

Crime Detected; Or, The Midnight Watch
by A. T.

I don't think that I was ever out in a hotter day in Australia than the one of which I am now about to write. The sun had been pouring down streams of fiery light, that made me thank my stars I was not in "Force" uniform, though, as it was, the heat burning through the tweed coat upon my back made me feel as if it was cast iron, and riveted upon my body. My poor animal felt the fatigue and almost insufferable heat quite as much as I did, I dare say; while the flies, those tormenting nuisances of bush life, nearly drove both him and me mad.

Very beautiful in early morning is the green scattered "bush" of Australia. A thousand beauties may be freshly discovered, as it were, at every fresh mile of travel. In one spot, grand, crooked old leaves lean caressingly over some tortuous and glistening creek, or stand sentinel over their own reflections in the placid water. Early birds call to each other from scented golden wattles, or wash themselves in the shadow of the old gum-trees upon the edge of the creek. If it is the season for the stately magpie, he utters those delicious gurgles of music, that cannot be compared with the notes of any other bird in the wide world, or stalks proudly over the grassy slopes, as if he really believed he and his were "monarchs of all they surveyed."

Later in the day, too, when the thermometer stands no higher than 103 or 104 or so, one may yet enjoy a ride through the glades of our eastern forest. The screams of the cockatoos are discordant, no doubt, but how enjoyable it is to catch a glimpse of them hovering over some tall tree or resting upon a bough, with outspread wing, swaying themselves to and fro in the very enjoyment of pure life. Cawing crows are nasty things, too, and suggestive of something that one doesn't at all want to come in contact with; nevertheless, their feathers are so glossy and black, and the clear blue sky, unflecked by a single cloud, throws their wings out into such bold relief above the green treetops, that one cannot but try to forget their disagreeable habits, and admire them as a part of a very Australian bush scene.

Well, I cannot be sure that you will exactly know what I am driving at, but I am coming to the point. After assuring you that I admire and enjoy the beauty of bush scenery as much as any one, when it is really admirable and enjoyable, I defy any man living to picture to himself or to endure a more detestable ordeal than a ride through that same beautiful bush scenery on the sort of day when my story commences. Over a long, broad, treeless plain, we will say, with the sun burning up every blade of grass dry and brown, and pouring down upon your miserable heads; or on a lonely track, where only now and then a tree comes aggravatingly near the road to make you wish for shade, if it were but for one moment; I say aggravatingly, for I think that, with respect to shade, those same eucalypti are the most aggravating trees in the universe. Fortunately I was in no hurry upon that particular day. I was returning from the successful accomplishment of a troublesome piece of police business, and was only anxious to get to my destination for the night, and over the seemingly interminable day of heat I had just passed through; but had I been upon the most urgent business in the world, it would have been next to impossible for my poor horse to have galloped many miles at a stretch, with the thermometer standing so high as it did that day.

Poor Vino! I fancy I see her now, as we neared the lonely bush inn, where she was as certain as I

was myself of rest and refreshment. She was a glossy bright bay, strongly built, and yet a half-blood; and although she bore no broad arrow branded on her silky coat, she had been in the Force many years. She was a detective's animal, and I had ridden her for most of the three years during which I had seen colonial service. I do believe she was almost as good as a detective, as I was myself; and I am not ashamed to own that her sagacity and instinct—whatever you may choose to call it—gave me many a hint, of which I never found it to my disadvantage to avail myself.

The sun then was just dipping below the tops of the trees as Vino pricked up her ears with a glad whinny, and I perceived, away through the heavy bush that was thickly scattered over the grassy plain over which we passed, the long, weather-boarded "Wallaby Hotel," which was my destination for the night. I had been there before, but in such different guise, that I had no fear of mine host recognizing me; nor did I much care though he should, save that the usual caution of a detective officer made me prefer secrecy, with a view to some possible future contingency.

