

STINGAREE STORIES.

By E. W. HORNING.

VII.—THE VILLAIN - WORSHIPPER.



HERE was no more fervent admirer of Stingaree and all bushrangers than George Oswald Abernethy Melvin. Despite this mellifluous nomenclature young Melvin helped his mother to sell dance-music, ballads, melodeons, and a very occasional pianoforte, in one of the several self-styled capitals of Riverina; and despite both facts the mother was a lady of most gentle blood. The son could either teach or tune the piano with a certain crude and idle skill. He endured a monopoly of what little business the locality provided in this line, and sat superior on the music-stool at all the dances. He had once sung tenor in Bishop Methuen's choir, but, offended by a word of wise and kindly advice, was seen no more in surplice or in church. It will be perceived that Oswald Melvin had all the aggressive independence of Young Australia without the virility which leavens the truer type.

Yet he was neither a base nor an unkind lad. His bane was a morbid temperament, which he could no more help than his sallow face and weedy person; even his vanity was directly traceable to the early influence of an eccentric and feckless father with experimental ideas on the upbringing of a child. It was a pity that brilliantly unsuccessful man had not lived to see the result of his sedulous empiricism. His wife was left to bear the brunt—a brave exile whose romantic history was never likely to escape her continent lips. None even knew whether she saw any or one of those aggravated faults of an only child which were so apparent to all her world.

And yet the worst of Oswald Melvin was known only to his own morbid and sensitive heart. An unimpressive presence in real life, on his mind's stage he was ever in the limelight with a good line on his lips. Not that he was invariably the hero of these pieces. He could see himself as large with the noose round his neck as in coronet or halo; and though this inward and spiritual temper may be far from rare, there had been no one to kick out of him its outward and visible expression. Oswald had never learnt to gulp down

the little lie which ensures a flattering attention; his clever father had even encouraged it in him as the nucleus of imagination. Imagination he certainly had, but it fed on strong meat for an unhealthy mind; it fattened on the sordid history of the earlier bushrangers; its favourite fare was the character and exploits of Stingaree. The sallow and neurotic face would brighten with morbid enthusiasm at the bare mention of the desperado's name. The somewhat dull, dark eyes would lighten with borrowed fires; the young fool wore an eye-glass in one of them when he dared.

"Stingaree," he would say, "is the greatest man in all Australia." He had inherited from his father a delight in uttering startling opinions; but this one he held with unusual sincerity. It had come to all ears, and was the subject of that episcopal compliment which Oswald took as an affront. The impudent little choristers supported his loss by calling "Stingaree!" after him in the street: he was wise to keep his eye-glass for the house.

There, however, with a few even younger men who admired his standpoint and revelled in his store of criminous annals, or with his patient, inscrutable mother, Oswald Melvin was another being. His language became bright and picturesque, his animation surprising. A casual customer would sometimes see this side of him, and carry away the impression of a rare young dare-devil. And it was one such who gave Oswald the first great moment of his bush life.

"Not been down from the back-blocks for three years?" he had asked, as he showed a tremulous and dilapidated bushman how to play the instrument that he had bought with the few shillings remaining out of his cheque. "Been on the spree and going back to drive a whim until you've enough to go on another? How I wish you'd tell that to our high and mighty Lord Bishop of all the Back-blocks! I should like to see his face and hear him on the subject; but I suppose he's new since you were down here last? Never come across him, eh? But, of course, you heard how good old Stingaree scored off him the other day, after he thought he'd scored off Stingaree?"



"HE SHOWED A TREMULOUS AND DILAPIDATED BUSHMAN HOW TO PLAY THE INSTRUMENT THAT HE HAD BOUGHT."

The whim-driver had heard something about it. Young Melvin plunged into the congenial narrative and emerged minutes later in a dusky glow.

"That's the man for my money," he perorated; "he's the greatest chap in these colonies, and deserves to be Viceroy when they get Federation. Thunderbolt Morgan, Ben Hall, and Ned Kelly were not a circumstance between them to Stingaree; and the silly old Bishop's a silly old fool to him! I don't care twopence about right and wrong. That's not the point. The one's a Force and the other isn't."

"A deuced sight too much force, to my mind," observed the whim-driver, with some warmth.

"You don't take my meaning," the superior youth pursued. "It's a question of personality."

"A bit more personal than you think," was the dark rejoinder.

"How do you mean?"

Melvin's tone had altered in an instant.

"I know too much about him."

"At first hand?" the youth asked, with bated breath.

"Double first!" returned the other, with a muddled glimmer of better things.

