"STINGAREE"

A Series of Thrilling Australian Tales by E. W. Hornung, Author of "Amateur Cracksman," "Raffles," Etc.

III--"To the Vile Dust"

VANHEIMERT had been in many duststorms, but never in such a storm so far from the haunts of men. Awaking in his blanket with his mouth full of sand, he had opened his eyes to the blinding sting of a storm which already shrouded the very tree under which he lay. Other landmarks there were none; the world was swallowed in a yellow swirl that turned browner and more opaque even as Vanheimert shook himself out of his blanket and ran for the fence as for his life. He had only left it in order to camp where his tree had towered against the stars; it could not be a hundred yards away; and along the fence ran that beaten track to which the bushman turned instinctively in his panic. In a few seconds he was groping with outstretched hands to break the violence of a collision with invisible wires; in a few minutes, standing at a loss, wondering where the wires or he had got to, and whether it would not be wise to retrace his steps and try again. And while he wondered a fit of coughing drove the dust from his mouth like smoke; and even as he coughed the thickening swirl obliterated his tracks as swiftly as heavy snow.

Speckled eyeballs stood out of a sanded face as Vanheimert saw himself adrift and drowning in the dust. He was a huge young fellow, and it was a great smooth face, from which the gaping mouth cut a slice from jaw to jaw. Terror and rage, and an overpowering passion of self-pity, convulsed the coarse features in turn; then, with the grunt of a wounded beast, he rallied and plunged to his destruction, deeper and deeper into the bush, further and further from the fence.

The trees were few and mostly stunted, but Vanheimert crashed into more than one upon his headlong course. The sense was choked out of him already; he was fleeing on the wings of the storm; of direction he thought no more. He forgot that the run he had been traversing was at the best abandoned by man and beast; he forgot the "spell" that he had promised himself at the deserted homestead where he had once worked as a lad. He might have remembered that the paddock in which he was burying himself had always been the largest in the district. It was a ten-mile block without subdividing fence or drop of water from end to end. The whole station was a howling desert, little likely to be stocked a second time by enlightened man. But this was the desert's heart, and into it sped Vanheimert, coated yellow to the eyes and lips, the dust-fiend himself in visible shape. Now he staggered in his stride, now fell headlong to cough and sob in the hollow of his arm. The unfortunate young man had the courage of his desperate strait. Many times he arose and hurled himself onward with curse or prayer; many times he fell or flung himself back to earth. But at length the storm passed over and over his spent members; sand gathered by the handful in the folds of his clothes; the end was as near as end could be.

It was just then that two riders, who fancied they had heard a voice, struck an undoubted trail before it vanished, and followed it to the great sprawling body in which the dregs of life pulsed feebly. The thing groaned as it was lifted and strapped upon a horse; it gurgled gibberish at the taste of raw spirits later in the same hour. It was high noon before Vanheimert opened a seeing eye and blinked it in the unveiled sun.

He was lying on a blanket in a treeless hollow in the midst of trees. The ground had been cleared by no human hand; it was a little basin of barren clay, burnt to a brick, and drained by the tiny water-hole that sparkled thru its thatch of leaves and branches in the center of a natural circle. Vanheimert lay on the eastern circumference; it was the sun falling sheer on his upturned face that cut short his sleep of deep exhaustion. The sky was a dark and limpid blue; but every leaf within Vanheimert's vision bore its little load of sand, and the sand was clotted as tho the duststorm had ended with the usual shower. Vanheimert turned and viewed the sylvan amphitheater; on its far side were two small tents, and a man in a folding chair reading the Australian. He closed the paper on meeting Vanheimert's eyes, went to one of the tents, stood a moment looking in, and then came across the sunlit circle with his newspaper and the folded chair.

"And how do you feel now?" said he, setting up the chair beside the blanket, but still standing as he surveyed the prostrate man, with dark eyes drawn together in the shade of a great straw sombrero.

"Fine!" replied Vanheimert, huskily. "But where am I, and who are you chaps? Rabbiters?"

As he spoke, however, he searched for the inevitable strings of rabbit-skins festooned about the tents, and found them not.

"If you like," replied the other, frowning a little at the immediate curiosity of the rescued man.

"I don't like," said Vanheimert, staring unabashed. "I'm a rabbiter myself, and know too much. It ain't no game for abandoned stations, and you don't go playin' it in top-boots and spurs. Where's your skins and where's your squatter to pay for 'em? Plucky rabbiters, you two!"

