



One Christmas Morn

A novelette in three parts



Fabian Bell

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PART I.
CYRIL'S INHERITANCE

Chapter I

He was a fortunate man. Everybody said so, and what everybody says must be true. Young, handsome, rich; with no clogs to his wealth in the shape of awkward relations, poor or otherwise. No person very near to him in blood, to torture or to bless. No father, mother, sister, brother. He was emphatically his own master. Nor had he any of the heavy responsibilities which landed property in the Old Country always brings with it. He had no tenants to look after, no model cottages to plan, or model farms to work, on strictly approved principles. Nor was he haunted with any of those morbid fancies concerning the riches of the few and the poverty of the many which have made men willing to 'sell all.' No, thank God! In these Colonies poverty, though real enough, is not yet so grinding as to make ease and plenty, by their mere contrast, an insult.

Cyril Horne was a fortunate man. Everyone said so, and for himself he never doubted it. Very easily, very lightly, very pleasantly had he passed through life up to the present time. Nothing on which he had set his heart had ever been denied to him. Was it a friend's horse that he admired, a stiff price purchased the animal; a dog, a gun, 'favour, observance, troops of friends' — all were his. And when, to crown all these, he wanted a woman's love — the love of the one woman on earth for whom his soul longed — it was surely not strange if he felt somewhat over-confident, and doubted not that this good thing also would be his for the asking.

But Nellie Francillon was not to be so easily won. Her voice shook and her heart beat cruelly when she said 'No.' But the word was spoken with decision, and was no mere conventional excuse.

Cyril was annoyed.

'Nellie, you are chaffing me — you don't mean it?'

'I do, Cyril; please believe me. I like you very much as a friend, but — I cannot marry you.'

'Why not?'

'I cannot. Is not that enough?'

'Certainly not. Look here, Nellie, I love you, and I'm pretty certain you return my love. Can you deny it?'

'That has nothing to do with the question.'

'I beg your pardon; it has everything to do with it. I love you; you return my affection. I ask you to marry; you hesitate for a while in a becoming and lady-like manner. I press you; you consent. We marry, and live happily ever afterwards. Is not that the correct thing?'

'No, Cyril, no; I cannot, I will not marry you.'

'Miss Francillon, you are rude.'

'I do not intend to be so. Please take my answer, and go.'

'What! Without a reason. I am at least entitled to know why I am so abruptly, so strangely refused. Give me your reason.'

'I dare not.'

'What absurd nonsense is this? What mad freak have you taken into your head? If you have a reason, give it; if not — but, as you can have no reason, you are merely tormenting me, and trying how far your power extends.'

'Cyril, you do me an injustice. I wish you would accept my answer. Let us be friends, and no more.' He waved his hand impatiently. 'It is painful to me to give you my reasons, but if you insist —'

'I do insist.'

And his handsome face clouded over, and a certain dogged expression drew down the corners of his mouth into very unamiable curves.

Nellie rose from her seat, with the restless movement of mental suffering, went to the window, and looked out, though without seeing any of the objects on which her eyes seemed bent, and then, passing her hand across her brow with a sudden swift movement returned to her seat, and with hands tightly clasped and face averted, said:

'Cyril, you know that I am an orphan. Did you ever hear how my father died?'

'No.'

'He committed suicide — shot himself in a gambling-house.'

'Oh, Nellie, my poor, dear girl! I had no idea of anything of the sort. If you knew how sorry I am. But that need make no difference between us, I assure you.'

'Hush! You don't understand. Let me tell you all. My father was a rich man..He inherited a fine fortune from his mother, and he also inherited from his father a love of play. He was reckless, extravagant, and, above all, a gambler. He soon dissipated his mother's fortune, and then his godmother left him an ample competence, and that went in the same way. When I first remember him, he was a noble, soldierly-looking man — one whom any girl would have been proud to call father, any woman to point to as her husband; but, young as I was, I remember well how he changed and deteriorated — how he lost his upright carriage, and began to slouch along like one who dares not face the world — how his eye grew wild and restless, and his lips and hands burned with constant fever. I remember, too, how we left our beautiful home and took a smaller house, and then one smaller and smaller still, until at last we found ourselves in a bare lodging. Worst of all, do I remember my mother's sufferings, and how she faded day by day. At last the crisis came.

'For weeks my father had been steadily losing. He did not come home (we learned these particulars afterwards). He staked all that he had — the few coins in his pocket, his watch, and all his trinkets. Suddenly he bethought him of his wife's wedding-ring, which he had just caused to be altered, her finger having grown too slender to retain it. He risked that, and lost.

"There is nothing left for me now to stake except my life," he cried, wildly. "I stake that!"

'His opponent laughed, and accepted the bet. They played, and again my father lost. He took up a pistol lying near, put the muzzle to his forehead, and blew out his brains.

'My mother never survived the sight of his mutilated body. She died in less than a month. I was only twelve years old when these events happened, but I can never forget them or my mother's dying words:

"Nellie, you are a child now, but you will be a woman someday. Never marry a gambler, or you will curse the day that you were born."

'I promised her, and my words are binding as an oath. Besides, I dare not face a life of such misery as she endured. I am not a saint, as she was. I should go mad, curse God, and die!'

Overcome by her emotion, Nellie burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

Cyril stood beside her, strangely pale and disturbed.

