

The Luckiest Man in the Colony.

By S. W. HORNING.

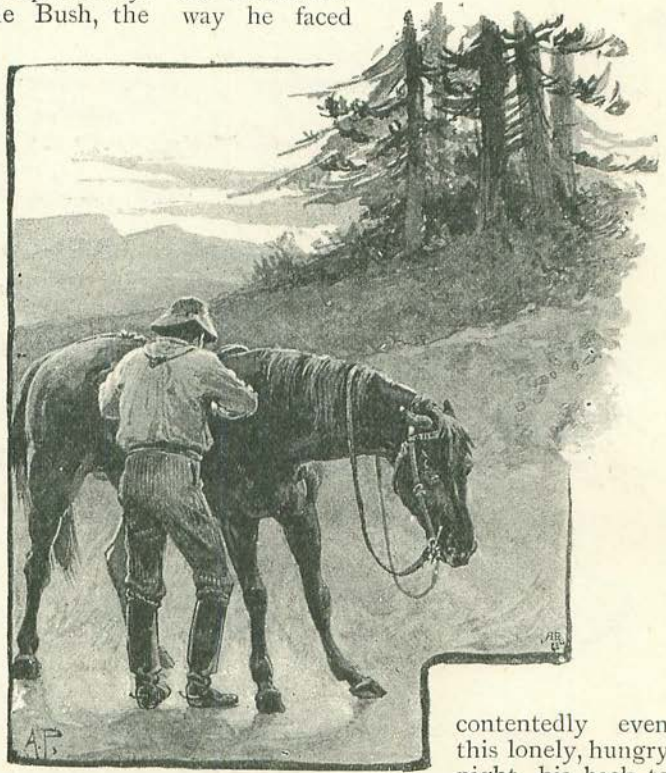


LHAT is never a nice moment when your horse knocks up under you, and you know quite well that he has done so, and that to ride him another inch would be a cruelty—another mile a sheer impossibility. But when it happens in the Bush, the moment is apt to become more than negatively disagreeable; for you may be miles from the nearest habitation, and an unpremeditated bivouac, with neither food nor blankets, is a thing that demands a philosophic temperament as well as the quality of endurance. This once befell the manager of Dandong, in the back-blocks of New South Wales, just on the right side of the Dandong boundary fence, which is fourteen miles from the homestead. Fortunately Deverell, of Dandong, was a young man, well used, from his boyhood, to the casual hardships of station life, and well fitted by physique to endure them. Also he had the personal advantage of possessing the philosophic temperament largesized. He dismounted the moment he knew for certain what was the matter. A ridge of pines—a sandy ridge, where camping properly equipped would have

been perfect luxury—rose against the stars a few hundred yards ahead. But Deverell took off the saddle on the spot, and carried it himself as far as that ridge, where he took off the bridle also, hobbled the done-up beast with a stirrup-leather, and turned him adrift.

Deverell, of Dandong, was a good master to his horses and his dogs, and not a bad one to his men. Always the master first, and the man afterwards, he was a little selfish, as becomes your masterful man. On the other hand, he was a singularly frank young fellow. He would freely own, for instance, that he was the luckiest man in the back-blocks. This, to be sure, was no more than the truth. But Deverell

never lost sight of his luck, nor was he ever ashamed to recognise it: wherein he differed from the average lucky man, who says that luck had nothing to do with it. Deverell could gloat over his luck, and do nothing else—when he had nothing else to do. And in this way he faced



"DEVERELL TOOK OFF THE SADDLE."

contentedly even this lonely, hungry night, his back to a pine at the north side of the

ridge, and a short brier pipe in full blast.

