Arthur Gask



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CHAPTER I. — RED DEATH.

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WHO will deny that all men have their secrets, and that deep down in every one of us the mind is scarred somewhere with the memories of unforgotten but nevermentioned acts?

I know I have my secrets, and they must be heavier, too, than fall to the lot of most men, for I—have taken life.

Ten years ago I secretly killed two men. One I shot with a rifle and to the other I dealt out death in a different way. And I was never found out.

But I was no murderer, and I regret nothing, for their deaths were forced upon me, and they were bad men, and they both deserved to die. One himself had just violently taken life, and the other would have tortured me in a form of living death. He was a blackmailer.

But they are both long since forgotten now, these men who died, and the manner of their passing even has never become known.

One lies buried in an old-world garden near his home, and laughing children play and gambol now above his bones. His people never knew what had happened to him, but they were grateful that he did not return. He had brought unhappiness and tears to all around him, and his own blood feared and hated him as little children fear and hate the ogres of their dreams.

The other died upon the desert sands. I left him with a bullet in his brain and with his staring eyes upturned towards the sky. He died in great loneliness, this man, for it was I alone who saw his limbs grow still in death. There was no pomp nor ceremony about his burial either, and there was no stone placed over him to commemorate his sleep. His end was as it should have been—the ending of a stricken beast of prey, and he just died and was left unheeded where he'd drawn his last breath. The winds over the salt bush sang his requiem while the crows picked his bones clean.

I doubt if I could find the place now where I killed him, for his remains must have long since been covered over by the driven sands. But it can be only a few hundred yards at most off the Port Augusta track, for vengeance had followed swiftly, and he died very near to the scene of his own dark crime.

Well, no one can learn my secret now, and I have no fears. I am safe after all these years.

But I was not always safe. There were days of peril for me once and any moment. Then I might have been delivered to the law.

Following quickly upon this death upon the desert sands I fell under the suspicion of the police for a murder I had not done, and they moved heaven and earth to connect me with the crime. No one could have been in more fearful danger than I was then, for by evil fortune my tracks had crossed those of the very assassin they were looking for, and by blind chance they had stumbled on my trail.

No, no, it was not blind chance that led them to suspect me, indeed it was no chance at all. It followed inevitably upon the appearance of one man. It was Larose himself who picked up that trail. Gilbert Larose, the star of all the detectives of the great Commonwealth of Australia, the prince of all the trackers of crime. The man who never failed.

They brought Larose across from Sydney to succeed when all their searchings had been vain and almost from the first moment of his coming he suspected me.

He saw what to their blind eyes had been hidden and news came to me quickly that he had marked me down. Yes, he hovered over me as the hawk hovers over a sparrow in the grass, and nightly the scaffold loomed up to me in my dreams. I knew that he was shadowing me, but for a long time I could not tell which among my enemies was he. He waited on me with a dreadful patience, and was so certain and so sure. But he never did, after all, get the evidence that he wanted, and with all his genius he never learnt the secret that I had to hide. My love for Helen made me brave, and I met him always, with a face as calm and inscrutable as his own. I had so much to live for, if I were not found out.

But he was a just man, this Larose, with sympathy and great kindness of heart, and many times I longed to throw myself upon his mercy and tell him all. But my lips were sealed by my own folly, and I could disclose to him nothing of the things that he wanted, without incriminating myself shamefully in another way.

It was an act of madness when I took that money off the man I had shot, and I regretted it within the hour. It was done heedlessly upon the spur of the moment, but it put me in the wrong at once, and I could never right myself after that. Ah! but he was puzzled, this great Larose, and although I shall always believe that his suspicions of me have never been quite dispelled, yet long before the end came he grew to like me and shield me too, in a way.

And he ought to have liked me, too. If only out of mere gratitude, for when he was completely at a loss I helped him to one of the greatest successes of his career. I added yet another leaf to the crown of laurel that he wears.

As I have said, it is ten years now since all these things happened, but Larose has not passed out of my life yet, and it is unlikely now that he ever will. We are good friends, he and I, and he always comes to see us when his work brings him to this State.

