

The Buln–Buln and the Brolga

Tom Collins (Joseph Furphy)

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Foreword

LIKE Rigby's Romance, The Buln–buln and the Brolga originally formed a chapter of Such is Life, and was detached with it to reduce the length of that book. Furphy at first planned to join these portions together as the basis of another novel. "The two segregated chapters," he wrote to his friend Cathels on 14 May 1901, "will go far to compose a second book. They will include my ideal liar in his full integrity, his wife, Barefooted Bob, and Jeff Rigby the agitator, also the whole scene at the fishing meeting. Two stories, in fact, loosely federated, The Lyre Bird and Rigby's Romance." By 18 October, however, he had decided to separate these and work on the "remodelling and elaboration" of each.

Rigby's Romance was finished first, and published serially in 1905–6. Furphy then gave his attention to the other story. On 20 June 1905 he wrote that he was "intermittently busy in revising, and re–writing, and largely altering, one of my old neglected yarns, entitled 'The Lyre Bird and the Native Companion'. The N.C. is Barefooted Bob of 'S'L', and the L.B., of course, is a fearful and wonderful liar." Bob, who appears in Chapter V of Such is Life, has now been elaborated to such an extent that he shares the title of the book with "The Lyre Bird", Fred Falkland–Pritchard, of whom, apparently, no trace remains in Such is Life.

In his title, Furphy finally chose to substitute the aboriginal names of the two birds which had provided the nicknames for Fred and Bob respectively—the one because of the obvious pun, the other from the tallness and thinness which suggested a physical resemblance to the long–shanked creature; hence The Buln–buln and the Brolga.

Though the year of the events, 1884, is unchanged, the circumstances are different. Here Tom Collins, the narrator, is not, as in Such is Life, a Government official, but, much like Rigby at one time, mechanical expert to an agricultural implement company, stationed at Echuca in Victoria, where the meetings and conversations which make up the story take place.

The book forms a study in character of Fred the liar, set off by Bob the bush–yarner, who can tell tall ones himself. As fabricators they differ in their procedures: Bob apparently works by means of extension of the facts, Fred on the principle of fanciful construction upon a small basis of fact. These two take to each other naturally, Fred finding a credulous listener, Bob a man with the gift of loquacity to admire. Also Fred has, as Collins explains, just the wife to suit him. Collins himself admires Fred, with pure disinterested appreciation of his mastery of his one talent. On her part, Mrs Fred assesses Tom and Bob by the value they place on the object of her adoration; accordingly she thinks highly of Bob, but fails to rate Tom high enough. Not that he cares: as Bob says to him in honest tribute, he is above being forgiven.

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From this, from his own recollections of his boyhood, and from the concluding reflection, we learn more about Tom than we do in *Such is Life* or *Rigby's Romance*. The last-named touches on his boyhood in reminiscences of his first meeting with Rigby and his early friendship with Steve Thompson, but *The Buln–buln and the Brolga* gives no fewer than four complete glimpses of Tom, in the company of Steve and Fred, at different stages of his boyhood and adolescence. From these we can almost piece his history together. Then, too, he reveals himself clearly in his attitude throughout—as usual that of the spectator and commentator of life, never interfering in its course—shown in his relation to Bob, then Fred, then Mrs Fred, and all three together; although he modifies that attitude to the extent of attempting to prevail on Bob to stay and spend more time with his new found friends, who rightly value Bob's admiration of Fred's abilities. At the end Tom makes the more-than-usually negative comment: "And so closes a glimpse, a mere momentary peep, into the vast and ageless volume of human insignificance."

Tom generally sees life as a humorous ironic spectacle: he here views it as also futile.

The characterization of Mrs Fred is subtle. Her appearance is prepared for, then Tom is disappointed of his dubious expectations; instead of wearing "a stern, practical, masterful look", being "sour in temper and repellent in manner, through continual brooding over her grand mistake", she proves to be tall, fair, lithe, graceful, and intellectual-looking. But—the art of it!—she is false—intellectual, pretentious, limited. Our first admiration of her is gradually abated, as she reveals herself; and when she turns against Tom, our sympathy moves quite away from her. She is simply Fred's "yes-woman", with a superficial interest of her own in native ethnology; which, also, draws her to Bob, as bushman.

The technique in presentation of Fred, too, is masterly, Furphy uses recollection, which is started, first by Fred's letter to Tom, later by mention of incidents of their common experience. We have a complete study of Fred from boyhood to his present self-assured manhood. And as a liar he is most convincing:

he has all Bobadil's regard for detail, all the coolness, resourcefulness and readiness to explain difficulties in a story that he shows without Munchausen's outrageous imposition on credibility. Surely, as Tom admiringly suggests, Fred is a genius-liar!

The story offers, in sum, just one more glimpse of human insignificance. But, almost glum as that interpretation may seem for a self-styled jester, the book is very amusing, partly through the characterization, partly through the yarns related, partly through Tom's own comments. Before the meeting with Fred, we have an excellent, unintentionally comic self-picture of the bushman in town, drawn by Bob. And there is sheer fun in most of the incidents that demonstrate the accuracy with which Tom perceives himself as he was in his graceless juvenility.

The Buln–buln and the Brolga, in that it fills out the portrayal of Tom, forms an essential—indeed, integral—part of the Collins saga; it is also an addition to the humorous chapters of *Such is Life*.

Furphy's own typescript, copies of which were kindly lent by his son Mr Samuel Furphy, Dr Lloyd Ross, and Mr E. E. Pescott, has provided the text of this book. For permission to quote from unpublished letters of Furphy in the National Library, Canberra, I thank Mr Kenneth Binns, former Commonwealth Librarian. The publication has enjoyed the usual interest and enthusiasm of Miss Kate Baker, O.B.E., and the ready co-operation of Miss Miles Franklin.

R. G. HOWARTH

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I THINK it was in the spring of '84. Anyway, in the exercise of my apostolate as mechanical expert for the

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Mohawk Twine Binder, I was temporarily quartered in Echuca. One evening, on reaching my lodgings at Mrs Ferguson's Coffee Palace, I found a letter and a telegram awaiting me. The wire was from my firm, in Melbourne:–

Meet Lascelles first through train tomorrow.

WAGHORN BROS.

Mr Lascelles was our commercial traveller. He would be seeking information from me touching a prospective buyer, referred to in my last weekly report. Twine Binders (which passed the Customs duty–free) were sold to the farmers at rather more than double the invoice price; hence there was keen competition between rival agencies, though all were members of a well–organized Union; hence, also, any commercial would shadow a possible purchaser with all the vim of Satan in pursuit of a valuable soul. Meanwhile, the honest farmers, smarting under this glaring extortion, responded by arraying themselves against the Labour Unions–not very rationally, perhaps, but on general cat–whipping principles.

The letter, dated from Essendon, ran:–

Dear Tom, Heard of your present vocation only yesterday. Called at your warehouse and saw Mr Waghorn in his office. Devilish nice fellow. Obtained your present address. Suits me down to the ground. Had made preparations for a trip to Echuca by Excursion Train. Can you meet me on the platform? Can you recommend lodgings, quiet, respectable, and not expensive for self and–and–prepare yourself! Wife and three (3) children, if you please!! Go thou and do likewise!!! We intend to stay a few days in Echuca.

Your comrade, as of old,

FRED FALKLAND–PRITCHARD.

I showed the letter to Mrs Ferguson, who readily agreed to furnish accommodation for the visitors.

Next morning, after breakfast, I put Mrs Ferguson's husband in the shafts of my buggy, while I pushed behind; and so we ran the vehicle to an adjacent forge, in order to have some repairs effected during the forenoon. On returning to the Coffee Palace, I received another wire from Melbourne:–

Missed train arrive tomorrow from Bendigo.

H. V. E. LASCELLES.

Here was a holiday, just forced upon me. Fred's Excursion Train was timed to arrive at 3.15 p.m. I soon decided to pass the intervening time in a horizontal position, amongst some blossoming wattles, a little way below the Campaspe junction. And by way of shifting a portion of that superincumbent mass of inborn ignorance which often humbles my soul, and always fetters my usefulness, I provided myself with Darwin's masterly and almost unreadable monograph on Earthworms. Also I let my kangaroo dog off the chain. Poor Pup! Wherever I might happen to be, I always had to tie him up every evening, otherwise he would have been lost or stolen before morning. And many a reproach I had to undergo on account of his unearthly rendition of Beethoven's masterpieces in the dead vast and middle of the night.

The most direct route to my sylvan destination was along one of the main streets; but, for reasons of my own, I dodged round by the back slums. Frankly, it is not a bit nice for a man of position to walk down a respectable thoroughfare, nodding to his acquaintances with dignified composure, when a backward glance has disclosed his

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kangaroo dog dawdling along at his heels, lithe, svelte and spirituelle, with about ten pounds of stolen sausages hanging festooned from his mouth, and tripping him up from time to time. But Pup couldn't eat the sausages without stopping; so, when we reached the outskirts of the town, I took them from him, and, sitting down on a stump, cut the isthmuses with my knife, in order to help him to them one by one. Then, after a mutual caress, we resumed our way to the romantic nook that I wotted of.

Darwin is very filling. After a couple of hours' reading, I laid the book aside, and turned my mind loose for a roll in the dust of Memory, and a cavort round the paddock of Imagination. Fred Pritchard was uppermost in my thoughts; and I longed, yet dreaded, to see him and his wife together. For it hath been said by them of comparatively recent time that no man is a hero to his vally–de–sham; and it seemed to me that few men of my acquaintance were worse fitted to sustain feminine analysis than this old schoolmate of mine.

As a boy, Fred had been distinguished by a curious combination of positive and negative qualities. His one positive quality was mendacity. His negative qualities spread out in an old man plain of comprehensive incapability, in the centre of which, his solitary characteristic reared its awful form above the clouds and midway left the storm. He could lie. His style was ornate, yet reposeful; microscopically exact, yet large and sublime. You could sit down and rest in the cool shade of one of his fabrications. Tasteful, audacious and adroit in his one art, he was limp and washy and generally inadequate outside that speciality. Mild and pusillanimous in temperament, the poor fellow's juvenile days were passed in the sphere of a scape–goat; and, without being personally popular, he was viewed as a sort of godsend by the bad boys of the generation to which I had the honour of belonging.

We called him "The Lyre Bird".

If unmerciful beating could have cast the untruthful spirit out of Freddy, and replaced it by something more in accordance with the prosaic conditions of life, that result would have been achieved by his surly English father. Pritchard senior lives in my recollection as a man of really fine education, and withal, the most ill–natured and supercilious person in our locality. His arrogance was not without grounds. He more than once unbent himself to confide to my own dad that he (the deponent, not my good old plebeian dad, for heaven's sake!) was the illegitimate son of an illegitimate son of George IV.

And this was no mere European gasconade. Each quarter brought him a remittance of £25 from his half–brother, Sir William Falkland, of Falkland Lodge, Hants, England. Most gentlemen—and many rank—and– file blokes—would have idly vegetated on this income; but Pritchard was too fidgety for that, and too fractious to supplement it by means of nap, baccarat, or other gentlemanly diversion.

By nature, culture and opportunity, a bully and a tyrant, he was, to do him bare justice, no snob. He hated all sorts of 'ocracy with equal malignity. And, believing himself to be, in a general way, born to command, his passion for having servants led him into the very inconsonant occupation of a road–contractor; in which sphere of noxiousness he could always manage to boss half a dozen men, picked for servility and cheapness. His wife owned a small farm besides, and, chiefly by her admirable management, made both ends meet. Whenever anything went wrong—which happened every second day, or so—Pritchard senior took it out of Freddy with a horse–whip. His wife seemed to have no influence over him in respect of the boy, though it was evident that she would rather have taken the beatings herself. (By the way, have you noticed that, at the present date, the barbarous custom of child–flogging—like the more brutal kinds of sport, and the grosser forms of immorality—is confined to the highest and the lowest classes? Conservatism, in both cases.)

Also, if tenderest love and idolatry could have made Freddy truthful and practical, that result might have been credited to his mother—a fat, good–natured woman, ladylike in manner, prudent and thrifty in management; and, as I remember, with a bust that seemed to boil and bubble when she laughed.

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But paternal brutality and maternal indulgence alike passed by Freddy as the idle wind which he respected not. He lived in fairyland; only returning to this low world of care when an appeal was made to his fears, his vanity, or his cuticle.

Now, every normally constituted boy spends a considerable portion of his time in the transitory Utopia above referred to; and the change of air doubtless does him good. He brings back visions of beauty, and aspirations of heroism, which become woven into the texture of his character. It is a part of Nature's progressive discipline; and can scarcely be called a digression in the journey of life. The boy who has brought nothing out of fairyland, for the reason that he has never been there, or has not found anything worth carrying away, develops inevitably into a mere earthworm—maybe a religious one, or one with a stake in the country, but an earthworm still. Again, the boy who refuses to leave fairyland when the whistle blows, pays his penalty, poor fellow, in the fecklessness of after–life. There is no harm in him; gritless and inoffensive, and usually a blind, unaccountably infatuated self–worshipper.

Both characters—the one who has never been in fairyland, and the one who never leaves it—are, of course, liars; the sordid practitioner lying for profit, at so much per fib; and the imaginative person lying spontaneously as the spirit gives him utterance.

O. W. Holmes remarks that each of us is the totting–up of two columns of figures—paternal and maternal. This is true of the very small baby; it is not true of the adult. The latter is the totting–up of one column, namely, his own self–discipline–headed, to be sure, by Holmes's twofold total as a single item.

This is the old Stoic theory, which will sturdily survive all chimerical and convenient hypotheses of heredity and atavism, fashionable in our own day. Moreover, it is the old Christian theory. Certainly, self–discipline is very largely directed and limited by extraneous conditions. This is a fact which the old Christianity took cognisance of, and provided for; and which the old Stoicism unfortunately overlooked.

Pious, narrow, opinionative Cowper tells us that, of all the budding ills by which the spring–time of our youth is dishonoured and defiled

None sooner shoots,
If unrestrain'd, into luxuriant growth,
Than cruelty, most d-lish of them all.

He is wrong. The first erratic shooting of the young idea is always performed with that good old English weapon, the long–bow. Lying commends itself to the juvenile mind as being easy, inexpensive, and convenient; and in course of time the habit becomes fixed. In fact, mankind may be broadly divided into two classes—perpetual liars, and intermittent liars.

Lying is, of all arts, the most popular and cosmopolitan. The psalmist reports himself to have said, in a moment of excitement, that all men were liars; and, on more leisurely review, allowed the statement to stand on record as being at least one truth emanating from himself. Sir John also remarked how this world was given to lying. Epimenides looked round on his countrymen, and chanced the assertion that the Cretans—including himself, of course—were always liars; a censure cordially endorsed by St Paul.

The Romans of old called the Greeks liars; and the Orangemen of the present day call the Romans liars.

The Foreign–traders call the Protectionists liars—and vice versa. And of all the accusations of mendacity which from time immemorial have primed our atmosphere, probably not one has been groundless—except, perhaps, when

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some Chinaman, after a few hours' patient controversy, has applied the epithet to his jibbing horse. Which simply means that truth is relative, not absolute.

But the long-bow is like the long-sleever, in respect that the habit of immoderate indulgence is apt to grow upon you; also in respect that, to maintain the doctrine of averages, the over-indulger should be equipped by the total-abstainer. Freddy was an over-indulger; I was a total-abstainer. There was a very good collection of assorted toxophilites at the country school we both attended—there being, indeed, only the one exception already noticed—but Freddy was the Teucer, the Locksley, the William Tell. In fact, during a space of eight or nine years, while we grew in beauty side by side, from the degree of the whining schoolboy, with his lunch-bag, to that of the lover, sulking like pig, I only knew him to tell the truth three times.

His first departure of this kind took place in school; each of us being then about twelve or thirteen years of age. I'll tell you how it came.—

A carpenter had been employed to build an addition to the schoolhouse; and the dominie—a reputed master of seventeen languages—took advantage of the opportunity to have all ink-stains, scribbings, scratches etc. planed off the school desks. Then he charged us to refrain from defacing the restored surface; or—

That was all, and it was enough. We knew from experience how he had taken to heart the counsel of that currier in the fable, touching the efficacy of leather.

During the afternoon of the following day, Freddy left his seat by my side to seek the master's assistance in a sum which wouldn't prove. I was working out a solitary game of puzzley—O at the time; but seeing at a glance that everyone in the school was engrossed in his own business, I moved to Freddy's vacant seat, took a soft pen, and wrote on the cleanest part of the desk, in very fair imitation of Freddy's handwriting, the signature, "Frederick Falkland Pritchard".

I protected the writing with my slate until the ink was dry, and concealed it with my arithmetic book when Freddy resumed his seat. A few minutes afterward, the master passed along behind us, pausing to scan each boy's work. While he stood behind Freddy and me, I was, of course, fiercely busy—though I never was, and never shall be, strong in arithmetic.—

"Nine times seven is fifty-six, and three is fifty-eight," I mumbled. "Five, and carry eight. Eight and six is fifteen, and fifteen into fourteen goes nothing times, and one over. Now, let's see "

and I drew the arithmetic book toward me for reference.

The master's eye, which was a sharp one, fell on the signature; and simultaneously his strap, which was a heavy one, fell on the shoulders of the supposed signatory.

"Pleasir I didn't write that," whimpered Freddy.

"WHAT!" exclaimed the master. "Will you never leave off lying?" And again the dust flew out of my poor client's jumper.

"I didn't do it! I didn't do it! Somebody else done it! Tom done it! Tom done it!"

"We'll see about that," said the master, still applying his favourite form of expostulation. "Did you do it?p

Did you do it? Did "

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"Pleasir yes!" screamed Freddy, finishing up with a lie, as usual, though he had told the truth in the first instance.

An hour afterward, I said to him, "What the dickens possessed you to write your name on the desk, you fool?"

"Devilment," he replied jauntily. "The idear struck me all of a sudden, to get up a rebellion in the school. I expected you fellers to mob Snarley while he was weltin' me. Never mind; I'll think out some other plot before I've done. Snarley's got to suffer; and he knows it; I see it in his eye."

A year or so afterward occurred the second known instance of Freddy's telling an unmitigated truth. It came about in this way:–

My little brother, Bobby, was at that time six or seven years old; Steve Thompson's brother, Jimmy, was about the same age; and the children were inseparable companions. One Sunday afternoon, returning from Sunday School, Steve and I sat down in a road–metal quarry, to enjoy a quiet smoke of honeysuckle; Bobby and Jimmy meanwhile gathering wild–flowers among the rocks.

"The little coves is about the same size," I remarked.

"Same temper, too," replied Steve. "Couldn't be better matched."

"Sooner they learn to take their own parts the better for themselves," I hinted.

"I think parents ought to learn their kids to defend themselves," observed Steve; "not have them growin' up helpless, for people to wipe their feet on."

After some further interchange of opinion, we called the children, promising to show them a new game.

We stripped them for combat, and tied their little suspenders round their waists. Then we pleasantly explained to them the details of the noble art, endeavouring at the same time to rouse their emulation by calling them our champions of feather–weights. But they stubbornly refused to hurt each other; so we were finally compelled to hammer their faces together, till they lost temper, and flew at each other with the ferocity of terriers. Then we had nothing to do but to pull them asunder when we judged that a fair round had been fought, and rush them together again after a very short interval of rest. The fifth round, I think, was in progress when we looked up and saw Freddy standing on the brink of the quarry. He disappeared immediately; and we knew what that meant. We stopped the combat, and dressed the children, after washing their faces in a crab–hole. Meanwhile we saw Freddy approach my home—which was about a quarter of a mile from the quarry—and stand for a few minutes talking to my father in the veranda. Then we saw him walk briskly and officiously across the road to Steve's place, and disappear through the front door. Oh, if we only had him by the ear! Ay, if!

So we returned to our respective homes; each of us weighed down by a bodement founded on the knowledge that our papas were men of the bad old Puritan strain—men of unappreciative minds and saturnine dispositions—no music in their souls, if you understand me. Each of us strongly impressed upon his champion the necessity of reticence respecting the new game; for we clung to the not unreasonable hope that Freddy had obeyed the primary impulse of his nature, and told some outlandish and confutable lie. The contingency was worth counting on.

Each of us slunk round his home till tea–time, and then till bed–time, silently offering up the prayer of Jacob the patriarch, "Lord, get me out of this scrape, and I'll guard against detection in future." I noticed, as a bad omen, that my dad was reading a volume of sermons. I would rather have seen him occupied with some lighter literature. Before retiring for the night, I ascertained that Freddy had told the truth. My father, in mentioning the circumstance to me, submitted a proposal that he and I should discuss the subject practically and exhaustively on the following morning. Nothing but the faint hope of miraculous interposition withheld me from infidelity.

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Now, Thompson senior was in the habit of putting a disagreeably literal construction on Prov. XIII. 24:–

"He that spareth his rod hateth his son; but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." It is a proverb which has earned for Solomon a rancorous hatred from many successive crops of bad boys—one which, in the juvenile mind, stamps the propounder as a fat–head or a skunk; in either case, a most objectionable adviser, and a man who should have had something done to him.

So on Monday morning Thompson senior, who, like my own senior, was a rigid sabbatarian, rose with the voice of the magpie, and disturbed Steve's beauty–sleep by throwing out a suggestion that they should together repair to the out–house, for the purpose of discussing the moral aspects of the new game from a physical standpoint Thompson senior had the riddle–belt of a chaff–cutter in his hand; and they performed the short journey with mutual though ill–distributed sorrow; the expedition ending, however, in a triumphant vindication of paternal affection—at least, according to Solomon's vagary.

My own dad was not so fond of dwelling on the diabolical proverb above quoted as on that terrible warning contained in the story of Eli, whose sons wrought evil in the sight of the Lord, and he restrained them not. But the difference of text mattered little to me, inasmuch as his system of exegesis brought him unerringly to the same conclusion as Thompson senior; and, being a man of exceptionally practical turn of mind, the firstlings of his heart were usually the firstlings of his hand; the latter being by no means a light one in its application.

Having, however, no desire to make myself the hero of my own story, I shall not describe the unequal contest in which I was engaged at the very time when Steve and his papa were quarrelling in the out–house.

But a few days afterward, when we were having a swim, Steve likened me to a tiger, and I compared him with a zebra.

Such similes, however felicitous at that later time, would have been odious to our dejected minds as we took our way to school together, a couple of hours after receiving the paternal sollicitation to virtue.

Why hadn't we watched better? Why hadn't one of us gone for Freddy, while the other washed and dressed the champions? All would have been well if we had but exercised a little judgment. No wonder we were overwhelmed with woe. And—in perfect seriousness—the humiliation of being whacked by foreign interlopers lent an intolerable bitterness to our affliction.

It was about two miles to the school; and when we had gone a little more than half–way we found, on the top of a hill, a capsized dray, with one shaft broken off by the body. A little cheered by the supposition that some one had paid the penalty of travelling on Sunday, we provided ourselves with levers, took the wheels off the dray, and bowled them down the hill. Then we journeyed on with lighter hearts, feeling that, after all, it was a goodly thing to behold the sun.

And life was even well worth living; for there was Freddy, fifty yards ahead. He saw us as we saw him, and took flight. We pursued.

