FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON

GRANT

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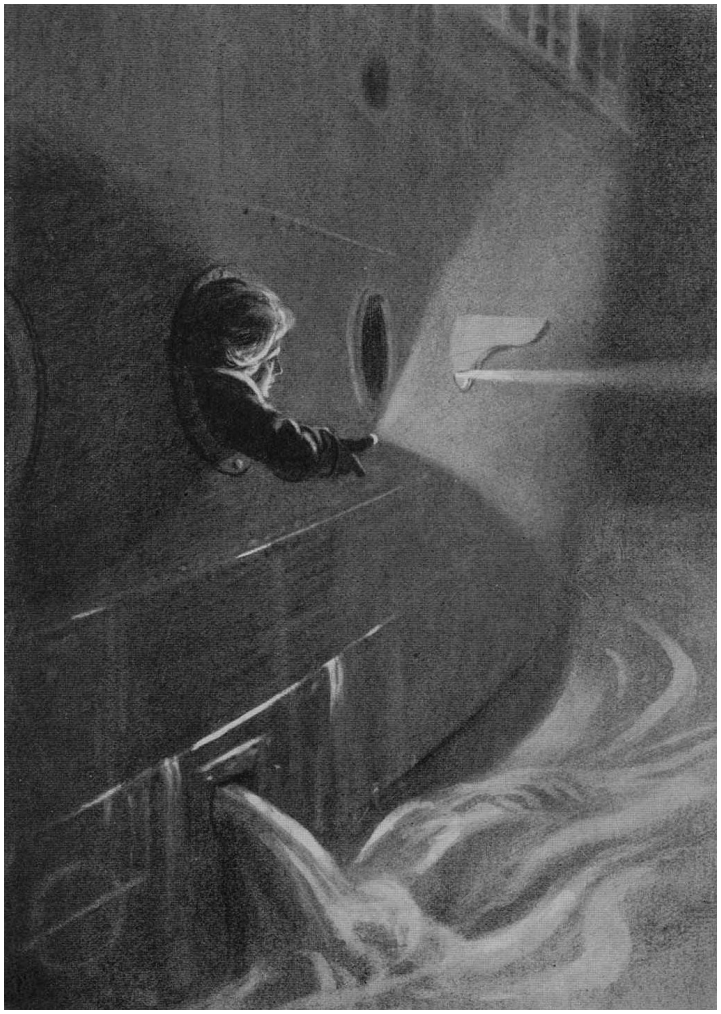

" 'Why!—it's some one signalling!' " (Page 145.)

From Billabong to London] [*Frontispiece*

FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON

BY

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FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON.

CHAPTER I.

HOLIDAYS AT BILLABONG.

IF you came to the homestead of Billabong by the front entrance, you approached a great double gate of wrought iron, which opened stiffly, with protesting creaks, and creaked almost as much at being closed. Then you found yourself in a long, winding avenue, lined with tall pine-trees, beyond which you could catch glimpses, between the trunks, of a kind of wilderness-garden, where climbing roses and flowering shrubs and gum-trees and bush plants, and a host of pleasant, friendly, common flowers grew all together in a very delightful fashion. Seeing, however, that you were a visitor by the front entrance, you could not answer the beckonings of the wilderness-garden, but must follow the windings of the avenue, on and on, until the wild growth on either side gave place to spreading lawns and trim flower-beds, the pine-trees ended, and you came round a kind of corner formed by an immense bush of scarlet bougainvillea, and so found the house smiling a welcome.

Very rarely were any doors or windows shut at Billabong. The kindly Australian climate makes the sunlit winter air a delight; and if in summer it is sometimes necessary to shut out heat, and possibly intrusive snakes, as soon as the sun goes down everything is flung wide open to admit the cool evening breeze that comes blowing across the paddocks. Billabong always looked as if it were open to welcome the newcomer.

It was a red house of two storeys, looking lower than it was because of its width and the great trees that grew all round it, as well as because of its broad balconies and verandahs. From either side the garden stretched away until hedges of roses blocked the entrance to orchard and vegetable patches. The house stood on a gentle rise, and in front the trees had been thinned so that across the smooth lawn you looked over stretching paddocks, dotted with gum-trees, and broken by the silver gleam of a reed-fringed lagoon. There was no

other house visible—only the wide, peaceful paddocks. The nearest road was two miles away, and it was seventeen miles to the nearest town. Perhaps, seen from the front, Billabong might have seemed a little lonely.

But, in fact, no one ever dreamed of coming to Billabong by the front. There had, of course, been a few exceptions to the rule; as in the case of a new Governor-General, who had been brought in state to see it as a typical Australian station, and had greatly annoyed the inmates by bringing his dogs in to luncheon and feeding them with bones on the dining-room carpet, which happened to be a Persian rug of value. The Billabong folk looked back to that visit with considerable disgust. Sometimes other strangers found their way to the great iron gates, and up the avenue; but not often. Occasional callers did not come to Billabong, since the owner and his motherless children were not ceremonious people, and in any case, no one drives seventeen miles in the Australian bush to pay a call of ceremony. Those who came were prepared to stay, and were more immediately concerned with the disposal of their horses than with any other consideration; so that it followed that the chief entrance to Billabong was known as "the back way."

The tracks alone would have told you that. As you came up from the outer paddocks, the gravel of the drive was smooth and untouched save for the gardener's rake; but the other tracks, deep and well trodden, swept round beside the garden and turned in to the courtyard of the stables—big, red-brick buildings, looking almost as large as the house itself. It was always cheerful and exciting at the stables, for all the dogs took charge of you directly you arrived, and made vigorous remarks about you, until they were quite sure whether you were a person to be trusted. "Swagmen"—the bush tramps of Australia—loathed the Billabong dogs very exceedingly; and the dogs returned the feeling in a lively fashion, so that the progress of a swagman from the outer gate to the security of the back yard was apt to be fraught with incident and marked by haste. But if your respectability were evident, the dogs became merely enthusiastic, inspecting visitor and horses with well-bred curiosity, and finally accompanying you to the gate with demonstrations of friendliness, and parting from you with regret.

Within the gate you had, as Murty O'Toole, the head stockman, put it, "your choice thing of tracks." One led across the gravelled yard to the kitchen and its long row of out-buildings; another took you in the shade of a row of pepper-trees to Mr. Linton's office, where interviews with the men were held, and all the business of a big station went forward. Another—Jim and Norah Linton liked this one—went directly to the orchard, where, on hot days, might be found cherries and apricots, peaches, nectarines, great red Japanese plums, guavas, and long beds of strawberries and raspberries. But the most worn track of all led through a porch that opened in a creeper-hung fence, on the other

side of which you found yourself in the garden, and presently on the side verandah, a pleasant place, half closed in by passion fruit vines and clematis, and made very homely and comfortable with long basket-chairs and tables where books and magazines lay. There were rugs on the tiled floor, and, here and there, tall palms in oaken tubs. Nearly all the year round, the Billabong folk were to be found on the side verandah.

It was vacant just now, save for one inmate, a big man in riding dress, asleep on a rush lounge. His whip and broad felt hat were tossed on the table beside him, and a collie, also asleep, lay in a patch of sunlight near. It was mid-winter, yet the sun shone warmly across the sheltered space; a good corner to bask in, after the keen wind sweeping across the paddocks. Everything was very quiet. The glass doors leading into a room close by were open, but no sound came from the house, and the big man slept like a child. Presently, however, a chorus of barking came from the stables, and the sleeper stirred and opened his eyes.

"Billy, I expect," he said, yawning. "Believe I've been asleep." He glanced at his watch. "Half-past three!—it's high time that black rascal was here."

He got up, stretching himself, and went to the edge of the verandah—a mighty figure of a man, well over six feet, with broad shoulders and a loosely hung frame indicative of great strength. His hair and close-cropped beard were turning grey; but the whole face held an indefinable boyishness, due perhaps to the twinkle that was never far from the deep-set eyes. As he watched, the chorus of barking drew nearer, the gate in the porch swung open, and a native boy came through, his black face a startling contrast to his white shirt and spotless moleskin breeches. He grinned broadly as he neared the verandah.

"You're late, Billy," David Linton said.

"Plenty that pfeller mare lazy," said the dusky one, cheerfully. "That one gettin' old, boss. Better me ride one of this year's lot—eh?" He handed over a leather mailbag and a bundle of papers, remaining poised on one foot, in evident anxiety as to his answer.

"One of the new young horses?—what, to carry out mails and parcels? No, thanks, Billy, I'm not keen on experiments that lead to broken legs," replied the squatter, laughing. "Old Bung-Eye is good for the job for a long time yet." Then, in answer to the downcast face as the black boy turned away, "I'll see what Mr. Jim says about your taking one of the new lot out mustering—if you behave yourself and take him gently."

"Plenty!" said Billy, rejoicing. "That black colt, boss—him going to make a mighty good horse——"

"We'll see what Mr. Jim says. Be off—it's high time you had the cows in the milking-yard." The gate slammed behind the ecstatic Billy as his master went back to his chair and unlocked the mailbag.

He lifted a rather furrowed brow half an hour later at a step beside him—the housekeeper, round, fat and cheery, her twinkling eyes almost lost in her wide, jolly face.

"Will you have tea now, sir?"

"The children are not in, are they, Brownie?"

"Not yet," Mrs. Brown answered, smoothing her spotless apron. "Mr. Jim said they'd be back at four-ish; but when it comes to gettin' back it's generally—as a rule more 'ish' than 'four.' Would you rather wait a little, sir?"

"I think so," said the squatter, absent-mindedly, his glance wandering back to the letter in his hand. "Yes—there's no hurry, Brownie—and Miss Norah seems to like to pour out my tea."

"She do, bless her," said Mrs. Brown. "I always say meals aren't the same to Miss Norah if you're not there, sir. Poor lamb—and so soon goin' back to that there school. Mighty little she gets for tea there, I'll be bound."

"Well, she doesn't strike one as ill-fed, Brownie—and you know she likes school."

"I know she likes home better," said Brownie, darkly. "Me, I don't hold with schools. I was glad when Master Jim came home for good an' I'll be gladder when it's Miss Norah's last term. Edication's all very well in its way, like castor-oil; but you can get too much of it. Why, Miss Norah's grandma never even heard of half them fancy things she knows, and where'd you find a better manager of a house than she was? What she didn't know about curing bacon——!" Brownie sighed in inability to express fitly the superhuman attainments of her nursling's ancestress.

"Well, you know, Brownie, I look to you for all that side of Norah's education," said Mr. Linton pacifically. "And you say yourself that the child is no bad housekeeper."

"I should think she isn't," retorted Mrs. Brown. "Mighty few girls, though I say it as shouldn't, cook better than Miss Norah, or can be handier about a house. But where's the use of all them other things? Physics, which ain't anything to do with medicine, an' brushwork that's not even first-cousin to a broom an' physi—something—or—other, which is learnin' more about your inside than any young lady has any call for. No, I don't hold with it at all. But it doesn't seem to hurt her, bless her!"

"No, I don't think it hurts her," David Linton said. "Learning does not seem to make her any less healthy, either in mind or body; and that's the main thing, Brownie. You mustn't grumble at the bit of extra polish—they all have it nowadays, and it's no bad thing." His eyes lit up suddenly. "There they come," he said. "Is your kettle boiling?"

There were sounds of hoof-beats on the track, faint at first and then more distinct. The dogs burst into a wild chorus of welcome. Brownie disappeared

hurriedly in the direction of the kitchen, and Mr. Linton lay back in his long chair and gave his letter a half-hearted attention, his eyes wandering to the door in the porch. Presently came quick feet and merry voices, the door swung open, and three people entered in a pell-mell fashion and descended upon the verandah like a miniature cyclone.

"I know we're late, but we couldn't help it," Norah said breathlessly. "There was such a heap to do in the Far Plain, Dad—you ask the manager!" She shot a laughing glance at her brother, an immensely tall individual, who responded by lazily pitching his hat at her. "Oh, the wind is cold, Dad—we raced home against it, and it cut like a knife. But it was lovely. Have you had tea? I do hope you haven't."

"I waited for the mistress of the house; and Brownie gave me her views on the Higher Education of Women," said her father. "She seems to think you're learning too much, Norah. Are you worried about it?"

"Not so much as my teachers," said Norah, laughing. "And their anxieties seem all the other way. Oh, don't let us think of school, Daddy—it will be bad enough when the time really comes."

The third of the newcomers uttered a hollow groan. Like Jim Linton, he was a tall, lean boy; but while Jim gave promise of as mighty a pair of shoulders as his father's, Wally Meadows exemplified at the moment length without breadth. Everything about him was lean and quick and active; his brown hands were never still, and his merry brown face was always alight with interest, except in those deep moments when those who knew him had reason to suspect some amazing outbreak of mischief in his plotting brain. Finding that no one observed him, he groaned again, yet more hollowly.

"What's the matter, old man?" Jim asked. "Toothache? Or lack of tea?"

"I don't have toothache; and Billabong doesn't have any lack of tea. If you haven't just had tea here, it's because you're just going to have it," said Wally severely, and with truth; for in an Australian bush home tea begins to occur at an early hour in the morning, and continues to occur with great frequency all day. "No, it's only the idea of school. You're so hideously old and important now that I suppose you forget all about it, but it's only two Christmases ago that Norah and I used to dry your tears at going back. Didn't we, Norah?

"What about your own tears?" Mr. Linton asked, laughing.

"Why, I shed them still," said Wally. "I could begin now, quite easily. Didn't you hear me groan?—I'll do it again, if you'd care for it. It isn't any trouble."

"Don't think of me," begged his host. "I wouldn't put you to the exertion for any consideration. And really I don't believe that any of you mind school half as much as you make out. You have an uncommonly good time when you're there."

"Yes, of course we do," Wally said. "School truly isn't a bad old place, once you've got to it. But a fellow gets a bit restless as age creeps upon him, you know, sir—and especially since this old reprobate left and took to station-managing, I've been feeling it was about time I got busy at something beside cricket and footer and lessons. And now, of course, it's worse than ever."

"Now?"

"Well, you see, so many of the fellows one knew are in camp. Lots of the seniors left almost as soon as war broke out and the Australian Contingent was started. Wouldn't I give my ears to go!" said Wally hotly. "And they say I'm too young. Well, Mills and Fisher and Ballantyne were under me in the footer team, and they're taken; they may be a bit older, but I can handle any of them with one hand. It doesn't seem fair. However, I expect there will still be war when I get to the age limit, and then I'm off!"

A slow flush had crept over Jim Linton's grave face. He rose and went to the edge of the verandah, staring across the garden, and kicking with his heel at a grass-tuft trying to grow up in the gravel. There was a moment's uncomfortable silence; and Wally, seeing his chum's hand clench tighter on the stockwhip he still held, bit his lip and mentally informed himself that he was an idiot. Then came footsteps, and Mrs. Brown appeared, panting behind a loaded tea-tray.

"I was getting quite worried about your pa having no tea, Miss Norah," she said, cheerfully. "But he wouldn't let me bring it till you was all home."

"And we were late, of course," Norah said, penitently, jumping up and making swift clearance of the hats and whips encumbering the rush-work tea-table. "But there was such a heap to do. We found one poor old sheep down; and when we were close to it we discovered that it was in a sort of barbed-wire entanglement. It had picked up a loose piece of wire somewhere, and managed to wind it round and round its body, buried deep in the wool. And its poor cut legs!"

"Could you save it, Jim?" Mr. Linton asked.

"Oh, yes, it's all right," Jim answered, turning. "Beastly job, of course; the poor brute was even more stupid than the average sheep, and kicked itself into a worse mess when we came near it. We had to get Norah to hold down its head while Wally and I got the wire away—and that meant cutting it out of the wool. It looked as if a very amateur shearer had been at it with blunt nail scissors, by the time we had finished; I never saw anything like the way twisted old barbed-wire can imbed itself in wool. However, the patient was able to walk away afterwards; he had two battle-scarred legs, but they didn't seem to worry him much."

"How are the cattle looking in the Far Plain?" his father asked.

"Bad enough," said Jim, stirring his tea. "The grass, such as it was, has

gone off very much since I was out there last, a fortnight ago. The Queensland bullocks haven't put on a bit of condition since we turned them in. And the creek is awfully low. Take it all round, Dad, I don't think we've ever had such a bad season."

"No; Billabong never was as dry—in my time, at all events," said David Linton. "It's the worst year in these parts that any one remembers. Australia is certainly having its full allowance just now—war, increased taxation, political troubles; and on top of all, the drought. I suppose we'll worry through them all in time, but the process is slow."

"Where were you to-day, Dad?" Norah asked.

"I've been through the lower paddocks; they always stand dry weather better than the Far Plain, but they're not encouraging, for all that," answered her father. "The cattle are holding their own, so far, but nothing more. Did you see any dead ones, Jim?"

"No—but two that were sick look weak enough to be thinking of dying. We got one poor brute bogged in the creek—not badly, thank goodness; we were able to get him out, but it took time. Some one will have to go out there every day until the boggy places are dry enough to be safe, or we'll certainly lose some stock. Drought years," said Jim, solemnly, "seem to mean plenty of extra work, extra expense, extra worry, and extra everything except money."

"They do—but we'll pull through all right," said David Linton, cheerfully. "I know it's disheartening to see the old place looking like a dust-heap; still, we've had a lot of good years, and we mustn't grumble. And even if it does look dry, there's plenty of feed and water yet on Billabong. Neither is the bank likely to worry me—if the worst came to the worst, and we had to shift the stock, or to buy feed, it can be managed."

"Things might be a heap worse," said Norah. "Why, we might be in Belgium."

"You're like Mrs. Wiggs, who consoled herself in her darkest hours by reflecting that she might have had a hare-lip," said Wally, laughing, though his eyes were grave. The great war was in its very early stages, and only cable messages of its progress had yet reached Australia; but the heroism and the sufferings of Belgium and her people were ringing round the world, and from the farthest corners of the Empire men were flocking to fight under the Allies' standard and to thrust back the German invaders. Half a dozen of the Billabong stockmen had gone; it was a sore point with the son of the house that he had not been permitted to join the Expeditionary Force with the men with whom he had so often ridden at work.

"I hear there's no fresh news," he said. "We met Mr. Harrison, and he said there was nothing."

"No; I telephoned at lunch-time," said his father. "But there's an English

mail in, and the papers should make interesting reading. We will have them to-night."

"Well, it's getting dusk, and I have one sick wallaby to look after, eggs to gather, and chicks to shut up," said Norah. "Come on, Wally, and I will let you crawl in under the haystack to the old Wyandotte's nest."

"Your kindness, ma'am, would electrify me if I were not used to it," said Wally, ruefully, getting his long form by degrees out of the low chair in which he was coiled. "Why you don't put a chain on that old Wyandotte's horny leg is more than I can imagine—I believe it's because you like to see me worming my way under that beastly stack. Man was not made to emulate the goanna and the serpent, young Norah, and it's time you realised the fact."

"I don't see how it affects you, at any rate," said Norah, cruelly. "Boys of seventeen!" She tilted a naturally tilted nose, and patted Wally kindly on the head as she passed him. "In a few years you will probably be too fat to crawl under anything at all, and meanwhile it's excellent exercise."

"It's a good thing for you that you're a mere girl," said the maligned one, following her. "When the meek inherit the earth I'll come in for all Billabong, I should think, for certainly you and Jim won't deserve it. Don't you think so, Jimmy?"

"All the real estate your meekness is likely to bring you won't embarrass you much," said his chum, grinning. "One's recollections of you at school don't seem to include anything so meek as to be startling. In fact, now that I come to consider the matter, Dad and Norah are about the only people who ever have a chance of observing your submissive side. And not always Norah."

"I should think not always Norah!" said that lady. "Meek, indeed!"

"As a matter of fact, there's no one who makes me feel my own meekness so much as Brownie," said Wally. "There's a dignity about her that you would do well to cultivate, Norah, my child. I think it comes with weight. Still, as there seems no chance of your attaining it, how about looking after the wallaby?"

"It's high time," said Norah. "I told Billy to feed him whenever he thought of it, knowing that would not be more than once, and probably not at all. Coming, Jim?"

"No, thanks," said Jim, from behind an outspread *Times*. "Not with the English papers in, old girl—and war flourishing."

"You can tell us about it when we come in," Norah said. "I'll race you to the paddock, Wally!" The sound of their flying feet died away, leaving two silent figures on the verandah.

"The progress of a swagman . . . was apt to
be fraught with incident and marked by haste."

CHAPTER II.

UPHEAVALS.

DUSK falls early in an Australian mid-winter, and as evening draws in, the frost in the air nips sharply after the brilliant sunshine of the day. It was half an hour later that David Linton put down his paper and glanced across at his son.

"Too dark to read—and too cold," he said. "Come into the smoking-room."

"I suppose it's time to make a move," Jim answered, rising, hat and stockwhip in one hand and a bundle of papers in the other. "It's going to be a cold night. I wish this frosty weather would break, and there might be a chance of rain; we want it badly enough."

"You're getting worried about the place," his father said, leading the way into the smoking-room, where the leaping light from a great fire of red-gum logs flung dancing shadows on deep leather chairs drawn invitingly near its warmth. The squatter sat down and glanced affectionately at his tall son. "Switch on the light, Jim. Drought is bad, but there's no need to make yourself an old man over it; we won't let the stock starve, and if we have a bad year—well, the old place is sound, and we've had many good ones. I'm not exactly a poor man, Jim, and one drought won't make me so."

"Oh, I don't worry about being poor," Jim answered. "After all, one doesn't want to do much with money up here; and one can keep away from Sydney and Melbourne, if cash is short. It's certainly disheartening to see the place looking its worst, and the stock getting poorer each week—there's nothing jollier than riding over it when the grass is knee-deep and the creeks and the river high, and all the stock rolling fat, and the horses kicking up their heels with sheer joy at being alive. One doesn't think then of the actual money it means; it's only the feeling that it's a good thing to be alive oneself. This sort of year does not come often, thank goodness, and one knows it can't last for ever."

"It is just a little rough on you that it should come in the first year you have helped me to manage the place," said his father. "But then, from a selfish point of view, it's better for me to have your help and companionship through a tough time. And it has been a help, Jim."

Jim shot a grateful look at him. David Linton was a man of few words; the brief sentence meant much on his lips, and the boy's eyes softened.

"I'm awfully glad if it has," he said, awkwardly. "I haven't had enough experience to be really useful, but I'm as interested as I can be—and there's no life like it. I don't want anything better than Billabong, and to work with you.

But——”

He broke off, irresolutely. That which he had to say had never seemed easy; it was harder than ever, now, with his father’s kind words warm at his heart. All day, riding through the bare, bleak paddocks, he had tried to frame words that would be firm, and yet not hurt. Now, looking into the steady grey eyes that were like his own, he could not find speech at all. He rose, and taking a pipe from the mantel-shelf, began to fill it slowly.

“But you’re worried still,” said David Linton, watching him. “Well, so am I. And as open confession is good for the soul, and we’re all mates on Billabong, let’s have the worries out, old son. Tell me yours first.”

Jim stood up, straight and tall, on the hearthrug, forgetting his pipe. The light was full on his brown face, showing it older than his years warranted. He met his father’s eyes steadily.

“I can’t stand it, Dad,” he said. “I’ve tried, honestly, since we talked about it, and done my best to put it out of my head. But it’s no good. I’ve got to go.”

“You mean—to the war?”

“Yes. I know jolly well it’s rough on you—because I’m the only son. I suppose it doesn’t seem quite fair to you, my even wanting to go. But if you were my age it would. And all the fellows I knew best have enlisted; some of them are younger than I am; and I’m standing out. They used to look up to me in a sort of way when I was captain of the school. They can’t do it now. They’re doing their share, and I’m just a shirker.”

“That’s rubbish,” his father said, hastily. “You wanted to go from the first day, only you gave in to my wish. It’s my doing.”

“That doesn’t seem to matter,” Jim answered. “The only fact that matters is that I’m taking it easy, and they are getting ready. I know you had lots of good reasons, and I have tried not to care; and it was hard, when the men went, and I felt they were wondering why I didn’t go, too. You know it isn’t because I want to leave you and Billabong, don’t you, Dad?”

“Oh, I know that,” said David Linton.

“There are some things that get too big for a fellow,” Jim said, slowly. “Of course I’m only a youngster; but I’m tough, and I can shoot and ride, and I had four years as a cadet, so I know the drill. It seems to me that any fellow who can be as useful as that, and who isn’t really tied, has no right to stay behind. Lots of fellows younger than I am are joining in England—boys of sixteen are getting commissions. I don’t care about a commission, but I want to do my bit. I’ve got to do the square thing.”

“It is always a little difficult, I suppose, for a man to realise that his children are growing up,” David Linton said, heavily. “You were such babies when your mother died—and that seems only yesterday. I know that you’ll do a man’s work wherever you are. But to me you’re still in many ways the small

boy your mother left me."

