HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON

AUSTRALIA FELIX

Henry Handel Richardson

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EAN 8596547245186

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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PROEM

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In a shaft on the Gravel Pits, a man had been buried alive. At work in a deep wet hole, he had recklessly omitted to slab the walls of a drive; uprights and tailors yielded under the lateral pressure, and the rotten earth collapsed, bringing down the roof in its train. The digger fell forward on his face, his ribs jammed across his pick, his arms pinned to his sides, nose and mouth pressed into the sticky mud as into a mask; and over his defenceless body, with a roar that burst his ear-drums, broke stupendous masses of earth.

His mates at the windlass went staggering back from the belch of violently discharged air: it tore the wind-sail to strips, sent stones and gravel flying, loosened planks and props. Their shouts drawing no response, the younger and nimbler of the two—he was a mere boy, for all his amazing growth of beard—put his foot in the bucket and went down on the rope, kicking off the sides of the shaft with his free foot. A group of diggers, gathering round the pit-head, waited for the tug at the rope. It was quick in coming; and the lad was hauled to the surface. No hope: both drives had fallen in; the bottom of the shaft was blocked. The crowd melted with a "Poor Bill—God rest his soul!" or with a silent shrug. Such accidents were not infrequent; each man might thank his stars it was not he who lay cooling down below. And so, since no more washdirt would be raised from this hole, the party that worked it made off for the nearest grog-shop, to wet their throats to the memory of the dead, and to discuss future plans.

All but one: a lean and haggard-looking man of some five and forty, who was known to his comrades as Long Jim. On hearing his mate's report he had sunk heavily down on a log, and there he sat, a pannikin of raw spirit in his hand, the tears coursing ruts down cheeks scabby with yellow mud, his eyes glassy as marbles with those that had still to fall.

He wept, not for the dead man, but for himself. This accident was the last link in a chain of ill-luck that had been forging ever since he first followed the diggings. He only needed to put his hand to a thing, and luck deserted it. In all the sinkings he had been connected with, he had not once caught his pick in a nugget or got the run of the gutter; the "bottoms" had always proved barren, drives been exhausted without his raising the colour. At the present claim he and his mates had toiled for months, overcoming one difficulty after another. The slabbing, for instance, had cost them infinite trouble; it was roughly done, too, and, even after the pins were in, great flakes of earth would come tumbling down from between the joints, on one occasion nearly knocking silly the man who was below. Then, before they had slabbed a depth of three times nine, they had got into water, and in this they worked for the next sixty feet. They were barely rid of it, when the two adjoining claims were abandoned, and in came the flood again—this time they had to fly for their lives before it, so rapid was its rise. Not the strongest man could stand in this ice-cold water for more than three days on end—the bark slabs stank in it, too, like the skins in a tanner's yard—and they had been forced to quit work till it subsided. He and another man had gone to

the hills, to hew trees for more slabs; the rest to the grog-shop. From there, when it was feasible to make a fresh start, they had to be dragged, some blind drunk, the rest blind stupid from their booze. That had been the hardest job of any: keeping the party together. They had only been eight in all—a hand-to-mouth number for a deep wet hole. Then, one had died of dysentery, contracted from working constantly in water up to his middle; another had been nabbed in a manhunt and clapped into the "logs." And finally, but a day or two back, the three men who completed the nightshift had deserted for a new "rush" to the Avoca. Now, his pal had gone, too. There was nothing left for him, Long Jim, to do, but to take his dish and turn fossicker; or even to aim no higher than washing over the tailings rejected by the fossicker.

At the thought his tears flowed anew. He cursed the day on which he had first set foot on Ballarat.

"It's 'ell for white men—'ell, that's what it is!"

"'Ere, 'ave another drink, matey, and fergit yer bloody troubles."