As we neared the hotel I perceived a bullock dray approaching it from an opposite direction to that in which I myself travelled, and just as I drew up at the door, the team also came to a halt in front of it; while the driver, leisurely tumbling himself off the empty dray, proceeded into the bar, one might guess for the purpose of obtaining a nobbler. All this was very natural, and there was nothing whatever suspicious about it; but as this man passed Vino, from whose back I had just alighted, she turned her head sideways, with a suspicious twist that I well knew, and gave a sniff at the man's back, pretty much as a dog might do, when he happened to come in contact with a person who, his instinct told him, was not to be trusted.

This was quite enough for me; and as I threw the bridle over the hook, I took a close survey of the bullock driver. He was a young, fair-haired, and soft-featured man, certainly not more than twenty-seven years of age, dressed in the usual careless dress of a teamster; and the expression in his face was of listless dreaminess—in short, just such an expression as one might expect to see in the face of a man of little intelligence, who passed most of his time on the monotonous roads of a bush country.

As I entered the bar he asked for a pint of ale, and, receiving it, sat down on a bench that ran along the wall, and seemed absorbed in imbibing it, and in gazing listlessly out at his bullocks. Casting but a glance at him as I passed, I informed the landlord of my intention of passing the night there, and requested that my horse might be carefully attended to. I have already spoken of my tweed coat. I was dressed in a suit of tweed, and to all appearance might have been a comfortable farmer, or a country storekeeper on my way to, or from transacting some business connected with my livelihood, at the not very distant large township.

"It's been a terrible hot day, landlord," I observed, as I availed myself of the drink I had ordered.

"Frightful, sir," he replied, glancing at the thermometer that hung in the bar behind him. "At two o'clock the glass stood at 112, and I say that's too hot for any white man."

"Or a black one either," I answered, carelessly. "Well, will you see about my animal, if you please? By and by, when I get a bit cool, I'll go and see that she's all right myself."

The landlord left to see after Vino, and I remained sipping my brandy and water, and slyly watching the bullock driver, who still kept silence opposite. His eyes seemed to be fixed upon the belt of the forest, which skirted the grass at a little distance; and had it not been for the entire absence of any intellectual appearance of face or expression, one might have fancied he was engaged in trying to solve some knotty problem, to the entire forgetfulness of everything around him.

At this moment a woman entered the bar. I am not one to forget faces readily; it is my trade to remember, and I recollected having seen the very same face when I visited the "Wallaby" some eighteen months before. This woman was a quiet, staid-looking person of about thirty years of age, precise in her movements, and rather slow. She was quite respectable looking, but had not a single iota of the too common "flashiness" of a colonial bar-maid.

Very possibly the landlady had sent her in to attend to the bar just then; at any rate, she commenced, in a mechanical sort of a way, to rinse out some glasses, and to polish them in the same mechanical sort of a manner, without lifting her eyes, that I could observe, from her employment. My seat commanded a view of both her and the bullock driver, it is true, but my thoughts were engaged so entirely with the latter that I paid but little attention to the bar-maid, and she was not one of those obtrusive ones, who, for "the good of the house," will insist upon making themselves conspicuous.

My man, however, appeared so completely absorbed in his ale and himself, and manifested so little inclination to move, that at length I turned my regards toward the woman. At the moment I did so, she lifted her eyes carelessly toward the door, and something she saw there distended them with some feeling of terror, while her cheeks grew ashy pale, and her lips *as rigid as stone*; the glass in her hand, too, had almost escaped her fingers, but, with a strong effort, she replaced it upon the tray, and caught hold of the counter as if to support herself, while she turned a quick, piercing glance first toward me, and then toward the bullock-driver—*there* her eyes rested.

Naturally I looked at the door to see what had occasioned the strange change in this quiet woman's face. I saw nothing that could possibly have affected her, turn it any way I would. The patient-looking bullocks were standing drowsily under their heavy yokes directly in front of the entrance, and nothing else was in view, save a grassy patch of land over their backs, and farther away the green bush, now beginning to look dimmer, that the sun had nearly set, and was throwing long shadows beneath the trees.

I own to being completely puzzled, but was beginning to be quite in my element. I like to be puzzled; and the detective instinct has grown so strong with habit, that, to perceive there is a secret, is to give me an insatiable craving to find it out.

