



"THE GREY SERGEANT FLUNG HIS ARMS ROUND THEIR PRISONER."

(See page 490.)

STINGAREE STORIES.

BY E. W. HORNUNG.

III.—THE HONOUR OF THE ROAD.



ERGEANT CAMERON was undressing for bed when he first heard the voices through the weather-board walls; in less than a minute there was a knock at his door.

"Here's Mr. Hardcastle from Rosanna, sir. He says he must see you at once."

"The deuce he does! What about?"

"He says he'll only tell you; but he's ridden over in three hours, and he looks like the dead."

"Give him some whisky, Tyler, and tell him I'll be down in two ticks."

So saying, the grey-bearded sergeant of the New South Wales Mounted Police tucked his night-gown into his cord breeches, slipped into his tunic, and hastened to the parlour which served as court-room on occasion, buttoning as he went. Mr. Hardcastle had a glass to his lips as the sergeant entered. He was a very fine man of forty, and his massive frame was crowned with a countenance as handsome as it was open and bold; but at a glance it was plain that he was both shaken and exhausted, and in no mood to hide either his fatigue or his distress. Sergeant Cameron sat down on the other side of the oval table with the faded cloth; the younger constable had left the room when Hardcastle called him back.

"Don't go, Tyler," said he. "You may as well both hear what I've got to say. It's—it's Stingaree!"

The name was echoed in incredulous undertones.

"But he's down in Victoria," urged the sergeant.

"He's come back. I've seen him with my own eyes. But I'm beginning at the wrong end first," said the squatter, taking another sip and then sitting back to survey his hearers. "You know old Duncan, my overseer?"

"I should think we did!"

"Of course you do, and so does the whole back-country, and did even before he won this fortune in the Melbourne Cup sweep.

I suppose you've heard how he took the news? He was fuddling himself from his own bottle on Sunday afternoon when the mail came; the first I knew of it was when I saw him sitting with his letter in one hand and throwing out the rest of his grog with the other. Then he told us he had won the first prize of thirty thousand, and that he had made up his mind to have his next drink at his own place in Scotland. He left us that afternoon to catch the coach and go down to Sydney for his money. He ought to have been back this evening before sundown."

The sergeant nodded.

"That he ought, for I saw him come off the coach and start for the station as soon as they'd run up the horse he left behind him at the pub. I wondered what had brought him if he was so set on getting back to the old country."

"I could tell you," said Hardcastle, after some little hesitation, "and I may as well. Poor old Duncan was the most generous of men, and nothing would serve him but that every soul on Rosanna should share more or less in his good fortune. I am ashamed to tell you how much he spoke of pressing on me. You have probably heard that one of his peculiarities was that he would never take payment by cheque, like other people? I believe it was because he had knocked down too many cheques in his day. In any case, we used to call him Hard Cash Duncan on Rosanna; and I am very much afraid that when you saw him he must have had the whole of his thirty thousand pounds upon him in the hardest form of cash."

"But what has happened, Mr. Hardcastle?"

"The very worst," said Hardcastle, stooping to sip. The three heads came closer together across the faded tablecloth. "There was no sign of him at seven; he ought to have been with us before six. We had done our best to make it an occasion, and it seemed that the dinner would be spoilt. So at seven young Evans, my storekeeper, went off at a gallop to meet him, and at twenty-

five past he came galloping back leading a riderless horse. It was the one you saw Duncan riding this afternoon. There was blood upon the saddle. I found it. And within another hour we had found the poor old boy himself, dead and cold in the middle of the track, with a bullet through his heart."

The squatter's voice trembled with an emotion that did him honour in his hearers' eyes; and the grey-bearded sergeant waited a little before asking questions.

"What makes you think it is Stingaree?" he inquired, at length.

"I tell you I saw him on the run, with my own eyes, this morning. I passed him in one of my paddocks, as close as I am to you, and asked him if he was looking for the homestead. He answered that he was only riding through, and we neither of us stopped."

