

Ambrose Pratt

The image features a central collage of several open books, their pages filled with text. The books are set against a background of a fine, light-colored halftone dot pattern. This central composition is framed by a dark, textured border that resembles a dense thicket of foliage or a rough, torn edge. The overall aesthetic is that of a classic book cover.

*A Daughter
of the Bush*

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A Daughter of the Bush



Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338094919

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CHAPTER I.—THE MOUNT OF OLIVES.

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IT must have been a dingo running across the starlit bridle track that threw old Sorrel from her stride. She was far too staid and self-possessed a creature to have permitted herself to be startled by a wombat or a wallaby. But I shall never know for certain, because I was asleep. I awoke to find myself sprawled at the bottom of a little gully that ran beside the path. And the worst of it was my right leg was broken. Sorrel was awfully sorry. She whinnied the most abject of apologies, and when I had contrived to drag myself upon the ledge she rubbed me all over with her nose. Fortunately I had a flask of whisky in my swag, but a tot-full of raw spirit could not prevent me from swooning. But it was better when my senses finally returned. My leg had gotten numbed, and it scarcely pained at all. I propped myself against a tree and looked about me. Sorrel was cropping the dew-wet mountain grass, her body silhouetted sharply against the stars. Strange to say, there were stars all round me. I seemed to-be sitting on the summit of the world. Rover had brought me to by licking my face. He now frisked about, plainly delighted with himself. But I was not so pleased. I had expected to make Nandlelong by dawn, and here was I—goodness knows where! and laid by the heels as helpless as any trapped rabbit. A number of profane thoughts occurred to me, and some of them tripped so freely from my tongue that Rover ceased frisking and Sorrel looked up from her breakfast. The mute criticism of my dumb friends had its effect in time. I felt that I had to

counter it to save my self-respect. "It's all very well for you two to stand there and stare at me like a pair of scandalised churchwardens!" I protested glumly. "But you've got all your limbs intact, and it doesn't matter a rap to either of you that Menindi is forty miles behind us and Nandlelong the Lord knows how many miles before."

Rover replied with a scoffing bark, and forthwith ran to the edge of the little plateau that contained us all. Then he barked again, and executed a *pas seul* against the stars. As plainly as dog could speak he was saying, "Look down there!"

I followed his advice, and was surprised to observe quite a dozen little twinkling lamps shining up at me through a thousand yards of intervening gloom. "Nandlelong, by gad!" I cried. "Come! it's not so bad after all."

Rover barked happily, and ran up to lick my hand. "Good dog," said I. "Go! fetch help!" He snarled intelligently, right in my face, and without more ado plunged headlong into the gulf of blackness at my feet. Sorrel snorted her approval and recommenced operations on the grass.

An hour later the rose-robed legions of the dawn began to put up the shutters of the stars. Gad! what a lovely sight the twilight opened to my gaze. On one side of the ledge endless reaches of eucalyptus-covered slopes and rising glades, which rolled in interminable dark green billows towards Menindi; and on the other there stretched before me the entire valley of the Hume—a silver thread of a stream that wound in the most amazing and fascinatingly irresponsible fashion conceivable among a tangle of woods and rocks and tiny table-lands broken with wild ravines and

gullies, and interspersed with emerald farms and sepia-tinted cultivation paddocks past two widely-separated little hamlets sheer to the far blue shimmering horizon. I was entranced into complete oblivion of my misfortune. It was nothing short of bliss to breathe deep draughts of that pure mountain air, to inhale the subtly acrid perfume of the gums, and to watch the while the rising sun's beams strike like golden fingers through the lower mists, and then reach upwards with quivering but tender eagerness across the wide abyss of sleeping shadows to implant a crown of glory on the highest mountain's brow. And there was a she to make the picture absolutely perfect. I watched her climb to a rocky pinnacle that reared its head a little to the left of where I sat. She greeted the orb of day like an ancient priestess making orison—with both her arms outstretched. The sunlight framed her in a shaft of flame and turned her yellow hair to living fire. She wore a plain white frock, but the sunbeams made it saffron. She was young and very good to look upon. I looked long, without tiring in the occupation. Her profile was strong and calm, and moulded like her figure in heroic lines. She was, in truth, a veritable classic incarnation of the dawn; and not the least aware of my existence. Rover yapped and snarled and barked impatiently behind her, yet she paid him no attention. She was silently saying her prayers. Twice she made the Sign of the Cross. But at length Rover forced her to take note of him by seizing the hem of her frock in his teeth. She turned, and permitted me to see her face in full presentment. "What can be the matter with the dog?" she said. Her countenance and voice were equally melodious—that is the word—not

beautiful: they harmonised so tenderly with one another and with the composite whole of her. Her eyes were big and ruddy brown and lustrous, and separated satisfyingly. Her mouth was red and firm and large and full of character. Her nose was not too short, but straight and strong, and her chin was like a man's in strength for all its softly-rounded curves and milky whiteness.

