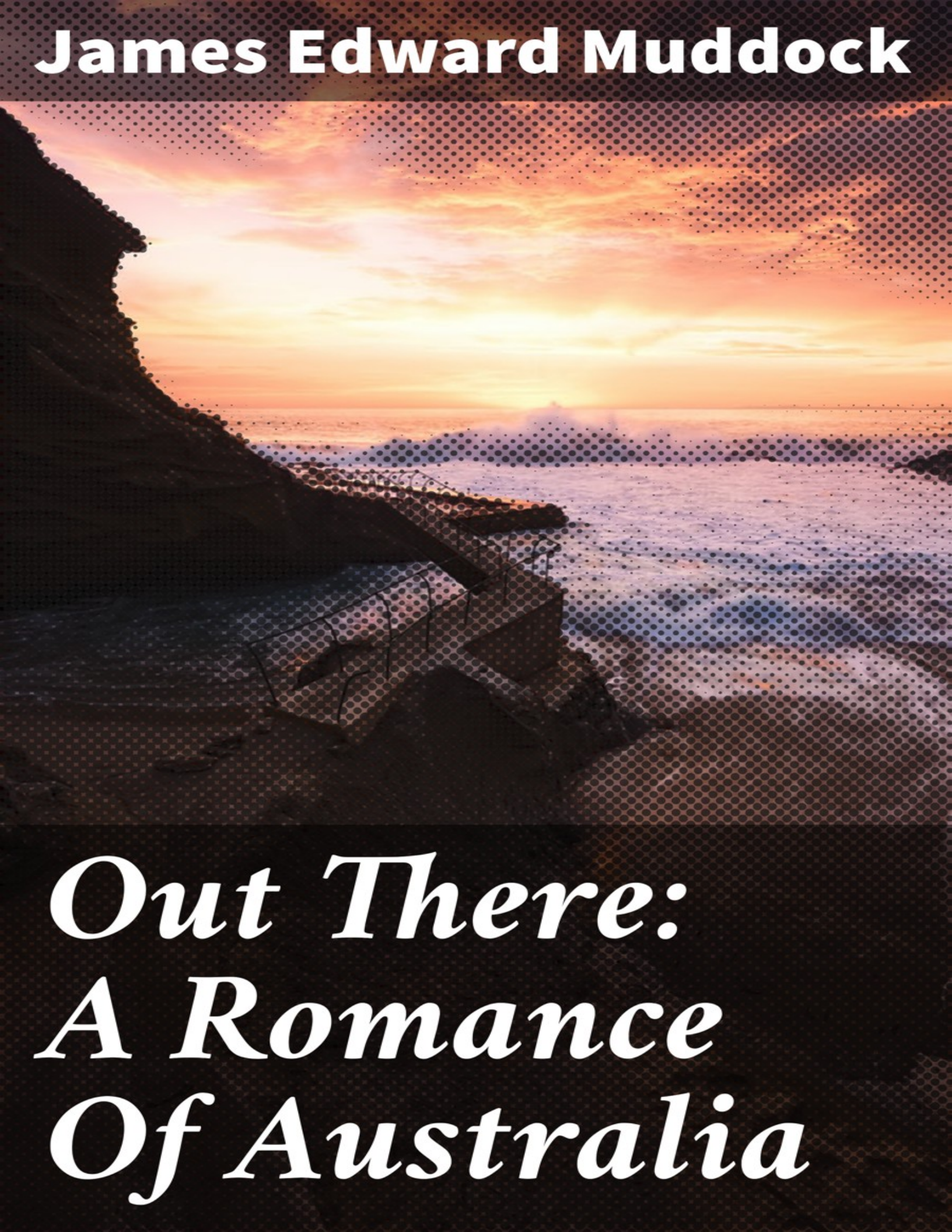
James Edward Muddock



Out There: A Romance Of Australia

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CHAPTER I. — THE DROUGHT

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THE blazing sun flung out its scorching rays from the cobalt sky, lighting up the billowy landscape with a flame of withering tire. The panting earth, riven and shrivelled, was brown and bare. The hardy gum and box trees drooped and wilted, the water courses had dried up, and the erstwhile picturesque little settlement of Glenbar Run had the appearance of having been swept by a thrice heated blast of a smelting furnace. Like most Australian settlements on the fringe of the Wilderness Glenbar Run, an outpost of civilisation, was a straggling hamlet composed of wooden shanties which might have been shaken up in a gigantic dice box and tumbled out on to the earth in higgledy-piggledy fashion. Hardy men from the old country had come here to tempt fortune and make their homes. They were all in the employ of the owner of the Run. There had been fat years and lean years. In the fat ones horses, sheep and cattle roamed the grass-green, well-watered plains, and brought wealth to their owners; then ensued a period when the heavens dried up, the parched earth turned brown and barren, while cattle and sheep perished by thousands, and their bones, bleached white in the pitiless heat, were scattered over the plains. There had been a two years' drought in the district of Glenbar, and the little handful of settlers bemoaned their fate, and were tempted to curse nature for her cruelty, forgetting the plenteous seasons when the trees put forth their green leaves, when the orchards were golden with ripening fruit, when the rich

