

Joseph Furphy



Rigby's Romance

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I am a humble actor, doom'd to play
A part obscure, and then to glide away;
Incurious how the great or happy shine.
Or who have parts obscure and sad as mine.

--Rev. George Crabbe.

WHILST conveying my own unobtrusive individuality into Echuca on a pleasant evening in the April of '84, I had little thought of the delicate web of heart history which would be unfolded for my edification on the morrow. My mind was running rather upon the desirableness of a whole bag of chaff for my two horses; a satisfying feed for my kangaroo dog (which is implying more than most people wot of); and a good sleep for myself. I would have been prepared to aver that I was merely bound for Yarrawonga, via Echuca, on business of my own; whereas the smoothly--running Order of Things had already told me off as eye-witness and chronicler of a touching interlude--a love passage such as can befall only once in that one life which is each person's scanty dividend at the hand of Time.

Making straight for my customary place of sojourn--namely, Mrs. Ferguson's Coffee Palace--I helped the landlady's husband to unsaddle and feed my horses; after which, I caused that unassuming bondman to bring about twenty lbs. of scraps for Pup, whilst I chained him (Pup, of course) in an empty stall. Then, with six or eight words of explanation and apology to Mrs. Ferguson, I sought my usual bedroom, and, shedding all my garments but one, threw myself into collision with that article of furniture which

has proved fatal to some better men, and to a great many worse.

Here an opportune intermission of about ten hours in the march of events affords convenience for explaining the purpose of my journey to Yarrawonga. The fact is that I object to being regarded as a mere romancist, even as a dead-head speculator, or dilettante reporter, of the drama of life. You must take me as a hard-working and ordinary actor on this great stage of fools; but one who, nevertheless, finds a wholesome recreation in observing the parts played by his fellow-hypocrites. (The Greek "hupokrisis," I find, signifies, indifferently, "actor" and "hypocrite.")

I was booked for one of those soft things that sometimes light on us as gratefully and as unaccountably as the wholesale rain from heaven upon the mallee beneath. John C. Spooner, Rory O'Halloran and I had just bought the Goolumbulla brand. Or rather, the manager, Mr. Spanker, had given us the clearing of the run under certain conditions, one of which was the payment of £100.

Goolumbulla--centrally-situated in that wilderness between the Willandra and the Darling--had been settled for about five years. Six hundred head of cattle had originally been placed on the run, to the disgust and exasperation of Mr. Spanker, whose bigoted faith in the evil-smelling merino admitted no toleration for any other kind of stock. His antipathy was reasonable enough in this instance, for these were warrigals, even as scrub-bred cattle go. You know the class--long-bodied, clean-flanked, hard-muscled, ardent-eyed, and always in the same advanced-store condition.

They had been wild enough when first brought from the ranges of the Upper Lachlan, and Goolumbulla was just the sort of country to accelerate their reversion to the pre-domesticated type. At the time I speak of, they could barely endure the sight of a man on horseback. As for a man on foot, they would face anything else on earth to get away from him; and if they couldn't get away, that man might either betake himself to his faith, or stand on guard. Which latter alternative sounds so dishonestly vague and non-committal that literary self-respect demands a slight digression.

To deal with fear-maddened cattle in confined spaces--as in drafting or trucking--the infantry man requires an alert eye, a cool head, and a suitable stem of scrub, terminating in a nasty spray of leafless twigs; also his flank and rear must be covered, in order to confine the enemy to a frontal assault. These conditions being fulfilled, the operator can reserve his mortal preparation for some future emergency, though it would, perhaps, be as well to abstain from anything in the nature of language until the draft is put through. A handy piece of brush, judiciously presented, will check the charge of any steer. The animal will try to get round the obstruction, but he won't attempt to break through.

Here, by the way, I may seize an opportunity of further disturbing the congested ignorance of the bookish public by noticing Sir Walter Scott's misapprehension of the bovine temperament, as displayed in "The Lady of the Lake." You remember how the milk-white bull--"choicest of the prey we

had, when swept our merry men Gallangad"--is depicted as fiery-eyed, fierce, tameless and fleet, to begin with.