His re-filled pannikin drained, he grew warmer round the heart; and sang the praises of his former life. He had been a lamplighter in the old country, and for many years had known no more arduous task than that of tramping round certain streets three times daily, ladder on shoulder, bitch at heel, to attend the little flames that helped to dispel the London dark. And he might have jogged on at this up to three score years and ten, had he never lent an ear to the tales that were being told of a wonderful country, where, for the mere act of stooping, and with your naked hand, you

could pick up a fortune from the ground. Might the rogues who had spread these lies be damned to all eternity! Then, he had swallowed them only too willingly; and, leaving the old woman wringing her hands, had taken every farthing of his savings and set sail for Australia. That was close on three years ago. For all he knew, his wife might be dead and buried by this time; or sitting in the almshouse. She could not write, and only in the early days had an occasional newspaper reached him, on which, alongside the Queen's head, she had put the mark they had agreed on, to show that she was still alive. He would probably never see her again, but would end his days where he was. Well, they wouldn't be many; this was not a place that made old bones. And, as he sat, worked on by grief and liquor, he was seized by a desperate homesickness for the old country. Why had he ever been fool enough to leave it? He shut his eyes, and all the well-known sights and sounds of the familiar streets came back to him. He saw himself on his rounds of a winter's afternoon, when each lamp had a halo in the foggy air; heard the pit-pat of his four-footer behind him, the bump of the ladder against the prong of the lamp-post. His friend the policeman's glazed stovepipe shone out at the corner; from the distance came the tinkle of the muffin-man's bell, the cries of the buy-a-brooms. He remembered the glowing charcoal in the stoves of the chestnut and potato sellers; the appetising smell of the cooked-fish shops; the fragrant steam of the hot, dark coffee at the twopenny stall, when he had turned shivering out of bed; he sighed for the lights and jollity of the "Hare and Hounds" on a Saturday night. He would never see anything

of the kind again. No; here, under bare blue skies, out of which the sun frizzled you alive; here, where it couldn't rain without at once being a flood; where the very winds blew contrarily, hot from the north and bitter-chill from the south; where, no matter how great the heat by day, the night would as likely as not be nipping cold: here he was doomed to end his life, and to end it, for all the yellow sunshine, more hopelessly knotted and gnarled with rheumatism than if, dawn after dawn, he had gone out in a cutting north-easter, or groped his way through the grey fog-mists sent up by grey Thames.

Thus he sat and brooded, all the hatred of the unwilling exile for the land that gives him house-room burning in his breast.

Who the man was, who now lay deep in a grave that fitted him as a glove fits the hand, careless of the pass to which he had brought his mate; who this really was, Long Jim knew no more than the rest. Young Bill had never spoken out. They had chummed together on the seventy-odd-mile tramp from Melbourne; had boiled a common billy and slept side by side in rain-soaked blankets, under the scanty hair of a she-oak. That was in the days of the first great stampede to the goldfields, when the embryo seaports were as empty as though they were plague-ridden, and every man who had the use of his legs was on the wide bush-track, bound for the north. It was better to be two than one in this medley of bullock-teams, lorries, carts and pack-horses, of dog-teams, wheelbarrows and swagmen, where the air rang with oaths, shouts and hammering hoofs, with whip-cracking and bullock-prodding; in this hurly-burly of

thieves, bushrangers and foreigners, of drunken convicts and deserting sailors, of slit-eyed Chinese and apt-handed Lascars, of expirees and ticket-of-leave men, of Jews, Turks and other infidels. Long Jim, himself stunned by it all: by the pother of landing and of finding a roof to cover him; by the ruinous price of bare necessaries; by the length of this unheard-of walk that lay before his town-bred feet: Long Jim had gladly accepted the young man's company on the road. Originally, for no more than this; at heart he distrusted Young Bill, because of his fine-gentleman airs, and intended shaking the lad off as soon as they reached the diggings. There, a man must, for safety's sake, be alone, when he stooped to pick up his fortune. But at first sight of the strange, wild scene that met his eyes he hastily changed his mind. And so the two of them had stuck together; and he had never had cause to regret it. For all his lily-white hands and finical speech Young Bill had worked like a nigger, standing by his mate through the latter's disasters; had worked till the ladyish hands were horny with warts and corns, and this, though he was doubled up with dysentery in the hot season, and racked by winter cramps. But the life had proved too hard for him, all the same. During the previous summer he had begun to drink—steadily, with the dogged persistence that was in him—and since then his work had gone downhill. His sudden death had only been a hastening-on of the inevitable. Staggering home to the tent after nightfall he would have been sure, sooner or later, to fall into a dry shicer and break his neck, or into a wet one and be drowned.