"You never knew him, did you?" whispered Oswald.

"Knew him? I've been taken prisoner by him," said the whim-driver, with the pause of a man who hesitates to humiliate himself, but is lost for the sake of that same sensation which Oswald Melvin loved to create.

Mrs. Melvin was in the back room, wistfully engrossed in an English magazine sent that evening from Bishop's Lodge. The bad blood in the son had not affected Dr. Methuen's keen but tactful interest in the

mother. She looked up in tolerant consternation as her Oswald pushed an unsavoury bushman before him into the room; but even through her gentle horror the mother's love shone with that steady humour which put it beyond the pale of vulgar pathos.

"Here's a man who's been stuck up by Stingaree!" he cried, boyish enough in his delight. "Do keep an eye on the show, mother, and let him tell me all about it, as he's good enough to say he will. Is there any whisky?"

"Not for me!" put in the whim-driver, with a frank shudder. "I should like a drink of tea out of a cup, if I'm to have anything."

Mrs. Melvin left them with a good-humoured word besides her promise. She had given no sign of injury or disapproval; she was not one of the wincing sort; and the tremulous tramp was in her own chair before her back was turned.

"Now, fire away!" cried the impatient Oswald.

"It's a long story," said the whim-driver; and his dirty brows were knit in thought.

"Let's have it," coaxed the young man. And the other's thoughtful creases vanished suddenly in the end.

"Very well," said he, "since I'm going to owe it to you! It was only the other day, in a dust-storm away back near the Darling, as bad a one as ever I was out in. I was bushed and done for, gave it up and said my prayers. Then I practically died in my tracks, and came to life in a sunny clearing later in the day. The storm was over; two coves had found me and carried me to their camp; and as soon as I saw them I spotted one for Howie and the other for Stingaree!"

The narrative went no farther for a time. The thrilling youth fired question and lead-

ing question like a cross-examining counsel in a fever to conclude his case, a very machine-gun among cross-examiners. The tea arrived, but the whim-driver had to help himself. His host neglected everything but the first chance he had ever had of hearing of Stingaree or any other bushranger at first-hand.

"And how long were you there?"

"About a week."

"What happened then?"

The whim-driver paused in doubt renewed.

"You will never guess."

"Tell me."

"They waited for the next dust-storm, and then cast me adrift in that."

Oswald stared; he would never have guessed, indeed. The unhealthy light faded from his sallow face. Even his morbid enthusiasm was a little damped.

"You must have done something to deserve it," he cried, at last.

"I did," was the reply, with hanging head. "I—I tried to take him!"

"Take your benefactor—take him prisoner?"

"Yes—the man who saved my life!"

Melvin sat staring: it was a stare of honestly incredulous disgust. Then he sprang to his feet, a brighter youth than ever, his depression melted like a cloud. His villainous hero was an heroic villain after all! His heart of hearts—which was not black—could still render whole homage to Stingaree! He no longer frowned on his informer as on a thing accursed. He had wiped out his original treachery to Stingaree by replacing the uninjured idol in its niche in the warped mind of the adoring egotist. But the man seemed better aware of the earlier impression he had made. And in a very few minutes Mrs. Melvin was back in her place, though not before flicking it with her handkerchief, undetected by her son.

It was certainly a battered and hang-dog figure that stole away into the bush. Yet the creature straightened as he strode into starlight undefiled by earthly illumination; his palsy left him; presently as he went he began fingering the new melodeon in the way of a man who need not have sought elementary instruction from Oswald Melvin. And now a shining disc filled one unwashed eye.

Stingaree lay a part of that night



AS HE WENT HE BEGAN
FINGERING THE NEW
MELODEON."

beside the milk-white mare that he had left tethered in a box-clump quite near the town ; at sunrise he knelt and shaved on the margin of a Government tank, before breaking the mirror by plunging in. And before the next stars paled he was snugly back in older haunts, none knowing of his descent upon those of men.

There or thereabouts, hidden like the needle in the hay, and yet ubiquitous in the stack, the bushranger remained for months. Then there was an encounter, not the first of this period, but the first in which shots were exchanged. One of these pierced the lungs of his melodeon—an instrument as notorious by this time as the musical-box before it—a still greater treasure to Stingaree. That was near the full of a certain summer moon ; it was barely waning to the eye when the battered buyer of melodeons came for a new one to the shop in the pretty bush town.

The shop was closed for the night, but Stingaree knocked at a lighted window under the veranda, which Mrs. Melvin presently threw up. Her eyes flashed when she recognised one against whom she now harboured a bitterness on quite a different plane of feeling from her former repulsion. Even to his first glance she looked an older and a harder woman.

