CLASSICS TO GO

AT LARGE

E. W. HORNUNG

At Large

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I

A NUCLEUS OF FORTUNE

A HOODED wagon was creeping across a depressing desert in the middle of Australia; layers of boxes under the hood, and of brass-handled, mahogany drawers below the boxes, revealed the licensed hawker of the bush. Now, the hawker out there is a very extensive development of his prototype here at home; he is Westbourne Grove on wheels, with the prices of Piccadilly, W. But these particular providers were neither so universal nor so exorbitant as the generality of their class. There were but two of them; they drove but two horses; and sat shoulder to shoulder on the box.

The afternoon was late; all day the horses had been crawling, for the track was unusually heavy. There had been recent rains; red mud clogged the wheels at every yard, and clung to them in sticky tires. Little pools had formed all over the plain; and westward, on the off-side of the wagon, these pools caught the glow of the setting sun, and filled with flame. Far over the horses' ears a long low line of trees was visible; otherwise the plain was unbroken; you might ride all day on these plains and descry no other horse nor man.

The pair upon the box were partners. Their names were Flint and Edmonstone. Flint was enjoying a senior partner's prerogative, and lolling back wreathed in smoke. His thick bare arms were idly folded. He was a stout, brown, bearded man, who at thirty looked many years older; indolence, contentment, and goodwill were written upon his face.

The junior partner was driving, and taking some pains about it—keeping clear of the deep ruts, and pushing the

pace only where the track was good. He looked twenty years Flint's junior, and was, in fact, just of age. He was strongly built and five-feet-ten, with honest gray eyes, fair hair, and an inelastic mouth.

Both of these men wore flannel shirts, buff cord trousers, gray felt wideawakes; both were public-school men, drawn together in the first instance by that mutually surprising fact, and for the rest as different as friends could be. Flint had been ten years in the Colonies, Edmonstone not quite ten weeks. Flint had tried everything, and failed; Edmonstone had everything before him, and did not mean to fail. Flint was experienced, Edmonstone sanguine; things surprised Edmonstone, nothing surprised Flint. Edmonstone had dreams of the future, and golden dreams; Flint troubled only about the present, and that very little. In fine, while Edmonstone saw licensed hawking leading them both by a short cut to fortune, and earnestly intended that it should, Flint said they would be lucky if their second trip was as successful as their first, now all but come to an end.

The shadow of horses and wagon wavered upon the undulating plain as they drove. The shadows grew longer and longer; there was a noticeable change in them whenever young Edmonstone bent forward to gaze at the sun away to the right, and then across at the eastern sky already tinged with purple; and that was every five minutes.

"It will be dark in less than an hour," the lad exclaimed at last, in his quick, anxious way; "dark just as we reach the scrub; we shall have no moon until eleven or so, and very likely not strike the river to-night."

The sentences were punctuated with sharp cracks of the whip. An answer came from Edmonstone's left, in the mild falsetto that contrasted so queerly with the bodily bulk of

Mr. John Flint, and startled all who heard him speak for the first time.

"My good fellow, I implore you again to spare the horseflesh and the whipcord—both important items—and take it easy like me."

"Jack," replied Edmonstone warmly, "you know well enough why I want to get to the Murrumbidgee to-night. No? Well, at all events, you own that we should lose no time about getting to some bank or other?"

"Yes, on the whole. But I don't see the good of hurrying on now to reach the township at an unearthly hour, when all the time we might camp in comfort anywhere here. To my mind, a few hours, or even a night or two, more or less——"

"Are neither here nor there? Exactly!" broke in Edmonstone, with increasing warmth. "Jack, Jack! the days those very words cost us! Add them up—subtract them from the time we've been on the roads—and we'd have been back a week ago at least. I shall have no peace of mind until I step out of the bank, and that's the truth of it." As he spoke, the fingers of Edmonstone's right hand rested for a moment, with a curious, involuntary movement, upon his right breast.

"I can see that," returned Flint, serenely. "The burden of riches, you see—and young blood! When you've been out here as long as I have, you'll take things easier, my son."

"You don't understand my position," said Edmonstone. "You laugh when I tell you I came out here to make money: all the same, I mean to do it. I own I had rotten ideas about Australia—all new chums have. But if I can't peg out my claim and pick up nuggets, I'm going to do the next best thing. It may be hawking and it may not. I mean to see. But

we must give the thing a chance, and not run unnecessary risks with the gross proceeds of our very first trip. A hundred and thirty pounds isn't a fortune; but it may be the nucleus of one; and it's all we've got between us in this world meanwhile."