On the surface of the Gravel Pit his fate was already forgotten. The rude activity of a gold-diggings in full swing had closed over the incident, swallowed it up.

Under a sky so pure and luminous that it seemed like a thinly drawn veil of blueness, which ought to have been transparent, stretched what, from a short way off, resembled a desert of pale clay. No patch of green offered rest to the eye; not a tree, hardly a stunted bush had been left standing, either on the bottom of the vast shallow basin itself, or on the several hillocks that dotted it and formed its sides. Even the most prominent of these, the Black Hill, which jutted out on the Flat like a gigantic tumulus, had been stripped of its dense timber, feverishly disembowelled, and was now become a bald protuberance strewn with gravel and clay. The whole scene had that strange, repellent ugliness that goes with breaking up and throwing into disorder what has been sanctified as final, and belongs, in particular, to the wanton disturbing of earth's gracious, green-spread crust. In the pre-golden era this wide valley, lying open to sun and wind, had been a lovely grassland, ringed by a circlet of wooded hills; beyond these, by a belt of virgin forest. A limpid river and more than one creek had meandered across its face; water was to be found there even in the driest summer. She-oaks and peppermint had given shade to the flocks of the early settlers; wattles had bloomed their brief delirious yellow passion against the grey-green foliage of the gums. Now, all that was left of the original "pleasant resting-place" and its pristine beauty were the ancient volcanic cones of Warrenheip and Buninyong. These, too far off to supply wood for firing or slabbing, still

stood green and timbered, and looked down upon the havoc that had been made of the fair, pastoral lands.

Seen nearer at hand, the dun-coloured desert resolved itself into uncountable pimpling clay and mud-heaps, of divers shade and varying sizes: some consisted of but a few bucketfuls of mullock, others were taller than the tallest man. There were also hundreds of rain-soaked, mud-bespattered tents, sheds and awnings; wind-sails, which fell, funnel-like, from a kind of gallows into the shafts they ventilated; flags fluttering on high posts in front of stores. The many human figures that went to and fro were hardly to be distinguished from the ground they trod. They were coated with earth, clay-clad in ochre and gamboge. Their faces were daubed with clauber; it matted great beards, and entangled the coarse hairs on chests and brawny arms. Where, here and there, a blue jumper had kept a tinge of blueness, it was so besmeared with yellow that it might have been expected to turn green. The gauze neck-veils that hung from the brims of wide-awakes or cabbage-trees were become stiff little lattices of caked clay.

There was water everywhere. From the spurs and gullies round about, the autumn rains had poured freely down on the Flat; river and creeks had been over their banks; and such narrow ground-space as remained between the thick-sown tents, the myriads of holes that abutted one on another, jealous of every inch of space, had become a trough of mud. Water meandered over this mud, or carved its soft way in channels; it lay about in puddles, thick and dark as coffee-grounds; it filled abandoned shallow holes to the brim.

From this scene rose a blurred hum of sound; rose and as it were remained stationary above it—like a smoke-cloud, which no wind comes to drive away. Gradually, though, the ear made out, in the conglomerate of noise, a host of separate noises infinitely multiplied: the sharp tick-tick of surface-picks, the dull thud of shovels, their muffled echoes from the depths below. There was also the continuous squeak and groan of windlasses; the bump of the mullock emptied from the bucket; the trundle of wheelbarrows, pushed along a plank from the shaft's mouth to the nearest pool; the dump of the dart on the heap for washing. Along the banks of a creek, hundreds of cradles rattled and grated; the noise of the spades, chopping the gravel into the puddling-tubs or the Long Toms, was like the scrunch of shingle under waves. The fierce yelping of the dogs chained to the flag-posts of stores, mongrels which yapped at friend and foe alike, supplied a note of earsplitting discord.

But except for this it was a wholly mechanical din. Human brains directed operations, human hands carried them out, but the sound of the human voice was, for the most part, lacking. The diggers were a sombre, preoccupied race, little given to lip-work. Even the "shepherds," who, in waiting to see if their neighbours struck the lead, beguiled the time with euchre and "lambskinnet," played moodily, their mouths glued to their pipe-stems; they were tail-on-end to fling down the cards for pick and shovel. The great majority, ant-like in their indefatigable busyness, neither turned a head nor looked up: backs were bent, eyes fixed, in a hard scrutiny of cradle or tin-dish: it was the earth that held them, the familiar, homely earth, whose common fate

it is to be trodden heedlessly underfoot. Here, it was the loadstone that drew all men's thoughts. And it took toll of their bodies in odd, exhausting forms of labour, which were swift to weed out the unfit.