"A wife to fear, a sweetheart to be proud of," I involuntarily quoted.

"The dog wishes me to follow him, I do believe," she said.

"Rover!" I called out, "you are exceeding your instructions. I sent you for help; I did not tell you to be impertinent."

Rover uttered a joyous bark to hear my voice, and bounded from the pinnacle. The girl started slightly, and looked across from her vantage post to mine. Fifty feet of space lay between us. I marked an angry colour stain her cheeks and saw her eyes dilate. It seemed that I was an intruder and unwelcome quite as unexpected.

Eager to propitiate her resentment, I doffed my ragged "cabbage-tree" and bent my head. "I have surprised you in sacred private—a custom, perhaps. But I did not know. I am not an iconoclast; merely a stranger to these parts."

She regarded me with steady eyes that expressed astonishment and some hostility, but she did not speak.

Presently her glance travelled from me to Sorrel.

"Ah!" she said, "you are a digger. You are going to the Yabba Gabba Rush."

"I was."

"Was!" she echoed.

"I have broken my leg. That is why I have not risen to salute you."

The look of astonishment left her eyes. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "How did it happen?"

I laughed and waved a hand towards Sorrel. "You must ask my mare. I was asleep. She betrayed my trust in her: she dropped me overboard into a gully."

The girl nodded and began to descend from the pinnacle. Soon I lost sight of her, but within two minutes she stood beside me.

"Your horse must have left the road at Eden and taken the old Temple track while you slept," she said. "Is your leg badly broken?"

"Simple fracture of the tibia, as far as I can make out," I answered. "Might I ask is that Nandlelong yonder, down below?"

"Yes; and you are on the Mount of Olives. The question is how to get you to the town," she frowned.

I laughed and looked about me. "Mount of Olives, eh? I cannot see any olive-trees. Are there any within a hundred miles or so?"

"None that I know of."

"Ah! that was why they so named it, I suppose—the *lucus a non lucendo* principle. It's a favourite of my own."

The girl frowned again; she was evidently in deep thought. "The track is fearfully steep and rough on either side," she mused aloud after a short pause. "There's no help for it but to set the bone as well as we can manage on the spot."

"You are, perhaps, a surgeon?" I enquired.

"You must wait," she commanded, unheeding my query. "I shall return as quickly as possible."

No fawn ever sprang more lightly or indeed more recklessly down a mountain side. In faith sometimes I caught my breath to see the manner of the progress. But she never made mis-step, and not once did she look back. I marked her cross the little rocky plateau that intervened the foothill and the village, and enter the garden of a slab-built shanty whose flaring signboard, even at the distance, proclaimed it unmistakably a public-house. Then she disappeared. The village exhibited no sign of life. It appeared to be either utterly deserted or abandonedly asleep. There was not even a dog to be seen, although I scanned each of the five-and-twenty humpies that formed Nandlelong, their yards, and gardens, from end to end. On a neighbouring slope, however, was a paddock where half a dozen milch cows browsed sedately. Their udders were bulging, simply crying to be drained. The lethargic stillness of the place filled me with wonder. It must have been already six o'clock, and yet—but yes—at that very moment the back door of one shanty opened and a young girl emerged, who at once began to stroll about collecting bits of wood, which she put into a fold of her apron. A few minutes later a second shanty woke to life. A dog came out, then a boy carrying a bucket. The pair sauntered leisurely over to the cow paddock, and without a trace of hurry drove the milkers before them towards some sheds and a stock-yard on the river bank. When I again glanced at the village, no fewer than three chimney-stacks were smoking and several figures were in evidence. The quaint thing was they

were all females, yet all did men's work. Two chopped wood; another was drawing water from a well; a third plied a spade in her garden, and so on. Where, then, were the men of Nandlelong? It was very curious. But I was even more bewildered presently: it was to see the girl who had promised me assistance emerge from the public-house, followed by a tall stout woman in a chintz gown and a sun-bonnet. They were carrying between them a sort of sled. This they put down upon the ground after quitting the enclosure, and each having seized a rope, they began to drag it after them. It was indeed a sled, and evidently destined for my convenience. But two women! I felt hot and uncomfortable at the thought of the labour before them. To get it up that mountain! Heavens! it was two men's work, and strong men at that. The sled made a noise as it moved—a noise that drew other women from their occupations to look and make enquiries. Presently every fence on the line of march was topped with a head. What inquisitive creatures women are! Soon all Nandlelong would know that a stupid stranger had broken his leg on top of the Mount of Olives, and that the sun-priestess and her chintz-robed henchwoman were proceeding to befriend him. My blood began to boil. What were the men of Nandlelong doing to allow that girl!—Rover howled an accompaniment to my imprecations. Meanwhile, the sled crossed the plateau and approached the mountain's angle. I leaned over the ledge, and making a funnel of my hands shouted to the toilers to stop. They paused and looked up. I wrote a note on a page of my pocket-book and pinned it to Rover's collar. "Wait for the dog!" I yelled, and fell back gasping. My note forbade

