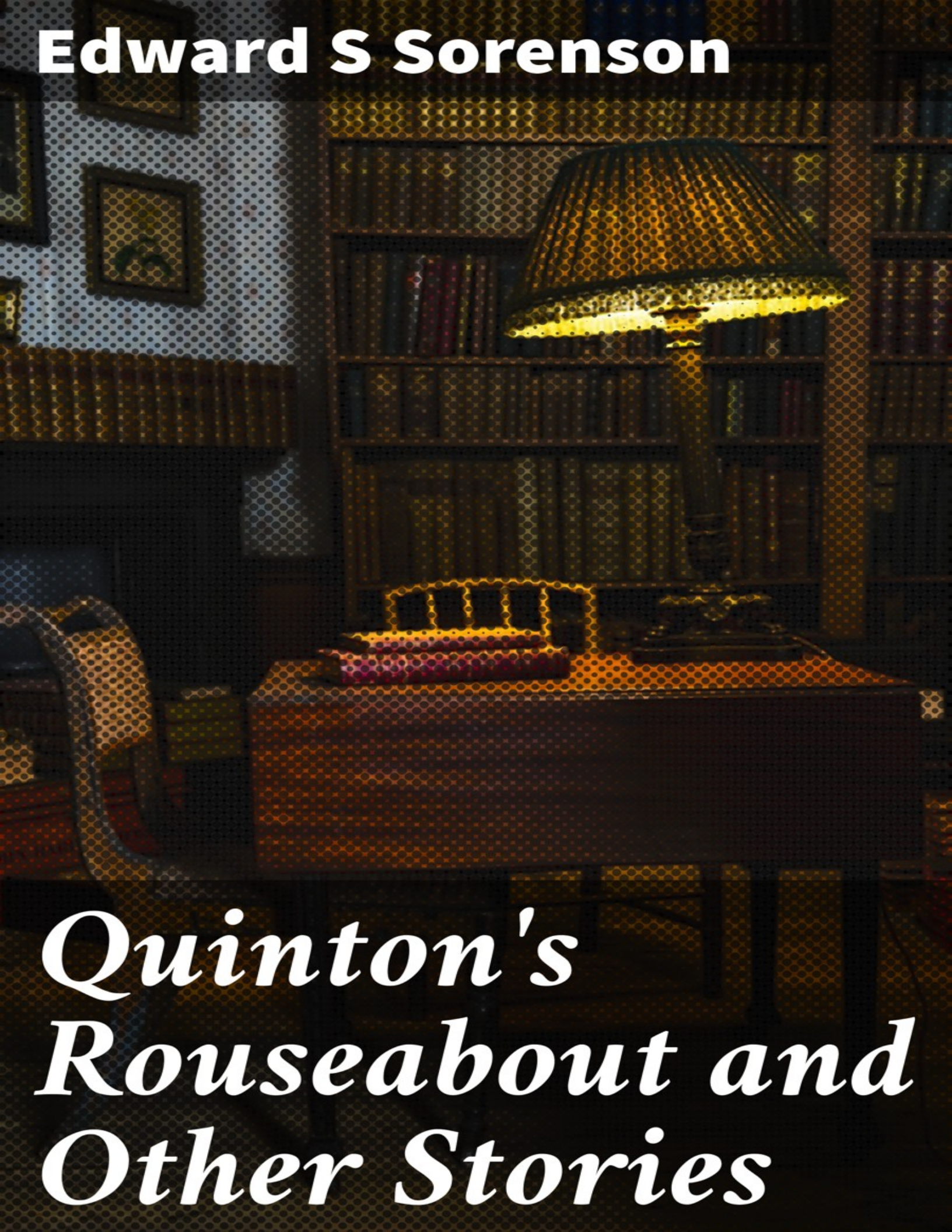




Edward S Sorenson

*Quinton's
Rouseabout and
Other Stories*

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Quinton's Rouseabout and Other Stories



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Murphy's Fireworks](#)

[The Man in the Mountain](#)

[The Station Spy](#)

["Only a Waster"](#)

[Bunny](#)

[Joe Possum](#)

[Bandy Hollow](#)

["Black Stump"](#)

[For Love and Gold](#)

[I.](#)

[II.](#)

[III.](#)

[A Cricket Match at Hogan's](#)