"But steep and flinty was the road.
And sharp the hurrying pikemen's goad;
And when we came to Dennan's Row.
A child might scatheless stroke his brow."

Stockman will conclude either that the child would be an accomplished matador in disguise, or that Scotch cattle have some peculiar way of reasoning out a new situation.

Nor did the Goolumbulla brand entertain any Scotch idea respecting the advantageousness of southward emigration. A draft, started for Victoria, was like a legion of evil spirits evicted from their haunt. As they went through dry places, seeking rest and finding none, the frenzy of nostalgia, or home-sickness, aggravated by chronic insomnia, made them harder to hold than quicksilver. Their camp was liable to spontaneous eruption at any hour of the night; and then it would be as easy to steady a cyclone as to ring the scattered torrent which swept through the scrub, like a charge of duck-shot through a wire fence.

Drovers of superhuman ability and profane address had at different times taken away three drafts; but none of these professors had ever besieged the station for a second contract. Indeed, the last drover, though as vigilant, as energetic, and as prayerful as any on the track, had found himself with about forty head left out of two hundred by the time he had crossed the first fifty miles. His horses being completely played out in limiting the leakage even to this proportion, he had sacked his three or four men, and had sullenly escorted the remnant of his draft back to their beloved wilderness. The absconders found their way home

in batches, franked by the boundary men of intervening paddocks, who willingly made apertures in their fences to speed the parting guests.

But now Goolumbulla had changed owners; and the new firm had authorised Mr. Spanker to get rid of the cattle at any price and stock up with sheep.

One of the Goolumbulla boundary riders was an old friend of mine. This Rory O'Halloran--better known as Dan O'Connell--was a married man. By nature dreamy, sensitive and affectionate, the poor fellow had a few months previously sustained a blow which left him in a trance of misery. His only child--a fine little girl five or six years old--had got lost in the scrub, and had been found too late. Rory had settled down patiently and submissively to his routine work again, but the memories and associations of his home, though precious while the sense of bereavement was fresh, had in time become intolerable. For such afflictions as his, there is no nepenthe, and the only palliative is strenuous action.

Hence Rory's nature, recoiling in unconscious self-defence from the congealing desolations of Memory, craved such hardship and distraction as would be limited only by physical endurance. And instinctively perceiving that the Goolumbulla cattle were quite competent to meet his requirements, he had talked the matter over with Mr. Spanker, and provisionally engaged to buy the brand for £100. He proposed me as an associate. Spanker, in seconding the motion, suggested John C. Spooner, professional drover, as a third co-operator. Seconded, in turn, by Rory, and carried on the voices. The station

stockkeeper had then been approached on the subject, but he washed his hands of the whole business. He darkly predicted calamity to the enterprise and insolvency to the station, as a consequence of such "blanky, flamin', jump-up greed for a bit of wool."

Then followed hasty and copious correspondence between Rory, Spooner, and myself. Everything went without a hitch. The preliminaries were soon arranged. For my own part, not being blessed by Nature with the saving grace of thrift ("saving grace" is good), I had no cash reserve. Spooner was in a similar state of sin, for, in spite of his almost insulting efficiency, he was constitutionally unfortunate. But Rory had about £300 in the bank at Hay, and he was prepared to finance the undertaking.

The arrangement was this: Spooner was to enclose with a strong wire fence each tank from which the cattle were accustomed to drink, leaving the lower wire high enough to admit sheep. An open gateway would be left in each fence until everything was ready. Then the gaps would be closed, and the cattle, shut out from water, would hang round the tanks, tailed and humored by our party, till the whole brand was collected. Meanwhile, the three of us would jointly sign a bond for the £100--which, by the way, was merely a nominal price for the draft, and immediately make a start. The poor dumb beasts would certainly be thirsty to begin with, but this was nothing when you consider how much worse they would be by the time they reached the next available water.