her to bring the sled and reminded her of Sorrel. Ten minutes later she once more stood before me. She was laden with cushions and other things, and she was perfectly composed and even smiling; but the henchwoman, although she carried nothing, was breathless from the climb. "Ouch! ouch!" she grunted, and flopped upon the grass. She was fat and red-faced, and five-and-forty.

"It's twenty years since I was here last, and I hope as I'll never have to do it again," she complained between her frantic attempts to reduce her breathing apparatus into normal working order.

The girl smiled and, kneeling on one of the cushions, she began to untie the smaller of her brown-paper bundles. She took out some rough board splints, several bandages, and a great roll of lint. Meanwhile the elder woman studied me. "Went ter sleep on yer horse, I hear?" she demanded presently.

"I did, madam," I answered, with my best bow. "You see how I am punished for my folly. But I regret most of all that you have been victimised. I shall never be able to thank you enough for your kindness in coming to my rescue."

"You wasn't drunk," she replied, "or you wouldn't 've got hurt: they never does. My old man's fallen off all ways, all times; never got even a bruise. Yer see, drunks fall flop like puddin's. It's drawin' up the muscles breaks the bones."

"I was not drunk—certainly," I ventured. "I wish I had been."

The girl swung round from her work and stared at me.

"I should, perhaps, have saved you all this bother," I explained.

She shrugged her shoulders, and answered in her slow, velvet-toned contralto, "You need not apologise for that—in such a way." Evidently she despised me.

"Are there no men in Nandlelong, Mrs.—?"

I asked abruptly.

"Nary one. My name is Missus Garfield. All the men's gone last week to the Yabba Gabba new Rush. What's your name?"

"Joe Tolano, at your service."

"I keep the pub," she went on, nodding in response to my bow. "I'll call you Joe—it's easier than the other to remember. Furriner are yer?"

"No, madam—an Australian, and so was my father before me."

"Furrin-soundin' name, anyhow. Yer ain't got a pocketful er cash, I'm reckonin'?"

"I have two pounds seven, and I own that mare."

"It ought ter see yer through, if yer blood's healthy. Anyway, you'll have ter stay at ther pub, till you can walk. There's nowhere else to go to, and no one ter take yer on to Wakool and the horsepetal."

"Is there a surgeon in Nandlelong?" I asked.

"No, only Myrtle Hofer there. She's the school marm. But she knows enough to fix you up, I guess. Say when you're ready, Myrtle!"

"I'm ready now," said the sun-priestess, rising as she spoke. Then she glanced down at me. "I have mended broken legs in Nandlelong before to-day. Of course, I am not a surgeon, but I know something of anatomy and I have an

Ambulance Society certificate. I shall do my best, if you will let me try."

She evidently disliked giving me so much information for some reason or another. She made me feel that I had incurred her disapprobation; perhaps it was my unlucky remark anent drink.

"I shall be only too glad," I replied, looking straight up into her eyes.

"I shall not hurt you any more than I can help, but you had better look away," she said.

She kneeled at one side of me and Mrs. Garfield at the other. Mrs. Garfield plied her scissors, and presently exclaimed on the whiteness of my skin. "Pore lamb!" she added. I suppressed a chuckle, and watched events from the corners of my eyes. Ostensibly I was gazing out across the valley of the Hume. The girl was deft, no doubt about it, and she knew her business. She very soon got the divided bone in place, and she took care, before binding on the splint, to see that both legs should be of equal length. It was wonderful for a woman to remember a detail like that. And no surgeon could have rolled bandages better. They were of the plaster of Paris persuasion, and as she wound them round and round my limb Mrs. Garfield, at her direction, wet them with water from a brandy bottle. They set hard almost immediately.

Yes, plainly the girl knew her business. In less than half an hour the job was done. I had managed in the meanwhile to keep up by making repeated applications—behind the backs of the ladies—to my whisky flask; in fact, I emptied the thing. Mrs. Garfield, unaware of this manoeuvring,

extolled my fortitude to the skies. I was, it appears, "a living, breathing wonder," and she only wished a certain Bob Bates—who, I gathered, possessed a somewhat effeminate disposition—could have seen me. He had my profoundest sympathy unmasked, poor devil!

