

IN NO MAN'S LAND.

(An Australian Story.)

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CHAPTER XXII.

THE SAVING OF CONSIDINE.

a note, and Madam also so much her lover. Yes, the sheep is M'sieur Ashton's, that you regard, my chaille. We go to veest at M'sieur's yort this day. Is it not so?"

Arrayed in her nautical costume, with the sailor hat bobbing and trembling on the toupee, Madam Duval proceeded with Madge to the landing place, where amongst a number of trim cutters lay one and two sailors in it. It was Mr Ashton's, and Madam tripped into it, giving a little scream as it rocked, and then she and Madge were being rowed rapidly to the schooner. A bluff, plain speaking man, whose dress betokened him to be the captain, received them, and with a sharp look round, Madam Duval went into the saloon, taking Madge with her. She had asked a question of the captain, which her companion did not catch, and flinging herself on the broad seat that went round the cabin, gave a merry laugh.

"At last they!" she cried. "Is it not delightful, my chaille? Hark! They pull up the anchor, and we sail away. We go to find what these English call their legs of sea."

"Where is Mr Ashton?" asked Madge.

"He shall be called to Portsmouth this morning, so say Captain Brown, his commander," replied Madam. "We meet him there, with his dear wife. Prepare yourself for a great surprise, my chaille," and her eyes danced merrily.

"Let us go on deck," said Madge. "We are losing the scenery."

"Tah! This scenery," retorted Madam. "It is nothing. The water makes dizzy my head also. Rest yet in this 'salon,'" and something appeared to give Madam such intense amusement, that she burst into a ringing laugh. There was wine on the saloon table, and she helped herself to it, explaining that she would combat the sea, whatever that might have meant.

The yacht was by this time hissing through the water, and from the saloon port, Madge could see the land sinking into indistinctness. They were making for the open sea too, and she turned to Madam Duval.

"You told me that we were to meet Mr Ashton at Portsmouth," she said. "We seem going away from it."

"Sweet chaille," replied Madam. "Is it I who guide the sheep? Is it I who direct where she shall be carried? Ma foi! I am but a vessel, who know nothing. Captain Brown will preserve us, yet how rocks the floor, Mon Dieu!" and she groaned.

The yacht was making good way, and although Madge would have preferred to go on deck, the condition of misery into which Madam had fallen called for sympathy and aid. For that seasoned mariner was ill, and after uttering the most dismal expressions of despair, and becoming very limp, Madge had helped her to a berth, where in a forlorn heap of nautical costume and crushed straw hat, the sufferer laid herself down, calling for a speedy death to release her from her torments, for brandy in the same breath, and Madge went into the saloon to procure it.

Somebody was standing at the entrance, and Madge uttered a cry of consternation. Somebody from whom she shrank angrily as he approached her, for the new comer was Jarvis Dorman.

(To be continued.)

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Next morning at grey dawn all the camp was astir. Hugh looked out from under his mosquito net and saw old Considine sitting over the fire, earnestly superintending the frying of a large hunk of buffalo meat. He looked like a man without a trouble in the world as he turned the hissing steak in the pan. Two black gins, in brief garments—a loin cloth and a villainously dirty pyjama jacket each, were sitting near him, languidly killing the mosquitos which settled on their bare legs. These were Magge and Lucy, but they had degenerated with the surroundings. Tommy Prince was oiling a carbine, and one of the shooters was washing his face at a basin formed by scratching a hole in the ground and pressing a square of canvas into the depression. The shooter sloshed himself merrily, using plenty of soap, and a dispirited dog which came up to drink the water found the soap too much for him, and went away growling after a mouthful.

The Chinese skinner was sitting on a log, rubbing a huge butcher's knife up and down on a sharpening stone. Away up the plain the horses, about 30 or 40 in number, were slowly trooping into camp, hunted by a couple of blackfellows. These men were naked except for little grass armlets worn above the elbow, and sticks stuck through their noses. When the horses reached the camp they formed a shuffling, constantly moving squadron under the shade of some trees, and pushed and shoved and circled about, trying to keep the flies off themselves and each other. Hugh walked over to Tommy Prince at his rifle oiling, and watched him for a while. That worthy, who was evidently a true sportsman at heart, was liberally baptising with Rangoon oil an old and much rusted Martini 577-bore carbine, whose ejector refused to work. Every now and then, when he thought he had got it ship shape, Tommy would put in a fresh cartridge, and—holding the carbine tightly to his shoulder and shutting his eyes—would fire it into space with a mighty roar. The old rusty weapon kicked frightfully, and after each discharge the ejector jammed, and Tommy ruefully poked the exploded cartridge out with a rod and poured on more oil.