He was the new manager of Dandong, to begin with. That was one of the best managerships in the colony, and Deverell had got it young—in his twenties, at all events, if not by much. The salary was seven hundred a year, and the homestead was charming. Furthermore, Deverell was within a month of his marriage; and the coming Mrs. Deverell was a girl of some social distinction down in Melbourne, and a belle into the bargain, to say nothing or another feature, which was entirely satisfactory, without being so ample as to imperil a man's independence. The homestead would be charming indeed in a few weeks, in time for Christmas. Meanwhile, the

"clip" had been a capital one, and the rains abundant; the paddocks were in a prosperous state, the tanks overflowing, everything going smoothly in its right groove (as things do not always go on a big station), and the proprietors perfectly delighted with their new manager. Well, the new manager was sufficiently delighted with himself. He was lucky in his work and lucky in his love—and what can the gods do more for you? Considering that he had rather worse than no antecedents at all—antecedents with so dark a stain upon them that, anywhere but in a colony, the man would have been a ruined man from his infancy—he was really incredibly lucky in his love affair. But whatever his parents had been or had done, he had now no relatives at all of his own: and this is a great thing when you are about to make new ones in an inner circle: so that here, once more, Deverell was in his usual luck.

It does one good to see a man thoroughly appreciating his good luck. The thing is so seldom done. Deverell not only did this, but did it with complete sincerity. Even to-night, though personally most uncomfortable, and tightening his belt after every pipe, he could gaze at the stars with grateful eyes, obscure them with clouds of smoke, watch the clouds disperse and the stars shine bright again, and call himself

again and again, and yet again, the very luckiest man in the Colony.

While Deverell sat thus, returning thanks on an empty stomach, at the northern edge of the ridge, a man tramped into the pines from the south. The heavy sand muffled his steps; but he stopped long before he came near Deverell, and threw down his swag with an emancipated air. The man was old, but he held himself more erect than does the typical swagman. The march through life with a cylinder of blankets on one's shoulders, with all one's worldly goods packed in that cylinder, causes a certain stoop of a very palpable kind; and this the old man, apparently, had never contracted. Other points slightly distinguished

him from the ordinary run of swagmen. His garments were orthodox, but the felt wide-awake was stiff and new, and so were the moleskins; these, indeed, might have stood upright without any legs in them at all. The old man's cheeks, chin, and upper lip were covered with short grey bristles, like spikes of steel; above the bristles he had that "lean and hungry look" which Cæsar saw in Cassius.

He rested a little on his swag. "So this is Dandong,"

he muttered, as if speaking to the Dandong sand between his feet. "Well, now that I am within his boundary-fence at last, I am content to rest. Here I camp. To-morrow I shall see him!"

Deverell, at the other side of the ridge,



"A MAN TRAMPED INTO THE PINES."

dimming the stars with his smoke, for the pleasure of seeing them shine bright again, heard a sound which was sudden music to his ears. The sound was a crackle. Deverell stopped smoking, but did not move; it was difficult to believe his ears. But the crackle grew louder; Deverell jumped up and saw the swagman's fire within a hundred yards of him; and the difficult thing to believe in *then* was his own unparalleled good luck.

"There is no end to it," he chuckled, taking his saddle over one arm and snatching up the water-bag and bridle. "Here's a swaggie stopped to camp, with flour for a damper, and a handful of tea for the quart-pot, as safe as the bank! Perhaps a bit of blanket for me too! But I *am* the luckiest man in the Colony; this wouldn't have happened to anyone else!"

He went over to the fire and, the swagman, who was crouching at the other side of it, peered at him from under a floury side palm. He was making the damper already. His welcome to Deverell took a substantial shape; he doubled the flour for the damper. Otherwise the old tramp did not gush.

Deverell did the talking. Lying at full length on the blankets, which had been unrolled, his face to the flames, and his strong jaws cupped in his hands, he discoursed very freely of his luck.

"You're saving my life," said he, gaily. "I should have starved. I didn't think it at the time, but now I know I should. I thought I could hold out, between belt and 'baccy, but I couldn't now, anyhow. If I hold out till the damper's baked, it's all I can do now. It's like my luck! I never saw anything look quite so good before. There now, bake up. Got any tea?"

