



Henry Handel Richardson
The Fortunes of Richard Mahony

AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE SOCIETY GOLD MEDAL 1926

INTRODUCED BY PETER CRAVEN

Text Classics



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ETHEL FLORENCE LINDESAY RICHARDSON was born into an affluent Melbourne family in 1870. Her father, Walter, was a doctor of medicine. When Richardson was nine he died of syphilis after being admitted to Melbourne's Kew mental asylum. His illness and suffering had a huge impact on his family.

After his death, Richardson's mother took her children to Maldon, where she worked as the postmistress.

Richardson was sent to board at the Presbyterian Ladies' College in 1883—an experience that provided material for her novel *The Getting of Wisdom*. At school she developed into a talented pianist and tennis player.

In 1888, she travelled to Europe with her mother and studied at the Leipzig Conservatorium, where she met John George Robertson, a Scottish expert in German literature. The pair married and settled in London. She published her first novel, *Maurice Guest*, in 1908. She took the pen name of Henry Handel Richardson and used it for all of her books.

Richardson made her only journey back to Australia in 1912 to complete her research for the trilogy that would become *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Her final novel, *The Young Cosima*, appeared in 1939. Henry Handel Richardson died in Sussex in 1946.

PETER CRAVEN is one of Australia's best-known literary critics. He was a founding editor of *Scripta*, *Quarterly Essay* and the *Best of* anthologies.

ALSO BY HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON

Fiction

Maurice Guest

The Getting of Wisdom

The Young Cosima

Two Studies

The End of a Childhood

The Adventures of Cuffy Mahony

Non-fiction

Myself When Young

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony
Henry Handel Richardson



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INTRODUCTION

No Success Like Failure by Peter Craven

BOOK I

Australia Fell

BOOK II

The Way Home

BOOK III

Ultima Thule

I

Only Australia could have coughed up *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. A doctor on the goldfields meets a girl and makes good. He thrives, he fails, he goes off his head. He brings all his bright hopes crashing down around him because he has no capacity for practical life. Call that a national epic. No wonder we settled for the doggerel and the bushrangers.

Patrick White read *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* as a young man, working as a jackaroo, and thought it was wonderful. He was not wrong. You could argue that the impulse to create an Australian art of fiction filled with that sense of calamity that can rise to tragedy, an art exalted in its scope however rooted in the notations of naturalism, and open to the way Australia can impose itself on the geography of the imagination as a thing of doom, rather than good fortune, all harks back to *Richard Mahony*. White might have said, with some truth, that he had come out of that rubbishy Ballarat goldfield too.

For some people the naturalism has always been the trouble with *Richard Mahony*. Germaine Greer wrote that Henry Handel Richardson chose to embrace the convention of naturalism at precisely the moment when those conventions died. It's a resounding judgement, though not one that can be sustained. *Richard Mahony* is a great, if belated novel: *Australia Felix* was published in 1917, *The Way Home* in 1925 and *Ultima Thule* in 1929, seven years after Joyce's *Ulysses* and the death of Proust.

It is, of course, an old story that Australian achievement can be old-fashioned, that it can be illuminated by supernovas which are—definitionally—no longer there. Dates tell us something. Ethel Florence Lindsay Richardson (who needed a male moniker as surely as George Eliot did) was born in Melbourne in 1870. That's a year before Proust, five years before Thomas Mann, three years after John Galsworthy and eight after Edith Wharton. And it's three years before Ford Madox Ford was born.

Well, she could never have got the formal perfection of *The Good Soldier* or the supple mediations between realism and interior monologue that make Tietjens in the

trenches seem like such a luminous middle way between Joyce and Evelyn Waugh. She does not, like Thomas Mann, master an old method and go on to animate a new: *Richard Mahony* has none of the modernist concentration, the claustrophobic and colossal form or intensity of *The Magic Mountain*, but in its limited and lopsided way it has something of the same steadiness of gaze of *Buddenbrooks* even if the familial focus is narrower to the point of seeming microscopic. There is too something of the same sense of a stretch of time (the period from the gold rushes to, by way of irony, the boom of Marvellous Melbourne) being intimately and absolutely known. Henry Handel Richardson did not, like Galsworthy with his Forsytes, win the Nobel Prize (though she deserved to) but she has the sense of drama and the piercing poignancy that Edith Wharton gets in a nineteenth-century novel, after the letter, like *The House of Mirth*.

Terence Davies filmed *The House of Mirth* and Gillian Anderson was staggering in it. And before that Martin Scorsese came as close as he ever could to Visconti with his film of *The Age of Innocence*. The difficulty with *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is that it has never become a shared myth by being filmed. Bruce Beresford, who filmed Richardson's school story *The Getting of Wisdom* with such effortless authority, has written a screenplay of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* but no one, so far, will come within cooee of producing it.

It might be a different story if David Lean had filmed *Richard Mahony* as he was edging towards epic in the 1950s. Or Tony Richardson, who made *Ned Kelly*, and described Australia as a beautiful country full of horrible people. It's his father-in-law Michael Redgrave who I see as Mahony: the silver voice, the refined face, the capacity to represent an imperviousness which is the other side of excruciation.

