

BILLABONG'S LUCK



MARY GRANT BRUCE

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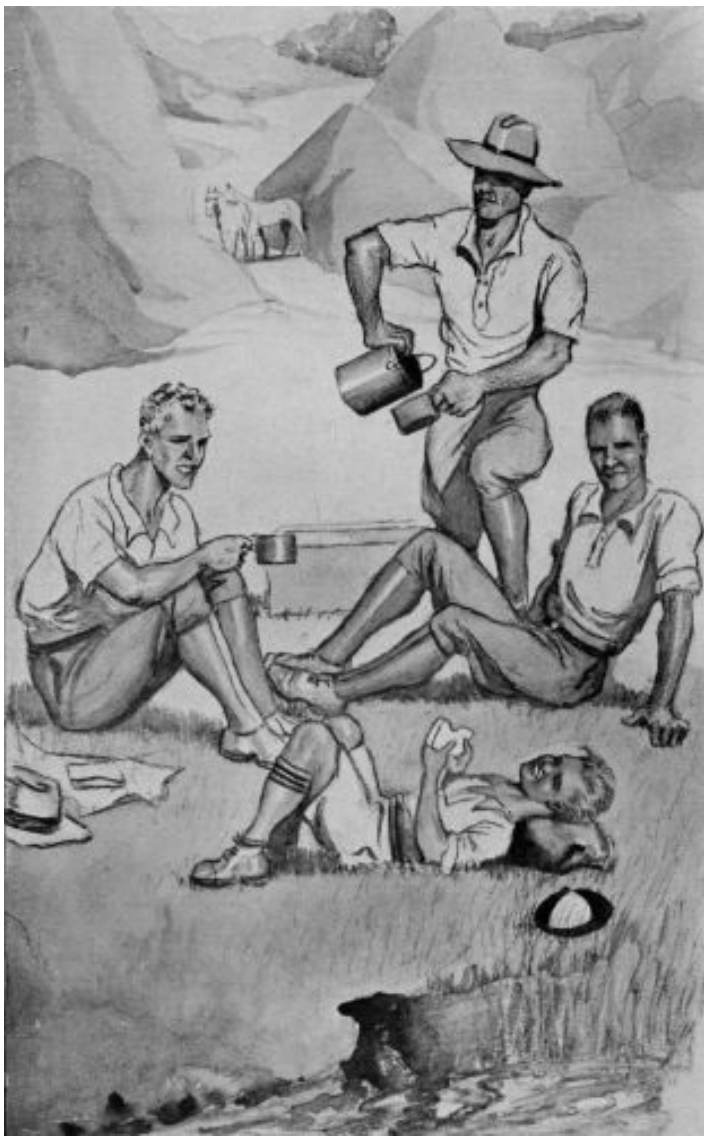
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MARY GRANT BRUCE

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JIM AND WALLY
NORA OF BILLABONG
TIMOTHY IN BUSHLAND
GRAY’S HOLLOW
GLEN EYRE
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON
A LITTLE BUSH MAID
’POSSUM
DICK
CAPTAIN JIM
DICK LESTER OF KURRAJONG
BACK TO BILLABONG
THE STONE AXE OF BURKAMUKK
THE TWINS OF EMU PLAINS
BILLABONG’S DAUGHTER
MATES AT BILLABONG
THE HOUSES OF THE EAGLE
THE TOWER ROOMS
BILLABONG ADVENTURERS
GOLDEN FIDDLES
THE HAPPY TRAVELLER
BILL OF BILLABONG
ROAD TO ADVENTURE



“He was lying flat on his back, taking large bites out of a mammoth sandwich.” (Page 99.)

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BY
MARY GRANT BRUCE

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To
G. E. B.

FOREWORD

THIS story is the result of a dream.

* * * * *

I have been told that people will not believe this. That is possible. But, whether dream or vision, the experience was so real to me that I tell it for the few who will believe—and partly to excuse myself for having written another book of Billabong.

* * * * *

On a winter night I fell asleep thinking of the book I was planning to write: a story which had no connection with Billabong. I awoke in grey morning light. Through the open window I could see the leafless trees. The clock in the hall chimed seven, slowly. I tried to catch anew the idea that had been in my mind when I went to sleep the night before.

Then, suddenly, I was in a large room which I knew to be the smoking-room of Billabong. David Linton was there, with Norah and Wally and Jim. There was nothing dream-like about them; they were very solid and natural. They were talking quietly, and they seemed rather amused.

"I hear she wants to write another book," said Jim.

"Not about us, I hope," Wally said, quickly. "I don't much like all this publicity!"

Norah looked thoughtful.

"Well—we have to remember that, after all, she made us."

"She did," agreed her father. "She took a lot of trouble over us, too!"

"And she gave us a very good time," Norah said. "Think of all the fun we've had!"

"Well, yes," Wally admitted. "We'd never have done any of those things but for her. Travel, and war, and all sorts of larks!"

"And we've met such a lot of jolly people," Jim said. "After all, we do owe her something, don't we?"

"What I like," said Norah, "is all the friends we've made. Such a lot of people seem to know us. It's rather nice to think of all the homes where we are welcome."

"She made us," Mr. Linton said—"and then she just let us be. We never felt we were doing queer things, or being queer—but just ordinary people, doing ordinary things. So it was easy to do them for her and all the friends. And she knows we're real."

"Well, we *are* real," said Jim. "She opened a door and let us come out. We always felt that she just sat by and watched us running our own show."

"That's what made it so jolly," Wally said. "Sometimes, of course, we knew she wasn't putting it down in quite the right way—but she did her best. It couldn't have been very easy to think herself into all our skins, but she did try."

"And there's one thing that I have liked to see," remarked David Linton. "She didn't make you unnaturally good, which you couldn't be; but she did let all those friends of ours see you as happy, straight youngsters, doing the decent thing and getting a good time out of it. That counts with me, because I brought you up!"

"And what about you?" asked Norah. And they laughed at him.

"Oh, well—she simply set me going, like the rest of you. I had an easy job."

"Well, we owe her something for you," said Jim. "Think of the fathers we might have had!"

"And she gave us Billabong," said Wally.

"We can't let her down," Jim said. "Can't we help her with another yarn?"

"But what can we do?" Mr. Linton looked puzzled. "We've done everything we can think of."

"Oh, we'll plan something," Norah laughed. "We always managed it before when we put our heads together. And there's a new person to bring in now. He'll help."

"Yes, he'll help," said Wally. "It's time he began to make friends too. We'll just start off and begin something. There's always an adventure round the corner if you look for it. And, after all, we have only to be ourselves. That's how she likes us."

They smiled at each other—all through the scene I had been conscious of the curious undercurrent of amusement among them, some deep source of merriment I could not fathom. Their voices grew lower. Then other people began to drift in—Tommy and Bob Rainham, Brownie and Murty and the station hands, and little red-haired Bill; others in the background, more misty. But they were all very interested and purposeful, and they seemed to know that I was there; though they smiled at each other, part of the smile was for me. So that I knew that, though they were independent, still they were all my own people, whom I had made.

The vision that had been so real grew dream-like. The farther wall melted away, and beyond it I saw the trees and the lagoon and the wide paddocks of Billabong. And suddenly I was back in my own room, and the clock in the hall was chiming a quarter past seven.

* * * * *

In the days that followed it seemed to me that I had only to listen and hear the story and set it down.

MARY GRANT BRUCE.

BEXHILL-ON-SEA,
1933.

BILLABONG'S LUCK

CHAPTER I

THE COTTAGE OF THE CREEK

CREEK COTTAGE stood upon a gentle rise a few hundred yards from the stream that gave it its name. Only here and there could a glimpse of the water be caught, for all along the bank grew willows, their thick, down-drooping branches covered with the first green of early spring. Cattle had nibbled the young shoots so that they seemed to have been carefully pruned to an even level, and beneath them the grass grew green and thick—a refuge loved by the cattle in summer.

Only where the willows overhung the deep places of the creek were their boughs allowed to “weep” to their full extent. They took advantage of it, trailing their tips in the water that drew them downstream. Here and there a wattle showed gleams of early gold in its dark foliage. But in the garden of the cottage the earlier wattle, the Cootamundra, that defies winter with its hardy buds, had already broken into full blossom, and each burdened tree was loud with the steady hum of bees, working overtime among the feathery yellow masses.

The mistress of Creek Cottage was digging. She was a slight, fair girl; the casual observer would have said that Nature had fashioned her for other things than using a spade in heavy black soil. But there were unsuspected reserves of strength in the slender form, together with a spirit that was not to be subdued: she handled the spade like a workman, patting each sod into position with deft touches. She had paused to look with satisfaction on the nearly-finished bed when a dissatisfied voice hailed her from the verandah.

“Miss Tommy, you hadn’t ought to be doin’ all that diggin’.”

“But I like it,” said Tommy Rainham, smiling at her gaunt retainer. “Think of the roses we are going to have, Sarah!”

“I’m thinkin’ of your back,” stated the handmaiden, definitely. “Couldn’t the ’ole bed wait until Bill gets about again? Mr. Bob ’ull be fair annoyed if he catches you.”

“I want to finish before he comes home,” Tommy admitted. “Or else he will take the spade himself, and then it is I who will be annoyed. Five minutes will do it, Sarah. Is there any sign of him?”

“Not a sign—only any amount of dust down at the sheep-yards. I guess

he's got his hands full. Bill's real mad 'cause he can't be there. Well, I'm just goin' to make tea, Miss Tommy—shall I give you five minutes?"

"Say six," said Tommy; and fell to digging furiously.

"I'd do it meself, quick an' lively—only me an' a spade never got on," remarked Sarah, unhappily. "When I dig, it looks as if pigs had been rootin'." She disappeared with man-like strides round the corner of the verandah. Tommy—who had been christened Cecilia by misguided parents—finished her work swiftly, put away the spade, and ran to wash her hands, returning to find the tea-tray awaiting her.

"How good!" she uttered, sitting down thankfully. "But I am worried about Mr. Bob. Sarah, I know what I will do—I will put some tea in a Thermos and take it to the yards as soon as I have finished."

"Well, I bet Mr. Bob won't be sorry if you do," returned Sarah. "And it'll keep you from the botherin' old garden. True as life, Miss Tommy, you shouldn't do that heavy work."

"How can I be a good Australian if I do not work?" demanded Tommy, laughing.

"If work makes a good Aussie, then you're one, all right," quoth Sarah. "People used to say you'd never shake down here, seein' you'd been reared in France, let alone bein' English to start with. But they know better now. Seems to me that girls must get taught to be pretty useful in France. But there's a limit, Miss Tommy, only the mischief is you never seem to see it!"

"Oh—why trouble about limits?" laughed Tommy. "That is what Mr. Jim calls 'to cramp the style.'"

"Much yours gets cramped! Well, I'll go an' fix up Mr. Bob's tea. Make him come home soon, won't you?—he's got the milkin' an' all. Lor', I'll be glad when Bill can get back to work! I don't see why he wanted to let that old horse stand on his foot!"

"It does not seem that he wanted it greatly—poor Bill!" said Tommy. Bill's wife, however, was already out of earshot—most of Sarah's movements were of the type known as "whisking," a peculiarity which had lent much excitement to the few occasions when she had attempted to wait at table. She was hard of feature and rough of tongue. But—in a country of few retainers—Tommy Rainham had learned to look below the surface, and she was well aware that she had a treasure.

The two-roomed establishment which was the special property of Bill and his wife stood at a little distance from the Cottage. On its verandah sat Bill, bandaged foot propped on a box, his small daughter building houses with home-made blocks beside him. Sarah joined them, and together they watched Tommy, as, basket in hand, she went briskly across the paddock.

"Well, I'm fair sick of this old foot!" Bill said, gloomily. "There's the Boss

doin' all my work an' most of his own, an' Miss Tommy doin' all he can't fit in. An' goodness knows he works hard enough, any old time."

"Havin' a stiff time, too, he is," added his wife. "He's pretty worried—I know Miss Tommy don't spend a penny she can help."

"Not much wonder if he's worried. This last season's been enough to break bigger men than the Boss. Sheep worth nothin', an' wool sellin' at a price that's givin' it away. If it hadn't been for that bit of range-country he took up beyond Billabong he'd have been in Queer Street. Mighty good thing Mr. Jim persuaded him into it. Them bullocks he ran out there must have just about pulled him through."

"But I say, Bill"—Sarah leaned forward—"the Lintons 'ud always stand by the Boss and Miss Tommy. Bad times can't hurt a place like Billabong."

"Don't you believe it—Billabong isn't what it was, not by a long way. What with bad times and new taxes everywhere, the Lintons and Mr. Wally are hit, too. Not that they're exactly poor, or likely to be. But none of the squatters can find much ready money now. An' if they could—well, great friends an' all as they are, do you think Mr. Bob's the sort to take it?"

"He might—considerin' Miss Tommy."

"She wouldn't let him. No, I reckon them two'll stand or fall alone."

"They'd never have bought this place but for the Lintons," said Sarah, accusingly.

"Well, that was only because they all made friends on the ship, comin' out from England; and then Mr. Bob was glad enough to take Mr. Linton's advice about settlin'—him bein' a new-chum and knowin' nothin' about Australia. Jolly good advice it was, too; and the Billabong people have done a heap to help them, in all sorts of ways. But I don't believe they'd ever take money from the Lintons."

"I say, old man"—the hard face was suddenly softened—"we could let our wages run on, if Mr. Bob's short. We got enough banked to carry on with."

Bill grinned.

"Tell you the truth, old woman, I offered that to Mr. Bob last month. Said we were all right—not needin' cash."

"What'd he say?"

"Turned as red as a lobster, looked as if all the pride of all the Kings of England was ragin' in him—an' then shook hands with me an' told me a man with a wife an' kid couldn't afford to be generous. Said he'd sell the place for what it 'ud fetch if he couldn't pay wages."

"I might 'a' known it," said his wife, dolefully. "But I'd rather work for nothin' than leave Miss Tommy."

"Oh, well, I guess it won't come to that." He shook out his pipe. "Look here, old girl—you bring the potatoes out here, an' I'll peel 'em. Time you got

busy if you don't want Mr. Bob to come home an' find nothin' to eat."

At the moment Bob Rainham's thoughts were far removed from such matters as food. He had yarded his sheep early, and had spent a strenuous day in dealing with foot-rot. To catch and throw sheep for many hours on end is a pastime requiring more than average strength; and though Bob was no weakling, he had begun to feel that his body was one vast ache. His dog was temporarily out of action, lamed by a kick from a struggling ewe; and he had decided to cease work for the day when a sheep of an enquiring turn of mind discovered that the latch securing the gate in the fence between two yards was not fully home. This discovery was made by the act of bumping against it; the gate swung open and the two flocks hastened to visit each other.

It was upon this scene that Tommy came, finding an infuriated brother, surrounded by sheep whose outcries drowned his voice, struggling to shut the gate against the mass of bodies moving both ways. He succeeded at length and, meeting Tommy's eye, grinned at her ruefully.

"Marvels, aren't they? If I'd wanted to make them change yards do you think they'd have done it? Not they! And why I've gone to all this trouble to shut the gate I don't know, because they're thoroughly boxed. I'll have to draft the lot. Sheer waste of time!"

"That was your proud spirit determined to show them they had made a mistake," laughed Tommy. "Let them simmer down now, and come and have 'smoke-oh!' I've brought your tea."

"Bless you!" Bob said. "My throat is like a lime-kiln. Come over to the creek; I want a wash almost more than a drink."

He climbed over the low fence, took the basket, and together they strolled towards the creek. Bob plunged down the bank. Sounds of splashing and rubbing ensued, and presently he came back, face and hands dripping.

"I might have brought a towel," mused Tommy.

"There's grass," stated Bob, proceeding to pull up a handful and rub himself more or less dry. "My handkerchief is past praying for." He sat down on the ground, looking wolfishly at the Thermos as Tommy poured out the tea. "I drank about a quart of creek-water, just to get the edge off my thirst. At least, I don't think I swallowed it; it was just absorbed, like water on hot sand. Now I can drink comfortably." He did so.

"That was glorious!" He handed back the cup. "I don't believe I want to eat anything. The dust of the yards is very sustaining, and I've had plenty of that."

"Of course you must eat," said Tommy, calmly. "It would discourage me to think I had carried food across the paddock for nothing. This habit of yours of subsisting on dust is becoming too regular to please me." She held out a sandwich, and Bob took it meekly. They talked, and gradually the contents of the basket disappeared.

"Well, I didn't want anything, but somehow it's all gone," remarked Bob, nibbling the last cake and tossing fragments to his dog, which had limped to join them. "You have a way with you, Tommy. What have you been doing?"

"Oh, just pottering in the garden. There will be plenty of daffodils soon." She jumped up and went to where his coat was hanging upon a post; returning with his pipe and tobacco pouch. Bob had rolled over on his back, and was looking up into the heart of the willow overhead.

"Shouldn't have done that—thanks all the same," he said. "I've no time to smoke."

"Ten minutes won't make any difference," said Tommy. She filled the pipe, and Bob watched her, a twinkle in his eye, too lazy to argue the point.

"You won't smoke, but you fill a pipe like a man," he said, looking at the slender fingers.

"How else would I fill it? I have not had the opportunity of watching women fill pipes. And I do not smoke because I do not wish to—but just now I wish to keep you quiet for a little. There!" She gave him the pipe, and he lit it meekly.

"There isn't really time. I've got those blessed sheep to draft, and Spot's about useless. However—ten minutes won't make matters much worse. I'll get into trouble with Jim for not letting him know that Bill was off duty."

"Yes, Jim will be annoyed with you, and so will Wally. They would have been here very quickly if they had known. Why would you not tell them, Bob?"

Bob hesitated.

"Too much like asking for help," he said. "They're such good chaps: they'll put aside anything they're doing to lend me a hand. And it's queer, Tommy—I didn't mind taking their help when things were going well with us. But now that we're having a bit of a struggle I don't like doing it. Quite senseless, of course, but that's how I feel."

Tommy nodded wisely.

"I know. I feel it, too. Even with Norah—I find myself keeping things back from her, although I know she would be hurt if she guessed it. Are you afraid of being offered other help, Bob—money?"

"Yes. I couldn't take it. They'd offer it like a shot if I gave them an opening. And because I can't take money I don't want to take the other help. It's just an idiotic form of pride, I suppose—or like an animal that prefers to get off by himself to lick his wounds." His tired young face set in obstinate lines. "I want to win out by ourselves, without anyone's help—even the Lintons'."

"Well, we will do it. But we must be very careful, Bob. They are so quick to notice things, and they know so much of our affairs. It would be easy to hurt

them.”

“That’s just it,” Bob said. “Already I’ve kept one or two things about the sheep back from Jim, and I’m sure he knows it. Wally, too: there never was anyone quicker at feeling things than Wally. I’d hate them to misjudge us about it. It’s—it’s only the feeling that, apart from money, we owe them a thousand times more than we can ever pay back: all the kindness they’ve showered on us from the time we left England.”

“All the friendship,” said Tommy, softly.

“Yes. Well, we know what it’s been. And now I’ve the feeling that I ought to be able to make good on my own, without any spoon-feeding; only I’ve been so worried lately that it’s hard to help showing it when I’m with them. That’s why I’ve been keeping away from Billabong.”

“But you must not overdo it. That would be a bad mistake. Our plan is to keep our heads very high and be more cheerful than ever, so that they will think everything is going splendidly.”

“Per—haps,” said Bob, dryly. “I know Jim.”

“We must do it, Bob. And it will be good for us. You know what Jim and Norah and Wally believe; that if one always holds on to the thought that things will come right, then they *do* come right—if one goes on doing one’s best all the time. Let us do that. We’ll think success, and dream success, and we won’t let ourselves talk or think of anything else. And then—well, the Goddess Success will be so pleased with us that she will turn her face towards us again, all smiles!”

“It’s a good dream,” said Bob, smiling at the eager face. “But a bit hard to stick to when you come to pay the month’s bills with mighty little in the bank!”

“That is the time to dream harder—to believe that the Goddess is putting us through a test, just to see how much backbone we have. And you know, Bob, worrying and being unhappy never make things any better.”

“Better!” said Bob, with surprising energy. “It makes ’em a million times worse, because one only gets thick-headed and afraid, and one misses chances. If I’d had the pluck to buy those ewes of Wilson’s six months ago I’d have made a lot of money; but I worried over it, was scared to act, and some other fellow snapped ’em up. That’s what worry does. I get wild every time I think of it!”

“Then that is just a double worry, for you are worrying because you worried!” said Tommy, laughing. “And it does not one bit of good.”

“Well—but one can’t be so happy-go-lucky as to believe that one’s mistakes don’t matter.”

“I think one has to learn by one’s mistakes. But not to be miserable over them, when it cannot help. That only wastes time. Oh, let us try it, Bob!—we’ll

make it a game. We'll have a compact that we refuse to worry: we'll just believe that all is coming right for us. Then, even if the Goddess Success keeps her back to us for awhile, we shall be much happier in ourselves, and we can put up with her back view."

"Think it will work?" asked Bob, doubtfully.

"Yes, if you play the game fairly. Not if you pretend for my benefit and go on with the worry-thoughts inside your mind. That would not be cricket. Besides, it would be foolish, for I would certainly know!"

"And what do you call your game? The game of make-believe?"

Tommy considered this, nibbling a blade of grass.

"Not a bad name," she said. "But I think a better would be, The Game of Thinking-True."

"That's the last thing I'd have dreamed of calling it."

"Well—just make believe that it is the true name. And we'll play that game as hard as we can, and get some fun out of it."

"Right-oh!" said her brother. "You're a cheerful soul of mate to have, anyhow. I believe you'd just smile if I told you the whole place was to be sold up to-morrow!"

"But certainly!" said Tommy. "We are young enough to start again. Only we are not going to be sold up. Already I have a conviction that the Goddess is feeling the back of her neck with the idea of turning round!"

"May it be soon!" said Bob, fervently. "At all events, I had better begin to feel the back of my own neck, or whatever part of me will stir me towards drafting those sheep." He rose, stretching himself. "You'd better trot home before the dust begins to rise. It's going to be a beast of a job, without Spot."

Tommy looked at him severely.

"This is where you begin thinking-true," she informed him. "It is going to be a very pleasant job, because I am about to take Spot's place, and the sheep will be so impressed that they will behave meekly!"

"My dear kid, you can't," protested Bob. "You're far too clean to come near that yard."

"All of me can wash," stated Tommy. "You forget I'm a working partner, Bobby. Come along—the gate is where you stand." She cut short any further argument by running off to the yards, where she climbed the fence nimbly and dropped in among the huddling sheep. Bob grinned, shrugged his shoulders, and took up his position at the drafting-gate.

Possibly the sheep were tired: perhaps the Goddess Success turned just a glimpse of her smile: but the flock displayed surprising docility. They moved gently in response to the energetic, pink-clad figure that urged them on with little French ejaculations—Tommy always broke into French when dealing with sheep, declaring that it was quite impossible for her to learn the correct

Australian expressions; a decision which showed prudence. The dust raised by the scuffling little hooves rose and almost hid her from Bob as he stood, his hand on the gate that ended the narrow race, his eyes watchful; swinging the gate from side to side so that each sheep found the way clear to its rightful yard. But behind the cloud the gay voice came to him, bearing the message that his partner was finding it possible to enjoy even dust and dirt and smells when they made part of life and work. Something of the weight that had lain on Bob Rainham's anxious heart lifted. Dimly he felt that it might be possible to play Tommy's game of make-believe.

The last ewe joined her sisters in affliction, lending her voice to join their chorus of bleating protest. Bob slammed home the peg that held the gate and turned to meet his sister, who had scrambled over the fence and made the circuit of the yards.

"I believe you bewitched them," he told her, laughing. "I would say they went like lambs, only the fellow who invented that saying had never dealt with lambs—they can be wickeder than most things. Anyhow, you did more work than I did, Tommy, old thing."

"You provided the science: I should never know one sheep from another," said Tommy, cheerfully. "I only danced at their heels."

"You're not as clean as you were," said Bob, looking ruefully at her dusty face. "However, it's no use rubbing that in. Well, we'll put one lot into the next paddock, and then turn the others out here. They won't be sorry to get back to grass, poor brutes!"

Together they freed the prisoners: then went slowly towards the house. Sarah came out to meet them.

"You needn't go lookin' for the milk-buckets, Mr. Bob. Bill's been helpin' me, an' I had a bit of time on me hands, so I slipped across an' did the milkin'."

"Sarah," said Bob, joyfully, "you should have a halo. If Cunjee stocks them I'll buy you one next time I go in."

"Ah, go on!" said the handmaiden, beaming. "Nice I'd look with one of them contraptions under me hat!"

CHAPTER II

PEOPLE OF BILLABONG

BEYOND the red-brick homestead of Billabong Station, with the outlying buildings of stables and men's quarters that made it like a village set in a tree-clad expanse, the ground sloped gently away until it ended in a wide lagoon. A little creek, fed from the farther hills, flowed into it at the eastern end, so that the lagoon was always fresh and the carefully-tended native bush that fringed its banks grew dense and green. Bathing-huts were built near the deepest part, with springboards jutting out over the water; all the children of Billabong had learned to swim almost as soon as they could walk. Near them was a boat-house with a miniature landing-stage. They were all home-made erections, chiefly the work of Jim Linton and his brother-in-law, Wally Meadows: built in days before Wally had dreamed of becoming a brother-in-law. In those days Norah Linton had been playmate and workmate only: and was none the less so now that she was Norah Meadows, with a new responsibility and a new house—Little Billabong, a few minutes' walk from the old home that would never be anything but "home" to Norah.

The lagoon was a bird-sanctuary. No gun might be fired anywhere in its neighbourhood, even when parrots and sulphur-crested cockatoos, robbers that merit shooting, swept over the water in flocks and came to rest in the trees by the banks. Wild-duck knew it as a place of refuge; black swan came flying low to it in the evenings, their leader's cry clanging across the paddocks. Wading-birds stalked in reed-beds in the shallows; lesser fowl rested there and brought up their babies in happy peace. And all the bush about it was full of honeyeaters, minahs, magpies and a hundred other little brothers of the trees. Norah loved to sit motionless in the boat, listening to their ceaseless talk of joy.

She was in the boat now, but by no means motionless. Luckily it was a wide craft, built for safety, not speed. Speed was out of the question on the lagoon, and David Linton, Billabong's owner, rightly considered that a vessel which was used as a diving-stage, which was called upon to carry many people—some of them of unusual size—and which was, moreover, frequently the scene of combats, must be more than ordinarily sea-worthy. The boat that had preceded this one had lacked this quality. It had capsized more than once under stress of unusual activity on the part of its passengers; and it had closed a long and adventurous career by sinking beneath Norah and Wally on the morning of their wedding-day. The people of Billabong interpreted this omen in various ways—but David Linton's interpretation had been that a new boat was

indicated.

Hence the present craft, staunch, wide and flat-bottomed; and Norah's activity was due to the fact that there was at large within it one whom Jim described as Ruler-of-All-Billabongs—David Meadows, eighteen months old, and already giving evidence of having inherited the quality of swift and unexpected movement which distinguished his father. At school Jim and Wally had been given bird-nicknames: Jim, from his excessively long legs, being dubbed Emu, while it was agreed that Wally could be nothing but Restless Fly-Catcher: a title that endured until the victim's fists had grown hard enough to deal with his tormentors. In his more serious moments Wally now had forebodings that his son would find the old name waiting for him in his first term at school.

Norah did not look so far ahead. Davie at eighteen months was quite enough of a man for her—with his black curls, his dancing brown eyes, his mouth where smiles lingered even in sleep. From his first month—throughout which he had howled protests at being born into an inquisitive world—life had struck Davie as a colossal joke. This view of existence appeared to dawn on him when his despairing father had carried the screaming atom out to the stables, declaring that he would leave him in a manger. In the stable-yard, however, there were horses; at the sight of which the howls suddenly ceased, as though a tap had been turned off. He had clawed at a pony's mane delightedly, uttering gurgles which Wally had proudly translated as "Come up, old boy!" The alarmed family on the verandah of Little Billabong had been presently regaled with an unusual sight—Wally riding homeward on the pony, his long legs just clearing the ground, bearing in his arms the son who had come into his kingdom and had found it good.

This change of heart on the part of Davie had been hailed with relief by his family. But to nobody had it quite so fine a flavour as to Murty O'Toole, head stockman on Billabong, who had nursed Norah as a baby, had held her and Jim on their first ponies, and had deep and secret plans for teaching Norah's son to ride. Murty had declined to share the universal bewilderment at the baby's bad temper, declaring it to be merely a sign of "the strong character that was in him"; after the visit to the stables his complacency was such that his comrades, Dave Boone and Mick Shanahan, disgustedly christened him "Granny."

"Ah, what talk!" said Murty, unmoved. "Why wouldn't he be annoyed?—fussed about with a lot of wimmen, desthroyed with washin', an' him knowin' what he wanted all along! Just wan look at a horse, an' he'd found it! An' strong! he grabbed me finger to-day, an' 'twas the worrk of the world gettin' it away from him. That wan'll hold a pullin' horse all right——"

Further outpourings were drowned in unfeeling shouts of laughter from Dave and Mick.

Thenceforward, having discovered that life held joyful surprises, Davie accepted it gleefully, and became "the little friend of all the world." He grew prodigiously, a true son of Billabong. At four months Wally contrived a punching-ball for him—a rubber balloon, hung just out of reach of the clutching fingers, but near enough to hit: Davie quickly discovered the fascination of the bright-hued thing that danced over him—that evidently liked being punched, because it always came back for more. Now and then he actually succeeded in holding it; a short-lived triumph, since a touch with a sharp fingernail meant a soft "plop" and a mysterious disappearance of the treasure. But somehow there was always another: his tall subjects were quick to understand and sympathize with the little King's yell of despair.

In spite of the adoring old servants, he was not spoilt. Norah had definite views on his upbringing; he was too good a possession to be marred. Davie learned very quickly that yea was yea, and nay, nay. He was of an adaptable nature: when cries to be lifted up produced no result, he soon discovered that playing with his toes formed an agreeable substitute. He spent long hours in the garden, with Kim, Jim's old dog, on guard beside the perambulator: happy with Kim, with the birds that were always near, and thrown into ecstasies if a horse appeared beyond the fence. Norah was quite certain that he saw fairies. Perhaps he did.

To-day she had brought him out in the boat, always a special joy to Davie. Secured by leather harness that Wally called his kicking-strap, he would always sit more or less quietly in the stern while a subject rowed, his bright eyes roving in every direction, his tongue chattering ceaselessly. Very few words were intelligible, though Norah held the belief that she understood a larger percentage than most people. At all events, she answered his remarks gravely, and both were satisfied with the conversation.

They circled the lagoon twice. Then came Davie's supreme moment. He knew that it was about to come when his mother shipped the oars; then he strained wildly at his bonds and said "Go!" a great many times in quick succession. The strap was unbuckled from the ring in the stern; Norah held one end, but the freedom of the boat was his. He took advantage of every inch of it: sometimes balancing on unsteady feet as the boat rocked gently, gurgling with laughter when he over-balanced; then, deciding that crawling was more fun, scrambling over and under the seats, hanging over the sides to dabble his fingers in the water, returning to fling himself on Norah, patting her face with chubby wet hands. His tongue wagged: he became dirtier and dirtier; and both King and subject were entirely happy.

It was Davie who first saw the three riders. His announcement was a yell of joy—"Horses!"—and a mingling of words in which "Dad!" might be discerned, while he pranced in the bottom of the boat, beckoning wildly.

They came cantering through the trees; three tall men on great horses, Wally's chestnut reeving and straining a length in front of the others, as though he shared his rider's impatience to get home. Behind him rode David Linton and Jim; little to choose between them in the supple ease with which they rode, although the squatter's hair and beard were grizzled. Wally waved his hat: his "Coo-ee!" came to them, and Davie answered it in a gay little shout.

"Back, Davie!" commanded Norah, and the King obediently scrambled to the stem, knowing well that no oars would be lifted until he was safely shackled. To buckle him in was like tethering an eel: no power could keep Davie still when those three riders were in sight. He shouted without pause while Norah sculled swiftly to the landing-stage. They reached it just as the horses pulled up.

"Hallo, everybody!" said Wally. "Been fishing, Davie?"

"Up!" said Davie, stretching appealing arms. It was his invariable greeting to a rider.

"Not on this fellow, old chap," said his father, shaking his head. "Too merry. You wait until Daddy catches a pony." He smiled at Norah. "Had a good time?"

"Oh—beautiful. You're back early."

"Mrs. Anderson wanted us to stay for tea, but we thought home was better," Mr. Linton said. "Do we tea with you or do you tea with us?"

"I promised Brownie to go over," said Norah. "She seemed to think it was a long while since she had had Davie for a meal; and I believe it's quite three days!"

Jim had dismounted, leaving his big grey with trailing bridle; Struan resented being tied up, but would stand indefinitely if the reins were thrown over his head. Davie shouted "Dim!"—straining at the kicking-strap while Norah endeavoured to free him and Jim tied up the boat. Then he was swung up to his uncle's shoulder. Norah led Struan, and the procession moved slowly up the rise to Billabong.

A black boy ran out from the stables to take the horses. There were grey hairs in Billy's rough thatch, but he would always be known as "boy." He had long forgotten his tribe—probably it no longer existed, scattered to the winds before the advance of the white man long ago. Billabong was all the home he knew, and he served it with dog-like devotion. He grinned widely at Davie, who greeted him as a man and a brother, and would gladly have gone with him and the horses, but for Jim's restraining grip on his legs. He accepted it cheerfully: partly because Jim's shoulder was one of the best places he knew, partly because they had turned towards the house, and the house held Brownie; and Brownie was the one person privileged to spoil Davie.

She came out to meet them now; grey-haired and fat, encircled by the

voluminous snowy apron that was her badge of honour. The old arms that had nursed the motherless children of Billabong were held out to Norah's baby; and Davie went to them with a glad little shout. Just for a moment he was torn by a double longing when Wally came striding to them: he clutched his coat. "Dad, too?"

Wally patted the black curls.

"I'll have my innings later on," he said. "Take him away, Brownie, and remember that the digestion of a young child is not——"

"Well, of all the impudence!" broke in Brownie, chuckling. "Come along, my pretty, an' I'll tell you what he used to do to his own digestion—not so long ago, neither!"

"If you undermine my son's respect for me——!" threatened Wally.

"Could I?" Brownie asked sweetly—and waddled off with the honours of war.

"Any news, Dad?" Norah tucked her hand into her father's arm.

"Wally has a bundle of letters for you," he answered. "My only news is that young Bill is likely to pay us a longer visit than we expected."

"Well, that's good news," said Norah, comfortably. "What is the reason?"

"His school is quarantined. They're working on the new buildings in the holidays, and some freshly-engaged carpenter brought measles with him. It has spread all round the place. Hard luck for the school, but can't you imagine the unholy joy of about five hundred boys! Holidays indefinitely extended, and not even the scare of measles for themselves—the school had been closed for a week before this fellow came."

"I can imagine Bill," Norah laughed. "That is, if he is allowed to put in the time here. Not if they were to keep him in Melbourne."

"No, but they won't. He has written me a rather incoherent letter to ask if he may come at once and stay until the school re-opens. I gather that the formal request from his people will follow." He chuckled deeply. "One can imagine a family discussion, with Bill slipping out to scrawl his letter and make a frantic dash for the nearest pillar-box!"

"Did you send him a telegram?"

"Well, I didn't like to seem in too much of a hurry. But I wrote a card in the post office. So he'll hear in the morning."

"I expect he's begun to pack," said Jim. "Great scenes there must be when he packs for Billabong! He musters up all the oldest clothes he can find, all the treasures that are never allowed to see the light of day at home—remember that rusty old revolver he brought last time?—and lastly the sacred stockwhip is taken down from the wall and packed reverently. He told me his mother objected to it strongly because he'd greased it. Sort of apologized for her. 'Of course, ladies don't understand about those things,' said Bill. He doesn't

include you in that, Nor.”

“I don’t quite know how Bill places Tommy and me,” said Norah, laughing.

“Ladies, to Bill, are female people who live in houses in suburbs,” stated Wally. “You and Tommy are a different species altogether. I don’t think he catalogues you—he just thanks his stars you’re here.”

“Well, I rather fancy Bill’s father is thankful for Billabong,” Mr. Linton said. “He said as much, last time I met him in Melbourne. And certainly the boy is very different from the world-hating urchin that he was two years ago. Holidays here have done a heap for Bill. But I doubt if Mrs. Blake quite approves of us.”

“We can stand that, so long as she lets him come.” Jim’s voice was curt: he liked little Bill Blake, and did not like the mother who had never found time to make friends with her son. “And she will let him: it gets him out of her way in the holidays, and that’s a distinct advantage for Mrs. Blake.”

“It isn’t safe to discuss Bill’s mother when Jim’s about,” Wally said. “I believe she’s the only person you haven’t a good word for, old man.”

“I haven’t,” said Jim, calmly. “Bill’s a pal of mine, and Mrs. Blake is merely a fashionable apology for a mother. Didn’t she tell me herself she’d never been fond of children? Well, that’s her business: only she should have remained a gay spinster—not taken it out of poor old Bill when he happened along. And Blake isn’t much of a fellow for a youngster to fall back upon.”

“That is clearly why Bill’s guardian angel cast him in our path—and what a lot of fun we’ve had out of him!” Norah said, happily. “Tommy will be rejoiced that he is to be here for a good while. Bill confided to me last time that if he ever married, only he didn’t think he would, the bride would be Tommy.”

“Does Tommy know?” asked Mr. Linton, with interest.

“Certainly not. She might have been depressed to think how long she would have to wait—Bill was not twelve then. And man is fickle: before that, his affections were fixed on Brownie. I think it’s chiefly that all his mind is centred on owning a station, and he recognizes the advantages of having a woman about the place. That is why Wally got married!” she finished, gently.

“If you weren’t entrenched behind a tea-cosy!” threatened her husband. “Wait until I get you home!”

“Speaking of Tommy,” remarked Mr. Linton, “isn’t it rather a long while since she and Bob were here?”

“Can’t get Bob off his place,” Jim said. “He always says he’s too busy; last time Wal and I went up into the hills we tried to get him to come, but he wouldn’t. He asked us to ride round his cattle and look at the fences. And that’s one of the things he loves doing: it’s a real holiday for Bob to get into the hills.”

Mr. Linton stirred his tea thoughtfully.

"Do you happen to know if he did well out of that last lot of sheep he sold, Jim?"

"I don't," said Jim. "I thought he'd tell me, but as he didn't, I hardly liked to ask him. And that's queer, because I used to ask him anything. Somehow I've felt lately that Bob was keeping rather to himself."

"You haven't had any disagreement?"

"Bob and I? Rather not! There isn't anything like that, Dad. It's more a case of—well, feeling that he doesn't want to be questioned. And there is only one thing that would explain that idea."

"That he is worried?" Norah said.

Jim nodded.

"Yes. If things were going well with him he'd love to tell me."

"Wally and I have been uneasy about them," she said. "Tommy is the same—just as dear and jolly as ever, but she won't talk about the Creek."

"She and Bob are cut out of one piece," remarked Wally. "It's their blessed pride. If they're hit—and I believe they are—they would rather stick it out with their backs to the wall than tell us, for fear it would seem like asking for help. They ought to know us better."

"Well—they do know us," said Jim. "That's just it. They know we'd never let them go down, so they won't give us a chance. Dad, why did you start this? Heard anything?"

"Well, yes, a little. Macleod, of the Bank, was asking me about Bob to-day: said he gathered that things weren't too good with him."

"You told Macleod you'd back him, of course?" Jim said swiftly.

"Oh, of course. But it's one thing to tell Macleod, and quite another to let Bob know it. He wouldn't accept it—at any rate, without a struggle. And I heard from one of the men at the yards that he hadn't done at all well out of those sheep. Of course he's like all the men on little places just now—and most of the big ones; he's bound to have a struggle."

"I don't want the struggle to be too hard for my Tommy," Norah said, anxiously.

Jim uttered something unintelligible, and passed his cup for more tea.

"There's such a thing as being too proud!" he uttered. "Bob ought to have more sense where we're concerned."

"You'd be exactly the same yourself, Jimmy," Wally told him. "Catch you running off with a hard-luck story to any man!"

"Well—he hasn't got himself alone to think of," Jim said, hotly. "Tommy wasn't brought up to roughing it."

"Whoever brought up Tommy taught her to take the rough with the smooth," Mr. Linton said. "Nothing is going to daunt that small person. And as

Wally says, where pride is concerned, she and Bob are cut out of one piece. The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"You can generally wangle what you want, Dad," said Jim. "Can't you be very tactful and get Bob to take help?"

"Not so easy as it sounds," Mr. Linton answered. "If things come to a crisis we may have to do it by force: but that will hurt them badly. I suggest that we go slow for awhile before making any offer."

"And, meanwhile," said Norah, "we must put a stop to this business of letting them seclude themselves at the Creek. We'll all go over, as we used, and take a hand in any work that's going. I have got slack about planning those excursions since Davie learned to walk."

"Feeling you can't afford to miss seeing one of his strides?" her father smiled.

"Just that," owned Norah. "He's a new toy, you see. But I shall leave the toy with Brownie, and we'll all descend upon the Creek. If we can't do anything else we can make them laugh—and that will be good for them. And I may be able to get Tommy to tell me how things are going."

"You'll be clever if you pull that off when Tommy doesn't want to talk," said Jim, glumly. "I've tried."

"What happened?"

"She talked very fluently—about life in France and some chap's poems. Awfully interesting!"

Everyone laughed; Jim's views on poetry were known to his family. Norah's laugh, however, ended in a little frown.

"What is that for?" Wally asked.

"I was just thinking," said she, "that things are really serious. If Tommy talked poetry to Jim, she must indeed have been desperately anxious to change the conversation!"

"Just what I thought," agreed Jim. "When she laboriously headed me off Bob's sheep to that fellow's sonnets I knew jolly well there was something very wrong about the sheep!"

They had finished tea. Wally filled his pipe, and rose.

"I'm going after a pony—Davie will be looking out for a ride. Who'll bring him out to me?"

"I will," Mr. Linton said. "That is, if I can induce Brownie to give him up!" They went out together.

Jim walked to the window. He looked out, thinking deeply. Norah glanced at him, but she did not speak. She was troubled—and her trouble was for Jim.

He faced round presently.

"Find out all you can, Nor. We've got to help them. I can't stand the idea of Tommy's being poor and harassed."

Norah went over to him.

"I'll do all I can, Jim—you know that. But if she will not tell you——"

"Me!" He gave a short laugh. "I'm the last person she will tell. She knows well enough I'd give my right hand to be able to take her out of it all—but . . ."