'Nellie, dear girl, why this emotion? You should not have told me this painful story. Why —'

'Oh, Cyril, do you think I have not watched you? Do you think I do not know that you, too, have this terrible taint — that you, too, are a gambler?'

'I deny it. I am fond of games of chance, and often stake a few pounds on the issue, but I am not a gambler.'

'Not yet, perhaps; but the taint is in your nature, and if you do not struggle against it, you will certainly succumb to it. I have heard it said that your father was an inveterate gambler; that most of your present wealth is the result of successful speculation; and that, had he lived only a little longer, you might have been poor instead of rich. You, too, are notoriously fond of all games of chance. Cyril, I remember my mother's fate — I dare not marry you.'

'Not if I promise never again to bet on any game of chance?'

'Will you so promise?'

'I would do more than that to please and win you, and indeed it will not cost me as much as you think. I have betted from mere idleness, and, because other fellows did so; I have no real love of play.'

So declared Cyril Horne; but he deceived himself, as so many of us do, not knowing how deeply rooted in his nature was the fatal inheritance, far more tenacious and abiding than that other inheritance for which all men envied him. And Nellie believed with that half-belief with which so many women reason against the instinct which warns them of danger, trying to silence by argument the warning voice that will be heard, and which is sure to revenge itself someday.

They were engaged; in due time the wedding-day was fixed.

For months Cyril had not played with cards or dice. If he went to a race, he was accompanied by Nellie and her friends, and he carefully eschewed the betting-ring.

'You see, Nellie, I am not really a gambler.'

And Nellie flushed triumphant.

Why is it that all women — all the best of them at least — find such pleasure in the exercise of having power, and are never so well content as when employed in the task of reforming some recreant lover, so that, like the angels in heaven, 'they rejoice more over one sinner that repenteth, than over the ninety-and-nine just persons that need no repentance'?

A month before the day fixed for his marriage Cyril joined a party of bachelor friends. The play ran high. For some time he refused to join, and then, imperceptibly at first, he was drawn into the vortex, declaring, however, that he would not play longer than a certain time, and risk more than a certain sum. Fortune favoured him, and the man who could have lost hundreds without feeling embarrassed began to win, and won steadily. His opponents were, with one exception, men of moderate means, who could afford to lose some pounds. The exception was a young man, a 'new chum,' who had not long come out from Home, and had only just obtained a situation in one of the banks. He was poor — how poor none but himself and his young wife knew, as none but themselves knew how often they had gone dinnerless and supperless to bed. The game was loo, and on the whole the luck was fluctuating; but Cyril Home won steadily, while Maurice Grey lost as perseveringly. One and another of the party urged Grey to leave off, 'he was so down on his luck,' but he would not; the terrible gambling fever had got into his blood. At every fresh deal illusive hopes lured him on; it was impossible but that 'the luck would change some time.' He had lost so much — he dared not think how much; but the luck must turn soon, and when he had retrieved his losses then he would stop — not before. And so he played on, until his boyish face was distorted with the eager, craving, restless greed and terror which is the portion of every gambler. To do him

justice, Cyril was willing to leave off, and proposed to do so once or twice; but, being the chief winner, he could not refuse to give Grey his 'revenge.' So they played on until the fair pure light of dawn shone through the closed blinds upon the haggard faces and bloodshot eyes of the young men, and some of those who had business to attend to declared that they must break up the party, and Maurice Grey, awaking from his short trance of madness, knew himself to be disgraced and ruined, Cyril held a bundle of I O U's in his hand, and carelessly mentioned the sum total. Had the amount been ten-fold greater it could not have been more unattainable. The loser changed colour, but brought a desperate kind of courage to his aid.

'I have not so large a sum about me,' he said, quietly. 'I will pay it you tomorrow, when perhaps you will give me my revenge.'

Cyril consented unwillingly, for already his conscience reproached him for his broken promise, and he did not care to play again, but a false notion of honour compelled him.

On the second night Maurice Grey's losses were heavy, and again Cyril was the chief winner. The young clerk paid his debts of honour without flinching, but had there been one creature present who had cared to watch him, that man's heart would have ached to see the despairing expression of his bloodless face and anguish-drawn lips; but none noted these things at the time — afterwards they remembered them, and were grieved, but it was then too late.

Three days later Cyril Home read in the Daily Times that Maurice Grey was in prison, on a charge of embezzlement.

Chapter II

'Someone wants to see you, Miss.'

'To see me, Anne? Who is it?'

'I don't know, Miss; but she seems in trouble.'

This was an appeal to which Nellie Francillon never refused to respond. Young as she was, she had known mere than one severe trial, and the sympathy of fellow-feeling touched her quickly and keenly. She rose at once, and went into the hall.

'Did you want me? Please come in,'

A young woman, with pretty, delicate features — marred, however, by the signs of great weakness in the loose flexile mouth and pale eyes — stood timidly on the very edge of the mat.

'Did you want me? Please come in,' said Nellie, opening the door of a little morning-room.

The stranger followed, and again paused just within the door-way. She seemed in no hurry to speak, but twisted and untwisted her slender fingers in a restless, undecided way, and as Nellie looked she saw the great tears rise in her eyes and glide slowly down her cheeks. The sight moved the girl to great pity.

'I see you are in trouble,' she said, gently. 'Can I do anything for you?'