plains laughed into a harvest, and the cattle roamed knee deep in lush grass. The green years far out-numbered the brown ones, but when the brown ones came they spelt loss for all, ruin for some.

The earliest settlers in that wild region were the Prestons, descendants from hardy English stock, an ancient family who have written their names in something more stable than water. Emigrating from the old country their wandering feet came at last to this edge of the wilderness in a season when all was green, and the narrow meandering river flowed deep in its bed; there they pitched their tent, there they made their home; they sowed and reaped; their four-footed beasts increased and multiplied, and they waxed rich. They were followed in time by a family who boasted of their descent from the Scotch Gordons. The lure of Australia had drawn them from their native heath where the Scottish hills were barren, and life was hard, toil profitless.

Wide and rich as the district of Glenbar was the Prestons considered the Gordons intruders, and resented their settling there; a bitter feud arose between them, and lasted for many years. The Prestons, however, having made good their claims, did more than hold their own, and finally 'the Gordons retreated about forty miles further to the south-east, and founded the township of Gordonstown. But the feud continued between the two families until death claimed the old generation, and a new one began to consolidate that, which in the primitive days, their fathers had begun. The old feud seemed to have been forgotten and Harold Preston, Lord paramount of Glenbar Run, was the close friend of Oliver Gordon of Gordonstown. Harold was

Australian born, but Gordon had come from the old country while still a young man and so they had been much together, though Gordon had spent some years in the South, Melbourne and Sydney, and it seemed as if the bond of friendship that knit them would remain unbroken during the span of their mortal lives.

Harold Preston's homestead was a congeries of irregular buildings, including a large and roomy frame house which served the purpose of a dwelling and office, and numerous out-buildings, which now gaped and yawned in the blistering heat, and, excepting the stables, were silent and deserted. It stood at the end of "Main Street," a street only in name, facing the plains that stretched away to the north-west where land and sky seemed to meet. In a roughly boarded room whose wooden walls were hung with guns, revolvers, spears and pouches, Harold sat at a paper-strewn table. The window frames were hung with matting to keep out the blinding sunlight; saddles and harness, spades, rakes and a miscellaneous assortment of other tools were scattered about the floor, while a large oil lamp swung from the wooden ceiling.

Harold was a splendid specimen of a man who looked younger than his twenty-six years. He had a massive frame, muscular and well knit by the hard, open-air life he had led. He was a bushman by instinct and training, and the sun had tanned his skin to the colour of an Arab. Indeed his dark eyes, hair and moustache might have enabled him to pass for an Arab. Attired in a thin woollen shirt, belt, cord breeches and long boots, his arms bared to the shoulders, he looked like a man capable of bearing any hardship, one

who would be dauntless in the face of danger. But now as he sat with a number of open letters before him, he seemed thoughtful and troubled. His elbow rested on the arm of his chair, his hand was pressed to his forehead. He was not alone. His manager, Jim Dawkins, who an hour ago had ridden in from Gordonstown with the mail bag, was reclining on a rickety couch, blowing clouds of smoke from a clay pipe. His large felt hat was flung carelessly on the floor, his shirt was wide open at the neck, and the exposed parts of his body were brick-brown. He was the product of a country and mode of life that demand brawn and exceptional powers of endurance. After his long ride in the scorching heat, he had been content to rest and remain silent for half an hour enjoying his pipe while his employer perused his letters.

At last he swung his feet off the couch, and sitting upright, spoke.

"Bad news; eh, boss?" Jim was a man of discernment; he used his eyes to good purpose.

"Yes, Jim. Couldn't be worse. This drought means ruin for me."

"Not as bad as that I hope, boss."

"Yes, Jim, ruin, absolute ruin," said Preston with a sigh. "The loss of fifty thousand sheep and cattle during the last two years, to say nothing of the failure of the crops, had nearly brought me to the end of my tether, and now the final blow has fallen."

Jim jumped to his feet, his great bulky frame heaved.

"God! What is it, boss?" he exclaimed.