The men at the windlasses spat into their horny palms and bent to the crank: they paused only to pass the back of a hand over a sweaty forehead, or to drain a nose between two fingers. The barrow-drivers shoved their loads, the bones of their forearms standing out like ribs. Beside the pools, the puddlers chopped with their shovels; some even stood in the tubs, and worked the earth with their feet, as wine-pressers trample grapes. The cradlers, eternally rocking with one hand, held a long stick in the other with which to break up any clods a careless puddler might have deposited in the hopper. Behind these came the great army of fossickers, washers of surface-dirt, equipped with knives and tin-dishes, and content if they could wash out half-a-pennyweight to the dish. At their heels still others, who treated the tailings they threw away. And among these last was a sprinkling of women, more than one with an infant sucking at her breast. Withdrawn into a group for themselves worked a body of Chinese, in loose blue blouses, flappy blue leg-bags and huge conical straw hats. They, too, fossicked and re-washed, using extravagant quantities of water.

Thus the pale-eyed multitude worried the surface, and, at the risk and cost of their lives, probed the depths. Now that deep sinking was in vogue, gold-digging no longer served as a play-game for the gentleman and the amateur; the greater number of those who toiled at it were work-tried,

seasoned men. And yet, although it had now sunk to the level of any other arduous and uncertain occupation, and the magic prizes of the early days were seldom found, something of the old, romantic glamour still clung to this most famous gold-field, dazzling the eyes and confounding the judgment. Elsewhere, the horse was in use at the puddling-trough, and machines for crushing quartz were under discussion. But the Ballarat digger resisted the introduction of machinery, fearing the capitalist machinery would bring in its train. He remained the dreamer, the jealous individualist; he hovered for ever on the brink of a stupendous discovery.

This dream it was, of vast wealth got without exertion, which had decoyed the strange, motley crowd, in which peers and churchmen rubbed shoulders with the scum of Norfolk Island, to exile in this outlandish region. And the intention of all alike had been: to snatch a golden fortune from the earth and then, hey, presto! for the old world again. But they were reckoning without their host: only too many of those who entered the country went out no more. They became prisoners to the soil. The fabulous riches of which they had heard tell amounted, at best, to a few thousands of pounds: what folly to depart with so little, when mother earth still teemed! Those who drew blanks nursed an unquenchable hope, and laboured all their days like navvies, for a navvy's wage. Others again, broken in health or disheartened, could only turn to an easier handiwork. There were also men who, as soon as fortune smiled on them, dropped their tools and ran to squander the work of months in a wild debauch; and they invariably

returned, tail down, to prove their luck anew. And, yet again, there were those who, having once seen the metal in the raw: in dust, fine as that brushed from a butterfly's wing; in heavy, chubby nuggets; or, more exquisite still, as the daffodil-yellow veining of bluish-white quartz: these were gripped in the subtlest way of all. A passion for the gold itself awoke in them an almost sensual craving to touch and possess; and the glitter of a few specks at the bottom of pan or cradle came, in time, to mean more to them than "home," or wife, or child.

Such were the fates of those who succumbed to the "unholy hunger." It was like a form of revenge taken on them, for their loveless schemes of robbing and fleeing; a revenge contrived by the ancient, barbaric country they had so lightly invaded. Now, she held them captive—without chains; ensorcelled—without witchcraft; and, lying stretched like some primeval monster in the sun, her breasts freely bared, she watched, with a malignant eye, the efforts made by these puny mortals to tear their lips away.

Part I

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Chapter I

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On the summit of one of the clay heaps, a woman shot into silhouette against the sky. An odd figure, clad in a skimpy green petticoat, with a scarlet shawl held about her shoulders, wisps of frowsy red hair standing out round her head, she balanced herself on the slippery earth, spinning her arm like the vane of a windmill, and crying at the top of her voice: "Joe, boys!—Joe, Joe, Joey!"

