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The Bushranger's Gift.

Christmas in Australia. It is hard for us dwellers in the north to realize what Christmas weather is in the antipodes. Hot and dusty and dispiriting, it would seem there could be little thought of rejoicing at such a season, but the festive spirit was strong in the race which fashioned far-off Australia into a great country, and it will not be robbed of its traditional merrymaking. Such a merrymaking had been planned at the farm of John Wickham, near what is now the city of Victoria, but then (in 1842) a lonely sheep-herder's home, for in February, Milly, Wickham's daughter, was to marry Frank Goodwin, a rider on the adjoining farm, though many miles away, and Frank was to spend the week with them.

Naturally the girl had been looking forward impatiently to this visit of her lover. Distances in those days were immense, and the only means of travel was the horse, so that the young people did not see each other very often, and Milly was almost counting the hours that must elapse before his arrival.

On Christmas eve she stood in the twilight at the door of the rude house, and watched anxiously for Frank's coming. He was late, for she had expected him since the morning, and these were the days of the bushrangers. If Frank had been waylaid by them, she thought, with a shudder, there would be little merrymaking for her.

Milly stood there for some time, shading her eyes with her hand and peering in the direction from which she expected her lover to appear. The sound of fast-falling hoofs rapidly nearing her caused an expression of joy to cross her face, still mingled with a little anxiety, for Frank had not given the joyful "Coo-ee!" which he always sounded at the same distance, and her heart misgave her that the fast-coming rider could not be him, but a casual stranger.

Rapidly the horse drew nearer, taking shape in the darkness, and still no joyful hail from the rider. Alarmed, she hastily sounded the well-known call. No answer! Then with a mad rush which told of his terror, the horse—his horse—rushed past her and stood trembling in the yard, to which his instinct had brought him for safety, and Milly saw that the saddle was empty!

Quickly calling to her father inside the house, she hastened to calm the terrified horse, and lead him to the door. The light from the lantern held by her father showed her what she had feared to see—the saddle wet with blood.

No accident with which the rider might have met could account for that dark stain, and the terror displayed by the horse was proof positive that a tragedy had been enacted. The one question now in Milly's mind was whether there was yet time to help her lover. He might be dying on the trail, or—as bad, or worse—a helpless prisoner in the hands of the bushrangers.

Her mind was made up instantly. Without a thought of the danger she faced, or stopping to answer her father's call to her to wait, she sprang on the back of the horse, which knew her well, and turned his head in the direction of the bush, where she knew her lover was either dead or in the hands of the rangers.

What she meant to do she hardly knew. Fear she felt none, and the wild ride and the thought of what she might meet stirred her blood to madness. A few minutes of fierce galloping and she realized that in her haste she might pass the object of her search if he had been wounded and fallen from his horse, though she felt sure the faithful beast would not have deserted his master, and that her lover must be a prisoner.

Checking the speed of her horse, she rode along for some time, scanning with sharp eyes every spot on the

trail, and peering anxiously on each side, dreading to see what might meet her gaze, but ready for anything that would end the suspense. Several times dark patches of rank grass took the shape of the object of her search, and after each slight pause she rode on with her heart alternately lighter and heavier—lighter because the suspicious looking object was not the body of her Frank, and heavier as she realized that each step into the bush carried her into danger from the outlaws who had their hiding places there and it was in one of these she well knew she would find her lover, if, indeed, she was fortunate enough to find him at all.

Riding at an easy canter, Milly was well into the "bush" when the gleam of a light from a camp fire shone before her. Fittingly it showed, as if in a gully or among rocks, and on the soft grass she drew closer without dis-

yond the glare of the fire, a dark bundle which her heart told her was what she had come to find.

Uncertain what the advent of their visitor might mean, the men stood silent for a few minutes; then the leader said gruffly:

"You're a long way off the trail, ain't ye, miss? Did you come to spend Christmas with us?" The gang good-naturedly echoed the guffaw their captain gave at this sally of wit, but the girl now realized the danger she was in, and her brain worked rapidly. Rough, and often cruel, were these rangers of the bush, but deeds of generosity were not unknown to them. She would make an appeal.

In a voice the steadiness of which astonished her, she answered: "No, I can't stop. I came for a Christmas present."

Milly saw in an instant by the faces

of the men in an agony of fear.

The band drew closer, and one of them said: "He ain't hurt bad. Maybe his arm's broke. Let's bring him to the fire."

As they lifted him, and Milly bent to see his face, she caught her breath in fright, for he was unconscious, and a wild fear that he might be dead shot through her.

The movement, however, must have caused him pain, for he groaned, and Milly tenderly passed her handkerchief over his lips and face.

"You can have him, now you've come for him, though he'd make a likely ranger," spoke up the leader; "though I don't see how you're going to carry him. He can't ride a horse, that's sure."