The voice of Mahony is an extraordinary thing in the way it wraps itself, delusively and magnetically, yes, mesmerically, round his wilfulness and his capacity to pluck suffering for himself and his loved ones as another man might pluck a flower.

Why had he ever left Melbourne? What evil spirit had entered into him and driven him forth? What was that in him, over which he had no power, which proved incapable of adhesion to any soil or fixed abode? For he might arm himself, each time anew, with another motive for plucking up his roots: it remained mere ratiocination, a sop flung to his reason, and in no wise got at the heart of the matter. Wherein lay the fault, the defect, that had made of him throughout his life a hunted man?...harried from place to place, from country to country. Other men set up a goal, achieved it, and remained content. He had always been in flight.—But from what? Who were his pursuers? From what shadow did he run?—And in these endless nights, when he lay and searched his heart as never before, he thought he read the answer to the riddle. Himself he was the hunter and the hunted: the merciless in pursuit and the panting prey.

Mahony's predicament (which is never separate from his overweening blindness)

that his sense of his own superiority—which is real—is forever casting him down because he wears it like a fatality. Nowhere in Australian literature is there a more deadly and prophetic portrait of the national tendency (among intellectuals and other bright people) to see the singularity of the self as evidence of the fact—as a form of ontologic entitlement rather than happenstance—that *ego solus*, yours truly, will always be the brightest person in any room. Whereas just this way of seeing things—which Mahony exhibits to the point of hubris—is the abiding face of national immaturity.

This may be why a certain kind of Australian sensibility (literally or spiritually expatriated) resiles from this towering vertiginous tragedy. Mahony is mired in his Australianness even though ‘Australia’ in its various more or less comfortable manifestations is the destiny he shuns, starting with Ballarat where he first finds success.

It’s not hard to see how the combination of factors that make up the obsession with the power of Richardson’s masterpiece can come across with an all but crippling sense of embarrassment. That, I suspect, is the true source of the objection to the novel’s naturalism. In *The Getting of Wisdom* a limited part of Henry Handel Richardson’s experience is made to startle and soar through the guise of the school story. Societies which are worried about whether art is possible for them sometimes perpetrate literary achievement through the cover of writing for children. Everything from *Huckleberry Finn* to *Kim* to the novels of Sonya Harnett and *The Getting of Wisdom* does this.

In *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, by contrast, the raw material of the author’s background is utilised with an aptitude that might appear gargantuan and unbalanced. Young Ethel’s father was a doctor, a man of exceptional talent, who rose high and fell mightily. He turned his face from the light of Australian colonial success, was financially ruined and at one point certified as insane.

It seems unpromising material for a three-volume nineteenth-century-style novel replete with section titles which resound with the grimmest kind of irony when we realise the horrors they disclose. And indeed the title itself is chief among those ironies because the pivot of the book is precisely ill luck or rather a kind of malign fortune, not quite identified with character as the demon agency of fate or reducible to simple misfortune.

Yes, you can call it a mismatch of treatment and theme if you must but the limitations of the novel—not least the way it constantly seems on the point of disclosing a world which then shies away from—are trivial compared to its grandeurs which wring the heart. Henry Handel Richardson simply persists in the folly of her own literary conception. She is telling a story about what goes wrong with a career and a marriage that might be as concentrated as *Thérèse Raquin* and yet her instinct to link it up with the offcuts of the broad canvas of Australian life is what makes *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* so riveting in its reality.

It is funny to reflect that, in the century dominated by Proust and Joyce, each of whom used the raw material of life (never mind Swann and Bloom and the girls, the transpositions and transfigurations of personal sexual preference) as a sufficient literary

dominion, Australia's belated nineteenth-century novel, yielding the rich readerly satisfactions of life as it's felt and sensed, should come so patently out of the skeletons in the author's cupboard: the ruined mad father who forsook her when young and haunted her forever.

II

She was, of course, an Australian prodigy, young Ethel. She studied music in Leipzig and her fictional avatar in Mahony, the boy, Cuffy, never did. And by the time she was twenty-five she was married to J. G. Robertson, later professor of German at the University of London. Are there shades of George Eliot here, of Lewes, of Casaubon? Who knows? Only the work matters.

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is the great novel of that older Australia that lurched into nationhood like the aftermath to a bad dream. In a world that had cheered itself to Banjo Paterson and grown melancholy with Lawson and his bush undertaker this was the recapitulated image of a nation seen through the dark glass of the mind of a man whose grasp on life is so unsteady because it is essentially imaginative in a society that acknowledges no yardstick but material success. Or which he sees in this way because he interiorises a diminished version of its values. *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is tightly focused on a man of great fineness who comes apart and the woman who cherishes him like a mother, a child, a saint. Mahony's wife Mary (who starts life as Polly) is a magnificent portrait of a dark Geelong girl of sixteen who enacts the most extraordinary pietà over the husband who has become like a child whom she loves body and soul.

