A Voice in the Wilderness

E.W. Hornung

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"La parlate d'amor,
  O cari fior,
  Recate i miei sospiri,
  Narrate i miei matiri,
  Ditele o cari fior ——"
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MISS BOUVERIE ceased on the high note, as abruptly as string that snaps beneath the bow, and revolved with the music−stool, to catch but her echoes in the empty room. None had entered behind her back; there was neither sound nor shadow in the deep veranda through the open door. But for the startled girl at the open piano, Mrs. Clarkson's sanctum was precisely as Mrs. Clarkson had left it an hour before; her own photograph, in as many modes, beamed from the usual number of ornamental frames; there was nothing whatever to confirm a wild suspicion of the living lady's untimely return. And yet either guilty conscience, or an ear as sensitive as it was true, had heard an unmistakable step outside.

Hilda Bouverie lived to look magnificent when she sang, her fine frame drawn up to its last inch, her throat a pillar of pale coral, her mouth the perfect round, her teeth a noble relic of barbarism; but sweeter she never was than in these days, or at this moment of them, as she sat with lips just parted and teeth just showing, in a simple summer frock of her own unaided making. Her eyes, of the one deep Tasmanian blue, were still open very wide, but no longer with the same apprehension; for a step there was, but a step that jingled; nor did they recognize the silhouette in top−boots which at length stood bowing on the threshold.

"Please finish it!" prayed a voice that Miss Bouverie liked in her turn; but it was too much at ease for one entirely strange to her, and she rose with little embarrassment and no hesitation at all.

"Indeed, no! I thought I had the station to myself."

"So you had — I have not seen a soul."

Miss Bouverie instantly perceived that honors were due from her.

"I am so sorry! You've come to see Mr. and Mrs. Clarkson?" she cried. "Mrs. Clarkson has just left for Melbourne with her maid, and Mr. Clarkson has gone mustering with all his men. But the Indian cook is about somewhere. I'll find him, and he shall make some tea."

The visitor planted himself with much gallantry in the doorway; he was a man still young, with a single eye−glass and a martial mustache, which combined to give distinction to a somewhat swarthy countenance. At the moment he had also an engaging smile.

"I didn't come to see either Mr. or Mrs. Clarkson," said he; "in fact, I never heard their name before. I was passing the station, and I simply came to see who it was who could sing like that — to believe my own ears!"

Miss Bouverie was thrilled. The stranger spoke with an authority that she divined, a sincerity which she instinctively took on trust. Her breath came quickly; she was a little nervous now.

"If you won't sing to my face," he went on, "I must go back to where I hung up my horse, and pray that you will at least send me on my way rejoicing. You will do that in any case. I didn't know there was such a voice in these parts. You sing a good deal, of course?"

"I haven't sung for months."

He was now in the room; there was no longer any necessity to bar the doorway, and the light coming through fell full on his amazement. The girl stood before him with a calm face, more wistful than ironic, yet with hints of

humor in the dark blue eyes. Her companion put up the eye−glass which he had dropped at her reply.

"May I ask what you are doing in these wilds?"

"Certainly. I am Mrs. Clarkson's companion."

"And you sing, for the first time in months, the minute her back is turned: has the lady no soul for music?"

"You had better ask the lady."

And her visible humor reached the corners of Miss Bouverie's mouth.

"She sings herself, perhaps?"

"And I am here to play her accompaniments!"

The eye−glass focussed the great, smiling girl.

"Can she sing?"

"She has a voice."

"But have you never let her hear yours?"

"Once. I had not been here long enough to know better. And I made my usual mistake."

"What is that?"

"I thought I had the station to myself."

The questioner bowed to his rebuke. "Well?" he persisted none the less.

"I was told exactly what my voice was like, and fit for."

The gentleman turned on his heel, as though her appreciation of the humor of her position were an annoyance to him. His movement brought him face to face with a photographic galaxy of ladies in varying styles of evening dress, with an equal variety in coiffures, but a certain family likeness running through the series.

"Are any of these Mrs. Clarkson?"

"All of them."

He muttered something in his mustache. "And what's this?" he asked of a sudden.

The young man (for as such Miss Bouverie was beginning to regard him) was standing under the flaming bill of a grand concert to be given in the township of Yallarook for the benefit of local charities.