'Oh yes, Miss, if you would; but I scarcely like to ask you. But indeed it was not his fault; he was led into it. He's not a bad man, my Maurice; but he's fond of company, and easily led. And indeed it's not wonderful when you think. He's quite the gentleman, and in the Old Country he mixed with knights and nobles and the very highest in the land. And of course out here it's different. He can't bear to associate with the other clerks, and so he goes with the gentlemen, and they tempt him on to play, and he can't afford it, and so and so.'

She paused. Nellie, with gentle patience, tried to lead her on to explain the object of her visit, and strove to extract a kernel of sense from the mazes of her rambling talk.

At last a name was mentioned — the name of Cyril Horne.

Nellie started and coloured.

'Do you know Mr Horne?'

'It is he who has ruined my husband.'

'You must be mistaken. Mr Horne is far more likely to make the fortune of another man than to ruin him. He is rich, and —'

'I know he is rich — that makes it so hard that he should have tempted a poor man like my husband. What was a little money — a few pounds, or a few hundred pounds — to him? But the loss of it was ruin to Maurice. He said it was a debt of honour — oh God! What honour is there in such debts? — and must be paid. And so he took the money from his employers, hoping to pay it back in a few days, but they found it out before he had time to repay the money. They would not listen to a word he had to say, and this morning they took him from me, and now he is in prison, and they won't let me see him — and perhaps he is in a dark cell, with handcuffs on. My poor Maurice — we were so happy together. We have been poor — very, very poor — sometimes we did not have enough to eat; but he had just got this good billet, and we were beginning to get things comfortable round us, and I thought he had quite given up his love of play, and indeed he would never have done it, but Mr Horne and the others asked him to join, and he did not like to tell them how poor he was.'

While Mrs Grey rambled on thus, sudden and ghastly change took place in her hostess' face. The soft bright colour entirely faded from Nellie's cheeks, the shadow under her eyes deepened, her very lips took a livid tint; but she did not lose her self-control. Like others, she had read and heard of Maurice Grey's supposed crime, but not until that moment had she imagined that it could touch her in any way. Now, in an instant, she understood why the woman had come, and what was expected from her.

'And you are sure that Mr Horne was present when your husband lost the money?'

'Sure! It was he who won it. I have his receipt here; it dropped out of Maurice's pocket, and I thought I'd keep it and show it to you. Here it is.'

She held it out. Nellie saw the well known name, and, shuddering, pushed it back.

'Won't you take it?' said the little woman, pouting like a vexed child. 'Then you won't help me?'

'Yes, I will. I will write to Mr Horne, and tell him that having got your husband into this difficulty; he is bound to do the best he can to get him out.'

'Will you do that? Will you really do that? How very, very good you are!' It is the very thing I wanted, but I did not like to ask you. I thank you a thousand times.'

'Do not thank me. He may not be able to do much, but what he can, he must do for his own sake — yes, for his own sake.'

She sat down to a table, and drew writing materials towards her. For a moment she hesitated. Alice Grey watched her nervously. What if, after all, her courage should fail! But Nellie was no coward. She dipped her pen in the ink, and wrote steadily — even the bitter parting words which cost her so much.

'Dear Cyril, —

'Mrs M. Grey has been with me, and told me the story that you know. I think you will agree with me that it is your duty to do the best you can for the unfortunate man whom you have helped to ruin. No sacrifice of time or money can be too great to purchase his escape from the consequences of his foolish crime. Of course the engagement between us is at an end — you will understand that, and will, I trust, spare me all entreaties and remonstrances. You know my feeling on this subject — my solemn vow, and your broken promise. I do not

reproach you — it would be useless; but I beg you to believe that my resolution is irrevocable, and if you have ever loved me you will respect my wishes.

'Yours affectionately,
'Nellie.'

It was a strange, abrupt letter. Nellie did not pause to re-read it, lest her courage might fail, but, hastily gumming the envelope, handed it to her companion.

'You had better leave that at Mr Horne's lodging, to make sure that he gets it; but I should advise you not to see him personally. I am sure he will do his best to serve your husband, but do not count too confidently on his efforts: the richest and cleverest men fail sometimes. In the meanwhile, if you will allow me —'

She drew out her purse.

Alice Grey shrank back.

'Not that. Don't offer me money. If Maurice gets off, he can earn a living for us; if not, it matters not what becomes of me. I can be a servant, but I won't take your money. No, no, I could not. You have been very good to me, and I thank you. I should like to come and see you again, if I may.'

'Certainly you may. I shall be pleased to see you at any time; and, remember, I claim the right to help you if you need help.'

Cyril received Nellie's letter, and read it self-convicted. As he read, a strange resolution formed itself in his mind. First of all, however, he went to the — bank, and called upon the manager. What passed between them at that interview never exactly transpired. Cyril was a good customer; he was one whom it would not be wise to offend; the withdrawal of his account would prove awkward. Then, too, he offered to refund all, and more than all, that the bank had lost. Under such circumstances it was surely well to temper mercy with justice, to give the erring man another chance, and not to blast his whole future life by a criminal prosecution. Cyril talked, argued, drew out a cheque, and left the office with a cynical smile upon his lips. 'What was there in this world that money could not do?'

Then he took up Nellie's letter, and his mood changed. Here was one woman whom filthy lucre could not tempt. Never in his life had he respected and loved her so much as at that moment, when he knew that he had lost her. The strange resolution grew stronger, and began to gather form and shape.

On the following day Maurice Grey was brought before the magistrates on the charge of embezzlement, and was dismissed for lack of evidence. There had been some mistake. People looked at each other, and murmured strange doubts and questions. Some underhand influence had been at work, but they knew not whose or what.