[Rivals at Burrabang](#)

[I.](#)

[II.](#)

[III.](#)

[The Girl at McBride's](#)

[The Case of Black Eckert](#)

[Under the Gum Tree](#)

[The House on Wheels](#)

[The Jealousy of Ran Hassan](#)

[Jerry and John](#)

[I.](#)

[II.](#)

[THE END](#)

Larry Barnett was originally what Australian slang calls a "silvertail," though few thought it when they saw him rouseabouting for Neve Quinton at Gwilla. His father was a Melbourne merchant, and a much cartooned member of the State Parliament. Laurence Chesterfield Orlando Barnett, to give him his full title, did not take kindly to merchandise, so he was sent to Gwilla Station as bookkeeper, to gain colonial experience, and do some good for himself; also to cut short a career of profligacy and extravagance into which he had been drifting in Melbourne. Once he got over his homesickness he put forth his best efforts in his new field of labour. Indeed, Quinton often remarked that he took a keen interest in station life, and believed he would never go back to the city again. Quinton didn't know that the main attraction was Sibyl Rayne, the pretty daughter of a neighbouring squatter. Had he even guessed it, Larry's engagement at Gwilla would have come to a sudden end. It was a queer medley that Larry soon found himself mixed up in, and the story thereof will never be forgotten in that neighbourhood, though the whole truth was known only to their own small circle.

Neve Quinton was a middle-aged man, a bachelor, squat, bandy-legged, and bald-headed, with a thick, protruding underlip that reminded one of a dozing cart horse. Though an illiterate man, who signed his name with a cross, he was enormously rich, and he was close-fisted with his wealth, too. A pock-marked Japanese cooked and kept house for him; besides whom he kept two boundary riders, and, of course, the scholarly Mr. Barnett. Larry was indispensable; he had to look after the books, draw cheques, and conduct

correspondence; besides all which he made himself generally useful about the place and on the run. Thus he was soon intimately acquainted with Quinton's affairs; but it was not till Sibyl went to Melbourne for six months that he learned that Quinton was his rival. The revelation at first shocked him, then angered him; but he kept his own counsel. He was a prudent young man, and never let others know his feelings and opinions. He and Sibyl had come to an understanding on the eve of her departure, and had vowed for each other unalterable love; but she had said nothing about Mr. Quinton. Was she playing him false? He had thought her the truest and fairest little girl in Bushland, the embodiment of all that was innocent and sweet.

Then came Quinton's confidences, and a request to type a love-letter to Sibyl. Quinton, lying back in a big chair, his legs crossed, a black clay pipe in his mouth, dictated, with a grin on his face, born of his own fancied humour; whilst Larry, beiling with jealousy and indignation, played a vengeful and animated tattoo on the keyboard. A rigmarole of ridiculous balderdash, Larry called it. He was disappointed when he handed it to Quinton, smiling maliciously, for his signature, and that shrewd old party said, "Put it on with the machine." So Sibyl would not know that her wealthy admirer could not sign his name.

The post that carried his letter took also the pen-written billet-deux of Larry Barnett; but he mentioned nothing about Quinton's, and if Sibyl alluded to him at all in her replies it was in a decidedly hostile way. Still, she wrote to Quinton, and Larry had to read the letters to him. They were simple, somewhat guarded letters, and mostly concluded with

"love;" but they pleased Quinton, and occasionally he would say, "Read that again," and sometimes of an evening he would bring out the bundle and ask Larry to read them all slowly. Whilst this proceeded, he would smile contentedly, whilst Larry felt inclined to kick him for his "confounded impudence."

One day he caught two little rodents in the storeroom. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "even mice are useful to man." With which mysterious remark he strode jauntily into the office, and shut them up in a drawer. When Quinton next went to get his love letters, there was only a heap of tiny fragments remaining.

Larry had not been long at Gwilla when he discovered that there would be a chance to get hold of a fine 10-mile block adjoining Gwilla and Banoon. He saved his money for two years, and then, getting an advance from his father, had the block gazetted in his name. Just here Quinton woke up with a start, and wanted to know what the devil he meant by it.

"Going in for squatting," said Larry.

"What's the good of a 10-mile block?" demanded Quinton. "It's only a selection—an' wouldn't feed a bandicoot."

"It's a good start," said Larry; "and there's room for it to grow."