I could not fancy the bar-maid was acquainted with the man, for the gaze she fixed on him was not one in which was the anxiety to find some trace of an old acquaintance, it was a look with which you might regard a person in some way notorious to find out what constituted his peculiar difference from other of his fellow men. And yet the woman's eyes still retained that strange terror with which she had seen the unknown something in her look out through the doorway.

All this, you will understand, scarcely occupied a moment of time; and, after her straight, quick survey of the bullock-driver, the woman sauntered idly as it were round the counter and stood in the doorway. She looked first up the road and then down it, and then she looked directly before her. Of course, I could but judge from the movement of her head, as I was now behind her, but whatever she looked at, she remained but for a moment and then returned to the bar.

My friend the driver now began to show symptoms of a move. He lifted the long-handled whip which he had leaned against the seat and went to look out of the door likewise, and then he returned to the bar, and called for a nobbler of spirits. Tossing it off at a mouthful, as it were, he appeared to have reached some determination, for, as soon as he had swallowed it, he walked outside, and commenced rapidly to unyoke his bullocks. There was a veranda in front of the public house, and, finishing my glass, I strolled out, with my hands in my pockets, to watch my friend the driver in his arrangements.

“They are a fine team, mate,” I observed, “and in good condition. I wouldn’t care if I had such another. Horses are no good in rough bush land where mine lies. You’re going to camp here to-night?”

“Yes,” he answered, quietly. “I did think of pushing on to Cole’s Creek, but it’s later than I thought; and the day’s been so terrible hot the cattle’s regular baked.”

“I think you’re right. There’s plenty of feed here and water, too, I think,” and I moved inside to order supper.

There was no business doing to distract my attention from my chief present interest—the bullock driver. In that quiet bush inn, dependent upon stray travellers, or perhaps the occasional wasted cheques of a shepherd or a shearer, there was scarcely a movement upon that particular evening; and, my supper and *Vino* attended to, I sat down in the bar, and, while indulging in a “colonial yarn” with the landlord, watched the man outside as he made all his arrangements for passing the night. He had taken the dray a little farther on before he unyoked his cattle, and it now stood almost close to the stable of the horse. I saw him drive the bullocks to water, and then fasten on their bells, and then turn them out. I watched him return and unfold the tarpaulin that lay upon the dray and spread it over it, while his blankets were spread beneath to form a primitive but accustomed couch. In all this I was as yet at fault; but I never believed that *Vino*’s sagacity was, or doubted for a single moment, that my watch would be rewarded.

During the time the man was so employed, I often spared a curious glance at the movements of the bar-woman. Her demeanor seemed as calm and unruffled as ever; but I observed that her whole thoughts were occupied with the same object that formed the subject of my watch. She made many excuses to visit the bar; and once, with a glass in her hand, which she still kept polishing with that circular movement that bar-men and maids affect, she went to the door and stood a considerable time, looking intently over the now grazing cattle, with an occasional glance at the teamster as he prepared his bed for the night.

At length he retired under his tarpaulin, and I, too, expressed a wish to be shown my room. It

was one of a row of small bed-chambers built in a style frequently to be met with in country public houses, viz., of weather-board with iron roof, and almost detached from the main building. Each room was provided with a door of its own that opened into the yard—a rather unpleasant arrangement, especially during wet weather, when you require an umbrella to reach the dining-room, but one which exactly suited my plans at that moment.

My room was the very last of the row, and it was within a few feet of the stable that lay between me and the road where the teamster was camped. No sooner had I gained it than I took an opportunity, in the now gathering darkness, of passing out again, locking the door, putting the key in my pocket, and entering the stable, where Vino and another horse were contentedly munching their feed. In the stable was an aperture, constructed, as is usual, for throwing out the manure, and this opening was almost close to the dray in which I was interested. Placing myself in as easy a position as I could I commenced a watch, for what I should have been puzzled to tell. I was certainly determined to watch the bullock-driver, but what I expected to discover was, at that time, as much a mystery to me as what I did discover is to you at this moment.