"I am sorry to see you," she said, with a soft vehemence plainly foreign to herself. "I almost hate the sight of you! You have been the ruin of my son!"

"His ruin?"

Stingaree forgot the speech of the unlettered stockman ; but his cry was too short to do worse than warn him.

"Come round," continued Mrs. Melvin, austere. "I will see you. You shall hear what you have done."

In another minute he was in the parlour, where he had sat aforesaid. He never dreamt of sitting now. But the lady took her accustomed chair as a queen her throne.

"Is he ruined?" asked Stingaree.

"Not irrevocably—not yet ; but he may be any moment. He must be before long."

"But—but what ails him, madam?"

"Villain-worship!" cried the lady, with a tragic face stripped of all its humour, and bare without it as a winter's tree.

"I remember! Yes—I understand. He was mad about—Stingaree."

"It is madness now," said the bitter mother. "It was only a stupid, hare-brained fancy then, but now it is something worse. I have not admitted it to a soul," she con-

tinued, with illogical indignation, "but you—it is all through you!"

"All through me?"

"You told him a tale. You made that villain a greater hero in his eyes than ever. You made him real."

"He is real enough, Heaven knows!"

"But you made him so to my son." The keen eyes softened for one divine instant before they filled. "And I—I am talking my own boy over with—with——"

Stingaree stood in twofold embarrassment. Did she know after all who he was? And what had he said he was, the time before?

"The lowest of the low," he answered, with a twitch of his unshaven lips.

"No! That you are not, or were not, whatever you may say. You," she hesitated sweetly—"you had been unsteady when you were here before." He twitched again, imperceptibly. "Thank Heaven, you are now more like what you must have been. I can bear to tell you of my boy. Oh, sir, can you bear with me?"

Stingaree twitched no more. Rich as the situation was, keenly as he had savoured its unsuspected irony, the humour was all over for him. Here was a woman, still young, sweet and kind, and gentle as a childish memory, with her fine eyes full of tears! That was bad enough. To make it worse, she went on to tell him of her son, him an outlaw, him a bushranger with a price upon his skin, as she might have outlined the case to a consulting physician. The boy had been born in the trouble of her early exile ; he could not help his temperament. He had countless virtues ; she extolled him in beaming parentheses. But he had too much imagination and too little balance. He was morbidly wrapt up in the whole subject of romantic crime, and no less than possessed with the personality of this one romantic criminal.

"I should be ashamed to tell you the childish lengths to which he has gone," she went on, "if he were quite himself on the point. But indeed he is not. He is Stingaree in his heart, Stingaree in his dreams ; it is as debasing a form as mental and temperamental weakness could well take ; yet I know, who watch over him half the night. He has an eye-glass ; he keeps revolvers ; he has even bought a white mare! He can look extremely like the portraits one has seen of the wretched man. But come with me one moment."

She took the lamp and led the way into the little room where Oswald Melvin slept. He had slept in it from that boyhood

in which the brave woman had opened this sort of shop entirely for his sake. Music was his only talent; he was obviously not to be a genius in the musical world; but it was the only one in which she could foresee the selfish, self-willed child figuring with credit, and her foresight was only equalled by her resource. The business was ripe and ready for him when he grew up. And this was what he was making of it.

But Stingaree saw only the little bed that



"THERE WAS AN ENLARGED PHOTOGRAPH OF THE BUSHRANGER HIMSELF."

had once been far too large, the Bible still by its side, read or unread, the parents' portraits overhead. The mother was looking in an opposite direction; he followed her eyes, and there at the foot, where the infatuated fool could see it last thing at night and first in the morning, was an enlarged photograph of the bushranger himself.

It had been taken in audacious circumstances a year or two before. A travelling photographer had been one of yet another coach-load turned out and stood in a line by the masterful masterless man.

"Now you may take my photograph. The police refuse to know me when we do meet. Give them a chance."

And he had posed on the spot with eye-glass up and pistols pointed, as he saw himself now, not less than a quarter life-size, in a great gaudy frame. But while he stared Mrs. Melvin had been rummaging in a drawer, and when he turned she was staring in her turn with glassy eyes. In her hands was an empty mahogany case with velvet moulds which ought to have been filled by a brace of missing revolvers.

"He kept it locked—he kept them in it!" she gasped. "He may have done it this very night!"

"Done what?"

"Stuck up the Deniliquin mail. That is his maddest dream. I have heard him boast of it to his friends—the brainless boys who alone look up to him—I have even heard him rave of it in his dreams!"