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is written in a high, nearly stiff style and incorporates a good deal of European polish, is stately, rhythmical, visually precise and full of the points of view and idioms of the characters it wrestles with. Sometimes, as in the myriad details of Mahony's consciousness, the effect is of a sculpted narrowness that can formulate anything about the world but can never capture the blindness that attends its own insights. We see him following the will o' the wisp of a more refined life in England, a more remunerative life in some new nook of Victoria, always isolated from everyone except his beloved wife, whom he cabins and confines so selfishly, but who continues to adore him no matter how cold-eyed she is about his futile apprehension of the treasure at the end of the rainbow. It is a superb portrait of a marriage and the way in which a couple can hoodwink themselves through the magic scattered by intelligence even in the teeth of idiocy.

Here is Mary's voice of female sanity:

But that night—after a sheerly destructive evening, in which Mary had never ceased to plead with, to throw herself on the mercy of, an invisible opponent: I give you my word for it, he wasn't himself that day...what with the awful

heat...and the length of the drive...and the horse wouldn't go...he was so upset over it. And then the loss of our little girl...that was a blow he has never properly got over. For he's not a young man any more. He's not what he was...any one will tell you that! But they'll tell you, too, that he has never, never neglected a patient because of it. He's the most conscientious of men...he has always worked to the last ounce of strength, put himself and the state of his own health last of all...I have known him tramp off of a morning when anybody with half an eye could see that he ought to be in bed. And so kindhearted! If a patient is poor, or has fallen on evil days, he will always treat him free of charge. Oh, surely people would need to have hearts of stone, to stand out against pleas such as these?

It's a workmanlike technique but the cumulative effect, through every detail of the articulation, is one of truth.

Although it is variegated at every point in its local detail *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* has a monolithic coherence (as well as a certain thematic monotony) that means that it should be read in one big gulp, more or less quickly, at a steady rate. It has a rich supporting cast but Richardson is never quite sure how interested in them she is. This is evident at one glittering extremity from the figure of the alienated pharmacist Mahony meets in Ballarat who is an even more recklessly articulate nihilist than he is. But it's also there in the depiction of his early comrade-in-arms, Purdy, good-looking and cavalier in the Eureka days, who becomes bald and pudgy in middle age without losing the marvellous overheard quality of his dialogue.

Henry Handel Richardson is splendid at her vernacular dialogue though her notation of it in a crypto-Dickensian spelling is often homophonically inept. She does, however, give repeated signs of having a broader and somewhat more populist range of skills than she chooses to concentrate in *Richard Mahony*. Characters are realised at one juncture and then fade offstage to be revived or not as the merest afterthought or convenience. This is lifelike (in the sense that it mirrors the randomness and serendipity of life) but with some principle of absentmindedness but it suggests a nearly reckless disdain for structure and a lack of interest in the symbolic potency of the subordinate characters.

Mary's girlfriend, Tilly, a sane common Australian woman, is convincing but—given that she is an important figure who recurs, almost chorically, to put in her two bob's worth about the misfortunes of the action and the further limits of Mahony's miscalculations—we wish she were more integrated into the action as it stands. In practice *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is full of characters on the sidelines who are like the revenants of past lives. The scene, late in the piece, where the lawyer O'Connell comes to Mary's rescue—and we see tears in what have always been cold eyes—is the kind of touch we could do with a bit more of. Think, by way of contrast, of how the book kicks on when Richard and Mary's son, Cuffy, appears because he serves as a fo

to both his parents. *Ultima Thule* is illuminated by his voice. His shame at his father and his desperate blind pity for him which co-exists with his red-faced horror and confusion and loathing are beyond praise. So too is the moment when the old German professor realises he is a musical prodigy like his creator.

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is an all but lost continent of a book. It is a fierce, fierce lament for the destruction that rides over human life and it is also (in an incidental way) a book that spits in the face of every cliché about the ease of Australian life. It is a novel about poverty and worldly failure and the grind and nightmare of a life that is ruled by money which does its best to ride roughshod over every impulse towards simplicity and delicacy and truth. It is a book written in defiance of materialism and complacency, full of hatred of the vision of Australia summed up by James McAuley's words: 'The people are kindly with nothing inside them.'

And it is also—because it is a great book, a book full of grace and truth—a critique of precisely that attitude. Richard Mahony has everything inside him. Every scorpion and sensitivity which the mind can use to destroy itself, together with the people and places loved, is on show, seething and sympathetic. And so are those things which nurture and resist: a woman's love, a child's fear, the tears that make the world cherishable even as all runs down.

Henry Handel Richardson, this self-consciously compulsive, self-loathing Australian, had drunk deep of her Dostoyevsky and her Strindberg, even of her Freud, long before the world had. That is neither here nor there except that they add an extra worldliness, a tang of subtlety to this big, blind, stumbling block of a novel, this love letter written in blood and bile to a vanished Australia and the father whose ghost would always be heard.

I think of William Empson saying that he imagined the Book of Ecclesiastes had been written by a not very successful man. *Richard Mahony* is a dark impassioned homage to every vanity that sparkled like dew in the life of a terribly unsuccessful man. It might as easily, this long unwieldy variation on Zolaesque schematism, have been called *An Australian Tragedy*. But the brightness that falls from the air in Mahony's mind deserves the silver and the descant of a Redgrave voice.

