Hornung Ernest William

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# Содержание

# Hornung E. W.
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## CHAPTER I
## THE SECOND OFFICER

"Land ahead!"

The *North Foreland* had been made advisedly snug for the night. In the middle watch she was under her three lower topsails and fore topmast staysail only. Not that it blew very hard, but the night was dark and hazy, with a heavy swell. And it was the last night of the voyage.

At eight bells there had been a cast of the deep-sea lead, with the significant result that the skipper had been the first to turn in; gradually the excited passengers had followed his example, instead of staying on deck to see the Otway light. The second mate had said there would be no Otway that night, and what the second said was good enough for most. The saloon skylight had become a clean-edged glimmer in the middle of the poop, the binnacle a fallen moon; not a port-hole twinkled on the rushing ink; and the surviving topsails, without visible stitch or stick aloft

or alow, hovered over the ship like gigantic bats.

Four persons remained upon the poop: the middy of the watch, tantalized by muffled guffaws from the midshipmen's berth in the after-house; the man at the wheel, in eclipse above the belt, with the binnacle light upon one weather-beaten hand; and on the weather side, the second mate in reluctant conversation with a big cigar that glowed at intervals into a bearded and spectacled face, the smooth brown one of the young officer sharing the momentary illumination.

"It's all very well," said the senior man, in low persistent tones, "but if we don't have it out now, when are we to? You know what it will be like to-morrow: we shall land first thing, and you'll be the busiest man on board. As for the rules of the ship, if an owner can't use his discretion he might as well travel by some other line."

The young fellow was smiling pleasantly as the other puffed again.

"Very good, Mr. Merridew! I don't object if the captain doesn't; and of course I must tell you anything you want to know."

"Anything! My good young man, if I am to consider this matter for a moment (which I don't promise) I must at least know everything that you can tell me about yourself first; for what," continued Mr. Merridew, taking the cigar from his teeth, "what do you suppose I know about you at this moment? Absolutely nothing except that you seem to be a first-class sailor, as they tell me you are, and a very nice fellow, as I have found you for myself

– aboardship; but of your shore-going record, of your position in life at home, and of your people and their position, to speak quite plainly, I know nothing at all."

Mr. Merridew delivered himself with a certain dispassionate unction, as one who could do the judicial to a turn, and enjoy it. Yet his tone was kindly, and the periods free from wilful offense.

"You may make your mind easy about my people. I have none," said the sailor, bitterly. A fatherly hand found his shoulder on the word.

"My dear fellow! I am so sorry."

"You mean relieved."

"I mean what I say," said Mr. Merridew, removing his hand.

It was the young man's turn to apologize, which he did with much frankness and more feeling.

"The truth is, sir, my parents have been dead for years; and yet they are nearly everything to me still – they were all the world until this voyage! My mother was Irish; her name would not be new to you, but it will keep. It may not be necessary for you to know it, or anything more about me, and in any case it can't alter me. But I am half-Irish through my mother – though you wouldn't think it."

"I would think it," remarked Mr. Merridew, blowing at his cigar as at a forge, until the red light found him looking wise through his spectacles, but the officer with one eye on his sails and no perceptible emotion in the other.

"My first name," he went on, "is as Irish as you like; it's Denis;

and you may say that I've been living up to it for once!"

"Denis!" repeated Mr. Merridew, with interest. "Well, I know that name, anyhow; one of our partners – Captain Devenish's father – he's Denis Devenish, you know."

"Indeed," said Denis Dent, and there was a strange light in his spare eye. "Well, so much for my mother; my father was a Yorkshire dalesman, as his father and his father's father were before him. I am the first of them to leave the land."

"May I ask why?"

"It isn't our land any more. My father gave up everything to take my mother abroad, when her life was despaired of in England, and when her people – her own people – I can't trust myself to speak of them!"

And the young fellow turned abruptly aside, while Mr. Merridew puffed and peered at a massive though clean-cut face, whose only Irish feature was a pair of bright brown eyes, bold and resolute, yet quick to laughter, if quicker still to fire.

The south-easter sang through the unseen rigging; the ship rushed a fathom through the unseen sea. The second had a look at the compass, and came climbing back to windward with his hands in his pea-jacket pockets.

"And yet," said Mr. Merridew, flourishing his cigar, "and yet – you want to marry my daughter!"

"If she will have me, sir," said the sailor, with an uncertainty on that point in becoming contrast to his certainty of himself.

"But whether *I* will or not."

"I never said that, Mr. Merridew. I should be very sorry to take up such a position, I can assure you, sir."

"You would be sorry, but you would do it," retorted Mr. Merridew with acumen. "You would do as your father evidently did before you."

"I hoped we had finished with my parents, sir."

"But they left you nothing, if I understand aright," rejoined Merridew, changing his ground and his tone with some dexterity. "And you would marry my daughter on the pay of a junior officer in the merchant service."

"I never said that either. I have my captain's certificate, sir, as it is."

The new tone was the tone to take. Mr. Merridew went so far as to give his daughter her name.

"And Nan," said he, "might have ten thousand pounds for her marriage portion. I don't say she would, but for all you know she might have more. Her husband ought to bring at least as much into settlement, even as a self-respecting man, don't you think? And yet you would make her a merchant skipper's wife!"

The young man winced, as though for a flash he saw himself wholly in the wrong. Then his face hardened – all but the Irish eyes – and it was the face of a man who would justify himself with his life's blood. Impulse, initiative, temerity, were in the eyes, indomitable endurance in their solid setting.

"You take it for granted that I will never be anything more!" he exclaimed. "But, sir, once a sailor isn't always one. I've got

on well at sea. I'd get on well on land – anywhere – at anything! You may smile. I feel it in me. Mr. Merridew, it may seem what you please, but I'm pretty young even for what I am now. Surely, surely, you would give me time – if she would?"

It was the Irishman speaking, the Irish blood spurting out in words, and Mr. Merridew distrusted the bulk of that race; but his cigar glowed again upon a mouth and jaw that came of harder stock, and for the moment his mind was illuminated too.

Here was this Denis Dent, not one young man, it struck him, but two young men in one, each with a very name of his own. Dents from the Dales, Denis from old Ireland! Mr. Merridew smiled through his spectacles, pleased with his conceit, not altogether disposed to regard it as such, but incontinently interested in a personality to which he had been so clever as to supply the key. The heart of the discoverer warmed toward his own. There was an attractiveness in Denis, a solid worth in Dent. Denis might win the girl. Dent would deserve her. And Denis Dent might have carried her own father with him, had he been the only young man in the case, or even on the poop of the *North Foreland* as she drove through the haze on the last night of her voyage.

But as the pair stood eye to eye, the pregnant pause between them was interrupted by a loud and startling laugh, and a tall figure loomed through the first gray tinge of approaching dawn. It was that of a young man in a tasseled dressing-gown, with an ornate meerschaum pipe pendent between the bushy black

whiskers of the day.

"Well, if that doesn't take first prize for cheek!" cried he, and lurched toward them in his slippers as one who had never found his sea-legs.

"We are having a private conversation, Ralph," said Mr. Merridew in mild rebuke.

"A private conversation that you could hear on the forecastle-head!" jeered Ralph Devenish, who was full of liquor without being drunk. "I suppose he's so proud of it he wants the whole ship to know!"

And the meerschaum pointed jerkily at Denis, who stood the heaving deck as a circus rider stands a horse, his hands still deep in his pea-jacket pockets.

"Captain Devenish," said he, "it's against the rules to speak to the officer of the watch, but you shall speak civilly if you speak at all. Otherwise I advise you to take yourself off the poop before you're put off."

"By God!" snarled Devenish, "but you shall pay for that! Before one owner to another owner's son, on the last night of the voyage! It's your last in the Line, Mr. Officer of the Watch! And you dare to lay a hand on me! Come on. You dare. I know your blustering breed, you damned Jack-in-buttons!"

"And I know yours – you Devenishes! I know you too well to soil my hands on any one of you!"

The concentrated bitterness of this retort had an opposite effect on either hearer; one it stupefied, the other it flooded with

a sudden light; but Devenish was the first to find his tongue, and for the moment there was none more foul before the mast. The deplorable torrent was only stemmed by the startling apparition of a square little man in a still more awful, because a more articulate and more righteous, rage.

"I'll teach you to break the rules of my ship! I'll teach you to curse my officers, drunk or sober! Out of my sight, sir, or I'll have you in irons before you're a minute older!"

"Come, come, Captain Coles," said Mr. Merridew, with dignity; "there has been more provocation than you imagine; and this, you must remember, is Captain Devenish."

"I don't care a dump if it's Devenish Merridew and Company lumped into one!" roared the little skipper. "You can have your way ashore, but I mean to have mine at sea; and as for your iron coffin of a ship, I'll be thankful to come off her alive, let alone sailing in her again. No two compasses alike, thirty-six hours since we got the sun, the darkest night of the voyage, and Australia anywhere! Yet this is the night you choose, you owners, to bully and browbeat my officers of the watch!"

But it was no longer the darkest night of the voyage, or even night at all. The group stood visible and divisible in a cold gray haze. The lower topsails were no longer detached from the ship; there was a misty mast to each; and the ship was running dry-decked through the high smooth seas.

It was at this moment that the haze lifted like breath from a mirror; and a subtle new sound was just beginning to insinuate

itself upon the ear when the look-out man drowned it with his roar from the forecastle head.

# CHAPTER II
# SAUVE QUI PEUT

Land was indeed ahead, and in the most appalling shape known to seafaring man: at the last moment, the haze had lifted on a line of jagged cliffs, already parallel with the foreyard, albeit by the muffled thud of the breakers, not quite so near as it looked.

The *North Foreland* was blessed with a commander who was at his best in an emergency. Little Coles had turned in when he should have stayed on deck, and was no more prepared for shipwreck than if such disasters were unknown; but he rose to the occasion like a lark. His sharp voice cracked like a whip from the break of the poop, and all hands, piped from the forecastle, the petty officers' quarters, and the midshipmen's berth, came running as though the words drew blood.

The spanker was set, with the mizzen and maintopmast staysail, and the helm put down to bring her round; but there was no racing of the cliffs to port. She stumbled a little in her stride; the fresh sails flapped; but there was no getting her on the other tack, though the upper mizzen topsail was pressed into the job.