"Well, except for this I don't want to be any different," Jim answered. "You've never made me feel it, except in being jolly good to me—look how you've treated me as a sort of equal in managing the place, ever since I left school. I've never said anything, but I've noticed it every day."

"Well, you have common sense—and you don't do wild things with your authority," his father answered. "You've made it possible for yourself. And you know, Jim, I didn't actually forbid you to enlist. I don't give you orders."

"That's just it," Jim burst out. "You never do—you're so jolly decent to me. You asked me not to go; and I'd do anything rather than hurt you. But this is such a big thing, Dad—and it's getting bigger. I want you to believe that it isn't just the excitement and all that part of it. But——"

There was silence for a moment. Jim rammed tobacco into his pipe furiously, and then laid it aside again with a gesture of impatience.

"There are things a fellow can't talk about," he said. "I'm an awful fool at talking, anyhow. But one can't open a paper without reading about Belgium and the things the Germans have done there; and it makes one feel one has simply got to go. Fighting men is all very well, and in the way of business. But—women and kids!"

"I know," said David Linton.

From the drawing-room came the cheerful sound of a piano, and Norah's fresh young voice in a verse of a song, with Wally joining in. The father gripped the arms of his chair and stared in front of him; seeing, perhaps, blackened Northern cornfields, and children who fled, crying, before an army.

No one spoke for a long time. The silence in the room was only broken by the tick of the clock and the sputter and crackle of the wood fire. From his post on the hearthrug Jim watched his father, trying vaguely to read his answer in the grave face. But David Linton, staring into the fire, gave no sign. His thoughts were wandering back over the long years since his wife's death had fallen upon him suddenly, tearing the fabric of his life to pieces. Then it had seemed to him that nothing could ever mend it or make it again worth living; but as time crept on, baby fingers unconsciously had taken up the broken threads and woven them into something new—not the old, perfect happiness, but a life full of interest and contentment.

Such mates they had been, he and his children. All through the years, they had shared things: worked, and played, and laughed together until their relationship had grown into a companionship and a mutual comprehension that held little of authority on one side, but all of love on both. For that short, terrible season after the little mother had gone away, the house had been home no longer, but a place of desolation; and then the father had realised that his babies needed more from him, and that through them alone lay his way of

peace. There is nearly always something bigger than one's personal grief, no matter how great it seems; and it is that one thing bigger that spells comfort. David Linton had never put aside his grief altogether, for it was part of himself. But he had put his children first, since to do so was part of his doctrine of doing "the square thing." Little and helpless, their happiness must not suffer. Somewhere, he knew, the little mother was watching them. Heaven could not keep her from watching her babies—from straining hungry eyes to see how he was managing the task she had left him. When the time came to go to her he must be able to give a good account.

He knew, looking back, that they had been happy. Life had held no cares beyond the necessary trial of leaving home for school—a trial always compensated by the joy of getting back. They had known no loneliness; Billabong and its wild acres, its free, simple life, had filled each day with work that was pleasure and with the thousand cheerful recreations of the Bush. He had tried to make them healthy, wholesome, and useful, holding as he did that no life was complete without all three attributes. They had repaid him by coming up to his standard in other things as well; by being sound in mind and body, honest as the day, and of a clean, straight courage. Throughout all they had been his mates. The little watching mother would be satisfied.

Now, for the first time in sixteen years, the parting of the ways must come. Authority had never been one of his methods; and if it had been, this was not the time to use it. He had taught the tall lad who stood before him his version of "the decent thing," and his teaching had come home; even in his pain he welcomed it. Jim would not have been Jim had he been willing to sit contentedly at home.

He looked up, and smiled suddenly at the boy's unhappy face. "Don't look like that, old son," he said. "It's all right."

A great load rolled off Jim's heart.

"Dad! You don't mind——"

"Well, a fellow doesn't cheerfully give up his only son," David Linton said. "But I've seen it coming, Jim, and, as you say, this thing is bigger than we are. I wouldn't have you not want to go."

"Oh, thank goodness!" said Jim, and sat down and lit his pipe.

"I couldn't make up my mind to it at first," his father went on. "One didn't know how far things were going; and it's hard to realise you grown up. After all, you're only nineteen, Jim, lad, and for all that I know, you are capable of doing a man's work, to my mind soldiering demands an extra degree of toughness, if a fellow is to be of real use. Still, as you say, much younger boys are going; I won't ask you again to stay. Perhaps it wasn't fair to ask you in the beginning. I was doubtful in my own mind; but I had to be sure there was real need."

"And are you satisfied now?"

"Oh, yes. There isn't any room for further doubt. Every day brings evidence of what the job is going to be—the biggest the Empire ever had to tackle. And the cry from Belgium comes home to every decent man. I'd rather go myself than send you; but as I said, I'm glad you don't want to stay."

"Then that's all right," Jim said, with a mighty sigh of relief. "You don't know what a weight it is off my mind, Dad. I've hated to seem a beast over it, and you know I always go by your judgment. But somehow I knew you'd have to think differently yourself. Why, great Scott! I couldn't face you and Norah, in ten years, if I had stayed at home!"

"No; and I couldn't face you if I had been the one to keep you," said his father. "So that is settled. But there are other things to settle as well."

"Rather!" said Jim. "I wonder, can I get into the first contingent, or if I'll have to wait for the second."

His father paused before replying.

"There is something else, altogether," he said at length. "My own plans seem on the verge of an upheaval, just now."

"Yours? Nothing wrong, is there, Dad?"

"Nothing in the main. But you know I've been bothered for some weeks over that business of the English property your uncle Andrew left me. There is a lot of complicated detail that would take me a week to explain—it's all in the lawyer's letters over there, if you'd care to go through them. ("Not me!" from Jim, hurriedly.) Some of it ought to be sold, and some apparently can't be sold just now, and there are decisions to be made, at which it's almost impossible for me to arrive, with letters alone to go upon. Last week's English mail left me in a state of complete uncertainty as to what I ought to do about it."

"And has to-day's mail straightened out matters at all?"

"Well—it has," said Mr. Linton, with a wry smile. "I can't say it has exactly eased my mind, but at least the letters have made one thing abundantly clear, which is that the business cannot be settled from Australia. I'm needed on the spot. As far as I can see, there is no way out of it; I'll have to go home."

"Go to England!"

"Yes."

"But," Jim was on his feet, his face radiant. "Why, you'll be there when I'm in France—we might come home together! How ripping, Dad! When would you go?"

"Very soon, I think."

Jim sat down, the flash of joy suddenly dying away.

"Dad—what about Norah?"

"I wish I knew," said his father, uneasily. "I could leave her at school, of course; and she has always invitations enough for twice as many holidays as

are in the year. But she won't like it, poor little girl. It would be bad enough if only one of us were going; as it is, she will feel that the bottom has dropped out of the universe."

"I can't see us leaving her," Jim said. "Why not take her with you?"

"Why, I don't even know if it's safe," said his father, his brow knitted. "The voyage is a certain risk; and who knows what will be the conditions in England? I can't run the child into danger."

"If Germany wins you may not be able to keep her out of it," Jim answered. "One thing is certain—Norah would rather be in danger with you than feel that you were running risks and leaving her in safety. I think it would break her heart to be left here alone."

"I've been turning it backwards and forwards in my mind for a fortnight," said the father. "I felt that the time was coming to give you a free hand: and then, on top of that, came this complication." He laughed a little. "Life has been too easy for me, Jim: I'm not used to big decisions."

"Well, I am a beast," said Jim, frankly. "I've been chewing over my own disappointment; and about the worst part of it was that I got hold of the idea that you had put it right out of your mind, and that you didn't care. I wish I had known you were up to your eyes in worry. But you never let us suspect a thing."

"Well, I kept hoping against hope that each mail would straighten things out," his father answered. "Until I was certain I did not want to cast any shadows on Norah's holidays. Poor little lass; she'll have trouble in earnest now."

"Well, Nor will face it," Jim said, confidently. "She isn't made of the stuff that caves in—and as far as I'm concerned, Dad, she wants me to go. She knew I'd only eat my heart out if I didn't. But to have you go away is another matter. Don't you think you can take her?"

"If I were sure England would be safe . . ." mused Mr. Linton. "You can be very certain I don't want to leave her."

"Well, I don't think there's much risk for England," said Jim, with the cheerful optimism of youth. "And anyhow, there's always America—you and she could slip across there if there were any real fear of invasion. My word, Dad, it would be grand to think you and Nor were so near. Just think if I got wounded, how jolly it would be to come over to you!"

"I've thought," said his father, drily. The jollity of the idea seemed to him slightly exaggerated.

"Well, it would be heaps better than hospital. And then we'd all be together after the finish, and do London. It would be such a lark. Fancy old Norah in Piccadilly!"

"Me?" asked a startled voice.

Norah stood in the doorway, with Wally behind her. She had exchanged her riding-habit for a soft white frock, and her brown curls, released from their tight plait, fell softly round her face. No one would have dreamed of calling her pretty; but there was an indefinable charm in the merry face, lit by straight grey eyes. She was tall for her age; people found it difficult to believe that she was not yet sixteen, for she had left the awkward age behind her, and there was unstudied grace in the slender, alert form, with its well-shaped hands and feet. Occasionally—when she was not too busy—Norah had fleeting moments of regret, mainly on account of her men-folk, that she was not pretty. But it is doubtful if her father and brother would have cared to change a feature of the vivid face.

"Did you say Piccadilly? And me?" she asked, advancing into a startled silence. "I've always imagined Piccadilly must be rather worse than Collins Street, and I don't fit in there a bit. Stella Harrison says there are rather jolly motor-busses there, and you can get on top. That wouldn't be so bad." She perched on the arm of her father's chair. "Why are you talking about streets, Daddy? You know you don't like them any more than I do."

"No," said David Linton, finding that some answer was expected of him. Something in his tone brought Norah's eyes upon him quickly.

"There's something wrong, isn't there?" she asked.

No one spoke for a moment. Then Wally got up quietly and moved towards the door.

"Don't go, Wally, my boy," Mr. Linton said. "You're so much one of the family that you may as well join the family councils. No, there's nothing exactly wrong, Norah. But there are happenings."

"Jim's going?" said Norah, quickly. Her keen eyes saw that the new and unfamiliar shadow had lifted from her brother's face. Jim nodded, smiling at her.

"Yes, I'm going. Dad says it's all right."

Norah drew a long breath, and Wally gave an irrepressible whistle of delight.

"Lucky dog—I'm so glad!" he cried. "Oh, why can't I be eighteen!"

"There will be plenty of fighting after you are eighteen," Mr. Linton said. "This isn't going to be any lightning business. But that's not all, Norah. Your old father has to pack up, too. I must go to England."

"Daddy! You!"

The voice was a cry. Then Norah shut her lips tightly, and said nothing more, looking at her father.

"It's business," he said hurriedly. "I don't want to go, my girl. It may not take me long."

There was a long pause.

"I can't ask to go," said Norah at last, rather breathlessly. "It's too big a thing—not like a trip to Melbourne or Sydney. I know it would cost a fearful lot of money—and there are other things. It's—it's all right, Daddy, if you say so—only I want to know. Have I got to stay behind?"

There was no answer. Jim was watching the set, childish face pitifully, longing to help, and powerless. Norah got up from the arm of her father's chair at length, and turned her face away.

"It's—it's quite all right, Daddy," she said, unsteadily. "I understand. Don't go worrying."

"Worrying!" said David Linton, explosively. "No, I'm not going to worry—if I can help it: and I'm not going to leave you, either. We'll stick together, little mate."

"Daddy!" said Norah, very low. She went to him like a little child, and he put her on his knee, one arm round her, while Jim beamed on them both.

"I knew you couldn't do it," he said laughing. "It was so altogether ridiculous to think of old Nor here alone, and you and me at the other side of the world. Things like that simply can't occur!"

"Well—there may be danger" began his father.

"There would be strong danger of my losing my few wits if you did it," Norah said. "I thought I was going to lose them a minute ago, as it was. Oh, Daddy won't it be lovely! Think of the ship—and the queer ports—and England! It's the most wonderful thing that ever happened. And we'll be near Jim, and he'll get leave and come over to see us!"

"That's another thing," Mr. Linton said. "It's settled that you're to enlist, Jim; that matter is decided. But is there any particular reason why you should enlist in Australia?"

"In Australia?" repeated Jim, blankly. "Why—where else?"

"Well, if Norah and I are going home, why should we not all go together? You would have no difficulty in joining the Army in England, if boys of sixteen are getting commissions there."

"*What?*" burst from Wally.

"Oh, yes—you'd be quite a veteran, judging by to-day's news, Wally," said Mr. Linton, laughing. "There would be no difficulty at all, I should think, Jim; I know enough people in London to pull a few strings, though even that would hardly be necessary. But if you wanted a commission I should think it could be managed. It would leave us all together a bit longer."

"That would be ripping," Jim said, doubtfully. "I don't know, though; I'm an Australian, and I rather think Australians ought to stick together. And I would know such a lot of the fellows in our own contingent."

"That counts, of course," said his father. "But there's another point; there are rumours that our men may not be sent direct to the Front. You might get

hung up in Egypt, or the Persian Gulf, or Malta; I've heard suggestions that the Australians should even be used for garrison duty in India."

"By Jove!" said Jim. "I wouldn't like that."

"No; and it would mean that you might never get to England at all, to join Norah and me after the show. If you're going, I don't want you to be shelved in some out-of-the-way corner of the earth; I'd like you to have your chance."

"Oh, Jimmy, come with us!" said Norah. "Just think how jolly it would be—not like the voyage in a horrid old troopship, where you mightn't be allowed to see a single port. And perhaps we'd be together quite a lot in England, before you were sent to the Front."

Wally jumped up with such emphasis that his chair fell over backwards. He did not notice it.

"Let's all go!" he cried.

Three pairs of eyes turned upon him for information.

"If it's really true that boys younger than I am are being taken in England, I'd have a chance, wouldn't I, Mr. Linton?"

"I suppose you would—yes, of course, my boy. You're only a year younger than Jim, aren't you?"

"Yes—and he knows as much drill as I do, to say nothing of shooting and riding," Jim exclaimed. "Would you come, Wal?"

"I should just think I would!" Wally uttered. "But you'd have to join in England, Jim—not here."

"But your guardian—and your brothers, Wally. Would they be willing?" Mr. Linton asked. "It's rather an undertaking to arrange off-hand. And it would mean your leaving school."

"I know it would be all right, sir," Wally answered. "My brothers were only sorry I couldn't get into the first contingent; and old Mr. Dimsdale never worries his head about me, except to look after the property and send me my allowance. He knows I'm to join as soon as I can. The money part of it would be all right; I don't know much about it, but the money that's to come to me has been accumulating since I was a kid, and there must be plenty. If you'd let me go under your wing, nobody would think of objecting." He stopped, his brown, eager face flushing. "By Jove, you must think me awfully cool, sir. I sort of took it for granted I could go with you!"

"Well, you old goat!" said Jim, disgustedly. David Linton laughed.

"My dear boy, I think you're pretty well established as one of the family," he said. "You have been Jim's chum for five years, and somehow we've come to regard Billabong as your home. I have liked to think you felt that way about it, yourself."

"It's the only real home I ever remember," said Wally, still greatly confused. "And you've all been such bricks to me. I've quite forgotten I'm

really a sort of lost dog."

"It's rude to say you're a lost dog, when you belong to Billabong," said Norah solemnly, though her eyes were dancing. "Isn't he talking a lot of nonsense, Dad?—and this is much too exciting an evening to waste any time. I wish someone would sort me out, for I'm all mixed-up in my mind. We're going to England, you and I, Dad."

"And me," said Wally, cheerfully disregarding grammar.

"And me, I suppose," Jim followed. "If you think I've as good a chance there, Dad?"

"Better, I should think—judging from the rush of men here," said his father.

"Then we're all going," finished Norah blissfully. "In a 'normously large ship, Dad?"

"Most certainly," said David Linton, hastily. "I came out forty years ago in a five-hundred tonner, and I've no desire to repeat the experience. We're built on lines that demand space, we Lintons."

"And when we get to London?"

"We'll settle down somewhere—where we can be near the boys until they are sent out to the Front, and I can attend to business."

"And then——?"

"We'll wander about a bit until they come back to us. If it's likely to be long, you'll have to resume your neglected education, young woman," said her father severely.

"M'f!" said Norah, wrinkling her nose. "How unpleasant!—that's the first dismal thing you've said, Daddy. But I suppose one has to take the powder with the jam. And after the war——?"

"Oh, after the war——" said David Linton; and fell silent, looking at his son.

"After the war," said Wally, happily, "we'll all meet in London, and see the Kaiser led in triumph down Piccadilly. My own preference leads me to hope that it will be on a donkey with his face towards the tail of the ass, but I'm sadly afraid the world has grown too civilised."

"Well, you can't call him and his crowd civilised, anyhow," Jim said.

"No. But we'll have to be, I suppose, to show how nicely we were brought up. Anyhow, after that we'll explore all the things we've always wanted to see—London, and Stonehenge, and the Dublin Horse Show, and Killarney, and David Balfour's country, and heathery moors, and the Derby, and punts on the Thames, and the Dartmoor ponies, and——" Wally's extraordinary mixture left him breathless, but the others took up the tale.

"And English lanes——"

"And ruins—truly ruins——!"

“And old castles——”

“And woods and hedges——”

“And real hunting country——”

“And real hunts——!”

“And trout-streams——”

“And Irish loughs——”

“And then,” said Norah, as the dinner-gong clashed out its summons, —“then——”

“If we’ve any money left!” put in her father.

“Or even if we haven’t,” said Norah, and smiled at him—“we’ll go back to Billabong!”

CHAPTER III.

OF A CHESTNUT BABY.

"DO you know where Mr. Jim is, Murty?"

David Linton had just ridden into the stable-yard. It was midday, and though the night had been frosty, the sun was so warm that the master of Billabong was in his shirt-sleeves, his coat laid across the saddle before him. He swung himself to the ground as the head stockman came across to take his horse.

"At the stockyard, he is," said Murty O'Toole. "Miss Norah and Mr. Wally too, sir; they're handling the new chestnut colt, and it's the fun of the world he's been giving them. Mr. Jim had to lasso him before he could so much as lay a hand on him, but he's goin' nice and aisy now. Still in all, Mr. Jim'll have his own troubles when he comes to ride that one; sure, he'd kick the eye out of a mosquito."

"Has he saddled him yet?"

"Oh, yes; he's been under the saddle these three hours," Murty answered. "Mr. Jim hasn't been on him, of course; he believes in walkin' a young one round quiet and pleasant, to let him get used to the feel of the leather. 'Twas as good as a circus to see him when they girthed him up; he went to market good and plenty, and did his level best to buck himself clean out of the saddle. He's the cheerfullest colt ever I seen." Mr. O'Toole grinned at the recollection. "But he's got his aiqual in Mr. Jim."

"I'll go down and have a look at them," the squatter said. "Put Monarch in a loose-box and give him a feed, Murty; I may want him again." He slipped on his coat and strode out of the yard as the stockman led the great black horse into the cool dimness of the stables.

The stockyards of an Australian station form a very important part of its working establishment. A big "run" may have several sets of yards to save the trouble of driving stock far on any direction; but the main yards are always near the homestead—sometimes, indeed, a great deal too near. The yards at Billabong, however, did not err in this respect, being planned in a secluded corner whence they opened upon two paddocks. A belt of dwarfed gum-trees surrounded and shaded them; and beyond this shelter a little lucerne-field led to the kitchen-garden and orchard, so that the house itself was screened completely, and no dust could drift to it, even when, on a big mustering day, the bullocks had trodden every inch of the earth of the yards into fine powder.

To an unaccustomed eye they presented a somewhat bewildering array of

fencing. They were completely surrounded by a very high fence of red-gum slabs, laid horizontally and very close together, and finished at the top by a heavy, rounded cap of wood, bolted to the top of the massive posts, and forming an unbroken ring. This fence was calculated to withstand the rush of the maddest bullock, infuriated by the indignities of mustering; and at the same time, being easily climbed, formed a refuge in case of an animal charging a man on foot. The cap, broad and smooth, formed a pleasant place from which to watch the exciting manœuvres below; Norah had spent many a cheerful hour perched upon it.

Within the great ring-fence the space was divided into many enclosures, large and small; from the big general yard, capable of holding a mob of bullocks, to small calf-yards, where newly-branded babies were wont to bleat distressfully for their anxious mothers—little dreaming that within a very few days they would have forgotten all about them, in the joy of a wide run, new grass and youthful light-heartedness. A long race, just wide enough for a single bullock, led from the main enclosure to the drafting-yards. A gate at its further end worked on a pivot; Norah loved to watch her father stand at it as the big-horned cattle came down the narrow lane in single file, turning the gate with a movement of his supple wrist so that some bullocks were ushered into one yard and some into another, according to their class. A man needed a quick eye and hand, and keen judgment, to be able to work the drafting-gate when the bullocks were stringing quickly down the race, the nose of one beast almost touching the tail of the one in front of him. Sometimes two or three of a kind came down in succession, all bound for the same yard, and then the task seemed easy; but often they alternated, and the gate had to go backwards and forwards so quickly that either the tail of the yarded bullock or the nose of his successor was apt to suffer. Branding was done through the rails fencing the race; a brick oven was built beside it, for heating the irons. But this was one of the details at which Norah did not preside. On branding days she preferred to mount her special pony, Bosun, and go for long solitary rides along the bends of the river, or across plains where an occasional hare gave excuse for a gallop.

Altogether, the Billabong yards were the pride of its stockmen, and the cause of deep envy in men from neighbouring stations. Too often, yards are make-shift erections, hastily run up out of any timber that may be handiest, and generally awaiting a day of re-planning and re-building that never comes. But David Linton believed in perfecting the working details of his run; and his yards were well and solidly built, planned on a generous scale that gave accommodation for every class of cattle, and equipped with gates which, despite their massive strength, were so excellently hung that a touch closed them, and only another touch was needed to send home a solid catch. Once the owner of Billabong had seen a man killed, through a gate too stiff to shut

quickly before a maddened bullock's charge; and as he helped to rescue the poor, broken body he had vowed that no man of his own should ever run a needless risk through neglect on his part.

Black Billy was cutting lucerne for fodder as the squatter passed through the little paddock. He turned on him a dusky face full of ludicrous unhappiness. The black fellow of Australia takes kindly to no work that does not include horses; it was gall and wormwood to Billy to be chained to an uncongenial task almost within a stone's throw of the breaking-yard, through the high fence of which he could catch glimpses of a chestnut coat and hear voices raised in quick interest. He hewed viciously at the tough lucerne stems.

"That pfeller him buck plenty, mine thinkit," he vouchsafed to his employer.

"Master Jim bin ride him, Billy?"

"Baal—not yet. Lucerne plenty enough cut, eh, boss?"

David Linton laughed outright at the wistful face.

"If I say it's enough, what's the next job, Billy."

"Mine thinkit Master Jim him pretty likely want a hand with that pfeller chestnut," said Billy eagerly.

"Oh, do you?—I thought so," said his master. "All right, Billy—cut along; but don't get in Master Jim's way. He'll call you if he wants you."

"Plenty!" said Billy, thankfully, and fled towards the yards like a black comet. He was already perched on the cap, a grinning vision of joy, when Mr. Linton arrived on the scene, and swung himself up beside Norah.

The big mustering yard was empty save for Jim and his pupil—a beautiful chestnut colt, rather dark in colour, and with no mark save a white star. He was fully saddled and bridled, with the stirrups removed from the saddle and the reins tied loosely back, while in addition to the bit, bore a pair of long driving reins by which Jim was guiding him round and round the yard. It was evident that the colt was not happy. His rough coat was streaked with dark sweat and flecked with foam, and, though he went quietly enough his eye was wild, and showed more than a glimpse of white.

"Hallo, Dad!" sang out Jim cheerfully. The colt executed a nervous bound and broke jerkily into a canter.

"Steady there, you old stupid," said Jim, affectionately, bringing his pupil back to a walk with a gentle strain on the bit. "He has a curious dislike to the human voice if it's raised, Dad; and as we can't expect everyone to whisper for his benefit, the sooner he gets over it, the better. What do you think of him?"

"He'll make a good horse," said his father, surveying the colt critically. "A bit leggy now, but he'll mend of that. How is he going, Jim?"

"Oh, he's quiet enough; a bit nervous, but I don't think there's any vice in him," Jim answered. "At present he is exactly like a frightened kid, but he's

calming down. I drove him, without a saddle on, most of yesterday, and he graduated to the saddle this morning—and at first I think he thought it was the end of the world. He'll make a topping good hack, Dad."

"Better than Garryowen?" came from Norah.

"Better than your grandmother!" retorted Jim, to whom his own steed represented all that was perfection in horseflesh. "Better than your old crock, Bosun, if you like!" Which insult, Norah, who knew his private opinion of her pony, received with a tilted nose and otherwise unruffled calm.

"When do you think of riding him?" asked Mr. Linton.