The darkness, as I have said, was gathering; indeed, it had gathered, and now there was nothing but a host of clear, bright stars to illuminate it; but not a cloud in the whole magnificent firmament. I waited there quietly until every sound of life had died out at the hotel, and every light was extinguished, and my patience was beginning to be almost exhausted, when a rustle of the tarpaulin attracted my quick ear. In the starlit obscurity, I could perceive the teamster cautiously emerge from his lair, and peer carefully around before he raised himself to his full height from under the dray. Once satisfied, however, that everything was quiet, he started off quickly in the direction of the bush, and I, bounding through the opening of the stable, was on his track as rapidly.

It might have been his bullocks he was looking after, for all I knew, for he was proceeding directly toward the sound of their tinkling bells; but if so, why all that caution as he left the dray, and why his anxiety to steal under the shadow of every tree and bush he met? It was to solve this question that I followed his example, and kept as much in the shadow as I could; and it was fortunate I did so, for the man's haste did not prevent him from stopping occasionally and casting a quick glance behind him, although, strange to say, he seemed to hesitate more as he neared the forest, than he had done as he left his dray. It was but a few moments ere he reached the darker bush, and there he paused out of breath, as I could hear him panting as I stood within fifty feet of him, behind the huge trunk of some tree, the genus of which I did not trouble myself to note. As he stood there, irresolutely it seemed to me, I was glad to perceive that the moon had risen, and was beginning to pour long, slant rays of brightness through the branches, that lay like lances of silver upon the shaded grass, and made the darkness of the bush less obscure.

Slowly, at the lapse of a few minutes, he went on, cautiously creeping, and, as it appeared to me, starting at every crack of a stick under his foot, or every rustle of a branch that he disturbed as he passed.

I followed him as carefully, and once, as I was obliged to hide hurriedly behind a bush, as the teamster suddenly stopped, I fancied I saw another shadowy form stop likewise, and likewise hide behind the trunk of a tree, at the other side of the man I followed. This rather startled me,

and I felt to see that my revolvers were all right; but a moment served to convince me that it must have been all fancy, or the shadow of some branch that the evening breeze had moved.

The teamster moved onward again, and in a few more steps reached a small open glade in the bush, where the trees were further apart, and the moonlight, penetrating through the more open distance, lay brilliantly upon a small clear space, near which he stopped suddenly. I was not more than ten yards from him now, but remained in the dim shade of some underwood while he stood directly in the slant rays of the moon, and I could see every feature of his face, that looked white and wan as that of a ghost in the weird light, contrasted as it was by deep shadows of overhanging heavy branches.

He stood like one fearful, staring directly before him; and directly before him lay a fallen tree, that seemed to have lain there for years. The patches of grass looked white, like snow in the moonlight, and so did parts of the log; but directly before the man a broad spot seemed to have been burnt, and the fire had blackened and scorched the centre portion of the log, so that it contrasted vividly with the two extremities, and with the surrounding lighted grass spots.

I had but barely time to notice these facts, and to wonder what interest they possessed for this man, when he retreated backwards as if in fear, and fell rather than leaned against the rough trunk of an ironbark, that must have been anything but comfortable as a support, and there he stopped, with an expression upon his face I shall never forget, and which the momentarily increasing moonlight rendered almost as visible to me as if it were day. His face, that had seemed so expressionless as I first remarked it, was full of terror; every muscle was rigid, and his distended eyes turned in every direction alternately, as if in dreadful expectation. From my first glimpse of that face in the lonely bush, I was as sure of the correctness of Vino's instinctive suspicion as if I had seen the crime the man had committed, and if I had been asked to name the crime, I should have answered "*Murder!*" Murder! and where? Was it here on this spot where the man shook like a leaf, and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a hand that trembled as if it would scarce hold the handkerchief? Had he come, drawn by that strange fatality that makes guilt hover round the very spot it ought to avoid, until the avenger's hand is stretched forth, and justice is at length appeased? But in the middle of such thoughts as these I arrested myself angrily.

