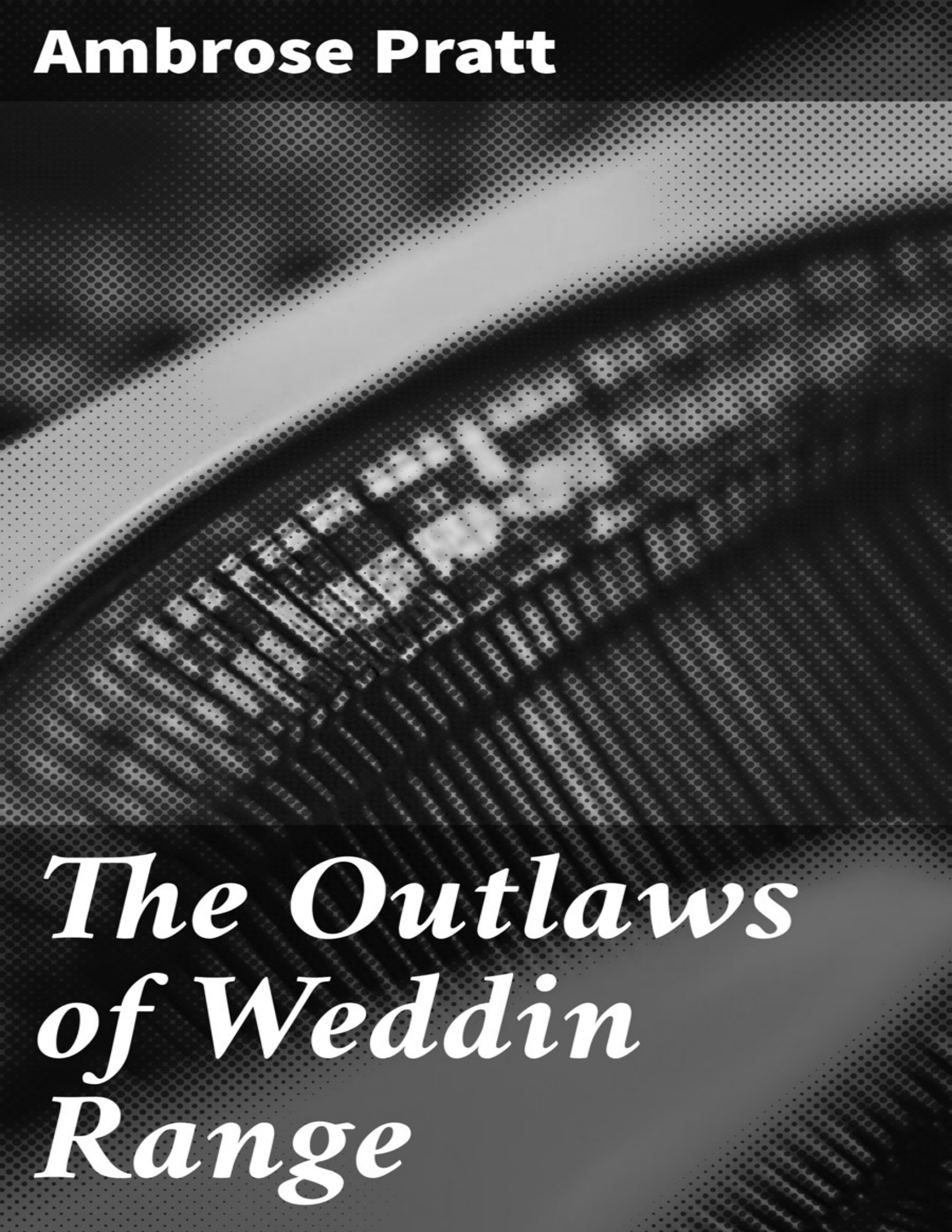
Ambrose Pratt



The Outlaws of Weddin Range

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I.—The Manufacture of a Bushranger.

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Ben's superior education and his habitual manner of superiority (acquired from his mother's training) made him an unpopular figure on his return to Breeza. The local lads were quick to resent his affectation of the gentleman, and he was promptly brought to book. He soon discovered that in the bush no claims to captaincy are recognised that cannot be enforced with the strong hand, and he abandoned grammar for the gloves. His manner, however, had already become too intimately a part of him to be resigned, then or later, and to the last hour of his life an elegant and cynically arrogant deportment distinguished him from his kind.

