he was not able to reason the matter thus calmly. One thing only seemed to him to promise safety—to get away from England at once, to the uttermost parts of the inhabited world, anywhere, where he could hide his head, and suffer the shame and the bitterness of heart, the remorse and undying anguish which must ever consume him for the deed he had done—for robbing of life the man who was his oldest and dearest friend. Horror of his deed had at least an equal share with fear in Oswald Dumaresque's heart. But the arm of the law was too rapid in its motion for the wretched man. He was arrested while on the point of embarking as a common sailor in a ship for China. He had thus adopted the course most damaging to himself—the one most calculated to deepen suspicion against him.

"Oswald Dumaresque was tried for murder. To his counsel he told all; the advocate believed his client, and with all his skill and power strove to convince the Court that the case was what he knew it to be—an unintended and accidental act.

"But to impartial judges, it had all the appearances of murder, and as such was evidently regarded by the jury. The legal evidence of the prisoner's guilt was not however conclusive, and the verdict was, in accordance with Scotch law, one of 'Not Proven.' Oswald Dumaresque left the court body-free, but with an indelible, life-long stain upon his character and name—in literal truth, with the brand of Cain

upon his forehead. Oswald Dumaresque was my brother."

George Herbert had been listened to throughout in perfect silence. But when he uttered the last sentence, which fell upon the listeners with sudden and total unexpectedness, Denison started to his feet.

"Brother! it is false!" he exclaimed. "You are the man himself. You are Oswald Dumaresque."

"And I declare that I am not. I am George Dumaresque."

"You must prove it. Your bare word goes for nothing in the face of the evidence which I have. I now tell you that I was in Edinburgh at the time of the trial, and was present at it. I saw you in the dock for a whole day. I have never forgotten your appearance. When I first saw you in Yodalla your face struck me as familiar. For a long time I could not recollect where I had seen you; but the idea haunted me constantly that I had seen you before, and at last an unexpected and trifling circumstance brought the whole matter back to my memory, and I knew at once who you were. I had never forgotten your face—I seldom do forget a face once seen—and I am perfectly convinced, and again repeat that you are Oswald Dumaresque. You have not in the least proved that you are not. You have but invented a clever story, which does your ingenuity credit; but it cannot avail you. Brother, forsooth! Do you expect that such a story can stand for one moment against the declaration of one who was present at your trial, and saw you not a dozen yards off?"

"How you have become possessed of the facts which have led you to identify me with Oswald Dumaresque, I neither seek nor care to know, Mr Denison; but that you have been misled I hope to prove," said George calmly. "Your mistake was a natural one in the circumstances, and easy of explanation. My brother and I bore a strong resemblance to each other. At the time he stood his trial I was finishing my medical studies at the Edinburgh University, and had just taken my bachelor's degree. There was a difference of three years between my brother and myself, but the likeness between us was so striking that we were frequently taken for one another by those with whom we were newly or slightly acquainted. This, I think, at once explains the mistake into which you have been led. You saw my brother, but not me. I did not appear at the trial. The memory of his face has remained with you, and when you met me here the recollection returned to you from my likeness to my brother, and though, as you admit, the remembrance was for some time a vague and indistinct one, circumstances, of which I am ignorant, and do not desire to know, have combined to further mislead you into the conclusion that in me you beheld my brother Oswald."

"Your story may seem to yourself a plausible one," retorted Denison, in a voice which he strove to keep calm, but which betrayed an increasing uncertainty. "But these are mere words. You have still given no scrap of proof of all this; and why, may I ask, did you change your name?"

George paused a moment before he answered.

"The reason might suggest itself, Mr Denison; but I am not sorry you have asked the question. Can you not conceive it possible how a man, situated as I was, might be tempted to change his name at the same time that he changed his country? I was beginning life, was hardly more than a boy, with little of the self-confidence that comes with riper years. It seemed to me impossible that I could practise my profession with any hope of success with such a stained name—I had not the courage to face the world so heavily handicapped. Perhaps I exaggerated the possible results of retaining the family name. It was a lack of courage—a moral weakness, in any case—that I at once admit. If it was anything worse than that—deception, or whatever you may deem it—I think I have, in some measure, paid the penalty of my fault since; for if I have prospered better in a professional sense than if I had kept my real name, I have endured other painful consequences of the course I adopted, that have outweighed tenfold my temporal gains."

"Still you offer no tittle of proof," exclaimed Denison, angrily. "Your story, as it stands, can convince no one. It is nothing more than a plausible explanation of your position here, one which you have carefully learned by heart long since, in the event of such a juncture as you now find yourself placed in."

