Guy Boothby

The Race of Life

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I. — "A BOY'S WILL IS THE WIND'S WILL."

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IF any man had told me a year ago that I should start out to write a book, I give you my word I should not have believed him. It would have been the very last job I should have thought of undertaking. Somehow I've never been much of a fist with the pen. The branding iron and stockwhip have always been more in my line, and the saddle a much more familiar seat than the author's chair. However, fate is always at hand to arrange matters for us, whether we like it or not, and so it comes about that I find myself at this present moment seated at my table—pen in hand, with a small mountain of virgin foolscap in front of me, waiting to be covered with my sprawling penmanship. What the story will be like when I have finished it, and whether those who do me the honour of reading it will find it worthy of their consideration, is more than I can say. I have made up my mind to tell it, however, and that being so, we'll "chance it," as we say in the Bush. Should it not turn out to be to your taste, well, my advice to you is to put it down at once and turn your attention to the work of somebody else who has had greater experience in this line of business than your humble servant. Give me a three-year old as green as grass, and I'll sit him until the cows come home; let me have a long day's shearing, even when the wool is damp or there's grass seed in the fleece; a hut to be built, or a tank to be sunk, and it's all the same to me; but to sit down in cold

blood and try to describe your past life, with all its good deeds (not very many of them in my case) and bad, successes and failures, hopes and fears, requires more cleverness, I'm afraid, than I possess. However, I'll imitate the old single-stick players in the West of England, and toss my hat on the stage as a sign that, no matter whether I'm successful or not, I intend doing my best, and I can't say more than that. Here goes then.

To begin with, I must tell you who I am, and whence I hail. First and foremost, my name is George Tregaskis—my father was also a George Tregaskis, as, I believe, was his father before him. The old dad used to say that we came of good Cornish stock, and I'm not quite sure that I did not once hear him tell somebody that there was a title in the family. But that did not interest me; for the reason, I suppose, that I was too young to understand the meaning of such things. My father was born in England, but my mother was Colonial, Ballarat being her native place. As for me, their only child, I first saw the light of day at a small station on the Murray River, which my father managed for a gentleman who lived in Melbourne, and whom I regarded as the greatest man in all the world, not even my own paternal parent excepted. Fortunately he did not trouble us much with visits, but when he did I trembled before him like a gum leaf in a storm. Even the fact that on one occasion he gave me half-a-crown on his departure could not altogether convince me that he was a creature of flesh and blood like my own father or the hands upon the run. I can see him now, tall, burly, and the possessor of an enormous beard that reached almost to his waist. His face was broad and red

and his voice deep and sonorous as a bell. When he laughed he seemed to shake all over like a jelly; taken all round, he was a jovial, good-natured man, and proved a good friend to my mother and myself when my poor father was thrown from his horse and killed while out mustering in our back country. How well I remember that day! It seems to me as if I can even smell the hot earth, and hear the chirrup of the cicadas in the gum trees by the river bank. Then came the arrival of Dick Bennet, the overseer, with a grave face, and as nervous as a plain turkey when you're after him on foot. His horse was all in a lather and so played out that I doubt if he could have travelled another couple of miles.

"Georgie, boy," Dick began, as he got out of his saddle and threw his reins on the ground, "where's your mother? Hurry up and tell me, for I've got something to say to her."

"She's in the house," I answered, and asked him to put me up in the saddle. He paid no attention to me, however, but was making for the house door when my mother made her appearance on the verandah. Little chap though I was, I can well recall the look on her face as her eyes fell upon him. She became deadly pale, and for a moment neither of them spoke, but stood looking at each other for all the world as if they were struck dumb. My mother was the first to speak.

"What has happened?" she asked, and her voice seemed to come from deep down in her throat, while her hands were holding tight on to the rail before her as if to prevent herself from falling. "I can see there is something wrong, Mr. Bennet."