"What do you want for it? Come, I'll buy it off yer—not that it's worth anything; but selectors don't make th' best o' neighbours."

Quinton began to feel anxious, why, he hardly knew himself yet.

"No, Mr. Quinton," said Larry. "I've got a lot staked on that block, and I mean to stick to it."

"You'll fall in the soup, Larry, that's what yer will. Go down like water. Look at Bob Rayne on Banoon."

"Bob Rayne's one; you're another. You haven't gone down yet and maybe I'll follow your example, not Rayne's."

He continued as rouseabout on Gwilla, though he got a few weeks off now and again, during which time he fenced in his property, and built a hut and yard. Quinton wondered where he had got the money, and did much hard reckoning in his office, and counted his loose cash night and morning. He also left marked coins about, and lamented the fact that some people were too dashed honest to pick them up. He hated the idea of a handsome, well-bred young man like Larry blossoming into a capitalist, right alongside of him, and within coo-ee of Sibyl's home; and he seemed just the stamp of man who would prosper. He began to dislike his genial factotum, and to plan ways and means of getting rid of him, though as yet he had no suspicion that there was anything between him and Sibyl.

Meanwhile Sibyl had returned. She said nothing about her correspondence with Quinton, and Larry studiously refrained from any reference thereto. Their courtship was a secret, her father, Robert Rayne, of Banoon, looked higher than a rouseabout for a son-in-law.

Larry understood Rayne's position. He owed Quinton nearly £10,000, which was pretty near all Banoon was worth. Here, he thought, was the whyfore of Sibyl's toleration of the old miser. She was playing a part to save her father from ruin. He would not interfere. He would trust

her through all, feeling sure that she loved him, and that no healthy young woman could feel anything but loathing for the ungainly and antique dodderer of Gwilla.

Rayne was a fine type of the pioneer squatter. He had done well until the drought. Since then misfortune had dogged his footsteps, and Quinton had got his iron clutches on Dunoon. His wife could easily have saved him from this; but declined to sink her fortune in the station.

"At the rate you are going, Sibyl and I will be left to battle for ourselves," she had told him. "Yon have lost thousands in this place; but you won't lose one penny of mine in it, no matter what comes."

Before her marriage she had been an actress, touring the big gold fields. She was the star of the company, and miners had heaped presents on her, mostly nuggets. Those she had locked up in a big iron box, every one of them stamped. She called them her jewels. They were worth £6,000, and though her husband repeatedly pointed out the big income she might draw in interest if she placed this money in the bank, she resolutely refused to do anything with the precious "jewels."

Larry called his place Onoroo. He stocked it with a few sheep, and by judicious management he soon had a good flock of lambs. He had one shearing at Gwilla shed; then he engaged an old man to look after his property, and soon afterwards he informed Mr. Quinton that he was going away for a lengthy spell.

"Goin' away, is it?" cried Quinton, surprised, "Where yer goin' ter?"

"Up north somewhere, prospecting," said Larry. "Want to make a rise." After a pause he added, "I'm dead tired of this. Too slow."

Quinton remained in a brown study for several minutes. Suddenly his face assumed a pleasant expression, and he said, with some enthusiasm, "Yes, yer might do better; I think it's a good spec for a young man. When are yer thinkin' o' goin'?"

"I'll make a start early on Monday morning. We'll square up on Saturday night—if you have no objection."

"Sartinly not, sartinly not." He became more cheerful as he thought the matter over, and Larry was puzzled to account for it, knowing that when he went someone else would have to be installed in his place, and Quinton did not like changing hands for that particular post, for his own shortcomings compelled him to make a confidant of his amanuensis.

On the Saturday night following, Larry was sitting under a tree near Gwilla boundary, between Onoroo and Banoon, thinking over his projected trip, and the bold, even desperate, scheme that Sibyl had thrust upon him for the making of their fortunes. He had just left her at the horse yard, and was to meet her again, for the last time before his departure, on the following night. He had not been there long when a man came blundering across from the direction of Gwilla. There was no moon, but it was light enough to see a few feet around, and as the man passed closely, Larry was surprised to find that it was Neve Quinton. It was unusual for Quinton to be out at night. Larry had never known him to leave the homestead for town at this hour.

"I wonder what his little game is?" he mused, peering after him. "There's something in the air."