For some moments the boss remained silent. His feelings had overcome him, but with an effort he recovered himself.

"Frampton & Heathcote, the solicitors in Melbourne, write to say that their client has instructed them to foreclose the mortgage on my property."

Jim Dawkins' tanned forehead puckered into a frown.

"Blarst 'em," he snapped ferociously.

"The drought has blasted us," the boss rejoined. "They'll flourish, but we shall go under. And this is the end of my toil and struggle." Then with a passionate outburst he pressed his hands to his head and cried: "My God, has nature no pity; will the rain never come?"

"Can nothing be done, boss?" asked Jim in a tone of despair, while his browned face took on an expression of deep concern.

"What is there to do? As you know the remnant of the live stock that I sent down to Melbourne three months ago were in such wretched condition that they only realised half of what I expected to get, and now I have nothing else to sell."

Jim thrust his great sunburnt hands deep into his breeches pockets, and paced up and down for some moments. He was a rugged, honest fellow, but his brain worked slowly though it worked well. Suddenly he swung round, and his blue eyes sparkled.

"Now look you 'ere, boss. I was on this Run in your old father's day, and I've seen ups and downs, but there has been more ups than downs. And you and me has seen ups and downs, but the ups had it till this hellish drought struck us. Now you've got to pull through somehow. I've been a

saving chap as you know, and I've got something like a thousand quid stowed away in a Melbourne bank. That's yours, boss, every farthing of it if it's of any use."

Harold seized the hand of his faithful servant and wrung it. His voice was husky as he spoke.

"Jim, you are a white man," he said with visible emotion. "But unless rain comes to-morrow or the next day, or a month hence your thousand pounds would only go into the melting pot, and you, like myself, would be left penniless. No, my friend, I am not going to gamble with your bit which you've won by sweat and toil. I am still young, you are getting into years. This is a big country, and somewhere or other I must begin life over again, or go out and search for gold."

"And what of Miss Mary?" asked Jim with a touching tenderness.

"My God! Yes, what of her," gasped Harold as he reeled, fell into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

Jim Dawkins' face was a picture of distress. He had been a loyal and faithful servant to his master, and beneath his rough exterior beat a big heart. He laid a hand on Harold's shoulder.

"Now look here, boss. You ain't agoing to knock under if I can help it. You've got to take that bit of mine for the gal's sake. Maybe it's only a drop in the bucket, but in these droughty times even a drop's precious. If the rains come in the autumn you can stock the land again, and things will pan out all right, you bet."

Harold caught the hand in both of his and pressed it hard. His eyes were wet. The strong man's soul was stirred

to its depths.

"Jim Dawkins," he said with a catch in his voice, "I wish you hadn't mentioned Miss Mary's name; it tempts me to take your savings—the savings of years—when all the time I know it is bound to go as the rest has gone unless God Almighty will open the sluice gates and let the rains fall. But the heavens are dried up, and the blistered land hasn't feed enough to keep a single sheep alive, nor moisture enough to grow a single ear of corn."

"But if the thousand would tide you over for another few months," urged Jim, "and if the rain comes then—"

"If—if—that mighty if. If one could make sure of the rain; if one could make sure of anything in this strange world—If!"

"I tell yer, boss, it will come in the autumn as sure's death," persisted Jim. "I see signs—Hullo, here's a buggy coming up," as the sound of wheels and the hoof beats of a horse fell on his ears. He walked to the window, pulled aside the matting, letting in a flood of blinding light, and shading his eyes from the quivering, white heat-haze he saw a buggy being rapidly driven up "Main Street," and as it came to a stop at the homestead, he let the mat fall, and announced: "It's Miss Mary Gordon, and Mr Oliver Gordon."

CHAPTER II. — MARY

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HAROLD PRESTON sprang to his feet and hurried to the veranda, followed by Jim, as a handsome young man in a white duck suit was helping a young lady out of the buggy.

"By Jove!" cried Preston as he wrung the hand of each in turn, "you come like manna from heaven to me in the wilderness. But whatever has brought you up to this furnace?"

"Phew! What heat," exclaimed Oliver Gordon. "It's been like driving through the realms of Hades. But give us to drink or we perish. Here, Jim, haul that case out of the trap, then get the horse into the stable and rub him down. I've brought plenty of feed for him in the buggy."

The case was carried into Harold's room. It contained an assortment of bottles of spirits, wine and soda-water. Harold's old housekeeper Betsy was summoned and ordered to conduct Miss Gordon to the bedroom and provide her with the means of removing the white dust of the road from her garments and face.

When the two men were alone Harold turned to his friend, and again asked:

"What in the name of all that's wonderful has induced you to come up here in this blistering heat?"

