

"Yaas," he replied.

"Why, what place is this?" asked Ford. And we both thought of ill-treated women and kidnapped beauties, of something vague that most urgently needed just two such men as we to unravel the mystery.

"It's the Black Grange," replied the captain, as he gave the order to go ahead.

"Black Grange!" I repeated.

"What is it? Who lives there?" asked Ford.

"'Ard questions to answer, sir. I dunno wot it is, an' it's 'arder still to say who lives there, but the owner is a real haristocrat, son of a dook, and no 'ave, fer there's been papers an' advertisements as can't be contryverted."

"But the girl, the singer?" went on Ford.

"Well, there be different opinions about 'er. Some say she's the owner's daughter, an' others reckon 'e's 'er guardian or something, but no one knows for certain."

"But she can't be kept there a prisoner against her will!" I cried. "British law doesn't allow that."

"British law!" The captain chuckled. "British law up 'ere knows better than to include the Black Grange. Look at the country, mister, British law 'ud get lost an' starved in it, an' it 'ud stand a poor chance against a desperate villian an' six niggers."

We looked at the country around the Black Grange. For miles there was nothing but patches of gum land, clumps of native bush, brown hills and swampy gullies, with no sign of another human habitation, although the little township to which we were going was only three miles ahead, round a bend in the river.

"And a girl is kept there a prisoner, in goodness knows what surroundings, and perhaps most brutally treated! Why, it's monstrous!" cried Ford.

"No 'arm's done to the leddy, accordin' to accounts," answered the captain. "She ain't allowed off the property, that's all."

"Has she ever tried to escape?" I asked.

"She tried once, an' got to a settler's near the township, but the darkies was after 'er,

an' took 'er back, an' them as was shelterin' 'er lost their sheep, an' got their cows mauled, an' their 'osses lamed, but there was no evidence to show who done it, though there weren't wantin' suspicions."

"Upon my honour," cried I, thoroughly roused. "I wouldn't mind having a try for her myself."

"What's she like?" asked Ford.

"They say she's a rare beauty."

Ford and I looked at one another, and our minds were made up. The captain understood and grunted contemptuously.

"You ain't got no right to interfere. An' if yer had, yer couldn't do anything. Listen!" and he pointed towards the Black Grange, now some distance behind us.

Up the river through the gathering darkness came the deep bark of big dogs mingled with the hoarse shouts of men.

"What could you do agin that?" asked the captain with a convincing puff at his pipe. We smiled the grim smile of a fixed determination.

"Any other women on the place?" asked Ford abruptly.

"Only one's been seen, an' she's worse than all the men put together, so they say. She's an awful old drunkard an' gets the D.T.'s somethin' 'orrible. I've 'eard 'er meself on still nights."

"And the owner, this aristocrat, is he here too?" I asked.

"Oh, yes! Knoocks round. They do say the old woman's got a hold on 'im, an' that she knows why the girl's there."

"By Jove! it's a queer story," said Ford, "and I'll know more of it before I'm done!"

And we repeated the words that night as we sat over our cigars in the country hotel where we had taken rooms.

The next morning we went with our guns in the direction of the Black Grange. We crossed swamps, cut through tea-tree clumps, and scrambled over fences with a philosophical disregard of the fact that we were trespassing. We were walking slowly under cover of thick tea-tree scrub when Ford touched my arm and whispered, "Stop, I heard voices."