It is an axiom of mine—and in no way clashing with what I said just now touching the column of figures, headed by Holmes's twofold total—that a man, if not trimmed, espaliered, and pot–bound, by routine systems of education or social conventionalities, naturally bourgeons into a specialist. I would go so far as to say that, not only is each individual designed to do something well, but he is fashioned by Nature to do that something better than anybody else. Man, though born in a state of deplorable helplessness and sottish ignorance, is inherently dowered with certain rudimentary talents. These, reaching the dignity of joey–faculties, are developed, this way or that way, by the operation of a Will, which (never forget) is in turn moulded by outward conditions. And there being no such thing in Nature as uniformity of power, the strongest one of these faculties—circumstances being

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favourable–dominates and dwarfs the rest; just as a blue gum, growing amongst shrubs and flowers, ultimately gets the garden to itself. And, paradoxical as it may seem, this involuntary tendency to individual concentration of faculty is the sheet anchor of ideal Socialism. Under present conditions, we find one man who can do nothing but cheat; another who can do nothing but show off; another who can do nothing but loaf; another who can do nothing but toil. And so on. The rule applies to boys; allowance being made for the versatility accompanying callowness. Now, Freddy's speciality of lying was so life–absorbing, so soul–enveloping, as to permeate even his physical system, leaving him about as vif and vigorous as a wet rag. Consequently, the chase was a short one.

"What'll we do with him?" asked Steve. "He can't fight worth sixpence. It ain't manly to hit him."

"Duck him till he's half–drownded," I suggested. "And here's a crab–hole, jist providentially made to order."

"Hold on, chaps!" remonstrated Freddy, not without dignity. "I don't understand you. I never done you any harm. We're in friends, ain't we?"

"What did you gosh well tell my dad yesterday?" I demanded.

"To keep six bags o' seed oats for us," replied Freddy, looking me frankly in the face. "That was the message the ole man sent me with."

"You lyin' cur!" I replied. "If you give my dad that sort o' message on Sunday, he'd order you off the place!"

"So he jist did, now! He says, 'Off the place you go! How dare you come with a message like that on Sunday?' says he."

"An' what fetched you to our place?" demanded Steve.

"I had to go about the turkeys."

"Which turkeys?"

"Well, when I was goin' to Collins's, about the seed oats, the ole woman she says, 'Call at Thompson's, an' see if them four young turkeys has took up with theirs; for I can't see them, high nor low,' says she.

An', sure enough, they ain't with yours, Steve. I think they must 'a' gone to Maguire's."

"Didn't you tell tales about the fight?" I asked.

"Which fight? Who's been fightin'?"

"Screw loose somewhere," muttered Steve. "But hold on!–what made you clear off when you seen us, just now?"

"Frightened," faltered Freddy, with a choking in his throat, and a swelling of tears to his eyes. "Ain't you fellers always on for givin' me sacks–in–the–mill, or somethin'?"

Apart from this verbal justification, there was such ingenuous innocence in the speaker's looks and tones that Steve and I sullenly resumed our school–bags, and turned away. Here we were joined by another boy, a trifle older, and a good deal sturdier, than any of us. This was Wesley Tregurtha, son of a local clergyman.

"What's up with you fellers?" he demanded.

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When Steve and I had stated our grievance, Wes turned on Freddy with a look of manly scorn, and struck him heavily in the face. Freddy staggered, then recovered himself, and, without raising his hands, opposed his patience to the other's brutality; the blood trickling from a slight abrasion on his cheek–bone, and mingling with his tears.

"The bark strips well, for this time o' year," remarked Wes, incongruously following up his British action with an Australian by–word. "Stand still till I have another smack at you."

But Steve drew Freddy aside, and walked away with his arm round the neck of the sobbing boy, offering such consolation as he could. Wes looked thoughtfully at me.

"Tell you what I'll do with you, Tom," he remarked, at length; "I'll take you one hand."

"Kneelin'?" I asked insidiously.

"Well, kneelin', if you like. I ain't particular."

Now it seemed my natural condition in those days to be a victim to the unholy passion of ambition (that last infirmity of noble minds); and the highest aspiration of my soul was to go through Wes Tregurtha.

Building on the rotten assumption that a bully is necessarily a fraud, I had always been ready to tackle Wes, and always with disastrous results. I was like the French nation, as pictured in English history.

From Cressy to Waterloo, these neighbours have warred almost continuously; and John Bull, though in every instance fighting against terrific odds, has uniformly come out on top. But this never seemed to matter much to Jacques Bonhomme. His troubles! Give him his customary majority of five to one and he needed no provocation to come up smiling again, and again, and again; to be sent home each time in a wheelbarrow. I was like Jacques, not only in his unbroken record of failure, but in the odds with which he waged his wars; for Wes had always been willing to fight under any reasonable handicap. But now he seemed to have delivered himself into my hand.

"Shed your duds, you slummockin' beggar!" said I gleefully, throwing down my school–bag. "Steve!

Freddy! come back here! Call Jack Simpson an' Corney Maguire! I'm goin' to take the flashness out o' this psalm–singin' beggar! Now, Wes, I got a crawfishin' line here that'll do to tie your hand behind your back."

"Thought you was goin' to take me kneelin'," observed Wes indifferently.

"So I am. One hand, kneelin'."

"Fat likely!" he retorted. "I said I'd take you one hand, standin', or two hands, kneelin'."

"Divil thank you! You'll do miracles! I'm not on!"

"Cowardy–cowardy–custard!"

"Parsony–parsony–pup! Who stole the missionary money?"

"Jis' you say that again!"

"I'll see you dash first, an' then I won't! Cock you up, indeed!"

"Ah! you ain't game, you skite!"

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And so with mutual taunts we followed Steve and Freddy to the school.

But the Order of Things is full of compensation. An hour later, Steve was frowning gloomily over the parsing of a treacherous sentence; Wes was wrestling with the difficulty of distinguishing the nominative from the objective on sight; I was trying the word "than" by every possible test, in a fruitless endeavour to decide what part of speech it belonged to; and each of us was cordially execrating the man that invented grammar. Freddy alone was happy. He was in fairyland again. He was a slight, graceful boy, brave, beautiful, and above all invincible; a creature of heroic blood, and proud though childlike form. With what calm, patrician scorn he confronted the burly avoirdupois of Wes Tregurtha; scarcely deigning to notice the uproarious cheering of the boys, and the tacit approval of the master, as his plebeian antagonist went down before each blow from the small, delicate, aristocratic hand!

Poor Freddy! But was he not wiser in his generation than the children of actuality? Old Dr Johnson says that the greatest sublunary happiness consists in being well deceived—well deceived, mind; and Julius Caesar is credited with the axiom that, if you want a thing done well, you must do it yourself.

Ah! but life is not all action, emulation, mischief. Now and then the two worlds silently approach each other; a spectral hand beckons from the Unknown Shore—and who shall detain life—mate, parent, child or brother summoned thus? Then the golden thread of gaiety, mercifully woven in the Parcaean web, takes a sickly leaden hue in the creeping solemnity of the changed atmosphere.

See what sad completeness this shadow gives to that brightest of comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Act after act, scene after scene, follow each other in the grace and glow of such pastimes as seem to go far toward making mere existence sufficient in itself. They fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the Golden Age. They eat their bread with joy, and drink their wine with a merry heart. But it cannot last; for the Unbidden Guest is there—

Mercadé. God save you, madam!

Princess. Welcome, Mercadé; But that thou interrupt'st our merriment.

Mercadé. I am sorry, madam; for the news I bring Is heavy on my tongue. The king, your father—

Princess. Dead! for my life!

Mercadé. Even so; my tale is told.

Thus confronted by a proposition admitting of no debate, the light–hearted Princess shall thenceforward be sadder in mood, and wiser in mind, by the vivid realization of Death's continual nearness. And so with endless iteration the lesson is forced on our reluctant perception, that the tale of life is never told till blue–shrouded Azrael's icy kiss blanches a loved one's lips, and his dread shadow falls on a familiar form.

From far away beyond History's dawn, the three old continents had been watered by mourners' tears; and the story is the same in an unexplored hemisphere. The sky is bright, the wilderness gay with life, and beautiful in summer vesture, as Hiawatha brings home the bride of his choice—brings the moonlight, starlight, firelight; brings the sunlight of his people. But this is not the end; it is only the end of the first chapter. For this joyous epoch contains the indestructible seeds of a coming time when leaden skies shall look down on skeleton forests and wastes of trackless snow; when the Famine and the Fever shall have done their work, and the brokenhearted chieftain shall sit down, still and speechless, on the bed of Minnehaha, at the feet of Laughing Water, at those willing feet that never more shall lightly run to meet him, never more shall lightly follow. Yet this will be the end of the second chapter only. The infallible literalist, and the no less dogmatic sceptic, are equally presumptuous in forecast of the

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third.

We do not know. We only know that from the bereavement which caused Jesus to weep, there is no escape, no exemption here. Familiar to the point of platitude is the truism, that one shall be taken, and the other left; yet of all actual experience this is the most startling and bewildering. And think not to be overlooked though you mingle with the crowd; for there, with anguish unabated by fellowship in desolation, you shall learn the lesson which dateless parting alone can teach. Or flee away on the wings of the morning with your loved ones to discover some smiling Azores or rugged Ile de Bourbon, where, since Chaos reigned, no human foot has trod, nor human sin penalized the soil—and how long before the grave–mould shall hide caressing hands for ever stilled, and responsive eyes for ever dimmed? Ay, wherever human life is lived, the smile and the tear, and the song and the dirge, still follow each other like surge upon surge.

And so let it be, for there is a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to mourn and a time to dance.

Alternate sunshine and rain is the law of Nature; alternate smiles and tears is the law of human life; and this rhythmic reaction is as necessary to healthy moral being as the tide to the sea, or the wind to the atmosphere.

About five years after the occurrence in the quarry, Steve and I strolled out, one Sunday, to the little country cemetery in hope of obtaining a distant view of some girls whom we mutually worshipped in their collective capacity, and whose leer we would have thought cheaply purchased by any sacrifice of comfort or principle on our part. The girls were not there; and we mechanically went on till we stood by two little fresh mounds, enclosed by the same picket fence. We glanced at each other, without speaking, and walked away in opposite directions. An epidemic of diphtheria had passed through the neighbourhood, a few weeks before; and our rival champions of feather–weights were sleeping side by side. They had never quarrelled but once; and that quarrel, divested of all its comical accessories, was the uppermost memory in our minds.

I mention this, because it was on the very next day that Fred told the truth for the third and last time within my knowledge. It happened in this way:–

Monday was a public holiday, owing to its being the birthday, or something, of some person in Europe; a prince of somewhere, I think; Wales, if I remember rightly—but no matter. Steve and I had gone out shooting; not that we found either pleasure or justification in firing on pretty and inoffensive birds, but it was the correct thing to go out shooting on holidays. Happily, however, we met with such qualified success that four o'clock in the afternoon found us sitting, hungry and tired, on the bank of the creek, two miles from the township, and three miles from home, with no spoil except a possum, which we had shot asleep on a sapling. We were both silent.

I was thinking how, in the morning, my little sister had humbly asked me to nail up a shelf in her play–house.

Being fully occupied just then in doing nothing, I had ignored the poor petition, and had left the child pottering patiently at the work herself. And now I was unable to banish the recollection, though it made me feel unbecomingly tall and manly in bodily presence.

"This is my last day's shooting, Tom," grumbled my companion. "I've said the same thing before; but I'll stick to it this time."

"Same here," I sighed.

"I think this gun of mine's like myself—getting a trifle the worse of wear," said Steve discontentedly.

"She shoots twice as wild as she did last Easter; and that's saying a lot. She can manage a twelve–foot circle at twenty yards. The only safe place is straight behind her."

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"Mine's just the reverse," said I. "The only safe place with mine is straight in front; the worst place is straight behind."

Another interval of silence.

"We've no business to be here at the present moment, Steve," I continued, at length. "This game would have suited us right enough when we were young; but a person gets sadder and wiser as they get older. Anything in the shape of recreation is a mistake."

"Fame and fortune is the only things worth going for," contributed Steve. "Everything else is a swindle. Love's the worst swindle of the lot. Too one–sided. You're welcome to get soft on a girl, and make an idol of her and an ass of yourself—and what does she care? Not sixpence. I'm off it for the future."

"Girls is no worse swindle than holidays," I replied, with bitterness. "You count the months on ahead; then you count the weeks, and the days; and round comes the holiday, as large as life—and what is it, after all? It's like the apples on the bank of the Caspian Sea; fair to the eye, and a thing to be desired to make one wise; and when you sink your teeth into them, you find nothing but ashes. How the ashes gets there is the thing that fetches me. But there's your holiday. Now, Fred Pritchard hasn't had a holiday since he started carrying the mail, twelve months ago; he doesn't look for one now; and he's a lot better without. Presently he'll come jogging along here, as happy as Larry; with his mail–bag on his saddle, and his revolver at his belt. The revolver amuses me. It's like poor old Fred; always romantic.

Does him good to fancy somebody wants to stick him up, if they were only game."

Our eyes met; and Steve murmured, half–unconsciously, "Sposen we were to blacken our faces, and stick him up? We could leave his horse and mail–bag where he could get them again. His version of the story would be worth listening to."

"At a word," I replied, rising to my feet. "I'll go and find some corks where the old shanty stood, while you kindle a fire."

A few minutes later, I was rubbing the burnt cork over Steve's face.

"We'll take a strip of skin off our possum and put it round under your chin," I suggested. "A grey whisker'll set you off to rights. I'll call you 'Captain'. You can call me 'Terry'. I'll speak with a slight Irish accent."

"Good, again. But I say, Tom; this is a five years' job, if we're found out."

"Life, more like," I replied. "Fancy you an old ticket–o'–leave man; a stiff, English–looking bloke, like an iron–grey cob; with a bit of whisker in front of your ear; and full of yarns about how bad you used to be treated–

They harness'd us onto a plough; To plough Van Diemen's Land.

Now that I think of it," I continued; "it's a hanging matter. Sticking up Her Majesty's mail comes next after high treason. I think I see you fetched into the Court with ten police–

" 'What's your name, you hound?' says the magistrate.

" 'Stephen Thompson, please your lordship,' says you, in a voice of emotion.

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"Well, Stephen Thompson,' says the magistrate, 'you're charged with sticking up Her Majesty's mail nunquam dormio; and the verdict of this Bench is that you're to be slung by the neck till you're dead–

dead– dead; and the Lord have mercy on your miserable rat of a soul. Ad valorem. If you know of any just cause or impediment why the above verdict should not be carried into effect, you're to spit it out now, or for ever hold your peace.'

"I done it for a lark, your majesty,' says you.

"Silence, you varmin! or I'll commit you for contempt of Court sine qua non,' says the magistrate. 'Your lark doesn't take properly, let me inform you; for the Fifty–seventh Clause of the Act expressly provides for these little jokes. String him up, boys, and shove on with the next case. God save the Queen!' "

"Remember that yours'll be the next case," said Steve, as he rubbed the burnt cork over my face.

"Gosh! we'll be a bit of an attraction to the Waxworks!"

"Not me!" I replied. "I know how to work these things.–

"What's your name, you mongrel?' says the magistrate to me.

"T. Collins Esquire, at your service,' says I. 'Well connected, though I say it myself. We move in the best society.'

"Well, Mr Collins,' says the magistrate. 'You see my predicament. Information has been laid before me, one of Her Majesty's Justices of the Peace in and for the said Colony of Victoria, to wit, namely, that whereas some evil–disposed person or persons, not having the fear of God before their eyes, so to speak, and being instigated by the Devil, as it were, has been sticking up Her said Majesty's mail of malice prepense and aforethought. What's your view on the subject, Mr Collins–if it's a fair question, in a Vox populi vox Dei sense?'"

"Kindly place the interrogation in Pons asinorum form,' says I.

"With pleasure,' says the magistrate. 'Have you any idea who robbed the mail?'

"No more than the man in the moon,' says I. 'I claim the protection of the Court, with a plea of semper idem.'

"Clear case of lucus a non lucendo,' says the magistrate; 'and the gentleman leaves the Court without a stain on–'

"

"Here comes Fred!" exclaimed Steve. "I think we're all ready. Take cover behind this big tree, and let things follow their natural course."

The unconscious Fred approached the ambushade. He was in fairyland, as usual. A gallant young knight, fearless, reproachless, and terrible as an army with banners. Proudly caracoled his Norman destriere; brightly flashed his lofty helmet, and gaily waved the foam–like plumes thereon. And see, by'r lady! streaming from that haughty crest, the silken scarf which but a se'en–night agone encircled the slender waist of the Lily of Roncesvalles. He hath sworn by Saint Jezebel of Vallombrosa an oath of parlous might–to bear yon fond token through fair and gentle joust, yea through desperate battle fray; and well, albeit lightly, mote that peerless knight maintain his pledge. By my faith! well mote he hang his blazoned shield high in tourney field, a challenge to Christendom!–for where rideth the champion who shall brook to meet with slackened rein and spear in rest such avalanche of glittering steel?p

Par le splendeur Dex! 'tis a gallant knight, and a joyous! Lightly he carols, in the sonorous syllables of the Langued'Oc, a roundelay of love and valour. I'faith he recks not for aught beside. He rides at will through the merry greenwood, in scorn of ducal feodary, or baron or squire, or knight of the shire; for mark ye, knaves! his pass, in

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danger tried, hangs from his belt and by his side! Lightly it clashes against silver stirrup and golden spur; freely it flashes back the rays of the declining sun; four and forty inches of grey Syrian steel, pardie!—who shall gainsay it? Ha!

Now, by my halidom, 'twere worth ten years of peaceful life to behold some half–score clerks of Saint Nicholas sally forth from ambush! 'twere worth a Jew's ransom to hear—

"Bail up! you son of a sea–cook!" Fred's horse immediately stood; so did Fred's hair; so also did his heart. The horse thriftily dragged sufficient slack through his rider's palsied fingers, and began to feed alongside the track; while Fred sat staring wildly at two slim, half–dressed figures, with blackened faces, twenty or thirty yards in front. These had just stepped out from behind a tree, and now stood leaning with ostentatious nonchalance on their grounded guns. Fred's white lips moved, but no words issued; the poor dreamer was past that. And this remorseful historian cordially endorses every ounce of reprobation you can heap upon the two thoughtless scamps who conducted the enterprise.

"Chuck yer mail–bag down on the blurry road," said one of the brigands gruffly.

Fred obeyed, with readiness.

"Shling ye'r revalver afther id, an' the cush o' Crammel an ye," snarled the other ruffian.

Alacrity is an inadequate word to express the promptitude of Fred's compliance.

"Git hoff o' that there blurry 'oss," growled the First Robber.

Again Fred obeyed, with a docility calculated to propitiate the miscreants, who were slowly drawing nearer.

"Give the wurrd, Captain," said the second bandit, raising his gun. "Didd min tells no tales, begorra."

"Who th'ell's boss, Terry–me or you?" asked the Captain imperiously, then, addressing Fred "See that there bunch o' 'eath? Well, lay down flat, with yer 'ead in that blurry 'eath. So. Flat! I tell yer"—

"Flatther! Tare–an–ouns! Flatther! ar be the mortial frast!"—click–click!—the Irish gallows–bird was raising the hammer of his gun.

"Steady, Tom," said the Captain, in an undertone. "You'll have him croaking on our hands, if you don't look out. He can't get any flatter; he's pressing about half a ton on the ground now. Say, young shaver," he continued, raising his voice; "take out yer blurry watch, an' see wot's the time. So.

Now stop jist as y'are f'r arf a hour, an' y'r safe's the blurry bank. Y'll fine y'r blurry 'oss hat the bridge.

Hif y' lif' y'r blurry ear afore the arf–hour's hup "

"Whoo! Captain mavourneen!" yelled the rapparee. "Jist lave me to dale with the ghassoon! Be the hole in me coat, av he moves leg ar limb, Oi'll settle him! D'ye moind that, now!"

Fred required no further caution. He heard with deep thankfulness the slow footfalls of his horse, as the Captain led the animal to the bridge; and with mingled emotions he listened to the discordant voice of the ferocious subordinate, who, whilst picking up the mail–bag and revolver, poured forth his irrepressible spirit in an airy distich:—

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Och! the swatest divarsion that's on dher the sun Is to sit be the foire till the praties is done!

"Yerra, be me sowl, the divil a foiner attmpt at clane an' dacent wurrk since the toime fwin Black Ryan wuz an fut–glory be to Ghad!" Then the voice died away, and the silence was broken only by birds and crickets.

"I say, Tom," suggested my companion; "we can do better than leaving the mail–bag on the saddle. We'll plant our guns and things in the sand, and wash our faces, and fetch the mail–bag to the post office. If we cut across the paddocks, we'll get there quicker, with the start we've got, than Fred can on horseback. We'll strap his revolver to the saddle."

The idea was good. We washed our faces, resumed the coats we had thrown off, and buried all our shooting tackle. Half an hour later, we were sauntering up to the post office. The mail was due; and the postmaster was standing at his door, looking down the stragglng street of the township. A puff of dust, half a mile away, indicated the approach of the flower of chivalry, coming as fast as he could hammer his old moke along.

"Evening, lads," said the postmaster, who, of course, knew us well. "Enjoying your holiday? Drop of rain wouldn't hurt."

"Badly wanted," I replied. "Isn't this Fred Pritchard's mail–bag?"

"To be sure, it is. Where did you find it?"

"Lying on the middle of the road, about sixty yards beyond the Honeysuckle Creek."

"And here comes Fred, with a lie cut and dried for the occasion," said the postmaster confidentially, as he placed the mail–bag behind the door. "That fellow never tells the truth, even by accident."

Fred reined up, and dismounted.

"Where's your mail–bag?" asked the postmaster.

"You'll hardly believe what I'm going to tell you, Mr Appleton "

"I won't believe one syllable of it, Fred. I'm interested in nothing but the mail."

"Well, I was stuck up by two bushrangers; and they "

"Never mind about the bushrangers now," interrupted the postmaster. "I asked you where was your mail?"

"They had their faces blackened, and "

"Did you hear my question? I asked you where was your mail? This is a serious matter, Fred."

"I know it is, Mr Appleton. Well, I was just riding along as usual, when suddenly two "

"Will you answer my question, or will you not? Where's your mail?"

"One of them was an Irish "

"Wait," interrupted the postmaster. "I think you make a parade of carrying a revolver–don't you?"

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"Well, yes; I do carry a revolver, but "

"Where is it?"

Fred reluctantly drew the weapon from a police holster on his belt.

"I thought so. And I see you've got your watch in your pocket still. And here's your mail–bag. Aren't you ashamed of yourself. Couldn't you come forward like a man, and say honestly that you had lost the mail instead of inventing an impudent lie about bushrangers? Now let this be a warning to you, Fred. Try if you can break off that habit. And see: a repetition of this–or anything like it–may be followed by estreatment. Now go."

And the good–natured, yet precise postmaster shot out the scanty contents of the mail–bag on his table.

"Nothing for any of you lads," he remarked, nodding a polite good–bye to all three. Fred's face was a scientific study, as he walked away with Steve and me.

"What was the yarn you were going to spin him?" I asked sympathetically.

"I was going to tell the plain truth," replied Fred. "I was going to tell him I was stuck up at the Honeysuckle Creek by two bushrangers with their faces blackened. I'm going straight to inform the police."

"My word! you'll get three years solitary if you do!" I rejoined quickly. "That's the regular penalty for laying the police on a wrong scent. Think twice, Fred, you want a mighty strong case before you go fooling with the police, let me tell you."