More than any other novel in our literature, more than Voss, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* deserves the accolade of the Great Australian Novel. It's a delusion, of course, a quest for the golden boomerang doomed to futility because only the Australian cult of success could make such a grail seem worth the candle. Still, it is a mighty and moving work, this bursting-at-the-seams anti-epic to the muse of a vanity which sees every golden bowl broken and every silver cord loosed. The last thing Henry Handel Richardson wanted was Australian success. She aspired to be part of European literature. Should we imagine *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* as the work of a not very successful woman?

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony

BOOK I

AUSTRALIA FELIX

PROEM

In a shaft on the Gravel Pits, a man had been buried alive. At work in a deep wet hole, he had recklessly omitted to slab the walls of a drive; uprights and tailors yielded under the lateral pressure and the rotten earth collapsed, bringing down the roof in its train. The digger fell forward on his face, his ribs jammed across his pick, his arms pinned to his sides, nose and mouth pressed into the sticky mud as into a mask; and over his defenceless body, with a roar that burst his ear-drums, broke stupendous masses of earth.

His mates at the windlass went staggering back from the belch of violently discharged air: it tore the wind-sail to strips, sent stones and gravel flying, loosened planks and props. Their shouts drew no response, the younger and nimbler of the two—he was a mere boy, for all his amazing growth and beard—put his foot in the bucket and went down on the rope, kicking off the sides of the shaft with his free foot. A group of diggers, gathering round the pit-head, waited for the tug at the rope. It was quick in coming; and the lad was hauled to the surface. No hope: both drives had fallen in; the bottom of the shaft was blocked. The crowd melted with a “Poor Bill—God rest his soul!” or with a silent shrug. Such accidents were not infrequent; each man might thank his stars it was not he who lay cooling down below. And so, since no more washdirt would be raised from this hole, the party that worked there made off for the nearest grog-shop, to wet their throats to the memory of the dead, and to discuss future plans.

All but one: a lean and haggard-looking man of some five and forty, who was known to his comrades as Long Jim. On hearing his mate’s report he had sunk heavily down on a log, and there he sat, a pannikin of raw spirit in his hand, the tears coursing ruts down cheeks scabby with yellow mud, his eyes glassy as marbles with those that had still to fall.

He wept, not for the dead man, but for himself. This accident was the last link in a chain of ill-luck that had been forging ever since he first followed the diggings. He only needed to put his hand to a thing, and luck deserted it. In all the sinkings he had been connected with, he had not once caught his pick in a nugget or got the run of the gutter; the “bottoms” had always proved barren, drives being exhausted without his raising the colour. At the present claim he and his mates had tailed for months overcoming one difficulty after another. The slabbing, for instance, had cost them infinite trouble; it was roughly done, too, and, even after the pins were in, great flakes of earth would come tumbling down from between the joints, on one occasion nearly knocking silly the man who was below. The

before they had slabbed a depth of three times nine, they had got into water, and in this they worked for the next sixty feet. They were barely rid of it, when the two adjoining claims were abandoned, and in came the flood again—this time they had to fly for their lives before it, so rapid was its rise. Not the strongest man could stand in this ice-cold water for more than three days on end—the bark slabs stank in it, too, like the skins in a tanner’s yard—and they had been forced to quit work till it subsided. He and another man had gone to the hills, to hew trees for more slabs; the rest to the grog-shop. From there, when it was feasible to make a fresh start, they had to be dragged, some blind drunk, the rest blind stupid from their booze. That had been the hardest job of any: keeping the party together. There had only been eight in all—a hand-to-mouth number for a deep wet hole. Then, one had died of dysentery, contracted from working constantly in water up to his middle; another had been nabbed in a man-hunt and clapped into the “logs.” And finally, but a day or two back, the three men who completed the night-shift had deserted for a new “rush” to the Avoca. Now, his pal had gone, too. There was nothing left for him, Long Jim, to do, but to take his dish and turn fossicker; or even to aim no higher than washing over the tailings rejected by the fossicker.

At the thought his tears flowed anew. He cursed the day on which he had first set foot on Ballarat. “It’s ’ell for white men—’ell, that’s what it is!”

“’Ere, ’ave another drink, matey, and fergit yer bloody troubles.”