The skipper waited a minute with compressed lips and fiery eye; then a crackle of musketry from his weatherbeaten throat, and both anchors were let go.

The port anchor had fifty fathoms of cable, the starboard

anchor sixty fathoms of chain; in anticipation of their holding, the sails were clewed up, and a man sent into the chains with the lead, for she was drifting inshore every moment. But the lead danced on smooth rock, where the anchors trailed as readily as over ice; the captain had them both up again, but that took longer than letting them go, and meanwhile half the hands were aloft shaking out sail once more.

Coles was showing his resource at every point, and by this time had his ship actually head to wind; in another minute she might have stood away upon the port tack. But at this juncture time was wasted in an attempt to sheet home the topsails, which failing, the buntlines of the mainsail were let go, the port main tack got on board, and the sheet hauled aft. The men were still upon the rope when the *North Foreland* struck and spilt them like the winners in a tug-of-war.

It was the horrible striking of an iron ship: a terrific crash under the mizzen-chains, and there she quivered like a rat in a terrier's teeth. And the devilish seas that had run with her, hunted with her, how they fell on her now, and swept and trampled her from the moment she was down!

The scene on deck, if it wanted the infinite horror of pitch darkness, was only a degree less dreadful in a pearly dawn that left no doubt about the situation. Every hatchway spouted crude humanity, shouting, shoving, screaming, scolding, covering a chattering nakedness as it gained the deck, and there struck silent at a glance. For nothing was hid, nothing extenuated, for a single

moment, to a single eye. There was no learning the worst by humane degrees. It was patent at once to the wildest and the calmest gaze. The sanguine soul was no more help to the stunned community than the born pessimist; there was no chance for the imagination either way.

They could see, every one of them, the towering cliffs – blind sides of houses without an inch of pavement – the rollers running up to them unbroken, for the better sport of leaping sky-high at the impact. They could see her settling, see her bumping, see the top-hamper falling about the deck. There was enough to feel and to hear. The eyes might have been spared a little. Some shut them more than once, as when an upper spar came down like an arrow, transfixing a sailor with incredible neatness, and actually sticking upright through man and deck; but few escaped the sight of blood, and none the dying scream. A worse sight was in store. A steward with the stock of life-belts from the lazaretto touched the captain's arm. And, checked in some hoarse tirade, the valiant Coles stood first aghast and then abject in the sight of passengers and crew – beaten man and broken reed.

The better part of valour was the only part he lacked. Not a boat in davits; the whole fleet docked, inboard, on skids! And exactly six life-belts to go round a ship's company of over a hundred souls!

The second mate was clearing away the port life-boat with five of the hands, one blaspheming, another in tears, more than one vowing with reason that they would all be drowned, and the

young officer himself in a consuming agony of his own. At the break of the poop, almost all this time, stood a slender figure in a pink wrapper, between a bearded man in spectacles and a man with bushy whiskers in incongruous silk and tassels. Dent wondered why he did not lend a hand; no, on second thoughts he knew, and cursed the fellow in his heart. He did not mean to leave her side. He meant to have the rescuing of her. Trust a Devenish to play his own game! Denis was too busy to look twice at the trio, but he seemed to see them all the time, and the vision galled him to insensate effort.

"Take your time, take your time," cried the chief officer, all red hook-nose and ginger moustache, an oilskin bonnet fastened under his chin. "The old man's done his part. He'll go down in her. The rest hangs on you and me."

The chief met the responsibility with his own tap of cold profanity, not unaccompanied by shrewd cuff and calculated kick, as he superintended the clearing of the other life-boat. As for the skipper, it seemed that he had recovered his mettle to meet fresh trouble further aft; they could hear him firing oaths and threatening lead; but when Denis looked he could not get his eyes past the two men at the break of the poop, for at that moment they were lashing one of the six life-belts about a forlorn little figure in pink.

The port life-boat was ready first, and the third mate busy marshaling the women and children in a helpless, eager, hesitating, exasperating throng; but Miss Merridew was still

detained by her friends on the poop. The gripes had been cut, and Denis himself had sent the last chock flying with a savage kick. He and his crew of five were in the act of hooking the tackles to the thwarts. The chief mate was shouting a timely word of advice.

"When you get her launched, and filled, and stand away in her _ "

But Denis did not hear what he was to do then, for at that instant a green sea lifted the port life-boat clean over the side with all six men.

Denis's next thought was that the water was warmer than he should have supposed, and his next but one that somebody was bent on braining him; he was hit about the head, not once but repeatedly; but as soon as he could see he knew the reason, for a dim glimmer was all there was to see. The boat was riding bottom upward. He had come up under her. It was the thwart that had been belabouring him. He caught hold of it, pulled as at a horizontal bar, came up like a cork, and easily wormed half his person between thwart and bilge.

In this position Denis regained breath, immersed to the waist, but with no lack of air, and a bilge-cork handy for fresh supplies, until the real danger occurred to him. The capsized life-boat rode the rollers like a cradle, but at any moment she might shatter herself against the cliffs. It was hardly the work of one for Denis to dive from underneath her at the thought. The cliffs, however, were still far enough away; of the wreck he could see nothing for the swell; but it was now broad daylight.

He went under the boat again, and in about five minutes she righted herself for no apparent reason. Denis was nearly stunned in the process, nor was the advantage otherwise unmixed. The boat had come up full, and Denis had now to bale for his life.

So she floated upon the cliffs, until the big seas began to break, when she instantly capsized again. This time he succeeded in scaling the keel, only to be dislodged as his perverse ship righted herself once more. But the tenacity of the Dents was now uppermost in Denis, if indeed he had any other quality left, and he was back in the boat when she eventually struck upon the cliff. The shock hurled him overboard for the last time, yet was so much less terrific than he had anticipated, that he sought and found the reason as he swam clear. A minute ago the boat had been within a few fathoms of the full face of the cliffs; at the last instant a mouth had opened, and all she had done was to cannon off the perpendicular wall of a strait so narrow as to be practically invisible from without.

It was comprehensible enough. The tide was setting through this tiny channel. The derelict life-boat was not alone; packages bobbed between the towering walls; a table came riding by on its top, three legs still standing, as Denis trod water. And on the table he partly floated and partly swam into a bay which stood to the channel as a flagon to its neck.

It was semicircular in shape, surrounded by cliffs as lofty and precipitous as those without, but mercifully provided with a sandy beach at the upper end. The castaway breathed a hoarse

thanksgiving at the saving sight. His smarting eyes had risen involuntarily, and as they rested on the heights, the sun lit up some heath and bracken that overhung the edge a few feet like a table-cloth: thence downward it was sheer for one or two hundred to the beach below. At the base a couple of caves opened romantically upon the yellow sand, but there was no sun for them yet, or for the dancing waves that bore Denis and his table finally to the land.

There in an instant he was staggering and stumbling under the abnormal weight of his dripping and exhausted body. A few yards he reeled, then fell prone upon the warm sand, digging in his fingers to the knuckles, thinking of no mortal but himself, thanking his God for preserving him as though he had made the voyage alone. Indeed the long voyage on the ship was temporarily blotted out of mind by the little one in the boat.

And he a lover! And his love as good as drowned before his eyes! – for not a vestige of the ship had he seen since the original mishap to the port life-boat. It was a terrible reflection to Denis for the rest of his days – but at the time he did not think of her – did not even picture a certain shade of pink and ask himself what it meant and must mean to him till his dying day. He just lay and held on to the warm sand, foot and finger, because the earth heaved under him as the sea had done for thirteen weeks, and his vitality was very low.

Consciousness might have left him altogether; he always wanted to think so, for then he could have forgiven himself; but

he was never satisfied on the point. He only knew it was a faint far cry that roused him in the end. But faint as it was, and never so far away, that thin high cry brought the half-dead man to his feet like a gunshot at the ear.

A bar of sunlight slanted through the narrow heads, and in the sun the blue waves were tipped with gold, and across the gold and the blue a black spar floated with some sodden and discoloured rags.

But Denis was in no doubt as to their shade.

# CHAPTER III
# THE CASTAWAYS

Denis had been a swimmer all his life; how he struck out now every swimmer will know, though none so well as the happy few who have themselves saved life. It is good to think that that noblest of human instincts had its secret place even now in this glowing heart; that Denis Dent would have given himself as unstintedly to the rescue of some unknown person; yet surely the sacred flame alone could have fired those spent members to the last pitch of redoubled endurance. The white left arm, brown as a glove from the wrist down, flew over as white a shoulder in flashing curves; the brown head dipped in the blue, to rise spluttering and dripping a good yard further; but the yards were close on two hundred from shore to spar, and when Denis came up with the latter, it was his love, indeed, but she was already senseless.

They had tied her in a life-belt, and lashed the life-belt to a spar; in time she would have been cast up on the warm sand, dead! She was not dead yet; she should not die. Denis took the hem of her dear drenched garment between his teeth, and swam in, if possible, more strenuously than he had swum out, but with the breast stroke, and in twice the time.

At last she lay where he had lain, only in the sun. Already the

sand was gloriously hot to bare knees; and there was still a faint throbbing in the inanimate wrist, though the eyelids lay leaden in a livid face. Denis caught up his scattered clothes, raced behind a ti-tree thicket, and put them on as hurriedly as he had plucked them off.

The thicket grew under the cliffs between the two caves, and Denis delayed some seconds to fill his arms with branches before running back to the girl.

Her pulse seemed stronger. He arranged some of the branches, but left the sun beating on her feet. It was the month of October, and early summer in Australia.

Sundry packages had already come ashore; there was the inevitable barrel of salt junk; there was a box of soap, that Denis spurned, and another box so similar that he left it to the last. Judge therefore of his joy on eventually discovering that here was nothing less than a case of Spanish brandy! He shrieked the good tidings to the girl. She did not stir. He had to run back to her, and lift that leaden wrist once more, before he could bear to open the box.

His sailor's knife was worth a thousand pounds to him in that hour; the great blade made short enough work of the lid, but the heavy haft knocked the neck off a bottle so prettily as to provide a measure with the medicine. Denis filled the inverted neck as he ran, and was soon spilling as much over the marble face as he managed to get between the bloodless lips. Then, for the first time, fear came to him: he retreated a little on his knees. The stuff

had caught her breath, her eyelids twitched, and as she coughed the marble flushed to flesh. She did not quite open her eyes.