Almost unconsciously he started after him, treading softly and slinking after the shadows. His curiosity deepened as he went on, and soon he was dogging Quinton with a lively interest, and a determination to see what his "little game" was. Quinton had been strange in his manner towards him during the week, and, somehow, he could not shake off the feeling that he was concerned in this whatever it might be. He followed him into Wallo; and what he saw there made his eyes bulge, and in fear he sought to cover up his own tracks by dragging a bush as he hurried back; but he chuckled gleefully over it often after.

Sunday was the longest day Larry had ever known. He was early at the tryst, and had to wait a long while for Sibyl. She came at last, stealthily and hurriedly.

"I couldn't get away," she said breathlessly, as she sank limply into his arms. "And I must go straight back. Quinton is there, and he'll want to say 'good night.'"

"The deuce take Quinton!" muttered Larry. "This is our last night together, Sibyl."

"Not our last, dear; we'll be always together by-and-bye," said Sibyl. "We must be careful now, or we might spoil everything. I've got the money," she whispered, thrusting a rolled parcel into his hand.

"How much?" asked Larry, as he concealed it inside his shirt.

"£5000." said Sibyl.

"It's a lot to risk," Larry rejoined. "I don't like taking it. If our plans fail—what will happen?"

"Oh, don't talk of failure. I'm staking my reputation—honour—everything on it. You must, succeed—you will. It only needs tact and management; and you'll be very, very careful for my sake, won't you, dear?"

"Have no fears on that score, darling, I'll do all in my power for you, and not one hour will be wasted. But what will you do if the gold is missed in the meantime?"

"I haven't decided yet; but that needn't trouble you. It's only a chance that it will be missed—and I'll get out of it all right if it is. Now I must hurry back. Good-bye, dear, and God speed."

She clung to him for a brief space, while he covered her face with kisses; then she sprang away and vanished in the darkness.

Hundreds of people remembered the date of Larry Barnett's departure for the Gulf country, though they did not know at the time where he went to or for what purpose; for, on that morning, the news spread over the mining field, and through the district, that the bank, a temporary structure, at Wallo, had been robbed of £5000 worth of gold. Quinton was dining at Banoon when the news reached him, and no man looked more astonished than he.

"Wonder would it be that rouseabout o' mine," he said, laughing, when they had discussed the sensation for some minutes. "Seems strange he should clear out just at the time, an' with so much mystery, too. He's been puttin' a lot o' money into Onoroo lately—a lot more 'n he's earned. Wouldn't surprise me if he had a hand in it."

"It would surprise me much less to know that you had a hand in it," said Sibyl, while her lips quivered and her eyes

flashed. Quinton's face went ghastly, but he tried to pass it off with a laugh. In the painful silence that followed Sibyl rose hastily and swept from the room.

From that moment Quinton and Rayne knew that she was not the gentle little lamb whom they had imagined they could mould to their wills. Indeed, Quinton was filled with alarm. What he had regarded as a remote possibility was revealed to him in the angry flash of those eyes; she was in love with the rouseabout. She had not yet given any promise to Quinton, nor had she ever allowed his ugly lips to touch her; but she had not actually repulsed him, and it was understood in her home that Quinton's hope alone kept the sword of ruin from falling. Her mother had more than once endeavoured to inveigle her into a marriage with Quinton; she never missed an opportunity of pointing out the advantages that would accrue to herself and parents from such a "desirable match."

Of course, Sibyl knew it was desirable; but it was not wholly a monetary matter with her. Her young heart swelled with love for Larry Barnett, and her one thought now was to avoid a crisis until his return. Quinton became impatient as the weeks went by; he almost lived at Banoon, much to the worry of Robert Rayne, and the annoyance and anxiety of the dissembling Sibyl.

Meanwhile, Larry, riding day and night, had sped over hundreds of miles of desolation to Arnhem's Land, near the Gulf. The drought had held the country in its awful grip for three years, and meat had almost become a luxury. Cattle were selling in Melbourne up to £30 a head, and killers were hard to get. Yet, in a corner of Arnhem's Land, cut off from

all markets by a wide belt of country laid waste by the drought, there were thousands of fat cattle that could be bought on the run for £4 a head. To buy ten or twelve hundred head and cross them over that barren belt, by travelling them at night, and nursing them in the day, and thence draw down to the south, was the desperate venture upon which Larry and Sibyl had staked—well, only themselves knew yet what they had really staked.