And he gazed across the open toward the farther tent, which had just disgorged a long body and a black beard not wholly unfamiliar to Vanheimert. The dark man was a shade darker as he followed the look and read its partial recognition; but a grim light came with quick resolve, and it was with sardonic deliberation that an eyeglass was screwed into one dark eye.

"Then what should you say that we are?"

"How do I know?" cried Vanheimert, turning pale; for he had been one of the audience at Mrs. Clarkson's concert in Gulland's store, and in consecutive moments he had recognized first Howie and now Stingaree.

"You know well enough!"

And the terrible eyeglass covered him like a pistol.

"Perhaps I can guess," faltered Vanheimert, no small brain working in his prodigious skull.

"Guess, then!"

"There are tales about a new chum camping by himself—that is, just with one man—"

"And what object?"

"To get away from the world, sir."

"And where did you hear these tales?"

"All along the road, sir."

The chastened tone, the anxious countenance, the sudden recourse to the servile monosyllable, were none of them lost on Stingaree; but he himself had once set such a tale abroad, and it might be that the present bearer still believed it. The eyeglass looked him thru and thru. Vanheimert bore the inspection like a man, and was soon satisfied that his recognition of the outlaw was as yet quite unsuspected. He congratulated himself on his presence of mind, and had sufficient courage to relish the excitement of a situation of which he also perceived the peril.

"I suppose you have no recollection of how you got here?" at length said Stingaree.

"Not me. I only remember the duststorm." And Vanheimert shuddered where he lay in the sun. "But I'm very grateful to you, sir, for saving my life."

"You are, are you?"

"Haven't I cause to be, sir?"

"Well, I dare say we did bring you round between us, but it was pure luck that we ever came across you. And now I should lie quiet if I were you. In a few minutes there'll be a pannikin of tea for you, and after that you'll feel a different man."

Vanheimert lay quiet enough; there was much to occupy his mind. Iinstinctively he had assumed a part, and he was only less quick to embrace the necessity of a strictly consistent performance. He watched Stingaree in close conversation with Howie, who was boiling the billy on a spirit-lamp between the two tents, but he watched them with an admirable simulation of idle unconcern. They were talking about him, of course; more than once they glanced in his direction; and each time Vanheimert congratulated himself the more heartily on the ready pretence to which he was committed. Let them but dream that he knew them, Vanheimert gave himself as short a shrift as he would have granted in their place. But they did not dream it, they were off their guard, and rather at his mercy than he at theirs. He might prove the immediate instrument of their capture—why not? The thought put Vanheimert in a glow; on the blanket where they had laid him, he dwelt on it without a qualm; and the same wide mouth watered for the tea which these villains were making, and for their blood.

It was Howie who came over with the steaming pannikin, and watched Vanheimert as he sipped and smacked his lips, while Stingaree at his distance watched them both. The pannikin was accompanied by a tinplate full of cold mutton and a wedge of baking powder bread, which between them prevented the ravening man from observing how closely he was himself observed as he assuaged his pangs. There was, however, something in the nature of a muttered altercation between the bushrangers when Howie was sent back for more of everything. Vanheimert put it down to his own demands, and felt that Stingaree was his friend when it was he who brought the fresh supplies.

"Eat away," said Stingaree, seating himself and producing pipe and tobacco. "It's rough fare, but there's plenty of it."

"I won't ask you for no more," replied Vanheimert, paving the way for his escape.

"Oh, yes, you will!" said Stingaree. "You're going to camp with us for the next few days, my friend!"

"Why am I?" cried Vanheimert, aghast at the quiet statement, which it never occurred to him to gainsay. Stingaree pared a pipeful of tobacco and rubbed it fine before troubling to reply.

"Because the way out of this takes some finding, and what's the use of escaping an unpleasant death one day if you go and die it the next? That's one reason," said Stingaree, "but there's another. The other reason is that, now you're here, you don't go till I choose."

Blue wreaths of smoke went up with the words, which might have phrased either a humorous hospitality or a covert threat. The dispassionate tone told nothing. But Vanheimert felt the eyeglass on him, and his hearty appetite was at an end.

"That's real kind of you," said he. "I don't feel like running no more risks till I'm obliged. My nerves are shook. And if a born backblocker may make so bold, it's a fair old treat to see a new chum camping out for the fun of it!"

