The Romance of the Swag

by Author of Winnowed Verse, Humorous Verses, Popular Verses, and (in prose) While the Billy Boils, Joe Wilson, Joe Wilson's Mates, Over the Sliprails, On the Track, and Send Round the Hat.

Sydney

Angus and Robertson

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The Romance of the Swag
The Romance of the Swag

The Australian swagman practises the easiest way in the world of carrying a load. I ought to know something about carrying loads: I've humped logs on a Selection, and loads of posts and rails and palings out of steep, rugged gullies (and was happier then, perhaps); I've carried a shovel, crowbar, rammer, and a dozen insulators strung round my shoulders with raw flax—to say nothing of soldering-kit, tucker-bag, billy and climbing spurs—all day on a telegraph line in New Zealand, often in places where a man had to manage his load with one hand, and help himself climb with the other; and I've helped drag telegraph poles up cliffs and sidlings where the horses couldn't go.

I've carried a portmanteau on dusty roads in the green old early days. Ask any actor who's been stranded and had to count railway sleepers from one town to another—he'll tell you what sort of load a portmanteau is when there's a broken-hearted man underneath it. I've tried loads knapsack-fashion—one of the most likely to give a man sores; I've carried my belongings in a three-bushel sack slung over my shoulder—blankets, tucker, spare boots, and poetry all lumped together. I've tried carrying a load on my head, and got a crick in my neck and spine for days. I've carried a load on my mind that should have been shared by editors and publishers. I've helped hump luggage and furniture up to, and down from, a top flat in London. I've carried swag for months Out Back in Australia—and, by comparison, it was life, in spite of its hardship—and a free life, among men from all the world over! I've carried babies, which are the heaviest and most awkward and heart-breaking loads for boy or man to carry. God remember mothers who slave about the house with a heavy, squalling kid on one arm!

The Australian swag was born of Australia and no other land—of the Great Lone Land of magnificent distances and bright heat; the land of Self-reliance, and Never-give-in, and Help-your-mate. The grave of many of the world's tragedies and comedies—royal and otherwise. The land where a man out of employment might shoulder his swag in Adelaide and take the track, and years later walk into a hut on the Gulf of Carpenteria, or never be heard of any more, or be found in the Bush and buried by the mounted police, or never found and never buried—what does it matter?

The land I love above all others—not because it has been kind to me, but because I was born on Australian soil, and because of the foreign father who died in the ranks of Australian pioneers, and because of many things. Australia! my country! her very name is music to me. God bless Australia!
for the sake of the great hearts of the heart of her! God keep her clear of the old-world shams and callous commercialism! and Heaven send that, if in my time her sons are called upon to fight for her, I may die in the front rank, and be buried in Australian ground.

In the old digging days the knapsack, or straps-across-the-chest fashion, was tried, but the load pressed on a man's chest and impeded his breathing—and a man needs to have his bellows free on long tracks in hot, stirless weather. Then the horse-collar, or rolled military overcoat style—over one shoulder and under the other—was tried, but it was too hot for the Australian climate, and was discarded along with Wellington boots and leggings. Until recently, Australian city artists and editors knew as much about the Bush as Downing-street knows about the British colonies in general and seemed to think the horse-collar swag was still in existence; and some artists gave the swagman a stick, as if he were an Old Country tramp with one eye on the backyard and the other on the dog. English artists, by the way, seem firmly convinced that the Australian Bushman is born in Wellington boots, and that they have a polish on 'em you could shave yourself by.

The swag is usually composed of a “fly” or strip of calico (a cover for the swag, and a shelter in bad weather—in New Zealand it is of oilcloth or waterproof twill), a couple of blankets, blue by custom and preference (hence the name “bluey” for swag), and the core is composed of spare clothing and small personal effects. To roll up your swag: lay the fly or strip of calico on the ground, blueys on top of it; across one end, with eighteen inches or so to spare, lay your spare trousers, shirt, etc., folded, light boots tied together by the laces toe to heel, books, bundle of old letters, portraits, or whatever little knick-knacks you have or care to carry, bag of needles, thread, pen and ink, spare patches for your pants, bootlaces, etc. Lay or arrange the pile so that it will roll evenly with the swag (some pack the lot in an old pillowslip or canvas bag), take a fold over of blanket and calico the whole length on each side, so as to reduce the width of the swag to, say, three feet, throw the spare end, with an inward fold, over the little pile of belongings, and then roll the whole to the other end, using your knees and judgment to make the swag tight, compact and artistic; when within eighteen inches of the loose end make an inward fold in that, and bring it up against the body of the swag. There is a strong suggestion of a roly-poly in a rag about the business, only the ends of the swag are folded in, in rings, and not tied. Fasten the swag with three or four straps, according to judgment and the supply of straps. To the top strap, for the swag is carried (and eased down in shanty bars and against walls or verandah posts when not on the track) in a more or less vertical position—
to the top strap, and lowest, or lowest but one, fasten the ends of the shoulder strap (usually a towel is preferred as being softer to the shoulder), your coat being carried outside the swag at the back, under the straps. To the top strap fasten the string of the nose-bag, a calico bag about the size of a pillowslip, containing the tea, sugar and flour bags, bread, meat, baking powder, salt, etc., and brought, when the swag is carried from the left shoulder, over the right on to the chest, and so balancing the swag behind.

A swagman can throw a heavy swag in a nearly vertical position against his spine, slung from one shoulder only and without any balance, and carry it as easily as you might wear your overcoat. Some Bushmen arrange their belongings so neatly and conveniently, with swag straps in a sort of harness, that they can roll up the swag in about a minute, and unbuckle it and throw it out as easily as a roll of wall-paper, and there's the bed ready on the ground with the wardrobe for a pillow. The swag is always used for a seat on the track; it is a soft seat, so trousers last a long time. And, the dust being mostly soft and silky on the long tracks Out Back, boots last marvellously. Fifteen miles a day is the average with the swag, but you must travel according to the water: if the next bore or tank is five miles on, and the next twenty beyond, you camp at the five-mile water to-night and do the twenty next day. But if it's thirty miles you have to do it. Travelling with the swag in Australia is variously and picturesquely described as “humping bluey,” “waltzing Matilda,” “humping Matilda,” “humping your drum,” “being on the wallaby,” “jabbing trotters,” and “tea-and-sugar burglarising,” but most travelling shearers now call themselves trav'lers, and say simply “on the track,” or “carrying swag.”

There you have the Australian swag. Men from all over the world have carried it —lords and low-class Chinamen, saints and felons, martyrs and murderers, educated gentlemen and boors who couldn't sign their mark, men who fought for Poland and convicts who fought the world, and more than one woman disguised as a man. The Australian swag has held in its core letters and papers in all languages, the honour of great houses, and more than one national secret, papers that would send highly-respected men to jail, and proofs of the innocence of men going mad in prisons, life tragedies and comedies, papers that secured titles and fortunes, and the last pence of lost fortunes, life secrets, portraits of mothers and dead loves, pictures of fair women, heart-breaking old letters written long ago by vanished hands, and the pencilled manuscript of more than one book which will be famous yet.

The weight of the swag varies from the lighter rouseabouts' “bluey,” containing one blanket and a clean shirt, to the “royal Alfred,” with tent and all complete, and weighing part of a ton. Some old sundowners have a
mania for gathering heart-breaking loads of rubbish which can never be of any possible use to them or anyone else. Here is an inventory of the swag of an old tramp who was found lying on his face on the sand, with his swag on top of him, and his arms stretched straight out as if he were embracing the Mother Earth, or had made, with his last movement, the Sign of the Cross to the blazing heavens:—

Rotten old tent in rags. Blue blanket, patched with squares of red calico. Half a white blanket, nearly black now, patched with bits of various material and sewn to half a red blanket. Three-bushel sack slit open. Pieces of sacking. Part of a woman's skirt. Two ancient pairs of moleskin trousers. One leg of a pair of trousers. Back of a shirt. Half a waistcoat. Two tweed coats, green, old and rotting, and patched with calico, blanket, etc. Large bundle of assorted rags for patches. Leaky billy can, containing fishing-line, papers, suet, needles and cotton, etc. Jam tins, medicine bottles, corks on strings, to hang to his hat to keep the flies off (a sign of madness in the Bush, for the corks would madden a sane man sooner than the flies could). Three boots of different sizes, all belonging to the right foot, and a left slipper. Coffee-pot, without handle or spout, and quart-pot full of rubbish—broken knives and forks, with the handles burnt off, spoons; and many rusty nails, to be used as buttons, I suppose. Broken saw-blade, hammer, broken crockery, old pannikins, small rusty frying-pan without a handle, children's shoes, bits of old boot leather and green hide, part of yellow-back novel, mutilated English dictionary, grammar and arithmetic book, a ready reckoner, a cookery book, a bulgy Anglo-foreign dictionary, part of a Shakespeare, book in French and book in German, and a book on etiquette and courtship. A heavy pair of blucher boots, with uppers parched and cracked, and soles so patched (patch over patch) with leather, boot protectors, hoop iron and hob nails that they were about two inches thick, and weighed over five pounds. (If you don't believe me go into the Melbourne Museum, where, in a glass case in a place of honour, you will see a similar pair of bluchers labelled “An Example of Colonial Industry.”) And in the core of the swag was a sugar bag tied tightly with a whip-lash, and containing another old skirt, rolled very tight and fastened with many turns of a length of clothes-line, which last, I suppose, he carried to hang himself with if he felt that way. The skirt was rolled round a small packet of old portraits and almost indecipherable letters—one from a woman who had evidently been a sensible woman and a widow, and who stated in the letter that she did not intend to get married again as she had enough to do already, slavin' her finger-nails off to keep a family, without having a second husband to keep. And her answer was “final for good and all,” and it wasn't no use comin' “bungfoodlin'” round her again. If he did she'd set
Satan on to him.

The widow's letter commenced “Dear Bill,” as did others; but they were addressed from no place in particular, and there were no envelopes, so there weren't any means of identifying the dead man. The police buried him under a gum, and a youthful trooper cut on the tree the words—

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
BILL,
WHO DIED.
The Bush Fire

I.—Squatter and Selector

Wall was a squatter and a hard man. There had been long years of drought and loss, and then came the rabbit pest—the rabbits swarmed like flies over his run, and cropped the ground bare where even the poor grass might have saved thousands of sheep—and the thin rabbits cost the squatter hundreds of pounds in rabbit-proof fences, trappers' wages, etc., just to keep them down. Then came arrangements with the bank. And then Wall's wife died. Wall started to brood over other days, and days that had gone between, and developed a temper which drove his children from home one by one, till only Mary was left. She managed the lonely home with the help of a half-caste girl. Then, in good seasons, came the selectors.

Men remembered Wall as a grand boss and a good fellow, but that was in the days before rabbits and banks, and before syndicates and pastoral companies began to oust the good old breed of squatter.

Runs were mostly pastoral leases for which the squatter paid the Government a nominal rent per square mile. Selections were small holdings taken up by farmers under residential and other conditions, and paid for by instalments. If the selector was not ruined by drought, and paid up long enough, the land became freehold. (The writer is heir to a dusty patch of 300 acres or so in the scrub, which was taken up thirty years ago and isn't freehold yet.)

Selectors were allowed to “select” on runs or pastoral leases as well as on unoccupied Crown lands, and as they picked the best bits of land, with water frontages where they could be had, squatters loved them like elder brothers. One man was allowed to select only a certain area, and was required by law to live on it, so the squatters bought as much freehold around the homestead as they could afford, selected as much as the law allowed, and then employed “dummy” selectors to take up choice bits. They fought selectors in many various ways, and, in some cases, annoyed and persecuted them with devilish ingenuity.

Ross was a selector, and a very tough man physically. He was short and nuggety, with black hair and a frill beard (a little dusty), bushy black eyebrows, piercing black eyes, horny knotted hands, and the obstinacy or pluck of a dozen men to fight drought and the squatter. Ross selected on Wall's run, in a bend of Sandy Creek, a nice bit of land with a black-soil flat, and red-soil sidlings from the ridges; with the help of his boys he got the land cleared and fenced in a year or two—taking contracts about the
district between whiles, to make tucker for the family.

Wall was never accused of employing dummies, or of underhand methods in dealing with selectors, but he had been through so much, and had brooded so long, that he grew very hard and bitter and suspicious—as many men do who start out in life too soft, and with too much faith in human nature.

He ordered Ross's boys off the run, impounded Ross's stock—before Ross got his fencing finished—summoned Ross for trespass; and Ross retaliated as well as he could, until at last it mightn't have been safe for one of them to have met the other with a gun. The impounding of the selector's cattle led to the last bad quarrel between Wall and his son Billy, who was a tall, good-natured Cornstalk, and who reckoned that Australia was big enough for all of us. One day in the big drought, and in an extra bitter mood, Wall heard that some of his sheep had been dogged in the vicinity of Ross's selection, and he ordered Billy to take a station-hand and watch Ross's place all night, and, if his cattle put their noses over the boundary, to drive them to the pound, fifteen miles away; also to lay poisoned baits for the dogs round the selection. Billy flatly refused.

“I know Ross and his boys,” he said, “and I don't believe they dogged the sheep. Why, they've only got a Newfoundland pup and a lame, one-eyed sheep-dog that couldn't hurt a flea. Now, father, this sort of thing has been going on long enough. What difference does a few paltry acres make to us? The country is big enough, God knows! Ross is a straight man and—for God's sake, give the man a chance to get his ground fenced in; he's doing it as fast as he can, and he can't watch his cattle day and night.”

“Are you going to do as I tell you, or are you not?” shouted Wall.

“Well, if it comes to that, I'm not,” said Billy. “I'm not going to sneak round the place all night and watch for a chance to pound a poor man's cows.”

There was an awful row down behind the wool-shed, and things looked so bad that old Peter, the station-hand, who was a witness, took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, ready, as he said afterwards, to roll into either the father or the son if one raised a hand against the other.

“Father!” said Billy, though rather sobered by the sight of his father's trembling, choking passion, “do you call yourself an Englishman?”

“Yes!” yelled Wall, furiously. “What the hell do you call yourself?”

“If it comes to that I'm an Australian,” said Billy, and he turned away and went to catch his horse. He went up country, and knocked about in the North-west for a year or two.

II.—Romeo and Juliet
Mary Wall was twenty-five. She was an Australian Bush girl every inch of her five-foot-nine; she had a pink-and-white complexion, dark blue eyes, blue-black hair and “the finest figure in the district,” on horseback or afoot. She was the best girl-rider too (saddle or bareback), and when she was a tomboy used to tuck her petticoats under her and gallop man-fashion through the scrub after horses or cattle. She said she was going to be an old maid.

There was no “life” at home nowadays, so Mary went to all the Bush dances in the district. She thought nothing of riding twenty or thirty miles to a dance, dancing all night, and riding home again next morning. At one of these dances she met young Robert Ross, a clean-limbed, good-looking young fellow about her own age. She danced with him and liked him, and danced with him again, and he rode part of the way home with her. The subject of the quarrel between their parents came up gradually.

“The boss,” said Robert, meaning his father, “the boss is always ready to let bygones be bygones. It's a pity it couldn't be fixed up.”

“Yes,” said Mary, looking at him (Bob looked very well on horseback), “it is a pity.”

They met several times, and next Prince of Wales's birthday they rode home from the races together. Both had good horses, and they happened to be far ahead of the others on the wide, straight road that ran between walls of scrub. About dusk, they became very confidential indeed—Mary had remarked what a sad and beautiful sunset it was. The horses got confidential, too, and shouldered together, and touched noses, and, after a long interval in the conversation, during which Robert, for one, began to breathe quickly, he suddenly leaned over, put his arm round her waist and made to kiss her. She jerked her body away, threw up her whip-hand, and Robert ducked instinctively; so she brought the whip down on her horse's flank instead, and raced ahead. Robert followed—or, rather, his horse did: he thought it was a race, and took the bit in his teeth. Robert kept calling, appealing—

“Wait a while, Mary! I want to explain! I want to apologize! For God's sake listen to me, Mary!”

But Mary didn't hear him. Perhaps she misunderstood the reason of the chase and gave him credit for a spice of the devil in his make-up. But Robert grew really desperate; he felt that the thing must be fixed up now or never, and gave his horse a free rein. Her horse was the faster, and Robert galloped in the dust from his heels for a mile or two, till, at the foot of a rise, Mary's horse stumbled and nearly threw her; then stopped like the good horse he was.

Robert got down, feeling instinctively that he might best make his peace
on foot, and approached Mary with a face of misery—she had dropped her whip.

“Oh, Bob!” she said, “I'm knocked out;” and she slipped down into his arms and stayed there a while.

They sat on a log and rested, while their horses made inquiries of each other, and compared notes.

And after a good while Mary said—

“No, Bob, it's no use talking of marrying just yet. I like you, Bob, but I could never marry you while things are as they are between your father and mine. Now, that'll do. Let me get on my horse, Bob. I'll be safer there.”

“Why?” asked Bob.

“Come on, Bob, and don't be stupid.”

She met him often after that, and “liked” him.

III.—The Tramp's Match

It was Christmas Eve at Wall's, but no score, or so, of buggies and horses, no dozen, or so, of strange dogs were round the place as in days of old. Glasses and decanters were dusty on the old-fashioned sideboard in the dining-room; and only a sullen, brooding man and a sullen, brooding half-caste were in the homestead. Mary had ridden away that morning to visit a girl chum.

It was towards the end of a long drought, and the country was like tinder for hundreds of miles round—the ground for miles and miles “as bare as your hand.” There was feed grass in places, but you had to look close to find it.

Shearing had finished the day before, but a black boy and a station-hand or two and six or eight shearers and rouseabouts and a teamster were camped in the men's huts—they were staying over the holidays to shear stragglers, and clean up generally. Old Peter and a Jackeroo were out on the run, watching a bush fire across Sandy Creek.

A swagman had happened to call at the station that morning; he asked first for work and then for tucker. He irritated Wall, who told him to clear out. It was the first time a swagman had been turned away from the station.

Swaggy went along the track some miles, brooding over his wrongs, and crossed Sandy Creek. He struck a match and dropped it in a likely patch of tufts, with dead grass running from it up into the scrubby ridges. Then he hurried on.

* * * * *

Did you ever see a bush fire? Not sheets of flame sweeping and roaring
from tree-top to tree-top, but the snaky, hissing, grass fire of hardwood
country.

The whole country covered with thin blue smoke so that you never know
in what direction the fire is travelling. At night you see it like the lighted
streets of cities, in the distant ranges. It roars up the hollow dead trees and
makes them look like factory chimneys in the dusk. It climbs, by shreds of
bark, the trunks of dead whitebox and blue-gums—solid and hard as cast-
iron—and cuts off the limbs. And where there's a piece of recently ring-
barked country, with the dead leaves still on the trees, it will roar from
bough to bough—a fair imitation of a soft-wood forest fire. It will travel
through the scrubs for hundreds of miles, taking the grass to the roots,
scorching the living bush, but leaving it alive—for gum-bush is hardest of
any to kill. Where there is no undergrowth, and the country seems bare as a
main road, the fire will cross, licking up invisible straws, dusty leaves,
twigs, and shreds of bark on the hard, baked ground. You are told of a fire
miles away, and next day, riding across the head of a gully, you hear a
hissing and a crackling, and there is the fire running in lines and curves of
thin blue smoke, snakelike, with old logs blazing in the blackened
background. Did you ever hear a fire where a fire should not be? There is
something hellish in the sound of it. When the breeze is, say, from the east
the fire runs round western spurs, up sheltered gullies and appears along
the top of the ridge, ready, with a change in the wind, to come down with a
front miles long on farms and fields of ripe wheat.

A selector may be protected by a wide sandy creek in front, and wide
cleared roads behind; but any hour in the day or night, a shout from the
further end of the wheat paddock, and—"Oh, my God! the wheat!"

Wall didn't mind this fire much; most of his sheep were on their way Out
Back, to a run where there was grass; and the dry ridges along the creek
here would be the better for a burning off—only he had to watch his
fences.

But, about dusk, Mary came galloping home in her usual breakneck
fashion.

"Father," she cried, "turn out the men and send them at once. The fire is
down by Ross's farm, and he has fifty acres of wheat standing, and no one
at home but himself and Bob."

"How do you know?" growled Wall. Then suddenly and suspiciously,
"Have you been there?"

"I came home that way."

"Well—let Ross look after his own," snarled the father.

"But he can't, father. They're fighting the fire now, and they'll be burnt
out before morning if they don't get help—for God's sake, father, act like a
Christian and send the men. Remember it is Christmas time, father. You're surely not going to see a neighbour burnt out.”