It was as if, with these words, she had dropped a live shell in the diggers' midst. A general stampede ensued; in which the cry was caught up, echoed and re-echoed, till the whole Flat rang with the name of "Joe." Tools were dropped, cradles and tubs abandoned, windlasses left to kick their cranks backwards. Many of the workers took to their heels; others, in affright, scuttled aimlessly hither and thither, like barnyard fowls in a panic. Summoned by shouts of: "Up with you, boys!—the traps are here!" numbers ascended from below to see the fun, while as many went hurriedly down to hiding in drive or chamber. Even those diggers who could pat the pocket in which their licence lay ceased work, and stood about with sullen faces to view the course of events. Only the group of Chinamen washing tail-heaps remained unmoved. One of them, to whom the warning woman

belonged, raised his head and called a Chinese word at her; she obeyed it instantly, vanished into thin air; the rest went impassively on with their fossicking. They were not such fools as to try to cheat the Government of its righteous dues. None but had his licence safely folded in his nosecloth, and thrust inside the bosom of his blouse.

Through the labyrinth of tents and mounds, a gold-laced cap could be seen approaching; then a gold-tressed jacket came into view, the white star on the forehead of a mare. Behind the Commissioner, who rode down thus from the Camp, came the members of his staff; these again were followed by a body of mounted troopers. They drew rein on the slope, and simultaneously a line of foot police, backed by a detachment of light infantry, shot out like an arm, and walled in the Flat to the south.

On the appearance of the enemy the babel redoubled. There were groans and cat-calls. Along with the derisive "Joeys!" the rebel diggers hurled any term of abuse that came to their lips.

"The dolly mops! The skunks! The bushrangers!—Oh, damn 'em, damn 'em! ... damn their bloody eyes!"

"It's Rooshia—that's what it is!" said an oldish man darkly.

The Commissioner, a horse-faced, solemn man with brown side whiskers, let the reins droop on his mare's neck and sat unwinking in the tumult. His mien was copied by his staff. Only one of them, a very young boy who was new to the colony and his post, changed colour under his gaudy cap, went from white to pink and from pink to white again;

while at each fresh insult he gave a perceptible start, and gazed dumbfounded at his chief's insensitive back.

The "bloodhounds" had begun to track their prey. Rounding up, with a skill born of long practice, they drove the diggers before them towards the centre of the Flat. Here they passed from group to group and from hole to hole, calling for the production of licences with an insolence that made its object see red. They were nice of scent, too, and, nine times in ten, pounced on just those unfortunates who, through carelessness, or lack of means, or on political grounds, had failed to take out the month's licence to dig for gold. Every few minutes one or another was marched off between two constables to the Government Camp, for fine or imprisonment.

Now it was that it suddenly entered Long Jim's head to cut and run. Up till now he had stood declaring himself a free-born Briton, who might be drawn and quartered if he ever again paid the blasted tax. But, as the police came closer, a spear of fright pierced his befuddled brain, and inside a breath he was off and away. Had the abruptness of his start not given him a slight advantage, he would have been caught at once. As it was, the chase would not be a long one; the clumsy, stiff-jointed man slithered here and stuck fast there, dodging obstacles with an awkwardness that was painful to see. He could be heard sobbing and cursing as he ran.

At this point the Commissioner, half turning, signed to the troopers in his rear. Six or seven of them shook up their bridles and rode off, their scabbards clinking, to prevent the fugitive's escape.

A howl of contempt went up from the crowd. The pink and white subaltern made what was almost a movement of the arm to intercept his superior's command.

It was too much for Long Jim's last mate, the youthful blackbeard who had pluckily descended the shaft after the accident. He had been standing on a mound with a posse of others, following the man-hunt. At his partner's crack-brained dash for the open, his snorts of indignation found words. "Gaw-blimy! ... is the old fool gone dotty?" Then he drew a whistling breath. "No, it's more than flesh and blood .... Stand back, boys!" And though he was as little burdened with a licence as the man under pursuit, he shouted: "Help, help! ... for God's sake, don't let 'em have me!" shot down the slope, and was off like the wind.

His foxly object was attained. The attention of the hunters was diverted. Long Jim, seizing the moment, vanished underground.