"Oh, I'll get on him this afternoon," Jim answered. "It's getting near lunch-time; and it won't do him any harm to have another hour or so getting used to the feel of the leather, and the creak thereof—which is the part he dislikes. I'm not anxious to scare him by mounting him too soon. At present he is gradually realising that I'm a friendly beast; for a good while he was certain I meant to kill him."

Mr. Linton nodded.

"Quite right—I don't believe in hurrying a nervous young horse," he said. "Scare him at first and he is apt to remain scared. I'm glad you're taking him quietly. He will be up to my weight when he fills out, Jim, don't you think?"

"Oh, easily," Jim answered. "When we get back from England you'll find him just about right; we'll get Murty to keep him for his own use while we're away. I don't want him hacked about by any man who chooses; he is quite the best of this year's lot." He shook the reins very gently, and addressed the colt in friendly fashion. "Get on, old man."

The chestnut broke into an uneasy jog, which his driver had some little difficulty in reducing to a sober walk. He went with sidling steps, hugging the fence as much as possible, as if longing for the space and freedom of the paddocks outside. The corners of the yard had been rounded off, so that he could not indulge his evident inclination to put himself as far as possible into one and dream of his lost youth. It was just a little hard on him—last week all he had known of life was the wild bush paddocks on the outer fringe of Billabong run, where there was good galloping ground for him and his mates on the rough plains, and deep belts of timber to shelter them from the hot noonday sun or the frosty nights of winter. Then had come a time of mad excitement. Men and dogs had invaded their peaceful solitudes, and the hills had echoed all day to shouts and barking and the clear cracks of stockwhips, that ran round the hills like a fusillade of rifle shots. It was all very alarming and disturbing. At first the young horses had been inclined to treat it as a joke, but they soon found that for them it had a more serious meaning, that gradually they were being surrounded and edged out of the timber to the open plain, that they had not even time to eat, and that the deepest recesses of the hills and

creeks formed no secure hiding-place from their pursuers.

Then they grew afraid for the first time. They galloped hither and thither wildly, to the great annoyance of the men, who had no wish to see valuable young horses hurt or blemished by running into a tree or under a low-growing limb, in these wild rushes through the scrub. They tried to drive them as quietly as possible; but the horses thought they knew far too much for that, and before they were finally mustered there had been racing and chasing that had brought much secret and unlawful joy to Jim and Norah and Wally, but no little anxiety to the owner of the run. No great damage, however, had been done; gradually all the wild youngsters had been driven out of the timbered country, hustled through the gate that effectually barred them from such shelter in the future, and brought to the homestead through a succession of peaceful paddocks, peopled with sleek cattle almost too lazy to move aside for the drove of uneasy horses. The home paddock had received them at last; and then every day saw them driven up to the yards, where they were left for a few hours so that they might grow accustomed to being close to civilisation, and to the sound of the human voice. One by one they dropped out; a youngster would be edged away from his mates into a little yard, presently to find himself alone when the main mob was let out to go galloping down the hill to freedom. Then real education began; education that meant bit and bridle and saddle, and the knowledge that the strange new creature called Man was master and meant to remain so.

Jim had kept the chestnut colt for his own tuition. Mick Shanahan, chief horsebreaker of Billabong for many a year, had gone to the war; and though every man on the station had a settled conviction of his own ability to break horses, Jim and his father did not, in every instance, share the belief. The chestnut was too good to be given to any chance-comer to handle. Most of the youngsters were destined for use as stock-horses, and might as well be handed over to the men who were to ride them in their work; but not this well-bred baby "with the spirit of fire and of dew," and with all his nerves jangling from the indignity of being made a prisoner. Jim had been carefully trained in Mick Shanahan's methods; besides which, he had a natural comprehension of horses, and a rooted dislike of rough-and-ready ways of breaking-in. There was something in the strong gentleness of the big fellow that soothed a young horse unconsciously.

He pulled up the chestnut after a few turns round the yard, and proceeded, as he said, to talk to him, speaking in a low voice while he handled him quietly, stroking him all over. The colt, nervous for a moment, soon settled down under the gentle voice and hand; and so found the bit which he had champed indignantly all the morning, slipped out of his mouth, and an easy-fitting halter on his head. Then came Norah, at whom he was inclined to start

back, until he remembered that he had met her twice before, that she also was a person who moved quietly and had an understanding touch, and that she always carried a milk-thistle—an article delicious at all times, but especially soothing to a tired mouth, hot and sore after even the broad, easy bit Jim always used. Norah said pleasant things to him and stroked his nose while he munched the cool, juicy thistle; and then he was led to a bucket, in itself a very alarming object, until he found that it held water which tasted just as good as creek water. After that he was tied up to the fence and left to his own reflections, while the humans who were causing him so much uneasiness of mind went away, apparently that they might seek milk-thistles on their own account.

It was nearly a week since the momentous decision to go to England; and while the life of the station had apparently pursued its ordinary course, in reality preparations had gone forward swiftly. To Brownie the news had been broken gently, with the result that for twenty-four hours the poor old woman had been thrown into a condition of stupefied dismay; then, rallying herself, with caustic remarks directed inwardly on "women who hadn't no more sense than a black-beetle," she set herself to overhaul the various wardrobes of the family with a view to the exigencies of foreign travel. Brownie's ideas as to what was necessary for a long voyage were remarkably vast, and included detailed preparations for every phase of climate, from Antarctic to Equatorial. Mr. Linton had finally interfered at a stage when it appeared probable that it would be needful to charter a whole ship to convey the family baggage, and had referred the question of Norah's outfit to an aunt in Melbourne who was well skilled in providing for damsels of fifteen.

Wally had written slightly delirious letters to his guardian and his brothers in far-off Queensland, and was impatiently awaiting replies, in much agony of mind lest these should not come in time to prevent his going back to school. The end of the holidays was fast approaching; unless within a very few days permission came for him to accompany Mr. Linton's party to England he must pack up and return meekly to class-room and playground—a hard prospect for a boy whose head fairly seethed with war, while his pockets bulged with drill-books. His ordinary sunny temperament had almost vanished as he wavered from day to day between hope and despair. To go back would be bad enough in any case; but to go back when his one chum was about to gain their hearts' desire, taking away with him all that meant real home to the orphan lad, was a sentence worse than banishment. Jim and Norah, themselves torn with anxiety as to his fate, endeavoured to cheer him by every means in their power; but Wally watched for the mails anxiously, and refused comfort.

The question of a suitable ship was causing Mr. Linton no small perplexity. He disliked the heat of the Suez Canal route, and wished to go by South

Africa; but although it was possible to decide upon a ship, and even to engage cabins, embarking was quite another matter, since any vessel was liable to Government seizure as a transport for troops. No firm of agents could guarantee the sailing of a ship. The Government was hard-pressed to find transports for the thousands of men and horses that Australia was hastily preparing to despatch to the mother-country's aid; and many a big "floating hotel" was commandeered within a very short time of her sailing and transformed by a horde of carpenters into a troopship—losing her name and identity and becoming a mere number. No one grumbled; it was war, and war meant business. But undoubtedly it increased the difficulty of going to England, and daily Mr. Linton knitted his brows over worried letters from shipping agents extremely anxious to have the conveyance of so large a party to England, but quite unable to offer a sailing date.

Jim, meanwhile, was preparing methodically for a long absence. Under Murty O'Toole the work of the station could be trusted to go steadily forward, agents being entrusted with the buying and selling of stock. But there were a hundred threads that Jim kept ordinarily in his own hands and which, it was necessary to adjust carefully before he gave up his work. It had been the boy's ambition to be indispensable to his father. From the day he had left school he had worked for that end, succeeding so far that David Linton, understanding and appreciating his efforts, had gradually put more and more responsibility into his hands, discussing the management of the run with him, and treating him in all ways more as a man of his own age than as a boy newly released from school. Jim was not new to the work, and he loved it; instinctively he fell into step with his father, profiting by his experience, and learning every day. "Mr. Jim's put his mark on Billabong," Murty said, ruefully to Mrs. Brown. " 'Twill not be an aisy matter to rub out that same."

For Norah the days went by like a dream. The even current of her life, that had known no break but school, was suddenly rudely disturbed. A prospect was opening before her, so vast that she was almost afraid of it. To every Australian whose parents are British-born, the old land overseas is always "home." From childhood the desire grows to see it—to go back over the old tracks our parents trod, to visit the spots they knew, and to enjoy the share that belongs to us, as atoms of Empire, of its beauty and its tradition. It is ours, even though we be born at the other side of the world; "home"—and one day we shall go to see it. But when the day comes, even if we are older than Norah, we are very often a little afraid.

Norah was torn in more than one way. To go to England! that was beautiful, and wonderful, and mysterious; to go with Dad and Jim, and possibly Wally, who was almost as good as Jim, made the prospect in some way an unmixed delight. There would be the voyage, itself a storehouse of

marvels to the little girl from the Bush; strange ports, queer people such as she had never seen, famous sights of which she had heard all her life, scarcely realising that she would ever see them. A voyage, too, with a spice of danger; there were German cruisers in the way, only too anxious to sink a fat Australian liner. It was easier to realise the excitement than the risk, at all events for people under twenty; and Norah and Jim were not quite certain that the appearance of a hostile warship might not add the last pleasing touch of exhilaration.

There was, however, another side to the picture. There was War, grim and terrible, and scarcely to be comprehended; it threatened to grip Jim and take him away, to unknown and dreadful dangers. But War was very far off, and that Jim should not come through it safely was simply not a thing to be imagined; besides which, many people thought it would be all over in a very few months—an idea which caused Jim and Wally acute uneasiness. They had no desire for "the show" to be finished before they arrived to take a hand.

Then there was Billabong; and at the thought of leaving that dearest place in the world, Norah's heart used to sink within her. Each time she caught sight of Brownie's face unawares a fresh pang smote her. Brownie was playing the game manfully, and wore in public an air of laboured cheerfulness that would not have deceived a baby; but when she fancied no eye was upon her, the mask slipped off, and her old face grew haggard with the knowledge of all that the coming parting meant to her. Norah had never known her mother. Brownie had taken her, a helpless mite, from the arms that were too weak to hold her any more; and since that day she had striven that the baby the little mistress had left to her care should never realise all she had lost.

Norah did not realise it at all. Her life had not led her much among girls with mothers, though she knew instinctively that they were lucky girls, it was beyond her power to think herself unlucky. For she had always had Billabong, and Jim, and Dad: Dad, who was splendid above all people, being father, and mother, and mate in one. She did not miss anything, because she did not fully understand. Brownie had been always at hand to supply a kind of mothering that had seemed to Norah very effective; and Norah paid her back with a wealth of hearty young affection that made the old woman's chief joy on earth. Now her nursling was going out of her life, so far that her imagination could not follow her, and unknown dangers would be in her path. They were hard days for Brownie; and Norah, knowing just how hard they were, was heavy-hearted herself at the sight of the brave old face.

Nor was it easy to leave Billabong itself, seeing that no place could possibly be so good in Norah's eyes. Home had always spelt perfection to her; and its simple, free life—the outdoor life of the Bush, with dogs and horses a part of one's daily existence, the work of the station better than any game ever

invented, and always the sense that one was helping—surely there could be nothing better. If there were, it was beyond the imagination of the daughter of the Bush. So, notwithstanding the fascination of their future plans, Norah clung to each day that was left to her of Billabong, and tried to act as though England were as dim and misty a prospect as it had always been.

Wally ate his lunch with a sober air that sat queerly on his usually merry face. The mail, to which he had been eagerly looking forward, had not arrived; but there was a telephone message from the newspaper office in Cunjee, the nearest township, giving more particulars of the fierce fighting of the early days of the war, and of Great Britain's insistent call for recruits. The first Australian contingent of twenty thousand men was reported ready to go; there were rumours more or less vague, of warships, British, Japanese, and French, waiting at various ports in each state, to convoy the troopships; but these were only rumours, for the newspapers were not allowed to publish any information that might possibly be utilised by German spies—one of whom was said to have been caught at his pretty seaside home, near Port Phillip Heads, with an excellently equipped wireless in action. Every one was on the watch, and suspicious characters found themselves of unpleasant interest to the police. Small boys in the cities constituted themselves detectives and "shadowed" unfortunate and inoffensive people whose names chanced to sound "foreign," on the principle that anything foreign might be German, and anything German was to be severely dealt with. Altogether, there was much excitement; and the station book-keeper, who had taken the telephone message, declared his intention of enlisting.

"Another item to be replaced before I can go," said Mr. Linton, a trifle ruefully. "And Green knows his work, which is more than one can say for most book-keepers. Still, I'm glad he's going. He's young and strong, and has no ties; and no man with those qualifications has any right to be rounding his shoulders over station ledgers nowadays."

"He can't ride for nuts," said Wally, despondently, "and as for shooting—well, did you ever see him try? It's awfully risky for anyone who goes out with him, but very safe for the game."

"Oh, he'll learn," Mr. Linton said. "He needn't ride—and shooting can be taught. Why this sudden outburst against poor Green, Wally?"

Wally looked abashed.

"I didn't mean to run Green down," he explained. "He'll be all right, sir, of course. I only meant it was hard luck to think they'll take him, and they won't take me—and I'm partly trained, at any rate. Silly asses! I've been wondering if I got a false moustache—a very little one, of course—would I pass for twenty, do you think?"

The Linton family shouted with joy.

"Oh, do, Wally!" Norah begged. "It would drop off in the riding tests, and everyone would be so interested."

"Great idea," Jim said. "But why a little one, old man? You might as well have one with a good curl—and a pair of side whiskers of the drooping variety. They'd lend a heap of dignity to your expression."

"Get out!" said the victim, sheepishly. "All very well for you to jibe—you're certain of going just because you're older. And goodness knows you haven't half as much sense!"—modestly. "Wait till you get into a regiment at home and they give you a platoon to handle, and see you tie it into knots!"

"Well, you'll be somewhere handy to take some of the colonel's wrath," said Jim, comfortably.

"Wish I were sure of it," Wally answered, his face falling. "I can't make out why they don't write; Edward may be up country, but there's been quite time to get an answer from that blessed old slowcoach, Mr. Dimsdale. He said he was sorry I couldn't get into the contingent, but he's quite likely to change his mind now that I've really a chance. Guardians are like that!" And Wally, whose chief experience of his guardian had been occasional glimpses of a benevolent old gentleman who paid his bills promptly and tipped him twice a year, sighed as though his youth had been one long persecution.

"Oh, he'll be quite meek, you'll see," said Jim. "Give them time—Queensland is a long way from Billabong. We're not going without you, if we have to kidnap you, old man." He rose from the table. "I must get back to my patient; I expect he thinks he's had enough post-and-rails by now."

The chestnut colt was looking sleepy, as though a post-and-rail diet had a sedative effect. He backed and snorted as Jim came up to him, and Jim stopped and talked to him soothingly until he was quiet enough not to resent a caressing hand on his neck, and presently the bridle slipped on so gently that he scarcely noticed it.

"Good lad," said Jim. "Come and hold his head, Wally, while I tighten up the girths."

Wally came, and the broad, soft leather girth was adjusted deftly, the colt making no further protest than to walk round several times. Jim ran his eye over him.

"That's all right," he said. "Take care, old man, in case he goes to market."

Suddenly, quickly, but quietly, he was in the saddle, and his feet home in the stirrups. The colt stood stock-still, apparently petrified with astonishment. Wally took himself unobtrusively out of the way, joining Mr. Linton and Norah on the cap of the fence.

Jim leaned forward, patting the colt.

"Go on, stupid." He touched the chestnut neck gently with the rein, and the colt took a few uncertain steps forward, coming to a standstill in bewilderment.

The watchers on the fence were very quiet. Behind Jim two new faces appeared, as Murty O'Toole and Black Billy climbed to good positions.

"Baal that pfeller him goin' to buck, mine thinkit," said Billy, in low tones of disappointment. "Him get walk about too much."

"You let Mr. Jim alone, you black image of a haythen," said Mr. O'Toole, affably. "Think you can teach him how to break in a horse?"

"Not much," said Billy, accepting the epithet and the criticism cheerfully. "But mine like 'em buck—plenty! Wish Master Jim him wear spurs."

"Spurs—on that chestnut baby!" ejaculated Murty, in subdued accents of horror. "Is it to butcher him ye'd like, then? Sure ye think every horse needs as much encouragement as y'r old Bung-Eye. Sorra the horse I'd give you to break, barring it was a camel; I'm told them needs persuasion."

"That pfeller mare Bung-Eye no good," said Billy, scornfully—the ancient piebald mare on which many of his duties were carried out, was the chief bitterness of his life. "Mine thinkit she bin fall down—die, plenty soon."

"Not she!" chuckled Murty. "Don't you hope it, me lad. Boss bin tell me 'tis Bung-Eye for you until you learn to ride a bit—if you ever do, an' that's no certainty, I'm thinking." Then, as the outraged aborigine turned his eyes upon him in speechless wrath, Murty grinned in friendly fashion. "Never mind—there's a quiet old pony mare running down in the Far Plain, and we'll see if you can't have a thrifle of a turn on her, if you're good."

Billy spluttered.

"Boss him bin say I could ride one of the young ones," he protested. Whatever Billy could or could not do, he could sit any horse that had ever been handled. He had a wild, primeval desire to smite the broad, good-humoured face grinning at him.

"The Boss said that, do ye say? Me poor lad, ye've misunderstood him—'twas to lead one about he meant!" Murty's tone changed suddenly and his smile faded. "Yerra now—look at that one!" he uttered.

The chestnut colt had made several unquiet attempts at progressing round the yard. The weight on his back troubled him; there was a feeling pervading him that he was being mastered, although he could no longer see his conqueror. When he tried to break into a jog-trot there came on his mouth a steady strain, gentle but quite determined, bringing him instantly to a puzzled standstill. Then came a hint that more movement was required of him—that he was expected to walk. But his mind was far too excited for him to think of walking; he wanted to jog, to trot—to break into a wild gallop that would rid him for ever of this strange, perplexing Presence on his back. He came to a halt again, snorting.

"Go on, old chap!" Jim's unspurred heel touched his side gently.

A sudden wild impulse came upon the colt. He flung himself forward,

plunging violently—snatched at the restraining bit, felt the strain on his mouth and the pressure on his sides as Jim stiffened a little in his seat; and then, quivering with one mad desire to be free, his head went down and he bucked furiously. To the onlookers he seemed like a ball—his head and tail tucked between his legs, his back humped until the rider seemed perched upon the very apex. To and fro he went in one paroxysm after another; writhing, twisting, pounding across yard until brought up by the fence; coming to a standstill with a jerk after a wild fit of bucking and then flinging himself into another yet more wild. Jim sat him easily, his supple body giving a little to each furious bound, but never shifting in the saddle. The five on the fence-cap watched him breathlessly; however secure the rider may be there is a never-failing excitement in watching a determined buck-jumper. And the chestnut was bucking with a determination worthy of his good breeding.

He stopped suddenly, all four feet planted wide apart, panting heavily, with nostrils dilated. For a moment it seemed as though he had enough. Then his head went down again, he sprang into the air, bounding forward with a sudden twist—the hardest buck of all to sit. It was too much for the chestnut himself. As he landed he crossed his fore-feet, tripped, and went headlong to the ground. A little cry broke from Norah, and Wally drew in his breath sharply.

David Linton was off the fence almost before his son touched the earth. Jim kicked his feet out of the stirrups as the colt tripped, and was flung clear, not relinquishing his hold on the bridle. He landed easily, and was up again as quickly as he had gone down, dusty but uninjured. The chestnut lay on his side, panting, for a moment; then, with a scramble, he came awkwardly to his feet. As he rose, Jim slipped into the saddle. The whole incident was over so speedily that it seemed like a trick of the imagination. David Linton gave an inaudible sigh of relief, climbing back to his place on the cap of the rail.

The chestnut was beaten. He had done his worst, culminating in a display that had shaken and alarmed him a good deal and had made his shoulder ache badly; and the Presence on his back had not seemed disturbed at all. It was evident that nothing could be done to annoy him; at the end of a period which had been exceedingly trying for the colt himself, the Presence was quite unruffled; not angry, not in any way moved, but saying soothing things in his quiet voice, and patting his neck in the same friendly way. The colt gave it up. Evidently it was prudent and simpler to do as the Presence desired since in the long run it came to the same thing, after much personal inconvenience if he resisted. The fire died out of his wild eye, and the stiffness of his muscles relaxed. In a moment he answered the rein meekly, and walked round the yard; and when he found that he was expected to increase the pace to a trot, did so awkwardly enough, but without any resistance.

Jim trotted him for a few minutes, pulled him up, and slipped to the

ground, talking to him, and patting the wet neck. Then he grinned up at the trio on the fence.

"He'll do now, I think," he said. "That last outburst took all the inquiring spirit out of him. You know, he hasn't one little bit of vice; he only wanted to know who was boss."

"Did he hurt you, Jimmy?" Norah asked.

"Not a scrap, thanks. I'm awfully sorry the poor little chap came down—it scared him. But he had to find out; and now we'll be first-rate friends—won't we, old man?" This to the chestnut, who hung his head meekly and looked comically like a naughty little boy released from the corner. "Hope we didn't give you a fright?"

"You were too quickly down and up for us to have much time for that," said his father, disguising the fact that in a moment of paternal weakness he had moved with equal rapidity.

"There's a lot of the tennis-ball in our Jimmy," said Wally, bringing his long legs over the fence and descending to earth. "Can't keep him down—what a nasty bit he'll be for a solid, earnest German to tackle! Going to rub him down, Jim?"

"Yes—bring me the things, Billy, and take this saddle," Jim said, addressing the dusky retainer, who hovered near, armed with cloths and brushes. "No, I'll do it myself, thanks; I want him to get thoroughly used to me. Got a thistle for him, Norah?" And for the next quarter of an hour the colt's toilet proceeded with a thoroughness bent on impressing the pupil with the knowledge that the human touch was really a comforting thing and led to a tired chestnut baby ultimately feeling good all over.

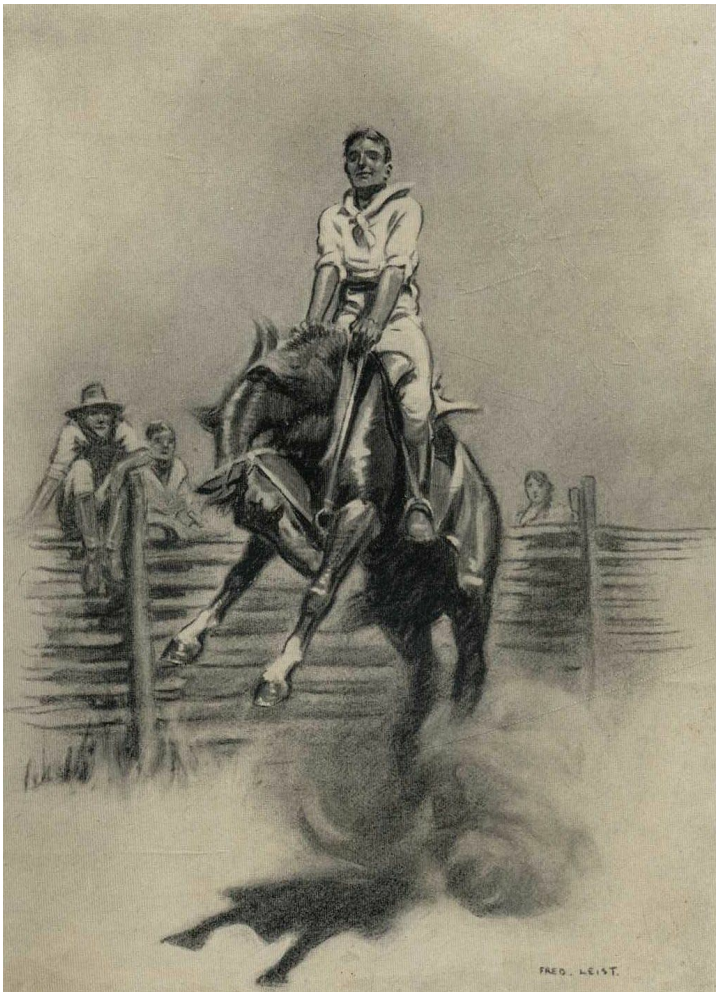
"There you are," said Jim, giving him a final pat as he slipped off the halter and watched him trot off into the freedom of the paddock. "When you find out what to do with your legs and arrive at something resembling a mouth, you'll be worth riding. And now I'm going to give myself a treat by getting on Garryowen and going to see how the fencers are working in the new subdivision; they want a cheque on account, and I want to see if they have earned it, before they get it. Who's coming?"

"Me," said Norah, with great and ungrammatical fervour.

"And me," said Wally.

Jim looked at his father.

"Oh, well, we haven't much more Billabong time left," said David Linton, smiling. "Me, too, I suppose."



"Jim stiffened a little in his seat."

CHAPTER IV.

A BILLABONG DAY.