Yes, we are good friends, but still he often even now, regards me in an unusually thoughtful kind of way, and he seems to look searchingly too at my children sometimes, as if he were still wondering exactly what manner of man their father was.

Ah! well, the years pass on and time is not without its recompenses. I have suffered, but I have also rejoiced, and if I have plumbed once to the lowest depths of misery, surely I have climbed also to the greatest heights of joy.

I have possessed the woman of my desire. I have strained to my arms the woman that I love. Bodies and souls we have been one to one another, and I have lived to see my likeness in the faces of her children when they smile.

Yes, mine are happy days now. I am well-to-do and prosperous, and there are no shadows upon my life. But I have not forgotten my folly of those years ago, and as a

Justice of the Peace, have always pity for those who from sudden temptation have fallen under the ban of the law.

I am not, and never was, a bad man, notwithstanding that I have taken life and for ever and ever shall have blood upon my hands.

Ten years ago, and I was just over three and twenty. I was alone in the world and was a clerk in the head office of the Bank of all Australia in Adelaide. For three years I had been in the thick of the fighting in the Great War, and upon my return home had never been able to quite throw off that feeling of restlessness, that for so many of us proved in the end to be the most lasting heritage of those dreadful days.

I was frittering my life away in the ordinary aimless and desultory manner of so many young fellows about the city. I just lived from day to day, and although I was not without certain ambitions, I yet lacked somehow the impulse to try to realise them by application and hard work. Instead, I was always lazily hoping for something that would lead me by a short cut to fortune.

I was interested in the sports of the day, played football occasionally, and went too often to the races. I was a good shot with the rifle, could ride well, and was a somewhat bored member of the chief dramatic society of the city.

Altogether, however, I was a rather gloomy and reserved young man, keeping myself to myself, and making few friends.

But there was one great dream of my life, one great romance that should have spurred me to much greater endeavor. I was madly in love with Helen McLaren. I had never spoken to her, and in those days she did not even know of my existence, but for more than a year then I had regarded her as the most beautiful girl in the world. She was the only child of old Alexander McLaren, and her father was very rich. He was a retired pastoralist, and had a big home in North Adelaide. I rarely saw either of them except when they came into the bank, but there was often mention of them in the newspapers, for with the old man's wealth his doings were considered of sufficient interest to chronicle at all times.

Helen was really beautiful, in all the glory of young womanhood, and all that those could say who envied her was that her expression was sometimes unduly proud. She was just a year younger than I.

Well, so things were up to the very afternoon of that hot day in November, when I was on the eve of starting for my annual fortnight's holiday and then the avalanche swept into my life, bringing within forty-eight hours the dreadful incidence of crime and sudden death.

Fate came to me in the unromantic person of young Binks, of the Eastern Extension Cable Company. I almost knocked into him as I came down the bank steps exactly at half-past four.

His arms were full of parcels, and he scowled angrily until he realised who it was that had got in his way. Then his face broke into a friendly smile.

"Good-oh! Charlie," he said gleefully. "We've just met to say goodbye. I'm off to Northern Territory tomorrow. Going to be stationed at Darwin for two years. Only knew it last week."

"Darwin," I exclaimed enviously. "What a change from here!"

"Yes, old chap," he said, "it'll be A1. Lots of sport up there. Shooting and fishing—alligators and crocodiles,"—he winked his eye, "and beautiful young black gins. But look here," he went on, "come over to the Southern Cross and I'll stand you a drink; I've got to pick up some more parcels there."

"Now, Charlie," he said presently, "do you want to buy a motor bike? I've got one you can have dirt cheap."

"No," I said, shaking my head; "I've no money for motor bikes. My luck's been too bad at the races lately. I'm almost broke."

"Silly ass," he remarked reprovingly, "but, mind you, I'm almost giving this bike away. It's yours for a mere song. It's like this," he went on, "the bikes worth forty quid if it's worth a penny, but I had arranged to sell it to a chap at Mitcham for thirty. The beggar had agreed to that price, but at the last moment, this morning in fact, he rang up and said he would only give twenty! He knew I was going away tomorrow, and thought I should have to take anything he offered." Young Bink's face got very red. "But I told him off properly and hung up the receiver before he could think of any worse words than I had used, to say. I tell you, I'd rather give the bike away now than let that brute have it."