No one had any clear notion of how many head might be collected, but we counted on something over four hundred--

possibly up to five hundred and fifty, including calves and cleanskins. We intended to take them across the Murray, and dispose of them in handy lots at the agricultural fairs in northern Victoria, thus passing the trouble on a little farther.

But this was prospective. For the present, it had been arranged that Rory should meet Spooner and myself at Hay, on the next Sunday but one. Another week would take the three of us to Goolumbulla, with three or four hired men, and ten or twelve decent horses. Then, if we could not command success, we could do more, Sempronius, we would deserve it.

Again, we might fairly count upon favourable conditions. The route was familiar to Spooner and myself; there would be no disturbing moonlight for the first week or so; and we might expect reasonably cool weather. The trip to the Victorian border would be only about three hundred and fifty miles. So everything was propitious.

My own immediate business was to be at Yarrawonga on a certain day, there to take delivery of three horses, already purchased by Spooner with Rory's money; then I had to turn up at Hay on the Sunday above referred to. Meanwhile, Spooner, with a few more horses, would be converging from his native town of Wagga.

Of course, these details are nothing to do with my record; they are presented merely as a spontaneous evidence and guarantee of that fidelity to fact which I acquired early in life, per medium of an old stirrup leather, kept for the purpose.

Chapter I.

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I wol you tell a litel thing in prose.
That oughte liken you, as I suppose.
Or elles certes ye be to dangerous.
It is a moral tale vertuuous.
Al be it told sometimes in sondry wise.
Of sondry folk, as I shall you devise.

--Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales."

JUST as a bale of wool is dumped, by hydraulic pressure, to less than half its normal size, I scientifically compressed something like twenty-four hours' sleep into the interval between 9 p.m. and 7 a.m. Then a touch of what you call dyspepsia and I call laziness, kept me debating with myself for another swift-running hour. So it was getting on for nine o'clock when I sat down to breakfast with Mrs. Ferguson, the two servant girls, and the husband already glanced at. All the boarders had by this time dispersed for the forenoon.

However, scene and association presently recalled former companionship; and I varied the usual breakfast-table gossip by asking:

"Have you seen the Colonel lately, Mrs. Ferguson?"

"Not since a fortnight after the last time you were here; it's nine weeks to-day, and the other'll be seven weeks come Friday. There were two ladies here inquiring for him yesterday afternoon. One of them had a dark maroon, and a sailor hat trimmed with the same color; and the other had the new shade of brown, and a new tuscan with three black feathers. They wanted to know his address."

"Badly, no doubt. Had they little Johnny with them?"

"Go way. Well, I had just re-posted two letters that had come. They were both office envelopes; one of them was from Waghorn Brothers, who he was with three or four years ago fixing up them wire binders, and the other was from the agent he's with now. Most likely they want him again."

"Quite likely they do."

"That'll be it, then. But I wonder what they wanted him for. They were both strangers to me, and when they found I knew Mr. Rigby so well, I got them to come in and sit down in the front room in the cool. They were very quiet-mannered and nice-spoken (I don't care what you say). They said they might call again before they left, and the one with the brown dress gave me her card. What did you do with it, Louisa?"

"Annie had it after me."

"It's gone," said Annie laconically. "That cardbasket's piled up; and I s'pose it got blown on the floor. Anyhow, I found Bibblims sitting under the front room table, eating it."

Bibblims was the baby.

"Do you remember what the name was?" asked Mrs. Ferguson.

"It's on the tip of my tongue," replied Annie. "Something like 'Tasmania.'"

"Tasman," I suggested, incredulously.

"No," replied the girl, "it was a long name."

"And where is Rigby now?" I asked.

"Why, he's at Yooringa, of course," replied Mrs. Ferguson. "Maginnis (late Waterton), Farmers' Arms, Yooringa."