"My dear old boy, I'm fully alive to it. I only don't see the point of finishing the trip at a gallop."

"The point is that our little all is concealed about my person," said Edmonstone, grimly.

"And my point is that it and we are absolutely safe. How many more times am I to tell you so?" And there was a squeak of impatience in the absurd falsetto voice, followed by clouds of smoke from the bearded lips.

Edmonstone drove some distance without a word.

"Yet only last week," he remarked at length, "a store was stuck up on the Darling!"

"What of that?"

"The storekeeper was robbed of every cent he had."

"I know."

"Yet they shot him dead in the end."

"And they'll swing for it."

"Meanwhile they've shown clean heels, and nobody knows where they are—or are not."

"Consequently you expect to find them waiting for us in the next clump, eh?"

"No, I don't. I only deny that we are absolutely safe."

Flint knocked out his pipe with sudden energy.

"My dear boy," cried he, "have I or have I not been as many years out here as you've been weeks? I tell you I was in the mounted police, down in Vic, all through the Kelly business; joined in the hunt myself; and back myself to know a real bushranger when I see him or read about him. This fellow who has the cheek to call himself Sundown is not a bushranger at all; he and his mates are mere robbers and murderers. Ned Kelly didn't go shooting miserable storekeepers; and he was the last of the bushrangers, and is likely to remain the last. Besides, these chaps will streak up-country, not down; but, if it's any comfort to you, see here," and Flint pocketed his pipe, made a long arm overhead and reached a Colt's revolver from a hook just inside the hood of the wagon, "let this little plaything reassure you. What, didn't you know I was a dead shot with this? My dear chap, I wasn't in the mounted police for nothing. Why, I could pick out your front teeth at thirty yards and paint my name on your waistcoat at twenty!"

Flint stroked the glittering barrel caressingly, and restored the pistol to its hook: there was a cartridge in every chamber.

The other said nothing for a time, but was more in earnest than ever when he did speak.

"Jack," said he, "I can only tell you this: if we were to lose our money straight away at the outset I should be a lost man. How could we go on without it—hawking with an empty wagon? How could I push, push, push—as I've got to—after losing all to start with? A hundred pounds! It isn't much, but it is everything to me—everything. Let me only keep it a bit and it shall grow under my eyes. Take it away from me and I am done for—completely done for."

He forgot that he was using the first person singular instead of plural; it had become natural to him to think out the business and its possibilities in this way, and it was no less in Flint's nature to see no selfishness in his friend's speech. Flint only said solemnly:

"You shouldn't think so much about money, old chap."

"Money and home!" exclaimed Dick Edmonstone in a low, excited tone. "Home and money! It's almost all I do think about."

Jack Flint leaned forward, and narrowly scanned the face of his friend; then lay back again, with a light laugh of forced cheerfulness.

"Why, Dick, you speak as though you had been exiled for years, and it's not three months since you landed."

Dick started. It already seemed years to him.

"Besides," continued the elder man, "I protest against any man growing morbid who can show a balance-sheet like ours. As to home-sickness, wait until you have been out here ten years; wait until you have tried digging, selecting, farming, droving; wait until you have worn a trooper's uniform and a counter jumper's apron, and ridden the boundaries at a pound a week, and tutored Young Australia for your rations. When you have tried all these things—and done no good at any of 'em, mark you—then, if you like, turn home-sick."

The other did not answer. Leaning forward, he whipped up the horses, and gazed once more towards the setting sun. His companion could not see his face; but trouble and anxiety were in that long, steady, westward gaze. He was very young, this lad Edmonstone—young even for his years.

Unlike his mate, his thoughts were all of the past and of the future; both presented happy pictures; so happy that his mind would fly from the one to the other without touching the present. And so he thought now, gazing westward, of home, and of something sweeter than home itself; and he blended that which had gone before with that which was yet to come; and so wonderful was the harmony between these two that to-day was entirely forgotten. Then the sun swung half-way below the dark line of the horizon; a golden pathway shone across the sandy track right to the wheels of the wagon; the dark line of scrub, now close at hand, looked shadowy and mysterious; the sunset colours declared themselves finally in orange and pink and gray, before the spreading purple caught and swallowed them. The dreamer's face grew indistinct, but his golden dreams were more vivid than before.