"A fiver's all I've got," I said solemnly, "and I'll throw in a couple of verses of God Save the King as well." I grinned, "You say you'll sell it for a mere song."

"Twenty pounds, my boy," he said firmly. "You shall have it for twenty pounds; if not, I'll let it rot until I am back in two years' time."

I shook my head. "I'm just off for my holiday," I said, "and I've barely twenty pounds to my name. I'm going for a tour on my push-bike and camping out all the time. That's all the holiday I can afford."

"Push bike!" he sneered. "Why don't you hire a pram at once? But, look here," he went on, "I'd like you to have the bike, and, what's more, you needn't pay me until it's convenient. You can send the money on whenever you like. The governor's come down handsome, and I'm pretty flush just now."

I hesitated. "Does the darn thing go?" I asked.

"Like the wind," he laughed. "You should see the way it rips down a good steep hill." He grabbed me by the arm. "Now you're coming up to my place at once to have a look at it."

"But I've no driving license," I protested, "and I shall have to register it and all that. It'll mean delay and more expense."

"Nonsense," he insisted. "I'll pass you over my license and you can run it in my name." He looked at me disgustedly. "Where's your pluck, man? You'll never get on in the world if you don't risk things. It's courage that wins every time." He pulled me towards the door. "Now, come on, you're going to have it. I'll take you home with me now. You help me with some of these parcels until I get a taxi," and three minutes later we were bowling along to where he lived.

"I can't ask you to a meal at home," he said, "for there's no one at present living in the house but me. My people are on holiday in Sydney and I've had to batch by myself. For more than a fortnight I have been getting all my tucker outside."

Young Binks's father was well off, and the house we drove to was a large one in a good neighborhood. The motor cycle was in the garage at the bottom of the garden, and he soon had it out and was pointing out the great bargain that it was.

"It wants cleaning, of course," he remarked apologetically, "and it wants tuning up, too. I haven't ridden it for nearly six months. But you can do everything easily enough yourself; I know you used to run a motor bike."

I looked over the machine and saw at once that it was a real bargain at twenty pounds.

"I'll take it," I said, "and thank you very much, Teddy. I'll send you the money within three months. But it wants a bit of attention, as you say, and if I'm going touring with it, I must see it's all O.K. Now I've no convenience at all at my digs to do anything to it, so do you mind if I leave it here tonight and come round and put in a couple of hours tomorrow, first thing, directly it gets light?"

"Certainly," said Teddy heartily, "and you can use anything you want in the garage, too. Dad thinks he's a bit of a mechanic. He's put up that lathe there and he's got all sorts of tools. But you needn't make it a break-of-day business." he laughed. "You come here to-morrow whenever you like. I'm catching the East-West express then at ten, but that needn't make any difference to you, for I'll give you the key of the garage, and you can slip it under the front door of the house when you've done. Mum and dad won't be back

for three weeks, and they are expecting to find it there when they return. But we'll have a drink now to the success of both our adventures."

And then commenced a series of small happenings, each one small and insignificant in itself, but each and every one of them to make for me, in later years, all the difference between being a free and happy man—or maybe—a wretched prisoner doing penal servitude in the prison of the State.

To begin with, Teddy couldn't find a corkscrew to open the bottle of wine that he had brought out from his house, and in trying to open it in the less approved fashion of knocking off the neck, he broke the bottle and its entire contents were spilled upon the garage floor. Thereupon, determined not to omit the drinking of a farewell toast, he would insist on us going out to an Hotel and it ended in us stopping on there to dinner.

The dinner was a good one, and after a bottle of wine we were in no particular hurry to move on. Instead, we sat talking in the lounge until quite late, and interesting himself in my holiday, Teddy wanted to know all about where I was going. I told him I was going after gold and had intended to prospect among the Adelaide hills, but now with the possession of a motor cycle, I thought I should go further afield.

