



IT WAS UPON THE FOREMOST OF THE MASKED SCOUNDRELS THAT  
TAHOURDIN EMPTIED BOTH BARRELS.

*(See page 373.)*

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**T**AHOURDIN went out to Australia for his health, but in his secret soul he cherished other projects. Cursed by a distressing delicacy, and neither physically nor mentally robust, he had nevertheless an incongruous and quite unsuspected hankering after violent experiences in wild places. In part this was due to much early reading in a well-worn groove, in part to a less worthy stimulus. Tahourdin had a big brother, who had once turned up at South Kensington in romantic rags, thereafter to thrill all callers with graphic accounts of his more respectable adventures by flood and field. This had fired Tahourdin with an ignoble ambition, not so much to do and see and suffer in his turn, as to lay in a stock of yarns which should one day compare creditably with those of his brother. An unerring arrival in Hobson's Bay, after no more than eighty days under canvas, fell proportionately flat upon the bold spirit that had spent half the voyage in wistful day-dreams of coral islands and of pirates' lairs. But there was one dream

whose fulfilment nothing could prevent, and Tahourdin set foot on Australian soil with the fixed determination to plant it forthwith in the very heart of the Bush.

Tahourdin's preconception of the Bush (the capital was his in all his letters) was a mental picture of singular detail and definition. He saw huge and sombre trees in the bowels of some vast ravine, with perpetual noon above and perpetual night below—in the cool bed of an ocean of unchanging leaves. He picked out the shadows with horsemen in jack-boots and red shirts (himself among them), now feasting round monster camp-fires, now caracoling behind orderly flocks and herds. Then there were the gold-diggings: you pegged out your claim and dug away until your pick harpooned a nugget. Then there were bushrangers and wild blacks, and Tahourdin had hopes and fears of an encounter with one or the other. Perhaps the hopes predominated; they certainly did in the case of the bushrangers. Tahourdin had read much of these gentry; he intended to go prepared for them, with very little worth stealing about his person at any one time. With

their well-known magnanimity they would probably hand him that little back again, and he would have it to talk about for the term of his natural life.

It will be seen that this egoist did not fly too high. He did not aspire to astonish the world, but only his friends, and he kept his aspiration to himself. Moreover, there was one excuse for him. He was not quite eighteen when he landed at Williamstown.

His letters of introduction made him several friends, who did their best to deter the escaped schoolboy from plunging into a life for which he was obviously unfitted. They assured him that there were no wild blacks within a thousand miles; that bush-ranging had been stamped out years since with the Kellys; that the single digger was obsolete and his claim an anachronism. Tahourdin was sorry to hear all this, but was merely restrained from buying a horse and riding forth to seek adventures as he had originally proposed to himself. Instead, he pushed for introductions to squatters, and finally succeeded in discovering one who at length consented to feed him for his services, if he chose to present himself at the station at his own risk and expense, prepared to do anything he was told, and to pay his own way back if he could not do it well enough to be worth his rations. In other words, he was to be given a trial in the untranslatable capacity of "jackeroo." Now, "G-Block"—the station had no other name—was some six hundred miles from Scott's Hotel in Melbourne, where this dazzling prospect was unfolded; and Tahourdin had broken into the last ten pounds of his last remittance from home. So he could afford the train no farther than Echuca, whence he travelled steerage by the river steamer to Balranald, which he reached with just enough in hand to coach it to Clare Corner. This was the real bush: it did not deserve a capital after all!

The trees were not a bit high. They were uncommonly low. Ranges and gullies there were none. The whole country was as flat and arid as a rusty frying-pan. It whistled with crickets at night. It quivered in the heat all day. Night and day, Tahourdin had to jump down every five miles or so to open a gate, for he was the only passenger. It seemed that the whole country was in squares like a chess-board: it was as though a vast wire net had been cast across it. Tahourdin was thankful to see some cockatoos and parrakeets, and once a snake, and more than once a kangaroo: they were the only points

in common between the real and the ideal. In the end he was met by a lean and nasal lout in a "spring" cart, and jolted forty miles back from the so-called road to a few log huts on a sandy pine ridge. Such was the Riverina station of his dreams.

A bronzed man in leggings stepped down from a veranda and introduced himself as Mr. Glover, the manager. Tahourdin appreciated his friendly greeting, but lost no time in inquiring for the gentleman whom he had seen (and rather liked) in Melbourne.

"Oh, he doesn't hang out on G-Block," said Mr. Glover; "he lives at another of his stations down in Vic. He only comes up here for the lamb-marking and the shearing."

"When's that?" asked Tahourdin, feeling somewhat disappointed, but also desirous of obtaining such information for its own sake.

"That?" repeated the manager, cocking his eyebrows with a grin. "It's not the same thing, you know: it's two different things. We lamb-mark about June, and shear in August and September, so they're both over for the year. You're a pretty new chum, I take it, Mr. Tahourdin?"

"As new as they make them," admitted Tahourdin, with a laugh.