A deadly stillness enveloped the plain, making all sounds staccato: the rhythmical footfall of the horses, the hoarse notes of crows wheeling through the twilight like uncanny heralds of night, the croaking of crickets in the scrub ahead.

Dick was recalled to the antipodes by a mild query from his mate.

"Are you asleep, driver?"

"No."

"You haven't noticed any one ahead of us this afternoon on horseback?"

"No; why?"

"Because here are some one's tracks," said Flint, pointing to a fresh horse-trail on the side of the road.

Edmonstone stretched across to look. It was difficult in the dusk to distinguish the trail, which was the simple one of a horse walking.

"I saw no one," he said; "but during the last hour it would have been impossible to see any one, as close to the scrub as we are now. Whoever it is, he must have struck the track hereabouts somewhere, or we should have seen his trail before sundown."

"Whoever it is," said Flint, "we shall see him in a minute. Don't you hear him? He is still at a walk."

Edmonstone listened, and the measured beat of hoofs grew upon his ear; another moment and a horseman's back was looming through the dusk—very broad and round, with only the crown of a wideawake showing above the shoulders. As the wagon drew abreast his horse was wheeled to one side, and a hearty voice hailed the hawkers:

"Got a match, mateys? I've used my last, and I'm just weakening for a smoke."

"Here's my box," said Dick, pulling up. "Take as many as you like."

And he dropped his match-box into a great fat hand with a wrist like a ship's cable, and strong stumpy fingers: it was not returned until a loaded pipe was satisfactorily alight; and as the tobacco glowed in the bowl the man's face glowed in company. It was huge like himself, and bearded to the eyes, which were singularly small and bright, and set very close together.

"I don't like that face," said Dick when the fellow had thanked him with redoubled heartiness, and ridden on.

"It looked good-natured."

"It was and it wasn't. I don't want to see it again; but I shall know it if ever I do. I had as good a look at him as he had at us."

Flint made no reply; they entered the forest of low-sized malee and pine in silence.

"Jack," gasped Edmonstone, very suddenly, after half-an-hour, "there's some one galloping in the scrub somewhere—can't you hear?"

"Eh?" said Flint, waking from a doze.

"Some one's galloping in the scrub—can't you hear the branches breaking? Listen."

"I hear nothing."

"Listen again."

Flint listened intently.

"Yes—no. I thought for an instant—but no, there is no sound now."

He was right: there was no sound then, and he was somewhat ruffled.

"What are you giving us, Dick? If you will push on, why, let's do it; only we do one thing or the other."

Dick whipped up the horses without a word. For five minutes they trotted on gamely; then, without warning, they leaped to one side with a shy that half-overturned the wagon.

Side by side, and motionless in the starlight, sat two shadowy forms on horseback, armed with rifles, and masked to the chin.

"Hands up," cried one of them, "or we plug."

II

SUNDOWN

THERE was no time for thought, much less for action, beyond that taken promptly by Flint, who shot his own hands above his head without a moment's hesitation, and whispered to Dick to do the same. Any other movement would have been tantamount to suicide. Yet it was with his eyes open and his head cool that Flint gave the sign of submission.

The horsemen sat dark and motionless as the trees of the sleeping forest around them. They were contemplating the completeness of their triumph, grinning behind their masks.

Flint saw his chance. Slowly, very slowly, his left arm, reared rigidly above his head, swayed backward; his body moved gently with his arm; his eyes never left the two mysterious mounted men.

He felt his middle finger crowned by a cool ring. It was the muzzle of his precious Colt. One grasp, and at least he would be armed.

He turned his wrist for the snatch, gazing steadily all the while at the two vague shadows of men. Another second—and a barrel winked in the starlight, to gleam steadily as it covered Flint's broad chest. He who had called upon them to throw up their hands spoke again; his voice seemed to come from the muzzle of the levelled rifle.

"Stretch an inch more, you on the near-side, and you're the last dead man."

Flint shrugged his shoulders. The game was lost. There was no more need to lose his head than if the game had been won. There was no need at all to lose his life.

"I give you best," said he, without the least emotion in his extraordinary voice.

"Fold your arms and come down," said the man with the rifle, his finger on the trigger.