"Who told you I was a new chum?" asked Stingaree, sharply. "Ah! I remember," he added, nodding; "you heard of me lower down the road."

Vanheimert grinned from ear to ear.

"I'd have known it without that," said he. "What real bushman would boil their billy on a spirit-lamp when there's wood and to spare for a campfire on all sides of 'em?"

Now, Vanheimert clearly perceived the superiority of smokeless spirit-lamp to tell-tale fire for those in hiding; so he chuckled consumedly over this thrust, which was taken in such excellent part by Stingaree as to prove him a victim to the desired illusion. It was the cleverest touch that Vanheimert had yet achieved. And he had the wit neither to blunt his point by rubbing it in nor to recall attention to it by subtle protestation of his pretended persuasion. But once or twice before sundown he permitted himself to ask natural questions concerning the old country, and to indulge in those genial gibes which the Englishman in the bush learns to expect from the indigenous buffoon.

In the night Vanheimert was less easy. He had to sleep in Howie's tent, but it was some hours before he slept at all, for Howie would remain outside, and Vanheimert longed to hear him snore. At last the rabbiter fell into a doze, and when he awoke the auspicious music filled the tent. He listened on one elbow, peering till the darkness turned less dense; and there lay Howie across the opening of the tent. Vanheimert reached for his thin elastic-sided bushman's boots, and his hands trembled as he drew them on. He could now see the form of Howie plainly enough as it lay half in the starlight and half in the darkness of the tent. He stepped over it without mistake, and the ignoble strains droned on behind him.

The stars seemed unnaturally bright and busy as Vanheimert stole into their tremulous light. At first he could distinguish nothing earthly; then the tents came sharply into focus, and after them the ring of impenetrable trees. The trees whispered a chorus, myriads strong, in a chromatic scale that sang but faintly of the open country. There were palpable miles of wilderness, and none other lodge but this, yet the psychological necessity for escape was stronger in Vanheimert than the bodily reluctance to leave the insecure security of the bushrangers' encampment. He was their prisoner, whatever they might say, and the sense of captivity was intolerable; besides, let them but surprise his knowledge of their secret, and they would shoot him like a dog. On the other hand, beyond the forest and along the beaten track lay fame and a fortune in direct reward.

Before departure Vanheimert wished to peep into the other tent, but its open end was completely covered in for the night, and prudence forbade him to meddle with his hands. He had an even keener desire to steal one or other of the horses which he had seen before nightfall tethered in the scrub; but here again he lacked enterprise, fancied the saddles must be in Stingaree's tent, and shrank from committing himself to an action which nothing, in the event of disaster, could explain away. On foot he need not put himself in the wrong, even with villains ready to suspect that he suspected them.

And on foot he went, indeed on tiptoe till the edge of the trees was reached without adventure, and he turned to look his last upon the two tents shimmering in the starlight. As he turned again, satisfied that the one was still shut and that Howie still lay across the opening of the other, a firm hand took Vanheimert by either shoulder; otherwise he had leapt into the air; for it was Stingaree, who had stepped from behind a bush as from another planet, so suddenly that Vanheimert nearly gasped his dreadful name.

VANHEIMERT WAS LED A GOOD MILE THRU THE SCRUB, WITH HOWIE AT HIS HEELS.

"I couldn't sleep! I couldn't sleep!" he cried out instead, shrinking as from a lifted hand, tho he was merely being shaken playfully to and fro.

"No more could I," said Stingaree.

"So I was going for a stroll. That was all, I swear, Mr.—Mr.—I don't know your name!"

"Quite sure?" said Stingaree.

"My oath! How should I?"

"You might have heard it down the road."

"Not me!"

"Yet you heard of me, you know."

"Not by name—my oath!"

Stingaree peered into the great face in which the teeth were chattering and from which all trace of color had flown.

"I shouldn't eat you for knowing who I am," said he. "Honesty is still a wise policy in certain circumstances; but you know best."

"I know nothing about you, and care less," retorted Vanheimert, sullenly, tho the perspiration was welling out of him. "I come for a stroll because I couldn't sleep, and I can't see what all this barney's about."

Stingaree dropped his hands.

"Do you want to sleep?"

"My blessed oath!"

"Then come to my tent, and I'll give you a nobbler that may make you."

The nobbler was poured out of a gallon jar, under Vanheimert's nose, by the light of a candle which he held himself. Yet he smelt it furtively before trying it with his lips, and denied himself a gulp till he was reassured. But soon the empty pannikin was held out for more. And it was the starless hour before dawn when Vanheimert tripped over Howie's legs and took a contented header into the corner from which he had made his stealthy escape.