"Well, we're very glad of some fresh blood," said Mr. Glover; "there are only three of us here at the homestead, and we get pretty sick of each other at times. No ladies for you, Tahourdin! I haven't sighted a petticoat these six months. A Chinaman cooks for us, and we make our own beds. By the way, Symes and Hutchinson, my overseer and storekeeper, are camping out to-night, so you and I will be alone. Are you very hungry?"

"Not a bit," said Tahourdin. "I had a square meal when I left the coach."

"That's all right. Do you happen to have a good knife on you?"

Tahourdin happened to have a very good one indeed, the kind of present one gets on going to the Colonies, and he produced it with alacrity. The manager found a blade among the other implements, and ran a practised thumb along the edge.

"Will you lend it to me to stick a sheep?"

Tahourdin was taken somewhat aback, but of course complied.

"You see, you run out of things in the back-blocks, and it isn't worth sending for 'em piecemeal. I've been using my own penknife lately: this is a great improvement. You may as well come and lend a hand, or we'll never get any dinner to-night."

"With pleasure," said Tahourdin, sickening at the thought. "But—but you don't kill and eat on the same day?"

"Don't we! Wait till you know this climate; why, it's still a hundred in the shade, and it must be getting on for six o'clock. This way, Tahourdin, and you can hold your knife till I'm ready for it."

So the education of the jackeroo began with a baptism of blood, which turned him cold with sickness in the full glare of that sun. Yet he stood his ground manfully with set jaws; was even interested, once the breath was out of the mangled carcass, in its swift and cleanly reduction to the familiar and inoffensive joints; and marvelled later to find he could partake without a qualm. The barbarous repast was eked out with split-peas and a water-melon, the nearest approach to vegetables on the drought-stricken run, and washed down with pints of boiling tea; what was incongruous, but the more charming on that account, they sat down to it in black coats and clean collars, the manager setting the example.

"We took to dining in our shirt-sleeves," said he, "and then pyjamas. It was time to draw the line, so you find us at the opposite extreme."

Tahourdin did not think it an extreme, but he was pleased, and his pleasure deepened with the night. The manager was very nice to him as they sat in the veranda and watched the stars. He was a man of thirty, hard-featured, square-jowled, brown skinned, a native Australian from wideawake to spurs; very positive in his opinions; not particular as to the language in which he aired them; but, upon the whole, and seeing he was the "boss," decidedly amiable to the beardless and untried jackeroo. In point of fact, he was greatly entertained by Tahourdin, who was an exceedingly ingenuous and confiding youth, susceptible to the least friendliness, and apt under its

influence to divulge his own feelings and affairs with uncalled-for candour. Thus the jackeroo went to bed, in a chamber rude enough to satisfy even his requirements, with the feeling that he had made a valuable friend for life; and the manager, chuckling consumedly over a final pipe, foresaw infinite sport.

Next day they spent on the run together, shifting a few attenuated sheep from one paddock to another, and covering altogether some twenty miles on horseback in the heat. Tahourdin had not ridden since he became too big for the pony at home, and evening found him an ignominious cripple, driven to join insincerely in the laugh against himself. He was no longer in the highest spirits. He had shown great ineptitude in the saddle, and once at least, in the heat of a skirmish with the stupid sheep, his new friend had spoken to him in a way that rankled. But he had enlisted of his own free will; he was not such a fool as to resent a sharp word from a superior officer, and they rode home together the same good friends. Or so Tahourdin imagined; and Glover would have vowed that he was right; for there was no real malice in the man.

Nevertheless, his manner changed towards Tahourdin in the inspiring company of those tried comrades, Messrs. Hutchinson and Symes, station storekeeper and overseer



"A SCENES FROM THE STUPID SHEEP."

respectively. Hitherto it had not been worth while to poke even legitimate fun at the jackeroo; there had been no audience; but the manager soon made up for lost time. Tahourdin had scarcely given a second thought to his conversational indiscretions of the night before; the other had treasured the whole series; and out they came at dinner for the delectation of the previous absentees, in bursts of oblique rillery that left its object red with rage, for all the smiles he deemed it prudent to assume.

"Mr. Tahourdin never mixed tea and mutton before. Where's that champagne, Hutchinson? You're not half a store-keeper; but cheer up! After all, we're not such savages as Mr. Tahourdin expected to find us: he was quite astonished at our

expect of poor back-blockers? But, I say, it's a thousand pities we've got no lady of the house! Tahourdin could tell her about the latest fashions. His sister's been presented at Court!"

It was an undeniable fact, but how the fact had slipped out overnight Tahourdin could not now conceive. Had he fallen so low in unconscious boastfulness? He remembered now that he had been misled into talking about his people; and he was certainly very proud of that sister. Well, she would be the last to forgive him if this detestable conversation should ever come to her ears; meanwhile he deserved all he got.

"Which court?" inquired the overseer, a little man with a squeaky voice, but the



"I BROUGHT MY WHOLE KIT."

HE SHOUTED, IN EXPLANATION."

putting on black coats for dinner — *my* word!"