“Yes, I am,” shouted Wall. “I'd like to see every selector in the country burnt out, hut and all! Get off that horse and go inside. If a man leaves the station to-night he needn't come back.” (This last for the benefit of the men's hut.)

“But, father—”

“Get off that horse and go inside,” roared Wall.

“I—I won't.”

“What!” He darted forward as though to drag her from the saddle, but she swung her horse away.

“Stop! Where are you going?”

“To help Ross,” said Mary. “He had no one to send for help.”

“Then go the same way as your brother!” roared her father; “and if you show your nose back here again I'll horse-whip you off the run!”

“I'll go, father,” said Mary, and she was off.

IV.—The Fire at Ross's Farm

Ross's farm was in a corner between the ridge and the creek. The fire had come down from the creek, but the sidling was fairly clear, and they had stopped the fire there. But it went behind the ridge and ran up and over. The ridge was covered thickly with scrub and dead grass; the wheat-field extended well up the sidling, and along the top there was a bush face with only a narrow bridle-track between it and the long dead grass. Everything depended on the wind. Mary saw Ross and Mrs. Ross and the daughter, Jenny, well up the sidling above the fence, working desperately, running to and fro, and beating out the fire with green boughs. She left her horse, ran into the hut, and looked hurriedly round for something to wear in place of her riding-skirt. She only saw a couple of light print dresses. She stepped into a skillion room, which happened to be Bob's, and there caught sight of a pair of trousers and a coat hanging on the wall.

*         *         *         *         *

Bob Ross, beating desperately along a line of fire that curved down-hill to his right, and half choked and blinded by the smoke, stumbled against a figure which was too tall to be his father.

“Why! who's that?” he gasped.

“It's only me, Bob,” said Mary, and she lifted her bough again.

Bob stared. He was so astonished that he almost forgot the fire and the wheat. Bob was not thin—but—
“Don't look at me, Bob!” said Mary, hurriedly. “We're going to be married, so it doesn't matter. Let us save the wheat.”

Indeed, there was no time to waste; a breeze now came from over the ridges, light, but enough to bear the fire down on them. Once, when they had a breathing space, Mary ran to the creek for a billy of water. They beat out the fire all along the sidling to where a rib of granite ran down over the ridge to the fence, and then they thought the wheat was safe. They came together here, and old Ross had time to look and see who the strange man was; then he stared at Mary from under his black, bushy eyebrows, and Mary, choking and getting her breath after her exertions, suddenly became aware, said “Oh!” and fled round the track beyond the point of granite. Here she felt a gust of wind and looked up the ridge. The bush fence ended there in a corner, where it was met by a new wire fence running up from the creek. It was a blind gully full of tall dead grass, and, glancing up, Mary saw the flames coming down fast. She ran back.

“Come on!” she cried, “come on! The fire's on the other side of the rocks!”

* * * * *

Back at the station, Wall walked up and down till he cooled. He went inside and sat down, but it was no use. He lifted his head and saw his dead wife's portrait on the wall. Perhaps his whole life ran before him in detail.

There were only two tracks open to him now: either to give in, or go on as he was going—to shut himself out from human nature and become known as “Mean Wall,” “Hungry Wall,” or “Mad Wall.” He was a tall, dark man of strong imagination, and more than ordinary intelligence. And it was the great crisis of his life. He walked to the top of a knoll near the homestead and saw the fire on the ridges above Ross's farm. As he turned back he saw a horseman ride up and dismount by the yard.

“Is that you, Peter?”
“Yes, boss. The fences is all right.”
“Been near Ross's?”
“No. He's burnt out by this time.”

Wall walked to and fro for a few moments longer. Then he suddenly stopped and called “Peter!”
“'Ay, ay!’” from the direction of the huts.

“Turn out the men!” and Wall disappeared into a shed and came out with his saddle on his arm.

* * * * *

The fire rushed down the blind gully. Showers of sparks fell on the bush
fence, it caught twice, and they put it out, but the third time it blazed and roared and a fireengine could not have stopped it.

“The wheat must go,” said Ross. “We've done our best,” and he threw down the blackened bough and covered his eyes with a grimy hand.

The wheat was patchy in that corner—there were many old stumps, and there were bare strips where the plough had gone on either side of them. Mary saw a chance, and climbed the fence.

“Come on, Bob,” she cried, “we might save it yet. Mr. Ross, pull out the fence along there,” and she indicated a point beyond the fire. They trampled down and tore up the wheat where it ran between the stumps—but the fire was hissing and crackling round and through it, when, just as it ran past them, there was a shout, a clatter of horses' hoofs on the stones, and Mary saw her father riding up the track with a dozen men behind him. She gave a shriek and ran straight down, through the middle of the wheat, towards the hut.

Wall and his men jumped to the ground, wrenched green boughs from the saplings, and, after twenty minutes' hard fighting, saved the crop—except for a patchy acre or so.

When it was all over Ross sat down on a log and rested his head on his hands, and his shoulders shook.

Presently he felt a hand on his shoulder, looked up, and saw Wall.

“Shake hands Ross,” he said.

*         *         *         *         *

In after years they used to chaff the life out of Mary. “You were in a great hurry to put on the breeches, weren't you, Mary?”

“Bob's best Sunday-go-meetin's, too, wasn't they, Mary?” “Rather tight fit, wasn't they, Mary?” “Couldn't get 'em on now, could you, Mary?”

“But,” old Peter would say apart to some cronies, “it ain't every young chap as gits an idea of the shape of his wife afore he marries her—is it?”
The House that Never was Built

There had been heavy rain and landslips all along the branch railway which left the Great Western line just beyond the Blue Mountains, and ran through thick bush and scrubby ridgy country along the great alluvial sidlings—where the hills on the opposite side of the wide valleys (misty in depths) faded from deep blue into the pale azure of the sky—and over the ends of western spurs to the little farming, mining and pastoral town of Solong, situated in a circle of blue hills on the banks of the willow-fringed Cudgegong River.

The line was hopelessly blocked, and the publicans of Solong had put on a couple of buggies, a waggonette, and an old mail-coach—a relic of the days of Cobb & Co., which had been resurrected from some backyard—to bring the train passengers on from the break in the line over the remaining distance of forty miles or so. Capertee Station (old time, “Capertee Camp”—a teamster's camp) was the station before the first washout, and there the railway line and the old road parted company until they reached Solong—the one to run round by the ends of the western spurs that spread fanlike, and the other to go through and over the rough country.

The train arrived at Capertee about midnight in broad moonlight that was misty in the valleys and round the blue of Crown Ridge. I got a box-seat beside the driver on the old coach. It was a grand road—one of the old main coach-roads of New South Wales—broad and white, metalled nearly all the way, and in nearly as good condition as on that day when the first passenger train ran into Solong and superseded it. It dated back to the bushranging days—right back to convict times: it ran through tall dark bush, up over gaps or saddles in high ridges, down across deep dark gullies, and, here and there, across grey, marshy, curlew-haunted flats. Cobb & Co.'s coach-and-six, with “Royal Mail” gilded on its panels, had dashed along in ten and twelve-mile stages, three head-lamps flashing on the wild dark Bush at night, and maybe twenty-four passengers on board. The big rushes to richest gold-fields in the West had gone over it on coaches, on carts, on drays, on horse and bullock-waggons, on horseback, and on foot; new chums from all the world and from all stations in life.

‘When many a step was on the mountains,  
Marching West to the land of gold.’

And a few came back rich—red, round-faced and jolly—on the box-seat,
treating the driver and all hands, “going home” to sweethearts or families. And many came back broken, tramping in rags, and carrying their swags through the dusty heat of December or the bitter, pelting mountain rain of June. Some came back grey who went as boys; and there were many who never came back at all.

I remembered the old mile-trees, with a section of bark cut away and the distances chiselled thereon in Roman letters on the hardened sap—the distance from Bowenfels, the railway terminus then. It was a ghostly old road, and if it wasn't haunted it might well have been. There was a decaying and nearly deserted coaching town, or two; there were abandoned farms and half-way inns, built of stone, their roofs gone and nettles growing high between the walls; the remains of an orchard here and there—a few gnarled quince trees—and the Bush reclaiming its own again. It was a haunted ride for me, when I last rode over the old road long ago when I was young—going to see the city for the first time.

We slowly climbed, and almost as slowly descended, the steep side of a great hill called Aaron's Pass, and about a mile beyond the foot I saw a spot I remembered passing on my last journey down, so long ago. Rising back from the road, and walled by heavy bush, was a square clearing, and in the background I saw plainly, in the broad moonlight, the stone foundations for a large house; from the front an avenue of full-grown pines came down to the road.

“Why!” I exclaimed, turning to the driver, “was that house burnt down?”

“No,” he said slowly. “That house never was built.”

I stared at the place again and caught sight of a ghostly light between the lines of its foundations, which I presently made out to be a light in a tent.

“There's someone camping there,” I said.

“Yes,” said the driver, “some old swaggy or hatter. I seen him comin' down. I don't know nothing about that there place.” (I hadn't “shouted” for the driver yet.)

I thought, and remembered. I remembered, as a boy, being sent a coach journey along this road to visit some relatives in Sydney. When past this place, the women in the coach began to talk of the fine house that was going to be built there. The ground was being levelled for the foundations, and young pines had been planted, with stakes round them to protect them from the cattle. I remembered being mightily interested, for the women said that the house was to be a two-storeyed one. I thought what a wonderful thing it would be to see a two-storeyed house in the Bush. The height of my ambition then was to live in a house with stairs in it! The women said that the house was being built for young Brassington, son of the biggest squatter in the district, who was going to marry the daughter of
the next biggest.

Three or four miles along the road was a public-house, with a post-office, general store, and blacksmith shop attached, as is usual in such places—all that was left of the pastoral and coaching town of Ilford. I shouted for the driver at the shanty, but got nothing more out of him concerning the house that never was built. And I wanted that house for a story.

However, while yarning with some old residents at Solong, I mentioned the Brassingtons, and picked up a few links in the story. The young couple were married and went to Sydney for their honeymoon. The story went that they intended to make a trip to the Old Country and Paris, to be away a twelvemonth, and the house was to be finished and ready for them on their return. Young Brassington himself had a big sheep-run round there. The railway wasn't thought of in those days, or if it was, no Brassington could ever have dreamed that the line would be brought to Solong in any direction save through the property of the “Big Brassingtons.” Well, the young couple went to Sydney, but whether they got any farther the old residents did not know. All they knew was that within a few weeks, and before the stone foundations were completed, the building contract was cancelled, the workmen dismissed, and the place was left as I now saw it; but the pine saplings had now become trees. The Brassingtons and the bride's people were English families, and kept the story, if there was a story, to themselves. The girl's people left the district and squatted on new stations up country. The Big Brassingtons came down in the world and drifted to the city, as many smaller people do. Neither young Brassington nor his wife was ever again seen or heard of in the district.

I attended my relative's funeral, and next day started back for Sydney.

Just as the coach reached Ilford, the pin of the fore under-carriage broke, and it took the blacksmith several hours to set it right. The place was dull, the publican was not communicative—he harped on the old grievance of the railway not having come that way—so, about half an hour before I thought the coach would be ready, I walked along the road to stretch my legs. I walked on and on until I came, almost unaware, to the site of the house. The tent was still there; in fact, it was a permanent camp, and I was surprised to see a man working with trowel and mortar on a corner of the unfinished foundations. At first I thought he was building a stone hut in the corner, but when I got close I saw that he was working to the original plan: he was completing the foundation walls. He had bricklayer's tools, a bag of lime, and a heap of sand, and had worked up a considerable quantity of mortar: the clanging of the trowel had prevented his hearing my footsteps.

“Good day, mate,” I said, close beside him.

I half expected he'd start when I spoke, but he didn't: he looked round
slowly, with a haunted look in his eyes as if I might be one of his ghosts. He was tall, gaunt and haggard-eyed, as many are in the Bush.

“Good day,” he said; and set the stone in its place, flush with the outer edge of the wall, before he spoke again. Then he looked at the sun, which was low, laid down his trowel, and asked me to come to the tentfire. “It's turning chilly,” he said.

It was a model camp, everything clean and neat, inside and out; he had made a stone fire-place with a bark shelter over it, and there was a table and bench under another little shed, with shelves for tin cups and plates and cooking utensils. He put a box in front of the fire and folded a flour-bag on it for me, and put on the billy. He sat on his heels and poked the burning sticks, abstractedly I thought, or to keep his hands and thoughts steady.

“I see you're doing a bit of building,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, keeping his eyes on the fire; “I'm getting on with it slowly.”

I don't suppose he looked at me six times while I was in his camp. When he spoke he talked just as if he were yarning in a row of half a dozen Bushmen. Presently he said, giving the fire a vicious dig with his poker—

“That house must be finished by Christmas.”

“Why?” I asked, taken by surprise. “What's the hurry?”

“Because,” he said, “I'm going to be married in the New Year—to the best and dearest girl in the Bush.”

There was an awkward pause, but presently I pulled myself together.

“You'll never finish it by yourself,” I said. “Why don't you put on some men?”

“Because,” he said, “I can't trust them. Besides, how am I to get bricklayers and carpenters in a place like this?”

I noticed all through that his madness, or the past in his mind, was mixed up with the real and the present.

“Couldn't you postpone the marriage?” I asked.

“No!” he exclaimed, starting to his feet. “No!” and he looked round wildly on the darkening Bush. There was madness in his tone that time, the last “No!” sounding as if from a man who was begging for his life.

“Couldn't you run up a shanty then, to live in until the house is ready?” I suggested, to soothe him.

He gave his arm an impatient swing. “Do you think I'd ask that girl to live in a hut?” he said. “She ought to live in a palace!”

There seemed no way out of it, so I said nothing: he turned his back and stood looking over the dark, low-lying sweep of Bush towards sunset. He folded his arms, and seemed to be holding himself. After a while he turned
and blinked at me, and the fire, like a man just rousing himself out of a deep reverie.

“Oh, I almost forgot the billy!” he said. “I'll make some tea—you must be hungry.”

He made the tea and fried a couple of slices of ham; he laid the biggest on a thick slice of white baker's bread on a tin plate, and put it and a pint-pot of tea on a box by my side. “Have it here, by the fire,” he said; “it's warmer and more comfortable.”

I took the plate on my knee, and must say I thoroughly enjoyed that meal. The bracing mountain air and the walk had made me hungry. The hatter took his meal standing up, cutting his ham on a slice of bread with a clasp-knife. It was Bush fashion, and set me thinking of old times He ate very little, and didn't smoke. Nonsmokers are very scarce in the Bush.

I saw by the way his tent was pitched and his camp arranged generally, and by the way he managed the cooking, that he must have knocked about the Bush for some years.

He put the plates and things away and sat down on the empty gin-case by my side, and fell to poking the fire again; but he never showed the least curiosity as to who I was, or where I came from, or what I was doing on this deserted track: he seemed to take me as a matter of course—but all this was in keeping with Bush life in general.

Presently he got up and stood looking over the place where the house should have been.

“I think now,” he said slowly, “I made a mistake in not having the verandahs carried all round.”

“I— I beg pardon!”

“I should have had the balcony all round instead of on two sides only, as the man who drew the plan suggested; it would have looked better and made the house cooler in summer.”

I thought while I listened, and presently saw that it was a case of madness within madness, so to speak: he was mad on the idea that he could build the house himself, and he had moods when he imagined that the house had been built and he was married and had reared a family.

“You could easily get the balcony carried round,” I said; “it wouldn't cost much—you can get good carpenters at Solong.”

“Yes,” he said. “I'll have it done after Christmas.” Then he turned and blinked down at me.

“I am sorry,” he said, “that there's no one at home. I sent the wife and family to Sydney for a change. I've got the two boys at the Sydney Grammar School. I think I'll send the eldest to The King's School at Parramatta. The girls will have to get along with a governess at home and
learn to help their mother—"

And so he went on, talking just as a man would who has made money in the Bush, and is married and settled down.

"I suppose I'll have to get a good piano," he went on. "The girls must have some amusement: there'll be no end of balls and parties. I suppose the boys will soon be talking of getting 'fivers' and 'tenners' out of the 'guvner.' It's the way of the world. And they'll marry and leave us. It's the way of the world—"

It was awful to hear him go on like this, the more so because he never smiled—just talked on as if he had said the same thing over and over again. Presently he stopped, and his eyes and hands began to wander: he sat down on his heel to the fire again and started poking it. I began to feel uneasy; I didn't know what other sides there might be to his madness, and wished the coach would come along.

"You've knocked about the Bush a good deal?" I asked. I couldn't think of anything else to say, and I thought he might break loose if I let him brood too long.

"Yes," he said, "I have."

"Been in Queensland and the Gulf Country, I suppose?"

"I have."

His tone and manner seemed a bit more natural. He had knocked about pretty well all over Australia, and had been in many places where I had been. I had got him on the right track, and after a bit he started telling Bush yarns and experiences, some of them awful, some of them funny, and all of them short and good; and now and then, looking at the side of his face, which was all he turned to me, I thought I detected the ghost of a smile.

One thing I noticed about him; when he spoke as a madman, he talked like a man who had been well educated; his speech was deliberate and his grammar painfully correct—far more so than I have made it; but when he spoke as a Bushman, he dropped his g's and turned his grammar back to front. But I have met English university men who did the same thing after being a few years in the Bush; either they dropped their particular way of speaking because it was mimicked, because they were laughed and chaffed out of it, or they fell gradually into the habit of talking as rough Bushmen do; as clean-mouthed men fall, in spite of themselves, into the habit of swearing in the heat and hurry and rough life of a shearing-shed. Coming back into civilized life, these men drop into their old manner and style of speaking as readily as the foulest-mouthed man in a shed does when he finds himself in a decent home in the woman-and-girl world.

The hatter warmed up the tea again, got out some currant buns, which he had baked in the camp-oven, and we were yarning comfortably like two
old Bushmen, and I had almost forgotten that he was rattly, when we heard
the coach coming. I jumped up to hurry down to the road. This seemed to
shake him up. He gripped my hand hard and glanced round in his
frightened, haunted way. I never saw a man look so hopeless and helpless
as he did just then.

“I'm sorry you're going,” he said, in a hurried way. “I'm sorry you're
going. But—but they all go. Come again, come again—we'll all be glad to
see you.”

I ran down between the pines and reached the road just as the coach came
up. I found the publican from Ilford aboard—he was taking a trip to
Sydney. As the coach went on I looked up the clearing and saw the hatter
standing behind the fire, his arms folded and his face turned in our
direction. He looked ghastly in the firelight, and at that distance his face
seemed to have an expression of listening blindness. I looked round on the
dark Bush, with the last glow of sunset fading like a bed of reddening
coals, and I looked up at the black loom of Aaron's Pass, and thought that
never a man, sane or mad, was left in such a depth of gloomy loneliness.

“I see you've been yarning with him yonder,” said the publican, who had
relaxed wonderfully.

“Yes.”

“You know these parts, don't you?”

“Yes. I was about here as a boy.”

He asked me what my name might be. I told him it was Vernon. He
blinked a while.

“I never heard of anyone by the name of Vernon in the district,” he said.
Neither had I. I told him that we lived at Solong, and didn't stay long. It
saved time.

“Ever heard of the Big Brassingtons?”

“Yes.”

“Ever heard the yarn of the house that wasn't built?”
I told him how much I had heard of it.

“And that's about all any on 'em knows. Have you any idea who that man
back yonder is?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Well, who do you think it is?”

“He is, or rather he was, young Brassington.”

“You've hit it!” said the publican. “I know—and a few others.”

“And do you know what became of his wife?” I asked.

“I do,” said the shanty-keeper, who had a generous supply of whisky
with him, and had begun to fill himself up for the trip.

When I had remained silent long enough he continued very deliberately
“One yarn is that the girl wasn't any good; that as soon as they got to Sydney, she met a chap she'd been carrying on with before she married Brassington (or that she'd been married to in secret), an' she cleared off with him, leaving her fortnight-old husband. That was one yarn.”

“Was it?” I said.

“Yes,” said the publican. “That yarn was a lie.” He opened a flask of whisky and passed it round.

“There was madness in the family,” he said, after a nip.

“Whose?” I asked. “Brassington's?”

“No,” said the publican, in a tone that implied contempt of my ignorance, “the girl's. Her mother had been in a 'sylum, and so had her grandmother. It was—it was heridited. Some madness is heridited, an' some comes through worry and hard graft, an' some comes through drink, and some through worse; but as far as I've heard, all madnesses is pretty much the same. My old man was a warder in a 'sylum. They have their madnesses a bit different, the same as boozers has their D.T.'s different; but, takin' it by the lump, it's pretty much all the same."