"Oh, that's Mrs. Clarkson's concert," he was informed. "She has been getting it up, and that's why she's had to go to Melbourne — about her dress, you know."

He smiled sardonically through mustache and monocle.

"Her charity begins near home!"

"It need not necessarily end there."

"Yet she sings five times herself."

"True — without the encores."

"And you don't sing at all."

"But I accompany."

"A bitter irony! But, I say, what's this? 'Under the distinguished patronage of Sir Julian Crum, Mus. Doc., D.C.L.' Who may he be?"

"Director of the Royal College of Music, in the old country," the girl answered with a sigh.

"Royal College of Music? That's something new, since my time," said the visitor, sighing also. "But what's a man like that doing out here?"

"He has a brother a squatter, the next station but one. Sir Julian's spending the English winter with him on account of his health."

"So you've seen something of him?"

"I wish we had."

"But Mrs. Clarkson has?"

"No — not yet."

"I see!" and an enlightened gleam shot through the eye−glass. "So this is her way of getting to know a poor overworked wreck who came out to patch his lungs in peace and quiet! And she's going to sing him one of his own songs; she's gone to Melbourne to dress the part; and you're not going to sing anything at all!"

Miss Bouverie refrained alike from comment and confirmation; but her silence was the less creditable in that her companion was now communing chiefly with himself. She felt, indeed, that she had already been guilty of a certain disloyalty to one to whom she owed some manner of allegiance; but that was the extent of Miss Bouverie's

indiscretion in her own eyes. It caused her no qualms to entertain an anonymous gentleman whom she had never seen before. A colder course had commended itself to the young lady fresh from London; but to a Colonial girl, on a station where special provision was made for the entertaining of strange travellers, the situation was simply conventional. It might have been less onerous with host or hostess on the spot; but then the visitor would not have heard her sing, and he seemed to know what singing was.

Miss Bouverie watched him as he leant over the piano, looking through the songs which she had dared once more to bring forth from her room. She might well have taken a romantic interest in the dark and dapper man, with the military eye−glass and mustache, the spruce duck jacket and the spurred top−boots. It was her first meeting with such a type in the back−blocks of New South Wales. The gallant ease, the natural gayety, the charming manners that charmed no less for a clear trace of mannerism, were a peculiar refreshment after society racier of Riverina soil. Yet it was none of these things which attracted this woman to this man; for the susceptible girl was dead in her for the time being; but the desperate artist was alive again after many weeks, was panting for fresh life, was catching at a straw. He had heard her sing. It had brought him galloping off the track. He praised her voice; and he knew — he knew what singing was.

Who could he be? Not . . . could that be possible?"

"Sing me this," he said, suddenly, and, seating himself at the piano, played the opening bars of a vocal adaptation of Handel's Largo with just, though unpractised, touch.

Nothing could have afforded a finer hearing of the quality and the compass of her voice, and she knew of old how well it suited her; yet at the outset, from the sheer excitement of her suspicion, Hilda Bouverie was shaky to the point of a pronounced tremolo. It wore off with the lengthening cadences, and in a minute the little building was bursting with her voice, while the pianist swayed and bent upon his stool with the exuberant sympathy of a brother in art. And when the last rich note had died away he wheeled about, and so sat silent for many moments, looking curiously on her flushed face and panting bosom.

"I can't place your voice," he said, at last. "It's both voices — the most wonderful compass in the world — and the world will tell you so, when you go back to it, as go back you must and shall. May I ask the name of your master?"

"My own name — Bouverie. It was my father. He is dead."

Her eyes glistened.

"You did not go to another?"

"I had no money. Besides, he had lived for what you say; when he died with his dream still a dream, I said I would do the same, and I came up here."

She had turned away. A less tactful interlocutor had sought plainer repudiation of the rash resolve; this one rose and buried himself in more songs.

"I have heard you in Grand Opera, and in something really grand," he said. "Now I want a song, the simpler the better."

Behind his back a daring light came into the moist eyes.

"There is one of Mrs. Clarkson's," she said. "She would never forgive me for singing it, but I have heard it from her so often, I know so well how it ought to go."