"I am so cold," she moaned; and the white feet were drawn up a very little, but so stiffly, as though the whole body had been dragged with them.

Denis's blood froze as he remembered some vague saying that the feet die first; even in the hot sun these looked dead enough; they also must be brought to life, and the arch enemy repulsed at every point, at any sacrifice. In Denis, or rather in the Denis who was least a Dent, the act would almost outstrip the thought; this was the Denis who was saving his darling's life without time to realize what she was to him. Quicker than thought he had tipped up the bottle itself, so that the brandy came out in gulps, first over one pale foot and then the other. And now the left, now the right, now with one hand apiece, and anon with both together for one foot, did he chafe and rub, and rub and chafe, until the little lead feet were such pink shells, but so warm, so warm that the tears stood in his eyes. For he had been long enough at it to think a little as he rubbed; but as yet it was otherwise with her; she could only lie there with closed eyes, as meek and unashamed as any other dying soul.

She was not going to die, however, unless Denis dropped dead first. When he could leave her feet he had a turn at her hands, a much shorter journey for the blood, and by the time they began to clasp his feebly there was no more brandy left. Denis went for another bottle, and half the next dose she swallowed properly;

the rest she pushed toward him.

"To please me," she whispered: they were her first words, and it his first drop.

Now she was lying with her eyes tight shut, but not in sleep. Her lips moved, first in the faintest smile, then in more whispers.

"I remember – everything. I knew you would come to me. I knew it!"

He could only say her name.

"Nan! Nan! Nan!"

It was as though his heart had broken, it was so full. He had dared to call her his, the other night under the awning; he never dreamed of doing so now. His conception of honour forbade an endearment which she could not repudiate if she would; his own delicacy deplored the vital offices which had been thrust upon him. He had brought the life's blood back to leaden limbs, but he had brought it back at an expense which he already apprehended dimly. In her right senses she might have chosen death. He had taken on himself to give her life, and now she would live to love or loathe him.

Gentle birth and hard upbringing had produced in Denis an essential delicacy underneath a somewhat bluff exterior; but he was not self-conscious on either score. Qualm and pang came upon him as part of the situation, almost as his deserts. He was not aware of any fine feeling in the matter. He was full of feeling, but he did not know that it was fine.

Presently he saw she was asleep, and when he bent to listen

she was breathing beautifully; he just touched one hand, with the strange new awe he had for her, and it was warmer than his own. But now he was in a new difficulty; he found time to appreciate his own exhaustion; a stiff pull of brandy alone kept him from fainting, and he foresaw in alarm how it would be. They would both lie sleeping where they were, the almost tropical sun would beat down on them all day, and they might never see another. The nearer cave was not twenty yards away. Denis went to it, and it was lined with far finer sand than outside; he came back and gazed a moment on the girl. She was very young, and so delicately made! He knew that he could carry her, feeble though he now felt: if only it did not wake her. He gathered her tenderly in his arms: he carried her to the cave, he put her down on the cool fine sand, and all she did was to smile on him in her sleep.

If only she would when she awoke!

Meanwhile a pillow she must have before Denis would lay his own head anywhere, and he had seen some rushes in the thicket. He cut an armful, and thin bundle by thin bundle he got the lot under her head at last. Then there was the table. He caught sight of it along the beach, and thought what a fine screen it would make for Nan. It kept him up another ten minutes; but by that time, and thereafter, the sun might stream into the cave, but not a fiery finger would it lay on Nan. So then Denis measured his length at last, outside the screen, as a dog lies across the door.

On finally awaking (for many times he dropped off again deliciously), his first act was to listen on hands and knees; and

since the sound he could just hear was as peaceful as it was regular, his next was to go outside and stick a rush upright in the sand. Its shadow was a short finger pointing seaward, so that he knew it was about noon. The tide had gone down. Denis walked to the edge of the surf, and there stood gazing up at the cliff for many minutes. No; there was no way up that he saw or could conceive. Yet the little beach was only as the lees in the flagon of a bay. There was assuredly no way round.

It is fifty years since the wreck of the *North Foreland* and the second mate's extraordinary climb, but the scene of each remains an object of interest to visitors at the station on the heights above, while the minor incident is unfailing matter for conjecture, contention, and much open incredulity. It has been handed down that the sailor himself failed to identify the place within an hour of his alleged performance. The tradition is so far true. Denis never pretended to know how he had achieved the superhuman: had he been in a condition fully to appreciate what he was doing, the chances are that he never would have made the attempt. He did not mean to make it as it was. But with the brandy in him (and little else) he had clambered a few feet to see whether the thing was as impossible as it appeared. Of course, it was not; but already it seemed safer to climb a little further than to drop at the risk of broken bones; and so in a minute he found himself committed to the ascent. The cliff had beetled by insidious degrees; all at once there was nothing to be seen between his naked feet and the beach far below; one foot was

soon bleeding, and the drops falling clear into the sand. To drop clear himself would have meant certain injury now; as well break neck as leg, thought Denis, for all the use he would be to Nan with either. So on and up he went, now flattened for breath against a favourable slope, now swinging by the fingers from some ledge that threatened to saw them to the bone, anon testing tuft or twig with his life, yet all with so light a head that the protracted jeopardy was an exhilaration almost to the last. According to Denis, it was just at the top, when a bunch of bracken came up so slowly as to enable him to grasp a stronger bunch in time, that his gorge rose with the roots.

Remains the undisputed fact that between one and two in the afternoon, a lad on the station, whose boundary was these cliffs, saw an eerie figure approaching through the yellow dust of a mob of sheep which he happened to be driving at the time. It was this lad whom the papers mentioned as Mr. James Doherty; but like Denis he was Irish only by descent, and not for an instant did he imagine that he had seen the devil. He appeared to be a very quick youth, who knew the bush, and a glance convinced him that the ragged wretch had been lost in it and driven to some dreadful extremity; for his face and hands were all bloody, and even his bare feet incrusted with blood and dust. Moreover, his speech was slightly indistinct, as is the case with men who are half-dead with thirst.

This lad Doherty was the first person in Australia to learn the fate of the *North Foreland*, and the first to discredit the wild

finish of the wild man's talk.

"Why, there's stairs right down," he cried. "Over two hundred on 'em, cut in the sandstone."

"What a silly lie," sighed Denis.

"Did you sample the caves?"

"One of them."

"Which one?"

"The one with the big mouth."

"Don't you tell me you never went into the other! It's a nat'ral chimbley at the fur end, and the boss had it shoved right through, and steps cut in the sandstone for bathing."

The sailor's bloodstains were cracking in a ghastly grin.

"So that won't do, old man," added Mr. Doherty, severely.

"Will these?"

And Denis lifted one naked foot after the other; the left sole showed a purple bruise, the right a gash that still dripped as he held it up.

Mr. Doherty supposed that he must be the liar, but only allowed himself to look confounded for the moment; the next, he was emptying his water-bag, from which Denis had already enjoyed a deep pull, over the wounds. The sheep had scattered right and left, but the horse stood apparently fast asleep in the sun.

"Now up you jump," said Doherty. "He's as quiet as a cow."

Denis stared at him.

"Jump up? What for?"

"You're within a mile of the homestead. You struck the right track on top."

"Oh, but I'm not going on," said Denis hastily. "I must go back to – her."

"With them feet and without your tucker?"

And the lean brown lad stood with his bare arms akimbo, a stained statue in a flannel shirt and moleskins.

"At once," said Denis. "I've wasted time enough; and if there are stairs there's no difficulty. Go you back to the homestead, and tell them to send down everything they can think of for a young lady. Food and clothes; mind, she hasn't had a bite since dinner yesterday."

The young Australian doffed his wide-awake with a sweep.

"Why, mister!" he got out, but that was all. "I'm sorry I didn't call you 'mister' before," he added, after the stare of an idolater. "I'll never leave it out again!"

Denis was limping along only a few minutes later when the sound of a gallop made him look round for the rider who had just left him; and the same horse it was, but a different horseman, for whom the stirrups were grotesquely short. In a few seconds he had bobbed and bounded into a blue-eyed man with fair beard blowing and tanned face filled with humane distress.

"Get on this horse," he cried, flinging himself off. "If you don't, I'll carry you myself! There – let me give you a hand; my name's Kitto; this is my run. Everything's following in the buggy, but here's a biscuit to begin on; the beds will be made and aired

by the time we get you both back. But only two of you – only two!"

Mr. Kitto had a heart of gold, and wore it on his sleeve; rarer still was a tact almost incongruous in that desolate spot. Not a question had Denis to answer as the horse ambled under him and the squatter strode alongside. But when they came to the mouth of a long stair tunneled through the soft sandstone, it was Mr. Kitto who looked curiously at the rude steep steps.

"Nobody has come up here," said he. "We had a dust-storm yesterday before the wind went round, and the sand on these top steps is as it drifted."

Denis could afford to smile.

"So you didn't believe it either."

"What's that? I could believe the side of a house of you, my brave fellow!" cried Mr. Kitto. "I only mean that your companion hasn't found her way up in your absence."

"Ah, if she could!" sighed Denis. "But she is so weak I am afraid we shall have to carry her up between us."

The squatter smiled, but said nothing.

"If only she is no weaker – if only she has slept right through!" Denis went on, and repeated himself all the way down; but at the base he button-holed his guide.

"Do I look very awful, sir? Is my face as bad as my hands? Wait a bit, then – stay where you are."

And his injured feet could still dance him down to the water's edge; but he came stealing back, one index finger to his lips,

signing with the other to Mr. Kitto to let him go first; and the smile on the cleansed face told that good man a tale.

The mouth of the greater cave was just as Denis had left it. He crept on all fours between the table legs, and listened. There was no sound. He leaped up and looked over.

The cave was empty.

# CHAPTER IV
# LOST AND FOUND

Mr. Kitto saw the ragged figure shoot from the cave as though propelled by some unseen power within; and for one second he imagined the worst. He was relieved when the shipwrecked sailor raised his voice.

"Nan! Nan!" he yelled. "Miss Merridew! Miss Merridew! Nan! Nan! Nan!"

The squatter, running up, alone interrupted him.

"She's gone!" cried Denis in terrible excitement. "Gone clean away – God knows where! Look for yourself, if you like; with the sun pouring in you can see to the very end. Do you think I would miss her if it were ten times the size? See, there's where I left her lying; that was all the pillow I could give her; you can almost see the shape of her head!"