"You are a fool!" I mentally apostrophized myself; "a fool and a detective! Can't a man go into the bush for any purpose but to commit a murder? Suppose he has a '*plant*' here? Nothing more likely, and every one knows it isn't safe to carry money about the country nowadays; his own hard earnings, perhaps, and here you are dogging his steps, without any cause whatever save the sniff of a horse!"

This reasoning did not satisfy me, however. I am afraid I must confess that I *wanted* to find out this man a criminal—that I would have been disappointed to see him go and dig up a chamois bag, with a few coins of gold in it, and that I would have much preferred clapping a pair of steel bracelets upon his wrists to seeing him go happily on his harmless way, driving his patient cattle, and smoking his short, black pipe, to keep him company upon a lonely bush track. I am afraid I must confess that it was so; it is the force of habit, you see, and I do believe I was born to be a detective, as it is so entirely my "vocation."

As I was thus arguing with and against myself, the teamster seemed to make a strong effort, and raised himself from his leaning position to his feet. Pressing his hat firmly down upon his head, he strode determinedly to within a few feet of my hiding-place, and, kneeling down upon the ground, began to rapidly remove the soil with his knife, or some small instrument he had brought for the purpose. As he did so, a rustle behind me caused me to look hurriedly around, and again I distinctly saw that dark shadow I had fancied before; but this time I kept my eye upon it, and distinctly saw it flit past me, and creep cautiously to within ten feet or so of the busy teamster, and there, behind a bush, it rested, and leaned eagerly over to watch the man's movements, as if life and death depended upon sight and silence.

I will confess to you that at this moment I was so entirely paralyzed with astonishment that, if there had been occasion for sudden action, I could not have used it. The figure that I had watched, and fancied was a creation of my own imagination, now distinctly showed itself to be a woman in dark attire, and in the white, anxious face that leaned over to watch the teamster, who rooted and scraped out the mould so hurriedly, I recognized the bar-maid at the Wallaby.

In the face of all creation, what was she doing here? What connection was there between this man, who evidently knew nothing of her, and this woman, who left her room to steal into the fearful dark bush, to watch a man who was an utter stranger to her?

It was all dark to me, and I was glad when the bullock driver, quickly gathering something out of the hole, and throwing or rather pushing the mould in again with his feet, hastily covered up all traces of it, and prepared to depart.

It seemed to me to be a small parcel tied in a bit of calico, that he carefully stowed in his shirt, but I was not near enough to notice distinctly, and my attention was distracted by the woman, who still remained leaning over and watching, and so close that I almost fancied I could hear her breathing, although I was careful to keep closely hidden in the thick bush I occupied.

Much more rapidly than he had entered it, and with his hand firmly grasping the treasure hidden in his breast, the man left the bush, closely followed by the woman, who flitted from shadow to shadow like a spirit. In the wake of both I myself proceeded cautiously, much more occupied now, however, with the movements of the singular bar-maid than I was with those of the teamster; him I was sure of, he was not at all likely to run away and leave his bullocks and dray behind him; and I was at least certain of knowing when he left; with her it was different. As a clue to the conduct of the man, I was determined to have an explanation of her own that very night, nothing doubting but there was some strange mystery attaching to it, which it would be to my advantage to know.

When he had reached the edge of the more dense wood, my man emerged into the open, grassy plain, and made straight for his cattle, that were scattered at a little distance, grazing in the bright moonlight, and ringing their bells with every mouthful they cropped. Quite certain that, his great object, whatever it was, accomplished, he would return to his camp under the dray, I paid no further attention to him, but followed the woman, who stood a moment in the shade and looked wistfully after him. Then she quickly skirted the bush until she reached the nearest point to the

inn, when she ran with the speed of terror across the short, open distance, and disappeared behind the house.

I followed now cautiously, but, as the driver was out of sight, I lost no time in gaining the yard into which my bedroom opened; then, in the shade of the wall, I stood and listened, and watched for some sign of the woman gaining an entrance to the main building. I did not know in what portion of the premises she slept, or I should have devoted my attention to that particular quarter; but I was like a watch-dog, all eyes and ears.