The younger man ran with the lightness of a hare. He had also the hare's address in doubling and turning. His pursuers never knew, did he pass from sight behind a covert of tents and mounds, where he would bob up next. He avoided shafts and pools as if by a miracle; ran along greasy planks without a slip; and, where these had been removed to balk the police, he jumped the holes, taking risks that were not for a sane man. Once he fell, but, enslimed from head to foot, wringing wet and hatless, was up again in a twinkling. His enemies were less sure-footed than he, and times without number measured their length on the oily ground. Still, one of them was gaining rapidly on him, a giant of a fellow with long thin legs; and soon the constable's foot

filled the prints left by the young man's, while these were still warm. It was a fine run. The diggers trooped after in a body; the Flat rang with cheers and plaudits. Even the Commissioner and his retinue trotted in the same direction. Eventually the runaway must land in the arms of the mounted police.

But this was not his plan. Making as though he headed for the open, he suddenly dashed off at right angles, and, with a final sprint, brought up dead against a log-and-canvas store which stood on rising ground. His adversary was so close behind that a collision resulted; the digger's feet slid from under him, he fell on his face, the other on top. In their fall they struck a huge pillar of tin-dishes, ingeniously built up to the height of the store itself. This toppled over with a crash, and the dishes went rolling down the slope between the legs of the police. The dog chained to the flagstaff all but strangled himself in his rage and excitement; and the owner of the store came running out.

"Purdy! ... you! What in the name of ...?"

The digger adroitly rolled his captor over, and there they both sat, side by side on the ground, one gripping the other's collar, both too blown to speak. A cordon of puffing constables hemmed them in.

The storekeeper frowned. "You've no licence, you young beggar!"

And: "Your licence, you scoundrel!" demanded the leader of the troop.

The prisoner's rejoinder was a saucy: "Now then, out with the cuffs, Joe!"

He got on his feet as bidden; but awkwardly, for it appeared that in falling he had hurt his ankle. Behind the police were massed the diggers. These opened a narrow alley for the Camp officials to ride through, but their attitude was hostile, and there were cries of: "Leave 'im go, yer blackguards! ... after sich a run! None o yer bloody quod for 'im!" along with other, more threatening expressions. Sombre and taciturn, the Commissioner waved his hand. "Take him away!"

"Well, so long, Dick!" said the culprit jauntily; and, as he offered his wrists to be handcuffed, he whistled an air.

Here the storekeeper hurriedly interposed: "No, stop! I'll give bail." And darting into the tent and out again, he counted five one-pound notes into the constable's palm. The lad's collar was released; and a murmur of satisfaction mounted from the crowd.

At the sound the giver made as if to retire. Then, yielding to a second thought, he stepped forward and saluted the Commissioner. "A young hot-head, sir! He means no harm. I'll send him up in the morning, to apologise."

("I'll be damned if you do!" muttered the digger between his teeth.)

But the Chief refused to be placated. "Good day, doctor," he said shortly, and with his staff at heel trotted down the slope, followed till out of earshot by a mocking fire of "Joes." Lingering in the rear, the youthful sympathiser turned in his saddle and waved his cap.

The raid was over for that day. The crowd dispersed; its members became orderly, hard-working men once more.

The storekeeper hushed his frantic dog, and called his assistant to rebuild the pillar of tins.

The young digger sat down on the log that served for a bench, and examined his foot. He pulled and pulled, causing himself great pain, but could not get his boot off. At last, looking back over his shoulder he cried impatiently: "Dick!... I say, Dick Mahony! Give us a drink, old boy! ... I'm dead-beat."

At this the storekeeper—a tall, slenderly built man of some seven or eight and twenty—appeared, bearing a jug and a pannikin.

"Oh, bah!" said the lad, when he found that the jug held only water. And, on his friend reminding him that he might by now have been sitting in the lock-up, he laughed and winked. "I knew you'd go bail."

"Well! ... of all the confounded impudence...."

"Faith, Dick, and d'ye think I didn't see how your hand itched for your pocket?"

The man he called Mahony flushed above his fair beard. It was true: he had made an involuntary movement of the hand—checked for the rest halfway, by the knowledge that the pocket was empty. He looked displeased and said nothing.