"Just a nice stage for me to-day," I remarked; "and there's sure to be grass in Cameron's Bend. I'm going to

Yarrowonga, and I'll take this side of the river. What is Rigby doing now? I thought he was running the vertical at Hawkins' mill."

"Only till they got properly going," replied the inspired woman. "He's taking pictures and writing for them American people now. He got started nine weeks ago. It's for a big book, all in volumes, on farming, and dairying, and vines, and fruit trees, and one thing or another, in different parts of the world. They've kept him on a string longer than they'd keep me, anyway. It's five months ago since he was engaged, and not so much as 'thanky' till he got orders to start in a hurry. It was the American Consult who recommended him; and well he might, for there's very few things that would take Mr. Rigby at a short."

"I'll be pretty sure to meet him at Waterton's, then?"

"Maginnis (late Waterton), Farmers' Arms, Yooringa. He'll be there to--day; and he won't be leaving till next Monday at the inside."

"Well, I think I'll be going now, Mrs. Ferguson. I'll just settle up with you, so as not to keep the horses saddled."

"Oh, Ferguson'll saddle them." That unobtrusive, but useful person hastily finished his coffee and glided from the room. "Just rest yourself while you can. I'm afraid you'll have a dusty day for travelling," and so the frivolous conversation went on till I shook hands with the three women, gave the two children a threepenny bit each, wrung Mr. Ferguson's hand in silent condolence, and took the track.

As I rode eastward across the town, followed by my pack-horses and kangaroo dog, the postman intercepted me.

"Morning, Collins. Jefferson Rigby's a friend of yours, ain't he? Any idea where he is?"

"Up the river, I believe--so Mrs. Ferguson tells me. I expect to see him to-night."

"Couple of ladies came to the post-office yesterday hunting him up. We sent them to Mrs. Ferguson. So they'll be right. Horses looking a bit hairy on it."

"Season's telling on them."

"Grand dog."

"Middling."

"So long."

"So long."

Chapter II.

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One azure-eyed and mild.
With hair like the burst of morn.
And one with raven tresses.
And looks that scorch'd with scorn.
But yet with gleams of pity
To comfort the forlorn.

--Charles Mackay.

I WENT on, following the road up the river. I had cantered a mile, or better, and was hardening my horses with a long walk, when a buggy and pair overtook and passed me. Though grappling at the time with an exceedingly subtle metaphysical problem, I casually noticed that the driver was a boy of sixteen or seventeen wool seasons, and that there were two women in the buggy; a thinnish one sitting beside the boy, and a fatter one on the back seat, each sheltering from the blazing sun with her umbrella. The buggy went on its way.

My next spell of cantering took me past the vehicle, and my next spell of walking brought the vehicle past me again. This occurred time after time; it occurred till I was sick of it; and, when we had left Echuca twenty miles behind, it was occurring worse than ever. I had tried putting on more pace, and I had tried slacking off, but each expedient seemed equally to aggravate the evil, though the buggy horses kept up the same slow, uniform, slinging trot. Other travellers overtook and passed us, and were as though they had not been. We overtook and passed others, who similarly sank into oblivion. But we couldn't get rid of one another. Each

time we passed I looked sternly ahead, and the women occulted their faces with their umbrellas, for the thing was becoming intolerable. I felt as if I were dogging them with some sinister purpose, and they obviously felt like people driven by the mere stress of circumstances into immodest conspicuousness.

My whole day's journey was thirty-odd miles, and I had intended doing it in one stage, but now altered my plan on account of that buggy. On reaching a place where the track branched, to unite about a mile ahead, I watched the boy diverge to the left, then I quietly dodged off to the right. Half a mile further on I stopped, pulled the pack-saddle off Bunyip, and tied both horses in a good shade. Then I spent half-an-hour in carefully dredging Pup all over with insecticide, and another half-hour in the interminable work of carving a stock-whip handle. Having thus given the other party a fair start I resumed my way.