"There's one thing you want to look after," said Steve thoughtfully. "You want to make some distinction between the bushrangers. Say one of them was long and thin, and the other was short and fat; or one of them had a long beard, and the other was clean shaved. Something of that sort helps a lie out wonderfully–gives it a proper finish."

"It's not a lie," reiterated Fred. "And the bushrangers were about the same height, so far as I remember.

I don't care what you say. Certainly, one of them was clean shaved, and the other had a sort of grey whisker round his face–yes, I'm certain he had. He was a horrible–looking character. Gruff voice."

"That's right," said Steve approvingly. "Now the other bloke ought to have some particular brands to identify him by."

"He was an Irishman "

"North or South?" I asked.

"South. A low, rascally, bloodthirsty Fenian. I'd walk a hundred mile to see him scragged. His name was Terry."

"Fred, Fred," said I sadly; "you're overdoing the thing now. How do you know his name was Terry?"

"I heard the Captain calling him Terry."

"This is dreadful," I sighed. "You started with two bushrangers, and now you've got about a dozen.

You've got a beardy cove, and a shaved chap, and an Irishman, and the Captain, and the bloke you call Terry. Knock off, knock off."

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"Look here!" responded Fred solemnly. "I hope I may be struck dead if I haven't told the truth!"

"You'll be taken at your word, some of these times," said I gravely. "You'll use that expression once too often. Why, you've been dreaming about bushrangers. See how quick old Appleton bowled you out!"

Fred was silent. "Why didn't you have a crack at them with your revolver?" asked Steve.

"Well, to tell you the truth," replied Fred frankly. "I felt a bit nervous, for the moment."

"That gives the yarn away worse than anything else," said I decidedly. "We know your temper. If you had been stuck up, you'd have come into the township full gallop, with your empty revolver in your hand, and six bullets in your horse, and the blood trickling down your sleeve.–'Thank heaven!' says you. 'The mail's safe'–and you'd fall fainting into the arms of a young lady that would be waiting for letters. Then the police would go out, and fetch in the bodies; and the Government would hold a meeting, and consult about what to do for you."

An ecstatic far–away look beamed in Fred's face, but soon faded.

"There's two ways of looking at the thing," he remarked thoughtfully. "Of course, it would be grand to come into church of a Sunday, as modest as a girl; with your empty sleeve pinned to the front of your coat, and about a dozen medals and stars and crosses on your breast. That's right enough. But that's only one way of looking at it. Not so pleasant to have the bone of your arm smashed into splinters, and see the doctor wiping the blood and marrow and stuff off his saw after the operation." He paused with a sigh. "And yet the left arm's about the best place you can get hit," he added despondently.

"The shoulder's the most romantic," observed Steve.

"That's more than you can say for the abdomen," I rejoined.

"You're right, Tom," assented Fred earnestly. "That's just the one thing that would keep me from being a sojer. Think of some great, ignorant, hairy savage of a foreigner coming up full butt, and driving a three–square bayonet through your tummy, till it sticks out of the small of your back! No, beggar me if I'd like to feel a bullet or a bayonet tearing through my inside."

There was a minute's silence. By this time, we were two hundred yards from the post office. Fred suddenly stopped.

"Dash me!" he exclaimed. "I've forgot my horse! I won't be a minute. Will you chaps wait?"

"No," said I; and we were walking on, when Fred, having gone back a few steps, stopped again.

"Does either of you fellows happen to know what 'estreat' means?" he asked, with evident uneasiness. "Estreat a person, what's that?"

"It's Latin for three years in irons," replied Steve.

"With hard labour and solitary," I rejoined. "Considered equal to seven years of common chokey. But it's never whanged on to a person, except for a breach of Government contracts, or for laying the police on a wrong scent. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I got a bit of a wager about it; and I find I've won. Easy way of making five bob. Wish it was five notes. So long, chaps."

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"So long, Fred." Then we parted; Steve and I to recover our guns and go home; and Fred to pass his late adventure through the alembic of imagination, where it would suffer a sea–change into something rich and strange. A few months after this event, Pritchard senior died of some unpronounceable scientific term signifying internal haemorrhage of irascibility and malevolence; whereupon Mrs Pritchard sold out and removed to Melbourne. The farm had belonged to herself–her husband's half–brother, Sir William Falkland, having generously presented her with the purchase–money, ten years before. In fact, there was no end to Sir William's munificence. Just when Mrs Pritchard left our district, this gentleman sent for Fred to come and see him in England; he kept the young fellow there for months; then dispatched him back to Victoria with a life–annuity of £100, chargeable on an Irish estate. And from that time forward Fred hyphenated his own two last names; thus promoting his uncle's patronymic from a Christian name to a surname. There seemed to be a certain intricacy and vagueness of family relations in the case. So far as I have been able to learn, the complication stood thus–

Edward Falkland, Esquire, of Falkland Lodge, Hants (son of the First Gentleman in Europe, per Arabella Falkland) married Charlotte Pole (one of the Poles), and had issue William (referred to in this narrative as Sir William Falkland, of Falkland Lodge, Hants). By morganatic marriage with supplementary lady (presumably named Pritchard), this Edward Falkland, Esquire, had also issue Sylvester Pritchard (whose obituary notice has led on to this genealogical dissertation).

Sir William Falkland, thus grandson of the Lord's somewhat rakish Anointed, and half–brother to Sylvester Pritchard, married Helen Robberts, daughter of Vice–Admiral Robberts, K.C.B., and had issue one idiotic son and one deformed daughter, names immaterial.

Here the interest veers round to Miss Kirkham, seventh daughter of the Rev. Clarence Kirkham, incumbent of Thorpe Mullock, a parish contiguous to Falkland Lodge. In this way Sylvester Pritchard (our Pritchard senior), living as gentleman loafer on Sir William's Scotch estate, was summoned to Falkland Lodge in haste; there he received Miss Kirkham in marriage, with £300 in cash, and was straightway consigned, with his bride, to Victoria, on an allowance of £100 per annum during the pleasure of Sir William. Two months after landing in Melbourne, Sylvester Pritchard had issue my friend Fred–who thus, of course, became eligible for membership in the Australian Natives' Association. These family entanglements seem to afford a clue to the origin of hyphenated names.

Anyone with a fancy for working out such things by algebra or logarithms might find mental exercise here; but, as I never could get beyond Reduction, I must call Fly.

About the time when Fred went to England, Steve Thompson and I, confident that we were men of the time, departed from our homes in different directions, to fulfil, severally, our great destinies. Our efforts, by the way, have been rewarded by a measure of success. Each of us might now say, with Celia's shepherd, "I am a true labourer; I earn that I eat, get that I wear" etc. And I trust that if we shall be spared to assume the venerable age so beautifully and coincidentally pictured by both the Royal Sages, Jacky XL VIII and Solomon: "Bimeby plenty plour–bag longa cobra"– "The almond tree shall flourish"–

we may not be found whining over the transparent fact that our days are in the yellow leaf, but rather romancing magnificently re the athletic exploits of those times when, by the mass, we were called anything, and would do anything, indeed, and roundly too.

I had never seen Fred since, but had heard of him from time to time. It must have been in '70 that he went to England, for rumour reported that he had served with startling distinction, as a volunteer, in the Franco–German war. The same authority also stated that, on the return voyage to Victoria, his ship had twice been attacked by pirates–once in the Levant, and once in the Indian Ocean–and had each time been rescued by Fred's courage and address.

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Mrs Pritchard, versatile, capable, ladylike, and now relieved from her connubial incubus, was reported to be doing very well as a matron in some Melbourne institution; and, occasionally, country people who knew Fred saw him doing the Block in faultless array, or, more rarely, clerking, sometimes in one Government office and sometimes in another. To do him justice, superiority to any affectation of idleness had always been one of the many virtues which flourished on his Great Central Desert of incompetency. Toward old friends, it appeared, he was uniformly genial and obliging. But at last came a report which filled me with awe. The poor impostor had fatuously gone out of his way to court detection and ignominy. He was married. Now, I have a theory that women do not love their husbands; and the application of this rule to Fred and his wife is the mainspring of the present memoir. I hold that married life is a long–drawn ordeal, which no man short of a Chevalier Bayard has any business to face; and my hypothesis may be reasoned out in several ways. Perpend.

All deep feeling finds utterance in song. What an invaluable contribution our aggregate patriotic poetry is! Or our amatory; or our elegiac; or our pastoral; or our religious. But our connubial, which, you would think, ought to surpass any other section, is represented by just two songs worth publication: "John Anderson my Jo", and "There's Nae Luck About the House". And the last–named miracle of ardent expression is not the subjective utterance of a loving wife, nor is it the dramatic conception of the scholarly William Julius Mickle, to whom it is popularly attributed; it is the passionate, longing aspiration of a poor hysterical schoolmistress of Greenock, Jean Adams by name—a woman who never had a husband in her life, and to whom the far–off field looked anything but blue. "John Anderson my Jo", of unknown origin, is like the knife which first had the handle replaced, and afterward the blade. The original song was decidedly fie–fie in language and sentiment. In its present form, it is simply the objective literary exercise of a man who could write anything, and write it well.

Again. There were few aspects of human nature that the wonderful Hellenic race had not studied, and few intricacies of mind or heart that the restless research of its poets had not inquired into. Now, it certainly appears that their characteristic way of putting the conjugal case is this: Cupid (Love) was born of Venus (Desire), and in due time was wedded to Psyche (the Soul). Think over that for a moment, and its completeness will grow upon you. Cupid charged Psyche that she should never see him; she must be content with realizing his presence. That, of course, was enough to determine poor Psyche, who thereupon waited till Cupid was asleep. Whilst engaged in the interdicted survey, a drop of burning wax fell from her torch on the shoulder of Cupid. Then Love vanished, and the Soul was alone.

That is the end of the original allegory. The apotheosis of Psyche, and her eternal re–marriage with Cupid, are afterthoughts, exquisitely beautiful, but with the passionless loveliness of a sphere we may not explore. We have only one life here; and under the fierce white light that beats upon a married man, the hero vanishes; then I would rather not be the discredited old pensioner who takes his place.

To be sure, the truth never suffers by exposure; but we don't want the truth in this case; we want the other thing. For, unfortunately, the scare–crow truth of masculinity, the incorrigible he–ness of the he–feller, comes out only too brightly under the penetrating rays of Hymen's slush–lamp. "A woman's secret" is said to be her opinion of her husband—is it not reasonable to suppose that if the opinion were felicitous it would be anything but a secret?p

Give to lovely woman a slip or scion—be it of the commonest geranium or the unique Plusgorgeosorum Smithii—she will accept it with the vivid but inexplicable delight experienced by her sex in receiving a present probably worth rather less than nothing. She will carefully plant that scion—

most likely with the wrong end uppermost—and tend it according to her best judgment and ability—such as they are. And daily, with a touch soft as the fall of a snowflake, tender as the kiss of Artemis on the lips of sleeping Endymion, she will draw it out of the ground, into the fierce white light, to see how it is getting on. She will not let well alone. And you see the consequence.

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Woman's love is romantic, and flows like the Solway in romantic atmosphere, but ebbs like its tide when a more intimate knowledge has resolved that atmosphere into its prosaic components. Woman's love, like a rare Alpine exotic, planted in the backyard of Life, between the wood–heap and the clothesline, wilts and withers and is seen no more. Yet we will transplant this delicate edelweiss, and then helplessly watch it perish in uncongenial air. And while grass grows and water runs, woman will consider too curiously–Psyche will light her torch then alas! for the vanishing hero, and woe for the fatally–enlightened vally–de–sham! Ten thousand women revered and idolized John Wesley; but there was one woman to whom he was small spuds, and few in a hill; one woman who used to put out her tongue at him when he was preaching, and who, in the seclusion of domestic life, cursed and cuffed him, and set him utterly at naught. That was the dear lady Disdain who had studied the demi–god's close–cropped, wigless cranium; who had watched him shaving, and had marked him snore o' nights; who was familiar with all his jokes, and who knew exactly how much truth there was in his yarns; who had heard the demi–god's voice saying: "D–n the boots! and the (adj.) snob that made them!"–or words to that effect.

And who so admired by lady friends as Dr Johnson, the Colossus of Literature?–yet think of the valuation placed on him by the one woman who knew him down to the ground. In like manner, the Wizard of the North was no magician to his vally–de–sham. "When we want money," said she, "Walter writes one of his rubbishy novels." Rubbishy work, rubbishy workman. From Belisarius, the invincible soldier, down through the ages to Ruskin, the incomparable writer, that sad experience is repeated. Ah me! the husband once found out has no remedy that I can think of.

"He groans! he is not a god!" shout the irrationals of Owhyhee. Illogical idolatry has made the discovery, and the Circumnavigator is doomed. He was found out that's all. Illogical admiration is not content with the pencilled beauty of the butterfly's wings, but must needs turn the insect upside down, to be rewarded by the sight of a vulgar grub.

Why is Hamlet never a favourite with the woman–student? Merely because she sees him morally vivisected, and illustrated (so to speak) with coloured plates. Ophelia loved him as the glass of fashion, and so forth; but when he groaned he was no longer a god; when he raised his arabesqued wings, he disclosed the segmented and woolly body common to the Lepidoptera–and all was over.

The gods will give us some faults to make us men; therefore no man is up to the husband–ideal of a loving woman. The bachelor may reach this standard–for why shouldn't he be magnanimous, and mettlesome, and debonair; prepared to do all that may become a man, and sometimes even things that don't? And if he should fall a trifle short of the real Mackay–a contingency that you may safely count upon–he is in no way compelled to flaunt his own worthlessness before the feminine eye. But Sir Benedick, the married man, must wear his rue (rue is good) with a difference. To aggravate the disadvantage of living in a glass house, he will, like Martha, be careful and bothered about many things; he will, in a general way, become sordid, and thrifty, and domesticated; he will learn to glory more in buying articles cheap at sales than in carrying off trophies from his compeers; he will become particular over his tucker, and cautious about getting his feet wet; he will become prudent, and circumspect, and churchwardenlike, and befittingly frightened in the presence of anything lawless, from a crash of thunder to a scrub–bred steer. And, gentle lady, there goes your ideal. Confess it, ye divil! Let us all ring Fancy's knell.

David (the half–naked minstrel of Bethlehem, I mean not the French artist, nor the Melbourne newspaper man) was just such a daisy as you might expect a woman to love. He was brave, chivalrous, and accomplished; pious, without being at all sanctimonious; "of a fair countenance", the chronicler says, and distinguished, even in early youth, for gallant conduct in the field. Like Master Fenton, he capers, he dances (as we shall see in the sequel), he has eyes of youth, he writes verses (much valued by Presbyterians), he speaks holiday, he smells April and May; he will carry't, he will carry't; 'tis in his buttons; he will carry't. "And Michal, Saul's daughter, loved David," says the chronicler. So far, so good.

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The lovers' history might be epitomized in two proverbs—one relating to the course of true love, and the other to the bright lexicon of youth. Anyway, the romance ended as romances ought to end, namely, with orange blossoms, ring, register, rice, old boots, congratulations, etc.

Here your novelist would prudently leave them, with the foolhardy summary that they lived happily ever afterward. But the chronicler goes on to say that Michal's affection knew no decline, but rather intensified and matured while the days were going by. He tells us how, when the day's work was over, Michal used to place beside her undetected impostor the pipe and tabor he loved so well, while he spread a sheet of Egyptian papyrus on the table, and, dipping his reed pen in the Tyrian pigment, wrote in Old Hebrew (which is more like the charred relics of a half–burnt stockyard than an alphabetical character that honest men have any business to understand) his culpably unintelligible superscription, To the Chief Musician on Neginoth upon Sheminith Maschil A Psalm of David. (This "pipe", by the way, was probably something in the form of a chibouque; and the "tabor" seems to have been a vintage from the historic mountain of that name.) And in the cornucopia–laden autumn of their well–spent lives, the era of silver threads among the gold, her same old drunk—for you can call it nothing else—made her still petulantly insist on the affectionate abbreviation of "Mike".

The chronicler says nothing of the sort, for, like myself, he better loves the lone, chaste, monolithic severity of unembellished truth than any meretricious ornamentation—scroll, or acanthus, or parsley–leaf, as one might say—of poetic justice or dramatic unity. So these are his words:—

"And Michal, Saul's daughter, looked through a window, and saw David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart." Afterward, of course, she gave him a bit of her mind; behold, is it not written in II Samuel, Chap. VI.

It had to come, soon or late. The Psalmist was a man, like the rest of us; and under the fierce white light he had ceased to be a hero to his vally–de–sham, though still remaining the idol of the feminine public.

And when this stage is reached you may write Selah, and close the book. Nothing more tender than armed neutrality can ensue; for masculine human nature, once contemned by its chosen cwt. of poor, perishing dirt, never forgives. We find it so much easier, you will observe, to forgive our own shortcomings than the imperfections of our ladye–loves. This 'tis to be married; this 'tis to have linen and buck–baskets. Ay de mi!

Communing after this fashion with my own soul, I spent a few restful hours under the wattles; and in due time returned to Mrs Ferguson's for what the vulgar call dinner, and what we of finer moral fibre designate lunch. Then an hour before Fred's train was due I started for the railway station, leaving Pup safely chained in a comfortable place, with a few empty chaff–bags to repose upon.

Half–way to the station, I met a horseman, followed by a loose pack–horse; a lean, wiry–looking man, whose sun–darkened face and hands contrasted amusingly with his white boots and stylish city garments. I had to look over him carefully, as he approached, before fully recognizing another friend of former days, though of much later date than Fred.

"Bob himself!" I exclaimed, as we met.

"Go to (sheol)!" responded Barefooted Bob delightedly. "Where you off to?"

"Railway station, to meet a friend. But I'm in no hurry. Where are you off to?"

A look of tranquillity settled on Bob's face. "Jist as fur back as I can git," he replied quietly and decisively.

"But you'll stay in Echuca tonight?"

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"Didn't intend. But I'd like to have a pitch with you– sposen I wouldn't be in your road." So saying, he dismounted, and accompanied me back to Mrs Ferguson's, leading his horse.

Bob, with the bushman's habitual taciturnity, had the bushman's artless candour. When the spell of silence was broken, he would tell you, not only anything he thought might interest you, but everything that interested himself. He had just passed a fortnight of utter desolation in Melbourne, and was now returning with all speed to the more cheerful and homelike regions of the Never–Never. Reaching Echuca by the midday train, he had straightway gone to the paddock for his horses, with a view to Deniliquin Common as his next camp.

"Wouldn't live in that hell–upon–earth, not if you give me a pension," he remarked fervidly. "This was my fust sight o' the curse o' God wilderness, an I swear it'll be the last. I'm on'y sorry for the people that's tied up to it. Even the ships was a have. Why, they're no size. I always thought a ship was as long as from here to that pointed church, an' as wide as from here to where that dray's standin'." (The distance first indicated was about a quarter of a mile; the last, about a hundred yards.) "Decenter finished than I thought, though. I expected to see the mark o' the adze all over them; but they're touched off like buggies, an' most o' them solid iron. But once seein' them's enough, an' once seein' Melb'n's once too often. An' ain't the sea a swindle! Hear lots o' skitin' about sea–bathin'–well, I tried it one night last week, when there was nobody about; an' I'm blest if my rags ain't stickin' to my hide ever since. I'd rather stop dirty than fall back on that specie of cleanness. Fact is, the sea ain't fit to bogey in; it's too salt to drink, an' it ain't salt enough to keep properly. It's goin' rotten fast. An' I got my own opinion about the sea–breeze, from this out. My word!"

"You found M'Gregor, right enough?" I conjectured, knowing that Bob's business had been to force a personal interview with his elusive, yet exacting, boss.

"Like a bird. Tell you how I got on. Course, M'Gregor he deals with M'Culloch and Co.; so, after gittin' out o' the train, I gropes my way to M'Culloch and Co., Limited; an' when I found the place, I asked the people in the office where M'Gregor lived. I told the boss o' the place where I come from, an' how long I'd been with M'Gregor, an' how I was beginnin' to buck on it, an' wanted to git a settlin' up–

" 'Here's me,' says I to the boss, 'with a hundred an' fifty notes comin' to me–or from that to a couple o' hundred–an' on'y thirteen shillin's in my pocket! About as near flyblowed as a man could wish to be,' says I; 'an' can't git no more satisfaction from M'Gregor nor if he was in heaven; an' me has been breakin' my neck tryin' to keep things together for him. Seems like as if he'd been standin' in my light ever since I been workin' for him. I been chewin' the rag over it for years,' says I; 'but a mighty sight worse for the last six or eight months.'
" 'This has no interest for me,' says the boss.

" 'Simply because you ain't got a proper holt of it,' says I. 'I'll soon give you a sort o' rough insight: After me settlin' the cattle on a bit o' new country,' says I; 'an' livin' worse nor a blackfeller, an' buryin' my mate– Ah! Mr M'Culloch,' says I, 'I wish you'd 'a knowed Bat! Grandest feller ever put his foot in a stirrup; an' he'd give you the shirt off of his back! Well,' says I to the boss, 'after me doin' all that a man could do, till a narangy an' a couple o' chaps come an' took charge, the orders was for me to go back to Avondale. When I got there,' says I, 'I was shoved straight into the job of cleanin' out a tank, sticky as glue, that took me two solid months, with a mate that wasn't worth his grub, pore feller. An' all this time I was charged three bob a week paddickin' for my two horses; an' the boss o' the station, he had the devil's own cheek. You wouldn't believe your own eyes, Mr M'Culloch,' says I, 'how things was altered on Avondale since I fust seen the place–goin' on for fifteen year ago now. It's mostly all secured, one way or another; an' take my word, it's nothing for nothing; everything brought down as fine as a hair.'–

" 'I beg you parding!' says the office boss, sort o' quick.

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" 'No offence,' says I. 'Don't speak of it. Well, after makin' a decent job o' this tank—or you might call it a reservoy—I was sent to Wagga with twelve hundred yowes; an' still not a word about settlin' up; an' no satisfaction any road; for I'd jist as soon be dead, straight off, as I'd be crammed down on the Lachlan, where things is cut so fine.'

" 'Explain these matters to Mr M'Gregor,' says the boss.

" 'That's jist the very identical thing I'm on for doin',' says I. 'I'm ripe for a disturbance; an' I'm a treacherous beggar when the scales rises on my back. If I git a settlin' up with him,' says I, 'I'll sling him.'

I don't mind doin' it,' says I, 'for he's bound to clear a lot out o' pore Bat; for Bat's mother's in the Ararat Asylum, an' he never had any father, nor brothers, nor sisters.' An' then I was jist startin' to explain about Bat; an' the boss he makes a remark—

" 'This is an office,' says he.

" 'I know it is,' says I, 'but it seems more like a Governor's squat to me. Can't come this style o' thing at Wilcanniar,' says I, 'nor yet at Hay. But as I was tellin' you, Mr M'Culloch,' says I, 'me and Bat had been together since we was boys!'

" 'Wait a moment,' says the boss—'Who are you?'

"As soon as I told him—'Why, demmit,' says he, 'there's a letter been layin' here for you this last twelve–month.

It's care of Mr M'Gregor, an' per favour of this office; but it wants a fresh tuppenny to take it on to New South; so Mr M'Gregor he'd have nothing to do with it. He offered to give us your address,'

says the boss; 'but, of course, we couldn't forward it without the tuppenny.'

" 'Course not,' says I, 'but ain't it curious how they'd let themselves run short o' stamps in sich a big post office as you got here?'