ONE of the men had found an injured wallaby in an outlying paddock. It had caught in a sagging fence-wire, and broken its leg; the man, engaged in restoring the fence to tautness, had found it lying helpless and starving in a hollow. He was Murty O'Toole, and so he did not knock the soft-eyed little beast on the head, as most stockmen would have done. Murty had an Irishman's tender heart. Besides, he knew Norah.

"Poor little baste!" he said, picking up the wallaby gently. It made no resistance, but its great eyes were terrified, and he could feel the thumping of its heart. He whistled over it. "Well, well—the treachery of that barbed-wire! Broken, is it then; and me with never a thing to mend ye! Well, Miss Norah 'll be glad of the chance; she an' Mr. Jim 'll make a job of ye, an' they afther learnin' first-aid, near as good as doctors. Come along home now, an' get fixed up."

Norah had welcomed the invalid with enthusiasm. She had always kept tame wallaby, which make one of the best Bush pets; and this one was a very pretty specimen, the more attractive because of its helplessness and pain. Jim set the broken leg deftly, and Norah took over the care of the patient, which soon grew quite fearless and healed with the clean thoroughness characteristic of wild animals. Before long it could hop about the sheltered enclosure where it lived, never failing to limp to meet her when she came to feed it.

The wallaby's midday dinner was late to-day, since a job of mustering in an outlying paddock had kept everyone out far beyond the usual luncheon hour. Norah had hurried through the meal, excusing herself before the others had finished, so that she might go to her patient. She was coming back through the sunny garden, swinging her empty milk-tin, when a curious sight met her gaze.

On the first verandah were two revolving figures; one immensely fat, the other so thin that he seemed lost in the capacious embrace of the first. As she came nearer, looking with puzzled eyes, it was evident that they were Mrs. Brown and Wally; and that Mrs. Brown was not, indeed, the embracer, but the most unwillingly embraced. From the open window of the smoking-room came the voice of the gramophone, playing a waltz in time more suited to an Irish jig; to which melody Wally was endeavouring to tune his laggard partner's footsteps. The unfortunate Brownie, purple of face, did her best; but, for a lady weighing seventeen stone, the task of emulating Wally would not

have been easy at any time—and just now Wally appeared to be compounded of quicksilver and electricity. His long legs fairly twinkled; he gambolled and caracoled rather than danced. Glimpses of his countenance, seen over Brownie's shoulder as he twirled, showed a vision of delirious joy. At the window behind him was Jim's face, scarcely less joyous. Mr. Linton, grinning broadly, was in a doorway.

"Oh, Wally, aren't you an ass?" Norah ejaculated, helpless with laughter. "Brownie, dear, don't let him kill you!"

"If she dies, it will be in a good cause," Wally returned. "Nevertheless, a substitute will do, and you're a light-weight, Norah. Thank you, ma'am"—to Mrs. Brown, whom he deposited in a chair, where she subsided gaspingly. "Come along, Norah—let her go, Jim!" He seized his hostess, and they spun up the verandah in a mad waltz, the wallaby's milk-can, which she had not had time to drop, banging cheerful time.

The gramophone having come to the end of its tether, ended in a scratching howl, and Jim disappeared precipitately from the window. Wally came to a standstill regretfully.

"I could have gone on for quite a while," he uttered. "Bother you, Jimmy—why couldn't you keep her wound? Before we begin again, Norah, do you mind laying aside that tin? It's full of corners."

"I'm not going to begin again," said Norah, firmly, "so don't delude yourself. Now will you tell me why you've suddenly gone mad?" Then her eye caught a leather bag lying open on the floor, and her face suddenly flushed with delight. "Oh, Wally, it's the mail—and you can go!"

"Of course it is," Wally said, almost indignantly. "Do you think any other cause could have induced me to waltz with Brownie at this hour of day, no matter how much she wanted it?" There came a protesting gurgle from Brownie, to which no one lent hearing.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Norah caught Wally's hand, and they pumped each other enthusiastically. "I knew it must be all right, all the time, of course—but it's lovely to be sure. Were they nice, Wally?"

"Sweet as old pie," said Wally, happily. "Mr. Dimsdale had waited to communicate with Edward—and Edward was infesting a sugar mill somewhere in the cane districts, and appeared to have taken special precautions to dodge letters. However, he telegraphed to Mr. Dimsdale as soon as he did hear—and he's sent me an awfully jolly letter, and one to your father. And old Dimmy's written in his best style, giving me his blessing. And they've sent word to school—won't the Head kick! And they've fixed up money. And everything's glorious. Have another waltz, Brownie?"

"No, indeed, thank you kindly," said Brownie, hastily, grasping the arms of her chair in the manner affected by those about to have a tooth pulled. "Me

figure's against it, Mr. Wally, my dear, and it isn't hardly fair. If the day ever comes when you're seventeen stone, you'll know—not as it seems likely, but you can't be sure, and I was thin once meself. Came on me like a blush—and me that active! Ah, well, I'll be thin enough with worry by the time you're all safe home again."

"Rubbish, Brownie," said Jim, and smiled at her affectionately. "You and Murty will be so busy managing the place that you won't have time to think of worry."

"And there'll be letters every week," Norah added. "We'll have such heaps to tell you. And you'll have to write to us."

"Me!" said Brownie, visibly shuddering at the prospect. "Gettin' letters'll be all we'll have to look forward to, Miss Norah, my dear—but when it comes to writing them, it's another thing. I never was 'andy at the pen, as you know. In my day our mothers thought a sight more of making us 'andy about the house and with a cooking-stove. Girls is very different nowadays. Even Mary and Sarah, though goodness knows I've done me best with them."

"Oh, they're quite good girls," said Mr. Linton. "They should be, too, after the years you've trained them."

"And they'll write and say all you want if you're tired, Brownie darling," Norah put in.

"I dunno," said Brownie, despondently, "I'm stupid enough writing myself, but I'd be stupider yet dealing with a—what is it, Mr. Jim dear, when it's someone as writes for you? Something about ham."

"Amanuensis?" hazarded Jim.

"Yes, that's it. No, I'll have to do my own letters, an' they'll be bad enough. You'll have to excuse them, dearie."

"The only thing I wouldn't excuse would be not getting them," Norah answered. "I've had them whenever I was away at school, and you know I can't do without them, Brownie. Why, you tell me things no one else even thinks of. And I'll want home letters more than ever when I'm really away from Australia. It was bad enough when I was at school; but to be as far away from Billabong as England——" Norah stopped expressively.

"You'll have all I can send you, my precious," said Brownie tearfully. "I s'pose it's no good for me to make up a hamper now and then? Me plum-cakes'll keep a year!"

"I only wish it were," said Jim. "Your hampers have brightened my life from my youth up, Brownie—not that I ever gave one of your cakes a chance to keep three days! But I expect we'll have to wait until we come home again. One thing's quite certain, we'll all be ready for your cooking when we come back."

"Bless his heart!" said Brownie. It was plain that comforting visions of a

culinary orgie of welcome were already materialising in her mind. “It’ll be a great day for the station when we get you all again—and be sure you bring Mr. Wally too. I’ll have pikelets ready for you, Mr. Wally!”

“I’ll think of them, Brownie,” said Wally, his voice very kindly. “And anyhow, one of the best things about getting back will be to see your old face again. There now, I’ve made a sentimental speech. Take me away Jim, and give me some work.”

“Haven’t any,” Jim answered, lazily. “You forget I’ve been out since daylight, old man—at an hour when I believe you were snoring musically, I was giving the chestnut an early morning lesson. He went jolly well too; easy as a rocking-chair. Now it’s three o’clock and I’m thinking of claiming the eight-hours-day of the honest Australian working-man.”

“Well, it’s not often you limit yourself to it,” his father said.

“Don’t encourage him, sir,” Wally remarked. “Family affection doubtless blinds you to the idleness which has so long grieved me in your son’s character ____”

“Losh!” said Jim, in astonishment. He rose, and fell upon the hapless Mr. Meadows, conveying him to the lawn, where they rolled over together like a pair of St. Bernard puppies. Finally Jim, somewhat dishevelled, sat up on the prostrate form of his friend.

“I don’t mind your maligning me at all,” he said. “But when you take to talking like a copy-book, it’s time someone dealt with you, young Wally.” He shifted his position, thereby eliciting a smothered howl from the victim. “You needn’t think that because you’re going to the war you can make orations. Not here, anyhow.”

“Take him off, somebody—Norah!” came from the earth, in a voice much impeded by grass.

“Indeed, I won’t—you have me pained, as Murty says,” replied Norah callously. “He never did anything to you that you should talk in that awful way. You might be your own grandmother!”

“You’re not a nice family!” said Wally, gaspingly. He achieved a violent convulsion, and Jim, taken off his guard, lost his balance and fell over—of which his adversary was not slow to take advantage. The battle that followed was interrupted by the hasty arrival of Billy, his ebony countenance showing unusual signs of excitement. The tangled mass of arms and legs on the lawn resolved itself into its original parts, and Jim endeavoured to appear the manager of Billabong, even with much grass in his hair.

“What is it, Billy?”

“Murty him send me,” Billy explained. “Big pfeller shorthorn bullock him bogged in swamp—baal us get him out. Want rope an’ horses.”

“Where?”

"Far Plain. That pfeller silly-fool bullock—him just walk in boggy place. Big one—nearly fat."

Jim whistled.

"Nice game getting him out will be. Well, you've got your job, Wally, old man, and if you take my advice, you'll borrow some of my dungarees to tackle it. There'll be much mud. Billy, you run up old Nugget and put a collar and trace chains on him, and lead him out. Take some bags—we'll bring ropes. Tell one of the boys to saddle our horses—they're in the stable."

"Can I come, Jim?" Norah asked.

"Yes, of course; but you can't very well help, so your habit will be all right; good thing you hadn't got out of it," said Jim casting a glance at his sister's neat divided skirt and blue serge coat. "You might cut along, if you're ready, and hurry up the horses; Wally and I must go and change." The boys clattered into the hall and up the stairs.

Mr. Linton, who had retreated to his office, came out at the noise.

"Anything the matter, Norah?"

Norah explained briefly, securing her felt hat the while.

"H'm," said her father. "No, I won't come out, I think Jim and Murty can manage without me; and Green and I are up to our eyes in the books. Take care of yourself, my daughter." He returned to the society of the warlike Green, while Norah raced across to the stables.

A rather small lad of sixteen, a newcomer whom Murty was endeavouring to train in the place of one of the enlisted stockmen, was trying to saddle Jim's big bay, Garryowen—an attempt easily defeated by Garryowen by the simple process of walking round and round him. Norah came to his assistance, and the horses were ready by the time Jim and Wally, clad in suits of blue dungaree, ran over from the house.

"Good girl," said Jim, well understanding that the new boy would not have finished the task unaided. He dashed into the harness-room, returning with two coils of strong rope, which he tied firmly to his saddle. Norah and Wally were already mounted and out of the stable-yard.

There was a keen westerly wind in their faces as they cantered steadily across the paddocks. Billabong was looking its worst; the drought had laid heavy hands upon it, and its beauty had vanished. On every side the plains stretched away, broken here and there by belts of timber or by the long, grey, snake-like lines of fencing. The trees were the only green thing visible, since Australian forest trees do not shed their leaves; but they looked old and faded, and here and there a dead one stood grey and lonely, like a gaunt sentinel. Grey too were the plains; their withered grass merged into the one dull colour. It was sparse and dry; even though the season was winter, a little cloud of dust followed the riders' track.

They crossed the river by a rough log bridge, built by Mr. Linton and his men from trees felled by the stream. The dry logs clattered under the horses' feet. Looking up and down stream the water showed only a shrunken remnant of its usual width, with boggy patches of half-dried mud between the thin trickle and the dusty banks, where withered docks reared gaunt brown stems. Even the riverside was dull and lifeless. But the wattle-trees, bravely defying the drought, already showed among their dark-green masses of foliage the buds that hinted at the spring-time shower of gold.

"This time last year," said Jim, "the river came down in flood, and all but washed this bridge away."

"It doesn't look much like a flood now," Wally remarked, surveying the apology for a river with disfavour.

"No—it's hard to imagine that it was over the banks and half across these paddocks. By Jove, we had a busy time!" Jim said, reminiscently. "It came down quite suddenly; it was pretty high to begin with, and then a big storm brought a lot of snow off the mountains, and whish! down came the old river. We had sheep in these paddocks, and saving them wasn't an easy job. Sheep are such fools."

"Sheep and turkey-hens," said Norah, "have between them an extraordinary amount of idiocy."

"They have," agreed her brother. "Our blessed old Shrops. decided that they would like to die—so, instead of clearing out on the rises at the far side of the paddocks, they camped on little hills near the river; and, of course, the water came all round them, and there they were, stranded on chilly little islands, surrounded by a healthy brown flood. Some slipped in and were drowned; the rest huddled together, and bleated in an injured way, as if they hadn't had a thing to do with getting themselves into the fix."

"Could you get them off?" Wally asked.

"Oh, most of them. Where the flood wasn't very deep we just drove the big cart in and loaded them into it. It was too deep in a lot of places, and we had to get the old flat-bottomed boat from the lagoon near the house and go paddling over the paddocks. That was all right, but the stupid brutes wouldn't let themselves be saved, if they could help it; whether it was cart or boat they disliked it equally, and we had to swim after half of them—they simply hurled themselves into the water rather than be rescued. And when it comes to life-saving in pretty turbulent flood-water, you can't find anything much more unpleasantly awkward than a big woolly Shropshire, very indignant at not being allowed to drown."

"Jolly sort of job," commented Wally. "Water cold?"

Jim gave a shiver of remembrance.

"Well, it was chiefly snow-water," he answered "I don't want to strike

anything much colder. We were in and out of it all day for three days and the wonder was that some of us didn't die—poor old Murty finished up with a shocking bad cold. My share was earache, and that was bad enough. But we had a job the week after that was nearly as exciting."

"What was that?"

"Well, the flood-water went back, leaving a line of débris right across the paddock—a solid belt of rubbish about six feet wide, made of reeds, and sticks and leaves, and all the small stuff the water could gather up as it came over the grass. Dry reeds were the basis of it—there must have been tons of them. Then we had a few days of early spring weather—you know those queer little bursts of almost hot days we get sometimes. I was standing still on this layer of rubbish one morning, looking at a bullock across the paddock when I felt something on my leg—looked down, and it was a tiger-snake!"

"Whew-w!" whistled Wally.

"Only a little chap—but any tiger-snake is big enough to be nasty," Jim said. "It seemed puzzled by my leather gaiter; I kicked it off and picked up a stick to kill it. And I nearly picked up another snake!"

"Some people are never satisfied," Wally said, severely. "Were you trying to qualify for a snake-charmer?"

"Not much—I can't stand the brutes," Jim answered. "I killed those two and then went hunting among the rubbish—and do you know, it was simply alive with snakes! The flood had brought them, I suppose, and the warm sun had encouraged them to come out; anyhow, there they were, and a nice job we had getting rid of them. I killed eight or ten more, and then it struck me that the occupation was likely to last some time, so I went home to lunch, and brought the men out afterwards. We had to turn over every bit of that rubbish with forks—it was too damp to burn—and I forget how many snakes we got altogether, but it was enough to stock a menagerie a good many times over. Beastly game—we all saw snakes for a week after it was finished, and I dreamed of them every night."

"I should think you did," Wally said, with sympathy. "Did any one get bitten?"

"No—they were all pretty small and very sleepy. I daresay they thought it was a little rough on them; after all, they hadn't asked to be brought from their happy homes and dumped out on the plain. But a snake's a snake," finished Jim, emphatically. "It doesn't pay you to show mercy to one because he's small."

"It does not; he grows up, and bites you," said Wally, grimly, referring to a painful episode in his own career.

"Indeed, he doesn't always wait until he grows up," Norah put in. "Even a baby tiger-snake can be venomous enough to be unpleasant. I don't know why

snakes exist at all; they say everything has its uses, but I never can see what use there is in the snake tribe."

"Neither can I—unpleasant brutes!" Wally agreed. "You get used to them, but you never learn to love them—unless you're a freak. I knew an old swagman in Queensland who made pets of them, though. He had a collection of about a dozen, which he said were poisonous, but I believe, myself, he'd taken out their fangs."

"If he hadn't, it's the sort of thing nobody waits to prove," Jim said. "You have to investigate a snake pretty closely before you find out if he has fangs or not; and if he has, the enquiry is apt to be unhealthy for you."

"That's so," agreed Wally. "No one ever waited to investigate old Moriarty's serpents. He made them pay very well; he would run up a good big bill at a hotel, and borrow as much money as he could from men who were there, drinking; and then he would pull out his snakes in a casual way in a crowded bar-room. Well, it used to work like a charm—most men can tackle a snake or two in a room, but when it comes to seeing a dozen squirming in different ways, people are likely to get rattled. Old Moriarty could clear out a room in quicker time than any fire-alarm. The bar-lady, if she didn't escape with the first rush, would faint, or have a ladylike fit of hysterics; and by the time anyone collected enough presence of mind to return, Moriarty would be far away, generally helping himself to a couple of bottles of whisky as he went."

"Horrid old pig!" was Norah's comment.

"He wasn't a nice man," Wally agreed. "Still I suppose you might call him a genius in his own particular line. Anyway, he travelled all over Southern Queensland, leaving behind him a trail of memories of serpents and missing cash."

"What became of him?" Jim asked.

"What I believe becomes of every crank who goes in for snake-catching—he got bitten at last. He lost his snakes one by one; you see, quite often one or two would get killed when he let them loose in a bar, if they happened to wriggle up against a man who was sober and had his stockwhip handy. Then he tried the trick once too often; he came to a place where there was a drover who had seen him play his game in another township, and this fellow warned everyone else, and told them he was sure the snakes were really harmless. So when Moriarty let them go, everyone was ready, and nobody fled—but in about two minutes there wasn't a live wriggler left of all his stock-in-trade."

"That was awkward for Moriarty," Jim remarked "What did he do? Was he wild?"

"I guess he was pretty wild. But from all we could hear, he hadn't a chance to do anything, because things became so actively unpleasant for him. The

drover was one from whom he'd borrowed money previously; and he knew there was no chance of getting it back, so he was annoyed. He told the story of Moriarty's misdeeds until everyone else felt annoyed too, and they ducked the old sinner in a horse-trough outside, and then escorted him gently but firmly from the township, riding him on a fence-rail. It was summer, so it really didn't hurt him, but it discouraged him."

"Still, he went catching snakes again?" Norah asked.

"Oh, yes. I suppose he felt they were his only friends; they must have twin-souls to a certain extent. If a snake wasn't your natural affinity you couldn't go about with it in your pocket, could you?"

"I don't expect you could," said Jim, laughing. "I can't imagine doing it under any circumstances whatever; but there's no accounting for tastes, and your Moriarty seems to have been an unusual gentleman. I suppose he felt lonely without his pets. One would."

"One certainly would," Wally assented. "Fancy a dozen of 'em wriggling about you! Anyhow, Moriarty went off into the bush after more, and had pretty good hunting; he turned up on our station with five or six. Of course, he behaved all right there, and didn't attempt to show them unless he was asked—and, of course, we youngsters were as keen as mustard to see them. We always enjoyed a visit from Moriarty, and he used to be very careful with the snakes, not to run any risks for us. He was really quite a decent old chap, except for whisky; when he couldn't get any you might have easily mistaken him for a respectable citizen."

"Is that the kind you keep in Queensland?" enquired Jim, grinning.

"Don't know," returned Wally, evenly—"they wouldn't let me mix in respectable circles since I took to associating with you. However, Moriarty stayed with us a few days, and then went off into the bush again, saying he wanted more snakes. We never saw him again, poor old chap; but one of the boundary-riders came upon his body a few days later."

"Dead?"

"Oh, yes, quite dead. He had evidently been bitten by a snake. He had a theory that if one did bite him, it wouldn't hurt him, and he'd always said that he wouldn't do anything to cure himself—that he was too tough for poison to hurt him. All these snake-charming idiots say that sort of thing. Well, old Moriarty found out his mistake, as they all do—too late."

"Poor old chap!" said Norah.

"Yes—we were all jolly sorry for old Moriarty. Of course, he was really an absolute reprobate; but he always behaved decently on our station, and he used to be jolly kind to us boys. We were lonely kids, and the place was at the back of beyond—hardly a soul ever came there, and we welcomed Moriarty's visits tremendously. He was such an unusual animal. Ah, well, rest his sowl, as

Murty would say. I don't suppose he'd have done any good with himself, so perhaps it was as well he went out."

They had been riding through a belt of sparse growing timber, the track marked by the wheels of the bullock-drays that were sent to bring firewood to the homestead. Now they emerged upon an open plain, where quicker going was possible. Just ahead was Billy, jogging along upon the hated Bung-Eye, whose piebald sides bore many marks of his spurs. He was leading a heavy black horse; one of the generally useful "slaves" to be found on any station, capable of being used as hack or stock-horse, in buggy, cart, or plough, and equally handy in any capacity. It was said of Nugget that in an emergency he was quite agreeable to pulling a load with his tail; and it was known that by means of a halter fastened to that useful appendage he had once "skull-dragged" a jibbing horse home. Nothing came amiss to him. If he had a temper, it was never shown. In good seasons or bad, he throve, and under no circumstances was he sick or sorry. His breeding was extremely doubtful, but in all that matters he was a perfect gentleman.

Billy looked enviously at the unhampered riders as they swept past him. He hated slow progress; to him, as to most natives, a horse was a thing which should be kept at a high speed, and it was the sorrow of his life that the work demanded of him very often meant quiet going. It was bad enough to have to jog over the paddocks on lazy old Bung-Eye, leading Nugget, heavy-footed and with trace-chains clanking dismally, without being forced to watch these cheerful people tear by him on horses that he would have bartered most of his small worldly possessions to ride. He jerked Nugget's leading-rein angrily, whereof the old black horse took not the slightest notice. Nugget was certainly not a cheerful proposition to lead; he went at his own pace or none, and at any attempt to hustle him he simply leaned heavily on the bit, becoming in Murty's phrase, "as aisy as a stone wall." At the moment. Billy was blind to all his undoubted moral excellences.

Half a mile across the paddock was a swampy lagoon. Ordinarily it was fringed with a thick belt of green rushes, which made splendid cover for black duck, and always gave good shooting in the season. Now, however, it was half dried up, and the rushes, withered and yellow, rattled cheerlessly in the keen wind. There was a wide expanse of dried mud near the bank; then another expanse, deep chocolate in colour, not yet quite dry. Beyond was the water, dotted with clumps of rushes, and looking rather like pea-soup. The mud was deeply indented with hoof-marks. A loud croaking of innumerable frogs filled the air.

A dozen yards from the edge stood a big shorthorn bullock, girth deep in water. He was hopelessly bogged. From time to time he made a violent struggle to free his legs from the mud that held them; but each attempt only left

him sunk more deeply. It was quite evident that he fully understood the seriousness of his plight. His sides heaved with his panting breath; his great eyes were wild with fear. Now and then he gave a low bellow, full of anxiety.

"I'll bet he's cold!" said Jim, with emphasis. "The great stupid ass! Why couldn't he have the sense to keep out of a bog-hole like that?" He jumped off, and proceeded to tie Garryowen's bridle to a tree. "Been at him long, Murty?"

"Sure I kem upon him two hours ago, an' I've been doin' me endeavours to shift him ever since," replied Mr. O'Toole, picking his way across the hoof-marked mud to meet the riders. His usually cheery countenance wore a doleful expression, and was obscured by many muddy streaks. Mud, in fact, clothed him from head to foot; in addition to which he was extremely wet. He cast a look at his hands, plastered and dripping. "Sorry I can't take the pony for ye, Miss Norah."

"It's all right, thank you, Murty," Norah answered, securing Bosun. "I wish I had known you'd been at this horrible job so long. I could have brought you out some tea. You must be frozen."

"Don't you worry; I've something better," said Jim, producing a flask, at the sight of which Murty's eyes brightened.

"Well, I'll not be sorry for a drink," he said, gratefully. "Cold! It'd freeze a poley bear to be standin' in that water; and that's what I've been doin' these two hours, coaxin' of that onnatural baste. Thanks, Mr. Jim." His teeth chattered against the silver cup as he drank.

"I knew you'd need it," Jim said. "This isn't a winter job. Mud deep, Murty?"

"Och, deep as you like!" said Murty lucidly. He handed back the cup. " 'Tis good to feel that sendin' a taste of a glow through a frozen man! The mud's deeper than the water, Mr. Jim—there's mighty little of that. Good sticky mud too; it takes a powerful grip of the boot."

"Have you moved him at all?"

"I have not. He's precisely where he was when I found him, barrin' he's sunk deeper. I tried driving and I tried pulling; Billy an' I got our stirrup-leathers joined and did our divilmost to haul him out; and I've beaten the poor baste most unfeeling. There's no stirring him. So I sent Billy in f'r ye, and I've been employing me time laying down logs an' slabs all round him, the way he'll get a howlt for his feet when we do move him—an' have something f'r ourselves to stand on while we're getting the tackling on to him. That same is needed." Mr. O'Toole looked down ruefully at his mud-plastered feet and legs. "Near bogged I was meself, an' I beltin' him; a good thing f'r me I got a howlt on his tail, though I expect he thought it was a misfortunit thing for him. But it was him or me."

