

* A TANGLED WEB. *

Neville Lynne leaned on his pick, and wiping the perspiration from his face, gazed in a ruminative, not to say melancholy, fashion across the plain.

It was not a particularly pleasant view; in fact, it was as hideous as can well be imagined, and could have given 'points' to a scene in our own English Black Country and beaten it easily. For it was an Australian gold field—an arid, dusty plain which would have been ugly at any time, but was rendered simply appalling by the dust, confusion, and squalid poverty of a diggers' camp.

The sun had been glaring down upon this cheerless prospect during the whole of what had seemed an endless day, and was now sinking in a bed of fire, to stoke up for the next roasting. There were a few trees in the valley, but not a single leaf on them moved. A bird or two flew listlessly, across the waste, and dropped with heavy wings on to the scorching rocks or the cracking tent poles. If they had dropped into the tents themselves no man would have molested them, for every man was too tired, too dead beat and literally too exhausted even to knock down a bird.

A group of horses, whose bones stood out under their skins like the lines of a Gothic cathedral, drooped sleepily in what remained of the river, and the only sounds that broke the natural stillness of this aggravating, soul-crushing heat were the click of a pick in some claim, the restless bark of a dog, and now and again a feeble shout from Sandy Macgregor's gay tent, where some men were drowning care and poisoning themselves with the liquid which Mr. Macgregor with a facetiousness beyond all praise, called 'whisky.' Lorn Hope Camp was very much down on its luck. There was gold in the ravine, everybody believed, or said they did; but for some weeks past no man had succeeded in finding it; and, but for the heat, what remained of Lorn Hope Camp would have up sticks and departed for some other hopeless forlorn, but the heat had turned up the energy, melted the purpose, supped the perseverance of nearly all, and the men of Lorn Hope Camp still clung on, digging occasionally, sleeping often, quarrelling at times, and drinking whisky always. Neville Lynne's claim was at the end of the ravine, half a mile or more from the camp at which he gazed. A rough hut of planks and canvas stood at a little distance, and in this Neville and his partner and an old woman—so old that the boys had christened her Mrs. Meth, as short for Methusalem—had lived. 'Had'—for the evening before, Neville's partner, depressed by the run of bad luck, had cleared out and departed.

Why Neville Lynne had not gone too he could not have told. His belief in the presence of the hidden gold was certainly no stronger than that of the other diggers, and as certainly he had not grown to love the hideous, sandy, dusty, sun-stricken plain; but something—some feeling he could not have defined if his life had depended upon his doing so—had made him reluctant to leave the Lorn Hope, and there he stood, friendless, solitary, and most utterly bored on the edge of his barren claim, with the last rays of the sun spitefully smiting him on the head, and the flies buzzing round his ears. There were two reasons why Neville Lynne's claim was at a distance from the camp. The first was because he believed in the upper part of the ravine; the second, because he was different to the rest of the men who composed Lorn Hope Camp.

To put it shortly, the young fellow—he was very young, younger than he looked a mere lad just under twenty—was a gentleman, and the rest of the camp were not gentlemen.

Now, the only gentlemen in a society of black-legs, 'lags,' roughs and ruffians is always regarded by them with a certain amount of envy, malice, and all uncharitable feelings. It is very awkward and disadvantageous to be the only honest and well-bred man in a party, whether it is a picnic-party or a party of gold diggers, and it was very much to the relief of the majority that Neville Lynne pitched his tent nearly a mile from the main body. And yet, though they regarded him with a groundless dislike, and a not altogether groundless envy, they respected him. There was not a reckless, desperate dare-devil among them who possessed more pluck than the Young 'Un' as he was called. He was, in their expressive language, 'all grit,' and they knew that he was as ready with his revolver and his fists as any of them, and though slow at beginning a fight, was slower still at leaving off.

On his first joining the camp, Bully Swanger, the desperado, had gone for him with the altogether unlooked-for result of having been laid on his back for rather more than a fortnight, and since then the 'Young 'Un' had been severely let alone. There were some—the best of the crew—who would have been friendly with the lad who had so effectually shown that he could hold his own, but oil and vinegar will not easily mix, and though Neville Lynne was civil and courteous to all, he was not sociable.