“But about young Mrs. Brassington,” I interrupted.

“Young Mrs. Brassington? Rosy Webb she was, daughter of Webb the squatter. Rosy was the brightest, good-heartedest, an' most ladylike little girl in the district, an' the heriditry business come on her in Sydney, about a week after she was married to young Brassington. She was only twenty. Here—” He passed the flask round.

“And what happened?” I asked.

“What happened?” he repeated. “Everything was done, but it was no use. She died in a year in a 'sylum.”

“How do you know that?”

“How do I know that?” he repeated in a tone of contempt. “How do I know that? Well, I'll tell you how. My old wife was in service at Brassington's at the time—the oldest servant—an' young Brassington wired to her from Sydney to come and help him in his trouble. Old Mrs. Brassington was bedridden, an' they kep' it from her.”

“And about young Brassington?”

“And about young Brassington? He took a swag an' wandered through the Bush. We've had him at our place several times all these years, but he always wanders off again. My old woman tried everything with him, but it was no use. Years ago she used to get him to talk of things as they was, in hopes of bringin' his mind back, but he was always worse after. She does all she can for him even now, but he's mighty independent. The last five or six years he's been taken with the idea of buildin' that cursed house. He'll
stay there till he gets short of money, an' then off he'll go Out Back, shearin', stockridin', drovin', cookin', fencin'—anything till he gets a few pounds. Then he'll settle down and build away at that bloody house While he's a Bushman he's all right an' amusin' an' good company; but when he's Brassington he's mad—Don't you ever let on to my old woman that I told you. I allers let my tongue run a bit when I get out of that hole we're living in. We've kept the secret all these years, but what does it matter now?—I ask you.”

“It doesn't matter much,” I said.

“Nothing matters much, it seems to me, nothing matters a damn. The Big Brassingtons come down years ago; the old people's gone, and the young scattered God knows where or how. The Webbs are away up in new country, an' the girls (they was mostly all girls) are married an' settled down by this time. We kept the secret, an' the Webbs kept the secret—even when the dirty yarns was goin' round—so's not to spoil the chances of the other girls.”

But I was thinking of another young couple who had married long ago, whose married life was twenty long years of shameful quarrels, of useless recrimination—not because either was bad, but because their natures were too much alike; of the house that was built, of the family that was reared, of the sons and daughters who “went wrong,” of the father and mother separated after twenty years, of the father (in a lunatic asylum), whose mania it was, not to build houses, but to obtain matches for the purpose of burning houses down.

* Hatter—a man who lives and works alone in the Bush.
Barney, Take Me Home Again

This is a sketch of one of the many ways in which a young married woman, who is naturally thick-skinned and selfish, and who thinks she loves her husband, can spoil his life because he happens to be good-natured, generous, sensitive, weak or soft, whichever you like to call it.

Johnson and his young wife and two children went out to Australia as assisted emigrants. He should have left his wife and children with her mother, and got settled down comfortably in Australia before sending for her. It would have been better for both of them. But no man knows the future, and few can prescribe for their own wives. If we saw our married lives as others see them, half of us would get divorced. But Johnson was sentimental, he couldn't bear to part from his wife for even a little while. Moreover, man is instinctively against leaving his wife behind; it may be a natural instinct—but we won't argue that.

I heard from a fellow-passenger of Johnson's that he had “a hell of a voyage” because of his wife's selfishness and his own sensitiveness; he bribed stewards for better food and accommodation, paid the stewardess to help with the children, but got neither rest, nor peace, nor thanks for himself, and landed in Sydney a nervous wreck, with five pounds out of the thirty he started with.

Johnson was a carpenter. He got employment from a firm of contractors in Sydney, who, after giving him a fortnight's trial, sent him up-country to work on the railway station buildings at Solong. The railway just having come to Solong, things were busy, and Johnson settled there.

He was thin when he came to Solong; he had landed a living skeleton, he said; but he filled out later on. The democratic atmosphere soothed his mind, and he soon loved the place for its unconventional hospitality. He worked hard and seemed to have plenty of energy—he said he had acquired it in Australia, and that another year of the struggle in London would have driven him mad. He fished in the river on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, and, perhaps for the first month or so, he thought that he had found peace. Mrs. Johnson was a rather stout, unsympathetic-looking young woman, with the knit of obstinacy in her forehead; she had that stamp of “hardness” on her face which is the rule amongst English and the exception amongst Australian women. We of Solong thought her selfish and narrow-minded; later on we thought she was a “bit touched,” but people often think that of strangers.

Judged by her voice and her habit of whining she might have been a thin, sharp-faced, draggled-tailed woman in a back street in London, or a worn-
out selector's wife in the Bush. She whined about the climate. “It will kill the children! It will kill the children! We'll never rear them here!” She whined about the “wretched hole in the Bush” that her husband had brought her to; and to the women whom she condescended to visit—because a woman must have a woman to talk to—she exaggerated the miseries of the voyage until the thing became a sing-song from repetition. Later on she settled down to endless accounts of her home in London, of her mother and sisters, of the way they lived. “And I'll never see it any more. I'll never see them any more.”

The Solong climate was reckoned the best in Australia; the “wretched hole” was a pretty little town on the banks of a clear, willow-bordered river, with vineyards on the slopes, and surrounded by a circle of blue hills and peaks. But we knew nothing of London, so she had her own way.

“She'll feel a bit lonely at first, but she'll soon get used to Australia,” said Johnson. He seemed to me to go out of his way to excuse his wife.

Johnson had had a few contracts in England at one time; they had been in “better circumstances”—that was the time she looked back to; the last two years of bitter struggle at “home” was a blank in her mind—but that's how women jump over facts when they look back.

Johnson rented a cottage and garden on the bank of the sunny river. He said he took the place because there was ivy growing on the cottage, and it might cheer his wife; but he had lost sight of the fact that, while he had been born in an English village, his wife had been born and bred in London, and had probably never noticed ivy. She said it was worse than living in a slum.

Johnson was clever at his trade, and at many other things, but his wife didn't seem aware of it. He was well liked, he grew to be popular, but she wasn't proud of the fact; she never seemed interested in him or his prospects. She only wanted him to take her home again.

Johnson grew stouter and prospered in spite of his wife—for a year or so. New schools were being built in the district, and the town itself was practically re-built. Johnson took contracts for brickwork, plumbing and house-painting, as well as carpentering, and had at one time as many as ten men in his employ. He was making money.

I was working at my trade then, house-painting, and worked for him. I lodged at his cottage for a while, but soon got tired of hearing about London, and Mrs. Johnson's mother and sisters, and the house they lived in, and the street it was in, and the parks where they used to take their babies, and the shopping on Saturday afternoon. That woman was terrible. She was at Johnson all the time. “We'll surely be able to go home this year, Will.” “You promised to take me home by the end of the year.” “Mother
says in her last letter that Jack says there's more building going on about London than ever.” “You'll do just as well in London as you'll do here.” “What chance have the children got in a hole like this?” And the rest of it—every night.

When he took a new contract, it would be, “What did you want to take that new contract for, Will, when we're going home? You know you promised me you wouldn't take any more contracts.” First he'd try to cheer her, then he'd argue; but she'd only sit with the knit in her forehead deep, looking as obstinate as a mule. Then she'd sit down to a little harmonium he'd bought her and play and sing “Barney, take me Home again,” and “The Old Folks at Home,” and “Swannie Ribber,” till I felt like hanging myself—and I wasn't an exile. Sometimes Johnson would flare up and there'd be a row and he'd go to the pub. Gentle persuasion, argument, or swearing, it was all the same with her.

Bosses and men were different towards each other in Solong to what they are in London; besides, when I wasn't Johnson's sub-contractor I was his foreman—so we often had a few drinks together; and one night over a beer (and after a breeze at home, I think) he said to me—

“I can't make it out, Harry; there was nothing but struggle and worry and misery for us in England, and London was smothering me, my chest was bad and the wife was always in ill-health; but I suppose I'll have to take her home in the end or else she'll go melancholy mad!” And he drew a breath that was more like a gasp than a sigh.

“Why not send her home for a trip, for a year or so, boss?” I asked. “As likely as not she'll be just as eager to get back; and that will be the end of it.”

“I couldn't do that, Harry,” said Johnson. “I couldn't stay here and work alone. It would be like beginning life again; I've started twice and couldn't start the third time. You'll understand when you're married, Harry.”

Well, in the end, she wore Johnson out—or wore into him rather. He drank more, and once or twice I saw him drinking alone. Sometimes he'd “round on us” for nothing at all; at other times he'd take no interest in the jobs—he'd let the work go on anyhow. Some said that Johnson was getting too big for his boots—that's how men are misjudged. He grew moody and melancholy and thin again. Johnson was homesick himself. The misery of his domestic life made him so.

Towards the end of the third or fourth year he threw up a couple of contracts he had on hand, sacrificed a bit of land which he had bought, and on which he had built a cottage, and, one lovely day in June, when the skies were at their fairest, the hills their bluest, the river its widest and clearest, and the grass was waving waist high after rain—one blue and
green and golden day the Johnsons left Solong *en route* for smoky London.

Mrs. Johnson was a woman transformed—she was happy and looked it. The last few weeks she had been in every way the opposite of the woman we had known cheerful, kind to neighbours in sickness and trouble, even generous.

Johnson looked worn and worried at the railway station—more like he was when he first came to Solong—and as the train moved off I thought he looked—well, frightened.

That must have been nearly twenty years ago.

* * * * *

London last winter. It was one of those days when London's sun shows up for a little while like a smoky danger-signal. The snow had melted from the house-tops and the streets were as London streets are after the first fall of the season. But I could stand the flat no longer, I had to go out and walk. I was sun-sick—I was heart-sick for the sun, for the sunny South—for grassy plains, blue mountains, sweeps of mountain bush and sunny ocean beaches. I walked hard; I walked till I was mud-splashed to the shoulders; I walked through the maddening sameness of miles of dingy, grimy-walled blocks and rows of four-storeyed houses till I felt smothered—jailed, hope lessly. “Best get home, and draw the blinds on it,” I said, “or my brain will turn.”

I was about to ask a policeman where I was when I saw, by the name on a corner of the buildings, that I was in City Road, North.

The willow-fringed rivers and sunny hills of Solong flashed before me at the sight of that name. I had not been able to recall the name of the street off City Road in which the Johnsons lived, though I had heard it often enough in the old days.

I felt that it would be a relief to see anyone who had been in Australia. “Now,” I thought, “if I walk along City Road and see the name of that street I'll remember it”—and I did. It was a blind street, like the long, narrow yard of a jail, walled-in by dark houses, all alike. The next door but one to that at which I knocked was where the Johnsons lived; it was a four-storey house, or rather a narrow section of a four-storeyed terrace. I found later on that they paid the rent, or nearly paid it, by letting lodgings. They lived in one room with the use of the parlour and the kitchen when the lodgers weren't using them, and their son shared a room with a lodger. The back windows looked out on the dead wall of a poorhouse, the front on rows of similar windows opposite—rows of the sort of windows that run for miles and miles in London. In one a man sat smoking in his shirt-sleeves, from another a slavey leaned out watching a four-wheeler that had
stopped next door, in a third a woman sat sewing, and in a fourth a woman was ironing, with a glimpse of a bedstead behind her. And all outside was gloom and soot and slush.

I would never have recognized the Johnsons. I have visited them several times since and their faces are familiar to me now, but I don't think any traces of the old likenesses worked up in my memory. I found Johnson an old man——old and grey before his time. He had a grizzly stubble round his chin and cheeks towards the end of the week, because he could only afford a shave on Saturday afternoon. He was working at some branch of his trade “in the shop” I understood, but he said he felt the work come heavier on him every winter. “I've felt very poorly this last winter or two,” he said, “very poorly indeed.” He was very sad and gentle.

Mrs. Johnson was old and thin-looking, but seemed cheerful and energetic. Some chest trouble kept her within doors most of the winter.

“I don't mind so long as I can manage,” she said, “but Johnson gets so depressed.”

They seemed very kind to each other; they spoke but little of Australia, and then only as an incident in their lives which was not of any importance——one that had long been past and done with. It was all “before we went to Australia” or “after we came back from Australia” with Mrs. Johnson.

The son, whom I remembered as a bright, robust little fellow, was now a tall, white-faced, clean-shaven young man, a clerk on thirty shillings a week. He wore, on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, a tall hat and a frock coat, and an overcoat made in the latest fashion, so he couldn't afford to help the old folk much.

“David is very extravagant,” said the old man, gently. “He won't wear anything when once the nap is off it. But,” with a sad smile, “I get the left-off overcoats.”

He took me across to see his daughter. She had married a tradesman, and they were having a hard struggle in three rooms in a workman's dwelling. She was twenty-five, thin, yellow, and looked ten years older.

There were other children who had died. “I think we might have done better for the children in Australia,” said the old man to me, sadly, when we got outside, “but we did our best.”

We went into a hotel and had a drink. Johnson had “treated” last time——twenty years before. We call treating “shouting” in Australia. Presently Johnson let fall a word or two of Australian slang, and brightened up wonderfully; we got back out into Australia at once and stayed there an hour or so. Being an old man, Johnson's memory for the long ago was better than mine, and I picked up links; and, in return. I told him what
Solong was like now, and how some men he knew, who were going up, had gone down, and others, who were going to the dogs in his time, had gone up—and we philosophized. About one he'd say, “Ah, well! who'd have thought it! I never thought that boy would come to any good;” about another, “Ah, well! and he might have been an independent man.” How familiar that expression sounded!—I think it is used more often in Australia than in any other country: “He might have been an independent man.”

When I left Johnson I felt less lonely in London, and rather humbled in spirit. He seemed so resigned—I had never seen such gentle sadness in a man's eyes, nor heard it in a man's voice. I could get back to Australia somehow and start life again, but Johnson's day had been dead for many years. “Besides, assisted emigration's done away with now,” he said, with his sad, slow smile.

I saw them again later on. “Things have been going very sadly with us, very sadly indeed,” said the old man, when we'd settled down. He had broken down at the beginning of the winter, he had dragged himself out of bed and to work and back again until he could do so no longer; he had been laid up most of the winter. Mrs. Johnson had not been outside the door for months.

“It comes very hard on us,” she said. “I'm so poorly, and David is out of work. I wouldn't mind if I could get about. But,” she went on in her energetic manner, “we've had the house full all the winter; we've had very good luck with the lodgers, all respectable people, and one of them answers the door and that keeps me away from the draught——so it might be worse, mightn't it? But Johnson doesn't seem to mend at all, and he gets so terribly depressed. But the warm weather coming on, etc.”

They and the Lord only knew how they managed to live.

Johnson came out with me, and we had a drink or two together—his was gin hot. He talked a good deal about Australia, but sadly and regretfully on this occasion.

“We could have done well in Australia,” he said, “very well indeed. I might have been independent and the children well started in life. But we did things for the best. Mrs. Johnson didn't like Australia, you know. It was a pity we didn't stay there, a great pity. We would have done far better than in England. I'd go out again now if I had the money, but I'm getting too old.”

“Would Mrs. Johnson go out?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. But I'm afraid she wouldn't stand the voyage. . . . Things have been very sad with us ever since we came back to England, very sad indeed.” And after a while he suddenly caught his breath.
“It takes me that way sometimes,” he said. “I catch my breath just as if I was going to lost it.”
Andy Maculloch had heard that old Bill Barker, the overland drover, had died over on the Westralian side, and Dave Regan told a yarn about Bill.

“Bill Barker,” said Dave, talking round his pipe stem, “was the quintessence of a drover——”

“The whatter, Dave?” came the voice of Jim Bentley, in startled tones, from the gloom at the far end of the verandah.

“The quintessence,” said Dave, taking his pipe out of his mouth. “As I said, Bill Barker was the quintessence of a drover. He'd been at the game ever since he was a nipper. He run away from home when he was fourteen and went up into Queensland. He's been all over Queensland and New South Wales and most of South Australia, and a good deal of the Western, too: over the great stock routes from one end to the other, the Lord knows how many times. No man could bring a mob of cattle or a flock of sheep through like him. He knew every trick of the game; if there was grass to be had Bill'd get it, no matter whose run it was on. In a dry season he'd let his mob get boxed with the station stock on a run where there was grass, and before Bill's men and the station-hands could cut 'em out, the travelling stock would have a good bellyful. Billy was the daddy of the drovers. Some said that he could ride in his sleep, and that he had one old horse that could jog along in his sleep too, and that Bill and his horse would often wake up at daylight and blink round to see how far they'd got. Then Bill would make a fire and boil his quart-pot, and roast a bit of mutton, while his horse got a mouthful of grass and had a spell.

“You remember Bill, Andy? Big dark man, a joker of the loud sort. Never slept with a blanket over him—always folded under him on the sand or grass. Seldom wore a coat on the route—though he always carried one with him, in case of a Bush ball or a funeral. Moleskins, flannel waistcoat, cabbage-tree hat and 'lastic-side boots. When it was roasting hot on the plains and the men swore at it, Jim would yell—

“'Call this hot? Why, you blanks, I'm freezin'! Where's me overcoat?'

“When it was raining and hailing and freezing on Bell's Line in winter, and someone shivered and asked, 'Is it cold enough for yer now, Bill?'

“'Cold!' Bill would bellow, 'I'm sweatin'!'”

“I remember it well. I was little more than a youngster then—Bill Barker came past our place with about a thousand fat sheep for the Homebush sale-yards at Sydney, and he gave me a job to help him down with them over the mountains, and mighty proud I was to go with him, I can tell you. One night we camped on the Cudgegong River. The country was dry and
pretty close cropped and we'd been ‘sweating’ the paddocks all along there for our horses. You see, where there weren't sliprails handy we'd just take the tomahawk and nick the top of a straight-grained post, just above the mortise, knock out the wood there, lift the top rail out and jump the horses in over the lower one—it was all two-rail fences around there with sheep wires under the lower rail. About daylight we'd have the horses out, lift back the rail, and fit in the chock. Simple as striking matches, wasn't it?

“Well, the horses were getting a good bellyful in the police paddock one night, and Bill took the first watch with the sheep. It was cold and frosty on the flat and he thought the sheep might make back for the ridges; it's always warmer up in the ridges in winter. Bill roused me out about midnight. ‘There's the sheep,’ he says, pointing to a white blur. ‘They've settled down. I think they'll be quiet till daylight. Don't go round them; there's no occasion to go near 'em. Stop by the fire and keep an eye on 'em.’

“The night seemed very long. I watched and smoked and toasted my shins, and warmed the billy now and then, and thought up pretty much the same sort of old things that fellers on night-watch think over all over the world. Bill lay on his blanket, with his back to the fire and his arm under his head—freezing on one side and roasting on the other. He never moved. I itched to turn him over and bake the front of him—I reckoned he was about done behind.

“At last daylight showed. I took the billy and started down to the river to get some water to make coffee; but halfway down, near the sheep camp, I stopped and stared. I was never so surprised in my life. The white blur of sheep had developed into a couple of acres of long, dead, silver grass!

“I woke Bill, and he swore as I never heard a man swear before—nor since. He swore at the sheep, at the grass, and at me; but that it would have wasted time, and I was too sleepy and tired to fight, I'd have gone for him. We found those sheep scattered over a scrubby ridge about seven miles back, so they must have slipped away early in Bill's watch, and Bill must have watched that blessed grass for the first half of the night and then set me on to watch it. He couldn't get away from that.

“I wondered what the chaps would say if it got round that Bill Barker, the boss overland drover, had lost a thousand sheep in clear country, with fences all round; and I suppose he thought about it too, for he kept me with him right down to Homebush, and when he paid me off he threw in an extra quid, and said—

“ ‘Now, listen here, Dave! If I ever hear a word from anyone about watching that gory grass, I'll find you, Dave, and murder you, if you're in wide Australia.’ ”
There was silence for a time after Dave had finished. The chaps made no comment, either one way or the other, but sat smoking thoughtfully, and in a vague atmosphere as of sadness—as if they'd just heard of their mother's death and had not been listening to an allegedly humorous yarn.

Then the voice of old Peter was heard from the darkness at the end of the hut, where he sat on a three-bushel bag, with his back to the slabs.

“What's old Peter growlin' about?” someone asked.

“He wants to know where Dave got that word,” someone else replied.

“What word?”

“Quint-essents.”

There was a chuckle.


“How much did yer give for it, Dave?” growled Peter.

