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<p style="text-align: center;">HĒ FORGOT :</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A Wail From the Bush</p>																												<p style="text-align: center;">B. VON ROTZE.</p>																							

Mrs Clarke? Oh of course, you thought she and I would – eh? Well, I thought so myself at one time, but –

No, nothing of the sort. It was certainly not her fault. I might as well tell you the whole story. Only please don't show your contempt more than you can possibly help. I know I am an old idiot, and that my love adventures must seem ridiculous, but they have tasted bitter enough to me.

You see, May and I were friends years ago, when she was a little chit of a school girl and I a young fellow of twenty or thereabouts. I was trying to make love to her, or she to me, I don't remember which; anyhow, with our parents it was a foregone conclusion that we two should make a match of it – some time. But making love and marrying are two different things. I liked well enough to be bossed by the little beauty, it made my bashfulness appear less awkward, and kept my hands out of my trousers' pockets. I never was good at flirting, and it relieved me of a good deal of responsibility towards strange maidens on the lookout for a pastime – this quasi engagement to May.

But I did not think of settling down before I had had a fling at fortune, or the bush, or something or other I was not quite clear about. And so, like a fool, one fine day I cleared out without leave, in the happy fashion the Australian youth has of showing his filial affection.

It's no good telling you about my Queensland experiences. Bushlife is the same wherever you go. Salthorse and damper, hard work and small pay, occasionally diluted with that wondrous concoction of tea, tobacco and bluestone the poor

ignorant native calls whisky – and hope! Hope in all shapes and forms. Hope for a happy, comfortable future, for a life amongst civilised beings in exchange for that starvation of body and intellect out in the loneliness; hope for a love and sympathy no friendship can replace.

I soon drifted into mining ventures. With the careless crowd of rovers, who follow the trail of gold through the continent, I wandered from one field to another, hard up at times, and then again with a bank account, which I never failed to establish out of every haul I made, and quite as regularly over-drew again a short time after.

I had promised to write home. But show me the young fellow who keeps that promise, and I'll show you a damned hypocrite. I didn't, anyhow. And so it took me quite unawares, when I heard a few years after I had left May that she had married. It fairly took my breath away. I could not drown my grief in firewater either – I was stonebroke just then, which was another injustice of fate. So I cursed, and would not be comforted. In fact, in a short time I grew rather fond of my cruel misfortune. A fellow finds life in the never-never or on those dreary coastal ranges a deucedly slow affair, if he has nothing to think about except the commonplaces of existence. The withering sadness of the bush creeps imperceptibly into the heart of the gayest out there, and it rather an unpleasant feeling when a fellow recognises with a start, after having whipped the cat mournfully for a whole week or so, that he has in reality nothing whatever to bewail.

But now I had a grief, a heart-breaking sorrow made to order, and guaranteed to fit, and so I posed as an unhappy out-cast from fortune's plentiful banquet.

I was a humbug? Of course; every man is more or less of a humbug. The man who isn't is an ass. It is only the excess that here as elsewhere proves objectionable.

Well, I wrote a sarcastic letter of congratulation, got no answer, and the matter ended there.

More ups and downs; till about four years ago I dropped into a claim up Cloncurry way, that paid me at last for many disappointments and hardships. It was by no means a Dorado,

though by pegging steadily away at our reef, my two mates and I soon piled up funds at our bank in town. But it was hard work, hard living, and hopelessly monotonous. We had all of us sworn off the evil liquid as soon as we saw our chance towards a moderate pile, and the days went by, each so like its predecessor that we knew the date of the month no more, and had arguments about the number of the year according to the Gregorian Calendar. No books found their way into our camp bar the ubiquitous penny-horror, and it was an intellectual feast when the local rag made its weekly appearance.

Neither was our conversation very enlivening. For what on earth could we talk about after having lived together for months and months in utter seclusion? We knew what the other man was going to say, before a word left his lips. We could tell each other stock anecdotes with much finer a point than the author himself. We tried lying. But when my mates presented me one night with an exact calculation, setting forth that I must needs have attained the age of five hundred and seventeen years, eight months to have passed through all the adventures I related in a single fortnight, we gave that best too.

Days would often pass without an interchange of words between us. My mind began wandering at its own sweet will, hovering through strange lands and imaginary situations, leaving behind an unconscious machine; till I could trust my senses no more, till I was often in doubt whether certain things had happened to me in actual life or only in that mental catalepsy of daydreams and nightmares.

When we had nearly worked out our show, we bethought ourselves of floating it, and after some trouble managed to sell at a handsome figure to an English syndicate. Peace to its ashes! With well-filled pockets we separated without regret, for those years of closest intimacy that the camp-life makes necessary had prevented the growth of anything like real friendship or mutual admiration.

I made my way slowly south, homewards.

And then Fortune offered herself a second time. May's husband was dead.

Now comes the part of my story that, I am afraid, will

appear incredible to you. I may not be able to make you understand how it all happened. I scarcely understand myself. It was so easy. I fell into my place as May's suitor, as if she never had been married, or if I had only been away for weeks instead of years, and returned to claim her promised hand.

My outlook in life had changed indeed. Only the man who has spent youth's yearning passionate years in the heartless solitude of the Never-Never, restraining all that is noble in him, all finer and better instincts of his nature, his mood – only he can appreciate the sweetness I discovered in a life I had formerly scorned. I must have been an interesting study to any cynic old bachelor in that neighbourhood, walking about, wrapt up in my bliss, dreaming of the golden days to come, picturing to myself with the realistic clearness the imagination of the habitual hermit only is capable of, the details of connubial gladness to come.

So time went by in silent happiness. May had many admirers. But I felt calmly secure. Still, there was an informal young dude, who by sheer persistence and impudence seemed to make his way towards her whom I already regarded as my own. I did not like it. And then May even encouraged him in my presence. So I thought I would put a stop to that little game, and get married without any more loss of time, and one fine day I went up to . . . , where I long ago had determined to settle.

As if it were yesterday only, I remember my leavetaking from May. I did not tell her where or what for I was going. It was to be a surprise. I had pictured it all out in many a day-dream; the pretty little cottage, the garden, the surrounding scenery. Every room my imagination had carefully and lovingly furnished according to her taste and predilection.

And so it puzzled me not a little when she appeared grieved beyond reason at our short and last parting. As if she foresaw some fearful tragedy and was afraid to let me go, she kept me lingering at the threshold, again and again saying good-bye, and then preventing by some trivial question my departure.

At last – I was near missing the train and rather impatient at her unexplained conduct – I tore myself away, and then she sank into a chair sobbing bitterly. I stared. With a suppressed

oath I left her and slammed the door.

I was away longer than I had anticipated. It was a work of love, this selection of my homestead, and I was somewhat inclined to be hypercritical. At last everything was ready. I wired advising May of my return, and duly arrived at my lodgings. The first letter I opened amongst the stack that had accumulated during my absence was the conventional printed announcement of May's marriage to the young dude aforementioned. Yes, that was all! The explanation of her conduct is simple enough. You see, I — I had forgotten to ask her to be my wife. Well, there! It is no good trying to explain. It seemed so self-evident, a matter of course that I should marry her when she was free again and I an independent man. I had declared my love a thousand times over in glowing words in my day-dreams, but unhappily somehow I had never spoken aloud. As soon as I saw her letter I knew what I had done, or rather not done. But it was too late.

Yes, the cottage is for sale. I'll let you have it cheap.

And by the by, old fellow, if ever you should have a boy of your own, don't send him into the bush to make a man of him. That is all nonsense. The bush does nothing of the sort. It makes a man a useless, sentimental old woman, like myself.