"I wasn't a bit," protested Tahourdin, stung to the quick by this subtle perfidy, but still all good-nature on the surface. "I thought it awfully jolly."

"But not so jolly as dressing altogether, eh? He dresses every night of his life when he's at home in the old country; don't you, Tahourdin? You don't happen to have brought your dress-clothes with you, eh?"

Tahourdin, amid roars, confessed that he had "I brought my whole kit," he shouted in explanation. "I had nowhere to leave anything. Of course I wanted them in Melbourne."

"Never mind, Tahourdin! You must make allowances for us; what can you

roughest customer with whom Tahourdin had yet foregathered.

"The police-court, of course," replied Tahourdin, plunging into the joke in desperation. The manager's face grew long at once.

"Oh, I wouldn't give her away. His own sister, too! We'll drop the subject, gentlemen, if you please."

But another was soon forthcoming.

"Have we got any bushrangers kicking about, Hutchy? Because Tahourdin would rather like to meet one."

"The deuce he would!" cried the store-keeper, a buffoon himself, who foresaw many a merry innings when his senior should have wearied of the game.

"The deuce indeed!" echoed Tahourdin, trying once more to laugh it off. "I never

said that, Mr. Glover, I really didn't. I only said I'd read about the bushrangers, and was a bit disappointed to find them extinct. I rather wanted to meet somebody who's been stuck up by them——"

"Or be stuck up yourself, eh?"

"Well, I'm not even sure that I'd mind that so very much, if I hadn't too much to lose, and they left me with a pretty whole skin. It would be an experience worth having, I'm blowed if it wouldn't!"

"If you want real, warranted, cold-drawn pluck," said the manager, sententiously, "you must go to the old country for it, after all!"

It was not done in temper, or with at all an evil grace; but the meal was over, the chairs pushed back; and at this point the jackeroo, still red, but still grinning, managed to retreat in fair order.

"That was a nasty one," chuckled the storekeeper.

"One agen' his duck-house," squeaked the overseer.

"Not a bit of it!" cried Glover, rounding upon his wise men like any potentate. "I happened to mean that. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if that kid hadn't some grit in him somewhere. But—*my* word! What did I tell you chaps? *Isn't* he sport?"

He was more. He had come there of his own accord, for his own peculiar ends. He was willing to work for his bread, as a necessity of the situation, and disposed to enjoy that novelty with the rest. He was none the less a dabbler and a dilettante among hard-working men. He was not only sport, therefore, but perfectly fair game.

Only the game was not pursued in a very sporting spirit. It was generally three to one; never less than two; for, individually, the trio could be nice enough to Tahourdin; but, collectively, and even in couples, they seemed to vie with one another to make bush life a burden to him. Of course, this was not their cold-blooded design; equally of course, Tahourdin had himself to thank for the excessive measure of his humiliation. He was sensitive and vain, though unconscious of his vanity. It was none the less easily wounded on that account. His skin was as thin as a sensitized film; he was ashamed to show his arms; yet he had deliberately put himself at the mercy of men of infinitely coarser fibre, who could have thrashed him as they thrashed their dogs.

The manager was right, however, and there was some salt in Tahourdin even here. Having taken up his false position, of his own free will, he was not to be chaffed out

of it at theirs. He was not to be bullied out of it. He might suffer, but he would never fly from what after all was mere badinage, though of a peculiar brand. That much must be allowed. It was not the kind of chaff the jackeroo had come in for at school, though new boys at a public school plumb a very fair depth in this respect, and Tahourdin had been of the type to touch bottom. But in those days he had been freely kicked; an occasional blow would have been almost a comfort in these. They did not descend to that: he was so obviously a weakling; and their nice abstinence from physical violence was an unconsciously cruel reminder of the fact. They did not visit him with the traditional torments reserved for the conventionally robust "new chum." They did not put him on the dangerous horses. They merely mangled his somewhat peculiar patronymic whenever they addressed him. They merely discussed him in the third person as though he were not present, when he was; and that so freely and fully, amid so brisk a competition in insult, obscenity, and brutal wit, that blood and tears would rise together in the end, and the wretched youth rush choking from the room.

Once, however, he behaved differently; and the single instance must suffice to justify all generalities. If these be too strong—but the one little incident shall speak for itself.

It was a Sunday afternoon not three weeks after Tahourdin's arrival. The heat was an outrage on man and beast. Half-naked and unkempt, with face and arms not merely sunburnt, but red-raw and swollen from the burning, Tahourdin lay stretched upon his bed in the full tide of a hard-earned and duly grateful siesta. To him enter the high-voiced overseer and the big buffoon of a Hutchinson. They wake him up. He suffers this without complaint. They criticise his clothes, his trunks, his boots, his razor (a fruitful item, being in scarcely visible request), and, lastly, his home photographs upon the wall. All this he endeavours to take as he still half-believes that it is meant; but the photographs are different. At each word he winces; the more, because it is the one pretentious portrait, that of the favourite sister in her Court train, on which these vultures settle. Their vulgarity is intolerable: speak he must.