"You certainly must have had a cheerful time," Jim observed. "I'd sooner

have lots of jobs than laying down a wood pavement under water in this weather."

"Well, it passes the time away, an' that's about all you can say f'r it," said Murty, grimly. "Here's that black image. 'Twas all I wished wan of us had been on old Nugget—we'd have skull-dragged the baste out somehow, before he sank as deep as he is now. But we'll manage it nice an' pleasant, with all that tackling."

"I hope so," Jim said, surveying the muddy water a little doubtfully. "We'll have a good try, anyhow. Better stay out of the water now, Murty; you've had quite enough. We can rope him."

"Is it me?" queried Mr. O'Toole, indignantly. " 'Tis only used to it I am—there's no need f'r you to wet y'r feet at all. Billy an' I can fix it."

Jim laughed.

"I might have known you wouldn't be sensible," he said. "Come on, then, you obstinate old Irishman!" He picked up a coil of rope and some sacking and marched off into the water, followed by his henchmen.

The big shorthorn seemed to understand that the new arrivals were bent on helping him, for he showed no sign of fear as they waded across, stumbling in the boggy mud and tripping over Murty's unseen and uneven pavement of logs. To stand on logs hidden under water is never the easiest of pursuits—the log possessing an almost venomous power of tipping up; and when such action on the part of the log renders its victim exceedingly likely to be dogged by plumping him violently into mud, the excitement becomes a trifle wearing. Norah, left alone on dry land beside Nugget, who slumbered peacefully, was divided between mirth and anxiety. To the looker-on there was much that was undoubtedly comical.

"Scissors!" ejaculated Wally, making a mis-step and losing his balance altogether. A violent splash resounded as he struck the water, disappearing momentarily in a cloud of spray that half drenched his companions. Mr. Meadows arose like a drowned rat, amidst unfeeling laughter.

"Can't you stand up, you old duffer?" queried Jim—and promptly lost the use of one leg, which sank so far into the yielding mud that it was all its owner could do to avoid sitting down in the water. Prompt action rescued him, amidst jeers from Wally.

"Of all the evil places for a stroll!" ejaculated Jim. "What on earth possessed you to come in here at all, you owl?" This to the bullock, who very naturally made no reply.

"Contrary they do be, by nature," said Murty, picking his way from log to log. "You'd wonder, now, what he'd expect to be finding; and any fool could have towld it'd be boggy. Well, he has his own troubles coming, an' serve him right."

The bullock snorted uneasily when he found himself the centre of attraction: a matter brought home to him sharply by the fact that Jim slipped on a log near him, and fell against him with a violence that would have disturbed anything less firmly bogged.

"No good trying to move him by ourselves, I suppose, Murty?" queried Jim, recovering himself.

"Not a bit—we'll help the ould horse, but 'tis Nugget that'll pull him out," rejoined the stockman. "I doubt if we'd shift him in a month of Sundays. Let ye be catching that rope, Mr. Jim, when I pass it under him."

To adjust the tackling was a matter requiring care, in order to avoid injury to the bullock. They padded him with sacking wherever a rope was likely to cut when the strain came upon it, with due regard that no knots should press unduly. It took time—standing as the workers were on slippery hidden logs that moved and squelched under them like living things, and in icy water that chilled them through and through, and numbed their fingers as they wrestled with the hard rope. When it was done Norah led Nugget in to the edge of the boggy mud, and the trace-chains attached to his collar were joined to the tackling on the bullock.

"Lead him on, and we'll see if he can shift him, Nor," Jim called.

"Come up, Nugget," responded Norah. She took the black horse by the head; and Nugget, suddenly realising that great things were demanded of him, woke up and went forward with a steady strain. The bullock, finding himself more uncomfortable than he had ever dreamed of being, bellowed indignantly. But nothing happened. The prisoner did not budge an inch.

"No good," Jim sang out. "Back, Nugget," and Nugget stopped and backed with thankful promptness. "We'll have to rig up some more tackling."

The broad leather saddle-girths made an excellent foundation for side-ropes. Jim and Billy took one, Murty and Wally the other. They waded out until they were on firm ground. The bullock stood glaring at them, wild-eyed.

"Now, Nor—and all together!"

The tackling tightened. On either side, the rope-holders threw their weight on the stiffening cords, like men in a tug of war. Norah, stumbling on the hoof-printed mud, urged Nugget by voice and hand. There was a minute's hard pulling.

"Slack off," Jim commanded. "Back him, Norah." Men and horse panted in unison, getting their breath anew.

"I believe he came a little," Wally said.

"Something came," Jim agreed. "Let's hope it wasn't the tackling giving. We'll know this time, anyhow. Ready, boys?"

Once more the strain came. The four rope-holders struggled together, their muscles standing out like knotted cords. Nugget, knowing his business just as

well as they, put his head down and leaned against the strain, gaining foot by foot. An anguished bellow broke from the bullock. There came a sucking, squelching sound.

"He's coming!" Norah gasped. "Pull, boys!"

A final struggle, and the strain eased suddenly. The mud gave—the bullock, feeling himself freed from the horror that had gripped his legs, plunged stiffly forward, tripped, and fell bodily into the water. They dragged him out on his side, a pitiful, mud-plastered object. It required considerable coaxing to get him upon his feet, and then he stood still, too numbed and confused to move, while the tackling was removed.

"There you are," Jim said at last, dealing him a hearty blow with a girth. "Move on—you can't stand there all night, you know." But it was only after repeated blows that the rescued one obeyed, stumbling across the mud to the safety of the bank, where he stood, trembling with cold.

"We can't leave him here," Jim said. "He's too cold altogether—he'll have to be housed to-night. Billy, you bring him in slowly—hitch old Nugget to him if he won't travel."

"Plenty," said Billy, lugubriously. He also was cold, and the prospect of tailing in behind the numbed bullock was anything but pleasant. He began his slow journey as the other four cantered off across the paddock.

Mr. Linton came out to the stable yard to greet them. He had been watching for some time before he heard the beat of far-off hoofs, and the echo of young voices, singing in the dusk.

"Well, you seem cheerful enough," he said. "Job tough?" The light from the stables fell on his mud-covered son, and he laughed a little. "It was as well you put on dungarees, Jim."

"Just as well," said Jim, laughing. "Got him out, anyhow."

"You've had a long day," said his father.

"Have I?" Jim asked. "Oh, I suppose I have! Nothing to growl at, at any rate." He straightened his broad shoulders as they walked across to the house. "Billabong days never do seem long, somehow. I wonder if——" Whatever the conjecture was, it went no further. His hand fell on Norah's shoulder as they went in together.

" 'He's coming!' Norah gasped. 'Pull, boys!' "

CHAPTER V.

GOOD-BYE.

PORT Melbourne pier was a scene of hurry and bustle.

Along every yard of its great length lay mighty ocean-going steamers: mail-boats, Orient and P. & O., big White Star cargo-ships, French liners, and all the miscellaneous collection of ships that ply from up and down the world to Australia. Trains were coming and going along the railway lines running down the centre of the pier, piercing the air with their shrieks of warning, while people moved hastily out of their way, stumbling over the intricate network of rails. A motley crowd they were: passengers from the steamers; officers—sunburned men in blue uniforms; wharf labourers; sailors in blue jerseys, bearing the name of their ship across their breasts; dark-skinned Lascars from the P. & O. ships; Chinese; well-dressed city people tempted out by bright sunshine and blue sea; and the never-failing throng of children to be found on every great wharf, drawn to "the beauty and mystery of the ships." Amidst the crowd dock hands worked at loading and unloading cargoes; the shrieks of steam-cranes sounded as great wooden cases were lifted from the trucks, to be poised perilously in mid air over the pier before being swung inboard and lowered into the gaping holds. Each ship bore on its mooring-ropes wide discs of tin, to discourage the rats which would otherwise have found the rope an easy track into the steamer.

It was the usual Australian wharf scene; but there was another factor in it, by no means so familiar. Among the crowded ships were several painted in neutral colours, bearing no name, but only the letter A and a number. They were alongside the wharf, and on their decks men in uniform were working with a feverish activity quite unlike the ordinary movements of the dock-hand in Australia. At each gangway stood a sentry; and other men in khaki went up and down swiftly, some of them receiving salutes from the men who worked—not always, because the new Australian soldier was a free-and-easy person, and, having much to learn, did not easily see that saluting is a mark of respect to the King's uniform, more than to the man who wears it. The privates did not mean any disrespect to the uniform—they only knew they were busy, and that it seemed to them foolish to stop and salute a man whom they had perhaps known for years as "Bill" or "Dick," who might have been the fag of one of them at school, or perhaps worked for another for wages on a farm. There are all sorts of queer ups and downs in the composition of a Colonial volunteer force, and social distinctions are apt to collapse altogether before military

ability; so that the man with a big property and more money than he knows what to do with may find himself a mere private working under a martinet of a captain who possibly delivered his meat in the piping times of peace. Moreover, he will do it cheerfully. But he will find the saluting hard.

There was a steady hum of preparation on all the grey troopships with the white numbers. Stores and kit were being loaded into them rapidly, each item checked by an officer; on some, the decks of which were boarded up, soldiers, stripped to shirt and breeches, were working with great bundles of compressed hay and straw, emptying truck after truck in readiness for the horses that were to be the chief passengers. From within these could be heard the sound of hammering; they had been stripped of all their inside fittings, and every available inch of space was being turned into stalls and loose-boxes, made with due regard to the comfort of the puzzled four-footed occupants whose homes they would be for so many weary weeks.

All the quay-room was taken up; and besides, out in Port Phillip Bay, the ships lay thick: troopships; cargo-boats waiting their chance to unload, or busy discharging their goods into lighters; sailing vessels, tramps from every harbour in the world, with towering masts and rusty sides; and a host of smaller craft that nosed in and out among the big ships. Near some steps leading to the water a motor-launch tossed in the wash of a paddle-steamer leaving for some Bay port.

A large party, variously laden with hand-baggage, came rapidly along the wharf from the railway-station, and down the steps. At sight of their leader one of the men in the launch steadied her, while the other busied himself with the engine.

"We've sent all our heavy things on board, and this is quite the most comfortable way to get over to Williamstown," David Linton was saying. "No, it's quite unusual, of course, to be sailing from there; but war has upset everything, and there's simply no room for any more big ships at this pier. Williamstown is a fearsome place to embark from; it's bad enough to get there, to begin with, and when you have done so, the pier is miles from anywhere, and you traverse appalling tracks in finding your ship. Much simpler to run across the Bay from Port Melbourne by launch."

Edward Meadows, a tall, lean man, very like Wally, nodded assent.

"I've never seen the fascination of travel," he said lazily. "To me it's only bearable with the maximum of comfort—especially when you go to sea."

"Well, there's not much maximum of comfort about your back-country trips in Queensland," said Wally, rather amazed. "And you have plenty of those, Edward."

"Oh, yes, but that's different! You don't expect comfort, and you'd be rather surprised if you got it. And the Bush is different, too," replied his

brother, a trifle vaguely, yet conscious that his hearers understood. “You can live on corned-beef, damper and milkless tea for weeks in the Bush, and sleep in the open, with your saddle for a pillow, and on the whole you quite enjoy it; but you’d feel quite injured if you had to do it on board ship. Possibly it’s the clothes you wear—I don’t know.” He looked round, as if expecting to find enlightenment. “Let me help you in, Miss Norah.”

The launch held them all comfortably, though they were a large party: the travellers themselves, various relatives who had come to see them off, and a sprinkling of school friends who were openly envying Norah and the boys. They included a couple of lads in khaki, fresh from the camp of the Expeditionary Force at Broadmeadows.

“Well, you’re lucky to be getting straight to the middle of things,” said one of these. “Here we are, tied up week after week, waiting to get away, and nobody quite knows why we don’t start—they talk about German cruisers, of course, and there are stories of warships not being ready to convoy us, and a dozen other yarns. Every now and then comes a rumour that we’re just off, and we say good-bye wildly—and then we don’t go. I’ve made all my fond farewells four times, and I believe my people are beginning to feel a little less enthusiastic about it than they did. It must be jolly hard to keep on regarding one as a departing hero!”

“And when we do start, it’s going to be slow enough,” put in his companion. “There will be such a crowd of us—and we’ve got to make the pace by the slowest ship.” He jerked his hand towards a troopship round the stern of which the motor-launch was chug-chugging slowly. “That’s one of them. She was a German tramp steamer that strolled in here after war broke out and was collared; she didn’t know a thing about the war, and her captain said most unseemly things to the pilot who had gone out to bring them through the Heads and held his tongue about war until he had the ship covered by our guns at Queenscliff.” The soldier grinned with huge enjoyment. “I wish I’d seen him! But she’s not much of a tub, anyhow; I expect the Orient boat that has been turned into the Staff troopship has just about twice her pace, but she will have to accommodate herself to the slowest.”

“Yes, it will be a deliberate sort of voyage,” said the other. “No ports; no news; just dawdling along for weeks, packed like herrings. Hope they’ll keep us busy with drill; it will be something to pass the time away.”

“And you don’t know when you are to sail? Edward Meadows asked.

“For all we know it may be a case of strike camp to-night. There are too many German warships in the way—it wouldn’t be healthy to let the news leak out. Wouldn’t the *Emden* like a chance of meeting a crowd like ours!—a lot of transports like helpless old sheep, with a few men-o’-war to protect the whole mob. The *Emden* would not mind going down herself if she sank some of us.”

"Well, at least you'll have the men-o'-war" Norah put in. "We won't have anything at all to protect us."

"You don't seem very troubled about it, either," grinned the soldier lad.

"Why, it would be an experience. I don't suppose they would hurt us, even if they sank the ship. And our luggage is insured," said Norah, practically.

"The danger of a hostile cruiser does not seem to weigh heavily on the minds of the insurance companies," remarked her father. "It cost me a good deal more to insure against pilfering than against war risks!"

"You don't say so!" said Edward Meadows, staring.

"I do, though. It's a queer state of affairs, but I suppose they know their business. There's the old ship."

They had nearly crossed the narrow portion of the Bay that lies between Port Melbourne and Williamstown, and the docks were coming into view. Everywhere the wharves were crowded with shipping, mostly of a smaller character than the vessels they had seen; but towering above everything else, larger than even the Orient liner, lay a great ship. She had but one funnel, painted a vivid blue; it loomed vast above them, a mighty cylinder—large enough, if it lay on its side, to drive a coach-and-four through it.

"Whew-w! She's a big one!" ejaculated the young soldier.

"Yes; there's only one larger ship in the Australian trade," Jim answered.

"Many passengers?"

"Hardly any, I believe. But she's enormously valuable; she's carrying a huge cargo—the richest, with the exception of gold, that ever left Australia. And it's just what they want in England—frozen meat, wool, tallow, and things like that, and a huge consignment of food the Queensland people are sending to the troops at the Front. They say she's worth a million and a half!"

"By Jove, what a prize she'd make!" said the soldier. "I should think the German cruisers will be keeping a pretty sharp look-out for her."

"Yes—and I believe the *Emden* is particularly anxious to get a Blue Funnel ship before she goes under. The *Perseus* would make a pretty good scalp, wouldn't she?"

The engineer shut off the motor, and the little launch came to rest beside a gangway under the lee of the *Perseus*—whose bulk, seen close above them, seemed like that of a mountain. A sailor ran down the steps to steady the launch and offer a helping hand as its passengers climbed out. In a moment Norah stood for the first time upon the deck of a ship.

It gave her a queer little thrill of exultation. Everything about her was new and unfamiliar: the long lines of the deck, the hurrying officers and sailors, the creak of machinery, punctuated with crisp commands; and over all, the smell of the ship and the salt air blowing up from the wider spaces of the Bay. It seemed to mount to her head. Instinctively she put out her hand to her father.

"Well, my girl," he said. "It's a bit different to the old wind-jammer that I came out in."

"It's—it's lovely, Daddy!"

He laughed. "I hope you'll continue to think so," he said. "Come and we'll find our cabins."

A passing steward, to whom they gave their numbers, took them in charge and piloted them below. They went down a winding oak staircase with rubber treads that were soft to the feet, and passed through an open space invitingly furnished with lounge-chairs. Thence a passage led a little way until their guide turned sharply to the right.

"This is yours, sir," said the steward. "The young lady's is opposite."

The cabins were alike—roomy ones, each containing three berths, and lit by wide port-holes. The *Perseus* had accommodation for over three hundred passengers, and at an ordinary time went out with every berth taken; but war had made people disinclined to travel, and on this voyage her passenger-list held only about thirty names. Therefore there was room and to spare, and each passenger could have had two or three cabins had he been so disposed.

Already Norah's luggage was placed in readiness; and scattered on one of the berths were a number of parcels and letters, to which so many were immediately added that the bunk looked like a jumble-stall, but very interesting.

"No, you mustn't open them now," said her special school-chum, Jean Yorke; "they will keep, and you'll have loads of time going down the Bay. Come and explore the ship."

At the entrance to their alley-way they met Jim and Wally, returning from inspecting their cabin, which was near-by and "very jolly," said its owners; and then they all trooped off to find their way about the steamer, discovering big drawing-rooms and lounges, a splendid smoking-room panelled in oak, with a frieze of quaint carvings running round it, and the dining-saloon—a roomy place, furnished with swing-chairs and small round tables, on which ferns and tall palms nodded a friendly greeting. Everything was big and spacious and airy. Smart stewards, white-jacketed, darted hither and thither. They passed the galley, catching a glimpse of rows of bright cooking-ranges, gleaming copper saucepans, and busy cooks, with snowy aprons and flat caps—all so spotlessly clean that Norah wished audibly that Brownie could see it—Brownie having expressed dark doubts as to whether her belongings would be decently fed on board, coupled with unpleasant allusions to cockroaches. Then they came out on the decks, of which there were three—roomy enough for a regiment to drill, and with pleasant nooks sheltered from the wind, no matter from what quarter it might come. In one of these the deck steward had already set up their long chairs—made of Australian blackwood and dark green canvas, with "Linton"

painted on each of the four.

"I ran you in as one of the family, Wally," said the squatter.

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Wally, gratefully.

People were coming aboard quickly; though there were so few passengers, the *Perseus* was a popular ship, and many came to see her off. The first of the three warning bells clanged out sharply above the din.

"Come and have tea," said David Linton. "I told them to have it ready at first bell."

They crowded round the biggest table in the saloon, while the stewards brought tea. Every one was becoming a little silent; there seemed suddenly a great many things to say, but no one could remember any of them. No one wanted tea at all, except the soldier boys, who drank immense quantities, and did their best to keep the conversation going. Aunts and cousins heaped on Norah good advice about the journey. Edward Meadows stared at his young brother's bright face—a sudden fear at his heart lest he should be looking at it for the last time.

"He's such a kid," he said inwardly. "I wonder if we ought to be letting him go."

On the deck, after the second bell had brought them up from the saloon, he drew David Linton aside.

"You'll take care of him, if you get a chance, won't you, sir? He's only a kid."

"To the utmost of my ability," said Mr. Linton, gravely. "He is like my own son to me."

Then came the final bell, and with it a sudden gust of good-byes. Telegraph-boys came racing up the gangway with belated messages. Every one was trying to say twenty farewells at once.

"Good-bye, you chaps," said the soldier lads. "Expect you'll be in Flanders before we are—but we'll meet you there. Keep Australia going!"

"Hope we'll get a chance," Jim said, "and not mess it up if we get it. We'll try, anyhow. Good voyage. Don't be sea-sick!"

"Same to you. Write to us if you can."

"You too. Say good-bye to all the chaps we knew at school."

"Good-bye, Norah, dear," from an aunt. "Remember you're growing up—you can't be a Bush girl in England."

"I'll try," said Norah meekly. "I expect every one will be too busy with the war to notice me."

"I'm sure you'll be a credit to us," cried the aunt, inflicting a damp embrace. "If only you have a safe voyage!" She kissed Jim with fervour, and showed such signs of beginning on Wally that that timid youth retired precipitately into the crowd.

"All visitors ashore!" sang out a stentorian voice. People flocked down the gangway.

"You'll write, won't you, Norah?" asked Jean Yorke, a little shakily. Jean was a silent person, but Norah was very dear to her.

"Of course I will," said Norah, hugging her. "And you—lots! Oh, won't we want letters when we're right away over there!"

"It's awful at school without you," said Jean. "Oh, and everybody sent you their love—even Miss Winter! And they say, 'Come back soon.' So do I."

"Just as soon as ever we can. Oh, I don't want to go a bit!" said poor Norah. "There can't be any place as good as Australia."

"Of course there isn't. But you'll come back."

"Any more for the shore?"

"Oh, I must go!" cried Jean, and fled, after a final hug. Edward Meadows wrung Wally's hand hard, and went slowly down the gangway—in his mind a helpless feeling that perhaps they had not done as much as they might for the little brother who had known neither mother nor father. On the last step he hesitated, turned, and went back.

"Remember you needn't ever go short of money," he said. It seemed such a foolish thing; and yet it was all he could find to say.

"Thanks, ever so much, Edward. I'm sure I'll have plenty."

"And—come back safe," said his brother. He gripped his hand again, and went down. Already sailors were busy with the gangway ropes.

At the last moment, just as the cumbrous ladder began to be drawn up, a figure came racing down the wharf, uttering shouts that were incoherent through breathlessness. Behind him puffed a couple of porters, staggering under a leather suit-case and a Gladstone bag. The sailors above the gangway hesitated, and the newcomer sprang upon it.

"What are you up to, sir?" came the sharp voice of an officer. "Are you a passenger?"

"Certainly I am," responded the breathless one—a short, stout individual by no means fitted for violent exercise. "Kindly send some one for my baggage."

A couple of sailors ran down the gangway and took the burdens from the panting porters. The late arrival puffed up the steps.

"You cut it pretty fine," was the comment of the officer.

"Who ever heard of a ship being punctual before?" was the reply. "Extraordinary—almost ridiculous!"

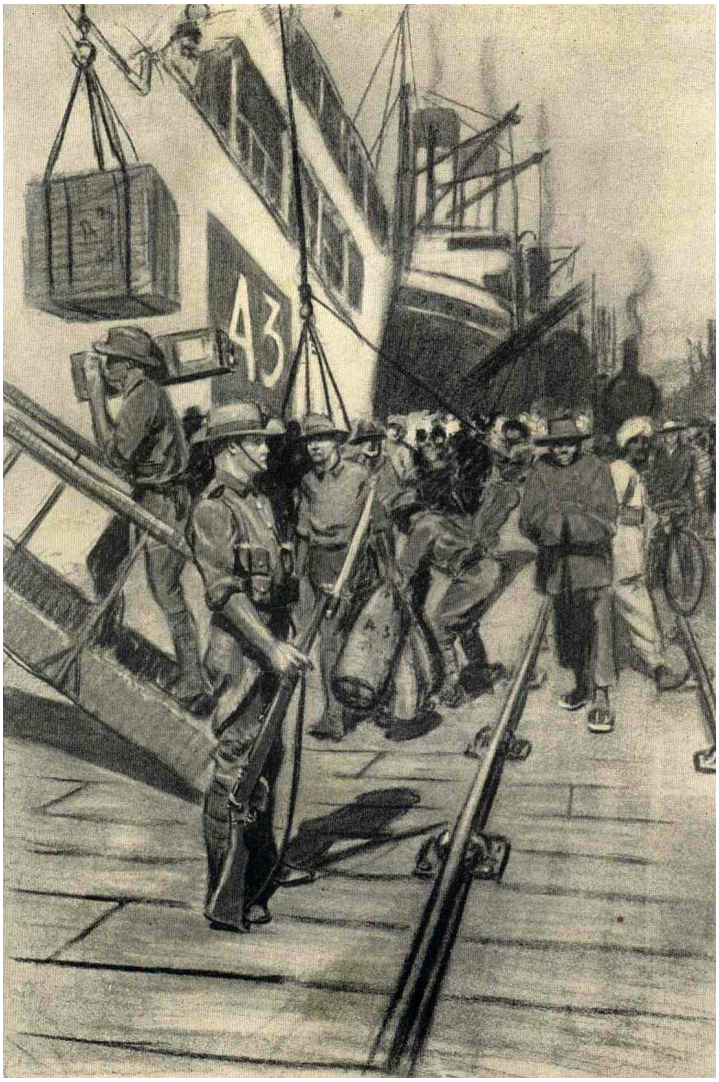
The officer laughed in spite of himself.

"It's never safe to bank on the *Perseus* being unpunctual," he remarked. "Lucky you caught us. Haul away!"

The gangway came up slowly. Three piercing whistles shrilled from the

siren. Down on the wharf, the people who had seemed so many on the ship now appeared dwindled to a little huddled crowd, with faces upturned; it was hard to pick out individuals.