"That's right," commented Teddy enthusiastically, "try the Flinders Range beyond Port Augusta or else the country off the Broken Hill line, about Waukaringa. It's all very well saying every inch of that ground has been already gone over. That counts for nothing, for a heavy shower of rain may any day expose a new reef cropping up to the surface. But you ought to have a good equipment and take plenty of grub if you're going away from the townships."

I laughed and replied that I had been on the job before and always travelled light. A blanket, a ground sheet, a billycan, a water bag, and a small .22 rifle were the chief items of my equipment, and I never went very far away from places where I could get food.

We didn't leave the hotel until nearly eleven, and finally it was past midnight when I had turned out my light and got into bed. Never at any time a good sleeper, late hours always mean for me an uncomfortable night, and it was again so with me, then. It must have been nearly four o'clock before I dropped off to sleep, but then I slept heavily and to my consternation did not wake up until the clock of the Town Hall was striking nine.

I was in a fine state of mind. I had intended to be at Teddy's before six, and start off from my rooms on the motor cycle, at latest, by about ten. Now, it would be midday or even later before I could get away, and it would make a lot of difference to the itinerary I had mapped out.

I dressed hurriedly and then an idea struck me. To save time, I would load up my luggage and go down to Teddy's with it all packed on the push bike. Then when I was ready I could start away on the motor cycle direct from there, for if Teddy were giving me the key, I could leave the push bike in the garage until after I returned from the holiday. There was also an added inducement to me in this plan. The landlady of my rooms was a very inquisitive woman, and she would not then have to speculate as to in what way I had so

I had not been particularly flush of money of late, for once recently, after a bad day at the races, I had had to let my weekly account stand over, and she had been impertinently curious why. I had cursed myself at the time, for I hated people prying into my affairs.

I had a snatch at breakfast, and got down to Teddy's just in time to bid him good-bye. Then I started at once upon the motor cycle, but soon found that it wanted much more to put it in condition than he had told me. To begin with I couldn't get the engine to fire at all first, and I rushed it up and down the drive until I was red in the face, much to the amusement of a grinning painter working upon the roof of the house next door. The fellow was so interested that finally I became annoyed and took the bike round to the other side of the garage, where he could not see what was going on.

The engine was horribly dirty, and I quickly came to the conclusion that if I were going to start off upon my journey with any feeling of security I must take the whole thing down and thoroughly overhaul it.

I worked hard without a break until well into the afternoon, and then at 4 o'clock, beginning to feel hungry I knocked off to go and get something to eat. To my annoyance, too, I had to go into the city to buy two new inner tubes. The ones then on the bike were patched all over and beyond safety.

After my meal I went into a motor cycle shop in Rundlestreet to get the inner tubes, and then occurred the second of those trivial happenings that were to make all the difference to my life in after years.

I was just coming out of the shop after having got what I wanted, when I saw one of the city detectives that I knew passing by. He was Ferguson, and a cousin of one of the clerks in our bank. I knew his work took him all over the State, and I thought it would be a good thing to ask him now which was the best road to take for Port Augusta. I nipped after him and had almost reached him when he suddenly dashed across the road to catch a newsboy, who was crying the afternoon papers.

"Entries for the Christmas Cup," was shouting the boy, "All the winners at Moonee Valley."

It was too much bother to follow across the road, and so I let the detective go, but—upon what small things do great ones depend.

Had Mr. Detective Alan Ferguson, at about 4.30 that afternoon not been so keen on learning the entries for the Adelaide Christmas Cup, or so anxious either to know what horses had won at Moonee Valley, I might have cross-examined him about the road to Port Augusta, and in consequence, two weeks later, he might have been well on his way to his inspectorship.

But there—that is what chance is.

It was past 7 before I had finally got the motor cycle to my satisfaction, and was washing my hands in the garage sink. I was intending to go back at once to my rooms, and after a good night's rest make a very early start in the morning, when suddenly I thought of a new plan. I would not waste another hour of my holiday. I would start off with a long night ride. Would do the 200 odd miles to Port Augusta in the dark.

I considered for a few moments. It had been nearly a full moon when I was arriving at my rooms the previous night. Well and good. It would be moonlight again to-night. I would take the road straight away, and be in Port Augusta before the morning came.