“Five shillings, Peter,” said Dave, “and stick of tobacco thrown in.”
Gettin' Back on Dave Regan

(AS TOLD BY JAMES NOWLETT.)

You might work this yarn up. I've often thought of doin' it meself, but I ain't got the words. I knowed a lot of rum yarns about the Bush, an' I often wished I had the gift o' writin'. I could tell a lot better yarns than the rot they put in books, but I never had no eddication. But you might be able to work this yarn up—as yer call it.

There useter be a teamsters' camp six or seven miles out of Mudgee, at a place called th' Old Pipeclay, in the days before the railroad went round to Dubbo, an' most of us bullickies useter camp there for the night. There was always good water in the crick, an' sometimes we'd turn the bullicks out in the ridges an' gullies for grass, an' camp for a few days, and do our washin' an' mendin', and make new yokes perhaps, an' tinker up the waggons.

There was a woman livin' on a farm there named Mrs. Hardwick—an' she was a hard wick. Her husban' was throwed from his horse agenst a stump one day when he was sober, an' was killed—so she was a widder. She had a tidy bit o' land, an' a nice bit of a orchard an' vineyard, an' some cattle, an' they say she had a tidy bit o' money in the bank. She had the worst tongue in the district, no one's character was safe with her; but she wasn't old, an' she wasn't bad-lookin'—only hard—so there was some fellers hangin' round arter her. An' Dave Regan's horse was hangin' up outside her place as often as anybody else's.

Mrs. Hardwick hated bullick-drivers—I dunno why. We never interfered with her fowls, an' as for swearin'—why, how could she swear herself! Jimmy Hardwick was a bullick-driver when she married him, an' p'r'aps that helped to account for it. She wo uldn't let us boil our billies at her kitchen fire, same as any other Bushwoman, an' if one of our bullicks put his nose under her fence for a mouthful of grass, she'd set her dogs onter him. An' one of her dogs got something what disagreed with him one day, an' she accused us of layin' baits. An', arter that, she 'pounded some of our bullicks that got into her lucerne paddick when we was on the spree in Mudgee, an' put heavy damages on 'em. She'd left the sliprails down on purpose, I believe. She talked of puttin' the police onter us, jest as if we was a sly grog-shop. (If she'd kept a sly grog-shop she'd have had a different opinion about bullick-drivers.)

Well, one wet season half a dozen of us chaps was camped there for a fortnight, an' one night they got up a darnse at Peter Anderson's shanty acrost the ridges, an' a lot of gals an' fellers turned up in spite of the pourin'
rain. Someone had kidded Dave Regan that Mother Hardwick was comin', an' he turned up in spite of a ragin' toothache he had. It was a very cold night, so we had a roarin' fire in the big bark-an'-slab kitchen where the darnsin' was. It was one of them old-fashioned, clay-lined fireplaces that goes right acrost the end of the room, with a twenty-five foot slab-an'-tin chimblly outside.

Dave Regan was wild about being had, an' we copped all the gals for darnsin'; he couldn't get one that night, an' when he wasn't proddin' at his tooth with a red-hot wire, someone was chaffin' him about Mrs. Hardwick. So at last he got disgusted an' left; but before he went he got a wet three-bushel bag an' climbed up very quietly onter the roof, an' laid it very carefully acrost the top of the chimblly flue.

We was a mortal hour tryin' to find out what was the matter with that infernal chimblly, and tackin' bits o' tin an' baggin' acrossthe fireplace under the mantelshelf to try an' stop it from smokin', an' all the while the gals set there with the water runnin' out of their eyes. We took the green back-log out an' fetched in a dry one, but that chimblly smoked worse than ever, an' we had to put the fire out altogether, an' then the gals set there shiverin' till the rain held up a bit an' the sky cleared, an' someone goes out an' looks up an' sings out, “Why, there's somethin' acrossthe top of the blazin' chimblly!” an' someone else climbs up an' fetches down the bag. But the darnse was spoilt, an' the gals was so disgusted that they went off with their fellers while the weather held up. They reckoned some of us bullickies did it for a lark.

Arter that Dave'd come ridin' past, an' sang out to know if we knew of a good cure for a smokin' chimblly, an' them sorter things. But he got away before we could pull him off his horse. So we made up our minds to git back on Dave some way or other, an' it come about this way.

About six months arter the darnse, four or five of us same fellers was campin' on th' Pipeclay agen, an' it was a dry season. It was dryer an' hotter than it was cold'n' wet the larst time. Dave was still hangin' round Mrs. Hardwick's doin' odd jobs for her. Well, one day we seen Dave ridin' past into Mudgee, an' we knowed he'd have a spree in town that night, an' call at Mrs. Hardwick's for sympathy comin' out next day; an' arter he'd been gone an hour or two, Tom Tarrant comes drivin' past on his mail-coach, an' drops some letters an' papers an' a bag o' groceries at our camp.

Well, when Tom handed down the tucker an' letters, he got down to stretch his legs and give the horses a breathe. The coach was full of passengers, an' I noticed they all looked extra glum an' sulky, but I reckoned it was the heat an' dust. Tom looked extra solemn, too, an' no one was talkin'. Then I suddenry began to notice something in the atmosphere,
as if there was a dead beast not far away, an' my mates started sniffin' too. An' that reminds me, it's funny why some people allers sniff hard instead of keepin' their noses shut when there's a stink; the more it stinks the more they sniff. Tom spit in the dust an' thought a while; then he took a parcel out of the boot an' put it on the corner post of the fence. “There,” he said, “there's some fresh fish that come up from Sydney by train an' Cobb & Co. larst night. They're meant for White the publican at Gulgong, but they won't keep till I git out there. Pity to waste them! you chaps might as well have a feed. I'll tell White they went bad an' I had to throw them out,” says Tom. Then he got on to the coach agen an' drove off in a cloud o' dust.

We undone the brown paper, an' the fish was in a small deal box, with a lid fastened by a catch. We nicked back the catch an' the lid flew open, an' then we knewed where the smell come d from all right. There wasn't any doubt about that! We didn't have to put our noses in the box to see if the fish was bad.

You know how a smell will start sudden in the Bush on a hot, still day, an' then seem to take a spell, an' then get to work agen stronger than ever. You might be clost alongside of a horse that has been dead a fortnight an' smell nothin' particular till you start to walk away, an' the further you go the worse it stinks. It seems to smell most round in a circle of a hundred yards or so. But these fish smelt from the centre right out. Tom Tarrant told us arterwards that them fi sh started to smell as soon as he left Mudgee. At first they reckoned it was a dead horse by the road; but arter a while the passengers commenced squintin' at ea ch other suspicio us like, an' the conversation petered out, an' Tom thought he felt all their eyes on his back, an' it was very uncomfortable; an' it got worse every hundred yards—like as if the track was lined with dead horses, an' everyone dead longer than the last. An' Tom never thought of the fish till he got down to stretch his legs and fetched his nose on a level with the boot.

Well, we shut down the lid of that box quick an' took it an' threwed it in the bushes a good way away from the camp, but next mornin', while we was havin' breakfast, Billy Grimshaw got a idea, an' arter breakfast he wetted a canvas bag he had an' lit up his pipe, an' went an' got that there box o' fish, an' put it in the wet bag, an' wrapped it round it an' tied it up tight with string. Billy had a nipper of a nephew with him, about fourteen, named Tommy, an' he was a sharp kid if ever there was one. So Billy says, “Look here, Tommy, you take this fish up to Mrs. Hardwick's an' tell her that Dave Regan sent 'em with his compliments, an' he hopes she'll enjoy 'em. Tell her that Dave fetched 'em from Mudgee, but he's gone back to look for a pound note that he dropped out of a hole in his pocket somewheers along the road, an' he asked you to take the fish up.” So
Tommy takes the fish an' goes up to the house with 'em. When he come back he says that Mrs. Hardwick smiled like a parson an' give him a shillin'—an' he didn't wait. We watched the house, an' about half an hour arterwards we seen her run out of the kitchen with the box in her hand, an' run a good way away from the house an' throw the fish inter the bushes, an' then go back quick, holdin' her nose.

An' jest then, as luck would have it, we seen Dave Regan ridin' up from the creek towards the house. He got down an' went into the kitchen, but come backin' out agen in a hurry with her in front of him. We could hear her voice from where we was, but we couldn't hear what she said. But we could see her arms wavin' as if she was drivin' fowls, an' Dave backed all the way to his horse and gets on an' comes ridin' away quick, she screamin' arter him all the time. When he got down opposite the camp we sung out to know what was the matter. “What have you been doin' to Mrs. Hardwick, Dave?” we says. “We heerd her goin' for yer proper jest now.” “Damned if I know,” says Dave. “I ain't done nothin' to her that I knows of. She's called me everything she can lay her tongue to, an' she's ravin' about my stinkin' fish, or somethin'. I believe she's gone ratty.”

“But you must have been doin' somethin' to the woman,” we says, “or else she wouldn't have gone on at yer like that.”

But Dave swore he hadn't, an' we talked it over for a while an' couldn't make head nor tail of it, an' we come to the conclusion that it was only a touch o' the sun.

“Never mind, Dave,” we says. “Go up agen in a day or two, when she's cooled down, an' find out what the matter is. Or write to her. It might only have been someone makin' mischief. That's what it is.”

But Dave only sat an' rubbed his head, an' presently he started home to where he was hangin' out. He wanted a quiet week to think. “Her chimblly might have been smokin', Dave,” we shouted arter him, but he was too dazed like to ketch on.

Well, in a month or two we was campin' there agen, an' we found she'd fenced in a lane to the crick she had no right to, an' we had to take the bullicks a couple o' miles round to grass an' water. Well, the first mornin' we seen her down in the corner of her paddick near the camp drivin' some heifers, an' Billy Grimshaw went up to the fence an' spoke to her. Billy was the only one of us that dared face her, and he was the only one she was ever civil to—p'r'aps because Billy had a squint an' a wall eye and they put her out of countenance.

Billy took off his hat very respectful an' sings out, “Mrs. Hardwick.”

“What is it?” she says.

“I want to speak to you, Mrs. Hardwick,” says Billy.
“Well, speak,” she says. “I've got no time to waste talkin' to bullick-drivers.”

“Well, the fact is, Mrs. Hardwick,” says Billy, “that I want to explain somethin', an' apologize for that young scamp of a nephew o' mine, young Tommy. He ain't here or I'd make him beg your pardon himself. I heard all about Dave Regan sendin' you that stinkin' fish, an' I think it was a damned mean, dirty thing to do—to send stinkin' fish to a woman, an' especially to a widder an' an unprotected woman like you, Mrs. Hardwick. An' I want to tell yer that I'm sorry a relation o' mine ever had anythin' to do with it. As soon as I heerd of it I give young tommy a lambastin' he won't forgit in a hurry.”

Mrs. Hardwick thought a while. Then she says, “P'r'aps arter all Dave Regan didn't know the fish was bad. I've often thought I might have been in too much of a hurry. Things goes bad so quick out here in this weather. An' Dave was always very friendly. I can't understand why he'd do a dirty thing on me like that.”

“Don't you believe that for a minute, Mrs. Hardwick. Dave knew what he was a-doin' of all right; an' if I ketch him I'll give him a beltin' for it if no one else is goin' to be man enough to stand up for a woman!” says Billy.

“How d'yer know Dave knew?” says Mrs. Hardwick.

“Know!” says Billy. “Why, he talked about it all over the district.”

“What!” she screamed out, an' I moved away from that there fence, for she had a stick to drive them heifers with. But Billy stood his ground. “Is that the truth, Billy Grimshaw?” she screams.

“Yes,” he says. “I'll take me oath on it. He blowed about it all over the district, as if it was very funny, an' he says—” An' Billy stopped.

“What did he say?” she shouted.

“Well, the fact is,” says Billy, “that I hardly like to tell it to a lady. I wouldn't like to tell yer, Mrs. Hardwick.”

“But you'll have to tell me, Billy Grimshaw,” she screams. “I have a right to know. If you don' tell me I'll pull him next week an' have it dragged out of you in the witness-box!” she says, “an' I'll have satisfaction out of him in the felon's dock of a court of law!” she says. “What did the villain say?” she screams.

“Well,” says Billy, “if yer must have it—an', anyway, I'm hanged if I'm goin' to stand by an' see a woman scandalized behind her back—if yer must have it, I'll tell yer. Dave said that the fish didn't smell no worse than your place anyway.”

We got away from there then. She cut up too rough altogether. I can't tell you what she said—I ain't got the words. She went up to the house, an' we seen the farmhand harnessin' up the horse, an' we reckoned she was goin' to
drive into town straight away an' take out a summons against Dave Regan. An' jest then Dave hisself comes ridin' past—jest when he was most wanted, as usual. He always rode fast past Mrs. Hardwick's nowadays, an' never stopped there, but Billy shouted after him—

“Hullo, Dave! I want to speak to yer,” shouts Billy. An' Dave yanks his horse round.

“What is it, Billy?” he says.

“Look here, Dave,” says Billy. “You had your little joke about the chimbly, an' we had our little joke about the fish an' Mrs. Hardwick, so now we'll call it quits. A joke's a joke, but it can go too far, an' this one's gettin' too red hot altogether. So we've fixed it up with Mrs. Hardwick.”

“What fish an' what joke?” says Dave, rubbin' his head. “An' what have yer fixed up with Mrs. Hardwick?”

So Billy told him all about us sendin' the stinkin' fish to Mrs. Hardwick by Tommy, an' sayin' Dave sent 'em—Dave rubbin' the back of his neck an' starin' at Billy all the time. “An' now,” says Billy, “I won't say anything about them bullicks; but I went up an' seen Mrs. Hardwick this mornin', an' told her the whole truth about them fish, an' how you knewed nothin' about it, an' I apologized an' told her we was very sorry; an' she says she was very sorry too on your account, an' wanted to see yer. I promised to tell yer as soon as I seen yer. It ought to be fixed up. You ought to go right up to the house an' see her now. She's awfully cut up about it.”

“All right,” says Dave, brightenin' up. “It was a dirty, mean trick anyway to play on a cove; but I'll go up an' see her.” An' he went there'n' then.

An' about fifteen minutes afterwards he comes boltin' back from the house one way an' his horse the other. The horse acted as if it had a big scare, an' so did Dave. Billy went an' ketched Dave's horse for him, an' I got Dave a towel to wipe the dirty water off of his face an' out of his hair an' collar, an' I give him a piece of soap to rub on the places where he'd been scalded.

“Why, the woman must be ravin' mad,” I says. “Whatever did yer say to her this time, Dave? Yer allers gettin' inter hot water with her.”

“I didn't say nothin',” says Dave. “I jest went up laughin' like, an' says, “How are yer, Mrs. Hardwick?” an' she ups an' lets me have a dish of wash-up water, an' then on top of that she let fly with a dipper of scaldin'-hot water outer the boiler. She's gone clean ravin' mad.”

“She's as mad as a hatter, right enough, Dave,” says Billy Grimshaw. “Don't you go there no more, Dave, it ain't safe.” An' we lent Dave a hat an' a clean shirt, an' he went on inter town. “You ought to have humoured her,” says Billy, as Dave rode away. “You ought to have told her to put a wet bag over her chimbly an' hang the fish inside to smoke.” But Dave was
too stunned to ketch on. He went on inter the town an' got on a howlin' spree. An' while he was soberin' up the thing began to dawn on him. An' the nex' time he met Billy they had a fight. An' Dave got another woman to speak to Mrs. Hardwick, an' Mrs. Hardwick ketched young Tommy goin' past her place one day an' bailed him up an' scared the truth out of him.

“Look here!” she says to him, “I want the truth, the whole truth, an' nothin' but the truth about them fish, an' if I don't get it outer you I'll wring yer neck for tryin' to poison me, an' save yer from the gallust!” she says to Tommy.

So he told her the whole truth, swelp him, an' got away; an' he respected Mrs. Hardwick arter that.

An' next time we come past with the teams we seen Dave's horse hangin' up outside Mrs. Hardwick's, an' we went some miles further along an' camped in a new place where we'd be more comfortable. An' ever arter that we used to always whip up an' drive past her place as if we didn't know her.
Shall We Gather at the River?

TOLD BY JOE WILSON.

“God's preacher, of churches unheeded,
God's Vineyard, though barren the sod,
Plain spokesman where spokesman is needed,
Rough link 'twixt the Bushman and God.”

The Christ of the Never.

I never told you about Peter M'Laughlan. He was a sort of Bush missionary Out Back in Australia, and before he died he was known from the Riverina to away up through the Never-Never Country in Western Queensland.

His past was a mystery, so, of course, there were all sorts of yarns about him. He was supposed to be a Scotchman from London, and some said that he had got into trouble in his young days and had had to clear out of the old country; or, at least, that he had been a ne'er-do-well and had been sent out to Australia on the remittance system. Some said he'd studied for the law, some said he'd studied for a doctor, while others believed that he was an ordained minister. I remember one man who swore (when he was drinking) that he had known Peter M'Laughlan as a medical student in a big London hospital, and that he had started in practice for himself somewhere near Gray's Inn Road in London.

He was a tall man, straight and well-built, and about forty or forty-five, when I first saw him. He had wavy dark hair, and a close, curly beard. I once heard a woman say that he had a beard like you see in some Bible pictures of Christ. Peter M'Laughlan seldom smiled; there was something in his big dark brown eyes that was scarcely misery, nor yet sadness—a sort of haunted sympathy.

He must have had money, or else he got remittances from home, for he paid his way and helped many a poor devil. They said that he gave away most of his money. Sometimes he worked as book-keeper at a shearing shed, wool-sorter, shearer, even rouse-about; he'd work at anything a Bushman could get to do. Then he'd go Out Back to God-forgotten districts and preach to Bushmen in one place, and get a few children together in another and teach them to read. He could take his drink, and swear a little when he thought it necessary.

Towards the end of his life, if he went into a rough shed or shanty west of the Darling River— and some of them were rough—there would be a rest in the language and drinking, even a fight would be interrupted, and
there would be more than one who'd lift their hats to Peter M'Laughlan. A Bushman very rarely lifts his hat to a man, yet the worst characters of the West have listened bare-headed to Peter when he preached.

It was said in our district that Peter only needed to hint to the squatter that he wanted fifty or a hundred pounds to help someone or something, and the squatter would give it to him without question or hesitation.

He'd nurse sick boundary-riders, shearsers, and station-hands, often sitting in the desolate hut by the bedside of a sick man night after night. And, if he had time, he'd look up the local blacks and see how they were getting on. Once, on a far out-back sheep-station, he sat, for three nights running, by the bedside of a young Englishman, a B.A. they said he was, who'd been employed as tutor at the homestead and who died a wreck, the result of five years' life in London and Paris. The poor fellow was only thirty. And the last few hours of his life he talked to Peter in French, nothing but French. Peter understood French and one or two other languages, besides English and Australian; but whether the wreck was raving or telling the story of a love, or his life, none of us ever knew, for Peter never told.

There's the yarn about Peter and the dying cattle at Piora Station one terrible drought, when the surface was as bare as your hand for hundreds of miles, and the heat like the breath of a furnace, and the sheep and cattle were perishing by thousands. Peter M'Laughlan was out on the run helping the station-hands to pull out cattle that had got bogged in the muddy water-holes and were too weak to drag themselves out, when, about dusk, a gentlemanly piano-fingered parson came to the station in his buggy to see him. He spoke to Peter M'Laughlan.

"Brother," he said, "do you not think we should offer up a prayer?"

"What for?" asked Peter, standing in his shirt sleeves, a rope in his hands, and mud from head to foot.

"For? Why, for rain, brother," replied the parson, a bit surprised.

Peter held up his finger and said "Listen!"

Now, with a big mob of travelling stock camped on the plain at night, there is always a lowing, soughing or moaning sound, a sound like that of the sea on the shore at a little distance; it might be called the sigh or yawn of a big mob in camp. But the long, low moaning of cattle dying of hunger and thirst is altogether different, and, at night, there is something awful about it—you couldn't describe it. This is what Peter M'Laughlan heard.

"Do you hear that?" he asked the other preacher.

The little parson said he did. Perhaps he only heard the weak lowing of cattle.

"Do you think that God will hear us when He does not hear that?" asked Peter.
The parson stared at him for a moment and then got into his buggy and drove away, greatly shocked and deeply offended. But, later on, over tea at the homestead, he said that he felt sure that that “unfortunate man,” Peter M'Laughlan, was not in his right mind; that his wandering, irregular life, or the heat, must have affected him.