Norah leaned on the rail, looking down—suddenly realising that it was indeed "good-bye." The ship was drawing out slowly—foot by foot the water appeared between her side and the pier—unpleasant, dirty water, full of floating rubbish. A little way out it sparkled to meet them, a dancing mass of foam-flecked blue. But Norah could not see that side now—only the little widening strip of brown water, and the wharf with its wistful faces. Her own, as she looked, was very wistful. Beyond, sea and sky might be blue, calling to her—but on this side lay Australia.



"At each gangway stood a sentry."

CHAPTER VI.

SETTLING DOWN.

"NOW then, kiddie."

Jim's hand touched her arm, and Norah looked round. They had passed the Gellibrand light and were heading towards the wider spaces of Port Phillip Bay. Across the water the sunlight lay golden on the beaches and the wooded shores. To the right a little steamer was coming lazily in from Geelong.

"Do you want me, Jim?" Norah tried to make her voice steady.

"Well, I think you might as well come and get your cabin ship-shape," Jim said. "You've got two or three hours of daylight and smooth water; and once you get outside the Heads there may be any sort of weather, and you may be any sort of sailor. Not that I believe any of us will be sea-sick—this huge old ship can't toss about much, unless she meets a hurricane."

"Well, you never know," said Norah, prudently. "And if I'm going to be ill I won't feel like getting ship-shape then, I suppose. All right, Jimmy, I'll go down. How do I get there?"

"Haven't an idea," said her brother, laughing. "We'll ask a steward if we get bushed—meanwhile, I know it's down a flight of stairs, and not up; and that's something. Come along, and we'll find our way, in time."

They plunged down the nearest companion, and by dint of studying the numbers of the cabins, finally arrived at Norah's, which looked much larger than it had appeared when full of people an hour earlier. Jim surveyed the berths with a twinkle.

"Apparently every one who knows you has sent you small tokens of regard," he said. "Better get them unpacked while I unstrap your boxes. Got your keys?"

Norah handed over her keys and began the work of investigation, suddenly immensely cheered by the friendly packages. Flowers first, in boxes and dainty green tissue-paper packages: boronia, sweet peas, carnations, and early wattle. Their fragrance filled the cabin, and even Jim exclaimed at their beauty.

"You can't possibly keep them all here," he said. "I'll ring for the steward and tell him to put some on our table in the saloon, don't you think? Vases not supplied in cabins—lucky for you this is a three-berther and you've got three tooth-tumblers!"

The flowers disposed of, the work of unwrapping the other parcels went on swiftly. Chocolate boxes of every shape and size; books; warm slippers; three cushions; bags to hold everything, from shoes to sponges; a work-board, fitted

with pincushion, thread, scissors, and other feminine necessities; an electric torch; and a fascinating wall-pocket of green linen, embroidered in shamrocks, with compartments for every toilet requisite.

"Now, that's an uncommonly jolly thing," said Jim, surveying it. "Keeps things all handy-by, and saves 'em rolling about in rough weather. Whoever sent you that had sense. Come, and we'll fix it up." He dashed away to his cabin, returning with a pocket hammer and some brass tacks. "Where will you have it?"

"Oh, here, I suppose!" said Norah, indicating a favourable site. "But are you allowed to put in tacks, Jim?"

"Can't tell till I've tried," said Jim, hammering swiftly. "I'm not going to ask, anyhow—they're very decent tacks. There, that's up, and it looks topping. Now for shoe-bags." He fixed them in a neat row on the wall, while Norah arranged her other small belongings.

"Gorgeous clearance!" Jim remarked, surveying the cabin with pride. "How about unpacking now? If I haul these trunks out for you, can you manage?"

"Rather!" said Norah, gratefully. "You've been a brick, Jimmy, and I feel much better. I'll stow away my things in the wardrobe and drawers, and then I won't have to haul my trunks often from under the berths."

"Don't you do it at all," commanded Jim, sternly. "Wal or I will always be somewhere about, and anyhow, what's a steward for? Well, I'll leave you to fix up your fripperies, and go and fix my own. Call me if you want me."

It was not altogether easy to remain cheerful over the boxes Brownie had packed so lovingly. The memory of the parting at Billabong was still too sore; in everything Norah touched she found reminders of the kind old face, struggling against tears, on that last morning when she had said good-bye to her. To say good-bye to Murty and the men—even to Black Billy; to the horses and dogs; to Billabong itself, peaceful and dear in its fringe of green trees; it had all been hard enough, and she ached yet at the thought. But Brownie was somehow different, and loved her better than any one on earth; and she was old, with no one to comfort her. Norah's heart was heavy for the dear old nurse as she took out one neat layer of clothes after another, packed with sprigs of fragrant lavender that brought the very breath of the Billabong garden.

Then came a tap at the door, and a neat stewardess looked in.

"Your father sent me to see if I could help you, miss."

"I don't think so, thank you," Norah answered, sitting on the floor of the cabin and looking up at her. "I've unpacked nearly everything. However do people manage when there are three in a cabin this size?"

"Why, I've known four," said the stewardess, laughing. "Four—and grown up. Oh, they fit in somehow; the worst of it is if they all happen to be sick.

That is rather hard on them—and on me. You're very lucky, miss, to have so much room to yourself."

"I suppose I am," Norah assented, meekly. "It's a little hard to realise. Do you ever get sick yourself?"

"Stewardesses aren't supposed to—and they haven't time," said the other. "We wouldn't be much good if we weren't hardened sailors. Dinner's at half-past seven, miss, and the dressing-bugle goes half an hour before. Shall I come in to fasten your frock?"

"Yes, please," Norah answered. "I suppose we'll be outside the Heads by then?"

"Oh, a long way! We'll be through the Heads at half-past five, and will have dropped the pilot. The steward will come in at dusk, miss, to shut your port-hole."

Norah looked up in swift alarm.

"My port-hole? But need I have it shut? I always have my windows open at night."

The stewardess shook her head.

"You could always have it open, in ordinary circumstances, so long as the weather wasn't rough; but not now. It's the war, you see, miss. We're under the strictest regulations not to show any lights at all; so as soon as it is dusk every window on the ship has to be fastened and shuttered. We don't have any deck lights either—not even the port and starboard lanterns and the mast-head. Coming out, there was a German warship looking for us, and we got past her in the dark and gave her the slip; she wasn't more than ten miles away. She'd have had us, to a certainty, if we had been lit up."

"Good gracious!" said Norah, weakly.

"You see, miss, when the *Perseus* has all her lights showing she's like an illumination display—any one could see her glow miles away. Our only chance may lie in slipping by in the dark. And just now the Germans are keeping a very close look-out on the Australian tracks, because they hope to cut off the troopships. It makes the voyage very dull, but it can't be helped."

Cheerful voices came along the alley-way as the stewardess, with a friendly smile, disappeared.

"Well, are you fixed up?" Jim asked. "Can Wal come in? Here, we'll put these trunks out of your way."

"I'm just finished," Norah said. "How do you think it looks?"

"Jolly!" said Wally, emphatically, casting glances of approval round the bright cabin, already homelike with photographs, cushions, flowers and other dainty belongings. "Why, it might be a scrap of old Billabong, Nor. Here's Jimmy with the final touch."

Jim had a grey, furry bundle in his arms.

"It's only a little 'possum rug," he said. "Your travelling rug may often get damp with spray, and it's rather jolly to have a spare one for your bunk. Dad and I got it for you." He spread it out on the berth. "Will it do, kiddie?"

"Do!" said Norah, and put her cheek down into the grey softness. "It's just a beauty, Jim—you and Dad do think of the loveliest things! They're splendid skins; and I'm so glad you had the tails left on. Doesn't it make my bed look nice?"

"You mustn't say a bed, on board ship," Jim said, severely. "Beds are shore luxuries, and this is merely a bunk."

"It's good enough for me," said his sister happily. "It looks a jolly place to sleep. I'm ready, Jim; can't we go on deck? I want to see the Heads."

"We came to bring you," Jim said, "though there's half an hour yet. Has the stewardess been saddening your young mind about your port-hole?"

"Yes—isn't it awful! How on earth is one to sleep with one's window shut?"

"Well, it isn't quite so bad as it seems—though it's bad enough," Jim answered. "As long as there's a light in your cabin the shutter must be up; but as soon as you switch it off, it can be opened, only of course you're on your honour not to light up again. So I can come in after you're in bed and open it for you."

"Oh, thank goodness!" Norah said, fervently. "Will it bother you much, Jim?"

"It will not. And if you want a light in the night, your little electric torch won't matter, if you pull the curtain across the port. We've been asking the purser about it, and he says it will be all right; only they have to make the regulations very strict, because so many people are fools about it, and disobey rules altogether if they get half a chance. A man always has to be on duty, keeping a watch over the side to make sure that no window is showing an unlawful beam."

"Funny, what idiots people can be!" Wally commented. "You wouldn't think any one would want to be caught by the Germans."

"Oh, there are always people who think they know more than the authorities," Jim said, "and who like to show how brave they are. As the purser says, the owners wouldn't a bit mind their being exceedingly courageous with themselves, but they object to their taking chances with a ship worth a million and a half. Anyhow, there will be trouble for transgressors on this voyage. Come up on deck."

There was a fresh breeze blowing as they reached the head of the companion; and Wally dived back again for Norah's coat. The *Perseus* was nearing the twin Heads, Point Lonsdale and Point Nepean, that form the entrance to Port Phillip Bay. On the right lay the little town of Queenscliff; on

the left, barren heights, sparsely covered with scrub, where, through the glasses, they could see soldiers moving about, keeping a close watch. A detachment of the Light Horse could be descried on a rocky point.

"A ship tried to slip out without her proper clearance papers the other day," Wally said.

"Did she get out?"

"Not much. The fort at Queenscliff fired a blank shot first, by way of friendly warning; then, as she didn't take any notice, they put a shell just across her bows. Then she paused to ruminate, and came back. She really wasn't up to any mischief—it was only a disinclination on the part of her captain to regard war restrictions. I hear they made him pay the cost of his own bombardment."

"Serve him right," said Norah, laughing. "Wally, is that the Rip?"

Outside the Heads could be seen a flurry of broken water—great green waves that came charging hither and thither, without any of the regularity of breakers dashing upon a shore. Now and then one broke in a wild "white horse" that was hastily engulfed in the mass of swirling green. Sometimes the mass would pile itself up and up in broken hills of water; then, as though sucked under by some mighty, unseen power, it subsided, tumbling into fragments and dashing away furiously. A little steamer was coming through it, rolling so terribly that momentarily it seemed that she could not recover herself, but must go under. As they watched, a great wave reared itself up and hit her squarely, burying her in a cloud of foam.

"Yes, that's the Rip," Wally answered. "My aunt, isn't that boat having a lively time!"

The little steamer emerged—her bluff black bows coming out of the spray much as a dogged mastiff might emerge from a ducking. She rolled, in the same whole-hearted fashion, as the next wave slid from under her—plunging down into a wild gulf of tumbling sea, to struggle up again on the further side, white foam dashing from her bows. The dense smoke from her funnels trailed behind her in a solid cloud of black.

"But she'll sink!" Norah gasped.

"Not she!"

"But—why, she was nearly over then!"

"She's used to it," said Wally, laughing.

"I never saw such a thing," ejaculated Norah. "Do you mean to tell me we'll be doing that in a few minutes?"

Some one behind them laughed cheerfully.

"We're much too big to dance such jigs as that," said a friendly voice—and they turned to see a man in blue uniform smiling at them. "Don't you worry—we'll go through the Rip as though it wasn't there."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Norah, relieved.

"I've been talking to your father," said the newcomer; "but as he isn't here, I'll have to introduce myself. My name is Merriton, Miss Linton, and I'm a highly formidable person, being the ship's doctor. I've heard all about you from my old friend, Dr. Anderson, in Cunjee; he has sent me special instructions to look after you. I hope you're not going to give me any trouble!"

"Well, I'm never ill," said Norah, smiling at the cheery face. "I'm sure Dr. Anderson didn't tell you I needed looking after in that way, because he always says he has never had the satisfaction of giving me medicine!"

"That's precisely the sort of person I like to look after," said the doctor. "Patients on land are all very well, but a patient in a cabin is a sad and sorry thing. Thank goodness, the *Perseus* doesn't have many of them; every one seems to come on board in rude health, and to leave, when the voyage is over, rather ruder. No, I look after the passengers on the principle of prevention rather than cure; keep 'em moving, keep 'em playing games, keep 'em doing anything that will have a salutary effect upon their livers and prevent them developing anything resembling a symptom!"

"Don't you get disliked, sir?" Jim asked, laughing.

"Oh, intensely! But it's all in the day's work. They abuse me, and they never know how much they owe to me. Now we're nearly through the Heads, Miss Linton—say good-bye to old Victoria!"

The ship was just passing the long pier that runs out from Point Lonsdale, and seems to divide the open ocean from the Bay. They could plainly distinguish the faces of people standing on the end, watching them. Beyond lay brown rocks, and the yellow curve of the ocean beach, with great waves beating upon it; to the left the jagged coast-line where more than one good ship had met her doom. Straight ahead lay the Rip. The little steamer had come through the roughest part and was running towards them.

Norah looked back. The greater part of the Bay was hidden since the turn by Queenscliff; she could only see the flat shore-line beyond the town. A haze had sprung up, obscuring everything. Melbourne was long ago blotted out. It was as though a veil had fallen between the old life and the new.

"Now you'll see how she takes it, Miss Linton," said the doctor cheerily.

They were through the Heads, and racing outwards; already the swell of the Rip was under them, and the great steamer rose and fell to it—so gently that Norah forgot to wonder if she were to be sea-sick or not. On, swiftly until the broken water was foaming round them, the *Perseus* rolling a little as she cut her way through. Then they were out in the smoother water beyond, with the long ocean swell heaving. A little grey steamer rocked just beyond.

"That's the pilot-boat," said Wally. "Watch him go."

They leaned over the side and watched the grizzled pilot go quickly down a

swinging rope-ladder to a waiting dinghy that had put off from the grey steamer. It was a kind of acrobatic feat, and Norah breathed more freely when the old man had landed safely in the tossing little boat. He took the tiller, and the oarsmen pulled swiftly across to the steamer, from the deck of which some one shouted last messages to the *Perseus*.

"So that's done with," said the doctor; "and now it's heigh for home!—for us, that is. When you're feeling blue, for want of Australia, Miss Linton, you can remember that we poor seafaring folk are going to have the luxury of getting home for Christmas—and that's a thing that doesn't often come our way."

"I'm glad you are," said Norah, soberly. It was easy to feel friendly with the doctor, even though she was a rather shy person. He was not very young, but for all that his face was like a boy's; he had a merry voice, and his eyes were quick and kindly. When he smiled at her she felt that she had known him for quite a long time.

Mr. Linton appeared round a corner of the deck-house.

"Oh! there you are—I've been looking for you," he said. "People on a ship of this size take plenty of hunting; I put a deck-steward on the trail at last, and he's probably hunting still. Feel all right, Norah?"

"Yes, thank you," said Norah, in such evident amazement that every one laughed.

"Well, you've been through the Rip—and that is an experience that leads many to take prompt refuge in their cabins," said the doctor. "Not that there's the least excuse for any one being ill on this ship—she's as steady as old Time."

"Why, I never thought about it," Norah said. "The girls told me I'd be ill in the Rip, and I was feeling worried—I was thinking last night how horrid it would be. But I forgot all about it when it came—it was so interesting!"

"You're not going to be ill at all—put it out of your head," said the doctor. Which Norah promptly did, and had no occasion ever to revive unpleasant memories, since none of the party manifested signs of illness at any period of the voyage.

On their way to dress for dinner some one called Mr. Linton back, while the others waited for him on a wide landing. Close by was the purser's office, where a heated altercation was going on between the chief assistant and the stout individual who had so narrowly caught the ship at the last moment.

"Sorry, Mr. Smith," the assistant was saying. "The purser is engaged—he's with the captain."

"I have asked for him at least four times, and he has always been engaged," said Mr. Smith, angrily.

"Well, he generally is, on a sailing day. Can't I do anything? Is your cabin

uncomfortable?"

"The cabin is well enough. It is about a telegram I must send."

The assistant shook his head.

"No wireless to be used," he said. "War regulation. You can telegraph from Adelaide, of course."

"That is ridiculous," said the stout man angrily. "In Australian waters——"

"Well, it isn't my regulation," the assistant said. "You'd better complain to the military authorities. No, the purser can't help you; why, the captain couldn't. It's war precaution, I tell you."

Mr. Linton then came up, and the rest of the conversation was lost. They could hear the stout man's angry voice as they went down the staircase.

"Seems in a bad temper," Wally observed.

"He's a hasty person altogether," said Mr. Linton. "The captain tells me that he decided only at the last moment to come on this voyage. He certainly arrived at the last moment!"

"Hadn't he a ticket?" asked Jim.

"Not a ticket—not that that matters, of course, with so empty a ship. No trouble for them to fix him up. But he seems to expect a good deal, for an eleventh-hour passenger." Mr. Linton yawned. "The sea is making me sleepy already," he declared, disappearing into his cabin.

It made Norah sleepy very early that night. After the lengthy dinner was over, they went on deck, where strolling was difficult because of the absence of lights; and the rushing water overside was a mysterious mass, dark and formless. All the best of Norah's world was with her—and yet she was homesick. Somewhere beyond the rail over which they leaned was home; they were lonely at Billabong, and here it was lonely, too.

She gave herself a little mental shake. After all they were together—and that was really all that mattered.

"I'm sleepy," she declared.

"Then turn in," Jim counselled. "I'll come and open your port when I go down. Can you find your way?"

"It's time I learned, at any rate," said Norah, sturdily.

She found it, after a few wrong turns, and made short work of preparing for bed. The stewardess looked in to find out if she could be of any use, and went off, with a brisk "good-night." The cabin was cheery and homelike—full of the scent of Bush flowers, and pleasant with photographs, that seemed to smile to her. She was not nearly so lonely when at last she slipped into bed, under the grey 'possum fur—and the little bunk was comfortable and quaint, and made her feel that she was really on board ship.

Jim looked in presently.

"Comfy, little chap? And how do you like it?"

“Yes, very comfy. Jim, I think it’s rather jolly.”

“Of course it is,” said Jim. “You look snug enough. Sure you’re warm? And you know where the bell is, in case you want the stewardess?”

“Oh, I’m not going to want anything!” Norah answered. “I’m too sleepy. She creaks a lot, doesn’t she, Jim?”

“Who—the stewardess?” said Jim, puzzled.

“No, stupid—the ship. If she didn’t creak, and I wasn’t in a bunk, she would be just like a hotel.”

“Not much difference,” Jim answered. He switched off the light and unscrewed the port-hole, going out with a last cheery word. And then Norah found that there was another difference—through the open port came the sound of the sea. It rushed and boiled past, splashing on the side of the ship near her; somehow there was an impression of great speed, far greater than in daylight. Norah liked the sound. She went to sleep, with the sea talking to her.

CHAPTER VII.

OF FISHES AND THE SEA.

"BEING at sea," said Wally, thoughtfully, "is very queer."

"In what way?" demanded Norah.

"Well, you forget all about everything else. At least, I do. Don't you? It's only a week since we saw land, but I feel as if I'd never been anywhere but on this old ship. You wake up in the same creaky old cabin, and you have the same tub, at the command of the same steward; and you come up on deck and see the same old sea, and the same faces; nothing else. Then you walk the same deck, and—oh, do the same old things all day! Nothing different."

"Yes—but it's all rather jolly," said Norah. "You like it, don't you?"

"Oh, awfully! I don't care how long it goes on. But I've got a queer feeling that I've never done anything else, and never will again."

"Well, that's just stupid!" said Norah, practically. "And if you really felt like it, I think you'd begin to be dull at once."

"Well, there's something in that," said Wally. "Of course, one knows it's going to end, and that something altogether different is going to happen. Only one can't picture it. It's like being told you'll die some day; you know it's perfectly true, but you don't believe it."

"Wally!" ejaculated Norah, amazed. "What on earth is the matter? Are you sick?"

"Sick?" said Wally, staring. "Not me. I was merely reflecting. Can't a fellow think?"

"It's so unusual, in your case," put in Jim, who had been silently smoking. "You might give us a little warning when you go in for these unaccustomed exercises. All the same, I know what you're driving at; one gets into a kind of rut on board ship, without being able to see the end of it. If one could imagine how things will be in England, it would be different—but it's hard to imagine a place you've never seen, and under extraordinary conditions!"

"So it is," Norah said. "The end of this voyage is like a dark curtain across everything. I wish we could see to the other side of it."

"So do I," agreed Wally. "But as we can't, the best thing is not to think of it. What are you going to do to-day, Norah?"

"Oh—just worry through another old day!" said Norah, laughing. "There isn't any special plan, I believe."

It was a week since they had seen land. They had said a final good-bye to Australia after a brief stay at Adelaide, spent in scampering round the bright

little city lying at the foot of the Mount Lofty Ranges, and in a motor-car run through the hills themselves, seeing exquisite panoramas of plain and sea far below. The almond-orchards were in blossom; over the plains their wide expanse was like a mist of shimmering opal. Above, on the foothills, golden wattle blazed for miles. But South Australia was in the grip of the worst drought in its history, and the hills were dry and bare, and scarred with the marks of great bush-fires; it hurt to see the happy country so worn and tired. They were not sorry when the time came to rejoin the ship, and to steam down the Gulf and out to sea.

Somewhere ahead, rumour said, were the Australian transports; the first contingent of troops had slipped away from Melbourne silently, under cover of darkness, and no one seemed to know definitely the day of their going. Rumour went further, saying that they were to coal at an unfrequented southern port of West Australia; so that the *Perseus* would probably draw ahead, without catching sight of the fleet—which was disappointing. After that, rumour became speculative and varied. One report stated that the troops were to go to South Africa, to help the Government there, hard-pressed between rebellion and the enemy; another gave India as their destination, and another, Egypt; while the majority still held to the belief that they would be sent direct to France. And as no one knew any more than any one else, and nothing definite was known in any quarter, the *Perseus* buzzed with conjectures and arguments, the natural result of which was that no one got any "forrarder."

Australia was now far behind them. They had not touched any western port, but had headed straight for the Indian Ocean, and now were swinging across it towards South Africa, apparently the only ship afloat upon its wide expanse. The outward and homeward routes vary, according to ocean currents, so that ships going and coming rarely meet; and, in addition, the *Perseus* was running many miles off her course, in the hope of eluding German cruisers, of which several were known to be prowling about, any one of their number ready to pounce upon the *Perseus* like a hungry dingo upon a large and very fat lamb. It was, however, unlikely that any would be so far south as their present position, and the passengers had been quite unable to stir themselves to any degree of nervousness. War precautions were observed in obedience to Admiralty instructions rather than from inward convictions.

Meanwhile, the voyage was not exciting. To put thirty passengers on board a ship capable of carrying three hundred and fifty is to produce an effect similar to that of a few small peas in a large pod. And these passengers on the *Perseus* were mostly anxious and pre-occupied people: full of anxieties connected with the war, and longing so keenly for the voyage to be over, that the ship and its population held but little interest for them. A sprinkling of

South African settlers were hurrying homewards; some to fight, and all concerned for the safety of their properties. There were wives whose husbands were already fighting in France; grave-faced women, who did not talk much, but counted each slow day that must elapse before they could obtain news of their dear ones. Half a dozen young men were on their way to England to enlist there—ready for any job, so that it only meant business; hoping for a commission, but quite willing to join as rankers if necessary. One had his motor-car on board; another had left a vast property in New South Wales; a third had been pearl-fishing off Port Darwin, and had made his way right across the desert in the centre of Australia to join the Expeditionary Force at Adelaide—and finding himself just too late for the first contingent, had been too impatient to await the formation of the second, and so had caught the *Perseus* at the last moment. Two or three retired British officers, recalled from Australia to the colours, were on board—with stories, half-comical, half-tragic, of homes broken up at a moment's notice on receipt of a curt cable from the War Office. The cloud that lay upon the whole world rested also on this one atom of Empire, lonely in a wide sea; there was no topic but War.

"It's maddening to be so long without news," Jim said, leaning over the rail to watch the white curl of foam breaking away from the bow. "It seemed long enough to wait for one's morning paper in Melbourne, even after you'd seen every 'special extra' the day before; and then suddenly to drop into silence!"

"You've only had a week of silence—and there are eleven days yet to Durban," Wally remarked. "No good in worrying yet. I wish they'd let us use the wireless."

"They won't," Jim said. "Orders are awfully strict; no wireless except in case of absolute emergency. Oh, it wouldn't be good enough; a German could locate a ship by her wireless to within a few miles. You might as well put a bell on your neck."

"Inventions are going too far nowadays," said Wally, with deep disfavour. "Old Marconi had done very well without a further refinement like that—it's only lately that they have been able to harness sound-waves so completely, and I don't see any real use in it. It's a jolly nuisance, anyhow."