Dick turned half round and looked at me. I suppose he did not want me to overhear what he had to say. My mother bade him come inside, and they went into the house together. It was nearly ten minutes before he came out again, and, though I had to look more than once to make sure of it, there were big tears rolling down his cheeks. I could scarcely believe the evidence of my eyes, for Dick was not a man given to the display of emotion, and I had always been told that it was unworthy of a man to cry. I admired Dick from the bottom of my heart, and this unexpected weakness on his part came to me as somewhat of a shock. He left the verandah and came over to where I was standing by poor old Bronzewing, whose wide-spread nostrils and heaving flanks were good evidence as to the pace at which he had lately been compelled to travel.

"Georgie, my poor little laddie," he said, laying his hand upon my shoulder in a kindly way as he spoke, "run along into the house and find your mother. She'll be wanting you badly, if I'm not mistaken, poor soul. Try and cheer her up, there's a good boy, but don't talk about your father unless she begins it." And then, more to himself I fancy than to me, he added, "Poor little man, I wonder what will happen to you now that he's gone? You'll have to hoe your row for yourself, and that's a fact."

Having seen me depart, he slipped his rein over his arm and went off in the direction of his own quarters, Bronzewing trailing after him looking more like a worn-out working bullock than the smart animal that had left the station for the mustering camp three days before. I found my mother in her room, sitting beside her bed and looking

straight before her as if she were turned to stone. Her eyes, in which there was no sign of a tear, were fixed upon a large photograph of my father hanging on the wall beside the window, and though I did not enter the room, I fear, any too quietly, she seemed quite unconscious of my presence.

"Mother," I began, "Dick said you wanted me." And then I added anxiously, "You don't feel ill, do you, mother?"

"No, my boy, I'm not ill," she answered. "No! not ill. Though, were it not for you, I could wish that I might die. Oh, God, why could You not have taken my life instead of his?" Then drawing me to her, she pressed me to her heart and kissed me again and again. Later she found relief in tears, and between her sobs I learnt all there was to know. My father was dead; his horse that morning had put his foot in a hole and had thrown his rider— breaking his neck and killing him upon the spot. Dick had immediately set off to acquaint my mother with the terrible tidings, with the result I have already described. The men who had accompanied him to the muster were now bringing the body into the head station, and it was necessary that preparations should be made to receive it. Never, if I live to be a hundred, shall I forget the dreariness, the utter and entire hopelessness of that day. Little boy though I was, and though I scarcely realised what my loss meant to me, I was deeply affected by the prevailing gloom. As for my mother, she entered upon her preparations and went about her housework like one in a dream. She and my father had been a devoted couple, and her loss was a wound that only that great healer Time could cure. Indeed, it has always been my firm belief that she never did really recover from the shock—at any rate,

she was never again the same cheery, merry woman that she had once been. Poor mother, looking back on all I have gone through myself since then, I can sympathise with you from the bottom of my heart.

It was nearly nightfall when that melancholy little party made their appearance at the head station. Dick, with great foresight, had sent the ration cart out some miles to meet them, so that my mother was spared the pain of seeing the body of her husband brought in upon his horse. Rough and rude as he was, Dick was a thoughtful fellow, and I firmly believe he would have gone through fire and water to serve my mother, for whom he had a boundless admiration. Poor fellow, he died of thirst many years after when looking for new country out on the far western border of Queensland. God rest him, for he was a good fellow, and did his duty as far as he could see it, which is more than most of us do, though, to be sure, we make a very fair pretence of it. However, I haven't taken up my pen to moralise, so I'll get along with my story and leave my reader to draw his or her own conclusions from what I have to set down, good, bad, or indifferent as the case may be.

As I have said, it was towards evening when my father's body reached the homestead. My mother met it at the gate of the horse paddock and walked beside it up to the house, as she had so often done when what was now but poor, cold clay was vigorous, active flesh and blood. It had been her custom to meet him there on his return from inspecting the run, when he would dismount, and placing his arm around her waist, stroll back with her to the house, myself as often as not occupying his place in the saddle. On reaching his old

home he was carried reverently to his own room and placed upon the bed there. Then, for the first time, my mother looked upon her dead husband's face. I stole in behind her and slipped my hand into hers. Together we stood and gazed at the pale, yet placid face of the man we had both loved so well. It was the first time I had met that grim sovereign, Death, and as yet I was unable to realise how great his power was. I could not understand that my father, the big, strong man, so fearless, so masterful, was gone from us beyond recall—that I should never hear his kindly voice again, or sit upon his knee while he told me tales of Bunyips and mysterious long-maned brumbies, who galloped across the moonlit plains, and of exploration journeys he had undertaken as a young man in the wilder and less known regions of the North and West. Even then I could not realise my loss. I asked my mother if he were asleep.