"Yet you knew all the time that it was Stingaree?"

"No; to be honest," replied Hardcastle, "I never dreamt of it at the time. But now I am quite positive on the point. He hadn't his eye-glass in his eye, but it was dangling on its cord all right; and there was the curled moustache, and the boots and breeches that one knows all about, if one has never seen them for oneself. Yet I own it did not dawn on me just then. I happened to be thinking of the stations round about, and wondering if they were as burnt up as we are, and when I met this swell I simply took him for a new chum on one or other of them."

"There had been robbery, of course?"

"Not a penny left upon him! The valise had been cut to ribbons with a knife, and its other contents were strewed all about; a pocket-book we found still bulging from the roll of notes which had been taken out. I waited beside him while Evans went back for

the buggy, and when they started to take him in I rode on to you."

"We'll ride back with you at once," said the sergeant, "and find you a fresh horse if your own has had enough. Run up the lot, Tyler, and Mr. Hardcastle can take his choice. It seems clear enough," continued Cameron, as the trooper disappeared. "But this is a new departure for Stingaree; it's the very thing that everybody said he would never do."

"And yet it's the logical climax of his career; it might have come long ago, but it was bound to come sooner or later," argued Hardcastle, when he

had drained his glass. "Your bushranger may much prefer not to shoot; but he has only to get up against a man of his own calibre, as resolute and as well armed as himself, to have no choice in the matter. Poor Duncan was the very type; he would never have given way. In fact, we found him with his own revolver fast in his hand, a finger frozen to the trigger, and not a chamber discharged."

"Indeed! Then it must have been foul play," remarked Cameron, owning a doubt in its dismissal; and with that he went off to



"WITHIN ANOTHER HOUR WE HAD FOUND THE POOR OLD BOY HIMSELF."

dress. Hardcastle was dozing^f in the chair on his return.

It was midnight before the little cavalcade set out upon a ride of over thirty miles, for arrangements had to be made for a telegram to be sent to the Glenrarnald coroner first thing in the morning, and to ensure this it was necessary to disturb the postmaster, who occupied one of the three weather-board dwellings which constituted the roadside hamlet of Clear Corner. A round moon shone as the trio rode away; it was at its almost dazzling zenith when they reined up at the scene of the murder. This was at a point where the sandy track ran through a belt of scrub, and the sergeant got off to examine the ground with Hardcastle, while Tyler mounted guard in the saddle. But nothing of importance was discovered by the pair on foot, and nothing seen or heard by their mounted comrade.

They found the station still astir and faintly aglow in the veiled daylight of the moon. A cluster of the men stood in a glare at the door of their hut; the travellers' hut betrayed the like symptoms of excitement; at the kitchen door were more men with pannikins, and odd glimpses of a firelit, white-capped face within. But on the broad veranda sat two young men with their backs to a closed and darkened window. And behind the window lay all that remained of an elderly man, whose brown, gnarled face was scarcely recognisable by the new-comers in its strange smooth pallor, but his grizzled beard weirdly familiar and still crisp with lingering life.

The coroner arrived in some thirty hours which had brought forth nothing new; his jury was drawn from the men's hut and rabbiters' tents; and after a prolonged but inconclusive investigation the inquest was adjourned for a week. But the seven days were as barren as the first, and a verdict against some person unknown a foregone result. This did not satisfy the many who were positive that they knew the person; for Stingaree had been seen a hundred miles lower down, doubtless on his way back to Victoria, and with his appearance altered in a tell-tale manner. But the coroner thought he knew better than anybody else, and had his way in spite of the manifest feeling on the long veranda where he held his court.

So jurors and spectators drifted back to hut and tent and neighbouring station, the coroner started in his buggy for Glenrarnald, and last of all the police departed, leading the horse which Hardcastle had ridden home

from their barracks, and leaving him at peace once more with his two young men. But on the squatter the time had told; his table had been full to overflowing through it all; and he sank into a long chair, a trifle greyer at the temples, a thought looser in his dress, as the pugarees of Cameron and Tyler finally fluttered out of sight.