And the hoarse voice broke piteously; but such a firm, kind hand had him by the arm, that Denis bit his lips and blinked the tears back to their source.

"Come, now," said Kitto, "there's nothing wonderful in this; the only wonder is that we didn't expect it. Why should she have slept so much longer than you? She had done far less; and they are tougher than you think. She would wake up and find you flown – "

"Poor Nan! Poor Nan!"

"And having the vitality she must have, to say nothing of the pluck, you wouldn't expect her to sit still and wait, would you?"

"I suppose not," said Denis, gloomily. "I only know I would have died to save her what she must have gone through alone – alone."

"You have done your best to die for her," retorted Mr. Kitto, with his kind smile. "Were her people on board with her?"

"Her father, yes; she has no one else."

"Then you may have to live for her," the older man said gravely. "So don't commit any more of your follies, and above all don't make yourself ill without a cause. She is probably trying to find her own way to the station, and it's safe to be the wrong way."

"But you said no one had been up those stairs."

Mr. Kitto stood confounded in the sun.

"She may be about the beach somewhere," he said hurriedly. "After all, it's not so little that you take in every cranny at a glance. Come and let's look. There are all sorts of holes and corners under the cliffs," he added as they went, "where my children play hide-and-seek at picnics. It's our favourite place for them; in fact, that's why I cut those steps. No harm could come to her here."

But his voice had lost something of its cheery confidence, and in spite of him it lost more as they sought together, but sought in vain. As for Denis, there was an end to his lamentations; he was

past that stage; but his dumb eyes plumbed the pit.

"Can you cooey?" asked the squatter. "No, you're too hoarse; don't try. But I can, like a blackfellow, thank God!" And he arched his sun-burned hands about his mouth.

"Coooooooooo – eeeey!"

It was long enough and loud to reach the one top-gallant mast of the *North Foreland* that they descried between the heads, at a certain stage of their wanderings, standing out of the waves for a monument to those beneath: had a single sailor been clinging to it, he must have heard so penetrating and so sustained a call: but from the lost one on shore, as from the drowned multitude without the gateway of sparking blue, not a sound, not a sign.

Doherty and another arrived with blankets, clothes, coffee, mutton, damper, billy-can, everything that kind thought could send, with a sweet message from her who sent them; but this fell on deaf ears. Denis would touch nothing till she whom he had lost was found again; so the squatter thrust him down into the sand, and between them they forced him to make a meal. And being at last in a more reasonable frame, he would have ended by putting on the shoes which he had cast off in the morning, and forgotten or despised ever since; but now his feet were so swollen, he could not get them on. But as for letting them send him back to the station in the buggy, and leaving the search to them, as Mr. Kitto had now the temerity to suggest, it was as much as Denis could do to hear him out civilly.

The survivor went his own way after this, and it led him first to

the summit of the cliffs, to see for himself whether there was no trace up there; for he had been incredulous on that point all along; but now so many had been up and down that he had still only one man's word for the absence of foot-marks in the beginning, and he roamed far afield in vigilant circles. He had been lost himself but for a fire they made on top of the cliff; and when he came shambling back to the brink, down below there was quite a galaxy of lanterns moving in different directions, a constellation of creeping stars. So they had not found her yet; and now it was black night.

In the utter heart-break of the hour, and the last stage of physical distress, Denis had half a mind to fling himself over and be done with it all; but only half a mind, and not a hundredth part of the heart. Instead, as he went down gingerly in the dusk, one painful step at a time, he reviled himself from top to bottom for the unnecessary climb which is not wholly credited to this day. It was already at the root of everything in the climber's mind. Had he only explored the smaller cavern, he had been back with succour in one hour instead of three.

Mr. Kitto meanwhile had made up his mind. "We shall never find her alive," he whispered to his overseer, who arrived upon the scene a little before Denis's return. "But for that poor fellow's sake we must keep up the pretence a bit longer. I can see there was something between them; and when we find her body it will probably kill him; and after all every soul will have been lost. Did you know the bodies were beginning to come ashore? There's a

little chap I take to be the skipper: last to leave and first to land."

"But you aren't looking for this girl among them?" the overseer exclaimed aghast.

"Not yet; but it will come to that," whispered Kitto. "I cooeyed till I was hoarse; that's why I can't raise my voice above a whisper now; and all the rest of us are in the same box. Mark my words, it's a case of suicide, and a fearful case: the poor thing was so terrified at her position when she awoke and found herself deserted on this desert coast, that it drove her clean out of her mind. I almost hope he won't live to realize it was that – though he's the sort we want in this colony – if he gave up the sea."

"Was there no tracking her?"

"Scarcely a yard from the mouth of the cave, and he doesn't know I did that; the sand is so heavy outside. But the tracks I did find pointed straight to the sea. I grant you there were not enough of them to mean anything in themselves."

They chanced to be passing close to the ti-tree clump as they conversed. Suddenly the overseer stood still.

"You've looked in there, I suppose?"

"In there? What would be the good? It's not above a dozen yards thick, though so dense; if she were alive in there she'd have heard us long ago; if she's dead she's in the sea. Why do you ask?"

"I thought I heard something. That was all."

They moved on a few yards.

"I say, Mr. Kitto, I do hear something! Listen, sir – listen to that!"

They heard the voice distinctly, faint and feeble though it was.

"I am dying!" it moaned. "*Oh, Denis, where are you?*"

Mr. Kitto almost choked.

"Thank God – but if she does die!" he croaked and whispered in one breath. "We're coming! We're coming, my dear, dear young lady! But," in his whisper, "who's that hobbling toward us – dot-and-carry-one? It's Dent, man, it's Dent himself; go and tell him like a good fellow – only don't raise too much hope." And deeply agitated, the squatter thrust his lantern among the outer branches of the thicket.

In an instant came the faint voice, immeasurably stronger, and poignant with a nameless agony:

"Take it away! Oh, take it way, or I must die – I must!"

Kitto flung his lantern far behind him: he had seen a terrified face among the branches, a burning face that told him all.

"And you have been here all day!" he cried, but chiefly to himself, in the inward glare of his enlightenment. "And I cooeying till I could cooey no more!"

"I thought it was savages," the voice in the clump faltered unconvincingly. "I – I never heard it before – "

"We have everything ready for you," continued Kitto, cheerily: "hot coffee, plenty to eat, dry clothes, and our best bed when we get you to it. Here, take this to go on with." His coat came off with the words, and was thrust through the branches until he felt she had it. "Now I'll get you the rest," he said, and was hurrying off.

"Wait! Wait!" she called to him, and even more strongly than in her last alarm. "Where's Denis – Denis Dent? He was the second officer, and he saved me, he alone. I must speak to him first … to thank him … while I can!"

And her voice broke for him, as his had broken for her, but with more reason than Nan Merridew could dream; for Denis was lying close at hand on the beach, with the station overseer stooping over him.

# CHAPTER V
# A TOUCH OF FEVER

Denis awoke between clean sheets in the widest berth and the largest cabin he had ever occupied: it was a matter of moments to realize that he was really on land, for the bed still heaved a little as the beach had done yesterday, or whenever it was he had been washed ashore. He felt as though he had been asleep a week; he could not have imagined so delightful a lassitude of limb and spirit. It was a small room without pretense of paper upon its weather-board walls, but the toilet cover on Denis's left was as snowy as the sheet under his chin, and a sunlit blind flapped soothingly behind it. Silence reigned, but it was the peculiarly drowsy hush of hot weather, only the deeper for its innumerable tiny sounds: one could have heard that it was hot. But there was so little on him, that little was so light, and so sweet a draught blew through the room, that in his own person Denis felt deliciously cool.

He tried to remember how he had come there, but the final stages were a painful farrago. He beheld a bandage on either hand, and could feel one on head and foot; but they led him too far back. He had an impression of the stars as he lay upon the beach, and another of interminable steps with a handbreadth of starry sky at the top, but there was something far more important

that he was seeking in his mind without avail. He certainly had not found it when the blind was pushed aside by a sun-burned face, which vanished instantly, to reappear with its appertaining shirt and moleskins in the doorway opposite.

"Awake at last, mister!"

"Only just," said Denis, feebly, but with his first smile, and the lad entered staring curiously.

"You couldn't look like that whilst we was seekin' her," said he, drily. "Why, what's wrong now?"

Denis had shot upright in bed.

"Didn't we find her?" he cried. "Yes, yes, of course we did! I remember now. I'm so grateful to you; that's exactly what I was trying to remember. Well? Well? And how is she?"

"Right as the mail, mister, so they all say; but I haven't seen her yet."

"You're sure they say so?"

"Sure as my name's Jimmy Dockerty."

Denis fell back with a whispered thanksgiving.

"What did you say your name was?" he asked presently.

"Dockerty," replied the boy. "Christian name of Jim."

"Well, Jim, I don't forget you. It was you I clapped eyes on first, and I'm almost as glad to see you again. Where am I exactly?"

"Merinderie Station: the barricks."

"The what?"

"Where the parlour men camp," explained Mr. Doherty,

darkly. "You've got the tooter's room; he has his schoolroom next door."

"It's very quiet."

"They've all cleared out for the day, apuppus; and you ain't in the house, you see, though nice and handy. But I'll have to go over to the house, to tell 'em you've waked up. There was something ready for you the moment you did. But, I say – mister!" And the boy stood wistfully beside the bed.

"Well, Jim?"

"Ask for me to come back and set along of you! Say you feel lonely like, and ask for me to look arter you, mister. You needn't take no notice of me, and no more won't I say nothink, if you don't want."

"But I shall want, Jimmy. I shall want you to tell me heaps of things. Go and say so for me, by all means; and bring me anything they like to send, though a cup of tea is all I fancy."

But when a chop was sent in characteristic conjunction it was eaten with its slice of damper, and so heartily as to exclude immediate conversation.

"One thing at a time," said Denis, "and the next thing is a wash; but I don't mean to get up yet a bit."

"I wouldn't," said the boy, removing the tray and flourishing a towel. "The young lady, there ain't any signs of 'er either; I'll give you the word when there is."