"You've asked her, Jim?"

"Three times," said Jim, shortly. "And that was foolish, I suppose. She was definite enough the first time. I don't believe any man could get Tommy away from Bob. Anyhow, it's clear that I'm not to be the man."

"I would keep on hoping, Jim, dear."

"No, I've given that up," he said. "Don't you worry, old Nor—I can hoe my own row. But do all you can to help her—you can have my last penny." His hand rested on her shoulder for an instant. "There's Wally and the small boy—come along and see him ride."



“ ‘G’d day, son. Going far?’
‘Out to Billabong,’ said Bill.”

CHAPTER III

BILL WALKS

BILL BLAKE arrived at Cunjee Station two days later; travelling, as was his custom, as a privileged passenger in the guard's van. Relatives might—and did—purchase him a ticket, but Bill and the guard were old allies, and the hospitality of the van was always his. Part of the joy of coming to Billabong was the long journey up, sharing the work at each station, and yarning sociably to the guard in the intervals. Bill possessed a knowledge of the inside working of a railway that is denied to most boys of twelve: a circumstance that made him an object of interest and envy to his form at school. The engine-driver was also a friend, and on more than one glorious occasion he had travelled on the engine for part of the way. He had actually been allowed to drive: but only Jim knew this. For Bill was a person of loyalty, and he knew that it was not a matter to be made public. He had made an exception in Jim's case because with regard to such an achievement it was necessary to have at least one confidant—or burst.

Bill swung out of the van in truly professional style before the train stopped. He bade a manly farewell to the guard, and cast a glance up and down the platform, expecting to see Jim's long figure.

"We're ahead of time," said the guard. "He'll be along presently. Here's your things, mate. See you when you're goin' back."

Bill collected his lighter luggage, leaving his trunk to take care of itself, and hurried up the platform. The stationmaster greeted him cheerfully.

"Hullo, young man! I thought it was about time for you to turn up again."

Bill grinned happily. At first sight no one could have called him good-looking, since a snub nose, innumerable freckles, and violently red hair do not make for beauty. It was when he smiled that people suddenly decided that they liked Bill.

"I've been thinking it was about time for a long while," he agreed. "Are they here, Mr. West?"

"Haven't seen 'em—and you're apt to see them if they're anywhere near, aren't you?" said the stationmaster. "I expect they'll turn up any minute." He waved the train away and possessed himself of Bill's ticket. "Stow your things on that seat and have a look if they're in sight."

Bill went off, his eager feet breaking into a run. Outside the station, the road that led to the township was empty of all traffic save for a dilapidated buggy waiting for the mail-bags. He sat on the fence, watching for the cloud of dust that would herald the Billabong car. One rose presently, and he jumped

down expectantly; but it was only a battered Ford truck laden with milk-cans that jangled furiously as the truck bumped by. Bill returned to the fence and whistled a tune to convince himself that he didn't mind.

Half an hour passed slowly. Then the stationmaster appeared.

"I say—no sign of 'em? Wonder what's up. P'raps they've had a breakdown."

"That's what I've been thinking," said Bill, gloomily. "They never were late before."

"Tell you what—we'll telephone," said the stationmaster, brilliantly. "I can get on to Billabong from here."

Several minutes' agitation with the telephone produced no result. Then, as Bill was beginning to decide that Billabong must have been burned down, with all inhabitants, West's harassed face relaxed.

"Here you are, son—got 'em at last. It's old Mrs. Brown. Catch hold."

"Hullo, Brownie!" said Bill. "It's me."

"Who's 'me'?" demanded a flustered voice. The telephone, as Bill knew, always had a disorganizing effect on Brownie.

"Me—Bill. Nobody's here."

"It's never Master Bill!" said a far-off squeak.

"Yes, it is, then," stated Bill, beginning to feel annoyed.

"But where are you?"

"Why, at Cunjee, of course."

"Cunjee!" The squeak had become a wail. "But why didn't you say you were coming?"

"I did," protested Bill. "Telegraphed yesterday. Didn't you get it?"

"Never a sign of it. Oh, *won't* Mr. Jim be wild! An' they're all over at Mr. Bob's. Went off early to spend the day."

"I say!" uttered Bill, feeling suddenly cold. "What'll I do, Brownie?"

"There's not a man about," said the troubled old voice. "Only me an' the girls; all the rest are out on the run somewhere. You let me think a minute, dearie." There was a pause. "Listen, Master Bill—you go down to the hotel an' get them to bring you out in their car. Tell 'em it's for Mr. Linton—they'll know you."

"Sure it's all right? It'll cost an awful lot, won't it?" piped Bill.

"Never you mind that. It's the only thing to do. You hurry along. Master Bill, my dear, an' I'll be lookin' out for you."

Bill replaced the receiver and explained matters to West.

"Well, that'll be the best way," agreed that official. "Off you go, son; your things'll be all right."

At the hotel, however, help was not forthcoming. The only car was away, out at a sale in the country; so, indeed were most of the men of the little

township.

"Won't be back till all hours, neither," said the landlady, much concerned. "We'll have to put you up here for the night—unless they send in from Billabong after they get home. I guess they'll do that."

Bill pondered the matter, trying to feel cheerful.

"I would walk it before dark," he said. "That's the best plan, I think."

The landlady gasped.

"Walk! Why, it's fourteen miles!"

"Oh, I'll get a lift part of the way, most likely. There's always someone on that road."

"It's a mad idea, if you ask me," asserted the landlady. "You just wait here, like a good boy."

There was an obstinate streak in Bill, and it was uppermost at the moment. To his disappointed mind anything was better than hanging about the little township. Also, there was a flavour of adventure in setting out by himself; and you never knew where an adventure might lead you. He set his jaw stubbornly.

"No, I won't wait, thanks. I'll like walking. And I'm sure to get a lift." He cut short the woman's protests by raising his cap and walking off.

He decided that it was rather a jolly adventure as he went briskly along the gravelled road that led out towards Billabong. After the long hours in the train his legs wanted stretching; and the coolness of the spring afternoon made walking very pleasant. There was no one on the road, nor did he want anyone—yet. Later on, he admitted to himself, he would be glad of a lift. He felt independent, nearly grown-up. This was what Jim would have done if he had been left stranded—run his own show, without bothering anybody. And Bill's deepest ambition was to do the sort of thing Jim would have done.

He was a good walker, and the first three or four miles went by easily. There had been a time in Bill's life—it was part of a bad time to which he did not care to look back—when the sights and sounds of the country had meant nothing to him. Billabong and its people had taught him to see and hear; now he was alive to every bird, every animal, that came within his range. It was glorious to be out in the open spaces that he loved, picking up the familiar landmarks; knowing that each moment brought him nearer Billabong.

He was well out of Cunjee before it occurred to him that he should have telephoned again to Brownie. She would be expecting him in the hotel car: perhaps worrying. He hesitated, glancing back. The township looked a long way off.

"Oh, Brownie's got sense," he muttered. "She'll think the car's had a puncture or something. I'll chance it." So he strode on.

The gravelled road came to an end, merging into the familiar bush track of hard-beaten earth. For a car it would have been worse going, for there were

many ruts and pot-holes; but it was softer walking, and Bill welcomed it: he could avoid ruts that a car would have taken heavily. It meant, too, that another stage of the journey was over. The dust settled on his boots and on his blue suit. Even that was welcome to him—you didn't get dusty in Melbourne, he reflected happily. Melbourne, and the trimness it demanded of a boy, seemed like a page that he had firmly closed down. He whistled as he went.

Far ahead, a slow-moving cloud of dust resolved itself into a bullock-team; a dray piled high with wood, drawn by a team of a dozen bullocks, plodding heavily along, their driver walking beside them, flicking occasionally with his long whip. Bill welcomed the sight delightedly, taking to the grass by the wayside to let them go by.

The driver looked at him with some amazement; one did not often meet in the bush a well-turned-out boy, wearing the cap of a Melbourne school. Bullock-drivers are leisurely folk: he halted his team to exchange a word with the traveller.

"G'd day, son. Goin' far?"

"Out to Billabong," said Bill.

"Billabong! Not walkin'?"

"Yes, I am. They didn't know I was coming."

"Well, you're a tough 'un," said the driver. "Reckon you'll have had enough by the time you get there. Havin' holidays?"

Bill nodded.

"'Twouldn't be my idea of a holiday to tramp this track. I do it too often. Give me Melbun," said the driver. "I'll get down there for the Show if I'm lucky. See lots of your chaps out there always. One of 'em was ridin' a pony over the jumps last year; he could ride, too."

"Yes, I know him," said Bill. "He's in my form. Those are nice bullocks of yours."

"Not too bad. Not a better pair in the district than them leaders. They know as much as I do. Well, I suppose you want to be gettin' along—you ain't got too much time if you want to strike Billabong before dark. So-long, son."

"So-long." The driver shouted and cracked his whip—"C'up, Bawley! Darkey!" The team rolled off, the dust rising again.

Bill went on, feeling that he had talked as man to man. That was one of the jolly things about the country; everyone was sociable and friendly. You didn't have to wait to be introduced; and people talked about sensible things. He was glad he had said that about the bullocks; the man had liked it.

He fell to thinking of Jim as he plodded on. That was one of the ideas that Jim had put into his head in their long talks, riding slowly after cattle: that it was rather decent to say things that people liked.

Jim had been careful over it. "You don't want to be sloppy. A man's a fool

who goes about paying silly compliments. There's only one bigger fool—the fellow who goes round saying things that hurt. Between the two is the man who goes a shade out of his way to say something that gives pleasure. It isn't a hard knack to acquire. Queer thing is, too, that when you do it you find all sorts of jolly things you didn't expect. So it greases the wheels all round."

Bill could hear the deep slow voice; the short, clipped sentences had stuck in his memory. He did not know that Jim had planned the advice deliberately for a boy who had thought all the world unfriendly. If anyone else had said it Bill would have thought it "all rot." But because Jim had said it, it could not be anything but sense. He trusted Jim absolutely. So he had tried the plan, awkwardly enough at first; and he had found that it worked. People were really friendly, when you came to know them—they even said nice things to him, Bill Blake, who used to go through the world in the attitude of expecting a blow. Yes—it paid.

A horse's slow trot sounded behind him. He glanced round. A boy on a grey pony was coming—evidently he was a butcher's boy, for he carried a big basket, from which protruded the shank of a leg of mutton. He grinned at Bill, dropping into a walk beside him.

"That chap with the bullocks said you was walkin' out to Billabong. Some walk, ain't it? 'Spose you wouldn't like a lift?"

"Wouldn't I!" rejoined Bill. "But you've got that basket."

"Oh, we could manage it. This pony's pretty steady. I'm only goin' three miles, but it 'ud be better than nothin'."

"Rather!" Bill said, gleefully.

"Well, I'll bring her up to that log an' you hop on. Can you ride?" asked the boy, as an afterthought.

"Oh, yes. At least, I'm all right by myself—I never tried double-banking."

"Well, all you got to do is to sit on her," said his new friend, practically. He edged the little mare beside the log, and Bill got on behind the saddle. It was a large saddle for a pony, so that it did not leave him much to sit on; and what there was could not have been called comfortable, being much too wide for his legs. To Bill, however, the mere feel of a horse was joy. Even with his nose close to a very greasy shirt, and with the sharp corner of the basket afflicting his leg, he was happy.

The pony was less cheerful. She sidled off uneasily. It was evident that she considered that one boy and a meat-basket was as much as she ought to be asked to endure.

"Hope she don't root," said the boy, cheerfully. "Better hang on to me—not too hard, 'cause I'm ticklish. Get along, Daisy, you old ass."

Daisy "got along," but without enjoyment. Her hindquarters moved uneasily under Bill. Then she decided that to show her indignation would be

more wearing than to go quietly, and she fell into her usual “butcher’s jog.” Bill found that he bumped far more than he liked. Occasionally he had to clutch the boy in a way that made that benefactor squirm violently. The greasy masses of meat in the basket, imperfectly wrapped in gory scraps of newspaper, sent up an odour that would have offended sensitive nostrils, had there been any about. The boys did not notice it.

They exchanged names and other minor confidences as they jogged along. The butcher boy’s name was Ernie, and his life’s ambition was to become a circus-rider. Practising for this had already cost him one job, but this incident had failed to shake his determination. Bill gathered that Daisy was used for exercises in a way that would have horrified her owner, had he known anything about it. The description made him resolve privately to imitate them on a Billabong pony.

Thus the time passed pleasantly until a gate came in sight.

“That’s where I turn in,” Ernie said, regretfully. “Sorry I can’t take you any farther.”

“That’s all right,” returned Bill. “It’s been a jolly good lift. I’m——”

A motor-cycle whizzed round a bend in the track, with a lank youth crouching over the handlebars. Daisy sprang aside with a snort of horror. Bill kicked her violently in his effort to retain his balance, and the combination of evils was too much for Daisy. She “pig-rooted” vindictively, flinging her heels higher at each attempt, trying to get her head down to buck in earnest.

The leg of mutton was first to go. It shot into the air, followed in quick succession by the other parcels of meat. One caught Daisy on the head, increasing her wrath. Bill had not thought she could become more active, but she did. He tried to dig in his knees, clutching Ernie desperately. Then the basket went. Ernie clung to it as long as he could, until the torment of its assault on his leg became too great to bear any longer. Then he cast it from him, and Daisy promptly put her foot in it.

There was a crunching of stout wicker-work and a dismayed howl from Ernie. Daisy plunged madly; her hindquarters shot up, and Bill, losing his grip, shot with them. He sailed into the air, described a neat curve, and came down, luckily for himself, in a thick patch of ragwort. Scrambling into a sitting position, he beheld the saddle turn. Ernie kicked his feet free of the stirrups just in time, and landed on his back on the grass.

He was up in a moment, still gripping the rein. Daisy had stopped, looking as foolish as a pony may, with one foot still in a basket. Ernie caught her leg and hauled it up, releasing her. He groaned.

“Made a nice mess of it, the old cow! New basket too, it was. I’ll catch it all right, when the boss sees it. You hurt, Bill?”

“Not me!” said Bill—and broke into a shout of laughter. Ernie stared at

him for a moment and followed suit, in a high cackle. They laughed until they could laugh no more.

"Must 'a looked funny, an' no error," said Ernie. "My word, look at the meat! It's pretty well scattered. You fix the saddle, an' I'll pick up the bits."

He did so, rubbing grass and dirt from them with his shirt-sleeve.

"They'll cook all right, I guess. But the basket's a worse job. Just my luck to meet that feller on the bike. That's Joe Wicks—he lives eighteen mile out, an' they say his bike only touches the ground three times on the way in, when he's in a hurry!"

"He was in a hurry to-day right enough," said Bill. "I say, Ernie, I've got five bob. You have it, 'cause of the basket."

Ernie stared at him.

"Well, you're a good sort. You can't spare all that, can you?"

"Yes, I can. You take it."

The boy hesitated, flushing.

"Well, I don't like takin' it off you, but I'm stone-broke meself. Had me wages stopped last week, 'cause I let the flies into the meat-house. Boss said he'd sack me next time I did a fool thing."

"Well, here you are," said Bill, awkwardly. Two half-crowns changed hands—both boys shy and embarrassed.

"Tell you what," said Ernie, suddenly. "I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb—not that that old leg ever came off any lamb!" he added, professionally. "I'll stick the basket inside the gate—it'll be all right there—and I'll take you a bit further along. We can make the pace without the basket, an' it'll teach Daisy a lesson."

"By Jove!" said Bill. "You're a brick!"

They were on the pony's back in a moment. Daisy was subdued by her exertions: she made no protest when Ernie urged her into a hard canter. They made the most of every yard of level going for another three miles. Then, at a creek, beyond which rose a long hill, Ernie pulled up.

"I don't dare go any farther," he said, regretfully. "Wish I could."

"Don't you worry," responded Bill, slipping off. "This has been a ripping help. I say, Ernie, I don't believe your boss would be wild if he knew you'd been helping anyone belonging to Mr. Linton. And I do belong, when I'm here. I'll get Mr. Linton to speak to him, if you like. He could telephone."

"Think he'd mind?"

"I'm jolly sure he wouldn't."

"Well, it 'ud smooth things. Thanks, Bill—you're a white man." They shook hands. "Glad I met you," said Ernie. He wheeled the pony and went off at a gallop.

Bill went down to the creek for a drink. It occurred to him that a wash

would also be an advantage—he was certainly no longer the comparatively clean person who had left the train at Cunjee. He sluiced his face and hands, beat his person severely to remove something of the dust that coated him, and went on his way, whistling.

Something of the spring had gone out of his step. Bill had not been on a horse for several months, and to ride behind the saddle on a rough pony is an exercise that does not improve suppleness. The miles ahead to Billabong began to look very long in his mind. He tried to calculate them, finding he could not make them fewer than five. Hunger, too, began to make itself felt: the sandwiches he had eaten in the train seemed far-off memories. He ceased to whistle, trudging on doggedly.

Jim and Norah had taught him that if things are difficult the best plan is to switch thought into another channel. The advice came back to the boy now.

“That’s what Norah calls the real Bill that lives inside me grinning at the outside Bill that’s getting tired,” he thought. “ ‘Cause I’m counting up miles, and thinking they’re jolly long. Well, I’ll back him up. I’ll think of the next bend of the road and make believe there’s an adventure waiting round it.”

His imagination was one of Bill’s strongest points. He made the adventure one with tigers, picturing several man-eaters waiting for him behind a clump of dogwood round the bend. This meant, of course, that he had to equip himself with an imaginary gun, and he forgot his stiffness in loading it, in carrying it warily, ready for anything. The road slipped away insensibly; the inner Bill, heroic and alert, stole upon his waiting prey.

He had killed his tigers so many times in fancy—no one had ever re-loaded so swiftly as the Bill who was a hunter!—that when at length he rounded the bend and saw nothing but another long stretch of road, empty and dusty, he was not daunted. The matter adjusted itself; the inner Bill said promptly that some of the tigers were lying dead in the dogwood, while the largest of all had fled farther on, so that another stalk was necessary. He shouldered the imaginary gun and stepped out smartly. “I’ll come back for the skins after I’ve settled this chap!” said the inner Bill.

He had gone a mile when the swift thud of an engine came to him. He glanced round. A motor-bicycle was flying along the track in his wake.

“Why, that’s the chap that got us pitched off!” he ejaculated—no longer a tiger-hunter. “Golly, he does make her go!”

The cloud of dust rushed towards him. He moved off the track, staring with all his eyes at this wild rider who was supposed to do most of his travelling in aerial leaps. To his astonishment the engine-beats slowed. The rider stopped beside him: a tall fellow with a good-natured face.

“Hullo! Are you the chap who was riding with Ernie Moon?” he asked. “I met Ernie back there, an’ he told me I’d sent the pair of you sky-high. Well,

now, I hadn't an idea of it!"

"Well, you were about a mile away a second after we saw you!" grinned Bill.

"Something like that," admitted the other. "I was in a bit of a hurry to catch the mail. Sorry, anyhow, kid. Sure you weren't hurt?"

"Not a bit." Bill's grin widened. "It was awfully funny, you know. Ernie's meat went in forty different directions before we did!"

"An' the pony finished up in the basket!" Joe Wicks chuckled. "Wish I'd seen it. Well, it was my fault, so I've squared up with Ernie for the damage. This is yours." He held out two half-crowns.

"Oh, I say!" Bill grew red. "I—I don't want it back."

"That's bosh. Ernie told me you'd forked out, but it's my job. Can't let a kid pay for my smashes." He dropped the coins into Bill's pocket with a quick movement. "Now we're all square." He cut short Bill's protests. "You're legging it out to Billabong, I hear. I pass their gate—like a lift?"

"O-oh!" The boy's eyes danced. "I never was on a motor-bike."

"Well, it isn't a comfortable seat, and I haven't any cushion, but I guess you won't mind that. I'll go slow—if I can hold the old lady in." He laughed. "She isn't used to slow-going. I got her up to ninety-five once, and then the speedometer broke. Not bad, on these roads."

"Rather not!" Bill peered eagerly at the speedometer. "Didn't you get it mended?"

"No. Left it for a record—I mightn't ever have got it as high again. You hop on now, and hang on to me as tight as you can."

"There, I said it would!" broke out Bill delightedly.

"Said what?" Joe was mystified.

Bill looked confused.

"Oh, it was just a game I had with myself. I was getting a bit tired, so I pretended that an adventure would come round that last bend. And hasn't it just!" He hopped on one foot joyfully.

"You don't call me an adventure, do you?"

"Riding on a motor-bike is a gorgeous adventure when you haven't ever done it," Bill told him. "My word, I'm glad I said I'd walk out from Cunjee!"

"You certainly seem to get fun out of most things," said Joe, eyeing him in friendly fashion. "Well, on you hop."

Bill obeyed, quivering with excitement. The machine started easily and in a moment they were running gently along the winding road. Joe steered with care, avoiding pot-holes.

"Feel all right?" he asked presently.

"Rather!" said a pipe behind him. "I say—do you think we could go a bit faster?"

"She certainly can, if you can stick it. Grip my coat tight, and look out for bumps. Hang on a bit extra round the corners—this track wriggles like a snake for the next mile."

Bill knew that well enough. Every turn of the Billabong track was familiar going. He clutched Joe's coat tightly. Then the trees began to fly past him. There were bumps and jars, but he did not notice them. Every curve was a delirious swing of joy. Even when a pot-hole, its depth masked by dust, sent his nose violently against Joe's back-bone; even the unsympathetic nature of the iron carrier on which he perched, could not mar the triumph of that first ride.

They took the last bend at an angle that would have struck horror into Bill's unsuspecting parents. Ahead was straight going: they flashed up it, the wind singing past them, trees and fences a blur of green and grey. Only a moment, it seemed: and then Billabong's gate showed clean and white, and the motor was chugging softly as Joe pulled up. Bill slipped off. He was panting, his face scarlet.

"Like it?" Joe grinned. "You look as if you did."

"B—by Jove! It was ripping! I say, thanks ever so!"

"That's all right. I'd take you up to the house, only I'm over an hour late for the cows as it is." He shook hands; and as he did so, suddenly he listened. "I rather guess that's the Billabong car—hear it?"

Bill stiffened to attention. Far away, hidden by the trees, was the faint sound of a motor.

"That's their engine all right," said Joe. "I'd know it anywhere. Well, you won't have to walk up, after all. So long—see you again sometime." He slipped in his clutch and flashed off.

Bill had forgotten him. With straining ears he stood, listening, holding his breath. It must be—this was the track by which they would come from the Creek. No other car had just that sound. The dust was rising above the trees near the bend: only a moment now, and they would be round the curve. There ———!

He shouted, racing to the gate. It swung back under his eager hands: he held it, widely open, knowing himself hidden from the road as he peered through the three-rail fence with dancing eyes. The car came along, slowed: Jim at the wheel, Mr. Linton beside him: Norah and Wally in the back seat. He heard Jim's voice, puzzled, and hugged himself.

"Hallo, the gate's open! Who on earth——!"

The car turned in, and stopped dead in the gateway, as Jim caught sight of the sturdy, silent figure. Four voices came, in varying keys of amazement.

"Bill!" And then:

"How did you come?"

“Oh—walked out,” said Bill.

“Walked!” uttered the four voices.

“Well—bits of the way!” said Bill, grinning.

CHAPTER IV

OF A BLUE CAR

THE last few miles of the road that led to Creek Farm were evil going for a car. Bob Rainham always took them slowly, edging in and out to avoid the worst places: not from any natural prudence, but because the car was Tommy's especial property, bought for her in their second year in Australia, when the Goddess Success had been so lavish with her smiles that they had fancied she had no other aspect.

Tommy rode well for one brought up in complete ignorance of horses. She had quickly realized that riding was necessary, setting herself to acquire the art with the doggedness that was part of her nature. But the car was her delight. In her handling of it was something of the comprehension of an engine that had made Bob notable as an airman in the War. It was to her a living, feeling comrade. The district agreed that few of its men could get as much out of a car, or take it through queerer places, than little Miss Rainham of the Creek.

Bob was proud of his "partner's" ability; happy that he had plunged in buying the blue car, even when later reverses made it seem an extravagance. When he used it himself he treated it with care and respect—cherishing, privately, dreams of a day when he would attain to a sports model and break records on land as he had broken them in the air. He had also dreams of an aeroplane, but only in his wildest moments.

Such wild moments seemed very remote this evening as he crawled along, even more slowly than usual. Tommy's game of "thinking-true" was becoming harder and harder for him to play. He had tried it honestly, and had admitted to himself that it paid; when worry-thoughts were swiftly headed into other channels everything seemed to go more smoothly than when he brooded over bad luck and permitted unpleasant possibilities to haunt him. He had slept better, and fewer bad dreams had troubled him. But to-day there was a letter in his pocket that had brought back the shadows in full force.

He turned in at the gate and increased his speed up the gravelled track through the homestead paddock. Tommy was visible in the garden, plying a hoe—having hurriedly laid aside a spade when she saw the car coming. She waved to him gaily. He ran the car into the garage, brought out mail-bag and parcels, and came across to the house.

"Tea's ready on the verandah, Mr. Bob," Sarah informed him, as he dumped part of his load on the kitchen table. "I'm just comin' along with the teapot."

"Thanks, Sarah. Hallo, Myrtle—what are you doing under the table?"

Sarah's three-year-old daughter crawled out rapidly, scrambling to her feet. "Choc.?" she asked, hopefully.

"Now, what made you think of that?" demanded Bob, severely. He sat down. Myrtle emitted a squeak of joy, entrenching herself between his knees. She clawed at his pocket.

"Wrong again, old lady," said Bob, laughing. He put his hand into another pocket, producing a small package, at sight of which Myrtle's squeak swelled to a high chant of joy. Bob lifted her to his knee, watching the quick fingers that tore at the paper bag.

"You fair spoil that imp, Mr. Bob," said Sarah, beaming on them both.

"Oh, I don't bring her a parcel every time, Sarah," protested Bob. "And she's just as contented if I don't."

"Well, as long as you don't make it a regular habit. I couldn't have her expectin' it always. That 'ud be cupboard-love. And it ain't no cupboard-love Myrtle has for you an' Miss Tommy—though you do let her boss you."

"Up to a point," Bob said, smiling. "Myrtle and I know where the point is."

"She's gettin' a handful to manage," said Sarah. "What d'you think I caught her at this afternoon? She got away from me while I was cleanin' meself, and I called an' called, an' never an answer. So I came out—in me mackintosh, 'cause I was too scared to wait to dress—an' there was me lady down the paddock, drivin' in the cows! The limb!"

"Well, it's only an inherited instinct," said Bob. "She sees her mother do it often enough; and it isn't her mother's job, either! So you can't blame Myrtle, Sarah."

"I might have known you'd take her part," grinned Sarah. "Now, Mr. Bob, the tea's made, an' Miss Tommy'll go on workin' in the garden until you go an' make her stop."

"All right, Sarah: I'll go and be firm with her." He rose, putting Myrtle on the floor. She trotted after him, but was whisked back by a determined mother.

"I reckon they'll have a more peaceful tea if you stay in the kitchen," said Sarah, firmly.

Tommy was on the verandah when Bob came out.

"You have been doing great work," he told her, looking at the neat beds. "Three letters for you. I gave Sarah the parcels. Oh, by the way, Tommy, you didn't put bread on the list. Was that a mistake?"

"No. Sarah and I have developed a new ambition," said Tommy, pouring out tea. "We are going to bake at home in future."

"I say!" He raised his eyebrows. "Isn't that a lot of extra work?"

"Oh, no. A very little thing. Sarah is going to teach me. It will be great fun, and we shall save much money." She smiled at him. "You know I love learning new things."

Bob pondered this in silence. He was not without experiences of his own in bread-making.

"If you only did things in the house I wouldn't say anything," he broke out. "But you're all over the place—sheep-work or cutting ferns, or any job that's going. You call them all fun, but——"

"If I do, it is because they *are* fun," laughed Tommy. "And you are not to have any other thought about them. The only thing that could make me unhappy would be to keep out of the work. When we are rich squatters and I have to behave beautifully, I shall look back with envy to the days when I played about with a fern-hook on the Creek!"

"You'll certainly deserve your luck—when it comes," he told her.

"Bob, I have my luck now. When I think of the old days in England; that horrible time when I was an unhappy little drudge, and you were in danger all the time—why, I never cease to be astonished at the luck I have now! Whatever does work matter? The thing that matters is the way we think about it. And you are to remove that furrow from your brow and eat more scones!"

Bob grinned, and tried to do both. He talked of his trip to the township, of the people he had met, of the shaky condition of the bridge three miles away, which only needed another flood to finish it: in which painful event they would be cut off from the township. He made the most of these and other topics, talking with a laborious gaiety which he fondly hoped was convincing, but uneasily conscious of the keen young eyes across the tea-table. Tommy sustained her end of the conversation calmly. Bob's eloquence lasted until tea was over, when it came to an abrupt end. He cudgelled his brains for a new subject, but none came.

"Now that you have said all that," remarked Tommy, pleasantly, "suppose you tell me what is wrong."

"Who said there was anything wrong?" countered her brother.

"You had not put on the face you prepare for my benefit when you were walking across to the house," said she. "And it has not fitted very successfully since. Tell me, Bobby."

"There was a great Sherlock Holmes lost in you," he said, trying to smile. "Oh, well—you've got to hear it some time. There's a rather disagreeable letter from England."

"Yes, Bob?" She looked at him questioningly.

"Things are pretty bad there, you know," he said. "Dividends crashing, and all that. The lawyers write that some of ours have gone west. We—we've got to face having very little money sent out for a good while. The next payment will be only about half what it ought to be. I was counting on that money, you know, Tommy, to meet the next payment on the place."

She nodded. "Can we do it?"

"I don't see how. I've been racking my brains ever since I got the letter. There are no more bullocks fit to sell, and the sheep won't bring us in anything for a good while." He looked at her rather pitifully. "I'm afraid I've slumped on your 'thinking-true' business."

"We can't do that," she said, firmly. "We said we would play the game, no matter what happened. Even if we have to get a mortgage on the place we should work it off in time, Bob. We could do without Bill and Sarah, if necessary."

"That's the last thing I'd do. They're cheap, as servants go, and Bill more than pays for what he costs us. And I won't have you without anyone, in this lonely place, apart from the work. It isn't safe. No, we've got to think of some other plan, Tommy. I suppose it will have to be a mortgage—if I can raise one. But once you mortgage a place you never seem to get clear."

"That's not thinking-true," said Tommy, stoutly. "Of course we'll get clear; we'll just keep all our minds on that, and shut out every other thought. Bob, I *know* it's the way to win out. If we have to tighten our belts—well, we will find ways to do it. But we will keep smiling."

Bob squared his shoulders.

"Right-oh!" he said, and managed a smile. "You do buck a fellow up, Tommy, and no mistake. I've been wondering all the way out how to tell you, but I might have known the way you'd take it." The smile became a real one. "I suppose if I'd thought-true I'd have just said, 'Oh, Tommy won't fuss!'—and left it at that."

"It is so much easier not to fuss," she laughed. "Don't you remember when we were little we learned to take castor-oil smiling? Well, we have to take any medicine smiling now. The Goddess Success is only having a game with us—we'll show her who can play it best. And now we won't talk about it any more, but just believe some brilliant idea will come along." She paused. "You have not to take any immediate action?"

"Oh, no; I've a month yet."

"Then you will hurry and get the milking done, and we will play backgammon this evening."

It was a successful evening; and the days that followed were happy ones. Bob put his troubles resolutely from him, playing Tommy's game manfully: filling each day with hard work and with hope. He had no clear ideas of what to hope for; if he let himself reason out things, no avenues of help appeared. Therefore it seemed more comfortable not to reason, but to let himself be like a child that believes that good luck must come. It was certainly restful; he found himself marvelling at the ease with which he was able to play the game. Time enough to think, he told himself, when it was actually necessary to face his bank manager and discuss mortgages.

Tommy played her game steadfastly, carrying on as though nothing had happened: contriving to be with Bob as much as possible and to keep their talk to the future more than to the present. They dreamed great dreams in those days—plans of what they would do when success smiled, of extending the property, of breeding sheep of a magnificence unknown to the district. Fancy soared beyond the Creek to a station of their own, modelled on Billabong: they built the dream-house on it, a remarkable mixture of French and English architecture. They were very young; it was not hard, once the effort was made, to put the shadows aside by building castles in the air. “If you make them very good castles,” remarked Tommy, “some day the stone foundations will grow up from the solid ground!”

She had kept so much by his side that Bob was faintly surprised when, one morning, she announced that she was going to Cunjee.

“For a load of bricks for the castles?” he asked, with a twinkle.

“I might meet one,” she said. “Who knows? Luck is always waiting if one goes out to meet her.”

“Well, put hobbles on her if you do,” said Bob.

“Certainly, I will. But you must be watching for her, too.”

“It’s stretching things to imagine that Luck is going to spring at you when you’re hoeing ragwort,” said Bob. “But I’ll keep my eye skinned for her.”

Tommy drove off, a trim, alert little figure in the blue car. She took the bad road at a speed far beyond Bob’s careful pace; when the shaky bridge was passed she accelerated, flying at the racing pace she loved. Light fingers on the wheel, happy face lifted to the rush of the keen spring air: no one who saw her could have dreamed that any shadows were on Tommy’s horizon. AH too soon Cunjee was in sight. She slackened as she came into the main street, casting a quick glance up and down, then giving a little sigh of relief. No other car was in sight: and for her own reasons Tommy did not want to see the Billabong people just then.

She ran in by the footpath. Getting out, she closed the door carefully. Her hand lingered for an instant on the glossy blue surface.

“That was a good run, my friend,” she said to the car. “Well——” She shrugged her shoulders lightly, and went off.

Bob attacked the fast-growing ragwort all through the morning. He was glad that he had not brought lunch out with him: lacking Tommy’s merry presence it was not so easy to hold the visions of the Goddess Success. The tough weeds spoke more readily of mortgages, of debts; when such pictures rose in his mind he tried to play Tommy’s game by imagining that he destroyed them as he abolished the ragwort, with great sweeps of his hoe. It was not altogether satisfactory. “It’s better fun to build with Tommy than to knock down by myself,” he muttered, as he shouldered his hoe and strode

homeward.

Tommy was already home: she came out to meet him, looking very cheerful.

"Hallo!" Bob said. "I didn't see you come; and I was looking out for you. Had a good time?"

"Splendid!" She slipped her hand into his arm. "I saw Dr. Anderson, and we are to go to play tennis on Saturday."

"Oh, I——" began Bob.

"Now, you need not say you have no time. We have all the time there is, and part of it is going into tennis—you know you love it, Bob, and it keeps you fit. At all events, I have promised, and all the Billabong people are coming, and it will be fun," she ended breathlessly.

Under this burst of eloquence Bob yielded meekly.

"Well, you don't get so very much fun these times——"

"I get more fun than you know," Tommy interposed. "So you need not put on that grandfatherly air, Bobby. We are going to be young and gay on Saturday and forget all about work. And lunch is ready—so hurry!"

She looked very young and gay at the table. Bob registered a private vow that he would send her more often into the township—she always came back glowing. Most people found the run into Cunjee tame enough, but Tommy always had a thousand things to tell after the trip. Sarah, going about her work in the kitchen with a lugubrious face, heard the happy voices and an occasional shout of laughter from Bob.

"Listen to 'em!" said Sarah, darkly. "Beats me what they've got to laugh at. I feel more like howlin', meself!"

There was coffee after lunch, at sight of which Bob raised his eyebrows. Coffee was one of the minor luxuries that the Creek had given up.

"'Stravagance!" he said. "You seem in a very wild mood to-day, Thomas."

"One must be wild now and then," she told him, "I dream beautiful castles on coffee. Come and we will have it on the verandah."

"I ought to rebuke you, but the scent of coffee is too much for me," he said, following her out. He dropped into a chair luxuriously.

"No, you must not rebuke me for anything," she said. There was a trace of nervousness suddenly in her voice. "Bob, I have something nice to give you." She put a piece of paper on the arm of his chair, smoothing it out with fingers that trembled a very little.

"Where have you been picking up cheques?" asked Bob, lightly. He glanced at it; and as the amount caught his eye he uttered a startled exclamation.

"Tommy! You haven't been borrowing!"

"Certainly not," was Tommy's cheerful answer. "I didn't need to. Bobby,

dear, you must not mind—I have sold the car.”

“Sold it! Your little car!” His voice was almost a groan.

She nodded happily.

“We did very well without a car before. We will do quite well now. And you can just bury the idea of mortgages for awhile—for ever, perhaps.” She patted his shoulder. “Bob, don’t look like that—I was so happy to do it.”

“I’d rather anything on the place had gone,” he said, heavily. “You love that car so. You shouldn’t, Tommy—you shouldn’t!”

“But I should. Nothing else would have brought in enough. It was really great luck that Mr. Petrie told me last week he would give me a good price if I wanted to sell it soon. And it will have a very good home!” finished Tommy, quaintly.

Bob got up and went to the edge of the verandah. He stared blankly across the garden.

“Bob,” said the quiet voice. “You promised to play my game.”

“This is no game!” he said, wretchedly.

“But yes!” She took his arm. “This is where we think-true harder than ever—just glad of the money when we need it, and being quite happy about it: and looking forward to the new car we shall have when the luck turns. Latest model, new gear-changing, and all the lovely things the catalogues talk about—I’ve been planning it all the way home!”

“How did you get home?” he flashed.

“Mr. Petrie brought me to the gate. I would not let him come any farther for fear we met you. Sarah saw me, and she has been in depths of woe ever since. But there is not going to be any woe about you and me, Bob. Don’t you see it will spoil it all if we failed to be happy?”

In the silence that followed Bob had his first real glimpse of what Tommy meant by her “thinking-true.” If a sacrifice bought happiness, then it ceased to be a sacrifice. If he failed her in that—even though the money met his payments—the little blue car would have been sold in vain.

With that light breaking upon him he swung round, putting his hands on her shoulders.

“All serene, partner!” he said. “We’ll play your game. We’ll drive in triumph in the old buggy, and we’ll plan the most gorgeous new car. Will it be blue, Tommy?”

“It will,” she said, joyfully. “And now I had better go and heat up the coffee!”

CHAPTER V

JIM IS ANNOYED

JIM LINTON and Bill were taking cattle to Cunjee, to be trucked to Melbourne. It had meant a very early start from home, for the bullocks were fat, and must not be hurried. They had risen long before anyone but Brownie was awake—no persuasion would keep Brownie in bed if any of her menfolk needed an early breakfast.

Bill had rolled out of bed protestingly, so sleepy that a cold bath and a hard rub-down left him still yawning.

“Wish I could start in my sleep!” he said, brushing his hair in a manner that left the result a doubtful benefit. “I love going, but getting up is horrid!”

“It might be a good idea,” Jim remarked. “Ever walk in your sleep now, Bill?”

“Oh, I haven’t done that for ages—not since I was a kid.”

“Two years ago, if I remember rightly,” Jim grinned. “You startled me that time.”

“It’s a silly thing to do. Anyhow, I don’t do it now.” He yawned. “I’m off to the kitchen—if I stay near my bed I’ll get back into it!”

After that, everything was good. He loved the hasty breakfast in the warm kitchen, with Brownie fussing between the table and the glowing stove, bringing relays of hot toast to supplement the eggs and bacon. Then the stables, where Murty had the horses ready: Jim’s grey and his own Topsy, a little black mare that was his special property on Billabong. Both were fresh and lively. Topsy had pranced all round the yard when he mounted, while Murty grinned, advising him to take a good howlt on the pommel. This was merely insulting, and Bill had endeavoured to turn up a snub nose not made for the purpose. Then they had trotted down the hill, both horses moving as though on springs, until level ground had given them a chance for a helter-skelter gallop to the gate, a mile away: and another, more subdued, along the road to the farthest corner of Billabong.

Here was a small paddock to which the bullocks had been taken the night before to shorten their journey. Jim unlocked the gate, standing by it to head the cattle in the right direction while Bill, with Kim, Jim’s wise old dog, at Topsy’s heels, rode round them and drove them out. They settled down to the long crawl into the township; sometimes riding, sometimes walking, bridle on arm. The bullocks took their own pace, knowing with the sure instinct of fat cattle that neither man nor dog would hurry them.

At one time Bill would have thought it a dreary business—long miles on

the quiet track behind the dust of the crawling bullocks. It might have been dreary even now, with some people. Not with Jim. He was Jim's "offsider," trained and trusted to help; and Jim treated him as though he were grown-up on these occasions, not as though he were only a twelve-year-old to be ordered about and patronized. There were many times when he was just a small boy—glorious times, when Jim "ragged" with him, seeming not much older himself. But when there was any work on hand they were as men together. "Like he is with Wally," thought Bill privately—and hugged the thought.

They discussed the cattle, and Bill had to show the result of his training by estimating prices and picking out those which would fetch most when they reached the Melbourne yards. Jim never snubbed him for a mistake: always he was patient in explaining the different points that would catch a buyer's eye. Just as David Linton had trained him and Norah when they were small, so did he teach the quick-eyed boy who rode beside him. Bill might grow disgusted over his own blunders, pushing his cap back until his red hair stood out rumpled round its edge; but Jim only smiled quietly. "Take it easy, and you'll learn," was all his comment.

That lesson over, they talked of plans for the weeks ahead: the paddocks to be mustered, the shearing-shed to be overhauled, a new springboard to replace the one that Wally had cracked last summer in executing a tremendous running-dive. The board had been seasoning throughout the winter; it was time to put it up, and Wally had announced his intention of tackling the job next day. There was work to be done at the Creek—a fascinating business of clearing out a section of the stream that had become half-choked with logs brought down in a small flood. "Too big a job for Bob and Bill Carter," said Jim. "Shouldn't be left, either."

"Why?" asked Bill.

"Not safe. If a big flood came, that place would dam back the water and it would be out over Bob's paddocks. A flood may do a lot of good—if it comes when and where it's wanted. Then you prepare for it, and get all the stock out of the way. But a flood would be a nasty thing at that part of his place—too near the house. The logs are pretty well jammed, and it won't be too easy to move them. But we'll manage it all right."

"It'll be fun," said Bill. "Will you have to use bullocks?"

"Oh, Bob's old horse should be able to do all the pulling that's wanted, if we can't move them ourselves. Sometimes it is only a matter of finding the key-log—the one that is holding back the others. Once you get that going all the others are easy. There's a lot of brushwood and small stuff caught in the jam: we'll burn that off first so that we can see what we're doing. Once I tried to burn out a jam in one of our creeks, and when the fire got going quite a nice little collection of snakes dashed out. They'd been caught there in a flood, I

suppose, and they'd made it a happy home. Very annoyed they were, too."