Passing the intersection of the tracks a few minutes later I saw the buggy standing in the shade of a tree, the boy taking the nosebags off the horses and the women putting things under the seats. They had been stopping for lunch, probably with a view to getting rid of me. Then I perceived that there must be something in it, and so resolved to let things take their course. I have seen too much of life to persist in shafting against destiny.

Still looking haughtily ahead, I passed at a walk within three yards of the party. The boy was now in his post of honor, keeping the buggy on the off lock. One of the women was taking her place beside him, while the other stood by, holding both umbrellas; then the latter climbed into the

back seat. I had opportunity to notice that the first woman was tall, straight, and symmetrical, though rather spare than slight; and that her hair was of a glossy, changeable brown. The other showed large and Juno-like, black haired, fairly handsome, but by no means young; and I was further privileged to observe that a good deal of her had been turned down over the anvil.

By the foot, American, thought I, as my politely restricted arc of vision left the party behind--and you'll see by-and-bye how infallible that rule is. In fact, the foot of the American woman is a badge as distinctive as the moustache of the Australienne. However, there was a good expression in the foot now under notice; it was a generous, loyal, judicious foot, yet replete with idealism and soulfulness; wherefore, I became at once prepossessed in favor of the owner.

In a few minutes the buggy overtook me for about the fifteenth time, and the boy pulled up to the walking pace of my horses.

"Say, boss," he inquired, "do you know where Maginnis' Farmers' Arms is, if it's a fair question?"

"Yes, straight ahead."

"How fur?"

"Twelve or fifteen miles. That's where I'm bound for."

"Grand dog you got there."

"Fair."

"Not a bad style o' moke you're ridin'."

"Decent. He does me for poking about."

"Could you tell us what kind of place this hotel is?" asked the light--brown hair. "Are the people likely to have accommodation for us to--night?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, ma'am," I replied, "the house was nothing to boast of in Waterton's time. Grog business, pure and simple. The hotel itself would be no disgrace to Echuca; but the management, as I knew it, was not good; it was but so-so; and so-so is not good, it is but so-so. I trust it may be better now, though there are more promising names than Maginnis. I think I'd as soon chance Flanagan."

Both women smiled amusedly, but a perturbed expression soon gathered on the face of the brown-haired one. Whilst replying to her question, I had taken note of thoughtful, pure-grey eyes, a faultless nose (which is saying a lot), and a mouth of ideal perfection; altogether, a face of more than common beauty, but of such exceeding loveliness as to disarm criticism. A face with a history, so I immediately snapshotted it on a blank spot in my memory, with a view to working out the biography at some future time. I could get her name from the boy in the evening, and no other factor would be required.

Close ahead of us was a farm-house on the right-hand side of the road. A few full-grown cattle were in the stockyard; the portly agriculturist was there himself, ordering some boys about; and a long-legged, slow-moving man with a Robinson-Crusoe beard, was arranging a roping-pole. A bright chestnut horse, saddled and bridled, was hitched to the fence close by. It is easy to be mistaken in the identity of a man, but the horse is always a certainty.

"I'll likely overtake you again in a few minutes," said I to the boy, as I turned Cleopatra, and crossed the road to the fence. "At it again, Steve?" I called out. Steve laid down the roping-pole, and mounted his horse to ride the fifty yards.

"You gave me a start," said he, as we shook hands across the fence. "I'm busy now; but you had better stop with us to-night. We're camped in Cameron's Bend, down from Waterton's pub. Dixon's with me. I've bought a pair of steers from this cove, and we're going to couple them now, and let them civilise themselves in his paddock for a day or two. Save any chance of them sulking in yoke."

"Well, I won't keep you, Steve. Did you see Jeff Rigby at Waterton's?"

"No. Haven't seen him for five or six seasons."

"Well, we'll be able to hold a meeting to-night, with the Major in the chair. Now go back to your vile occupation."

When I overtook the buggy again, I was as jocund as a seeker after wisdom may permit himself to be.