Still somewhat surprised at her friendly reception, and wondering dimly if the men were cruelly joking with her, Milly determined to play

A Christmas Carol.

There's a song in the air!
There's a star in the sky!
There's a mother's deep prayer
And a baby's low cry!
And the star rains its fire with the
Beautiful sing
For the manger of Bethlehem cradles a
King.

There's a tumult of joy
O'er the wonderful birth,
For the virgin's sweet boy
Is the Lord of the earth.
Ay! the star rains its fire and the
Beautiful sing
For the manger of Bethlehem cradles a
King.

In the light of that star,
Lethal ages imperiled;
And that song from afar
Has swept over the world.
Every hearth is aflame, and the Beautiful
sing
In the homes of the nations that Jesus
is King.

We rejoice in the light,
And we echo the song
That comes down through the night
From the heavenly throng.
Ay! we shout to the lovely evangel they
bring
And we greet in His cradle our Savior
and King.
—Josiah Gilbert Holland.

As well as she was able, she bound up the injured arm in such a way as to ease the pain, and supporting his head on her arm she waited anxiously for the outcome of the adventure.

While Milly was ministering to her lover, the bushrangers had been conferring at a little distance, and the leader now came forward and spoke to her with a little harshness in his tones:

"The men say you know our hiding places, and if we let you go you may inform on us. Who are you, and who is this chap?"

"My name is Milly Wickham, and this is Frank Goodwin," the girl answered. "My father's place is only a few miles over there," indicating "Frank is a herder with Shepstone, and we're to be married in February. I'll never say anything of this, believe me, and I promise for him. You can trust us."

"We've got to trust you if we let you go, but, by —, if you ever say a word about where you found us, we'll get you, be sure of that. Do you understand? Not a word, even to your father, and don't ever ride this way again. Will you swear?"

Gladly Milly gave the promise, and repeated after the man a rough formula calling down vengeance on herself and her friends if she ever violated the oath. And well she knew how fearful would be the vengeance of these men if through her their hiding place should be found.

Tales are still told in Australia of atrocities wreaked by these outlaws on persons whom they even suspected of betraying them, and rarely was a gang of desperadoes so utterly wiped out that none survived to do the work of vengeance. Milly felt gratitude toward these men, in addition to fear, for her enterprise had been extraordinarily successful.

Then the leader of the gang gave her her dismissal, leading up the tired horse, which had stood patiently waiting.

"Now, you've got to get him home on your own horse. We can't spare one of ours," said the man. He'll carry you both all right, though you rode him pretty hard. Must have been in a hurry, weren't you?" with a chuckle at the pleasantry.

And Milly in her joy looked up in his face and smiled with him, too pleased at her success to be afraid of his rough, bearded face and unkempt hair, which in the growing light she could almost see plainly. Well might she be proud of her night's work.

Frank, still hardly conscious, was lifted onto the horse in front of Milly, and the pair started out at a walk to cover the many miles she had ridden so fast a few hours before.

Stern injunctions from the rangers not to look back on their journey were strictly obeyed, and in the dawn the pair went homeward, Milly supporting in her arms—as she often told husband in after years—the "Bushranger's" Christmas Gift.



covery. Suddenly she was sharply challenged, and a startled sentry fired point blank at her, but the surprise spoiled his aim.

At once Milly urged her horse over the edge of a small gully, and with the spring landed in safety among a group of men lying at ease around a camp fire.

Though surprised, the bandits were on their feet with ready guns in an instant. Seeing only the unarmed girl on the panting horse, the leader sharply called to his followers not to shoot, and stood gazing at the silent figure.

Milly's eye went rapidly round the camp—she had no thought of danger to herself—and she saw with joy, be-

hind her audience that she had made a good impression, and went on: "There's what I came for," pointing to the bound figure, "he could not come to me, so I came to him."

"Oh, him!" said the leader, stepping close to her and leading her horse to the light. "Well, we don't want the fool. He wouldn't have been hurt if he had stopped when he was told to. But if he was coming to you—"

He broke off awkwardly, probably nearer to paying a compliment than he had been for many a year, but the girl's heart leaped at the word "hurt," and in an instant she was off the saddle, and bending over the wound-

her part to the end, as she had begun, and said with as much of a laugh as she could summon up:

"I'll wrap him up and carry him."

Her laugh was echoed boisterously, and one of the men handed her a flask of liquor, which Milly took gratefully, and forcing a little between the clenched teeth, soon saw with joy the color return to his cheeks and his eyes open with surprise at his surroundings. Aside from the broken arm he was unharmed.

Fearing he might spoil the good effect she felt she had made with the robbers, she whispered to him to be silent, and the man, still only half-conscious, obeyed her.