"I think we might have a drink," he said with a wry smile to Evans, who fetched the decanter from the store; the jackeroo was called from a stable which had become Augean during the week, and the three were still mildly tipping when the storekeeper came to his feet.

"Good Lord!" cried he. "I thought we'd seen the last of the plucky police!"

"You don't mean to say they're coming back?"

"I do, worse luck! Cameron, Tyler, and some new joker in plain clothes."

Hardcastle finished his drink with a resigned smile, and stood on the veranda to receive the intruders.

"After all, it will stave off the reaction I began to feel the moment they had turned their backs," said he. "Well, well, well! I thought I'd just got rid of you fellows, and back you come like base coin!"

"You mustn't blame us," said the sergeant, first to dismount. "We couldn't know that Superintendent Cairns had been sent up from Sydney, much less that we should ride right into him in your horse-paddock!"

The squatter had stepped down from the veranda with polite alacrity.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Cairns," said he. "I only wish you had come before."

The superintendent took his hand with a dry smile and a sharp eye upon the younger men and the empty glasses. His was a strange and striking personality. Dark as a mulatto, and round-shouldered to the extent of some little deformity, he carried his eyes high under the lids, and shot his piercing glance from under the pent-house of a beetling brow; a lipless mouth was habitually pursed in such a fashion as to shorten the upper lip and exaggerate an already powerful chin; and this stooping and intent carriage was no less suggestive of the human sleuth-hound than were the veiled vigilance and dogged determination of the lowered face. He shook his bent head to decline refreshment, but pointedly ignored a generalization of Hardcastle's about the crime: and when he spoke, it was in a sharp but stilted style of his own.

"May I ask, Mr. Hardcastle, if you are



"'GLAD TO SEE YOU, MR. CAIRNS,' SAID HE."

the owner or the manager of this lodge in a howling wilderness?"

"I'm sorry to say I am the owner."

"I appreciate the sorrow. I failed to discern a single green blade as I came along."

"We depend on salt-bush and the like."

"In spite of which, I believe, you have had several lean years?"

"There's no denying it."

"I am sorry to be one of so many intruders in such a season, Mr. Hardcastle, but I shall not trouble you long. I hope to take the murderer to-night."

"Stingaree?"

"Not quite so loud, please. Who else, should you suppose? You may be interested to hear that he has been in hiding on your run for several days, and so have I, within fairly easy reach of him. But he is not a man to be taken single-handed without further loss of life; so I intercepted you, sergeant, and now you are both enlightened. To-night, with your assistance and that of your young colleague, I count upon a bloodless victory. But I should prefer you, Mr. Hardcastle, not to mention the matter to the very young men whom I noticed in your company on my arrival. Have I your promise to comply with my wishes on this point, and on any other which may arise in connection with the capture?"

dangerous if a fourth person heard me say that I had discovered the murderer's ill-gotten hoard!"

"Not you!" cried Cameron.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the squatter.

"The discoverer was not divine, and, indeed, no human being but myself," the bent man averred, turning with mischievous humour from one to the other of his astonished hearers. "Yes, there was more gold than I would have credited a sane Scotchman with carrying through the wilds; but the bulk was in small notes, and the whole has been buried in the scrub close to the scene of the murder, doubtless to avoid at once the detection and the division of such unusual spoil."

"You are thinking of his mates?"

It was Cameron who had asked the question, but Mr. Hardcastle followed immediately with another.

"Did you remove the spoil?"

Cairns favoured the speaker with his most open smile so far.

"My dear Mr. Hardcastle! How you must lack the detective instinct! Of course, I left everything as nearly as possible as I found it; the man camps on the spot, or very near it; he lights no fires and is careful to leave no marks, but I am more or less convinced of ~~it~~ ^{its} origin and that is where I shall

And a steely glitter shot through the superintendent's eyebrows; but Hardcastle had given his word before the request was rounded to that pedantic neatness which characterized the crabbed utterances of the round-shouldered official.