It is recorded of him that he fought and beat all the boys residing in the neighborhood of Breeza of within five years above his own age, and the only occasion on which he lowered his flag was when he met and was worsted in the ring by a young man seven years his senior. But even that defeat enhanced his reputation, since he refused to surrender until he was beaten into unconsciousness, when his opponent claimed victory by default.

Ben Hall was still a mere youngster when his mother died. Soon afterwards his father removed to the Lachlan River to assume the management of Mr. Hamilton's run or station, situated some fifteen miles from Forbes, on the road to the Pinnacle. Ben accompanied his father, and remained on the station until he was eighteen years old. It says much for him that when he quitted Breeza the youths of that district were inconsolable at his departure, and they

testified their affection and regret by presenting the boy they had formerly disliked with a silver-mounted saddle and bridle.

Arrived at the Lachlan, Ben immediately began to earn his own living. Although little more than a child, he sought and secured a probationary appointment as accountant and stock-keeper to the station. In this he was speedily confirmed by Mr. Hamilton, who was both surprised and delighted by the lad's cleverness and accuracy; and he retained the position for several years, completely to the satisfaction of his employer. Young Ben's duties rapidly extended. It was part of his father's arrangement with Mr. Hamilton that the manager should be permitted to graze his own cattle on the squatter's holding. Ben was given charge of his father's stock, and thus received a double wage. Being naturally of a thrifty disposition, he saved money, and ere long he had sufficient capital at command to become a stock-holder in a small way on his own account. As Mr. Hamilton freely accorded of the boy the same rights of grazing that the elder Hall enjoyed, and in other ways generously encouraged the youngster's enterprise, Ben started out on his career with the fairest prospects.

For a considerable period fortune was his devoted mistress. The seasons were good, grass was plentiful, and all the herds in his control multiplied and throve unceasingly. There can be no doubt that in this stage of his life Ben was as honest as the sun. And he was as capable as he was honest, and brimful of energy into the bargain. His complex trust was discharged in the most exemplary manner. Not a single dispute as to brands ever arose on the

station. Mr. Hamilton's herds were attended to with unfailing care, and the elder Hall, although a hard and exacting man, had never a complaint to make of his son. In view of subsequent happenings, too much emphasis can hardly be laid upon the upright and sterling character which Ben exhibited during these early years. He was in a position to benefit greatly by employing methods of chicane, but his conduct was always unimpeachable. His capacity as a stockman was of a remarkably high order. He knew every beast on the station by heart, and such was his power of perception, and so retentive was his memory, that he could recognise and unerringly locate young cattle which he had only seen once and casually when just calved a year before. These exceptional faculties were at all times loyally disposed to the advantage of the squatter and of his father, and his own interests occupied a minor place.

In the circumstances it is not surprising that his name became a synonym for good judgment and integrity, and that his word was cheerfully accepted in settlement of every contention, small or large, that seemed to fall within the scope of his elastic and constantly expanding jurisdiction. Everybody on the station and in the surrounding district liked and trusted Ben, and he fully justified the confidence reposed in him. Before three years had elapsed he was virtually the manager of the estate and of all the diverse interests its boundaries contained. His father, it is true, continued to administer the office, but his rule was formal. Ben was the real authority. He eclipsed his father in all directions, even as a salesman, and the elder Hall rarely ventured on any important action without having previously

taken counsel with his son, in whose business capacity he placed unbounded faith.

The sprightly French philosopher of the Middle Ages who equipped posterity with his sardonic probe wherewith to expose the secret causes of the troubles that afflict and ruin men, might well have written with a foreknowledge of Ben Hall's career. "Cherchez la femme," advised the Frenchman —"In every disaster that overtakes a man, seek out the woman; for, be sure, a woman will be found at the bottom of it." It was a woman who wrecked Ben Hall's life, perverted his nature, and brought him to a premature and dreadful death.