His re-filled pannikin drained, he grew warmer round the heart; and sang the praises of his former life. He had been a lamplighter in the old country, and for many years had known no more arduous task than that of tramping round certain streets three times daily, ladder on shoulder, bitch on heel, to attend the little flames that helped to dispel the London dark. And he might have jogged on this up to three score years and ten, had he never lent an ear to the tales that were being told of a wonderful country, where, for the mere act of stooping, and with your naked hand, you could pick up a fortune from the ground. Might the rogues who had spread these lies be damned to all eternity! They he had swallowed them only too willingly; and, leaving the old woman wringing her hands, had taken every farthing of his savings and set sail for Australia. That was close on three years ago. For all he knew, his wife might be dead and buried by this time; or sitting in the almshouse. She could not write and only in the early days had an occasional newspaper reached him, on which, alongside the Queen’s head, she had put the mark they had agreed on, to show that she was still alive. He would probably never see her again, but would end his days where he was. Well, they wouldn’t be many; this was not a place that made old bones. And, as he sat, worked on by grief and liquor, he was seized by a desperate homesickness for the old country. Why had he ever been fool enough to leave it? He shut his eyes, and all the well-known sights and sounds of the familiar streets came back to him. He saw himself on his rounds of a winter’s afternoon, when each lamp had a halo in the foggy air; heard the pit-pat of his four-footer behind him, the bump of the ladder against the prong of the lamp-post. His friend the policeman’s glazed stovepipe shone out at the corner; from the distance came the tinkle of the muffin man’s bell, the cries of the buy-a-brooms. He remembered the glowing charcoal in the stoves of the chestnut and potato sellers; the appetising smell of the cooked-fish shops; the fragrant steam of the hot dark coffee at the twopenny stall, when he had turned shivering out of bed; he sighed for the light and jollity of the “Hare and Hounds” on a Saturday night. He would never see anything of the kind again. No; here, under bare blue skies, out of which the sun frizzled you alive; here, where it could rain without at once being a flood; where the very winds blew contrarily, hot from the north and bitter chill from the south; where, no matter how great the heat by day, the night would as likely as not be nipping cold: here he was doomed to end his life, and to end it, for all the yellow sunshine, more hopelessly knotted and gnarled with rheumatism than if, dawn after dawn, he had gone out in a cutting

north-easter, or groped his way through the grey fog-mists sent up by grey Thames.

~~Thus he sat and brooded, all the hatred of the unwilling exile for the land that gives him house room burning in his breast.~~

Who the man was, who now lay deep in a grave that fitted him as a glove fits the hand, careless of the pass to which he had brought his mate; who this really was, Long Jim knew no more than the rest. Young Bill had never spoken out. They had chummed together on the seventy-odd-mile tram from Melbourne; had boiled a common billy and slept side by side in rain-soaked blankets, under the scanty hair of a she-oak. That was in the days of the first great stampede to the goldfields, when the embryo seaports were as empty as though they were plague-ridden, and every man who had the use of his legs was on the wide bush-track, bound for the north. It was better to be two than one in the medley of bullock-teams, lorries, carts and pack-horses, of dog-teams, wheelbarrows and swagmen where the air rang with oaths, shouts and hammering hoofs, with whip-cracking and bullock-prodding in this hurly-burly of thieves, bushrangers and foreigners, of drunken convicts and deserting sailors, of slit-eyed Chinese and apt-handed Lascars, of expirees and ticket-of-leave men, of Jews, Turks and other infidels. Long Jim, himself stunned by it all: by the pother of landing and of finding a roof to cover him; by the ruinous price of bare necessaries; by the length of this unheard-of walk that lay before his town-bred feet: Long Jim had gladly accepted the young man's company on the road. Originally, for no more than this; at heart he distrusted Young Bill, because of his fine-gentleman air and intended shaking the lad off as soon as they reached the diggings. There, a man must, for safety sake, be alone, when he stooped to pick up his fortune. But at first sight of the strange, wild scene that met his eyes he hastily changed his mind. And so the two of them had stuck together; and he had never had cause to regret it. For all his lily-white hands and finical speech Young Bill had worked like a nigger, standing by his mate through the latter's disasters; had worked till the ladyish hands were horny with warts and corns, and this, though he was doubled up with dysentery in the hot season, and racked by winter cramps. But the life had proved too hard for him, all the same. During the previous summer he had begun to drink—steadily, with the dogged persistence that was in him—and since then his work had gone downhill. His sudden death had only been a hastening-on of the inevitable. Staggering home to the tent after nightfall he would have been sure, sooner or later, to fall into a ditch, to shicer and break his neck, or into a wet one and be drowned.

On the surface of the Gravel Pits his fate was already forgotten. The rude activity of a gold digging in full swing had closed over the incident, swallowed it up.

Under a sky so pure and luminous that it seemed like a thinly drawn veil of blueness, which ought to have been transparent, stretched what, from a short way off, resembled a desert of pale clay. No patch of green offered rest to the eye; not a tree, hardly a stunted bush had been left standing either on the bottom of the vast shallow basin itself, or on the several hillocks that dotted it and formed its sides. Even the most prominent of these, the Black Hill, which jutted out on the Flat like a gigantic tumulus, had been stripped of its dense timber, feverishly disembowelled, and was now become a bald protuberance strewn with gravel and clay. The whole scene had that strange, repellent ugliness that goes with breaking up and throwing into disorder what has been sanctified as final, and belongs, in particular, to the wanton disturbing of earth's gracious, green-spread crust. In the pre-golden era this wide valley, lying open to sun and wind, had been a lovely grassland, ringed by a circlet of wooded hills; beyond these, by a belt of virgin forest. A limpid river and more than one creek had meandered across its face; water was to be found there even in the driest summer. She-oak and peppermints had given shade to the flocks of the early settlers; wattles had bloomed their brilliant, delirious yellow passion against the grey-green foliage of the gums. Now, all that was left of the

original "pleasant resting-place" and its pristine beauty were the ancient volcanic cones of Warrenhe and Buninyong. These, too far off to supply wood for firing or slabbing, still stood green and timbered, and looked down upon the havoc that had been made of the fair, pastoral lands.