Flint did as he was ordered.

"The same—you with the reins."

Edmonstone's only answer was a stupefied stare.

"Jump down, my friend, unless you want helping with this."

Dick obeyed apathetically; he was literally dazed. At a sign from the man with the rifle he took his stand beside Flint; three paces in front of the luckless pair shone the short barrel of the Winchester repeater. The other robber had dismounted, and was standing at the horses' heads.

In this position, a moment's silence fell upon the four men, to be broken by the coarse, grating laughter of a fifth. Edmonstone turned his head, saw another horseman issuing from the trees, and at once recognised the burly figure of the traveller who had borrowed his match-box less than an hour before. At that moment, and not until then, Dick Edmonstone realised the situation. It was desperate; all was lost! The lad's brain spun like a top: reason fled from it; his hand clutched nervously at the pocket where the money was, and he swore in his heart that if that went, his life might go with it.

In another instant the hairy ruffian had ridden his horse close up to Edmonstone, whipped his foot from the stirrup, and kicked the youngster playfully in the chest—on that very spot which his thoughtless gesture had betrayed.

At this the other bushrangers set up a laugh—a short one.

With a spring like a young leopard, Dick Edmonstone had the big horseman by the beard, and down they came to the ground together. There, in the sand, they rolled over each other, locked in mortal combat—writhing, leaping, twisting, shifting—so that the leader of the band, though he pointed his rifle at the struggling men, dared not fire, for fear of hitting the wrong one. But there came a moment when the struggling ceased, when Flint sprang forward with a hoarse cry on his lips and Sundown took careless aim with the Winchester.

Dick Edmonstone was lying on his back with white, upturned face. Two crushing weights pinned down each arm below the shoulder; his adversary was kneeling on him with grinding teeth and a frightful face, and one hand busy at his belt. His hand flew up with a gleam. It was at that moment that the man with the rifle raised it and fired.

The bearded ruffian shook his hand as though hit, and the haft of a knife slipped from it; the bullet had carried away the blade. With a curse he felt for his revolver.

"Don't be a fool, Jem Pound," said the marksman quietly, lowering his smoking piece. "Before you bring the lot of us to the gallows, I'll put a bullet through your own fat head. Get up, you big fool! Cut the mokes adrift, and turn everything out of the wagon."

The man Pound rose sulkily, with a curious last look at the young Englishman's throat, and hell-fire in his little eyes.

"Ben, watch this cove," the chief went on, pointing to Flint, "and watch him with the shooter. I'll see to the youngster myself. Come here, my friend."

The speaker was plainly no other than the rascal who called himself Sundown; the hawkers heard the sobriquet on the lips of the other masked man, and their glances met. He was wrapped in a cloak that hid him from head to heels, stooped as he walked, and was amply masked. What struck Flint—who was sufficiently cool to remain an attentive observer—was the absence of vulgar bluster about this fellow; he addressed confederates and captives alike in the same quiet, decisive tones, without either raising his voice to a shout or filling the air with oaths. It appeared that Ned Kelly had not been the last of the real bushrangers, after all.

"You come along with me," said he, quietly; and drew Dick aside, pointing at him the rifle, which he grasped across the breech, with a finger still upon the trigger.

"Now," continued Sundown, when they had withdrawn a few yards into the scrub, "turn out that pocket." He tapped Edmonstone on the chest with the muzzle of the rifle.

Dick folded his arms and took a short step backward.

"Shoot me!" he exclaimed, looking the robber full in the face. "Why did you save me a minute ago? I prefer to die. Shoot me, and have done with it."

"Open your coat," said the bushranger.

Edmonstone tore open not only his coat, but his shirt as well, thus baring his chest.

"There. Shoot!" he repeated hoarsely.

Sundown stared at the boy with a moment's curiosity, but paid no heed to his words.

"Empty that pocket."

Dick took out the pocket-book that contained all the funds of the firm.

"Open it."

Dick obeyed.

"How much is in it?"

"A hundred and thirty pounds."

"Good! Cheques!"

"More notes."

The robber laughed consumedly.

"Take them, if you are going to," said Dick, drawing a deep breath.

Sundown did take them—pocket-book and all—still covering his man with the rifle. The moon was rising. In the pale light the young fellow's face was ghastly to look upon; it had the damp pallor of death itself. The bushranger eyed it closely, and half-dropped the bushranger's manner.