"Did you ever see any one look so miserable as the sentry?" asked Norah, laughing.

A young sailor was on duty at the door of the Marconi-room, standing sentinel, with rifle and fixed bayonet. It was evident that he had not been prepared for warlike uses, and his expression also was a fixed one, full of woe. His mates, passing, grinned at him openly; small cabin-boys and junior stewards peeped round corners and jeered at him, beseeching him not to let his bayonet go off. Like Casabianca, he stood at his post, but without enthusiasm.

"It would be interesting to see him if any one tried to get in to the

wireless," said Jim. "I'm sure he wouldn't run away, but he'd be much more likely to damage himself than the intruder with that toothpick of his; I don't believe he ever handled one before."

"Who would want to get in, anyhow?" Wally inquired, lazily.

"No one, that I know of," Jim answered. "It would bore most people stiff to be kept in the Marconi-room for ten minutes. Still, they can't make rules for one ship alone, and there may be Germans on board any ship, able to use the instrument. I suppose if we were on a crowded boat, with a few suspects with foreign accents scattered among the passengers, we'd think all the precautions highly desirable; it's only because we're on this peaceful old tub that they seem unnecessary."

"I wouldn't mind their having sentries all over the ship, if they wanted to—but I'm beginning to feel I would chance any number of Germans for the sake of fresh air!" said Norah, ruefully. "It's bad enough to have your cabin shut up from dusk until you're in bed—but at least you don't stay in it. The rest of the ship just gets stifling."

"You see," said Wally, "if you shut up a ship, you shut so many assorted smells into her—engine-rooms, cooks' galley, saloon, cabins, and people, with a sort of top-dressing of new paint, hot oil, and wash-up water. Then the gentle aroma of tallow, from the holds, works up through the lot. Then you don't breathe any more."

"You wish you didn't, at any rate," responded Norah, laughing.

"It beats me, how some of the passengers seem to thrive on it," Jim remarked. "Look how they sit in the lounge at night, half of 'em smoking, and every chink shut up, and play bridge. I've come to the conclusion that they're made of sterner stuff than we are."

"Well, we can't help it—it's because we live in the open all the year round. A stuffy house is bad enough, but a stuffy ship—ugh!" Norah grimaced, with expression, if not with elegance. "Let's be thankful we can live on deck most of the time; it's always lovely there."

"This is where you hail me as your benefactor, by the way," Jim observed. "The little cabin next yours is empty; I've arranged with your steward for you to use it as a dressing-room in the evenings, and then you needn't have a light in your own cabin at all—and the port needn't be shut."

"Jimmy, you are an angel!" said his sister, solemnly. "When did you think of it?"

Jim had the grace to look sheepish.

"When it struck me this morning to manage the same thing for myself and Wal!" he admitted. "I don't know why I didn't think of these empty cabins before. At least it means that we'll have fresh air to sleep in, and that's something." He broke into a suppressed laugh, hiding it by renewed attention

to the waves.

"What is it?" asked Norah.

"That seafaring person," said Jim, indicating an old quartermaster, who had passed them with a slightly aloof air, "had an adventure with Wal and me after you had gone below last night. We were stretched out on our deck-chairs—the deck as dark as usual, of course, only you know how you get used to the dim light after a while?"

Norah nodded.

"Well, he came suddenly out of the light of a doorway, shutting it quickly after him, and approached us. We thought he saw us, so we never thought of speaking; and we only realised that he couldn't see us at all when he fell violently on top of us. He hit Wal's chair first, and tripped; then he fell across us both and lay face downwards on us for a moment, with a loud groan—and then he rolled off our knees, and sat up on the deck, looking the biggest idiot you can imagine. And we hadn't any manners—we just howled!"

"How lovely!" said Norah, twinkling. "What happened?"

"He fled," said Jim. "And we went on howling. It was a very cheerful happening."

"No wonder he went past you with his nose in the air," Norah said. "Poor old fellow!—it must have been a shock to him."

"Not half such a shock as it was to us," said Wally. "We never asked him to fall on us—and he's bonier than you'd think. Next time I would like to choose a fat, soft quartermaster; this one is simply one of the horrors of war, when he falls on you. He's all bony outcrops. Look, Norah, there's a porpoise!"

"One!—why, there's a school!" Jim said.

The big creatures were gambolling about a ship's length away, having mysteriously appeared from the west. More and more appeared, until the sea seemed full of them—great, dark forms, shooting into the air in a curve that was extraordinarily graceful, considering their bulk, and piercing the waves again with hardly a splash. They came nearer and nearer, evidently interested in the ship; looking down, Norah could see them under water, dim shadows shooting through the green depths. For a while they kept pace with the steamer; then they gradually drew off, as if in obedience to some invisible signal from their leader, and headed westward again, until at length the leaping, sleek forms were lost in the distance.

"They must be immensely strong beasts," Wally said. "I remember once being in the bow of a big steamer going to Queensland, and three porpoises had quite a game with us—they kept springing into the air and shooting backwards and forwards in front of the bow—so close to it that it looked as if they'd be cut in two as they sprang. But they must know exactly how to judge

distance; the bow seemed right on them every time, but it never touched them. They played with that old ship like three great puppies—and she was going along at a good rate, too. I must say I'd like to see a porpoise in a real hurry—he'd be something like a torpedo!"

"Nice people," said Norah, watching the last dark speck in the west. "I hope they'll come often. Are we likely to see any whales?"

"It's not the season, but you never can tell. Durban is a great place for them, I believe," Jim answered. "Mr. Smith saw a great many there last time he came out."

"Mr. Smith seems to be developing an affection for you, Jimmy," Wally said. "I saw him deep in soulful intercourse with you before breakfast."

"I don't know about either the soul or the affection," said Jim—"but he's a lonely sort of beggar. No one seems to want him. And he's really rather interesting when he gets talking. I can't quite make out who he is, or where he comes from; he's been in Australia for a good bit, and he says he's a Canadian, but he doesn't look like one."

"He's such a bad-tempered animal," Wally said. "He fell foul of the purser on his first day on board, and seems to have been fairly uncivil to the captain; and my steward says he's a 'holy terror' in his cabin. One of those people who are never satisfied. And he can't play games or do anything."

"Oh, well, he doesn't worry us much!" said Jim, easily. "He doesn't often want to talk, and when he does, one can't be rude to him. He's very interested in the troopships—has a nephew in the New South Wales contingent. That's what we were talking about this morning; he heard me say I knew a lot of fellows in the crowd, and he wanted to know if I knew where they were going. His nephew can't stand heat, he says, and he doesn't want him to be in Egypt. I guess he'll get enough cold in Flanders before the show is over."

"Where's Mr. Smith going?" inquired Wally.

"Oh, to London, I think! He isn't communicative about himself, and I don't know what his business is; he has travelled a lot, and knows Europe pretty well. Quite an interesting animal to talk to. But I haven't run across any one with so little interest in the war—he says he's lost heavily by it, and that seems to have soured him—he won't talk war, except for his beloved nephew. Must be a pretty decent sort of uncle, I should think."

"That sort of person might be all right as an uncle, but I don't seem to hanker after him as anything at all, myself," said Wally. "But you always used to find some decency in the most hopeless little beggars at school, Jim."

"Oh, well, most people are pretty decent when you come to know 'em a bit!" said Jim, carelessly. "Anyhow, I believe in thinking they are; life wouldn't be worth living if one went round expecting to find the other fellow a beast. And old Smith isn't really half bad. Here's Dad."

"Where have you been hiding yourself, Dad?" Norah asked, turning to meet her father. "We hunted everywhere for you a while ago."

"I've been up in the captain's quarters," explained her father. "He has very comfortable rooms; we have been smoking and talking. It's an anxious position to hold; I wouldn't care to be captain of a big liner in the present state of affairs, but it seems to sit lightly enough on him. At any rate, he doesn't wear his heart upon his sleeve, and if he's worried, his passengers are the last people likely to find it out."

"The voyage out must have been exciting," Wally remarked. "They had a huge passenger-list, and German cruisers were very plentiful—one only missed them by a few miles in the dark."

"We're to have boat-drill every week," said Mr. Linton. "After the drill for the crew, a double whistle is to summon the passengers; every one has been allotted a boat-station, under the command of an officer, and we're supposed to tumble up pretty sharply and answer to our names. Not much in it, but it will teach us where to go in case of emergency, and to know under which officer we should be. Otherwise we should be like a mob of sheep."

The captain, cheery-faced and alert, bore down upon the little group.

"Has your father been telling you my plans for disturbing your leisure, Miss Norah?" he asked. At home the captain had small girls of his own; Norah and he were already great friends. "I hope you won't find it a bore; some passengers on the way out considered it beneath their dignity to turn up to boat-drill, but on the whole they are very good about it."

"I think it will be rather fun," said Norah. "Whose boat are we in?"

"You're in the second boat, under the doctor," replied the captain. "I shall look to you to aid him, as first mate—with full authority from me to keep Wally in order, and put him in irons if necessary."

"What have I done?" asked Wally plaintively.

"That's very satisfactory," said Norah, laughing, and not heeding the victim. "Captain, if we had to take to the boats in earnest, what luggage could we have with us?"

"H'm," said the captain, reflectively. "Luggage is a wide term, and it would entirely depend upon the Germans—they might let people take a good deal or nothing at all. I wouldn't have any say in the matter. There is plenty of room, of course, with so few passengers. I should recommend you to have a small suit-case with valuables and necessaries, and as many rugs and coats as you could carry, separately."

"Would it be wise to have a suit-case ready packed?"

The captain laughed.

"Well, I don't suppose for a moment that the Germans are going to get us, Miss Norah," he said. "Don't you worry your little head about them. We take

precautions, of course, because that's common-sense, but they need not make any one nervous. A lot of passengers on the way out kept their valuables packed in readiness, and it may have acted as a kind of insurance against trouble, for the enemy didn't get us—and they were near enough. Just please yourself, and don't get anxious."

"Why, I don't suppose they would hurt the passengers, in any case," said Mr. Linton. "War isn't piracy, captain."

"No; not with decent people. And so far the Germans at sea have been exceedingly decent," the captain answered. "The *Emden* has done plenty of damage, but not to people; her captain must be a very good sort, judging by the way he has acted towards British who fell into his hands. No; there might be a certain amount of discomfort, of course, but no danger. Do you like queer experiences, Miss Norah?"

"I do," said Norah, promptly.

"Then I hope you won't get this one!" said the captain, as promptly. "Not on my ship, anyhow. And I don't think you will, either—the route will be well guarded, and we don't run risks. You must look on boat-drill as just one of the games the doctor advocates—designed to keep you all from getting fat and lazy. And there's a whale blowing over there—can you see?"

Norah turned in excitement, and could just see the faint spout of water on the horizon.

"Is that all?" she said, disgustedly. "Won't he come any nearer?"

"I'm afraid that one won't," said the captain; "he's a long way off, and we're going fast. But don't say I didn't provide you with diversions, Miss Norah—porpoises and leviathans of the deep, and boat-drill!" He laughed at the disappointed face. "A whale is really a dull, old thing, until you get to close quarters, but you needn't say I said so—they're one of our stock attractions. I must go"—and he went, swiftly, with quick greetings for passengers on the way. The captain possessed in full that valuable attribute of captains of liners—at the day's end each passenger used to feel that he or she had been the special object of "the skipper's" attention and interest. It is this quality which helps to lead to the command of big ships.

Some one came up and carried off the boys and Norah to a game of deck-tennis—which is played with a rope quoit across a net, and provides as much strenuous exercise and as many bruised knuckles as the most exacting could demand. Mr. Linton found his deck-chair and a book, and the long, lazy morning went by imperceptibly, as do all mornings on board ship. At luncheon, there were rumours of news—some one had heard that the wireless operator was in communication with a ship, and there ensued a buzz of speculation. The captain, entering, was appealed to by a dozen voices.

"No news at all," said he, sitting down. "The operator heard a British

warship speaking somewhere, a long way off; she speaks in code, but they know the preliminary signals."

Mr. Smith, looking slightly anxious, shot out a question.

"That does not mean danger to the troopships, I hope, captain?"

"I shouldn't think so," said the captain. "There's no reason that it should; with a big convoy like that the warships will be spread out, and they must exchange messages. It's probably of the simplest nature—only we don't know anything about it, so I can't enlighten any one." He gave a little laugh. "I suppose there is no use in my mentioning that the best advice I can give you all is to forget that there is a war?"

Mr. Smith, returning to his soup, was heard to murmur something unintelligibly about his nephew. He looked worried and pre-occupied; and when his neighbour, who happened to be the pearl-fishing man from Port Darwin, asked him a question, he hesitated, stammered, and finally gave an answer so incoherent that the other stared.

"He's a rum chap, that," the Port Darwin man, John West, confided to Jim, later. "You'd almost think he had something on his mind. Anybody after him, do you think?"

"Well—he joined the ship in a hurry at the last moment," Jim said. "Naturally, he didn't mention if any one were on his track."

"If you come to that, I did the same thing myself," said West, laughing. "Going down to Port Adelaide, I was thinking I should have to chase the old ship down the Gulf in a motor-boat! So I can't very well afford to talk about Smith. And I daresay he's all right—he's only worried about his precious nephew. I told him at lunch that there were heaps of other people's nephews in the contingent, so his wouldn't be lonesome; but it did not seem to comfort him to any noticeable extent. There isn't much emotion left for a wife or mother when a mere uncle takes on like Smith!"

"He's a man of feeling—and there aren't many among you hard-headed young Australians!" said the doctor, laughing in his turn. "You can't understand a man showing any emotion at all. Smith, being fat and soft, is different—that's all. Look at him now."

They were sitting in the deck-lounge, smoking. A few yards away Mr. Smith came into view, an unlit cigar in his mouth. His broad face was almost comically lined and perplexed, and he passed them without any sign of observing them. Immediately behind him came Norah, encumbered with a large, restless baby.

"Wherever did you get that thing, Norah?" Jim called to her.

"He isn't a thing," said Norah, indignantly. "He's a very nice person—only his mother is apt to get a bit tired."

"I don't wonder," said the doctor, as the baby executed a leap that would

have been a somersault but for his bearer's firm grip. "Is he training for a porpoise, do you think? Come and sit down, Miss Norah—he's too heavy to be carried for long at a stretch."

Norah sat down thankfully, and the baby graciously accepted the doctor's silver tobacco-box, and proceeded to concentrate all his energies on opening it.

"What have you done with his mother?"

"Oh, she has gone to lie down—she has a headache, and the baby doesn't give her much peace," Norah answered. "He's really quite good if you show him things. We've been looking for whales—but whales are so uninteresting in the distance."

"I wish I could show you some giant rays I saw once," the doctor said. "We were going up the coast from Bombay to Karachi in a British-India turbine boat, and after breakfast one morning on a calm day there were a lot of them jumping about two miles off. They're worth seeing when they jump. You know their shape—enormous flat things—and they came out of the water with a sort of gradual upward rush, like a hydroplane lifting, rise about ten feet from the water, and then come down flat—whop! It's like a billiard-table falling on the water."

"Whew!" said Wally. "I'd like to see them. What size do they run to?"

"I could tell you of one that measured thirty feet from nose-tip to tail-tip, and sixteen feet from side to side—only people don't always believe the yarn, and it discourages me," said the doctor, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Go on, doctor—we promise to believe anything!" Jim assured him.

"As a matter of fact, the story is sober truth—but it was a queer coincidence," the doctor said. "We were talking about these big rays to the first officer of the ship, that morning, and he told us that about two years before, a ship in which he was second mate had run into one of them in those same latitudes. It got across the bow, simply wrapped round it, and was drowned by being dragged through the water. They got a rope on to it and lifted it aboard by a windlass. It was the one of which I told you—measured thirty by sixteen."

"What would he weigh?"

"Oh—tons. I caught a ray once in the Andaman Islands; it was a small one, four feet from side to side, and ten feet long—six or seven feet of that was tail. It weighed a hundred and forty pounds. So you can calculate the big one, Miss Norah."

"No, thank you," said Norah, hastily. "We'll call it tons."

"Well, the first officer of our ship had photographs of that brute hanging up in Karachi, where he said they had taken it, for exhibition. Of course, it might have been any big ray, hanging anywhere; I'm afraid most of us put it down as a sailor's yarn, rather more circumstantial than usual. But this is where the queer part of my story comes in."

The baby drummed happily on the table with the tobacco-box, and gurgled.

"The kiddie likes it, anyhow," said Jim, laughing. "Go on, doctor."

"That was about ten o'clock in the morning. We watched the rays as long as they remained in sight, and then forgot all about them. After lunch the skipper noticed that our speed was wrong; he had been suspicious for some time, and on testing it by the patent log he found we were doing only eleven knots instead of fifteen. That sort of thing annoys a skipper, especially when there is no reason for it. So he rang up the engine-room and asked what revolutions she was making, and was told that she was doing her fifteen knots. The captain argued the point with some warmth; the chief engineer defended his engines with equal vigour, and finally they came to the conclusion that something was wrong."

"Not a leak?"

"Oh, no! I happened to stroll up to the bow about that time; it's the quietest place on the ship, and I like it—and looking over, I saw something half in and half out of the sea, for all the world like a thick white sheet wrapped round the cutwater. It beat me for a few minutes—the foam from the waves partly concealed it—and then I saw that it was one of these huge rays. The ship had run into it and broken its back, just as the chief officer had described—and it had revenged itself by reducing our speed by four knots!"

"Well!" said Norah. "Did you all go and apologise to the chief officer?"

"It might have pained him to know we'd even doubted him," said the doctor, laughing. "We made our apologies—mentally. The thing was exactly as he had described. We wanted the skipper to stop and get it aboard, but he was sufficiently disgusted with the delay it had already caused; and it would have taken a good while to rig up a derrick. So he had the engines reversed, and we backed slowly astern, and as soon as the pressure of the water against it was released, Mr. Ray dropped off. I think he was even bigger than the one the chief officer had measured."

"Well, it would be a good deal of fish that you would need to wrap round the stern, to bring down the speed of a big ship," said Jim. "I wish you'd got him on board, doctor."

"So do I—there were batteries of cameras waiting for him; and the skipper was unpopular for fully twelve hours," said the doctor. "Skippers, however, have to be stern men, and indifferent to questions of popularity—where the coal bill is concerned. Owners and coal bills remain long after passengers are a misty memory; and you can't appease owners—not even with a fish story!" He patted the baby's head, rescued his tobacco-box, and was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT NORAH SAW.

"BOTHER!" said Norah, with vexation.

She sat up in bed in the dark. From the skylight over her door a very faint light filtered in from the shaded lamp in the alley-way; but the cabin was very gloomy.

"Toothache is bad enough in the day," murmured Norah, indignantly. "But when it wakes one up at night——!" She put her hand to her face, trying to still the throbbing of the offending tooth; obtaining no relief, as was natural, seeing that for half an hour she had been trying such simple means, aided by the warmth of her pillow. The tooth had refused to be soothed; it was evident that sterner measures were demanded.

"Now, if I could remember where I put that bottle of toothache stuff——!" she pondered. "Brownie packed it, I know, and I'm sure I unpacked it; but where did I put it? And I can't switch on my light to look. Bother the old Germans!"

She slipped out of bed. The breeze blew in sharply through the open port-hole, and shivering a little, she groped for her dressing-gown and slippers, and, having donned them, drew the curtain across the port-hole. Then she found her little electric torch, and blinked as its ray illuminated the cabin.

"That's better," she reflected. "Now for that horrid little bottle."

It is not very easy to hunt for a small object in drawers and boxes when one hand is occupied in pressing the button of an electric torch; and the search was somewhat prolonged. Finally, the missing toothache cure turned up in the retirement of a work-bag, and Norah thankfully applied it to the troublesome tooth. By this time she was cold and tired—glad to get back to the warm comfort of bed.

Peace, however, did not last long. In a very few minutes a heavy step sounded in the alley-way, and an authoritative tap at her half-open door.

"Who's there?" said Norah, quaking.

"Quartermaster, ma'am," said a deep voice. "Officer of the watch wants to know if your port is uncovered. Light showing on this side."

Norah explained briefly.

"My curtain was drawn," she finished; "and my little torch doesn't give much light. The purser said I might use it."

"The purser doesn't have to stand watch at night," said the quartermaster, acidly. "That there torch of yours must give more light than you think, ma'am.

Orders are to close your port if found open and light showing. Can I come in, ma'am?"

He came in; a sternly official figure in oilskins, bearing a shaded lantern. At the sight of the dismayed little figure with the mass of disordered curls, he relented somewhat.

"Oh, it's you, miss! Now, didn't you know you was disobeying orders?"

"No, I didn't," said Norah, sturdily. "I had leave. And that is all the light my little torch gives." She pressed the button.

"Well, it don't look exactly powerful and that's a fact," remarked the quartermaster. "Still, orders is orders—and you'd be surprised to see how a light shines out through a winder, miss, when you're lookin' down from the bridge."

"Well, I won't light it again—not at all—if only you'll leave the port open," Norah pleaded. "The ship is stuffy enough without having one's cabin stuffy too."

"Lor, you should put your nose into our quarters, miss!" remarked the quartermaster. "No draughts up there, I promise you! We wouldn't sleep easy with all this cold air a-blowin' in." He looked at Norah's distressed face. "Well, if you give me your word there won't be any more light, miss, I might chance it."

"Not if I have fifty teeth aching—I promise!" said Norah gratefully. "Thank you ever so much, quartermaster."

"Don't mention it," said the sailor, affably. "Good-night miss—or rather good-morning! It ain't far off dawn." He tramped out, leaving the cabin redolent of oilskins and hot lantern.

Jim, a few hours later, was indignant.

"I never heard such bosh," he said, warmly. "Light—why, that little torch couldn't be seen a dozen yards away! I wonder who was the officer of the watch. I'd like to speak to him."

"Oh, don't bother, Jimmy!" said Norah. "It must show more than we thought, or they couldn't have seen it, that's clear. And for all we know, I may never want to use it again. If I do, I'll rig up a dark serge skirt over the port-hole, and I'm sure no one could see a chink of light then.

"Well, it's rather a bore to have to do that in the dark, but I suppose there's no help for it," said Jim. "And there is really nothing to be gained by speaking to headquarters, I suppose; if the light shows, it mustn't be permitted, and that's all about it. I'm glad the quartermaster was decent over it, anyhow."

"Oh, he was a dear! he might have shut the port-hole, and he didn't. But I'm sorry the officer should think I disobeyed orders," added Norah.

"I'll fix that up with him, if I get a chance," said her brother. "And don't you go making a habit of getting toothache and lying awake at night; it isn't

good for you." He gave her hair a friendly tweak. "Come up on deck; Wally will be looking for us."

It occurred to Norah two nights later, that she was in a fair way to disobeying at least part of Jim's injunction. Toothache had not visited her, certainly; but she had a most unusual fit of wakefulness. It was a still night, mild and close; scarcely any breeze came through her port-hole. Early in the night she had found the grey 'possum rug too hot and had cast it off; then a blanket followed suit; and still she was hot and restless, and the little bunk seemed suddenly narrow and uncomfortable.

She got up at last, put on her dressing-gown and leaned out of the port-hole. Without, the night was very dark; somewhere, a storm was brewing, and all the stars had disappeared. A faint, occasional glow of phosphorescence shone from the water racing past. There was refreshment in the cool touch of the night air upon her hot face. Norah liked the sea at night; even though now she could scarcely see it, it was there, great, and quiet, and companionable, with something soothing in the gentle touch of the water on the side of the ship. She liked it best when it came in waves that dashed cheerily beneath her port, breaking in a scatter of star-lit foam; but to-night it was dark and mysterious, and if you were wakeful it was easy to weave stories about it, and to picture tropic islands where just such seas lapped lazily on white coral beaches. In the daytime, Norah was a very practical person, and rarely thought of weaving stories. At night everything seemed different and strange; and the sea took possession of her imagination and whispered to her all sorts of queer things that she could never have told to any one—not even to Dad and Jim. They would have been kind and sympathetic, of course, and would never laugh at her; but they would probably have questioned themselves as to whether she were quite well.

As she leaned out, watching, the little phosphorescent gleams on the water came and went fitfully; sometimes barely a glimmer, and then a stronger gleam that rested for a moment on the crest of a lazy swell. So black was the night that every tiny fragment of light seemed twice its real size—and when dark water rolled over the faint sparkles, the gloom seemed a hundred-fold deeper. Presently, however, the little intermittent flashes grew stronger, and the periods of complete darkness less frequent.

"I do believe it's getting into the air," Norah murmured. "I never heard of phosphorescence in the air, but that doesn't say it may not be there!" She leaned further. "There!—that flash wasn't in the water, I'm sure."

It had not seemed so—still it was a little difficult to tell where the water ended and the dark bulk of the ship began. She watched, keenly interested; this was a new natural phenomenon—something to tell dad and the boys in the morning. The little flashes in the air came again; and at the same moment, far

below, a curl of phosphorescence on a long wave.