"I say, dry up!"

Not the slightest notice.

"Say what you like about anything

else, but have some respect for a fellow's people. Do you hear me? Do you hear, I say?"

They heard, but did not heed. The photograph was that of a fine young woman in compulsory white, with rounded arms and shapely neck, eyes bright from the day's ordeal, yet not without a hint of tears, and in the upper lip contemptuous impatience of this last infliction at the photographer's hands. Face and form appealed equally to the connoisseurs, whose insolent admiration was the final outrage. Comment capped comment, not gross exactly, not absolutely coarse, yet inconceivably boorish and underbred; until Tahourdin, his protests ignored, had torn the frame from the wall, and leapt afoot like a thin flame.

"You—cad!" he roared. "Take off your coat and come outside!"

It was the big storekeeper whom he faced, the fellow who had



"TAKE OFF YOUR COAT AND COME OUTSIDE."

gone the further in clownish disrespect; and Ajax and the lightning were better matched. The absurdity of the thing silenced both aggressors. Yet at the second glance it did not look so very absurd. Tahourdin was rolling up his sleeves, and his arms were indeed like the pipe-stems to which

this very enemy had often likened them. But his face, fiery enough before, was now literally blazing with present passion and long arrears of resentment combined.

"You'll give me a hiding," he continued. "I know that well enough. Do you think I care? I'll mark you first! I'll mark you for this! I'll mark you——"

And he repeated his most opprobrious epithet, unrepresentable adjective and all; and what would have become of him in the next five minutes it is happily unnecessary to speculate, for at this juncture the manager arrived upon the scene, demanding an explanation of the row, which was duly given in the overseer's falsetto.

"You young fool," said Glover, "what do you mean by calling Hutchy a name like that? Do you know what you deserve?"

"Yes, and I want it. Don't stop him. I can take all he gives me. But, by Jove, I'll mark him first!"

"My good little ass, he didn't mean any harm. Did you, Hutchy?"

"Of course I didn't," said the burly storekeeper, looking hurt, for the evil word was ranking, and not the less because he had no desire to make Tahourdin swallow it with his teeth. Indeed, the man was less brute than boor; he also spoke the truth. He had not seriously exceeded the limits of legitimate "chiack."

"You hear that, Tahourdin?" continued Glover, not unkindly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, *my* word, to take a fellow up like that. Cad! That's a nice word to chuck about! It may do in the old country, but it won't do here."

"I'm ready to pay for it, right or wrong!"

"But you sha'n't. I won't let you. No more would Hutchy. I've known him for years, and he's one of the best. I thought you were a good sort, too, Tahourdin, until to-day! I thought we were all good pals! It isn't my idea of being pals to fly at a chap like that, and call him a cad when he didn't

mean any harm. Is it yours? We'd better leave you to think it over."

But Tahourdin was quite unable to think. He was dazed by the new light in which the manager had placed his conduct and Hutchinson's side by side. Glover had spoken kindly; he might be right; at any rate, he had put Tahourdin pretty effectually in the wrong; and the sense of this, after such a scene and such humiliation, was more than he could bear. He could have borne it if he had bled for it. But to be put in the wrong, and yet let off, was as the very hand and seal to his dishonour; and flinging himself on the bed where they had found him, Tahourdin wept like the child he was.

The others were already laughing it off.

"But I believe he *would* have marked you, Hutchy! He meant having a jolly good try. By the way, what did I tell you about his grit? He's got some, after all, you see; he'd have taken his hiding standing up."

The overseer squeaked dissent.

"I don't think it, Mr. Glover; he's a fiddlin' little fraud, if you ask me. He didn't know what he was doin' of just now; he was in too much of a stink. You try him in cold blood, and he'll back out every time."

"You mean out of a fight?"

"Out of anything you like."

"You don't think he'll ever show any more spunk than he did this afternoon?"

"He'll take jolly good care never to show as much."

"Oh; and what's your opinion, Hutchy? Do you agree with George Symes?"

The storekeeper was in a somewhat delicate position.

"I do and I don't," said he. "Of course I wasn't going for the cove; what's more, he knew it. Still, I must say he ran his risk."

"So you don't think it was a genuine challenge?"

"I don't know what to think of it."

"But you also wouldn't trust Tahourdin in a tight place?"

"No, I'm hanged if I would!"

The manager looked from one to the other of his friends, and shook his head.

"I'm sorry for you two chaps! You're hopelessly wrong, both of you. That young ass has got the right stuff in the right place—not too much of it—but enough. He takes too much notice of himself; he's got a lot of rot to be knocked out of him still. But if he stays here long enough he'll turn up trumps, and when you least expect it, you bet!"

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"Do *you* bet, old man?" inquired the cracked voice, slyly.

"I'm perfectly willing to back my opinion."

"How much for?"

"Five notes." \*

"Done with you," squeaked Symes.

"And with me?" said Hutchy.

"Another five!"