"Well, you'd be annoyed if you suddenly found your home burning," grinned Bill. "Where did they go?"

"One tried to come ashore along a log, but I met him," said Jim, leaving the fate of the snake to his hearer's imagination. "The others took to the water, and I don't know where they ended up: it wasn't anywhere near me."

"I hope there'll be snakes in Bob's creek," remarked Bill, hopefully. "I'll have a stick ready. Jim, are we going out into the ranges these holidays?"

"Oh, I think so. Wally and I go out pretty often, and sometimes Bob. He has some nice young cattle there. But he doesn't like taking the time off, so we look over them for him."

"I'd rather go into the ranges than anywhere," stated Bill. "That's where you get adventures."

"Well, you certainly got enough there on your first visit," said Jim, his mind going back to a time of anxiety two years before. "When a fellow goes and gets lost——"

"Oh, Jim!" protested Bill. "I was only mislaid!"

"That was a mislaying that lasted too long to be comfortable," said Jim. He smiled down at the freckled face. "Anyhow, it was a good thing you did go wandering that time. By the way, I saw Walker the other day—that chap whose family you happened on out there. He was asking after you."

"I thought they had gone away."

"They had, but they're back. There are not many prospectors in the hills these times, though I did run across a camp with three fellows not long ago. But Walker always believes he's going to strike gold, so when he makes enough money at odd jobs to set himself up in tucker, back he comes. I don't think much of his chance."

"Don't you think he'll find any?"

"He finds enough to keep going, after a poor fashion. But I've no belief in a big strike there."

"You and Wally and Norah always say that if you keep on believing a thing hard enough you get it," Bill said, after a thoughtful pause. "So why won't Mr. Walker find his big strike?"

Jim's mouth twitched at the corners.

"That's one up on me, isn't it?" he answered. "Well, I do believe that; and we've all proved it a good many times. But if there's one thing where you'd be likely to be let down over that theory, it's gold-hunting. After all, one must always hold a belief with common sense. Fellows who go prospecting for gold dream themselves into faith that they'll find it; and that isn't going to produce a mine in an unlikely place."

He rode in silence for a few moments. "I—don't—know," he said, slowly.

"Norah and Tommy wouldn't agree with me that you can limit our belief that way. You see, we've known things happen that looked like miracles when one held one's faith."

"Like finding me when I was lost."

"Yes—and other things. So I'm hanged if I know what to say about Walker and his gold-mine—and all the other fossickers who have never struck it lucky."

"P'raps they didn't hold their thought the right way," suggested Bill. "P'raps they're afraid all the time that they won't find it, just as much as they hope they will. Norah says *that* thought's no good."

"We'll leave it at that," said Jim, somewhat relieved to be helped out. "At all events, young Bill, don't you ever make that mistake when you're thinking about the station you're going to own some day!"

"Not me!" said Bill, confidently. "That station's mine already. I've thought out every paddock on it!"

The fascinating business of planning his future as a squatter made the journey pass quickly: it seemed only a little while before Cunjee became visible in the distance. As they struck the gravelled road there was a slight sound of clinking. Jim looked down sharply.

"That's one of Topsy's shoes loose," he said. "I thought I heard it a little way back. You'll have to take her to the blacksmith's when we get the cattle trucked, Bill."

"Right-oh!" Bill assented. "I like going there. He's a nice man—he let me blow his bellows one day. I do like the smell of his place, Jim, don't you?"

"I've known worse smells," said Jim, guardedly. "Now, you ride ahead and turn the bullocks into the side lane before we get to the township."

This was the part of the day that Bill loved. He trotted ahead, keeping to the grass beside the road; taking up his position at the turn so that the bullocks obediently swung round into the by-road. They reached the trucking-yards near the station without meeting any traffic. Then came the business of yarding: of driving the cattle one by one through the narrow race that led by an easy slope into a truck. They went quietly: Jim was never more gentle than when he was trucking. "You don't want to scare them by hustling them," he told Bill. "Poor brutes, it must be all pretty horrible for them now. I'm always sorry when the time comes. We bred those fellows, and I've known them from the time they were calves."

"I'd only be thinking about how much I was going to get for them," affirmed Bill.

"Don't you imagine that I don't think of that, too!" said Jim, laughing. "But I have a moment of softness when I see them huddled into a truck."

"They seem rather interested, I think." Bill looked at the great heads

peering out through the sides of the truck.

“Let’s hope the interest will last until they get to Melbourne,” Jim remarked. “Well, that’s done, and now I’ve to go and sign way-bills. You slip down to the blacksmith’s with Topsy, Bill, and leave her there. I’ll meet you at the hotel.”

Jim rode down the main street a few minutes later. He was turning into the stable-yard of the hotel when his glance fell on a blue car standing by the footpath some distance away. He swung out into the street again and cantered briskly towards it. Struan pulled up as they neared it. He knew that car as well as did his rider.

“Hullo!” said Jim, his face falling. “Why, is that you, Mr. Petrie? Sorry: I thought it was Bob Rainham’s car.”

Mr. Petrie, a pleasant little man, elderly and plump, smiled apologetically.

“And so it was, Mr. Linton: so it was. You didn’t know they had sold it to me?”

“Sold it!”

“Well, it was little Miss Rainham herself.” Mr. Petrie’s air of apology deepened. “I happened to mention to her one day that I would buy her car if ever she wanted to get a new one. You see, my wife took such a fancy to it—and of course my wife doesn’t know one car from another, but I really believe it was because Miss Rainham always looked so nice in it! I told the little lady as a joke. You could have knocked me over with a feather when she came and offered it to me.”

“I had no idea——” said Jim; and stopped.

“Well, my wife is pleased enough to have it—she’s been at me to get one ever since I retired from business; but we’re really sorry in a way. She told me straight out, Miss Rainham did, that they needed the money, only of course we wouldn’t mention that to anyone but your family, Mr. Linton. I thought you’d know. And I would like to say, Mr. Linton”—the little man turned pink—“that I was very glad to give her a good price for it. Better than she would have got from an agent.”

“Well, it’s what you *would* do, Mr. Petrie,” said Jim. “She couldn’t have gone to anyone who would have been kinder.”

“All business-like, Mr. Linton; all business-like. It’s a good car, and in perfect order. Miss Rainham wanted us to have a week’s trial, but we wouldn’t hear of that. I felt, if you understand me, that it would be less of a wrench to have everything done quickly. Nobody could help seeing how fond little Miss Rainham was of this car. Well, I drove her out to the Creek, and she chatted all the way as gaily as if she’d been to a party.”

“She would,” said Jim.

“Well, I hope it won’t be long before they have a new one. Bad times

won't last for ever; that's what I always say. And Mr. Rainham is one of the hard workers who's bound to come out on top. Such nice young people: I'm sure it was always a pleasure to see them come into my shop."

"Oh, they'll come out on top," said Jim. "Well, good luck to you with the car; it has a good owner, that's one thing." He smiled at the little man as he wheeled Struan round.

"And that was a blow to that young fellow," said Mr. Petrie, wisely. He started the car with a clash of gears that would have wrung Tommy's heart.

Bill was waiting on the steps of the hotel. They went inside and consumed an unattractive meal of the type that country inns offer wayfarers in the middle of the afternoon. Bill chattered happily of the blacksmith, who, although busy, had promised to have Topsy ready quickly.

"Topsy will miss her dinner," remarked Jim, who was eating his own in silence, leaving Bill to sustain the conversation. "Never mind; we'll go home by way of the Creek, and she'll get a bite there."

"Oh, ripping!" said Bill. "I love going there. I thought we were going straight home, Jim?"

"I've remembered I want to see Bob," said Jim. "It's not much out of our way."

"Rather not!" agreed Bill.

They retrieved Topsy from the smithy, the blacksmith exchanging pleasantries with Bill on the subject of "riding her tail off." It seemed to Bill that Jim was not concerned for Topsy's tail, for he cantered most of the way to the Creek; riding in silence, while Bill gave himself up to the joy of going fast after the long morning journey at a snail's pace. One of the points that strengthened their friendship was that Bill always understood his companion's moods and fitted in with them. He had learned that silence could be a very friendly thing.

"There's Bob, working up at the end of the paddock!" Bill exclaimed, as they drew near Creek Cottage. "I say, Jim, can I have a scurry up to him?"

"Off you go," said Jim, smiling. He watched his "offsider" with approval as he gave Topsy her head: the sturdy, erect figure, hands well down; the beautiful little mare enjoying the gallop as much as her rider. Then he cantered quietly across to the garden gate and went in.

Tommy was sewing on the verandah. She dropped her work and came to meet him.

"This is very nice," she said. "I do like unexpected visitors. Are there any more of you? I saw Bill crossing the paddock in a desperate hurry."

"No: we have been trucking the cattle." Jim was never one to beat about the bush: he went on swiftly. "I saw old Petrie in the township; that's why I came out. Tommy, why did you do it?"

"We had to do it, Jim." She met his eyes bravely.

"Oh, I know you had to have the money. I've suspected more than you and Bob would tell me. But—to sell your car! Good Lord, Tommy—aren't we friends!"

"The best friends any lone immigrants ever had," she answered. "Oh, Jim, do understand!"

"I understand right enough. But there's such a thing as being too proud. You know that not one of us would have let you do it. You know we should have loved to help."

"I know—we both know what your help can be. But——"

"Then why didn't you give us a chance, instead of doing the very thing that would hurt us most?"

"Jim—I can't face debt."

"Debt! To us! What on earth is the good of money if one can't help one's friends?"

"Oh, I know you would never look upon a loan to us as a debt. Don't you see, Jim, that is the very reason why we could not go to you for it? To sell a car—that is nothing; less than nothing. We keep our heads up. But not if we had—begged."

"That's about the hardest word you could use to any of us. Begged!" He hurled the word at her angrily. "Where would the begging be? We could have been as business-like as your silly pride could wish. You could have paid interest—any blessed thing you like. Only—not have left us on one side like strangers."

"You will not let yourself understand," she said. "You are angry, and so you say hard things. Well, you must say them all to me, not to Bob, remember. Because I did it by myself, without telling Bob."

"Would Bob have come to us?" he asked, quickly.

"Oh, no. He was going to arrange a mortgage." Her mouth twitched. "He was very angry with me, too!"

"Well——!" said Jim, expressively.

"But he did not stay angry when he saw that it hurt me. You see, I came home very happy, waving my nice cheque, and after he had begun to explode he realized that it was not good sense to take my happiness away by being angry. So we agreed to think it was all for the best and to laugh about it." She looked up at him. "You will do that too, won't you, Jim?"

"Well, I've got no right to come and bother you about it, I suppose," he said, slowly.

She cut across his words.

"Ah, that is a thing you must not say. I would rather you scolded me, though your scoldings are heavy, Jim. You have all been so good—you have

every right to come.”

“And none to help?”

“Yes—every right there too, except in just one way. And now you are going to help by being understanding—yes, and by keeping all the wrath of your father and Norah and Wally from us. You will, will you not, Jim? Make them understand, too.”

Jim burst out laughing.

“You have a neat method of turning an accuser into counsel for the defendant,” he told her. “If you weren’t such a little thing I’d let you fight your own battles, for I’m still very angry with you. But as it is, I suppose——”

“You may suppose that one battle with a giant is enough for me,” she said, twinkling. “So it is all arranged, and everyone will be happy. Come and we will find Bob and Bill, and bring them in to tea.”

CHAPTER VI

MURTY TELLS A STORY

DAVIE MEADOWS came out of the front door of Little Billabong and stood surveying the world with an air of satisfaction. He was alone, an unusual circumstance. Bill, in whose charge he was supposed to be for the moment, had discovered Wally engaged in cleaning a gun; a pursuit calculated to divert the attention of any boy. Davie had also been interested for the moment, and would gladly have assisted: but finding that his father sternly discouraged him from using a very greasy rag, he had grown bored and slipped away. Neither Wally nor Bill noticed him go: one being employed in peering down the barrels, the other ecstatically taking the lock to pieces. The small sandalled feet made no sound. The King-of-All-Billabongs found himself bereft of subjects.

He liked it. No doubt there would presently descend upon him the loneliness of great open spaces: but for the moment he only felt the thrill of the explorer. He moved to the edge of the verandah and decided to go farther. So he reached the ground by the simple expedient of lying down and letting himself roll over the edge, arriving on the gravel with a bump that shook him slightly, but did not lessen his desire for adventure. Gathering himself up, he kicked the gravel by way of punishment, and toddled off rapidly.

The garden paths were familiar country, too tame for an explorer. He turned from them to a hedge of tree-lucerne where there were thin places that offered passage to a very small body. Davie crawled through one, finding himself in the orchard. Here the grass was rough and thick: he fell a good many times, greeting each tumble with loud chuckles of satisfaction. This was life indeed! He went on rejoicingly.

A black shadow slipped through the trees towards him: Kim, whose home by day was always at Little Billabong now, unless his services were needed by his old master. Once, Kim had known only one ruler: his word had begun and ended with Jim. But from the time that Norah's baby had been able to sit up Kim had installed himself as guardian to the new monarch. So long as the perambulator remained out of doors he was to be found near it, watching every movement of its inmate when awake, and when he slept lying, head between paws, always ready. He had not seen Davie escape from the house, yet now he came, swift and silent, to his side.

Davie welcomed him with rapture. This was the perfect companion for an adventure: one who could not speak, could not pick him up in remorseless arms and carry him to places where he desired not to be. Kim looked as though

he wanted to speak. He knew perfectly well that this excursion was all wrong, and that he ought to be able to end it. He went so far as to try to head Davie back towards the garden, making little sounds of uneasiness and gently poking him with his nose, much as he might have tried to urge a very young calf. Davie shouted with laughter. Never had he known such a game!

A half-open gate caught his eye. He went towards it, pointing a chubby finger to indicate to Kim that his way led through it. Beyond was a small paddock where a man had been mowing. Davie brushed through the long grass, his curly head scarcely topping it, and came out where the mower had left his scythe. It lay on the soft swathes of mown grass, the long blade gleaming: clearly a new toy, thought the adventurer. He stumbled towards it, his feet catching in the grass.

Kim acted quickly. At first he slipped in between the baby and the scythe, trying to head him off. He barked—a sharp note of warning that would have halted a bullock abruptly, but did not halt Davie Meadows. “Get out!” said Davie, trotting on.

It was too much for Kim. Very carefully he gripped the blue jersey with his teeth, braced himself, and pulled. Davie gave an angry shout, pulling with all his tiny strength, uttering incoherent words of wrath. Kim held on, and, fortunately, Norah’s knitting was strong. From words Davie changed to howls: and on this scene, converging from different angles, came Murty O’Toole and Bill, each running at his utmost speed.

“Did ever I see the aiquial of that!” gasped Murty, swinging Davie up into his arms. “Whisht, now, me jewel—sure, ’twas doin’ you a good turn the ould dog was. He have more sinse than them that’s supposed to be lookin’ after you. However did he come here at all, Masther Bill?”

“I’m blessed if I know!” panted Bill. “He slipped away from us—I’ve been hunting the whole place for him. I say—didn’t Kim hang on to him like a good ’un!”

“Bill!” said Davie, forgetting his woes. He clawed at the red hair.

“All jolly fine!” said Bill, submitting meekly. “You ran away from Bill. Bad boy, Davie!”

“Dood boy,” stated the culprit, defiantly. “Want!” He lunged towards the scythe.

“Ye may want,” said Murty. “The like of that’s not for the like of you, me wee lad. Howld him now, Masther Bill, till I put this over the fence.” He went off with the scythe, returning to find Bill, Davie and Kim in a confused heap on the new-mown grass. Murty sat down, lit his pipe, and watched them with a twinkle in his eye until Davie disengaged himself, crawled rapidly to him and collapsed on his knees.

“Well, ’twas a mercy Kim took a howlt of you before you cut off eleven-

or-eight of them little fingers!” remarked Murty, holding the small hand. “Here’s me knife, now, to keep you happy—an’ you needn’t be askin’ me to open it, for I’d be undher the pain of refusin’ you. Nasty things, scythes: there’s many a bigger man than you has been hurt with ’em—or than you, too, Masther Bill, for the matter of that.”

“I tried cutting with one the other day and I didn’t hurt myself,” said Bill. “’Twasn’t hard: I liked it.”

“Ye might—for a bit. But it’s aisy to swing it a thrifle too far, an’ then the blade comes back at you. Many’s the man I’ve seen hurrt that way. Did I iver tell ye about them two lads in Galway I knew, that went afther a salmon with a scythe?”

“No,” said Bill. “How on earth did they do that?”

“’Twasn’t on earth at all, but in a river. Mowin’ a field, they was, an’ wan of ’em went over to the river to get a dhrink. An’ what did he see but the biggest salmon ever he seen, an’ it lyin’ quiet an’ peaceful in a deep pool inundher the bank. So he crept back an’ beckoned to the other lad to bring one of the scythes. Poachin’ it was, of course, but that wasn’t the thing that ’ud throuble them, an’ the place all nice and lonely.”

“It wouldn’t have troubled me!” Bill grinned. “But how could they get it with a scythe, of all things?”

“The scythe had a sharp little steel spear on the end of the handle, the way a man could stick it in the ground when he’d be sharpening it,” explained Murty. “The lad reckoned they cud spear it aisy enough. So he brought his mate along, an’ let him do the spearin’, while he pointed out the fish. They crept to the pool, very quiet, standin’ side by side; an’ there was the salmon just as before. The first lad was pointin’ it out, an’ the second rose the scythe up so as to get a good dhrive down. Then he dhrove. But what neither of them remembered was the blade, that came too. An’ it got the first lad on the neck, an’ cut his head off!”

“Did the other chap get the salmon?” demanded Bill, excitedly.

Murty looked at him severely for a moment. Then he gave a deep chuckle.

“Hear him, Davie! An’ that’s what yourself will very likely be sayin’ when I tell you that story in ten years or so. Is it him to be worryin’ about the lad that losht his head? It is not. Next time I tell you a sad story, Masther Bill——”

“Oh well, that was all a yarn, anyway,” said Bill, grinning. “But I nearly believed it for a minute.”

“Is it now?” Murty retorted. “Well, you go to County Galway some day an’ ask about it, Masther Bill. An’ let you be rememberin’, in anny case, that a scythe’s business-end is an unchancy thing, an’ you never know when it’ll be playin’ you a thrick you’d not be ready for. Like an adze. Them two tools is quare. I’ve an idea that a bad little imp lives in each wan of them always on the

look-out to damage a man. Many's the man I've known that's near cut his foot off with an adze. Don't you get monkeyin' with one, or Mr. Jim'll ate the face off ye."

"Promised him I wouldn't," said Bill, nodding. "He said an adze was the only tool most men ought to be scared of. He's going to teach me to use one some day, though. I say, Murty, you don't believe in imps and fairies and things, do you? Jim told me once that you did, but I thought he was only pulling my leg."

Murty retrieved his knife, which Davie had dropped into the grass. He drew out his great old-fashioned watch, on its guard of plaited kangaroo-hide, and dangled it for the baby's amusement.

"Yes, ye can play with it—but I'll keep a howlt on wan end, Davie-boy. Well, Masther Bill, I wouldn't say there mayn't be quare things in the worlrd that everywan don't see."

"But everyone knows fairies are all rot!" asserted Bill.

"Is it so? In me own counthry you'd find here-an'-there-a-wan that could tell ye somethin' about the Good People." He paused. "We don't call them fairies in Ireland."

"Why not?"

"People do be sayin' it's not lucky. The Good People, or the Little People: them's the names they have on them."

"As if a name mattered!" scoffed Bill.

"Well, now"—the soft Irish drawl was full of meaning—"I've heard tell of a boy that was named Percival. An' that boy towld me himself there was no luck on him until his name was changed to Bill!"

Bill's cheeks reddened.

"Oh, well," he muttered, "you know jolly well Percival's a rotten name, Murty."

"I know well enough that Bill suits you betther." Murty's eyes were kind. "Still-an'-all, you oughtn't to be the boy to say there's nothing in a name."

"I s'pose not," Bill admitted. "Anyhow, you can't say you've ever seen a fairy, Murty. Nor anybody else. They're all a yarn for kids." There was a faint trace of uneasiness in the old Irishman's face.

"There's things it's as well not to be sayin'. Out here in Australia folks don't think about the Good People or—or annything like that. An' perhaps there wouldn't be anny of them here, the way it's a new counthry. It's different in ould-ancient places. We grow up there hearin' ould stories—yes, an' new wans too, now an' then."

"But people aren't frightened of them—even in Ireland, surely!" said Bill, incredulously.

"I wouldn't say frightened. But there's plenty that believe it's as well to

keep on their good side. Then there may be good luck comin' to ye."

"And bad luck if you don't?" jeered Bill.

"Well, now, I'll tell ye, Masther Bill. There's lots of places in Ireland we call forts. Some call them raths—it's all the same thing. Great mounds of earth they do be, round and well-shaped; big enough to put a house on, some of them. That's where the counthry people believe the Good People live. An' there's ne'er a man—that knows annything—who'll put a spade into a rath or cut down a tree on wan."

"Why? What would happen if he did?"

"Bad luck, as sure as fate."

"Oh, Murty, what bosh!"

"Bosh, is it? I cud tell ye stories from here till to-morrow of the misfortunate things that have happened to people who interfered with raths. Sickness an' sorrow an' ivery kind of bad luck."

"If you mean to tell me it was because they touched the blessed old rath——!" began Young Australia, scornfully.

"There's too many stories. It always happens. Wanst in me own townland there was an Englishman bought a property that had a rath on it. There was a fine view from it, an' he had a great wish to build a summer-house there for his wife. So he thried to get men to lay the foundations, but no wan 'ud put a spade in it, no matther what wages he offered them. He was very scornful—like you, Masther Bill—an' he made fun of them until they were all ashamed of the way he'd be speakin' to them. In the latther end he offered to dig the first sods himself, an' they agreed to go on wid the wurrk if he did. They reckoned he'd get the bad luck; an' bein' an Englishman, they didn't mind."

"He was the only one who had any pluck," said Bill.

"Him? He had none at all. He didn't believe there was danger, so what call had he to be brave? 'Twas the men who were willing to follow him, believin' what they did, who had pluck: there's never anny knowin' where the Good People will strike if they're annoyed. Annyway, me bowld Englishman led half a dozen of them up on top of the rath wan fine day, an' he took a spade an' cut out a few sods. 'There's for you an' your Good People!' says he. An' he left them to it."

"Well, I bet nothing happened."

"He'd hardly got home before the women that was in the house came runnin' out to him. His wife was afther shlippin' on nothing at all an' breakin' her arm. The next day his child was tuk ill; and wan of the men wurrkin' on the rath had his cow die on him. Sickness an' accident, there wasn't wan of them spared: an' in the end the limb of a tree fell on the Englishman an' cut his head open, an' he wasn't the betther of it for a month. That finished the wurrk—the men threw down their tools an' swore they'd never lay hand to them

again. Them spades an' picks is there to this day, an' the earth an' the grass growin' over them."

Bill's eyes were round.

"But—but those were accidents that might have happened anyhow."

"Go up an' down the length an' breadth of Ireland, an' you'll hear stories of accidents like that whenever there have been men bowld enough to meddle with a rath," said Murty, grimly. "An' quarer than that." He smoked in silence, while Bill pondered these things in his modern young mind. Something in the old Irishman's manner had impressed him in spite of himself.

"And do you reckon the—the Good People are always unpleasant?" he asked at length.

"Not by anny manner of means," returned Murty, quickly. "They can be as good friends as a man need want, if you get on the right side of them."

"How do you manage that?" Bill grinned.

"Oh, by not interferin' with them or their special places; an' more than that, by thinkin' kindly of them an' maybe givin' them a blessing once in a while. There's a story told of a man who got a power of good out of them."

"Tell us, Murty," begged Bill.

"He was a poor wee fellow that was known as Critchey. That's the name for a hump on the back; an' this man had a hump that was a harrd thing to carry. But he was a cheery little man, an' he tuk his misfortune wid a good heart, an' had a pleasant worrd for everywan. He cud sing, too, an' it made him welcome in all the houses, for in Ireland the people have a great wish for a singer always. An' he never failed to speak well of the Good People, an' to send them a blessing when he passed a great rath not far from his village."

"He didn't *see* them, did he?" asked Bill.

"Not all his life until wan Midsummer Eve. That's the night when 'tis known that all the Good People have great rejoicings among themselves. An' this night Critchey was goin' along the road that led close to the rath—goin' slow and leanin' on his stick, for the hump on his back made him always tired. When he got near it he heard the wonderfulest sound of music an' singin' ever he heard in all his life. Then he came close: an' the rath was like as if it had been turned to clear glass, the way he could see within in it. An' there was the King of the Good People, surrounded by all his Court, an' his musicians playin': an' they were all singin' a song wee Critchey knew quite well."

"Murty! Do you believe it?" demanded Bill.

"Me father towld me," said Murty, gravely. "Well, Critchey stud in the road, listenin' wid all his ears; an' the music was that beautiful he forgot every throuble he had. The wan thing he didn't like was that they had wan line of the chorus wrong; he'd sung that song too often not to know it. They were singin' in Irish, of course, an' where they'd ought to have sung:—

'Da Sahern, da Downig, agus Diardin,'

they sang:

'Da Luain, da Mairth, agus da Caeduin.'

"Well, the third time they came to the chorus Critchey felt he cud not bear it. So he joined in, liftin' the song louder than anny of them: only he sang the right worrds.

"Wid that, there was a dead silence fell within the rath. The King was the furrst to break it. He lifted up his sceptre an' shouted in a terrible voice, 'Who's that disturbin' our singin'?' An' out of the rath came pourin' a great crowd of the Good People. They seized Critchey an' dragged him within in it.

"'Oh, it's you, Critchey O'Halloran, is it?' says the King. 'An' what do you mane by breakin' in on our fine song on Midsummer Eve? 'Tis a bowld man ye are, Critchey!'

"Critchey was terrible frightened, but he put a brave face on it. Himself was the lad that always had good manners, an' he'd heard tell that the Good People knew good manners when they saw them.

"'May it please Your Majesty,' says he, 'twas the heighth of impertinence I had, an' I afther joinin' in to your chorus. But—beggin' Your Majesty's pardon—'tis your own fault, Your Majesty: for the music an' the voices were that grand it broke the heart in me that the worrds should be wrong!'

"'I never was sure of them worrds,' said the King, thoughtful-like. 'Is it the second line, Critchey?' says he.

"'It is, Your Majesty,' says Critchey. "'Tis not

"Da Luain, da Mairth, agus da Caeduin"

ye should be singin' for the second line; but 'tis the way it is

"Da Sahern, da Downig, agus Diardin."

An' he trolled it out in his best voice, as bowld as if he'd been singin' for his supper in a village inn.

"The Good People raised a great shout. 'That's it!' cries they. 'That's our true song! Hurroo for Critchey O'Halloran!' An' they crowded round him, tellin' him what a fine, knowledgeable fellow he was, till the little man came near believin' them. Then the King called for order, an' they all sang the song together, with Critchey leadin' them. 'Twas a great time they had, entirely.

"When they had done, the King called out, 'What shall we do for Critchey O'Halloran, for giving us the true song?' An' some said wan thing, and some another, an' in the end they asked Critchey himself. An' he says, says he, 'Indeed, Your Majesty, I'm a happy man, wid little to wish for, if only I hadn't

this great critchey on me back to carry wid me day an' night.'

"With that the King shouts—"Take off his critchey!" An' they ran at him an' took off his critchey as aisy as you'd take off your coat: an' they put it in a corner.

"Critchey stud up, straight an' slender, an' he looked long at his ould hump. 'Begob, I'm well quit of you!' he says to it, says he. 'An' I'm grateful to Your Majesty an' to all these fine ladies an' gentlemen; an' may you have good luck go hand-in-hand with you to the end of the worrld!' says he.

"There was a great shout from them all, an' a burst of music: an' then Critchey found himself in the road again, an' the rath all dark an' silent: an' his hump was gone. He ran into the village, to the nearest house, an' towld what had happened him: an' all the people gathered in to look at him an' wish him luck, for he was everybody's friend."

"I say——!" began Bill.

Murty lifted his hand.

"There's more yet. It happened that there was another man in that village with a hump-back. A sour little man, he was, that had no good worrd for anny man. He saw Critchey's straight back, an' he thinks to himself—"If it's as aisy as all that to get rid of one's critchey, there's no reason meself would be carryin' mine longer than next Midsummer Eve!"

"So he waited a year, but he never throubled to make anny preparations, nor to wish the Good People well. He had no great opinion of annywan but himself; an' as for wee Critchey, he'd always despised him for all the odd kindnesses he'd done. Sorra a kindness would Barney McGee do to a soul in the place, barrin' it was himself. An' if there's Good People at all, you may be sure they know things like that.

"Well, the year went by, and Barney huggin' his great plan, thinkin' how he'd soon be strowling down the village street wid a straight back. Never a worrd of it did he breathe to annybody: he was a dark, silent man that didn't believe in tellin' his affairs. Besides, he thought that if people knew what he meant to do there might be others who'd go along too, thryin' what benefits they cud get from the Good People. Barney had no mind to be sharin' benefits.

"Midsummer Eve came, an' there was me bowld Barney leggin' it up to the rath as soon as it was dark. All the time he'd doubted if he'd really see what Critchey had seen; but, sure enough, there was the rath, all clear as crystal, an' the Good People within in it, singin' an' makin' merry. 'Twas a grand sight entirely, an' Barney was that took up with it he clean forgot to sing for awhile.

"Then he remembered. They were just beginning the chorus, an' he joined in. He hadn't the good voice that Critchey had, but he made up for it with loudness. At the top of his lungs he sang. But in his hurry he didn't care what

worrrds he put to the tune, an' he mixed them all up.

"The music stopped with a crash. The King lifted his sceptre an' cried out:

" 'Who's that, that's afther disturbin' our true song?'

"With that, there was a rush out of the rath, an' they laid howlt on Barney. They dragged him within. The King looked him up an' down.

" 'Is it yourself, Barney McGee?' says he. 'A bowld man ye are. There was wan came to sing with us last Midsummer Eve, but we made him free of our company because he taught us the true song. You have ruined it entirely. What have ye to say for yourself, Barney McGee?'

"Barney was never a lad to throuble about good manners. He looked at the King, sour an' dark. 'Yerra, what do worrrds matter?' says he. 'I came to get rid of me hump.'

"All the Good People burst out laughin', but 'twasn't pleasant laughter it was at all. They crowded round Barney, pointin' at him with their fingers, jeerin' at him. He was ragin' mad with the fury that was in him, but there was a powerlessness in his limbs, an' he couldn't move, nor yet utter a worrrd. It went on until he was near deafened with the noise of it; but what was worrst to him was the smile on the King's face. Never a sound did the King make; he just sat an' smiled. An' it was a smile that 'ud chill a man's heart.

"At last he lifted up his sceptre.

" 'Our guest is gettin' a thrifle annoyed,' he says, very polite. 'What shall we do with this merry guest?'

"All the Good People burrst out again. 'He came to get rid of his hump!' they cried. 'He came to get rid of his hump!' An' they made it into a wild song, dancin' round Barney an' chantin' it at him.

" 'Twas a slight mistake he's afther makin',' says the King. 'That wan needs more hump than less, I'm thinkin'. Well, 'tis lucky we have wan to spare. Give him Critchey's ould wan, boys; 'tis good enough for the likes of him!'

"He pointed with his sceptre; an' there in the corner lay Critchey's ould hump. A score of the wee lads rushed for it. They picked it up an' clapped it on Barney's shoulders on top of the wan he had already. Then the wild singin' an' laughin' began again, madder than ever as they danced round him. An' suddenly he was without on the road, an' the rath all dark and silent again. But Barney McGee had a double hump, an' he carried them as long as he lived."

Murty stopped abruptly. He tapped the ashes out of his pipe and put it into his pocket.

Bill was looking at him queerly.

"And—and do you truly believe all that?"

"Me father towld it to me—an' he was a wise man," said Murty, simply.

"Well, Masther Bill, there's wan thing I know; an' that is, that the oulder I

grow the less I feel like sayin' I don't believe annything. The ould stories get trimmed-up an' embroidered, till ye wouldn't know what was truth. But it's no bad thing to remember that when ye find a great manny people believin' a thing, even if that thing seems foolishness to ye, there's apt to be a bit of truth in it somewhere."

"Well——!" said Bill: and gave it up. "Anyhow, I'm jolly glad Barney got Critchey's hump. He was a beast!"

"Ye might be a beast yourself, if so be ye had to carry a hump!" said Murty, dryly. "Look at the wee lad now! Isn't it Kim that's as good as a nursemaid!"

Kim was lying quietly, nose between outstretched paws. Davie lay cuddled into his neck, fast asleep.

CHAPTER VII

THE FAR HILLS

FOUR riders were cantering over a wide paddock to the north of Billabong. It was one of those spring mornings that seem to hold a hint of early summer. The air was still: the warm rays of the sun were fast drying the dew that had clung to the grass an hour before. There were still wet and matted patches where bullocks had lain down; every hollow log showed, across its opening, spiders' webs that were gemmed with crystal drops. The air was full of the scent of wattle-blossom, of the song of mating birds. A morning when it was good to be alive—especially with a good horse under you, and ahead, calling, the blue ranges.

Bill Blake did not put this into words. It was enough for him to be on Topsy when that little mare was taking some holding, being fresh from a three-days' spell and the unwonted luxury of a feed of oats. She had pig-jumped gaily when he mounted, and her first movements when they settled down to canter had been a series of convulsive bounds—which greatly amused Bill. He sat her easily, talking to her as he had heard Jim talk to a fractious young horse: Jim had long ago taught his "offsider" the value of a quiet understanding voice upon a horse's nerves. Topsy liked Bill's friendly tone. She ceased to bound, deciding that, with so light a weight on her back, she would show a clean pair of heels to the three other riders, no matter how big their horses.

Bill was very willing. After the first gate they dashed ahead, an incoherent shout from Bill being interpreted by the others as an announcement that he would wait for them at the next fence. That was far away, and he was soon out of sight among the trees. Jim, Wally and Bob followed more steadily.

"Great kid he's growing," commented Wally, looking at the scurrying form. "I never saw a youngster take to horses as Bill has—thanks to you, Jim."

"Oh, we've all had a hand," Jim answered. "And he's easily taught. Patient, too—with a horse, anyway. That dogged streak of Bill's is pretty useful when you take it the right way."

"Well, Davie's had an earlier start, but I'll be satisfied if he has hands and a seat as good as Bill's," remarked Davie's father.

"I don't think you need worry about Davie's riding," Bob laughed. "If ever it was in any youngster's blood, it's in his."

"If it weren't, it would be firmly put into him," said Jim. "I found Murty the other day looking over those yearlings in the Far Plain. He has picked out two for special attention—thinks they'll make decent mounts for Davie!"

"I foresee fierce competition when the time comes to teach him to ride," Bob said. "Every man on the place will want to take a hand—to say nothing of Norah."

"He won't need teaching," was Jim's comment. "He'll just find himself riding. Why, already he knows all about the feel of a horse. And he ought to, seeing that he is put on one about five times a day!"

"You don't get as much help from Norah in the paddocks nowadays," said Bob, with a twinkle. "She's becoming very domesticated!"

"It won't last," predicted Wally. "It can't! So far, she has a feeling that she can't let the kid out of her sight. But I foresee a day when she will break loose violently, dump him on Brownie, and demand the wildest horse on the place! And then she'll wonder how she stood it so long!"

"There's mighty little sign of it yet," Jim remarked. "Sometimes I think we'll have to do something about it. Remember the days when it seemed unnatural to see Norah in anything but riding-kit?"

"Them was the days!" chaffed Bob.

"She'll come back to it," said Norah's husband, serenely. "Meanwhile, there are compensations: Davie is a cheerful lad to have about a house. Not that we own him, of course: he's everybody's property. I rather think we ought to have a vote of thanks for giving everybody such a good toy to play with!"

They neared the gate where Bill and Topsy were waiting. Bill had dismounted, giving Topsy a chance to nibble the long grass while he opened the gate.

"You're a slow lot!" he greeted them. "We've been here ever so long."

"That's what we brought you for," Jim told him, "—to go ahead and have all gates open."

"I like that! Turn-about's fair, isn't it, Bob?"

"Certainly. You and Wally and Jim take turns, and I keep tally to see fair play!"

Jeers greeted this proposal.

"Wily race, the English!" said Wally. "Come along, Bill, and I'll give you a lead over that log. Don't keep too close; this fellow isn't quite sure that he likes jumping timber yet."

The log was a fallen tree of respectable girth. Wally put his bay horse at it, and the bay, arriving at the jump, decided that he did not like it at all, propped, whirled round, and tried to seek another district. In the argument which followed Bill slipped by, and Topsy flew the log like a bird, her rider giving vent to yells of triumph. Bob and Jim followed, after which Wally's bay realized that he might as well be in the fashion, raced up to the log with ears daintily pricked and took it with a foot to spare.

"No more larks," commanded Jim. "We've got a long day ahead, and we

can't spare time for jumping."

"No, but Redwing needed a lesson," said Wally, "And Bill never thinks a day complete if he hasn't had at least one jump, do you, Bill?"

"Rather not! Wally, will you come round the jumping course with me tomorrow?"

"I will—if there's anything left of me after to-day. Tell you what, Bill—we'll make Norah come too, on Garryowen. I don't believe she's been over a fence for six months."

Bill accepted this proposal joyfully. Norah had been his first teacher, not only in riding, but in understanding the ways and the mind of a horse, opening to him the gate of knowledge that had led into a land of happiness. Even though Norah's men-folk made him one of themselves. Bill missed the old days when they had galloped and jumped together.

"I like Davie," he said, thoughtfully, "I think he's a ripping baby. Most kids yell all the time, but he's always jolly. But he does make a difference to Norah, doesn't he? She seems to like being with him more than riding."

"These things are curious," said Wally with gravity. "There are actually times when I'd rather be with Davie myself than go out after cattle."

"Jolly rum. I suppose it's because he belongs to you," suggested Bill, brilliantly.

"It must be, as I've dodged babies all my life. Davie is the first who has been more than a nodding acquaintance. Perhaps I've missed a lot by being stand-off."

"Don't you believe it!" was Bill's quick rejoinder. "I've got some young cousins I know quite well, and they're an awful nuisance. And Mother says I was a perfectly dreadful baby myself. I think Davie's a bit out of the common, don't you?"

"We've fancied he is, but I'm glad you notice it, too," said Davie's father.

"Well, he's got sense. Likes the right sort of things, I mean—horses and dogs and tools. I was awfully afraid he'd like dolls."

"Some misguided person gave him one, but he dropped it into the pigsty. Oh, I think the lad's instincts are sound," said Wally. "Hullo, those people are getting too far ahead, Bill!—we'll have to catch up or we'll keep them waiting at the gate."

They were bound for the rough hill-country beyond Billabong, where Jim and Wally had taken up land three years before as an out-station. Later on they had induced Bob to follow their example, and he had acquired the land adjoining theirs. Here they reared young cattle, which picked up a living in the gullies among the rocky hills, growing strong and healthy, so that when it was time to bring them down into the good grass country they fattened quickly.

Sheep were Bob's main interest, but he had learned to love his cattle. A

day in the hills was always a special joy to him. Here he was able to forget the hundred petty jobs of the farm, to breathe the clean hill-air that seemed to blow away all the shadows that crept up between him and Tommy's game of "thinking-true." He had not ceased to play the game. But to do so he had to put his reasoning mind to sleep, lulling it with hard work and his dreams and pictures of a better time. Tommy, he knew, was a step farther: her dreams were very real to her.

Still, even though the game was a pretence to Bob, he played it according to promise, and he was forced to admit that his brain was less tired, that his whole outlook seemed more cheerful. So much so, that it had not required much persuasion to make him fall in with Jim and Wally's suggestion of a day in the ranges. His bullocks should be looked over, he knew; and the boys grimly refused to do it for him, though perfectly willing to accompany him. This method of gentle persuasion, delivered with broad grins, reduced Bob to meekness. Bill Carter's foot was well; he was no longer tied to the morning and evening milking. Jim had appeared with Bill in the car on the previous evening and carried off to Billabong the master and mistress of the Creek.

Bob felt young and happy as he rode towards the hills. They had had a merry evening at Billabong. Wally and Norah had come over: they had danced to the music of the wireless in the long room that had seen so many dances—to the sound of concertina and fiddle in the long ago, then to a piano, later on to gramophone strains, and now to the dance-tunes that came mysteriously out of the ether. Years had brought their changes, but Billabong was what it had always been—a place of light feet and light hearts.

Yes—it had been a good evening. Not a small part of its goodness had been the sight of Tommy's happy face. Bob had watched her dancing with Jim, his giant height towering above the shining fair head that scarcely reached his shoulder: Jim's deep laugh had rung out at something she had said. Bob liked to recall the memory. He decided, in the glow of hope that filled him this morning, that there must be more evenings at Billabong for Tommy.

They came to the end of the plains and passed through a gate into the foothills. At once the soil changed; instead of deep green grass and a mat of strawberry-clover they rode over rocky ground where sparse native grasses struggled for existence. No longer were there any mighty red-gums and box-trees flinging wide arms above them. Here the trees were slender and stunted, growing among thick masses of dogwood and scattered scrub. Wild clematis twined everywhere, its drooping curtains of creamy flowers like fragrant stars, among which honeyeaters fluttered. All the bush was full of birds, curiously unafraid—humans were so rarely to be seen in the lonely country that they brought no sense of danger with them.

The horses climbed slowly upwards. They picked their way over steep

ridges, cut across in many places by stony gullies, water-worn; the riders leaned back as the horses gathered their hooves to slide and scramble down them, and then bent forward to ease the stiff pull up the farther slope. Here and there was a little pocket of level ground where grass grew thickly, fed from springs in the rocks, kept short and sweet by the cattle. There were generally a few bullocks in such places, youngsters with short horns, their coats ragged and matted with the winter growth, though it was beginning to fall—every rock was a rubbing-place, and the bushes showed many a tuft of shed hair. The boys inspected each beast closely.

“Coming on well,” said Wally, with approval. “Look at that little roan: he isn’t half such a scrag as he was last time we were out.”

Jim carried a revolver, which he fervently hoped he would not have to use. It was a humane precaution; now and then a beast might be found hurt by a fallen tree or a landslide, or with a broken leg caused by a concealed hole. Such an accident might mean slow death by starvation, with crows hovering near, waiting for the moment when the sufferer was too weak to raise his head; a bullet then was a quick mercy.