Later arose the question of transit. In response to my whistle poor old Sorrel came up and put her nose in my hand, but that did not help me to her back, and all my strength had fled. Miss Hofer said nothing, but quietly began to arrange a sling along Sorrel's neck by looping up my swag across the saddle. I glanced at Mrs. Garfield and, remembering her distress after her climb, was filled with misgivings. But there was no occasion to have worried.

She was a poor climber, but an excellent lifter. I might have been a child of four, so easily did she wield my twelve stone odd. And when I would have gasped out my respectful admiration of her prowess, she sternly forbade me to reflect upon her masculinity. It seemed that she was ashamed of her physical strength, and considered it a serious impeachment on her womanhood. Later on she confided to me the fact that it had kept her single over thirty through all the "blokes" in her part being afraid to take a maid to wife who could "whop 'em, sir, as easily as dammit." She was a delightful creature, Mrs. Garfield, when one did not know her very intimately.

The journey to the village cost my good Samaritans two hours' anxious toil. But I do not remember much about it, for I was insensible most of the time. When I awoke it was to find myself in a small truckle bed, clad in one of Mr. Garfield's pink flannel nightshirts. The room was small, but

excellently well ventilated. It was walled with slabs, through the interstices of which daylight could be seen in several directions. Besides the bed, its only furniture was a small board table and a large mirror, ornamented with a hand-painted scroll of words which invited beholders to drink somebody's dry gin if they regarded pure blood and workmanlike kidneys as worthy of the sacrifice.

Miss Hofer was holding a bottle of smelling salts to my nose, and Mrs. Garfield stood beside her with a glass of spirits talking volubly. "Anyone can see he's got a weak heart, the pore lamb," she was observing; "but by all the devils in Hades, Myrtle Hofer, if he dies in my shanty, the blooming loafer, I'll pull ye to Court for damages, my dear. You brought him here, and I'll make you pay for it, my beauty, as sure as my name is Henrietta Garfield. I'll be ruined, so I will. There won't be a soul come near the place for weeks, no there won't. Remember the trade I lost through letting the Crowner's jury sit on Bill Maloney's corpse last Easter. And that was only on the verandah, so it was. Sure, didn't the boys say for months after that there was a smell of blood in their rum, and dynamite. Now, I warn you, Myrtle."

"Hush," said Miss Hofer, suddenly, "he is waking."

"The pore lamb," cried the other, "so he is! The pore lamb. Here ye are, my dear; give him this drop o' gin, with my love; and I won't charge for it neither. I'll just go out and get another drop for myself. Oh dear! oh dear!"

I swallowed the gin and felt immediately restored. "Mrs. Garfield unnecessarily alarms herself. I'll be on my feet before the month is out," I murmured cheerfully.

"Mrs. Garfield is drunk," said Miss Hofer calmly. "She is a periodic dipsomaniac. You probably will not see her again for several days. On that account I regret that there is no other place in Nandlelong where you can be temporarily accommodated, for Mrs. Garfield has just lost her only servant. I shall have to do what I can for you pending her recovery."

"You are altogether too kind, Miss Hofer, but cannot I—is there no other way? I——"

"There is no alternative," she interrupted frigidly. "I must leave you now to attend to my class. But I shall return about midday to prepare something for you to eat. Be advised and endeavour to sleep in the interval."

With that she was gone. Rover was as astonished as myself. He followed her to the door, stared after her a full minute in contemplative silence, then turned and looked at me and barked. I knew exactly what he meant and I agreed with him.

CHAPTER II.—LIFE AT THE "GOLDEN GATE."

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FOR perhaps an hour a heavy silence reigned. Then came a diversion. It was Mrs. Garfield's voice raised in song. She was evidently in a distant part of the shanty, most probably the bar-parlour, but every sound she made reached my ears distinctly. In raucous accents calculated to outrage the nerves of even a stone-deaf dingo, she quavered through "Killarney," word by word. Sometimes she stopped—no doubt to moisten the works—but with scrupulous honesty she always picked up the theme just where she had dropped it. Rover became desperately uneasy towards the finish. I begged him to restrain himself and he nobly endeavoured to comply, but it was no use. Mrs. Garfield terminated on a split high C that rent both our hearts. In spite of myself, I groaned, and Rover relieved his feelings with a long-drawn melancholy howl. Whether or not Mrs. Garfield noticed these tributes to her performance I am unable to conjecture, but mercifully, she did not sing again. She sobbed. I fancy that the gin must have plunged her soul into a state of mournful ecstasy, for after a period of laboured lamentation, she sighed forth this dolorous apostrophe: "Etty Garfield, Etty G—G—Gar—Garfield, what the divil would yer do if there was no more unsweetened gin in the world?" There was a short pause; then she supplied the answer to this cryptic problem in a tone of stern admonition. "Woman—you'd take to rum—yer know yer would!" There was another pause. Then: "Yer'd have ter!" she declared, "bad smell an' all. Yer know yer