"Yes, dear," she answered, very softly, "he is asleep—asleep with God!" Then she led me from the room and put me to bed as quietly and composedly as she had always done. Her grief was too deep, too thorough, to find vent in the omission of even the most trivial details. I learnt afterwards that when she left me, after kissing me and bidding me "good- night," she returned to the death chamber and spent the night there, kneeling and praying beside the bed on which lay the body of the man she loved, and to whom she had always been so good and true a wife.

Realising how overwrought she was, Dick Bennet made all the necessary arrangements for the funeral, which took place two days later on a little knoll that over-looked the

river, some two miles below the station house. There he was quietly laid to rest by the hands, who one and all mourned the loss they had sustained in him. Dick it was who read the service over him, and he, poor fellow, broke down in the middle of it. Then, after one final glance into the open grave, we, my mother and myself, took our places in the cart beside him and returned to the house that was destined to be our home for only a short time longer. As a matter of fact, a month later we had bade the old place "good-bye," and were installed in a small house in the neighbourhood of Melbourne, where I was immediately put to school. My father had all his life been a saving, thrifty man, so that, with what he left her, my mother was able not only to live in a fairly comfortable way, but to give me an education by which, I can see now, I should have profited a great deal more than I did. I am afraid, however, that I had not the gift of application, as the schoolmasters express it. I could play cricket and football; in fact, I was fond of all outdoor sports —but book-learning, Euclid, Algebra, Latin, and Greek, interested me not at all. Among my many other faults I unfortunately possessed that of an exceedingly hot temper, but from whom I inherited it I am quite unable to say. At the least provocation I was wont to fly into fits of ungovernable rage, during which I would listen to no reason, and be pacified by nothing short of obtaining my own way. It was in vain that my mother argued with me and strove to make me conquer myself; I would promise to try, but the next time I was upset I was as bad as ever. To punish me was useless, it only strengthened my determination not to give in. I have often thought since, on looking back on it all, that it must

have been a sad and anxious period of my poor mother's life, for, after all, I was all she had left in the world to think of and to love. What would I not give now to be able to tell her that I was sorry for the many heartaches I must have caused her by my wilfulness and folly?

It was not until something like nine years after my father's death, and when I was a tall, lanky youth of close upon eighteen, that I was called upon to make up my mind as to what profession I should adopt. My mother would have preferred me to enter the Government service, but a Civil Service clerkship was far from being to my taste. The promotion was slow and the life monotonous to the last degree. My own fancy was divided between the bush and the sea, both of which choices my mother opposed with all the strength and firmness of which she was capable. In either case she knew that she would lose me, and the thought cut her to the heart. Eventually it was decided that for the time being, at least, I should enter the office of an excellent firm of stock and station agents to whom my father had been well—known. Should I later on determine to go into the Bush, the training I should have received there would prove of real value to me. This compromise I accepted, and accordingly the next two years found me gracing a stool in the firm's office in Collins Street, growing taller every day, and laying the flattering unction to my soul that since I could play a moderate game of billiards and had developed a taste for tobacco, I was every day becoming more and more a man of the world. All this time my mother looked on and waited to see what the end would be How

many mothers have done the same! Alas, poor mothers, how little we understand you!