Meanwhile the subject nearest Denis's heart was the one on which he could extract least information. Doherty did not warm

to it as he did to other topics. And yet Denis could not help liking the lad; in the first place, the lad was openly enamoured of him, and the present Denis far too languid a hero to object very strenuously to his worship. There was nothing slavish about it; hardly a word was employed in its expression; but in the pauses the boy's eyes would remain upon the man's, and once he said he had been to see the place, and continued gazing at Denis and his bandages with redoubled reverence. It appeared that many bodies had been washed ashore, and Mr. Kitto with nearly all his men was down there now. Mrs. Kitto was at the other bedside, and had sent word that she preferred not to leave it in case her patient, who had been asleep many hours, should wake and miss her. Doherty suddenly remembered the message; it drove Denis back into yesterday's inferno, and he lay with such a pained face that the boy darted in with his own details. It was four o'clock in the afternoon: Denis had slept nineteen hours, but Miss Merridew was beating him. And they were the only survivors; not another soul had been saved.

Denis thought of the hundred souls on board, above all of Nan's father, her all in this world, to whose loss she would awake now any moment. And that was a thought which brought tears to the second mate's eyes, yet it was one with several facets, and presently his eyes were shining in quite a different way; then he caught himself, and little Jim saw the marine bronze deepen on the heroic cheek. But at last it was Jim's turn, for Denis turned to him as though impatient of himself.

"Now let's hear about you," he said. "How long have you been in Australia, Jim?"

"Only since I was born, and a bit before, and ever after, amen!" said Mr. Doherty; and the teeth displayed by his grin were certainly worthy of an aboriginal.

"And how long is that?" asked Denis, smiling, too.

"I don't know. They say as I am a good seventeen, but I don't look it, do I?"

"What! Don't know your own age?"

"Not to a year or two."

"Didn't your parents tell you?"

"I never had none, mister."

And Mr. Doherty grinned again.

"You don't remember, them?"

"That's what I mean. They were – I don't mind tellin' you, mister, though I'd rather bite my tongue out than tell another soul on the place" – and little Jim came sidling from his seat at the foot of the bed to an easy distance from Denis's ear, a dead secret in his astute young face. "But you'll think no worse of a cove," he went on, whispering, "and you won't split either; so it's a bit of a relief to tell you – they was both old hands."

"Old hands?"

"Lags!"

Now Denis understood. "Of course I don't think the less of you," he said, gently; "we are what we make ourselves, at any rate there's no credit in anything else we may be. I, for instance – "

But Denis had strength enough left to control his tongue, and his parents' memory was too sacred for association with that of transported felons, however little there might be to chose between their sons.

"It might be worse," the lad went on, with an elderly air the more pathetic for its unconscious humour: "they was married at Parramatta factory, and my mother let me know it when I was as high as this bed; it's the one thing I recollect her by, keepin' on tellin' me that; but 'im I never see as I remember. Parramatta factory," he continued, lifting his shrewd eyes once more, "was the place where they kep' the women prisoners, up on the Sydney side in the convict days; you could go and take your pick as long as you married her." The boy's stare grew into a contemplative grin, and Denis prepared for a familiarity. "There'll be need for you to go there," said Mr. Doherty.

Denis was not offended; either he was too stricken to be readily ruffled, or the young monkey had a way with him. He only rolled his head on the pillow, and questioned whether such an establishment existed still.

"It doesn't," rejoined Jim; "but even if it did, eh? You're all right, you see, so you can go on shaking your head till you loosen it! *I* seen, whether or no, last night when you couldn't."

"I don't want to know what you saw," cried Denis, vehemently enough; and lay quite agitated between the sheets.

"I suppose," the imp pursued, with a precocious union of tact and tenacity, "you'll go and get married straight away, and never

let us see or hear from you again."

Denis set his teeth, not because the boy jarred, but at the gulf between this fancy picture and the possibilities of the case as it now stood. It was characteristic of him that for the first time they seemed impossibilities. He had saved her life, and now they were alone in the world, he and she: how could he trade on such things, how avoid the suspicion of trying to trade on them? If only another had saved her! If only others had been saved!

"Don't speak of it," he groaned. "I am far too poor."

"Too poor, are you?"

The boy had brightened.

"And she is too rich."

"Then what more do you want, mister?"

"What more? It should be the opposite way; we should both be one thing or the other. Anything but as we are!"

There was a brief intermezzo of the tiny summer noises. The blind flapped; a mosquito sang an ominous solo in the sick man's ear; from without came the faint hacking of an axe at the wood-heap. Denis looked up at last, and there sat Jim with a startlingly wise face upon his narrow young shoulders.

"Do you know what I should do, if I was you, mister?"

"Well, what?"

"If I felt same as you," said Mr. Doherty, "I'd make a fortune same as hers."

Denis smiled tolerantly; the urchin amused him.

"Well, and how would you do that?"

"I should go up to Ballarat, and peg out my claim, as sure as my name's Jimmy Dockerty!"

"It would have to be a lucky one," said Denis, dryly, though not until he had paused to think.

"Then it wouldn't be the only one," retorted Doherty, with the readiness of their common race.

Denis could not help dallying with the idea.

"Have they been doing such good business up there, then?"

"Good! Why, haven't you heard? There's never been such doings as they've had on Ballarat this year. I thought it was all over the world," the boy added, with shining eyes.

"It may be," said Denis, "but I've been at sea since June, and it isn't exactly in a sailor's line."

"Isn't it!" laughed Jimmy. "You wait till you see the empty ships in Hobson's Bay! Some of 'em been stuck there since the last day of January, when the fun began. Do you mean to say you never heard of the big finds in Canadian Gully?"

"You tell me, Jimmy. I want to hear."

Denis was leaning on an elbow. Jimmy had long been on his feet.

"There were some coves had a claim in Canadian Gully, on Ballarat," the boy began, a wild light in his face, a light that Denis had never seen before. "They were doing well, but not too well, and they offered to sell the hole for a matter of three hundred. Then one of them went down and came up with a nugget weighing sixty-six ounces!"

"At how much the ounce?"

"About four guineas."

"Well, that wasn't quite the three hundred."

"Stop a bit!" cried Doherty, a perfect fever in his eyes, a fever as new to Denis as the light upon the lad's face. "That was only the beginning of it. Of course they wouldn't sell after that. And before night they'd got a nugget of a hundred and twenty pounds. Troy weight – whatever that is – perhaps you can turn it into the other pounds, for I can't."

Denis sat forward, pressing the lint upon his forehead with his hands. When at length he looked up there was the same light beneath the bandages, the same fever in the still blood-shot eyes, as Denis himself had remarked in the face and eyes of his companion.

"Six thousand pounds!" he whispered almost aghast.

"Six thousand golden sovereigns!" shouted the lad, capering about the room. "Think of that, mister, think of that! I had it read to me out of the papers. I got it off by heart. It was one big, solid, yellow lump of gold, and they had to carry it between them slung to a pole. It wasn't the only one, neither; as they went tunneling on it stuck out of the sides, like bunches of grapes – at twenty pound a berry! There was only four on 'em in the party; they made their fortunes in less than no time; and two on 'em was new chums, same as you'd be if you went up and – and – "

"And what, boy?"

"And took me along with you!"

Denis only wondered that the little brown face, thrust so near him in its eagerness, did not burst into actual flame; it never occurred to him that his own was perhaps presenting the like phenomenon.

"You talk as though you'd been there already, Jimmy," said he.

"But I haven't. I'd only give my two ears to go. The boss won't let me. He says I'm too young; and he's been such a jolly good boss to me, I haven't the heart to go agin him, especially when he's promised me my kit if I wait till the Noo Year. But I b'lieve he'd give 'em me to-morrow, mister, if I was going up with you!"

It was a strange talk for Denis on the day after his deliverance, in the bed where they had laid him more dead than alive, but the manner of its ending was the strangest part of all. In the fever that was so new to Denis, that he had a touch of it before he dreamed there was such a disease, he not only forgot the perils through which he had passed, but his every sense turned blunt by comparison with the intensely keen edge put so suddenly on certain of his desires. He had not heard the voices outside; neither had Doherty; and the feet upon the threshold fell upon four equally deaf ears. It was not until Mr. Kitto opened the door, and entered first, that the one looked round and the other up.

"Here," said the squatter, "is a gentleman whom I know you will be heartily thankful to see again."

The gentleman stood forward with outstretched hands and a quivering lip.

It was John Merridew.

# CHAPTER VI
# NEW CONDITIONS

The following were the facts, as Denis grasped them by degrees.

Not many minutes had elapsed between the mishap to the port life-boat and the resolution of the *North Foreland* into so much wood and iron at the bottom of the sea, with a single top-gallant mast standing out to mark the place. But during those few minutes the minor disaster had caused another.

The loss of the first boat augured ill for the rest; and, indeed, only the chief officer's lived to salute the sun; but before it was launched, Miss Merridew had been swept overboard through the little faith of her own friends, who had lashed her life-belt to a fallen spar, only to give a gratuitous handle to the next great wave.

It was Captain Coles whose last remembered act had been to prevent one or both gentlemen from diving after her to their death – some said with his revolver at their heads; and, as if because neither seemed to care any longer for his life, these were the two male passengers to be saved. They were dragged into the mate's boat. The boat was successfully launched by a mixture of good management and better luck. But it was entirely to the mate's credit that she immediately stood out to sea, and so continued until picked up by a coasting vessel, which landed the party in

Melbourne before night. The post-haste journey to the landward scene of the wreck, all that night and nearly all next day (it was a matter of a hundred miles up and across country), was only such as any father would have undertaken in the circumstances, and most men in Ralph Devenish's position would have taken with him.

But Captain Devenish did not accompany Mr. Merridew to the little outbuilding in which Denis lay; nor did Jim Doherty, or his master, remain even so long as to see the older man take the bandaged hands, tenderly, tremulously, in both of his.

The interview which followed was an affecting one; but Denis had done too much, too recently, to take a very emotional view of his exploits. In his heart he took little credit for them. It was not he who had saved Nan Merridew's life, but a merciful God who had merely used him as His tool; and while, perhaps, more thankful than he now knew for that supreme preferment, the prostrate man was almost morbidly alive to its disadvantages. Thus, when Mr. Merridew led the conversation back almost to the point at which their last had been interrupted, it was Denis who created the awkward silence. He was touched by the uncontrolled revelation of a hard man's soft side, by the contrast between the exceedingly deliberate and rather irritating voice that he remembered on the poop, and the voice that still broke with very tenderness. But his own voice was so much the more dispassionate, and apparently perverse.