She received one letter from him, advising the purchase of the cattle, and the starting on the hazardous journey. Then followed two months of silence, made harder to bear by the harrowing reports anent the state of the country in every paper she picked up, till she almost dreaded to look at a news sheet of any kind. Her heart ached day and night for him, as she pictured the hardships he had to face, and the sufferings of his brute charges, strewing the route across the awful desert with their dead bodies.

One burning hot afternoon, as she lay dozing in a canvas chair on the verandah, a low, deep volume of sound reached her that sent thrills through her like electric waves. She sprang to her feet, and shaded her eyes as she looked out through the shimmering heat haze. Through the dust cloud on the barren plain came a long string of thirst-maddened cattle, lowing and bellowing as they scented the water in the station dam. It is a sight that at all times stirs the emotions, and it affected Sibyl doubly now, and she stood for awhile with heaving bosom, and tears trickling down her cheeks.

She remembered just then that a blackboy had called the previous morning, and it occurred to her now that he must

have brought the notice to her father. She rushed to the office and, sure enough, on the file was Larry's written notice. She went to the verandah again, with a telescope in her hand. Poising it against a post, she quickly focussed the horsemen. Her father was there, riding with Larry; Quinton was also with the cattle, and riding towards them was the sergeant and a trooper from Walloo. She dropped the telescope, and called out to the groom.

"Tom, saddle my horse, and bring him round at once." In five minutes the horse was at the gate, and in five seconds more she was galloping towards the drovers.

The police were riding back, and the sergeant came abreast of Quinton as she approached.

"You've made a mistake, Quinton," she heard the sergeant say. "The cattle belong to Miss Rayne; Barnett is employed by her."

The same ghastly hue overspread Quinton's face that she had noticed that day at dinner. Then the sergeant turned to her and raised his hat. She shook hands with him, passed a remark about the weather, and rode on, apparently oblivious of Mr. Quinton's existence. The sergeant's words warned her that her father must know now that the mob belonged to her. She had insisted on the business being conducted in her name, because, in the event of their plot being discovered, it was far easier for her to rub through than it would be for him. She must take her father into her confidence, that's all, and in another 24 hours all would be well.

Meeting him immediately afterwards, she asked, "What were the police after?"

"I believe they came to take Barnett; but his papers didn't fit the case."

"What did they want him for?"

"The bank robbery at Wallo."

"Why did they suspect him?"

"Well, someone was good enough to give certain information that, but for his papers, would have got him arrested on suspicion."

"Oh! I can guess the informant. Never mind; we'll got even with that party."

Larry came up, travelled-stained, weary, and haggard-looking. Sibyl's whole heart went out to him, and, careless of her father's watchful eyes, she spurred to his side, leaned over in her saddle, and kissed him.

Quinton, fifty yards off, saw the greeting, and slewing his horse sharply, rode furiously homeward, vowing vengeance on her father. Rayne sat as though he had been petrified, feeling like one who is conscious of some impending doom, but hardly knowing what.

"Good old Larry!" said Sibyl. "You've succeeded."

"If I get water here," said Larry, "I'll be right. There are no bad stages ahead."

"You'll have water," Sibyl declared. "How many did you lose?"

"A hundred and eighty."

"Out of 1200? You did well, Larry." She wheeled towards, her father. "Father," she said, "I want water for those cattle. They're perishing."

"Father" stared, and a little angry flush showed under his eyes.

"Better take the station," he said. "Perhaps you own it now?"

"Never mind the station," Sibyl returned. "Help Larry water the mob, like a good dear, and say nothing. I've got to go to the bank. I'll tell you all to-night."

She cantered off towards Wallo, and Rayne threw his gates open, and let the thirsty mob swarm into the dam. More than that, they were let go in Banoon paddock, and spelled there for a week after.

That night, after tea, Sibyl went into her father's office.

"I want you to do me one more favour—," she began, when her father checked her.

"I think I am entitled to an explanation before we go any further," he reminded her. "Things seem to be getting topsy-turvy here. Where did you get the money from to buy those cattle?"