In a few seconds the darkly clad figure I was in search of emerged from around the very abutting building against which I leaned, and so close to me that, before she had time to take one step after I had first caught sight of the moving form, I had a firm grip of her wrist, and stopped her.

“Don’t be frightened,” I said; “I am an officer in the detective force, and I want to have a few words with you.”

She did not scream or speak; she was not a timid woman, I knew, or she would not have dared that midnight watch alone in the bush. But that there was still some more powerful feeling than mere animal courage at work in her breast to make her keep silent, I had no doubt. When I arrested her arm so suddenly she did not, as I have said, speak, but she shook in every limb like one who had been stricken with ague.

“You need not be afraid,” I repeated, quietly; “there is nothing wrong, only I want some information from you. Go in there,” and, as I spoke, I opened the door of my room and pushed her gently in. Even then she did not speak; and when I had locked the door, and, as there was no window, lighted the candle, I saw her leaning against the wall with a face white with terror, and her hands hanging by her side helplessly.

“Sit down,” I whispered, placing a chair for her. “Is there any one in the next room?”

“No,” she answered; “there is no one outside the big house but yourself.”

“Well, now,” I continued, calmly but firmly, “I want to know what you have been watching that bullock-driver in the bush for?”

“Are you watching him?” she whisperingly questioned. “Do you know anything? Oh, tell me, for mercy’s sake!”

“It would not do for me to tell every one my business, you know,” I replied; “but I tell you I am a detective, and I followed you both to-night, and now I want to know for what reason you watched that man, who seems a stranger to you? Is he a stranger to you?” I added, as she hesitated and wrung her hands.

“I never saw him in my life before.”

“Explain, then—you must do so, mind.”

“If you are a detective,” she whispered, suddenly, lifting up her face and looking keenly into mine, “you will remember James Parsons.”

“James Parsons? A man who disappeared about two years ago, and was supposed to be murdered?”

She nodded.

“He left home with a team of bullocks,” I went on, “and a heavy purse to bring a load from F—, but never returned.”

She nodded again.

“Why, ’twas about two miles from this very house,” I continued, a light all at once breaking in upon my bewildered brain, “that we lost all trace of him. Some one had met him upon the road, and after that he was never more heard of.”

I was looking keenly and anxiously at the woman as I spoke these words rapidly; when concluded, she said, faintly, “*I was James Parsons’ wife.*”

If I had not been accustomed to control all outward semblance of feeling, I should certainly have uttered an exclamation at this moment. It was as if the corner of a mysterious curtain had been lifted, and I was beginning to see a dim but partially illuminated vista beyond, which included a lonely bush tract, upon which jogged along a team of bullocks driven by James Parsons, and terminated in that scorched and blackened log, near which I had so lately seen that strangely moved teamster digging up some hidden thing.

“I was James Parsons’ wife, and this evening, when that man came to the door, I knew my husband’s bullocks. I could swear to every one of them. We reared them ourselves; and I am sure as I stand here, that every one of them, this moment, would eat out of my hand.”

I was silent, as much from admiration of this poor woman’s noble courage in the attempt to discover her husband’s murderer, as from any other feeling, and she went on calmly:—

“When the police gave up all hopes of finding James, or any trace of him, I came and took a situation here, in hopes that some day I might see or hear something of the man that killed him. Killed, I’m sure he was, and I am sure that the man I followed to-night did it, and did it on the very spot where the hand of God seemed to strike him to-night, and freeze up his marrow with fear.”

“Well, give yourself no further anxiety, my poor girl,” I said. “I will dog this man’s steps like a shadow until I prove his guilt, if he is guilty. Meanwhile, say not one word about the events of this night, and as soon as I gain any information I shall see you again.”

“Mind,” she said, emphatically, as I opened the door to let her out, “if you play me false in this I

will find this man out though he died. Now that I have seen the hand that spilled my poor James' warm blood, I will track him until I die myself, or he is hanged," and she softly closed the door and went away.