As I have said, I endured the agent's office for two years, and during that time learnt more than I was really conscious of. There was but small chance of advancement, however, and in addition to that I was heartily sick and tired of the monotony. Bills of lading, the rise and decline in the price of wool and fat stock, the cost of wire netting and of station stores, interested me only in so far as they suggested, and formed part and parcel of, the life of the Bush. For me there was a curious fascination in the very names of the stations for which my employers transacted business. The names of the districts and the rivers rang in my ears like so much music—Murrumbidgee, Deniliquin, Riverina, Warrego, Snowy River, Gundagai, and half a hundred others, all spoke of that mysterious land, the Bush, which was as unlike the Metropolis of the South as chalk is unlike cheese. At last, so great did my craving become, I could wait no longer. Being perfectly well aware that my mother would endeavour to dissuade me from adopting such a course, I resolved to act on my own initiative. Accordingly, I took the bull by the horns and sent in my letter of resignation, which, needless to say, was accepted. Almost wondering at my own audacity, I left the office that evening and went home to break the news to my mother. On that score I am prepared to admit that I felt a little nervous. I knew her well enough to feel sure that in the end she would surrender, but I dreaded the arguments and attempts at persuasion that would lead up to it. I found her in our little garden at the back of the house, sitting in her cane chair, darning a pair of my socks.

Nearly fifty though she was, it struck me that she scarcely looked more than forty. Her hair, it was true, was streaked with grey, but this was more the handiwork of sorrow than of time. On hearing my step upon the path, she looked up and greeted me with a smile of welcome.

"Come and sit down, dear boy," she said, pushing a chair forward for me as she spoke. "You look tired and hot after your walk."

I took a chair beside her and sat down. For some time we talked on commonplace subjects, while I stroked our old cat and tried to make up my mind to broach the matter that was uppermost in my mind. How to do it I did not quite know. She seemed so happy that it looked almost like a cowardly action to tell her what I knew only too well would cause her the keenest pain she had known since my father died. And yet there was nothing to be gained by beating about the bush or by putting off the evil moment. The news had to be told sooner or later, and I knew that it would be better in every way that she should hear it from my lips rather than from those of a stranger. That would only have the effect of increasing her pain.

"Mother," I blurted out at last, "I've got something to say to you which I am very much afraid you will not be pleased to hear. I have been thinking it over for a long time, and have at last made up my mind. Can you guess what I mean?"

The happy light at once died out of her eyes, as I knew only too well it would do.

"Yes, dear," she replied very slowly and deliberately, as if she were trying to force herself to be calm. "I think I can

guess what you are going to say to me. I have seen it coming for some time past, though you may not have noticed it. George, dear. You are tired of your present employment and you want to go into the Bush. Is that not so?"

"It is," I said. "Mother, I can stand this drudgery no longer. It is worse than what I should imagine prison life must be. The same sort of work day after day without any change, the same dreary old ledgers and books, the never-ending acknowledgment of the 'receipt of your esteemed favour of such and such a date'—it is enough to drive any man mad who has a love for the open air, for the sunshine and the doing of man's work. Why, any girl could carry out my duties at the office, and probably better than I do. And what do I get for it? A paltry salary of thirty shillings a week, upon which I have to live and dress like a gentleman and fritter the best years of my life away on the top of a high stool with next to nothing to look forward to. No, mother, I have been convinced in my own mind for a long time that it cannot go on. I must go into the Bush, as my father did before me. Like him, I must work my way up the ladder, and you may be sure, if only for your sake, I shall do my best to succeed."

I paused, not knowing what else to say. For the moment I had forgotten to explain the important fact that I had sent in my resignation to the firm, and that they had accepted it. My mother shook her head sadly. She had seen so many start out filled with ambition and the desire to carry off the prize in the Race of Life—only to succumb before the contest was completed under the crushing weight of

competition, which in the Bush is perhaps keener than anywhere else.

"Ah, my dear boy," she said, laying her hand upon my arm, "you are young, and, like most young folk, you imagine you have only to go forth armed with the strength of youth and ambition to carry all before you. Do you think you realise that if your life in this wonderful city is monotonous, it will be doubly so in the solitude of the Bush? Who knows that better than I, who have spent so many years of my life there? You see it through the rosy spectacles of romance. I am afraid, however, you will find it very different in reality. It is both a rough and a hard calling, and, unhappily, it as often as not unfits a man for any other, so that when he tires of it, he is apt to discover, as so many have done before him, that he must continue in his servitude, for the simple and sufficient reason that there is nothing else that he can do. At the best it is a wearing, soul-tiring profession, and even if a man is lucky the profit can only be a small one in these days."