And, fetching the song from a cabinet, she thrust it boldly under his nose. It was called "The Unrealized Ideal," and was a setting of some words by a real poet then living, whose name caused this reader to murmur, "London Lyrics!" The composer was Sir Julian Crum. But his name was read without a word, or a movement of the strong shoulders and the tanned neck on which Miss Bouverie's eyes were fixed.

"You had better play this yourself," said he, after peering at the music through his glass. "It is rather too many for me."

And, strangely crestfallen, Miss Bouverie took his place.

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"My only love is always near, —
    In country or in town
  I see her twinkling feet, I hear
    The whisper of her gown.
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"She foots it, ever fair and young,
    Her locks are tied in haste,
  And one is o'er her shoulder flung
    And hangs below her waist."
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For that was the immortal trifle. How much of its immortality it will owe to the setting of Sir Julian Crum is a matter of opinion, but here is an anonymous view.

"I like the words, Miss Bouverie, but the setting doesn't take me. It might with repetition. It seems lacking in go and simplicity; technically, I should say, a gem. But there can be no two opinions of your singing of such a song; that's the sort of arrow to go straight to the heart of the public — a world−wide public — and if I am the first to say it to you, I hope you will one day remember it in my favor. Meanwhile it is for me to thank you — from my heart — and to say good−by!"

He was holding out a sunburnt hand.

"Must you go?" she asked, withholding her own in frank disappointment.

"Unfortunately, yes; my man is waiting for me with both horses in the scrub. But before I go I want to ask a great favor of you. It is — not to tell a soul I have been here."

For a singer and a woman of temperament, Hilda Bouverie had a wonderfully level head. She inquired his reason in no promising tone.

"You will see at Mrs. Clarkson's concert."

Hilda started.

"You are coming to that?"

"Without fail — to hear Mrs. Clarkson sing five songs — your song among them!"

"But it's hers; it has been the other way about."

The gay smile broadened on the swarthy face; a very bright eye twinkled through the monocle into those of Miss Bouverie.

"Well, will you promise to say nothing about me? I have a reason which you will be the first to appreciate in due season."

Hilda hesitated, reasoned with herself, and finally gave her word. Their hands were joined an instant, as he thanked her with gallant smile and bow. Then he was gone. And as his spurs ceased jingling on the veranda outside, Hilda Bouverie glanced again at the song on the piano and clapped her hands with unreasonable pride.

"I do believe that I was right after all!" said she.

II.

MR. CLARKSON and his young men sat at meat that evening with a Miss Bouverie hard to recognize as the apparently austere spinster who had hitherto been something of a skeleton at their board. Coldly handsome at her worst, a single day had brought her forth a radiant beauty wreathed in human smiles. Her clear skin had a tinge which at once suggested and dismissed the thought of rouge; but beyond all doubt she had done her hair with less reserve; and it was coppery hair of a volatile sort, that sprang into natural curls at the first relaxation of an undue discipline. Mr. Clarkson wondered whether his wife's departure had aught to do with the striking change in her companion; the two young men rested mutually assured that it had.

"The old girl keeps too close an eye on her," said little Mr. Hack, who kept the books and hailed from Middlesex. "Get her to yourself, Ted, and she's as larky as they're made."

Ted Radford, the station overseer, was a personage not to be dismissed in a relative clause. He was a typical back−blocker, dry and wiry, nasally cocksure, insolently cool, a fearless hand with horse, man, or woman. He was a good friend to Hack when there was no third person of his own kidney to appreciate the overseer's conception of friendly chaff. They were by themselves now, yet the last speech drew from Radford a sufficiently sardonic grin.

"You see if she is, old man," said he, "and I'll stand by to collect your remains. Not but what she hasn't come off the ice, and looks like thoring if you take her the right way."

Ted Radford was a confirmed believer in the rightness of his own way with all mankind; his admirable confidence had not been shaken by a long succession of snubs in the quarter under discussion. As for Miss Bouverie, it was her practice to play off one young man against the other by discouraging each in his turn. But this evening she was a different being. She had a vague yet absolute conviction that her fortune was made. She could have sung all her songs to the twain, but for the reflection that Mr. Clarkson himself would hear them too, and report the matter to his wife on her return.

And the next night the male trio were strangely absorbed in some station happening which did not arouse Miss Bouverie's curiosity in the least. They were excited and yet constrained at dinner, and drew their chairs close together on the veranda afterward. The young lady caught at least one word of which she did not know the meaning. She had the tact to keep out of earshot after that. Nor was she very much more interested when she met the two young men with revolvers in their hands the following day.