The tent was tropical when he awoke, but Stingaree was still at his breakfast outside in the shade. He pointed to a bucket and a piece of soap behind the tent, and Vanheimert engaged in obedient ablutions before sitting down to his pannikin, his slice of damper, and his portion of a tin of sardines.

"Sorry there's no meat for you," said Stingaree. "My mate's gone for fresh supplies. By the way, did you miss your boots?"

The rabbiter looked at a pair of dilapidated worsted socks and at one protruding toe; he was not sure whether he had gone to bed for the second time in these or in his boots. Certainly he had missed the latter on his second awakening, but had not deemed it expedient to make inquiries. And now he merely observed that he wondered where he could have left them.

"On your feet," said Stingaree. "My mate has made so bold as to borrow them for the day."

"He's welcome to them, I'm sure," said Vanheimert with a sickly smile.

"I was sure you would say so," rejoined Stingaree. "His own are reduced to uppers and half a heel apiece, but he hopes to get them soled in Ivanhoe while he waits."

"So he's gone to Ivanhoe, has he?"

"He's been gone three hours."

"Surely it's a long trip?"

"Yes; we shall have to make the most of each other till sundown," said Stingaree, gazing thru his glass upon Vanheimert's perplexity. "If I were you I should take my revenge by shaking anything of his that I could find for the day."

And with a cavalier nod, to clinch the last word on the subject, the bushranger gave himself over to his campchair, his pipe, and his inexhaustible Australasian. As for Vanheimert, he eventually returned to the tent in which he had spent the night; and there he remained a good many minutes, tho it was now the forenoon, and the heat under canvas past endurance. But when at length he emerged, as from a bath, Stingaree, seated behind his Australasian in the lee of the other tent, took so little notice of him that Vanheimert crept back to have one more look at the thing which he had found in the old valise which served Howie for a pillow. And the thing was a very workmanlike revolver, with a heavy cartridge in each of its six chambers.

Vanheimert handled it with trembling fingers, and packed it afresh in the pocket where it least affected his personal contour, its angles softened by a big bandanna handkerchief, only to take it out yet again with a resolution that opened a fresh sluice in every pore. The blanket that had been lent to him, and Howie's blanket, both lay at his feet; he threw one over either arm, and with the revolver thus effectually concealed, but grasped for action with finger on trigger, sallied forth at last.

Stingaree was still seated in the narrowing shade of his own tent. Vanheimert was within five paces of him before he looked up so very quickly, with such a rapid adjustment of the terrible eyeglass, that Vanheimert stood stock-still, and the butt of his hidden weapon turned colder than ever in his melting hand.

"Why, what have you got there?" cried Stingaree. "And what's the matter with you, man?" he added, as Vanheimert stood shaking in his socks.

"Only his blankets, to camp on," the fellow answered, hoarsely. "You advised me to help myself, you know."

"Quite right; so I did; but you're as white as the tent—you tremble like a leaf. What's wrong?"

"My head," replied Vanheimert, in a whine. "It's going round and round, either from what I had in the night, or lying too long in the hot tent, or one on top of the other. I thought I'd camp for a bit in the shade."

"I should," said Stingaree, and buried himself in his paper with undisguised contempt.

Vanheimert came a step nearer. Stingaree did not look up again. The revolver was leveled under one trailing blanket. But the trigger was never pulled. Vanheimert feared to miss even at arm's length, so palsied was his hand, so dim his eye; and when he would have played the man and called desperately on the other to surrender, the very tongue clove in his head.

He slunk over to the shady margin of surrounding scrub and lay aloof all the morning, now fingering the weapon in his pocket, now watching the man who never once looked his way. He was a bushranger and an outlaw; he deserved to die or to be taken; and Vanheimert's only regret was that he had neither taken nor shot him at their last interview. The bloodless alternative was to be borne in mind, yet in his heart he well knew that the bullet was his one chance with Stingaree. And even with the bullet he was horribly uncertain and afraid. But of hesitation on any higher ground, of remorse or of reluctance, or the desire to give fair play, he had none at all. The man whom he had stupidly spared so far was a notorious criminal with a high price upon his head. It weighed not a grain with Vanheimert that the criminal happened to have saved his life.