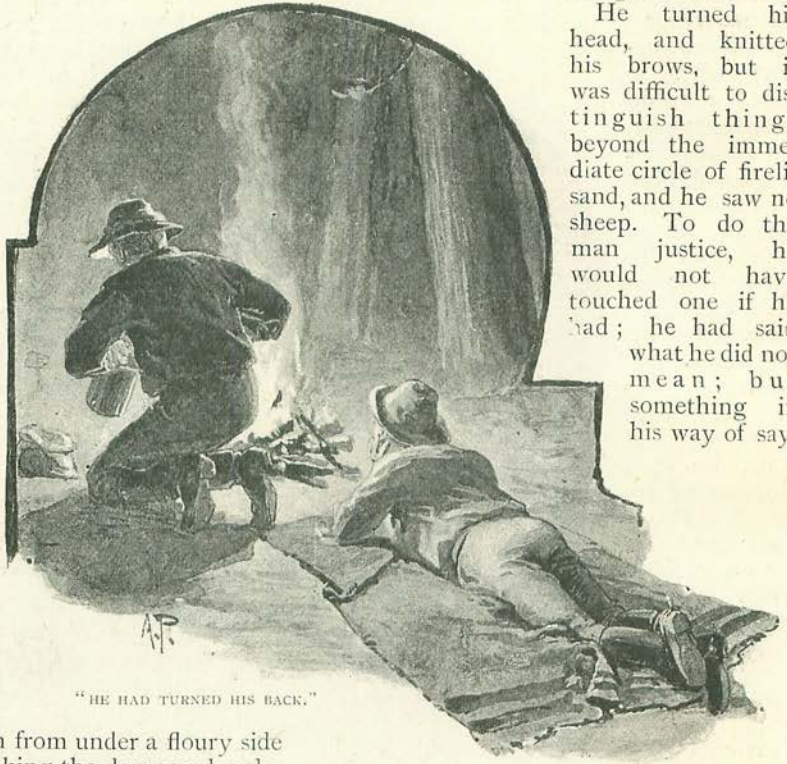
"Yes."

"Meat?"

"No."

"Well, we could have done with meat, but it can't be helped. I'm lucky enough to get anything. It's my luck all over. I'm the luckiest man in the Colony, let me tell you. But we could have done with chops. Gad, but I'd have some yet, if I saw a sheep! They're all wethers in this paddock, but they don't draw down towards the gate much."

He turned his head, and knitted his brows, but it was difficult to distinguish things beyond the immediate circle of firelit sand, and he saw no sheep. To do the man justice, he would not have touched one if he had; he had said what he did not mean; but something in his way of say-



"HE HAD TURNED HIS BACK."

ing it made the old man stare at him hard.

"Then you're one of the gentlemen from Dandong Station, are you, sir?"

"I am," said Deverell. "My horse is fresh off the grass, and a bit green. He's knocked up, but he'll be all right in the morning; the crab-holes are full of water, and there's plenty of feed about. Indeed it's the best season we've had for years—my luck again, you see!"

The tramp did not seem to hear all he said. He had turned his back, and was kneeling over the fire, deeply engrossed with the water-bag and the quart-pot—which he was filling. It was with much apparent preoccupation that he asked:—

"Is Mr. Deverell, the boss, there now?"

"He is." Deverell spoke drily, and thought a minute. After all, there was no object in talking about himself in the third person to a man who would come applying to him for work the next day. Realising this, he added, with a touch of dignity, "I'm he."

The tramp's arm jerked, a small fountain played out of the bottle neck of the water-bag and fell with a hiss upon the fire. The tramp still knelt with his back to Deverell. The blood had left his face, his eyes were raised to the pale, bright stars, his lips moved. By a great effort he knelt as he had been kneeling before Deverell spoke; until Deverell spoke again.

"You were on your way to see me, eh?"

"I was on my way to Dandong."

"Wanting work? Well, you shall have it," said Deverell, with decision. "I don't want hands, but I'll take *you* on; you've saved my life, my good fellow, or you're going to, in a brace of shakes. How goes the damper?"

"Well," said the old man, answering Deverell's last question shortly, but ignoring his first altogether. "Shall I sweeten the tea or not?"

"Sweeten it."

The old man got ready a handful of tea and another of sugar to throw into the quart-pot the moment the water boiled. He had not yet turned round. Still kneeling, with the soles of his boots under Deverell's nose, he moved the damper from time to time, and made the tea. His hands shook.