"Going to fight a duel?" she inquired, smilingly, for her heart was still singing Grand Opera and Oratorio by turns.

"More or less," returned the overseer, without his usual pleasantry. "We're going to have match at a target behind the pines."

The London bookkeeper looked an anxious clerk: the girl was glad when she saw the pair alive at dinner. There seemed to be little doing. Though the summer was already tropical, there had been plenteous rains, and Mr. Clarkson observed in Hilda's hearing that the recent day's mustering would be the last for some little time. She was thrown much in his company, and she liked Mr. Clarkson when Mrs. Clarkson was not there. In his wife's hands the good man was wax; now a mere echo, now a veritable claque in himself, he pandered indefatigably to the multitudinous vanities of a ludicrously vain woman. But it was soon Miss Bouverie's experience that he could, when he dared, be attentively considerate of lesser ladies. And in many ways these were much the happiest days that she had spent on the station.

They were, however, days of a consuming excitement for the caged and gagged nightingale that Hilda Bouverie now conceived herself to be. She sang not another note aloud. Mr. Clarkson lived in slippers on the veranda, which Hilda now associated chiefly with a stranger's spurs: for of the booted and spurred stranger she was thinking incessantly, though still without the emotions of an ordinarily romantic temperament. Would he be at the concert, or would he not? Would he turn out to be what she firmly imagined him, or was she to find out her mistake? Might he not in any case have said or written some pregnant word for her? Was it beyond the bounds of possibility that she should be asked to sing after all?

The last question was the only one to be answered before the time, unless a point−blank inquiry of Mrs. Clarkson be included in the category. The lady had returned with a gorgeous gown, only less full of her experiences than of the crowning triumph yet to come. She had bought every song of Sir Julian's to be had in

Melbourne, and his name was always on her lips. In a reckless moment Miss Bouverie had inquired his age.

"I really don't know," said Mrs. Clarkson. "What can it matter?"

"I only wondered whether he was a youngish man or not."

Mrs. Clarkson had already raised her eyebrows; at this answer they disappeared behind a toupet dating from her late descent upon the Victorian capital.

"Really, Miss Bouverie!" she said, and nothing more in words. But the tone was intolerable, and its accompanying sneer a refinement in vulgarity, which only the really refined would have resented as it deserved. Miss Bouverie got up and left the room without a word. But her flaming face left a misleading tale behind.

She was not introduced to Sir Julian; but that was not her prime disappointment when the great night came. All desire for an introduction, all interest in the concert, died a sudden death in Hilda Bouverie at her first glimpse of the gentleman who was duly presented to Mrs. Clarkson as Sir Julian Crum. He was more than middle−aged; he wore a gray beard, and the air of a somewhat supercilious martyr; his near sight was obviated by double lenses in gold rims. Hilda could have wept before the world. For nearly three weeks she had been bowing in imagination to a very different Sir Julian, bowing as though she had never beheld him in her life before; and yet in three minutes she saw how little real reason she had ever had for the illogical conclusion to which she had jumped. She searched for the sprightly figure she had worn in her mind's eye; his presence under any other name would still have been welcome enough now. But he was not there at all. In the patchy glare of the kerosene lamps, against the bunting which lined the corrugated walls of Gulland's new iron store, among flower and weed of township and of station, did Miss Bouverie seek in vain for a single eye−glass and a military mustache.

The concert began. Miss Bouverie opened it herself with the inevitably thankless pianoforte solo, in this case gratuitously meretricious into the bargain, albeit the arbitrary choice of no less a judge than Mrs. Clarkson. It was received with perfunctory applause, through which a dissipated stockman thundered thickly for a song. Miss Bouverie averted her eyes from Sir Julian (ensconced like Royalty in the centre of the first row) as she descended from the platform. She had not the hardihood to glance toward the great man until the indistinct stockman had had his wish, and Mrs. Clarkson, in her fine new raiment, had both sung and acted a coy ditty of the previous decade, wherein every line began with the word "somebody." It was an immediate success; the obstreperous stockman led the encore; but Miss Bouverie, who duly accompanied, extracted solace from the depressed attitude in which Sir Julian Crum sat looking down his nose.