Stingaree was heavy for a moment with a mental calculation. His head was a time-table of Cobb's coaches on the Riverina road-system; he nodded it as he located the imperilled vehicle.

"Then he sha'n't," said he. "But there's not a moment to lose!"

"Do you mean that you will follow and stop him?"

"If he really means it."

"He may not. He will ride at night. He is often out as late."

"Going and coming about the same time?"

"Yes—now I think of it."

"Then his courage must have failed him hitherto, and it probably will again."

"But if not?"

"I will cure him. But I must go at once. I have a horse not far away. I will gallop and meet the coach; if it is still safe, as you may be sure it will be, I shall scour the country for your son. I can tell him a fresh thing or two about Stingaree!"

"Heaven bless you!"

"Leave him to me."

"Oh, may Heaven bless you always!"

His hands were in a lady's hands once more. Stingaree withdrew them gently. And he looked his last into the brave, wet eyes raised gratefully to his.

The villain-worshipper was indeed duly posted in a certain belt of trees through which the coach-route ran, about half-way between the town and the first stage south. It was not his first nocturnal visit to the spot; often, as his prototype divined, had the mimic would-be desperado sat trembling on his hoary screw, revolvers ready, while the red eyes of the coach dilated down the road; and as often had the cumbrous ship pitched past unscathed. The weak-kneed and weak-minded youth was too vain to feel much ashamed. He was biding his time, he could pick his night; one was too dark, another not dark enough; he had always some excuse for himself when he regained his room, still unstained by crime; and so the unhealthy excitement was deliciously maintained. To-night, as always when he sallied forth, the deed should be done; he only wished there were a shade less moon, and wondered whether he might not have done better to wait. But the die was cast, as usual. And indeed it was quite a new complication that deterred this poor creature for the last time; he was feverishly expecting the coach when a patter of hoofs smote his ear from the opposite quarter.

This was enough to stay an older and a bolder hand. Oswald tucked in his guns with unrealized relief. It was his last instinct to wait and see whether the horseman was worth attacking for his own sake; he had room for few

ideas at the same time; and his only new one was the sense of a new danger, which he prepared to meet by pocketing his pistols as a child bolts stolen fruit. There was no thinking before the act; but it was perhaps as characteristic of the naturally honest man as of the coward.

Stingaree swept through the trees at a gallop, the milk-white mare flashing in the moonlit patches. At the sight of her Oswald was convulsed with a premonition as to who was coming; his heart palpitated as even his heart had never done before; and yet he would have sat irresolute, inert, and let the man pass as he always let the coach, had the decision been left to him. The real milk-white mare affected the imitation in its turn as the coach-horses never had; and Oswald swayed and swam upon a whinnying steed. . . .

"I thought you were Stingaree!"

The anti-climax was as profound as the weakling's relief. Yet there was a strong dash of indignation in his tone.

"What if I am?"



"THE MIMIC WOULD-BE DESPERADO
SAT TREMBLING ON HIS HOARY
SCREW."

"But you're not. You're not half smart enough. You can't tell me anything about Stingaree!"

He put his eye-glass up with an air.

Stingaree put up his.

"You young fool!" said he.

The thoroughbred mare, the eye-glass, a peeping pistol were all superfluous evidence. There was the far more unmistakable authority of voice and eye and bearing. Yet the voice at least was somehow familiar to the ear of Oswald, who stuttered as much when he was able.

"I must have heard it before, or have I dreamt it? I've thought a good deal about you, you know!"

To do him justice, he was no longer very nervous, though still physically shaken. On the other hand, he began already to feel the elation of his dreams.

"I do know. You've thought your soul into a pulp on the subject, and you must give it up," said Stingaree, sternly.

Oswald sat aghast.

"But how on earth did you know?"

"I've come straight from your mother. You're breaking her heart."

"But how can *you* have come straight from *her*?"

"I've come down for another melodeon. I've got to have one, too."

"Another——"

And Oswald Melvin knew his drunken whim-driver for what he had really been.

"The yarn I told you about myself was true enough," continued Stingaree. "Only the names were altered, as they say; it happened to the other fellow, not to me. I made it happen. He is hardly likely to have lived to tell the tale."

"Did he really try to betray you after what you'd done for him?"

"More or less. He looked on me as fair game."

"But you had saved his life?"

Stingaree shrugged.

"We rode across him."

"And you think he perished of dust and thirst?"

Stingaree nodded. "In torment!"

"Then he got what he jolly well earned! Anything less would have been too good for him!" cried Oswald, and with a boyish, uncompromising heat which spoke to some human nature in him still.