Later in the day little Mrs Grey called on Nellie Francillon, and overwhelmed her with thanks and gratitude.

'There is nothing to thank me for. Pray say no more. But, Mrs Grey, I think it would be wiser for you to leave this town. People are sure to talk, and —'

'That is just what Maurice says. I think we shall go to Australia in the boat which sails next week.'

'That is a wise resolution. I hope that you will get on there, and that your husband will profit by the lesson he has received. He has had a narrow escape.'

'Oh, you need not fear that. Maurice has had a good fright. He will never touch another card so long as he lives — he swears it. And, Miss Francillon, will you thank Mr Horne for us? We called at his lodging, but he was not in.'

Nellie bent her head.

'Mr Horne is already thanked,' she said.

And then she kissed the little woman, and bade her 'God-speed,' and the two parted, as they thought, for ever. But the world is narrow, and we move in circles which from time to time touch, but never blend.

Where was Cyril?

Not in his lodgings, not in any of his old haunts, not in country inns, or enjoying the hospitality of his friends.

He had disappeared.

Yes, that strange resolution had gathered form and shape, and was now an accomplished fact. He had disappeared, self-exiled, from all those advantages of wealth and position which he had hitherto prized so highly.

'Farewell, dearest Nellie,' he wrote; 'farewell, but not for ever. I shall return and claim your promise. You are right: I am not worthy of you.' My life has been too easy. I have stripped myself of all the false adjuncts of wealth. I am going to fight the world — to leave behind one inheritance, and conquer another. I may be worsted in the struggle; I may lose heart and courage, and return to my wallowing in the mire. But I think not. If I return at all, I shall return triumphant. So wait for me five years, for I know you love me. But if I do not then return to claim my promised bride, think of me as dead or worse than dead, and forget your true love,

'Cyril Horne.'

And so he disappeared, leaving minute directions with banker and solicitor, and even to them giving no address.

Where had he gone? No one knew.

What had he taken with him? Only a cheap outfit of common, ready-made clothes, and a hundred pounds or so in cash.

'What a strange fancy!' said his friends. 'He will soon tire of it, and come back.'

But a year passed by, and then a second, and the third had nearly expired, and no word or sign had been received from the wanderer. Whether he were dead or living, ill or well, prosperous or the reverse, none knew — perhaps none cared. Only Nellie was Nellie Francillon still — often wooed, but never won. Was she waiting for Cyril? Who can tell? She herself hardly knew. But as the five years drew to an end she became restless and excited, as one who expects some crisis in her fate, some supreme moment to which the whole of her previous life has been tending, and for which it has been in some sort a preparation. She expected some strange thing to happen, and was ever on the watch for some word or sign from her absent lover. That he would return to her she doubted not, and his prolonged absence proved clearly to her mind that he had maintained his self-appointed probation, and that, whenever he did return, he would have mastered the vice which had once threatened to master him. In this hope, which was well nigh assurance, she watched and waited.

PART II.
IS IT HE?

Chapter I

In the wild land, still only half explored, which lies north of Queensland, is many a stretch of rich alluvial soil — rolling prairies, fertile as those of the States, covered in the wet season with the rich lush grass that the cattle love, but subject in the summer heats to terrible droughts, which toll sorely on man and beast.

On such an outpost of civilisation, among the pioneer sentinels of progress, lived a young couple named Yates, who, having little money and plenty of the courage of youth, had elected to settle on the new and comparatively cheap land. To them, on one bright spring day, just as the rain had ceased, and the whole country rejoiced in the rich prospect of the coming years — to them, on such a day, came a stranger, who, after enjoying a short hospitality, frankly asked and frankly given, offered to join them at the frontier post.

'I have no particular predilection, and no special vocation of any kind that I know of,' he said, lightly; 'but I know a good horse and a good dog when I see them, and I am some judge of cattle. I am just wandering round to see a little of the world, and I prefer the world of nature to the world of towns. I am charmed with your frontier life; I have a few hundreds that I can invest; — and, in short, if it is agreeable to you, I will take a portion of the runoff your hands, and either assist you to look after the land myself, or pay someone else to do so.'

The proposition was joyfully received. White men are scarce in the frontier districts; educated white men still more uncommon; ditto ditto with money, rara aves indeed. Tom Yates was chronically short-handed, and he closed with the offer immediately. The preliminaries were speedily arranged, for the newcomer was by no means grasping, and matters were soon settled to the mutual satisfaction of the partners; but before they had proceeded quite so far, Tom asked the stranger's name.

The latter hesitated for a moment.

'You may call me Charlie Hall,' he said. 'It is not my real name, but it will serve as well as another.'

And thus, under a new name, and among new and strange surroundings, Cyril Horne commenced his new life. It was not exactly the kind of existence he had pictured to himself when he left Dunedin and Nellie. His dreams had been of something vaguely great and heroic, but in this nineteenth century of ours such dreams are difficult of realisation. There is so little of the heroic element in our busy, matter-of-fact lives — so little of what is great, and rare, and noble — that Cyril perhaps might be pardoned for having speedily resigned the task as hopeless. The free frontier life appealed vividly to his imagination, as being in every way different to all his previous experience; and the elements of possible danger and excitement, conveyed by the near neighbourhood of the blacks, offered an additional attraction, for Tom had told him at once that their position was not without risk.