The township boasted its score of dwellings, but few of them showed a light that evening; not less than ninety of the round hundred of inhabitants clapped their hands and mopped their foreheads in Gulland's new store. It might have been run up for its present purpose. There was an entrance at one end for the performers, and that on the platform level, since the ground sloped a little; at the other end was the only other entrance, by which the audience were admitted. A makeshift lobby had been arranged behind the platform, and thither Mrs. Clarkson retired to await her earlier encores; when the compliment became a recognized matter of course, she abandoned the mere form of a momentary retirement, and stood patiently smiling in the satin ball−dress brought from Melbourne for the nonce. And for the brief intervals between her efforts she descended to a throne specially reserved on the great musician's right.

The other performers did not dim her brilliance by reason of their own. There was her own dear husband, whose serious recitation was the one entertaining number. There was a Rabbit Inspector who rapped out "The Scout" in a defiant barytone, and a publican whose somewhat uneven tenor was shaken to its depths by the simple pathos of "When Sparrows Build." Mrs. Clarkson could afford to encourage such tyros with marked applause. The only danger was that Sir Julian might think she really admired their untutored attempts.

"One must do it," she therefore took occasion to explain as she clapped. "They are so nervous. The hard thing is to put oneself in their place; it's nothing to me to sing a song, Sir Julian."

"So I can see, madam," said he.

At the extreme end of the same row Miss Bouverie passed her unemployed moments between Mr. Radford and the wall, and was not easy until she had signalled to little Mr. Hack to occupy the seat behind her. With the two together she felt comparatively comfortable. Mr. Radford's running criticism on the performers, always pungent, was often amusing, while Mr. Hack lost no opportunity of advancing his own ideals in the matter of musical entertainment.

"A song and dance," said he, again and again, with a more and more sepulchral deviltry — "a song and dance

is what you want. You should have heard the Sisters Belton in their palmy days at the Pav! You don't get the best of everything out here, you know, Ted!"

"No; let's hope they've got some better men than you," returned Radford, inspired by the quorum of three to make mince−meat of his friend.

It was the interval between parts one and two. The platform was unoccupied. A cool draught blew through the iron building from open door to open door; there was no occasion to go outside. They had done so, however, at the lower end; there was a sudden stampede of returning feet. A something in the scuffling steps, a certain outcry that accompanied them, caused Miss Bouverie and her companions to turn their heads; they turned again at as sudden a jingle on the platform, and the girl caught her breath. There stood her missing hero, smiling on the people, dapper, swarthy, booted, spurred, and for one moment the man she had reason to remember, exactly as she remembered him. The next his folded arms sprang out from the shoulders, and a brace of long−barrelled revolvers covered the assembly.

"Up with your hands, every man of you!" he cried. "No, not the ladies, but every man and boy who doesn't want a bullet in his brain!"

The command was echoed in uncouth accents at the lower door, where, in fact, a bearded savage had driven in all and sundry at his pistol's point. And in a few seconds the meeting was one which had carried by overwhelming show of hands a proposition from which the ladies alone saw occasion to dissent.

"You may have heard of me before," said the man on the platform, sweeping the forest of hands with his eye−glass. "My name's Stingaree."

It was the word which Hilda Bouverie had heard on the veranda and taken for some strange expletive.

"Who is he?" she asked, in a whisper that bespoke excitement, agitation, but not alarm.

"The fancy bushranger — the dandy outlaw!" drawled Radford, in cool reply. "I've been expecting him. He was seen on our run the day Mrs. Clarkson went down to Melbourne."

That memorable day for Hilda Bouverie! And it was this manner of man who had been her hero ever since: a bushranger, an outlaw, a common robber under arms!

"And you never told me!" she cried, in an indignant whisper.

"We never told Mrs. Clarkson either. You must blame the boss."

Hilda snatched her eyes from Stingaree, and was sorry for Mrs. Clarkson for the first time in their acquaintance. The new ball−dress of bridal satin was no whiter than its wearer's face, which had aged several years in as many seconds. The squatter leant toward her with uplifted hands, loyally concerned for no one and for nothing else. Between the couple Sir Julian might have been conducting without his baton, but with both arms. Meanwhile, the flashing eye−glass had fixed itself on Miss Bouverie's companion, without resting for an instant on Miss Bouverie.