"I unsay every word," said Mr. Merridew, for the second time,

and more pointedly than ever; for, even in his really generous emotion, he could not help feeling that it was unsaying a great deal.

Denis nodded from his pillow, but only to signify that he heard. "You are very kind," he answered at length, with no ironic intent; "too kind, I almost think. You might live to regret it."

"No, no; never, never! Now I know what you are."

"I am a junior officer in the merchant service – with a captain's certificate."

Mr. Merridew was genuinely pained. "Dent," said he, "I take back my words twice over, and still you throw them in my teeth! Surely you must see that everything is altered now?"

"But it might have happened to anybody else," urged Denis, with gentle tenacity. "You should look at it in that way, Mr. Merridew. Suppose it had been one of the stewards; for all you knew, or seemed prepared to believe, I was no more eligible than they, the night before last. I have been infinitely lucky – no, blessed, blessed! – but that's all. It doesn't give me ten thousand pounds to put to hers."

Mr. Merridew jumped up from the bedside. It was partly with temper that he was trembling now.

"Have you changed your mind already, Mr. Dent, or is all this so much affectation on your part? Did you mean what you said to me that night before we struck or did you not?"

"Every word of it," answered Denis, in a whisper that brought the other back to his former position on the bed, only now he

was peering into eyes averted from his own.

"You do love her, don't you, Dent? I can see it – I can see it – whatever you may say!"

Denis could only nod. His weakness had come upon him very suddenly. But by an effort he was able to prevent it from rising to his eyes. And soon he was sufficient master of himself to attend to what Mr. Merridew was saying with so strange an eagerness of voice and manner.

"You must come back with us. That's what you must do. Melbourne's a perfect pandemonium: street upon street of tents, teeming with the very sweepings of the earth, and ship upon ship without a man on board. But there's a fine clipper, the *Memnon* by name, lying ready for sea at Geelong, and we'll all go home in her together. She's bound to be under-officered, and I suppose you would be happier so than as a passenger; but let this voyage be your last. You said you were as good a man ashore as at sea, if my memory serves me as well as yours. Well, now I can believe you, and in you, as I shall show you – as I shall very soon show you! I have no one to follow me in the firm, Denis – that's your name, isn't it? – and you don't mind my calling you by it, do you? But if you became my son, Denis … can't you see … can't you see?"

The man's tongue had run away with him, as the unlikeliest tongues will, under strong emotional strain: so we prattle of our newly dead, magnifying the good that we belittled in their lives. But here the strain was far greater; for she who had been dead

was alive again; and this, this was her saviour, for whom nothing, not even the girl herself, was now too good.

"There is one thing you have forgotten," said Denis, without withdrawing his hand from the nervous grasp that now hurt considerably. "I had not got my answer – the other night. And how can I press her for it now? Don't answer yourself, sir, till you have thought it over, if I may ask that much of you, alone; and then I know you will agree with me. She ought not to be allowed to give me her answer now. And I – I ought to go away without seeing her again – until I have really shown myself – " He could not finish. His weakness and his sincerity were equally apparent: deeply moved, the elder man took his leave, with but one more syllable, and that to promise Denis, from the door, not to repeat a word of their conversation to Nan.

But Denis had not said all that it was in him to say, for in the first place he had not the heart, and in the next he was not too proud of his latest resolve; but it was a resolve no less, and already it might have been the resolve of his life.

"This is not the real man," he lay saying to himself. "The real man had his say on the poop – and the sounder man of the two. I won't take advantage of either of them. Let me make that money. I can, and I will. Then she shall give me her answer – not before."

And yet he had an uneasy conscience about his new resolve, plausible as it became in words; but the qualm only hardened it within him; and he lay in the twilight with set teeth and dogged jaw, quite a different Denis from the one who had leaned forward

to listen to Jimmy Doherty, but every inch a Dent.

Doherty came stealing back with the face of a conspirator; his worldly wisdom did not as yet include a recognition of the difficulty of picking up broken threads, even when they are threads of gold. Denis would not promise to speak to Mr. Kitto, would hear no more, indeed, of Ballarat; all he seemed to care to know now was what Captain Devenish was doing with himself.

"Him with the whiskers?" said Jimmy. "I can't sight that gent!"

"What do you mean?"

"Beg yer pardon, mister, but I don't like him. He speaks to you like as if you was a blessed dingo. That sort o' thing don't do out here; we ain't used to it." And young Australia shook a sage old head.

"But what's he doing with himself, Jimmy?"

"Oh, lookin' at the papers an' things, an' yawnin' an' smokin' about the place."

"And Mr. Merridew?"

"With the young lady. She ain't a-goin' to show up to-night, the young lady ain't; and you can take that as gospel – for I had it from the missus herself."

The boy's eyes were uncomfortably keen and penetrating. Denis got rid of him, and lay thinking until it was nearly dusk. Then they brought him his first solid meal; and presently Mrs. Kitto paid a visit to a giant so refreshed that nothing would persuade him to keep his bed without a break. He must have a breath of air: he was quite himself. So early evening brought him

forth in a pair of Mr. Kitto's slippers.

The very first person he saw was Ralph Devenish, reading by lamplight in one of the many rude verandas which faced and flanked one another under the bright Australian stars. Denis went limping up to him with outstretched hand.

"I am glad to set eyes on you, Devenish," he said gravely.

"Really?" drawled the other, with light incredulity; but he could hardly refuse the bandaged hand.

"Ralph Devenish," pursued Denis, chilled but undeterred, "I make no apology for the sudden familiarity, partly because we've both been so near our death, and partly because we're cousins. My mother was a Devenish; you may open your eyes, but I would drop them if I came of the stock that treated her as her own people did! I never meant to tell you, for there can be no love to lose between your name and mine, but I blurted it out in a rage just before we struck. I want to say that I'm heartily ashamed of the expressions I made use of then; that I apologize for them, and take them back."

"My good fellow," replied Devenish, with engaging candour, "I don't recollect one of them; the fact is, I was a little drunk. As to our relationship, that's very interesting, I'm sure; but it's odd how one does run up against relations, in the last places you'd expect, too. I can't say I remember your name, though; never heard it before, to my knowledge. If there's been anything painful between your people and mine, don't tell me any more about it, like a good feller."

"I won't," said Denis, secretly boiling over, though for no good reason that he could have given. It certainly was not because Devenish continued occupying the only chair, leaving the lame man to stand. Denis was glad to have so whole a view of him as the lamplight and the easy chair afforded. Save for the patent fact that his clothes had not been made for him, the whiskered captain looked as he had looked on board, a subtle cross between the jauntily debonair and the nobly bored. As Denis watched he produced the same meerschaum that he had smoked all the voyage, a Turk's head beautifully coloured, with a curved amber mouthpiece, and proceeded to fill it from the same silken pouch.

"Another soul saved, you see!" said Ralph Devenish, as he tapped his Turk affectionately; it was the acme of sly callousness, even if intended so to appear. Denis turned away in disgust, but turned back for a moment in his stride.

"Are you going home with the Merridews?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Devenish. "Are you?"

"I don't know," echoed Denis. "But I think – not."

"Really?" drawled Devenish. "Well, as a year's leave don't last forever, I'm not so sure."

And as Denis saw the last of him under the lamp, he had not yet resumed the filling of the Turk's head.

# CHAPTER VII
# DENIS AND NAN

Miss Merridew continued prostrate, yet so exempt from bodily mischief that her case began to baffle all except the other woman, who had charge of it.

Mr. Merridew allowed himself to be dissuaded from obtaining indifferent medical advice at exorbitant cost, but his anxiety increased with his perplexity, and was only allayed by his instinctive confidence in Mrs. Kitto. That lady proved as practical and understanding as she was good and kind. Yet even Mrs. Kitto was puzzled just at first. They had to deal with one singularly reserved – who could lie for hours without closing an eye or uttering a word – and the father's way was to force her to say something, at the pain of his own passionate distress. But Mrs. Kitto would bring in her sewing, of which she seemed to have a great deal, and sit over it, also by the hour, in a quietude as grateful as her sparing speech. She was very observant, however, and the one thing that puzzled her only did so in the beginning. This was the anomaly presented by a patient whose face was often in a burning fever while her head and hand kept perfectly cool.

The wreck was never mentioned in the sick-room, nor did Nan guess that an inquest on the bodies was held within a few yards

of where she lay. Yet it was she who eventually broke the ice.

"Is Mr. Dent still here?" she asked, but in a tone so magnificently offhand that a less astute person than Mrs. Kitto would have detected its anxiety as soon.

"He was this morning," replied Mrs. Kitto, smiling.

"Do you mean that he isn't now?" the girl demanded, half-rising on an elbow.

"No. I think I should have heard of it if he had thought of leaving us to-day."

Nan Merridew fell back upon her pillow.

"I wish he would go on board," she said petulantly, "if he is going."

"On board?" queried Mrs. Kitto; and she set down her work.

"Isn't he to be one of the officers on the ship we are all going home by?"

"I didn't know of it," said Mrs. Kitto, with equal embarrassment and surprise.

"But he is," declared the girl, with all an invalid's impatience. "I understood that from papa the day he came; he had spoken to the agents, or he was going to speak to them, and Denis – I mean Mr. Dent – was to have the best berth they could give him. I do wish he would go on board. I – I almost wish he hadn't saved my life!"

And she tossed her face to the wall, for it was burning as it had burned so often since her deliverance.

"It's meeting him again," said Mrs. Kitto to herself; "and she

does care for him, or she would mind less." It made it all the harder to ask aloud, "Did your father say he had succeeded, dear?"

"We have never mentioned Mr. Dent again," said Nan to that, quite haughtily.

"Because I don't think he's sailing in the *Memnon* at all," continued Mrs. Kitto, gently. "I think he's going to the diggings instead."

"Going where?" the girl asked after a pause. The first sentence was all that she had heard.

"To Ballarat or Bendigo – to make his fortune."

"I hope he'll succeed," said Nan, after a pause; but her voice was a sweet bell jangled, and an hour went before she turned her face from the wall. It was still red, but there was a subtle difference in the shade. And in the hazel eyes, which were the most obvious of Miss Merridew's natural attractions, there was a crude, new light.