" 'Very singular, indeed,' says the boss. 'However, here's your letter'—after one o' the young chaps had fetched it—'Much pleasure in deliverin' it to you personal. An' here's Mr M'Gregor's address, wrote on this nongvelup. Good afternoon,' says he.

" 'Good afternoon,' says I, as polite as himself; an' I sets down on a table, an' reads the letter "Made me ropeable. The letter was from my sister, to say she was jist startin' for Mount Bischoff—wherever that is. My brother—in–law he'd got into a good billet there; an' my mother she was goin' with them; an' they wanted to hear from me quick. Seems my ole man died a bit before that "

"By the way, Bob," I interrupted, "how long is it since you wrote to your people?"

"Goin' on for three year," replied Bob reluctantly. "Well, when I read the letter, I says to the boss o' the office—

" 'Jist look here, Mr M'Culloch!' says I. 'Don't that bang Bannaghar?'—an' I goes on explainin' things for his satisfaction, an' showin' him how I'd lost the run of every relation I had, through M'Gregor's carelessness—

" 'I don't understand you,' says he.

" 'Simple as ABC, when you got the proper hang of it,' says I; an' I starts explainin' it agen—when suddenly! I couldn't believe my own eyes; an' I felt like a dog that's been found out shakin' tucker from the camp; for who should drop in but M'Gregor himself! It was jist as if it was to be.

" 'Bob, laddie!' says he, shakin' hands with me like as if I was his son—an' you could 'a' knocked me down with a feather at the same time, on account o' the sort o' guilt that was on me—'Bob, laddie,' says he, 'I been expectin' you day after day for the last fortnit. This is my right–hand man,' says he to the office

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bloke. 'I back him agen the world,' says he, 'for to go through with anything he tackles.'

" 'Delighted to make his acquaintance,' says the office feller. 'We been conversin' amicable for a good half–hour. Great pleasure to me,' says he; 'but I'm frightened I've trespassed on his time.' " 'Don't mention it, Mr M'Culloch,' says I. 'I ain't in sich a red–hot hurry as all that. Jist you wait till you hear me makin' myself anyways nasty about it.'

" 'I'll say this for him,' says the office bloke; 'he's a man can make himself at home anywhere; but I should say his proper home's about half–ways between here an' the Gulf.'

" 'Gospel truth, this time, Mr M'Culloch,' says I– 'even if you never told the truth before. Same time, I'd feel lonely enough on'y for meetin' with coves like you. Anyhow,' says I, 'I s'pose that's about all I'm goin' to git here; so I'll let go my holt on you an' hang on to Mr M'Gregor. Come an' have a drink, Mr M'Culloch,' says I.

" 'Not before dinner, thanks,' says he, startin' on a stack o' letters to open them.

" 'Bar jokes,' says I–'ain't you had no dinner yet?' An' with that, M'Gregor he grabs me by the sleeve, an' snakes me out to a pub; an' the two of us has a drink; an' he told me to wait till he'd call round for me.

" 'You got to take up your quarters with me while you're havin' your holiday,' says he.

"So by–'n–by he calls round, an' out we goes to his place at Kew. Style! Don't mention it! An' he fetches me into the house as if I was the Governor, an' gives me an intro. to Mrs M'Gregor an' the two Miss M'Gregors–

" 'My right–hand man,' says he. 'If I'd a couple o' dozen more battlers like him,' says he, 'I'd be the richest man in Australia in another ten years.'

"So there was me. Anyhow, M'Gregor wouldn't hear o' me goin' for one day after another, till I was fair sick an' tired with goin' back an' forrid to Melb'n every day, seein' life. I used to git my tucker in the sort o' second–class–quality place, an' I had a bedroom all to my own self, with washin' tackle an' everything complete. Real copperplate. An' mostly every evenin', M'Gregor'd send for me to come into his office; an' he'd talk to me quite confidential about all that was takin' place on his stations, so fur as I knowed.

Course, I ain't a master's man; an' I was careful not to say anything I'd be sorry for after. Still, there ain't a single thing happens on all them properties but what he knows; an' he's got the measure of everybody, from the supers down."

"No false pride about him," I observed.

"Not a particle. Jist the other way, if anything. Is this the place where you're stoppin'?" For we had reached the Coffee Palace, and were now turning into the stable yard.

Mrs Ferguson shook her head when I presented Bob as an applicant for lodgings. The very last bed in the house was already engaged.

"O, stick a pole out o' the winder, an' I'll roost on it," interposed Bob deprecatingly. "Nothing gits over me like this idear o' beds. Take my word, missus, I've slep' every way except standin' on my head; an' I might have to tackle that style yet. Don't bother about me, or you'll make me feel uneasy. I got blankets with me; an' I on'y want you to show me where I won't be in the road."

Mrs Ferguson yielded. "Have you had lunch?" she asked.

"Well, yes. Every time the train stopped for refreshment I had a small feed; so I ain't as badly off as I might be. Time we was gittin' a move on us, Collins–ain't it?"

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"By the way, Bob," said I, as we turned back toward the railway station, "I'll have to introduce you to the Pritchards. What's your other name?"

"Bruce–Robert Bruce."

"A good name. I fancy I've heard it before. Now, Bob, you must watch yourself, and keep from swearing, or saying anything that would shock a lady. But I notice you've turned over a new leaf in the matter of language."

"Yes, I'm middlin' straight along that line now," replied Bob, complacently, yet sadly. "Knocked off swearin' when pore Bat went, an' kep' on the narrer path ever since. Fact, I ain't shy o' sayin' I'm a religious man now. But a person wants to watch his self in respect o' swearin'. Now, I had a fashion of sayin' 'Go to (sheol)' when you said anything that struck me forcible; an' when I repented I sort o' overlooked this habit, right on till on'y the Sunday before last. Tell you how it come–

"I was havin' a look at the ships; an' there was a bloke standin' on one o' them, seemin'ly in charge; an' I ast this feller, in a sort o' matter–o'–fact way, whether the ship was holler all the ways down, for convenience o' stowin' things, or whether she was logged up solid at the bottom to give her stidiment when the wind was blowin' all o' one side; an' this cove he told me to come on board if I liked, an' look down the catchway. Then we got into a yarn; an' he seemed to take pleasure in explainin' things.

"'Now,' says I to him, in the course o' conversation; 'about what bat can she go, when everything's right, an' you send her at her level?' " 'About eighteen mile an hour,' says he.

" 'Go to (sheol)!' says I.

"He gives a look at me that I didn't think of till after, an' then goes on explainin' something else. By–an'–by says I, 'An' how much of a load can you stack onto her, without her goin' heels–over–tip, or anything givin' way?'

" 'Two thousand ton,' says he.

" 'Go to (sheol)!' says I, quite natural.

"He wheels round an' looks at me agen, an' then goes on explainin'–an' me never takin' the hint. The habit had a holt o' me, an' I didn't know it. After a while, I says–

" 'Well,' says I, 'I can't make out–not if I was to be shot,' says I, 'how you can strike the place you start for, when you got a matter of twenty or thirty thousand mile to go, an' not a thing to be seen. Sposen you start her straight,' says I, 'she might go edgin' off right or left, an' you not know. How do you make her fetch the very spot you aim her for, no matter how she wriggles about?'

" 'Easy,' says he. 'We got instruments to make observations, so we know the very spot we're in; an' knowin' where we are,' says he, 'course, we know which way to steer.'

" 'Go to (sheol)!' says I.

"He steps back an' looks me up an' down. 'Well,' says he, 'if you ain't got common manners, you ought to have common impidence. I make a point o' civility to any blubber that shows an interest in seafarin' details; but you ain't worth it. You're a savage! Clear off o' this boat!' says he, 'an' foller your own advice,–in other words, go to (sheol)!'

"Course, I apologized as polite as himself; then we got on fust class; an' when I was comin' away, he give me a fistful o' cigars. But that'll tell you how habits git holt of a man. One minit, while I think of it," he continued, after a pause. "I'll cut across to that cloth–shop, an' git a new nose–rag. When you're in Rome, you must do as the Romanists does. Here you are, sonny." He tossed his white silk handkerchief to a barefooted guttersnipe (who needed it badly), and then, with his long, slow, brolga–like step, strode across the street to parade his refinement

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in a draper's shop.

His wits, thought I, as I lit my pipe, are not so blunt as, God help, I would desire they were; but in faith, honest as the skin between his brows. Ay sir, (ruminating along the text), and to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.

"So you didn't appreciate Melbourne," I observed, as we resumed our way to the station.

"Well, it ain't altogether like what I expect heaven to be, sposed I'm lucky enough to git there. Certainly, the Waxworks is splendid; I used to have a look through it every time I passed; but, outside o' that, you can see everything worth seein' in a couple of hours."

"Art Galleries?" I suggested.

"Turn out better work myself, if I had a fortnit's practice," replied Bob confidently. "Who wants to see a picture of a 'Sunrise', or a 'Winter Evening', when you can git the genuine article for nothing? As for the statutes—I wonder the bobbies allows them."

"Of course, you went to the theatre?"

"Rather. But one trip left me full up."

"What was the play?"

"Hamlet, I think—yes, Hamlet. The front part might 'a' been worth seein': but I was on'y in time to git the tail—end. The blokes on the stage acts right enough, but they can't recite worth sixpence. One o' them happened to spout my own favourite recitation; an' it would give you the influenza to watch his gyvers.

Course, you know the words as well as I do:—

" 'Alaspore YorickIknewhimwellHoratio'—

"An' so on. Well, this cove, with his black tights an' black poncho, he turns the skull over in the hands for a bit; then he looks across the country at nothing, like a feller in a dream; an' by—an'—by he says, " 'Alas!

"Then he looks down at the skull agen; an' after a while he says, " 'P—o—r—e Yorick!

"Studies a bit longer, then turns partly round to the other galoot, an' remarks in a mournful tone o' voice, " 'I knew him well, Horatio.' Another bit of a think; then he gits a move on him agen—'A fellow of in—finite jest, of most ex—cellent fancy; has borne me on his back a thousand times' an' cetera.

"An' while this was goin' on, about an acre of people was watchin' an' lis'nin', an' tryin' to git the worth o' their money. I was fair disgusted."

"You should have followed it up every night, Bob, till you got properly in touch," I suggested.

"I bettered that," replied the Goth drily. "Opera— no less. Yes; I've seen a opera, an' I'm quite satisfied.

My word! I forgit the name o' the performance— foreign gibberage, anyhow. Fust, a woman comes on the stage, dressed up to the nines, an' sings something, with music goin' all the time; then comes a bloke, dolled up like's if he'd come out of a ban'—box, an' he sings some parley voo to the woman; an' she sings something back to him. But while these two was actin' the goat, an' the music keepin' time with them, in comes another cove wearin' the same rig—out; an' he sings something to the fust feller; an'

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the fust feller sings something back to him. Then each o' them draws a sword about as wide as a saddle–strap, an' they fought to a brisk, lively sort o' music. Next, the woman runs in between them, an' sings something to the second chap; an' he sings back to her; an' the fust bloke chips in with his Last–Rose–of–Summer–That settled me.

"Here!" says I to the swell–cove sittin' aside me–'let me git out! This is deadly!' An' out I got. Yes. I can stand a lot o' common foolishness; but I'd want ten bob an hour for seein' operas. I was to have took one o' the servant girls with me that time, on'y M'Gregor wouldn't allow it. Fearful strict, God–fearin' man, he is."

"Did you come to any settlement with him?" I asked.

"Well, no," replied Bob reluctantly. "He hadn't any settlement made out; an' he was fearful busy. He said he thought there was more comin' to me than I was aware about. So that's all right. He give me a cheque for ten notes, the fust evenin'; an' then, last night, he give me another cheque for thirty notes, besides five sovereigns–'I s'pose you'll be wantin' to git away early in the mornin',' says he. An' take my word for it, he was right."

"Did he get you to sign anything?"

"Yes; he got me to sign a matter o' form. Beggared if I'd 'a' knowed what it was, on'y he told me. An' the last word he says to me, last night, when I was biddin' him good–bye–'Bob, laddie,' says he, an' he lays his hand on my shoulder. 'Bob, laddie,' says he, 'I'll make a man of you yet. I'm givin' you a free hand,' says he, 'on account o' the opinion I got of you; an' I won't keep you tied up to a locality you don't like. I'll stick to you, Bob,' says he; 'an' I'll expect you to stick to me.' "

"God send the companion a better prince," I muttered involuntarily; and then it struck me that my quotation was even happier than I had intended, for my friend, though distinctively known as Barefooted Bob, was colloquially termed "The Companion".

"No savvy," he remarked dubiously, though recognizing his own title.

"It's nothing," I replied sadly. "Bob! I'll give you a token of my prophetic power!"

"How?"

"I'll tell you exactly what you're going to do."

"Go to (sheol)!"

"You're going to do some pioneering for M'Gregor."

"Wrong, this time," replied Bob, smiling. "I'm on'y goin' to smell out a new run, off from the Diamantinar.

Me an' Bat we found some splendid country there, jist before pore Bat took bad; an' M'Gregor's frightened o' somebody collarin' it, though it ain't a good place to git at. Fact, me an' Bat mightn't 'a' got back, on'y for a thunderstorm; for we lost the run o' Bat's horse; an' we on'y had mine between the two of us.

"Tell you how it was. One afternoon, we sighted the prettiest little lake you ever seen; an' our horses was mad thirsty; an' we knowed the water was good, by the birds; an' on we goes, yarnin' like two fools, an' lettin' our horses rush the water. Nice smooth sheet o' white sand all along the edge; you'd think she'd carry ten ton; but my mind misgave me, on account of a dream I had the night before; so I pulled up, an' sung out to Bat. He was tryin' to turn before the word was out o' my mouth; but it was too late, for his horse went through the sand into black

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mud, an' couldn't recover, no road. Bat he turns a back summerset, an' rolls clear; an' the horse begun to struggle; an' the whole place movin' an' bulgin' like a tarpolin with the wind under it; an' in about two minits there was no more sign of horse, nor saddle, nor bridle, nor there is on that footpath; nothing on'y jist a sort o' wavy crack in the dry sand, with the black mud spuein' up from underneath. An' as luck would have it, both the two water–bags was on Bat's saddle, on account of his horse bein' a lot stronger nor the bit of a weed I was ridin'. Nice way to be fixed, with sixty to eighty mile of rough, waterless country to cross back agen; an' no preparation; an' the ground about two degrees short o' redhot; an' us in a sudden fright about the four hundred head o' cattle we ought to be mindin'—Shows how careful a person ought to be."

"How did you manage?" I asked.

"Why, went to a sound place, an' stuffed ourselves an' the horse with water, an' got a few mussels, an' scooted. Uneasy about the cattle, for we'd no business to be both away together. Next afternoon, we begun to feel it. When you're in a cool climate, like this, if you want a drink, you can go without till further orders; but in a warm climate you feel it. So there was us, splodgin' through some sand, peltin' the horse along in front of us, for, to make matters better, he had broke a bit off his hoof in some stony ground. No foolish yarin' then, but plenty of good hard thinkin' instead; an' each of us with a mussel in his mouth, to keep it damp; an' we seen the sky turnin' black, low down, out to our left, an' the sun blazin' away everywhere else; an' by an' by we seen the lightnin' so bright it made the sunshine seem dark after; an' we heard the thunder goin' grand. Then we soon reckoned her up to be about five mile away, to the middle."

"You're a scientific man, Bob."

"On a piccaninny scale," replied the pioneer, modestly yet complacently. "Anyhow, I always found a certain rule to work out correct, simple as it is. When you see the lightnin', you jist begin to count, middlin' slow 'one–two–three'—till you hear the thunder belongin' to that flash; then you drop countin', an' allow a little better'n four to every mile, an' reckon her up. You foller this rule for a few brattles o' thunder, to make sure; an' you'll git at her middlin' right. Worst of it is, you can't see nor hear no sign of a thunderstorm, if she's goin' on ten or twelve mile away—fact, very seldom eight mile.

Queer, too, considerin' the loudness of thunder. I've heard a frog–bell quite as fur from the camp."

"The earth is a good sound–conductor, and the air a very bad one, Bob," I remarked. "Thunder is actually louder than artillery; yet no peal of thunder is audible at twelve miles from the point of explosion; whilst the cannonade of Jena, for instance, was distinctly heard at a distance of more than ninety miles; Waterloo at a hundred and ten; and, without a word of exaggeration, the artillery fire at the siege of Ant "

"Go to (sheol)!" ejaculated Bob, with the touching interest of an intelligent but uninformed man.

"Anyhow, by the time we got three or four mile, it was sundown, an' the air was cool, an' you could smell the rain on any scrub there was; an' in another mile or two, we seen the stars shinin' in a gilgie that the rain had filled. So we got through right enough."

"Fine open country we have in the interior," I observed, as we seated ourselves in the veranda of the railway station. "No name for it. Do your eyes good to see the place where we lost Bat's horse. Grass above your stirrups, an' no end o' permanent water. Seems to be a sort o' island—like the Tatiara; on'y, of course, the desert's a lot rougher, an' the island's a lot better. I was tellin' M'Gregor it's middlin' bad to git at; but there was some emus, about half–road; an' they wouldn't be far off o' water in that sort o' weather.

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Must be water there; an' I'll find it before I'm six months older, or you can call me Johnny–come–lately, or Burke–an'–Wills, or anything you like." He paused, and sat with his eyes thoughtfully and approvingly fixed on his effeminate boots.

"Another for Clan Chattan," I soliloquized hopelessly.

"Eh?"

"Nothing, Bob. Habit of talking to myself. Here comes the train, at last!"

The long line of carriages drew up to the platform, which instantly became alive with hundreds of holiday–seekers. I attentively scanned the crowd, doubtful of recognizing Fred, but certain of identifying his wife at a glance. I could picture her exactly. Let me explain.

We are all gifted with an intuitive sense of what you might call appellative congruity, or the appreciation of fitness in proper names. But from a very early age I have endeavoured to systematize the crude intuitions, the mental phantasms, which as proper names vibrate on the tympanum, photograph themselves on the uninviting grey matter inside. In fact, I have formulated a science, which I call Nomenclology, and which, like all other sciences except Mathematics, sometimes runs cronk. Yet I felt that I would recognize Mrs Pritchard on sight. As Fred's antithetical complement, she would carry a stern, practical, masterful look; also the poor woman would be sour in temper and repellent in manner, through continual brooding over her grand mistake.

To describe her after the poundkeeperlike manner of your gushing novelist, she would have coarse, hard, black hair, in close proximity to a receding forehead; black eyebrows, well defined, but somewhat misplaced, bounding her nose (if you understand me) on the south–east and south–west instead of the north–east and north–west, and meeting at the little gutter which separates the nose and mouth. Small, keen, dark–grey eyes, and a strong–minded aquiline nose, would give character to her face. She would have thin, firm, colourless lips– a mouth which would strike you as being designed for the reception of sustenance, and the expression of opinion, rather than for the more romantic office in which, as poets feign, this important organ is not unfrequently employed. She would have a strong and prominent chin; a square, pugilistic jaw; and I must not omit to mention a very conspicuous mole, crested by five long, black hairs, and situated on the side of her chin, about an inch below the extremity of her left eyebrow. Sinewy neck, angular shoulders, level bust, and all the rest in proportion.

Australian born–as her eyebrows betoken–but speaking with a perceptible Scotch accent.

As the crush at the barriers subsided, I saw Fred, carrying a child on his arm, and recognized him with some relief of mind. Time had dealt bountifully with my old schoolmate. All that he had lost in youthfulness was more than gained in bearing and presence. He had stopped growing–much to his own discontent–at fifteen or sixteen; but the resultant deficiency was now generously overpaid by a better–class portliness. His bright, luxuriant, curly hair–noticeable when he raised his hat to some departing fellow passengers–was efficiently seconded by the most harmoniously associated whiskers and moustache which I have yet been privileged to admire; and his unobtrusive chin was set off by that aristocratic shave vulgarly known as the "squatters' gap". Indeed, so pronounced was his air of distinction that even the most casual observer would at once have marked him as a man of no common standard. But there is usually some outward and visible sign of any inward and spiritual greatness; and Fred was as great as Washington, though in an entirely different way. At all events, there was such consciousness of indisputable eminence in his whole aspect that I looked round with vivid interest, and some uneasiness, for the stern face of the person who, in the nature of things, had found him out. She was nowhere to be seen; but Fred was followed through the wicket by a tall, fair, intellectual–looking woman, lithe and graceful, carrying a baby in her arms, and towing a little boy by her skirt. I was on the point of asking after Mrs Pritchard when Fred, stepping aside from the crowd, introduced this splendid cedar of Lebanon as his wife. I leaned against a veranda post for support. Nomenclology–

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a science as yet only in its infancy, and purely empirical, in the best sense of that abused word, was at fault once more.

In face and figure she was beyond criticism; not only negatively perfect, but almost aggressively attractive. Analysed, this attractiveness was of the kind that faithfully indexes a true woman's temperament—which implies much, and nothing but good. Owing to many co–operative causes, the Australian woman of the best type has probably no equal on earth; and Fred's wife was a satisfactory illustration of our country's possible achievement in the most momentous and far–reaching of all national commissions. In no respect was she like her picture; indeed, I noticed with a touch of chagrin that even her moustache was golden brown instead of rusty black.

My compassion for Fred was augmented to poignancy. It is bad enough to stand disclosed in all your worthlessness before a commonplace woman; but to be weighed in the balances by such a daughter of the gods is simply to have MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN written on your forehead.

There were three children to the fore. The eldest, Hereward, was old enough to do a good deal of exploring on his own account, and to declare with easy fluency his impressions of the various sights he saw. He was also addicted to the asking of difficult questions; a habit not so offensive in children as in adults, and one, by the way, that cost Socrates his life. The second child, Sissy by name, was somewhat younger; she too could speak fluently, though not intelligibly. The third, of unknown sex, I should imagine to have been some months old; a fat, white child; remarkably good–tempered, conspicuously bald–headed, and, as I remember, subject to lacteal eructation.

On recovering my self–possession, I introduced Mr Bruce. Then, as Mrs Pritchard preferred walking, after the long ride, we arranged with a cabman for conveyance of the luggage. Bob, meanwhile, was cultivating the goodwill of Hereward and Sissy.

"Jist let me take these two little coves, missus," said he. "Ain't every day a man gits a slant o' goin' mates with white piccaninnies." He gently raised Sissy as you would lift a teapot, and placed her on his left arm. "Comfortable there, ole son?" he asked.

The child glanced at his face in quick alarm; but when he stooped down and took Hereward on the other arm, she smiled confidently to her mother, and secured herself by a good grip of her new guardian's beard. And so Bob brought up the rear of our procession; presently diving into a confectioner's shop, where he speculated in a large quantity of the most glutinous lollies known to the trade. When he reached Mrs Ferguson's a few minutes after our arrival, the children were excessively thirsty, and industriously wiping their viscous, saccharine hands on their apparel. Their mother took charge of them for a while, after which they returned, with shining faces and smoothly–brushed hair, to their new friend.

The children were not more taken with Bob than Bob was with Fred. It was pleasant to notice how the simple–minded bushman was bewitched by the affable man of the world, who, without a shadow of sarcasm, spontaneously addressed him as "Mr Bruce". And Bob's admiration was just the sort of tribute that Fred—unless he was much altered—would cordially recognize and carefully cultivate.