'I have done the best I can to conciliate the black boys,' he said, 'and have treated them with uniform kindness and firmness; but there is no disguising the fact that they are savages, with all the vices of savages, and in these remote spots we are very much at their mercy. In the most settled districts, where they have learned by experience the strength of the white man, there is little to be feared from them --- they are petty thieves and inveterate beggars; but here it is different. It is not so long since these "happy hunting grounds" were their own undisputed possessions. They hate us, and they have not yet learned to fear us. Frightful tragedies are by no means rare in these frontier posts. It was only last year that a

neighbouring settler (he lived eighty miles away, but that is near in the bush) lost two shepherds and his only son, a promising lad of twelve, who had gone to bring home a mob of sheep from some place near Brisbane. Neither the boy, the men, nor the sheep ever came home; and from the incoherent statement of a tame black, known to be faithful, they had been set upon in a lonely defile of the hills, the men and boy killed, and the sheep carried off. And this was no particular act of vengeance — merely because the blacks were in need of fresh mutton. I can tell you I never leave the house for a few hours without feeling nervous on Mary's account, and it is a great comfort to me to have another white man on the spot on whom I feel that I can depend.'

'I should like to see some of these aborigines in their native haunts,' said Cyril, lightly.

And his wish was fulfilled in a manner that he little dreamed of at the time of its expression.

The season turned out a remarkably dry one. The run was well watered, a creek, almost deserving the name of river, skirting it on the south and west; but all the minor streamlets and waterholes were empty, or only contained a little heap of half-dried mud at the bottom, which tantalised instead of relieving the cattle. The two partners and their men were employed almost night and day in the effort to alleviate the sufferings of their dumb companions, driving them to and from the water, seeking the best pasturage, and striving by every means in their power to keep them alive and well.

One day Tom returned from this task with an unusually grave face, and, drawing his partner on one side, said:

'The black boys are out on the warpath; I have seen their trail. They have driven off a small mob of our cattle — the Red Bull's mob. The worst of it is that we are not strong enough to punish them, and if they get off with impunity, the example will be most dangerous. Neither our lives nor our property will be safe.'

'We must punish them, and get back the mob in some way.'

'But how?'

'I have an idea. Leave it to me. Do you stay at home and look after the homestead with your wife, while I pursue the cattle-stealers.'

'I can't allow that; you are such a stranger —'

'All the better; I shall be less likely to arouse their suspicions. But don't be afraid; I am not going to run my neck recklessly into a noose whence I can't withdraw it. Our own black boys will help me; not because they are faithful — I don't believe in the faithfulness of a savage — but because, being of another tribe, they hate the marauders like poison, and would gladly exterminate them. They will help me.'

'On my word, Hall,' said Tom, with admiration, 'I believe you already know more of these rascals than I do, who have lived among them for years.'

'I have not gone among them with my eyes quite shut — that is all. Now let me call them in, and we will talk matters over a bit.'

There were four blacks on the station, who had been brought from a district much further south, and were therefore of another tribe to the aborigines immediately around them, whom indeed they looked upon as deadly enemies — 'mean blackfellows.' When, therefore, they were told of the loss of the cattle, they expressed the utmost indignation and declared themselves most anxious to punish the 'tammed tiefs.'

Briefly Horne explained his plan. It was daring, and yet simple. The eyes of the black boys sparkled with delight. He led them to the spot whence the cattle had been 'lifted.' For some distance round the plain was parched and withered, the dead grass allowing no more than a little brown dust and dried sticks. Over such a surface it did not seem easy to track the marauders; but the savages made no difficulty. Kneeling down, they carefully examined

the locality; then, pointing northward, confidently asserted that the enemy had 'moved in that direction.

'As I expected,' said Horne. 'They will make for the bush on yonder ranges, and then they will deem themselves secure. I wonder are they a strong party?'

And then, turning to the natives, he put the question to them.

They again examined the tracks, and then held up the fingers of each hand twice in succession, to indicate that the number was about twenty.

'So many?' said Yates. 'My dear fellow, you had better let them alone. The first risk is the least.'

'But it will not be the last. No, no. They are but four to one, and half of them are cowards, whereas my men are brave as lions.'

The natives laughed and grinned, showed their white teeth, and slapped themselves on the breast, when they heard the encomiums; and Tom Yates, who knew how little they were deserved, winked at Cyril, who, however, made no sign.

'My boys are brave,' he repeated; 'not twenty times twenty ignorant blackfellows could make them run. Besides, I do not mean fighting if I can help it. But, look here, Tom, you promised to leave this affair to me. Go home, and look after the missis and the station, and don't expect us till you see us, and then we shan't return empty-handed.'

After a few further remonstrances Tom returned to the homestead, and Cyril and his four companions started on the warpath. They each carried a gun — Cyril's was a trusty breechloader; but he relied not so much on his weapons as on the result of a simple stratagem which he had formed.

All day the blacks traced their brethren, Cyril riding somewhat in the rear. The horses of all were good and fresh, but they could not travel fast, because they did not want to exhaust their beasts, and also lest they should override the track in their eagerness.

Towards nightfall they came to the wooded ranges which formed the northern boundary of the run, and beyond which the partners had never penetrated.

Here the blacks found the remnants of a fire, round which many bones lay scattered.

'Ugh! D——d thief! Blackfellow! Eat muchie beefie, him; no go far — him tummy too full.'