"That is well," pursued Cairns, "for now I can admit you both into my plan of campaign. Suppose we sit down here, at the end farthest from any door. Be good enough to draw your chairs nearer mine, gentlemen. It might be dan-

take him to-night, or, rather, early to-morrow morning."

"I wish you could make it to-night," said Hardcastle, with a yawn that put a period to a pause of some duration.

"Why?" demanded the detective, raising open eyes for once.

"Because I've had a desperate week of it, and am dead with sleep."

Cairns carried his growing geniality to the length of an almost hearty laugh.

They had their simple dinner at half-past seven, when the Sydney detective took it on himself to entertain the party, and succeeded so well that the entertainment was continued on the veranda for the better part of another hour. Doubled up in his chair, abnormal, weird, he recounted in particular the exploits of Stingaree with a zest only equalled by his confident undertaking to avenge the death of Robert Duncan before another day was out; all listened in a rapt silence, and the younger



"HE RECOUNTED IN PARTICULAR THE EXPLOITS OF STINGAREE."

"My dear sir, do you suppose that I thought of taking *you* with us? No, Mr. Hardcastle, the risks of this sort of enterprise are for those who are paid to run them. And there is a risk; if we timed our attack too early or too late there would be bloodshed to a certainty. But at two o'clock the average man is fast asleep; at a quarter after one, therefore, I start with Sergeant Cameron and Constable Tyler."

Hardcastle yawned again.

"I should like to have been with you, but there are compensations," said he. "I doubt if I shall even stay up to see you off."

"If you did you would sit up alone," returned the superintendent. "I intend to turn in myself for three or four hours; and it will be in the face of all my wishes, sergeant, if you and Tyler do not do the same. I must trouble you not to tell him anything meanwhile. Let it be arranged that we all turn in betimes in view of an early start; we three alone need know how early the start will be."

men were duly disappointed when the party broke up prematurely between nine and ten. But they also had played their part in a fatiguing week; by the later hour all were in their rooms, and before very long Rosanna station lay lighted only by the full white moon of New South Wales.

Cameron wondered if it could possibly be two o'clock, while Tyler sat up insensate with the full weight of his first sleep, when the superintendent crept into the double-bedded room in which the two policemen had been put. Cairns owned himself before his time by an hour and more, but explained that he had an idea which had only struck him as he was about to fall asleep.

"If we hunt for the fellow in the dark," said he, "we may give him the alarm before we come on him. But if we go now there is at least a chance that we may find his fire to guide us. I am aware I said he wouldn't light one there, but everybody knows that Stingaree uses a spirit-lamp. In any case it's a chance, and with a desperate man like that

we can't afford to give the ghost of a chance away."

The sergeant dressed without more ado, as did his subordinate on learning the nature of their midnight errand; but Superintendent Cairns was gone to the horse-yard to start saddling. The others followed in a few minutes. And there was the horse-yard overflowing with moonshine, but empty alike of man and beast.

"I wonder what's got him?"

murmured the bewildered sergeant, uneasily.

"Old Harry, for all I care!" muttered the other. "I'm no such nuts on him, if you ask me. There's a bit too much of him for my taste."

In his secret breast the sergeant entertained a similar sentiment, but he was too old an officer to breathe disaffection in the ear of his subaltern. He contented himself with a mild expression of his surprise at the conduct of the Sydney authorities in putting a "towny" over his head without so much as a word of notice.

"And such a 'towny'!" echoed Tyler. "One you never heard of in your life before, and never will again!"

"Speak for yourself," rejoined Cameron, irritated at the exaggeration of their case. "I have heard of him ever since I joined the force."

"Well, he's a funny joker to have shoved over us, a blooming little hunchback like that."