George turned a shade paler, and his lips tightened again, but he hardly showed that he noticed the insult of the words.

"I have proof, Mr Denison. Had the declaration of what you believed you had discovered been so painful a task as you wished us at first to believe, one would hardly have thought you would have been so anxious to press your point, so unwilling to take the word of a man at least your equal in birth and education, so eager to display the zeal of a prosecutor rather than the fairness of a judge.

"But I have other proofs of the truth of my story. My brother left Scotland immediately and sailed for America. He went far out into the backwoods, seeking the most remote districts open to him, and there led the life of a pioneer settler. Two years later he fell, mortally wounded, while defending the settlement against an attack by Indians. He lingered on for some days before his wounds proved fatal. During that time he was able to dictate a letter to me, in which he narrated at length all that I have told you. He had told me almost all of it himself, but it seemed to relieve and satisfy him during the last hours he was to pass on earth, to make a full and written statement of the facts of his case. It served to strengthen me in my belief—though indeed I hardly required that—that my unfortunate brother's deed was purely accidental, that he had not the slightest intention of killing Walter Fleming, that he had raised his hand to strike his friend in a moment of uncontrolled passion excited by Fleming's light and careless words, words which stung and cut deeper than the speaker intended, or was aware of. And my brother's letter further convinced me that his sorrow and remorse

for his deed was most deep and sincere, ending only with his life. That letter, signed by my dying brother, is still in my possession. But that is little perhaps. It would not be difficult to forge such a document. But in addition to my brother's letters I have an American paper containing a narrative of the attack of the Indians upon the little pioneer settlement, mentioning the part which Oswald Dumaresque took in the defence, and his subsequent death. Mr Denison can, if he pleases, see that paper at any time. I have still one last proof of the truth of what I say. You were present, you say, during the greater part of my brother's trial. Then you cannot fail to remember a fact that was commented on at some length, namely,—that the panel had early in life suffered a slight accident in his right hand, by which he had lost the first joint of the forefinger of that hand. The circumstance was brought out with sufficient prominence in the course of the evidence for it to be impossible that you can have forgotten the circumstance, remembering all the other facts of the trial as you do. Answer me, Mr Denison, as you would on oath: Do you remember that?"

"I do remember the circumstance," came slowly and reluctantly from Denison's lips.

"Then, if it has escaped your notice hitherto, you will see now that my right hand has no such defect —has the forefinger intact."

And George stretched out his right hand before him.

"Does that at length convince you, Mr Denison? The finger is flesh and blood, I assure you," he

continued with a slight scorn in his voice—and turned from regarding Denison to the others.

"At anyrate, I hope it will convince you, Mr Vallance," he said.

"Yes, yes, George; I believe your every word," exclaimed Mr Vallance rapidly, and he advanced and grasped George by both hands. "You have made everything clear—I did not believe it possible. Mr Denison's proof seemed flawless. It is a strange, sad story; but thank God that you have been able to make all so plain! Words cannot express my joy that you are what we all believed you to be."

"I knew it from the first," said Mabel. She came forward from her place and gave her hand to George, who took it silently. "I knew the story was false from beginning to end. I knew that there was some terrible mistake."

"And now, Denison, I am sure that you will admit that you have been misled and mistaken," said Mr Vallance. "The mistake was such as anyone might have fallen into, for the circumstances have been indeed strange. But you will admit, now, your error; and that George Herbert, or George Dumaresque, as we must now call him, stands here as guiltless and incapable of any such deed as we thought, as any of us."

"I believe no word of it!" cried Arnold Denison, with fierce intensity; "I cannot be mistaken. The story is a carefully-planned lie, as I shall yet prove."

His face was livid; his eyes flashed. He spoke no word further, but strode, unchecked, across the

room, opened one of the windows, and passed out into the verandah, and thence into the garden. He had not put his horse in the stables, but had left it in the yard, tethered by the bridle. He mounted and drove his spurs into the animal's quivering flanks, and the horse leaped under him with a startled bound. Those in the house presently heard the rapid beat of his horse's hoofs as he galloped down the carriage drive.

"It is a lie!" the baffled man had cried in his passion and mortification, but in his heart he knew it was not; and he knew, also, that all hopes he had ever cherished in connection with Wyandra and its occupants had that day perished.

"His conduct is very strange and unlike him. It is strange that he cannot see what is so clear," said Mr Vallance with a perplexed look.

"He does not wish to see it, papa," said Mabel gently. "I once thought differently of Mr Denison, but I know his character better now."