"From the bank," Sibyl answered. He looked at her sharply, and waited, half fearfully, for her to go on. "I know I did wrong; but it was to save you—and myself—and—"

"Good God!" he cried, springing up, his face paling. "Did—was it you—"

"Oh! no; it's not so bad as that," she interrupted. "I didn't rob the bank."

He dropped back into his chair again, his eyes fixed wonderingly on his daughter's face. She was twisting the corner of her handkerchief round her finger.

"The bank advanced me £5,000," she informed him.

"On what security?"

The handkerchief tightened on her finger.

"Mother's jewels," she whispered.

"What?" Again he jumped up, his eyes rolling. "Do you mean to tell me you stole her treasures, and sold them—"

"Oh! don't call it stealing; and I didn't sell them. I only borrowed them to raise a loan."

"And where are they now?"

"At the bank. But I've arranged to get a loan on the cattle to-morrow, with which I'll be able to get them out of pawn."

"And supposing your mother misses them?"

"She won't miss them now. I want you to take her for a drive to-morrow—take her anywhere; and in the meantime Larry will fetch the parcel out from the bank, and I'll replace them in the box. She need never know that they had been out of it."

Rayne's face was a study in expressions. "It was a dangerous thing, a very wrong thing to do," he reproved. "But there's no harm done, as it happens."

"There's a world of good done," said Sibyl.

"Quinton will never trouble you again, even if you never paid him a cent. But you'll have money to pay him."

"How, then, have you silenced Quinton?"

"I've had no hand in that. Larry's got him in a tight corner somehow. He's over there to-night. Perhaps he'll tell you some day."

"It seems to be a made up affair between you and Larry?"

"He's a man, father, and—I love him."

"All right, my girl; I have no objection to Larry Barnett."

"You dear, good pater!" cried Sibyl, and put her arms round his neck.

"By George though, you've had a narrow escape," he went on. "Don't ever do it again."

"I don't think there'll be any reason to repeat the offence," said Sibyl demurely.

"Yet," he added, laughing heartily, "it would have served her right if she had lost her precious jewels. She wouldn't help me out of a tight fix when she could easily have done so."

"She'd take a blue fit if she knew," said Sibyl, with a grimace.

Her father, looking at it now as a huge joke, brought his fist down on his knee, and laughed uproariously. His wife's refusal to help him out of his difficulties had rankled in his heart, and he felt grateful to Sibyl, though he wouldn't say so, for having outwitted her; and many and many a time afterwards he chuckled joyously over it to himself.

Meanwhile Larry was closeted with Neve Quinton at Gwilla.

"I suppose you'll soon be comin' back to me now, Larry," said Quinton. "There's a lot o' straightenin' up to do here."

"So there is at Onoroo," Larry rejoined. "I'm on my own for the future."

"Ah! moneyed man now," said Quinton, his sneer but slightly veiled.

"Well, I've got enough to get married on, anyhow."

"Goin' to get married, eh? An' who's the lady?"

"Sibyl Rayne—old friend of yours, I think."

"Eh? What? Sib—" He clutched the arms of his chair in a frenzied grip, and the blood seemed to fly from his face. "You treacherous dog—"

"Save your epithets, old party. It's you who have been treacherous. You tried your best to got me juggled for the bank robbery—your own crime."

"It's a lie," cried Quinton, hoarsely.

"You know it's true," said Larry. "You were seen going to the bank that Saturday night, and you were seen coming out of it with the booty. You didn't want that money, Quinton. Being a wealthy man, you thought no one would suspect you, and the crime could be fixed on me."

Quinton glared, and quivered like a cornered dingo.

"Now," continued Larry, "I'll expect you to return every cent to the bank—as conscience money, if you like—and to wait Rayne's convenience for the payment of what he owes you. If you fail in either, you'll find yourself in Queer-street very quickly. Good night, Mr. Quinton."

So saying, he walked out, leaving Quinton trembling and speechless.

A few days later a sensational discovery was made at the bank. The missing gold was found under the counter by the charwoman. How it had got there was a mystery to the officials, but no one in Wallo would believe now that there had ever been a robbery.

Quinton showed his face no more at Banoon; even an invitation from Rayne to Larry and Sibyl's wedding was ignored. This was after Larry had returned from Wodonga. He brought back for his bride a cheque for £18,000. Mrs. Rayne received him with open arms. She believed that his father had financed him at the outset, and, though her precious jewels had become a jest at the station, no one considered it worth while to undeceive her.