"You are not very encouraging, mother," I remarked, with what was, I fear, but a forced laugh. "After all is said and done, it is a life fit for a man, and as such must surely be better than that of a miserable, ink-slinging, quill-driver, such as I have been for too long."

"Think it carefully over," was her reply; "do not act too hastily. Look at it from every point of view. Remember the old saying, 'A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.' "

"Yes," I answered, "that is so. At the same time, in my opinion, twenty clerks in town are not worth five good men in the Bush—which is another side of the question. No, dear,

my mind is made up, and—" here I hesitated, and I noticed that she looked at me in a startled way. "Well, the long and the short of it is, my resignation has gone in."

"Oh, George, George," she said, "I am afraid you have been very ill-advised to take such a step. I only pray you may not live to regret it. Oh, my boy, you must not be angry with me, your mother, for you don't know what you are to me. I have only you to look to, only you to think of. When you leave me I shall be quite alone."

"But only for a time, mother," I answered. "I will work hard to make a home for you so that we may be together again. That will make me anxious to get on, if nothing else does. Who knows but that some day I may get the management of the old station where I was born and where you were so happy. Think of that!"

But she only shook her head; she was not to be comforted merely by speculation as to what the future might or might not bring forth. While I was dreaming my day—dreams, she was standing face to face with the reality.

"Then in a month's time you will be wanting to go off," she said after a long pause. "Have you any idea where you are going? The Bush is a big place, and since you have set your heart on going, I should like you to start well. My experience has taught me that so much depends on that. Could not the firm advise you on the matter? They know that you have served them well, and, doubtless, they would be willing to lend you a helping hand. Try them, dear lad."

But, as I have already said, I was an obstinate young beggar, and to use a strong expression, I was anxious to start my new life off my own bat. Besides, the managing

partner had rather taken me to task on the matter of my resignation, and had prophesied that it would not be long before I should find reason to regret my "hasty and ill-considered determination," as he was pleased in his wisdom to term it. For this reason alone I did not feel disposed to solicit a favour at his hands, however trivial it might be. I argued that before very long I would be in a position to prove to them that the change I had made in my life was not for the worse, but for the better. Who knew but that the time might come when I should be enrolled upon their list of clients—a client before whom they would bow and scrape, as I had so often seen them do during the time I had been with them? That, I flattered myself, would be a triumph big enough to compensate one for any amount of privation and hard work. How sanguine I was of success you will be able to estimate for yourself. After all this time, I can look back on it with a smile of compassion for the poor deluded youth, who not only thought his own wisdom infinitely superior to that of anyone else, but was foolish enough to act upon it. How he fared you will be able to see for yourself, if you can find sufficient patience to read on.

After that memorable conversation on the lawn, when I had told her of my resolution, and of the action I had taken, my mother raised no further objection. Probably she realised that it would have been of no use if she did.

During the month's grace that was allowed me, I did not permit the grass to grow under my feet. I made enquiries in all directions, and brought to bear every influence I could think of. But like every new player of the game, I was too much inclined to be fastidious. I made the mistake of

settling in my mind the sort of station I wanted, without pausing to reflect that it was within the bounds of possibility that that station might not want me. For this reason I threw aside more than one fair offer, which later on I should have been glad to jump at. But one has to learn by experience in the Bush as well as elsewhere, and I was only doing what many another deluded youngster had done before me.

Slowly the month wore on, and each day found me nearer the end of my clerkly service and closer to the new life which I had assured myself was to bring me both wealth and happiness. So far I had not succeeded in hearing of anything I liked, and was, in consequence, beginning to fear that to avoid being laughed at it would eventually be necessary for me to end by taking whatever I could get. The position was humiliating, but the moral was obvious.

At last the day arrived on which I was to bid farewell to the firm and my old associates. I am not going to pretend that I felt any great sorrow at severing my connection with them; it was unlikely under the circumstances that I should. Nevertheless it is scarcely possible to discard a life to which one has been long accustomed without some small feeling of regret. The grey-haired chief clerk hoped, but not too confidently, that I might be successful; the junior partner wished me good luck in his best society manner; while the senior, before whom we were all supposed to tremble, sincerely trusted I might never have occasion to reproach myself for the course of action I had thought fit to pursue. It did not strike any of them to ask me whither I was going. Had they done so, I should have found it difficult to tell them.