But Stingaree frowned up the moonlit track the coach must traverse. Time was short. The morbid enthusiast was not to be disgusted; indeed, he was all enthusiasm

now, and a less unattractive lad than the bushranger had hoped to find him. He looked the white screw and Oswald up and down as they sat in their saddles in the moonshine: it seemed like sunlight on that beaming fool.

"And you think of commencing bushranger, do you?"

"Rather!"

"It's a hard life while it lasts, and a nasty death to top up with."

"They don't hang you for it."

"They might hang me for the man I put back in the vile dust from whence he sprung. They'd hang you in six months. You've too many nerves. You'd pull the trigger every time."

"A short life and a merry one!" cried the reckless Oswald. "I shouldn't care."

"But your mother would," retorted Stingaree, sharply. "Don't think about yourself so much; think about her for a change."

The young man turned dusky in the moonlight; he was wounded where the Bishop had wounded him, and Stingaree was quick to see it—as quick to turn the knife round in the wound.

"What a bushranger!" he jeered. "Put your plucky little mother in a side-saddle and she'd make two of you—ten of you—twenty of a puny, namby-pamby, conceited young idiot like you! Upon my word, Melvin, if I had a mother like you I should be ashamed of myself. I never had, I may tell you, or I shouldn't have come down to a dog's life like this."

The bushranger paused to watch the effect of his insults. It was not quite what he wanted. The youth would not hang his head. And, if he did not answer back, he looked back doggedly enough; for he could be dogged, in a passive way; it was his one hard quality, the knot in a character of deal. Stingaree glanced up the road once more, but only for an instant.

"It is a dog's life," he went on, "whether you believe it or not. But it takes a bulldog to live it, and don't you forget it. It's no life for a young poodle like you! You can't stick up a better man than yourself, not more than once or twice. It requires something more than a six-shooter, and a good deal more than was put into you, my son! But you shall see for yourself; look over your shoulder."

Oswald did so, and started in a fashion that set the bushranger nodding his scorn. It was only a pair of lamps still close together in the distance up the road.

"The coach!" exclaimed the excited youth.

"Exactly," said Stingaree, "and I'm going to stick it up."

Excitement grew to frenzy in a flash.

"I'll help you!"

"You'll do no such thing. But you shall see how it's done, and then ask yourself candidly if it's nice work and if you're the man to do it. Ride a hundred yards farther in, tether your horse quickly in the thickest scrub you can find, then run back and climb into the fork of this gum-tree. You'll have time; if you're sharp I'll give you a leg up. But I sha'n't be surprised if I don't see you again!"

There is no saying what Oswald might have done, but for these last words. Certain it is that they set him galloping with an oath, and brought him back panting in another minute. The coach-lamps were not much wider apart. Stingaree awaited him, also on foot, and quicker than the telling Oswald was ensconced on high where he could see through the meagre drooping leaves with very little danger of being seen.

"And if you come down before I'm done and gone—if it's not to glory—I'll run some lead through you! You'll be the first!"

Oswald perched reflecting on this final threat; and the scene soon enacted before his eyes was viewed as usual through the aura of his own egoism. He longed all the time to be taking part in it; he could see himself so distinctly at the work—save for about a minute in the middle, when for once in his life he held his breath and trembled for other skins.

There had been no unusual feature. The life-size coach-lamps had shown their mountain-range of outside passengers against moon-lit

sky or trees. A cigar paled and reddened between the teeth of one, plain wreaths of smoke floated from his lips, with but an instant's break, when Stingaree rode out and stopped the coach. The three leaders reared; the two wheelers were pulled almost to their haunches. The driver was docile in deed, though profane in word; and Stingaree himself discovered a horrifying vocabulary out of keeping with his reputation. In incredibly few minutes driver and passengers were formed in a line and robbed in rotation, all but two ladies who were kept inside unmolested. A flagrant Irishman declared it was the proudest day of his life, and Oswald's heart went out to him, though it rather displeased him to find his own sentiments shared by the vulgar. The man with the cigar kept it glowing all the time. The



"OSWALD WAS ENSCONCED ON HIGH."



"OSWALD WATCHED THE MARE TOSS HER RIDER LIKE A BULL."

mail-bags were not demanded on this occasion. Stingaree was too far afield to dally over them. He was still collecting purse and watch, when Oswald's young blood froze in the stiffening limbs he dared not move.