"Come and eat," shouted Stingaree at last; and Vanheimert trailed the blankets over his left arm, his right thrust idly into his pocket, which bulged with a red bandanna handkerchief. "Sorry it's sardines again," the bushranger went on, "but we shall make up with a square feed tonight if my mate gets back by dark; if he doesn't, we may have to tighten our belts till morning. Fortunately, there's plenty to drink. Have some whisky in your tea?"

Vanheimert nodded, and with an eye on the bushranger, who was once more stooping over his beloved Australasian, helped himself enormously from the gallon jar.

"And now for a siesta," yawned Stingaree, rising and stretching himself after the meal.

"Hear, hear!" croaked Vanheimert, his great face flushed, his bloodshot eyes on fire.

"I shall camp on the shady side of my tent."

"And I'll do ditto at the other."

"So long, then."

"So long."

"Sweet repose to you."

"Same to you," rasped Vanheimert, and went off cursing and chuckling in his heart by turns.

It was a sweltering afternoon of little air, and that little as hot and dry in the nostrils as the atmosphere of a laundry on ironing day. Beyond and above the trees a fiery blast blew from the north; but it was seldom a wandering puff stooped to flutter the edges of the tents in the little hollow among the trees. And into this empty basin poured a vertical sun, as if thru some giant lens which had burnt a hole in the heart of the scrub. Lulled by the faint perpetual murmur of leaf and branch, without a sound from bird or beast to break its soothing monotone, the two men lay down within a few yards, tho out of sight of each other. And for a time all was very still.

Then Vanheimert rose slowly, without a sound, and came on tiptoe to the other tent, his right hand in the pocket where the bandanna handkerchief had been but was no longer. He came close up to the sunny side of the tent and listened vainly for a sound. But Stingaree lay like a log in the shade on the far side, his face to the canvas and his straw sombrero tilted over it. And so Vanheimert found him, breathing with the placid regularity of a sleeping child.

Vanheimert looked about him; only the ring of impenetrable trees and the deep blue eye of heaven would see what really happened. But as to what exactly was to happen Vanheimert himself was not clear as he drew the revolver ready cocked; even he shrank from shooting a sleeping man; what he desired and yet feared was a sudden start, a semblance of resistance, a swift justifiable shot. And as his mind's eye measured the dead man at his feet, the live man turned slowly over on his back.

It was too much for Vanheimert's nerves. The revolver went off in his hands. But it was only a cap that snapped, and another, and another, as he stepped back firing desperately. Stingaree sat upright, looking his treacherous enemy in the eye, thru the glass in which, it seemed, he slept. And when the sixth cap snapped as harmlessly as the other five, Vanheimert caught the revolver by its barrel to throw or to strike. But the raised arm was seized from behind by Howie, who had crept from the scrub at the snapping of the first cap; at the same moment Stingaree sprang upon him; and in less than a minute Vanheimert lay powerless, grinding his teeth, foaming and bleeding at the mouth, and filling the air with nameless imprecations.

The bushrangers let him curse; not a word did they bandy with him or with each other. Their action was silent, swift, concerted, pre-arranged. They lashed their prisoner's wrists together, lashed his elbows to his ribs, hobbled his ankles, and tethered him to a tree by the longest and the stoutest of their many ropes. The tree was the one under which Vanheimert had found himself the day before; in the afternoon it was exposed to the full fury of the sun; and in the sun they left him, quieter already, but not so quiet as they. It was near sundown when they returned to look upon a broken man, crouching in his toils like a beaten beast, with undying malice in his swollen eyes. And Stingaree sat at his prisoner's feet, offered him tobacco without a sneer, and lit up his own when the offer was declined with a curse.

"When we came upon you yesterday morning in the storm, one of us was for leaving you to die in your tracks," began Stingaree. He was immediately interrupted by his mate.

"That was me!" cried Howie, with a savage satisfaction.

"It doesn't matter which of us it was," continued Stingaree; "the other talked him over; we put you on one of our horses, and we brought you more dead than alive to the place which no other man has seen since we took a fancy to it. We saved your miserable life, I won't say at the risk of our own, but at risk enough even if you had not recognized us. We were going to see you thru, whether you knew us or not; before this we should have set you on the road from which you had strayed. I thought you must know us by sight, but when you denied it I saw no reason to disbelieve you. It only dawned on me by degrees that you were lying, tho Howie here was sure of it.