II. — "A BIT OF A 'SCRAP.'"

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ON the Thursday following the termination of my connection with the company who had taught me all they could of business, I left the suburb in which my mother's house was situated and went into the city in the hope that I might meet someone who would be in a position to put me in the way of obtaining employment. By this time I had learned not only a useful, but at the same time a humiliating lesson. This was to the effect that it is not so easy to obtain a situation in the Bush as folk are apt to imagine, particularly when the seeker is, as in my case, young and entirely devoid of experience. However, I was determined to succeed one way or another, and the greater the difficulties at the beginning, the greater, I told myself, the honours would be when I had surmounted them. By reason of my business training, I was familiar with the haunts of squatters when they visited the city, and I tried each of these in turn. I was entirely unsuccessful, however, in obtaining an engagement. Driven into a corner, I was compelled to admit that I knew nothing of stock, save the question of sales in town and the travelling announcements in the newspapers. I had never shorn a sheep in my life, and should not have known how to set about it had one been placed in my hands. My humiliation was complete when I had to confess that my horsemanship was of the most rudimentary description possible, that I had never had a branding iron in my hand, and that I no more knew how to tell the age of a sheep than I did of Arabic. In point of fact, as one man, more

candid perhaps than polite, found occasion to point out to me, it would take as long and as much trouble to show me the way to do a thing as it would for him to do it himself. Another looked me over with a supercilious sneer that made my blood boil, and, noticing my fashionably cut clothes, enquired if I had ever slept in the Stranger's Hut, and whether on this occasion I proposed taking my valet with me? The roar of laughter which followed this witticism drove me from the place in a whirlwind of rage. I had been insulted, I told myself, and, worse than all, I knew that I was powerless to retaliate. But though I was considerably cast down by these repeated rebuffs, I was in nowise dismayed. On the contrary, I was more determined than ever that I would succeed. It was late in the evening when I returned home, thoroughly tired out. Being skilled in the somewhat difficult art of managing me, my mother did not enquire what success I had met with; indeed, there would have been no need for her to do so. She had but to look at my face to see the result plainly written there. Next day I determined to have another try, so after breakfast I set off for the city once more, to begin the round of which I was heartily sick and tired. Fate, however, for some time was still against me, and though I tried in every direction, and questioned all sorts and conditions of people, no success rewarded me. Later in the day, however, my luck changed, and I changed to hear of a man, a drover, who was going into Queensland for a mob of cattle to bring down to a station on the Lower Darling. He was short of hands, so I was informed, and I determined to apply for the job. Having obtained his address, I set off in search of him, and eventually discovered

him in a small public-house in the neighbourhood of Little Bourke Street.

It was not a nice part of the town, being situated in close proximity to the Chinese quarter. The house itself more than matched its surroundings, and the customers who frequented it were in excellent keeping with both. The front bar, when I entered it, was crowded to its utmost capacity, and I don't think I should be overstepping the mark if I were to say that more than half the men it contained were decidedly the worse for the liquor they had taken. The reek of the place was enough to choke one; bad cigars, the strongest blackstick tobacco, spirits and stale beer, onions from the kitchen at the end of the passage, and the intolerable odour of packed humanity of the roughest description, were all united in an endeavour to see what really could be achieved in the way of a really nauseating stench. I had never to my knowledge smelt anything like it before, and I sincerely trust I may never do so again.

Pushing my way up to the counter, I enquired for Mr. Septimus Dorkin, and was informed by the highly-painted damsel in attendance that I should probably find him in the private bar if I looked there. I departed in search of the room in question, and discovered it without much difficulty. Why it should have been dignified with its name I could not for the life of me understand. It was in no sense "private," seeing that anyone was at liberty to use it; while if the name had been given it on account of its selectness, as distinguished from the ordinary or common bar, it was an equally unhappy choice, inasmuch as its patrons were for the most

part of the same class and, in nine cases out of ten, partook of the same refreshment.