After dinner, Fred and Bob went down the street together, taking the children with them. Mrs Pritchard had taken the bald–headed baby to her room. I remained alone in the little parlour, disquieted on poor Fred's account, yet hoping against hope that his wife might yet disclose just sufficient intelligence to obey without cavil her repressive and salutary marriage vow. But soon the object of my uncharitable, though well–meaning, wishes, entered the apartment; and I placed a chair for her by the open window, with some trivial remark about the view. "Yes, the upper foliage looks promising," she replied. "I should like to go for a walk, when Fred comes back. I love to come in touch with the grand old trees that have sheltered generation after generation of a vanishing race. Ah! if one could only capture and interpret the mystery locked up in those stately giants! Just think, Mr Collins, what a landmark in history this era of transition will seem in the far future, and how precious every relic of

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Aboriginal lore will be then!" There was no sign of gush in her subdued and almost reluctant discourse. But she was evidently a thinker, and was now thinking aloud. Poor old Fred!

"Yes," said I helplessly; "the tree is generally the oldest inhabitant."

"But there is one thing that lasts longer than the tree," she rejoined, with deference in her tone, though with authority in her calm grey eyes "that is, the spoken word, the appellation. The Aboriginal name of this town will probably outlive any tree in Australia. Strange, isn't it—to think that a word, impalpable to touch and invisible to sight, should be more enduring and reliable than any material monument? The history of nations— their migrations, settlements, conquests—can be traced by the philologist far back into ages which afford little or no clue to the antiquarian. Yet in spite of the paramount significance of local designations—or, perhaps because of it—the map of this young land is already defaced by ugly and incongruous names, transplanted from the other side of the world."

"I agree with every word you say," I replied, resolutely banishing from my mind all unavailing compassion for Fred, and collecting my own mental resources in sordid self–defence. "To my mind, the immigrant who disgraces an Australian river, or mountain, or town–site, or locality of any kind, with the name of his own insanitary European birthplace is guilty of a presumption which amounts to unpardonable impudence. And there seems to be no limit to this effrontery. For instance, when I was a small boy, a township was laid out in our vicinity. The authorities, in Melbourne, courteously invited some local residents to suggest a new name which would replace 'The Twelve–mile'. Mr Pritchard's father argued persistently for 'Thorpe Mullock'; Steve Thompson's father urged 'Icklingham'; the Reverend Mr Tregurtha pleaded for 'Padstow'; and my own father stoutly contended for 'Darrymacash'.

However, the old police magistrate happened just then to marry a young wife; and through his influence the place was called Juliatown. Bad enough, but it might have been worse. Ridiculous and silly as the name appears, it can scarcely be called obscene."

"Fred often speaks of Juliatown, and of you," continued the lady after a pause. "Tell me, Mr Collins, do you find much change in him since you were boys together?"

"No change," I replied, with my habitual truthfulness. "Only the ripened fulfilment of his early promise. I may tell you that, in the olden days, we simply recognized his superiority and let it go at that. In fact, he's gifted with a power that I've never yet seen equalled."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," rejoined Mrs Pritchard, evidently relieved. "I do admire a magnanimous spirit. But—speaking confidentially—doesn't it seem strange to you that the world, against its own interests, passes by men like Fred, and lavishes place and power on mere nobodies?"

"Not more strange than true, however," I replied, veiling my bewilderment under a sympathetic air. "And apart from the injustice perpetrated—society, in so doing, sustains a loss."

"Yes; but, you see, Mr Collins, the sin of society, in this case, is visited on the victim, as well as on society itself. I should like to see society suffer the whole penalty. Of course, you can reason the question out dispassionately, while I feel the injustice day by day, as I see condemned to inaction hands that the rod of empire might have swayed."

"Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre," I rejoined thoughtfully; and I maintain, even now, that my quotation was the more apt of the two—heartless, maybe, but just a desperate grip at something tangible in this chaotic situation. "I fancy that Gray himself was much like Fred in some ways," she continued, with appalling artlessness—

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"Too poor for a bribe, and too proud to importune; He had not the method of making a fortune."

"My old schoolmate always appeared to be half–unconscious of his own superiority," I suggested, avoiding her eyes. "And the egotism which he lacks is often an important element in success. Bacon knew this when he depicted his Julius Caesar as possessing in an extraordinary degree only two qualities—an unerring knowledge of human nature, and an unbounded self–esteem. Let a man devoutly and constantly believe in himself, and he will find a multitude of others to believe in him also."

There's something in the prayer of the Presbyterian minister,—'Lord, gie's a gude conceit o' oorsel's!' Anyway, I can sympathize with anyone who labours under the moral defect of diffidence."

"I should scarcely say that Fred's comparative obscurity is owing to any moral defect," replied the infatuated woman, with a black–and–tan fidelity more touching than grief itself. "It is attributable, I think, to the overflowing of those higher qualities which are so little appreciated in the great world; a kind of chivalrous audacity which shocks and frightens humdrum people. Now, if the Emperor Napoleon's advisers had given Fred an independent command, during the Franco–German War, he would certainly have turned the scale in favour of France, and prevented the disaster to the Imperial family. His youth was the only objection; but they should have remembered Alexander of Macedon. That is only one instance; but the same blindness to Fred's evident ability has prevailed everywhere. I am happy to notice, however, that, in each case where he has been slighted, those who undervalued him have suffered for it afterward."

By this time, I had passed that uncertain line where amused astonishment ends, and compassionate pain begins; and it seemed to me that my theory of the feminine vally–de–sham ought to be stated as subject to certain exceptions. Whilst thinking about this, and apparently brooding over the world's non–appreciation of Fred, I heard, outside, that hero's voice in measured narration. Looking through the open window, I saw him and Bob approach a veranda seat just below. Bob was leading by the hand the loquacious Hereward, and gently carrying the unconscious Sissy, who, though she had now reached the limp and perspiring condition peculiar to childhood, still clung to Bob with the tenacity of a native bear. Fred carried on his arm a fine new stock saddle, with high, thin knee–pads, hollow seat and raking pommel—one of the very few articles of merchandise which the Fred of other days would have liked to be seen carrying along a public street. They seated themselves comfortably, just under the window, and the anecdote flowed on—

"—but, young as I was, I had enough personal experience to know that, in fighting on horseback, the best rifle–shot is to the left, and the best pistol–shot is to the rear. So, by Jove, I turned tail and galloped for it. I could have left the bushrangers out of sight, for I had a devilish good mare under me; but I wanted to keep them in range of my revolver, and at the same time prevent them getting me on their left.

The chase lasted for about a mile; and I fired twice on each of the fellows. The middle–aged man with the monkey beard fired three shots, and the Irishman, four. They shot devilish well under the circumstances—one bullet went through the rim of my hat; another through the sleeve of my coat; and a third cut the strap of my mail–bag. The mail–bag dropped, of course, and, in the excitement of the moment, I went on like the deuce for half a mile before I missed it. By this time, my two black–faced friends were quite satisfied, and had made their escape into some scrub. I rode back across the bridge, to recover the mail; but deuce take me if I could find any trace of it—thought the fellows had got it, after all. I went on to the post office, to report the loss, and found the mail–bag there before me. The postmaster afterward told me that Collins, here, and another young fellow, named Steve Thompson, had found the bag, and brought it with them. In fact, they were at the post office when I rode up. They had heard the firing, but thought nothing of it, as the whole country used to be out shooting on holidays."

"I know Steve Thompson well, an' by the same token I know him to be an ole crony of Collins's,"

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remarked Bob, struck by the undesigned coherency of Fred's story. "But you didn't lay the bobbies onto them misfortunate outlaws?" he added deprecatingly.

"No, Mr Bruce, I didn't. Perhaps I should have done so; but, deuce take me, I couldn't. They were my game. I had taken the mail–contract just in the hope of meeting with some adventure of this kind. I was full of devilment in those days. If I hadn't kept myself usefully employed, I'd have been the terror of the country. No. On leaving the post office, I gave Collins and Thompson the slip, went straight back to the place where the chase had ended, and picked up the tracks of the fellows' horses "

"Wouldn't it be comin' on night by that time?" suggested Bob.

"And devilish dark, too," assented Fred. "But I had trained my mare to run a scent like a bloodhound.

She took me about a mile, and then stopped in a thicket of wild raspberry bushes, at the foot of a precipice. Of course, I knew the place well. The two horses were there, without saddles or bridles; and deuce take me if I could make head or tail of it till I put my ear to the ground and heard a sound of voices that seemed to come out of the solid cliff before me. I crept under the raspberry bushes, pistol in hand, and soon found myself feeling my way along a low, pitch–dark passage. When I had gone about thirty yards, the passage opened into a large cave, lighted by a slush–lamp. There I found my two bushrangers, both badly wounded, and each lying helpless on his couch of dried fern. Horribly grotesque they looked too, with their blackened faces.

"You may blame me, Mr Bruce; but I venture to say you would have done the same as I did. I acted the Samaritan. I found that every one of my bullets had told. The grey–bearded man—who, by the way, had once been a captain in Her Majesty's 63rd Infantry; I would prefer not to mention his name—he was hit in the right shoulder and the left knee; but, knowing something of surgery, I managed to extract both bullets. The Irishman, Terence Murphy, had received both my shots just below the belt. Of course, there was no extracting those bullets; though the poor devil was suffering the most excruciating agony. I did as you would have done. I made the unfortunate scoundrels as comfortable as possible—in fact, I attended on them every night for the next three weeks, and saw that they wanted for nothing. By this time, the captain was on his feet again; but poor Terry! Well, I had to ask him if I could do anything to make his last hours easy. I don't know what creed you profess, Mr Bruce; but I'm High Church; and I could see no harm in granting the poor fellow's last request. I brought the local priest—at midnight, of course—and next morning at grey dawn poor Terry passed away, blessing me with his latest breath. I cried like a child."

Fred's voice failed as he recalled the scene; whereupon the late lamented bushranger, leaning on the window sill, made some trifling remark to him about the weather, or the flies, or something. But it was no use trying to get up a conversation with Fred just then. He had found a listener of rarest qualities, and was as frankly independent of his earlier friend as a half–grown boy is of his mother. And Mrs Pritchard, having brought the bald–headed baby from her room, was ostentatiously occupying herself with that imbecile, evidently in order to add me to Fred's audience, for his honour and my own profit.

But it was a false position; so I listened without marking, whilst listlessly noting the few people who passed along the quiet street. One remarkably graceful woman attracted my attention; and I inwardly moralized on the peculiar perversity of instinct which impelled an apparently rational being to disfigure the symmetry of her form (you remember the Hottentot fashion of those days?) by a hoop–iron arrangement, shaped like a meat–cover. As is often the case with me, the thought shaped itself into verse:

Worth makes the man, the want of it the fellow; But Worth makes the woman a perfect Punchinello.

A mere nothing—almost English in point of wit, and probably the thousandth quibble on a well–advertised name. I wouldn't think of recording such a trifle but that it has to do with my story; for I must have smiled at the conceit;

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at all events, Hereward, who was squatted on the seat with his back toward me, suddenly whirled round and demanded: "Wass you laughin' at, Tom?"

"Hereward!" exclaimed his mother. "You must say 'Mr Collins'."

"Well, I won't. Tell me wass you laughin' at, Tom?"

"At an epigram, Hereward."

"Where it is? See it to me! I never see one. Where did it go?" And his quick eyes darted excitedly over the window sill and curtains. "Where did it go, Tom? Is it a hairy fing, wif many feet? I want–a see ghat epigram."

"It's no good of a thing, Hereward. See, here's a pocket–knife I got for you. Mind you don't cut yourself."

"Fank you, sir. Say, Tom,–ghat big, spindly, green dog, sleepin' on ghem bags–does he b'long to you?"

"Yes, dear."

"Wass hees name?"

"Pup."

"Ghat's a devilish good name."

"You shouldn't say that word, dear."

"Ghat's Pa's word. Did you buy ghat dog wif white money, Tom?"

"Yes, dear."

"Who did you buy him from?"

"From a cockie."

"Where did ghat cockie get him from?"

"Made him, probably."

"I folt God made everyfing. How much money did you give ghat cockie for him?"

"Three notes."

"Hereward, lovey, come in here," said his mother, meekly yet impressively. "I want you."

"No, I won't; I'm talkin' to Tom."

"Do, please, let him alone, Mrs Pritchard," said I. "We're getting on very well together."

"Is he a good dog, Tom?"

"Yes, dear; he's one of the very best."

"But what is he good for?"

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"Heaven only knows, Hereward; I'm sure I don't."

"I want—a fine ghat cockie; he might have some moe dogs made. Do you know where Essendon is, Tom?"

"Yes, dear."

"Ghat's where we live! We been savin' up money such a lot of Sundays to pay—a man for givin' us a ride to ghis place. Ghat's—a man—a says 'Tickets, please'. Have you got much money, Tom?"

"See that high chimney, Hereward!" I replied desperately, for there was suppressed agony in the mother's voice and manner as she crooned her baby to sleep.

"Wass ghat fork on top o' ghat chimley for, Tom?"

"For catching the lightning, dear."

"But what does it do wif—a lightnin'?"

"Sends it into the ground."

"An' how does it get up on top—a a chimley again?"

Before I could frame a reply, he suddenly asked, "Wess—a end o' ghat river, Tom?"

"At the sea, Hereward."

"But wess—a nother end? Is it stuck in—a sea too?"

"No; it's away among the mountains."

"But what does it do among—a mountains? Does it go over—a top?—or does it grop down a crack?"

Without waiting for my answer, he re-seated himself with some violence, and instantly lapsed into reverie. Again I was alone. Leaning on the window sill, I looked out, and gave ear unto another anecdote which Fred was relating to Bob.—

"—perfect stranger to most of the chaps, and only a visitor at the station, I didn't like to make myself too conspicuous, though I longed to be at it. However, this brindled steer tore round the yard at such a deuce of a rate that none of the fellows could get near him—

" 'Open the rails, and let him go!' says the manager— nice, gentlemanly fellow, but a perfect devil to swear— 'I don't give a—' "

"Kids," murmured Bob hastily.

"Thank you, Mr Bruce. I admire your scruples; but I'm on my guard. 'I don't give one etcetera,' says the manager, 'if we never see the etcetera again! Let the etcetera go!'

"However, the steer didn't want permission. He took a race at the fence—close on seven feet high—

and cleared it, by Jove! like a bird. But while he was making the spring, I snatched up a rope, noosed at one end, and called to some of the fellows to take a turn of the other end round a post. Then, just as the steer rose over the

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fence, I launched out my slack; and just as he touched the ground outside, I tightened the loop round his horns. But the fellows hadn't been smart enough in taking a turn with the other end; so away went the steer like the very devil, with the rope fairly whistling through the grass behind him–

"Well," says the manager, "I've been among cattle for five and thirty etcetera years; but I'll be etcetera well etcetera if I ever saw a thing so neatly done!"

"Nor me, nyther," said Bob simply.

"I was always a hot–headed, thoughtless fool," continued Fred, in tones of self–scorn; "and now I could see that I was throwing away a devilish good rope, through a little boyish bravado. No sooner did this cross my mind than I found myself on the manager's blood horse, flying after the steer like the very deuce. You've never been in East Gippsland, I think you said, Mr Bruce? No. Well, if you should ever visit Muddy–gong station, you'll notice a single tree on the plain, about a mile from the stockyard–east, or perhaps a little to the north of east. I headed the steer for this tree; and just as he passed it, I stooped down and caught hold of the rope "

"Full rip?" queried Bob, almost incredulously.

"Full rip. And then, quick as thought, I wheeled my horse twice round the tree, and brought the steer up standing. Then I jumped off, to make the rope fast; and when the steer saw me on foot, he charged me like a flash of lightning."

"Bet yer life on that lot," assented Bob.

"You're right, Mr Bruce. I can see you're no novice in these affairs. But, as I was telling you, the steer charged me. I dodged round the tree, and he gave chase. I could have shinned up the tree like a cat, but then he would have unwound the rope, and got away; so there was nothing for it but to run round the tree, winding on the rope as fast as he took it off. This lasted for fifteen or twenty minutes, with the steer a couple of yards behind me; and then "

"How long was the rope, Fred?" I asked involuntarily.

"About fifty feet, I should think, Tom.–And then, by Jove! he gave it best, and stood with his tongue out, staring at me. I made the rope fast, caught my horse, and cantered back to the stockyard in a much better humour. They wanted the steer for a worker, so they shoved a yoke on him where he stood.

Turned out one of the best bullocks in Gippsland, the manager afterwards told me. Broke his neck, at last, poling a portable engine down a hill on the Walhalla road. Try this brand of cigar, Mr Bruce; I think you'll like it."

Mr Bruce, who, like the average bushman, instinctively shrank from saying "Thank you", took the cigar without phrases; and, whilst trying it, deferentially related a little adventure of his own–how, upon one occasion, in a lonely place, he was trying to turn a single steer– how he had to fall in behind the steer for a hundred yards, on account of a belt of mallee–how, while his stockwhip was dancing on the steer's back, the latter came down–how his horse went heels–over–tip across the prostrate beast, breaking his own neck in the fall, and afterward lying with all his weight on the narrator's leg–how that tight–placed son of adversity, believing all the time that his own leg was broken, spent the rest of the day mining under the imprisoned limb with his pocket knife, before he got clear; and then, though lame as a cat, had to carry his saddle and bridle twelve or fifteen mile. Bob related this experience with the apologetic air of some obscure literary aspirant reading a little thing of his own to the greatest author of the age; and Fred listened with the flattering attention of the same great author storing up material for his next work.

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Here Hereward, rousing from his meditations, complained to Bob of thirst, intimating, however, that the craving was not for water, but for "moe lemonaig". So the three stepped across to an adjacent pub, leaving the saddle on the seat, and handing the somnolent Sissy to me through the window.

It was instructive to notice how Bob, having allowed and encouraged Fred to set himself on the pedestal of eminence, felt his own blind faith in no way shaken by the extreme steepness of his hero's yarns. Bob's face always indicated his current thought, just as the sky betokens the passing weather; and now its settled expression denoted that, notwithstanding his life–long experience, he critically attributed to his own defective apprehension all apparent incongruities in Fred's stories. And yet I question whether this semi–barbarian was much softer–headed than your serpent–wise self, though his credulity might run in a different line.

For instance. When the sparrow brained scribe of your favourite loyalist journal twitters joyously to the effect that the King of Yvetot, or the Prince of Old Sarum–whom you know to be, in every respect, considerably below mediocrity–is not only an unrivalled statesman, general, orator, poet, artist, scientist etc., but is also the greatest athlete, horseman, yachtsman etc. on this unworthy dab of muck–doesn't your plush–clad soul pour itself forth in hosannas? Come now! Of course, you could see through Fred right enough; but then, Bob could see through your king or prince just as clearly. The fact is, that authority or precedence, however ridiculous, being once accepted and enthroned, is apt to paralyse judgment. There is an unnoted undercurrent of significance in the confession: "All we, like sheep, have gone astray." Like sheep! Ay, heaven help thee, cross–bred jumbuck! Amen.

When the Buln–buln and Brolga returned to their seat, I looked through the window and proposed a walk along the river. Fred assented, and came round into the parlour, with Bob and Hereward. Mrs Pritchard took the latter and Sissy away to give them a general freshening up; and presently we went forth like Brown's cows (as the saying is).

Bob, with Sissy again asleep on his arm, was still rapt in the moving accidents of all descriptions so accurately related by his adventurous companion. On the other side of Fred walked his spell–bound wife; and I, neglect and oppressed, brought up the rear, carrying the bald–headed bambino, now wrapped in a shawl like a silkworm in its cocoon. Hereward pattered along beside me, conducting a severe cross–examination on general subjects, abruptly varied now and then by the ventilation of what he conceived to be a grievance, namely, that I had failed to call his attention to the epigram before it got away. Once, in filling and lighting my pipe, I inadvertently changed the position of the cigar–shaped roll which contained the slumbering papoose. Mrs Pritchard was by my side in an instant, her quick maternal eye having observed that I was carrying the cocoon with the wrong end uppermost.

Otherwise, I got on very well.

We returned as night was setting in. After tea, we were again found in the little parlour. Hereward had talked himself to sleep, and was folded, shapeless and invertebrate, on my knees. Sissy was in the same condition on Bob's knees. Mrs Pritchard took them away in rotation, and disposed of them for the night. Fred was still bringing forth out of his treasury twisters old and new, whilst Bob ministered comment and question, innocently seconding the narrator to the top of his bent. I heard them, but I heeded not; for, drifting into a Hamlet–mood, I was contemplating the boneless mollusc which Mrs Pritchard had left in my charge; and though, as a rule, I don't care about children till they are old enough to stagger about, this one supplied as good fodder for my thinking faculties to work upon as it would have done for the digestive apparatus of my not very remote ancestors. Aeons of memory seemed to roll back in dreamy retrospect, till I fancied myself older than the satrapies of Victoria or Queensland; and I recalled the bygone days when I used to incur the displeasure of mothers and nurse–girls by stoutly and conscientiously repudiating their allegation that I was once a baby myself. And now, as I viewed the cheap angel–gift, blinking and slobbering on my knees, I renewed my protest against the impeachment–a protest which still remains in good working order. I admit that I was once a boy, even as young as Hereward; but a contentedly incapable, bald–headed baby, without a vestige of manners or self–respect; with creases round my

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wrists, and only two rodent–like teeth in the centre of my mouth–No, no–pardon me!–no, no.

"Thank you, Mr Collins," said the lady sweetly, as she took delivery of the interesting object, and seated herself in the arm–chair which I placed for her. "I've imposed upon your good–nature this evening; but you must remember that you were once a baby yourself. Mr Bruce, I suppose, is familiar with Aboriginal babies. How I should like to see one of the dear little things. They must be very interesting."

"Well, no; they ain't," replied Bob respectfully. "Same time, I've knowed white women to give a good price for very small piccaninnies. Course, wild lubras won't part with their kids at no price."

"How dreadful to think of a mother selling her child!" murmured the lady.

"Not so bad, from a right–thinkin' point o' view, as a blackfeller sellin' his lubra; an' that's common occurrence," rejoined Bob. "Low figure, very often. Happened to see a bargain struck las' year.

Manager of Yarralong–nice feller as you'd meet in a week's travellin'–he bought a big, handsome, young lubra from her ole man, out an' out, for thirty bob cash an' a couple o' notes in second–hand truck."

"And even that," I observed involuntarily, "was probably as much as poor Mr Inkle obtained for Yarico."

(This remark was merely the incidental outcrop of a habit which the censorious reader may have already noticed—a habit of airing some scrap of unhackneyed information, apparently, though not actually, with a view to effect. Immoral as the practice is, and pert as it may seem to the unbookish critic, I hold it to be far less reprehensible than the converse impropriety of writing for full–grown people in the painfully simple manner so often affected in literature intended for the "masses".

Believe me, any genial pedant that casually assumes you to know who Oliver Cromwell was—when, in point of fact, you neither know nor want to know is an angel of light compared with the transparent prig who, in simple sentences and words of one syllable contends (as in a book lying before me now)

that the landlord is the greatest of all benefactors, seeing that to him the tenant owes his hovel, his pig–sty, his hen–house—in a word, his foot–hold on the crust of this planet. Distrust the presumptuous snob who avowedly writes down to an implied standard of adult information or intelligence, thus adding the insult of condescension to the injury of sinister purpose. Not that I by any means defend the systematic pundit. I only hold him to be a less culpable poseur than the driveller who glories in his puerility.