"I still couldn't make out your game; if it was funk I could have understood it; so I tried to get you to own up in the night. I let you see that we didn't mind whether you knew us or not, and yet you persisted in your lie. So then I smelt something deeper. But we had gone out of our way to save your life. It never struck me that you might go out of your way to take ours!"

Stingaree paused, smoking his pipe.

"But it did me!" cried Howie.

"I never meant taking your lives," muttered Vanheimert. "I meant taking you—as you deserved."

"We scarcely deserved it of you; but that is a matter of opinion. As for taking us alive, no doubt you would have preferred to do so if it had seemed equally safe and easy; you had not the pluck to run a single risk. You were given every chance. I sent Howie into the scrub, took the powder out of six cartridges, and put what anybody would have taken for a loaded revolver all but into your hands. I sat at your mercy, quite looking forward to the sensation of being stuck up for a change. If you had stuck me up like a man," said Stingaree, reflectively examining his pipe, "you might have lived to tell the tale."

There was an interval of the faint, persistent rustling of branch and leaf, varied by the screech of a distant cockatoo and the nearer cry of a crow, as the dusk deepened into night as expeditiously as on the stage. Vanheimert was not awed by the quiet voice to which he had been listening. It lacked the note of violence which he understood; it even lulled him into a belief that he would still live to tell the tale. But in the dying light he looked up, and in the fierce unrelenting face, made the more sinister by its foppish furniture, he read his doom.

"You tried to shoot me in my sleep," said Stingaree, speaking slowly, with intense articulation. "That's your gratitude! You will live just long enough to wish that you had shot yourself instead!"

Stingaree rose.

"You may as well shoot me now!" cried Vanheimert, with a husky effort.

"Shoot you? I'm not going to shoot you at all; shooting's too good for scum like you. But you are to die—make no mistake about that. And soon; but not tonight. That would not be fair on you, for reasons which I leave to your imagination. You will lie where you are tonight; and you will be watched and fed like your superiors in the condemned cell. The only difference is that I can't tell you when it will be. It might be tomorrow—I don't think it will—but you may number your days on the fingers of both hands."

So saying, Stingaree turned on his heel, and was lost to sight in the shades of evening before he reached his tent. But Howie remained on duty with the condemned man.

As such Vanheimert was treated from the first hour of his captivity. Not a rough word was said to him; and his own unbridled outbursts were received with as much indifference as the abject prayers and supplications which were their regular reaction. The ebbing life was ordered on that principle of high humanity which might be the last refinement of calculated cruelty. The prisoner was so tethered to such a tree that is was no longer necessary for him to spend a moment in the red eye of the sun. He could follow a sufficient shade from dawn to dusk. His boots were restored to him; a blanket was permitted him day and night; but night and day he was sedulously watched, and neither knife nor fork was provided with meals. His fare was relatively not inferior to that of the legally condemned, whose notorious privileges and restrictions served the bushrangers for a model.

And Vanheimert clung to the hope of a reprieve with all the sanguine tenacity of his ill-starred class, tho it did seem with more encouragement on the whole. For the days went on, and each of many mornings brought its own respite till the next. The welcome announcement was invariably made by Howie after a colloquy with his chief, which Vanheimert watched with breathless interest for a day or two, but thereafter with increasing coolness. They were trying to frighten him; they did not mean it, any more than Stingaree had meant to shoot the new chum who had the temerity to put a pistol to his head after the affair of the Glenranald bank. The case of lucky Fergus, justly celebrated thruout the colony, was a great comfort to Vanheimert's mind; he could see but little difference between the two; but if his treachery was the greater, so also was the ordeal to which he was being subjected. For in the light of a mere ordeal he soon regarded what he was invited to consider as his last days on earth, and in the conviction that they were not, began suddenly to bear them like a man. This change of front produced its fellow in Stingaree, who apologized to Vanheimert for the delay, which he vowed he could not help. Vanheimert was a little shaken by his manner, tho he smiled behind the bushranger's back. And he could scarcely believe his ears when, the very next morning, Howie told him that his hour was come.

"Rot!" said Vanheimert, with a confident expletive.

"Oh, all right," said Howie. "But if you don't believe me, I'm sorrier for you than I was."

He slouched away, but Vanheimert had no stomach for the tea and damper which had been left behind. It was unusual for him to be suffered to take a meal unwatched; something unusual was in the air. Stingaree emerged from the scrub leading the two horses. Vanheimert began to figure the fate that might be in store for him. And the horses, saddled and bridled before his eyes, were led over to where he sat.