Ah! but I was not too sure of the road, and it was too late now to buy a map. I looked at my watch. The public library was still open, however, and I could go there and work out my route.

Finally, it was exactly 20 minutes past 9 when I locked the garage door and rode off into the night. The moon had not yet risen.

Thus I left Adelaide in the darkness, and as I threaded my way along the by-streets to strike the Great North road, it happened that no one noted my going, and upon no one's memory was recorded the beginning of that journey that in so few hours only was to set the whole State of South Australia in such a fever of excitement, and for me, threaten so many anxious weeks, with the penalty of penal servitude, or worse still—perhaps with the horror of a shameful death.

I intended making for the mountain ranges beyond Port Augusta, and for most of the 200 miles my way would lie along the side of the gulf, giving me an easy and comfortable journey.

A score or so of miles to the north of the city of Adelaide, and the made roads begin to fade quickly into roads or tracks. The middle of the highway may in some parts be macadamised, but on either side, and often at a lower level, stretch the natural earth roads or dirt tracks. And in fine weather, for the motorist, these dirt tracks surely constitute one of the most glorious highways in all the world.

They are as soft as velvet on the surface, and yet there is the feeling of a hardness, as of glass, underneath, and to the ardent speedster it is an ecstacy to follow along their curves. But in wet weather, and indeed even after a little rain, it is quite another story, and then woe betide the unwary motorist who ventures upon them.

That night they were in their most perfect condition, and I shall never forget my ride. Looking back, I see it was like a delicious and entrancing overture preceding the rising of a curtain for the presentation of a dark and dreadful drama.

There was the soft and scented warmness of a perfect Australian summer night—the satin darkness shrouding the mighty distances of hill and valley that lay before me, and the loneliness and the mystery of it all.

Down the deserted highway the motor cycle sped like the projectile from a gun and the swift rushing through the air lulled my senses into the rapture of a beautiful dream.

And then when the moon rose and I glided through the little scattered hamlets, I was as if in a dead world. I saw no one and as far as I knew, no one saw me. I just passed, and was probably only a few discordant moments in the harmony of a thousand sleeps.

Dawn was just rising when I ran into Port Augusta at the head of the gulf. The motor bicycle had behaved beautifully, and I had covered the 200 and odd miles, with no hurry, in a little over six hours.

But I was not minded to stop yet. Speeding along, I had rearranged my plans. I had always wanted to visit Port Lincoln, and although this would be taking me away for the time from the Flinders Ranges, I thought it too good an opportunity to be missed. Port Lincoln was 206 miles down the other side of Spencer's Gulf, and it meant I knew a lonely ride nearly all the time. About midway I should meet the little township of Cowell, but in the 143 miles before I reached there, there would be no habitation of any kind. Just a long and lonely track winding, now through the mallee scrub, then over the desert sands, and then again among the saltbush that for miles and miles would stretch like a never ending sea, half knee-high.

For three hours after leaving Port Augusta I rode very slowly, and then, when fifty-three miles away I came upon right and left divergences from the main track with a sign post pointing to the port of Whyalla in one direction and to the mining town of Iron Knob in the other. The distances were sixteen miles to each place.

The configuration of the country began to change here and the mallee scrub rose now on either side to the height of small trees.

I rode on further for a short distance and then suddenly realised that I was both hungry and sleepy. So I turned off for about fifty yards into the mallee, and making a small fire, grilled myself a couple of chops. Then finding a clear space and making sure there were no snakes about, I folded my blanket for a pillow and lay down in the shade for a good sleep.

I dropped off at once and slept deeply and refreshingly until past two o'clock, and should not probably even have awakened then, if some crows had not found me out. Their raucous cries broke in inharmoniously upon my dreams. There were quite a number of the wretched birds perched on the bushes around, and it was obvious that they were all acutely interested in the condition of my health. They peeked their little beady eyes inquisitively at me when I stood up, but when I threw some sticks at them, they rose up screeching and after some reluctant circling round flew disgustedly away.

I soon packed up and by half-past two had taken to the track again, but trouble came to me all at once and before even I had gone a hundred yards my engine began to misfire badly and finally to completely peter out.