At seventeen years of age his reputation was deservedly above reproach, his prospects were brilliant, and the whole world was his friend. Suddenly he met the woman predestined to be his evil genius. That was his darkest and most fateful hour; but Ben imagined it his most gloriously fortunate. He fell in love with her as immature boys so often do with women who are at once beautiful and experienced coquettes—madly, blindly, desperately in love—and he was deliriously happy in that she seemed to return his affection. To recount in detail the story of his wooing would be to pay too high a compliment to the memory of a worthless coquette, for such she afterwards proved herself to be.

The main facts, however, must be related. At that juncture she was a mere girl, and not much older than Ben. Her name was Bridget Walsh. Her father was a squatter, stationed near Wheogo, and there Bridget lived. To Ben's dazzled and inexperienced eyes she appeared a veritable angel of purity and loveliness. He was an excellent

stockman, but a poor appraiser of women. It must be confessed that the girl had a pretty face, and was a physically perfect specimen of her sex, but no other virtues, if she possessed them, have been revealed to us. She was notorious throughout the district as a heartless flirt. It was her pride and pleasure to keep several admirers at a time dangling on a string, and to make each believe himself the sole repository of her favors. She hated work, and she adored finery. Her moral sense belonged to the palaeolithic era. In short, she was an idle, sly, and irresponsible person.

It was a flattering triumph to the vanity of such a girl to secure so popular a youth as Ben Hall as the captive of her bow and spear. Not a handsomer lad was to be found in the countryside. His generous disposition and unfailing willingness to assist his neighbors had endeared him to all, and everyone held in high esteem the enterprise, energy, and acumen he evinced in the conduct of business affairs. Moreover, he was already, despite his years, quite a substantial citizen. He owned a flourishing herd, and he was reputed to possess a large sum of ready money at call in the hands of his employer, Mr. Hamilton.

Miss Walsh encouraged Ben, and her parents, who had long been anxious as to her future, enthusiastically welcomed his suit. Mr. Hall, however, was of another mind. Having taken pains to acquaint himself with the girl's character, he perceived danger in the connection to his son, and he opposed the match with all his force. There was re-enacted the old, old tragic-comedy of blind and sanguine faith triumphing to its own undoing above experience. Mr. Hall brought convincing evidence to Ben that Bridget Walsh

was trifling with him, that she had many lovers, and that one in particular, a young police constable whom we shall call James Garrett (for reasons that our readers will readily appreciate) had a better right than all others to become her husband. Ben sturdily refused to believe anything detrimental of his lady love. He passionately asserted his unconquerable faith in her integrity, and when his father persisted in attempting to open the boy's eyes, the pair quarrelled violently. Mr. Hamilton then intervened, hoping to save Ben from a mistake which he foresaw might wreck the lad's career. But Ben stubbornly refused to listen to any counsel, and proclaimed his resolve to marry Bridget, even though all the world should range against him.

Matters having come to this pass, Mr. Hall made a final desperate effort to prevent the marriage, which, in view of his opposition, the Walsh family was secretly arranging to expedite, notwithstanding the youth of the lovers. Apprehending that Bridget's parents considered Ben a desirable husband for their daughter principally on account of the lad's cattle and the money he had stored up, Mr. Hall decided on a coup d'etat. Exercising his legal right as the father of an infant, he withdrew from Mr. Hamilton's keeping the whole of Ben's little fortune, and, quitting the station, he removed both his own and his son's cattle to the other side of the country, returning to his earlier home near Murrurundi.

Ben, of course, could not be kept in ignorance of his father's intentions, but he was helpless to avert them. He witnessed the preparations for the exodus in a state of burning indignation. But his rage was futile. Mr. Hall proved

inexorable alike to menaces and abject protestations. He believed that it was his duty to do what he was doing, and nothing could turn him from his purpose. Ben was in despair. He saw himself bereft of all the property that he had toiled for years to amass, and it was no comfort to him to know that he might regain it, for he could only do so by giving up the girl he loved and abandoning the district. One last stormy interview took place between father and son. It was fruitless. Cruel speeches were exchanged, and the pair parted—for ever.