"Are you going to shoot me before you go," he cried, "or are you going to leave me to die alone?"

"Neither, here," said Stingaree. "We're too fond of the camp."

It was his first brutal speech, but the brutality was too subtle for Vanheimert. He was beginning to feel that something dreadful might happen to him after all. The pinions were removed from his arms and legs, the long rope detached from the tree and made fast to one of Stingaree's stirrups instead. And by it Vanheimert was led a good mile thru the scrub, with Howie at his heels.

A red sun had risen on the camp, but in the scrub it ceased to shine, and the first open space was as sunless as the dense bush. Spires of sand kept whirling from earth to sky, joining other spinning spires, forming a monster balloon of yellow sand, a balloon that swelled until it burst, obscuring first the firmament and then the earth. But the mind of Vanheimert was so busy with the fate he feared that he did not realize he was in another duststorm until Stingaree, at the end of the rope, was swallowed like a tug in a fog. And even then Venheimert's peculiar terror of a duststorm did not link itself to the fear of sudden death which had at last been put into him. But the moment of mental enlightenment was at hand.

The rope trailed on the ground as Stingaree loomed large and yellow thru the storm. He had dropped his end. Venheimert glanced over his shoulder, and Howie loomed large and yellow behind him.

"You will now perceive the reason for so many days' delay," said Stingaree. "I have been waiting for such a duststorm as the one from which we saved you, to be rewarded as you endeavored to reward me. You might, perhaps, have preferred me to make shorter work of you, but on consideration you will see that this is not only just but generous. The chances are perhaps against you, and somewhat in favor of a more pleasant death; but it is quite possible that the storm may pass before it finishes you, and that you may then hit the fence before you die of thirst, and at the worst we leave you no worse off then we found you. And that, I hold, is more than you had any right to expect. So long!"

The thickening storm had swallowed man and horse once more. Vanheimert looked around. The second man and the second horse had also vanished. And his own tracks were being obliterated as fast as footmarks in blinding snow.

Revenge on the Fly

By Alexander Ricketts

I THOUGHT it an attractive proposition I was explaining, but Jones, all the time I was setting it forth, was apparently much more intent on flirting with a fly.

With that astonishing persistency of purpose which all bald-headed observers have recorded as the most notable characteristic of the species, the fly insisted upon alighting upon his desk, tho every time it did so Jones menaced it with his ruler until it buzzed away. He could easily have killed it outright innumerable times, but he seemed content simply to keep it on the wing.

"See here, Jones!" I demanded, exasperated at last by his inattention beyond the point of further endurance, "why don't you kill that dratted bug and listen to what I'm telling you?"

"Don't want to," he replied, intent upon poking it up again. "What's it done to you, anyhow, to make you so bloodthirsty?"

"Well, let it alone, then, confound it!" I exclaimed sharply.

"Nixy!" he returned, earnestly watching for it to light again. "But go on with your scheme. I'm listening all right. Get up there, you rascal!" This last was addressed to the fly, which had lit on his ruler and was complacently rubbing its front hands or feet or feelers, or whatever they are, together.

"Well, I'm going over to Brown's office," I announced angrily, rising to my feet. "He's got sense enough to prefer making a bunch of money to playing tag with silly insects in business hours, anyway."

"Playing? Great Scott, I'm not playing with it! I'm teaching this pestilent fly," retorted Jones, stirring it up again, "a much needed lesson in deportment. I supposed you could see that for yourself."

"Eh?" I ejaculated blankly.

"Yes, siree, that's what!" exclaimed Jones, as he solemnly reached for the fly once more. "I was out pretty late last night to a card party, and when I tried to catch a cat-nap here a little while ago this fly impolitely persisted in trying to buzz into my ear, in spite of all I could do to drive it away, and keeping me awake. So I'm keeping it on the move just to show it how uncomfortable it is to have its rest interrupted every time it gets settled."

"You gave yourself away badly then," said the native to his American friend, who was in England for the first time. "And they'll put 50 per cent on the bill." "Why," asked the American. "You ordered tomaytoes. On this side they are tomahtoes." The American friend smiled sweetly and watched the waiter as the dishes were placed upon the table, "Where," he said, "are the potathoes?"

The South African gold mines have recovered from the effects of the Boer war, as shown by the output for July—$9,031,250, against $8,604,000 in August, 1899 (the highest record before the war).

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