"New chum, I take it!"

"What of that?" returned Dick bitterly.

"And not long set up shop?"

Dick made no answer. Sundown stepped forward and gripped his shoulder.

"Say, mate, is this hundred and odd quid so very much to you?"

Still no answer.

"On oath, now: is it so very much?"

Dick looked up wildly.

"Much? It is everything. You have robbed me of all I have! You have saved my life when I'd as soon lose it with my money. Yes, it's all I have in the world, since you want to know! Do you want to madden me, you cur? Shoot me—shoot, I tell you. If you don't I'll make you!" And the young madman clenched his fist as he spoke.

That instant he felt himself seized by the neck and pushed forward, with a ring of cold steel pressing below his ear.

"Here you—Jem Pound—have your revenge and bind this cub. Bind tight, but fair, for I'm watching you."

In five minutes the blood would scarcely circulate in a dozen different parts of Edmonstone's body; he was bound as tightly as vindictive villain could bind him, to the off hind-wheel of his own wagon. Sundown stood by with the rifle, and saw it done.

Flint had already been bound to the near hind-wheel, so that the partners were lashed back to back—both able to watch their property looted at the rear of the wagon, but unable to exchange glances.

Sundown strolled about during the operation, which his subordinates conducted with deepening disgust, till he returned and asked what they had got.

"Precious little," was the answer. "Stock sold out—boxes mostly empty."

Nevertheless some few varieties of bush merchandise strewed the ground, and hats, boots, and pipes were quickly selected by Jem Pound and the man addressed as Ben; though as for Sundown, he seemed content with a supply of smoking materials, and, indeed, to be more or less preoccupied while the plunder went forward. At length, at a word from him, the other men mounted their horses, while their leader walked round to where Flint was spread-eagled against the wheel.

"Is there anything you want before we go?" the bushranger inquired, as civilly as you please.

"Yes," said Flint; "I want you to fill my pipe, stick it in my mouth, and put a match to it, if you will be so good."

The other laughed, but complied with the full request before turning his attention to young Edmonstone.

"As for you," he said, "here's your pocket-book. I couldn't take such a treasure from you. Better keep it in memory of the fortune (the immense fortune of a hundred and thirty pounds) it once contained. Not that I have quite emptied it, though; I may be a devil, but I never clean a man out quite; so you'll find enough left to get you a night's lodging and some tucker. And—and don't forget old Sundown altogether; you may be able to put in a good word for him some day!"

These last words, though spoken after a pause, were thrown off lightly enough; yet somehow they were unlike the rest that had gone before. Before their sound had died away Sundown was in his saddle, and the sound of horses galloping through the scrub was growing faint and far away.

Flint was the first to free himself. It took him hours. His teeth ached, his fingers bled, before the last knot that bound his hands was undone. His knife quickly did the rest.

He went straight to Edmonstone, who had not spoken since the gang decamped. Flint found him pale and cold, with a very hard expression upon his face. Dick allowed himself to be set free without a word—without so much as an intelligent glance.

The horses could be heard munching bits of bushes close at hand. They were easily caught. Nor was it a difficult task to a ready-handed fellow like Flint to splice the traces, which the bushrangers had cut.

The crestfallen partners were on the point of reentering the wagon, when Flint saw the pocket-book lying where it had been dropped.

"Better take it," said Flint sorrowfully.

In utter apathy Dick picked it up.

"Wouldn't you see if they've cleaned it entirely?" suggested Flint.

With listless fingers Edmonstone withdrew the elastic and opened the pocket-book.

By this time the moon had mounted high in the clear southern sky; by her pure white rays they might have read small print. Flint's heart smote him; it was by his doing they had carried so many notes, through a fad of his about opening their banking account with hard cash; at cheques the bushrangers might easily have turned up their noses, as bushrangers had done before. But now, as it was—poor, poor young devil!

A cry broke the silence, and rang out loud and wild upon the still night air. It came from Flint's side. He turned to find his companion tottering and trembling.

Dick Edmonstone had dropped the pocket-book, and was nervously counting a roll of crisp, crackling papers.

"They are all here!—all! all!" he whispered in a strange, broken voice.

"Never!"