One of the ladies had got down from the coach on the off side, and behold! it was a man wrapped in a rug, which dropped from him as he crept round behind the horses; at their head stood the lily mare, as if doing her own nefarious part by her own

kind. In a twinkling the mad adventurer was on her back, and all this time Oswald longed to jump down, or at least to shout a warning to his hero, but, as usual, his desires were unproductive of word or deed. And then Stingaree saw his man.

He did not fire; he did not shift sight or barrel for a moment from the docile file before him. "Barmaid! Barmaid, my pet!" he cried, and heard rather than saw what happened.

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But Oswald watched the mare stop, prick her ears under the hammering of unspurred heels, spin round, bucking as she spun, and toss her rider like a bull. There in the moonlight he lay like lead, with leaden face upturned to the shuddering youngster in the tree.

"One of you a doctor?" asked Stingaree, checking a forward movement of the file.

"I am."

The cigar was paling between a finger and thumb.

"Then come you here and have a look at him. The rest of you move at your peril!"

Stingaree led the way, stepping backward, but not as far as the injured man, who sat up ruefully as the bushranger sprang into the saddle.

"Another yard, and I'd have grabbed your ankles!" said the man on the ground.

"You're a good man, but I know more about this game than you," the outlaw answered, riding to his distance and reining up. "If I didn't you might have had me, but you must think of something better for Stingaree!"

He galloped his mare into the bush and Oswald clung in lonely terror to his tree. A snatch of conversation called him to attention. The plundered party were clambering philosophically to their seats, while the driver blasphemed delightedly over the integrity of his mails.

"That wasn't Stingaree," said one.

"You bet it was!"

"How much? He never would work so far south."

"And he's nuts on mails."

"But if it wasn't Stingaree, who was it?"

"It was him all right. Look at the mare."

"She isn't the only white 'orse ever foaled," remarked the driver, sorting his fistful of reins.

"But who else could it have been?"

The driver uttered an inspired imprecation.

"I can tell you. I chanst to live in this here township we're comin' to. On second thoughts, I'll keep it to myself till we get there."

And he cracked his whip.

Oswald himself rode back to the township before the moon went down. He was very heavy with his own reflections. How magnificent! It had all surpassed his most extravagant imaginings—in audacity, in expedition, in simple mastery of the mutable many by the dominant one. He forgave Stingaree his gibes and insults; he could have forgiven a horse-whipping from that

king of men. Stingaree had been his imaginary god before; he was a realized ideal from this night forth, and the reality outdid the dream.

But the fly of self must always poison this young man's ointment, and to-night there was some excuse from his degenerate point of view. He must give it up. Stingaree was right; it was only one man in thousands who could do unerringly what he had done that night. Oswald Melvin was not that man. He saw it for himself at last. But it was a bitter hour for him. Life in the music-shop would fall very flat after this; he would be dishonoured before his only friends, the unworthy hobbledehoyes who were to have joined his gang; he could not tell them what had happened, not at least until he had invented some less inglorious part for himself, and that was a difficulty in view of newspaper reports of the sticking-up. He could scarcely tell them a true word of what had passed between himself and Stingaree. If only he might yet grow more like the master! If only he might still hope to follow in his startling steps!

So aspiring, vainly as now he knew, Oswald Melvin rode slowly back into the excited town, and past the lighted police-barracks, in the innocence of that portion of his heart. But one had flown, running ahead of him, and two in uniform, followed by that one, dashed out on Oswald and the old white screw.

"Surrender!" sang out one.

"In the Queen's name!" added the other.

"Call yourself Stingaree?" panted the runner.

Our egoist was quick enough to grasp their meaning, but quicker still to see and to seize the chance of a crazy lifetime. Always acute where his own vanity was touched, his promptitude was for once on a par with his perceptions.

"Had your eye on me long?" he inquired, delightfully, as he dismounted.

"Long enough," said one policeman. The other was busy plucking loaded revolvers from the desperado's pockets. A crowd had formed.

"If you're looking for the loot," he went on, raising his voice for the benefit of all, "you may look. I sha'n't tell you, and it'll take you all your time!"

But a surprise was in store for prisoner and police alike. Every stolen watch and all the missing money were discovered no later than next morning in the bush quite close to the scene of the outrage. There had been no



“‘SURRENDER!’ SANG OUT ONE.”

attempt to hide them; they lay in a heap, dumped from the saddle, with no more depreciation than a broken watch-glass. True to his new character, Oswald learned this development without flinching; his ready comment was in next day's papers.

“There was nothing worth having,” he had maintained, and did not see the wisdom of the boast until a lawyer called and pointed

out that it contained the nucleus of a strong defence.

“I'll defend myself, thank you,” said the inflated fool.