Even with his partner, the least dishonest man in the camp, Neville had been reserved and reticent, and the man had worked with him, slept in the hut beside him, shared his meals and hopes and disappointments, without learning his real name or anything about him, and had known that Neville Lynne had a history.

There were two or three women in the camp, mostly old and battered, who eyed the young lad curiously and admiringly; but not even the youngest and least ill-looking of them had ever received more than a smile or a civil 'good morning' from him. 'The Young 'Un' as full of pride as

Mac's whisky is of fusel oil,' remarked the wit of the camp; 'that's what's the matter with him. I shouldn't be surprised if he was a young duke in disguise. Some of these days he'll sot around with a coronet on his head, and then flit up to heaven—that is, if some of the boys don't get too much of his pride and bore a hole through him.'

But though many doubtless would have liked to have 'perforated' the Young 'Un,' no one had as yet attempted it; the reflection that he was a very quick hand at the perforating process himself perhaps deterred the desperadoes.

The sun sunk at last, and Neville, as if he had been waiting for its disappearance, dropped into the hole and resumed work; but there was not much heart in his strokes, and he seized the appearance of a solitary figure coming slowly across the plain toward him as an excuse for stopping again, and once more leaning on his pick, waited and gazed.

The man came up with a lagging gait and threw himself down on the edge of the claim. He was inexpensively attired in a pair of trousers made out of some sacks, a shirt frayed and torn, and rather blacker than a tinker's boots, which no self-respecting tramp in England or America would have deigned to pick up, and a chimney-pot hat so battered and napless and brimless as to convey the idea that the man who would wear it could only have insanity for an excuse for doing so.

He was the doctor of Lorn Hope—there is always a doctor, a barrister, not unfrequently a baronet, and occasionally a clergyman in a diggers' camp—and he, too, like Neville, was nameless, answering always to the abbreviated cognomen of 'Doc.'

'Well, Young 'Un,' he said, mopping his face, scamed and hollowed by a long and steady course of Macgregor's whisky, 'still hangin' on?'

'Still hanging on, Doc,' said Neville, with as cheerful a nod as could be expected under the circumstances.

The doctor stared at the handsome, sun-browned face with its short crisp hair looking almost yellow against the darkened skin, and the clear blue eyes that met his so squarely, and then let his own blinking, undecided ones drop into the pit.

'Seems as if there wasn't any more luck for this yere camp, don't it?'

'Yes, it seems so,' assented Neville, listlessly, and he took out his pipe.

The doctor's eyes glistened.

'Ain't got any 'bacca to spare, I suppose?' he remarked.

'Oh, yes,' said Neville; and he tossed his pouch.

The doctor caught it with eager, shaking hands, crammed a blackened old briar as full as it would hold, and another pipeful in the palm of his hand with charming dexterity, and tossed the pouch, with just half a pipeful remaining, back to its owner.

'Partner's cleared out, ain't he?'

Neville nodded as he lighted his pipe.

'Tired out at last, eh? Ah, well, I'm not surprised. Why on earth the rest of the boys don't up stick and cut it, I can't make out! Appears to me Lorn Hope is clean played out. Why don't you go young 'un?'

Neville Lynne leaned against the side of the pit and looked absently across the plain.

'I don't know,' he replied at last. 'I suppose I shall presently.'

'That's what most of 'em says,' remarked the doctor, squatting on his haunches and puffing away with profound and sleepy satisfaction in the eleemosynary tobacco. 'Seems to me there won't be many of us left to go if we don't look sharp about it. Two more waiting the undertaker this morning—sun-roke—and there's three lying low besides, guess we had better wait and bury 'em all together; it's a saving of time—though time don't appear to be money in this yere camp now.'

The doctor was not an American—no one knew exactly what country could rightly claim the honor of his birth—but he had been in the California gold fields, and had caught the tone of that country, and half a dozen others as well.

'Sickness always follows other ill-luck,' said Neville.

'Not much sickness about you, Young 'Un' remarked the doctor, eying the slim but well knit frame approvingly.

'No; I'm all right enough,' assented Neville. 'I trouble the baker more than your profession, Doc.'