"Yes, all—all! Only think of it; our fortune is not lost, after all—it's made—the key to it is in my hand again! Jack, the fellow had pity on me. No, I mean on us. I don't mean to be selfish, Jack; it's share and share alike, between you and me, and always will be. But if you knew—if you knew! Jack, I'll put in that good word for him—I'll make it more than words, if ever I get the chance! For I do owe him something," said the poor fellow, carried away by reaction and excitement, so that his breaking voice trembled between sobs and laughter. "I do owe that Sundown something. God bless him—that's all *I* say."

But Flint said nothing at all; he was much too amazed for words.

III

AFTER FOUR YEARS

One chilly night in June, 1886, the ship *Hesper*, bound from Melbourne to London, sailed into the Channel. She carried the usual wool cargo and twenty saloon passengers besides. When the Lizard light was sighted, the excitement —which had increased hourly since the Western Islands were left astern—knew no reasonable bounds. For the *Hesper* was a hundred and eight days out; and among her passengers were grizzled Colonists, to whom this light was the first glimmer of England for thirty years; men who had found in the Colonial Exhibition at South Kensington an excuse to intrust vast flocks and herds to the hands of overseers, and to consummate that darling scheme of every prosperous Colonial, which they render by their phrase "a trip home." Sweepstakes on the date of sighting England, got up in the tropics, were now promptly settled; quarrels begun in the Southern Ocean were made up in the magic element of British waters; discontent was in irons, and joy held the ship. Far into the middle-watch festive souls perambulated the quarter-deck with noisy expressions of mirth, though with the conviction that the vessel was behaving badly; whereas the vessel was a good deal more innocent of that charge than the gentlemen who preferred it. But even when the last of these roysterers retired there was still one passenger left on the poop.

A young man leaned with folded arms upon the port rail, staring out into the night. It seemed as though his eye penetrated the darkness, and found something bright beyond, so wistful was its gaze. One bell rang out from the

forecastle, two bells followed half an hour later at one o'clock, but the figure of this dreamer remained motionless. For an hour he did not stir; but, as his imagination became more vivid, the expression of his eyes grew softer, until their yearning melted into a thin, thin film, and the firm lines of the mouth relaxed, and facial creases carved by a few hard years were smoothed away. He was only a few hours ahead of the *Hesper* after all: she was off the Cornish coast, and he (in fancy) far up the Thames.

Three-bells aroused the dreamer. He stood upright with a start. He passed his hand quickly across his forehead, as if to rid his brain of weak thoughts. He began tramping the deck rapidly. Now the whole man was changed: his step was brisk, his frame instinct with nervous animation, his chest swelled proudly, his eyes sparkled with triumph. He had hung over the rail like any sentimental home-comer; he marched the deck like a conquering hero.

Yet this was one of the youngest men on board, and his years of absence from England were but a tithe of some of his fellow-passengers. During a long voyage the best and the worst of a man's character come out; but this man's display had been less complete than any one else's, and he was probably the better liked on board in consequence. Though reserved and quiet, he had, indeed without being conscious of it, become very popular. Perhaps one factor in this was the accidental discovery, half-way through the voyage, that he could draw uncommonly well; for it opened up a source of unexpected entertainment at a time when the stock amusements of the high seas had begun to flag. But there was one thing about him which, had his fellow-passengers suspected it, in all probability would have interfered considerably with his popularity: this was the astounding fact that at the age of twenty-five he had already made his fortune.

One scene from the bush life of this exceedingly lucky young gentleman has already been set forth. It will be sufficient to briefly glance at the remainder of his Colonial career, since details of unbroken success are voted a bore by common consent.

The firm of Flint and Edmonstone did well out of licensed hawking. Perhaps their honesty—which was as transparent as it was original in that line of business—had much to do with their success; for although squatters were at first sceptical of the new firm, their eyes were at once opened to the iniquitous prices of the Jews, who had hitherto enjoyed a monopoly of their custom. The newcomers thus gained experimental patronage, which they retained on their merits. After a year they advanced a step in the mercantile scale of the Colony: they set up a general store at a rising settlement on the Darling. The store had not been opened six months when the senior partner's chequered life in the Colonies was terminated in a manner utterly unforeseen. Word came that he had inherited, through an accommodating series of deaths, money and property in Ireland. It was no brilliant heritage, but it held out advantages greater on the whole than back-block storekeeping could be expected to afford. Withdrawing a temperate share of the profits, Mr. John Flint kicked the dust of the Riverina from his long boots, and finally disappeared from the face of the desert, and Edmonstone was left sole proprietor of a most promising "concern."