I found I had got a short circuit, and not only that, but one of the oil pipes was blocked. It was a long and messy job putting things right, and my hands were in a fine state when I had done. I had just finished when I heard a distant rumbling of a car, and a couple of minutes later, a motor lorry passed me coming from the direction of Port Augusta, it was a builder's lorry, carrying ladders, and pails and pots of paint. There were two men sitting behind, and they waved their hands as they passed.

Then, not a minute after, and, indeed, before I had finished wiping my hands in the sand, another car came by from the opposite direction. It was a touring one this time, and it was going at a moderate pace. A big red-faced man was driving, and he was smoking a cigar. There were two

other passengers on the back seat, and the hood and side curtains were up.

As it passed I got a strong whiff of petrol. "Pugh!" I ejaculated, "they've got a leak somewhere." and my eyes followed interestedly until the car had disappeared round a bend through the scrub.

I jumped on my motor bike again, and started off in the direction of Port Lincoln, but fifty yards was the utmost it carried me before it again stopped abruptly in its tracks.

With a sigh of resignation, I got off to find speedily that this last trouble was beyond immediate remedy. I was faced with one of the worst things that could have happened in such a lonely place. The head of the valve had broken off.

Grimacing philosophically, I sat down and considered matters.

I was helpless, almost midway between Port Augusta and Cowell, with fifty and odd miles to go, either way. It was nearly four o'clock, and it was quite possible that no more cars might pass that afternoon. There was never much traffic along the track, I knew, for the Gulf towns were served mostly by the steamers that ply up and down.

Then, again, unless another motor lorry happened to pass, my position would not be much better. An ordinary car would not certainly be able to take on board a heavy motor cycle.

So I quickly decided to leave the machine somewhere in the bush, and wait my chance to be picked up by a motor car going to Port Augusta. I could get a new valve in the town there, and return at my leisure to make the bike serviceable again. At any rate, I comforted myself I was in no hurry, and, after all camping in the wilds was what I had intended my holiday should be. So I wheeled the motor cycle into the mallee scrub, and then, when about a hundred yards off the track, propped it up under a big bush that would provide a certain amount of shelter if any rain fell. I was confident that no one would interfere with it in so lonely a spot, and that, however long I might leave it, it would be quite all right.

Prepared then for a night in the bush, I packed all my camping requisites in the blanket and strapped it like a knapsack across my shoulders. My little .22 rifle I kept out, and carried in my hand.

I was just leaving the place when I noticed a quite recent snake trail in the sand, and instantly was thrilled with the prospect of reptilian sudden death.

No good Australian ever misses the opportunity of killing a snake, and quickly filling the magazine of my rifle, I picked up a stick and set off to follow the markings in the sand.

But they went quite a long way, and it was a good hundred yards before I came upon the snake sunning himself in a little open space. I walked up very quietly, and then just when he was preparing to glide off. I popped him one on the back, and it was all over. Snakes are the easiest creatures in the world to kill, and unless they are trodden upon accidentally, or are cornered, their only thought is to get away.

He was a big black fellow, this one I had killed, with a vividly red belly, and after I had well and truly bashed his head in to make sure that he was dead, I curled him artistically round one of a line of wooden posts that had

evidently at one time marked the boundary of some sheep station.

I little thought then what good service this simple action was to do me in a few weeks' time.

I had just finished dealing with the snake and was congratulating myself upon what a good deed I had done, when, turning to get back on to the track again. I suddenly heard voices.

My legs were galvanized instantly into quick action, and in a few seconds I was almost out on to the track again, when in a flash, I brought myself to a stand, and stood stock still, staring between the branches of a thick bush.

The touring car that had recently passed me and that had smelt strongly of petrol, was now standing stationary not fifty yards away. There had been an accident, undoubtedly, for it was half slewed round across the track, and its radiator was rammed up close against a tree. Also, it had got a bad list to one side. Its three passengers were out upon the track behind it, and one of them was kneeling down and peering under the chassis. He was turned sideways to me, and I recognised him instantly as the man who had been driving.