I sat down upon the edge of the bed to think, and, you will perhaps laugh at me when I say, that my first thought was the proved sagacity of my faithful animal Vino. Well, you may laugh if you like, but she never did deceive me and never will; I feel as sure of it as I feel Heaven's aid is around me at this moment.

Satisfied that all was well with the teamster, as I could hear the tinkle, tinkle of the cattle bells still, I lay down in my clothes to snatch a few hours of as sound a sleep as I ever enjoyed. We are used to it, you see. And the certainty that I had fairly got hold of the right end of a chain that would give me credit with my superior, caused me to sleep well. The sun was but barely up, however, when I arose and hastened a look at things outside.

The bar was open, and the woman, as quiet seeming as ever, was attending to her various arrangements in it. The teamster was busily yoking up his cattle with the same quiet and listless manner I had observed the night before, and, hastily giving the bar-woman a hint to let me have my breakfast immediately, I went to look after Vino.

While I was eating my breakfast I heard the loud cracking of a driver's whip, and the rumbling of the rough conveyance convinced me that he was off. This, however, gave me no concern; for it was far from my intention to let him perceive that I was about to return by almost the same track I had arrived on the previous evening. I was most anxious, of course, to avoid exciting his suspicions. Half an hour saw Vino and myself upon the road, upon which, however, I proceeded scarcely half a mile, when I diverged into the bush and rode leisurely along, keeping within an easy distance of the road, so as to be able at any moment to near my friend the driver. I could hear the crack of the whip in the distance, and even the rattle of the wheels, and, satisfied that he was still proceeding, I proceeded also. It seemed a long forenoon, going at the slow pace of the cattle, but everything has an end, and at last the hour of noon arrived, and, from the vicinity of the only water within miles, I felt that my man would camp soon.

I was right. As I neared the road cautiously I saw that he had selected a shady spot near a waterhole, and was about unyoking his cattle once more. Alighting, I left Vino to graze quietly she was too well trained to stray far away—and then stole cautiously nearer, and seated myself under a close bush to resume my watch. I was anxious about that little parcel he had exhumed, and fearful he might make a fire and burn it. He made no fire, however. As soon as his cattle were turned out, he commenced to examine one of his yokes—and a most unusual step it was for a carter who had two good hours' spell before him to set to work mending a yoke before he had made the slightest preparation for his noon-day meal. That, however, was what he appeared to be doing; and he chose an old stout log that lay upon the bank of the creek, and, leaning the yoke across it, went down on his knees and commenced his repairing. This was how it looked to me, I say, for I was at some little distance, you know, but his occasional fearful looks around him aroused my suspicion, and I kept a closer eye upon the movements of his body. Mending the yoke? Bah! he was digging a hole under the log, and simply using the yoke as a screen in case of watch.

“Ah, my man!” said I, to myself. “I have you now; you are simply *replanting* your parcel, and with a bad conscience, too, or you would not use so much caution.”

A few moments after and his task was ended, his fast broken upon some cold provisions, and he was lying in the shade, to all appearance fast asleep. I followed his example, in that matter at least, after having consulted a pocket pistol, and some sandwiches with which I had provided myself at the Wallaby.

The first crack of the teamster’s whip aroused me, and I watched his departure with impatience. It appeared an hour ere he had fairly disappeared, and I had liberty to pounce upon his *plant* and to unearth it. I found some difficulty in doing so, but at length the parcel was in my hands, which appeared to be of so much value to the bullock driver. It was tied up with strong cord in a piece of tarpaulin, and, had it been a measure of Aladdin’s jewels, my fingers could scarcely have trembled more as I undid it.

There was little to reward me, you might have supposed, but I was perfectly satisfied. One old leather bag containing notes to the value of one hundred dollars. I remembered these very notes were missing, and known to have been in the possession of James Parsons when he so unaccountably disappeared (and I had the numbers of them in my note-book at that very moment, and a crooked sixpence which had also been described. This was absolutely all of value the parcel contained, as two or three scraps of belt, shrivelled and burnt, two buckles, as if braces, a few brass buttons sadly discolored, and a few charred and partially destroyed *bones* might seem valueless to any one, but they were everything to me, and were *life itself* to the wretched man, who had tried to hide them to his own destruction.