"I am going to get up," said she.

Mrs. Kitto proved not unprepared for the announcement; it appeared that all her needlework had been for Nan, and now it was as though the last stitch had just been put into everything. It was all a surprise to the girl, who had not given the matter a thought. She was to get a fresh outfit at Geelong, before the ship sailed, but Mrs. Kitto insisted on sending her so far equipped by herself. And the dress which the kind soul had been so busy altering was almost the last remnant of her own trousseau, and

some years behind the fashion.

In point of fact it was what used to be called a "double robe" of lavender cashmere; and it was trimmed with braid of the same colour, but the braid was a shade darker than the rest, and its criss-cross pattern as unlovely in its way as the voluminous skirts it was intended to adorn. But the fabric was soft and fine, and the delicate tint happened to suit Nan Merridew, who had a singularly clear and pale skin, and dark gold ringlets almost the colour of her eyes. For she was of the type dear to the pre-Raphaelites, with rather more flesh and blood, and a much more conspicuous spirit of her own, perhaps a little too conspicuous when Nan reappeared in the sunlight, with quite another light in her eyes, on the fourth day after the wreck.

It was near the close of a radiant afternoon, and Mr. Merridew was absent for the day; but Captain Devenish had been seen strolling toward the cliffs, and Nan thought that she would stroll after him in spite of the direction. No one must think of accompanying her; she would so enjoy finding the way for herself. To this Mrs. Kitto pretended to make no objection, but expressed a belief that Mr. Dent was with Captain Devenish, thinking she had named the last deterrent. On the contrary, it only decided Nan to go quickly; and go she did with that peculiar light stronger than ever in her eyes.

Now the way led through a belt of young pines, by which the station was almost surrounded, and in the middle of them Nan met a man in moleskins and a red shirt. Him she was approaching

with downcast eyes, as one who must regard her curiously, when his voice thrilled her at close quarters.

"Nan! And you'd have passed me without a word!"

Denis was standing in her path, a common wide-awake drooping from one hand, the other reaching out for hers.

"I didn't recognize you," she said, scarcely touching his hand. "And I was looking for Captain Devenish – can you tell me where he is?"

"He has gone down to bathe," replied Denis with some reluctance. To bathe where a ship's company had been drowned that week! No wonder Nan winced. "Can't you spare me a few minutes instead?" he added as she was about to turn.

"Oh, yes, if you wish it."

"Of course I wish it!" exclaimed Denis. His shoulders looked very square under the coarse red flannel; but they were heaving, too.

Nan was her own mistress on the spot. "I couldn't know," said she. "You see, you never sent me any message – not one word."

"I shall tell you why."

"And then I understood you were going to the diggings."

"So I am," said Denis. His voice was preternaturally deep and vibrant. She looked up at him with the odd light in her eyes.

"And why haven't you gone yet?"

"I wanted to see you first."

"That was very kind."

"To tell you why I was going at all – to tell you everything,

Nan, if you will let me – if you aren't determined to misunderstand me before I open my mouth!"

Their eyes were together now, his dark with passion, in hers a certain softening of the unlovely light that hurt him more than her tone: and her eyes were the first to fall, to wander, to espy a stump among the pines.

"I must sit down," she faltered. "It's my first appearance, and I tire directly. But I'm not too tired to listen to you – I want to."

Yet already a change had come over her, and either she was physically weaker or else softer at heart than she had been but a minute before. At all events she took his arm to the stump, which was one of several in a little clearing lit and checkered by the slanting sun. And she sat there almost meekly in his sight, while Denis planted a foot upon one of the other stumps and said what he had to say with bare arms folded across a moleskinned knee.

"In the first place," he began, "I saved your life."

Nan's smouldering spirit was in flames upon the word, and her face caught its fire.

"And you remind me of it!" she cried in red scorn. "Is it the sort of thing one forgets? Is it a thing to thank you for like any common service, and are you the one to put the words in my mouth?"

Denis did not wince.

"I am wrong," he said, quietly. "In the first place, I asked you to marry me; it was only in the second place, and before you had time to give me an answer, that I was so unfortunate as to save

your life."

"Unfortunate!"

"Most unfortunate to be the one to save you, Nan, because if it had been any one else it would have made no difference between us; as it is it makes all the difference in the world."

"I don't understand," she said, trembling because she was beginning to understand so well. "I only know how brave you were – how brave!"

And she raised her sweet face without restraint, for now she was thinking of nothing but his bravery.

"Most men are that at a pinch," said Denis, with a twitch of his red shirt: "but I was luckier than most. I won't make too light of it. I can swim. But you don't suppose I was the only strong swimmer on board. And which of the rest, I should like to know, wouldn't have made as good use of my chance?"

"But it wasn't only the swimming!" the girl cried without thinking, to break off with her bent face in its besetting fever.

"If you mean the climbing," he continued equably, "there was still less merit in that, for it was absurdly unnecessary, as you probably know, besides which I was full of Spanish brandy at the time. Not that I'm ashamed of that," added Denis with the absolute candour of the dales. "I believe that brandy was the saving of us both; but it was another piece of pure luck."

Nan said nothing for a minute. She was trying to see his hands, and he showed her with a shrug the only finger that was still in rags. His wounds had not been serious; he was scarcely walking

lame; the scratches had skinned over on his face. She could look in it again, steadfastly, simply; she was even beginning to like it better between a wide-awake and an open throat than in the spruce cap and collar of the voyage. Her own scarlet she had conquered in a tithe of the time it had often taken her in secret: it was not so dreadful to be with him after all. And if he loved her nothing mattered: not even her long agony in the ti-tree thicket. Yet he had hurt her by belittling himself, and by something else of which his last words reminded Nan.

"But you don't look on it as luck. You aren't a bit glad you saved my life!" And her eyes fell once more, if this time not involuntarily.

"Glad!" he cried out. "Gladness is no word for my feeling about that – for what I feel every moment of every hour."

"Yet you wish it had been some one else."

"I don't!"

"But you said you did, Denis."

"Well, and I have felt it, too, when I couldn't send you a single message – couldn't make a single sign – for fear you should think – for fear you should misunderstand!"

Nan had not raised her eyes again; his tone made it difficult now. He was leaning toward her, almost bending over her, and yet his foot clung to the pine-stump as though by conscious effort of the will, and his face was a fight between set jaw and yearning eyes. But Nan could not see his face; she could only see the sunlight and the shadows in the lavender skirts that spread

about her as she sat, and a few inches of hard yellow ground beyond. She was beginning to believe in his love, to understand his position before he explained it to her, to see the end of her own doubts. His halting voice was more eloquent than many words.

And yet for words she was constrained to probe.

"So you determined to go up to the diggings?"

"I did."

"And to leave me?"

"Nan, I must."

His voice reconciled her more and more.

"Must you, Denis?"

"To make some money, Nan dear! And I will make it – I will – I will!"

She felt that he would. His voice only stirred her now.

"And then?" she asked.

"And then," he cried, "and then I sha'n't mind pressing you for an answer to what I dared to ask you on the *North Foreland*."

There was a silence in the little clearing among the young pines. Only near at hand the hum of insects, and in the distance a cloud of cockatoos shrieking the sun into the sea, and the sea itself faintly booming upon the base of the sandstone cliffs. Before either spoke there was indeed one other sound, but it fell on ears doubly deaf; for Nan had flung back her dark-gold ringlets in a way of hers, and from the bold pose of her head none could have imagined the warm bloom upon her cheeks, or the

tender film that dimmed the hazel eyes.

"Suppose I prefer to give you your answer first?"

"Nan! Nan! I would have you think it over, and over, and over again!"

"But suppose I refused you after all?"

"I would sooner that than be accepted in haste and – and repented of – you know!"

It was as though he was maintaining his balance for a bet, and near the end of his endurance even so. Nan watched him with a smile touched by the last beams of the setting sun, but as she rose the red glory beat full upon her.

"Very well!" said she. "Then if you won't come to me for your answer, I must bring it to you."

Night falls like an assassin in that country, but the purple tints were only beginning when in his very ear she implored him not to leave her any more, and he held her closer, but said he must. It would not be for long. Others were growing rich in a day; he would make one more. He knew it; something told him; and again, something else told her.

Yet she was vexed with herself for her impulsive appeal against a decision to which she had felt reconciled but the moment before; and vexed with him for scarcely listening to her appeal, unpremeditated as it was, unreasonable as it might be. He might have wavered; she would not have had him yield. His resolution was fine, heroic; she only wondered whether it was quite human, and wondering, lost the thread of his defense.

"Think, think!" he urged. "Think what it would be for me to go home in this ship and marry you as I am, on my poor captain's certificate and nothing else; and then, only think, if I followed in a few months with a few thousand of my own behind me! You may say I ought to have thought of this before. But I did. I told your father so a few minutes before the wreck. I wanted you to wait for me – I was selfish enough for that from the beginning!"

The disparaging epithet pricked Nan to interrupt him and take it on herself. But Denis persisted without a smile.

"Darling, I am selfish about it still; for if I am not worth waiting for, I am not worth having; but if you can wait only a few months – not a day more than a year – I will come to you as I should come if it is to be – but come I will, rich or poor, if I am alive! Nan, darling, I have everything to gain, only these few months to lose; but I will gain all the world in them. I will, I will, I will!"

She could not but be infected with his confidence, his enthusiasm, and his ideal. There in the dusk were the eager Irish eyes glistening and burning into hers, but there also was the strong north-country jaw set for success as the needle to the pole. And yet – and yet – she was weeping on his shoulder as the purple turned to deepest blue.

"I could have helped you, dearest," came her broken whispers. "But no, not here. It's an awful country. It will break my heart to think of you in it. I thought, if you loved me … after all we have been through … you would never, never leave me again! But,

dearest, I do believe in you, and I will wait, for you know best."

So after all it was a brave face, bright as her will could make it, though still wet with tears, that she held away from him, for Denis to look upon it for the first time as his own. But it was a very terrible face that hovered over the same spot but a minute later, when Ralph Devenish came crashing through the young pines to curse the very ground where they had stood, and the sea that had not swallowed one or both.

# CHAPTER VIII
# COLD WATER

The Merridews sailed for England about the middle of October. They had been less than a fortnight on dry land; and it was with a heavy and uneasy heart that Denis watched their new vessel to a speck from the highest point commanding Corio Bay.