"You may well ask! But I'm choking with dust; my mouth is like a fiery furnace; I must have a drink before I can talk." He produced a corkscrew from his pocket, opened the case, took out a bottle of brandy and some soda-water, while Harold produced glasses from his cupboard.

"Well, here's to you, old chap; and may God be merciful and send rain," said Oliver as he drained a tumbler of brandy and soda. "Ah, that's refreshing, hot as it is." He threw himself on to the couch, pulled out his pipe and rammed it full of tobacco, and as he puffed out a cloud of smoke said, "Now I begin to feel more like a respecting Christian. Upon my soul I think that drive from Gordonstown here in weather like this is about the limit. And I don't believe any other horse I have in my possession but the roan gelding would have stayed it. Forty odd miles in this heat is a staggerer."

"What! do you mean to say you've driven Kangaroo?"

"Why of course. Didn't you recognise him?"

"No, I was so surprised to see you and Mary I had no eyes for anything else."

"Dear old Kangaroo," mused Oliver. "Do you remember my riding him last year in the Gordonstown sweepstakes, and beating you on Charioteer by a head, and Charioteer was a beauty."

"Of course I do."

"And Charioteer was as good a bit of horse flesh as ever was bred. By the way, what's become of him?"

"I had to sell him," answered Harold with a lump in his throat.

"The devil you did. Why was that?"

"I wanted money, old chap, or you may bet your life I wouldn't have parted with him. There will be no more racing for me for some time to come, I'm afraid."

"Good God, are things as bad as that?" gasped Gordon.

"Yes. I'm broke."

At this announcement a peculiar expression came into Oliver Gordon's face, and he glanced at his friend out of the corners of his eyes.

"Don't make ghastly jokes, old fellow," he said with a little short laugh. "You broke! No—I—"

"I assure you it's no joke, my dear friend. I got a mail this morning from Frampton & Heathcote to say their client had instructed them to foreclose. I wonder who their mysterious client is."

"I wonder!" muttered the other, while his eyes seemed bent on vacancy.

"I wonder too. It's like hitting a man when he's down, eh?"

"Yes," assented Gordon still with the vacant expression.

"It isn't cricket, but it's business," said Preston with a disdainful shrug of his massive shoulders. "Business! Good Lord! Business to take advantage of your fellow-men to feather your own nest. When a fellow is hard up and he owes you money, crush him body and soul. Get your pound of flesh whether you kill him or not. That's smart business. The laws of business decree that you must have no bowels of compassion. The bond. The bond, that's the only thing to be considered. Let the bond-giver go to Hades and be damned. It's business. Well, thank heaven I'm not a business man in that sense. A man who can pay and won't should be made to pay; he who would but can't should be dealt with mercifully."

"It's everyone for himself, old chap, in this strangely constituted world," remarked Oliver as if for the sake of saying something.

"Let's change the subject," said Preston with a show of irritation. "You haven't told me yet the cause of this unexpected visit."

"Mary."

"Mary?"

"Yes. She informed me yesterday when I happened to meet her at the Pioneer Club that she must see you on an urgent and pressing matter, and that she intended to ride over here to-day. I urged the madness of so long a ride in weather like this, and offered to drive her in the buggy. She protested. I insisted, so here we are."

"You're a brick, Oliver. But what's the urgent and pressing matter?"

"Don't ask me. Mary doesn't take me into her confidence," answered his friend with something very like a sneer. "She's a Gordon and has got a will of her own. A Gordon can give a mule points in stubbornness."

Preston laughed.

"Don't forget that you are a Gordon, old fellow."

"By the Lord Harry I don't and won't," exclaimed Oliver with what seemed unnecessary vehemence, and a look of fierceness as if some memory of an old wrong had been suddenly revived. The eyes of the men met, Harold's spoke of the astonishment he felt at his friend's outburst. Before he could make any reply the door opened and Mary entered.

"You dear, plucky little woman, to risk coming to this fiery furnace," cried Harold with admiration as he placed a chair for her.

"Risk! there is no risk," answered Mary with a sweet girlish laugh. "Besides, I've come on a most important

errand that would admit of no delay."

"Yes, so Oliver tells me; an urgent and pressing matter, he says. Pray don't keep me in suspense. What is it? 'Urgent and pressing' sounds rather alarming."

"You will have to nurse your curiosity," she answered with a smile, "until such time as—well until I've cooled down and an opportunity occurs." Her sparkling brown eyes were fixed on Oliver's face, as if looking for signs.