"I suspect it must be as you say, my dear," said Mr Vallance with a slightly sad tone in his voice.

The sound of the retreating rider had hardly died away when Lotty entered the room through the open window.

"Whatever has happened?" she said. "I saw Mr Denison galloping down the road like a man possessed. Can his horse have bolted with him?"

"I do not think it is that, Lotty. But I will tell you about it by-and-by," said Mabel.

"George, I have to ask your pardon," said Mr Vallance; "I have to confess that I suspected you.

I could see no other way out of the mystery. But the story was such a dreadful one that I think it must have weakened, for the time, my ordinary powers of reasoning. Will you forgive my unworthy suspicions?"

"There is nothing on my part to forgive, Mr Vallance. Any one would have believed as you did. It is I who have to ask pardon from all. I have been here in a false position from first to last."

"We need say nothing more upon that for the present," said Mr Vallance. "I am too happy and thankful at the unexpected ending of to-day, to give any thought to lesser considerations. And now, George, we will wish you good-bye for the present. This has been a trying day. Perhaps it will be as well for us all if we part now. We shall see you again very soon."

CHAPTER XIX.

GEORGE AND MABEL.

ON the afternoon of the following day, as Mabel Vallance sat at the open window of her bedroom with a book before her, to which she was giving but little heed, and gazing from time to time down the road towards Yodalla, the figure of a horseman came into sight, and rapidly drew near. In a few moments she knew that it was George Dumaresque.

George desired to see Mr Vallance alone. The interview between the two lasted some time. When it was over, and George came out from the library, he entered the drawing-room, seeking Mabel. She was not there, but the housemaid being sent for her, she presently came into the room. Meanwhile Mr Vallance had sought his wife, related to her the purport of what had passed between George Dumaresque and himself, and suggested that it would be as well to leave the two young people alone for a little, in which Mrs Vallance quite acquiesced.

George advanced to meet Mabel as she entered the room. He took her hand, and drew her unresistingly towards a window. The room was darkened against the strong afternoon sun. George drew aside

a curtain, and admitted a broader light, which fell with a rippling gleam on Mabel's rich brown hair.

"I have been with your father, Mabel," George began. "I have had much to say to him, but I have said all I wished. Mabel, my position now is a very different one from what it was on that night—you know what I mean. You quite understand now everything that seemed strange and inexplicable to you then, do you not? Why I said all I did say—why I said we could never be anything but friends—why I called myself a madman and a coward for revealing my love for you—why I said that I should shortly leave Yodalla. My manner and words must, indeed, have seemed to you little short of those of one bereft of his reason. But all that is changed and past now, Mabel. Your father has overlooked the fact that I have been in a measure acting a part ever since I took a name that was not my own. But that has been the extent of my deception, and your father can overlook it. He is willing that I should be your suitor, Mabel. He knows that I am with you now. He has spoken very kind words, and chooses to regard me as in some sort his benefactor, though all the debt of gratitude is on my side. Mabel, can you, too, condone my fault? Can you bring yourself to respect one who has acted as I have done? Can you love such a one, who had not the courage to face the consequences which he feared a disgraced name would bring on all who bore it? Can you, in a word, Mabel, love me now, as you said you did before?"

Mabel looked up into her lover's face with a fear-

less but tender and entirely trustful look. Her eyes were bright, as though the tears were glinting in them.

"Yes, George, I can love you as before," she said; "better than before. I love you for all you have gone through. Your burden has not been a light one. If I can, in time to come, do anything to help you to forget even the memory of it, it will be dear service to me."

George drew her close to him, and pressed his lips upon her cheek.

"And can you still give me a little respect as well love, as before? Respect from the woman he loves is dear to a man, Mabel."

"I can, George. I know you are true and brave as you are kind. Have not I, with all in this house, good cause for knowing that?"

"My darling, I am not worthy of so much happiness. I never hoped to win it. God bless you, Mabel, and grant that I may so act, until death shall divide us, that I may never cause you a moment's regret for the day when your choice fell upon me!"

"It is long since I loved you, George."

"I think I must have loved you from the first, my darling. And now, let me speak of something else for a little. I have been proposing something to your father, to which he agrees. Very soon after that night of the party, I set about making arrangements for leaving Yodalla. First, I told my whole story to Dr Brooke, telling him that I had decided on returning to England and beginning practice there under my own name. He agreed with the course I

was taking, spoke very kindly and leniently in regard to my story, and promised further, that he would do all he could in the way of furthering my plans. He said that if it would suit me to go to the south of England, where he still has a few friends and relatives alive, he thought his recommendation would do something for me. I replied that Devonshire—Dr Brooke's native county—would suit me as well as any other part of England; and it was accordingly agreed between us that I should try my chances there. Now, Mabel, I cannot but feel that I am asking much when I ask you to leave your home and family here to follow me so far, and to what is nearly a stranger's land to you. I almost shrink from asking it. Can you give up so much, Mabel?"