Carefully wrapping them up, and once more securing *Vino*, I placed my precious find in my valise, and mounting, rode rapidly along the road after the bullock team. I had not much to hide now, as I was quite satisfied in arresting this man, with such a strong chain of circumstantial evidence against him. I thought it as well to wait, however, until we reached a house of accommodation not more than three miles off, which I knew he must pass, as a desperate man in a lonely bush had a chance it were as well not to give him.

I soon overtook the dray, and I thought the driver looked rather uneasy as he recognized me. “You’re luckier than myself, mate!” I cried, as I rode up. “I’ve been riding in the bush all day lost. I ought to be ashamed to tell it, too, after being in the colony so long.”

“There’s a good many tracks hereabouts,” he answered. “You’ve taken the wrong one, I guess.”

“Yes, I took the wrong road after leaving the Wallaby, and then trying to cut across the bush, I lost myself. If it hadn’t been for the sound of your whip, I should have pulled myself up. Are we near any public house?”

“Yes, the Accommodation Inn is only about two miles off.”

“Well, I’ll go on, then. I am regularly tired. Call as you’re passing, mate, and I’ll shout.”

So we parted, and as I left him I saw a feeling of relief steal over his face. Had there been any other road I should have feared his trying to avoid me; but there was not, so I waited patiently in the bar of the inn, until I heard the dray passing, and then I went to the door and called him in.

There was no one in the bar but the man who served, and who supplied the driver and myself with our chosen drinks. I suffered him to swallow his in peace. Poor wretch, I knew he would require all the fortitude it would give him to enable him to undergo the terrible ordeal before him. But no sooner had he finished than the handcuffs were locked upon the hand that placed the glass upon the counter, and in another second the other was clasped beside it.

He turned upon me such a look of speechless terror as I shall never forget, and once more I saw before me the same agonized face of the night before, during the midnight watch in the moonlit forest.

“I arrest you for the murder of James Parsons,” I said, and he staggered back against the wall, and then fell heavily on the floor.

I assisted him to rise, for he was faint and weak, and the handcuffs prevented him from helping himself. But when he had been seated on a form, where he could support himself against the counter, his pale, haggard face grew red with excitement, and I feared he was going mad.

“Thank God, it’s over!” he said. “It’s better to be hung at once than to live such a terrible life. I did it! yes, I did it! I killed him and buried his body!”

“Take care!” I remonstrated, “every word you say now will be used against you.”

“I want them to be used against me,” he said, loudly. “I want to relieve myself and die. I met Parsons about two miles from the Wallaby. I was on tramp with my swag, and he gave me a lift. I found out he had money, and coaxed him into the bush, gammoning I knew a nice water-hole to camp for the night. We made a fire near a log, and while he was putting a billy over it, I struck him with the axe—his *own* axe—right on the back of the head, and he fell into the fire. I piled branches and wood on half the night, until he was burned to cinders, and then, when the fire died out, I raked up every bit of strap, and button, and *bone* that I could find, so that no one could find any trace. I put these into a bit of rag, and planted them, but, until last night, I never had a chance to take them from the spot. Oh, heavens above! It’s a fearful thing to be a murderer! I should have had to drag these bones over the world with me; fire or water would never have hidden them! You will find them planted at”—

“They are here,” I replied, laying the parcel before him as he spoke.

He *glared* at it for a second, shuddered as if a keen, cold wind pierced his bones, then he lifted up his manacled hands, as if to seek for the hot blood he had spilled; and staring wildly at them for a second, fell back—*dead!*

I have been in many terrible scenes during my colonial experience, but among them all, this one often starts vividly into remembrance. The bush inn, with the open door, showing the green, beautiful plain, with its dotting trees, the quiet bullocks lashing the flies off lazily on the road, and the dead man, with staring eyes and fettered hands, fallen against the wall, with that terrible look of unspoken agony stiffening into his face.

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