"Oh, if I'm *de trop*," he snapped irritably, "I—"

"No you won't, Mr Hoighty-toighty," she chided pleasantly. "You'll stop where you are. What I've got to tell Harold is in the first instance for his ears alone. But it will keep for a little while; in the meantime one of you give me a bottle of soda-water. I'm choking."

Oliver made no movement, he had stretched himself on the couch, but there was fire in, his eyes as he replied with ill-concealed irritation:

"You command, I obey of course." He laughed, but it lacked the soul of true laughter. "I'm only the *tertium quid*, that is the one too many."

"Now don't be a snarly bow-wow," replied the girl with an entrancing smile, her eyes dancing with good humour.

"No, I'm only the silly poodle," he said acidly. "Harold's top dog; lucky beggar."

"Now no wrangling," exclaimed Harold as he filled a glass with soda-water and handed it to Mary, who took it, and with a glance of approval at each of the men drank a deep draught, and sighed gratefully. She was a picture of womanly beauty. Her fawn-brown eyes, her healthy pink and white complexion, her wealth of brown-gold hair shimmering

in the sunlight that filtered through the screened windows, were points calculated to arouse the enthusiasm and stir the blood of the dullest of men. Whilst allied to this physical attractiveness was a quick wittedness, a keen intelligence, not to speak of a self-possessed manner and a certain masterfulness that commanded respect. Mary Gordon was Australian born, she came of good stock on both sides, and the free open life of the bush had developed in her the highest qualities of womanhood and self-dependence. Her mother was a Miss Howard, a lineal descendant of the Howards of England. Oliver Gordon was her kinsman by consanquinity although they were only distantly related, but they regarded themselves as cousins. At one time there had been some girl and boy love passages between her and Oliver, but Harold Preston had won her heart, and Oliver had remained the chum of both, although at the time he bitterly reproached Mary for "throwing him over."

"Well, this is a scorched-up, blighted spot," she said as she leaned back in her chair and fanned herself with her handkerchief. "It's bad enough in Gordonstown, but occasionally heavy rain and thunderstorms freshen us up, and keep the temperature comparatively cool."

"It has scorched and blighted me," said Preston thoughtfully, "and to-day I have learnt that I am ruined."

Mary searched his face with a keen glance, and placing a hand on each of the arms of the chair she leaned forward, and in an eager tone said:

"Bosh! Don't talk about being ruined, Harold. A man of your resource and energy and splendid youth is not likely to

go under. You've got to fight. You are too optimistic to be easily knocked out."

"It's true, Mary, my dear, all the same," he answered sadly. "This two years' drought has beggared me, and to-day I have received a letter from Frampton & Heathcote informing me that their client intends to foreclose on the mortgage. That spells utter and absolute ruin for me."

Mary sat straight up and stared at him with a pondering and thoughtful expression that made her look years older.

"Foreclose on the mortgage," she echoed.

"Yes."

"Who is their client?"

"Ah, that I don't know. I was recommended to the solicitors, who told me they had certain money of a client to invest, but the client did not want to be known nominally. The solicitors are the mortgagees."

Mary leaned her elbow on the chair arm and her head on her hand, in an attitude of deep reflection.

"Does foreclosing mean that they can take your property?" she asked pointedly.

"That is exactly what it does mean. They collar everything mentioned in the bond; every acre, houses, stock, all I possess in the world. Possibly they would take the flesh off my bones if they thought it was worth anything; or even my soul if they could realise on it."

Oliver sat bolt upright on the couch, took his face in his hands, and puffed at his pipe.

"Can't something be done?" he asked, staring at the floor like a man lost in thought.

"Can't *you* do something?" Mary queried sharply.

He rose to his feet, thrust one hand in his breeches pocket, and held his pipe in the other.

"I don't know," he said, still pondering. "I've been pretty hard hit myself, and what trifle I've got is so tied up that I find it difficult to keep my head above water."

"My dear old chum," cried Harold huskily as he grasped his friend's hand, "I know that you've got your own worries and difficulties, and I'll be hanged before I pile mine on top of you. Life's a game. I've had a run of rotten luck, but I must just begin again, that's all."

Gordon appeared to be deeply affected.

"It breaks a fellow's heart," he said, "to have to stand helpless and see his chum go under. But don't despair, old chap. Something will turn up. It's the dark hour before the dawn, you know. I must look into my affairs and see just where I stand. You know that if I've a loaf half of it is yours."

Harold's feelings and acknowledgments were expressed by a hand grip, he could not voice them, while Oliver seemed a prey to emotion that overcame him, and catching up his felt hat, he rammed it on his head, saying:

"I'll leave you two together for a bit. I'll take a turn round and have a look at the horses; we'll talk matters over later on."