I well remember the day I first heard Peter M'Laughlan preach. I was about seventeen. We used sometimes to attend service held on Sunday afternoon, about once a month, in a little slab-and-bark school-house in the scrub off the main road, three miles or so from our selection. School was held in this hut for a few weeks or a few months, now and again, when a teacher could be got to stay there and teach, and cook for himself, for a pound a week, more or less, contributed by the parents. A parson from the farming town to the east, or the pastoral town over the ridges to the west, used to come in his buggy, when it didn't rain and wasn't too hot, to hold the service.

I remember that Sunday. It was a blazing hot day towards the end of a long drought which ruined many round there. The parson was expected, and a good few had come to “chapel” in spring carts, on horseback, and on foot; farmers and their wives and sons and daughters. The children had been brought here to Sunday-school, taught by some of the girls, in the morning. I can see it all now quite plain: The one-roomed hut, for it was no more, with the stunted blue-grey gum scrub all round. The white road, so hot that you could cook eggs in the dust. The horses tied up, across the road, in the supposed shade under clumps of scraggy saplings along by the fence of a cattle-run. The little crowd outside the hut: Selectors in washed and mended tweeds, some with paper collars, some wearing starched and ironed white coats, and in blucher boots, greased or blackened, or the young men wearing “larstins.” The women and girls in print frocks, with a bright bit of ribbon here and there amongst the girls.

The people didn't like to go inside and sit down before the minister came. The wretched hut was a school sometimes, with a clay fireplace where the teacher cooked, and a corner screened off with sacking where he had his bunk; it was a camp for tramps at other times, or lizards and possums; but to-day it was a house of God, and as such the people respected it.

The town parson didn't turn up. Perhaps he was unwell, or maybe the hot, dusty ten-mile drive was too much for him to face. One of the farmers, who had tried to conduct service on a similar occasion, had broken down in the middle of it, so he was out of the question. We waited for about an hour, and then who should happen along but Peter M'Laughlan. He was on his way to see a sick friend at a sheep-station over the ridges, but he said that he could spare an hour or two. Peter tied up his horse under a bush
shed at the back of the hut, and we followed him in.

The school had been furnished with a rough deal table and a wooden chair for the teacher, and with a few rickety desks and benches cadged from an old “provisional” school in town when the new public school was built; and the desks and benches had been fastened to the floor to strengthen them; they had been made for “infant” classes, and youth out our way ran to length. But when grown men over six feet high squeezed in behind the desks and sat down, the effect was ridiculous.

Above us bare tie-beams and the sapling rafters (with the bark still on), and the inner sides of the sheets of stringy bark that formed the roof. The slabs had been lined with sacking at one time, but most of it had fallen away; there were wide cracks between the slabs and we could see the white sunlight outside, with a strip of dark shade, like a deep trench in the white ground, by the back wall. Someone had brought a canvas waterbag and hung it to the beam on the other side of the minister's table, with a pint-pot over the tap, and the drip, drip from the bag made the whole place seem cooler.

Peter M'Laughlan was dressed in washed and mended tweed vest and trousers, and had on a long, light-coloured coat of a material which we called “Chinese silk.” He wore a cotton shirt with collar attached, and blucher boots.

He gave out a hymn in his quiet, natural way, said a prayer, gave out another hymn, read a chapter from the Bible, and then gave out another hymn. They liked to sing, out in those places. The Smiths used to bring a cranky little harmonium in the back of their old dog-cart, and Clare Smith used to accompany the hymns. She was a pretty girl, fair, and could play and sing well. I used to think she had the sweetest voice I ever heard—But—ah, well!—

Peter didn't sing himself, at first. I got the notion that he couldn't. While they were singing he stood loosely, with one hand in his trouser-pocket, scratching his beard with his hymn book, looking as if he were thinking things over, and only rousing himself to give another verse. He forgot to give it once or twice, but we got through all right. I noticed the wife of one of the men who had asked Peter to preach looking rather black at her husband, and I reckoned that he'd get it hotter than the weather on the way home.

Then Peter stood up and commenced to preach. At first he stood with both hands in his pockets, his coat ruffled back, and there was the stem of a clay pipe sticking out of his waistcoat-pocket. The pipe fascinated me for a while, but after that I forgot the pipe and was fascinated by the man. Peter's face was one that didn't strike you at first with its full strength, it grew on
you; it grew on me, and before he had done preaching I thought it was the
noblest face I had ever seen.

He didn't preach much of hope in this world. How could he? The drought
had been blazing over these districts for nearly a year, with, now and again,
a shower that was a mockery. Wheat came up a few inches and was mown
for hay, or the cattle turned on it; and last year there had been rust and smut
in the wheat. On top of it all, pleuro-pneumonia had somehow been
introduced into the district. One big farmer lost fifty milkers in a week.

Peter M'Laughlan didn't preach much of hope in this world; how could
he? There were men there who had slaved for twenty, thirty, forty years;
worked as farmers have to work in few other lands—first to clear the
stubborn bush, then to fence the ground, and manure it, and force crops
from it—and for what? There was Cox, the farmer, starved off his selection
after thirty years and going Out Back with his drays to work at tank-
sinking for a squatter. There was his eldest son going shearing or
droving—anything he could get to do—a stoop-shouldered, young-old man
of thirty. And behind them, in the end, a dusty patch in the scrub, a fence
post here and there, a pile of chimney stones and a hardwood slab or two
where the hut had been, would be all that there was to show for thirty hard
years of the father's life and twenty of the son's.

I forget Peter's text—if he had a text; but the gist of his sermon was that
there was a God—there was a Heaven! And there were men there listening
who needed to believe these things. There was old Ross from across the
Creek, old, though not sixty, a hard man. Only last week he had broken
down and fallen on his knees on the baked sods in the middle of his
ploughed ground and prayed for rain. His frightened boys had taken him
home, and the same afternoon, when they brought news of four more cows
down with “the pleuro” in an outer paddock, he stood up outside his own
doors and shook his fist at the brassy sky and cursed high Heaven, to the
terror of his family, till his brave, sun-browned wife dragged him within,
and soothed him. Peter M'Laughlan knew all about this.

Ross's family had the doctor out to him, and persuaded him to come to
church this Sunday. The old man sat on the front seat, stooping forward,
his elbow resting on the desk, his chin on his hand, bunching up his beard
over his mouth with his fingers and staring gloomily at Peter with dark,
piercing eyes from under bushy eyebrows, just as I've since seen a
Scotchman stare at Max O'Rell all through a humorous lecture called “A
Nicht wi' Sandy.”

Ross's right hand resting on the desk was very eloquent: horny, scarred
and knotted at every joint, with broken, twisted nails, and nearly closed, as
though fitted to the handle of an axe or a spade. Ross was an educated man
(he had a regular library of books at home), and perhaps that's why he suffered so much.

Peter preached as if he were speaking quietly to one person only, but every word was plain, and every sentence went straight to someone. I believe he had looked every soul in the eyes before he had done. Once he said something and caught my eye, and I felt a sudden lump in my throat. There was a boy there, a pale, sensitive boy who was eating his heart out because of things he didn't understand. He was ambitious and longed for something different from this life; he'd written a story or two and some rhymes for the local paper; his companions considered him a "bit ratty" and the grown-up people thought him a "bit wrong in the head," or at least "queer." And during his sermon Peter spoke of "unsatisfied longings," of the hope of something better, and said that one had to suffer much and for long years before he could preach or write; and then he looked at that boy. I knew the boy very well; he has risen in the world since then.

Peter spoke of the life we lived, of the things we knew, and used the names and terms that we used. "I don't know whether it was a blanky sermon or a blanky lecture," said long Jim Bullock afterwards, "but it was straight and hit some of us hard. It hit me once or twice, I can tell yer." Peter spoke of our lives: "And there is beauty—even in this life and in this place," he said. "Nothing is wasted—nothing is without reason. There is beauty even in this place—"

I noticed something like the hint of a hard smile on Ross's face; he moved the hand on the desk and tightened it.

"Yes," said Peter, as if in answer to Ross's expression, and the movement of his hand, "there is beauty in this life here. After a good season, and when the bush is tall and dry, when the bush fires threaten a man's ripened wheat, there are tired men who run and ride from miles round to help that man, and who fight the fire all night—and some of them may have been wrangling with him for years. And in the morning, when the wheat is saved, and the danger is past, when the fire is beaten out or turned, there are blackened, grimy hands that come together and grip—hands that have not joined for many a long day."

Old Palmer, Ross's neighbour, moved uneasily. He had once helped Ross to put a fire out, but they had quarrelled again since. Ross still sat in the same position, looking the hard man he was. Peter glanced at Ross, looked down and thought a while, and then went on.

"There is beauty even in this life and in this place. When a man loses his farm or his stock, or his crop through no fault of his own, there are poor men who put their hands into their pockets to help him."

Old Kurtz, over the ridge, had had his stacked crop of wheat in sheaf
burned—some scoundrel put a match to it at night—and the farmers round had collected nearly fifty pounds for him.

“There is beauty even in this life and in this place. In the drought, when the cattle lie down and cannot rise, neighbours help neighbours to lift them. When one man has hay or chaff and no stock, he gives it or sells it cheaply to the poor man who has starving cattle and no fodder.”

I only knew one or two instances of this kind; but Peter was telling us what man should do as well as what they did.

“When a man meets with an accident, or dies, there are young men who go with their ploughs and horses and plough the ground for him, or his widow, and put in the crop.”

Jim Bullock and one or two other young men squirmed. They had ploughed old Leonard's land for him when he met with an accident—a broken leg got by a kick from a horse. They had also ploughed the ground for Mrs. Phipps when her husband died; working, by the way, all Saturday afternoon and Sunday, for they were very busy at home at that time.

“There is beauty even in this life and in this place. There are women who were friends in girlhood and who quarrelled bitterly over a careless word, an idle tale, or some paltry thing, who live within a mile of each other and have not spoken for years; yet let one fall ill, or lose husband or child, and the other will hurry across to her place and take off her bonnet and tuck up her sleeves, and set to work to help straighten things, and they will kiss, and cry in each other's arms, and be sisters again.”

I saw tears in the eyes of two hard-faced women I knew; but they were smiling to each other through their tears.

“And now,” said Peter, “I want to talk to you about some other things. I am not preaching as a man who has been taught to preach comfortably, but as a man who has learned in the world's hard school. I know what trouble is. Men,” he said, still speaking quietly, “and women too! I have been through trouble as deep as yours—perhaps deeper. I know how you toil and suffer, I know what battles you fight: I know. I, too, fought a battle, and I carry a load and am fighting a battle still. But this is not what I wanted to talk to you about. I have nothing to say against a young man going away to better himself; but there are young men who go Out Back shearing or droving, young men who are good-hearted but careless, who make cheques and spend them gambling or drinking, and never think of the old folk at home until it is too late.”

Jim Bullock squirmed again. He had gone Out Back last season and made a cheque, and lost most of it on horse-racing and cards.

“They never think—they cannot think how, perhaps, long years ago, the old father, as a young man, and his brave young wife, came out here and
buried themselves in the lonely Bush and toiled for years, trying—it does not matter whether they failed or not—trying to make homes for their children; toiled till the young man was bowed and grey, and the young wife brown and wrinkled and worn out. Exiles they were in the early days—boy-husbands and girl-wives some of them, who left their native lands, who left all that was dear, that seemed beautiful, that seemed to make life worth living, and sacrificed their young lives in drought and utter loneliness to make homes for their children. I want you young men to think of this. Some of them came from England, Ireland, Bonnie Scotland.” (Ross straightened up and let his hands fall loosely on his knees.) “Some from Europe—your foreign fathers—some from across the Rhine.” (We looked at old Kurtz. He seemed affected.) 

Then Peter paused for a moment and blinked thoughtfully at Ross; then he took a drink of water. I can see now that the whole thing was a battle between Peter M’Laughlan and Robert Ross—Scot met Scot. “It seemed to me,” Jim Bullock said afterwards, “that Peter was only tryin' to make some on us blanky well blubber.”

“And there are men,” Peter went on, “who have struggled and suffered and failed, and who have fought and failed again till their tempers are spoiled, until they grow bitter. They go in for self-pity, and self-pity leads to moping and brooding and madness; self-pity is the most selfish and useless thing on the face of God's earth. It is cruel, it is deadly, both to the man and to those who love him, and whom he ought to love. His load grows heavier daily in his imagination, and he sinks down until it is in him to curse God and die. He ceases to care for or to think of his children who are working to help him.” (Ross's sons were good, hard-working boys.) “Or the brave wife who has been so true to him for many hard years, who left home and friends and country for his sake. Who bears up in the blackest of times, and persists in looking at the bright side of things for his sake; who has suffered more than he if he only knew it, and suffers now, through him and because of him, but who is patient and bright and cheerful while her heart is breaking. He thinks she does not suffer, that she cannot suffer as a man does. My God! he doesn't know. He has forgotten in her the bright, fresh-faced, loving lassie he won long years ago—long years ago—”

There was a sob, like the sob of an overridden horse as it sinks down broken-hearted, and Ross's arms went out on the desk in front of him, and his head went down on them. He was beaten.

He was steered out gently with his wife on one side of him and his eldest son on the other.

“Don't be alarmed, my friends,” said Peter, standing by the water-bag
with one hand on the tap and the pannikin in the other, “Mr. Ross has not been well lately, and the heat has been too much for him.” And he went out after Ross. They took him round under the bush shed behind the hut, where it was cooler.

When Peter came back to his place he seemed to have changed his whole manner and tone. “Our friend, Mr. Ross, is much better,” he said. “We will now sing”—he glanced at Clara Smith—“we will now sing ‘Shall we Gather at the River?’ ” We all knew that hymn; it was a favourite round there, and Clara played it well in spite of the harmonium.

And Peter sang—the first and last time I ever heard him sing. I have no ear for music; but never before nor since have I heard a man's voice that stirred me as Peter M'Laughlan's. We stood like emus, listening to him all through one verse, then we pulled ourselves together.

‘Shall we gather at the River,
Where bright angels' feet have trod—’

The only “rivers” round there were barren creeks, the best of them only strings of muddy waterholes, and across the ridge, on the sheep runs, the creeks were dry gutters, with baked banks and beds and perhaps a mudhole every mile or so.

‘Gather with the saints at the River
That flows by the throne of God.’

Peter's voice trembled and broke. He caught his breath, and his eyes filled. But he smiled then—he stood smiling at us through his tears.

‘The beautiful, the beautiful River,
That flows by the throne of God.’

Outside I saw women kiss each other who had been at daggers drawn ever since I could remember, and men shake hands silently who had hated each other for years. Every family wanted Peter to come to tea, but he went across to Ross's, and afterwards down to Kurtz's place, where he bled and inoculated six cows in a new way; and after that he rode off over the Gap to see his friend.
His Brother's Keeper

‘By his paths through the parched desolation,  
Hot rides and the terrible tramps;  
By the hunger, the thirst, the privation  
Of his work in the furthermost camps;

‘By his worth in the light that shall search men  
And prove—ay! and justify each—  
I place him in front of all Churchmen  
Who feel not, who know not—but preach!’

The Christ of the Never.

I told you about Peter M'Laughlan, and how he preached in the little slab-and-bark school-house in the scrub on Ross's Creek one hot Sunday afternoon long ago, when the drought was ruining the brave farmers, and breaking their hearts. And how hard old Ross broke down and blubbered, and had to be taken out of church.

I left home and drifted to Sydney, and “back into the Great North-West where all the rovers go,” and knocked about the country for six or seven years before I met Peter again. I was young yet, but felt old at times; how often I wished when in the hot, rough shearing-shed, or in the bare “men's hut” by the flicker of the stinking slush-lamp at night, or the wretched wayside shanty with its drink-madness and blasphemy, or trampling the dusty, endless track, that I could fall back with all the experience I'd got, and sit once more in the little “chapell” on Ross's Creek and hear Peter M'Laughlan and the struggling selectors sing “Shall We Gather at the River?” and then go out and start life afresh.

My old school chum and Bush mate, Jack Barnes, had married pretty little Clara Smith, who used to play the harmonium in chapel. I nearly broke my heart when they were married, but then I was a young fool. Clara was a year or so older than I, and I could never get away from a boyish feeling of reverence for her, as if she were something above and out of my world. And so, while I was worshipping her in chapel once a month, and at picnics and parties in between, but always at a distance, Jack used to ride up to Smith's place on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, and on other days, and hang his horse up outside, or turn it out in the paddock, and argue with old Smith, and agree with the old woman, and court Clara on the sly.

It was at their wedding that I first got the worse for drink.

Jack was a blue-eyed, curly black-haired, careless, popular young scamp; as good-hearted as he was careless. He could ride like a circus monkey, do
all kinds of Bush work, add two columns of figures at once, and write like copper-plate.

He was given to drinking, gambling and roving. He steadied up when he got married, and started on a small selection of his own; but within the year Clara was living in a back skillion of her father's house and Jack was up-country shearing. He was ringer of the shed at Piora Station one season, and made a decent cheque; but within a fortnight after the shed cut out he turned up at home with about thirty shillings in his pocket. He had fallen from his horse in the creek near Smith's, and altogether was a nice sort of young husband to go home to poor, heart-broken Clara.

I remember that time well. She stopped me one day as I was riding past to ask me if I'd seen Jack, and I got off my horse. Her chin and mouth began to twitch and tremble, and I saw her eyes filling with tears. She laid her hand on my arm and asked me to promise not to drink with Jack if I met him, but to try and persuade him to come home. And—well, have you ever, no matter at what time or place, felt a sudden mad longing to take the one woman you can't have in your arms and kiss her—and damn the world? I got on my horse again. She must have thought me a brute, but I felt safer there. And when I thought how I had nearly made a fool of myself, and been a cowardly brute, and a rotten mate to my mate, I rode ten miles to find Jack and get him home.

He straightened up again after a bit and went out and got another shed, and they say that Peter M'Laughlan got hold of him there. I don't know what Peter did to him—Jack never spoke of it, even to me, his old mate; but, anyway, at the end of the shearing season Jack's cheque came home to Clara in a registered envelope, addressed in Peter's handwriting, and about a week later Jack turned up a changed man.

He got work as a temporary clerk in the Lands Office at Solong, a pretty little farming town, encircled by blue hills, on the banks of a clear, willow-fringed river, where there were rich, black-soil farms, and vineyards on the red soil slopes, and blue peaks in the distance. It was a great contrast to Ross's Creek. Jack paid a deposit on an allotment of land on the river bank, and built a little weatherboard box of a cottage in his spare time, and planted roses and grape-vines to hide its ugliness by and by. It wasn't much of a place, but Clara was mighty proud of if because it was “our house.” They were very happy, and she was beginning to feel sure of Jack. She believed that the miserable old time was all past and gone.

When the work at the Lands Office gave out, Jack did all sorts of jobs about town, and at last, one shearing season, when there was a heavy clip and shearers were getting £1 a hundred, he decided to go Out Back. Clara was against it, but he argued that it was the only chance for him, and she
persuaded herself that she could trust him. I was knocking about Solong at the time, and Jack and I decided to go together and share his packhorse between us. He wrote to Beenaway Shed, about three hundred miles north-west in the Great Scrubs, and got pens for both of us.

It was a fine fresh morning when we started; it was in a good season and the country looked grand. When I rode up to Jack's place I saw his horse and packhorse tied up outside the gate. He had wanted me to come up the evening before and have tea and camp at his place for the night. “Come up! man alive!” he said. “We'll make you a shakedown!” But I wouldn't; I said I had to meet a chap. Jack wouldn't have understood. I had been up before, but when I saw him and Clara so happy and comfortable, and thought of the past and my secret, and thought of myself, a useless, purposeless, restless, homeless sort of fellow, hanging out at a boarding-house, it nearly broke me up, and I had to have a drink or two afterwards. I often wonder if Clara guessed and understood. You never know how much a woman knows; but—ah, well!

Jack had taken my things home with him, and he and Clara had packed them. I found afterwards that she had washed and ironed some collars and handkerchiefs of mine during the night. Clara and Jack came out to the gate, and as I wouldn't go in to have a cup of tea there was nothing for it but to say good-bye. She was dressed in a fresh-looking print blouse and dark skirt, and wore a white hood that fell back from her head; she was a little girl, with small, freckled features, and red-gold hair, and kind grey eyes. I thought her the freshest, and fairest, and daintiest little woman in the world!

I was Jack's mate, so she always treated me as a sort of brother-in-law, and called me by my Christian name. Mates are closer than brothers in the Bush.

When she said good-bye to Jack, I turned my back and pretended to tighten the straps and girths on the packhorse. I heard her speaking earnestly to him, and once I heard her mention Peter M'Laughlan's name. Jack answered rather impatiently, “Oh, that's all right, Clara, that's all over—past and gone. I wish you would believe it. You promised never to speak of that any more.”