can't abear whisky. It turns sour on yer stummick. Yes; yer'd have ter!" In these five sentences admonition had merged into sorrowful complaisance, complaisance had become absorbed in philosophic resignation, and resignation had faded into a lugubrious conviction of predestination. I laughed till the tears ran down my cheeks. Meanwhile Mrs. Garfield wept dismally. Perhaps her gin bottle was empty—poor thing! At length, however, the noise of her wailing gave place to a succession of loud snores. It was a relief, I am sure, to all of us—particularly to Rover. He had been on tenter-hooks, but he now yawned, lay down and composed himself to sleep. I thought of Myrtle Hofer and wondered what was the cause of her dislike of me. What a strange girl she seemed; how cool and self-possessed and clever and self-contained; and above all how disdainfully aloof. Still she was kind—or was it merely charitable? At any rate, I was deeply in her debt and it did not become me to be critical. I think I must have fallen into a doze, for of a sudden I heard voices and one was Mrs. Garfield's.

"Ah! it's you, Mrs. Soames!" she was saying. "Yer needn't be staring at me like that. Can't a body be takin' a bit of a rest widout 'er highness' permission I'd like yer ter tell me."

"I've brung yer the milk, an' ther butter and the heggs," replied Mrs. Soames, "an' I've come to tell yer besides that Tommy'll be late wid the mate becasse the pony got out av the paddick last night, an' he's had to shank it in to Yabba Gabba an' ther butchers; an' I want an extry bottle av beer becasse I'm expectin' Mrs. Twomy ter dinner, an' she can't abide spirits."

"Well, well, Mrs. Soames; yer know where the beer is. Put the things in the safe like a good soul, will yer. Me leg is that bad with the rheumatics this blessed morning I'm just obliged ter nurse it."

"Humph!" sniffed Mrs. Soames, with a scorn that sent tremors down my spine, "it's gin's the matter wid yer leg, Mrs. Garfield; gin, and nowt else."

"Mis-sus Soames!"

"Glare away, Missus Garfield. Yer can't get up an' yer knows it."

"No—but——" cried the other in a terrible voice. There followed a loud crash and a sound of shattering glass. Without doubt mine hostess had hurled some handy implement at her mentor's head. It was equally evident that she had missed her mark, for Mrs. Soames' voice continued calmly and with undiminished scorn. "An' now ye've bruk yer motter: 'God bless our home!'" (*Sniff.*) "I would think yer did ought ter be ashamed av yerself. Yer a disgrace ter the town. That's what yer hare!"

"Mis-sus Soames!"

"Don't yer dare ter Missus Soames me, Missus Garfield! I hain't pore Jim Garfield, let me tell yer! Yer can't browbeat me. No, yer can't. Why, fer two pins——"

"Ju-lia," sobbed Mrs. Garfield.

There was a long pause. "Julia," wailed Mrs. Garfield.

"Huh!" sniffed Mrs. Soames. "It's Julia, now."

"We're both fe-fe-fe-males," wept Mrs. Garfield.

Mrs. Soames must have been touched. "Well, there," she said, "tain't, after all, none er my business if yer do make a beast er yerself. But dry up—do! I can't abide yer snivellin'."

"I've not had a blessed bite ter eat this blessed day. That's how it's gone ter me legs," sobbed Mrs. Garfield. "But I know what's what!" she added with a sudden note of dignified asperity. "An', anyways, it ain't fer you ter bully me, you wid yer breakin' yer back ter keep yer Bill off-en-er ther booze, an' can't do it neither."

"Bill's a man," retorted Mrs. Soames; but her voice was appreciably milder.

"And so's my Jim, but I don't lets him beat me!" crowed Mrs. Garfield.

Mrs. Soames had apparently hauled down her colours, for she made no reply. I heard her bustling about for a few minutes, then a voice I scarcely recognised for hers, it was so subdued and indeed affectionate, asked meekly, "Wud yer like me ter git yer anything, Mrs. Garfield?"

"Yes," snapped the other, "git yerself (*hic*) off'n my premises an' let me go ter sleep in peace."

"The bar's open, Mrs. Garfield."

"Thet's my business," with tremendous dignity.

"Oh, very well," Mrs. Soames now had the huff. "Hi suppose as how yer've no hobjection ter me seein' of the hinvalid."

"That's really wot yer come so early for, I knows. Yer can't kid me."