Seen nearer at hand, the dun-coloured desert resolved itself into uncountable pimpling clay and mud-heaps, of divers shade and varying sizes: some consisted of but a few bucketfuls of mullock, others were taller than the tallest man. There were also hundreds of rain-soaked, mud-bespattered tents, sheds and awnings; wind-sails, which fell, funnel-like, from a kind of gallows into the shafts they ventilated; flags fluttering on high posts in front of stores. The many human figures that went and fro were hardly to be distinguished from the ground they trod. They were coated with earth, clay, clad in ochre and gamboge. Their faces were daubed with clauber; it matted great beards, and entangled the coarse hairs on chests and brawny arms. Where, here and there, a blue jumper had kept a tinge of blueness, it was so besmeared with yellow that it might have been expected to turn green. The gauze neck-veils that hung from the brims of wide-awakes or cabbage-trees were become stiff little lattices of caked clay.

There was water everywhere. From the spurs and gullies round about, the autumn rains had poured freely down on the Flat; river and creeks had been over their banks; and such narrow ground-space as remained between the thick-sown tents, the myriads of holes that abutted one on another, jealous of every inch of space, had become a trough of mud. Water meandered over this mud, and carved its soft way in channels; it lay about in puddles, thick and dark as coffee-grounds; it filled abandoned shallow holes to the brim.

From this scene rose a blurred hum of sound; rose and as it were remained stationary above it, like a smoke-cloud, which no wind comes to drive away. Gradually, though, the ear made out, in the conglomerate of noise, a host of separate noises infinitely multiplied: the sharp tick-tick of surface-picks, the dull thud of shovels, their muffled echoes from the depths below. There was also the continuous squeak and groan of windlasses; the bump of the mullock emptied from the bucket; the trundle of wheelbarrows, pushed along a plank from the shaft's mouth to the nearest pool; the dump of the dart on the heap for washing. Along the banks of a creek, hundreds of cradles rattled and grated; the noise of the spades, chopping the gravel into the puddling-tubs or the Long Toms, was like the scrunch of shingle under waves. The fierce yelping of the dogs chained to the flag-posts of stores, mongrels which yapped at friend and foe alike, supplied a note of earsplitting discord.

But except for this it was a wholly mechanical din. Human brains directed operations, human hands carried them out, but the sound of the human voice was, for the most part, lacking. The diggers were a sombre, preoccupied race, little given to lip-work. Even the "shepherds," who, in waiting to see if their neighbours struck the lead, beguiled the time with euchre and "lambskinnet," played moodily, their mouths glued to their pipe-stems; they were tail-on-end to fling down the cards for pick and shovel. The great majority, ant-like in their indefatigable busyness, neither turned a head nor looked up: backs were bent, eyes fixed, in a hard scrutiny of cradle or tin-dish: it was the earth that held them to the familiar, homely earth, whose common fate it is to be trodden heedlessly underfoot. Here, it was the loadstone that drew all men's thoughts. And it took toll of their bodies in odd, exhausting forms of labour, which were swift to weed out the unfit.

The men at the windlasses spat into their horny palms and bent to the crank: they paused only to pass the back of a hand over a sweaty forehead, or to drain a nose between two fingers. The barrow-drivers shoved their loads, the bones of their forearms standing out like ribs. Beside the pools, the puddlers chopped with their shovels; some even stood in the tubs, and worked the earth with their feet as wine-pressers trample grapes. The cradlers, eternally rocking with one hand, held a long stick in the

other with which to break up any clods a careless puddler might have deposited in the hopper. Behind these came the great army of fossickers, washers of surface-dirt, equipped with knives and tin-dishes and content if they could wash out half-a-pennyweight to the dish. At their heels still others, who treated the tailings they threw away. And among these last was a sprinkling of women, more than one with an infant sucking at her breast. Withdrawn into a group for themselves worked a body of Chinese in loose blue blouses, flappy blue leg-bags and huge conical straw hats. They, too, fossicked and washed, using extravagant quantities of water.

Thus the pale-eyed multitude worried the surface, and, at the risk and cost of their lives, probed the depths. Now that deep sinking was in vogue, gold-digging no longer served as a play-game for the gentleman and the amateur; the greater number of those who toiled at it were work-tried, seasoned men. And yet, although it had now sunk to the level of any other arduous and uncertain occupation and the magic prizes of the early days were seldom found, something of the old, romantic glamour still clung to this most famous gold-field, dazzling the eyes and confounding the judgment. Elsewhere the horse was in use at the puddling-trough, and machines for crushing quartz were under discussion. But the Ballarat digger resisted the introduction of machinery, fearing the capitalist machinery would bring in its train. He remained the dreamer, the jealous individualist; he hovered for ever on the brink of a stupendous discovery.