But to-day there were no such tragedies. They rode for a couple of hours, finding only healthy, peaceful cattle. The boys were in high spirits when Jim called a halt and they camped by a creek for lunch, in a place so ringed with rocks that it was possible to fling off saddles and bridles and let the horses stray; freedom which they used immediately by lying down and rolling. Then they trotted to the creek to drink, returning slowly to graze among the rocks.

“This is a good place,” said Bill. He was lying flat on his back, taking large bites out of a mammoth sandwich. “I hate to have to keep Topsy tied up while I’m having lunch.”

“Can’t let them go everywhere,” Wally answered. “Jim and I tried it one day in a more open gully, and Redwing took it into his head to explore. We had no end of a merry hunt to catch him.”

Bill chuckled. “Wish I’d seen you!”

“It wouldn’t have been good for you. Jim had Monarch, so he was all right; but I wasn’t a bit pleased.”

“It’s a rough business, hunting in this sort of country, when your game is a horse that doesn’t wish to be caught,” said Jim. “He’s got all the advantages. To see what places a horse will tackle when he isn’t wearing a saddle and bridle is simply an education.”

“Well, I learned my own lesson pretty thoroughly. So now I take no chances. I had two sore feet and a torn coat before we got hold of Mr. Redwing that day.”

“And that wasn’t the sorest part of it,” Jim grinned.

“No—I was a little hot under the collar, I believe. A horse can make you

look such a fool; you scramble over horrible places for ten minutes, trying to get near him, and then he trots happily away and you have it all over again. No one will ever persuade me that a horse doesn't know how to laugh!" Wally asserted. "Redwing used to dodge me that morning for the mere pleasure of chuckling behind a tree."

"Topsy and I have lots of laughs." Bill rolled over and looked at the little black mare. "I believe she'll talk some day."

"Hopeful lad!" said Bob, lazily.

"I don't know about talking—but some horses certainly do queer things," reflected Jim. "I've heard of a pony that could count."

"Not sheep!" cried Bill.

"I don't think they tried him on sheep. But if his owner asked him questions about a number he'd answer. Like, 'How many legs have you?' and he'd stamp four times with his forefoot."

"Oh, lots of circus ponies are taught things like that," Bob remarked.

"This fellow went a good bit beyond circus-stuff. I never saw him, though I'd have liked to. But the man who told me had seen him—my Colonel, he was; and he was a person of hard sense. If it had been anyone else, I should have thought he was pulling my leg; but Weatherley wasn't that sort of chap. And it would have taken a good man to fool old Weatherley."

"What did the pony do?"

"He was decidedly queer. He could multiply, for one thing. If you asked him what were five times six, or any other simple bit of multiplication, he'd stamp out the right answer without any hesitation."

"Go on!" said Bill, unbelievably.

"Weatherley saw him. He went prepared to find out a hoax, but he couldn't. He asked his own little sums, too—didn't leave it to the owner: and got the answers every time. The owner went out of sight, but it made no difference."

"He must have been well taught," was Bob's comment. "But I don't see how."

"There was a good deal of 'don't see how,' according to Weatherley," put in Wally. "Do you remember about his telling ages, Jim?"

"Yes, but I thought it might be too much for Bob and Bill to swallow," Jim answered, smiling.

"Go on: we're ready for anything," said Bob.

"Well, I found it hard enough to swallow, myself: but the Colonel said he'd actually seen it. I liked the Colonel," said Jim, reflectingly; "he was a white man. Poor old chap, he was killed at Amiens."

"But what was it?" demanded Bill.

"Well—he said that when the pony was asked the age of anybody—it

might be a perfect stranger—he would tell it. The owner put his hand on the Colonel's shoulder and asked, 'How old is this friend?' and the pony stamped fifty-two times. Weatherley turned away from them, so that the owner couldn't see his face and read anything from it—some people would give themselves away—but the pony went on slowly and deliberately until he got up to fifty-two, and then stopped. It was right; and of course no one but the Colonel himself could have known. They said that in one case he gave forty-three as a lady's age, and she was much annoyed, and said she was thirty-five. But it was found out afterwards that she actually was forty-three!"

"Well, of course, Jimmy, you are a truthful man, and all that," said Bob, with a broad grin. "If it were anyone but you——"

"Not me, at all," said Jim, placidly: "It was Weatherley."

"But you believed Weatherley."

"So would you, if you'd known him. And remember, he went there as unbelieving as ever you could be—perhaps a bit more, for he was a tough specimen—and he couldn't find the slightest explanation. It wasn't even as though the owner had stayed with the pony and put his own questions; but he didn't, and it made no difference. You'll feel even worse when I tell you the pony could spell, too!"

"I can't feel worse," said Bob. "Go ahead!"

"Weatherley said they had heavy leather discs, with letters stamped on them, and when the pony was asked to spell a simple word—four or five letters—he would touch the right letters with his forefoot."

"Surprise words?" queried Bob.

"Oh, yes. Weatherley asked his own. The pony was right every time."

"There's been a lot written about that pony," put in Wally, seeing that Bob and Bill appeared bereft of further speech. "Ever so many scientific big-bugs have been to test him, and none of them have been able to find any explanation. It just *is*, that's all. There's a dog, too, somewhere I've read about; he does the same sort of thing, only his method is by barking. One of his pups could do the same things. The old dog went blind, but it didn't seem to affect his peculiar powers."

"Well——" said Bob; and paused. "There must be an explanation somewhere."

"If there is, I haven't heard it," Jim answered. "Anyhow, I believe that most horses and dogs know a good deal more than people think they do. If that's so, I suppose that occasionally a particular one may go a bit further—like the amazing child-geniuses that have been known. Wasn't it Mozart or one of those musical chaps that composed music when he was three? Stuff that his own father, who was a professional, couldn't play!"

"I saw a kid in a music-hall who did that kind of thing," said Bob. "He

looked about five, though I suppose he was really older. They asked him the most awful sums—things I'd take a week to do with pencil and paper. This infant used to blink, run his fingers through his hair, and give the right answer!"

"Could anybody ask him?"

"Oh, yes. I gave him one myself: comparatively mild, but I'd have been sorry to do it without writing materials. He looked at me in a pitying fashion, as if I were too young to be out without my nurse, and rattled off the answer. I wrote it down and worked it out afterwards, in silence and alone—the only way I can do sums."

"Was it right?"

"Oh, yes. I don't think anyone ever caught that youngster out. He'd do awful things—cube roots and decimals and all sorts of horrors. I heard that he died a year or so later."

"Of a surfeit of sums, I suppose?" said Wally, with a grin.

"I suppose so. Nasty death, I call it."

"Well, *I* won't die that way, that's one thing!" stated Bill. "My word, though, wouldn't it be ripping to be like that boy! I'd be top of the form in arithmetic all the time, instead of being bottom."

"Queer as it may seem, I believe we'd rather have you as you are," Jim said. "What will you do with Davie, Wal, if he shows any signs of being a child-genius?"

"Sit on his head," said Wally, firmly.

"It's lucky for Davie that it's unlikely. This family runs to brawn, not brains," said Jim, cheerfully. "And now, I rather think it's time we caught our horses."

They saddled up and found a ford across the creek, climbing to the crest of a long ridge. This they followed until they came to a wire fence, beyond which began Bob's land. They halted beside a padlocked gate.

"I'd like to take a look into those gullies to the west, Bob," Jim said. "Don't you think it would be better if we split up? You and Bill could begin going over your cattle while Wally and I slip down to those gullies. It won't take us very long. We'll join you as soon as we can."

Bob agreed.

"It would certainly save time. I'd like you to see some of my cattle, though—your opinion is worth ten of mine."

"Oh, we'll come. But you two can do a good deal of scouting round without us."

"Right. We'll make up towards the north and then work down in the direction of the gate again. That will leave us the south part to go over together. Most of the bullocks will be down there."

“Then we’ll wait for you somewhere near that tree,” Jim said, pointing with his stockwhip handle at a blossom-covered wattle in a hollow. “Look out for Topsy on the slopes, Bill.” Wally and he rode away across the ridge.

CHAPTER VIII

BOB TAKES A FALL

BOB RAINHAM and Bill passed through the gate, followed the ridge until they came to a spur at right-angles, and struck northward along it. It sloped gently to a long and deep gully, where a dozen young bullocks were grazing. They rode round them quietly, noting their condition. In Jim's absence Bill considered himself a judge: he commented on the cattle in phrases modelled on Jim's, while Bob smiled to himself.

"Well, that's satisfactory, old chap," he said. "They've put on a good bit."

"Yes, they come through the winter well, up here," rejoined Bill. "That red and white fellow's going to make a good bullock. Where next, Bob?"

"Up the next ridge and beyond it. That's a very rough bit: I don't suppose we shall find any there, but we may as well look."

They gained the ridge. It was a steep and narrow one: from its crest they looked down on a waving green sea of hills and hollows, all densely covered in scrub. As they picked their way down the farther side, Topsy trod on a loose stone; it gave with her, and she slithered forward, sending Bill on to her neck. He scrambled back into the saddle, annoyed with himself.

"I ought to have held her up better," he said. "These slopes are beastly going." He rode with care until they reached more level ground. A hundred yards farther on he looked up at Bob.

"I say—do you think she's limping?"

Bob had had his eye on Topsy.

"I believe she's going a bit short," he said. "Jump off, Bill, and we'll look at her feet."

They examined her feet carefully, but found nothing wrong. The little mare stood quietly, looking round at Bill now and then as though she wished she could speak.

"It may be her shoulder," said Bob. "Lead her along a bit, Bill." He watched narrowly as she moved.

"She's certainly going a bit queer on the near shoulder," was his verdict.

"Oh, Bob, do you think it's anything bad?" asked Bill, anxiously.

"Nothing to worry about in the long run, I should say," Bob answered. "But we can't take any chances with her in rough country like this." He thought for a minute. "I think, old chap, you'd better stay here with her. Take off her saddle and let her move if she wants to. I'll ride a little way on, but I won't go far. Then I'll come back for you, and we'll take her up very slowly to the gate."

"All right," Bill answered, trying not to look gloomy. "Don't be long, will you? I say, Bob, do you think I might rub her shoulder?"

"Rather, if you do it very gently—better leave off if she flinches." He ran his own hand over Topsy's shoulder, but she showed no feeling. "I'm sure you can't hurt her, and you may do her good." He mounted his horse and was riding off, when a thought struck him.

"Don't you worry about having to take her home if she's really lame," he called out. "There's no need to risk travelling her. We could leave her here for a spell, and you could double-bank with me."

"Oh, that's good!" said Bill, his face brightening. "I was thinking she oughtn't to be asked to carry me home. Sure you don't mind. Bob?"

"Sure you aren't an old duffer?" rejoined Bob, laughing. He touched his brown mare with his heel, and they disappeared within the scrub.

"That was jolly decent of Bob," reflected Bill. "Golly, Jim will say I was a careless ass not to hold her up properly—and he warned me, too."

His concern for himself was a small thing beside his anxiety for Topsy. The boyish face was very troubled as he slipped the saddle from her back. Stories of horses that had never been sound again after a bad strain flooded into his mind. He dismissed them with an effort.

"Norah would say that was all wrong—to think of things like that," he muttered. "She'd say my job was to put my mind on its being nothing much." He tried to do so as he gently rubbed the glossy black shoulder, remembering another thing Norah had told him—that the touch of hands that had love in them would often have power to heal.

Certainly the hard little hands that rubbed had no lack of love in them. And Topsy liked it: she stood calmly, without trying to feed, and now and then the lean well-bred head came round, and the eyes looked affection. Bill rubbed as long as he thought prudent. Then he sat on a log and talked to her. He thought of Jim's story of the pony that did sums; and decided that even if he did, he wasn't a patch on Topsy.

Time went on. Bob ought to be getting back any minute now. But the moments slipped by, and there was no sign of the brown mare; nor any sound, when he listened. Nothing but the bird-talk in the bushes and the little movements of Topsy as she cropped the grass. Bill began to feel a little uneasy.

"He ought to be back. Jim and Wally will be waiting for us if he isn't here soon. Wonder if he's all right?"

Bill had good cause to know how easily and suddenly things can go wrong in rough country. And Bob was not like Jim and Wally, who could take care of themselves, no matter what happened: Bob was an Englishman, little more than a "new-chum," who could not be expected to know the ways of the hills,

seeing that his work lay nearly always in the plains. In a vague way Bill felt that he was in charge of Bob, lacking Jim and Wally.

“Wonder what I’d better do?” he thought. “I believe I’d better go and meet the boys on foot. They’ll know——”

He stopped, listening intently. Was that a shout? Bill held his breath.

It came again, from the north. Very faint, yet distinct—“Coo-oo-ee!”

“By Jove, that’s Bob!” He was on his feet. “Whatever’s happened?”

“Coo-ee!”

Bill answered, a long shrill cry. For a moment he was uncertain as to his best plan of action. It would undoubtedly be a good thing to get Jim and Wally, those two cheerful giants before whom all difficulties seemed to vanish. But that would take time, on foot: and meanwhile, Bob might be in some danger that called for immediate help. That he was in a difficulty was certain. It might be unsafe to delay.

“I’ll have to go!” He tied Topsy to a sapling, and ran as fast as he could in the direction Bob had taken, shouting as he went.

Meanwhile Bob had ridden for some distance into gullies and hills rougher than anything they had encountered during the morning. The gullies were often nothing more than deep clefts in the rock, masked with brambles and bushes that found scanty growing space between the boulders: there was no crossing them on horseback, and it would have been hard work on foot. Steep spurs, densely wooded, ran between them. There were no creeks visible, yet water was there: when he stopped and listened he could sometimes catch the splash of a streamlet in the hidden depths.

No cattle were there, that was certain: they had nothing to come for. No feed could grow in that inhospitable soil. Bob decided that he would return to Bill. He headed his mare downhill, riding with unusual care: Topsy’s mishap had been a warning. They could not afford to damage a second horse.

Presently he pulled up. Was that a movement? He thought he heard a rustle in the scrub. It might be nothing more than a bird: yet it somehow did not suggest a bird-movement. Bob peered into the scrub, seeing nothing, nor did the sound again come to his ear. Yet something held him—something that seemed to whisper that he had better investigate.

It was no place to take a horse, that was certain: any investigation must be done on foot. He got off, slipping his bridle over a slender pinnacle of rock, and made his way into the scrub.

Within a few yards it thinned. He was on a stony slope. Just ahead was a deep cleft, the beginning of which was completely hidden by bushes; he made his way towards it, hearing the tinkle of water somewhere below. A great rock, standing grey and silent in the bush, seemed to be the head of the cleft. He worked towards it, finding that its base on the southern side ran sheer down to

the bottom.

"I don't believe anything can possibly be down there," he muttered.

Something drew him on, nevertheless. He broke through the bushes and found himself looking down into the cleft: seeing only rock-walls, of no great height at this point, and gravelly soil below, chiefly hidden by low bushes. So much he saw; and then the ground beneath his feet gave way. He grasped a sapling as he fell, a slender thing with light roots. It held for a moment, checking his fall. Then it gave: and with a mighty thud Bob found himself at the foot of the big rock, with the sapling across him and a considerable amount of dirt in each eye.

He scrambled to his feet, shaking himself. The fall had been a heavy one, but not far: he was only bruised, and distinctly ruffled in temper.

"Talk about a full-grown idiot!" he uttered, impatiently. He looked about for a way out.

There was none. Only a very brief examination was necessary to reveal to his astonished mind the fact that he was neatly and most effectively trapped. On three sides the rock that formed the walls of the cleft were straight and smooth, with no footing on their surface: on the fourth, hiding the continuation of the ravine, another rock had fallen sideways, completely blocking it. Its face was as smooth as that of the other walls. Bob was in a rock-chamber, perhaps ten feet square; and he might as well have been in a prison-cell.

A trickle of gently-rippling water was at his feet, making scarcely a track in the gravelly soil. He looked at it, wondering where it came from. It seemed to issue from under the big rock, running down, if so gentle a movement could be called running, to disappear under the slab that blocked the cleft. A spring, probably, or an underground stream with its origin far back: the hills were full of such runlets.

"If I had any sort of a tool I could probably burrow under that slab," thought Bob. "But with bare hands it wouldn't be a pleasant job. Well, there's nothing for it but to pocket my pride and yell for old Bill."

There was no need for anxiety. The walls that were unscalable from below were low enough to offer no serious difficulty if help were given from above. Bob studied the position in the intervals of shouting, seeing that there would be no risk of a rescuer falling in on the opposite side from that which had witnessed his downfall, for on that side the rock was bare and craggy at the top, with no treacherous overhang of earth such as he had encountered. So he tried to laugh at his misfortune, hoping that Bill would arrive in time to help him out before Jim and Wally grew uneasy at their absence.

"This is where even Tommy would find it difficult to 'think-true,' I believe," he reflected. "There may be a blessing in disguise in falling into a beastly pot-hole, but if there is, it's uncommonly well disguised." He shouted

again, “Coo-ee!”

Bill’s answer came this time, and he sighed with relief. There was nothing now to do except to shout from time to time to guide Bill to the spot. He sat down with his back against the rock, digging his heels into the gravel: and then fell to examining the stones idly, and the curious markings on the boulders. They held his attention until Bill’s shouts grew nearer, led by his answers. Presently came a call.

“I’ve found Cricket! Where are you, Bob?”

“Quite close, but you’ve got to come carefully and just where I tell you.”

“Are you all right?”

“Perfectly, only I’m trapped in a bit of a hole. Listen, Bill. Bring my stirrup-leathers and reins. I think Cricket will stand with the head-stall on, but we must chance it.”

“I’ve got a good bit of string,” piped Bill. “I can tie her up with that.”

“Good man. Sing out when you’re ready.”

“Ready now!” came the call a moment later.

“See that big rock standing up? Well, keep well round to the north of that and you’ll come on a lower shelf of rock joining on to it. I’m just below that. I think it’s all safe, but watch every step you take, unless you want to fall into the middle of the earth, like me!”

The red head that peeped at him over the top of his cell a moment afterwards was a very welcome sight.

“Hullo, old chap!” said Bob. “This is a nice little trap, isn’t it?”

“However——?” began Bill, wide-eyed.

“The ground gave under me on the other side. Warning to watch my step,” said Bob, lightly. “Well, you can get me out. Is there a good strong chunk of that rock that will hold my weight?”

Bill examined it.

“There’s a beauty, growing out of itself. I mean,” he explained, “it isn’t just a loose rock. I’ve tugged and tugged, and it’s as firm as a house.”

“First rate. Now, if you pass a stirrup-leather over that, after you’ve made a long rope of both leathers and the reins, and throw the end down to me, I will ascend. Mind you buckle them properly: I’ve had all the somersaulting I want.”

The leather rope came snaking down the rock-wall presently. Bob scrambled up with a good deal of difficulty, watched anxiously by the rescuer, who put out all his strength to drag him over the edge.

“Golly, I’m glad you’re up!” uttered Bill. “Sure you’re all right?”

“Right as rain.” Bob was swiftly unbuckling the leathers. “Thanks awfully, old man. Now we’ve got to leg it as hard as we can, or Jim and Wally will think we’re bushed. I’ll tell you what—you get on Cricket and ride to meet

them.”

“Oh, that’s not fair!” protested Bill. “She’s yours, and you’ve had an awful buster. I’ll walk.”

“You will not,” said Bob, firmly. “I’ll make better time walking, and you’ve had one trip on foot already.” They had arrived at the brown mare’s resting-place; he adjusted the stirrups while Bill buckled on the reins. “Right? Then off you go. I’ll wait for you all where Topsy is.” He tossed the boy into the saddle, gave Cricket a slap on the flank, and strode off.

Bill’s appearance on the brown mare rather startled Jim and Wally, who were smoking peacefully under the wattle-tree. He explained matters, and they all went in search of Bob and Topsy. Bill watched with anxious eyes while the boys examined the pony, putting her through a series of movements.

“Only a strain,” was Jim’s verdict; “but you can’t fool with a strain in country as rough as this. I wouldn’t like to take her across the hills with it. We’ll have to leave her here; there’s plenty of grass and water in this gully, luckily, and she won’t stray out of it.”

“She’ll get all right, won’t she, Jim?”

“Of course she will.” He smiled at the troubled face. “A few days’ rest is all she needs. You’ll have to accept Bob’s offer and ride home behind him: Cricket is the only one of our three who would put up with a passenger in the rear.”

“And don’t forget I’m ticklish, Bill!” put in Bob, grinning.

“I’ll remember it,” Bill promised him, a threat in his voice. “What about my saddle and bridle, Jim?”

“We’ll make a rock shelter for them. They won’t come to any harm. The worst of it is, I don’t see how we’re to go round your cattle, Bob.”

“Don’t worry,” was Bob’s prompt answer. He paused. “If you don’t mind, we could come out again to-morrow.”

Jim looked pleased, and a little surprised.

“Rather—nothing I should like better than to keep you another day. Only I thought you would be in your usual annoying hurry to get home.”

“Oh, well, another day won’t matter,” Bob answered. “I’d like to come out, now that the job is begun.”

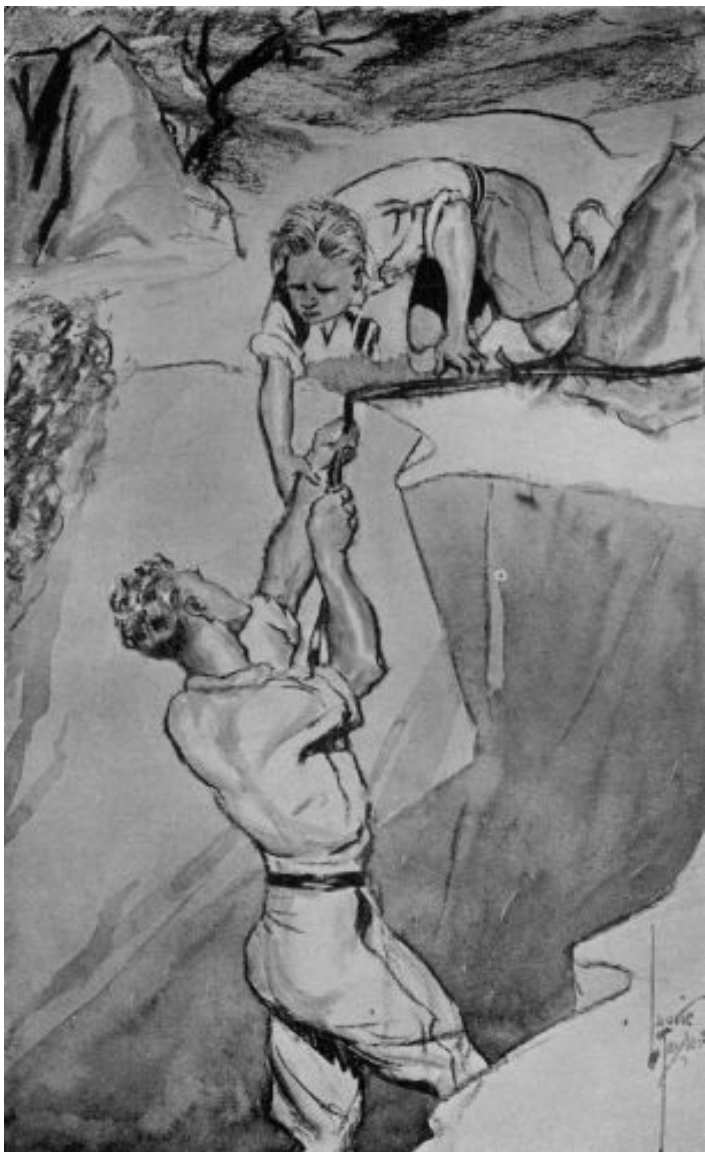
“Well, that’s settled. Now we’d better get busy and hide Bill’s gear. We shall have to travel slowly, so it’s time we started.”

They made a cache under the lee of a boulder. Bill bade Topsy good-bye a little gloomily. She watched him, as if puzzled, when he mounted behind Bob: when they rode away she followed uncertainly for a few yards.

“Go back, Topsy!” Bill called out, raising a warning hand.

The little mare stopped. Perhaps she understood: possibly the stony rise brought a twinge to the aching shoulder. At all events she made no further

attempt to follow, and when they looked back from the ridge she had accepted the situation and was peacefully feeding. Bill rode home with a lighter heart.



“His rescuer put out all his strength to drag him over the edge.”

CHAPTER IX

PEBBLES

AT DINNER that night Bob was unmercifully chaffed over his adventure in the hills. He took it smilingly, making suitable references to misfortunes endured there by others at the table—Bob was by no means the first to come to grief in the ranges.

“I seem to have heard,” he said, fixing his host with an inquiring eye; “of one unfortunate who had actually to be carried home! One who—er—certainly should have known better!”

“One up on me, Bob, my boy!” admitted Mr. Linton, with a laugh.

“What was that?” demanded Bill.

“Oh, that was my own stupidity in taking Monarch out there when he was a gay young thing, just broken in. I was younger and gayer myself then.”

Violent dissent broke out round the table at this assertion. Mr. Linton continued to eat his dinner, unmoved.

“Well, we won’t discuss my age, since it seems to annoy you,” he said, when comment had subsided. “I’ll admit to being Peter Pan or anything else that keeps you quiet. Anyhow, Bill, Monarch and I went out there in the pride of our youth, and he played the fool on a bit of ground that was mostly rock, and came down with me. Awkward, because I was by myself. Not that I knew anything about it. I went out of business when we came down and my head met a rock even harder than the head.”

“Whew-w!” Bill’s eyes were round. “What next?”

“Next was a search-party,” said Jim, “and a most unpleasant time getting the casualty home.”

“If you don’t mind,” came Norah’s clear voice from the end of the table, “I think we won’t talk about that. We have much jollier memories.” She met her father’s eyes. They smiled at each other.

Bill was faintly disappointed. Since it was evident that Mr. Linton was alive and whole, he had no objection to hearing gruesome details. He registered a private determination to get them out of Murty or Brownie. Instinct told him that, from either of these informants, the story would lack nothing.

Wally had changed the subject.

“What have you people done with yourselves to-day, while we have been earning your bread?”

“Earning is a good word,” his wife told him. “I like to hear it! Well, we boated with Davie; and we rode—also with Davie.”

"You rode old Bess, I suppose?"

"I did. And Davie sat on his cushion in front of me and cheered loudly. We had a good time, hadn't we, Tommy?"

"I thought as much!" Wally said. "When I remember what you would have said if anyone had offered to put you on that old screw at one time——! How are the mighty fallen!"

Norah remained calm under this display of gloom.

"You didn't let me finish. That was only the first act. When Davie had had his ride, and Tommy had nobly sustained the part of the docile aunt-in-waiting, I made Murty get Garryowen for me."

"Eh!" said Wally, losing all gloom. "Why, he hasn't been ridden for a month!"

"No, and he let me know it. I don't know when I've met anything so excited."

"I had thought she was becoming sedate, Wally." Tommy laughed. "Indeed, I had told her so. But I had to eat my words. It was an astonishing sight, because I had grown accustomed to seeing her on Bess."

"What happened, Tommy? Tell me," begged Wally joyfully.

"She got on Garryowen—I do not know quite how, because he was dancing madly, and Murty was trying to hold him and saying excited things in Irish almost as fast as I say them in French when the sheep behave badly. However, she was suddenly in the saddle, and Garryowen danced out of the yard on two legs, with Murty shouting imploringly, 'Howld him—howld him, Miss Norah, dear, or he'll get away on you!' "

"And did he?"

"He did. He came to earth with all his feet, and tried to buck. And Norah kept his head up—she really has not forgotten how to ride, Wally!—and they went down the hill in a very curious manner. Something between a crab and a grasshopper, but with much more of the grasshopper than the crab!"

Jim shouted with laughter.

"Why weren't we there! And we riding over to the hills and mourning because Norah had forgotten her youth!"

"They got to the level ground, and then Garryowen stretched out his neck and fled. I do not know all that happened then, because all I could see was a chestnut streak with something on top, flashing in and out of the trees, round and round the big paddock. Sometimes I thought they were coming home, but they always changed their minds—or Garryowen's mind—and went all the harder. I gathered from her attitude that Norah was enjoying herself almost as much as Garryowen!"

"More," said Norah. She was leaning forward, her face alight with the joy of the memory. "Garryowen is like Dad, Wally; he will never grow old. Even

after he had bolted round the paddock three times he couldn't settle down; we tried to go for a quiet ride, but he *would* dance. So I realized what he was asking for, poor old darling, and we went round the steeplechase course."

"I take back my remarks about the fall of the mighty," Wally said, meekly. "This is the best thing I've heard for ages! How did he jump, Norah?"

"Oh, he was pretty mad—but it was lovely!"

"Mad!" said Mr. Linton, looking at his daughter with an attempt at severity that wholly failed. "I came along in time to see them: Tommy taking the jumps in show-ring style, and Norah firmly convinced she was riding in the Grand National! I thought that long experience of you children had got my heart pretty well under control, but it was in my mouth most of the time to-day. That blessed chestnut took every one of those jumps at racing pace, and he cleared each with yards to spare! And Norah blatantly happy! Well, I won't say it wasn't worth seeing, but Murty and I were propping up each other's aged forms before it was over. 'An' she the mother of that great lad!' Murty kept saying."

"Frauds, both of you!" Norah laughed. "You were only sorry you weren't mounted, so that you could join in."

"Well, she kept him on his legs," said Mr. Linton, ignoring this thrust. "And there's been a distinct look of renewed youth about her ever since. I foresee a full muster of our stock-riders in future. Davie's nose is definitely out of joint."

"Is it?" Norah said lightly. She rose from the table. "I'll take care of my son's poor nose. All the same—it was rather joyful to feel Garryowen going like old days."

Wally possessed himself of her arm. He was beaming.

"The one drawback was that I was out of it," he declared. "In fact, as Jim says, I was mourning over your change of heart. We'll do it together to-morrow, my girl. No, we can't to-morrow, because we're going back to the hills. But next day. Come and play billiards. Or would you rather dance?"

"Billiards, I think. To tell you the honest truth, Wally, it's dreadful to have to admit it, but I'm just a little stiff. In fact, I creak when I move!"

"Serve you right for being sedate for so long!" said her unfeeling husband.

They trooped out, talking, happy. In the hall Bob put his hand on Jim's arm.

"Come into the smoking-room for a minute, will you, Jim?"

They turned aside from the others. Jim switched on the smoking-room light.

"Nothing wrong, old chap, is there? You sound a bit grave."

"No, but I want your advice. What would you say that was, Jim?"

Bob held out something on the palm of his hand. A little pebble,

apparently. But one corner of it caught the light, and there a dull gleam showed.

Jim took it from him without speaking. On the writing-table was a high-powered lamp; he sat down before it, turned it on, removed the shade, and studied the pebble intently. Then he opened a drawer, took out a magnifying-glass, and with it scanned every angle, turning it over and over, weighing it on his palm. Bob stood near, watching the deliberate movements. He liked to see them; they were characteristic of Jim, who never jumped hastily to conclusions.

The deep voice came at last. Jim swung round in his chair.

"Gold, all right. Where did you find it, old man?"

"In that queer place I fell into. I was waiting for Bill, sitting down and literally kicking my heels, and it caught my eye. It was in a trickle of water that runs through that cleft. I'd kicked it up."

"Any more?"

"Yes, quite a lot. That's the best-looking bit, though." He fished in his pocket, bringing out a handful of similar pebbles, and scattered them on the blotting-pad. "I've given them all a good scrubbing with my nail-brush. You can see colour in them all—but of course, I know colour and glitter aren't everything—you can be deceived by pyrites and mica and all sorts of oddments, can't you?"

Jim grunted assent, examining the stones closely with the glass.

"You see, I know so little about it," Bob said. "Only what I've heard fellows say. I went by weight more than anything: I compared them with ordinary bits of stone of the same size, and they're far heavier."

"Yes—the weight is pretty good evidence," Jim said, his eye at the glass. "Did you get everything that was there?"

"Heavens, no! I had only time to collect a few specimens. I studied the rocks a bit, though, and they are not the ordinary rocks; there are curious veins and streaks in them. That may be nothing at all, naturally; I don't know the slightest thing about rock. But they were different."

He sat down in Mr. Linton's big chair; and then stood up again.

"I—I don't want to be a fool. But—well, somehow I felt queer. As if I were on to something. I had a sudden wave of belief that I hadn't fallen into that hole for nothing." His voice was low and eager, his eyes bright. "I suppose every fossicker who comes on the colour feels like that, though. Only . . . Oh, I don't know how to put it without seeming an idiot. I suppose it's Tommy's game of 'thinking-true' that has given me rose-coloured spectacles."

"They're better than smoked glasses, anyhow, old man," said Jim. "Perhaps you'll have to change the colour again and look through golden ones. By Jove, Bob, I'll be glad if it is so!"

"I know jolly well you would. But I'm not dreaming too hard yet."

"That would be foolish." Jim's face was grave. "We can't start any castles in the air on the strength of a few pebbles. You see, old chap, there are so many chances. A place like the one you describe might quite easily be a little pot-hole—a trap where odd bits like this might be held and all finer gold washed down ages ago. Plenty of men have found a few ounces in such a place and pegged out a claim, thinking they'd struck a second Coolgardie—and found that the surface stuff was all the colour there was."

"Yes," Bob agreed. "I've been telling myself that all day." He sat down again, taking out his pipe.

"Then, they say every yard of those hills has been well prospected," Jim went on. "That's only a figure of speech, of course: nobody on earth could believe that hill-country of that type could be thoroughly combed, unless you let loose on it such a flood of men as poured into the Oxley diggings in the old days—men from all over the world, every incoming ship crammed with them. And then it would take them a good while. All the same, fossickers have been about there as long as I can remember."

"And none of them found anything worth having?"

Jim shook his head.

"Not one. Any number of them find the colour, of course: a few, like that fellow Walker, pick up enough for a scanty living by sticking to it, year in, year out. But it seems reasonable, doesn't it, that if gold were really there in any payable quantity, some of them would have hit on it?"

"Of course it does. And a good proportion of those men must have been experienced miners," Bob added. "Men who would know what ground to look for—the likely places, and all that."

"Yes. I'm quite ignorant, myself: cattle have always appealed to me more than gold-hunting. They're pretty sure; and looking for gold is the un-surest thing in this world. Still, I've listened to a lot of talk: I've yarned to old fossickers out there. They keep on, because once a man becomes a confirmed fossicker he hardly ever changes, though it's a dog's life: but the hope gets fainter and fainter. Most of them have died off now, or chucked in their hands. Walker is the only one I know who has stuck to it steadily."

"And Walker wouldn't strike anybody as a model of intelligence," Bob said, with a grim laugh.

"Well, he wouldn't. But he's a sticker, and that may be something to his credit. Bob, old chap, I don't want to seem altogether a wet blanket. You may be on to something—no one can tell. Only—for goodness' sake, old fellow, don't raise too big a crop of hope."

"I've been stoking that bit of sound sense into myself ever since I happened on that first chunk," said Bob. "I picked it up and felt its weight, and

a kind of electric thrill ran all through me—so of course I knew it was the gold-madness coming on, and I tried to be the stolid Englishman. The thrill keeps coming back, and I talk hard facts to myself.”

“If there’s a man who can pick up gold-bearing stones and not feel a thrill—well, he ought to be in a museum!” Jim laughed.

“Well, I suppose so. But I know I’ve got to be practical and expect disappointments.” He stopped abruptly, and brought his clenched fist down on the arm of his chair. “No, I’m hanged if I will! That’s dead against Tommy’s game—and I promised her I’d play it.”

“She told me that.” Jim’s voice was kind. “And it’s a game we believe in, you know, Bob.”

“I’ve been a dashed sight more cheerful since I played it, that’s all I know,” Bob said, energetically. “I’ll hang on to my dream, Jim, and believe that the Goddess Success has felt a pain at the back of her neck from looking too long the other way! She may have decided to look round.”

“And if not—will the bump be too hard?”

Bob thought, clenching his pipe in his hand. Then he smiled.

“I don’t believe it will—not with young Tommy about. She’ll always keep on smiling, whatever the Goddess does.”

“She certainly will—and you can’t let her down.” There was a ring in the deep voice. “All right, old man; we’ll all start raising a crop of hope.”

“Not all,” Bob said, quickly. “Don’t you think we had better keep it to ourselves until you’ve been out to see it? I would rather tell Tommy nothing yet.”

“Possibly that’s wiser. But I’m not much more good than you are at sizing up gold-bearing country. Dad knows more than I do, though he’s no expert. I think you had better let him into the secret, Bob.”

“Oh, yes, I meant to do that—and Wally, of course. I thought that as we had arranged to go back there to-morrow, Mr. Linton might come too. Do you think he’d mind?”

“Mind? He’ll jump at it. Dad always loves going out there. I’ll get Norah to plan some sort of excursion for Bill; he’s just as well out of it for the present. He will be quite happy if he goes out with Norah and Tommy—especially if they have a steeplechase!”

“That’s something I wanted to say,” Bob answered, quickly. “If there’s anything in this, Jim, I want Bill to have a share. He’s so mad keen on having land when he leaves school, and, as far as I can gather, there’s very little chance of his father giving him anything of a start. Even if there is not much gold, a nest-egg in the Bank now would be worth having in seven or eight years. And old Bill pulled me out.”

“Well—that wasn’t exactly heroic,” Jim said, looking at him curiously.

“Bill thought it rather a lark.”

“I know. But somehow, when that jolly little red head came in sight over those rocks I made up my mind that he was going to be in the show—if it turned out a show.”

“Well—perhaps your old Goddess gave her head another movement when you did that. It’s like you to think of the kid, anyhow. But the main thing is to set you and Tommy on your feet. You can’t afford to be generous until that’s done.” Jim broke off, laughing. “Here am I, for all my warnings, talking as if it were a certainty! Let’s get Wally—oh, that’s his step.”

Wally came in, demanding why they chose to brood in the smoking-room instead of playing billiards. He lost all interest in billiards or any other form of amusement when the situation was explained to him, and in a moment was in Jim’s chair with the magnifying-glass at his eye.

“Well,” he said, his scrutiny ended—“if any of the prospectors out there were to find as much in one place he’d certainly think he was on to something. Shake hands, Bob, old man!” He gripped Bob’s hand, beaming on him. “You deserve a stroke of luck, if ever anyone did!”

“Go easy,” warned Jim. “There’s a lot to find out before we send our hats into the air.”

“Oh, I know—and, of course, you’ve told Bob all the chances against it, if I know you, Jimmy. We’ll be sober,” said Wally, looking anything but sober; “but we’ll hope mighty hard! May I tell Norah? She’s a most powerful hoper.”

“Not until your father has seen the place, Wal, please,” said Bob. “I’m keeping it dark from Tommy until then.” They explained their plan of action, and Wally nodded approval.

“I had better keep out of Norah’s way as much as possible until then, or she’s sure to read something in my wild eye,” he said, ruefully. “I’ll talk of nothing but Davie: that’s the only subject warranted to keep her off anything else.”

“If you do, you’ll probably forget to come out yourself!” warned Bob.

CHAPTER X

THE SEARCH

ANY difficulty about getting down into that place of yours, Bob?" asked David Linton. "I'm not quite as handy a climber as I used to be."

"I don't think you'll find it hard, sir. It's no great depth. If we took out a coil of light rope we could easily knot a few green sticks into it for a ladder."

"I should like to take a pick, only we can hardly ride out with one without having questions asked," Mr. Linton said.

"Hardly," Jim agreed. "But I can take a valise on my saddle, Dad—we can say it's the handiest way of carrying lunch. Then I can slip in a short crow-bar and a hammer and cold-chisel. That should be enough to give us some idea of the place."

They were in the smoking-room. Wally had carried Norah off early, declaring that he was sleepy. Bill and Tommy were safely in bed, and Brownie had been warned that an early start was intended.

"Do you think I'm a fool to hope, sir?" Bob asked.

"To hope—no, certainly not, as long as you don't make sure." Mr. Linton turned over the pebbles he had been studying. "These are enough to hope on. You see, the thing is so completely a matter of chance. If there is an underground stream coming out from that rock there may well be something. It's less likely if the water is just a spring."

"You mean that the stream brings the gold down?"

"Very likely. It's this way: what gold there is in that country is found in the hills. There is no gold-bearing soil on the plains beyond, where Bread's Creek township lies, any more than there is in the Billabong plains below."

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite. In the old days, when everyone thought and dreamed and breathed gold, all this part was very thoroughly prospected. No one ever found so much as the colour. But always there have been traces in the hills, and the old hands of the district believe yet that it is there, in spite of the fossickers' bad luck. Gold is a queer thing: you never know where it will lie. There have been innumerable instances of a man making a fortune on the diggings, with a claim like a jeweller's shop, while the claims adjoining his on all sides never got a trace."

"But there is some soil that's hopeless, and some that will always have a chance, surely, sir?"

"Oh, of course. Experienced men know pretty well where to look. But even the most experienced can be thrown out of their calculations by a twist in a

reef, caused by some underground means; generally underground water. That's where the lottery of the thing comes in. Or a creek may wash gold, in a strong flood, down-country, so that it is found in an otherwise hopeless area. And beyond that, there are chances. The miner makes his reckoning by what he sees. He can't guess what old Mother Nature has accomplished in some internal spasm, hundreds—perhaps thousands—of years ago."

Bob nodded. "It seems rather like trying to back the winner of the Cup."

"The Cup? That's only about thirty to one against you. Nature has much longer odds, when you hunt for gold. She knows well enough how to hide it. You may have struck quartz that carries it, but the cost of working might eat up all the profits. Many a promising mine has been abandoned for that. Or you may sink shafts and hew out stone for years, and miss the gold-bearing seam that may be almost within a stroke of the pick. That's heart-breaking work. To slave underground in perpetual night, crouching in a drive too low for a man to stand upright—picking, picking. And then to miss it."

"But they don't all miss it," said Bob, stubbornly.

"Not all. I knew one man who had faith in his mine. It was near the site of a famous one that had been worked out and abandoned. This fellow had been a boy in the district: he knew the hills as few did, and he always vowed he would find the gold seam that had petered out in the old mine. He got a few people who believed in him and his dreams to put money into it, and he worked at it for years: sank a shaft, and ran drives from it into the hill. Now and then he was able to get help, but for the most part he worked alone. I used to see him swinging off into the bush in the morning with his quart-pot and his dinner tied up in a red handkerchief, just at sunrise; and come back at dark with his shoulders bent with crouching—but always whistling. He was a man!"

"You'd need a stout heart for that," said Bob.

"It was his stout heart that kept him going—and his dreams. You see, he loved the place. He couldn't breathe away from his hills, and he never lost his faith in them. It's strange, the effect hills have on people who love them. He used to say St. Michael was his patron Saint, because he was the Saint of high places. And he stuck to it that St. Michael would look after him. He infected other people with his faith and his courage—he got an unusual amount of backing, or he couldn't have carried on. Year in, year out, growing an old man, but always believing in his luck—or his Saint. Same thing, I fancy."