That night Ben left the station surreptitiously on foot, saying good-bye to no one, and, very probably, uncertain of his future course, for he had no mind, being a proud lad, to beg help of any man, least of all from the father of his sweetheart. Calf-love, however, is a compelling force, and daylight found Ben on the road to Wheogo. He arrived there at even-fall, tired out, hungry, and infinitely miserable. Mr. Hall had made one mistake. It was a crucial one. In assuming that Mr. John Walsh, Bridget's father, was a mere worldling, he had profoundly erred. Ben's sterling character and abilities, and not Ben's herds and money, had been this worthy man's chief motive in accepting the lad's suit for Bridget's hand.

Penniless and starving, Ben received a warmer welcome from John Walsh than had ever been accorded him when at the top of his fortunes. He was instantly appointed head stock-keeper of the station, at a high salary, and that very night Ben and Bridget were formally betrothed before an assembly of the station hands and servants over which the

squatter presided; and the young couple's health and happiness were toasted in flowing bumpers of champagne.

Twelve months later the lovers were married, and took up their residence on a run named Sandy Creek, adjoining Wheogo, which Ben was helped to stock with cattle and horses through his father-in-law's generosity.

The ensuing six years passed like a happy dream for Ben, only a single untoward incident occurring to disfigure its blissful tranquillity. One winter evening he returned home late and unexpectedly from a journey after stock. Entering the house softly, intent upon giving his wife a pleasant little surprise, he found her standing before the fire in the living room locked in the embrace of Constable James Garrett. But Bridget was a clever woman. She saw the door open, and, guessing the intruder, she at once began to rant and struggle and to cry out. Ben dashed to her assistance, and hurled the constable aside. A fight followed, in which Garrett was severely beaten and almost killed before he could effect his escape. Then came confidences, and Ben indignantly lamented that he was not a homicide when he learned how his darling's innocent hospitality had been abused, and how only his own fortunate return had preserved her (for it seems that her strength had been all but spent in strife with her cowardly assailant) from outrage worse than death.

Ben's confidence in Bridget's fidelity increased rather than diminished as time proceeded. His love for her was an all-absorbing passion, amounting very near to sheer idolatry. She bore him two children, and he was, perhaps, the only person for fifty miles around who never questioned her faithfulness, for he did not dream that it was her practice to

entertain admirers in his absence. And Ben was often absent from the homestead, since his manifold duties and growing enterprises called him constantly afield.

The end came like a bolt shot from the blue. Early in the year 1862 Ben was required to attend to a big muster at Bland. He took a most affectionate leave of Bridget and the babies, and the former lovingly entreated him not to be long away. He hurried home at the earliest moment possible to find the house a desert. His wife and her children had vanished. A letter was pinned to the central panel of her bedroom door. It was addressed to Ben. He tore the envelope across, and the following lines were unfolded to his gaze:—

> Dear Ben,
>
> Try to forgive me, for I shall never forgive myself. But I cannot help what I am doing. I love Jack Taylor, and I cannot live without him. Do not follow us. It would be useless. I never cared for you like I do for Jack, and I would not go back to you if you gave me gold to walk on.
>
> BRIDGET.

Until that instant Ben had never as much as heard of the man with whom his wife had eloped.

II.—A New Cog in the Machine.

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The black hour found Ben Hall utterly unprepared to meet it. Respect for women as a sex had been with him from childhood a cardinal sentiment, something more, indeed, than an article of faith. And he had held his wife in outstanding veneration, believing her the epitome and personification of all the sweetest female virtues. He conned over the missive which proclaimed the creature of his worship a meretricious jade with an incredulous and speculative mind. It was not a jest, of course. No true woman could steep her robe of honor in the mire of pleasantry.

But why had she written such a letter?

Had she been forced to pen those words of infamy?

He searched the house again and found evidence enough to assure him it had been unoccupied for at least two days. The maid servants had vanished with their mistress. He opened cupboard after cupboard. All were bare. It struck him that the house was too well lighted. He glanced at the windows and perceived that the blinds and curtains had disappeared. A little later he missed many familiar articles of furniture, knick-knacks, and petty valuables. He laughed stridently and pursued his investigations. The plate and household linen had melted into air.

In good truth, little had been left save furniture too heavy to be easily removed.