I knew how it was. Jack never cared to hear about Peter; he was ashamed of the past, perhaps; besides, deep down, we feel a sort of resentment at any reference to a man who has helped or saved us in the past. It's human nature.

Then they spoke in low tones for a while, and then Jack laughed, and kissed her, and said, “Oh, I'll be back before the time's up.” Then he ran into the house to say good-bye to Mary's sister, who was staying with her,
and who was laid up with a sprained ankle.

Then Clara stepped up to me and laid her hand on my shoulder. I trembled from head to foot and hoped she didn't notice it.

“Joe,” she said, looking at me with her big, searching grey eyes, “I believe I can trust you. I want you to look after Jack. You know why. Never let him have one drink if you can help it. One drink—the first drink will do it. I want you to promise me that you will never have a drink with Jack, no matter what happens or what he says.”

“I never will,” I said, and I meant it.

“It’s the first time he’s been away from me since he gave up drinking, and if he comes back all right this time I will be sure of him, and contented. But, Joe, if he comes back wrong it will kill me; it will break my heart. I want you to promise that if anything happens you will ride or wire for Peter M’Laughlan. I hear he's wool-sorting this year at Beenaway. Promise me that if anything happens you will ride for Peter M'Laughlan and tell him, no matter what Jack says.”

“I promise,” I said.

She half held out her hand to me, but I kept both mine behind my back. I suppose she thought I didn't notice that she wanted to shake hands on the bargain; but the truth was that my hands shook so, and I didn't want her to notice that.

I got on my horse, and felt steadier. Then, “Good-bye Clara”—“Good-bye Jack.” She bore up bravely, but her eyes were brimming. Jack got on his horse, and I bent over and shook hands with her. Jack bent down and kissed her while she stood on tip-toe. “Good-bye, little woman,” he said. “Cheer up, and I'll be back before you know where you are! You mustn't fret—you know why.”

“Good-bye, Jack!” She was breaking down.

“Come on, Jack!” I said, and we rode off, turning and waving our hats to her as she stood by the gate till we turned down a bend of the road into the river.

As we jogged along with the packhorse trotting behind us, and the quart-pots and hobble chains jingling on the packsaddle, I pictured Clara running inside, to cry a while in her sister's arms, and then to bustle round and cheer up, for Jack's sake—and for the sake of something else.

“I'll christen him after you, Joe,” said Jack, later on, when we'd got confidential over our pipes in our first camp. It never seemed to enter his head that there was the ghost of a chance that it might be a girl. “I'm glad he didn't come along when I was drinking,” he said.

And as we lay rolled in our blankets under the stars I swore a big oath to myself.
We got along comfortably and reached Beenaway Station in about a week, the day before the shearer's roll-call. Jack never showed the slightest inclination to go into a shanty; and several times we talked about old times, and what damned fools we'd been throwing away our money over shanty bars shouting for loafers and cadgers. “Isn't this ever so much better, Joe?” said Jack, as we lay on our blankets smoking, one moonlight night. “There's nothing in boozing, Joe, you can take it from me. Just you sling it for a year and then look back; you won't want to touch it again. You've been straight for a couple of months. Sling it for good, Joe, before it gets a hold on you, like it did on me.”

* * * * *

It was the morning after cut-out at Beenaway, and we were glad. We were tired of the rush and roar and rattle and heat and grease and blasphemy of the big, hot, iron shed in that dusty patch in the barren scrubs. Swags were rolled up, saddle-bags packed, horses had been rounded up and driven in, the shearer's cook and his mate had had their fight, and about a hundred men—shearers, rouseabouts, wool-washers, etc.—were waiting round the little iron office to get their cheques.

We were about half through when one Bushman said to another, “Stop your damned swearin', Jim! Here's Peter M'Laughlan!” Peter walked up and the men made way for him as he went into the office. There was always considerably less swearing for a few feet round about where Peter M'Laughlan happened to be working. It seemed to be an understood thing with the men. He took no advantage, never volunteered to preach at a shed where he was working, and only spoke on Union subjects when the men asked him to. He was Shearers' Union Representative at this shed, but squatters and station managers respected him as much as the men did.

He looked much greyer now, but still stood square and straight. And his eyes still looked one through.

When Peter came out and the crowd had cleared away he took Jack aside and spoke to him in a low voice for a few minutes. I heard Jack say, “Oh, that's all right, Peter! You have my word for it,” and he got on his horse. I heard Peter say the one word, “Remember!” “Oh, that's all right,” said Jack, and he shook hands with Peter, shouted, “Come on, Joe!” and started off, with the packhorse after him.

“I wish I were going down with you, Joe,” said Peter to me, “but I can't get away till to-morrow. I've got that sick rouseabout on my hands, and I'll have to see him fixed up and started off to the hospital” (the nearest was a hundred miles away). “And, by the way, I've taken up a collection for him; I want a few shillings from you, Joe. I nearly forgot you. The poor fellow
only got in about a fortnight's work, and there's a wife and youngsters in Sydney. I'll be down after you to-morrow. I promised to go to Comesomehow and get the people together and start an agitation for a half-time school there. Anyway, I'll be there by the end of the week. Good-bye, Joe. I must get some more money for the rouser from some of those chaps before they start.”

Comesomehow was a cockatoo settlement, a bit off the track, about 150 miles on our road home, where the settlers lived like savages and the children ran wild. I reckoned that Peter would have his work cut out to start a craving for education in that place.

By saying he'd be there I think he intended to give me a hint, in case anything happened. I believe now that Jack's wife had got anxious, and had written to him.

We jogged along comfortably and happily for three or four days, and as we passed shanty after shanty, and town after town, without Jack showing the slightest inclination to pull up at any of them, I began to feel safe about him.

Then it happened in the simplest way, as most things of this sort happen if you don't watch close.

The third night it rained, rained heavens hard, and rainy nights can be mighty cold out on those plains, even in midsummer. Jack and I rigged up a strip of waterproof stuff to cover the swags on the packhorse, but the rain drove in almost horizontally, and we got wet through, blankets, clothes and all. Jack got a bad cold and coughed fit to break himself; so about daylight, when the rain held up a bit, we packed up and rode on to the next pub, a wretched little weather board place in the scrub.

Jack reckoned he'd get some stuff for his cold there. I didn't like to speak, but before we reached the place I said, “You won't touch a drink, Jack.”

“Do you think I'm a blanky fool?” said Jack, and I shut up.

The shanty was kept by a man who went by the name of Thomas, a notorious lamber-down, as I found out afterwards. He was an awkward bullock of a man, a selfish, ignorant brute, as anyone might have seen by his face; but he had a loud voice, and adopted a careless, rollicking, hail-fellow-well-met! come-in-and-sit-down-man-alive! clap-you-on-the-back style, which deceived a good many, or which a good many pretended to believe in. His missus was an animal of his own species, but she was duller and didn't bellow.

He had a rather good-looking girl there—I don't know whether she was his daughter or not. They said that when he saw the shearers coming he'd say, “Run and titivate yourself, Mary; here comes the shearers!”

But what surprised me was that Jack Barnes didn't see through Thomas;
he thought that he was all right, “a bit of a rough diamond.” There are plenty of scoundrels knocking about the world disguised as rough diamonds.

Jack had a fit of coughing when we came in.

“Why, Jack!” bellowed Thomas, “that's a regular churchyarder you've got. Go in to the kitchen fire and I'll mix you a stiff toddy.”

“No, thank you, Thomas,” said Jack, glancing at me rather sheepishly, I thought. “I'll have a hot cup of coffee presently, that'll do me more good.”

“Why, man alive, one drink won't hurt you!” said Thomas. “I know you're on the straight, and you know I'm the last man that ud try to get you off it. But you want something for that cold. You don't want to die on the track, do you? What would your missus say? That cough of yours is enough to bust a bullock.”

“Jack isn't drinking, Thomas,” I said rather shortly, “and neither am I.”

“I'll have a cup of coffee at breakfast,” said Jack; “thank you all the same, Thomas.”

“Right you are, Jack!” said Thomas. “Mary!” he roared at the girl, “chuck yerself about and get breakfast, and make a strong cup of coffee; and I say, missus” (to his wife), “git some honey and vinegar in a cup, will yer? or see if there's any of that cough stuff left in the bottle. Go into the kitchen, you chaps, and dry yourselves at the fire, you're wringing wet.”

Jack went through into the kitchen.

I stepped out to see that the horses were all right, and as I came in again through the bar, Thomas, who had slipped behind the counter, crooked his finger at me and poured out a stiff whisky. “I thought you might like to have it on the quiet,” he whispered, with a wink.

Now, there was this difference between Jack and me. When I was on the track, and healthy and contented, I could take a drink, or two drinks, and then leave it; or at other times I could drink all day, or all night, and be as happy as a lord, and be mighty sick and repentant all next day, and then not touch drink for a week; but if Jack once started, he was a lost man for days, for weeks, for months—as long as cash or credit lasted. I felt a cold coming on me this morning, and wanted a whisky, so I had a drink with Thomas. Then, of course, I shouted in my turn, keeping an eye out in case Jack should come in. I went into the kitchen and steamed with Jack for a while in front of a big log fire, taking care to keep my breath away from him. Then we went in to breakfast. Those two whiskies were all I meant to have, and we were going right on after breakfast.

It was a good breakfast, ham and eggs, and we enjoyed it. The two whiskies had got to work. I hadn't touched drink for a long time. I shouldn't like to say that Thomas put anything in the drink he gave me. Before we
started breakfast he put a glass down in front of me and said—
“There's a good ginger-ale, it will warm you up.”
I tasted it; it was rum-hot. I said nothing. What could I say?
There was some joke about Jack being married and settled and steadied
down, and me, his old mate, still on the wallaby; and Mrs. Thomas said
that I ought to follow Jack's example. And just then I felt a touch of that
loneliness that some men feel when an old drinking mate turns teetotaller.

Jack started coughing again, like an old cow with the pleuro.
“That cough will kill you, Jack,” said Thomas. “Let's put a drop of
brandy in your coffee, that won't start you, anyhow; it's real ‘Three Star.’
And he reached a bottle from the side-table.

I should have stood up then, for my man-hood, for my mate, and for little
Clara, but I half rose from my chair, and Jack laughed and said, “Sit down,
Joe, you old fool, you're tanked. I know all about your seeing about the
horse, and your ginger-ales. It's all right, old man. Do you think I'm going
on the booze? Why, I'll have to hold you on the horse all day.” I sat down
and took up my glass.

“Here's luck, Joe!” said Jack, laughing, and lifting up his cup of coffee
with the brandy in it. “Here's luck, Joe.”

Then suddenly, and as clearly as I ever heard it, came Clara's voice to my
ear: “Promise me, whatever you do, that you will never have a drink with
Jack.” And I felt cold and sick to the stomach.

I got up and went out. They thought that the drink had made me sick, but
if I'd stayed there another minute I would have tackled Thomas; and I knew
that I needed a clear head to tackle a bullock like him. I walked about a bit,
and when I came in again Jack and Thomas were in the bar, and Jack had a
glass before him.

“Come on, Joe, you old bounder,” said Jack, “come and have a whisky-
and-soda; it will straighten you up.”
“What's that you're drinking, Jack?” I asked.
“Oh, don't be a fool!” said Jack. “One drink won't hurt me. Do you think
I'm going on the booze? Have a soda and straighten up; we must make a
start directly.”

I remember we had two or three whiskies, and then suddenly I tackled
Thomas, and Jack was holding me back, and laughing and swearing at me
at the same time, and I had a tussle with him; and then I was suddenly
calmer and sensible, and we were shaking hands all round, and Jack was
talking about just one more spree for the sake of old times.

“A bit of a booze won't hurt me, Joe, you old fool,” he said. “We'll have
one more night of it, for the sake of Auld Lang Syne, and start at daylight
in the morning. You go and see to the horses, it will straighten you up.
Take the saddles off and hobble 'em out.”

But I insisted on starting at once, and Jack promised he would. We were gloriously happy for an hour or so, and then I went to sleep.

When I woke it was late in the afternoon. I was very giddy and shaky; the girl brought me a whisky-and-soda, and that steadied me. Some more shearers had arrived, and Jack was playing cards with two of them on top of a cask in the bar. Thomas was dead drunk on the floor, or pretending to be so, and his wife was behind the bar. I went out to see to the horses; I found them in a bush yard at the back. The packhorse was rolling in the mud with the pack-saddle and saddle-bags on. One of the chaps helped me take off the saddles and put them in the harness-room behind the kitchen.

I'll pass over that night. It wouldn't be edifying to the great, steady-living, sober majority, and the others, the ne'er-do-wells, the rovers, wrecks and failures, will understand only too well without being told—only too well, God help us!

When I woke in the morning I couldn't have touched a drink to save my life. I was fearfully shaky, and swimming about the head, but I put my head over a tub under the pump and got the girl to pump for a while, and then I drank a pint of tea and managed to keep it down, and felt better.

All through the last half of the night I'd kept saying, in a sort of drink nightmare, “I'll go for Peter M'Laughlan in the morning. I'll go for Peter as soon as I can stand!” and repeating Clara Barnes's words, “Ride for Peter if anything happens. Ride for Peter M'Laughlan.”

There were drunken shearers, horsemen and swagmen sleeping all over the place, and in all sorts of odd positions; some on the verandah with their heads on their swags, one sitting back against the wall, and one on the broad of his back with his head on the bare boards and his mouth open.

I went in to see how Jack was. He was lying in the parlour on a horse-hair sofa, that might have seen better days in some clean home in the woman-and-girl world. He had been drinking and playing cards till early that morning, and he looked awful—he looked as if he'd been boozing for a month.

“See what you've done!” he said, sitting up and glaring at me; then he said, “Bring me a whisky-and-soda, Joe, for God's sake!”

I got a whisky-and-soda from the girl and took it to him.

I talked to him for a while, and at last he said, “Well, go and get the horses and we'll start.”

I got the horses ready and brought them round to the front, but by that time he'd had more to drink, and he said he wanted a sleep before he started. Next, he was playing cards with one of the chaps, and asked me to wait till he'd finished that game. I knew he'd keep promising and
humbugging me till there was a row, so at last I got him aside and said—

“Look here, Jack, I'm going for Peter M'Laughlan—”

“Go to hell!” said Jack.

I put the other horses back in the yard, the saddles in the skillion, got on my horse and rode off. Thomas and the others asked me no questions, they took no notice. In a place like that a man could do anything, short of hanging himself, without anyone interfering or being surprised. And probably, if he did hang himself, they'd let him swing for a while to get a taste of it.

Comesomehow was about fifteen miles back on a track off the main road. I reckoned that I could find Peter and bring him on by the afternoon, and I rode hard, sick as I was. I was too sick to smoke.

As it happened, Peter had started early from his last camp and I caught him just as he was turning off into Comesomehow track.

“What's up, Joe?” he asked as I rode up to him—but he could see.

“Jack Barnes is on the booze at Thomas's,” I said.

Peter just looked right through me. Then he turned his horse's head without a word, and rode back with me. And, after a while, he said, as if to himself,—

“Poor Clara! Poor little lassie!”

By the time we reached the shanty it was well on in the afternoon. A fight was stopped in the first round, and voices were lowered, when the chaps caught sight of us. As Peter walked into the bar one or two drunks straightened themselves and took off their hats with drunken sentiment.

“Where is Jack Barnes, Thomas?” asked Peter, quietly.

“He's in there if you want to see him,” said Thomas, jerking his head towards the parlour.

We went in, and when Peter saw Jack lying there I noticed that the swift, haunted look came into his eyes, as if he'd seen a ghost of the past.

He sat down by the sofa to wait until Jack woke. I thought as he sat there that his eyes were like a woman's for sympathy and like a dog's for faithfulness. I was very shaky.

Presently Thomas looked in. “Is there anything I can do for you, M'Laughlan?” he asked in as civil a tone as he could get to.

“Yes,” said Peter, “bring me a flask of your best whisky—your own, mind—and a glass.”

“We shall need the whisky for him on the track, Joe,” said Peter, when the flask came. “Get another glass and a bottle of soda; you want a nip.” He poured out a drink for himself.

“The first thing we've got to do is to get him away; then I'll soon put him on his feet. But we'll let him sleep a while longer. I find I've got business
near Solong; and I'm going down with you.”

By and by Jack woke up and glared round, and when he caught sight of Peter he just reached for his hands and said, “Peter! Thank God you've come!” Then he said, “But I must have a drink first, Peter,”

“All right, Jack, you shall have a drink,” said Peter; and he gave him a stiff nobbler. It steadied Jack a bit.

“Now listen to me, Jack,” said Peter. “How much money have you got left?”

“I—I can't think,” said Jack. “I've got a cheque for twenty pounds here, sewn inside my shirt.”

“Yes; but you drew thirty-six in three cheques. Where's the rest?”

“Thomas has ten,” said Jack, “and the six—well, the six is gone. I was playing cards last night.”

Peter stepped out into the bar.

“Look here, Thomas,” he said quietly, “you've got a ten-pounds' cheque from Barnes.”

“I know I have.”

“Well, how much of it does he owe you?”

“The whole, and more.”

“Do you mean to tell me that? He has only been here since yesterday morning.”

“Yes; but he's been shoutin' all round. Look at all these chaps here.”

“They only came yesterday afternoon,” said Peter. “Here, you had best take this and give me the cheque;” and Peter laid a five-pound note on the bar. Thomas bucked at first, but in the end he handed over the cheque—he had had several warnings from the police. Then he suddenly lost all control over himself; he came round from behind the bar and faced Peter.

“Now, look here, you mongrel parson!” he said. “What the hell do you mean by coming into my bar and interfering with me. Who are you anyway?” He used the worst oaths that were used in the Bush. “Take off your bloody coat!” he roared at last, shaping up to Peter.

Peter stepped back a pace and buttoned his coat and threw back his head.

“No need to take off my coat, Thomas,” he said, “I am ready.” He said it very quietly, but there was a danger-signal—a red light in his eyes. He was quiet-voiced but hard-knuckled, as some had reason to know.

Thomas balked like a bull at a spread umbrella. Jack lurched past me as I stood in the parlour door, but I caught him and held him back; and almost at the same moment the wretched old boozer we called “Awful Example,” who had been sitting huddled, a dirty bundle of rags and beard and hair, in the corner of the bar, struggled to his feet, staggered forward and faced Thomas, looking once more like something that might have been a man.
He snatched a thick glass bottle from the counter and held it by the neck in his right hand.

“Stand back, Thomas!” he shouted. “Lay a hand—lay a finger on Peter M'Laughlan, and I'll smash your head, as sure as there's a God above us and I'm a ruined man!”

Peter took “Awful” gently by the shoulders and sat him down. “You keep quiet, old man,” he said; “nothing is going to happen.” Thomas went round behind the bar, muttering something about it not being worth his while to, etc.

“You go and get the horses ready, Joe,” said Peter to me; “and you sit down, Jack, and keep quiet.”

“He can get the horses,” growled Thomas, from behind the bar, “but I'm damned if he gets the saddles. I've got them locked up, and I'll something well keep them till Barnes is sober enough to pay me what he owes.”

Just then a tall, good-looking chap, with dark-blue eyes and a long, light-coloured moustache, stepped into the bar from the crowd on the verandah.

“What's all this, Thomas?” he asked.

“What's that got to do with you, Gentleman-Once?” shouted Thomas.

“I think it's got something to do with me,” said Gentleman-Once. “Now, look here, Thomas; you can do pretty well what you like with us poor devils, and you know it, but we draw the line at Peter M'Laughlan. If you really itch for the thrashing you deserve, you must tempt someone else to give it to you.”

“What the —— are you talking about?” snorted Thomas. “You're drunk or ratty!”

“What's the trouble, M'Laughlan?” asked Gentleman-Once, turning to Peter.

“No trouble at all, Gentleman-Once,” said Peter; “thank you all the same. I've managed worse men than our friend Thomas. Now, Thomas, don't you think it would pay you best to hand over the key of the harness-room and have done with this nonsense? I'm a patient man—a very patient man—but I've not always been so, and the old blood comes up sometimes, you know.”

Thomas couldn't stand this sort of language, because he couldn't understand it. He threw the key on the bar, and told us to clear out.