But what made me suddenly stand still and froze me in my tracks, were the sinister actions of his companions close behind him. Standing with their heads near together, they yet seemed to be speaking to one another by signs. One pointed to the kneeling man, and then they both looked quickly round and stared intently up and down the track as if to see if they were being observed. One of them was dressed in a light suit, and what struck me about the other

was that he was slight in build, with the trim figure of an athlete. He was wearing his coat tightly buttoned up across the chest.

All this I took in in a lightning glance, but in some way so impressed was I, that for many haunting weeks afterwards every little trivial incident of the whole scene was seared upon my mind.

Suddenly then, the man in the light suit stealthily bent down and picked up a big jack that was lying on the sand, then quick as the eye could follow, he aimed a fierce blow at the head of the man who was kneeling behind the car. But the latter rose at the exact moment and the heavy jack missed his head and fell upon the shoulder instead. He uttered a sharp cry, and, although reeling under the blow, turned and made a quick movement to rise to his feet, but the athletic-looking man darted in and struck him a terrific blow in the face, with a spanner that I now saw he had been holding in his hand. Then the dreadful jack descended again, once, twice, and I almost thought I heard it breaking into the poor wretch's skull.

Then the two men stood motionless over the prostrate figure, and I could see the face of the man in the light suit like a white patch against the blackness of the back of the car.

The athletic-looking man then made a sign with his hand, and his companion, throwing down his jack, began roughly to rifle the body.

He tore a thick wallet from somewhere, and, after a short argument with his companion, thrust it in his own pocket.

Then the two stood talking vehemently together, both of them the whole time glancing apprehensively up and down the track. They seemed uncertain what next to do. It appeared to me that the man in the white suit wanted to make off straight away, but his companion held him by the sleeve as if he were insisting upon a different course of action.

Finally they appeared to agree and, dragging the body round to the side of the car, they lumped it on to the driver's seat and banged to the door. Then they both leant down under the back of the car, and I heard the sound of knocking. In a moment they both sprang up quickly again and stood well away from the car. One of them then struck a match and threw it on to the ground. There was a flash, and a broad flame leapt up and began to lick round the back of the car. I realised instantly what they had done. They had opened the petrol tank in order to burn up the car.

They waited a few seconds, and then, seeing the flames had apparently got a good hold, as if all their plans were now cut and dried, they nodded excitedly to one another and ran quickly into the scrub, with each one, however, going off in a different direction.

The man in the light suit ran west in the direction of the township of Iron Knob, whilst his companion ran east in the direction of the Port of Whyalla.

And all this while I had stood still as if turned to stone. Everything had followed so quickly and had been of so astounding a nature that, from no sense of cowardice, I had been too astonished to act.

But with the running off of the two men the spell was broken, and with no further hesitation I rushed forward intending to try and put out the flames. The man who had been so ruthlessly thrust inside the car might not yet be dead, and, if so, he was now being burnt alive.

And then—the totally unexpected happened. Before even I had got half-way towards the car the flames suddenly died right away, there was the sound of a dull explosion, and the back of the petrol tank blew out.

"Ah," I exclaimed in excitement, "the tank was almost empty. The petrol has been leaking away, and that was why I smelt it as the car passed."

With my heart thumping hard, I ran up and pulled open the door of the car, but it required no second glance to see that its occupant was dead. The injuries to his head were horrible, and his death must have been quite instantaneous. His features were completely obscured in his blood.

A fearful rage surged through me, and with an oath upon my lips I turned into the scrub and tore after the man in the light suit.

CHAPTER II. — THE AVENGER AND THE FOOL.

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LOOKING back in after days, I have often wondered why I so instantly determined to follow the man in the light suit. The other wretch I had seen was in every way as culpable and from all I knew would have been just as easy or just as difficult to follow. But I turned to the light suit man as a matter of course, perhaps subconsciously because it was he whom I had seen give the absolutely fatal blows, or perhaps again simply because I thought that, by reason of his light suit, he would be the easier of the two to pick out among the mallee scrub.

At any rate, after him I went at full pelt, and so enraged was I, that the heavy blanket roll upon my shoulders felt as light as a feather, and no burden at all. I ran bent down so that he should not see me if he should turn round, and I held my little rifle on the ready for anything that might happen.