This dream it was, of vast wealth got without exertion, which had decoyed the strange, motley crowd, in which peers and churchmen rubbed shoulders with the scum of Norfolk Island, to exile to this outlandish region. And the intention of all alike had been: to snatch a golden fortune from the earth and then, hey, presto! for the old world again. But they were reckoning without their host: one too many of those who entered the country went out no more. They became prisoners to the soil. The fabulous riches of which they had heard tell amounted, at best, to a few thousands of pounds: what folly to depart with so little, when mother earth still teemed! Those who drew blanks nursed an unquenchable hope, and laboured all their days like navvies for a navvy's wage. Others again, broken in health or disheartened, could only turn to an easier handiwork. There were also men who, as soon as fortune smiled on them, dropped their tools and ran to squander the work of months in a wild debauch and they invariably returned, tail down, to prove their luck anew. And, yet again, there were those who, having once seen the metal in the raw: in dust, fine as that brushed from a butterfly's wing; in heavy, chubby nuggets; or, more exquisite still, as the daffodil-yellow veining of bluish-white quartz, these were gripped in the subtlest way of all. A passion for the gold itself awoke in them an almost sensual craving to touch and possess; and the glitter of a few specks at the bottom of pan or cradle came, in time, to mean more to them than "home," or wife, or child.

Such were the fates of those who succumbed to the "unholy hunger." It was like a form of revenge taken on them, for their loveless schemes of robbing and fleeing; a revenge contrived by the ancient, barbaric country they had so lightly invaded. Now, she held them captive—without chains, ensorcelled—without witchcraft; and, lying stretched like some primeval monster in the sun, her breasts freely bared, she watched, with a malignant eye, the efforts made by these puny mortals to tear their lips away.

CHAPTER ONE

On the summit of one of the clay heaps, a woman shot into silhouette against the sky. An odd figure clad in a skimpy green petticoat, with a scarlet shawl held about her shoulders, wisps of frowsy red hair standing out round her head, she balanced herself on the slippery earth, spinning her arm like the vane of a windmill, and crying at the top of her voice: "Joe, boys!—Joe, Joe, Joey!"

It was as if, with these words, she had dropped a live shell in the diggers' midst. A general stampede ensued; in which the cry was caught up, echoed and re-echoed, till the whole Flat rang with the name of "Joe." Tools were dropped, cradles and tubs abandoned, windlasses left to kick the cranks backwards. Many of the workers took to their heels; others, in affright, scuttled aimlessly hither and thither, like barnyard fowls in a panic. Summoned by shouts of: "Up with you, boys!—the traps are here!" numbers ascended from below to see the fun, while as many went hurriedly down, hiding in drive or chamber. Even those diggers who could pat the pocket in which their licence lay ceased work, and stood about with sullen faces to view the course of events. Only the group of Chinamen washing tail-heaps remained unmoved. One of them, to whom the warning woman belonged, raised his head and called a Chinese word at her; she obeyed it instantly, vanished into the air; the rest went impassively on with their fossicking. They were not such fools as to try to cheat the Government of its righteous dues. None but had his licence safely folded in his nosecloth, and thrust inside the bosom of his blouse.

Through the labyrinth of tents and mounds, a gold-laced cap could be seen approaching; then a gold-tressed jacket came into view, the white star on the forehead of a mare. Behind the Commissioner, who rode down thus from the Camp, came the members of his staff; these again were followed by a body of mounted troopers. They drew rein on the slope, and simultaneously a line of foot police, backed by a detachment of light infantry, shot out like an arm, and walled in the Flat to the south.

On the appearance of the enemy the babel redoubled. There were groans and cat-calls. Along with the derisive "Joeys!" the rebel diggers hurled any term of abuse that came to their lips.

"The dolly mops! The skunks! The bushrangers!—Oh, damn 'em, damn 'em!. . .damn the bloody eyes!"

"It's Rooshia—that's what it is!" said an oldish man darkly.

The Commissioner, a horse-faced, solemn man with brown side whiskers, let the reins droop

his mare's neck and sat unwinking in the tumult. His mien was copied by his staff. Only one of them, a very young boy who was new to the colony and his post, changed colour under his gaudy cap, went from white to pink and from pink to white again; while at each fresh insult he gave a perceptible start and gazed dumbfounded at his chief's insensitive back.

The "bloodhounds" had begun to track their prey. Rounding up, with a skill born of long practice they drove the diggers before them towards the centre of the Flat. Here they passed from group to group and from hole to hole, calling for the production of licences with an insolence that made the object see red. They were nice of scent, too, and, nine times in ten, pounced on just those unfortunates who, through carelessness, or lack of means, or on political grounds, had failed to take out the monthly licence to dig for gold. Every few minutes one or another was marched off between two constables to the Government Camp, for fine or imprisonment.

Now it was that it suddenly entered Long Jim's head to cut and run. Up till now he had stood declaring himself a free-born Briton, who might be drawn and quartered if he ever again paid the blasted tax. But, as the police came closer, a spear of fright pierced his befuddled brain, and inside a breath he was off and away. Had the abruptness of his start not given him a slight advantage, he would have been caught at once. As it was, the chase would not be a long one; the clumsy, stiff-jointed man slithered here and stuck fast there, dodging obstacles with an awkwardness that was painful to see. He could be heard sobbing and cursing as he ran.

At this point the Commissioner, half turning, signed to the troopers in his rear. Six or seven of them shook up their bridles and rode off, their scabbards clinking, to prevent the fugitive's escape.