"Don't be afraid, I'll pay you back soon's ever me ship comes home," went on the young scapegrace, who very well knew how to play his cards. At his companion's heated disclaimer, however, he changed his tone. "I say, Dick, have a look at my foot, will you? I can't get this damned boot off."

The elder man bent over the injury. He ceased to show displeasure. "Purdy, you young fool, when will you learn

wisdom?"

"Well, they shouldn't hunt old women, then—the swine!" gave back Purdy; and told his tale. "Oh, lor! there go six canaries." For, at his wincing and shrinking, his friend had taken a penknife and ripped up the jackboot. Now, practised hands explored the swollen, discoloured ankle.

When it had been washed and bandaged, its owner stretched himself on the ground, his head in the shade of a barrel, and went to sleep.

He slept till sundown, through all the traffic of a busy afternoon.

Some half-a-hundred customers came and went. The greater number of them were earth-stained diggers, who ran up for, it might be, a missing tool, or a hide bucket, or a coil of rope. They spat jets of tobacco-juice, were richly profane, paid, where coin was scarce, in gold-dust from a match-box, and hurried back to work. But there also came old harridans—as often as not, diggers themselves—whose language outdid that of the males, and dirty Irish mothers; besides a couple of the white women who inhabited the Chinese quarter. One of these was in liquor, and a great hullabaloo took place before she could be got rid of. Put out, she stood in front of the tent, her hair hanging down her back, cursing and reviling. Respectable women as well did an afternoon's shopping there. In no haste to be gone, they sat about on empty boxes or upturned barrels exchanging confidences, while weary children plucked at their skirts. A party of youngsters entered, the tallest of whom could just see over the counter, and called for shandygaffs. The assistant was for chasing them off, with hard words. But the

storekeeper put, instead, a stick of barley-sugar into each dirty, outstretched hand, and the imps retired well content. On their heels came a digger and his lady-love to choose a wedding-outfit; and all the gaudy finery the store held was displayed before them. A red velvet dress flounced with satin, a pink gauze bonnet, white satin shoes and white silk stockings met their fancy. The dewy-lipped, smutty-lashed Irish girl blushed and dimpled, in consulting with the shopman upon the stays in which to lace her ample figure; the digger, whose very pores oozed gold, planked down handfuls of dust and nuggets, and brushed aside a neat Paisley shawl for one of yellow satin, the fellow to which he swore to having seen on the back of the Governor's lady herself. He showered brandy-snaps on the children, and bought a polka-jacket for a shabby old woman. Then, producing a bottle of champagne from a sack he bore, he called on those present to give him, after: "'Er most Gracious little Majesty, God bless 'er!" the: "'Oly estate of materimony!" The empty bottle smashed for luck, the couple departed arm-in-arm, carrying their purchases in the sack; and the rest of the company trooped to the door with them, to wish them joy.

Within the narrow confines of the tent, where red-herrings trailed over moleskin-shorts, and East India pickles and Hessian boots lay on the top of sugar and mess-pork; where cheeses rubbed shoulders with tallow candles, blue and red serge shirts, and captain's biscuits; where onions, and guernseys, and sardines, fine combs, cigars and bear's-grease, Windsor soap, tinned coffee and hair oil, revolvers, shovels and Oxford shoes, lay in one grand miscellany:

within the crowded store, as the afternoon wore on, the air grew rank and oppressive. Precisely at six o'clock the bar was let down across the door, and the storekeeper withdrew to his living-room at the back of the tent. Here he changed his coat and meticulously washed his hands, to which clung a subtle blend of all the strong-smelling goods that had passed through them. Then, coming round to the front, he sat down on the log and took out his pipe. He made a point, no matter how brisk trade was, of not keeping open after dark. His evenings were his own.

He sat and puffed, tranquilly. It was a fine night. The first showy splendour of sunset had passed; but the upper sky was still aflush with colour. And in the centre of this frail cloud, which faded as he watched it, swam a single star.

Chapter II

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With the passing of a cooler air the sleeper wakened and rubbed his eyes. Letting his injured leg lie undisturbed, he drew up the other knee and buckled his hands round it. In this position he sat and talked.

He was a dark, fresh-coloured young man, of middle height, and broadly built. He had large white teeth of a kind to crack nuts with, and the full, wide, flexible mouth that denotes the generous talker.