Deverell made himself remarkably happy during the next half-hour. He ate the hot damper, he drank the strong tea, in a way that indicated unbounded confidence in his digestive powers. A dyspeptic must have wept for envy. Towards the end of the meal he discovered that the swagman—who sat remote from the fire, and seemed to be regarding Deverell with a gaze of peculiar fascination—had scarcely broken his bread.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Deverell, with his mouth full.

"No."

But Deverell *was*, and that, after all, was the main thing. If the old man had no appetite, there was no earthly reason for him to eat; his abstinence could not hurt him under the circumstances, and naturally it did not worry Deverell. If, on the other hand, the old man preferred to feed off Deverell—with his eyes—why, there is no accounting for preferences, and that did not

worry Deverell either. Indeed, by the time his pipe was once more in blast, he felt most kindly disposed towards this taciturn tramp. He would give him a billet. He would take him on as a rabbitier, and rig him out with a tent, camp fixings, traps, and even—perhaps—a dog or two. He would thus repay in princely fashion to-night's good turn—but now, confound the thing! He had been sitting the whole evening on the old fool's blankets, and the old fool had been sitting on the ground!

"I say! Why on earth don't you come and sit on your own blankets?" asked Deverell, a little roughly; for to catch oneself in a grossly thoughtless act is always irritating.

"I am all right here, thank you," returned the swagman, mildly. "The sand is as soft as the blankets."

"Well, I don't want to monopolise your blankets, you know," said Deverell, without moving. "Take a fill from my pouch, will you?"

He tossed over his pouch of tobacco. The swagman handed it back—he did not smoke; had got out of the way of it, he said. Deverell was disappointed. He had a genuine desire at all times to repay in kind anything resembling a good turn. He could not help being a little selfish; it was constitutional.

"I'll tell you what," said Deverell, leaning backward on one elbow, and again clouding the stars with wreaths of blue smoke, "I've got a little berth that ought to suit you down to the ground. It's rabbiting. Done any rabbiting before? No. Well, it's easy enough; what's more, you're your own boss. Catch as many as you can or care to, bring in the skins, and get sixpence each for 'em. Now the berth I mean is a box-clump, close to a tank, where there's been a camp before, and the last man did very well there; still, you'll find he has left plenty of rabbits behind him. It's the very spot for you; and, look here, I'll start you with rations, tent, camp-oven, traps, and all the rest of it!" wound up Deverell, generously. He had spoken out of the fulness of his soul and body. He had seldom spoken so decently to a pound-a-week hand—never to a swagman.

Yet the swagman did not jump at the offer.

"Mr. Deverell," said he, rolling the name on his tongue in a curious way, "I was not coming exactly for work. I was coming to see you. I knew your father!"

"The deuce you did!" said Deverell.

The old man was watching him keenly. In an instant Deverell had flushed up from his collar to his wideawake. He was manifestly uncomfortable. "Where did you know him?" he asked doggedly.

The tramp bared his head; the short grey hair stood crisply on end all over it. He tapped his head significantly, and ran the palm of his hand over the strong bristles of his beard.

"So," said Deverell, drawing his breath hard. "Now I see; you are a brother convict!"

The tramp nodded.

"And you know all about him—the whole story?"

The tramp nodded again.

"By God!" cried Deverell, "if you've come here to trade on what you know, you've chosen the wrong place and the wrong man."

The tramp smiled. "I have not come to trade upon what I know," said he quietly, repeating the other's expression with simple sarcasm. "Now that I've seen you, I can go back the way I came; no need to go on to Dandong now. I came because my old mate asked me to find you out and wish you well from him: that was all."

"He went in for life," said Deverell, reflecting bitterly. "I have the vaguest

And you know what brought him there, the whole story!" Curiosity crept into the young man's tone, and made it less bitter. He filled a pipe. "For my part, I never had the rights of that story," he said.

"There were no rights," said the convict. "It was all wrong together. Your father robbed the bank of which he himself was manager. He had lost money in mining speculations. He took to the bush, and fought desperately for his life."

"I'm glad he did that!" exclaimed Deverell.

The other's eyes kindled, but he only said: "It was what anyone would have done in his place."

"Is it?" answered Deverell scornfully. "Did *you*, for instance?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. Deverell laughed aloud. His father might have been a villain, but he had not been a coward. That was one consolation.