"I can, George; and besides, it is not so great a sacrifice as you say—at least, it is not as if we were compelled to bury ourselves in some remote and half-civilized place. I should have a sort of home-feeling and affection for England, and especially for Devonshire. It is papa's county, you know, as well as Dr Brooke's."

"So it is. I did not think of that when I was speaking to Dr Brooke, but I am glad it is so. But there is one other thing which I have kept till the last to tell you. I wanted first to see if you could reconcile yourself to being separated from the others at all. Your parting from them will not be sudden, nor for some little time. Your father and mother have decided to take a trip to England, and remain there perhaps a year. Your father says the matter was only finally settled last night, and that you and

Lotty had not yet been told. He said that I might mention it to you at this time."

"That will be delightful—nothing could be better," said Mabel. "But surely the idea must be rather a sudden one on papa and mamma's part?"

"I think they have had a little difficulty in making up their minds. The fact is, that the spectacle daily before him of his desolated property pains your father a good deal; and although he has no feeling of despair or discontent about it, at the same time he would as soon be absent for a while, and return when the garden, and farm, and everything have been restored to something like their old shape and beauty. That is only a natural feeling. So he will leave behind him full instructions as to how the work of restoration is to be carried out, appoint a competent person to superintend the whole, and in three weeks from this your mother hopes to be ready to sail for England."

"Then we shall all go together?" said Mabel.

"I think not, Mabel."

A little cloud crossed Mabel's face.

"Why?" she asked.

"I think it will be better that I should go first. I am ready to start at once. I shall take my passage by the mail, and then I shall be awaiting you in Plymouth, with some place ready to receive you all, and I myself a little bit settled in the place. Don't you think that will be best, though it is a hard thing that we should part so soon? But your father thinks that this will be best, and the time will soon pass. I shall be sorry to leave Yodalla, too; for

though I have had many an hour of sadness and perplexity here—from what cause I need not say—I have had happy ones, too, and now the end is crowned with a happiness so great and unexpected that I can hardly yet realise it. And then I have found loyal and true friends here as ever man found. Dr Brooke has been as a father to me—taught, counselled, and guided me—and was glad that I should be his successor. I have reaped all the fruits of his long experience and matured skill; and in Dick Wedderburn I have had a friend such as man rarely makes but once in a lifetime. Honest, true-hearted Dick! how grieved I am to part from him I can hardly tell. I believe he has loved me with a love passing that of women."

George's voice fairly shook as he spoke.

"George, don't say that," said Mabel with a half smile. "You forget that I am unfortunately a woman."

"I didn't mean that, Mabel," said George gravely, and a little confusedly. "Yes, I forgot. The old words just came up to me at the moment as forcibly expressing a strong feeling such as I have for Dick Wedderburn, that is all."

"Perhaps he will come to England himself some day," said Mabel.

"I should be sorry to think I should never see him again," replied George. "Perhaps he will. It is not impossible, though there is no likelihood of its being soon. I have, of course, told him all my story, and he had nothing but cheering words for me, and pity for my poor brother."

"Your brother had a sad end, George."

"Not sad altogether, Mabel. Honour came too, in his death at least. He died bravely in defence of helpless women and young children. I do not think that he desired long life, and his death was such a one as he would have chosen."

CHAPTER XX.

A SENSATION FOR YODALLA.

THE conversation between George and Mabel just narrated took place on a Friday. On the Monday morning following there was most unusual excitement in Yodalla. Indoors but one thing was being talked of. Little knots of men were collected at corners all along the main street of the town, while in front of the offices of the Polynesian Bank there was quite a small crowd. It was manifest that the interest and excitement centred at that point.