The luck that had hitherto attended him was soon to be enhanced; for, gold being discovered close to the little township on the Darling, a "rush" from all parts of Australia followed. As in most similar cases of late years, expectations were by no means realised on the new diggings. Still, people came, and the storekeeper was a made man.

A colonist of less than three years' standing, he joined three congenial spirits in the enterprise of stocking a station in the new Kimberley district of Western Australia. Here a huge success seemed certain in process of time; when, in the full tide of prosperity, with all he touched turning to gold beneath his fingers, with the lust of wealth upon him, there came a sudden revulsion of feeling. He realised that he had already amassed a fortune—small enough as fortunes go, but beyond his wildest hopes when quitting England. He saw that to go farther was to pursue wealth for wealth's sake—which was a rather lofty view of it; and that luck might not last for ever—which was shrewd; and that, with the sufficiency he had won, a rather better kind of existence was within reach. In short, he sickened of money-grubbing in a single night, and turned desperately home-sick instead; and, as it was not a game of cards, he was able, without incurring anything worse than compassion, to rise a winner. He determined to go home, invest his "pile," live on the interest, and—devote himself to art! He journeyed forthwith to Melbourne, and there succeeded in disposing of his share in the Kimberley station for a sum little short of five figures.

Dick Edmonstone was opposed to sensational methods, or he would have taken the first mail-steamer and dropped like a thunderbolt among his people in England, with his money in his pocket. Besides, an exceptional amount of experience crammed into four years had robbed him, among other things, of nearly (though not quite) all his boyish impetuosity. So he merely wrote two letters by the first mail to his mother and to a certain Colonel Bristo. Thereafter he took his passage by the clipper *Hesper*, then loading at Williamstown, and prepared for a period of reflection, anticipation, and well-earned rest.

Dick Edmonstone had altered a good deal during his four years in Australia. In the first place, the big boy had become

a man, and a man who held up his head among other men; a man who had made his way by his own indomitable perseverance, and who thereby commanded your respect; a man of all-round ability in the opinion of his friends (and they were right); a man of the world in his own (and he was wrong). And all at twenty-five! The old tremendous enthusiasm had given place to a thoroughly sanguine temperament of lusty, reliant manhood. He was cooler now, no doubt, but his heart was still warm and his head still hot. Strangers took him for thirty. His manner was always independent, could be authoritative, and was in danger of becoming arrogant. This much, successful money-hunting had naturally brought about. But a generous disposition had saved him from downright selfishness through it all, and the talisman of a loyal, honest, ardent love had led him blameless through a wild and worldly life. And he was still young—young in many ways. His hopes and beliefs were still boundless; they had all come true so far. He had not found the world a fraud yet. On the contrary, he liked the world, which was natural; and thought he knew it, which did not follow because he happened to know some rough corners of it.

One curious characteristic of young Edmonstone as a public schoolman and a modern young Englishman was the entire absence in him of false pride. Though transported pretty directly from Cambridge to Australia, he had taken to retail trade (of a humble kind at that) with philosophical sang-froid. On leaving England he had asked himself, What was his chief object in going out? And he had answered, To make money and return. Did it matter how he made it, once out there? No. No manual toil need degrade him, no honest business put him to shame. In England it is different; but in her democratic Colonies her younger sons—whether from Poplar or from Eton—must take the work that offers, as they covet success. Dick Edmonstone jumped at his first opening;

that it chanced to be in the licensed hawking line cost him hardly a pang.

Indeed, he looked back lovingly in his success on those early days, when all he possessed in the world was invested in that daring venture. He thought of the anxiety that consumed him at the time, and of Jack Flint's cooling influence; and whenever he thought of those days one episode rose paramount in his brain, obliterating other memories. That episode was the "sticking-up" of the wagon on the first trip by Sundown and his men, which must have meant his ruin but for the extraordinary behaviour of the bushranger with regard to the pocket-book and its contents. He did not forget that the bushranger had preserved his life as well as restored his money. And that hundred pounds actually turned out to be the nucleus of a fortune! Sundown—poor fellow—was captured; perhaps by this time hanged, or imprisoned for life. Just before the *Hesper* sailed, word of the outlaw's arrest in a remote district of Queensland was telegraphed from Brisbane. He had been heard of from time to time during the preceding years, but on the whole his gang had done less mischief and shed less blood than some of their predecessors. As for Dick, when he read of the capture he was downright sorry. It may be a passive order of kindness that refrains from robbing a man; yet Dick was so peculiarly constituted as to feel in secret more than a passing regret at the news.