"An old school mate of mine," I remarked graciously, as the three looked round toward me. "Steve Thompson, I've known him since we were each about as high as that middle rail. One of the straightest men in the country--though he's supposed to have a curse on him through a dubious transaction of ten or twelve years ago. He was owing fifty notes to a man that got lost in a shipwreck on the coast of New Zealand, and Steve failed to chase his friend with the money till the whole transaction adjusted itself at that, leaving a curse on Steve. I had little thought of meeting him to--day--thought he was a couple of hundred miles north. I was looking forward to meeting another very old friend, Jeff Rigby, a striking contrast to Thompson in many ways; the most conspicuous point about him being that he allows nobody to know anything except what he tells." The sentence seemed to die out to nothing; partly because it

was impossible to finish the last clause without a solecism, but more particularly because I noticed both women's eyes fixed on my face, with a disconcerting interest in the casual gossip. It is humiliating when you feel yourself expected to say something good, and a swift reconnaissance of the subject shows you no opening for anything beyond what a nobleman might drivel. Moreover, I was fresh from the pastoral regions, where etiquette demands frank, unsolicited, and copious comment on the merits or demerits of some absent person; whereas these women were evidently civilised, and consequently regarded my conventional remarks as the exordium of some good anecdote. I therefore gave my earnest attention for a few moments to a mare and a foal, standing in the shade of a tree close by.

Chapter III.

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A still, sweet, placid, moonlight face.
And slightly nonchalant.
Which seems to claim a middle place
Between one's love and aunt.

--O. W. Holmes.

"PARDON my question," said the brown hair hesitatingly. She paused a moment, then asked: "What countryman is your friend?"

"Australian, madam; born near Geelong. His parents are English."

"Are you sure?" she faltered, while the color faded from her face.

"Perfectly sure, madam. I'm as certain of his nationality as of my own."

Then twenty or thirty seconds heaped twenty or thirty years on that's girl's head. I hadn't noticed the faint wrinkles about her eyes till now, but, riding close to her, and looking at her with puzzled sympathy, I marked not only these footprints of the crows of Time, but here and there a silver thread imparting unsought dignity to the beauty of her sun-bright hair. And lapsing into my deplorable Hamlet mood I began to calculate her age.

Ay, poor post-meridian! Under the searching analysis of some mental confluent, the beauty was dissolving from her face, yet leaving the loveliness intact. Enhanced, heightened rather, by unspoken kinship in liability to the tyranny of Time--that pathetic kinship which, clothed in

poet's words carries more tenderness than any other touch of nature. There is one grace of the rosebud; another grace of the expanded blossom; and, to the enlightened mind, a more adorable grace in the fading flower, which gains in fragrance as it loses in freshness.

When we liken women to glass--as we often do--the parallel rests on fragility, on restorableness, on refractiveness, or some such property. But there is a more touching similitude yet. Of all known glass the most lovely is a collection exhumed some forty years ago at Idalium in Cyprus. Science becomes Poetry in mere contemplation of these relics. Take some excerpts from a description in Knight's "Dictionary of Mechanics":--"Tints, positively outside of all experience, confuse the most accurate observation...marbled with hues like those of incandescence...sending light, pearly hints of variegated radiance from elusive depths fantastically pied with scales of iridescence on strong original coloration...defeating all sense of strict estimation and cheating the mind with the notion of a possible perfection...as if Turner had painted skies on them in his maddest mood, and had been allowed to use flames for colors... The general effect seems to suggest that all the sunsets that have glimmered over Cyprus since those vessels were lost on the earth had sunk into their hiding-place and permeated their substance."

The glass is perishing. Matchless, indescribable, inimitable in its beauty, yet it is a loveliness that comes only with decline, a passive response to the first tender touch of that inexorable hand which brings man and all his works to dust.

I wish I could stay to moralise on this, because our appreciation of women is a subject that seems to invite disentanglement and exposition. But knowing my own proneness to wander aside, plucking fruits of philosophy, I shall, for once, guard against digression and confine myself to clean-cut narrative.