As soon as the door had closed upon his retreating figure Mary sprang up, and throwing her arms round her lover's neck, she said with soul-felt sympathy:

"Poor darling boy! I had no idea things were so bad as that. But Gordon must do something. I don't believe him when he says he's hard up. He—"

"I am afraid, sweetheart, that Oliver really is in straits himself, he surely wouldn't lie to me," said Harold as he took the girl's face in his hands and kissed her. "He has been an extravagant beggar, and, as you know, his passion for horse racing has landed him in difficulties, at least that is what he says."

"I didn't quite understand that," answered Mary thoughtfully, "though I know he's pretty reckless. But now let us sit down and talk things over. Never mind Gordon. He hasn't your big-heartedness." She resumed her seat, he drew his chair up to hers and held her hand. "Of course it's all nonsense," continued Mary, "about your going under. You will not go under if I can help it. Dear old Aunt Margaret, who has been a mother to me, has managed the bit of property my father left me so well that I can help you and will. You are my affianced husband, and what is mine is yours."

"My God, Mary, you are a woman worth dying for, but you unwittingly torture me. This is the second time to-day my feelings have been stirred to their depths. Just before your arrival old Jim Dawkins offered me his life's savings, a thousand pounds. He's a pal, Gordon's a pal, and you are a saint, but I'm going to work out my own salvation or perish." His face was tormented, his eyes misty. He sprang up and paced the room. There was an impressive silence. Mary was a tactful woman. She watched and waited. She saw that her lover's soul was tortured, and understood that it was better to let the paroxysm subside. Presently he swung round and faced her. "No, Mary," he continued. "I am not going to risk your little fortune, nor Dawkins', nor Gordon's. I'm winded

but not beaten. Fate has dealt me a heavy blow, but I am young. I have health and strength, those are qualities that count in this country, and I'll face my difficulties like a man."

Mary's sweet face was filled with an expression of admiration, and rising from her seat she clasped her hands about his arm, and asked softly:

"I admire your spirit of independence, but why are you so obstinate, dear? Think of the friends who love you; think of *me*. It's my duty to help you."

He caught her in his arms and held her in a passionate embrace.

"Do I not think of you, my beloved," he cried. "You are my life, my heart, my world. But the pride of my race burns fiercely in my veins, and I would rather die than bring anyone I love to ruin."

"That is foolish talk, dear," she answered with gentle chiding. "I cannot do very much, but such little as I can do, I say again, it is my duty to do. Should I love you if I acted otherwise. I have a few thousand pounds, and—"

"Mary darling, you don't understand," he cried distressfully. "It would take over ten thousand pounds to clear off the mortgage to begin with. Supposing I could raise that amount to-morrow, what then? Unless the drought breaks up suddenly, and there is no hope of that at present, I should be as bad as ever in a month's time. Even if rain came next week it would take months for the land to recover. The great drought of twenty-five years ago lasted four years, and this one seems likely to last as long. No, men who come to the wilderness take their fate in their hands. Fortune smiled upon me for a time, now she has

pitilessly crushed me. I must abandon the struggle here and go elsewhere. I've no alternative. They'll turn me out."

"Go where?" the girl asked quietly.

"God knows," he answered despairingly.

Mary was distressed and her eyes were filled with tears, though she tried to control herself.

"I still think you should allow your friends to help you," she murmured appealingly.

"Now look here, little woman," he said firmly, "we are only making ourselves miserable. At the present moment the outlook is as black as it can be, and I cannot see a glimmering ray of hope. Our marriage has already been postponed through this infernal drought. In the glamour of more fortunate days I dreamed of the time when with you at my side I might win fortune here. But Nature can be cruel even to those who love her as I do. My dream is over, and I have no right to ask you to waste the flower of your youth, and miss your chances in life waiting for me—a broken, ruined man."

He buried his face in his hands, and his great chest heaved with a sob. Mary's white fingers closed about his wrists; she drew his hands down gently, and laying her dear face against his she said in a low sweet tone:

"Harold, the flower of my youth is yours; I am yours until death. Whatever fate the years may have in store for us hope and my heart will wait for you. Emotion choked him. He could only hold her in his strong embrace; and his silence was a thousand times more eloquent than words could possibly have been. At last the strong man's strength came back. He released her, sprang up, and laughed—but it

was the laugh of a defiant and embittered man; he was not embittered against her, for her sake he would have sacrificed his life, but in his heart he railed against the fate that had ruined him.