'Kind of a teetotaler, ain't you?' said the doctor. 'Don't see you open up at the poison shop.'

Neville smiled absently.

'No, I'm not a teetotaler,' he said. The doctor smoked on in silence for a minute or so; then, without movement, remarked:

'Well, I must be going. And so you mean to stick on here, then?'

'For the present—yes,' said Neville.

'It ain't no good. There's nothing at the bottom of that, Young 'Un; and he nodded at the pit.

'I don't think there is,' assented Neville, looking down at the hole. 'I shall stick to it for—say two days longer, and then—'

The doctor nodded.

'Well, here's luck to you,' and he raised an imaginary glass. 'I must be going.'

He half rose, then sunk down again. 'There, now! hang it all! if I haven't clean gone and forgotten what I'd come for! and he smote his leg feebly, causing a faint cloud of dust to rise. 'You ain't got a drop of brandy—real brandy, cognac, you know, not old Mac's—have you, Young 'Un?'

Neville hesitated and glanced at him.

'Oh, it ain't for me, don't you mistake,'

said the doctor, as promptly as the heat and his jelly-fish condition would permit.

'Mac's poison is good enough for me. I want it for the stranger.'

'The what?' asked Neville.

'What! ain't you heard?' rejoined the doctor, stretching himself.

'I've not been down to the camp for the last three days.'

'No; you ain't very sociable, Young 'Un. Well, last night or yesterday evening the Scuffler—the gentleman so-called was one of the idle vagabonds of the camp, who was always ready for a fight or a drink, but showed a marked disinclination for anything in the shape of work—the Scuffler comes down to my diggin's, and says he's got company as wanted me—wanted me bad. I thought at first that the Scuffler had been on one of his sprees, and was a bit wandering; but he took his oath that he hadn't had more than half a pint of whisky the whole blessed day, and I went along of him. And it was Gospel truth, for there was a new chum a-lying there a-basking in his cheeks as fast as he could. Scuffler said he'd found him and the girl.'

'What girl?' asked Neville.

'Didn't I say there was a child?' said the doctor. 'Well, there was—a bit of a girl like a young colt, and—Where am I now? Oh, yes; the Scuffler found the old gent—for he's a real gent, Young 'Un or I've forgotten, in this God-forsaken hole, how to tell a gentleman—lying in the road; and, doing the Good Samaritan, Scuffler helped him into his shanty, and not having any oil or a penny to bless himself with does the next best thing he could, and went, for me.'

'Who is he?' asked Neville, not callously, but with that lack of keen interest which becomes natural to a man who has spent nine months in a diggers' camp, especially when that camp happens to be one like the Lorn Hope, in which sickness and death are always present or very near.

The doctor carefully stopped his pipe, using his begrimed finger as the stopper, and shook his head.

'Not knowing, can't say. Visitors to the Lorn Hope don't, as a rule, bring letters of introduction with them, or call around dropping visiting cards, and the stranger ain't no exception. But he's a gent, I'm sure, and it occurred to me that you, being also a gent, might feel inclined to part with a drop of the real old stuff; that is, if you'd got it.'

'There is no resisting such a compliment as that, Doc,' said Neville. 'I think there is a little cognac left; if so, you are welcome to it.'

He put his strong hand on the side of the pit, and, leaping lightly to the top, went toward the hut.

The doctor followed him, and stood leaning against the apology for a door, while Neville unlocked a strong box, and after some rummaging about found a bottle containing a small quantity of brandy.

'There you are,' he said, tossing it to the doctor, who caught it as dexterously as he had caught the tobacco-pouch. 'Is there anything else I can do, Doc?'

'No, not as I know on, and I'm thinking no one else can do anything.' Then, holding the bottle under his tattered shirt, he patted it meaningfully. 'Don't you be afraid; I'm square, Young 'Un, and I've been telling you Gospel truth. Every drop the stranger don't drink I'll hand back; and confirming the assertion with an emphatic digger's oath, he shuffled off.

It took him sometime to reach the camp, notwithstanding the distance was so short, and passing right through it, he stopped at a shanty rather more ruinous and tumble-down than the rest, and after a knock, by way of announcement, pushed aside the tattered canvas that served as a door, and entered.