A silence fell between the two men. There were no more flames from the fire, but only the glow of red-hot embers. This reddened the face of Deverell, but it did not reach that of the old man. He was thus free to stare at Deverell as hard and as long as he liked, and his eyes never left the young man's face. It was a sufficiently



"IT WAS ALL WRONG TOGETHER."

memories of him; it happened when I was so very young. Is he well?"

"He was."

"And you have been in gaol together!

handsome face, with eyes as dark as those of the old man, only lightened and brightened by an expression altogether different. Deverell's pipe had soothed him. He

seemed as serene now as he had been before he knew that his companion had been also the companion of his father—in prison. After all, he had grown up with the knowledge that his father was a convicted felon; to be reminded of it casually, but also privately, could not wound him *very* deeply. The tramp, staring at him with a fierce yearning in his eyes, which the young man could not see, seemed to divine this, but said:—

“It cannot be pleasant for you to see me. I wouldn’t have come, only I promised to see you; I promised to let him hear about you. It would have been worse, you know, had he got out on ticket-of-leave, and come himself!”

“It would so!” exclaimed Deverell sincerely.

In the dark, the old man grinned like one in torment.

“It would so,” Deverell repeated, unable to repress a grim chuckle. “It would be the most awkward thing that could possibly happen to me—especially if it happened now. At present I call myself the luckiest man in the Colony; but if my poor father were to turn up—”

Deverell was not interrupted: he stopped himself.

“You are pretty safe,” said his companion in an odd tone—which he quickly changed. “As your father’s mate, I am glad you are so lucky; it is good hearing.”

Deverell explained how he was so lucky. He felt that the sentiments he had expressed concerning his father’s possible appearance on the scene required some explanation, if not excuse. This feeling, growing upon him as he spoke, led him into explanations that were very full indeed, under the circumstances. He explained the position he had attained as manager of Dandong; and the position he was about to attain through his marriage was quite as clearly—though unintentionally—indicated. It was made clear to the meanest perception how very awkward it would be for the young man, from every point of view, if the young man’s father *did* turn up and ostentatiously reveal himself. While Deverell was speaking the swagman broke branches from the nearest pines and made up the fire; when he finished the faces of both were once more illumined; and that of the old man was stern with resolve.

“And yet,” said he, “suppose the impossible, or at any rate the unlikely—say that he does come back. I know him well;

he wouldn’t be a drag or a burden to you. He’d only just like to see you. All he would ask would be to see his son sometimes! That would be enough for him. I was his chum, mind you, so I know. And if he was to come up here, as I have come, you could take him on, couldn’t you, as you offer to take me?” He lent forward with sudden eagerness—his voice vibrated. “You could give him work, as you say you’ll give me, couldn’t you? No one’d know it was your father! No one would ever guess!”

“No!” said Deverell, decidedly. “I’ll give *you* work, but my father I couldn’t. I don’t do things by halves: I’d treat my father *as* my father, and damn the odds! He had pluck. I like to think how he was taken fighting! Whatever he did, he had grit, and I should be unworthy of him—no matter what he did—if I played the coward. It would be worse than cowardly to disown your father, whatever he had done, and I wouldn’t disown mine—I’d sooner shoot myself! No, I’d take him in, and be a son to him for the rest of his days, that’s what I’d do—that’s what I *will* do, if ever he gets out on ticket-of-leave, and comes to me!”

The young man spoke with a feeling and intensity of which he had exhibited no signs before, leaning forward with his pipe between his fingers. The old man held his breath.

“But it would be devilish awkward!” he added frankly. “People would remember what they’ve been good enough to forget; and everybody would know what now next to none know. In this country, thank God, the man is taken for what the man is worth—his father neither helps nor hinders him, when once he’s gone. So I’ve managed to take my own part, and to get on well, thanks to my own luck. Yes, it would be devilish awkward; but I’d stand by him, before Heaven, I would!”

The old man breathed hard.

“I don’t know how I’ve come to say so much to you, though you did know my father,” added Deverell, with a sudden change of tone. “It isn’t my way at all. I needn’t tell you that from to-morrow forward you’re the same as any other man to me. And if you ever go to see my father, you must not tell him all I have said to you about what, as you say, is never likely to happen. But you may tell him—you may tell him I am glad he was taken fighting!”