"I always heard that he was none the worse for what he couldn't help, and now I can understand it," said the sergeant, "for he's not such a hunch——"

The men looked at each other in the moonlight, and the ugly word was never finished. A dozen hoofs were galloping upon them, their thunder muffled by the sandy road, and into the tank of moonshine came two horses, driven by the superintendent bareback on the third.



"INTO THE MOONSHINE CAME TWO HORSES, DRIVEN BY THE SUPERINTENDENT."

"Someone left the slip-rails down, and they were all over the horse-paddock," he panted. "But I took a bridle and managed to catch one, and it was easy enough to run up the other two."

But even Constable Tyler thought the more of their misshapen leader for the feat.

There was now no time to be lost, for it approached midnight, but the trio were soon cantering through the horse-paddock neck-and-neck, and the new day found them at the farther gate. The moon still poured unbroken brilliance upon that desert world of sandy stretches tufted with salt-bush and erratically overgrown with scrub. The shadow of the gate was as another gate waiting to be hung; for each particular wire in the fence there was a thin black stripe upon the ground. The three passed through, and came in quick time upon the edge of that scrub in which the crime had been committed. And here the superintendent called a halt.

"The two to nail him must be on foot," said he. "You can creep upon him on foot as you never could with a horse; but I will remain mounted in the road and ride him down if he shows fight."

So the pair in the pugarees walked one at either stirrup of the round-backed superintendent, leaving their horses tethered to a tree, until of a sudden the whole party halted

as one. They had rounded a bend in the road with infinite caution, for they knew where they were; but only Cairns was prepared for the position of the light which flashed into their eyes from the heart of the scrub.

It was a tiny light, set low upon the ground, and yet it flashed through the forest like a diamond in a bundle of hay. It burnt at no little distance from the track, for at a movement it was lost, but it was some hundreds of yards nearer the station than the scene of the murder. Cairns whispered that this was where he had found the buried booty, and over half the distance he led the way, winding in and out among the trees, now throwing a leg across his horse's withers to avoid a bole, anon embracing its neck to escape contact with the branches. It was long before they could discern anything but the light itself amid the trunks and branches of the scrub.

Suddenly the superintendent stopped, beckoning with his free hand to the pair afoot, pointing at the fire with the one that held the reins; and as they crept up to him he stooped in the stirrups till his mouth was close to the sergeant's ear.

"He's sitting on the far side of the light, but you can't see his face. I thought he was a log, and I still believe he's asleep. Creep on him like cats till he looks up; then rush him with your revolvers before he can draw his, and I'll support you with mine!"

Nearer and nearer stole Cameron and Tyler; the superintendent managed to coax a few more noiseless steps from his clever mount, but dropped the reins and squared his elbows some twenty paces from the light—a hurricane lamp now in the sharpest focus. The policemen crawled some yards ahead; all three carried revolver in hand. But still the unsuspecting figure sat motionless, his chin upon his chest, the brim of his wideawake hiding his face, a little heap of gold and notes before him on the ground. Then the superintendent's horse flung up its head; its teeth champed upon the bit; the man sat bolt upright, and the light of the hurricane lamp fell upon the face of Hardcastle the squatter.

"Rush him! rush him!" roared Cairns. "That's the man we want!"

But the momentary stupefaction of the police had given Hardcastle his opportunity; the hurricane lamp flew between them, going out where it fell, and for a minute the revolvers spat harmlessly in the remaining patchwork of moonshine and shadow.

"Get behind trees; shoot low, don't kill him!" shouted Cairns from his saddle. "Now on to him before he can load again. That's it! Pin him! Throw your revolvers away, or he'll snatch one before you know where you are! Ah, I thought he was too strong for you! Mr. Hardcastle, I'll put a bullet into you if you don't instantly surrender!"

And the fight ended with the superintendent leaning in his stirrups over the locked and swaying group, as he brandished his revolver to suit deed to word. It was a heavy blow with the long barrel that finally turned the scale. In a few seconds Hardcastle stood a prisoner, the handcuffs fitting his large wrists like gloves, his great frame panting from the fray, but full of manhood in its stoical and defiant carriage.