"Blast the carbine!" said Tommy. "It kicks upwards like; it's kick'n my nose all skew whiff."

"Don't put it to your shoulder, you fool," said one of the shooters, "it'll kick your head off. Hold it out in one hand."

"Then it'll kick my arm off," said Tommy.

"No it won't; you won't feel it at all," said the shooter; "your arm will give it the recoil. Blaze away!"

"What are you up to with the carbine?" said Hugh.

"I'm goin' to have a blaze at some of these 'ere buffloes," said Tommy gaily. "Bill's lent me a 'orse. They's got a rifle for you and one for the old man. We'll give them buffloes hell to-day. Five rifles—they'll think the French is after them."

"Well, but I want to get back," said Hugh. "We musn't waste any time. What about the storekeeper's horses?"

"Ho! I'd never do to take them straight back again," said Tommy. "Never do. They must 'ave a spell. Besides, what's the 'urry?"

And Hugh, recognising that for all the good he had done by his mission he might just as well not hurry back again, resigned himself to the inevitable, picked up his bridle, and went into the shuffling herd of horses, and caught the one pointed out for him—a big, raw-boned, ragged hipped bay, a horse that would have been a gentleman under any other conditions, but from long buffalo hunting had become a careless going, loose jointed ruffian, caring his life in his hand every day, and, like his masters, careless of appearances, and without morals. He bit savagely at Hugh as

he saddled him, and altogether proclaimed himself devoid of self-respect and all the finer instincts.

Breakfast was despatched almost in silence. The shooters knew vaguely that Hugh's visit was in some way connected with old Considine, and they knew also that Considine had refused to do what Hugh wanted. But the hospitality of the Buffalo camp is the hospitality of the Arabs of old—the stranger within the camp is made welcome whatever be his business, and he may come and go unquestioned. Hugh had little enough desire to talk on the subject of his visit, and old Considine maintained a dogged silence. Tommy Prince alone chattered away affably between large mouthfuls of buffalo beef, damper and tea, airing his views on all subjects, but principally on the fair sex. Meanwhile the blacks were catching the pack horses and sharpening their skinning knives. The two horses used by the shooters were brought over to the camp fire and given a small feed each of much-prized maize and oats and bran brought round in the lugger from Port Faraway, with the camp supplies landed on the river bank twelve miles off, and fetched in on pack horses.

"A little more beef, Mister? No? Well, all aboard for the Buffalo Brigade! That's your rifle by the tree. Put this cartridge belt on and buckle it real tight, 'cos, if you leave it loose, when you start to gallop it will shake up and down and chafe the soul out of you. Come, Paddy Keogh. What are you going to ride?"

"I'm going to ride the Boco" (one-eyed horse).

"I wouldn't if I was you. He's all right to race up to a buffalo, but that blind eye of his'll fetch him to grief some day. Ride the old grey."

"No fear," said the old man obstinately, "the Boco's one eye's worth any other horse's two. Me an' the Boco will be near the lead when the whips are crackin' 'em now, take it from me."

"Come along then."

Hugh clambered on to his raw-boned steed, known as "Close Up," because he would go so close to the buffaloes, and the procession started. The five white men rode ahead, all smoking with great enjoyment. Hugh rode beside one of the shooters and opened conference with him.

"I've heard a lot about this business," said Hugh, "but never hoped to see it. What are these Australian buffaloes? I thought they were just lumpy cattle, like those little Brahmin cattle."

"People reckon they are the Indian buffaloes," said the bushman. "They were fetched here about fifty years ago from Java—just a few pair, and they were let go and went wild, and now they're all over the face of the earth about here. We shot six hundred of 'em—just the two rifles—in six months. It's not play, I tell you, to shoot and skin six hundred beasts and cure their hides in that time. We'll get 1000 this season."