“Then you'll make a mess of it, and deserve all you get. And it would be a pity to spoil such a good defence.”

“What is the defence?”

“You did it for a joke, of course!”

Oswald smiled inscrutably, and dismissed his visitor with a lordly promise to consider the proposition and that lawyer's claims upon the case. Never was such triumph tasted in guilty immunity as was this innocent man's under cloud of guilt so apparent as to impose on every mind. He had but carried out a notorious intention; for his few friends were the first to betray their captain, albeit his bold bearing and magnanimous smiles won an admiration which they had never before vouchsafed him in their hearts. He was, indeed, a different man. He had lived to see Stingaree in action, and now he modelled himself from the life. The only doubt was as to whether at the last of that business he had actually avowed himself Stingaree or not. There might have been trouble about the horse, but fortunately for the enthusiastic prisoner the man who had been thrown was allowed to proceed on a pressing journey to the Barcoo. There was a plethora of evidence without his; besides, the hide-and-bone mare was called Barmaid, after the original, and it was known that Oswald had tried to teach the old creature tricks; above all, the prisoner had never pretended to deny his guilt. Still, this matter of the horses gave him a certain sense of insecurity in his cosy cell.

He had awakened to find himself not only deliciously notorious, but actually more of a man than in his heart of hearts he had dared to hope. The tenacity and consistency of his pose were alike remarkable. Even in the overweening cause of egoism he had never shown so much character in his life. Yet he shuddered to realize that, given the usual time for reflection before his great moment,

that moment might have proved as mean as many another when the spirit had been wine and the flesh water. There was, in fine, but one feature of the affair which even Oswald Melvin, drunk with notoriety and secretly sanguine of a nominal punishment, could not contemplate with absolute satisfaction. But that feature followed the others into the papers which kept him intoxicated. And a bundle of these papers found their adventurous way to the latest fastness of Stingaree in the mallee.

The real villain dropped his eye-glass, clapped it in again, and did his best to crack it with his stare. Student of character as he was, he could not have conceived such a development in such a character. He read on, more enlightened than amused. "To think he had the pluck!" he murmured, as he dropped that *Australasian* and took up the next week's. He was filled with admiration, but soon a frown and then an oath came to put an end to it. "The little fool," he cried, "he'll kill that woman! He can't have kept it up." He sorted the papers for the latest of all—a sinful publican saved them for him—and therein read that Oswald Melvin had been committed for trial, and that his only concern was for the condition of his mother, which was still unchanged, and had seemed latterly to distress the prisoner very much.

"I'll distress him!" roared Stingaree to the mallee. "I'll distress him, if we change places for it!"

Riding all night, and as much as he dared by day, it was some hundred hours before he paid his third and last visit to the Melvins' music-shop. He rode boldly to the door, but he rode a piebald mare not to be confused in the most suspicious mind with the no more conspicuous Barmaid. It is true the brown parts smelt of Condy's fluid, and were at once strange and seemingly a little tender to the touch. But Stingaree allowed no meddling with his mount; and only a very sinful publican, very many leagues back, was in the secret.

There were no lighted windows behind the shop to-night. The whole place was in darkness, and Stingaree knocked in vain. A neighbour appeared upon the next veranda.

"Who is it you want?" he asked.

"Mrs. Melvin."

"It's no use knocking for her."

"Is she dead?"

"Not that I know of; but she can't be long for this world."

"Where is she now?"

"Bishop's Lodge; they say Miss Methuen's with her day and night."

For it was in the days of the Bishop's daughter, who had a strong mind but no sense of humour, and a heart only fickle in its own affairs. Miss Methuen made an admirable, if a somewhat too assiduous and dictatorial, nurse. She had, however, a fund of real sympathy with the afflicted, and Mrs. Melvin's only serious complaint (which



HE RODE BOLDLY TO THE DOOR.

she intended to die without uttering) was that she was never left alone with her grief by day or night. It was Miss Methuen who, sitting with rather ostentatious patience in the dark, at the open window, until her patient should fall or pretend to be asleep, saw a man ride a piebald horse in at the gate and then, half-way up the drive, suspiciously dismount and lead his horse into a tempting shrubbery.

Stingaree did not often change his mind at the last moment, but he knew the man on whose generosity he was about to throw himself, which was to know further that that generosity would be curbed by judgment, and to reflect that he was least likely to be deprived of a horse whose whereabouts was known only to himself. There was but one lighted room when he eventually stole upon the house; it had a veranda to itself; and in

the bright frame of the French windows, which stood open, sat the Bishop with his Bible on his knees.