The thought flashed: "A cavalcade was needed with such a flitting." Ben laughed again, and strode out of the house to

the stable. He glanced into the stalls, then swept the stockyard with eyes that had begun to blaze. Two well-bred hacks and three stout pack-horses were missing. A heavy silence brooded over the station. Had his men gone too? He walked down the line of huts. All seemed empty, but as he passed the last he heard a suppressed guffaw, and swinging on his heel he saw three stockmen skulking behind an angle of the building which, till then, had screened them from his sight. They stiffened and shrank as he angrily confronted them. He read knowledge, contempt, and a little pity, too, in their would-be non-committal looks. He realised suddenly that they knew infinitely more than he of one matter at least, and mayhap of many things. A frantic thirst for larger wisdom awoke in him, but hand in hand with a new and unsuspected cunning. He dissimulated the fire that was burning in his heart, smoothed his face and smiled.

"Well, boys," he said, "so it's come at last, hey?"

They exchanged quiet glances, then looked at him; but reassured by his composed and confidently expectant demeanor, they relaxed in grins. "My!" exclaimed one, "if you ain't a deep one, boss, I'd like to know who is."

"Strike me!" said another.

The third was content with a gesture eloquent of surprise and admiration. Such material was as clay to the potter's hand. Ben easily turned the trio inside out, and learned as much as he required, more than was true, perhaps. But there was room and reason for exaggeration in such a parlous case, and when Ben closed the inquisition he brushed all petty details from his memory. Only two facts concerned him. He had been living for a lustrum with a

wanton. He had reverenced this woman like a saint. He returned to the house, and in the shelter of his little office he threw himself upon a couch to think.

An hour later he arose, pallid and purposeful. He would follow the woman (he had learned where she had gone) to the Fish River, and kill her, kill her in her latest lover's arms. But first he must have drink, and plenty of it; the pain in his breast must be numbed, or he would go mad before he could do what he wished to do. He proceeded to the storeroom, where the station liquor was kept, but it was to find the rum puncheon stone dry.

Then he remembered the carouse given to the servants by his wife on the eve of her elopement—whereof the men had told him. He ground his teeth upon a curse. He must be content with wine. A case of sparkling Burgundy had come by waggon from Forbes just before he left for Bland. He had put it in the pantry himself. He went to the pantry. The case was there, but it was empty of bottles, and it bulged untidily with a mess of shades and wrappings of straw.

Ben had purchased the wine for a feast that he had intended to give in honor of his eldest child's birthday. He gazed at the straw and felt all the laughing imps of Eblis tugging at his heartstrings. "No doubt sparkling Burgundy is Mr. Jack Taylor's favorite tipple," he said aloud. "I remember now how keen Bridget was that I should order it rather than champagne." Then he leaned against the wall and laughed with maniacal immoderation. He laughed and laughed until he sank a helpless, sore, and shuddering heap upon the floor; and still spasms of laughter shook him furiously, even when the slightest movement of any muscle had become an

agony. It was long before Dame Nature condescended to be kind to him. But at last, after a period of anguish unspeakable, some vital cord or fibre seemed to snap. There came a noise of rushing water in Ben's ears. He flung out his arms and fought as a drowning man for breath, but the visionary waters closed upon him, and peace settled on his tortured spirit.

III.—The Wheels Begin to Move.

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Ben Hall's mind was blessedly purged of murderous intention in that deep slumber of exhaustion. When his senses returned to him his sole desire was to murder thought and to stifle the glowing pain of recollection. Wandering like a ghost through the house where he had spent so many blissful years, he made a brave effort to discover fresh material for the reconstruction of his life. He made several resolutions. He would neither abandon the district nor his home. He would oppose a face of granite to the world, and allow none to suspect the havoc that Bridget had wrought in his heart, but force people to believe, on the contrary, that he was quietly glad to be rid of her. He would devote himself, soul and body, to the task of amassing money, and he would become a power in the land. Thus he would wipe out his dishonor and avenge his hurts, by wringing the vanity of his faithless wife. He would compel her to suppose, by his disdainful indifference to her defection, that his love, too, had been a mockery and a fraud; and by augmenting his fortunes he would oblige her to look up to his eminence from the depths of her own infamy and covet helplessly the brilliant prize that she had forfeited.