"Good Lord!" said Hugh. "Won't they be shot out?"

"Not they. There's about eight thousand of 'em shot every year for their hides, and it's just like the ordinary increase of a big cattle station. They're all over these plains, and for miles and miles away down the coast, and in these jungles there's thousands of 'em. There's jungles here that are 100 miles round, and no animal but a buffalo will go into 'em. The blacks say that inside them there's jungles there's big patches of clear plain, with grass and water, where there's buffaloes as thick as bees; but you can't get at 'em."

"How do you shoot 'em?" said Hugh.

"Race right up alongside 'em, and put the carbine out with one hand and shoot downwards into the loin. That's the only way to drop 'em. You can shoot bullets into 'em by the haful everywhere else, and they just turn and charge, and while you're dodging round, first you huntin' the buffalo and then the buffalo huntin' you, the rest of the mob are out of sight. You

must go right up alongside, close enough to touch 'em with the barrel, and fire down—so," illustrating the shot by holding the carbine as he spoke. "And whatever you do don't pull your horse about. He knows the game if you don't. And never stop your horse near a wounded buffalo, either. They make a rush as sudden as lightning. They look clumsy and big, but, my oath, a wounded one can hop along something wonderful. They'll surprise you for pace any time, but most of all when they're wounded. "Do they always come at you when they're wounded?" said Hugh.

"Always," said the shooter, "and very often when they're not wounded they'll turn and charge if you've run 'em a long way. You want to look out, I tell you. They'll wheel very sudden, and if they catch a horse they'll grind him into pulp. Ben, my mate here, had a horse killed under him last week, horse we gave five-and-twenty quid for, and that's a long shot for a buffalo horse. I believe in Injia they shoot 'em off elephants, but that's 'cos they won't come out in the open like they do here. There's hundreds of tofs in England and Injia 'd give their ears for a day after these, you know. Hello! Look! See there!"

"Far away, out on the plain, over the unbroken expanse of long waving grass, Hugh saw fifteen or twenty bluish grey mounds rising above the grass. They were ranged in line, and were like the earth before the creation, without form and void. They were a herd of buffalo feeding, and as they never lifted their heads they maintained a curious resemblance of a lot of railway trucks covered with grey tarpaulin. It was impossible to tell which was head and which was tail. All that could be seen were just the bluish mounds, looking like islands in the sea of grass. A short halt was made while girths were tightened, cartridges slipped into place, and hats jammed on, Hugh trembling with excitement. They all mounted and rode slowly towards the herd, which were at least half a mile off, and still feeding steadily. Everyone kept his horse in hand, ready for a dash the moment the mob lifted their heads.

"How fast will they go?" whispered Hugh to the nearest shooter.

"Fast as blazes," said the shooter. "You've no idea how fast they are. They're the biggest take in there is. Now, when they lift their heads they'll stare for half a minute, and then they'll run. The moment they start off you go. Watch 'em. There, one sees us! Keep steady yet. Don't rush till they start."

One of the blue mounds lifted up a huge black muzzled head decorated with an enormous pair of sickle-shaped horns that stretched right back to his shoulders. He stared at them with great sullen eyes, and trotted a few paces towards them, and one after another the rest lifted their heads and stared too. Closer the horsemen drew at their steady, silent jog, the horses pricking their ears and getting on their toes, as racehorses do at the start of a race.

"We ready," said the shooter. "Now!"

The mob, with one impulse, wheeled and set off at a heavy, lumbering gallop, and the horses at once dashed into full gallop after them. It was a ride worth a year of a man's life. Every man sat down to his work like a jockey finishing a race, and the big stock horses went striding through the long grass after the buffaloes like hawks swooping down on a lot of pigeons. The men carried their carbines ready loaded, holding them straight up over the shoulder, so as to lessen the jerking on the wrist caused by the horse's gallop. The surface of the plain was level enough, but frightfully bad going. The sun had baked and dried the black soil till great, gaping cracks, a couple of feet wide and ten feet deep, were opened in the ground. The buffaloes had wallowed in the wet season, and made round well-like holes that were now hard, dry pitfalls. Here and there a treacherous, slimy water-course wound its slinking way along, making a bog in