"Done again," cried the storekeeper. "But look here: how long are we to give him to play up in? He's only here for the fun of the thing, and don't you forget it. He may chuck it, after this."

"Give him six months," said Glover, "and I think he'll stay them out. If he doesn't make you change your opinion in that time——"

"The bet's off?"

"Not it! I'll pay up. But you must both play a bit lighter in the meantime; give the poor fellow a rest now and then, or you'll spoil his nerve. I know it was me that started it, but I'm rather sorry now that I did. I don't ask you to let him off altogether; he doesn't deserve that; only don't you two have quite such an almighty down on him. And I'll win my money yet—five notes from each of you—let's make another note of that."

And Tahourdin thought it all came of his having shown fight at last; that was part of the comic little tragedy; but the really serious part was to follow soon enough.

It was just before Christmas that the news came in. Tahourdin first heard of it at dinner on the 23rd of December, and, in his growing confidence, was not ashamed to express his delight that there were bush-rangers once more, after all these years ("for my benefit," said Tahourdin), in New South Wales. His little aside was taken more seriously than he expected. The three sat looking at him. As a matter of fact, they had made their arrangements to nip across country to Ivanhoe races on Christmas Day; the jackeroo only was to be left behind; but this startling rumour threatened to upset all their plans.

It seemed that another station, within but fifty miles, had been stuck up in quite the old fashion: masters and men (to say nothing of some ladies) imprisoned in an underground dairy: and the place looted in a style worthy of bygone traditions. The miscreants had disappeared for the time being. None knew whence they had sprung; but they were hiding in the midst of stations, and were

\* One-pound notes.



certain to descend upon another ere long ; their choice a toss-up, so far as station-folk could judge.

"Of course I shall chuck the races," said Glover, gloomily. "George and Hutchy can go ; but I must stay here. Not that they're the least likely to trouble *us* ; that's the nuisance of it."

"Then why not leave me, as you intended?" asked Tahourdin, in a flutter. "If we've nothing worth robbing, what harm can they do?"

The trio looked at him.

"Rot!" said Glover.

"But I mean it. They're not likely to come here. You say so yourself. If they did come, they'd have to go empty away."

"There are always the horses."

"They would need running up."

There was a pause which left Glover looking at the other two.



"HOW ABOUT MY BET?"

"How about my bet?" said he.

Tahourdin took this to refer to the races.

"You don't win it yet," said Symes.

"But I will!" cried Glover. "I've a jolly good mind to take Tahourdin at his word, and leave him in sole charge."

"Do!" pleaded Tahourdin.

And in the end he did.

But meanwhile no more had been heard

of the bushrangers, and it was even doubted whether the original report was not a mere canard. Such things are peculiarly common in the bush, where most intelligence travels by word of mouth, and gains inevitably in the process. Either to soothe his conscience (as it seemed, indeed, to Tahourdin), or for both reasons, the commanding Glover was the first to express incredulity in the matter. Tahourdin was only too thankful to take his opinion for even more than it was worth ; the other two, however, seemed doubtful. As for the rank and file of the station hands, they were never informed of the rumour ; in old days it had been the rank and file of station hands who had shown a dangerous sympathy with such desperadoes.

So said Glover, and he seemed to know, though he was not the man to trust too implicitly to his own opinion. This was shown in the precautions which he took in the face of his own conviction. He helped Tahourdin to carry his bed into the store under cloud of the night of Christmas Eve. The store was a log-hut standing by itself. In it was a rack of shot-guns, and Tahourdin was given the key of a drawer full of cartridges. Before daylight the trio went off, with a led horse which the odious Symes, a magnificent horseman, was to mount in person for the Maiden Plate ; before midnight, if their horse-flesh could do it, they would all three be safe and sound again on G-Block.

There are many reasons why Tahourdin is never likely to forget his Christmas on that station. The day was unique in his short experience, first because he had it wholly to himself, and secondly by reason of the incredibly hot wind which blew from dawn to dewless eve. This wind had been blowing all the week, but it surpassed itself on Christmas Day. It came from the Equator

in one steady burning blast, as from some fiery furnace of the gods or the gates of hell itself. It heated everything, indoors and out, with a heat independent of the sun. The water in the ewers might have come fresh from the hot tap, the bed-linen from the ironing-board. In the kitchen the Chinaman used his apron to lift a latch, and could have cooked the Christmas dinner on the four-hundred-gallon tank outside, without burning a stick. The men dozed in their hut; the crows hid in the pines; and on the homestead veranda, with the station to himself and the day his own, Tahourdin could almost feel the blood sparkling in his veins.

This is the surprising property of the hot north wind six hundred miles inland. It does not enervate like damp or sluggish heat. It scorches the nostrils and cracks the lips, but is almost bracing in its effect upon a healthy body and a sanguine soul.