"An' jist as well I did hif this is ther way yer treats him. Not arnother soul in the house, too. Where hev yer put him?"

"He's in ther lean-to (*hic*). Oh, git out, do."

"Very good, Missus Garfield. I will git out. An' I hopes as how you'll wake in a more comfortable temper. Good

morning—Mis-sus Garfield."

Mrs. Garfield's reply was a prolonged and bitterly insulting snore. Mrs. Soames must have stood regarding her adversary for a full minute in full-hearted anger, since quite that time elapsed and at least four more snores were hurled at her, before I heard her move. But at last she departed and a good deal to my trepidation her footfalls unmistakably approached my room. Presently, without any preliminary ceremony, the door swung open on its leather hinges, and on the threshold I beheld a picture such as Whistler would have loved to paint. My visitor was small and old, and garbed from head to foot in grey—save for one big splash of scarlet—her apron. And the light behind her framed her in a scintillating aureole, that made her little bare and boney arms shine like sticks of weather-beaten ivory, and the edges of her face glow like the rim of a red-hot guinea. She was the most exquisitely ugly little creature my eye had ever looked upon; and yet her eyes were beautiful and full of twinkling kindness. "I'm Mrs. Soames," she announced; "my man's ther blacksmith 'ere, but he's gone to ther Rush. 'Ow's ther laig?"

"Nicely, thank you, Mrs. Soames. Miss Hofer and Mrs. Garfield looked after that."

"Yer do seem fixed up—properly," she conceded, after scanning the bed. "That's Myrtle; she's a ginger fer thoroughness. Clean sheets, too, I see; an' my land, ther floor's bin scrubbed, positive! More Myrtle! Mrs. Garfield—hum!—she——"

"She suffers from rheumatism," I suggested. Mrs. Soames giggled. "S'pose yer must a heard us," she said. "She's lyin'

in a corner er ther drawrern-room, and heaven or earth won't shift her till ter-morrer. But yer mustn't put it agin her, Mr.—"

"Tolano," I suggested.

"Mister Terlarner," she went on. "She's a decent body when she's sober, an' sometimes she keeps off'n er ther gin fer as long as six months at a stretch. I specs it's how as helpin' Myrtle mendin' yer leg druv her to it this go."

"I should be grieved to think that, Mrs. Soames."

"Oh, yer needn't, young man. One excuse is as good as ernother ter Mrs. Garfield when ther cravin' comes on her. Yer laig hurtin' any?"

"Not a bit. I hardly feel it."

"Time enough. When ther bone begins ter knit it'll give yer old beano at ther dog-fight. I've bruk both er mine, so I ought ter know. Was on yer way ter the Rush when it happened, I hear?"

"Yes."

"'Ard luck, an' no mistake. I'm real sorry. Smith's party got a sixty-ounce nugget yesterday, and Daebarn cleaned up forty fer two days' graft—mostly slugs; all pretty gold—pretty ernuff ter go inter a shop winder. Nearly all on 'em's doin' fair, too—ther others I mean, even the parties workin' on the foothills."

"And here am I laid by the heels," I groaned, involuntarily, "lying on my back idle and helpless while old mates of mine are making their fortunes seven miles away."

"Sorry I spoke," lamented Mrs. Soames. "I oughter guessed it'd make yer feel sick inside. Comes er bein' an ole fool jabberin' without thinkin'. But buck up, young man."

Parson Jones says everything 'appens fer ther best, an' he ought ter know. He only said it last Sunday. 'Praps it's a blessin' in disguise. Yer never know yer luck."

I grinned to show I did not care. "No doubt a blessing in disguise," I agreed.

Mrs. Soames nodded. "We'll all do our level best to cheer yer," she said brightly. "Mrs. Twomy'll be erlong this after'. She's been laid up at the Wakool 'orsepital with pleurisy. She's a real card, she is, and a terror fer ther men. As there ain't none here just now 'cept you, I specs as 'ow she'll make it a point ter nurse yer."

"I should not like to trouble her."

"Yer couldn't, me son, bein' a man, fer she's twice married whatever, an' 'er chances o' pickin' up ernother 'usband ain't too rosy. It's my opinion she'd take on a nigger if nothin' else offered; and lor! though you ain't 'ansome, 'zactly—you ain't a nigger. 'Sides yer young."

"You terrify me Mrs. Soames."

Mrs. Soames shook with mirth. "An' bashful, too!" she chuckled. "My, we're goin' ter have great times in Nandlelong."

"I am to understand that your friend is a man-hunter?" I enquired, morosely.

"No, a widder," corrected Mrs. Soames, and as though that were the last word possible to utter on the subject, she changed the topic. "Myrtle Hofer's goin' ter fix up yer vittles, she tells me?"