I pushed open the door and entered the room. In comparison with its size, it was as well filled as that I had just left. In this case, however, the majority of its occupants were seated in faded velvet armchairs, secured to the walls, a precaution probably taken in order that they might not be used as weapons of offence and defence in times of stress, which, I learned later on, not infrequently occurred. Scattered about the room were a number of small tables, littered with glasses of all shapes and sizes, pewter pots, and upwards of half-a-dozen champagne bottles. The majority of the men were, to put it mildly, in a state of semi-inebriation, while some had crossed the borderland altogether and now lolled in their chairs, sleeping heavily and adding to the best of their ability to the general uproar that prevailed. The picture of one elderly individual remains in my memory to this day. He might have been from fifty to fifty-five years of age, and was the possessor of an extremely bald pate. His chin rested upon his breast, so that the top of his head, with its fringe of faded hair, looked directly at the company. Some wag, with an eye to a humorous effect, and sketched with burnt cork the features of a face—nose, eyes, and mouth—upon it, and the result, if lacking in taste, was exceedingly ludicrous. The artist had just finished his work when I entered, and was standing back to see the effect. I was informed that he had once been a famous scene painter, but was now a common bar-room loafer, who would do anything if he were well paid for

it. He was, I believe, found drowned in the Yarra some few years later, poor wretch.

Turning to a tall, soldierly-looking man seated near the door, I enquired in an undertone if he could inform me where I should find Mr. Dorkin, the well-known drover, who I had been informed was staying in this house. As I have just said, the man from his appearance might have been taken for a soldier, a cavalry officer for preference, but when he spoke the illusion vanished like breath upon a razor blade. The change was almost bewildering.

"Dorky, my boy," he cried in a voice like that of our old friend Punch, "here's somebody wants to see Mr. Septimus Dorkin, Esq., Member of Parliament for Mud Flats. There you are, my boy, go and 'ave a look at 'im. He won't eat you, though he do somehow look as if he'd like to try a bite."

The man to whom he referred, and for whom I was searching, was standing before the fireplace, smoking an enormous cigar and puffing the smoke through his nose. He must have stood a couple of inches over six feet, was slimly built, particularly with regard to his legs, which were those of a man who had spent his life in the saddle. His face might have been good-looking in a rough fashion, had it not been for an enormous scar that reached from his right temple to the corner of his mouth—the result of a kick from his horse. His nose had also been broken at the bridge. His eyes were his best features, well shaped and at times by no means unkindly. He wore a large moustache and a short beard, dressed simply, and, unlike so many of his class when in town, wore no jewellery of any sort or description. A plain leather watch-chain was the only adornment he permitted

himself. When I came to know him better I discovered him to be a past master of his profession, a shrewd man of business, a superb judge of stock, a fearless rider, and the most foulmouthed ruffian, I firmly believe, that it has ever been my luck to become acquainted with. Wondering how I should be received, I approached him, a silence falling upon the room as I did so. This did not strike me as looking well for the success of what was to follow. Mr. Dorkin looked me over as I approached him, and I thought I detected a sneer upon his lips as he did so. As it seemed evident that I was about to be insulted, I began to regret that I had been foolish enough to come in search of him. Indeed, had it been possible I would have backed out of it even then; that, however, was out of the question. My blood was up, and I was determined to go through with it at any cost to myself. Whatever else they might call me, it should not be a coward.

"Mr. Dorkin, I believe," I said, looking him full and fair in the face as I did so. "I was told I should find you here."

"And whoever told you that, young fellow, told you the—-truth" (I do not repeat the adjectives with which he garnished his speech. They were too comprehensive for repetition.) "What do you want with me? Got a letter for me from the Prince of Wales to say that he's goin' to leave me a fortune, eh? Break the news to me gently, for I'm not so strong as I used to be."

This banter did not promise well for what was to come. Such of the assembled company as were awake evidently regarded the situation with satisfaction, and I have no doubt were looking forward to seeing what promised to be some

excellent fooling at my expense. If so, they were destined to be disappointed, for I had by this time got myself well in hand, and in consequence was ready for any emergency.