"Sentiment is all very well, little woman, but we cannot live in a world of dreams, although I am afraid I've been given to dreaming," he said. "I am not a coward, I can fight as you say, and for your sake I'll fight, and by God I'll win. The weakness is over, and now tell me what the urgent and pressing matter is that has brought you here."

"Oh yes," she exclaimed, as her pretty lips parted, revealing her white teeth as she smiled sweetly. "You quite put the matter out of my head. It's rather curious. It appears that a few days ago an old bushman staggered into the town desperately ill, and was taken to the hospital. He was delirious for a time, but when he recovered his senses he asked Nurse Wood, who, as you know, is a great friend of mine, if you were still living at Glenbar Run. Of course Miss Wood told him that you were still here, and he said he must see you immediately."

"See me," Harold gasped, with a puzzled look.

"Yes. He said he would get up and come to you, but Doctor Blain wouldn't hear of it, and he asked me to see the old man. He told me his name was Bill Blewitt, and beseeched me to bring you to him."

"I don't know anyone of the name of Blewitt," said Harold, still puzzled. "What does he want?"

"He wouldn't say, but declared it was a matter of life and death. He made me promise not to mention the matter to a living soul except yourself. As the poor old man seemed in

such deadly earnest I promised him I would let you know. I thought of writing to you, but as I longed to see you I decided to come myself. On leaving the hospital I ran against Oliver and incidentally mentioned I was going to ride out to Glenbar. He was very anxious to know the nature of my errand, but I refused to enlighten him. Anyway, he insisted on bringing me in his buggy. I would rather have come by myself, for though I am very fond of Oliver, he annoys me sometimes by saying things he ought not to say as your friend and my friend, and knowing that I'm engaged to you."

"Poor Oliver," said Harold with a laugh. "He has a heart of gold, and if I were out of the way he'd marry you if you would have him."

"Well, you see, you are not out of the way and I am going to be wife to you, so there is nothing more to be said on that point." She spoke with a decisiveness not to be gainsaid.

"You darling," exclaimed Harold, his face betraying the intensity of his feelings. Then he suddenly waxed thoughtful, and pulling his moustache he muttered:

"Bill Blewitt! Bill Blewitt! I can't place the fellow. What the deuce can he want to see me for?"

"Perhaps he has some secret that he wishes to impart to you," suggested Mary. "He is a strange old man, and very determined, I should think."

"Yes, but why make *me* his father confessor?"

"You know just as much as I do, Harold dear, but as Doctor Blain says the poor old fellow has a dog's chance of his life, humour his whim and see him."

"Of course I will, little woman. Anyway, I have to thank Bill Blewitt for your presence here, so I am grateful to him and you."

He threw his arms about her, their lips met, and at that moment the door was flung open and Oliver Gordon reappeared. They drew apart quickly.

"Oh, I'm sorry I've interrupted," he said, laughing. "But there, don't mind me, I'm only a cipher."

"We don't," replied Harold. "Why should we?"

"As you say, why should you. Spoon away to your hearts' content and I'll be deaf, dumb and blind. All the same I'm ravenously hungry; have you got any tucker in the place?"

"Yes, of a kind," answered Harold, who seemed to have quite recovered his good spirits. "I'll tell Jim Dawkins to make a damper, and we'll have a scratch meal. After that, when the sun's gone down, you'll drive Mary back, and I'll follow in the saddle."

Mary, who knew the place well, said she'd help the old housekeeper to prepare the food, and ran off.

"God bless that dear little woman," murmured Harold.

"She's a mascot; she'll bring you luck," Oliver remarked, as he proceeded to mix a brandy-and-soda.

The two men pledged each other and Mary; filled their pipes, and fell to chatting for a little while, until drowsiness stole upon them both. Outside the heat haze still quivered over the thirsty land like a gossamer veil of wind-stirred silver. The fiery sky was without a cloud, and the sun as it sank to the west threw never a shadow over the yellow plain. The silence was almost painful, now and again it was punctuated by the whinnying of a horse in the stables, or

the drowsy drone of a buzzing bluebottle as it winged its flight about the house. The friends slept until the sun had sunk below the horizon, then Mary burst into the room with a cheery laugh and startled them into wakefulness.

"Now then, you lazy mortals," she cried, "the feast awaits you, a perfectly royal banquet."

They followed her to the so-called common dining-room, where the rough log table was covered with a white cloth, and the resources of Harold's establishment had been taxed to furnish the proper embellishments. Some old silver plated forks and spoons which had belonged to his people had been hunted out by Mary; the glasses had been polished, the cruets cleaned, fresh mustard made, clean salt provided.

"By Jove, Mary, you are a brick," exclaimed Harold. "It's a jolly long time since my table looked so spick and span."