Poor Ben Hall! The end of all these desperate determinings was that he hung himself upon his marriage bed in a wild fit of weeping, and sent forth vain heart-broken cries into the still and empty twilight for his darling to return to him. When the mountains of his grief were dry, he stole

out to the stables and mounted his best horse. Riding at headlong speed to the nearest village, he entered a public house and essayed the anodyne of drink. The bar-room had its usual tale of loafers—some waggoners whose teams were staked out on the roadside, a bibulous squatter named Hale, and a sundowner or two. Ben nodded to Hale, and called on the publican to supply all hands. The loungers enthusiastically breasted the counter, and prepared for a rousing spree. They had already heard of Bridget Hall's elopement (it is probable indeed that Ben had been the last man in the district to learn of it, for such news travels at the speed of light to all except the interested), and they could see at a glance that Ben's mood was entirely reckless—ergo, his purse would be at their disposal. It was. Three rounds were consumed in as many minutes, but in dead silence, because the loungers were obsessed with a single thought, and they hesitated to offer Ben their sympathy, because of his silence and the inscrutability of his face.

The company was just about to drain the fourth round—supplied noiselessly in response to a peremptory nod—when the outer door opened, and Constable James Garrett stalked into the room. His face was flushed (he had just hurried away from a neighboring inn, having heard of Ben's arrival) and he was obviously not his own master. He strode to the counter (a sundowner obsequiously made room for him) and noisily called for a glass of rum. Ben spoke for the first time. "I'm in charge here, Garrett. If you drink, you drink with me."

"Of course, I will drink with you," cried the constable. Seizing the ready glass he held it on high. "And I'll give you

a toast," he bawled; "Good luck to Jack Taylor, the eye-opener of Sandy Creek!"

Ben Hall fell back a step, and his face slowly blanched. Garrett swallowed his liquor and turned to meet his enemy, bringing into prominence his pistol as he moved. "Now, I'm even with you," he jeered. "You took me at an advantage once, but never again. It's my turn now. Offer to touch me, and I'll send you up!"

The warning was apposite, for Ben's rage was in a flame, and his eyes gleamed madness. With a visible effort he controlled his passion, then he muttered, in a queer stammering way: "You've said enough for revenge, Garrett, let it go at that."

"Ay, ay, let it go at that," chimed in Hale, who thirsted for more free liquor, and was impatient at this interruption. "Shake hands and be friends," he added yearningly. But the constable was not to be satisfied with a little triumph, A beggar on horseback, he needs must ride to the devil. He named Bridget Hall, and with a biting jibe besmirched her reputation from the cradle. Ben laughed hoarsely and called for more rum. Garrett, always keeping his revolver pointed and at cock, plied the victim with still coarser insults. But he paused at length to drink, and Ben's chance arrived. The pistol cracked, but the bullet sped harmlessly into the ceiling.

Almost simultaneously the two men crashed to the floor, locked in each other's arms; but Garrett was a mere child in the powerful young squatter's grip, and in a few seconds he was screaming for mercy. As profitably he might have cried to the moon. The punishment meted out to him was brutally

severe, but he had labored to deserve it, and neither then nor later did it win the ruffian any sympathy. Garrett was thenceforth known as "the Black Snake," for it was rumoured and generally believed that he carried in his mouth a pronged tongue as the result of his encounter with Ben Hall in the Maid of Arens Hotel, at Wheogo.

Ben spent the next ten days riding from one township to another, drinking heavily and ceaselessly. During all the time he was never once sober, yet never once completely intoxicated. Always he was profoundly miserable, and his wanderings were inspired by the hope of somewhere discovering a cordial potent to obliterate consciousness and memory. Although he never once guessed it, his every moment was shadowed by a watchful and ruthless enemy, who had vowed to destroy him.

Ben's companions of this era were the riff-raff of the countryside; sundowners, drunken teamsters and stockmen, and suspected highwaymen—all those, indeed, who customarily sought relaxation, excitement, or information in the low social change-houses of vice and gossip provided by the remote wayside public-houses of the period. Ben's commerce with this scum was entirely innocent of any ulterior criminal intention, but Garrett chose to think otherwise, and laid his plans accordingly.

On the eleventh day Ben found himself at Wowingragong. A race meeting chanced to be in progress, and some idlers whom he met at the local tavern persuaded him to visit the course. Ben had scarcely entered the enclosure when he was accosted and publicly arrested by Sir Frederick Pottinger, chief of police of all that district, and