He paused to light his pipe.

"He was extraordinarily happy all the time. I think his daily tramps through the bush helped him. He knew every tree and every bird—he could see a bird farther off than any man I ever knew, and he understood all their habits. Poverty and failure didn't seem to touch him. You see, it wasn't really gold he was looking for: he was always seeking his dream, and believing in it. If you'd

offered him a thousand a year to stop, he'd have laughed at you. Gold would not have paid him for giving up his dream. And he wasn't a hungry seeker—he'd always take time off if anyone needed a helping hand; and he loved children in the way he loved birds and animals. I think St. Michael must have had a very friendly eye on his old hillman."

"But he never found the gold?"

"Didn't he, though! He found it, all right. One fine day he was working in a new drive and on the very last stroke of his shift his pick went into the seam. He came up with his quart-pot full of specimens that created a bit of a sensation when he sent them down to be assayed. That mine is going still, and likely to go. Old Harrison made a pile that would have let him wallow in luxury for the rest of his days."

"And he went on working in his mine, I suppose," said Jim, laughing.

"Well no, not exactly. It lost all its charm for him when it became a big, commercialized affair, with all the latest machinery and regular gangs of men working shifts by the clock. And the bush spoiled with great dump-heaps. He built a fine house and established his family in it; bought them cars and all the rest of it. And then he just went after another dream.

"What—not another mine?"

"Yes. He had always said his hills were full of gold, so he meant to prove it. He had lots of theories as to where the gold seams should run; and he chose another hill and went to work in the old way. I don't think he's struck the new reef yet, but I'll swear he's perfectly happy with his hills and St. Michael and his dream."

Bob drew a long breath.

"I could understand it if one were working on the surface," he said. "But not underground, in a beastly passage, airless and dripping, with one dim lamp."

"I don't think Harrison ever noticed that part of it. And it makes one realize the power of the dream that held him, when you remember how he loved the surface; all that the open air meant to him, and the trees and the birds. Perhaps he cared for his hills so much that he loved them within, as well as without."

"Well, he was close enough to Nature inside a drive," Jim said, smiling.

Mr. Linton pondered this.

"It might have had something to do with it," he admitted. "I've known other men who said the hills talked to them; and if a man thinks that, he might well believe it inside a hill. If you put down your pick and just listened—I wonder! Well, I've lived all my life on the surface, and my dreams have been realities; but there's no doubt that men who live alone in the wild places get queer fancies. I'm not prepared to say how much is fancy. One thing is fact—old Harrison was practical enough to find his reef!"

He tapped out his pipe, and rose, putting it carefully into the pipe-rack Jim had made for him as a small boy. From his great height he looked down kindly on the young Englishman.

"Well, Bob, my boy, I hope St. Michael has his eye on you as well as on old Harrison. That old Saint was a bonny fighter, according to the old stories, and you've done a bit of fighting, yourself, in high places!"

Bob reddened and looked foolish, as he always did at the remotest allusion to his exploits as a very young airman in the Great War. Tommy treasured sundry medals which had been entrusted to her with a stern injunction that they were never to see the light of day.

"And you haven't ceased fighting since you came and settled on a creek," Mr. Linton went on. "You've earned some luck: I'd give something to see you get it." He said good night abruptly, and left the room.

"Your father is a brick," said Bob, thoughtfully.

"Dad is—well, Dad," returned Jim. "That's all one can say about him. I vote we turn in, old chap."

They got away next morning before the household was astir, save for Brownie and the men. Murty, hearing Jim in the tool-room, went in to see if he needed anything; and finding him rolling up in bits of sacking tools not usually associated with riding after stock, said nothing, except a mild, "I'm after a spoke-shave, Mr. Jim." He withdrew, his keen old eyes having noted the leather valise ready to receive the tools: Jim, knowing that Murty had little use for a spoke-shave at any time, and none whatever at that hour of the morning, grinned to himself. He was well aware that if he chose to take a lawn-mower out to the ranges Murty would say nothing unless consulted—though in the event of the lawn-mower, he might have silently provided a pack-horse.

They were mounted on fresh horses for the trip, and were soon out of sight of the homestead. David Linton set the pace, well understanding Bob's eagerness, and, indeed, scarcely less eager himself. Whatever prudence and common sense might preach as to the improbability of finding fortune, the lure of gold—gold that is Nature's gift—so deep in every Australian heart, drew them on.

"Norah suspects something," said Wally. "Not that she said anything, only I feel it in my bones. Not my fault, either, Jim: it was your elaborately unconcerned explanations as to our going out again and Dad's coming too. If you had made the announcement in your usual voice—you know, the 'take-it-or-leave-it' one—she wouldn't have given the matter a second thought."

"It's always the way," said Jim, resignedly. "I do my best, and get sat on. Never yet did I try to hoodwink Norah with any success. She always knows there's something in the wind."

"We'll tell her and Tommy whatever there is to tell, to-night," Bob said. "If

it's a wash-out—well, they will not have wasted any hopes.”

“I believe there is enough in that lot you brought home last night to buy Tommy another sheep—and that's what Tommy likes!” laughed Jim. “So she will get something out of it, at any rate.”

“At present prices, perhaps—but even then, not a good sheep, I'm afraid,” said Bob. “What a come-down!—to have dreams of a gold-mine, and then to slump to mutton!”

“Tommy would certainly say that wasn't ‘thinking-true,’ wouldn't she?” Jim responded. “You'd better imitate old Harrison, Bob, and start your dreams again.”

The dreams were busy in Bob's brain as they went. On the plains, hard riding was a relief to his feelings, but it was not easy to control his impatience during the long slow journey across the hills. They went by every short cut known to Jim and Wally, yet the time seemed endless as, in single file, with Jim in the lead, they climbed ridges, slithered down the sides of gullies, and edged along narrow ledges on the steep hill-sides, where a false step might mean disaster. They reached Bob's land at last, and rode past Topsy, who whinnied delighted greetings to her paddock-mates and stared after them in a bewildered way when they went on without stopping. Then they were at the journey's end, and unsaddling the horses and tying them up.

“You lead on, Bob.” Jim shouldered the valise.

To climb down into Bob's prison of yesterday was a simple matter, even for Mr. Linton. Wally was the last to descend, and, becoming too impatient to wait for the ladder, he went down by the quicker method of hanging by his hands and chancing a long drop. Even for one of Wally's inches it was more of a drop than was prudent: he landed on his feet, but over-balanced, and, staggering half across the space, fell violently. He sat up, laughing.

“Sorry—I miscalculated it. No, I'm all right of course.” Suddenly his glance fell on something by his foot. His mouth opened as he stared at it.

“My hat! Bob, look what I've kicked up.”

With a lithe movement he was on his feet, grasping his find. They crowded about him to stare at it—a nugget of dull gold, half-encrusted with clay, yet unmistakable. It was irregular in shape, roughly resembling a half-walnut.

“Well, that's the real thing, and no mistake!” uttered Jim. “Bob, old boy, I believe your Goddess has got over her stiff neck!”

Bob took the nugget with a hand that shook a little. Nor was his voice quite under control as he spoke.

“T-too soon to be sure,” he said. “You know what you said last night about odd bits.”

“Yes, it's too soon to talk,” agreed Mr. Linton. “But I think the price of shares in your mine is going up, Bob!”

"Well, it's yours, Wal." Bob dropped the nugget into Wally's hand.

"Mine? You howling old ass! Take it back!" thundered Wally, indignantly.

"Rubbish!—you found it."

"Finding isn't keeping, on another man's claim. You don't know anything about the morals of gold-fields, young Bob." He pinned both of Bob's arms with one of his own, and placed the nugget firmly in his pocket. "Suppose you stop talking rot, and get to work!"

Bob was too eager to argue. They were all on their knees in an instant, searching every inch of the surface. It was evident that the soil was rich in gold-bearing specimens; they found not a few that were better than Bob's discoveries of the previous afternoon, and three small nuggets, though Wally's find remained the champion of the day. When they were convinced that nothing more was visible, they sat down and took stock of their collection. Bob was flushed, but silent.

"That's the best haul any fossicker has ever got out of these hills, I'll bet!" affirmed Wally, gazing fondly at the specimens, which he had placed in the crown of his hat.

"Much better than anything I had expected," admitted Mr. Linton. "There may well have been a stream running here once. I don't think this little trickle has anything to do with it: it's just a tiny surface-spring. At all events, it's well worth pegging out a claim and working it. We'll have to do the thing legally and take out miner's rights."

"What happens if one doesn't?"

"Why anyone who has one can jump your claim. You've no legal standing without a miner's right. I'm not well up in the business, but Murty will know—he's been a digger."

"Then any fossicker happening along here could peg out this place for himself?" Bob asked.

"Yes, and legally you couldn't lift a finger to stop him, so long as he had his miner's right—and that's a scrap of paper which no sane fossicker is without."

"I don't know much about the legal side of it," remarked Jim. "But if a stray prospector should stroll along and attempt to collar this claim I should gently but firmly tie him up while Bob made tracks to a township for a right!"

"Hear, hear!" said Wally, solemnly.

"You're not likely to get strollers here," Mr. Linton said, laughing. "If it happened—well, I think I should join in the fray! No, we'll peg out the place, and see to the business side to-morrow." He rose and examined the rocks carefully.

"That slab at the south end must have fallen in a mighty long time ago. We'll have to blast it away: and there's all the gully below to explore. That can

wait, however.” He was peering into the rock, moving as he talked.

“Have a look at the big rock at the north end, sir,” suggested Bob.

They were silent as he studied it, now and then pausing to scrape away lichen with his knife. Presently he took out a pocket magnifying-glass, bringing it to bear upon an irregular seam in the rock. The knife came into action again; he picked at the seam, detaching a few minute fragments.

“Gold, I think,” he said, finally. “Look at it with the glass, Bob.”

Bob tried, and found he could not keep the glass steady.

“I’m no good,” he said, huskily. “You try, Jim.” He leaned against the rock, watching Jim’s face.

“No doubt about it,” was Jim’s verdict. “Of course, it may not be enough to be payable. We’ve got to be cautious still, old chap.”

“Jim,” said his father—“get the crowbar and see if you can find any space under this boulder. It looks as if it grew from the centre of the earth, but you never can tell. I want to find out where the water comes from.”

Jim took off his coat and set to work with the crowbar. He endeavoured to thrust it under the rock, but there seemed no opening: then he fell to digging steadily, while Bob and Wally scooped up the soil with their hands and flung it out of his way. Mr. Linton possessed himself of the hammer and cold-chisel and began to chip specimens out of the rock walls. He made some headway into the seam on the north face, where the stone was softer, and succeeded in chipping out a fair-sized fragment. Peering closely at the place from which it had fallen, he gave a low whistle.

“Look at this, boys.”

They were on their feet in a flash. A yellow gleam ran across the cut surface.

“No mistake about *that*,” Jim said, in a low voice. “If only there’s enough of it!”

“Does this mean,” asked Bob, half-incredulously, “that there are *two* chances of gold? I mean, the gold you get by digging, and the gold you get by crushing rock? I don’t know what they’re called—but you know what I’m trying to say.”

“Well, the source is all the same,” Mr. Linton told him. “Nature locked up the gold in the rock, and from time to time she has worn down some of the rock, or crushed it, and freed some of the gold. If there is rock where gold is found loose, the odds are that it is gold-bearing stone. I don’t know how much surface rock there is—but it’s down below, that’s certain. And we’ve found free gold, haven’t we?” He laughed, and clapped Bob on the shoulder. “I believe your luck is in, old chap!”

Bob pushed his hat back—and found that his forehead was wet. He looked feebly from one face to another.

"You sit down, my lad!" said Wally, decidedly. "I can keep Jim going while Dad geologizes."

Bob obeyed meekly and watched the hole growing at the base of the boulder. The trickle was only on the surface; there seemed no underground water. But it made digging difficult, filling up the hole; and presently Mr. Linton checked them.

"I don't know that there's any use in your going on with that now, boys," he observed. "The water is a nuisance, and you can't do much with a crowbar—I rather think blasting will be the only way. What I want to do next is to climb out of this and scout round to the north. We may find out whether there is a little creek up above."

"All right," Jim agreed. "Half a minute, though—there's something loose down here." He worked with the bar for a few minutes: then, putting it down, he plunged his hand into the hole and drew it out, dripping, grasping a lump of quartz.

"Whew-w!" he whistled. "How's that, Bob? Catch!" He tossed it over.

Bob caught it and held it up. The sunlight fell on the veined surface, streaked and marbled with yellow. In one corner gold cropped out, looking as though it had once been melted, hardening into a strange tortured shape. Bob turned it over and over. The quartz was clean and sparkling from the water; but brighter than any mineral it held was the dull gleam of the gold. It seemed to shout hope at them.

As they stared at it, a pebble rattled down the rock where the rope hung. They glanced up sharply.

A dark face, crowned by a battered felt hat, looked down, hungry eyes fixed on the stone in Bob's hand. Then it disappeared. The rope-ladder, cast off by an unseen hand, slid down in a heap at their feet.

CHAPTER XI

MAN-HUNTING

JIM moved like a flash. He sprang forward to the rock. "Up on my shoulders, Wal!" he cried. "You're lightest. You can get out, can't you?"

Wally made no answer—he was saving his breath. Bob stooped to give him a back, Mr. Linton at hand to help. A spring, a struggle, and he was standing on Jim's shoulders: another, and he was clambering over the edge of the wall. He turned as he gained his footing.

"Up with the rope!"

Once it whistled through the air from Jim's hand, and fell back. The second time Wally caught it. He made it fast, and without waiting, plunged through the bushes.

For a moment he was at fault. There was no sign of the intruder. He checked, and stood listening. A sound caught his ear, and he swung round, shouting to Jim.

"He's after the horses!"

The man had made good use of his start. As Wally raced out of the scrub, with Jim and Bob at his heels, he saw three of the horses, their bridles flung off, moving away. Behind them, riding bare-backed on Bob's mare, the stranger urged them on. They trotted down the gully.

"The sweep!" Jim said, between his teeth. "I know that chap—he's one of the three I saw last week." He caught up a bridle. "Get the others—we may head him off. He'll have to make for the gate."

They dashed across the gully and up the farther side. The man saw them and gave up the attempt to drive the horses further, relying on the start he had given them. Striking his heels into the mare's side, he urged her into a gallop while the level ground lasted, and then forced her at a dangerous pace up the rise. Jim checked for an instant, tossing his bridle to Bob.

"I'll try to beat him to the gate. You fellows get the saddles on and come after me."

He pounded up the hill, and raced down the other side, trying to gain time across country by choosing places where a horse could not go. It was an almost hopeless chase, he knew; but there was a chance. Through the clinging bushes he forced his way by sheer strength, leaving fragments of his shirt on the prickly scrub. A branch swept his hat off; he ran on with a red scar across his forehead, beaded with little drops of blood. Up and down, straining every muscle. He came out of the trees fifty yards from the gate. The fugitive was

beside it, wrestling with the stiff fastening, and Jim threw every ounce into a last spurt.

Not quite in time. The gate yielded. It swung open when he was within ten yards, and the man dashed through. Then the scrub swallowed him up.

Jim leaned against the gate-post, panting.

"I'd have had him if we'd put the padlock on again," he thought. "Well, my lad, you're not clear away yet. I hope to goodness the horses won't make any trouble about being caught."

Before he hoped to see his companions, they became visible, riding at a good pace. Jim ran to meet them, leaving the gate wide.

"Better let me ride, Bob: I know where their camp is—over in the north-west corner. He's bound to make for his mates, but we may get between them. I'll try to head him—you chaps follow up." Then he was in the saddle, and they swept through the gateway like a whirlwind.

Struan was fresh and eager, and no horse on Billabong was surer-footed. Beyond the gate Jim went off at an angle, away from the track the stranger had taken. They saw him plunge up a rise and out of view: heard the clattering of hooves down the hidden slope. Wally pulled up, shouting to Bob, who was running after them.

"You ride, Bob. I can run faster, and I may be more use that way. If Jim can't head him, none of us can. He will have to dodge back if Jim does get ahead—be ready, in case he does. We'd better scatter." He was shortening his stirrups for Bob as he spoke, and flinging off his coat. "Keep up your pecker, old man; Jim won't be beaten in a hurry." He went off at top speed, and Bob followed Mr. Linton.

Jim's mind was working busily as he pushed his horse across the hills, trying to fix in his brain every possibility of a short cut and the route the prospector must take.

"He knows his only chance is to get to his mates—that he wouldn't have the ghost of a show if he tried to tackle us alone. Three of them together could stand up to us, and we couldn't stop them from pegging out claims—they're sure to have miner's rights. Even if we pegged first, they'd probably pull out our pegs on the chance that we hadn't got our rights yet. So he'll make the shortest tracks he can, back to his camp. The question is, what tracks does he know?"

He eased Struan up a precipitous slope, thinking hard.

"A man who's always dodging about on foot may not know much about where he can take a horse. I believe our friend would have been wiser not to ride after all—he may find it was a mistake. If he does, he'll leave Bronzewing and take to his heels."

This was a disquieting thought. He turned it over and over.

"I'll have to take my chance of that. The only thing I can do is go as straight as I can and hope to head him near the long gully where we often camp for lunch. He'll have to pass that way—he can certainly ride, but he won't take a bare-backed horse in the roughest places, I fancy. And he probably thinks he has a better start than he really has got. They were wonderfully quick with the horses. Well, it's up to you, now, Struan, old boy."

Struan seemed to understand, if his rider might judge by the way he tackled his work. He flung himself at the hills as though they had been level going, thrusting steadily through scrub where Jim lay flat to avoid the boughs: gathering his legs under him and sliding down the stony slopes, breaking into a gallop whenever there was the slightest chance. Up and down they went. Jim's shirt was in tatters now, and his breeches torn in a dozen places. The tough bushes tried to hold them back as they burst through them. Now and then they splashed through hurrying, rocky streams: many times the big grey gathered himself up for a leap over a cleft—leaps that would have seemed madness, taken in cold blood. He was panting, his neck black with sweat—but he held on gallantly.

On the crest of a ridge a sound came to Jim's straining ears. He looked down. Far below him, and in his rear, he caught a glimpse of Bronzewing, cantering fast on level ground, her rider glancing back anxiously. Jim knew the place: it ran round the foot of the spur that ended the ridge, turning into the long gully which led to the miners' camp. He whistled under his breath.

"Only one chance for it now. Come on, Struan!"

He pressed forward across the ridge. Below him the hill went down sharply, precipitous, rocky, strewn with clumps of scrub: a place that a cautious man would take on foot, leading his horse. Jim took it at a gallop. He held Struan firmly, leaning back; they dashed downwards in a helter-skelter of flying stones and crashing saplings, shaving trees and boulders by a miracle. On and on; leaping and scrambling, missing disaster by inches at every stride, yet still galloping. The hill ended in a sheer drop: Struan checked for a second, gathered himself, and took it in a bound, landing in the gully just as Bronzewing's head came round the corner of the spur a hundred yards behind.

Jim whirled the grey as he landed, and charged. The other rider pulled up short, uttering a savage oath. A moment he hesitated, as if to brave it out. But the sight of the huge man on the charging grey horse was too much for him: he wheeled, shouting at Bronzewing and kicking her furiously. They flashed out of sight round the spur.

"One up to me, Struan," said Jim, cheerfully. "You're a great lad!"

He leaned forward, easing him to a canter, patting his neck. They rounded the spur. The fugitive was galloping back along the gully.

"I'd give something to be able to spell you for a bit, old chap," Jim told

Struan. "But we can't let this gentleman too far out of our sight. I hope he'll meet Dad and Wally soon." He cantered on.

Before the gully ended another ran off from it at right-angles. Jim hesitated, wondering which way his quarry had gone. The breaking of a stick to the right gave him his answer: he swung off, not along the hollow, but keeping on the side of the ridge above it, knowing that, whatever happened, he must remain between the prospector and his reinforcements. Twice the man tried to strike upwards; only to dodge back into the scrub each time at a safe distance from his pursuer.

Jim was becoming anxious.

"If he slips back behind me I'll never be able to head him again," he muttered. "By Jove!—there he goes!"

He caught a glimpse of Bronzewing as her rider turned her suddenly and rushed her back along the gully. Jim was round as quickly, making the best pace he could on the steep hill-side, riding desperately. He came out into a patch that was clear of trees: the brown horse was ahead, and he knew he had no chance of gaining the lead. His heart sank—and then bounded as he saw Bronzewing whirl again and dash back.

David Linton had ridden into the gully; his son shouted to him joyfully.

"Dad! Block the track round the spur, whatever you do! I'll take care of him here. Where are the others?"

"Bob is a little behind me. Wally is somewhere—on foot," called Mr. Linton from below.

"I'll edge him over towards them. You guard that spur, Dad." He heard the answering call as he turned to follow his man.

It was no easy hunt. Before long it became evident that the fugitive had given up the attempt to get back to his friends, and was simply trying to shake Jim off. He led him a wild chase, in and out of the hills and spurs, doubling back whenever possible, and always keeping under cover of the scrub. Twice Jim almost caught him in a thick patch of bushes: once he came so close to Bob that Jim held his breath as he urged Struan forward, knowing that Bob, single-handed, was no match for a powerful and desperate man. Bob had not hesitated; he had thrust his horse forward, shouting. But, although the prospector might have tackled the slight young Englishman, Jim was too near: he had swung round, and the scrub had hidden him again.

They lost sight of him after that for a long time. It was anxious work, always with the knowledge that he might find a way to double back unseen. They rode carefully, peering into every thicket, following up each chance sound. The horses were tiring, although they kept on gamely.

Had they known it, the miner had changed his plans altogether. He had decided that his chance lay in returning to the place where he had seen his

pursuers with the gold: there he could peg out a claim, trusting that the law would uphold him, even if he were caught after the pegs were in position. He went ahead swiftly, keeping to the higher ridges until he judged that it was safe to turn southward again.

The coast seemed clear as he came out on a long spur. He looked keenly in every direction, seeing no one. Quickly he crossed the spur, worked his horse down to a ledge running along the farther side, and gradually winding to a creek below, and made his way along it.

He had not been on the ridge for more than a minute. But that minute had been enough for one pair of eyes. Bob, on another hill, had seen him: and had groaned, knowing that between him and the ridge lay ground that his horse could not possibly cross. It was a mass of boulders, with rocky banks shutting in a swift stream that raced downwards, shut in its narrow channel. Bob turned to seek a longer path.

There was a sound of running feet, and Wally burst out of the scrub. He was as ragged and scarred as Jim, and his face was crimson; but the joy of battle was in his eyes.

“Seen him?” he panted. “I’ve headed him half a dozen times, but he’s always got away.”

“He’s just gone over that ridge,” Bob cried. “Wally, do you think he’s making back for the gold?”

“We’ll see!” said Wally, briefly.

He went down the hill with enormous running strides. More than once he fell, as a stone gave under his foot, but he was always up almost before he had touched the ground. Bob watched him for a moment, his heart in his mouth, before he turned to make his way down the hill.

On the more level ground Wally ran like a hare, taking rocks in his stride. The creek pulled him up, but only for an instant; he judged the distance, ran back a few yards, and raced for it, clearing it with a leap like a stag’s. Then he went swiftly up the hill, not sparing himself. If Bob’s idea were correct, it was their last chance.

He slackened as he reached the crest, going forward carefully and peeping through the bushes. Bronzewing was coming in his direction, on the ledge below. If he could get down in time, he could block her, and there was no room to turn her. Then it would be a question as to which was the better man.

He plunged downward with a shout. The mare propped short, snorting, and tried to turn, while her rider urged her on, with a volley of evil language. The ledge gave way beneath them. Man and horse rolled down the hill-side in a smother of loose earth and stones, and lay still.

Wally was down almost as quickly. Bronzewing had struggled to her feet, and was standing with drooping head, panting heavily. Her rider lay still, his

face upturned to the sky. Blood was oozing from a wound on his temple: one arm was twisted under him.

"Good Lord, I hope the poor beggar isn't killed!" uttered Wally. The fierce excitement that had held him so long died away in anxiety. He bent over the unconscious man; then, straightening up, sent out a succession of long coo-ees.

Bob was the first to appear.

"Bring the others!" Wally shouted to him, as soon as he was within calling distance. He went off quickly, and Wally busied himself in doing what he could for the enemy who had become a patient. It amounted to little, since his means of help were limited. He ran to the nearest water and soaked his handkerchief to put a pad on the wound on his head: and he drew out and straightened very gently an arm that was obviously broken. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

Jim appeared presently, his exultation considerably checked at the condition of the foe. Together, they made a more detailed examination.

"I don't think there are any other bones broken, though one can never be certain about ribs," said Jim. "His knee doesn't look quite right, either—but he might have got a worse knee than that at football. It's his head I don't like. Well, the poor beggar asked for trouble, and there's no doubt he's got it." He fell to looking for sticks that would make splints.

"Not a decent bit anywhere," he grumbled. "Well, these will have to do. It will take all the handkerchiefs and all the bootlaces we have amongst us to make anything of a job of him." He looked pityingly at the quiet form. "My friend, you chose a very bad spot to get damaged."

"He certainly did," agreed Wally, who was sitting on a rock, wishing he had his pipe. "We're going to have a bit of a job to move him, Jim."

"We are. Here come Dad and Bob. Dad will have ideas."

They talked over the problem after they had set the broken arm—glad that the patient was unconscious during the process.

"I see nothing to be gained by telling his mates to-day," said Mr. Linton. "They can't look after him—we must get him to Billabong, and then to the Cunjee hospital, I suppose. We can make a stretcher with a couple of poles threaded through coats. But he will have to be tied on it; no getting him down hills otherwise."

"That means the rope," said Wally. "And it's up at Bob's gold-mine."

"Yes." Mr. Linton pondered. "Will you take my horse, Bob—he's the freshest—and ride up for it? You'll have to find the boys' coats, too. Don't be any longer than you can help."

"Right," said Bob: and went.

"As soon as Bob comes back we'll send him home for help," Mr. Linton said. "Two men to meet us and help with the carrying; and Murty to bring the

light cart with a mattress as far as he can. We three can get him a good way on the road home.”

“Jim and I can do all that, Dad,” said Wally.

“You’ll be glad of a spell now and then. Bob will want to stay, but it would be no use: he is too short to be able to carry with either of you. Well, I’m very glad we caught our man, but I would have been more glad if we had done it without hurting him. How did it happen, Wally?”

Wally told him.

“I’ve looked over Bronzewing,” he finished, “and I think she has got off lightly. A bit sore and shaken, but she’s feeding quietly.”

“Oh, she is the least part of it,” Mr. Linton said. He got up to brush away a fly that was hovering near the miner’s face. “You crossed that gully? How did you manage the creek?”

“Jumped it, I believe,” said Wally; “there wasn’t time to do anything else.”

Jim whistled softly.

“It ought to be christened ‘Meadows’ Leap,’ ” he said. “I wouldn’t have admitted that it was jumpable. Jove, you were handy on foot, Wal!—every now and then, when I thought he’d got away from me, I’d get a glimpse of you heading him. I’ve sent blessings in your direction a good many times this day!”

“Oh, it’s easy to cut across on foot where a horse can’t go,” said Wally, lightly. “Anyhow, you headed him, or there would have been nothing for any of us to do—except go back and sit tight on Bob’s mine.” He gave a grim laugh. “In which case, I suppose it would have meant a pitched battle between the two camps.”

“Better fun than—this.” Jim nodded towards their captive. “I was pretty savage while it was on, but now that it has ended like this I don’t think I much care for man-hunts.”

“Well, he asked for it,” said Wally, practically. “And the battle might have ended with much more damage: I don’t think we’d have stopped with only one man out of action.”

“I’m hanged if I’m going to waste any regrets over him—if the damage is not too great,” Mr. Linton said, energetically. “We’ll look after him. I’ll keep him at Billabong if I can: Dr. Anderson can come out. We don’t want him talking in the hospital when he comes round.”

“Good idea!” said Jim. “He can chat to Brownie. I expect he’s only got a bit of a concussion.”

Cheered by this view, they went in search of suitable sticks for a stretcher, and had them ready by the time Bob returned. He was despatched to bring help, bewailing his lack of inches, and they made a stretcher, turning coats inside out with the poles run through the sleeves. The patient was lifted and

carefully laid upon it, with a folded coat for a pillow, and roped securely. Then began the slow journey home.

It was cruel carrying on the steep, rough hills. Strong as were Jim and Wally, they could manage only a short distance without a rest. On the upward slopes two bearers were necessary in the rear; Mr. Linton and Wally each taking a pole, while Jim struggled on ahead, using all his giant strength. Often it was not possible to advance in a straight line: wide détours had to be made to avoid the worst places. There was no talking, for all their breath was needed: the only sound was the hard, panting breathing as they fought each yard. By the time the foothills were reached they were all near exhaustion.

"Steady on!" gasped Wally. "I'll have to take a spell."

"I'm about all in," said Jim, flinging himself on the ground. "Dad, are you very done-up?"

"I haven't had your share—but I'm not sure that I can do much more," said Mr. Linton, sitting down on a stone and mopping his brow.

"Give me five minutes, and I'll be able to go on," Wally said. He lay flat on his back, flexing his stiffened arms, and Jim followed his example.

"Well, thank goodness the poor wretch is unconscious," Mr. Linton said. "I hope we haven't hurt him any more: he's had some pretty hard bumps." He raised his head sharply. "Listen!"

"Coo-ee!" The welcome sound came faintly.

"That's the men!" They sent out a united shout: and presently four riders came in sight; Murty and three of the station hands.

"Mr. Bob is dhrivin' the cart out, sir," Murty explained. "We thought you'd need all the carriers we cud muster. An' Miss Norah's after sendin' this."

"This" was a flask, and the three weary bearers greeted it with enthusiasm. Mick Shanahan and Dave Boone wasted no words. They picked up the stretcher after a curious glance at the still face upon it, and went off slowly.

"Ye've been havin' a little adventure, Mr. Jim?" observed Murty, gently. Jim was mounted on his horse, while Murty walked beside him.

"Well—a trifle, Murty," Jim grinned.

"'Tis a way ye have. 'Twas in me mind I'd be hearin' of some new little thing when I seen ye packin' up that shmall crowbar this morning." The voice grew even more gentle. "An' was it with that, now, that ye landed him, Masther Jim!"

CHAPTER XII

THE STAKING OF THE CLAIM

THE Cunjee doctor, summoned by telephone, pronounced the patient's condition one of concussion, complicated by minor injuries, but not likely to be serious. He re-set the broken arm, remarking that first-aid had been rendered in not too discreditable a fashion, under the circumstances; and was plainly relieved at Mr. Linton's offer to keep the man at Billabong.

"I'll come out to-morrow to see if he needs a nurse," he remarked. "Not that I think it is likely; your old Mrs. Brown and her helpers can do all that is necessary for him. We're terribly short-handed at the Hospital, as usual. Don't be worried if he remains unconscious for a day or so: Nature's cure, that's all; Nature's cure. No, I'm sorry I can't stay: got to see another patient. I suppose the boy can sit a buck-jumper by now, Norah? No?—and he's going on for two years! Disgraceful!" And the little doctor, who had known Billabong before Norah was born, jumped into his car and shot down the track.

"Then that is all settled," said Norah, comfortably. "And now, suppose you come and tell us all about it."

"Didn't Bob tell you?" asked Mr. Linton, with an air of mild surprise. "Oh, the poor fellow just managed to fall off his horse on a hard spot, that's all."

"How lucky that you happened to be there, was it not?" murmured Tommy.

"Very," said Jim, gravely. "I don't know when I've been more glad of anything."

Norah and Tommy looked at each other and began to laugh.

"Well, of all the unfeeling——!" began Wally, looking from one to the other.

"We are really very sorry for your poor man," said Norah. "We don't know what he has to do with it all, but——"

"With what all?" demanded Wally.

"That is what you are going to tell us," responded his wife, sweetly. She led the way into the smoking-room. A bright fire was burning in the big open grate: there were arm-chairs in readiness, into which the tired men subsided with sighs of thankfulness. Norah perched on the arm of Wally's chair and Tommy produced the tobacco-jar. They filled their pipes in silence. Mr. Linton sent out a fragrant cloud of smoke, and hazarded a remark.

"It's been quite a warm day, hasn't it?"

Wally wriggled under Norah's gaze.

"If you'd take that eye off me, woman——!" he began.

"We have shown great patience and restraint," said Norah. "Even last night—with an air everywhere of conspiracy and secrecy——"

"Conspirators slinking off in pairs," put in Tommy.

"Do you apply the word 'slink' to me, Thomas?" demanded Mr. Linton, sternly.

Tommy, who was sitting on a footstool at his feet, laughed up at him and rubbed her head against his knee. His eyes twinkled: for a moment his hand rested on the shining fair head.

"Excited voices, hushed to sudden silence when we came in," went on Norah, unmoved. "Hasty concealments of mysterious objects. Sudden determination to return to the hills——"

"No invitations issued," mourned Tommy.

"Wonderful efforts to make conversation—especially by my husband. Anxiety shown lest I should ask questions. Fatherly devotion to sleeping child. Headlong flight in dawn. Suspicions aroused even in breast of Brownie——"

"What did *she* say?" grinned Jim.

"She said, 'They're up to something, you mark my words, dearie!' Which Tommy and I had realized already."

"So you spent the day discussing everything probable and improbable?" suggested her father.

"We did not. We agreed to think hard that it was something good, and left it at that. So we took Bill for a long ride and had a steeplechase and a very good time. But you will tell us now, won't you?" She was suddenly grave, looking at them steadily, her arm across Wally's shoulders.

"Tommy," said Bob, abruptly, "I believe your game has panned out all right. I—I've found gold!"

"Bob, dear!" Tommy went white.

"Oh—quick!" cried Norah.

"I found it yesterday. Only, of course, I couldn't be sure until I had told the others and they had seen the place. And we can't be quite sure now. But there's hope." He stopped, biting his lips. Tommy got up and went to sit on the arm of his chair, while Jim carried on the story of their day.

"And you have left it all out there!" Norah exclaimed, when he had finished. "The nuggets and everything?"

"Everything—sitting in my old hat!" grinned Wally. "You might have brought them when you went back for the rope, Bob."

"Do you know, I never thought of them?" said Bob. "I just grabbed the rope and ran. You see, I didn't know if that poor wretch was badly hurt. The only thing I could think of, all the way over, was that gold was not worth killing a man."

"Well, he's not killed—only comfortably out of the way," said Jim,

cheerfully. "And he asked for it, didn't he? He put himself altogether in the wrong when he cleared out with our horses."

"I've felt better since the doctor said he would be all right," admitted Bob. "In fact, all my charitable thoughts have gone!"

"We certainly had none while we were careering round the hills after him," said Wally. "Oh, Norah, it was a great dance he led us! I wish you had been there to take a hand. And I've ruined a pair of perfectly good boots." He stretched out his long legs, looking ruefully at scratched and torn leather. "You owe me a pair, Bob, when the mine turns out trumps."

"You'll get them—if it does," agreed Bob. "But mind, Tommy—we can't be certain yet. It's promising, but it may turn out only a little thing: we can't tell."

"My castles were all built long ago," returned Tommy, calmly. "If this is not to be their foundation—well, there will be something else!"

Jim smiled at her. "There's no discouraging Tommy!" he said. "At all events, this looks uncommonly like foundation-stones."

"And what is the next move?"

"Dad and Bob and Wally drive in early to-morrow to get miner's rights," said Jim. "Not in Cunjee: some township where we aren't so well known. We don't want to start several hundred urgent inquirers out here, armed with picks and shovels. I ride out first thing to the claim to put in pegs and get the specimens. Then I'll go round and find our friend's mates and tell them he's hurt himself and is being looked after at Billabong."

"Are we invited?" smiled Tommy.

"You are: also Bill."

"He went to bed very sadly because you were not home," said Tommy. "We had ridden most of the day, and he could not keep his eyes open any longer."

"Bill is to be in this, if there is anything to be in," said Bob. "He fished me out, you know."

"That is a beautiful idea," Tommy agreed. "But how? Bill is rather young to be a miner."

"We can peg out a claim for him and put men on to work it," Jim said. "There may be plenty of ground for claims: once the news gets about, all that part of the hills will be pegged out. Our job is to prospect it as quickly as possible and secure the ground we want."

"Murty must be let into the secret at once," observed Mr. Linton. "He has had more experience of mining than anyone on the place. He had better go out with you to-morrow. After that, Norah, we must arrange a camping-party for the hills."

Norah nodded. "I was thinking that. It won't surprise anyone, though it is a

little early in the season for it.”

“Oh, the men know we like to look round the cattle as soon as we can after the winter,” said Wally. “And nothing you and Tommy do ever surprises anybody! Ouch!” he added, as Norah pulled his ear.

“It’s rather fortunate that all the men are busy at the fencing at the opposite end of the run,” Mr. Linton observed. “They are away so early in the morning that they won’t have the chance of wondering why you are making a hobby of the ranges—and carrying tools out there. And now, I think everyone had better turn in: I have a profound longing for bed.”

“If you were a good wife, Norah, and had a Bath-chair, you would wheel your sore-footed husband home,” stated Wally, heaving himself out of his chair. “I never was meant for a mountain-goat.”

“You certainly were one to-day,” Bob said. “I’ll show you the place he jumped, when we go out, Norah. Murty would say he was a flippant lepper. Anyhow, if he hadn’t jumped it we might have been chasing our friend yet. I rather think I might offer to take you home in a wheelbarrow, Wally.”

“You might,” said Wally, eagerly accepting this proposition.

“Can’t be done,” Jim said, shaking his head. “Our wheelbarrow isn’t licensed to carry passengers. And whatever we are on Billabong, we’re law-abiding!”

“You looked it!” affirmed Bob, “—when you went off after the foe to-day. Did you give any thought to the law then, Jim?”

“Once or twice,” admitted Jim, with a short laugh. “I did wonder what counts as justifiable homicide, and how I could dispose of the remains. It’s better luck than I imagined, to have them safely stowed in bed upstairs!”

The matter of informing the miners of their companion’s disaster proved to be easily disposed of, for in crossing the first spur next day the riders came in sight of one of the men. He hailed them, and Jim rode over to him.

“Good day, boss. Haven’t seen one of our camp, have you? We’ve a man missing.”

“I think we have him at our place,” said Jim. “Tall, dark chap: I saw him with you once before. We found him yesterday, rather knocked about: he’d had a fall and hurt his head and broken one arm.”

“Whew-w!” whistled the miner, ruefully. “Is he bad?”

“Well, he’s not good, but there’s no reason for anxiety. We took him to the homestead and got the doctor out. He’ll be all right, but of course he’ll do no work for a good while.”

“By Jove! Poor old Fred!” exclaimed the other. “He went off by himself early yesterday—thought he’d try a fossick right away from the part we’re prospectin’. I don’t reckon he’d have done any good, but Fred’s a chap as gets a bit restless now an’ then. He didn’t turn up last night, so we downed tools an’

started huntin' for him—an' huntin' a man in these hills is like lookin' for a needle in a haystack. Well, it was great luck you found him, boss."

"Yes, rather luck," agreed Jim.

"My word, you must have had a job to get him home! Couldn't walk, could he?"

"No. There were several of us, and we managed it."

"Jolly good of you. What about him now? You can't keep him at your place, can you?" The man looked worried. "It's no use tryin' to bring him out here."

"Oh, you couldn't do that. We can keep him, unless the doctor thinks he should go to the hospital. If he does, we'll take him there. You needn't worry about him."

The miner hesitated.

"We can pay a bit," he said, doubtfully, putting his hand in his pocket.

"There's nothing to pay," Jim said, shortly. He gathered up his reins. "Well, I'll tell him I saw you: and when I'm out this way again I'll let you know how he goes on."

"Thanks awfully, boss. I'll go an' find Alf; he's scoutin' up that hill over yonder. He'll be relieved."

"Right. Doing any good, are you?"

"Oh, we get a little bit now an' then: enough to pay for tucker. Gettin' the tucker is the worst: I'll have to knock off work an' get over to Broad's Creek for a load this week. It's no nice trip, either, over to the north."

"No," Jim agreed. He thought for a moment. The way to Broad's Creek led through Bob's land, and he had no desire to see strangers there just now. "Look here—we have to be out here a good deal at this time of year. I could easily bring you out some food in a day or so; we'll be killing for the homestead meat this week."

"Well, that's darned good of you, boss," said the prospector, gratefully.

"No trouble. I'll leave it at your camp if I don't see you."

"You'll see us if you coo-ee; we're workin' not far from camp." They parted on excellent terms. Jim rode after the others, his mind at ease.

"I felt rather a worm," he told them; "he wouldn't have been quite so grateful if he had known all I could, have told him. However, he's safely out of our way. I thoroughly agreed with his estimate of our friend Fred."

"What was that?" asked Tommy.

"He said he was a bit restless at times. That's certainly how he struck us yesterday!" Jim ended with a deep chuckle.

They found Bob's discovery as he had left it, and all the new-comers had to climb down into it and examine the collection in Wally's hat, and peer at the rock-walls that might hold the key to so much more. Murty did not remain

long in the hole. He disappeared in the direction of the north, and was away for some time: so long that Jim grew tired of waiting, and suggested that they should prospect towards the south.

Beyond the slab that formed the south wall, a shallow gully sloped gently downwards, overgrown with scrub. They pushed their way through it, searching the ground as well as they could, but finding little. Now and then a pebble showed a faint trace of yellow, scarcely visible, even to eager eyes. Very little water showed: the trickle that ran under the slab seemed to disappear into the ground. They followed the gully for half a mile: then, deciding that nothing could be done except by clearing the scrub and digging, they turned back.

Bill mourned openly. From the moment that the news of the find had been made known to him—which had not been until they were well into the ranges—he had been in a simmer of excitement, certain in his own mind that he had only to arrive at the scene to pick up enough gold to buy a station. The sight of the nuggets had confirmed this belief, and he had dashed into the scrub full of hope. Now he returned empty-handed, convinced that finding a fortune was not so simple a matter as he had thought.

Tommy was undaunted. She pushed on, her eyes roving busily, her face as serene as though the fortune were already found.

“One does not expect too much all at once, Bill. How can one know what is lying underneath—under our feet?”

“Well, it’s all jolly fine,” gloomed Bill. “Bob and Wally just picked it up in chunks!”

“That was a special place. Bill, I know what we will do—I have brought two trowels, and after lunch we will do some digging in that place, you and I.” She smiled at him.

“Golly! I say, need we wait for lunch?” Bill cried. “I don’t want any!”