And Cyril was well aware of the fact that these creatures will gorge themselves like vultures, until, like them, they cannot move, and are obliged to wait for sleep and the slow process of digestion to relieve them from the consequences of their hideous orgies. Judging by the signs, the trackers declared that the meal could not have been many hours disposed of. The robbers must have deemed themselves very secure, to feast thus freely in broad daylight.

They do not expect to be followed; we shall find them quite unprepared.'

At this point the pursuing party dismounted, and, hobbling their horses, hid them as well as they could in a neighbouring gully. It was now necessary to proceed with rather more caution, and as a preliminary the blacks stripped themselves to the skin, retaining only their guns and shot-belts, in which full dress, or undress, they looked so excessively wild and fierce, that Cyril's bold heart for a moment quailed as he realised that he was one white man alone among a herd of savages. What more natural than that the two bands should combine together, secure their prey, and dispatch him? But he quickly dismissed the doubt, and calling his sable followers around him, gave them their orders.

'Proceed cautiously, look out for spies, and, above all things, do not fire until I give the order.'

They entered the bush. The track was no longer difficult to follow. Twenty men and double the number of cattle make a sufficiently wide trail, but Cyril judged it probable that one or more sentinels would be left behind to watch the path, and give an alarm should any

strangers approach; but apparently this ordinary precaution had been neglected, such was the foolish security of the robbers, and the pursuers followed the forest path unchallenged.

The sun had set, but the full moon gave a light almost as bright as day.

The bush was full of sound; a thousand night-birds fluttered in the branches, and myriads of insects buzzed and circled in the soft air. In hot countries' the nights are never still; it is at noon that all nature slumbers in a death-like silliness, and the men who are wise follow her example.

'Hist!'

And the foremost tracker stood still.

Cyril paused also and listened intently, but he could hear nothing save the call of the birds and the humming of the insects. The other blacks, however, had more acute hearing; their eyes sparkled, and they began to talk together in low, rapid whispers. The most civilised of them, on whom the settlers had bestowed the absurd name of 'Mountain Dew,' now approached Cyril, and in his peculiar jargon informed him that the camp of the robbers was not far distant, for he could hear the hum of human voices and the lowing of cattle.

'I can hear neither,' thought Cyril; and then, as often during the expedition, he marvelled at the wonderful gifts of sight and hearing which these wild men possessed, the ease with which they read the signs of nature, and interpreted the secrets close hidden in the mysterious depths of the forest, or in the wide and seemingly trackless plain — all of which lay before them like an open book. 'How marvellous is the law of compensation, which thus gives to the savage a special realm into which the white men, who have stolen all his other possessions, cannot enter.

In a few hurried whispers orders were given, and the party again advanced, though more cautiously.

At the end of half an hour Cyril could hear the sounds described. Soon another halt was called, and the white man, sending on two of his companions as scouts, patiently awaited their return. This was not long delayed, and they came back full of eager excitement, having visited the camp of the enemy and the temporary corral in which the cattle were confined. The latter they described as very simple, merely a natural glade in the forest, strengthened here and there by a few felled trees and bush. The cattle were guarded by only two men, all the remainder of the party being gathered in the camp, feasting to repletion on half-raw beef.

'That is the second big meal they have had in six hours,' said Cyril, with grim humour; 'if they continue in this style much longer, there will not be many of our mob left to drive home.'

'Ugly blackfellow! Tamned tief ! Eat massa's beefie — muchie eatie — all red, red,' making signs to show that the juices of the meat were oozing over the lips and cheeks of the savage gourmands. 'Tamn fellows kill one, two, three, four cows.'

'Good gracious! Is it possible?' cried Cyril, who had still to learn how savages can eat when an unlimited supply is placed before them.

However, their greediness at this crisis was a point in his favour. When gorged to excess they would sleep heavily, like other wild animals, and then would be the time to make a bold stroke for the recovery of the lost property. The moon was already high, and the night somewhat advanced. They had but to wait a few hours, and then most of their enemies would be sunk in the heavy torpor which is not easily broken.

The five trackers prepared themselves to wait, but first they took a hurried meal of biscuit and preserved meat, and the four blacks loudly envied the red beef on which their compatriots were regaling themselves.

By degrees the sounds in the enemy's camp grew less; the feasting, and shouting, and occasional squabbles became indistinct and confused. One by one the doughty warriors fell asleep around the watch-fire; even the sentinels, unable to struggle against the mighty force of digestion which called the blood away from the brain to help in assimilating the heavy meal, succumbed to the dictates of nature, and nodded at their posts. The dogs fought and snarled over the remnants of the feast; otherwise all was still.

Then five shadowy figures rose from their ambush, and glided to the corral where the stolen cattle were detained. A muffled, choking, and scarce audible sound proclaimed the death throes of the two sentinels, over the head of each of whom a thick cloth had been deftly thrown, and the work of strangulation easily accomplished. It was then no difficult task to break down the corral on one side, and drive the cattle back along the forest track.

The dogs grew uneasy, and leaving the half-gnawed bones, began to utter their warning cries. More than one of the sleepers stirred and seemed about to awake.

Mountain Dew, showing Cyril an ordinary table-knife ground to a dagger-like point, requested his permission to glide into the camp and quiet one or two of the most restless of the dreamers. But this was sternly forbidden.

'No, no — we have had enough blood shed already; we cannot kill unresisting men. If they pursue us we will fight — not unless. To kill a sleeping man is like murder.'