"She has promised to prepare my lunch."

"She's a fine cook, Myrtle. She'll do yer proud, 'specially as she found yer. She'll make yer a stoo, likely's not."

"Oh!"

"Ye'll lick yer chops when yer just smell her stoo."

"You make me feel hungry in anticipation, Mrs. Soames."

"She's good at other things than cookin' though—Myrtle."

"Indeed."

"You bet. She's as good as er vet fer sick cows an' horses with ther glanders. She'll put yer laig right in lessern no time."

"She appears to be a very learned young woman?"

"So she'd oughter be—brung up at ther Fort Street Trainin' College."

"She teaches in the State School here, does she not?"

"Usual—but she ain't got much ter do just now—only about nine girls ter bang knowledge into—ther boys 'as mostly lit out ter ther Rush at Yabba Gabba. There's only my Tommy, and the Levy's three brats left, an' they're all wanted home fer yakker, milkin', fetchin' wood and meat an' such like."

"Do Miss Hofer's parents reside in Nandlelong?"

"Lordy, no. 'Er ole man's a cocky farmer up top er ther Noo England plains. Myrtle sleeps at ther school house an' boards at ther Post Mistress's—Missus Inglehaere's."

"I see."

"She's a queer girl, Myrtle. Up every morn at daylight winter an' summer an' climbs ther Mount of Olives—fer exercise, she says. She's got a terrible lot er books an' she's always readin'. But she don't take much account er men. Bill Ickerspoon's clean crazy about her; so is Jerry Arbight; but she don't seem ter care fer either of 'em, though both could give her a decent 'ome!"

"A bit stuck-up, perhaps," I hazarded.

Mrs. Soames closed her left eye. "'Tween you an' me," she answered, "she's bidin' her time—flyin' fer 'igher game. They say as how ther School Inspector is the person she's settin' 'er cap at. He's twice her age, but 'e's got a good screw an' 'e must 'a saved a tidy bit 'aving no one but himself ter keep all these years."

But this confidence had made me feel mean. I, therefore, asked for a cup of water in order to make a break in the tide of my visitor's garrulity. She fetched one immediately and sighed as I drained it. "Could 'er done that myself once," she mused.

I gave her back the cup. "You don't care for water?" I enquired.

"I got ter think er ther spasms," she answered sadly, "so I has ter put a drop er somethin' in it when I drink anythin' but tea."

Then she brightened up. "What part er ther country might yer come from?" she demanded.

"Sydney, madam."

"A big place?"

"Fairish."

"I've never bin there, but they say it's more'n twice as big as Wakool. Is it?"

"I should say even bigger still."

She shook her head. "They can keep it, fer me. Why, even Wakool bothers me; gives me ther blues an' makes me feel I can't breathe proper. Ole man alive?"

"No, madam; my father and mother both died ten years ago."

"Ah, well! ye've had time ter git over it. What did ther old cove do for a livin'?"

"He was a lawyer."

The lady sighed. "Pore man! I specs he's sorry fer it now. Got any brothers and sisters?"

"One brother living."

"Deary me! deary me! No sisters! An' what might he be doin'—ther boy I mean?"

"He is a lawyer."

"Well, well, well! An' is he makin' a do of it?"

"I believe he is fairly well off, Mrs. Soames."

"An' he lets you go about the country—prospectin' an' breakin' of yer laig? Him well off?" The horror in the old lady's voice was the last straw. I could no longer restrain the laughter that had been consuming me. But she was not in the least offended, only surprised. "I can't see nowt to laugh at," she kept repeating over and over; and when I had recovered my composure she instantly resumed her inquisition.

"I s'pose you quarrelled with him?"

"No," said I, "we are the best of friends."

"P'raps you're the black sheep of the family an' he's tired o' helpin' you?"

"He has never lent or given me a sixpence in his life."

This was plainly a staggerer. Mrs. Soames bent her brows together, stroked her chin with her forefinger and thought hard.

"I specs," she said at last, "you won't let him 'elp you?" and she fixed me with two bright eyes that contained forty separate qualities which each defied a contradiction.

I surrendered at discretion. "I admit, Mrs. Soames, that he has grown weary of offering to help me. He is a splendid fellow in every way and generous to a fault."

"Married?"

"Yes."

"And yorself?"

"Do you think I look a lady's man?"

She smiled capaciously. "Yer don't," she conceded. "But take my tip and keep yer eye skinned fer Mrs. Twomy, or maybe ye'll be mendin' of yer evil ways. Ah well! I'll hev ter be goin' now, an' that's a fact. I've got ther dinner ter git ready an' ther fire ain't lighted even yet. But I'll see yer agin soon. S'long!"