A man was lying upon three upturned empty boxes covered with sacks, and, as the doctor had said, he was dying.

The doctor had called him old, but



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though the man's hair was gray, almost white, and his face thin and wasted, he was not yet fifty. There was that unmistakable look of refinement about the face which denotes the gentleman. The hands clutching the ragged blankets were thin and small and well shaped. Besides him knelt a young girl—a thin slip of a child with great gray eyes and a wealth of dark hair that half swept over her pale little face.

She was not crying, but there was a world of mute anguish in the big gray eyes as she turned them from the dying man's face to the whisky-sodden one of the doctor.

'Waal, here we are again,' remarked that gentleman, with a ghastly attempt at cheerfulness; 'and how are we getting on now? Is there such a thing as a glass about? Ah, no; the Scuffler don't go in for such luxuries.' He held the bottle to the man's lips, and a few drops passed them. 'That's better. Now, missie, just raise your father—he is your father or granddaddy, which?'

'Father,' said the girl.

As if her voice were more effectual than the doctor's in rousing him, the dying man raised his head and looked from one to the other. Then he made a motion with his hand which the doctor accepted as a sign of dismissal.

'Want to be alone a bit, eh?' he said. 'All right; you give me a call if you want me. I'll go and take a hand at 'beggar my neighbor' with the Scuffler. Just call out 'Doc' missie, and I'm with you in a crack.'

The dying man waited until the tent curtain had flapped to upon the doctor's back, then he signed to the girl to come nearer.

She laid her head upon the pillow—a sack stuffed with grass—and wound her arm round his neck.

'I'm going to leave you, Syl,' he said, feebly. 'My poor, poor child! it is hard, but God's will be done. Don't cry, Syl; it's I who should cry; for—for when I think of you all alone in the world, without even one to help you and protect you—I—' he drew a long sigh, and the tears filled his eyes. 'But listen, Syl; I am going to give you something. It is something very precious, and I—I want you to guard it as if it were your very life. Don't lose it or let any one take it from you. Hide it next your heart, and—and when you are eighteen open it, and—his voice failed him. He touched his heart and signed to her to take something from his pocket, and she put in her trembling hand and drew out a small flat package. It was covered with parchment stained and crased, but securely sealed at each end.

'Take it,' he whispered. Put it in the bosom of your dress, and—keep it there. Some day—' his voice faltered and broke, and his head fell back, but he seemed to indicate by a sign that she was not to call out, and she remained silent, holding him against her sob-shaken little breast. While she waited with her anguished eyes fixed upon him, a man's head appeared in the space between two of the boards which formed the side of the hut.

It was a long, unpleasant looking countenance, rendered all the more unprepossessing by a slight cast in the left eye. It was not only an ugly but a mean and villainous-looking face, and the expression of eagerness and craft in the eyes glaring watchfully at the dying man and the girl would have made a very nice model for a painter who wanted to paint, say, Judas before his act of treachery, and it would have been a very low type of Judas at that.

'Are—are you there still, Syl?' asked the dying man. 'Have you hidden the packet? Remember! Hide it—keep it—guard it! It is the secret of your life, Syl—the secret of your life! How—how old are you, Syl?'

Her lips formed: 'Fifteen.'

'Three years, then?' he murmured. 'Oh, my dear, my dear, if I could only stay with you! All alone in the world! All alone, and such a child! But God's will—' he stopped, his face working, his eyes fixed on her with pitying love and tenderness. 'Good-bye, Syl! Good-bye!'

The doctor came in with a hand of greasy cards in his claws at her cry, and the uncouth, dust-stained figure of the Scuffler stood at the hut door.

'All over, Doc?' he asked.

The doctor nodded with a gravity which would not have discredited his flourishing professional days.

'All over, Scuffler?' he said. 'Fetch one of the women—the child's fainted.'

The Scuffler turned, and in turning himself, stumbled over a third person. It was the owner of the face which had been thrust between the boards.

'Halloo, Lavarick!' he said. Is that you? Out of the way!'

'What's on, Scuffler?' asked the individual addressed. 'I've only just come up. Anybody bad?'

'Yes, bad and worse!' retorted the Scuffler, with a chuckle of surprise at his own wit.