Murphy's Fireworks

[Table of Contents](#)

Wood was a scarce commodity about Nuggety—a little mining town in the north-west. The old fossickers, living in little canvas humpies, could manage very well with a few sticks in summer, but in the bleak winters they wanted a good log pretty often. The nearest supply was in the hotel yards. When business was brisk the publicans didn't mind good customers taking a cheap log home with them instead of a bottle. But there were some who never spent anything on drink, yet carried off more wood than those who spent everything. They would smoke a pipe on the verandah, and when Murphy (proprietor of the Lost Souls' Hotel), had a conversation on in the bar, slip quietly sound to the back, lift a handy log from the woodheap, and sneak off into the shadows of the rock-heaps.

The flats were honeycombed with shallow holes, and narrow pads zigzagged through them to the various camps. It was an awkward place to meet anyone at night when carrying wood out of town, as to step off the track would probably mean an ugly fall down an abandoned shaft, and to turn back would simply invite investigation. One might cross 99 times empty-handed and meet nobody, and next time, staggering under a fat lump of gidgee, he might meet half-a-dozen, including Constable Swanker, who sometimes struck off among the burrows for no apparent reason.



"Lift a Handy Log From the Woodheap."

It was by accident I discovered the trick adopted by the fossickers. I came suddenly on to a man one night climbing out of a shaft and shoving a log in front of him. He had been making home with it when he heard someone coming towards him. He dropped it quietly into the nearest hole, took a few steps forward, and stopped to light his pipe, then went on. When the other man had passed out of earshot he went back and recovered his bit of wood. It cost a lot of exertion at times to get a log home. Sometimes it would have to be popped down half-a-dozen holes, and some of those holes were deep.

There was one grey-bearded hatter of the blue ribbon variety, known as Old Ned, who had become a perfect plague to Murphy. He lived directly behind Murphy's yard, and consumed enough firing material for a factory. At least, Murphy blamed him for it all, though the quantity that 'walked' more than equalled what Murphy used himself.

It cost Murphy £1 a load. So, when business was slack, and the weather a little colder than usual, he set a trap to catch old Ned. Several short, junky logs were chucked carelessly about the heap, where Ned would have no trouble in finding them. An inch hole had been bored into each, filled up with powder, and carefully sealed.

That night, about 9 o'clock, noticing a big blaze in Ned's shanty, Murphy examined his wood heap. Every 'doctored' log was gone. Then he crept over to Ned's, and posted himself at a crack in the door. Ned was sitting on a stone before his fire, his elbow on his knee and his pipe propped between his fingers. A cat lay coiled up at His feet. It was a cheery picture of a rugged fireside.

Presently a deafening explosion happened; the logs jumped, and splinters flew up in a cloud of ashes, sparks, smoke, and cinders. The cat took a flying leap through the window, and old Ned fell over on his back, and lay wedged between the stone and the foot of his bunk, gasping and staring in a dazed way at the fireworks. Murphy tore round a heap of gibbers to laugh.

A few minutes later a shot was heard from down the flat, then another behind the hill. While Murphy stood scratching his head, and shaking in his boots a terrific blast came from Widow Bran's hut on his left, followed by screams and shrieks, and a cloud of sparks up the chimney. More shots down the flat and over the hill filled the interval; then two echoing reports broke up the serenity in the Chinese camp, mingled with yells and a babel of Mongolian chatter. Murphy had a fit at this juncture, and rolled on the ground.

When all was quiet again, he made a circuit towards the pub and back to Ned's humpy. Ned was standing outside,

viewing the disturbing element from afar off.

"Plenty of fireworks about to-night, Ned," he remarked.
"What's on?"

"Er—dunno!" said Ned, with a scared look inside.

"Thought I heard a shot here," Murphy went on.

"Er—was outside," Ned stammered. "Some fool goin' along
let a cracker off."

"Scattered your fire a bit," said Murphy quietly. "Those coals
'll be burning something directly."

Ned put one leg through the doorway, and drew it back
again.

"Oh, it's all right," he said. "Nuthin' to burn."

"Better rake it together," Murphy, advised. "There's a bag
behind your bunk smoking."

Ned made another attempt to screw up his courage, but
just as he moved his leg the cat jumped back through the
window. Ned jumped also.