Tahourdin, at all events, had never felt so well in his life, and seldom happier. He was getting on better with the others. That was much to him. But it was nothing to his excited pride in the present trust reposed in him. A chance of bushrangers, and his little self left in charge! So he put it in more than one letter that he wrote that day. It was such an opportunity for letter-writing, and such a situation to describe! There was no need to finish these letters at this sitting; it would never do to put them in suspense at South Kensington for a whole week; but he felt that he would thrill them more by writing of a present than of a past danger, and he deemed it legitimate to thrill his people when he was genuinely thrilled himself. And his mood was indeed one of suppressed but intense excitement, as even the Chinese cook might have seen when he showed himself on the veranda, and Tahourdin started to his feet like a guilty man. Then he would reconnoitre the premises at frequent intervals, while early in the morning he put a cartridge into every barrel in the store. But nothing happened, and the poor youth wrote in raptures to the end, while the perspiration ran down his nose and sometimes rattled on the crisp, hot paper, to leave blisters as of contradictory tears, and to dry before the leaf was turned. At the end of each letter a space was left, a space that Tahourdin thought to fill next day with comic lamentations on the anti-climax: so little was his heart of hearts prepared.

And yet he sat up for the others until two o'clock next morning, and only went to bed then because the wind flew round into the

south, as the hot wind will at its worst, and he found himself shivering on the veranda before he realized the cause. It was a cloudy night; the change of temperature was sudden and extreme beyond belief; bed became the one place for a sane being, and even there Tahourdin required his rug. The Chinaman had retired hours earlier to his opium-reeking kennel off the kitchen; but at the men's hut, which, however, was a quarter of a mile away, appropriate festivities had been sustained until past midnight, thereafter to sink from songs and wranglings to sudden silence with the lights still burning. Tahourdin in his innocence had been up to see the cause, and had left the scene in fitting darkness. He need not rely upon the men. It was a pity, because the bell which roused them each morning was slung from the wood-and-iron gable of the store, and, though the rope hung outside as a rule, Tahourdin had been at some pains to alter this arrangement for that night. Thus a temporary extension of the bell-rope hung ready to his hand when at length he lay down in the small hours. The store door was locked and bolted; the store window was high up and barred. Tahourdin smiled in premature judgment upon the folly and futility of it all; and, smiling, fell asleep.

He cannot have slept very long; what awoke him you will possibly guess. It was an unseen hand trying the locked and bolted door. Tahourdin was on his elbow in an instant, trembling horribly, yet exalted in that instant above his normal self.

"Who's there?" he called, shrilly.

The answer was short and sharp:—

"Open up!"

Tahourdin found the match-box, and lit the candle at his elbow.

"I'm hanged if I do," he said. "Who are you?"

"You'll know soon enough."

"So will some others," shouted Tahourdin, and straightway the station-bell rang out upon the night. Outside there fell a pause, a whisper, and a brutal laugh.

"You're a silly fool, whoever you are. The hut's baled up, and every man a prisoner; as it happens they're as drunk as coots, but it'd make no odds if they wasn't. Open up, curse you, or we'll open *you!*"

The door shook and rattled in a horrible manner. Tahourdin was shaking, too, but he cocked one gun, laying two others upon the counter.

"You're the bushrangers, are you?"

"You can call us what you like ; we'll pay you in a minute !"

"Then I call you a pack of infernal ruffians and cowards ; and I tell you this—you may have nobbled the men, but you don't nobble me ! I'm bolted and barred, and jolly well armed — and I expect my bosses back any minute ! They were to have been here by midnight ; they'll be here before morning, as sure as you'll swing before you've done !"

A louder laugh—a fouler oath.

"You precious innocent ! We brought 'em in ourselves, trussed up like chickens, and they're now in the hut with the others. So much for your blessed bosses !"

Tahourdin sickened. So he stood alone ! For an instant there seemed but one thing to be done, but for an instant only. If he stood alone, he would fall alone, and after his death the bush world—nay, the world at large—would know him for what he had really been.

The stimulus was odious—the resolve heroic.

And who knows how many heroes are no more heroically inspired ?

"Break in the door !" yelled this one, beside himself with excitement. "The first man comes in dead !"

He had no idea how many men there were, for one did all the threatening, while the remnant egged him on in savage undertones which gave no clue to their number. The spokesman had a voice in accordance with the best bushranging traditions, as conned by Tahourdin with prophetic fascination. It might have been the voice of a gentleman, and was worthy of Captains Melville and Moonlite. Tahourdin actually thought of these worthies as he awaited their successors' next move ; but he need not

have gone to Australia or to Australian criminals for what promptly followed. Some iron implement was hammered between door and door-post, just below the upper hinge. Tahourdin held up the candle,

and saw to his horror that the hinge was rusty. He remembered once hearing, as a fact not generally known, that at their best hinges are more vulnerable points than bolts. And he suddenly recognised that he was beset not by bushrangers, who would have stuck him up in broad daylight, but by common cracksmen, come to break in and steal with no more gallantry than their fellow-practitioners of South Kensington itself !

"You bale up the men !" he roared in scorn. "You stick up a station ! Why, you're nothing but a gang of common or garden thieves !"