"Silence over there!" cried Stingaree, sternly. "I'm here on a perfectly harmless errand. If you know anything about me at all, you may know that I have a weakness for music of any kind, so long as it's good of its kind."

The eye−glass dropped for a moment upon Mrs. Clarkson in the front row, and the irrepressible Radford was enabled to continue his say.

"He has, too, from a mouth−organ to a full orchestra, from all accounts, Miss Bouverie. My revolver's in the coat−pocket next you!"

"It is the music," continued Stingaree, looking harder than before in their direction, "which has brought me here to−night. I've come to listen, and for no other reason in the world. Unfortunately, when one has a price upon one's head, one has to take certain precautions before venturing among one's fellow−men. And, though I'm not here for gain or bloodshed, if any man of you gives me trouble I shall shoot him like a dog!"

"That's one for me," whispered the intrepid overseer, in lower key. "Never mind. He's not looking at us now. I believe Mrs. Clarkson's going to faint. You take what I told you and slip it under your shawl, and you'll save a second by passing it up to me the instant you see her sway!"

Hilda hesitated. A dead silence had fallen on the crowded and heated store, and in the silence Stingaree was already taking an unguarded interest in Mrs. Clarkson's appearance, which as certainly betokened imminent collapse. "Now!" whispered Radford, and Hilda hesitated no more. She was wearing a black lace shawl between her appearances at the piano; she had the revolver under it in a twinkling, and pressed it to her bosom with both hands, one outside the shawl and one underneath, as who should hug a beating heart.

"Mrs. Clarkson," said Stingaree, "you have been singing too much, and the quality of your song has not been equal to the quantity."

It sounded a brutal speech enough; and to do justice to a portion of the audience not hitherto remarkable for its spirit, the ungallant criticism was audibly resented in the back rows. The maudlin stockman had indeed to be restrained by his neighbors from precipitating himself upon the barrels of Stingaree. But the effect upon Mrs. Clarkson herself was still more remarkable, and revealed a subtle kindness in the desperado's cruelty. Her pale face flushed; her lack−lustre eyes blazed forth their indignation; her very clay was on fire for all the room to see.

"I don't sing for criminals and cut−throats!" the indignant lady cried out. She glanced at Sir Julian as one for whom she did sing. And Sir Julian's eyes twinkled under the bushranger's guns.

"To be sure you don't," said Stingaree, with as much sweetness as his character would permit. "You sing for charity, and spend three times as much as you are ever likely to make in arraying yourself for the occasion. Well, we must put up with some song−bird without fine feathers, for I mean to hear the programme out." His eyes ranged the front rows till they fell on Hilda Bouverie in her corner. "You young lady over there! You've been talking since I called for silence. You deserve to pay a penalty; be good enough to step this way."

Hilda's excitement may be supposed; it made her scandalously radiant in that company of humiliated men and women, but it did not rob her of her resource. Removing her shawl with apparent haste, but with calculated deliberation, she laid it in a bunch upon the seat which she had occupied, and stepped forward with a courage that won a cheer from the back rows. Stingaree stooped to hand her up to the platform; and his warm grip told a tale. This was what he had come for, to make her sing, to make her sing before Sir Julian Crum, to give her a start unique in the history of the platform and the stage. Criminal, was he? Then the dearest, kindest, most enchanting, most romantic criminal the world had ever seen! But she must be worthy of his chivalry and her chance; and, from the first, her artistic egoism insisted that she was.

Stingaree had picked up a programme, and dexterously mounted it between hammer and cartridge of the revolver which he had momentarily relinquished, much as a cornet−player mounts his music under his nose. With both weapons once more levelled, he consulted the programme now.

"The next item, ladies and gentlemen," said he, "is another pianoforte solo by this young lady. We'll let you off that, Miss Bouverie, since you've got to sing. The next song on the programme is called 'The Unrealized Ideal,' and the music is by our distinguished visitor and patron, Sir Julian Crum. In happier circumstances it would have been sung to you by Mrs. Montgomery Clarkson; as it is, I call upon Miss Bouverie to realize her ideal and ours, and on Sir Julian Crum to accompany her, if he will."

At Mrs. Clarkson's stony side the great man dropped both arms at the superb impudence of the invitation.