'Dear me!' said Lavarick. 'I'll go in and see if I can be of any assistance; and softly rubbing his hands together, he entered the tent.

CHAPTER II.

Two days passed—four days—and Neville Lynne was still at his claim. He had not been down to the camp; no one had come up to him since the doctor had paid him the visit. He had heard nothing of the death and burial of the man, the stranger; and, solitary and alone but for the old woman, Mrs. Meth, he toiled on his barren claim. Sometimes, when the heat and the flies and the dust seemed worse than usual, he pitched the pick and the spade as far as he could, and flung himself on his back, and lay there—not asleep, but thinking—thinking no doubt of his home far away in England, of the relatives and friends he might never see again—of the dear old home and the soft, luscious green fields of Devonshire. He used to think it rather a sleepy, sloppy place, and had been wont to declare that

it always rained there. What would he give for a Devonshire downpour now! A young man, a gentleman, dressed in rags, who has had a crust of dry—very dry—bread for breakfast, and is rather uncertain as to whether it will run to quite such an extensive menu for dinner—a young man so utterly and completely run down on his luck as Neville Lynne, has plenty to think of.

The old hag came shuffling—nearly everybody shuffled in Lorn Camp, as the gait was found to be less exhausting than walking in the proper Christian manner—and shook an empty meal-bag at him.

'This yere bag's empty, Young 'Un,' she said, not complainingly, but as it she were stating a matter of fact.

'So it is, so am I, so are you,' said Neville, grimly, and so is the claim. But he got up and fetched his pick and spade and dropped into the hole again. This was soon after noon on the fourth day after the doctor's visit. He had grown to hate the sight of the hole, the tools, the very sand and pebbles which he painfully cast up to the surface, and after digging for an hour, he looked up and laughed.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's played out, as the Doc said, and I'm off. But where? He looked absently round the plain. 'To some other camp, I suppose. No use going back to England without money; better stop here, where it isn't wicked to wear old clothes and go barefoot. Poverty's a crime in England, and I should be punished, and justly. Besides—he wiped the sweat from his brow, and his handsome face clouded—I couldn't face them—couldn't face Jordan's sneer. No, not England.'

Then he sighed. The old woman came down to the hole again and shook the meal-bag as before.

'This yere's as empty as a drum,' she croaked.

Neville got out of the pit slowly and walked to the hut, unlocked the box and took out a silver pencil case, value probably two and sixpence.

'My last piece of plate,' he said, with a short laugh. 'Take it down to the camp and swap it for meal. Somebody who can't write may take a fancy to it.'

The old woman clutched it with her grimy claw—every hand in Lorn Hope was more or less grimy, generally more—and shuffled off toward the camp. Neville went slowly back to his claim and took up the pick.

'Yes,' he said, 'the Doc was right. Lorn Hope is played out. I ought to have cut it with my partner. Now, look here; I'll take just six strokes, and then good-bye, and be blown to you!'

He raised his pick above his head and struck to the right of him once, twice, three, four, five times. A cloud of red dust—a heap of stones, as usual. He had the pick poised, a grim smile on his sun-browned lips.

'The sixth and very last, so help me Heaven!'

(To be continued.)

EXPRESS MY FEELINGS!

A Minister was recently trying to make a telephone connection. The sweet telephone girl at the exchange was probably exchanging confidence with her Sweet-heart. The minister 'hello'd' several times, but got no answer. He was in a hurry, and the inattention put him out. A lay friend came behind him. He turned to the latter. 'My dear fellow' he said with a look of mingled wrath and misery, 'would you kindly express my feelings?' Ladies never use strong language, but if anything would tempt them it would be the mangy appearance of their dress or jacket after using any other dyes but TURKISH DYES. The ladies of Canada use the TURKISH DYES. They now appreciate their worth. TURKISH DYES will never wash out. No other dyes will stand a soap and water test. The TURKISH DYES invite it, soap only brings out their lustre. Every color (72) has its own beauty. Every color is perfect. No ill tempers when you use TURKISH DYES. No spoiled garments. Try them and see how you can augment your wardrobe with beautiful garments which ordinarily would have been thrown aside.

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