"Yes, I know you," said he, putting his marker in the place as Stingaree entered, boots in one hand and something else in the other. "I thought we should meet again. Do you mind putting that thing back in your pocket?"

"Will you promise not to call a soul?"

"Oh, dear, yes."

"You weren't expecting me, were you?" cried Stingaree, suspiciously.

"I've been expecting you for months," returned the Bishop. "You knew my address, but I hadn't yours. We were bound to meet again."

Stingaree smiled as he took his revolver by the barrel and carried it across the room to Dr. Methuen.

"What's that for? I don't want it; put it in your own pocket. At least I can trust you not to take my life in cold blood."

The Bishop seemed nettled and annoyed. Stingaree loved him.

"I don't come to take anything, much less life," he said. "I come to save it, if it is not too late."

"To save life—here?"

"In your house."

"But whom do you know of my household?"

"Mrs. Melvin. I have had the honour of meeting her twice, though each time she was unaware of the dishonour of meeting me. The last time I promised to try to save her unhappy son from himself. I found him waiting to waylay the coach, told him who I was, and had ten minutes to try to cure him in. He wouldn't listen to reason; insult ran like water off his back. I did my best to show him what a life it was he longed to lead, and how much more there was in it than a loaded revolver. He wouldn't take my word for it, however, so I put him out of harm's way, up in a tree; and when the coach came along I gave him as brutal an exhibition of the art of bushranging as I could



"STINGAREE ENTERED, BOOTS IN ONE HAND AND SOMETHING ELSE IN THE OTHER."

without spilling blood. I promise you it was for no other reason. What did I want with watches? What were a few pounds to me? I dropped the lot that the lad might know."

The Bishop started to his gaitered legs.

"And he's actually innocent all the time?"

"Of the deed, as the babe unborn."

"Then why in the wide world—"

Dr. Methuen stood beggared of further speech. His mind was too plain and sane for immediate understanding of such a type as Oswald Melvin. But the bushranger hit off that young man's character in half-a-dozen trenchant phrases.

"He must be let out, and it may save his mother's life; but if he were mine I would rather he had done the other deed!" exclaimed the Bishop. "But what about you?" he added, suddenly, his eyes resting on his sardonic visitor, who had disguised himself far less than his horse. "It will mean giving yourself up."

"No. You know me. You can spread what I've told you."

The Bishop shifted uneasily on his hearth-rug.

"I may not see my way to that," said he. "Besides, you must have run a lot of risks to do this good action; how do you know you haven't been recognised already? I would have known you anywhere."

"But you have undertaken not to raise an alarm, my lord."

"I shall not break my promise."

There was a grim regret in the Bishop's voice. Stingaree thought he understood it.

"Thank you," he said.

"Don't thank me, pray!" Dr. Methuen could be quite testy on occasion. "I have other duties than to you, you know, and I only answer for my actions during the actual period of our interview. There are many things I should like to say to you, my brother," a gentler voice went on, "but this is hardly the time for me to say them. But there is one question I should like to ask you for the peace of both our souls, and for

the maintenance of my own belief in human nature." He threw up an episcopal hand dramatically. "If you earnestly and honestly wished to save this poor lady's life, and there were no other way, would you then be man enough to give yourself up—to give your liberty for her life?"

Stingaree took time to think. His eyes were brightly fixed upon the Bishop's. Yet they saw a little bedroom just as plain, an English lady standing by the empty bed, and at its foot his own portrait, armed to the teeth.

"For hers?" said he. "Yes, like a shot!"

"I'm thankful to hear it," replied the Bishop, with most fervent relief. "I only wish you could have the opportunity. But now you never will. My brother, if you look round, you will see why!"

Stingaree looked round without a word. In the Bishop's eyes at the last instant he had learned what to expect. A firing-party of four stocking-soled constables were drawn across the open French windows, their levelled rifles poking through.

The bushranger looked over his shoulder with a bitter smile. "You've done me, after all!" said he, and stretched out empty hands.

"It was done before I saw you," the Bishop made answer. "I had already sent for the police."

One had entered excitedly by an inner door.

"And he didn't do you at all!" cried the voice of high hysteria. "It was I who saw you—it was I who guessed who it was! Oh, father, why have you been talking so long to such a dreadful man? I made sure he would shoot you, and you'd still be shot if they had to shoot him! Move—move—move!"

Stingaree looked at the strong-minded girl, shrill with her triumph, quite carried away by her excitement, all undaunted by the prospect of bloodshed before her eyes. And it was he who moved, with but a shrug of the shoulders, and gave himself up without another sign.

(To be concluded.)