"I believe you are acquainted with Mr. Gerald Williamson," I said, feeling sure that he would know my friend's name. For a few moments he did not reply, but stood stolidly pulling at his cigar and looking me up and down while he did so, as if he were thinking deeply. I could feel that every eye in the room was steadfastly fixed upon us. At last he withdrew the cigar from between his lips and addressed me as follows:—

"Mr. Gerald Williamson," he drawled. "And who the—-may he be when he's at home? Is he a shearer from the Billabong, who never called for tar—or what is he? Know the cuss, how should I know him—think I carry the visitin' card of every dog—rotted, swivel-eyed, herring-stomached son of a mud turtle in my waistcoat pocket? I guess not. Now out with it, young fellar, what is it you want with me? I've got my business to attend to, and can't afford the time to go moosin' around here listening to talk about Mr. Gerald Williamsons and folk of his kidney. Mr.— Gerald—Williamson —the infernal skunk—I don't believe there ever was such a person."

This was more than I could stand. It was bad enough to be addressed as he had addressed me, but it was a thousand times worse to have it insinuated that I was endeavouring to cultivate his acquaintance through the medium of a person who had no existence. My temper was rising by leaps and bounds.

"I saw Mr. Williamson this morning," I said. "He is the managing clerk for Messrs. Applethwaite and Grimes, whose offices are in Swanston Street, and with whom, I believe, you have done business from time to time. He told me that you are about to leave for Queensland to bring down a mob of cattle."

"He told you all that, did he?" drawled Dorkin, replacing his cigar in his mouth. "Well, I don't say he's wrong, nor do I say that he's right, mark you. What I want to know is, what the—-you've come to me about."

"To be straight with you, I want work," I replied, looking him in the face as stoutly as I knew how. "I want to go with you."

"Suffering Daniel," he returned, and accompanied it with an oath of such magnificent atrocity that I dare not attempt to recall it. "Did I understand you to say that you want to go with me? With me, Sep. Dorkin? Well, well, I'm—I'm—" He stopped and shook his head; the situation had got beyond him. Then, looking round the room, he continued, "Boys, what do you think of this for a sprightly bull calf? Wants to come with me. Now if it was Bill Kearney, or Tod Griffiths, I could have understood it; but for him to want to come with me!" Words again failed him, and he lapsed into a moody silence that lasted for upwards of a couple of minutes. Then, placing his hand on my shoulder, he said, very much as a father might address a small child, "Run along home, bub, and tell your mammie to give you a Johnny—cake. When you're a man come to me again, and if I've got time I'll teach you the difference between a 'possum and a Jackeroo-Savee. Now run along to mother, dear."

I flushed up to the roots of my hair as I heard the laugh that followed. I had never been treated in such a way in my life before, and I felt my heart thumping inside me like a sledge- hammer. Seated between the two windows that looked out on the street was a middle-sized horsey-looking man in a loud check suit and wearing a sham diamond horseshoe pin in his tie. He was by no means sober, and I had noticed also that he had always been amongst the loudest laughers at my expense. He had now an opportunity of showing his own wit, and he hastened to take advantage of it. Rising from his chair, he came slowly forward to the fireplace, before which we were standing.

"I say, Dorky, my boy," he began, "you're a bit too 'ard on the gentleman, it appears to me. Take 'im along with you, and be proud of 'is company. Don't you be afraid of him, young man. Have a drink along with us, and we'll talk it all over quiet and sociable like. There's nothin' to be gained by quarrelin', as the bantam said to the Shanghai rooster, when the rooster had pecked 'is heye hout. What's your particular poison, Dorky, Esquire? Give it a name. A glass of rum! Good! Mine's a brandy. And yours, Mr. Williamson—I mean Mr. Williamson's friend. Do me the honour of takin' a glass with me—now do! Don't be bashful."

Feeling that it might only have the effect of adding to the unpleasantness of my position if I were to refuse his invitation, I expressed my willingness to drink a glass of beer with him, upon hearing which he professed to be much delighted. He struck the bell on the table, and presently the barmaid appeared in answer to it. The look of eager expectation on the faces of the company should have