Two widely-divergent views of women are illustrated--one in "The Gowden Locks of Anna," by Burns, the other in Moore's exquisite paraphrase of St. Jerome "Who is the Maid?" The former paints the inherent sex-charm of Creation's fairest type; the latter pictures her attained sex-value. The former conveys passion; the latter, adoration. The former sees femininity; the latter, womanhood. And these are the two extremes.

The relative potency of these diverse influences depend, of course, upon the receptivity, sensuous or psychical, of the person subjected to their agency, yet it is worthy of note that, where controlling masculine minds are moved or biassed by sex-influence, the force is exercised by a woman, not by a female. And not till the peach-bloom of youth is gone can the woman dominate the female and her personality reach its maximum angel--loveliness or its most formidable devil-beauty. None but Kadijah, fifteen years his senior, could captivate the stormy soul of the Arabian prophet. Also, if the mature Josephine Beauharnais had cared for the Faubourg St. Antoine as she cared for the Faubourg St. Germain, Bonaparte might have been the brightest name in modern history; but we know in which direction her strong allurements led, and we know how he followed it to perdition. These instances, though multiplied

by ten figures, could prove nothing; nevertheless, they exemplify how the world is swayed by women, not by females. And each man, be he king or beggar, is a little world of his own. If he be swayed by a female, as kings and beggars frequently are, he is an extremely little world.

But don't misapprehend me as identifying or confounding femininity with youth, and womanhood with maturity. Just as many a man, having outlived the boy's enthusiasm and ingenuousness, retains the boy's uselessness and self-conceit, so in the other sex, mere femininity too often accompanies maturity. When this occurs--in fact, when the case is one of incorrigible femininity--the subject is good for two things only: to suckle fools and chronicle small beer.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the deliberate voice of the woman on the back seat, "were you speaking of Mr. Rigby, or of the other gentleman?"

"I was speaking of Thompson, madam. Rigby is an American. He came out here--let's see--just when Dunolly broke out; and our acquaintance began immediately after. Of the many friends he has made, my father, I think, holds priority in date, and I take precedence in intimacy."

My reply was, of course, addressed to the black hair, who had asked the question. Glancing then at the other, and perceiving that she had renewed her youth like the eagle, I thought to while away a few minutes by remarking, in my dry way, that Echuca was just then in a state of hungry curiosity touching two ladies who had been making inquiries after the very person under discussion.

"Speaking of Rigby," said I, "it was only this morning that I was a little amused by"--here, with a sudden flash of

intuition, I loosely and tentatively identified my auditors with the mysterious scouts; whereupon, figuratively speaking, I flogged my tongue unmercifully, then gave it its head, and heard it continue in the same breath--"remembering what a hero he seemed to me in the days when the earth was young. I like to consider myself a Melchisedec in philosophy; but the conviction is often forced upon me that, in many ways, I have been a mere disciple of the Colonel's. In fact, we differ only on points where he's grimly and disagreeably right, and I'm comfortably wrong. I wouldn't take £100 a year and be as conscientious as he is. For instance, I'm a Conservative; and he is--well, not to mince matters, he's a State Socialist. In other words, I adapt myself to the times and the seasons, whilst he thinks the conformity ought to be on the other side." Rather disconnected, and altogether rudely confidential, but not bad for a desperate impromptu. And the women, refined as they evidently were, listened as to the voice of a clergyman.

"What is Mr. Rigby's occupation?" asked the black hair, after a short silence.

"Second-rate photographer and descriptive writer, at present, madam. He has been a first-rate engine-driver, also mechanical expert, a third-rate journalist, and a fourth-rate builder. At various times he has ranked high up to ninth and tenth rate in something like a score of other and more menial occupations; but speaking with actuarial precision, he's a land surveyor. If there's any question of his identity, I may add that he was born at a place called Marathon, somewhere in the backblocks of New York State."