The old man was once more quite calm.

"I shall never see your father again. No more will you," he said slowly and solemnly; "for your father is dead! I promised him to find you out when my time was up, and to tell you. I have taken my own way of breaking the news to you. Forgive me, sir; but I couldn't resist just seeing, first of all, if it would cut you up very badly!"

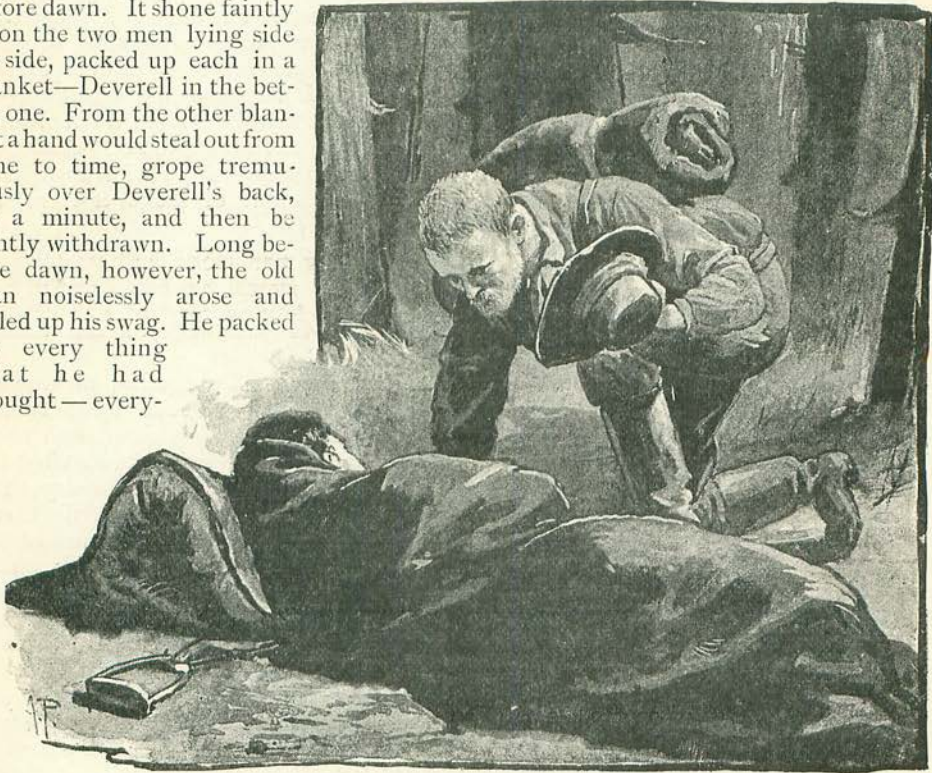
Deverell did not notice the quiet bitterness of the last words. He smoked his pipe out in silence. Then he said: "God rest him! Perhaps it's for the best. As for you, you've a billet at Dandong for the rest of your days, if you like to take and keep it. Let us turn in."

* * * *

The worn moon rose very late, and skimmed behind the pines, but never rose clear of them, and was down before dawn. It shone faintly upon the two men lying side by side, packed up each in a blanket—Deverell in the better one. From the other blanket a hand would steal out from time to time, grope tremulously over Deverell's back, lie a minute, and then be gently withdrawn. Long before dawn, however, the old man noiselessly arose and rolled up his swag. He packed up every thing that he had brought—every-

thing except the better blanket. Over that he smiled, as though it was an intense pleasure to him to leave it behind, lapped round the unconscious form of Deverell. Just before going, when the swag was on his back, he stooped down once and put his face very close to that of Deverell. The worn moon glimmered through the pines upon them both. The faces were strangely alike; only Deverell's was smiling sweetly in his dreams, while the other's shone moist with—something.

A few minutes later the gate in the Dandong boundary-fence closed for the last time upon the gaol-bird tramp; and Deverell's father was dead indeed—to Deverell. Lucky for Deverell, of course. But then he was the luckiest man in the whole Colony. Didn't he say so himself?



"HE STOOPED DOWN."