We were very quiet riding along the track that evening. Peter gave Jack a nip now and again from the flask, and before we turned in in camp he gave him what he called a soothing draught from a little medicine chest that he carried in his saddle-bag. Jack had got rid of his cough; he slept all night, and in the morning, after he'd drunk a pint of mutton broth that Peter had made in one of the billies, he was all right—except that he was quiet and
ashamed. I had never known him to be so quiet, and for such a length of
time, since we were boys together. He had learned his own weakness; he'd
lost all his cocksureness. I know now just exactly how he felt. He felt as if
his sober year had been lost and he would have to live it all over again.

Peter didn't preach. He just jogged along and camped with us as if he
were an ordinary, every-day mate. He yarnd about all sorts of things. He
could tell good yarns, and, when he was fairly on, you could listen to him
all night. He never preached except when he was asked to hold service in
some Bush pub, station-homestead or Bush church. But in a case like ours
he had a way of telling a little life story, with something in it that hit, and
hit hard. He'd generally begin quietly, when we were comfortable with our
pipes in camp after tea, with “I once knew a young man—” or “That
reminds me of a young fellow I knew—” and so on. You never knew when
he was going to begin, or when he was going to hit you. In our last camp,
before we reached Solong, he told two of his time-fuse yarns. I haven't
time to tell them now, but one stuffed up my pipe for a while, and made
Jack's hand tremble when he tried to light his. I'm glad it was too dark to
see our faces. We lay a good while afterwards, rolled in our blankets, and
couldn't get to sleep for thinking; but Peter seemed to fall asleep as soon as
he turned in.

Next day he told Jack not to tell Clara that he'd come down with us. He
said he wouldn't go right into Solong with us; he was going back along
another road to stay a day or two with an old friend of his.

When we reached Solong we stopped on the river bank just out of sight
of Jack's house. Peter took the ten-pound cheque from his pocket and gave
it to Jack. He hadn't seen Peter give the shanty-keeper the five-pound note.

“But I owed Thomas something,” said Jack, staring. “However did you
manage to get the cheque out of him?”

“Never mind, Jack, I managed,” said Peter.

Jack sat silent for a while, then he began to breathe hard.

“I don't know what to say, Peter.”

“Say nothing, Jack. Only promise me that you will give Clara the
cheques as soon as you go home, and let her take care of the cash for a
while.”

“I will,” said Jack.

Jack looked down at the ground for a while, then lifted his head and
looked Peter in the eyes.

“Peter,” he said, “I can't speak. I'm ashamed to make a promise; I've
broken so many. I'll try to thank you in a year's time from now.”

“I ask for no promises,” said Peter, and he held out his hand. Jack
gripped it.
“Aren't you coming home with me, Joe?” he asked.
“No,” I said; “I'll go into town. See you in the morning.”
Jack rode on. When he'd got along a bit, Peter left his horse and moved up to the head of the lane to watch him, and I followed. As Jack neared the cottage we saw a little figure in a cloak run out to the front gate. She had heard the horses and the jingle of the campware on the packsaddle. We saw Jack jump down and take her in his arms. I looked at Peter, and as he watched them, something, that might have been a strange look of the old days, came into his eyes.
He shook hands with me. “Good-bye, Joe.”
He took the track that ran along the foot of the spurs by the river, and up over a gap in the curve of blue hills, and down and out west towards the Big Scrubs. And as he rounded the last spur, with his pack-horse trotting after him, I think he must have felt very lonely.
And I felt lonely, too.
The Story of Gentleman-Once

‘They learn the world from black-sheep,
Who know it all too well.’

—Out-Back.

Peter M'Laughlan, Bush missionary, Joe Wilson and his mate, Jack Barnes, shearers for the present, and a casual swagman named Jack Mitchell, were camped at Cox's Crossing in a bend of Eurunderee Creek.

It was a grassy little flat with gum-trees standing clear and clean like a park. At the back was a steep grassy ridge, and far away across the creek to the south a spur from the Blue Mountain range ran west, with a tall, blue peak showing clear in the broad moonlight, yet dreamlike and distant over the sweeps of dark green bush.

There was the jingle of hobble-chains and a crunching at the grass where the horses moved in the soft shadows among the trees. Up the creek on the other side was a surveyors' camp, and from there now and again came the sound of a good voice singing verses of old songs; and, later on, the sound of a violin and a cornet being played, sometimes together and sometimes each on its own.

Wilson and Barnes were on their way home from shearing at Beenaway Shed. They had been rescued by Peter M'Laughlan from a wayside shanty where they had fallen, in spite of mutual oaths and past promises, sacred and profane.

They were in a bad way, and were knocking down their cheques beautifully, when Peter M'Laughlan came along. He rescued them, and some of their cash, from the shanty-keeper, and was riding home with them, on some pretence—because he had known them as boys, because Joe Wilson had a vein of poetry in him, a something in sympathy with something in Peter; because Jack Barnes had a dear little girl-wife who was much too good for him, and who was now anxiously waiting for him in the pretty little town of Solong; because, perhaps, of something in Peter's early past which was a mystery. Simply and plainly, because Peter M'Laughlan was the kindest, straightest and truest man in the West.

They all knew Mitchell, and welcomed him heartily when he turned up at their camp, because he was a pathetic humorist and a kindly cynic—a “hard-case” as the Bushmen say.

Peter was about fifty, and the other three were young men.

There was another man in camp who didn't count, and was supposed to be dead. Old Danny Quinn, champion beer-chewer of the district, was on
his way out, after a spree, to one of Rouse's stations, where, for the sake of past services—long past—and because of old times, he was supposed to be working. He had spent his last penny a week before and had clung to his last-hope hotel until the landlord had taken him in one hand and his swag in the other and lifted them both clear of the verandah. Danny had blundered on, this far, somehow; he was the last in the world who could have told how, and had managed to light a fire; then he lay with his head on his swag and enjoyed nips of whisky in judicious doses and at reasonable intervals, and later on a tot of mutton broth, which he made in one of the billies.

It was after tea. Peter sat on a log by the fire with Joe and Jack Mitchell on one side, and Jack Barnes on the other. Jack Mitchell sat on the grass with his back to the log, his knees drawn up, and his arms abroad on them: his most comfortable position and one that seemed to favour the flow of his philosophy. They talked of Bush things or reflected, sometimes all three together, sometimes by turns.

From the surveyors' camp—

‘I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn—’

The breeze from the west strengthened, and the voice was blown away.

“That chap seems a bit sentimental, but he's got a good voice,” said Mitchell. Then he remarked—

“I wonder if old Danny remembers?”

And presently Peter said quietly, as if the thought had just occurred to him—

“By the way, Mitchell, I forgot to ask after your old folk. I knew your father, you know.”

“Oh, they're all right, Peter, thank you.”

“ Heard from them lately?” asked Peter in a lazy tone.

Mitchell straightened himself up. “N—no. To tell the truth, Peter, I haven't written for—I don't know how long.”

Peter smoked reflectively.

“I remember your father well, Jack,” he said. “He was a big-hearted man.”

Old Danny was heard remonstrating loudly with spirits from a warmer clime than Australia, and Peter stepped over to soothe him.

“I thought I'd get it, directly after I opened my mouth,” said Mitchell. “I
suppose it will be your turn next, Joe.”
   “I suppose so,” said Joe, resignedly.
   The wind fell.

   ‘I remember, I remember,
   And it gives me little joy,
   To think I'm further off from heaven,
   Than when I was a boy!’

When Peter came back another thought seemed to have occurred to him.
   “How's your mother getting on, Joe?” he asked. “She shifted to Sydney
after your father died, didn't she?”
   “Oh, she's getting on all right!” said Joe, without elaboration.
   “Keeping a boarding-house, isn't she?”
   “Yes,” said Joe.
   “Hard to make ends meet, I suppose?” said Peter. “It's almost a harder
life than it could have been on the old Selection, and there's none of the old
independence about it. A woman like your mother must feel it, Joe.”
   “Oh, she's all right,” said Joe. “She's used to it by this time. I manage to
send her a few pounds now and again. I send her all I can,” he added
resentfully.
   Peter sat corrected for a few moments. Then he seemed to change the
subject.
   “It's some time since you were in Sydney last, isn't it, Joe?”
   “Yes, Peter,” said Joe. “I haven't been there for two years. I never did any
good there. I'm far better knocking about Out Back.”
   There was a pause.
   “Some men seem to get on better in one place, some in another,”
reflected Mitchell, lazily. “For my part, I seem to get on better in another.”
   Peter blinked, re-lit his pipe with a stick from the fire and reflected.
The surveyor's song had been encored:—

   ‘I remember, I remember—’

Perhaps Peter remembered. Joe did, but there were no vines round the
house where he was born, only drought and dust, and raspy voices raised in
recomposition, and hardship most times.
   “I remember,” said Peter, quietly, “I remember a young fellow at home
in the old country. He had every advantage. He had a first-class education,
a great deal more money than he needed—almost as much as he asked for,
and nearly as much freedom as he wanted. His father was an English gentleman and his mother an English gentlewoman. The old man was proud, but fond of his son; he only asked him to pay a little duty or respect now and again. We don't understand these things in Australia—they seem formal and cold to us. The son paid his respects to his father occasionally—a week or so before he'd be wanting money, as a rule. The mother was a dear lady. She idolized her son. She only asked for a little show of affection from him, a few days or a week of his society at home now and then—say once in three months. But he couldn't spare her even that—his time was taken up so much in London and Paris and other places. He would give the world now to be able to take his proud, soft old father's hand and to look into his eyes as one man who understands another. He would be glad and eager to give his mother twelve months out of the year if he thought it would make her happier. It has been too late for more than twenty years.”

Old Danny called for Peter.

Mitchell jerked his head, and gave a sound like a sigh and a chuckle conjoined, the one qualifying the other.

“I told you you'd get it, Joe,” he said.

“I don't see how it hits me,” said Joe.

“But it hit all the same, Joe.”

“Well, I suppose it did,” said Joe, after a short pause.

“He wouldn't have hit you so hard if you hadn't tried to parry,” reflected Mitchell. “It's your turn now, Jack.”

Jack Barnes said nothing.

“Now I know that Peter would do anything for a woman or child, or an honest, straight, hard-up chap,” said Mitchell, straightening out his legs and folding his arms, “but I can't quite understand his being so partial to drunken scamps and vagabonds, black-sheep and ne'er-do-wells. He's got a tremendous sympathy for drunks. He'd do anything to help 'em. Ain't it marvellous? It's my private opinion that Peter must have been an awful boozzer in his time.”

The other two only thought. Mitchell was privileged. He was a young man of freckled, sandy complexion, and quizzical grey eyes. “Sly Joker;” “could take a rise out of anyone on the quiet;” “You could never tell when he was getting at you;” “Face of a born comedian,” as Bushmen said of Mitchell. But he would probably have been a dead and dismal failure on any other stage than that of wide Australia.

Peter came back and they sat and smoked, and maybe they reflected along four very different back-tracks for a while.

The surveyor started to sing again:—
‘I have heard the mavis singing
Her love-song to the morn
I have seen the dew-drop clinging
To the rose just newly-born.’

They smoked and listened in silence all through to the end. It was very still. The full moon was high. The long white slender branches of a box-tree stirred gently overhead; the sheoaks in the creek sighed as they are always sighing, and the southern peak seemed ever so far away.

‘That has made me thine for ever!
Bonny Mary of Argyle.’

“Blarst my pipe!” exclaimed Mitchell, suddenly. It's always getting stuffed up.”

The breeze had changed and strengthened. They heard the violin playing “Annie Laurie.”

“They must be having a Scotch night in that camp,” said Mitchell. The voice came again:—

‘Maxwelton Braes are bonny—
Where early fa's the dew,
For 'twas there that Annie Laurie
Gie me her promise true—’

Mitchell threw out his arm impatiently.

“I wish they wouldn't play and sing those old songs,” he said. “They make you think of damned old things.”

Peter sat leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his hands fingering his cold pipe nervously. His sad eyes had grown haggard and haunted. It is in the hearts of exiles in new lands that the old songs are felt.

“Take no thought for the morrow, Mitchell,” said Peter, abstractedly. “I beg your pardon, Mitchell. I mean—”

“That's all right, Peter,” said Mitchell. “You're right; to-morrow is the past, so far as I'm concerned.”

Peter blinked down at him as if he were a new species.

“You're an odd young man, Mitchell,” he said. “You'll have to take care of that head of yours or you'll be found hanging by a saddle-strap to a leaning tree on a lonely track, or find yourself in a lunatic asylum before you're forty-five.”
“Or else I'll be a great man,” said Mitchell.
Peter turned his eyes to the fire and smiled sadly.
“But not enjoyment and not sorrow, is our destined end or way,” he repeated to the fire.
“But we get there just the same,” said Mitchell, “destined or not.”

‘But to live, that each to-morrow,
Finds us further than to-day!’

“Why, that just fits my life, Peter,” said Mitchell. “I might have to tramp two or three hundred miles before I get a job, and if to-morrow didn't find me nearer than to-day I'd starve or die of thirst on a dry stretch.”

“Why don't you get married and settle down, Mitchell?” asked Peter, a little tired. “You're a teetotaller.”

“If I got married I couldn't settle down,” said Mitchell. “I reckon I'd be the loneliest man in Australia.” Peter gave him a swift glance. “I reckon I'd be single no matter how much married I might be. I couldn't get the girl I wanted, and—ah, well!”

Mitchell's expression was still quaintly humorous round the lower part of his face, but there was a sad light in his eyes. The strange light as of old dead days, yet he was still young.
The cornet had started in the surveyors' camp.

“Their blooming tunes seem to fit in just as if they knew what we were talking about,” remarked Mitchell.
The cornet:

‘You'll break my heart, you little bird,
That sings upon the flowering thorn—
Thou minds't me of departed joys,
Departed never to return.’

“Damn it all,” said Mitchell, sitting up, “I'm getting sentimental.” Then, as if voicing something that was troubling him, “Don't you think a woman pulls a man down as often as she lifts him up, Peter?”

“Some say so,” said Peter.

“Some say so, and they write it, too,” said Mitchell. “Sometimes it seems to me as if women were fated to drag a man down ever since Adam's time. If Adam hadn't taken his wife's advice—but there, perhaps he had taken her advice many times and found it good, and, just because she happened to be wrong this time, and got him into a hole, the sons of Adam have never let the daughters of Eve hear the last of it. That's human nature.”
Jack Barnes, the young husband, who was suffering a recovery, had been silent all the evening. “I think a man's a fool to listen to his wife's advice,” he said, with the unreasonable impatience of a man who wants to think while others are talking. “She only messes him up, and drives him to the devil as likely as not, and gets a contempt for him in the end.”

Peter gave him a reproachful look, and stood up. He paced backwards and forwards on the other side of the fire, with his hands behind his back for a while; then he came and settled himself on the log again and filled his pipe.

“Yes,” he said, “a man can always find excuses for himself when his conscience stings him. He puts mud on the sting. Man at large is beginning all over the world to rake up excuses for himself; he disguises them as “Psychological Studies,” and thinks he is clean and clever and cultured, or he calls 'em problems—the sex-problem, for instance, and thinks he is brave and fearless.”

Danny was in trouble again, and Peter went to him. He complained that when he lay down he saw the faces worse, and he wanted to be propped up somehow, so Peter got a pack-saddle and propped the old man's shoulders up with that.

“I remember,” Peter began, when he came back to the fire, “I remember a young man who got married—”

Mitchell hugged himself. He knew Jack Barnes. He knew that Jack had a girl-wife who was too good for him; that Jack had been wild, and had nearly broken her heart, and he guessed at once that Jack had broken out again, and that Peter M'Laughlan was shepherding him home. Mitchell had worked as mates with Jack, and liked him because of the good heart that was in him, in spite of all; and, because he liked him, he was glad that Jack was going to get a kicking, so to speak, which might do him good. Mitchell saw it coming, filled his pipe, and settled himself comfortably to listen.

“I remember the case of a naturally selfish young man who got married,” said Peter. “He didn't know he was selfish; in fact, he thought he was too much the other way—but that doesn't matter now. His name was —well, we'll call him—we'll call him “Gentleman-Once.”

“Do you mean Gentleman-Once that we saw drinking back at Thomas's shanty?” asked Joe.

“No,” said Peter, “not him. There have been more than one in the Bush who went by the nickname of ‘Gentleman-Once.’ I knew one or two. It's a big clan, the clan of Gentleman-Once, and scattered all over the world.”

“By the way,” said Mitchell—“excuse me for interrupting, Peter—but wasn't old Danny, there, a gentleman once? I heard chaps say he was.”

“I know he was,” said Peter.
‘Gentleman-Once!’ Whose talking about Gentleman-Once?” said an awful voice, suddenly and quickly. “About twenty or thirty years ago I was called Gentleman-Once or Gentleman Jack, I don't know which—Get out! Get out, I say! It's all lies, and you're the devil. There's four devils sitting by the fire. I see them.”

Two of the four devils by the fire looked round, rather startled.

Danny was sitting up, his bloodshot eyes glaring in the firelight, and his head looking like the bloated head of a hairy poodle that had been drowned and dried. Peter went to the old man and soothed him by waving off the snakes and devils with his hands, and telling them to go.

“I've heard Danny on the Gentleman-Once racket before,” remarked Mitchell. “Seems funny, doesn't it, for a man to be proud of the fact that he was called ‘Gentleman-Once’ about twenty years ago?”

“Seems more awful than funny to me,” said Joe.

“You're right, Joe,” said Mitchell. “But the saddest things are often funny.”

When Peter came back he went on with his story, and was only interrupted once or twice by Danny waking up and calling him to drive off the snakes, and green and crimson dogs with crocodile heads, and devils with flaming tails, and other unpleasant things that force their company on boozers and madmen.

“Gentleman-Once,” said Peter, “he came from the old country with a good education and no character. He had disgraced himself and family once too often and came, or was sent, out to Australia to reform. It's a great mistake. If a man is too far gone, or hasn't the strength to live the past down at home, he won't do it in a new country, unless a combination of circumstances compel him to it. A man rises by chance; just as often he falls by chance. Some men fall into the habit of keeping steady and stick to it, for the novelty of it, until they are on their feet and in their sane minds and can look at the past, present, and future sensibly. I knew one case—But that's got nothing to do with the story.

“Gentleman-Once came out on the remittance system. That system is fatal in nine cases out of ten. The remittance system is an insult to any manhood that may be left in the black-sheep, and an insult to the land he is sent to. The cursed quarterly allowance is a stone round his neck that will drag him down deeper in a New Land than he would have fallen in the Old. You know that remittance men are regarded with such contempt in the Bush that a man seldom admits he is one, save when he's drunk and reckless, or wants money or credit. If a ne'er-do-well lands in Melbourne or Sydney without a penny, he will probably buck-up and do something for himself. When he lands with money he will probably spend it all in the first
few months, and then straighten up because he has to. But when he lands on the remittance system he drinks, first to drown home-sickness. He decides that he'll wait till he gets his next quarter's allowance, and then look round. He persuades himself that it's no use trying to do anything: that, in fact, he can't do anything until he gets his money. When he gets it he drifts into one 'last' night with fellows he has picked up in second and third-rate hotels.

“No matter what precautions his friends at home take, he will find a way of getting credit or drawing on his allowance before it is due—until he is two or three quarters behind. He drinks because he feels happy and jolly and clever and good-natured and brave and honest while he is drinking. Later on he drinks because he feels the reverse of all these when he is sober. He drinks to drown the past and repentance. He doesn't know that a healthy-minded man doesn't waste time in repenting. He doesn't know how easy it is to reform. He gets a muddled idea that the past can't be mended. He drifts to the Bush and drinks, to drown the past only. The past grows blacker and blacker until it is a hell without repentance; and often the black-sheep gets to dread his sober hours. And the end? Well, you see old Danny there, and you saw old Awful Example back at Johnson's shanty—he's worse than Danny, if anything.”

Jack Barnes drew up his leg and rubbed it surreptitiously. He had “pins and needles.” Mitchell noticed, and turned a chuckle into a grunt.

“Gentleman-Once was a remittance man,” continued Peter. “But before he got very far he met an Australian girl in a boarding-house. Her mother was the landlady. They were Bush people who had drifted to the city. The girl was pretty, intelligent and impulsive. She pitied him and nursed him. He wasn't known as Gentleman-Once then, he hadn't got far enough to merit the nickname.”

Peter paused. Presently he jerked his head, as if he felt a spasm of pain, and leaned forward to get a stick from the fire to light his pipe.