However, this habit of mine was acquired early in life, when my chief ambition was to emulate, or even excel, Macaulay's erudite "schoolboy". Now, like Fred's practice of lying, it simply comes natural. So unless you are unreasonable enough to feel affronted with a white gum for its manner of shedding bark which it has done with, I don't see how you can consistently resent my style of dropping a few sporadic cylinders from my branches. In conversation, this habit sometimes does me good service in enchainning the attention of a restive listener; but again, there are instances in which I have been hoist with my own encyclopaedic petard. A most unfortunate mishap of this kind occurred during the evening I am now endeavouring to recall. I shall draw your attention to it at the proper time and place. Go to, then.)

The conversation being turned in the direction of Aboriginal life, Bob, of course, was soon pulling stroke; Mrs Pritchard listening with vivid interest.

After some time, the bushman seemed to feel himself looming too conspicuously in the foreground; and his low, impassive monotone came to an awkward stop.

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"But, Mr Bruce," said the lady eagerly, "aren't the poor creatures often treated cruelly by new settlers?"

"It's this way, mem," replied Bob humbly. "Course, the New South Wales blackfellers is all right now

what's left o' them—but when you git at the Queensland fellers in their raw state, you'll mostly fine some bullies among 'em—same as among whitefellers—an' it's these bullies makes all the mischief; an' when you disperse them, then the rest o' the tribe's quiet. If there was no bullies among the blackfellers, they wouldn't want dispersin'. White bullies wants dispersin' too."

"I happen to have done a little of that in my time," remarked Fred, in his genial way. "You remember Wesley Tregurtha, Tom? You remember that when his father was removed to another circuit, he was articed to Courtenay, and afterward—just before I went to England—got into trouble over a cheque?"

"I remember it well," I replied. "My father and Steve Thompson's father went bail for him; but he shook the dust off his feet, and a very good horse out of our paddock, and withdrew quietly before the Sessions came on."

"And you never heard of him since?"

"Never a word."

"I should think not. I can give you the latest intelligence of the poor devil. But I beg your pardon, Mr Bruce; you were speaking."

"No; nothing particular," replied Bob uneasily. "I was on'y goin' to say it don't do blackfellers any good to civilize 'em. There's no gittin' over the fact that people naturally inclines to sin, an' wickedness, an' rascality—blackfellers an' whitefellers, jist the same—an' civilizin' makes people worse. I of'en go in for workin' out this class of idears in my own head. All these latest improvements; an' the people as thick as ants; an' a bobby every fifty yards—further you look into them, the more you'll get disgusted at seein' things drawed out so fine till there's nothing but selfishness an' man—eatin', with a bit of toffishness an' foolish yabber to set it off." He paused in confusion. What if his hearers should do him the injustice of applying these general strictures to themselves?

"Yes, Mr Bruce," sighed the lady; "we boast of our civilization, but the trail of the serpent is over it all."

Bob's face revealed a manly pity, taking the place of apprehension; for Mrs Pritchard's vague and irrelevant reference to the lower creation was a touching illustration of foolish yabber. But the chivalrous bushman would see her through.

"You're right, missus," said he, with simulated thoughtfulness. "The serpent's a very good instance of pure divilmint. An' see how birds goes in for swearin', as soon as they git civilized. I noticed that very forcible one time, long ago, on the Lachlan. I don't blame a bird at a shanty for swearin'; but this time me an' Bat was mindin' a paddick with a bad fence; an' we got a galah an' kep' it at the hut where on'y the two of us was stoppin'. Well, as soon as that bird got civilized, he'd waken up every mornin', reg'lar, with an oath in his mouth; an' whenever he seen us, he'd keep rippin' it out for his own amusement. He was a hard case; an' he's on'y jist a fair sample. Good job birds has no souls."

He paused, and sighed sadly, gazing into the fireplace. Presently he proceeded in a husky tone, and with averted face.

"Wonder if God takes to a person that repented, so's you got a bit of a show to shove in a good word for anybody that ain't got the slant to repent? I knocked off swearin', myself, over a year ago. Before that, it'd 'a' made the hair

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stand on your head to hear me comin' out."

"Oh no, Mr Bruce!" exclaimed the lady. "Fact, missus," replied Bob abjectly. "When things used to go crooked, I'd jist go ramsackin' my mind for something real venomous—couldn't git enough satisfaction out o' common swearin'. But I didn't have no trouble knockin' it off; not half what I expected. Knockin' off swearin's on'y child's play compared to knockin' off lyin'. Six or eight year ago, I was the fearfulest liar unhung."

I hazarded a lighting glance round the company. Fred was observing with good–humoured interest the wincing of this galled jade under the burden of remorse. His withers were unwrung. And I read in the winning face of his wife nothing but overflowing sympathy, with a touch of suppressed amusement.

"We was talkin' about blackfellers," continued Bob, recalling himself. "I'd jist put it this way; it's wrong to be too hard on the pore beggars; an' it don't do to be too soft with 'em. I seen one little instance, the fust time me an' Bat was up north. Tell you how it come—

"Me and Bat was ridin' in by our two selves from Drumclog, in Queensland; an' it was always safe to have a rifle with you about that quarter; an' we was layin' out to stop all night at Yandaree. Well, gittin' on in the afternoon, an' us dodgin' up to the back o' the station, we hears the crack of a gun, an' then another crack. Course, we thought nothing of it; but I'll tell you what was takin' place at the time—

"The man that owned the station—nice feller he is, as you'd meet in a week's travellin'—he'd on'y been there a couple or three months; an' he'd come from a part where the blackfellers was quiet as sheep, on account of all the rumbumptious fellers gittin' dispersed. Well, this Moorfield had jist shifted his fambly to Yandaree; an' this afternoon he was at home, doin' a bit o' carpenter work; an' his missus she was pokin' about the house; an' the kids was playin' under a tree at the back door; an' Miss Moorfield she was sittin' in the front veranda, readin' a book; an' the servant girl was moochin' round as usual; an' the couple or three hands was away that day at the joinin' station, helpin' to muster. There was a whole swag o' blackfellers had come into a deep holler, half a mile away, but they was supposed to be tame—though, mind you, they hadn't got their Marys or piccaninnies with 'em.

"Well, Miss Moorfield she hears a 'Woh!' an' she sees a big buck blackfeller comin' along solitary, with three or four spears. She didn't altogether like the looks of him, bein'—well, bein' jist in his skin, so to speak; an' she was goin' inside; an' he lets fly a spear at her. It didn't hit her, but it nailed the gown—part of her frock to the wall; an' she makes a dart for the door, leavin' half her frock stickin' on the spear; an' in she bolts, an' slaps the door shut behind her. Broad daylight, if you please!

"Course, Moorfield, he got excited; an' he collars holt of his rifle, an' runs out on the veranda—

" 'Clear off!' he sings out; an' he levels his rifle at the blackfeller. The blackfeller he stopped, but he wouldn't clear off—not frightened enough. He knowed who he'd got to deal with. That's the grand secret, missus.

" 'Clear off!' says Moorfield agen; an' he fires a shot over the blackfeller's head. Rotten bad line. The blackfeller he runs back a bit, an' then comes forrid slowly. Moorfield he presents his rifle, an' the blackfeller laughs. Both o' them killin' time; but the blackfeller was gainin', hand over fist—on'y Moorfield couldn't see it.

"Well, this style o' thing was goin' on when me an' Bat come so as we could see across a bit of a rise at the back o' the station. We pulls up, an' looks at one another.

" 'Blackfellers!' says Bat. 'Jist in time.'

" 'There's my dream out!' says I.

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"Holy snake! you're right," says Bat. That was the pore feller's favourite word. Sort o' technical phrase. 'If we scoot up the bed o' the creek,' says he, 'we'll git a sittin' shot to start with.'

"So it was no time before we was dartin' up through the back garden, layin' on our horses' necks—an' the fun of it was that the blackfellers was watchin' every road but that one, in case the station hands might be turnin' up.

"Thank God! thank God!" says Mrs Moorfield, when she seen us; an' her as white as a sheet, an' her arms round the whole bunch o' kids.

"We fetches our horses right into the back veranda, behind some creepers, an' walks into the house, an' looks through the winder o' the front room. Moorfield he was standin' in the door; an' there was the blackfeller laughin' an' dancin'; an' ten to fifteen more blackfellers sneakin' up from one cover to another, half-game an' half-frightened. Bat he lifts the winder about two inches, an' drops on one knee—that bein' his favourite style, pore feller.

"Don't shed blood till you can't help it," says Moorfield. 'Jist keep him at a distance for one minute more, to give him a chance. I always been on the best o' terms with the blacks,' says he. 'If you kill that feller, we'll have to fight the whole tribe.'

"Ain't you got to fight the whole tribe now?" says Bat. 'You ain't looked round yet. But you want to let this bloke hear the bizz o' the bullet. Watch here'—an' he lets drive.

"The blackfeller he jumps up about two foot, or mebbe two foot an' a half; an' flaps down on his face.

Then other blackfellers that we'd never seen a sight of, not to mention the ones we had noticed, they began to show up everywhere, but they all walked off to the nearest brigalow. Fact, they run; for I lined two o' them, an' got one out o' the two; then Bat he missed the next one; an' I rolled another feller over, but he crep' away among some bushes. Then we both wasted a couple o' shots, through bein' in too great a hurry. Then Bat—he was wonderful quick, pore ole Bat!—he lames another feller; an' away scoots the rest o' the mob, takin' all the cover that come in their road. You see, missus, when the bully o' the tribe was dispersed, the others was like a swarm o' bees with no queen. Course, me an' Bat we jumped on our horses agen, an' started the whole drove across the country, till our rifles was too hot to handle—for we'd no end o' cartridges. Providence sent us round that road, for a certainty.

Still, you'll hear people sayin' there's nothing in dreams."

"Did you dream of this adventure beforehand, Mr Bruce?" asked the lady, with vivid solicitude.

"Tell you what I dreamed the very night before. I dreamed I was fishin' in a sort o' black lagoon, baitin' with bits o' water-melon, an' pullin' out fish with blackfellers' heads on' em."

"But wasn't there some danger of the survivors plotting revenge?" asked the lady, after a pause.

"Well, no. The fust blackfeller was dead, an' that was the main object; dead as a nit; with the hole between his shoulders where the bullet come through." He hesitated a moment, with the uneasy consciousness of something unappetizing in this post-mortem evidence; then, turning his soft, Byronic eyes on the lady's face, he resumed in a coldly scientific spirit. "Curious thing about the Martin-Henry—

you can hardly poke your finger in the hole where the bullet goes in at, but you could shove your fist in the place where she comes out."

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Then a troubled look, and a despondent mal–du–mulga sigh, bespoke the sensitive barbarian's appreciation of the lady's half–averted face and my stony silence.

"While Mr Bruce was speaking of bullies, I thought of Wesley Tregurtha," said Fred, turning to me. "Do you know, I never could overcome my dislike to that boy. You may remember how I used to trounce him on the slightest possible pretext, or on no pretext whatever? Sometimes he resisted, too! I've known that boy, Mr Bruce, to fight till he could neither see nor stand. Upon my honour, I have. Poor devil! his end was a terrible one. It's a painful story, Tom, but I think it will interest you."

"I'm sure it will," I replied, flinching under the honest eyes of the past master.

"It was–let's see–in August '71," continued Fred. "I was coming back to Victoria, from England, in the Aurungzebe–1500 tons–George Butterworth, master. One morning, at daylight–it was the tenth of August– I heard a rap at my cabin door.

" 'Come in,' says I; and in comes Stokes, the mate, with a long face "

"Your mate?" asked Bob, hiding his misery under an affectation of critical interest.

Mrs Pritchard bent toward the last speaker while she courteously explained the rating of ships' crews; and straightway a sense of returning self–respect threw sunshine over that incongruously lengthy effigy which contained Bob.

" 'Serious matter, Mr Falkland–Pritchard, I'm afraid,' says Stokes. 'We're chased by a suspicious looking sail.'

" 'Probably a brother to our Mediterranean friend,' says I, referring to an incident of a few weeks before. 'Don't disturb me, please. I'm sleepy this morning. Call the old man.'

" 'Tanked up, as usual,' says Stokes. 'All the responsibility is on my shoulders. For heaven's sake, let me have your assistance.'

"I dressed myself, and went on deck. About a mile to windward, I saw a wicked–looking craft, schooner rigged, keeping the weather gauge of us, and decreasing her distance every moment. I should have told you that the Aurungzebe was a sailing vessel.

" 'She declines to answer our signals; what do you make of her?' says Stokes, handing me a glass."

"Livens a man up wonderful, fust thing in the mornin'," observed Bob approvingly.

"One look was sufficient. The long, low hull was bristling with the muzzles of cannon, showing through the open ports," continued Fred, while a flash of intelligence passed over Bob's face, followed by a wave of colour.

" 'What shall we do, Mr Falkland–Pritchard?' says Stokes.

" 'Call up the watch below, and batten down the hatchways,' says I. 'Let us keep the passengers out of the way, and out of danger at the same time.'

"Just then a puff of smoke rose from one of the forward ports of the schooner, and a shot whistled across our bows.

" 'Couldn't the Aurungzebe get away from her, if you had the weather gauge, and the wind on your quarter?' says I.

" 'Not a doubt of it,' says Stokes–'if we had a lead of a mile.' " 'Heave to, and speak her, then,' says I. 'I'll be with you in a moment.'

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"I darted into my cabin, and slipped on an undress uniform, together with a splendid sword, presented to me by the Emperor of the French. Then I returned on deck. By this time, the schooner was hove to, half a cable's length to windward, commanding us with her guns. Stokes was waiting for me. I took the speaking–trumpet from his hand–

"'Ship ahoy!' I called out. 'Who are you?'

"'Surrender, or I'll sink you!' was the answer, in a voice I thought I recognized. It was the pirate captain– quite a young fellow. All the crew seemed to be Malays. My resolution was taken at once.

"'I'm willing to surrender,' says I, speaking through the trumpet. 'As a guarantee of good faith, I'll go on board your ship alone. Now, Stokes,' says I, 'man your halyards immediately, and the moment you see me board that vessel, put your helm hard a–port, clap on every stitch of sail you can carry, and cross her stern. Then show her a clean pair of heels, and go like the deuce.' "

"'You foolish, mad–headed thing!'" murmured the desperado's wife, in a trembling voice.

"I jumped into the gig "

"Jumped into the gig," repeated Bob deprecatingly. Again his ministering angel explained, evidently finding relief in the distraction.

"–I jumped into the gig as she touched the water, and pulled across to the schooner. A rope–ladder was lowered, and in half a minute I was on deck. The pirate captain came forward.

"'Permit me to introduce myself,' says I, with a deceit which may be forgiven under the circumstances– 'Captain George Butterworth, of the ship Aurungzebe, at your service.'

"As the words left my lips, there was a creaking, rushing, hissing sound; and the Aurungzebe dashed across the schooner's wake, showing one cloud of canvas from t'–galla'–m'st to deck, and every inch of it drawing hard.

"'Treachery!' yelled the pirate captain; and he rushed upon me, sword in hand. Now comes the surprising part of my story–a part which, for certain reasons, I have been in the habit of suppressing.

I never forget a face I have once seen; and in the pirate captain I recognized–whom do you think, Tom?"

"I couldn't guess."

"Then, by Jove, I recognized Wes Tregurtha! and he fairly foamed at the mouth as he recognized me.

"'I've caught you at last, Falkland–Pritchard!' he hissed through his clenched teeth.

"'And take my word for it, my good fellow, you've caught a Tartar!' says I, laughing. Then our blades crossed.

"By Jove, it was splendid! I had proved more than a match for the most skilful fencing–masters in France, but, deuce take me, I seemed to have met my equal at last."

"The other blokes they never interfered?" suggested Bob, with docile interest. "Asiatics are peculiarly susceptible to panic," I remarked in explanation.

"I am no theorist," continued Fred candidly; "all I know is that they didn't interfere. They stood huddled together in the bow of the ship, watching Tregurtha and myself, as we stood, foot to foot; our blades bending and quivering, and crossing like flashes of lightning, while the spray of sparks flew like the very devil from both

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weapons. I soon saw that the game was in my own hands, for neither of us could gain one point on the other, and it would simply be a question of endurance. However, busy as I was, I noticed the sky turning black as ink; and, looking over Tregurtha's shoulder, I saw, along the western horizon, a thin line, like a thread of silver. Then I noticed a low, moaning sound that soon increased to a deafening roar; and the sky turned blacker, and the thin, white line grew broader and brighter; coming across the dark water with the speed of a race–horse. By Jove, it was a white squall!"

"Go to (sheol)!" murmured the rapt bushman.

"All this time, the duel went on. Tregurtha began to give way. I could have cut him down, but, deuce take me, I thought of old times. Suddenly the squall struck the schooner with the force of an avalanche.

The sheets snapped like threads of twine; the two masts went by the board; and I found myself swimming for my life. I saw the mainmast floating beside me, and I managed to get astride of it. Then, looking through the blinding spray, I saw a man slowly drag himself out of the water and sit on the other end of the mast. It was Tregurtha. He crept toward me without speaking. When he approached within ten or twelve feet, we both prepared for a contest which could leave only one survivor. I saw him coolly draw a long Venetian dagger, and throw the steel sheath into the sea. I was unarmed. He still crept on like a tiger, watching me with murder in his eyes. Nearer–nearer–till we were only a yard apart; then he sprung on me. Quick as lightning, I caught his wrist, and endeavoured to wrench the weapon from his grasp. At last, struggling desperately as we were, and the mast pitching and rolling like the devil, his dagger–point struck him full in the body "

here the narrator laid his hand tenderly upon his own stomach in illustration "the glass blade snapped off at the hilt, and the fight was over."

Bob drew a long breath. The lady's face was white as chalk. I was listening with genuine admiration.

You will notice that Fred's power lay largely in the quality of compatibility, or congruity. You would never hear him say, like your first–person–singular novelist–liar, "my blood ran cold" "I was unnerved with terror"– "I never was so frightened in my life"–or words to similar purport. He could see the inconsistency. With the instinct of genius, he perceived that the genuine hero, relating his little adventure, never descends to that sort of palaver, simply because attested courage neither knows nor needs any such paltry foil. (Good counsel, marry; learn it, learn it, marquess.)

"I watched the poor devil's agonies with a horrible fascination," continued Fred sadly. "His convulsions broke the blade into fragments; and the barbed splinters worked their way, through his body. He tried to throw himself into the sea, but he was entangled among the ropes, like a fish in a net. What the deuce could I do? I knew the unfortunate wretch would live for days; and already half a dozen albatrosses had gathered round him, and were going for his eyes. I couldn't bear to see it. By this time the squall had blown over, and it was a clock calm. I saw the Aurungzebe about two miles eastward, with all her sails and half her spars carried away. The schooner, being broadside on to the squall, had gone down with all hands. I stripped, and swam for the ship, reaching her, I should think, in about two hours. Bad news awaited me there. Poor Stokes and six of the crew, including the second mate, had been killed or swept overboard with the wreck of the spars and sails; and four more were hurt. Captain Butterworth was still incapable. The first thing I did, of course, was to liberate the passengers. They were in a terrible state of alarm; the women fainting and screaming "

"You'd got another shoot o' toggery?" suggested Bob uneasily.

"Oh, certainly! But as I didn't want to cause consternation or excitement, I kept the affair of the pirate ship from the passengers, and instructed the crew to do the same. In all probability, very few of them know anything–or, at least, anything definite–about it at the present time. They only know that they were shut down below during a

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squall in the Indian Ocean."

"How small the world is, after all!" I remarked, turning to Mrs Pritchard, whilst inwardly thanking heaven for a rarely conducive coincidence. "I remember the disaster to the Aurungzebe, though I had little idea that Fred was so deeply involved in it. The incident attracted my notice at the time, because it was fully detailed in a Melbourne weekly which constituted my sole reading matter for a month. Butterworth lost his certificate over it. But according to the evidence, he was a drunken lunatic."

"Drink was his bane," assented Fred, with a retrospective sigh. "However, upon this occasion, I got him sobered up after a time, and managed to keep him pretty straight for the rest of the voyage. For a week or so, I had to navigate the ship myself; taking observations, and writing up the log, and so forth. Butterworth's misfortune in losing his certificate was nothing to the loss that I sustained over the affair. What with the excitement of the moment, and the pain of seeing my poor schoolmate suffering the horrible fate he had brought upon himself, deuce take me if I didn't entirely forget that my whole fortune was in the pockets of the undress uniform I threw off when I left the mast to swim for the ship. Before leaving London, I had been foolish enough to put all my money into Bank of England notes of high value. I did this because I wasn't sure but I might leave the vessel at some intermediate port, and go rampaging heaven knows where. The world seemed too small for me in those days.

However, though I feel most regret over the loss of the sword the Emperor gave me, I certainly feel most inconvenience over the loss of the money. Candidly, I returned to the Aurungzebe poorer by about £12,000 than when I left her, two hours and a half before."

"You were like Francis I after the battle of Pavia," I observed, in my pedantic way "all was lost, save honour." This is the remark to which I promised, a few pages back, to direct the reader's attention. It doesn't look so bad on paper; but, uttered then and there, it seemed to fit in as a studied anti-climax.

Then the accursed remark appeared to grow of its own accord, till it became pregnant with a jocular fellow feeling and an off-hand appreciativeness, completely overbearing and obliterating my own corroborative reminiscence of two minutes before, and throwing its baleful shadow backward across Fred's yarn. For one instant I thought of fashioning the diabolical lapse into a graceful compliment, by brazening out a serious comparison between the two dispossessed heroes; but I hesitated; and the suspect who hesitates is judged.

A dead silence fell on the company; whilst a glance of resentment from the luminous eyes of the lady made me feel much as when, in a dream, we are conscious of having in our possession property which we vaguely remember to have stolen, and which we can find no opportunity of quietly restoring.

I made two or three more slips of the same kind before the evening was over; but the deepening of my infamy was only like a few cumulative sentences upon a lifer.

The bushman, whatever else he may be, is always a consecutive thinker, balancing evidence with judicial circumspection; and he seldom speaks till he has something to say. Bob turned to Mrs Pritchard.

"Curious thing how some yarns proves their own selves," he remarked. "I notice that very forcible with your ole man. Now, when he said, quite simple, about makin' observations to find out what part o' the sea he was in, I seen the truth o' the yarn stickin' out a yard. Course, I seen the truth of it all along; for schooners has on'y two masts, an' by the same token sheets ain't sails, they're ropes. But that remark about takin' observations sort o' clinched the yarn on the fur side."

"You're a keen observer, Mr Bruce," said the lady, half-suspiciously; though she might have known that, to the barbarian's sense of propriety, my own frivolous comment had made a clear vindication politely imperative.

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"On'y some ways," replied Bob, with a sigh. "Most ways, I'm a morepoke. But I can't help thinkin' about that pore outlawr layin' among the ropes, sufferin' from pain an' agony; an' the birds pickin' his eyes out while he's alive," he continued thoughtfully. "Minds me o' one time me an' Bat was comin' home to Tarrawarra, after deliverin' a few fats at the Palmer. Well, one night we sent Paddy O'Rafferty across the rise to look at the horses "

"There were three of you in the party, Mr Bruce?"