A howl of contempt went up from the crowd. The pink and white subaltern made what was almost a movement of the arm to intercept his superior's command.

It was too much for Long Jim's last mate, the youthful blackbeard who had pluckily descended the shaft after the accident. He had been standing on a mound with a posse of others, following the man-hunt. At his partner's crack-brained dash for the open, his snorts of indignation found words. "Gaw-blimy!. . . is the old fool gone dotty?" Then he drew a whistling breath. "No, it's more than flesh and blood. . . Stand back, boys!" And though he was as little burdened with a licence as the man under pursuit, he shouted: "Help, help!. . . for God's sake, don't let 'em have me!" shot down the slope, and was off like the wind.

His foxly object was attained. The attention of the hunters was diverted. Long Jim, seizing the moment, vanished underground.

The younger man ran with the lightness of a hare. He had also the hare's address in doubling and turning. His pursuers never knew, did he pass from sight behind a covert of tents and mounds, where he would bob up next. He avoided shafts and pools as if by a miracle; ran along greasy planks without a slip; and, where these had been removed to balk the police, he jumped the holes, taking risks that were not for a sane man. Once he fell, but, enslimed from head to foot, wringing wet and hatless, was up again in a twinkling. His enemies were less sure-footed than he, and times without number measured their length on the oily ground. Still, one of them was gaining rapidly on him, a giant of a fellow with long thin legs; and soon the constable's foot filled the prints left by the young man's while these were still warm. It was a fine run. The diggers trooped after in a body; the Flat rang with cheers and plaudits. Even the Commissioner and his retinue trotted in the same direction. Eventually the runaway must land in the arms of the mounted police.

But this was not his plan. Making as though he headed for the open, he suddenly dashed off at right angles, and, with a final sprint, brought up dead against a log-and-canvas store which stood on a rising ground. His adversary was so close behind that a collision resulted; the digger's feet slid from

under him, he fell on his face, the other on top. In their fall they struck a huge pillar of tin-dishes ingeniously built up to the height of the store itself. This toppled over with a crash, and the dishes went rolling down the slope between the legs of the police. The dog chained to the flagstaff all but strangled himself in his rage and excitement; and the owner of the store came running out.

“Purdy! . . . you? What in the name of . . . ?”

The digger adroitly rolled his captor over, and there they both sat, side by side on the ground, one gripping the other’s collar, both too blown to speak. A cordon of puffing constables hemmed them in.

The storekeeper frowned. “You’ve no licence, you young beggar!”

And: “Your licence, you scoundrel!” demanded the leader of the troop.

The prisoner’s rejoinder was a saucy: “Now then, out with the cuffs, Joe!”

He got on his feet as bidden; but awkwardly, for it appeared that in falling he had hurt his ankle. Behind the police were massed the diggers. These opened a narrow alley for the Camp officials to ride through, but their attitude was hostile, and there were cries of: “Leave ’im go, ye blackguards! . . . after sich a run! None o’ yer bloody quod for ’im!” along with other, more threatening expressions. Sombre and taciturn, the Commissioner waved his hand. “Take him away!”

“Well, so long, Dick!” said the culprit jauntily; and, as he offered his wrists to be handcuffed, he whistled an air.

Here the storekeeper hurriedly interposed: “No, stop! I’ll give bail.” And darting into the tent and out again, he counted five one-pound notes into the constable’s palm. The lad’s collar was released and a murmur of satisfaction mounted from the crowd.

At the sound the giver made as if to retire. Then, yielding to a second thought, he stepped forward and saluted the Commissioner. “A young hot-head, sir! He means no harm. I’ll send him up in the morning, to apologise.”

(“I’ll be damned if you do!” muttered the digger between his teeth.)

But the Chief refused to be placated. “Good day, doctor,” he said shortly, and with his staff on his heel trotted down the slope, followed till out of earshot by a mocking fire of “Joes.” Lingerin in the rear, the youthful sympathiser turned in his saddle and waved his cap.

The raid was over for that day. The crowd dispersed; its members became orderly, hard-working men once more. The storekeeper hushed his frantic dog, and called his assistant to rebuild the pillar of tin-dishes.

The young digger sat down on the log that served for a bench, and examined his foot. He pulled and pulled, causing himself great pain, but could not get his boot off. At last, looking back over his shoulder he cried impatiently: “Dick! . . . I say, Dick Mahony! Give us a drink, old boy! . . . I’m dead on my feet.”

At this the storekeeper—a tall, slenderly built man of some seven or eight and twenty—appeared bearing a jug and a pannikin.

“Oh, bah!” said the lad, when he found that the jug held only water. And, on his friend reminding him that he might by now have been sitting in the lock-up, he laughed and winked. “I knew you’d give me bail.”

“Well! . . . of all the confounded impudence. . . .”

“Faith, Dick, and d’ye think I didn’t see how your hand itched for your pocket?”

The man he called Mahony flushed above his fair beard. It was true: he had made an involuntary movement of the hand—checked for the rest halfway, by the knowledge that the pocket was empty. He looked displeased and said nothing.

“Don’t be afraid, I’ll pay you back soon’s ever me ship comes home,” went on the young

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