The savage could not understand this reasoning. According to his code, no better opportunity for slaying an enemy could have occurred; but he dared not disobey Cyril's positive command, and he fell into the place, assigned to him.

The howling of the dogs grew louder and more continuous. The cattle became restless and fidgety, and could with difficulty be kept together. Their objection to the blacks is well known, and none of the four men whom Cyril had brought with him had any power to soothe them; but the voice and presence of the young settler seemed to exercise a restraining influence upon them, and he drove them steadily on the homeward track, ordering the natives to follow closely, keep a sharp look-out, and act as a rear-guard. So far all was well — indeed, he had succeeded in his enterprise far better than he could have expected.

But they were not yet safe. The dogs grew wild in their excitement and the least gorged of their masters began to bestir themselves, and ask what the noise meant. Suddenly an arrow passed within an inch of Cyril's shoulder, and quivered in the flank of a young heifer, brought up the rear of the mob. The creature gave a cry, and plunged wildly forward. Cyril wheeled round quick as lightning, and discharged his rifle at random in the direction whence the arrow had proceeded. A shriek rang through the forest, and a black figure fell, like a lump of clay, across the moon lit path, and lay, a great blot, in the white light. The four southern natives uttered a discordant war-whoop and discharged their pieces recklessly here and there, doing little damage but causing, some consternation among the marauders, who were as yet but little accustomed to the fire-sticks of the white men, and showed a decided inclination to shrink from a close encounter with those unknown weapons. Cyril noticed their hesitation, and resolved to take advantage of it.

'Do not waste your fire,' he said to his men. 'Wait till you see some signs of the enemy; then take careful aim, and let the shot tell.'

They obeyed him, and the result was conveyed in many a sharp cry of agony. The flight of arrows became unsteady in their aim, and finally ceased altogether.

Cyril and his party had succeeded in their daring attempt, and the mob, minus six slaughtered cows, was driven once more into the open.

Tom Yates could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw his partner return triumphant, and Mountain Dew and his three compatriots were looked upon as heroes by the

rest of the station hands, and took upon themselves most absurd airs and graces accordingly, telling yarns which speedily attained to quite apocryphal dimensions.

But, in spite of the success of his bold manoeuvres, Cyril himself felt rather uneasy. He did not think that the blacks would suffer themselves to be balked of their prey without making reprisals; besides which, there were the deaths of three at least of their number to be avenged, and also the wounds of many others.

He urged Tom to keep a sharp lookout.

'These rascals will pay us another visit before long,' he said; 'we had better be prepared for them.'

'Of course; but I think you have given them their quietus. The beggars are cowards at heart, and do not like the smell of powder. I shall be surprised if we see any more of them.'

Cyril thought otherwise, but could give no valid reason for his opinion; and as weeks went on, and no new losses were proclaimed, the subject gradually lost interest, and the vigilant watch of the settlers was much relaxed.

It happened just at that time that a friend of Tom's wrote to him from Brisbane, telling him that a chance would speedily offer of securing some specially well-bred cattle such as were very seldom brought into the market, and urging him not to lose the opportunity of purchasing them.

Tom showed the letter to his partner.

'What shall we do about it? It is a chance that we ought not to miss.'

'Well, I don't know that. We want come new stock badly enough, but then I don't see how we can either of us leave the station just at this time.'

'But see what he says? A pure-bred bull, imported; sire bred by the Duke himself. Oh, I must have that fellow. See what he would do for us. In a few years the whole stock on the farm would have received an impetus.'

'Yes; I suppose you are right, well, what do you propose to do? Will you go down to Brisbane, or shall I?'

'My dear Hall, I never thought of such a thing as your going. You are too good.'

'Not at all. I have never seen Brisbane, and should like the opportunity of so doing. Give me my instructions, and I'll be off in a couple of days; and, mind, keep a sharp look-out on the blacks while I'm gone. I don't want to return and find all your throats cut.'

'No fear of that; but, oh dear! it is awfully good of you to take so much trouble for mere strangers, as we are.'

'There are no strangers and acquaintances in the bush — we are all friends or enemies; and I trust I am not included among the latter. Have all my credentials ready to-morrow, and I shall start early on the next day.'

So it was arranged. Cyril went to Brisbane, bought the pedigree bull and two other fine animals, and then, having engaged a man to take charge of them, and to follow him more slowly, he hastened back to the station.

A fear for which he could in no way account, and which had the force of a presentiment, urged him to return home with all speed. At the stations where he spent two nights on the road he heard horrible stories of black outrages, and as he listened to these his vague fears crystallised into a distinct form, and when he approached the homestead his heart beat loudly and seemed to thump against his ribs. Surely the place was strangely quiet. Where were the dogs, which were always so ready to give the alarm or to welcome their friends? Then, as he wondered, his horse's foot struck against a woolly mass, which in a moment proved itself to be his favourite colley Juno, stone dead, the arrow which had pierced her heart still protruding from the wound. He sprang from his steed and touched the dead beast tenderly, and then looked fiercely round as if to ask whose hand had wrought the

fatal deed. But no creature was within sight to whom he could put the question. The heavy silence oppressed him more and more.

He led his horse by the bridle into the stockyard, and called to one of the blackboys to take him, but no one answered. He hastily hitched the bridle over a post, and went towards the house. A few paces from the door a figure lay crouched on the long grass, under a giant wattle. He lightly touched it with his foot.