"No, missus; on'y me an' Bat. Paddy was a blackfeller. Well, he told us he seen a fire about a mile away, so us not bein' tired, we thought we'd walk across. We fetched our rifles with us for company, not expectin' any bother; but when we come near the fire, we begun to think different. Blackfellers mostly goes in for a piccaninny fire–jist three sticks, with the ends kep' together–but these fellers had a rouser; an' we begun to think they was at it agen. Cannivals. Us an' two other blokes had caught them jist finishin' off a Chow, on'y three weeks before; an' another Chow, with his legs broke, keepin'

fresh for when he was wanted. Well, this time I'm tellin' you about, we seen a lot o' them in the light o' the fire; an' us about sixty yards away; an' by 'n by two fellers comes out o' the dark, leadin' a lubra by both arms. They fetches her in front of the fire; an' us sneakin' a bit closer; an' another feller he grips a holt of her hair, an' drags her head down forrid, about that low; an' another feller he swings his nilla–nilla with both hands–

" 'Fire!' says Bat, jist above his breath; an' we let fly the both of us together. Guess how many we got?"

The lady shook her head despairingly. She was in dreadful company this evening.

"Jist on'y the feller with the waddy," continued Bob, with his melancholy smile. "One bullet under the shoulder–blade, an' one at the butt o' the lug. But we was one second too late to save the pore lubra; her back was broke, an' her legs was useless. An' before we had time to shove in another cartridge, the blackfellers was gone like mallee–hens; an' no one was left on'y the lubra an' the corp.

"Next mornin' we passed the blackfellers' camp a bit after sunrise; an' there was the lubra ketchin' holt o' the grass an' stuff with both hands, tryin' to snake herself along the ground, to git a drink at the gilgie.

I give her a drink with my pannikin, an' turned her over on her back–bein' a bit easier that way. Well, after we had went about a mile, I pulls up–

" 'Bat,' says I; 'I'm thinkin' about that pore misfortunate. The crows'll have her eyes before she's dead.'

" 'Please yourself,' says Bat. 'I'll wait here till you come back.'

"So I canters back; an' there was the lubra, layin' where I left her, pullin' up grass with her fingers, an' moanin' pitiful. I ties up my horse, an' sneaks on till I wasn't ten yards off of her; then I fires straight into the top of her head. She never knowed what put her out o' pain; an' I ain't frightened of her risin' up in judgment agen me."

We were all silent for a minute.

"You served in the Franco–German War, Fred?" said I at length, in sickly endeavour to conciliate the warrior's bride.

"Yes," replied Ananias, with a retrospective sigh. "I was on the Emperor's staff."

"How?" asked the pioneer, boldly chancing some unknown sell.

Mrs Pritchard considerably explained. Then came the inevitable question, "Was you ever wounded?"

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"Only once," replied the campaigner. "I got a scratch on the very day before the battle of Sedan. Let's see— Sedan was on the first of September, wasn't it? I was out of that little affair, though I fell into the hands of the Germans along with the rest of the staff. But you were asking me if I had been wounded.

It was in this way—

"Bazaine was cooped up in Metz, with 180,000 men. We concentrated at Vouziers with 130,000, and advanced by forced marches toward the Meuse, to effect a junction with Bazaine. If we could have accomplished this manoeuvre, the war would have been virtually over, and with honour to France; for, with a reinforcement of another 100,000 men, then on their way from the provinces, we could have cut off the three German armies in detail, with a total loss on our part of perhaps not more than 100,000 in killed and wounded."

"How many head o' fellers was there in the other army?" asked Bob, embarrassed by numbers which would have been big, even in connection with sheep.

"Close on a million altogether, but only about 600,000 at the front. Of course, it was a deucedly important thing to keep up our communication with Bazaine; and it was just as important, on the part of the Germans, to prevent it. They had a devilish fine body of light cavalry, called the Black Jagers, told off for this particular purpose. So the carrying of our dispatches was supposed to be a service of some danger. The Emperor had sent instructions to Bazaine on the morning of the twenty–ninth of August; and in the evening we learned from some Westphalian deserters that the aides had been cut down, and the dispatches taken. The fate of the campaign seemed to hang by a thread.

"Fred,' says the Emperor to me—he always called me Fred—'get as much sleep as you can tonight; there will be devilish hard work for you in the morning.'

"The Emperor sat up all night with his military council. In the morning his private secretary called me, and I presented myself. An equerry was standing at the door of the tent, holding a splendid iron–grey charger, saddled and bridled.

"Fred, my boy,' says the Emperor, with a tremor in his voice—'I'm selecting you out of 180,000 men to perform a service that I would entrust to no man but an Australian. Put these dispatches in your sabretache, and give them to Bazaine before the sun sets. You understand me? Tomorrow at daylight you will leave Metz with Bazaine's reply, and place it in my hands before sunset. These are your orders. There is your horse. No ceremony. Go!' "

"How fur was the trip?" asked Bob.

"Only about a hundred miles, each way; but the country was swarming with German sharpshooters, and there were three large rivers to swim. The adventures I met with during those two days—the thirtieth and thirty–first of August—would fill a deuced good three–volume novel; but I must get on to the afternoon of the second day—that is, the day before the battle of Sedan.

"Very well. At five in the afternoon I was about ten miles from my destination, on the return journey. I could just see in the distance the white tents of our camp, and the spires of the churches in Sedan. I had got a fresh horse from a friend in Metz—a Colonel Leverrier, Thirty–third Infantry. The horse was a Limousin, as good as ever was saddled; he had gone about ninety miles at the gallop, and now he was pulling the reins through my fingers, and still spinning along like the very devil. I thought my journey was as good as over; but, as the poet says, 'there's many a slip between the cup and the lip'. Suddenly I saw in front of me a large body of men "

"In buckram?" suggested some malicious demon, speaking through my lips.

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"No, Tom; in the uniform of our Nineteenth Cuirassiers," replied Fred, with a shadow of severity. "They were out reconnoitring. The colonel made a sign to me. I pulled up."

"'Est–ce que vous allez à Sedan?' says he. "'Oui, Colonel'–I beg your pardon, boys; these old recollections bring back the old language unknowingly 'Yes, Colonel,' says I, saluting.

"'You can't do it,' says he. 'Von Moltke has cavalry pickets everywhere. There will be a battle tomorrow. I am going into Sedan. Fall into my troop.'

"'How long will it take you to reach the camp?' says I, glancing at the sun.

"'About two hours,' says he.

"'I must be there in an hour,' says I, in my devil–may–care way. 'Au revoir!' And I was off like the wind.

"When I was within about three miles of Sedan, there suddenly started out of a thicket in front of me, four Black Jagers. We unfortunate devils of aides used to dread these fellows more than any other branch of the German service, on account of their being supplied with magazine rifles, carrying explosive bullets. They were a strange corps, and a very expensive one, being all picked men, mounted on pure–bred Arab horses. Their special duty was to cut off aides and intercept dispatches; they were sworn to allow no French aide to escape; to take no prisoners; to give no quarter. And, by Jove, they fulfilled their engagement to the letter!"

"Like Thugs?" suggested the demon again, in spite of my efforts to strangle him.

"Very much," assented the aide–de–camp, with good–natured irony. "If you were flying across country, with the fate of an army in your sabretache, and saw a few of them racing after you–every man with his spurs buried in his horse, and the butt of his magazine rifle on his thigh–you'd have thought they were very much like slugs. However, on the occasion I'm speaking of, I saw at a glance that only two of the Jagers had their rifles. Quick as thought, I drew my revolver and dropped these two fellows, just as they were raising their pieces. The next instant, the two others were upon me at full gallop. But I was master of my weapon in those days. I turned a sword–cut and parried a thrust in half the time I take to tell it; and in thirty seconds more, I had disarmed one of my antagonists. But during the half minute I was engaged with this Jager, the other spurred past me, wheeled his horse, and rising in his stirrups "

here the lady caught her breath and shuddered, though she was listening to the story for perhaps the fiftieth time "treated me to Number Seven across the crown of the head. It was a cowardly blow."

"My word, you're right!" exclaimed Bob indignantly.

"I reeled in the saddle, but the thought of my dispatches flashed on my mind, and I gave spurs to my horse, leaving the Jager in possession of the field. Not a soldierly action on my part, you may think–but what the deuce could I do?"

"I can't say that I have a very distinct recollection of anything that took place for the next fortnight. It seems like a dream to me, riding into the camp at full gallop, drenched with blood from shako to spur; the sentries saluting and falling back as I passed them like a bird on the wing. I dimly remember reaching the Emperor's tent; then a giddiness came over me, and I fell into the arms of one of the staff.

Next, I found myself lying on a camp–bed, and I heard the Emperor's voice, 'Send for Dupong!'

"Dupong made his appearance–supposed to be the cleverest surgeon in the world–a man wearing thirteen Continental orders on his breast–

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"Dupong,' says the Emperor, 'ce jeune homme est à votre charge'—I must apologize again, boys; the old tongue comes back with the old scenes—'This young fellow is in your charge,' says the Emperor. 'If he lives, I'll make your fortune; if he dies, I'll hang you on the nearest tree.' "Dupong sent for his pharmaceutical paraphernalia without a word, and immediately exhibited chloroform. Of course, I remember nothing further. In fact, I remember nothing distinctly for a fortnight.

Then I heard the Emperor's voice, speaking in a low tone.

"Well, Dupong—can you save him?"

"Save him! Your Majesty,' says Dupong, 'I can't kill him! He has the Australian constitution—the constitution of a horse!"

"I spoke up. 'Yes,' says I; 'and at the present moment he could eat a horse, and chase the rider for his life!"

"The Emperor laughed.

"Of course, at this time we were prisoners of war. The Emperor had managed to have me removed to the castle of Wilhelmshohe, when he was sent there by the German Emperor. To finish my story. Another month found me as well as ever; out shooting all day—perhaps hunting or fishing—and having a quiet game of chess with the Emperor in the evening. I never felt any effect from the wound afterward; though I don't suppose I could carry a bottle of cognac as steadily as I used to do before I got it."

"Did it leave much of a mark?" asked the son of the wilderness, oblivious to my warning look.

"Not much," replied the soldier indifferently. "Dupong promised to close the wound without leaving any scar whatever, but I daresay you can see a trace of it still." And turning the back of his head for Bob's inspection, he exposed a formidable scar, extending fore—and—aft across the swirl of the hair. Which set me musing on bygone days.

And what a little thing sometimes suffices to recall a scene from that Past which, independently of all we can do or say now, is folded up and pigeon–holed, to reappear while we are in process of being drowned! You visit your parental home, for instance, and your mother brings from her museum of antiquities the faded photographic album of other days, and places it in your hands. Your attention is arrested by your own likeness. You don't, at the first moment, speculate as to whether you were really such a sheepish–looking object as you are there represented—that is the afterthought. At the first moment you involuntarily recall the almost painful pleasure which overwhelmed your worthless little soul when your mother took you to the portable gallery of the travelling photographer, who was staying in the township for three weeks only. Again the artist jams the back of your head into his reversed sugar–tongs; again he charges you to remain quite still, also to keep your eyes open, and look pleasant; again he pulls the cap–box off the spout of his machine, and you feel yourself wriggling, and swaying, and winking, and grinning, for half a lifetime; again you experience the heavenly relief—albeit dashed with incredulity—when the artist, replacing his cap–box, says, "That will do, thank you; I think we shall have a very good result." A glance at the photograph brings the whole scene back.

In like manner, the sight of that scar on Fred's head recalled an incident which had occurred when I was twelve or thirteen years of age; and this affords opportunity of indulging in a reminiscence—an opportunity which, when seasonable and seemly, I am seldom known to neglect. Go to, then; here be truths, I hope.

Few mothers, I think, are likely to forget the annoyance to which they were subjected when the epidemic of bullet–making broke out among their boys. But there is a limit to the patience even of mothers. One evening, Steve Thompson and I had reached this limit, and were sitting in the middle of the road between our homes, after eviction from both kitchens.

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"People ought to build a extry chimley on their houses," remarked Steve moodily. "Well, I'm about sick of it, Tom; an' I s'pose you're the same. If we had a elephant of our own; or else a calf with seven heads an' ten horns; or else a bairded woman for a wife; or else any other way of makin' a respectable livin', it would pay us to clear out, an' scrat for our own gosh selves."

"I don't give a beggar," said I viciously. "When I have kids of my own, I'll git them chris'ned with the ugliest names I can find, an' wallop them within one inch of their beggarin' life."

"But what are we goin' to do now?" queried Steve, throwing a clod at his sister, who was approaching us to tender her sympathy and services, eating a raw carrot as she came.

"Ole Jones's smiddy's the idea," said I, rising to my feet. "Go an' fetch us a bit o' candle, Kit, an' I'll say you're a good girl."

"If you give me ten kicks at your football tomorrow," she replied, with the provident instinct of her sex.

I agreed to these terms, and the girl skipped away. Then we gathered up our impedimenta—a broken saucepan, which we used as a crucible; a bullet–mould of the good old spherical pattern; a few bullets, about the size of plums, and some dumps cast in the outer shell of an ancient coat button, which bore in high relief the insignia of a fox's head. Also a quantity of crude material, consisting of a pound or two of tea–chest lead; an old Britannia–metal teapot; a bar of solder, which Steve had found in his father's tool–box; a pewter ladle, recently very useful to my mother, but now prudently battered beyond recognition; lastly, a sardine box full of nuggets recovered from the ashes of a zinc hut, burnt down by accident. The zinc had been discovered and collected by Freddy, but I had happened to meet him before he got home with it.

"Let me go with you, Tom, like a good feller," pleaded the girl, as she returned with half a candle in her hand. "I ain't as useless as Steve makes out."

"Well, I'll see about it, Kit," said I, gently, as I took the candle. "No, you shan't," I continued, putting the article in my pocket. "You're as fat as a fool," I continued, with supererogatory politeness.

"Oh, indeed!" she retorted superbly. "An' pray who are you? The Tom–the rom–the rick–stick–stom!

The rose is red–no–Flash cat, eat a rat; fill your "

"Oh, shut up!" said I. "I hate girls." And so I did, as a boy. Afterward, to be sure, when the boy proper became a boy in the Irish sense of the word, I softened down considerably.

So we took our way toward the smiddy, half a mile down the road–the girl's voice ringing after us through the evening air "Now mind you give me them ten kicks at that football in the mornin', or else you know where story–tellers goes to when they croak."

On reaching our grimy haven we inserted a bit of hoop–iron between two boards of the back door, and so lifted the latch. We took possession with a clear conscience, knowing that old Jones was safely established for the evening in the pub where he boarded. We had matches with us; and the hearth of the forge was soon generously heaped with glowing charcoal, which illuminated the little shop, shedding a cadaverous light on our faces, and glinting brightly on the knife–bar of a reaping machine which Jones had left sticking in a slanting position, edge downward, in the vice. In a few minutes the first charge of metal was sinking down in the corner of our saucepan.

"What's you fellers doin' in there?" We recognized Freddy's voice, speaking through a crack in the wall.

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"You can come in if you like," said Steve. "The back door ain't fast."

"I say, Steve; we're in luck!" I exclaimed. "Here's ole Jones's crucible!" I had seen it on a shelf when I looked round as Freddy spoke. We annexed it at once— a fire–proof crucible which the absent owner was accustomed to use for melting brass.

"I s'pose these is the pinchers he hold it with," I continued, taking up a pair of forge tongs with mandibles bent at a right angle to the handles. I gripped the edge of the crucible with the tongs; and the fragile graphite yielded to the unfair pressure.

"Hold on!" cried Steve. "Them's the wrong sort o' pinchers; them's for nave–bands. See what you done!"

The crucible's cooked now. It cost two notes in Melb'n."

"Beggan the odds," I replied, with the nonchalant philosophy which, even in those days, was a conspicuous feature of my character. "It isn't like as if we couldn't afford it. But here's the ladle he uses for meltin' lead. Some sense in a thing like this." And we appropriated the ladle.

"Now, Freddy," I continued, fixing the candle on the anvil block; "you'll have to sling yourself about. Hold them bullet–moulds while I pour in the stuff; an' mind you don't open them before the bullets is properly seasoned."

"I'll jist shift this lead into the ladle; it's the handiest," said Steve. "I'll put all our zinc into the saucepan, an' leave it stewin' on the fire. Zinc's middlin' hard to melt."

Then the work began to make some progress. Steve kept a strong blast on the fire, whilst I devoted myself to the administration of the ladle, and the bossing of Freddy.

"Ain't the fire gittin' a curious colour," remarked Steve, at length. "Talk about the colours o' the rainbow Hello! the bottom's out o' the dash saucepan!"

And, of course, the zinc was in the fire. Now it is within the knowledge of all workers in metal–and laymen may safely take it on the word of one who values truth more than fine gold—that the smallest bit of zinc in a blacksmith's fire necessitates the complete cleaning out of the hearth; not to speak of the probable spoiling of subsequent work, owing to the fused surface of the iron becoming impregnated with the hydrochloric nitrocarburet of oxysulphuretted hypophosphite (or words to that effect), liberated by the action of the fire on the ultimate molecules of the zinc. There were more things in Science than we had any notion of, and this was one of them.

"Bad job about the zinc," remarked Steve, as we resumed our work. "I was jist thinkin' we might mix different sorts o' stuff, an' see what it would turn into. That's the way gunpowder was invented–ain't it, Tom?"

"Who invented gunpowder?" asked Freddy meekly.

"You ain't the bloke that invented gunpowder, anyhow," retorted Steve, unconsciously repeating the popular German proverb. "But who was it, Tom?"

Those who are personally acquainted with me will readily believe that the most difficult self–disciplinary lesson of my life has been obtaining a practical mastery of that fine Rabbinical precept, 'Learn to say, I do not know.' So I replied, "Well, various people gits the credit of it; but after givin' the subject some study, I come to the conclusion that Lord Bacon was the man. He invented lots o' things."

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"Bakin' powder, besides gunpowder," suggested Steve.

"Yes. An' the latest news is that he wrote Shakespeare."

"Do you read Shakespeare, Tom?" asked Steve, in the tone which Xenocrates might have used in addressing Plato. (However affected and incongruous this comparison may appear, I shall let it stand, just as a typical illustration of my unhappy mannerism, frankly confessed, you will remember, on a former page.)

"On'y the blaggard places," said I, in the tone which Plato might have used in reply. "I know where to find them."

"Lots o' blaggardism in the Bible," contributed Freddy.

"That's a dash lie," replied Steve piously.

"I don't believe the Bible," added Freddy.

"Then you'll go to the burnin' fire," retorted Steve. "Ain't he safe for it, Tom?"

I cleared my throat. "It's this way," said I judicially. "There's various things keeps a person from goin' to the burnin' fire, but the main holt is believin' the Bible; an' you see he skites about not believin' it. Yes, he'll go to the burnin' fire, right enough. Quick with them bulletmoulds, you lazy varmin." "Lazy" is not exactly the word I used, but it is phonetically near enough for the purposes of narration.

"So Lord Bacon invented gunpowder?" remarked Freddy uneasily.

"Yes," I replied, with affability, for I never resented a tribute to my knowledge, even from Freddy.

"Young fella, at the time. Ole blokes never invents anything. Why, gunpowder it's four shillin's a pound, an' blastin' powder it's only a shillin'; an' none o' your ole beggars ever thought o' makin' gunpowder out o' blastin' powder till us two studied it out. We must have another try at that invention, Steve. Shouldn't wonder if we made our pile out of it yet."

"Did you have a try at it?" asked Freddy respectfully.

"Course we did," replied Steve. "That's how we got our eyebrows burnt off—not through helpin' ole Jones to put on some tires. Mind, if you say a word about it, we'll wring your dash neck. Tom foun' out where his dad kep' the keg o' blastin' powder; an' Tom he stole a pannikin full; an' we got that big camp—oven lid at our rubbage—heap, an' we carted her down the paddick in the moonlight; an' we emp'ied the powder in her; an' we had two quartz boulders, like goose eggs, to pound it with; an' me and Tom we was sittin' one at each side, beltin' away like fury, an' talkin' about one thing or another; an'—fluff!—off she goes! I thought it was the end o' the world comin'; an' I'm dashed if I was ready."

"I'm middlin' hard to puzzle," I rejoined; "but beggar me if I can make out what started her off so suddent."

"Git a wallop in'?" queried Freddy unctuously.

"No gosh fear!" replied Steve. "Kit foun' a stink o' powder on me when I went home, so I kep' by my own self till I sweetened agen. I'm goin' to welt her if she tells; an' if you split on us!—gr—r—r—r!" And Steve ground his teeth.

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"Our hands is a bit sore yet, with the scorchin'," I remarked; "but we'll finish the invention when I git another chance at the blastin' powder. That's part of our idea of makin' these bullets, Freddy. We're goin' to git up at daylight every mornin', an' practise with our guns till we kin bust a bottle every shot at a quarter of a mile. People'll wonder what the mischief we're up to; but we'll keep that to ourselves–

won't we, Steve?"

"My word!"

"I made a middlin' good shot when I was out at the ole man's contract, last week," observed Freddy, encouraged by our confidences. "One day, all hands was out at work, an' I was stoppin' at the camp, boilin' some meat; an' three emus was goin' past; an' I takes Jack Blake's gun out o' the tent, an' lets fly. Well, the bullet it goes through one emu, an' hits another, an' goes through him, an' lodges in another; an' there was the four emus all layin' dead in a straight line. Queerest sight I ever seen."

"Where's the skins?" asked Steve, eyeing the marksman sternly.

"I give 'em to the shanty–keeper's wife–an' more fool me, for bein' so soft."

"Let him rip, Steve," said I complacently. "He'll git a roastin' yet that'll waken him up. Gimme this for a kettle–holder," I continued, taking Freddy's cap off his head.

"These bullet–moulds is flamin' hot, too," said Freddy; "we'll better wait till they cool."

"Plop them in the tub, an' let them soak a minit, you morepoke," I replied.

"I think we're goin' to invent a new metal, after all," remarked Steve, peering into the ladle. "It looks dash like silver; an' it ought to be somethink good, for there's samples of everythink in it; an' it's the last we got left."

I took the ladle. Steve left his bellows to watch the pouring of the alchemic triumph.

"Grope up them bullet–moulds out o' the tub, you jackass," said I to Freddy. "Mind, you got no share in this invention. Scrape the scum off the ladle, Steve. It is silver, by gosh! See how bright it is! If we had some yalla stuff to mix with it, we could make gold! A person's always findin' out something new. Now keep them bullet–moulds steady, you "

Spit–bang! A person's always finding out something new.

This time, it was a spray of molten metal in our faces. We darted back from the treacherous bullet–mould like crawfish from a bait when their prominent eyes detect the dirty little hand of the operator descending slowly through the water, with intent to scoop them ashore. Steve alighted on a nave–band belonging to one of those mighty bullock drays of the Golden Age; the opposite edge flew up, chopping him on the knee, and prompting him to say something awful for a boy of his age. The blacksmith's tub, containing two feet of water, was immediately behind the divine Plato; and that philosopher landed–

launched, rather–therein in a sitting position. Freddy fared worst. The knife–bar, before referred to, was close behind him; and, in springing back, he brought the crown of his bare head against the edge of one of the knife sections, with a force that shook the vice–bench.

I came forth from my tub, like Diogenes, when Alexander–(Avaunt, tempter! not this time!)

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I extricated myself from the tub, raised Freddy from the floor, and, finding him still alive, clapped his cap on his bleeding head, and shoved him out of the smiddy, with an inward prayer that he might survive till he got home. The poor fellow tearfully and distractedly averred that he could feel his own brains bubbling out; so I was vaguely alarmed for myself. Then Steve and I collected our assets, and departed in silence. A lesson in metallurgy; and, like Sir John, we paid nothing for it neither, but were paid for our learning.