“Now, there's the girl who marries a man to reform him, and when she has reformed him never lets him hear the last of it. Sometimes, as a woman, she drives him back again. But this was not that sort of girl. It's a terrible thing for a man, a few months, perhaps a few weeks after his marriage, to ask himself the question, 'Have I made a mistake?' Gentleman-Once discovered that he had married beneath him in intellect and education. He had not married beneath him as far as birth was concerned, for his wife's father had been a younger son of an older and greater family than his own— But Gentleman-Once wouldn't have been cad enough to bother about birth. I'll do him that much justice. He discovered, or thought he did, that he and his wife could never have one
thought in common; that she couldn't possibly understand him. He was gloomy most times, and she was a bright, sociable, busy little body. When she tried to draw him out of himself he grew irritable. Besides, having found that they couldn't have a thought in common he ceased to bother to talk to her. There are many men who don't bother talking to their wives; they don't think their wives feel it—because the wives cease to complain after a while. Gentleman-Once tried his best, according to his lights—and weaknesses. Then he went in for self-pity. He wanted to be left alone. They were both high-spirited, in different ways; she was highly strung and so was he. They quarrelled badly sometimes. Then he drank again and she stuck to him. The only time he was cheerful and affectionate was when he had a few drinks in him. It was a miserable existence—a furnished room in a cheap lodging-house, with the use of the kitchen.

“He drank alone.

“Now a dipsomaniac mostly thinks he is in the right—except, perhaps, after he has been forced to be sober for a week. The noblest woman in the world couldn't save him—everything she does to reform him irritates him; but a strong friend can save him sometimes—a man who has been through it himself. The poor little wife of Gentleman-Once went through it all. And she stuck to him.

“She went through it all. He swore promises. He'd come home sober and fill her with hope of future happiness, and swear that he'd never take another glass. ‘And we'll be happy yet, my poor boy,’ she'd say, ‘we'll be happy yet. I believe you, I trust you’ (she used to call him her ‘bonny boy’ when they were first married). And next night he'd come home worse than ever. And one day he—he struck her!

“And one day he struck her. He was sober when he did it—anyhow he had not taken drink for a week. A man is never sober who gets drunk more than once a week, though he might think he is. I don't know how it happened, but anyway he struck her, and that frightened him. He got a billet in the Civil Service up-country. No matter in what town it was. The little wife hoped for six months.

“But Gentleman-Once found that he could not stand the routine of office work and the dull life in that place. He commenced to drink again, and went on till he lost his billet.

“The last spree was a terrible one. He was away from home for a fortnight, and in that fortnight he got down as low as a man could get. Then a man got hold of him and set him on his feet, and straightened him up. The man was a ruined doctor, a wreck whose devil was morphia. I don't hold that a man's salvation is always in his own hands; I've seen mates pull mates out of hell too often to think that.
“Then Gentleman-Once saw the past as he had never seen it before—he saw hope for the future with it. And he swore an oath that he felt he could keep.

“He mended the past, as far as he could, during the next two years, and she seemed happy. He was very gentle, he was very kind to her. He was happy, too, in a new, strange way. But he had learned what it was to suffer through his own fault, and now he was to learn what it was to suffer through no fault of his own, and without the consolation of saying ‘I was wrong! I was to blame!’ At the end of the two years a child was born, and his wife died.”

The four sat silently smoking until Jack Barnes asked—
“And what did he do then, Peter?”

“Who?” said Peter, abstractedly.

“Well, I've told the story, and it is about time to turn in,” he said. “I can't say exactly what Gentleman-Once did when his wife died. He might have gone down to a deeper depth than Danny's. He might have risen higher than he had ever been before. From what I knew of his character he would never have gone down an easy slope as Danny has done. He might have dropped plump at first and then climbed up. Anyway, he had the memory of the last two years to help him.

“Then there's the reformed drunkard who has trained himself to take a drink when he needs it, to drink in moderation—he's the strongest character of all, I think—but it's time to turn in.”

The cornet up the creek was playing a march.

Peter walked across and looked at Danny, who was sleeping as peacefully as could be expected.

Jack Barnes got up and walked slowly down the creek in the moonlight. He wanted to think.

Peter rolled out his blankets on the grass and arranged his saddle-bags for a pillow. Before he turned in Mitchell shook hands with him, a most unusual and unnecessary proceeding in camp. But there's something in the Bush grip which means “I know,” or “I understand.”

Joe Wilson rolled out his blankets close to Mitchell's camp; he wanted to enjoy Mitchell's quiet humour before he went to sleep, but Mitchell wasn't in a philosophical mood. He wanted to reflect.

“I wonder who Gentleman-Once was?” said Joe to Mitchell. “Could he have been Danny, or old Awful Example back there at the shanty?”

“Dunno,” said Mitchell. He puffed three long puffs at his pipe, and then said, reflectively—
“I've heard men tell their own stories before to-night, Joe.”
It was Joe who wanted to think now.

* * * * *

About four o'clock Mitchell woke and stood up. Peter was lying rolled in his blanket with his face turned to the west. The moon was low, the shadows had shifted back, and the light was on Peter's face. Mitchell stood looking at him reverently, as a grown son might who sees his father asleep for the first time. Then he quietly got some boughs and stuck them in the ground at a little distance from Peter's head, to shade his face from the bright moonlight; and then Mitchell turned in again, to sleep until the sun woke him.
Ghosts of Many Christmases

Did you ever trace back your Christmas days?—right back to the days when you were innocent, and Santa Claus was real. At times you thought you were very wicked, but you never realize how innocent you were until you've grown up, and knocked about the world.

Let me think!

Christmas in an English village, with bare hedges and trees, and leaden skies that lie heavy on our souls as we walk, with over-coat and umbrella, sons of English exiles, exiled in England. We think of bright skies and suns overhead, and sweeps of country disappearing into the haze, and blue mountain ranges melting into the azure of distant lower skies, and curves of yellow beaches, and runs of shelving sandstone sea-walls—and the glorious Pacific! Sydney Harbour at sunrise, and the girls we took to Manly Beach.

Christmas in a London flat. Gloom and slush and soot. It is not the cold that affects Australians so much, but the horrible gloom. We get heart-sick for the sun.

Christmas at sea—three Christmases, in fact—one going saloon from Sydney to Westralia early in the Golden Nineties, with funds; and one, the Christmas after next, returning, steerage, with nothing but the clothes we slept in. All of which was bad judgment on our part—the order and manner of our going and coming should have been reversed.

Christmas in a hessian tent in "th' Westren," with so many old mates from the East that it was just like old times over again. We had five pounds of corned beef and a kerosene tin to boil it in; and while we were talking of old things the skeleton of a kangaroo dog grabbed the beef out of the boiling water and disappeared into the scrub. That made it seem more like old times than ever.

Christmas going to New Zealand, with experience, in the Tasmania. We had plumduff, but it was too "soggy" for us to eat. We dropped it overboard, lest it should swamp the ship—and it sank right to the ooze. The Tasmania was saved on that occasion, but she foundered next year outside Gisborne. Perhaps the cook had made another duff. There was a letter from a sweet-heart of mine in her mails when she went down; but that's got nothing to do with it, although it made a vast difference to me.

Christmas on a new telegraph line with a party of lining gangmen in New Zealand. There was neither duff nor roast because there was no firewood within twenty miles. The cook used to pile armfuls of flax-sticks under the billies, and set light to them when the last man arrived in camp.
Christmas in Sydney, with a dozen invitations to dinner. The one we accepted was to a sensible Australian Christmas dinner; a typical one, as it should be, and will be before the Commonwealth is many years old. Everything cold except the vegetables, the hose playing on the verandah and vines outside, the men dressed in sensible pyjama-like suits, and the women and girls fresh and cool and jolly, instead of being hot and cross, and looking like boiled carrots, and feeling like boiled rags, and having headaches after dinner, as would have been the case had they broiled over the fire in a hot kitchen all the blazing forenoon to cook a scalding, indigestible dinner, as many Australian women do, and for no other reason than that it was the fashion in England.

Christmas dinner in a Sydney sixpenny restaurant, that had opened a few days before with brass band going at full blast by way of advertisement. “Roast-beef, one! Cabbage and potatoes, one! Plum-pudding, two!” (This was the first time I dined to music.) The dinner was a good one, but my appetite was spoilt by the expression of the restaurant keeper, a big man with a heavy jowl, who sat by the door with a cold eye on the sixpences, and didn't seem to have much confidence in human nature.

Christmas—no, that was New Year—on the Warrego River, Out Back (the alleged river a sickly stream that looked like bad milk). We spent most of that night hunting in the dark for camel and horse droppings with which to build fires round our camp to keep off the mosquitoes. The mosquitoes started at sunset and left off at daybreak. Then the flies got to work.

Christmas dinner under a brush shearing-shed. Mutton and plum-pudding—fifty miles from Beer!

Jimmy Nowlett told me of a Christmas he had. He was cut off by the floods with his team, and had nothing to eat for four days but potatoes and honey. He said potatoes dipped in honey weren't so bad; but he had to sleep on bullock yokes laid on the ground to keep him out of the water, and he got a toothache that paralysed him all down one side.

And speaking of plum-pudding, I consider it one of the most barbarous institutions of the British. It is a childish, silly, savage superstition; it must have been a savage inspiration, looking at it all round—but then it isn't so long since the British were savages.

I got a letter last year from a mate of mine in West Australia—prospecting out beyond White Feather—telling me all about a “perish” he did on plum-pudding. He and his mates were camped at the Boulder Soak with some three or four hundred miles—mostly sand and dust—between them and the nearest grocer's shop. They ordered a case of mixed canned provisions from Perth to reach them about Christmas. They didn't believe in plum-pudding—there are a good many British institutions that Bushmen
don't believe in—but the cook was a new-chum, and he said he'd go home to his mother if he didn't have plum-pudding for Christmas, so they ordered a can for him. Meanwhile, they hung out on kangaroo and damper and the knowledge that it couldn't last for ever. It was in a terrible drought, and the kangaroos used to come into the Soak for water, and they were too weak to run. Later on, when wells were dug, the kangaroos used to commit suicide in them—there was generally a kangaroo in the well in the morning.

The storekeeper packed the case of tinned dog, etc., but by some blunder his man put the label on the wrong box, and it went per rail, per coach, per camel, and the last stage per boot, and reached my friends' camp on Christmas Eve, to their great joy. My mate broke the case open by the light of the camp fire.

“Here, Jack!” he said, tossing out a can, “here's your plum-pudding.”

He held the next can in his hand a moment longer and read the label twice.

“Why! he's sent two,” he said, “and I'm sure I only ordered one. Never mind—Jack'll have a tuck-in.”

He held the next can close to the fire and blinked at it hard.

“I'm damned if he hasn't sent three tins of plum-pudding. Never mind, we'll manage to scoff some of it between us. You're in luck's way this trip, Jack, and no mistake.”

He looked harder still at the fourth can: then he read the labels on the other tins again to see if he'd made a mistake.

He didn't tell me what he said then, but a milder mate suggested that the storekeeper had sent half a dozen tins by mistake. But when they reached the seventh can the language wasn't even fit to be written down on a piece of paper for the magistrate. The storekeeper had sent them an unbroken case of canned plum-pudding. Probably by this time he was wondering what had become of that blanky case of duff.

The kangaroos disappeared about this time and my friend tells me that he and his mates had to live for a mortal fortnight on canned plum-pudding. They tried it cold and they tried it boiled, they tried it baked, they had it fried, and they had it toasted, they had it for breakfast, dinner and tea. They had nothing else to think, or talk, or argue and quarrel about; and they dreamed about it every night, my friend says. It wasn't a joke—it gave them the nightmare and day-horrors.

They tried it with salt. They picked as many of the raisins out as they could and boiled it with salt kangaroo. They tried to make Yorkshire pudding out of it; but it was too rich.

My friend was experimenting and trying to discover a simple process for separating the ingredients of plum-pudding when a fresh supply of
provisions came along. He says he was never so sick of anything in his life, and he has had occasion to be sick of a good many things.

The new-chum cook is still alive, but he won't ever eat plum-pudding any more, he says. He's cured. He wouldn't eat it even if his bride made it.

* * * * *

Christmas on the goldfields in the last of the Roaring Days, in the palmy days of Gulgong and the golden days. Let's see! it must be nearly thirty years ago! Oh, how the time goes by!

Santa Claus, young, fresh-faced and eager; Santa Claus, blonde and flaxen; Santa Claus, dark; Santa Claus with a brogue and Santa Claus speaking broken English; Santa Claus as a Chinaman (Sun Tong Lee & Co., Storekeepers), with strange, delicious sweets that melted in our mouths, and rum toys and Chinese dolls for the children.

Lucky diggers who were with difficulty restrained from putting pound notes and nuggets and expensive lockets and things into the little ones' stockings. Santa Claus in flannel shirt and clay-covered moleskins. Diggers who bought lollies by the pound, and sent the little ones home with as much as they could carry.

Diggers who gave a guinea, or more, for a toy for a child that reminded them of some other child at home. Diggers who took as many children as they could gather on short notice into a store, slapped a five-pound note down on the counter and told the little ones to call for whatever they liked. Who set a family of poor children side by side on the counter and called for a box of mixed children's boots—the best—and fitted them on with great care and anxiety and frequent inquiries as to whether they pinched. Who stood little girls and boys on the counter and called for the most expensive frocks, the latest and best in sailor suits, and the brightest ribbons; and goods came long distances by bullock dray and so were expensive. Impressionable diggers—and most of them were—who threw nuggets to singers, and who, sometimes, slipped a parcel into the hands of a little boy or girl, with instructions to give it to an elder sister (or young mother, perhaps) whom the digger had never spoken to, only worshipped from afar off. And the elder sister or young mother, opening the parcel, would find a piece of jewellery or a costly article of dress, and wonder who sent it.

Ah, the wild generosity of luck-intoxicated diggers of those days! and the reckless generosity of the drinkers. “We thought it was going to last for ever!”

“If I don't spend it on the bairns I'll spend it on the drink,” Sandy Burns used to say. “I ha' nane o' me own, an' the lass who was to gi' me bairns, she couldn't wait.”
Sandy had kept steady and travelled from one end of the world to the other, and roughed it and toiled for five years, and the very day he bottomed his golden hole on the Brown Snake Lead at Happy Valley he got a letter from his girl in Scotland to say she had grown tired of waiting and was married.

Gulgong on New Year's Eve! Rows and rows of lighted tents and camp fires, with a clear glow over all. Bonfires on the hills and diggers romping round them like big boys. Tin-kettling—gold dishes and spoons, and fiddles, and hammers on pointing anvils, and sticks and empty kerosene tins (they made a row); concertinas and cornets, shot-guns, pistols and crackers, all sorts of instruments, and “Auld Lang Syne” in one mighty chorus.

And now—a little pastoral town; a collection of glaring corrugated-iron hip-rooms, and a propped-up bark or weatherboard humpy or two—relics of the Roaring Days; a waste of caved-in holes with rain-washed mullock-heaps and quartz and gravel glaring in the sun; thistles and burrs where old bars were; drought, dryness, desolation and goats.

Lonely graves in the Bush and grey old diggers here and there and anywhere in the world, doing anything for a living, lonely yet because of the girls who couldn't wait, but prospecting, fossicking, and dreaming still. They thought it was going to last for ever.

*         *         *         *         *

Christmas at Eurunderee Creek, amongst the old selection farms in the western spurs of the Blue Mountains. They make plum-puddings yet, weeks beforehand, and boil them for hours and hang them in cloths to the rafters to petrify; then they take them down and boil them again. On Christmas Eve the boys cut boughs or young pines on the hills, and drag them home and lash them to the verandah posts.

Ted has turned up with his wife and children from his selection Out Back. The wheat is in and shearing is over on the big stations. Tom—steady-going old Tom—clearing or fencing or dam-sinking up-country, hides his tools in the scrub and gets his horse and rides home. Aunt Emma (to everyone's joy) has arrived from Sydney with presents (astonishing bargains in frocks, etc.) and marvellous descriptions of town life.

Joe, “poor” Mary's husband, who has been droving in Queensland since the Christmas before last—while poor Mary, who is afraid to live alone, shared a skillion and the family quarrels at home—Joe rides day and night and reaches home at sunrise on Christmas morning, tired and dusty, gaunt and haggard, but with his last cheque intact. He kisses his wife and child and throws himself on the bed to sleep till dinner-time, while Mary moves
round softly, washes the child, dresses it and herself, lays out Joe's clean things, and bends over him now and then, and kisses him, perhaps, as he sleeps.

In the morning the boys and some of the men go down to the creek for a swim in the big shady pool under the sheoaks, and take their Sunday clothes with them and dress there.

Some of them ride into town to church, and some of the women and children drive in in spring-carts—the children to go to Sunday school, leaving mother and the eldest daughter—usually a hard-worked, disappointed, short-tempered girl—at home to do the cooking.

There is some anxiety (mostly on mother's part) about Jim, who is “wild,” and is supposed to be somewhere Out Back. There was “a piece of blue paper” out for Jim on account of illegally using a horse, but his mother or father has got a hint—given in a kindly way by the police-sergeant—that Jim is free to come home and stay at home if he behaves himself. (There is usually a horse missing when Jim goes Out Back.)

Jim turns up all right—save that he has no money—and is welcomed with tearful affection by his favourite sister Mary, shakes hands silently with his father, and has a long whispered conversation with his mother, which leaves him very subdued. His brothers forbear to sneer at him, partly because it is Christmas, partly on mother's account, and thirdly, because Jim can use his hands. Aunt Emma, who is fond of him, cheers him up wonderfully.

The family sit down to dinner. “An old mate of your father's”—a bearded old digger—has arrived and takes the place of honour. (“I knowed yer father, sonny, on the diggings long afore any of you was ever thought on.”)

The family have only been a few hours together, yet there is an undercurrent of growling, that mysterious yet evident undercurrent of nastiness and resentment which goes on in all families and drags many a promising young life down. But Aunt Emma and the old mate make things brighter, and so the dinner passes off fairly well.

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The local races or “sports” on Boxing Day. There is nothing to keep the boys home over New Year. Ted and his wife go back to a lonely life on their selection; Tom returns to his fencing or tank-sinking contract; Jim, who has borrowed a couple of pounds from Tom, goes Out Back with strong resolutions for the New Year, and shears “stragglers,” breaks in horses, cooks and clerks for survey parties, and gambles and drinks, and gets into trouble again. Joe knocks about the farm a bit before going into the Great North-West with another mob of cattle.
The last time I saw the Old Year out at Eurunderee the bush fires were burning all over the ranges, and looked like great cities lighted up. No need for bonfires then.

* * * * *

Christmas in Bourke, the metropolis of the great pastoral scrubs and plains, 500 miles west, with the thermometer 100-and-something-scarey in the shade. Careless shearers come in from stations many dusty miles out to have their Christmas sprees, to drink and “shout” and fight—and have the horrors some of them—and be run in and locked up with difficulty, within sound of a church bell.

A Bourke Christmas is a beery, exciting one. The hotels shut up in front on Christmas Day to satisfy the law (or out of consideration for the feelings of the sergeant in charge of the police-station), and open behind to satisfy the public, who made the law.

Christmas in Sydney, though Christmas holidays are not so popular as Easter, or even Anniversary Day, in the Queen city of the South. Buses, electric, cable and the old steam trams crowded with holiday-makers with baskets. Harbour boats loaded down to the water's edge with picnic-parties. “A trip round the Harbour and to the head of Middle Harbour one shilling return!” Strings of tourist trains running over the Blue Mountains and the Great Zigzag, and up the coast to Gosford and Brisbane Water, and down the south coast to beautiful Illawarra. Hundreds of young fellows going out with tents to fish in lonely bays or shoot in the mountains, and rough it properly like Bushmen—not with deck chairs, crockery, a piano and servants. For you can camp in the grand and rugged solitude of the Bush within a stone's throw of the city, so to speak.

Jolly camps and holiday parties all round the beautiful bays of the harbour, and up and down the coast, and all close to home. Camps in the moonlight on sandy beaches under great dark bluffs and headlands, where shelving, sandstone cliffs run, broken only by sandy-beached bays, and where the silver-white breakers leap and roar.

And Manly Beach on a holiday! Thousands of people in fresh summer dress, hundreds of bare-legged, happy children running where the “blue sea over the white sand rolls,” racing in and out with the rollers, playing with the glorious Pacific. Manly—“Our Village”—Manly Beach, where we used to take our girls, with the most beautiful harbour in the world on one side, and the grandest ocean on the other. Ferny gullies and “fairy dells” to north and south, and every shady nook its merry party or happy couple.

Manly Beach—I remember five years ago (oh, how the time goes by!)—and two names that were written together in the sand when the tide was
coming in.

And the boat home in the moonlight, past the Heads, where we felt the roll of the ocean, and the moonlit harbour—and the harbour lights of Sydney—the grandest of them all.