Original from

"HE BRANDISHED HIS REVOLVER TO SUIT DEED TO WORD."

"Put a bullet in me now!" he cried. "Put three bullets through me, and divide what's on the ground between you!"

"I half wish we could, for your sake," replied the superintendent; "but it's idle to speak of it, and I'm afraid you've committed a crime that places you beyond the reach of sympathy."

"That he has!" cried the sergeant, wiping blood from his grey beard. "It's plain as a pikestaff now; and to think that he was the one to come and fetch us the very night he'd done it! But what licks me more than anything is how in the world you found him out, sir!"

The superintendent looked down upon the stalwart prisoner standing up to his last inch between his two captors, and there was an impersonal interest in the man's bold eyes that invited a statement more eloquently than the sergeant's tongue.

"I will tell you," said the misshapen horseman, smiling down upon the three. "In the first place, I had my own reasons for knowing that Stingaree was nowhere near this place on the night of the murder, for I happen to have been on his tracks for some time. Who knew all about the dead man's stroke of luck, his insane preference for hard cash, the time of his return? Mr. Hardcastle, for one. Who swore that he had met Stingaree face to face upon the run? Mr. Hardcastle alone; there was not a soul to corroborate or contradict him. Who was in need of many thousand pounds? Mr. Hardcastle, as I suspected, and as he practically admitted to me when we discussed the bad season on my arrival. I was pretty sure of my man before I crossed the boundary fence, but I was absolutely convinced before I had spent twenty minutes on his veranda."

The prisoner smiled sardonically in the moonlight. The policemen gazed with awe upon the man who had solved a nine days' mystery in fewer hours.

"You must remember," he continued, "that I have spent some days and nights upon the run; during the days I have camped in the thickest scrub I could find, but by night I have been very busy, and last night I had a stroke of luck. I stumbled by accident on a track that led me to the place I had been looking for all along. You see, I had put myself in Hardcastle's skin, and I was quite clear that I should have buried a lapful of gold and notes somewhere in the bush until the hue and cry had blown over;

only, I hardly expected to find it so near the scene of the crime, and I should certainly have gone farther afield myself."

"But I can't make out why that wasn't enough for you, sir," ventured the sergeant, deferentially. "Why didn't you come in and arrest him on that?"

"You shall see in three minutes. Wasn't it far better to catch him red-handed as we have? You will at least admit that it was far neater. I say I have the place. I say we are all going to it at two in the morning. I say, let us sleep till a little after one. Was it not obvious what would happen? The only thing I did not expect was to find him asleep with the swag under his nose."

Then Hardcastle spoke.

"I was not asleep," said he. "Shall I ever get to sleep again!"

And his dreadful voice had time to die very slowly on the night.

"But Stingaree," put in Tyler in the end. "What's happened to him?"

"He also has been here. But he was many a mile away at the time."

"What brought him here?"

The crooked superintendent from Sydney was sitting strangely upright in his saddle; his face was not to be seen, for his back was to the moon, but he seemed to rub one of his eyes.

"He may have wished to clear his character; he may have itched to uphold the honour of that road of which he considers himself a not imperfect knight. At his worst he never killed a man in all his life. And you will be good enough to take his own word for it that he never will!"

He had backed his horse while he spoke; he turned a little to the light, and the eye-glass gleamed in his eye.

The young constable sprang forward.

"Stingaree!" he screamed.

But the grey sergeant flung his arms round their prisoner.

"That's right!" cried the bushranger, as he trotted off. "Your horses and even your pistols are out of reach, thanks to a discipline which I cannot too heartily commend. You hang on to your bird in the hand, and never again misjudge the one in the bush!"

And as the trees swallowed the cantering horse and man, followed by a futile shot from the first revolver which the young constable had picked up, an embittered admiration kindled in the captive murderer's eyes.