But as the *Hesper* drew towards the Channel he thought less and less of the life he had left behind, and more and more of the life before him. He longed all day to feel the springy turf of England under foot once more; to have the scent of English flowers in his nostrils; to listen to English larks carolling out of sight in the fleecy clouds of an English sky. How green the fields would seem! How solid the houses, how venerable the villages, how historic the rivers of the Old

World! And then how he longed to plunge into the trio he styled "his people"—his mother the widow, his brother the City clerk, his sister the saint! Yet what were these yearnings beside one other! What the dearest kin beside her who must yet be nearer and dearer still!—the young girl from whom he had fled to seek his fortune—for whom he had found it. In her his honest yearning centred, in her his high hopes culminated. Of her he thought all day, gazing out over the sun-spangled waves, and all night, tossing in his berth. A thousand times he cursed his folly in choosing canvas before steam; the time was so long—and seemed longer; the brightest days were interminable ages; favouring gales were lighter than zephyrs.

He allowed no doubts to interfere with the pleasures of anticipation; no fears, no anxieties. If he thought of what might have happened at home during the last four or five months since he had received news, the catalogue of calamities was endless. He did not believe disappointment possible through any sort of a calamity. If those he loved still lived—as he knew they did five or six months ago—then he was sure of his reception; he was sure of hearts and hands; he was sure of his reception from every one—yes, from every one.

The future seemed so splendid and so near! Yet it was giving the future hardly a fair chance to expect as much of it as young Edmonstone expected during the last days of his homeward voyage.

IV

HOW DICK CAME HOME

A CROWD of the usual dock order had gathered on the quay at Blackwall by the time the *Hesper* made her appearance, towed by two Channel tugs. Some time, however, passed before the vessel swung near enough to the quay for recognitions to begin; and by then the dingy line of dock loafers and watermen was enhanced by a second rank of silk hats and a slight leaven of bonnets. With intolerable sloth the big ship swung closer and closer, broadside on; greetings were excitedly exchanged, and at length the gangway was thrown across and held by a dozen eager hands.

Dick Edmonstone, at the break of the poop, bent forward to search among the faces on the quay, apparently without finding any he knew. But presently, as his eye glanced rapidly up and down the line, he became conscious of one gaze fixed steadily upon him; twice he overlooked this face; the third time, a mutual stare, a quick smile of delight, a bound across the gangway, and Dick was grasping his brother's hand.

"Dick!"

"Maurice!"

Then they seemed to gasp in the same breath:

"Never should have known you!" "Nor I you—from Adam!"

And then they were silent for a whole minute, scrutinising one another from head to heels; until Maurice said simply that he had got away from the bank and needn't go back, and fell to asking about the voyage, and the weather, and the passengers, and had the cabin been comfortable? and what a stunning ship! To all of which Dick replied coherently; and for five minutes they talked as though they had parted last week. Only for such trifles could they find ready words; so much was inexpressible just at first.

They went into Dick's cabin; and there their tongues loosened a little. All were well at home, and happy, and comfortable; the news was good all round, as Dick phrased it, with thankfulness in his heart. That was the first delicious fact to be realised. After that, words flew with marvellous rapidity; the brothers were soon like two competitive human looms, turning them out one against the other. Fortunately the pace was too quick to last; in ten minutes both were breathless. Then they fastened upon stewards and Customs officials, and, by dint of some bullying and a little bribing, managed finally to get clear of the ship with Dick's luggage.

Dick was in tremendous spirits. He was back in old England at last, and testified his appreciation of the fact every minute.

Between Blackwall and Fenchurch Street he made odious comparisons touching Colonial travelling; in the four-wheeler across to Waterloo he revelled in the rattle and roar of the traffic; along the loop-line his eyes feasted on the verdant fields that had haunted his dreams in the wilderness.

The Edmonstones lived in a plain little house in a road at Teddington, in which all the houses were little, plain, and uniformly alike. They called their house "The Pill Box"; but