'Get up, you lazy rascal,' he cried, 'and don't be sleeping there. Go and unsaddle my horse.'

But the body remained motionless, and a thrill of horror curdled his blood when he saw that it was lifeless, and that the flies were already settling thick upon it. A few paces further on he came upon another dead body, and across the threshold lay a third.

He scarcely dared to step across this latter and enter the house, dreading the sight which might there be awaiting him. The three bodies were all those of black boys who had accompanied him on his expedition. There were two white men on the station, besides Mr and Mrs Yates — what had become of them, especially of her? After a moment's hesitation he entered the kitchen; it was untenanted. He called. The empty house re-echoed his cry, but did not answer it. His courage rose. He passed from room to room, but saw no other ghastly sight. All the drawers and chests stood open, and had evidently been rifled of their contents, but, compared with his apprehensions, robbery seemed a light crime, and he scarcely took note of possible losses.

The sitting-room and chief bedrooms opened on a deep verandah, this again on a pleasant garden — the favourite haunt of Mrs Yates — which was bounded by a deep creek, the banks of which were thickly lined with mimosas, wattles, blue gums, and veronicas, which formed a dense and welcome shade.

As he stood upon the verandah, and looked around oppressed by the deathlike silence, he saw a man emerge from the trees, who made hurried signs to him to approach.

Cyril did not hesitate. He went quickly down the path; and, as soon as he saw that he was followed, Mountain Dew — for it was he — plunged back again into the shadow. Cyril hurried to overtake him, and then suddenly stopped. At their very feet, and white as the loose white dress that she wore, lay Mary Yates — dying, but not dead, as Cyril at first supposed.

As he knelt by her and took her hand in his, her dark eyes unclosed and fixed themselves on his.

'I am glad you have come; you will break it to— to—Tom.'

'Dear Mrs Yates, I can never tell you how shocked I am to find you like this. But surely you are not much hurt — you will soon be better?'

'I am dying. The wound was not deep, but the arrow was poisoned. Mountain Dew has done what he can for me, but I shall die at sunset.'

'Do not say so — do not think so; that is a mere superstition. Let me carry you into the house, and lay you on the sofa.'

'No, thank you; it is cooler here. Besides—' A strong shudder agitated her weak frame, and he knew that she was thinking of the dead bodies which he had seen. 'No, I had rather stay here. But you — will you go and find Tom? I should like to see him before I die.'

'Where is he?'

'Gone to Garoopna, with the two stockmen. They went early this morning', to look after some strayed cattle.'

'And left you with only the four blacks to protect you. How could he be so foolish?'

'He had no thought of evil. The enemy burst on us about noon. I was reading in the verandah. Mountain Dew saw them coming, and warned me — indeed, he almost carried

me here in his strong arms; and I should have, escaped altogether but a random shot struck me here,' and she motioned to the thick part of her arm, from which the sleeve had been removed, and to which a plaster of leaves — of a kind unknown to Cyril — had been applied. 'Mountain Dew put them there; he says they are what the snake-charmers eat, so that they may not feel the snake-bites.'

'Let us hope they will cure you.'

She slightly shook her head.

'They have done me good — they seem to take the curious numbness out of my blood; but I shall die at sunset. I feel strangely weak and faint, as if in a waking dream. I am in no pain, but my soul seems to be wandering away from the body which holds it no longer. I should like to see Tom once more before I am altogether beyond his reach.'

'I will fetch him. But I do not like to leave you.'

'There is no fear for me. Mountain Dew will do all he can for me, and indeed he can do more than you or anyone else.'

'But if those wretches should return?'

'That is very unlikely. They took all they cared for, and drove off a lot of cattle. They have also revenged the deaths of the three men who were murdered in your expedition. They will not come back.'

'Can I do nothing for you before I go?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Give me my Bible; it is on the table in my room. They will not have taken that — it is too old and shabby.'

He brought it.

She tried to hold it in the uninjured hand, but her fingers seemed to have lost all power to grasp anything; and even when Cyril held it open for her, her eyes swam, and she could not see the words, which were all blended together in an undistinguishable haze.

'Never mind,' she sighed; 'lay it beside me. When Tom comes he will read to me.'

Cyril saw that the greatest kindness he could do would be to go and fetch Tom; and although he dreaded and shrank from the task, he hesitated no longer, but, taking her hand in his, promised to go at once and fulfil her bidding.

A faint smile brightened the tired eyes.

'You are very good; but please make haste, or it will be too late.'

He stooped and kissed her hand, and then, because he could not trust himself to speak, turned hurriedly away and left her, with her sable guardian keeping silent watch by her side.

Chapter II

Tom Yates had started for Garoopna early on that morning. It was a lovely day, and his spirits rose with the barometer. As he kissed his wife and waved her a gay adieu, not a single fear or presentiment of any kind darkened his mind. He was 'light-hearted as a boy, when first he leaves his father's fields.'

And so he rode lightly away across the plain to a distant part of the run, where he had built a little hut, with stockyard for cattle, &c., which Mary, who had just been reading Kingsley's charming story, had christened 'Garoopna.' Here they found and yarded the stray beasts, and, having eaten a hurried meal, were on their way home when Cyril met them.

'What, Hall! is it you, old man? You are back before we expected you — all the more welcome for that. It is really first-rate of you to come on like this, and meet a fellow. But how strange you look. Are you tired? Has anything happened? What is the matter?'

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