I don't think, however, that I had any very clear idea as to what exactly I was going to do, but I had seen the wretch I was following participate in a brutal murder, and every instinct of good citizenship in me was insisting that he should not get away unpunished.

I soon picked him out among the scrub, for even at some hundreds of yards distance the light suit was conspicuous, and I gained upon him fast. I did not, however, run in a direct line behind him, but a good 50 yards to one side, for I was expecting him at any moment to turn round and look back.

And this was exactly what he did do when he had run, I should say, about half a mile. He almost stopped and then slewed his head round for a rapid glance behind.

But he did not catch sight of me, I was quite confident, for I had thrown myself down instantly with the first turning of his head, and I did not get up again until he was running on.

Then, about a hundred yards further in front of him, I noticed that the scrub was beginning to get very thin and soon, to my consternation, I saw it was about to disappear altogether, and give way to open salt-bush country beyond. The salt-bush grows only to about a foot in height, and in between the mallee bushes I could not glimpse it, stretching for mile upon mile towards the foot of the far distant mountain range.

How on earth then could I approach the man unawares, I asked myself, once he had left the scrub and was in the open, and I quickened my pace in my dismay.

Then suddenly I lost sight of him altogether, and for the moment I believed he must have thrown himself down to rest. But there was no sign of him on the ground anywhere, and I could see everywhere to the farthest bush.

I slackened my pace, however, at once, and approached warily to where he had seemed to disappear, just where the bushes ended, and I quickly realised that it was well I had done so, too.

Without any warning the ground broke suddenly to a little hollow, a sort of little cup that the winds had scooped among the sand, and there, all on an instant, and not ten paces away from me, I came upon the man. He was leaning against a low bank, and with an expression of rapt attention upon his face was going over a thickish wad of banknotes that he was holding in his hand. A discarded wallet and some loose papers lay upon the sands at his feet.

He had not heard my approach, for the sound of my footstep had been deadened in the sand, and for a good half-minute at least I stood watching him.

He was not by any means a bad-looking fellow, for he had a good profile and a strong, determined face. He was quite well dressed, too.

Suddenly, then, something attracted his attention—I may have moved, or perhaps he heard me breathe—and he jerked his head round sharply and saw me standing there.

He sprang like lightning to his feet and then stood staring at me as if I were an apparition from the grave. His face was white as death, his eyes bulged, and his mouth was opened wide.

Then covertly he flashed his eyes behind me and to right and left, as if he were searching to see if I were there alone, and then a moment later his face became more composed and took on a cunning look.

He crushed up the notes he was holding, and with a sly, furtive movement thrust them into one of the side pockets of his coat.

"No good," I cut in sharply, and I spoke hoarsely from a dry mouth. "I saw where you got them from. I was watching you both from the scrub." The anger rose into my voice. "You murdered that man."

Just for the instant fear seemed to grip over him again, and then the ghost of a mocking smile crossed into his face. His eyes closed to narrow slits, so that their expression could not be seen.

He had weighed me up, I thought grimly, and was satisfied on which side the scales would turn.

But if he had been busy calculating, so had I, and I was making no mistake as to who was the stronger man.

In a rough and tumble fight the wretch would be my conqueror every time. He was about my own height, but he was much more muscular and sinewy, and looked hard as nails. Besides, I should be terribly handicapped by the blanket knapsack on my shoulder, which by now had become as if a ton in weight.

So I stepped back a pace, and with the safety catch slipped, held my rifle straight before me breast high.

Perhaps then we waited thirty seconds—it might have been less and it might have been more, and then I made the first move, and I calculated too, that I made it only just in time.

I saw the man in front of me was getting ready, and was gathering himself in for a rush. His lips had closed right together, his shoulders had sunk a little, his head was poised like a runner before a race, his hands—but then I pressed my trigger finger and a .22 long rifle bullet crumpled him up.

I was no fool with a rifle, and had meant to take him directly over the heart, but my hands were shaking, and instead I sent the bullet high, and it struck him over the left temple. Instantly the blood spurted down his face.