"Good-bye, Mrs. Soames, and thank you kindly for your call."

"I've enjoyed it," she declared, and vanished. Rover followed her, a circumstance that spoke volumes. It showed that Rover—an unerring judge of character—had approved the old lady as a good, kind-hearted creature who could be confidently trusted to relieve his hunger. For perhaps an hour thereafter I listened to Mrs. Garfield's snores. Then Rover returned, looking almost aggressively sleek and comfortable. He had evidently gorged himself and was too full to spare me a word. He did not even trouble to reply to my salutation, but curled up in a corner and went instantly to sleep. I was yawning for the hundredth time when a shadow of a sudden fell athwart the bed. It was Miss Hofer, carrying a small table. Her movements were completely noiseless. She had fancied me asleep. She placed the table at my elbow and then brought in a tray containing a bowl of

soup, some toast and the half of a grilled chicken. The soup was for me, the chicken for herself. She took the latter outside, and sitting on a stool in the shade of the verandah, she began to eat—all without a word, for she paid no attention to my thanks. I polished off the soup and toast in two-twos, and thought hungrily of the chicken. I could hear her munching it distinctly. The torture of Tantalus was a mere circumstance to mine. Eighteen hours had elapsed since my last meal, and besides, I was a breathing animal, not a ghost. I could not bear it long.

"I wonder whether you think I lie in any danger of fever?" I ventured, in tones I strove to render invitational of discussion.

"Do you feel feverish?" came her answer.

"Not exactly."

"Why do you ask then?"

"I fancied that perhaps you were lunching out there for fear of exciting me?"

"Exciting you! What do you mean?"

"Raising my temperature by inspiring gastronomical anticipations you might conceive it hazardous, from a scientific point of view, to satisfy."

"I suppose that rodomontade means that you have finished your soup," she answered with contemptuous coolness.

I was too crushed to retort. I heard her rise and move away across the boards, but three minutes later she returned, and re-appeared with a plate containing the other half of her chicken and some steaming chipped potatoes.

"You must not expect to obtain any spirituous liquor while I am in charge of you," she announced as she handed me the food. "Tea or water you may have—but nothing else."

"Oh, indeed!" I gasped.

She met my enquiring glance and frowned. "I suppose you wish to make a quick recovery?" she asked impatiently.

"I'm afraid you have misinterpreted an unlucky remark of mine, Miss Hofer," I replied. "The flaws in my equipment don't really include a craving for alcoholic stimulants. I'm sorry if you are disappointed, but the fact is, I never touch spirit when I can avoid it."

She turned scarlet, slowly but surely from throat to forehead, yet she did not turn her head nor withdraw her eyes from mine.

"It appears that I have foolishly misjudged you," she said quietly. "I hope you will forgive me."

"On condition that you excuse me also, for having till this moment fancied you hard-hearted and unsympathetic."

"You thought me that?" she cried.

"Even after your great kindness on the hill? Yes, I did; but I was wrong. Won't you finish your lunch in here, Miss Hofer?"

She nodded, and went out to fetch her tray and a chair. She was silent for quite a long while. So was I.

I glanced at her occasionally, but she was plainly preoccupied, and she ate mechanically.

Suddenly, however, she began to speak. "I have been here for two years, and during all that time seldom a week has passed without a disturbance caused by drink. Almost all the men drink too much. I don't mean to say they are

dipsomaniacs or anything like that, but periodically they go on the spree. It's their chief amusement. It is horrible—and the more so because they are such decent good people when they keep away from the accursed thing. I've tried and tried and tried to do them good, but it's not any use. They make vows and promises, but they always break them. Only a month ago young Joyce Spalding fell down a shaft and was killed; he was drunk. Oh! if you knew him. He was one of Nature's noblemen, with that one fatal weakness. But what do you think? Instead of being warned by his dreadful fate, almost the whole town got drunk the night of his burial, and there was fighting and brawling till daybreak. You wouldn't wonder at my hatred of drink and my contempt for drunkards if you had known Joyce Spalding, and could guess what my life has been these two years past."

"I am not wondering, Miss Hofer. I should like you to tell me."

But she shook her head and smiled. "It would depress you, and I must not forget you are an invalid." She rose and took away the tray. Later on she brought me a cup of tea. "I have no class to teach this afternoon—I am one of the unemployed, perforce. Perhaps you would like me to read to you?"

"I would prefer you to talk."

"Very good, but I shall first get my needlework." She was away an hour, and she had not used all the time looking for her sewing. She had changed her frock. She came back clad in a complete costume of brown muslin that left her throat and elbows bare. I was charmed to observe that her arms and neck were exquisitely moulded and as white as