“Now I begin to see what gold-fever means,” laughed Tommy. “Never before did I hear you say you did not want lunch, Bill!”

“Don’t, either,” said Bill, stoutly. “I’d rather pick up a nugget than eat any old lunch.”

Murty was waiting, smoking peacefully as he sat on a rock.

“Any luck, Murty?”

“There’s no tellin’ until we do a deal of clearin’, Mr. Jim. The bush is very dense above beyant. But I got up to where the hill rises steep”—he pointed to a precipitous cliff-face some distance above them—“an’ there’s an ould cave there; I couldn’t get into it, for it’s all choked with boulders, an’ overgrown with bushes. I’ve been studyin’ the ground, an’ it’s below there this gully begins.”

“What’s your idea, Murty?”

"There's no wather there now. This that's in the hole must be only a spring, an' not much of a wan. We'll aisy turn it aside. But I'd not say that in the ould-ancient times there wasn't a river comin' down here, or annyway, a creek. If that's so, it rose from undherground, in the hill; an' that cave's where it came out. This big rock at the north of the hole might have stood in its bed—or it might just be a thunderin' big boulder that fell in."

"I wish to goodness," said Bill, bitterly, "you'd stop talking about rivers and rocks and say if you found a gold-mine!"

"I'm gettin' to that, Masther Bill. The man that goes lookin' for a mine generally has his eye on rivers and rocks. An' there's been some big strikes made where people were lucky enough to shtumble on a dead river."

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"'Tis a river that's afther dhryin' up. I dunno how it happens. Maybe, if there's a big hill with caves in it where that river rises, the supply gets cut off—falls of rock, or springs dhryin' up. Who'd know what's afther happening thousands and thousands of years ago?"

"Murty"—Tommy's voice was a little breathless—"do you think this is a dead river?"

The old Irishman's eyes were very kind as they rested on her face.

"Miss Tommy, I think it's likely. Only I didn't want to say much, because wan can't be certain, just with pokin' round. But it looks like it, to me. Of course, there's lashin's of dead rivers with no gould in them. Still-an-all—there's gould where this wan ran, for isn't Mr. Bob afther pickin' it up?"

He rose, and looked down into the hole.

"That place 'ud be a kind of trap. If it hadn't been for the big slab fallin' in to block it, them bits of gould 'ud have found their way down the gully, and by now they'd be covered with earth, an' bushes growin' over them. They're surface gould. But when ye sink a shaft down into the bed of an ould river there's likely to be gould all the way down; an' the most of it when ye strike bed-rock. That's by raison of the fact that gould'll always sink where there's wather to help it."

"Then you think——?" Jim stopped.

"I think this is likely to be an ould river. An' if that's right, the chances are that Mr. Bob's made a find. An' the chances are that I'm all wrong. Miss Tommy, there's no wan has anny right to build on chances, so don't be doin' it," he begged, anxiously.

"I won't, Murty—I won't. Only we can go on hoping."

"Sure, ye can. Mr. Jim, if you'll be said by me you'll get every foot of this gully pegged out, right back to the hill. Very chancy is these ould places: if there's gould in them it may be everywhere, or it may be only in a pot-hole. You'll need more than just yourselves to peg out claims; ye can let in anny of

your friends, for there's more ground here than ye can hould. An' wance anny of these fossickers find worrk goin' on here they'll peg out for themselves fast enough."

"H'm," said Jim, thoughtfully. "And there may be nothing after all."

"Thru for ye. But get all ye can pegged out, or ye'll have strangers doin' it for ye. Did ye bring a measuring-tape?"

"I did."

"Well, we cud pick out the best-lookin' places to-day——Mr. Bob's hole in wan claim, an' the ground near the cave, an' some others——wan for each of ye. An' me, too, for it'll be the same as Mr. Bob's own. 'Tis not gould I'm wantin' for meself. I can hould it for him."

"Murty!—as if he would let you!" broke in Tommy.

"Yerra, what 'ud I do with gould? I've me job an' me home, Miss Tommy. But we'll talk of that afterwards. The thing now is to get the claims marked."

"Well, they won't run away while we have lunch," said Jim, practically. "It's after two o'clock; we'll get lunch over and then start work."

They ate quickly, but none so quickly as Murty. He went off with a hatchet before they had finished, and they heard him chopping at saplings vigorously. There was a pile of stout pegs, three feet long, ready pointed when Jim joined him.

They pegged the first claim with Bob's hole as its centre, and four others near it, up and down the gully. Then they scrambled through the bush to the cave Murty had found, and marked out more ground there.

"Thim sides is none too straight," observed Murty, with a grin. "I'd like to see the man that 'ud run them straight in this scrub. We'll make that all right when we clear it."

"What is to hinder anyone coming along and pulling these pegs out?" asked Tommy.

"Nothing—if we were not about. But somehow, it's rarely done," said Jim. "Sort of unwritten law, I think. To the average Australian prospector, a peg is as good as a padlock. Isn't that so, Murty?"

"It is: but all the same, I'll be glad when we have a camp out here," replied Murty. He drove in the last peg, and straightened himself up. "That's a good job done. Now what's the next thing, Mr. Jim?"

"Oh, may we not go back to Bob's hole and dig, Jim?" cried Tommy. "I do want to be able to feel that I have been a miner!"

Jim thought, looking at her, that no one had ever been less like a miner. She was hatless: her rippling hair golden in the sunshine, her blue eyes glowing. In her well-cut coat and breeches she was thoroughly workman-like, and yet dainty from head to foot. He answered her gravely.

"You have pegged out claims, so you can certainly feel like a miner—

especially if you forget that it's quite illegal to peg without a miner's right!"

"Pouf!" said Tommy. "What do I care for miner's rights! But I want to dig. Where is Bill?"

They glanced round. Bill was not to be seen.

"He's afther slippin' back to the hole, I'll be bound," laughed Murty. "We'll find him there."

Bill had found that pegging claims was dull work when there was no job for him. He had had visions of getting into the cave, but they died when he saw that it was so filled with boulders and fallen rock as to leave no room, even for a small boy. Everyone was busy with the tape and pegs. He decided that Bob's hole offered better entertainment; and quietly slipped off through the bush.

There was adventure in climbing down alone into the hole, having first found one of Tommy's trowels. He recalled stories he had read of gold-mining, and since these were American, he equipped himself in fancy with revolvers—and hip-pockets in which to carry them. So furnished, he reached the bottom of the hole and fell to digging.

The trowel was not the best of tools for hard ground. Bill scraped away diligently, making little headway, but full of hope. It was hot: there was no shade, and the sun beat down fiercely into the little close-walled space.

"I think I'd better take my coat off," he muttered, straightening up. Then he jumped violently.

A black snake lay a few feet from him; an early arrival, tempted from a hole under the rock by the heat. It stared at him with cold, unwinking eyes: and Bill wished earnestly that he had a stick.

Snakes had not come much in Bill's way during his holidays at Billabong. He had killed one or two, under Jim's guidance, and with a long stick; but he had certainly not experienced being bottled up with one in a rock-hole. He did not hesitate, however. The trowel was his only weapon. He took careful aim and flung it, edge downward.

A trowel has ideas of its own when used as a missile. It turned slightly in its flight; and it was the rounded side of the blade that struck the snake; a blow that did no damage, but galvanized the snake into instant activity. It darted forward, and Bill dodged, diving for the trowel. Again he flung it, but this time his aim was less sure, and it fell just in front of the black nose—with the result that the snake whirled upon itself and came back at its assailant with a speed that the boy barely dodged. He managed it with a wild leap—the wicked head, flicking upwards, was very near his leg. It twisted and was at him again, savagely.

"Jump for the ladder, Bill; I've got him," said a cool voice. Jim's long form dropped into the hole: a lightning movement placed him between the combatants, and as the snake checked for an instant his foot crashed down on

its head. He stood calmly while the black, convulsed body thrashed madly about his breeches and leggings. Bill, half-way up the ladder, turned, and cried out in terror.

“It’s all right, old man: I’m standing on his business end,” said Jim, lightly. “He didn’t get you, Bill?”

“No, but jolly close,” panted Bill. He dropped back into the hole. “Sure you’ve got him safely, Jim?”

“He’ll never smile again,” Jim answered, grinding the head under his boot. “Out of the way, Bill—there’s a lot of wriggle about him yet. Oh, there you are, Murty; throw me a stick, will you, please?” The stick came down; he caught it, stepped aside, and finished off the enemy with a few quick blows.

“Is that the sort of nugget ye’re afther diggin’ up, Masther Bill?” grinned Murty.

“It’s all I found, anyway,” growled the still-panting Bill. “I think gold-mining’s a rotten game!”



“ ‘It’s all right, old man: I’m standing on his business end,’ said Jim, lightly.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAMP

HONESTLY," said David Linton, "I can't see the use of dragging you and Tommy out to this camp, Norah. It isn't as if you could do much to help."

"We could cook for you all," said Norah, thoughtfully.

"Yes, but so could Lee Wing. His cooking is quite good enough for a men's camp, and he could get in firewood as well and do other odd jobs. It will be a rough business, at first, with no fun in it: not like one of our usual camps, where we ride round the cattle and take intervals for playing about. Now that all the ground is marked out, all hands will have to clear the scrub and get rocks out of the way. You can't help in that."

"Not very well," she admitted. "And Tommy, Bill and I would mean three extra people to feed—we should be what soldiers call 'useless mouths,' shouldn't we?"

"I might not have put it that way, but it's true, all the same. Feeding the camp will be a heavy job: Billy will have to come and go with a pack-horse all the time."

"That will put a good deal of work and organizing on Brownie's shoulders—and there is the sick man as well. No, I think we should certainly stay at home, Dad."

David Linton looked relieved.

"I knew you would see it," he said. "It will seem strange to have a camp without you, all the same. What do you say, Tommy? I know you want to be there, and no wonder; but——" He looked at her inquiringly.

"But of course I see it your way. We should only potter about without being really useful, and very often the men would wish we had stayed at home."

"You can't go back to the Creek, Tommy," Norah said, firmly. "I do not see you sitting there in lonely glory, wondering what was happening in the hills."

"You certainly would not see her sitting," laughed Mr. Linton. "She would try to do all Bob's work as well as her own."

"Besides, I'll need you here. There will be ever so much to do. Your Bill and Sarah can carry on quite well, can't they?"

"Oh, I think so," Tommy answered. "And I would love to stay."

"We can dash over in the car and inspect the Creek from time to time," Norah said. "And of course we shall make expeditions to the camp. That is the only thing that will console our Bill for not going."

There had been many councils of war during the three days since Murty's first visit. Already a preliminary camp had been established at "The Hope," as they had christened Bob's find, and Bob, Murty and Mick Shanahan had begun the work of clearing. All legal formalities had been complied with; miner's rights were held by everyone on Billabong. The station hands were all old servants, tried and trusted friends. Mr. Linton had called them together and explained the situation.

"There may be gold for everyone," he had said. "Mr. Rainham's chance comes first, of course, and his ground and ours is already pegged out. You are all free to take up claims, and the more Billabong holds, the better."

"That's so," Dave Boone had said. "You'll have all the districk there, once it leaks out."

"The last thing I want to do is to start a gold-rush that may all end in nothing. That land Mr. Rainham holds will be quite useless for cattle if a crowd of prospectors come in; we should have to move out every bullock, and possibly our own as well. If the thing is a find, we should be able to stand that without any trouble—if not, it would be a heavy loss for nothing. And Mr. Rainham is hard enough hit as it is; none of us want to see him lose his hill-country unless he is to get something to make up for it. My proposal is that everyone should peg out a claim. Then that we should all set to work on Mr. Rainham's and see what we can find for him."

The men had accepted this enthusiastically. None of them had the miner's gold-hunger; they were cattlemen who had long served a place and a master that they loved, and gold-digging for themselves made but little appeal to them, especially for an uncertain chance. The personal ambition might leap to life if gold were really found, but meanwhile the idea of helping Bob Rainham fired them much more. Bob and Tommy had a knack of making friends. The Billabong hands had watched keenly—perhaps a little jealously at first—the English boy and girl, from the time that they had settled at the Creek. They had seen them face bad luck with pluck and hard work; they knew of many little kindnesses shown to their poorer neighbours. Dave Boone had summed up the verdict of the hands in a brief remark—"We might 'a' known that when Mr. Jim and Miss Norah picked up pals they knew what they were pickin'."

Hence the eagerness with which they abandoned their own work and made ready for a tough and unaccustomed job. Billabong was a wide and isolated property; with reasonable care there was little chance of outsiders guessing that anything unusual was going on in the out-station in the hills. The hills themselves were so wide, so rough, that, even there, the proceedings might escape the notice of the few prospectors. "Until we take to blashtin' the rock," said Murty. "Then 'tis likely that there'll be wan or two strowlin' along to find where the earthquake was."

Out at "The Hope" the advance party planned the main camp in front of the cave which Murty had discovered. No work could be done there without a considerable amount of preliminary blasting, nor was it desirable to attack it until Bob's first find and the gully leading downwards from it had been thoroughly explored. The site was good, protected by the cliff-like hill: a plateau at first, then sloping gently. Water was close at hand, from a good spring.

"There's no better place," said Murty. "'Twill look natural too, Mr. Bob, if annywan comes along: an' no wan will think of lookin' for a claim undher the camp itself, nor in the hill behind it, neither. Lee Wing'll be about camp most times, an' 'tis little conversation he have: people askin' questions'll get small change out of that wan."

Bob agreed.

"If we clear enough ground for the camp and just a track down to the rock-hole, a man might pass close to it and never see it," he said. "The scrub all round is very thick."

"It is; we'll have to cut a way in for the pack-horse as well. But that can be done cunning, so as not to be noticed. Of course, the smoke of the fire will show, but we'll have to chance that."

Already they had provided for the riding-horses by running a bush fence across the narrow mouth of a hill-enclosed gully where a little creek flowed. There was a good growth of spring grass there; the horses might not get fat, but they would not starve. To clear the camping-ground was not a hard task for three good axemen: the space was ready, the tracks cut, and some bush huts built, by the time the main body arrived from Billabong, with pack-horses laden with tents, tools and supplies. Then all hands set to work, and before sunset the camp was thoroughly established, with Lee Wing brooding happily over his cooking-pots.

"You've worked hard," Jim told Bob, as they strolled down to "The Hope." "It must have gone against the grain to do bush-work when you were longing to start digging."

"Oh, it had to be done," Bob answered. "I won't deny that I had my moments of wanting to break loose with a pick. But I came here and looked at the ground now and then, and—oh, I just dreamed."

"I've been studying this place in my mind," Jim said. "It's an abominably small space to work in; with a couple of us using picks and shovels, and the soil we dig accumulating all the time, the difficulty will be to know where to stand. I'm all for blasting away that slab to the south as soon as possible."

"I've thought of that," Bob answered. "But won't the row give notice to all the district that someone has arrived?"

"The population of this district is strictly limited; and prospectors are pretty

tired when they turn in, and they sleep soundly. My notion is to do it late at night. Then, if it wakes anyone up, he will only turn over and think it was a dream."

"That's distinctly an idea, Jim," Mr. Linton said. "If all the work of drilling and charging were done in daylight there would be no difficulty about firing the fuses at night. We have the petrol-lantern."

"It would simplify matters, certainly," Bob agreed, looking at the confined space beneath them. "All the same, I'd like to have a shot at digging tomorrow."

"Rather! We'll tackle it early, while the men set to work at clearing the gully. You haven't made any more finds, Bob?"

"Nothing to speak of: there were a few tiny specks on the roots of a bush I pulled out when we were clearing. But there has been nothing to excite any hopes—except here."

"Well, this is enough to start on: and your 'few specks' may mean a very good indication," said Mr. Linton. "It isn't the surface we have to look to. Bob, have you considered your plan of action if any prospector does happen along?"

"Yes, I have. I think the plan is to enlist them in the plot—let them peg out at once if they wish; or we'd promise to give them warning if we struck gold. No man would talk then, for his own sake. And there's another thing, sir. I have pegged out a claim already for the fellow we hurt, and I'd like to let his mates in before anyone else, supposing there is anything."

"I'm glad you did that," said Mr. Linton.

"It was Tommy's idea," said Bob. "We talked it over and agreed that we owed him something. Even if he tried to down us—well, it was a big temptation, and he came pretty badly out of it."

"It will cheer his convalescence to know he's going to get a slice of the cake, even if he missed the icing off the top," Wally said. "The poor wretch is lying pretty heavily on my conscience. I happened to be the one to damage him, you see."

"That's utter nonsense," Jim answered, quickly. "We were all out to down him, and in my opinion he deserved all he got. Still, I'm all for giving him a good chance, and his mates too. The one I talked to is a decent chap. I dropped a bag of tucker at his camp this morning, and I hope they'll like it. Brownie had put in a slab of cake about a foot square. I told her she was pampering them, but she said, 'Pore chaps—when id they taste cake last, I wonder!'; and added a sponge-roll. I only hope it didn't get fused with the mutton!"

The next morning found them early at "The Hope." Jim swung a pick steadily, while Bob and Wally dug up the loosened soil, examining each spadeful for traces of gold. Now and then tiny fragments were visible, and they found one small nugget; but the pile of loose earth mounted without any

exciting results, and Bob's high hopes began to recede. He said nothing, but worked away quietly until a shadow fell on the ground near them, and they looked up to see Murty's cheerful face.

"'Tis airy ye are," said he. "When ye've had a bit more mining ye'll not be in a hurry to shtart diggin' before breakfast. The man as does that same doesn't finish the day well. Have ye anny luck, at all?"

"Hardly anything, Murty," Bob said.

"Maybe 'tis only expectin' ye are that it'll jump out at ye in nuggets," suggested the Irishman. He came down the ladder and inspected the loose soil closely.

"We might wash a bit, so," he remarked. "I'll take the fill o' me hat, an' we'll run it through. Come along, now; Lee Wing'll be callin' us to breakfast, an' we'll do this furrst."

They followed him as he strode swiftly to the camp. He annexed a tin basin from the cooking-hut, with a word to Lee Wing to "go aisy on the bacon for a few minutes," and then plunged downhill to a little creek that flowed swiftly in a succession of rocky pools.

The boys clustered round to watch him. He emptied the earth into the dish and dipped it into a pool, holding it aslant. With one hand he stirred gently, at the same time rocking the dish with a half-circular motion. As the earth-stained water flowed away over the lip of the basin he added more and more, until it grew clear. From time to time he picked out small stones, freed from the encrusted earth; these he examined carefully before throwing them away.

There was nothing left at last but the heaviest part of the wash-dirt: a little layer in the bottom of the dish. Murty poured off the remainder of the water very carefully. He straightened himself and held out the basin.

"Take a good look at that, now, Mr. Bob."

They saw, among the sand and fine gravel that coated the bottom of the dish, a sprinkling of dull yellow specks, with a few tiny glittering fragments. It did not look much to Bob as he bent forward. This was not his dream of nuggets—this faint powdering that he supposed was gold. Surely dream-castles did not find their foundations in such slender material. But he looked up, and Murty was beaming.

"Is it—is it any good?" Bob stammered.

"Good? Well, the man that found a prospect like this on a gold-field 'ud have his hat in the air—an' so wud annywan who had a claim forninst him! That's from wan hatful of earth, Mr. Bob—when you've a claim, 'tis in tons ye begin to think."

Bob found himself violently pounded on the back as Jim and Wally grasped Murty's meaning. He wriggled out of their clutches, still dazed.

"But—has it all got to be washed like that?"

“Every ounce has to be washed, Mr. Bob, but not in a wee dish. We’ll rig up a long-tom—that’s a kind of trough I can be makin’. It’s a far quicker job then. But this is surface. We’ll be sinkin’ a shaft next—what we want is to get down to the bed-rock of the ould river. It’s at the bottom that ye get gould like they did in the old diggin’s, in the claims they called ‘the jewellers’ shops.’ Leastways, if the luck holds, an’ this is an ould river. There’s no tellin’. Many a man’s shtarted off with a betther prospect than this, only to find he’d bottomed a duffer.”

“I go up one minute and down the next!” said poor Bob. “If it weren’t so dashed exciting I’d like to go to bed and sleep until it was settled one way or the other!”

“Well, as far as I can see, you can’t help getting something out of it, old man,” said Jim practically. “It may not be a lot, but it will help along the old banking-account. Let’s leave it at that and go to breakfast.”

They set to work to sink the shaft as soon as breakfast was over, piling the earth against the rock-walls. As they had foreseen, however, the space was too limited for practical working. Murty heartily seconded Jim’s plan to blast away some of the rock by night.

“We’ll have to do it sooner or later,” he said. “An’ what matther if callers do come along?—sure, we have our ground marked out. If ye’ll be said by me, Mr. Bob, ye’ll knock off diggin’, an’ we’ll get to work an’ dhrill holes for the charges.”

They laid three charges, finding the drilling harder work than the digging had been. All was made ready for lighting the fuses, and a strong ladder constructed of saplings and cross-struts, so that the one who lit them might have means of a more speedy exit than the ropes afforded. Then the horses were caught, and they scattered through the surrounding hills and gullies to look for any bullocks which might be dangerously near the blasting, and to drive them as far away as possible.

Sunset found all the workers gathered at the camp. The riders had found few cattle, and had seen no human beings. Jim reported that he had discovered Topsy near the horses’ gully, evidently anxious to rejoin her friends, and quite recovered from her lameness; he had put her into the gully, where she would be safe from the explosion. The men had made good headway with the clearing: the trees in the valley were small, and there was no rock. They were all in high spirits, delighted with the result of Murty’s gold-washing.

“I’m beginnin’ to think of meself in a Rolls-Royce,” remarked Dave Boone. “Wonder could I take it after cattle? That flyin’ friend of Mr. Jim’s, wot came in an airyplane to Miss Norah’s weddin’, told me he used to fly round his station in Queensland to see if the bullicks was all right.”

“You’d be leavin’ go of the wheel in an awkward place an’ grabbin’ your

stockwhip," Mick told him.

"No fear. I'd learn 'em to move by means of the hooter."

"An' if 'twas a Rolls-Royce ye had, wouldn't ye be a millyunnaire?" asked Murty. "An' if so be ye was that, where'd be the need of goin' afther cattle at all, at all?"

Dave stared at him blankly.

"Not go after cattle? What 'ud a man *do*, then?"

"'Tis a fine house in Toorak ye'd be havin', an' wearin' the grandest of clothes. I think, then," said Murty, sweetly, "ye'd take to golf."

There was a roar of laughter from the men, and he dodged a missile flung at him by the indignant Dave.

"I'm hanged if I can see what I'd do with a pile, supposin' I did dig it up," remarked Mick. "I wouldn't say as I wouldn't like to own a good racehorse or two. But beyond that, I'm well enough orf as I am. Can't see meself leavin' Billabong, anyway."

"Nor me, neither," Dave said. "Twenty year I've been with the Boss this month. I'd be like a motherless foal if I went away, pile or no pile. What about you, Murty?"

"I did me share of knockin' about before I come here," said Murty, thoughtfully. "Gould-diggin' I tried, an' a taste of coal-minin' when I was on me uppers; an' I wint to sea, in an ould tub goin' to New Zealand, an' sorra a meal stayed wid me all the time I was aboard her. I'm no friend to salt wather: 'tis too movable. So I come back to Victoria an' humped me bluey, not very wishful for worrk, but likin' to feel the ground solid undher me feet. An' I struck Billabong just when the Boss happened to need a lad that cud ride; an' I've been ridin' for him ever since."

He paused, lighting his pipe.

"That 'ud be before Mr. Jim was born?" said Dave.

"It was. An' the little Misthress had him sent out for me to see when he wasn't a day ould: an' Miss Norah, too, when she came. An' when the little Misthress was dyin' she had me brung in, an' she says, says she—'Murty, I'm leavin' you in charge of them—all my three.' An' she smiled at the Masther, that was sittin' there very quiet, houldin' her little hand. I do be thinkin' long of that day: them two, that was so young—an' Brownie wid Masther Jim in her arms, an' the wee thing in the cradle. An' I gave her me promise. She cud hardly lift her hand, but she tried: an' I tuk it. Well—I was a wild lad, an' she knew it. But I've done me best to keep that promise; an' I'm hopin' she knows that, too."

"I reckon she does," said Mick, gruffly.

"Well, the Masther an' I are afther growin' grey together," said Murty. "Himself has done his job, knowin' she watches, an' when he goes to find her

I'm thinkin' he won't have far to go. Ye'd have said his life was smashed, but he gathered it up, an' he set out to make the children happy. An' I tried to help."

He was silent. From the cook-hut they heard Lee Wing calling.

"Gould!" Murty muttered scornfully under his breath as he rose. "Gould! What 'ud I be doin' wid the stuff!"

CHAPTER XIV

NIGHT BLASTING

THE camp was asleep. It was a night of black darkness; the fire, round which sat Bob and Jim and Wally, glowed redly, and above and around rose the dense wall of the dark scrub. The three talked in low voices, so that they might not rouse the sleepers; though the sound of steady snoring from the direction of the men's hut seemed to show that noise would not be likely to affect the inmates.

David Linton had, with some difficulty, been persuaded to go to bed. Indeed, all hands would gladly have remained up until the blasting was done, though they had yielded to the common sense argument that there would be nothing for them to do, and certainly nothing to see. Finally, it had been arranged that the boys should turn in for a nap until eleven o'clock, when Mr. Linton awoke them. He withdrew to his tent after delivering much sound advice on the danger of handling explosives; to which the three War veterans listened meekly.

Twelve o'clock had been fixed as the time for the blasting, since it was safe to suppose that the most restless prospector would be soundly asleep by midnight. The boys huddled round the fire, for the night was cold, especially after the snug blankets. They smoked, arguing hotly as to who should light the fuses. Each claimed the privilege, but Bob stonily upheld his right, as owner of the claim. This being unanswerable, Jim and Wally generously offered to toss for it: a proposal which Bob met with derision.

"You're a stubborn Englishman, Bob," stated Jim, finally. Bob grinned, and remarked that if an Englishman were more stubborn than an Australian, he had yet to meet the Australian.

"Time we got going," said Wally, knocking out his pipe and moving to light the petrol-lantern. They drank large mugs of tea from a billy simmering near the fire. Jim brought from his tent a sack containing spare fuses, and they set off for "The Hope."

It was eerie walking in single file down the scrub-walled track. The lantern ahead threw a brilliant circle of light, outside which the bush seemed the blacker by contrast. There was no sound save for the ceaseless calling of mopokes across the hills and now and then the hooting of owls. The snap of a dry stick underfoot seemed unnaturally loud. Bob jumped when Wally began to whistle a tune. He was nervous—though he would not have admitted it, even to himself. The suspense of the last week had keyed him to a high pitch: this stealthy midnight expedition seemed a fitting climax. He knew he would

be glad when it was safely over.

They climbed down into the rock-hole and removed the sacking which had been spread over the fuses to protect them from the night dew. It was not a first experience of blasting for Wally and Jim: they inspected every detail narrowly, working in a quiet, leisurely fashion that helped to steady Bob's nerves. When all was in readiness Wally turned to him.

"I wish you'd let me light them, old chap."

"And you a married man with a family!" laughed Bob. "Out you go, both of you."

"Well, take a good look at the ladder, Bob, to get your distance—and for goodness' sake move like smoke when you've lit them," counselled Jim. "We'll light you from above." Wally went up the ladder, and he followed, holding the lantern. They leaned over the rock parapet. The brilliant light flooded the ground below, scarred by digging, with heaps of loose soil, over which snaked the long fuses, their ends brought towards each other, to make the lighting of all three a quicker matter.

"Ready!" Bob called.

He drew a long breath as he bent down, striking a match. One fuse sputtered; the next followed quickly. Then Jim and Wally suppressed exclamations as the match suddenly went out.

Bob was quite cool. He had another match ready: the little flame sprang out, and in a second the third fuse caught, and went spitting towards the charges.

"Quick, Bob!" shouted Wally.

Jim said nothing. He bent lower, moving the lantern slightly so that its full light fell upon the ladder. Bob had swung round, leaping across the heaps of earth. He sprang up the ladder. Wally's hand was ready; he grasped Bob's firmly and hauled him over the top. They raced into the dark tunnel of the track, straining their ears for the first sound from "The Hope."

It came sooner than they expected. A dull roar split the silence of the night, another following so quickly as to blend with it. Crash after crash of falling rocks sounded through the bush: a shower of small fragments fell near the boys, one just missing Jim's head. They ducked, and ran harder. Then came the third deafening roar, followed by thudding rocks among the shattered trees.

They halted, panting. The long roll of the explosions was ringing round the hills, taken up by a hundred echoes. It died away: and all about them was a wild chattering of terrified birds, and a scurrying of little animals through the scrub. From farther away came the sound of galloping hooves, with shrill neighs, as the horses bolted up their gully in terror. Jim gave a short laugh.

"Hope there won't be any broken legs!" he said.

"Well—if any prospector has slept through that he ought to qualify as Rip

Van Winkel!” uttered Wally.

“I clean forgot what the echoes would be in these hills,” confessed Jim. “The camp is awake, anyhow.”

Voices and confused shouts came through the trees; above them rang out Mr. Linton’s voice.

“Are you all right, boys?”

A cheerful shout answered him. Then came Murty, in shirt and trousers, his boots pulled hastily on bare feet.

“Did she go well, Mr. Jim?”

“If one can judge by sounds, the whole place has gone up,” laughed Jim. “They weren’t quite simultaneous, Murty: one fellow lagged a bit. But I don’t think there was enough difference to matter.”

“Let’s go and have a look at her,” cried Bob. He raced off, and within a few yards tripped over a piece of rock and went headlong to earth.

“Wait for the lantern, you ass!” shouted Jim. “Are you hurt?”

“No, but I took an almighty toss,” said Bob, sitting up and rubbing an elbow. “Come along with your old lantern—this place is strewn with chunks of rock.”

“What else do you expect? You lit the fuses!” chaffed Wally. “You won’t recognize the landscape in the morning. Steady on—let Jim get in the lead.”

They fell into single file, making what haste they could among the fallen débris. Everywhere was silent evidence of the blasting; the ground was littered with fragments, the size of which increased as they drew near “The Hope,” where a boulder, seamed with great cracks, almost blocked the track. They edged round it and cautiously approached the hole.

The place was unrecognizable. A gaping void had taken the place of the south wall, which had been shattered clean away, scarcely a fragment remaining. Part of the east and west walls had gone, whether from general shock or from being hit by flying boulders, they could not tell. Piles of rock filled the space, hiding the earth. Even the great rock at the north had suffered; its top had gone, and a wide fissure ran irregularly down it.

Murty whistled.

“Tare-an’-ages! That’s the best smash-up ever I seen!”

“A pretty thorough job, isn’t it?” Jim said. “And it will be something of a job to get all that stuff out of the way. We’ll have all hands on that to-morrow, Bob.”

Bob was peering down into the hole, flushed and excited. “I wish I could see a bit more!” he uttered. “Think we could get down? The ladder’s smashed to bits, of course.”

“What I think,” said Jim, firmly, “is that you’re going to bed. Get hold of him, Wally—gold-mining has gone to his head!” Bob found himself in the grip

of a long and sinewy arm, gently but irresistibly propelled towards the camp.

He went to bed, but not to sleep. Each time he dozed off, the roar of the explosion seemed to reach him again, rousing him with a violent start. Once he went far enough into forgetfulness to dream; and in his dream he was holding the match once more to the third fuse, and it would not light. It burned down until the yellow flame touched his fingers: he threw it away impatiently and lit another, his fingers shaking so that he could not hold it steadily. And all the time the other fuses were sputtering fiercely, the little lines of sparks creeping across to the charges. He knew they would reach them before his fuse was lit, but he could not go: he could only crouch there, waiting for the explosions. They came after what seemed an age of waiting; a sheet of yellow flame, and then an earth-shaking roar—and he was sitting up in his bunk, shivering and sweating; in his mind a dull wonder that Wally could sleep through it calmly.

He lay down again and shut his eyes resolutely, abusing himself for being a fool. He tried to count sheep in his mind, but the sheep would only run to “The Hope” and try to jump it: the woolly bodies curved through the air, one after another in an endless procession. Bob twisted and tossed impatiently, his blankets becoming a hopeless confusion. His head ached violently: his tired eyes felt like coals. If only daylight would break!

A quiet voice came out of the darkness.

“Having a thin time, old man?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Wally—I can’t get to sleep, that’s all.” He blinked as a flashlight clicked and the glow filled the little tent. Wally was out of bed, fumbling in a haversack: then he went out, and Bob heard the clink of a tin cup against a water-bucket.

“I say, Wally, go back to bed. I wish to goodness I hadn’t waked you,” he exclaimed, irritably, as the tall figure stooped to re-enter the tent.

Wally had had considerable experience of over-wrought men in the War years. His voice was gentle as he bent over him.

“Just take this, old chap. Only aspirins. Norah stuck some in my bag without telling me—rather luck, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t want any beastly drug——” Bob began.

“You want sleep, and these will do the trick. Here you are, and a drink of water.” Somehow, the deep voice was compelling: he found himself sitting up and doing as he was told. Then he was lying down; and Wally was straightening his blankets as he would have straightened little Davie’s, giving him a friendly pat.

“There—you’ll be asleep in two minutes. Don’t think of anything but just sleep—sleep—sleep.” The voice was only a murmur now, curiously soothing. He did not know how long it went on in the dark and quiet tent. Bob gave a great sigh, cuddled down as Davie would have done, and drifted into

dreamless sleep.

It was broad daylight when he awoke. Voices came to him, and the good smell of wood-smoke. He felt very peaceful. The tent-flap parted and Wally looked in, grinned, and disappeared: returning in a moment with a steaming mug of tea.

"Topping morning, and everybody has overslept. Except Lee Wing, and he's looking like a reproachful heathen god. Feel all right?"

"Rather—I've had a great sleep. Hope I didn't spoil your night, Wally," Bob said; "I don't know what got hold of me."

"Oh, everyone has a restless fit at times," said Wally, cheerfully. "And this business of having a fortune dangled before your eyes doesn't exactly make you placid. How about a bathe?—we're just going."

They ran down to the creek, where the water was cold enough to discourage a seal, in Wally's opinion: returning after a brief plunge to find breakfast ready and Lee Wing plainly questioning the sanity of people who bathed at such an hour.

"'Flaid bacon welly hard," he remarked, setting it before them. "Him cooked long time."

There were no criticisms of the bacon. It disappeared in surprising quantities and at high speed. Everyone was eager to inspect "The Hope" by daylight; the plates were scarcely empty when there was a general stampede.

"Well, there's no doubt that them charges was thorough," was Boone's comment as they gazed at the hopeless jumble of shattered rock.

"I knew we'd get rid of the end slab, but I'd shmall hopes that the other sides 'ud catch it like this," said Murty, jubilantly. "The truth is, d'ye see, Mr. Jim, them rocks wasn't near as solid as they looked. This wan to the wesht wasn't much more than a fut thick, barrin' the overhang on top."

"When you let loose three charges in a confined space something is bound to happen—only I hardly thought the luck would be as good as this," said Jim.

Bob's attention was concentrated on the place where the southern slab had been. He made his way across the heaped rocks and scanned narrowly the few places where the soil was visible. At first he saw nothing of interest. Then a gleam caught his eye, half-hidden under a stone—and the next moment his companions were edified by the spectacle of his feet in the air, while, head downwards, he tried to dislodge the rock fragment.

"Got it!" The feet came down and the head came up. Bob stumbled across the boulders, gripping his prize—a water-worn lump of gold, irregular in shape, encrusted with gravel: the biggest find yet. He held it out to Mr. Linton, his eyes dancing.

"That'll buy more than one sheep, sir!"

They crowded round to look at it: the nugget passed from hand to hand.

"My holy aunt!" ejaculated Boone. "If there's much like this you'll be buying elephants, Mr. Bob! Bet you I find another before you do, Mick!"

There ensued a wild hunt among the rocks, even Mr. Linton yielding to the infection of the excitement. A wild yell from Mick rent the air as he discovered another fragment: Wally found a tiny pocket in a rock where lay a number like grains of wheat, their hiding-place laid bare by the explosion. But the encumbering rocks made searching too difficult, and presently Mr. Linton called a halt.

"We are only wasting time; what is here won't run away. If we clear the place we shall be able to see what we are doing."

"That's so, sir," agreed Murty. "But 'twould be as good for us to keep our eyes skinned while we're at it. There's no knowin' what these rocks do be houldin'."

There was no need to tell the workers to keep their eyes skinned. It made the task a long one, for every boulder, every fragment, had to be turned over and examined before being levered down into the gully, where all were piled at one side to await a future crushing. There were many gleams of gold in the broken stone: now and then a larger piece could be picked out with a knife. The little pile that gathered in a hollow on a flat rock grew to respectable dimensions as the work went on.

Bob did the work of two men, flinging himself at the heaviest boulders, straining every muscle to get them out of the way. Jim and Wally, exchanging a significant glance, attached themselves to him quietly after a while, saving his strength as much as possible. The men were quick to notice. They said nothing, but if any find were made, however small, the finder called Bob to examine it and to add it to the heap.

It was when his head was bent over a gold-seamed pebble which Mick had fished up that disaster nearly occurred. Jim and Wally had levered over a heavy rock leaning against the eastern wall, and were standing aside, resting their muscles for a moment, when a dull crack behind them made them swing round suddenly. A tall slab of rock, split by the explosion, had been held in position in the wall by the boulder they had moved. As they turned, it tottered, seemed to pause a moment, and then crashed downwards towards Mick and Bob.

There was no time to shout. Wally and Jim moved as one man. In the second of hesitation before the crag fell they flung themselves forward at the unsuspecting pair, cannoning into them with a force that sent them staggering across the cleared ground. The rock crashed to earth, missing them by inches.

"By St. Patrick!" gasped Murty—"that was a near thing!"

"As near as I want to see," said Jim. He wiped his forehead. "Sorry if we hurt you."

“Something would ’a’ hurt us worse if you hadn’t,” Mick said. He was leaning against the wall with Bob: both a little dazed. “My word, Mr. Bob, you an’ me was near bein’ flattened out permanent!”

“It’s thanks to you two we weren’t,” said Bob, coming forward.

“Or thanks to us you nearly got it,” Wally interposed. “That chunk we moved was propping it.”

“Nobody would have suspected it,” Mr. Linton said. He was examining the place: the raw earth of the bank showed where the slab had stood. “It’s as Murty said: the rock wall here is comparatively thin. We must go over every inch of it, in case any more comes down.”

“Well, the more that comes away, the better,” said Murty—“if so be as no wan is shtandin’ fominst it. What became of that bit of gould ye were lookin’ at, Mr. Bob?”

“Hanged if I know,” said Bob, “it went—as we did!”

“Ah, well, there’s that many odd bits in sight we don’t need to worry about it,” remarked Murty. “It’ll turn up in the wash. I’m thinkin’ we’d best get busy with crowbars an’ loosen anny of the wall that’s tired of standin’ up, like that slab. A funeral here ’ud be a great hold-up to the worrk.”

CHAPTER XV

BILL MAKES A DISCOVERY

DAYS of heavy labour followed the blasting at "The Hope." The broken rocks were cleared away, together with any fragments of the walls that could be brought down with picks and crowbars: the earth that had accumulated behind the rocks during the centuries was shovelled away to give easy access to the shaft and to make room for the soil to be excavated.

No strangers came near the claim. The noise of the blasting did not seem to have disturbed any prospector.

"Or if so be it did," remarked Murty, "he'd not be able to say where it came from. An' there's plenty of counthry for him to be lookin' through to find it. Maybe he'd just put it down to blashtin' for a new road near the hills."

"After all," said Jim, "we did a bit of blasting to get rid of rocks when we were running our fences in this country: and no one turned up to make inquiries."

"That's true," Wally reflected. "Well, why not make a clean job of it and do a bit more? Let's get all this surface rock out of the way."

"It would certainly make work much simpler if we could get at the shaft from every side." Mr. Linton looked thoughtfully at the remaining crags. "When we begin sinking there will be huge heaps of wash-dirt, and it will have to be carted to the creek. We could make a track then, and rig up a box-cart. Billy could bring out an old pony and the earth could be removed very easily."

"Oh, let's do it, and chance what happens!" cried Jim. "I'm beginning to get tired of making this a hole-and-corner job."

That night, therefore, witnessed a second series of explosions: and next morning they toiled joyfully at removing the remains. The claim was laid bare at last, with many finds of small gold in the process. Then the shaft was marked out, a wooden stage made round it, and the work of sinking began.

The temptation was strong to examine each bucketful of earth taken out. Gold was there, in tiny flecks, sometimes in small nuggets; and to Bob Rainham each gleam, however faint, spoke of payments made on his farm—of a new blue car for Tommy. Murty, however, was firm.

"Leave it be for now, Mr. Bob. There'll be none losht when we wash it. What we've to do is to get down to the bed-rock as fast as we can. That's the 'bottom': an' if this is an ould river-bed, it's at the bottom, what they call the alluvial drift, that the real gould'll be. An' if it isn't—well, there's payable gould in gine in the dirt. Ye can be patient."

So the piles of wash-dirt mounted and the shaft drove down into the

gravelly soil until it was necessary to rig up a windlass to haul the loads to the surface. Billy was commissioned to bring out bullock-hides, from which Murty made buckets to hold the earth as it was drawn up: a staunch old pony, harnessed by a long rope to the windlass, soon learned to walk slowly away at a signal, hauling the brimming buckets out of the shaft.

It was hard, dull work—had it not been for the excitement that drove them on. The clearing of the gully was discontinued: all hands worked in regular shifts at driving the shaft. Only David Linton was exempted, and that not without a struggle on his part. But Bob could be obstinate; he set himself so stubbornly against Mr. Linton's working underground, and was so ably backed up by Jim and Wally, that the squatter reluctantly gave in.

"It isn't as if you had to sit still and look at us, sir. There's the track to the creek to clear: we'll want it when we make the cart."

"I never had any fancy for the lightest job," said Mr. Linton, dolefully.

"There's plenty of work in it—and it's necessary. Norah will be out any day, and I couldn't face her if she found you down in the murky depths." Bob grinned. "She and Tommy would go down themselves if you were there, and argue it out with you."

"I believe they would," agreed the squatter. "And they would be worse than the lot of you! Oh, well—where's an axe?" He went in search of one, and in a few minutes was working vigorously.

Norah and Tommy, with Bill in attendance, arrived next morning. They inspected all the camp details thoroughly; peered into the shaft; and gazed with mingled horror and amusement at their usually trim men-folk, now coated with clay from head to foot, and wearing a several-days' growth of beard.

"Ruffianly is the only word I can think of," laughed Norah. "Jim, I never imagined you could look such a brigand! When did you shave last?"