"What a wind-bag it is, to be sure!" thought his companion, as he smoked and listened, in a gently ironic

silence, to abuse of the Government. He knew—or thought he knew—young Purdy inside out.

But behind all the froth of the boy's talk there lurked, it seemed, a purpose. No sooner was a meal of cold chop and tea over than Purdy declared his intention of being present at a meeting of malcontent diggers. Nor would he even wait to wash himself clean of mud.

His friend reluctantly agreed to lend him an arm. But he could not refrain from taking the lad to task for getting entangled in the political imbroglio. "When, as you know, it's just a kind of sport to you."

Purdy sulked for a few paces, then burst out: "If only you weren't so damned detached, Dick Mahony!"

"You're restless, and want excitement, my boy—that's the root of the trouble."

"Well, I'm jiggered! If ever I knew a restless mortal, it's yourself."

The two men picked their steps across the Flat and up the opposite hillside, young Purdy Smith limping and leaning heavy, his lame foot thrust into an old slipper. He was at all times hail-fellow-well-met with the world. Now, in addition, his plucky exploit of the afternoon blazed its way through the settlement; and blarney and bravos rained upon him. "Golly for you, Purdy, old 'oss!" "Showed 'em the diggers' flag, 'e did!" "What'll you take, me buck? Come on in for a drop o' the real strip-me-down-naked!" Even a weary old strumpet, propping herself against the doorway of a dancing-saloon, waved a tipsy hand and cried: "Arrah, an' is it yerrself, Purrdy, me bhoy? Shure an' it's bussin' ye I'd be afther—if me legs would carry me!" And Purdy laughed, and

relished the honey, and had an answer pat for everybody especially the women. His companion on the other hand was greeted with a glibness that had something perfunctory in it, and no touch of familiarity.

The big canvas tent on Bakery Hill, where the meeting was to be held, was already lighted; and at the tinkle of a bell the diggers, who till then had stood cracking and hobnobbing outside, began to push for the entrance. The bulk of them belonged to the race that is quickest to resent injustice—were Irish. After them in number came the Germans, swaggering and voluble; and the inflammable French, English, Scotch and Americans formed a smaller and cooler, but very dogged group.

At the end of the tent a rough platform had been erected, on which stood a row of cane seats. In the body of the hall, the benches were formed of boards, laid from one upturned keg or tub to another. The chair was taken by a local auctioneer, a cadaverous-looking man, with never a twinkle in his eye, who, in a lengthy discourse and with the single monotonous gesture of beating the palm of one hand with the back of the other, strove to bring home to his audience the degradation of their present political status. The diggers chewed and spat, and listened to his periods with sang-froid: the shame of their state did not greatly move them. They followed, too, with composure, the rehearsal of their general grievances. As they were aware, said the speaker, the Legislative Council of Victoria was made up largely of Crown nominees; in the election of members the gold-seeking population had no voice whatsoever. This was a scandalous thing; for the digging constituent outnumbered

all the rest of the population put together, thus forming what he would call the backbone and mainstay of the colony. The labour of THEIR hands had raised the colony to its present pitch of prosperity. And yet these same bold and hardy pioneers were held incapable of deciding jot or tittle in the public affairs of their adopted home. Still unmoved, the diggers listened to this recital of their virtues. But when one man, growing weary of the speaker's unctuous wordiness, discharged a fierce: "Why the hell don't yer git on to the bloody licence-tax?" the audience was fire and flame in an instant. A riotous noise ensued; rough throats rang changes on the question. Order restored, it was evident that the speech was over. Thrown violently out of his concept, the auctioneer struck and struck at his palm—in vain; nothing would come. So, making the best of a bad job, he irately sat down in favour of his successor on the programme.

This speaker did not fare much better. The assemblage, roused now, jolly and merciless, was not disposed to give quarter; and his obtuseness in dawdling over such high-flown notions as that population, not property, formed the basis of representative government, reaped him a harvest of boos and groans. This was not what the diggers had come out to hear. And they were as direct as children in their demand for the gist of the matter.

"A reg-lar ol' shicer!" was the unanimous opinion, expressed without scruple. While from the back of the hall came the curt request to him to shut his "tater-trap."

Next on the list was a German, a ruddy-faced man with mutton-chop whiskers and prominent, watery eyes. He could