"Oh, you men," sighed Mary, with a rueful expression, "you are such helpless creatures when you haven't a woman to look after you. You are all alike; just great careless children."

Jim Dawkins had turned out an excellent damper; he could hold his own with any chap at damper-making. Then there were eggs, stewed fowl, tinned corned beef, and other delicacies, and Harold declared it was a feast for the gods. Jim Dawkins plied his knife and fork with the rest, and the wine and spirits Oliver had brought served to enliven the feast, whilst sweet Mary Gordon sat at the head of the table, the Queen of the hour.

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Two hours later Oliver Gordon and Mary in the buggy and Harold following-, riding a bush hack, were making their way under the canopy of stars that glittered like burnished steel, to Gordonstown.

CHAPTER III. — BILL BLEWITT

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THE township of Gordonstown, although only a little over forty miles from the Glenbar Run, was outside the belt of drought that every now and again withered up the plains. It could boast of a Town Hall, Club, Library, weekly newspaper, and streets of stone-built houses. It wore an air of prosperity, and the district round about was fertile enough, while a projected railway from Melbourne had recently caused a boom in "town lots" which for years had been waiting for buyers. Pleasantly situated on a bend of the river which was navigable for small craft up to that point, it was a place of some importance, as a port of shipment for live stock, wool, hides and other produce. Its population of between five and six thousand was a thriving and contented community, proud of their pretty little town, and particularly proud of their excellent racecourse on the outskirts. Racing went on practically all the year, but the great event, when all the town got racing mad, was the "Gordonstown Gold Cup Day," in the middle of June. It was the chief event of a four days' programme, and it attracted racing lovers from far distant parts. Oliver Gordon was prominent among those who fostered the sport, but it was generally believed that for some time his luck had been out.

Mary Gordon's home was a picturesquely situated stone villa, standing in about five acres of charming grounds on the outskirts of the little town, near the race-course. Here she lived with her aunt, Margaret Bruce, her mother's widowed and childless sister. Mary was left an orphan when

she was a child. She had a brother, her senior by some years, and Mrs Bruce came from Scotland, where she had resided with her husband, to mother them. The brother died three or four years later, and since then Mary had lived under her aunt's care. Margaret Bruce was a middle-aged lady, sweet tempered and devotedly attached to her niece. She was exceedingly fond of Harold Preston, and from the very first had encouraged the love-making between him and Mary. For a brief period, however, just prior to Harold's declaration of love, she was inclined favourably to Oliver Gordon, but his gambling propensities and love of horse-racing caused her to mistrust him, and she set the seal of approval upon Harold. For nearly four years the young people, who were nearly of the same age, had been very happy, and but for the drought which had brought disaster to him, Harold would have made her his wife.

When Mary and the two men arrived at Gordonstown after their night journey from Glenbar, Gordon proceeded direct to his house, and Harold was a guest at Mary's house, where he was cordially welcomed by Margaret Bruce. She commiserated with him in his misfortune, but encouraged him to hope that there would speedily be a change for the better. Mrs Bruce was always optimistic, and her influence invariably inspirited Preston whenever he was inclined to be despondent.

A hearty breakfast the next morning after a good night's rest, combined with the cooler air and greenery and freshness of the place, heartened Harold considerably, and about noon he set off for the hospital. It was a white building, with green shutters and flower-covered walls; it

stood in a neatly kept garden, and the long veranda that ran round the building afforded a pleasant promenade or resting-place for those patients who were not compelled to keep to their beds in the wards.

As Harold mounted the steps to the main entrance he ran up against Doctor Blain, who had just finished his morning round. They greeted each other very heartily.

"No need to ask why you are here," said Blain. "Miss Gordon told me she was going to bring you back. I hear you've been having a bad time up there. These scorchers try a man's patience, but one has got to take the rough with the smooth, and lucky he who can smile at misfortune."

"Lucky he who can smile at misfortune, as you say," Harold answered, "though one wants to have a deuced lot of philosophy to smile when he is face to face with stark ruin."

"Come, come. I trust things are not so desperate as that."

"I am afraid they are. To the struggling man two years of drought spells disaster."

"By Jove I am sorry, truly sorry," said the doctor with a ring of genuine sympathy in his voice, "but all trouble has its compensations. You have troops of good friends—"

"Thank God, yes," exclaimed Harold earnestly; "more than that I have health and strength and am going to win through."

"That's the way to look at things," the doctor remarked. "Pluck and energy can do wonders."

"Well now, who is this mysterious patient of yours—Bill Blewitt, isn't it?"