"We shave on Sundays," said Jim, firmly. "At least, we did last Sunday, but I don't know that we're going to be so particular in future. I begin rather to like myself with a beard. Gives me dignity: I'll come home looking like Father Christmas."

"If Davie sees you and Wally disguised in that fashion I won't answer for the consequences," affirmed Norah.

"My son must learn to take the rough with the smooth," said Wally, loftily.

"But there isn't any smooth!"

"Look here," said her husband, "if you two fashion-plates have only come out here to jeer at honest, hard-working men——"

"We haven't—we truly haven't," cut in Norah. "We are laden with baked meats, tobacco and newspapers, and we are wearing our oldest kit, and we want work. May we dig in the shaft?"

"You may not. Women and children not allowed below the surface. You

may pick up sticks for Lee Wing, if you like——”

A yell from Bill, who was grubbing in the wash-dirt, startled them.

“I’ve got a nugget! Look!” He raced to them, grasping a fragment the size of a pea.

“Keep it,” said Wally, languidly. “We only pick ’em up when they’re as big as pumpkins!”

“I’ll bet it’s worth eighteenpence,” said Bill. “P’raps two bob. I say, where do you find the pumpkin-bits?”

“Oh, we stub our toes against them. Look at our boots—that’s what has taken the shine off them.”

“They don’t look as if they had ever had any shine,” said Bill. “Well, I’m going to hunt for more.” He returned to the wash-dirt.

“And we must go below,” Jim said, knocking out his pipe. “Tommy, you may stay to lunch if you brought enough to eat with you.” He looked down at her with a smile.

“Our saddles were hung with bundles of food at every point,” laughed Tommy. “We do little except cook nowadays. Oh, and your man is getting better, and he is very meek. Brownie talks to him as though he were a bad little boy of five.”

“You told him he and his mates were to have a claim?” Bob asked.

“Yes, and he said you were white men. He would not say so if he could see you now!” She looked wickedly at the hairy faces.

“Well, I’m glad he doesn’t bear malice,” Jim said. “Does he remember all about it?”

“Oh yes,” Norah said. “He told us he didn’t know why he behaved in such a mad fashion. ‘I clean lost me ’ead when I seen the gold,’ he said. ‘Seemed to me I’d got to get to me mates an’ peg out claims. An’ of course, if I’d had any sense I’d have hid in the bush till they were gone, an’ pegged all I wanted!’ That is the only part he seems to regret—he is quite cheerful over his injuries.”

“I think he consoles Brownie for Murty’s absence,” Tommy said. “She takes her knitting to his room in the afternoons, and they have great talks. Fred has quite lost his restlessness. I think he does not care how long he stays at Billabong, with Brownie to feed him.”

“And that must be a change, after camp tucker,” commented Bob.

“I say!” called Bill from the wash-dirt “—can Mr. Walker have a claim, Bob?”

“I don’t see why not. We were thinking of letting him in, if there is anything good,” was Bob’s answer. “Not that we have a high regard for Walker.”

“No, but Mrs. Walker’s nice. She’s a friend of mine,” stated Bill, who had at one time sojourned in Mrs. Walker’s bush shanty—much against his will.

"Poor thing, she deserves a lift—and a chance for her youngsters," remarked Norah. "Bill, we are going to look for Dad—are you coming?"

"No, I'm after gold," returned Bill. "I've got two more bits."

"Don't play any tricks near the shaft," commanded Jim. "We hate people falling in on our heads." He grasped the rope and disappeared in the earth, followed by Wally.

"I do not see why we should not work," remarked Tommy, as they strolled away. "Let us go to the camp and find tools. I am not much use with an axe, but I can do odd things with a tomahawk. Very odd, Bob says, when he sees my chopping!"

"No one will criticize your chopping out here. Dad will object, but that doesn't matter," said Norah, joyfully. "Come along—I do want to have a hand in things."

They descended upon Mr. Linton in a few minutes, made light of his protests, and set to work: Tommy attacking the lighter bushes, while Norah swung an axe at the saplings with the ease of long practice. The morning went by swiftly, the cleared track rapidly lengthening towards the creek.

Meanwhile Bill, grown tired of fossicking, had left the claim and made his way to the camp. Lee Wing was peeling potatoes; he chatted to him for awhile, peeped into the iron pots that were simmering by the fire, and decided that no food ever smelt so good as camp food. Then he wandered towards the cave.

A cave always holds possibilities of mystery and adventure, where a boy is concerned. Bill had been too excited, on his first visit, to give much attention to this one. The bushes grew thickly before the opening, and within only boulders could be seen. So much Bill had found out before. To-day, however, he decided to explore more thoroughly.

He forced his way through the bushes and tried to climb up the jumbled heap of rocks. This was not easy, but he managed to scramble to a height of six or seven feet. Then he was blocked by a great irregular boulder, straddling across two smaller ones.

Bill clung there for a moment, realizing that he could go no farther. As he felt cautiously for a foothold before descending, it seemed to him that a glimmer of light caught his eye, under the big rock. He put his face close to the gap between its supporting stones.

"It's light, sure enough!" he muttered. "I believe there's a big space behind there. Wonder where the light comes from?"

His foot slipped, and he almost fell, finding a new foothold just in time. It held him, but it rocked beneath him in a distinctly alarming manner. Bill decided that he would be safer on the ground, and clambered down cautiously, feeling other rocks that wobbled a little beneath his weight.

Arrived on the earth he looked curiously at the rocks, studying the way in

which they were piled.

"There's more than one unsteady," he reflected. "I believe I could lever one out. What a lark it would be if I could make a hole big enough to crawl through and see what that light is!"

He ran back to the men's hut and possessed himself of a crowbar, with which he tapped and prodded among the rocks.

"If I could get that chap out," he said aloud, poking at a boulder three feet up, "quite a lot would be moved. It's like the key-log in a jam in a creek, like Jim said. Once it was shifted they'd have to come too. I'll have a try."

Of the possible consequences of loosening several tons of stone he did not think at all, as he inserted his crowbar at different angles. He tugged and levered, but to no purpose: the stone rocked slightly, but was too firmly held by the weight above it. A little to one side of it, and slightly held by it, was a smaller one that seemed not so well seated: Bill turned his attention to this.

He was instantly rewarded by feeling it move. It slipped forward a little, giving him a better opening for his tool. Bill took advantage of it, pushing with all his strength; then, realizing that the crowbar was too short, he hurriedly found a long, tough stick, inserted it, and put his full weight upon it.

The stone yielded suddenly, shooting out a yard in front of him. As it came, a little quiver seemed to run through the piled rocks: there was a faint grinding sound, and Bill ducked instinctively, turned, and fled.

He had not a second to spare. There was a dull roar of moving rocks: half a dozen were forced out from below, and the whole mass subsided, crashing out in front of the cave. Bill held his breath as they rolled towards the tent, seeing it, in imagination, overwhelmed by the whole avalanche. But the jagged stones caught in the earth, and the distance was just too great. Three reached the trench the men had dug in case of heavy rain: Bill blessed them for it as the rocks toppled into it and came to rest.

"Golly!" he breathed, "that was a near thing."

As the dust cleared away Lee Wing's scared yellow face came round the tent.

"What you doin', Mas' Bill? 'Flaid you got killed."

"Not me!" said Bill, endeavouring to look as though nothing unusual had happened. "Just clearing out this old cave a bit, that's all."

The Chinese came forward, his eyes round with amazement.

"But—how come? Rocks too welly big. Mas' Bill—you not touch bust-up stuff?"

"Gelignite?—no fear!" said Bill hurriedly. "I just poked 'em about a bit, Lee Wing." He turned to the cave for the first time, and his assumed carelessness fell from him. "Golly!—look at it! Why, it's only a little bit of a cave, and there's a great big cave behind it!"

Lee Wing joined him, babbling the need of care lest the rocks should be unsafe. They climbed on fallen boulders and looked in together.

It was as Bill had said. The fallen rocks disclosed, behind the entrance they had blocked, a cave like a vast hall, the roof so high that they could not see it. Through some hidden crevice light came in—enough to see limestone walls hung with long stalactites that glittered in the new light from the outer world. There were jutting pillars and dim recesses that might lead to unknown depths in the heart of the hill. A faint sound of dripping water came to their ears.

“My hat!” shouted Bill. “I’m going in!”

Lee Wing caught his arm as he scrambled forward.

“No—no! Too welly dangelous—never could know what in cave like that.”

“Oh, rot, Lee Wing! Let me go!”

“Boss sack me all li’, one-time, if I let l’il boy go there all alone,” jabbered the Chinese, holding on tightly. “Mr. Jim him vely angly man with me, too. An’ him angly with you, Mas’ Bill, when him catch you. Him say you got no business fool about all-same that!”

“H’m,” said Bill, ceasing to struggle. Visions of Jim’s probable wrath came to him. He had an uneasy feeling that he had shown a lack of the common sense that Jim expected in his offside.

“You come down one-time, like good boy,” begged Lee Wing. “Go tellee Mr. Jim, gettee him come look-see. ‘Sposin’ I not watchee dinner, him all spoilt.”

“Oh, all right,” said Bill gloomily, jumping down. “Anyhow, we found it first, didn’t we, Lee Wing? It’s our cave!”

“Not mine, Mas’ Bill. Your cave, all li’.”

“Well, I never thought I’d find a cave,” said Bill, gloom yielding to triumph. “If I do get into a row, it’s jolly well worth it!”

“You bet,” said Lee Wing, hurrying back to his cooking-pots.

Bill encountered the whole party on their way back to camp to dinner, and found them suitably impressed by his story. There was a rush to inspect the new find.

“You got that down! By Jove, young Bill, it’s a wonder you’re alive!”

“I—I never thought the lot would come like that. I say, don’t be wild with me, Jim. The cave’ll be jolly useful to store the gold in, anyhow!”

Jim chuckled.

“I hope we’ll need it all.” He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I’m not going to talk about it. I don’t fancy you’ll monkey about with rocks again. But you’ve got to promise you won’t go in there without one of us.”

“No fear!” said Bill, much relieved. “I’ve heard lots of yarns about people being lost in caves. We went to see the Buchan Caves once, and I know jolly

well I wouldn't care to be there without a light. Why, you could wander for miles!"

"It's a way caves have," said Bob. "We'll have some fun exploring this one when we get time, Bill."

"Can't we look at it to-day?" pleaded the discoverer.

"Oh, we'll have a look-see," Jim said. "It's not our shift this afternoon. Only we've got to test those rocks first, to make sure nothing else can come down. Just look at those chunks in the drain!—it's a miracle that the tent wasn't wrecked."

Bill looked down his nose modestly.

"Well, he's provided you with a fine large bedroom, if you care to use it," said Bob, laughing.

"We may all be very glad of it if the weather breaks," Mr. Linton remarked. "It would not be much fun to be cooped up in tents and bush huts if we had a week's rain. This is a find."

"Therefore we will not have you shot at dawn, this time, Bill, old son," said Wally. "Only don't do it again, will you? Your people will bar Billabong holidays if you go in for any more wild adventures."

CHAPTER XVI

INSIDE THE HILL

INSPECTION proved that the cave which had been blocked was a narrow and lofty one, forming a natural porch or antechamber to the great cave within. The stone had fallen from the roof, piling up in fragments, and the scrub had grown thickly before it, masking it until Murty's keen eyes had pierced it in his search for the dead river.

All the bushes were now levelled, crushed down by the avalanche that Bill's energy had released. The blocks lay scattered, some still partly filling the mouth of the cave, some rolled back into the inner space, and the remainder outside. It was easy to scramble over them into the dim and lofty hall beyond.

Far above them the roof glimmered faintly. Light came in from hidden crevices, reflected in down-pointing stalactites like twisted rods. Twenty feet above the floor in one wall there was a wide recess, leading back to depths at which they could only guess. Over its edge seemed to pour a great mass, as though a waterfall had curved out and paused, petrified. It hung in a glistening curtain, with interwoven bands of colour.

There was a faint sound of falling water, but it was invisible. The cave was quite dry, save that in a few niches stalactites shone with moisture: beneath them stalagmites formed by the slow dripping of many centuries were growing up to meet the points above.

"How long before they join?" Bob asked, pointing to one.

"Perhaps a thousand years," answered Mr. Linton.

Their voices were low. No one seemed to wish to speak: even Bill was awed by the brooding silence of the great hall, the stillness held so long in the heart of the hill. The place held something of the effect of a temple, in which the little group, eager and modern, was altogether alien. If a file of ancient Egyptian priests, with torches and swinging censers, had curved into sight round the far pillars they would have seemed a natural part of the scene.

Jim had brought the petrol-lantern. With a brief, "Wait here a moment," he went to the farthest end of the cave, where his great figure merged into the gloom, and there lit it. At once the brilliant light changed all to colour, reflected in a hundred gleaming points in the walls. The hanging curtain seemed to ripple as though it were suddenly alive. Places that had been pools of shadow revealed themselves as the openings to passages: a standing rock became startlingly like a human figure.

Bob gave a low whistle.

"Whew-w! I've never seen anything like this."

"I have," said Bill, with the assurance of the travelled man. "At Buchan there's places like this, only not so big—an' the stal—stal—you know, the hanging things—are just like blankets—stripes and all—and curtains and branches of trees. And fruit, all colours when they put a light behind them: and lots of heads like men and women. You can walk through them for ages. I say, let's go and look for more caves—I bet there's one down there!" He ran towards a dark opening.

"Stop!" Jim's shout rang out, and echoed up in the roof, and Bill halted promptly. "Keep back, Bill—no going anywhere without the light, and pretty carefully then." He picked up the lantern and came towards them.

"Goodness only knows what we've struck. There are two openings into other caves at the far end, and several narrow places that may lead ever so far."

"I hope everyone will remember," said Mr. Linton, "that when one wanders in places like this the ground is apt to disappear at any moment. I don't want any of my family falling into gulfs a hundred feet deep."

"No—it's a case of watch one's step everywhere," Jim said. "Bill, you are not to go out of sight."

"I won't—true," Bill promised. "Do let's go and look at the other caves."

They followed Jim to the far end. On either side jutting rocks half-hid the entrances to caves into which no light came from above. One was almost as large as their first find: the other much smaller, but even richer in the stalactite formations that decorated it. The floor in all was solid rock, lightly coated with fine dust.

There were no outlets from these caves except high up near the roof, where here and there the walls shelved back into gloom. In all, the air was perfectly fresh. When a match was struck it burned steadily and strongly.

"Probably there are plenty of crevices admitting air, among the rocks outside on the hill," said Wally. "But you might be up there for a year and never guess what was under your feet."

"I doubt if anyone has ever been there," Jim answered. "That hill is as steep as the side of a house, and all covered with rocks and scrub. I tried it once, from the north, but I gave it up. Hullo—what have you got, Bill?"

Bill, who had been prowling round the walls had pounced on something with a yelp of triumph. He ran back to them with his prize—a black-fellow's stone axe.

It passed from hand to hand in silence. How long had it lain in that still place? What had made its owner drop so great a treasure, unless his hand could no longer wield it? Had that owner's bones been beside it the puzzle would have been solved: but the axe was the only relic.

"Queer," said Jim, thoughtfully. "Any wild black would risk his skin for an axe as good as that. And eyes that were used to spying out every grub that

could be eaten wouldn't have been likely to miss it."

"I know!" said Bill, excitedly. "He got trapped here when the stones fell, and when he was dying he got light-headed, and he crawled off and died somewhere else. P'raps we'll find his bones!"

"Hopeful chap!" said Wally, laughing. "Anyhow, your story is as likely as any other guess."

"And it's a jolly good curio, isn't it?" said Bill, happily. "I'll lend it to the School Museum. My word, the boys will be jealous when I tell them about these hols! Gold-mines and caves! Let's come and find something else!"

They explored two of the narrow passages, walking in single file, with Jim in the lead, carrying the lantern. The first ended abruptly in a deep chasm with sheer sides. They could not see the bottom: but far down they could hear gently-falling water. Beyond the gulf the passage went on, seeming to turn to the left.

"We could make a bridge across here some day," suggested Bill.

"That will be a day when we haven't much else to do," Jim returned. "Meanwhile, I'll bring in some saplings and block the opening. I don't want anyone coming to grief down this place. We'll try another passage."

The next one led on and on, in apparently endless fashion. Once it widened out into a small cave, continuing on the other side. It was never wide, and at times two could scarcely walk abreast. The floor was smooth rock, slippery and uneven. Mr. Linton called a halt presently.

"I think we've had enough. It isn't pleasant walking; and if Jim happened to slip and drop the lantern, getting back would be a nasty job."

"Also it's nearly time the girls made a start for home," said Wally. "I want you out of the hills before dark, Norah."

They stumbled back, glad to find themselves again in the free space of the great cave. The dark shut-in passage had held many unpleasant possibilities. Tommy was rather white. Jim helped her over the fallen rocks, letting the others go on ahead.

"Sure you're all right?" he asked, in a low tone. "You've had a hard day—and there's a long ride home. I shouldn't have let you explore as much."

"I am not tired," she said, quickly. "It is only that I am foolish about shut-in places. I have been so always. Just a stupid feeling that the walls will close in upon me."

"You should have told me."

"I try not to tell even myself," said Tommy, quaintly. "I have to be very stern with the part of me that is afraid, telling it how silly it is. You see, there is no sense in it: if I had to walk through a railway tunnel I should be just the same. The sensible part of me knows there is no danger—the stupid part wants to sit down in a corner and gibber!" She looked up at him in a troubled way.

"You know I do not like being a coward, Jim."

Jim laughed outright.

"You're as little of a coward as anyone I ever knew," he said. "When I see you sailing over the fences—you that never were on a horse until you came here! But that queer feeling about closed-in places is well known: you needn't think you're the only one, Tommy."

"Truly?" Tommy looked relieved. "I have always been very ashamed of it."

"Rather. There's a Greek or Latin word for it about a mile long, but I can't remember it. Quite heroic people have it—like the queer twist that makes some people afraid of a cat. Lord Roberts was one of those, and you wouldn't say *he* hadn't pluck—but he had a horror of a cat."

"You are very comforting, Jim. Are there really men who hate shut-in places?"

"Lots of 'em. I knew one in France. Shells and whizz-bangs didn't worry him at all, but he used to turn positively green if he had to stay long in a dug-out. I've known him go out for relief from it when all the rest of us were thanking our stars for cover. He told me he felt just the same in a lift or a Tube train. It's born in some people."

"And I thought I was just a solitary idiot," laughed Tommy. "You don't know how ashamed I have been. Well, I will go on fighting it, but with less shame."

"I don't believe it's a good thing to fight it," Jim said, slowly. "You can't repress a thing like that. Just keep out of such places, Tommy—you can generally dodge them. You certainly aren't going cave-exploring again."

The tone was masterful. Tommy smiled up at him.

"I do not mind the big cave. But—yes, I will not go into the others. It is not nice to feel green, like your friend."

"Tea-oh!" sang out Wally's voice. They found the others round the camp-fire, where Lee Wing had the billy boiling. The three horses were saddled, ready for the start.

"It's awful having to leave it all," Bill mourned. "Can we come back tomorrow, Norah? Would you and Tommy be tired?"

"We'll have to shut down on cave-exploring, old chap," said Jim. "It's very handy to have found the big ones, but apart from them mining is our job. Caves will keep, and I want to see what is at the bottom of that shaft."

"I suppose so," Bill admitted. "Anyhow, I've seen a lot, and I've got a stone axe!" Suddenly he flushed, looking up at Mr. Linton.

"I—I've got a pretty good cheek, haven't I? It's really your axe, of course. You'll take it, won't you?—it would look jolly in the smoking-room."

David Linton laughed and patted the tousled red head.

"If we are to be strictly legal on the matter of ownership, it was found on Bob's land," he said. "How about it, Bob?"

"I'm getting somewhat bewildered with my new possessions," stated Bob. "I was very poor a fortnight ago; and now I have suddenly become the owner of a gold-mine, a set of caves, and a stone axe! For goodness' sake, Bill, lighten my load by taking the axe!"

"Sure you don't want it?"

"I do not. I'd be wondering where the owner's bones were, every time I looked at it."

"Well, we may find 'em yet, and then you'll know," said Bill cheerfully. "Bob, if you find his skull, can I have it for the museum, too? One chap I know has a black-fellow's jaw-bone for a pen-rack, and I'd love to go one better!"

"Nice grisly tastes you have at your school," said Bob, laughing. "Do you bar white men's bones?"

Bill considered this point.

"I don't think I'd like them," he admitted. "Blacks' seem different, somehow, but I don't quite know why." Light came to him. "I expect it's because you can always imagine that they were killed trying to spear someone's grandfather, so it just served them right!"

"And they might have died peacefully in their wurleys amid the wailing of their numerous wives," grinned Wally.

"Shouldn't have had numerous ones," said Bill, firmly. "So it served them right, anyhow!"

"There were points about having a mob of wives," Wally said. "They did all the work, dug up all the grubs—and kept the best for their husband, or he knew the reason why!—and they cooked anything there was to cook, and found other things when there wasn't."

"But lone wives do all that, too," said Norah, meekly.

"Some of 'em. But the black-fellow's crowd were very well in hand. They built the wurleys, and made fur rugs, and baskets, and their own digging-sticks. You don't make your own digging-sticks."

"Certainly not," said his wife. "More cake, please."

"You'd never have said that if I'd been a black-fellow husband."

"I should have known it wouldn't be any use," returned Norah.

"That black chap must have felt very regal," said Wally, enviously. "Think of him on the march—strolling ahead with his spears and woomera, and not another blessed thing to carry! And the mob of ladies behind him happily shouldering all the kids and household furniture. Those were the days!"

"You might arrange a dinner of grubs and a wallaby's leg for him when he comes home, Norah," said Mr. Linton, laughing. "Uncooked, of course."

"It shall be done," said Norah, grimly.

"I'll look forward to it," Wally said, grinning. "And when Billy comes out again would you add to your kindnesses by sending me some more socks?"

"Socks are no longer in my programme," returned his wife. "The best black-fellows never wore them. I am going to drop knitting and take to making digging-sticks. And now it is time we were off."

She held out her hands to Wally and he pulled her lightly to her feet. They looked into each other's eyes, laughing.

"I wish I didn't have to go. Take care of yourselves, and don't work too hard."

"No—but as hard as we can," said Wally. "We want to be able to come home with good news."

Jim swung Tommy into her saddle. He stood bareheaded, with one hand on the mare's neck; dirty and unshaven, but bearing the look of quiet strength that never failed.

"If there's gold in these hills, we'll find it," he said, in a low voice. "You're going to have a little blue car again, Tommy."

Tommy could not find her voice for a moment. She looked at him in silence. He was so strong, such a friend: never by word or glance had he betrayed the wound that was in him. In her heart rose a surge of feeling that it was all wrong that she should have had to hurt Jim.

"If I have not the car, I have—many other things," she said, softly.

His hand gripped hers.

"Well—we'll take care of Bob for you," he said, lightly. "Wally and I will haul him away from the shaft by main force if he shows signs of taking an unfair number of shifts."

"No risk," said Bob, coming up. "By the time I've finished one spell of work in that unpleasant well, I've made up my mind definitely that Nature didn't intend me for a miner. The brightest moments of my existence at present are when my head comes up into the fresh air again. I'm even looking forward to ragwort-hoeing as a pleasant change."

Jim had walked over to where Bill sat on his pony. Bob looked hard at Tommy.

"You're not worrying about all this?" he asked. "I thought you looked a bit tired. Tommy, I'm not building on the mine. We shall be all right, whatever happens."

"No, I'm not worrying," she said. "Especially when you tell me that. Sometimes I am afraid lest you should make too sure—and be disappointed."

"I promise I won't." He squared his shoulders, his face determined. "You've taught me something, with your game of 'thinking-true.' If we're not meant to win out by means of a gold-mine—well, we'll win out some other way, that's all. I've come to see that it only needs hard work and believing in

our luck. We'll stick together over that."

"Yes—we'll always stick together," she said, happily. "So—good luck to the work, Bob; and we'll know that our luck is good, whatever comes."

"All ready?" called Norah.

"Tell Davie I'm coming to see him soon." Wally released her hand.

"I have to tell him that three times a day!"

"We'll be out again soon—won't we, Norah?" from Bill.

"Yes—of course. Good-bye, everybody!"

The three horses swung into the track through the scrub. A shrill cry from Lee Wing halted Norah. The Chinese was running forward, grasping a frying-pan, his face anxious.

"Missee No-lah! Missee No-lah! You no forget tellee Missee Blown she send out plenty dly onion!"

CHAPTER XVII

VISITORS

IT WAS Saturday evening, and the kitchen at Billabong looked and smelt like a baker's shop. Cakes and pies of large size and solid consistency were ranged along a table; lighter delicacies occupied wire stands. A mighty joint of spiced beef lent dignity to the general effect, flanked by a pressed tongue and a pair of well-browned fowls. Amid these luxuriant surroundings Brownie presided with the air of one who asks nothing more of life.

Tommy, somewhat flushed, and with a dab of flour on one cheek, was perched on the window-seat, her part in the cooking orgie happily ended. Still on duty was Norah, who hovered near the oven, with one eye on the clock. She peeped in presently, and rose, closing the oven door with respect.

"I think they're done, Brownie."

"Well, I'd give 'em a few minutes more, Miss Norah. Better 'ave 'em too hard than too soft; it's rough travellin' for 'em on a pack-horse, no matter how careful we pack 'em. They're things as is easy squashed."

"It will not trouble the miners if they are squashed," said Tommy, laughing. "Food is food, out at the camp. They would call them cold stew, and eat them gaily with spoons!"

"Well, they might. But I'd rather feel they ate 'em like they ought to be ate."

"I'm sure they're burning underneath!" cried Norah, suddenly. She flung open the door, withdrew a tray of smoking Cornish pasties, and hurried with them to the table.

"Well, they may be a bit overdone below, but they'll stand the journey all the better," said Brownie, comfortably. "Don't you worry, dearie: they've cooked a fair treat. An' that's the last, an' no one can say as we've done badly. Sit down, now, Miss Norah, an' take a bit of a rest. You ain't been off your feet all the afternoon."

Norah joined Tommy on the window-seat, and fanned herself with a newspaper. The day had been warm, especially for cooks.

"Here comes my son—with the faithful Bill," she said, looking out. "Bill looks a little part-worn, I'm afraid."

"Is it time to bring him in yet?" called the voice of one who hopes against hope. "I'll take him away again if it isn't."

"No—come along, Bill. We've finished." She went to the door to meet Davie, who arrived with a rush, stumbled over the edge of the verandah, and found himself picked up and swung aloft, uttering a flood of remarks, of which

the only words clear to anyone but Norah were “Muvver!” and “Bwown!”

“Yes, you come to your old Brown, my lamb!” said Brownie, holding out her arms. Davie accepted the invitation promptly, standing on her knee with a cheerful disregard of the effect of dusty sandals upon a white apron. The array on the table caught his eye. “Want!” he shouted, comprehensively.

Bill had followed with less energy.

“I say!” he uttered, brightening. “You have been going it, haven’t you! Is that all for the camp?”

“Most of it; but I should be glad to have your opinion on one of these,” said Norah, laughing. She selected a cake of a variety he favoured especially. “Sit down, old chap: you look as if Davie had been rather a handful.”

“Dates!” said Bill, blissfully, over his first bite. “Oh, he’s all right, Norah. He talks an awful lot, doesn’t he? I think he’s going to be a clergyman.”

“My goodness!” said the startled parent.

“Or a Member of Parliament, I don’t know what he’s saying most of the time, but he keeps on at it.”

“Then it is certainly a Member of Parliament,” said Tommy, chuckling.

“Listen to them insultin’ you, my pretty,” said Brownie, with indignation. Davie, his desires satisfied with a biscuit, gurgled defiance.

“He’s awfully energetic,” Bill remarked. “We’ve been all round the lagoon twice, and half-way down the paddock; and I never thought I’d get him away from the pig-sties. Then he reckoned he could catch a calf, but the calf reckoned the other way. He got wild over that. So we went to the wool-shed. I’m afraid he’s pretty dirty—do you mind?”

“Not a bit,” said Norah, placidly. “Have another cake?”

“Thanks,” said Bill. “They’re jolly good. He made up his mind I was a horse after that, so I’ve been one ever since!”

“Poor old Bill!” Norah provided a glass of milk to accompany the cake. “It has been a great help to have him out of the way, hasn’t it, Tommy?”

“Enormous,” agreed Tommy. “I don’t know how we should have managed without Bill.”

“I’m glad,” said Bill, heavily.

“A baby,” remarked Norah, “can be rather a trial, if you’re not used to them. Of course, you’re a sort of uncle, Bill, but all the same, I expect you’re a bit tired.”

“Well——” said Bill; and checked because he feared there was a note of complete agreement in his voice. “Don’t you go thinking I don’t like having him, Norah. He’s a great kid. When he rides you, though, he’s so jolly sure you’re a horse that you’ve got to gallop all the time. Of course, it’s topping that he’s so strong, isn’t it? I don’t suppose there are many babies as strong as Davie.”

"Or as 'eavy," said Brownie, solemnly.

"I shall take you away and bath you, my weighty son," said Norah, possessing herself of the culprit. "Say good night to your Uncle Bill, and tell him you're ashamed of yourself."

There was no shame about Davie. He shook hands with his late horse in manly fashion—one of Bill's private fears, quickly dispelled, had been that he would be expected to kiss Norah's baby. Then, chuckling loudly at some secret joke, the King-of-All-Billabongs was borne away to the bathroom, with Tommy in attendance.

The bath was always the crowning incident of the day to Davie. He scorned anything but a full-sized tub, and when let loose in it with a large sponge, a celluloid duck, and a red fish, without which to bath was unthinkable, he could be guaranteed to flood the bathroom and any unwary subject. To-night he was particularly uproarious. Shouts of laughter echoed to the kitchen, where Brownie and Bill sat gravely discussing the ways of the world.

"Now, ain't he a trick!" spoke Brownie, at an especially piercing shout, followed by a splash, mingled with mirth. "I'll bet he's landed Miss Tommy with the wet sponge, same as he did the other night. She 'ad to change to 'er skin, so she 'ad. His mother knows him better, an' she can ushally dodge; but Miss Tommy's too confidin'. It don't do to be confidin' with Davie. I guess you found that out, didn't you, Master Bill?"

"My word, yes!" agreed Bill. "I say, they're having an awful lark! Let's go and see." His injuries forgotten, he dashed upstairs, Brownie waddling in the rear.

Davie welcomed the new-comers gleefully. The tumult increased: the splashing developed until Brownie declared that the bathroom was "a perfick shambles." Finally, clad in brief pyjamas, his damp black curls in wild confusion, he slipped like an eel from Norah's knee and fled out on the landing.

"A proper tyrant, ain't he!" chuckled Brownie, delightedly. "Hark at him!"

The triumphant shout changed suddenly to a joyful cry. "Dim! Dim!" Davie rushed to the stair-head, sat down, and began to travel downstairs in the swiftest fashion he knew—which was to bump from stair to stair in a sitting position. No speed, in Davie's mind, could be swift enough to take him to the tall figure that had just come into view: Jim, in riding-kit, who took the stairs three at a time to meet him and swung him up to his shoulder.

"Jim! But how lovely!" Norah came hurrying after her son. "Is Wally here?"

"Yes—he thought you might be at Little Billabong, so he looked in there. He'll be over in a minute. Hullo, Bill!—been looking after things?" He

grasped Tommy's hand. "Brownie, I couldn't live any longer without a glimpse of you!"

"Well, an' we've been wantin' one of you badly enough," said Brownie, her old face puckered with delight as a great arm went round her shoulders. "Is the Master well?"

"Everybody's well. Bob is in great form, Tommy."

"The shaft?" asked Norah.

"Not bottomed yet, but near it. Wal and I thought we'd ride in and have a look at home, since to-morrow is Sunday."

There was a quick step on the gravel. Norah slipped past the group and fled outside to meet it. Davie uttered a shout—"Dad!" and wriggled out of Jim's arms to continue his journey downstairs.

"Well, it's worth being a miner, to get home again," said Wally, when the excitement had subsided, and Brownie had hurried off to the kitchen. He beamed on everyone: an arm round Norah, the other holding his son. "I believe he has grown, Norah."

"In wickedness, certainly," agreed Norah. "He found a trowel yesterday and did some most effective digging before I caught him. It was where I had sown seeds a week ago. Davie was far more pleased than I was. Bill has been in charge of him all the afternoon."

"I thought there was an aged look about you, Bill," grinned Wally. "Takes some holding in, doesn't he?"

"Oh, he's only got to know who's boss," said Bill, loftily—avoiding Norah's eye.

"That's the tone I try to adopt with him—but it doesn't always come off," remarked Wally. "You're rather a nice thing, Davie, when you've just had a bath. Which reminds me: Jim and I have been feverishly looking forward to large hot tubs ever since we left camp."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tommy. "We have just tubbed Davie, and the bathroom is a swamp!" She turned hurriedly towards it with visions of repairing the damage, but a hand fell on her shoulder.

"Keep back, woman!" said Jim, firmly. "Wally and I love swamps." He ran upstairs, with a call over his shoulder, "Bring towels, Wal!" The bathroom door slammed.

The girls were on the verandah when, after a long interval, Jim and Wally reappeared, refreshed, and in civilized clothing.

"The years have fallen from you," stated Norah, regarding them admiringly. "How does it feel to be clean again?"

"I don't object to the cleanliness," answered her husband, "but my neck revolts at this collar! I haven't worn a stud for weeks." He wriggled uncomfortably. "Oh, well, I suppose I'll get used to it."

"You won't have much time," Jim said. "We go back to-morrow."

"Why didn't I put on a tennis-shirt!" mourned Wally. "Coming back with us, Nor?"

"We were planning to go out in the morning," she answered. "Billy must take a load out—we have had a wild cooking-party to-day. Tommy and Bill and I meant to make a very early start and spend Sunday with you. But this is better. We can easily put off our trip until Monday."

"Well, we have a new plan," Jim said. "That's really why we came in. Murty thinks we are nearly down to the bottom in the shaft, and there have been better signs of gold. It occurred to us that since Tommy is the chief person concerned she ought to be on the spot at the finish." He smiled at her. "In fact, Tommy's belief in the Goddess Luck is so strong that Bob doesn't seem to think it's safe to go on without her!"

"You've got to sit on top of the windlass, Tommy, and mesmerize the Goddess," laughed Wally.

"Can do," replied Tommy, calmly. "How long must I sit there?"

"Not too long, we hope. It's a pity you don't smoke, but perhaps you can take out chewing-gum!"

Tommy lifted a scornful nose.

"Nasty stuff! I shall whistle—for luck. Then, do we follow you on Monday?"

"That's where our plan comes in," said Jim. "The brilliant idea came to me when I was wandering in Bill's cave yesterday. Here we are, said I to myself, with a whole suite of bedrooms, complete with all the latest improvements. Billy seems able to bring out enough food for a regiment, thanks to those pannier affairs you fixed up for the pack-saddle, Nor. Why not, says I, invite the girls and Bill to come out for a night or two?"

"Gosh!" burst from Bill. "Oh, Norah, you'll go, won't you? Say you will!"

"Do I need to, you old duffer!" she said, laughing. "I suppose we can manage blankets, Jim?"

"You won't have to bring out many. The nights are so much warmer that we are all over-blanketed. Dad and Bob will fix up bunks before we arrive. They're awfully keen that you should come. In fact, all hands were willing to sign an imploring round-robin urging your presence—only we believed it wasn't necessary." He looked at Tommy. "Was it?"

"Not so far as I am concerned," she smiled. "It is a beautiful plan, Jim. How lucky that we cooked so much. We knew we were overdoing it, but somehow we could not stop."

"With three extra appetites, we'll want it all," Jim said. "Especially when one is Bill's!"

"I wouldn't eat hardly a thing if we got short—true, I wouldn't, Jim!" said

Bill, earnestly. "I say, I've always wanted to sleep in a cave. We'll be like smugglers!" He twirled on one foot delightedly. "Do I take pyjamas, or can I sleep in my shirt?"

"That's a matter between you and your own conscience," said Wally, laughing.

"Smugglers never had pyjamas, I'll bet," Bill said. "But I don't believe they had bunks, either. You always see them in pictures just lying about in heaps."

"Murmuring in their dreams 'Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!' I suppose," grinned Wally. "Well, we'll all do that if the claim turns out trumps. It will have to be 'Yo-ho-ho, and a billy of tea!' until we get back to Billabong, but that's a detail."

"Have you done any more exploring in the caves, Jim?" asked Bill, eagerly.

"Oh, we have wandered about a little in our spare time. We found a new passage that twists for a long way and ends in a very little cave; a regular prison-cell. I could only just stand upright in it. Not a nice place: I wouldn't recommend it to any smuggler."

"Can I go there?"

"I suppose so, if we have time to take you. I don't think you'll like it."

"Any cave's a cave," stated Bill. "And I want to see every bit."

"So you shall, sooner or later. We tracked the passage that we first explored for a long way beyond the place where we stopped. It passes through two more caves, and it's going on still; we gave it up, for lack of time. I think the whole of that hill must be honeycombed with caves."

"Dad is gloomy over horrible ideas that the place is going to be a second Buchan or Jenolan," said Wally. "He has visions of chars-à-bancs with loads of trippers."

"There will be some merry blasting before they can run a motor-road to that place," commented Jim. "It would have to come in from the north, but, even so, it would be a tremendous business. There must be a road, of course, if the mine is a success, but it need not be a tourists' track—except for the most hardy brand of tourist."

"And we need not worry in that case, for with a mine in full swing Bob would have to clear his cattle out of that country: and if he finds gold, he won't mind," Wally said. "That's all arranged for in the dream-country, I suppose. Tommy?"

"I do not think we have dreamed that part yet," she said, twinkling. "You see all our dreams were made before this astonishing matter of a mine cropped up. But"—loftily—"there is nothing easier than to adjust a dream!"

"A mere matter of changing gears, I suppose," Wally laughed.

"Just that. When the Goddess Luck turns her head nothing will matter—her smile will be towards us. And if we go on picturing her smile, it is bound to come, whether by way of the mine or not."

"Will you say that if it turns out that we've bottomed a duffer?"

Tommy's eyes were bright as she looked up at the speaker.

"Yes, I will, Jim. And so will Bob. He has promised me."

"I believe you will," he said. "I believe you will. Still, we're not going to think of that, Tommy."

"I never do," she said. "I just go ahead and believe that everything is all right."

"My station, too?" asked Bill, a little wistfully. "Do you believe in that, Tommy?"

"But of course I do. When a boy makes up his mind when he is ten years old that he is going to have a station when he is a man—well, Bill, I do not believe he can miss it. Just go on knowing it will come if you make yourself fit for it."

"Jim'll jolly well see I do that!" stated Bill. "If I don't know something about cattle before I'm grown up, it won't be your fault, will it, Jim?"

"I'll do my bit," said Jim, tersely. "I've hopes, too—you haven't mistaken a bantam hen for a Shorthorn all these holidays, have you?" Further remarks were checked by a red-haired avalanche of boy, flinging himself upon him like a battering-ram.

"Save me, Tommy—I'm being killed!" begged Jim. "Why did I teach this thing to box?" He broke away and dashed across the garden, his long legs taking beds and bushes in great leaps: Bill pounding in the rear, uttering vengeful shouts. The gong sounded in the hall: Jim turned, dodged his pursuer neatly, and fled into the dining-room, where Bill, arriving breathlessly a moment later, found him at the head of the table, armed with the carving-knife.

"You wait!" threatened Bill, and subsided into his chair.

"This is what I come home for—to be bullied and knocked about!" sighed Jim. "Life is hard for a poor man. Chicken, Tommy?—not that you deserve it, for you didn't lift a finger to help me."

"Tommy wouldn't," jeered Bill. "She and I are pals—aren't we, Tommy?" He attacked his dinner contentedly.

In the dusk later on Norah and Jim strolled round the garden.

"It was a lovely plan you made," she said.

"Well—we all wanted to get you out, but chiefly we thought it would be a good thing to have Tommy there with Bob," he answered. "If the claim turns out poor it is going to hit him hard, no matter how brave a face he puts on it; and no one could help him as Tommy could. It would be a rotten job for him to have to come back to tell her bad news: if she is on the spot that will be saved

him.”

“Are you anxious about it? You sound very doubtful.”

“We’re simply ignorant. There have been a lot of hopes raised, and of course there must be some profit in it, if only a little. But it’s impossible not to hope for more, with all Murty’s talk of dead rivers. And how much do any of us know about whether it’s a dead river at all? I’ll admit I’ve got a bit jumpy in the last few days—and I know what Bob must be feeling. He’s hardly eating anything, and Wally thinks he sleeps badly.”

“Suspense isn’t an easy thing to live with,” Norah said, thoughtfully.

“It certainly is not. And Bob has had an over-dose, poor old chap. Tommy is so serene, whatever happens, that she will be like a rock beside him.”

Jim pulled hard at his pipe.

“Queer, isn’t it?” His voice was low. “Such a little bit of a thing, and she looks so soft you’d be almost afraid to touch her. But she’s like a rock for strength. It’s a dashed sight easier to put a rock aside than to get Tommy to change her mind!”

Norah slipped her hand through his arm.

“Poor old Jimmy!” she said softly.

Jim was silent for a moment, busy with his thoughts.

“Oh, well, I can take my gruel too, I suppose,” he said. “Sometimes I’m sorry I ever told you, Nor, for I know it has hurt you. But we’ve always told each other things since we were kids.”

“I hope we shall always do that,” Norah said. “And not even Wally knows this, Jim. It is the only thing I have ever kept from him.”

“Best not,” he said. “It was a bit of a help, to tell you. But I think you had better do what I mean to try—forget all about it.”

“No,” said Norah. “I go on hoping.”

She felt Jim’s arm tighten on hers, but he did not speak. They walked back slowly to the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

BACK AT "THE HOPE"

WELL, you really couldn't call it exactly a smugglers' cave," said Bill. "But it's a jolly good place, all the same."

"We had hopes that it might have been considered a ladies' bower," said Bob, modestly. "But nobody seems to take that view of it."

"That is because we have a feeling for Bill," Norah put in. "What would our William do in a ladies' bower?"

The great cave had been made ready by willing hands for its new tenants. Probably a certain amount of laughter had gone to the preparations. The fallen boulders blocking the doorway had been levered aside, so that there was a clear pathway. Within, three bunks were in readiness: one for Bill near the entrance, and those for Tommy and Norah farther back. A rather tattered piece of hessian hung on a string across the outer doorway. It was tied back now, but the furnishers demonstrated that it could be drawn across when necessary.