With all his candour, there were one or two things that he could not hide from himself, but that he had hidden from the girl to whom he was now engaged. He was a very young man. He loved adventure for its own sake, and though he had been through much, he felt to the very bone that he was only on the threshold of an exciting and successful career. There could scarcely have been a more sanguine temperament, or a character with more right to one. But the young man's confidence in himself was neither blind nor overweening, and in his heart he was under no illusion as to his own motives. It grieved his soul to see the ship sailing away with all he loved on earth, yet he knew how bitterly he would have felt sailing in her, with never a sight of Bendigo or of Ballarat. Then he was inordinately independent. It was in the blood. He must make his own way. And here he was frank, yet not so frank as to tell his Nan that her father had definitely offered to put him in a position to make his way quietly at home; and the father was not so incontinent.

A little incident had contributed to Denis's depression; and he was not one to make much of little incidents. But the first person he had encountered on the *Memnon*, when he had gone on board to see the last of them, was another survivor of the *North Foreland*– a diseased being named Jewson, who had shipped in her as chief steward, only to be disrated for an incompetent sot before the voyage was a month old. The disrating had been largely due to the second officer, who did not hesitate to ask the fellow in what capacity he saw him now.

"Captain Devenish's servant," was the answer, with a grin that maddened Denis, but it was the fact that rankled. He had said no more. It was too late; and the man had been saved, he deserved a fresh start; but that Devenish, of all people, should give him one, in that vessel of all vessels! It was a sign of more than Denis had time to realize until Corio Bay lay blue and bare at his feet, and the tiny sail on the horizon had vanished forever from his view.

He sat in the sun with his face hidden in his hands. His heart had filled with prayer, his eyes with tears; he dug his knuckles into them, and missed the bloodstone signet-ring that he had worn since his father's death. There had been no time for an engagement ring, but Nan was to wear this one until they met again. And she had given him one of hers – a ruby, a diamond, and a sapphire – that jammed in the middle of his little finger nail; but he was to wear it day and night about his neck instead, on a tiny lanyard that she had plaited for it out of her own warm hair. Denis could not trust himself to look at it yet; he could only

press the ring to his heart until it hurt, as holy sinners press the scapular, but that was enough to nerve him. He could even smile as he remembered the absurd injunction which had accompanied this sweet talisman. Still smiling he looked down again through the sunshine upon the empty bay; but now the first thing Denis saw was a separate shadow on the grass.

"Cheer up, mister! All board! It's getting on for fifty knots to Melbourne, and the Lord knows how many bells!"

Jimmy Doherty was standing over him, and his dark skin beamed as he rolled the nautical phrases on his tongue. Denis got up without a smile.

"Don't remind me of the sea, Jimmy; help me to forget about it. And as for Melbourne, we shall never see it to-night."

"Sha'n't we though!"

"What! Fifty miles between midday and midnight?"

"It's not so much, and I've got us a lift half-way."

"But we can't afford that, Jimmy."

A shifty grin from Doherty betrayed a sort of guilty pride in his arrangements.

"I've got it for love, mister, from a hawker as only wishes he was a-goin' all the way, for the honour and glory o' carryin' a gent that's done what you've done and got himself in all the papers."

Denis was divided between natural satisfaction and annoyance.

"Very well, Jimmy, and I congratulate you; but, once and for all, never another word about that unless you're asked! We're

mates now, remember; I might as well brag of it myself. Besides – but it's a bargain, isn't it?"

Mr. Doherty said he supposed it must be; but for once his spirit was under a cloud, for he had appointed himself sole minstrel of his hero's praises, foreseeing both honour and profit in the employment; but on reflection the embargo only made him think the more of Denis, and his first care was to whisper it in the hawker's ear.

The hawker was waiting with his wagon outside an inn in Moorabool Street, and Denis was relieved to find the man less palpably impressed by his exploit than Jimmy had represented him. He was a little flint of a fellow, sharp but surly, who accepted an eight-penny glass of porter with a nod and drained it without removing his eyes from the sailor's face. But in a mile or so his tongue loosened, as the trio sat abreast under the wagon's hood, and the scattered buildings of the budding town melted into the unbroken timber of the bush track.

"So you're bound for the diggings, are you?" said the hawker. "And what may you think of doing when you get there?"

"Well," said Denis, to enter into the man's humour, "we did think we might dig."

"Oh, dig!" said the hawker, and relapsed at once into his former taciturnity.

"What would you do, then?" inquired Denis, nudging Doherty, who, though he had plenty to say when they were alone, was a respectful listener before a third person.

"Bake!" said the hawker, without a moment's hesitation.

"Bake?" echoed Denis in amused dismay.

"It's four-and-six the half-loaf at this moment," said the hawker. "Same price as a quarter of sheep. On the diggings, that is. Yes, sir, I'd bake, that's what I'd do, if I had my time over again, and capital enough to make a start."

"And if you hadn't enough?"

"If I hadn't enough, and if they were full-handed in all the publics, and I couldn't get a job in any o' the stores, and the Commissioner wouldn't give me one, and if I could borrow a license, beg some tools, and steal enough to eat, well, I might have another dig myself. But not till I'd tried everything else. You've heard what they got in Canadian Gully, I suppose?"

"I have," said Denis.

"So had I," said the hawker.

"And what did you get?"

"Not enough to eat bread on; not one in a thousand does. But you go and have your try. You may have a bit of luck in the end, and manage to bring your bones away with the flesh on 'em, like me. That's the most I can wish you, and it's hoping for the best. But you take my advice, and when the luck turns, never wait for it to turn again. You get rid of your claim for what it'll fetch; mine fetched what you see – a hawker's wagon, horses, and whole stock-in-trade. I just jumped in and drove away, and he jumped into my claim. And I will say I'm doing better at this game than I was at that."

"And how is he doing?"

"I don't know," said the hawker, "and I don't care."

"Prices must be good," remarked Denis.

"Among the middlings," said the hawker with a sidelong glance at Doherty, who, however, was looking the other way. "I can let you have a nice pair o' boots for a five-pound-note, and a spare shirt like what you've got on for thirty bob. But it's not what it was when I came out last year. I wouldn't come into the hawking business if I were you; you could get twenty-five bob a day as a carpenter, and three-pound-ten to four pound a week at bullock-driving. But I'd rather be a labourer on the roads, with two crown certain a day, and wood, water, and tent supplied, than peg out another claim."

Denis had heard enough. He was not easily discouraged, but he found it a relief to turn his attention to the scenery. They were intersecting a forest of rather stunted trees, all blown one way by the wind, which made music of a peculiar melancholy among their branches. Doherty said the trees were she-oaks, answering Denis's question with great zeal. Similarly Denis learned the names of the various parrots that perched by the flock amid the dull green foliage, or fled from tree to tree with a whirr and a glint of every colour in the rainbow. Then a pond must be called a water-hole, it seemed – a beck a creek, and the curly-bearded aboriginals blacks or blackfellows – but not niggers. It was the earliest and most elementary stage of Denis's colonial training, and he would have relished it if only for his mentor's intense

satisfaction in his task, to say nothing of a capacity to teach not inferior to the will. But the hawker had a last word left, which he kept, as though by demoniac design, for one of their glimpses, depressing enough to Denis as it was, of the sparkling sea never many miles distant on their right.

"Ah!" said the hawker, pointing with his whip, "if I'd been one hour earlier in Geelong, I'd have sold lock, stock, barrel an' ammunition for a berth in that ship that cleared out for Old England this forenoon. Ship from Melbourne you can't get. It was a chance in a hundred, and I'd have given all I have for it, as you will for such another before you've seen half as much as me."

It was about three in the afternoon, at a place called Wyndham, that the pair took their leave of this dispassionate pessimist, with as little regret as may be supposed, and found themselves afoot for the last twenty miles. And almost from the first step Doherty was loud in his denunciation of every word the hawker had uttered, not one of which was Denis to believe for an instant. But there was no Denis left to embrace this view; the leave-taking of the morning and the hawker in the afternoon had reduced him between them to unmitigated Dent, a dogged fellow ready for the worst, though more than ever bent upon the best.

"There are two sides to everything, and give me the dark side first," said he; "besides, a lift for nothing is a lift for nothing. But what's that you've got in your pack, Jim?"

"What's what?" asked Doherty, changing colour as he trudged.

"There's a box of some sort showing through your outer blanket."

"Oh, that's my revolver."

"Your revolver! You hadn't one this morning. Who's given it to you?" demanded Denis.

"No one," the boy confessed. "I bought it from the hawker while you were on the ship."

"And how much did you give for this?" asked Denis, as they squatted by the roadside, with a neat oak case open between them, and a great five-chambered Deane and Adams twinkling in the sun.

"Ten guineas, mister."

"Ten guineas! More than half the wages you drew from the station, for a second-hand revolver? He didn't say it was first-hand, did he?"

"No, but he said it was worth more."

Denis sprang impatiently to his feet.

"Well, it may save our lives, and then it will be," said he. "But I like your notion of a lift for love!"

# CHAPTER IX
# THE CANVAS CITY

The travelers had been variously advised as to their best road to Melbourne from a certain point; but what they did (by pure accident) was to come out on the Williamstown promontory and get a second lift (by sheer luck) in a boat just leaving for the Sandridge side. They were even luckier than they knew. The gain in mileage was very considerable. And there was sun enough still upon the waters for them to see with their own eyes the derelict sail of all nations and of every rig, swinging forlornly with the turning tide, their blistered timbers cracking for some paint, and all hands at the diggings.

But the sun was sinking when the two friends landed at Liardet's Jetty, and came at once by the Sandridge Road to the first thin sprinkling of the tents which formed the Melbourne of those days. The track ran in ruts through sand and dust as fine as tooth-powder; they trudged beside it over scanty grass, with here and there a star-shaped flower without the slightest scent. Gum-trees of many kinds, some with the white bark peeling from their trunks, others smooth and leafless as gigantic bones, made amends with their peculiar aroma. There was a shrill twittering of the most unmusical birds, the croak of bullfrogs from a neighbouring lagoon, a more familiar buzz of flies, a

tinfoil rustle of brown grass at every step. Once the grass rustled before Denis's foot came down, and in a second he had stamped the life out of his first snake – a long black fellow with a white waistcoat and pink stripes. Doherty held it up in horror.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.