"Quite right, Sir Julian; let the blood run into them," said Stingaree. "It is a pure oversight that you were not exempted in the beginning. Comply with my entreaty and I guarantee that you shall suffer no further inconvenience."

Sir Julian wavered. In London he was a clubman and a diner−out; and what a tale for the Athenæum — what a short cut to every ear at a Kensington dinner−table! In the end it would get into the papers. That was the worst of it. But in the midst of Sir Julian's hesitation his pondering eyes met those of Miss Bouverie — on fire to sing him his own song — alight with the ability to do it justice. And Sir Julian was lost.

How she sang it may be guessed. Sir Julian bowed and swayed upon his stool. Stingaree stood by with a smile of personal pride and responsibility, but with both revolvers still levelled, and one of them cocked. It was a better song than he had supposed. It gained enormously from the composer's accompaniment. The last verse was softer than another would have made it, and yet the singer obeyed inaudible instructions as though she had never sung it otherwise. It was more in a tuneful whisper than in hushed notes that the last words left her lips:—

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"Lightly I sped when hope was high,
    And youth beguiled the chase;
  I follow — follow still; but I
    Shall never see her Face."
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The applause, when it came, was almost overwhelming. The bushranger watched and smiled, but cocked his second pistol, and let the programme flutter to the floor. As for Sir Julian Crum, the self−contained, the cynical, he was seen for an instant, wheeled about on the music−stool, grasping the singer by both hands. But there was no hearing what he said; the girl herself heard nothing until he bellowed in her ear:

"They'll have their encore. What can you give them? It must be something they know. 'Home, Sweet Home'? 'The Last Rose'? 'Within a Mile'? The first, eh? Very well; it's a leaf out of Patti's book; but so are they all."

And he struck the opening bars in the key of his own song, but for some moments Hilda Bouverie stood bereft of her great voice. A leaf out of Patti's book, in that up−country township, before a roomful held in terror — and yet unmindful — of the loaded pistols of two bloodthirsty bushrangers! The singer prayed for power to live up to those golden words. A leaf out of Patti's book!

It was over. The last poignant note trembled into nothingness. The silence, absolutely dead for some seconds, was then only broken by a spirituous sob from the incorrigible stockman. There was never any applause at all. Ere it came, even as it was coming, the overseer Radford leapt to his feet with a raucous shout.

The bushranger had vanished from the platform. The other bushranger had disappeared through the other door. The precious pair of them had melted from the room unseen, unheard, what time every eye doted on handsome Hilda Bouverie, and every ear on the simple words and moving cadences of "Home, Sweet Home."

Ted Radford was the first to see it; for by the end of the brief song he had his revolver uncovered and cocked at last, and no quarry left for him to shoot. With a bound he was on the platform; another carried him into the canvas anteroom, a third and a fourth out into the moonlight. It was as bright as noon in a conservatory of smoked glass. And in the tinted brightness one man was already galloping away; but it was Stingaree who danced with one foot only in the stirrup of a milk−white mare.

Radford rushed up to him and fired point−blank again and again. A series of metallic clicks was all the harm he did, for Stingaree was in the saddle before the hurled revolver struck the mare on the ribs, and sent the pair flying through the moonlight with a shout of laughter, a cloud of sand, and a dull volley of thunderous hoofs. The overseer picked up his revolver and returned crestfallen to examine it in the lights of the emptying room.

"I could have sworn I loaded it," said he. "If I had, he'd have been a dead man six times over."

Miss Bouverie had been talking to Sir Julian Crum. On Radford's entry she had grown distraite, but at Radford's speech she turned back to Sir Julian with shining eyes.

"My wife wants a companion for the voyage," he was saying. "So that will cost you nothing, but if anything the other way, and once in London, I'll be answerable. I've adjudicated these things for years to voices not in the same class as yours. But the worst of it is you won't stay with us."

"I will."

"No; they'll want you at Covent Garden before we know where we are. And when you are ready to go to them, go you must."

"I shall do what you tell me."

"Then speak to Mrs. Clarkson at once."

Hilda Bouverie glanced over her shoulder, but her employers had left the building. Her smile was less roguish than demure.

"There is no need, Sir Julian. Mrs. Clarkson has already spoken to me, though only in a whisper. But I am to take myself off by the next coach."