Having completed these basic arrangements the furnishers had given their fancy a free rein in more ambitious matters, providing luxuries and adornments not usually found in caves. Beside each bunk was a flat rock, bearing a candle, stuck upright by means of dropped wax, and a box of matches. Flour-sacks had been spread for the girls as bedside carpets; Bill, as a mere man, had not been given this delicate attention. A cracked shaving-mirror hung from a jutting point of rock, flanked on either side by a candle, stuck on convenient stalactites. Beneath it a slab of rock, supported on two boulders, formed a dressing-table: a similar one was equipped as a washstand with a tin basin and two enamelled mugs.

"Which, you will remember," Bob remarked, "are liable to be commandeered at any moment for camp use."

"Also the bucket," said Mr. Linton, regarding one which, brimming with water, stood beside the washstand. "The competition for that bucket is always keen—even without extra users. Lee Wing all but wept when we took it."

He paused.

"I should not like to put any undue restrictions on our guests," he resumed: "but may I gently hint that anyone throwing out water from the front door with vigour is liable to hit my tent? I would not mention this, but that the head of my bunk is very near the canvas!"

The guests hastened to assure him that caution would be observed in this respect.

Pillows were provided, consisting of flour-bags well stuffed with bracken

—Jim had been instructed to bring out pillow-cases.

"They won't fit, of course," said Bob, mournfully. "But you can lay them on top."

"This is luxury beyond all bounds," exclaimed Tommy. "And I thought we were coming out to rough it!"

Having placed flat rocks wherever it was in the least probable that a seat would be required, the furnishers had turned to artistic decoration—represented by tree-fern fronds ten feet long, which leaned in various degrees of drunkenness against the walls. It was conveyed to the guests that if the scent of withering fern became distasteful, nobody would be wounded if these were thrown out.

"I doubt if I could bring myself to do it," Tommy said. "It is a wonderful sight! You must have been toiling all day—and we pictured you having a peaceful Sunday!"

"As a change from the shaft, this has been distinctly peaceful," Bob assured her. "Of course, we felt that our genius was limited by our resources. The only thing we had in plenty was rock—and, by Jove, we used it!"

"I'm jolly glad you didn't use it in my bunk!" said Bill.

"Well, it's your domain, girls," observed Mr. Linton. "Bill can be cast out, or into one of the inner caves, whenever you don't want him. And considering the amount of food you have brought with you, we don't mind how long you stay. If supplies run short your horses will be saddled and you'll be gently but firmly headed for home!"

"We will curb our appetites," said Tommy, laughing. "I have felt for some time that I ought to go in for slimming."

"You!" he said. "We might not be able to see you if you did. Now, Norah might well reduce a little."

"But she won't," said Norah, firmly. "This family is thin enough, in all conscience. Now let us go and look at the shaft; we're dying to see how far it has gone."

The track to "The Hope" was now worn smooth by the daily passing to and fro of heavy boots, and all rocks had been cleared away. The claim itself was almost hidden under great heaps of wash-dirt, stacked in orderly fashion, leaving the stage and windlass clear. In the midst gaped the great mouth of the shaft, a dark empty space ringed by the yellow masses of gravel and clay.

They leaned over to look down into the black depths. The sides were smooth, timbered to prevent the earth falling in; scarcely could the bottom be seen. Jim kept a close grip on Bill's coat.

"Steady there, Bill—you don't want to take a header, do you?"

"I can't see a thing," said Bill, aggrieved. "Let me lie down and look in."

He lay flat, his head over the edge, peering eagerly: then wriggled back,

scrambling to his feet.

"I thought I might see lumps of gold sticking out; but there isn't a thing!" he said, disgustedly. "It's only like an old well!"

"Very like," said Bob, laughing; "only there's no water, thank goodness! And we also keep a look-out for chunks of gold, but they're not like plums in a pudding."

"Can I hunt for some in the earth?"

"Yes, if you keep to the outside of the heaps," Jim answered. "Guests on the sides next the shaft are strictly barred. Lee Wing took it into his head to fossick there one day, with the result that he showered us with gravel."

"And I can tell you that when you've dug up the stuff and had it hauled out, the last thing you want is to have it hurled back on your head," said Wally, laughing. "We were quite peevish with Lee Wing. The poor old chap made some extra-special flapjacks for supper as a peace-offering."

"Did he find any gold?"

"Trust a Chinese!" grinned Wally. "I've always heard they could pick up nuggets where no white man could see even the colour. Lee Wing found quite a decent bit."

"He didn't want to keep it, though," Bob observed. "He took it back to the cook-hut, washed it well, and offered it to me in the evening. We had quite an argument before he consented to stick to it."

"Come and look at Dad's track," suggested Jim. "It's a great job."

The track wound down to the creek, avoiding rough ground as far as possible. It was bare of all scrub now, and every stump had been hewn off below the surface. Holes had been filled up and hillocks levelled: and it ended on a flat place where the wash-dirt could be conveniently stacked, close to the water.

"The cart will be the next thing to make," observed Mr. Linton, when the track had been duly admired. "I have written for some small wheels; when they come, Billy can bring them out with the wood sawn into lengths. We'll put it together here. Then we can begin moving the wash-dirt."

"Do you think you will ever come home again to run Billabong?" Norah asked, laughing.

"Oh, I'm not going to stay here long," he answered. "I admit that I'm enjoying it, but a few weeks will be enough for me. After that, I'll leave it to the boys. We have not mapped out any plans yet. Everything depends on the shaft at the moment, so far as I'm concerned."

"But, in any case, the dirt has to be washed?" Norah asked.

"Oh, of course. That means an indefinite time of very dull work, if the yield is poor; and it won't keep me here. Murty can take charge of it, under Bob."

"We can arrange all that later," said Jim. "If I try to think out all we may have to do, I feel dizzy—considering that we all have claims, but we haven't done more than peg them out. So we try to forget all about them, and concentrate on 'The Hope.' When we get to bed-rock there we'll know more about the future."

They strolled back to the camp. Norah and her father fell behind the others.

"I want gold to be found, for Tommy and Bob—I want that terribly," she said. "But, apart from that, Dad, I don't think I like it. Perhaps it's foolish—but we have enough, you and Jim and Wally and I: we have never been troubled about money. And all this—well, it does not seem a bit like Billabong."

"I know how you feel, because it's the way I feel, myself," he said. "Gold-mining is a feverish business; it unsettles one, and it brings evil so often. Certainly these hills will be full of the wrong sort of people if this is a big find. Of course, I'm not such a fool as to refuse gold if I find it. It won't hurt us, my girl, because we've always gone on the principle of helping people when we could. We'll pass on our luck, and then there will be no evil in it. It's when a man becomes a hoarder that he needs to watch what is becoming of his soul."

"You certainly trained us not to hoard," she said, smiling.

"I didn't have to do much training. Probably it was your mother's spirit in you: she had a horror of it always. We had only five years together, but those five years taught me all I know that's worth knowing. So I tried to do the things she cared about, and luck has never left me."

He stood still, looking at the wild country about them.

"It won't leave us now, Norah." There was a ring in the deep voice. "We'll carry on in the same way. And remember, this can't touch Billabong. Any settlement must come in from the north; if these hills are invaded we shall be outside it all. You need not fear for the boys. They may profit by the gold, but it will be only an incident in their lives. Can you imagine a sackful of nuggets interesting Wally and Jim as much as a herd of decent Shorthorns?"

"I can't," Norah laughed. "Dad, what would you have done if we had found gold in a Billabong paddock?"

David Linton considered this, a twinkle in his eye.

"I think I should immediately have chosen that spot for a new set of stock-yards!" he decided. "We should have had to make digging the post-holes a family matter. After that, I fancy the mine would have taken care of itself!"

They came in sight of the camp-fire. Murty and the men, who had been riding, were among the group. The old Irishman came quickly to meet them, his face beaming.

"'Tis like ould times to have you an' Miss Tommy in camp," he said. "There's something wrong, Miss Norah, when you an' she are out of things. Not as ye've been that entirely, but—well, we want all the luck we can get

here, and 'tis yourselves that bring it. An' isn't it the fine bedroom we're after gettin' ready for ye?"

"It is, indeed, Murty: we never camped in such splendour before," she laughed. "You must have worked very hard over it."

"'Twas a thrifle," said Murty, airily. "There was plinty of hands to shift them bits of rock. 'Twas the Masther and Mr. Bob that did all the fancy-work. A great thing it was for Mr. Bob, too, he's been lookin' like an ould man all the week, but over the cave this mornin', when he wasn't whistlin' he was on the broad grin! An' how's the wee lad?"

"Fit as possible, Murty, and very excited at seeing his father. I'm sure he misses you: if I take him to the stables he calls 'Murty!' all the time."

"D'ye tell me that! Well, I'm shtarved for a sight of him. I'm thinkin' of ridin' in next Sunday, just to have a look at the place: I've not been off it so long, all the years I've been on it!"

"There will be a big welcome for you," said Norah. "Brownie says that life isn't the same without you. She has nobody to yarn to but Fred, and she doesn't find him much of a substitute."

"I cud do with a cup of tay in Mrs. Brown's kitchen, an' herself sittin' there in her white apron. That's a very comfortable sight for a man, Miss Norah. Is the invalid gettin' on well?"

"Fred? Oh, yes: he isn't really an invalid now. But I think he is in no hurry to move."

"I wouldn't wonder," said Murty. "Livin' in luxury he do be, after roughin' it in the hills. We tuk a ride this afternoon to see his mates, just by way of passin' the time o' day, friendly-like. I'll not deny we was wishful to know if they'd noticed annything about us."

"They have not been this way, have they, Murty?" she asked.

"Sorra a sign of them, Miss Norah. This corner is a long way off their beat. But there's been a deal of thraffic on the thrack to Billabong, an' we thought they might have seen Billy comin' an' goin' with the loads. An' Mr. Jim has kept them goin' in tucker—an' they might have begun to think it wasn't just on account of their good looks!"

"What did you gather, Murty?" David Linton asked.

"Not a thing in the worrld, sir. Either they're as innocent as babies, or they're pretty good at keepin' their mouths shut. We had a great colloque about all the throuble there is in lookin' for gould, an' the shmall chance of findin' that same. They showed us a little specimen they were plazed with, an' we said it was good—as far as it wint. An' that was throe: only it didn't go far."

"Poor beggars!" said Mr. Linton. "I hope we're going to put them on to something better."

"Indade, we couldn't help hopin' that ourselves, sir. Great patience they do be havin', an' a harrd life. Wan of them's an ould man, too. An' the other has a wife an' child in Broad's Creek. I'd say they were decent fellows. Ye might do worrse than put them on here on wages when the washin' begins, sir. They could worrk claims for themselves if so be the result was good enough to encourage them."

"That's an idea, Murty. I'll see them myself in a few days."

He went over to consult Jim. Murty looked after him.

"He's been worrkin' like a lad again, Miss Norah. Ye seen his thrack?"

"I have indeed, Murty. I hope he didn't work too hard."

"He did not. He was always fit an' happy over it, an' ready for his three good meals a day. Lots of odd jobs he's afther doin' as well. But they're all a bit on the jump, especially Mr. Bob. It'll do them the worrld of good to have you an' Miss Tommy here. Get them singin' round the fire to-night, Miss Norah, the way you'd be singin' in ould times. Mr. Jim's lookin' pretty grave nowadays."

They looked at each other, and Norah wondered how much was seen by the old man who loved Jim. There was not much hidden from Murty.

"You always have good ideas, Murty," she said, gently. "We'll have a sing-song—all of us. And you must sing us some of the old Irish songs. How long is it since we heard you sing 'Mary Ann Malone'?"

"Well, I'm singin' it, an' a good many more, to wee Davie sometimes," confessed Murty, bashfully. "He have a great wish for the ould songs, the same as Masther Jim an' you had when you were shmall."

"Oh, we haven't lost our wish for them," Norah said, quickly.

"You'd laugh to see the little lad," said Murty. "Niver a worrd does he understand, of course, but he nods the curly head of him, an' as soon as I've finished wan, 'More!' says he. So I go on till me ould throat's as hoarse as a crow. Yerra, Miss Norah, I'll be glad whin we all go home again!"

"Come every Sunday, Murty dear: then the time will not seem so long," said Norah.

"I will, so. I'd got settled down to the diggin' and pickin', but to-day I've had the feel of a horse undher me again, an' I'm thinkin' it's made me reshtless," admitted the old man. "Come on, now, Miss Norah, an' sit down. We've some fine rock-chairs by the fire—ye wouldn't call them well-sprung, but I know ye won't grumble at a little thing like that!"

There were no grumblers round the camp-fire that evening. They sung all the songs they knew, and a great many that they did not know very well. Bob, to the delight of everyone, threw himself gaily into it—sitting on the ground at Tommy's feet and shouting choruses with all the vigour of a schoolboy. Songs old and new they sang: school songs, war songs, songs of a bygone day such as

still linger among people of simple hearts. Murty gave them Irish ballads: Dave shyly “obliged” with a long and melancholy ditty that moved most of his hearers to struggling with secret laughter. Tommy’s “turn” was gay little French songs, which puzzled the men for a moment and then wrought them to a pitch of wild applause.

“It’s foreign, all right,” remarked Dave. “But I don’t care how foreign it is as long as she’ll go on singin’ it like that!”

Lee Wing squatted at the door of the cook-hut, a broad smile on his yellow face. It was not the music of China: perhaps he had forgotten the clashing music of his own land. The people of his adoption were happy, and that was enough for old Lee Wing.

David Linton was very content. He watched the firelight that flickered on the ring of faces: Jim near Tommy, Norah leaning against Wally’s knee, little Bill beside them: the men at a little distance, friends of long years. The wild bush closed them in. But it was his own Billabong: transplanted to a new setting, yet the same.

They were all smiling, their eyes on Murty as he sang:

“She was a great, big, shtout, sthrong agricultural lump of an Irish gerrl!

Her face was all her fortune, an’ her figure was all her own.

She cud sthrike that harrd, ye’d think ye was hit by the kick of a mule!

Oh, the full-of-a-house of an Irish gerrl was Mary Ann Malone!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE PROVING OF THE GAME

DAWN came softly into the great cave. No ray of sunlight could enter there, but the light grew, accompanied by the twittering and calling of birds in the trees outside, and the gay carol of a magpie.

Bill stirred and woke. For a moment he was completely bewildered by his strange bed and the unfamiliar surroundings. Then he remembered, and grinned delightedly.

“Jolly!” he murmured. He lay for a few minutes in complete happiness, listening to the birds and watching the trees that showed through the doorway—the cave-dwellers having refused to sleep with the curtain drawn. Then it occurred to him to wonder whether Norah and Tommy were awake; a glance showed him they were not. There were no sounds of movement outside: no smell of wood-smoke. That would come when Lee Wing had rolled out of his blankets. Bill knew that it was the cook’s job to be first astir.

The restlessness peculiar to small boys took hold of him presently. He decided to get up and prowl round the caves. To Bill they were his very own caves: mysterious and splendid places to which he had boldly let in the light.

He longed intensely to explore the inner passages, especially the new one that he had not yet seen. He pictured it in his mind as he slipped into his gym shoes and overcoat, shivering a little in the keen spring air. The notion of it caught his fancy: a long, twisty passage, ending in a tiny cave with no exit.

“That’s the sort of private cave that I’d like to have for my very own,” he thought. “I could keep all my things in it, and nobody would be allowed to go there unless I took them.”

He pictured the scene at school when he would tell the other fellows all about it. They were always keen to hear his stories of Billabong—stories that lost nothing in the telling. Boys from country districts, whose fathers were squatters, might—and did, very often—sniff at these recitals, asking with jeers if he thought his old Billabong was the only station in Australia; but the Melbourne boys listened open-mouthed and enviously. Wouldn’t they just stare when he told them about his caves—how he had opened them up, explored them, slept in them!

“They’ll never believe half of it!” he reflected; and then remembered with satisfaction that Wally, who was a magician at camera-work, had promised to take flashlight photographs of them and to give him copies. Bill determined to be a central figure in at least one print. The most unbelieving boy in his form couldn’t dispute the evidence of the camera. Glorious ideas of offering them to

the School magazine floated into his mind. That would be fame indeed—and the only time his name had ever been in the “mag” was when he had won an egg-and-spoon race!

He peeped into the entrance of the new passage, and even went a yard or two along it, greatly longing. But his promise to Jim was a thing that he did not dream of breaking, and he was out again in a moment. Jim had promised to take him to the little cave as soon as he could, and Bill told himself there was no sense in being impatient. So he wandered happily about the three large caves, flashing his electric torch upon the stalactites in the inner ones—careful not to awaken Norah and Tommy, who slumbered peacefully: and he sat down in the darkest one and imagined himself a smuggler captain, awake among his sleeping band—tarry ruffians, worn out with a long night of dodging a Revenue cutter in a rough sea.

This was a soothing picture; it became so real that he could almost hear his ruffians snoring. All about him, he knew, were the goods they had chanced life and liberty to bring to land: kegs of brandy, tobacco, French lace, puncheons of rum. Bill was not quite sure that he knew what a puncheon was, but it sounded the sort of thing a smuggler would use for rum. There would be pieces-of-eight, too, and gold moidores—or was it only pirates who had those luscious-sounding coins? Anyhow, he reflected, there wasn't a whole lot of difference between pirates and smugglers.

He was not in the big cave, in his fancy. That was too ordinary a place, and too liable to attack; no snoring for his ruffians if he had not a better hiding-place for his goods than that. No; they were safe in the little inner cave, with a trusty man on guard at the entrance to the twisty passage. Even if he were surprised and overpowered by the Revenue men they were safe, since the foe could only come in single file along the narrow way to the cave. Bill toyed with this idea, deciding that it might be prudent to see to the priming of his pistols: but at this moment a voice fell on his ear. It was Jim's and—yes, there was the crackling of dry sticks. The smugglers' den abruptly lost its charm. He hurried into the open air, where Lee Wing already had the billy boiling, and the tents were yielding up their sleepers: and all the jolly business of early tea, a creek-bathe, and breakfast were awaiting him.

There was more joy after breakfast, for Murty and the men had the first shift at “The Hope,” and Jim was free.

“Who's coming to explore caves?” Jim asked, as he lit his pipe. “Electric torches for everyone who wants to come: Dad has nasty ideas about the lantern fizzling out in an awkward place.”

“I have a high regard for the lantern—but it's a thing of moods,” said Mr. Linton. “There's no harm in carrying torches as an extra.”

“That's so,” agreed Jim. “Well—who says caves?”

“Me,” said Bill, firmly.

“Anyone else? Tommy, I won’t take you; it’s really not interesting, once you’ve seen a bit of it.”

Tommy flashed a grateful look at him.

“No, I think I would rather stay with Bob,” she answered. “I feel that he is going to hover round the claim.”

“Don’t let him: make him take you for a walk along the creek. Norah?”

“Yes, I’ll come,” said Norah. “So will Wally.”

“And who told you that?” asked Wally. “I may have all sorts of other plans.”

“Yes, but you won’t let your only wife wander inside a hill without you.”

“It’s a vile place,” affirmed Wally. “The passage is always becoming an inch too low for me: I bumped my head about seventy-five times the other day. However, I suppose I had better go and look after you. That new passage has some bad holes in its floor, and it would be quite easy to put a leg down into space.”

“Oh, the holes are only at one place,” Bill said, defending his cave.

“I thought you hadn’t been there yet,” said Wally.

“Jim told me. He says it’s quite safe if you watch your step.”

“So it is, but you certainly need to watch it,” remarked Jim. “Otherwise, the floor is better going than in the other passages; the rock is smoother—not so many hollows and bumps. Well, I’m going to light the lantern.”

Bill had no criticisms to make of the new passage. He loved every yard of it, as he followed Jim along the narrow slit that wriggled deep into the hill, sometimes twisting like a snake, sometimes with right-angled turns so sharply cut that one might almost have believed that tools had been used to hew it. The holes in the floor fascinated him: he lay flat, striving to pierce with his torch the black depths below. Nothing could be seen. Jim dropped a stone into one; they heard it bound and rebound from rock to rock, and then, after what seemed a long pause, came a faint splash as it found deep-hidden water.

“Whew-w!” Bill, still flat, twisted his head to look up at Jim. “It must be miles deep!”

“Something like it,” Jim agreed. “We’ll get some magnesium tape and drop a lighted bit down some day. Then it may be possible to see something. But I fancy that old hole will keep most of its secrets.”

The little cave, when at length they reached it, proved to be just the cave of Bill’s imaginings. It was quite small, and the roof was low; there was no visible outlet, though a threadlike space in the circular wall, running from roof to floor at one point, seemed to hint that the passage might continue beyond it. That was another secret Mother Nature was likely to keep. Bill put an ear to the crack, listening, but there was nothing to hear.

“Jolly place,” he said, looking round it. “I’m going to have this for my private cave!”

“Everyone to his taste,” laughed Wally. “I prefer something with a little more head-space.”

“It suits me, all right,” Bill said. “Wonder what’s up above it?”

“More caves, probably,” said Jim. “There’s certainly air coming through those slits in the roof: it’s not stuffy here. The passage slopes downward a little all the way, did you notice? Oh, this hill is nothing but a big honeycomb.”

“Suppose you tried to blast a way through here?” Bill suggested, his ear pressed to the crack.

“Then we should probably smash up the honeycomb considerably, and do no good at all. Once these places were loosened, and rocks split, not a yard of it would be safe.”

“Oh!” murmured Bill, rather dashed. “Well, some day I’m going to invent an electric machine and tunnel through here!”

“I wish you luck,” grinned Jim. “Now we had better get a move on, if you want to explore along the passage that doesn’t end”: and Bill, rather reluctantly, had to leave his cave to its silence and darkness.

They came out into the open an hour later, somewhat foot-sore with stumbling over uneven rock; all, except Bill, very glad to get back into daylight and to feel the clean breeze.

“I believe you’d like to stay there all day, Bill,” remarked Wally, looking at the boy’s eager face.

“So I would,” rejoined Bill, sturdily. “If I was let, I’d take the lantern and explore every bit all over again! Wally, can you take a flashlight of my little cave?”

“I don’t think it would be worth it,” began Wally. He saw the disappointment in Bill’s eyes, and relented. “Oh, I’ll try, if you’re keen on it, old chap. I must write to Melbourne for the things I need, first.”

“You write to-day, and let Billy take the letter back,” begged Bill. “I want to see how you do it. Can I help?”

“I expect I can find a job for you,” said Wally, good-naturedly. “You can take the photograph of your private cave, and then, if it’s a failure, you can’t blame me!”

“Rather not!” said Bill, beaming. “I’d love to show the chaps a photo I took myself.”

“Better have two,” Jim suggested. “One that you take yourself, and another by Wally, with you sitting in the middle of the cave like a hermit in a cell.”

“You let me have your revolver, and it’ll be more like a smuggler,” was Bill’s amendment. “Hermits were tame old things. That’s a true smugglers’ cave.”

"I suppose it's a minor point that smugglers didn't have revolvers," grinned Jim. "It would be quite effective if we blacked you all over and gave you the stone axe. Hullo, there's Murty! What's he up here for, I wonder?—his shift isn't over yet."

Murty came hurrying up the track, full of suppressed excitement.

"We're on the bottom, Mr. Jim!" he shouted. "I've dhruv the crowbar down to it. Let ye hurry down—we've a lot of stuff loosened, but I won't send anny up till ye're all there."

"Where's Mr. Bob?" asked Jim, quickly.

"He's there, an' Miss Tommy an' the Masther." Murty turned and ran back towards "The Hope," the others following, helter-skelter.

The little group near the head of the shaft was grave and silent. Tommy had slipped her hand through Bob's arm. He stood with compressed lips, his hat pushed back from his fair hair, his face showing all the repressed strain of the past weeks. Jim went quietly to his other side, dropping a hand on his shoulder.

Murty was leaning over the shaft, his hand on the windlass-rope.

"Send her up, boys!" he shouted.

"Ready!" came a muffled shout from below.

Murty clicked his tongue. At the signal the old pony walked slowly away down the track her feet had made. The rope tightened, beginning to wind up on the windlass. Slowly, very slowly, it crept up. Just at the end of the "horse-walk" the leather bucket came in sight above the staging, full to the brim with loose wash-dirt. The pony stopped.

Murty leaned over, swung the bucket to the staging, and unhooked it. With a mighty heave he raised it and emptied out its contents upon a bare space on the ground. The heads gathered round him eagerly as he ran his fingers through the mass, scattering it.

"By the powers!" he yelled. "Ye've bottomed dead on the gutter, Mr. Bob!"

There was little need to look closely. Amid the confusion of pebbles, gravel and sand, the gold showed clearly. Jim swooped suddenly and fished out a big nugget, handing it to Tommy. A shout of triumph from Bill came as he plunged upon another.

"I've been pretty sure of it," Murty uttered, his face a study of delight. "I'd have put me shirt on this bein' a dead river, an' so it is! We're right on the bed. Talk about a jeweller's shop! ye can pick it out like plums out of a cake!"

"Then—there's no doubt?" Bob faltered.

"Doubt! Yerra, boy, what more d'ye want? Don't ye see that if it's like this, with the gould in slugs showin' at this rate, right in the drift, ivery ounce of the dirt is houldin' the dust! We'll wash it out like they did on the Oxley.

Even if this claim is only a pocket—an' it may be that same, for ye never can tell—ye're a rich man, Mr. Bob. An' so's Miss Tommy!" He gripped a hand of each.

"I—I——" stammered Bob.

Wild yells came from below.

"What about it, Murty?"

"Just what I'm afther tellin' ye—dead on the gutter," bawled Murty down the shaft. Cheers came from Dave and Mick, and an imploring shout:

"Then for goodness' sake send down the bucket and let's come up an' have a look at it!"

Jim sprang to the rope and backed the pony. One after another the earth-stained men came up, to join the excited group. Everybody shook hands with everybody else.

"If this claim is only a pocket, then it's shares all round!" said Bob, finding his voice.

Laughter greeted this statement.

"It's your claim and Tommy's, my boy," said David Linton. "I don't think you'll find anyone willing to go shares."

"I reckon there's plenty all round it," cried Dave. "An' if there isn't—well, we've had the fun of gettin' it. Three cheers for 'The Hope,' boys! It ain't no Hope now—we'll have to call it 'The Dead Cert'!"

The cheers rang out, Bill's shrill treble above all the rest. Tommy and Bob stood among their friends, flushed, smiling at each other, overwhelmed. A kookaburra alighted on a tree close by, surveyed the scene curiously, and broke into a long peal of laughter.

"Listen—he's cheering too!" cried Bill. It broke the tension; everyone joined in the bird's laughter.

Bob looked round the group, gratitude in his eyes.

"You—you've all been such bricks!" he began. Suddenly he faced round on Tommy and seized her hands.

"Tommy! Tommy! We'll get back your little blue car!"

CHAPTER XX

NIGHT AND SILENCE

DAVID LINTON sent all his party early to bed that night. The day had been a strenuous one, full of hard work and excitement. Murty and the men had stoutly refused to cease work during the afternoon shift: they had remained on the surface of the claim, overhauling the wash-dirt as the buckets came up from the toilers below. All the party had helped in this; the competition was keen as to who should have the best total of gold for Bob when the time came for him to emerge from the shaft.

The result had been beyond their hopes. The workers paused at dusk, weary and earth-stained, amazed and delighted at the amount of free gold in the alluvial drift-soil. Murty had washed out a bucketful, with Bill as assistant. They came back from the creek, jubilant and very wet, bearing a precious load in their tin basin.

"Gould-plate, ye might be callin' it," said Murty. "I'm thinkin' the King himself wouldn't be the worrse of havin' a few dishes like that!"

Bob and Tommy walked down to the creek after supper, along Mr. Linton's track—soon to be worn bare by the carriage of the cart-loads of wash-dirt. They did not talk much; the sudden fulfilment of their dreams had left them shaken. Bob smoked in silence, sitting on a log by the water: Tommy beside him, in quiet peace.

"It's queer," he said, at length. "I have a feeling that it all came of your game of thinking-true. Everything has seemed to go right since we tried to play it. Certainly the Goddess Success has turned her smile to us, Tommy, old girl!"

"But everything came right in our minds first," she said. "Before you found the claim you had ceased to worry—even though the game seemed stupid to you at first."

"It did seem stupid," he admitted. "I'm too practical, I suppose. There was just one thing that made me play it, Tommy—and play it hard."

"Yes?"

"Your selling your car. When you did that—and I suddenly realized that you were really happy over it, and that I'd be a brute to spoil your happiness; well, I made up my mind to play your game for all I was worth."

"And it worked," she said, gently. "You found you could be happy, too."

"Yes, I did. I couldn't let myself reason about it, but I was quite happy. It was rather fun, building castles. Tommy, I keep feeling that it was queer—about finding the claim, I mean. *Why* did I go to that place? There was nothing, really, to take me there. Only, something seemed to make me—to draw me

on.”

“And to drop you into it?” she laughed.

“Well, Mother Earth did that. Perhaps she was in league with your Goddess Success. Anyhow, she dropped me into the middle of our luck. I keep thinking about it: the strange feeling that I *had* to go there. Any sensible person would say it was just coincidence, I suppose. But—I might so easily have gone by.”

Tommy made no answer for a few moments. She was thinking deeply.

“Life is full of queer things,” she said, at length. “It might be called just coincidence that I stumbled on the Billabong people, perfect strangers, in a crowded street in Liverpool: and it changed our lives. Bob, shall we say that when we keep on believing all will come right the right coincidences come our way? I can’t explain them. Only I feel all through me that brave thoughts draw happy things to their thinkers.”

“And cowardly thoughts the other kind of things, I suppose?”

“But, of course! Do not the people who think and talk ill-health and bad luck always get them? And people who think fear-thoughts have always plenty to make them afraid: such things seem to surround them. And most fears are just imagination.”

“There was a wise man who once said that when you walk boldly up to the fiercest-looking lion in the path he’ll generally turn out to be only a waggle-dog!” said Bob, laughing.

“Yes!” she said, eagerly. “And if you keep on refusing to believe in him he will often turn out not there at all! But if you go on just knowing you’ll find good luck—why, you meet it, Bob.”

Tommy thought over their talk later on that night, lying wakeful in her little bunk in the great cave. She had fallen asleep quickly on going to bed, too tired to keep her eyes open, but in a few hours she had awakened suddenly, and sleep refused to come back.

She thought over all the wonder and excitement of the day. How good they had all been to Bob, to herself! Very clearly she knew that no find of gold for themselves could have given them such deep joy. She smiled to remember how Wally had picked her up bodily and hugged her, as though she had been little Davie; she recalled Mr. Linton’s delighted face. And Jim’s long hand-grip. She knew that no one was quite so glad as Jim.

And Norah, whose caresses were so rarely given, had held her tightly that night; the few words she had said lay warm at Tommy’s heart. There was not one of them, even among the old station hands, who had not given her some happy thing to remember.

Now that the solid foundation had miraculously grown up under the dream-castles. Tommy found herself curiously unable to think clearly about them. In

the days when common sense—that too-sure possession—would have said they were impossible, she had been able to make them clean-cut and real to the smallest detail. Now all was a blur; when she tried to fix them steadily her hurrying mind raced over a thousand new possibilities. Tommy sighed, wishing that sleep would come.

A little sound caught her ear. The cave was dark; but outside was clear moonlight, and a little of its shining crept through the outer doorway. As she turned at the sound it seemed to her that a small figure crossed the dimly-lit space.

Tommy felt for her torch and switched it on. She saw Bill, barefooted and in his pyjamas, standing in the middle of the cave. He moved uncertainly, walked towards the door, and then turned back. The ray from the torch did not seem to have attracted his attention at all. He faced it now, his eyes wide open, but unseeing. Tommy realized, with a little start, that he was asleep.

She was about to speak, but hesitated. Sleep-walkers, she knew, should not be wakened abruptly, for fear of shock. Only, if he went out of the cave she must follow him and bring him back. She hoped that he would go back to bed naturally, as he had done once before when he had walked in his sleep at Billabong. In case he did not, however, it was as well to be ready. Tommy slipped quietly out of bed and put on coat and shoes.

To do so, she had to lay the torch on the rock near her bed, and Bill passed out of her vision. She snatched it up again as quickly as possible. Where was he? She took a few swift steps towards his bunk, then paused and swept the little ray round the cave.

Bill was walking steadily along the opposite wall. There was something purposeful about him; he moved with quick, light steps, his head up, his lips parted as though he were about to speak. Suddenly he turned inwards and disappeared within the entrance to the passage that led to the little cave.

Tommy gasped, and sprang forward. Then, on an impulse of prudence, she ran back, snatched his overcoat from a rock, and went swiftly after him.

Quick as she was, Bill had been quicker. The little feet must have moved almost at a run in the narrow, winding passage. Tommy, hurrying in his wake, marvelled at the sure instinct of the sleep-walker—the mysterious power that guides and guards such helpless ones. Turn after turn, and he was still ahead and invisible.

Not until she had gone far into the hill did Tommy remember what she had heard about the holes in the floor. She caught her breath in horror. A wordless prayer for help went up. Then she called to him loudly—better to risk shock than injury.

“Bill! Bill!” Her voice echoed about her, as though the walls thrust it back. She was running and stumbling, edging round turns and angles, calling as she

went. The torch sent out a fitful ray, held in a shaking hand. A movement deflected it downwards—and Tommy recoiled just in time.

The holes were at her feet. She paused uncertainly, any realization of her own escape lost in the great wave of relief that swept over her. Bill must have passed them as easily as he had traversed any part of the passage.

Now she knew she must find him, and she breathed freely. With careful steps she edged past the gaping holes, and went on quietly, wondering what she should do to avoid giving him any shock. Already he might have awakened: perhaps terrified at finding himself alone, in such a place.

She began to sing gently as she went, one of the little French songs Bill liked: the words were beyond him, but the gay, lilting tunes always pleased his ear. That would not wake him, she thought: if he were already awake he would know that help was near. She pressed on, wondering how far ahead the cave lay. The darkness before her seemed to grow deeper; in a moment she realized why, with a pang of dismay. The torch was dying!

Then she hurried anew, almost running, but not ceasing to sing; and as she sang, it seemed that another part of her prayed. And, as if in answer, came a high, quivering voice.

“Is that you, Tommy?”

“Yes, Bill, dear—it’s all right.”

Ahead, in the faint ray, she saw the entrance to the cave. She ran to it. Bill was standing in the centre, rubbing his eyes. He clung to her, and she put her arms round him.

“I—I didn’t know where I was—and it was all black,” he quavered. “How did I get out of bed?”

“You took a little walk in your sleep,” she told him. “Don’t trouble—you are quite safe.” She dropped the torch into her pocket. He caught at her, feeling her arms leave him. “Don’t go away, Tommy!”

“Go away?—you old stupid! But I have your coat, and you must put it on.

“Won’t I go back to bed?”

“Soon—but you had better have your coat.” She put him into it, buttoning it and turning up the collar.

“Where am I?” he asked, pitifully. “Tommy, my feet are all sore!”

“You have had a long walk, you see,” she said, gently. “Too much thinking about your private cave, Billy-boy: you went to find it in your sleep.” She took out the torch: it was almost exhausted, but the flicker of light showed the bewildered boy where he was.

To her relief, he seemed more interested than surprised.

“Well, I’m blessed!” he uttered. “I was dreaming about it, Tommy. Did I really come here by myself?”

“Yes, with me trotting behind you. It was lucky that I saw you go. And

now the torch has decided to die, and that is awkward. But we shall manage.”

As she spoke, the torch gave its final flicker and went out. Tommy put it into her pocket and spoke lightly.

“We shall have to play your game of smugglers, Bill, and sleep in this cave.”

“Can’t we go back?”

“We dare not risk the broken part of the floor. You crossed it in your sleep, but we could not do it awake and in darkness. We must just wait here and take care of each other until help comes.”

“They’ll find us—won’t they?”

“Of course they’ll find us. You don’t imagine Jim will lose much time about it, do you? But he will not know until Norah gets up. Then there will be a great scurry round-about for Bill and Tommy, and Jim will guess very soon where we are.”

“Yes, I know he’ll guess,” said Bill, with relief. “I say, Tommy, I’ve given you an awful lot of bother!”

“Not a bit. Now you must sit down; we’ll lean against the wall, and be as comfortable as we can.”

They groped for the wall, found it, and felt for a smooth place to lean against. Tommy drew the boy down beside her.

“There is one great piece of luck,” she said, cheerfully. “I had no time to bring your shoes, and they would be cold comfort for sore feet if I had: but I have a soft woollen scarf in my coat-pocket, and it will do splendidly to wrap your poor old feet.”

“No, indeed—you put it on!” he protested.

“I don’t want it—I have this great collar to turn up.” She knelt beside him, carefully wrapping the scarf about his feet.

“Now, curl them up and put them on this fold of my coat. You’ll have to pretend you are quite small, and just snuggle up to me.” She drew him close to her.

“I—I guess I don’t feel awfully big,” he confessed. “It’s great to have you, Tommy.” He nestled against her.

“We’ll be small together. Getting warm, Bill?”

“Yes. Are you all right?”

“Quite. Now, we’ll just go to sleep and forget everything.”

“I’m awfully sleepy.” The head against her shoulder grew heavy. For a minute he did not speak, and Tommy thought he had gone to sleep. But he started, and a little shiver ran over him. His hand caught at Tommy’s and gripped it.

“Oh—it was lovely to hear you coming—singing!” he whispered.

She began to sing again, very softly, a French lullaby. He cuddled against

her with a long sigh. Then, as she crooned to him, the head grew heavy again, and his breathing became regular and deep.

Sleep was very far from Tommy. She tried to calculate how long it would be before they were found. They had gone to bed early, so it was reasonable to think that the camp would be astir in good time. Then their absence would be discovered, and the seekers would realize that Bill, wherever he was, was barefooted. That would limit the area of search; they would know he could not be outside the caves. She felt that Jim's thoughts would turn to Bill's "private cave." Even though he might be unwilling to believe that the boy would break his promise, he would come to look.

That was a comforting conclusion, but daybreak might be hours ahead, and the hours had to be passed. Tommy tried to relax, hoping that sleep would steal upon her: but each moment seemed to make her more vividly awake.

She knew the danger that hung over her, and she tried to ward it off by steady thinking. Again she endeavoured to piece together the dream-castles, planning the station home as she and Bob used to plan it, in the evenings at Creek Cottage and out on the farm by day. For a time she succeeded: room by room, paddock by paddock, she built it up, seeing the furniture in place, the roses blooming in the garden, the well-bred cattle grazing on the strawberry-clover of the flats. It could all be true now. The reality of it increased as she pictured it. There would be no worries about bills and mortgages: she saw herself signing cheques light-heartedly.

She pictured the new car. It must be very like the old one—not possible that it should be any colour but blue. Tommy permitted herself to plan dresses that would match it. It would be the very latest thing in cars, and its driver must be fittingly attired. There would be other cars, of course: Bob's dream of a sports model would come true, and they would need a roomy touring car. That led her on to planning tours: roaming to the parts of Australia they had always longed to see. They would have glorious long journeys: glorious homecomings when they were over.

And what then?

She tried to picture the years ahead. The partnership that had meant everything to them since they had left England could not go on for ever. So long as poverty had chained them, there had been no possibility of any change: they could only stick together. But change would come now. Bob would find someone to make him happy, as Wally had found Norah. Tommy knew well that she would not wish it otherwise. And for herself, who had put aside happiness rather than leave him to struggle alone—well, when that time came she would give up her place gladly to Bob's wife.

"I will not let myself be lonely," she thought, firmly. "Not a lonely, idle woman, feeling sorry for myself. If once I began to pity myself I would not be

what Jim thinks me. There will always be work to do—somewhere. Perhaps in England again. I think it would not be very easy to stay in Australia.”

And at that, a blank sense of utter loneliness fell upon her. The inky darkness seemed to come stealthily closer: and she knew that in her first moment of weakness the danger she had tried to keep at bay had sprung at her.

The horror of shut-in places! All her life she had known it—the feeling that roof and walls were closing in upon her, crushing her, depriving her of air—the sense of physical choking and of a terror that was worse than physical fear. Tommy had suffered it in places far more ordinary than this cave, closed in utter darkness in the heart of a hill. The silence of ages seemed to hang in it, a brooding stillness.

She tried to reason with herself as she had reasoned so many times—facing it steadily, telling herself it was senseless, childish: such arguments as she had used when in War-time she had been shut in a cellar among trembling women during an air-raid over London. She had been conquered then: had given in, slipping out unnoticed, to rush upstairs and lean out of a window, heedless of the roar of the guns, careless of death that might at any moment come crashing from the sky. At least it was free air: not the shuddering horror of an overwhelming weight, slowly closing in.

Now she could not even move. But for Bill she would gladly have risked the dangers of the passage, crawling slowly until she had passed the broken floor. He was her responsibility, and he had had enough to shake him: not for an instant did Tommy contemplate the possibility of waking him to find her terrified, useless to him.

It was only the nearness of the little boy, the sense of his complete dependence upon her, that kept her courage unbroken. She put her cheek against the rough red head that leaned on her shoulder: listened to his quiet breathing, forcing herself to be glad that he slept. Whatever she suffered, there must be no more fear for Bill to endure. The thought gave her strength each time the terror closed upon her.

But she was almost at breaking-point when, at long last, a sound came faintly to her ears. She lifted her head quickly, listening, afraid to hope. It came again: quick feet in heavy boots, ringing on the stones. And then, suddenly, the blessedness of light—the glare of the petrol-lantern, a ray at first, and then its full blaze: and Jim in the doorway of the cave, looking down at her, with Wally at his side.

Tommy forced a smile, with lips that quivered. Jim dropped on one knee beside her.

“All right?” he asked. She nodded, glancing at Bill—who stretched himself, gave a great yawn, and woke, blinking at them.

“Hullo!” he said. “You were a long time coming, Jim!”

“I’ll bet it seemed long—you poor old cave-dwellers!” said Wally. “Ready to come home?”

“O-oh!” said Bill, longingly. “Jim, I didn’t break my promise—I walked in my sleep. And Tommy ran after me.”

“I knew you didn’t break it, mate.” Jim was unwrapping his feet. “Can you take him, Wally? You’ve got your torch?”

“Yes,” said Wally. “Put him on my back. Hang on tight, old son.” He turned and swung out of the cave. The sound of the tramping feet died away.

Tommy had scrambled up unsteadily, glad to lean against the wall of the cave. Jim’s eyes searched her face. With an effort he kept by his side the arms that longed to hold her.

“Was it very bad?” he asked, his voice low. “You little thing!—Tommy, if I’d only known!”

She looked at him; and at what he saw in her eyes Jim’s heart leaped. He caught her to him.

“I’ll never let you go again!” he said.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Billabong's Luck* by Mary Grant Bruce]