And out rang the station bell once more, in a frenzied peal exactly worthy of the poor ringer, who was indeed half mad with fear and excitement, and sudden and ill-founded hope. Yet justification was to follow, for that very instant the hammering stopped, and in its stead a thunderous voice promised nameless tortures if the ringing went on.

"That proves it !" shouted Tahourdin. "You never interfered with the men ; but they'll interfere with you ; they're not so drunk as all that ! Do your worst to me, they'll avenge me ; and I'll kill a couple of you first, and my bosses—"

The high hysterical voice was drowned in a deafening assault upon the hinge itself. A splinter flew ; the hinge had started ; a few more blows sent it flying over Tahourdin's head, with strips of wood adhering. This was the beginning of the end. The door



"STRAIGHTWAY THE STATION BELL RANG OUT UPON THE NIGHT."

itself kept its place a little longer, held wonderfully fast by lock, bolts, and remaining hinge; when this went, all went; but Tahourdin had gained some minutes' grace. He was discovered crouching behind the counter, his head only showing above a rampart mounted with three double-barrelled guns, one of which was at his shoulder. And to the end his left hand tugged the bell-rope, the last clang exactly coinciding with the first shot.

A couple of masked scoundrels had tumbled in over the ruin of the door, and it was upon the foremost of these that Tahourdin had emptied both barrels in his frenzy. The man clapped his hands to his face and went reeling back into the night. His comrade meanwhile fired a revolver point-blank at Tahourdin, yet missed him, whereupon the defender discharged his second piece with the like result, having no time even to raise it from the counter. Never was worse shooting at such a range: four times in four seconds Tahourdin gave himself up for dead, and four times the flash was followed by no twinge of pain in any portion of his body. Not a word was spoken, but each time the masked man aimed deliberately, his eyes peering through round holes in the crape, and fixed steadily on Tahourdin, who returned their glare. It was all he could return; the wretch had seized the third pair of barrels, and held them firmly to one side. But Tahourdin had the stock with both hands, and when the revolver was empty he had another chance: for the one bad shot fled incontinent, followed without a moment's hesitation by the other.

Through the yard they rushed, and out and in among the pine trees, dark as it was, though indeed there was a lantern burning somewhere, and by its rays Tahourdin had one glittering glimpse of a horse's trappings. But the light was too little and the pace too great for effective firing, and this time it was not to his discredit that neither charge found flesh. In another instant Tahourdin had clubbed his piece, and in yet another he had struck his man senseless from behind. Drunk with battle, the clubbed gun whirling round his head, the now unrecognisable Jackeroo danced round in nick of time to meet poetic justice in his turn. He saw absolutely nothing: there was a single crash, a strangled cry, and he lay upon his back with closed eyes and a convulsive chin—a dead man with a living jaw.

He came to his full senses in Glover's

room. This was many hours afterwards. There had been an earlier but only partial return, when insensibility had merged into natural sleep, but Tahourdin had no recollection of it. He knew nothing until he awoke between the manager's sheets. He was alone. It was evidently afternoon. He could not imagine what had happened; and this was the trouble when the manager entered somewhat later, though by that time he had recalled everything up to the moment of his eclipse.

"So you were in time! You must have been! I knew you would be—didn't I tell them so?"

"Yes, I was in time," said Glover, with dry kindness; "but keep cool, old chap, or I shall have to clear out. I'm what we call a bush doctor, remember! And it was a deuce of a knock you got—poor old boy!"

His voice was almost affectionate: he was feeling Tahourdin's pulse; no woman could have done it more tenderly.

"Where was I hit?" asked Tahourdin. "I can't find a bandage anywhere."

"It was clean on the point," said Glover, looking upon the stricken hero in sorrowful pride. "It wasn't a bullet, though. I wouldn't bother about it. You'll knock yourself up if you do."

But his look had reminded Tahourdin that he *was* a hero, after all, and the recollection disturbed his simplicity of mind.

"I did what I could," he sighed, with self-conscious modesty.

"You did magnificently!" cried Glover, enthusiastically. "We're all most awfully proud of you. And—you've put ten notes in my pocket!"

"How?"

"I'm ashamed to tell you now."

"It'll knock me up if you don't," whined Tahourdin, silyly.

"Well, then—after that row you had with Hutchy—do you remember the one I mean?"

Tahourdin sighed.

"I wish I didn't!"

"Well, after that we had an argument about you. They thought you hadn't meant business. I swore you had. In the end we had a bet about it."

"You bet about me?"

"On you, my boy! I backed you for five notes with each of them—to show your grit if you got a chance. And you have done it—*my* word! You've done what the three of us rolled together couldn't have done better in your place."

Tahourdin did not speak. He merely thrust a sunburnt hand and the thinnest of wrists over the single sheet that covered him. Glover crushed it in sympathetic silence.

"What happened after I was knocked out?" asked Tahourdin, at length.

"Oh, the very deuce of a row. I'll tell you about that to-morrow."

"But how many of them were there, and what happened to the two I tackled?"

Glover seemed embarrassed.

"Did I—*kill* one of them?" whispered the jackeroo.