About a week later, Steve, Freddy and I ventured to favour Jones with one of our customary visits.

Without noticing Steve or me, the blacksmith scowled from beneath his bushy eyebrows at Freddy, who, by virtue of the white bandage on his head, assumed a placidly heroic look. Incidentally, a day or two previously, I had heard his mother tell mine that the poor boy had fallen down a quarry in the dark, whilst looking for the geese. "Wass the matter wi' yer 'ead, boy?" growled Jones, whose voice was a trustworthy index to his temper, ranging from the croak of a frog to the snarl of a terrier, as his chronic crossness varied from the comparative to the superlative. Jones out–blacksmithed the ordinary blacksmith in snappishness–

which is saying a lot.

"Met with a accident," replied Freddy serenely. "I was at a man's place the other day; an' there was a brown colt that slung everybody that got onto him; an' they dared me to tackle him, or else I'd 'a' had more sense; an' when the colt foun' he couldn't shift me, he raired up an' come back on top o' me; an' my head come on a broken bottle; an' serve me dash well right for bein' sich a fool. He was a brown colt, with white hine "

"Ain't you frightened o' bein' struck dead, boy? Come 'ere," and Jones, taking Freddy by the arm, led him to the bench. "See that there dollop of ezzinc? Well, I got that layin' in the bott'n o' my fire; that's your ezzinc; same ezzinc I seen you pickin' out o' the ashes o' the ole quarry hut, las' Sat'day week–

an' you dassent deny it, boy. See that there tussick o' hair, layin' on the winder–sill? Well, I got that stickin' on a knife–bar, in my vice; that's your hair. See that crucivle, all broke to shivereens? Well, I got that layin' on my hearth; that's my crucivle. Now lookee 'ere see–if I ketch you in this 'ere shop agin, I'll–I'll–I'll–jis' you look out–that's all. Ain't you gone yit? Gosterewth! I'll "

Steve and I stood by, with surprise and interest depicted on our faces, while this chain of circumstantial evidence was unfolded link by link; and, as Freddy nimbly departed, Jones turned to encounter our look of honest sympathy.

"You chaps kin take that ezzinc for makin' dumps," he croaked. "Blinded thing's costed me two notes a'ready, not to speak o' the fire. Now, mizzle!"

We accepted the zinc, though it was no use to us. Like St Paul, we had put away childish things. We had become convinced that the shortest cut to opulence and renown lay in the direction of mining enterprise. Already we had put down a shaft about three feet, having, for blackfellow reasons, selected a soft alluvial flat as the scene of our labours. Already we had decided that the new goldfield should be proclaimed as the Ethiopian Serenaders' Gully; already we had arranged that the Government reward should be divided equally between us; and lastly–a suggestion which emanated from myself–that alphabetical order should be respected in the public announcement of the discoverers' names.

"Yes; the mark's there, right enough," said Bob. "My word, boss, you got a rakin' good head," he continued, artfully yet transparently opening for himself an opportunity to contribute of his own fullness toward the Adelaide shout of information. "The moral sentiments is normal; an' the intellectual faculties balances them to a nicety. The propensities is fairly counterbalanced; an' the development of the perceptive faculties an' the reflective faculties is

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jist in proportion. I don't see as you got a disturbin' bias any particular road, without it's for Ideality, an' its correlative organ, Sublimity. These gives a man a tendency to etherealize, but, when dominated by the strictly moral group, an' controlled by those higher propensities which confer vigour an' force of character, they constitute the Poetry of Life."

"You have studied phrenology, Mr Bruce?" said the lady, with ready sympathy.

"Yes, missus; me an' pore Bat we studied it for over a year. We on'y had a phrenology book an' a ready reckoner; an' we studied that phrenology book for all she was worth. You can't git over phrenology—not fur. 'Know thyself,' says the Hellenic sage; an' sixty generations have endorsed the imperishable wisdom of the precept."

"I'm a firm believer in phrenology, myself," remarked Fred, with the complaisance of real gratitude.

"It ain't easy to understate the advantages of it," responded the man of one book. "Now, there was pore Bat "

he hesitated, sighed deeply, and proceeded in a low tone "You'll notice everybody's got one main fault; an' the pore feller, of course, he had one too. Well, I couldn't account for it, no road, till we studied that phrenology book. I don't deny it was a middlin' bad sort o' fault, common as it is.

Never mind what it was. Ah! I wish you'd 'a' knowed Bat! Prettiest rider ever I seen on a horse; an' always jolly, no matter if he was froze, or if he was roasted alive; an' he'd give you the last drop o' water out of his bag, no matter if his own tongue was stickin' to his mouth. 'Bat,' says I to him, many's the time, 'turn over a new leaf, while you got the slant.' 'You go to—so—an'—so,' says he, an' he'd laugh.

Pore ole Bat! Ah! life ain't what it's cracked up to be!" He paused awhile, gazing into the fire–place, then recalled himself by an effort—

"Well, when I begun to study phrenology, I foun' Bat wasn't responsivle, in a manner o' speakin', for this fault; an' people that ain't got it needn't be anyways nasty, for ten to one they got some other fault to make up for it—an' I don't deny I'm in that perdicament myself. Anyhow, I can't believe but what the pore feller's gone to heaven, no matter if the back of his head was as thick as a corner post. I ain't worth a beggar that way myself," he continued, with the horrible frankness of a child; "you can easy tell by the back o' my head that I don't "

"I suppose you generalize the science, Bob," I interposed. "That is to say, you have learned to balance organ against organ, and group against group, taking the prevailing drift of the development?"

"That's jist my favourite holt," replied Lord Chesterfield. "The book warned a person to be on their guard agen overlookin' the counterbalancin' influence of organs possessed of what might be termed the affinity of opposition. Now take a instance. We'll say a party's got Acquisitiveness large, an' Conscientiousness an' Benevolence large too. You mustn't run away with the idear that he's a miser, on account of his Acquisitiveness, for there's two good strong ole–man bumps buckin' agen it. But s'posen', on the other hand, a party's got Acquisitiveness large, an' nothing worth while to rassle with it—on'y, we'll say, Time, an' Tune, an' Size, an' Colour, an' ever sich a swag o' piccaninny faculties—

why, that party he can't help bein' a miser. If you're any good, you'll pity thet bloke; an' by the same token you may swear he's got reason to pity you. Yes; phrenology's the grandest science goin'."

"Now, what is your estimate of me, Mr Bruce?" asked Fred. "I'm not afraid of your judgment."

"Nor you needn't be," replied Bob honestly. "To my judgment, you're fit for anything from pitch—an'—toss to man–slaughter, as the sayin' is. I on'y wish I was like you. My word, I'd write a book! Tell you what I'd do if I

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was you, with your practice at sojerin'. I'd stick up the Gover'ment for a good permanent billet over the Volunteers. You'd shine!"

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Fred sadly. "People persist in over–rating my abilities. For instance, no sooner had I returned to Victoria from England than I was offered a colonel's commission."

"That's a lot higher nor a aidy–conk–ain't it?" inquired Bob.

"I should think so, Mr Bruce. But, of course, I had to decline."

"Why?" asked Bob, in natural surprise.

"I had sworn allegiance to the French flag; and no man of my race ever sold his sword to the highest bidder," replied the soldier with melancholy pride. "This dooms me to obscurity. It is said that every man makes one false step in life."

"Like goin' insolvent," suggested Bob, kindly but hazardously.

"Like going insolvent, as you say, Mr Bruce. But, deuce take it, my insolvency is no mere money matter.

It prevents me taking a command in the forces of my native country." Mr Bruce, though lost in the maze of motives, scruples, and unhappy conjunctures, assumed an air of sage appreciation; whilst my besetting sin overtook me once more–

"Well, Fred," said I lightly, "though I am myself indifferent honest, I think I'd let that perfunctory oath of allegiance slide. And if my soul wanted anything in the way of flattering unction, I would gently apply a passage you'll find in the Hippolytus of Euripides:– 'Although my tongue hath sworn, my soul is from the compact free'."

"Different men have different principles," observed the lady tartly; then, demonstratively turning her back to me, she continued, with a marked change of tone.

"Oh, Mr Bruce! I want you to give me all the information you can, about the Aborigines. You are evidently a high authority on their manners and customs."

"Well, I'm frightened you'll be disappointed, so to speak," replied Bob uneasily, whilst his helpless glance at me betrayed an apprehension that the person who could administer the reproof valiant to a man of my tonnage might easily find some occasion against himself. "I never studied blackfellers. In fact, missus, to tell you the truth, they don't bother much about manners an' customs, so there ain't much to study. Anyhow, they're dyin' out by degrees, so the time ain't fur off when it won't matter sixpence what their manners and customs was like."

"Ah! Mr Bruce, for that very reason, every detail of their life or history is of special value."

"Well," continued Bob desperately, "they smoke when they can git tobacker; an' they booze when they can git grog; an' they got no shame in regard o' cadgin', an' very little shame any other way. Some places they live mostly on possums; an' some places mostly on fish; an' some places mostly on other things; an' they can eat wild melons without goin' cronk in their inside; an' their main delicacy's wood–grubs.

You've seen woodgrubs?"

"I'm not sure."

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"Well, they're best roasted on a hot stone; an' they taste like nuts; an' you can eat them when you're too full to eat anything else. They're jist for all the world like your second toe, but mostly a good deal bigger. They got a shinin' head, like your toe–nail; an' they "

"The blacks are strong in Locality," I suggested carelessly; for it was time to draw a red herring across Bob's epicurean line of thought; and I chose a trustworthy one.

"Wonderful!" replied the scientist eagerly. "I notice, the Reflective faculties is mostly deficient, an' so is "

"I am particularly curious respecting the boomerang," interposed the lady, with a deprecatory gesture.

"Our information leads us to believe that this weapon will strike the object aimed at, and return to the feet of the thrower. Now, is this peculiar property in the boomerang owing to its shape, or to the kind of wood it is made from, or to dexterity on the part of the thrower?"

Bob glanced at me with the beseeching look of a man condemned to unravel a tangled line, with both ends cut off, and nowhere to begin upon; then, fairly lifting his self–possession with rein and spur, he remarked diplomatically, "Yes; it would be straight into the blackfeller's hand, if his boomerang would come back after hittin' anything."

"And doesn't it?"

"Oh, no. If it hits anything worth while, it loses its grip on the air, an' comes wobblin' down."

"Just fancy! Now I want you to explain the weapon thoroughly—all its properties, and all its uses. I know nothing of it except that it is a most peculiar engine."

"Oh, no; it ain't a engine, no road," replied Bob, with returning composure. "Blackfellers couldn't go that lot."

"But think what a strange interest is attached to the weapon," continued the lady, with forced gravity.

"It seems to separate the indigenous Australian from every other race—that is to say, the possession of the boomerang and the lack of the bow. There is presumptive evidence of great antiquity here—don't you think? These people must have become isolated before the invention of the bow; and what a singular substitute they contrived; so simple in appearance, yet—according to all accounts—so complex in operation. You must know all about boomerangs, Mr Bruce?"

"Mostly all, I s'pose. But, as I was sayin' jist now, it ain't worth while to know anything about a class of people that's had their day. Curious thing, missus; fust news o' the whitefellers gives the blackfellers a jar, all over the country; an' they don't bother much about anything after. Fact, most tribes is dyin' out o' their own accord, even where they ain't interfered with. Small loss."

"This is very interesting! Oh, Fred! I trust that you availed yourself of Mr Bruce's information this afternoon?"

"I assure you, Lilian, I have seldom enjoyed any man's society as much," replied Fred; and for once that day, he spoke the truth.

"But must you really leave us tomorrow morning?" asked the lady.

Bob nodded; but the quick feminine eye detected a wavering purpose.

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"Surely one day wouldn't make much difference to you," she pleaded; "and it would make a very great difference to me. Do let us have your society tomorrow."

"Well—I been layin' out to go—but "

"Very well. You're absolved from that resolution. You'll stay—won't you? Of course you will! You promise to stay another day? No words can express my thanks."

"Boot's on the other foot, missus," replied Bob, lapsing into hazardous ease of mind. "I'll do what little lays in my power to give you a sort o' rough insight into blackfellers' ways, if it's any use to you."

"Now I'll look forward to a day of exceptional interest," said the lady complacently. "Be sure I'll make the best use of this rare opportunity. You know, Mr Bruce, I write occasionally for the Australasian, and sometimes for the Bulletin."

"Go to (sheol)!" exclaimed Mr Bruce rapturously; then like fire through dry silver–grass the burning flush of shame and mortification swept across his brown face and white forehead, and there remained, spreading to neck and ears, while the only expression left on his ingenuous countenance was that of unspeakable longing for a private earthquake of a yard in diameter, immediately underneath his chair.

The authoress, politely oblivious, used every effort toward his moral restoration, but to no purpose. It was the proclamation of Peace, peace, when there was no peace. Abysmal ignominy was Bob's portion for the rest of the evening. He was writ with me in sour misfortune's book; though (if you understand me), his calamity was subjective, whilst mine was objective.

But Bob's extremity was Fred's opportunity. The latter now proceeded to narrate, in his really lucid and interesting style, and with marvellous coherency, the honours lavished upon him at the ivy–wreathed castle which had been the home of the Falklands from time immemorial. Of course, I listened with ostentatious interest; but the more cunningly I grovelled the more emphatically the lady ignored me, whilst enclosing Bob in an atmosphere of something like adulation.

Howbeit, according to my custom, I sought surcease of sorrow in philosophy and so turned disgrace to profit; finding a honeycomb of truth in the skeleton of my dead honour; namely, that it is the nature of woman to assess the worth of any outsider solely by the character of such appreciation as he concedes to her own fetish; so that the most cordial appraisal may be offensive rather than conciliatory. Now, Bob and I admired Fred with about equal warmth; but we saw his greatness from different aspects; whereupon the feminine mind mirrored back each estimate with characteristic perversity, investing the barbarian with moral beauty, and making the philosopher's righteousness seem as filthy rags. But are we not all prone to value people for conformity with our own notions, rather than for isolated righteousness in the sight of heaven?p

The unconscious subject of my speculations had been glancing uneasily at the clock from time to time; at last she rose, shook hands with Bob, bowed coldly to me, and retired. As soon as she was out of hearing, I brought a bottle of Muscat from my room, and three glasses from the kitchen. Then Bob and I lit our pipes, while Fred produced his cigar–case—and isn't it queer how, under these circumstances, the best of us feel morally called upon to relate gentlemen's stories?p

Of course, we gave precedence to Fred, who forthwith entered upon the narration of an English *affaire de coeur*; the heroine being a giddy countess; the rival, an officer of artillery; and himself, the hero. But he was tired and sleepy; so that, though the massy grouping, and relation of parts to the whole, bore token of a master's hand, the perspective was Japanese, the technique damnable, and the subordinate details feeble in conception and vicious in execution—the duel, for instance, being merely sketched in. And after giving the last slovenly touches to this

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pot–boiler, he yawned drowsily, congratulated himself on the prospect of Bob's company for the morrow, bade us good night, and retired.

The ensuing silence was broken by a shuddering sigh from Bob, while he absently contemplated the armchair Mrs Pritchard had occupied. Then he slowly unfolded himself upward, like a fire–escape.

"Pleasant social evening we've had," I remarked cheerfully.

"I'm off in the mornin'; so I bid you good–bye tonight," replied Bob, in a sepulchral voice. "Skreek o' day's my idear."

"You mustn't think of such a thing," said I gravely. "Consider the slight you would be putting on these people, after your voluntary promise. Why, the grossest incivility on their part wouldn't justify the course you propose; and you've met with nothing but courtesy and consideration."

"It ain't the fust dirty thing I done in my life, an' I'm middlin' sure it won't be the last," rejoined the brolga doggedly.

"Every one of us makes a conversational slip once in a while, and we think nothing of it," I argued. "You could see that Mrs Pritchard overlooked your little mistake "

"Fool's parding," interposed Bob bitterly. "That's jist where it comes in. Can't I read her like a book? I'll be floggin' over this evenin' for the next couple o' years. I been there before."

"But, Bob, don't you see that she treats you with respect, and me with contempt? Why should you fly from her sincere friendship, while I have no intention of flying from her scorn?"

"Now you jist said it. You're worth scorn, an' I ain't. If I stayed tomorrer, she'd be givin' me a bit o' bread an' jam every two hours. I tell you, I'm frightened–frightened!–It's jist her politeness that knocks me. It's a fearful thing to be forgiven. A man should be independent of it–like you are."

"Well, Bob, she'll feel very much hurt if you disappoint her."

"I'd sooner walk a hundred mile than be any nastier nor I can help," replied the pioneer sullenly. "But you see for yourself I can't help bein' nasty if I stop here; an' my nastiness all disappears when I'm joggin' along, with my horses for company. It makes me shiver to think about turnin' dog on sich nice people as these is; but it's a choice between the divil an' the deep sea, an' I'll chance the deep sea. I'd start this very minit, on'y that old morepoke" (Mrs Ferguson's husband) "has got my things locked up in the store–room.

He showed me the door I was to knock at in the mornin', if I wanted to start early; but it ain't decent to rouse him out before the cocks begins to crow. So I got to pass the time some road; an' that's no easy matter, for I'm so sleepy I daren't lay down. Would you mind stoppin' up for a couple or three hours?"

"You're acting foolishly, Bob. You hold a high place in the estimation of these people; and you can make it higher if you only go on as you have begun. Certainly I'll stay up with you awhile, if you will only listen to reason."

"Enough's a feast, but more's a glutton," muttered the barbarian, as he stalked out of the parlour.

I refilled my pipe, slipped off my boots, and put my heels on the mantelpiece, in hope that Bob might be driven back by the dread of going to sleep. To my mind, there was an element of pathos in the situation.

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One may be a stranger in a strange land without coming from a foreign country. The society man "gentleman", slum–denizen, or intermediate–turned adrift in the silences of the Never–Never, will be forlorn as any alien derelict. The born–and–bred nomad of Out–back, drawn into the maelstrom of civilized society, is desolate also, and worse, for he feels himself in the way. A rational egotism usually sustains the exiled unit of society; whilst a sensitive self–consciousness inevitably crushes the transplanted bushman. The former feels like a martyr; the latter, like a criminal. Perhaps the most pronounced effect of life–long communion with Nature is the strengthening of personality; therefore, the motto of a medieval Italian family, "I break, but not bend," might be applied to the bushman entangled in the amenities of civilization; whilst the legend of a rival house, "I bend, but not break", would fit the society exile as our word "damper" fits the provender it designates. Of course, there are bushmen who are townsmen by nature, and vice versa. But Bob was a bushman by nature, as well as by unbroken experience; by choice, as well as by compulsion. His individuality was clear–cut as a cameo.

Faithful and single–hearted, he was sternly honest in his criminality, and pious in his acknowledged wrong–doing. For instance, his sympathy with bushrangers and horse–stealers was as magnanimous as your own tenderness for usurers, profit–mongers, noblemen etc. In a word, he walked conscientiously in a light that was extremely dim. Every unselfish man is loyal to something extraneous; at that date Bob was loyal to Capitalism and M'Gregor; a few years later, he was still more loyal to the Queensland strike leaders and Socialism–in–our–own–time–just as his historical namesake was loyal to England at Falkirk, and to Scotland at Bannockburn. Yet Bob was the same incorrigible brolga as before. Any scribe learned in the Scriptures will tell you that a zealous persecutor will be a zealous apostle, if the object of his fidelity be changed, by reason of meeting the Lord in the way. But this discretional and deliberate fixity of purpose is a rare quality, and perhaps the only one held in common by Paul and Bob.

Presently I fell musing upon the problem presented to me in Fred's successful pre–emption of a piece of womanhood, trusty, pliant, and responsive to his touch as the Jager–quelling blade of other days. There must, I argued, be something in Fred, after all–some magnetic property, enabling him to draw from the heterogeneous mixture of society such a finely–tempered bit of steel. And, beyond controversy, there was only one thing in Fred. Therein, as a matter of mere necessity, his magnetism must lie (lie is good).

Moreover, this magnet–metaphor may serve to throw light upon many of the conjugal successes and disasters that have puzzled philosophers.

Say that the moral constitution of woman causes her to present different aspects, or fronts, to different people. Say that to the bold and brilliant liar she is what is scientifically termed paramagnetic–

that is, strongly susceptible to magnetic attraction, like iron, platinum, nickel, and some other substances. Say that to the man of austere veracity, such as myself, she is diamagnetic–that is, strongly repellent, like gold, silver, ivory, and so forth. Briefly, she is a thing of credulity, and a hero–worshipper for ever; and there is not enough heroism in the earth–born he–feller to keep her going, unless his store of that ingredient is continually supplemented from the laboratory of the imagination.

Desdemona loved Othello for his own uncorroborated account of the dangers he had passed, and for nothing else. This, Othello assured the Senate, was the only witchcraft he had used. She herself bade him, if he had a friend that loved her, he should but teach him how to tell his story, and that would woo her. If you can get the correct hang of all those pronouns, you will perceive that Desdemona loved the narrator, not the hero. As the play advances, the narrator's purse becomes empty; all his golden words are spent; and nothing remains but the mere hero. Then the dramatist, by delicate touches, discloses the woman's wandering fancy, and mercifully takes her from the evil to come. Othello is a man of action, rather than of imagination; he could, and did, pack the adventures of a year into an evening's narration. Hence his failure. Not so Fred Pritchard; he is a man of imagination, rather than of action; in his case the adventures of an evening could scarcely be packed into a year's narration. Consequently, he is an evergreen hero to his vally–de–sham. Age cannot limit him, nor use exhaust his infinite mendacity.

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Can I wonder, then, that the paramagnetic aspect has been so squarely presented to this *Menura superba*?—or that the diamagnetic front has always encountered myself; seeing that he is my direct antithesis, and that the pollution holds in the exchange.

Such was my solution of the problem, here briefly summarized, and made to embrace a trustworthy tip for whomsoever it may concern.

As Bob did not return to the parlour, I resumed my boots, went out to give Pup the head—and—pluck reserved for his second supper, and then to bed.

In the morning, bearing in mind that there was no hurry, I remained storing Energy out of the blankets till about half past eight. By this time Fred and his family had gone out for a morning walk. While I was having breakfast, Mrs Ferguson came into the dining—room and asked me, in a low, confidential tone, "Has your friend been drinking?"

"Only from the fountain of Romance. By the way, Mrs Ferguson, if you want to stand well with his wife, you must believe every word he says."

"Oh, I don't mean Mr Pritchard. I mean the tall gentleman."

"Did he forget his account? I can assure you it was pure inadvertance. He's a bit troubled in his mind. I'll be very happy to take up his liability."

"Very far from that!" replied the landlady, laughing. "He's sound asleep still. When Annie went into his room, just now, to do it up, she found him lying on the bed, with his boots and spurs on, and his overcoat spread over the foot of the counterpane, to keep it clean. So she told me; and I went into the room, thinking there might be something wrong with him; but he's all right, only sleeping like the dead."

"I'm very glad to hear it. He's going to spend the day with the Pritchards. However, I must get my buggy and dodge over to the railway station, to wait on Mr Lascelles."

In another couple of hours I was conveying that capable salesman to Diggora; whilst, as a matter of course, all the other participators in this little episode continued to employ themselves in activities suitable to their several endowments. And so closes a glimpse, a mere momentary peep, into the vast and ageless volume of human insignificance.