At first, sufficiently various and conflicting versions of the story in everybody's mouth were current through the town; but the community being but a small one, most persons were in possession of a pretty accurate knowledge of the facts by mid-day. By that time everybody knew that the manager had not been found dead in his bed, having died during the night from an overdose of laudanum taken to relieve the pain of a neuralgic attack; nor that he had fallen back dead in his chair at breakfast while in the act of raising his cup to his lips, from a supposed sudden attack of heart-spasm; nor yet that he had been found lying lifeless on the floor of his room, with a smoking pistol at his side, the victim of his own rash deed—all

which stories, besides several others of a like complexion, were current for some hours. By the discovery of the truth, was rudely dispelled the ambitious speculation which had been indulged in by a public-spirited section of the community, that Yodalla had at length given birth to a real tragedy, in the shape of a suicide. Everybody knew by noon that the manager of the Polynesian Bank had disappeared, leaving no word as to why or whither he had gone. Mrs O'Hara's witness was that her lodger had retired earlier than his wont on the Sunday night, and that when she knocked at his door next morning to awaken him, as was her custom, she received no reply, Mr Denison being accustomed to acknowledge her summons with a word. She had repeated her knock several times, and had then judged right to enter the room. The chamber was empty, the bed had never been slept in, the small wardrobe which was among the furniture of the room was flung open, and a leather portmanteau, the property of her lodger, which was used to stand in a corner of the room, was gone.

When she had recovered from her momentary fright, Mrs O'Hara immediately proceeded to the house of the bank accountant and told him what had happened. The accountant proceeded straight to the bank, where he found the safe open and its contents rifled. There had been gold in the safe to the amount of nearly five hundred pounds, and the keys were always in the keeping of the manager. All was as clear as daylight to the accountant. The manager had absconded with all the bank's gold.

The machinery of the law was put in motion against Denison with as much rapidity as it was capable of at Yodalla, where the legal appliances were apt to get a little stiff and rusted from unfrequent practice. But the fugitive managed to outwit and escape his pursuers. He got clear away to a sea-coast town, and was lucky enough to catch a small sailing vessel on the eve of departure for the Sandwich Islands. From thence he was traced to San Francisco, and there for a time lost. Rumours, indeed, of the absconder found their way to Yodalla. One of these was to the effect that Arnold Denison was directing his energies to mining speculations in a gold-mining district on the Pacific slope. A second rumour said that he had become the editor of a Western paper; a third, that he was a partner in a gambling firm in San Francisco. Some one, it was said, had seen Arnold's handsome, clever face at the head of a faro table in a saloon in that city of gold and gaming, watching the cards with impassive calmness, while the handsome white hands gathered in the pyramids of gold pieces. But all these reports were vague and conflicting. Nothing really certain in regard to the whilome manager of the Polynesian Bank ever reached Yodalla. Arnold Denison had succeeded in completely eluding pursuit, and as far as the community of Yodalla was concerned, had become lost in the world's crowd. It was not long before his memory died out in the place; for although the excitement caused by the startling climax of his career was keen enough at the time, and the society in which it had occurred was small enough to be

nourished for a long time on such a bit of scandal, yet Arnold Denison had mingled so little in general society in Yodalla, had manifested such scant interest in local affairs, and his neighbours had succeeded in discovering so little in regard to his private affairs,—knowing him only in his public capacity as the manager of the bank,—that the interest in the man himself was small; and his deed and himself faded faster from the memory of Yodalla than might have been the case under different circumstances.

Is it necessary to try to indicate the motives which led Arnold Denison to the act he had committed? It will not have greatly surprised the reader, nor struck him as impossible in the actor. Arnold saw nothing whatever to keep him in Yodalla. All his hopes in regard to Wyandra and its occupants were blasted. If he remained in Yodalla, it was more than doubtful if he could have resumed intercourse with the Vallances on the old terms. Matters had gone too far for that; and even if he did continue to possess the friendship of the family, that alone would have been nothing to him. The whole prospect of further existence in Yodalla was flat, blank, and utterly depressing and abhorrent to him. No amount of philosophic indifference to temporary difficulties, of self-reliant hopefulness, or audacious courage, could avail against such an outlook. If he could have seen any likelihood of its being a temporary state of matters, any possible brightening of his prospects by-and-by—but he could not, and he determined that the best thing left him to do was to quit the country while he could with most advantage to

himself, and seek a wider field for his energies in other lands. He might never have a better opportunity. Having once resolved on his course of action, he did not hesitate a moment in putting it into execution. His plans were conceived and carried out with the cool daring which was among Arnold Denison's gifts, and the success which often attends on such men—for a time at least—crowned his exploit.

How long this species of good fortune waited at Arnold's call in his after career was, as has been said, never accurately known. It is not difficult to imagine how such a man might end amid the scenes in which his future life was laid; but there would be little profit in pursuing the speculation, nor is it necessary to the narrative. The episode in the lives of two or three people, which it has been the endeavour to record, is ended and complete here. To follow the course of their fortunes further is beyond the prescribed design, leading as it would amid other scenes and other lands than those which lie BENEATH THE SOUTHERN CROSS.

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