"No, no, you didn't do that."

"What, then?"

"I'd really rather tell you to-morrow! Upon my word, you're not in a fit state to-night!"

"But you're keeping something from me! I sha'n't rest until I know what it is. Were any lives lost?"

"None."

"How many of them were there?"

"Three or four."

"Have you got them?"

"Got them? *My word!*"

Ha, ha! Nice sort of trick to play, wasn't it?"

"It was worse than me," chuckled Tahourdin; "but I'm jolly grateful to him, I can tell you. Still, I must have half-blinded the chap."

"You did; and burnt off all his eyebrows and eyelashes; but *he'll* be all right."

Tahourdin dismissed all qualms.

"And what about the other one?"

"Oh, he'll be all right, too; he's wearing a sort of skull-cap of sticking-plaster at present; but his head's pretty thick, and it'll mend."

Tahourdin said nothing. He felt very weak, and the glow that had come over him, from head to heels, was as a consuming fever. There were steps on the veranda outside.

"So he's awake, is he?" said the store-keeper's voice. "May we come in?"

"Not yet," said Glover.

"Yes, do!" cried Tahourdin.



"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU, SYMES?"

"Then you ought to know whether it's three or four. Never mind! I only hope you're telling me the truth. What about that chap I shot? Will you swear he's not dead or dying?"

"Till I'm blue in the face. And I'll tell you why. There was evidently something wrong with those cartridges; er—the fact is, we used to get our last jackeroo to load 'em, and it's quite clear to me now that he must have put in double powder and no shot.

And they spoke in the same breath; but it was Tahourdin who raised his voice; and in marched the other two.

For a full minute there was silence in the room: the appearance of one new-comer was only less extraordinary than that of the other. Tahourdin himself altered strangely as he lay and looked at them.

"What's the matter with you, Symes?" he asked, at length, and his voice was very low and hollow.

"Oh, nothing," squeaked the overseer; "only got no wool on the lids of my eyes, in the place where the wool ought to grow. And I'm more than half blind. A little accident, that's all."

"And you, Hutchinson?"

"Can't you see? Got my head broke in the rumpus last night. And I'm hanged if it didn't serve me right!"

He had taken a forward step that did him honour, and was holding out his hand to the prostrate jackeroo. But Tahourdin did not see it. He had turned a livid face towards the manager.

"Get them to go," he begged, in whispers; "you were quite right! I can only stand—one at a time."

When they were once more alone the manager was no longer seated on the bed. He was striding quickly up and down.

"I won't say I'm sorry," he blurted out; "it isn't strong enough. I'm simply sorrier than I ever was for anything in these back-blocks—there! And it was all my fault. Not that I began it. But I took it up. I was so jolly sure of you. And I wanted to make them the same."

There was a moment's pause between the close-clipped sentences. Tahourdin took advantage of it. His voice was stronger.

"Wait a bit," he said. "Tell me where the fraud began."

"From the very start."

"The report about the bushrangers?"

"There never were any."

"And you doctored those cartridges?"

"With my own hands!"

There was a longer pause.

"And who was your spokesman? I didn't recognise the voice."

"You wouldn't; you've never met him. It was a young chap on Quandong whom we roped in at the races."

"And who knocked me out in the end?"

The manager interrupted his walk to come to the bedside and show Tahourdin his knuckles. They were slightly grazed; he looked terribly ashamed of them.

"My dear fellow, it was you or me for it

then! I only wish it had been me—to go down. I deserved it; you didn't; you're the pluckiest little demon in New South Wales!"

Tahourdin took the offending hand outstretched to him, but his face had wrinkled with sudden pain.

"Oh, no, I'm not! It was a fraud—a fraud—a fraud!"

And there was all but tragedy in his tone.

"That makes no difference. It was just as plucky of you. It counts the same."

"No," said Tahourdin; "it doesn't count. It's not the same. Oh, to think—it was only a fraud—after all!"

He had closed his eyes very tight, but not tight enough. Glover turned away, but in a moment he was back.

"Will you forgive us, Tahourdin?"

"There's nothing to forgive."

"But there is—you know there is!"

"Then it's forgiven."

But he would not see the others. He wished to be alone: his wish was respected for the rest of that day. And the next, when Glover, who had merely visited him last thing at night, repeated his visit first thing in the morning, the jackeroo was gone!

Of course it was his wounded vanity, and everything else that was paltry and egoistical: the little note confessed it in so many and hard words. But he had taken the liberty of borrowing the night-horse, and he believed that both it and he were just good enough to catch the coach. It was lucky he had received his Christmas remittance by the last mail; this would enable him to pay, among other things, for the borrowed beast's keep at the roadside inn until sent for, and he trusted Glover wouldn't mind his inclosing enough also to defray the further cost of forwarding his trunks to some Melbourne shipping agents whose name he gave. The jackeroo wound up with very simple and hearty thanks for all the manager's kindness, with markedly friendly messages to the other two, but with the equally emphatic assurance that they would never see him on G-Block again.

And they never did.