"Why!" said Norah, in amazement—"why, it's quite different. It's not the same light at all!"

It was not the same. The glimmer on the water was a pure white radiance—almost the ghost of light; but this flash in the air was quite another thing. It came more regularly now; and Norah, searching the side of the ship with wide eyes of curiosity, saw that its origin seemed to be in one place alone; she could not tell how it came. Flash—flash—flash. Then comprehension swooped upon her, and she gasped in amazed horror.

"Why!—it's some one signalling!"

The flashes came and went, intermittently, yet with a certain regularity. It was puzzling; she could not see their beginning, or what caused them, and yet they were there—in the air, more than coming from the ship; ghostly, mysterious rays. Still, the longer Norah watched, the more certain she felt that this was something wrong—something coming stealthily from the steamer—sending a hidden message over the water.

She slipped down, and stood inside her cabin, breathing quickly. Her first impulse, to ring for the night-steward, she put aside; she must be more certain first. The night-steward was an unintelligent person, and might raise a wild alarm, or simply laugh at her; and neither alternative seemed to meet the case. She must be quite certain before taking any one into her confidence.

Her little electric torch came into her mind. She found it, and managed to wriggle one small shoulder and arm as well as her head, through the port-hole; then, twisting to obtain a clear view along the side of the ship, she pressed the button. The little beam shot out and for an instant she could see the dark hull and the long line of ports like black eye-holes. The second from her own was obscured by what Norah recognised as a wind-scoop—the long tin funnel, like a grocer's mammoth scoop, with which each cabin was fitted. They used them in the tropics, her steward had told her, screwed into each port to project outwards and catch more air and so suck it into the cabin. This wind-scoop was fitted in the wrong way; its wide part uppermost, so that the port-hole was completely screened from the deck above. It was only a second that Norah looked, but that glance was enough. She released the button of the torch, and wriggled back into the cabin.

"I think I'll get Jim," she said, shivering a little in her excitement. "This job is too big for me!"

She found her dressing-gown and a pair of noiseless slippers, and hurried down the dim alley, wondering how she should explain her presence if she met a steward or any of the watch. But it was three o'clock in the morning, when even night-stewards grow sleepy; there was no one visible. Faint snores came from sundry cabins as she passed. She came to Jim's door; it was wide open,

the curtain drawn across it. Norah tapped on it gently.

"Jim! Jim!" she said, very softly.

"Who's there?" came a voice, prompt, but sleepy.

"It's me—Norah."

"What's wrong?—is Dad ill?" Jim was out of bed, wide awake in an instant.

"No, he's asleep. But there's some one signalling, Jim!"

"Well, that's the ship's business," said Jim, in natural bewilderment. "There are plenty of people on deck to receive signals. What are you worrying for, kiddie? Go back to bed."

"Oh, it isn't any one signalling to us!" Norah answered, impatiently. "I wouldn't have waked you for that, Jimmy. But there's some one in a cabin near mine sending out signals."

"Are you certain?" Jim asked, incredulously.

"I've been watching for a long time. He's got a wind-scoop fixed over his port-hole, so as to screen it from the deck. It's on this side; look out of your own port, and you'll see the flashes. Go on—I'll wait."

Jim sprang to his port-hole. A sleepy voice came from Wally's berth, demanding what was up?

"Look out here, Wal," said Jim's voice, from the darkness, in a quick whisper. "Can't you see flashes? There's some queer game on. Norah saw it first, and woke me."

There was never any hesitation on the part of Wally between being profoundly asleep and broad awake. He was at Jim's side in a bound, craning his neck through the narrow opening. Then the two boys faced each other in the dark.

"This is a nice little find," Jim ejaculated. "There are no officers' quarters down here, are there?"

"No; nothing but passengers. Do you know who have cabins on this side?"

"There's West," Jim said, considering—"and Grantham, that New South Wales fellow, and I think Mrs. Andrews. I don't know who else."

"I'm coming in—I'm lonely!" said Norah, from the door. She groped her way in, suddenly relieved to find Jim's hand on her shoulder.

"Poor little kiddie!" he said. "A jolly good thing you saw it. Is it next cabin to yours?"

"No—the one after the next—that's vacant," Norah said. "It's the little one where I dress. The light comes from the one next to that. I don't know who sleeps in it—it opens on a different alley-way. You don't think we're making a mistake, Jim? I was so afraid you'd think I was a duffer to come to you."

"Indeed I don't," Jim answered. "It's no right thing, whatever it is. We'll go along to your cabin and look out—it's closer to the enemy."

They filed along the gloomy alleys, silently, with hurried steps. Further inspection from Norah's port-hole only confirmed the boys' previous opinion. They held a council of war, whispering in the darkness.

"Let's make a dash for him, whoever he may be," said Wally. "If we spring in and surprise him he can't get away, and the wind-scoop will be evidence; no other cabin has one sticking out."

Jim hesitated.

"That won't do," he said at length. "He isn't such a fool as not to have his door bolted—and a wind-scoop is evidence to a certain extent, but it won't convict a passenger of signalling. He might simply deny any light, and say he had a passion for more air."

"Much air he'd get with the scoop in that way!" objected Wally. "The broad part has to be against the wind."

"Yes, but lots of passengers don't know how to fix them. I don't see that we can run this by ourselves, Wal—we'll have to get an officer and let him see the flashes. We don't want to make fools of ourselves; and there is a chance that it may be something we don't understand, and quite all right."

"Oh, all serene!" Wally agreed. "If you'll watch I'll go and report it on the bridge. I expect they'll have to come in here, Norah—do you mind?"

"Of course she doesn't—and it wouldn't matter to them if she did!" said Jim in an impatient whisper, cutting across Norah's quick disclaimer. "Hurry, Wal—it would be awful if he knocked off and went to bed!"

Wally sped for the door, a dim vision of haste, lean and long in his pyjamas. Disaster awaited him—his foot caught in the fur rug trailing from Norah's berth, unseen in the gloom, and he fell violently against the half-open door. It crashed into a wardrobe behind it, with a clatter of timber and falling bottles within. The noise echoed through the silent ship.

"Oh, Lord!" said Jim, disgustedly, his head through the port-hole. "That's finished him, I guess."

The flashes of light ceased abruptly. Silence fell again—and then Mr. Linton's voice.

"What's that? Are you all right, Norah?"

"Yes, she's all right," answered Wally, ruefully—his bruises nothing in comparison with his deep abasement. "Jim's here, sir—come in. We're spy-hunting, and I've spoilt the show. Oh, I am a blithering ass!"

"But what on earth——?" began Mr. Linton, justifiably bewildered. Norah whispered a hasty explanation.

"You couldn't help it," she finished, consolingly to Wally. "I ought to have remembered about the rug."

"I ought to have been careful where I was going," said the disconsolate Wally. "Trust me to mess up a good thing!—why ever did you wake me? He

might have been in irons now, but for me! I ought to be put in 'em myself." He sat down on the edge of the berth and groaned in a whisper.

"Cheer up," said Jim, coming softly from the port-hole. "The show's over for to-night, I expect, but I really think he's given himself away—the flashes stopped the instant the noise came, and after a few minutes the wind-scoop was very gently taken in. We'll get him yet. Come on back to bed."

"Aren't you going to report it?"

"What have we got to report? There is no evidence now—not even a wind-scoop. Whoever is in that cabin has probably unbolted his door by this time, and if any one came to investigate, he would be sleeping peacefully. And it's getting towards morning—he can't do much more to-night, in any case."

"I think you're right," Mr. Linton said. "Go back to your cabin now, boys, and let Norah get to bed. We'll hold a council in the morning." The boys tip-toed away, and Norah crept into her berth, perfectly certain that she was far too excited ever to sleep again.

Then she suddenly found that she was very tired; and in five minutes she was sound asleep. The ship had not been disturbed by the sudden clamour of a moment; it was perfectly silent, in the sleepy hush before the dawn. Without, the second port-hole from her own loomed round and black. No further flashes came from it to mingle with the phosphorescent glimmer on the water below.

CHAPTER IX.

DETECTIVE WORK.

A deputation of three paused at the foot of the ladder leading to the captain's quarters.

"You can't keep it to yourselves," Mr. Linton had said. "If there's nothing in it, you might get yourselves into a good deal of trouble by interfering; and if your suspicions are correct, you want authority behind you. In either case the captain might resent your not reporting the matter to him. No, I won't come; it's your own party. I didn't get out of my excellent bed in the small hours of the morning and wander round the ship acting Sherlock Holmes!"

"Norah, The Human Sleuth!" murmured Wally, admiringly.

Norah reddened. In the commonplace light of day she felt a little shaken about her discovery. It had seemed very certain in the night; now she wondered if it were indeed quite so sure a thing. Uncomfortable visions of bursting into the cabin of perhaps an innocent old lady, filled her mind.

"Be quiet!" said Jim, patting his chum on the head with more vigour than consideration. "Who upset himself?"

"That isn't decent of you," said Wally, rubbing his pate. "I'm still bruised, in mind and body. It's evident that there's nothing of the sleuth about this child. Well, you and Norah can go to the skipper."

"Indeed, you're coming too," said Jim. "You saw the light as well as we did."

"And messed up the show, without any assistance," Wally added, sadly.

"Don't be an old stupid," said Norah. "If this show is a show at all, it isn't a matter of one night only. We'll get him, if he's there to be got."

"Of course we shall," Jim said. "Well, we might as well go and hunt up the captain."

"Wait until eleven o'clock," counselled his father. "Most of the passengers are pretty well taken up then, between beef-tea and games, and you're likely to find the boat-deck empty; it's just as well not to court observation when you attack him in force." So the deputation possessed its soul in what patience it might until the coast was fairly clear, and then made a rapid ascent to the upper deck.

"Shall we send him a message?" Norah asked, stopping at the foot of the ladder.

"No, I don't think so," Jim answered. "This is a private call, and we don't want attention drawn to it. Come on." They plunged up the steep steps and

knocked discreetly.

"Come in," said the captain's voice; and they entered, to find not only Captain Garth, but the chief officer, comfortably ensconced in easy chairs; at sight of whom the deputation stopped, in some confusion.

"I beg your pardon," Jim said; "we ought to have found out if you were engaged."

"By no means—it's all right," said the captain, cheerfully. "Mr. Dixon and I were merely discussing affairs of state—the weight of brown trout, I think it was, eh, Dixon? Sit down, Miss Norah. Is it very private, or can Mr. Dixon stay?"

"It's certainly private," Jim said, laughing; "but I should think Mr. Dixon had better stay, or you might have the trouble of getting him back, captain."

"It sounds alarming," said the skipper. "May I smoke, Miss Norah?—thank you. I'll feel better able to bear it, with a pipe, whatever it is. Not mutiny, I hope, Jim?"

"You may think it's nothing at all," Jim answered "But we thought we'd better tell you." He made his story as brief as possible, watching the captain's face—which darkened as he heard, while Mr. Dixon's remained frankly incredulous.

"If this is so, what's the watch doing, Dixon?" was the captain's first question.

"The watch is generally pretty well on the look-out," the chief officer said. "Only a night or two before, Miss Norah, here, was telling me they raided her cabin because a light was coming from it." He stopped, for Norah had given a hasty jump. A sudden flash of comprehension illuminated a puzzle that had remained in a corner of her mind.

"I don't believe it was my light they saw at all!" she exclaimed. "I never could make out how it could be. Jim, don't you think it must have been the same flashes that we saw?"

"By Jove!" said Jim. "That explains it—I couldn't understand why they went for you and your little torch."

"You might tell me what it means," said the captain, patiently. "I'd know more if you did!"

"My port was open—but the curtain was drawn across it," Norah explained. "I wanted some toothache stuff, so I was using my little electric torch—it's only a wee one, and I'm just certain it couldn't throw any light through the curtain and outside. But the quartermaster came down and complained. I don't believe it was my cabin at all that they saw—it was the one we were watching last night."

"Yes," exclaimed Wally, "and, ten to one, whoever it was heard the quartermaster raiding you, and profited by the warning. And then he thought of

fitting in his wind-scoop so that it would shut out his light from the deck above."

"That's possible, of course," Mr. Dixon said. "Those wind-scoops jut out a good way; I don't believe any one looking down would see a light shielded by one. The watch is well kept—but all that the men think of looking for is a decided ray of light from a cabin window."

"H'm!" said the captain. "You didn't find out who occupies the suspected cabin?"

"No," Jim answered. "We thought of doing so, but Dad reckoned it might excite suspicion if we took any steps. So we haven't done anything."

"Quite right. The purser can tell me easily enough." The captain paused, and knitted his brow in thought.

"Well," he said, at length, "it may be innocent enough—but it doesn't sound so. I'm giving you three credit for being fairly acute observers; I don't think you'd jump to wild conclusions."

"We were awfully scared of making fools of ourselves!" Jim said, laughing.

"Very wholesome feeling. Anyhow, I'll speak to the purser, and make a few inquiries. And as it's your case, so to speak, perhaps you would all come up here this afternoon and have tea with me, and I'll tell you anything I've found out. Bring your father."

"Thanks, awfully," said the deputation, greatly relieved at being taken so seriously.

"I don't think I need mention that 'a still tongue makes a wise head,' or any sage proverb of that description?" said the captain, with a smile.

"I don't think so," Jim answered. "If you have a raid, Captain, may we be in it?"

"I'll see," said the captain. "Too soon to make rash promises—and your father might have a word to say in the matter. We'll have a talk about it this afternoon. You can tell any one that you're going to hear my gramophone." He smiled at them encouragingly, and the deputation, understanding that it was dismissed, withdrew. On the boat-deck, it broke up into three, each unit rejoining the main body of the passengers separately, with an elaborate air of unconcern.

"We were wondering what had become of you," remarked John West, whom they found, with two or three of the younger men, talking to Mr. Linton. "Some one was hunting for you two fellows to play cricket."

"Sorry," Jim said. "Are they playing?"

"I don't think so—it fell through. There are really not enough passengers to get up games. Some of the more energetic are talking of a sports committee—but I'm dead against it this side of Durban. We shall probably pick up more

people there."

"You're coming on to London?" Jim asked.

"Oh, yes—Grantham and Barry and I mean to stick together if we can, and try to get into the same crowd; we don't care what it is, but we'd prefer a mounted one. You two had better come along with us. We'd be a pretty useful lot."

"Thanks," said the boys, flattered at the invitation from older men. "It would be jolly."

"I'm a bit doubtful as to its being jolly at all," said Grantham, laughing. "From all I can read it's going to be a particularly beastly business, and I rather think a good deal of the 'romance of war' will disappear over it. The only thing is that it would be less jolly to stay out of it."

"Yes; you'd feel a bit of a waster, to stand out, wouldn't you?" West said. "Everybody's going to be in it before long, I'll bet—it will be a sort of International Donnybrook Fair." He raised his voice to include Mr. Smith, who was standing by the rail, looking out to sea. "Going to join when you get home, Smith?"

"To join?" said the stout one, turning. "To join what?"

"Oh, just the little old Army! You're not going to be out of the fun, are you?"

Mr. Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm too old," he said. "Men of my age aren't wanted—it's youngsters like you and those boys. Very useful you'll be, if you get there. But for me—well, there is the Rifle Club of which I'm a member; and they may make me a special constable. That requires heroism, if you like—to march up and down a sloppy London street in the pouring rain for four hours each night, knowing just how much use you would be if anything went wrong."

"But why wouldn't you be of use?" Norah asked.

"Why?—because I am not young. Nobody is much use who is elderly—and fat. One gets flabby and one's muscles become soft and limp. Only one's head remains. Therefore, I cultivate my head."

"For the sake of your country?" Grantham asked, laughing.

Mr. Smith nodded.

"Just so—for the sake of my country. We cannot all serve in the same way. Somewhere or other there will be a job of work for me, and I shall try to hold down my job, as the Americans say. No one can do more than that." He laughed good-humouredly. "So when you are marching by in khaki, you can spare a thought for the poor, chilly special constable who keeps the streets clear for you to pass, or performs some equally dull and ordinary duty—and gets no fun out of it; not even a medal."

"You under-rate your capabilities, Mr. Smith," said Mr. Linton, laughing.

“No one who saw you racing down the pier at Melbourne could regard you as either elderly or decrepit.”

“Well—perhaps not yet. But fat—yes!” Mr. Smith smiled deprecatingly, casting a downward glance at his ample figure. “I fear I am no longer a stayer; and in a trench I would certainly take up too much room. So I curb my ambitions. But there will be a job for me somewhere, though it may not be a showy one.” His smile widened, including all the little group; then the chief engineer passed, and Mr. Smith fell into step with him and strolled off along the deck.

“Jolly decent of the old chap,” said Grantham. “I like a man who doesn’t talk much, but is ready to take his share; and somehow, you don’t expect it from a lazy-looking, comfortable business man of his type.”

“No,” said Barry. “People like us go in as much for the fun of it—the adventure—as anything; but he can’t anticipate experiences like that. Just shows you can’t judge any one; I’d have put old Smith down as an arm-chair patriot, if ever there was one, but he seems anxious to be thoroughly uncomfortable, if necessary.”

“Oh, he’s not half a bad fellow!” Jim said. “He’s so interested about things; it’s quite jolly to talk to him. And he’s keen about his nephew and the boys on the transports. There are lots of people worse than old Smith.” Thus dismissing the claims to respect of his fellow-passengers, Jim demanded volunteers for deck-quoits, and the party, having volunteered in a body, withdrew.

The captain’s gramophone was something of an institution on the ship. It was an excellent machine, and the captain loved it. Occasionally he was induced to bring it to the saloon at night, or, in the tropics, out on the deck; but his more usual form of entertainment was to invite a select few to his cabin for tea, an invitation understood to include music. It was not therefore, regarded as anything unusual when the Linton group declined the general tea-summons, and moved away in the direction of the upper deck. In the comfortable rooms under the bridge, tea was made the chief business of the gathering, and nothing was said of any other matter until every one was served and the stewards had withdrawn. Then the captain looked round the expectant faces.

“Well, I have not much to report,” he said. He produced a plan of the ship, showing the outer view of the port-holes. “That is your cabin window, Miss Norah. Now where did you see those flashes emerging?”

“From this one,” said Norah, unhesitatingly, indicating a port-hole. “Wasn’t it, boys?” Jim and Wally, looking over her shoulder, nodded confirmation.

“Ah, so I thought! Well, that cabin has no occupant—it’s a small vacant one.”

Disappointment showed plainly written on the faces of his three younger

hearers.

"That, of course, proves nothing," went on the captain; and the faces cleared immediately. "Any one could get in to use it; it is not locked. There are no signs of its having been occupied in any way, but then, no one using it surreptitiously would leave signs. We have one piece of evidence, however; the wind-scoop is a new one, but there are scratches on it that show it has been applied, possibly by a person who did not thoroughly understand how to insert it in the port-hole. Why, you blood-thirsty young people!—you look pleased!"

The three detectives had beamed, quite involuntarily. They laughed, a little shame-faced.

"We're anxious not to have taken up your time for nothing, sir," explained Wally, suavely.

"H'm," said Captain Garth, looking from one guest to another. "Mr. Linton, you look as pleased as any of them!"

"The family reputation for common sense is at stake," said Mr. Linton, smiling. "I admit I don't want to find they've led you on a wild-goose chase, captain. Besides, they woke me up; I want some compensation for a disturbed night."

"A peaceful man, anxious to command a blameless ship, has a poor time nowadays!" said the captain. "Well, that's how the matter stands. The cabins near the empty one are occupied by ladies, who, I think, are guiltless of anything desperate; they're all addicted to wool-work and playing Patience. Further inquiry leads me to feel very doubtful about two men; one is employed in the galley, the other is a foremast hand. Both are Swedes."

"But could they get into the cabin?"

"Oh, easily! Every one knows the plan of the ship, and there would be no difficulty in dodging into an empty cabin. Frankly," said the captain, "it is a relief to me to find suspicion directed away from the passengers; it's a much easier matter to tackle a foremast hand with alien tendencies. The sailor was seen last night under somewhat queer circumstances; he was in a part of the ship where he had no business. He gave a fairly lame excuse."

"What time was that, Captain?" Jim asked.

"A little after three. It might mean nothing—but putting everything together, the matter is suspicious. We'll set a watch to-night, in two places?"

"Can we be in it?" came from Jim and Wally, simultaneously.

The captain looked questioningly at Mr. Linton.

"Oh, I leave it to you, Captain!" said that gentleman; "I can't keep them in cotton-wool."

"And after all, it's their find—if it be a find," said the captain. "At least, it's Miss Norah's—but I can't very well let you watch!" He smiled at Norah.

"It's awful to be a girl!" said she, lugubriously. "But I suppose it can't be

helped. You'll tell me all about it, won't you?"

"You shall know all!" said the captain, dramatically. "Well, one watch must be kept in the empty cabin you are using for a dressing-room—cheer up, Miss Norah, we'll give you another. You boys can watch there, if you like. Then I will have men posted further aft, also in an empty cabin; and a special watch kept on deck."

"And if we see the flashes?"

"Report to Mr. Dixon. Both watches will close up on the alley-way leading to the cabin, and we'll burst the door in. I'm having the hinges specially fixed, so that the screws will give, if necessary. If any one is there, he must be caught red-handed, or not at all. It's a mercy that the cabin is unoccupied and that no one has any right to be there—to break violently in upon a feminine passenger doing nothing more deadly than using a spirit-lamp to heat curling-tongs, would lead to unpleasantness with the powers that be, at home!"

"I guess it was more than that," Wally remarked.

"Oh, of course it was! Still, it may be capable of some very simple explanation; don't run away with the idea that we have really an alien on board." The captain smiled. "I know you want a scalp—but I don't know that I do. And, in any case, I want to keep the matter from the other passengers. That sort of thing only leads to nervousness and excitement and I'm especially pleased in the present state of affairs, that my passengers show no signs of getting 'jumpy' over war risks. Coming out, there was a lady who used to consult the officers several times a day on the probability of being sunk, and she got on our nerves."

"She would," said Jim. "We shan't speak of it, Captain. But can you keep it dark, if we make a capture?"

"Oh, I think so. Everything leads me to suspect one of the two Swedes; and the temporary disappearance of a hand may be easily explained to the rest of the crew, while the passengers need never hear about it. Lots of things occur on a voyage about which it isn't necessary to inform the passengers," said the captain, with a twinkle. "They're all very good, of course—but they have such a way of asking questions!"

"There's so little else to do," said Norah, laughing—"and such heaps of questions to ask!"

"Quite so," agreed the captain. "Well, lest you should ask me any more just now, let's have the music-box." He opened the gramophone, and gave himself to melody.

Later, on their way to dress for dinner, they passed a tall, fair-haired sailor, busily cleaning paint. He looked up at the merry group, with a surly face.

"That's a Swede, I know," Wally said, when they were safely out of hearing. "I wonder if he's one of the suspects."

"If he is, he'll be an awkward man to tackle," Mr. Linton said. "You will have to be careful, boys; don't run unnecessary risks in the way of going for him single-handed. That fellow is as strong as a bull."

Jim and Wally passed over this sage advice in the airy way of boyhood.

"It really looks very likely," said the former. "He's probably pro-German; and it's quite a reasonable thing to suppose that he may be in the pay of Germans in Australia, and has simply joined the ship in the hope of signalling our whereabouts to an enemy cruiser."

"Yes—wouldn't he get a nice bonus for us!" Wally added. "And a free trip for himself to Germany—to say nothing of the fact that he may be carrying information about the transports. Scissors!—don't I hope we'll get him!"

But the watch that night proved fruitless. Jim and his chum spent long comfortless hours in the little cabin near Norah's, taking turns at the port-hole; further up, Mr. Dixon, very bored and cold, shared a similar vigil with an elderly quartermaster. But no queer flashes of light came from the port-hole between them; nor had the watch on deck anything to report. It was a disconsolate trio that met on deck next morning.

"Never mind," Norah said, comforting. "He may have been too sleepy. He'll be there to-night."

He was not there, however. Again the weary night brought no satisfaction. Jim and Wally, heavy-eyed and yawning, gave up the watch towards daybreak, and sought their bunks thankfully, unable to keep awake any longer.

Mr. Dixon was sarcastic at the expense of the amateur detectives.

"Too much reading of penny-dreadfuls, and visiting picture-shows," said he, acidly. "I've heard that it makes people think in melodrama, and it also appears to make them see weird flashes that aren't there!"

"They were there!" said Wally, hotly. "We all three saw them."

"I'm sure you thought you did," said the chief officer, with a soothing note that was more irritating than acidity. "Now you must keep a good look-out for the sea-serpent; that's a daylight affair, and doesn't necessitate extra night-watches." He yawned cavernously. "No more sitting up for me, thank goodness!—the old man reckons this business is a frost."

The captain bore out this statement, in terms less calculated to hurt.

"We have to consider the possibility of a mistake," he told them. "And I can't keep men out of bed indefinitely. The officer of the watch will have special instructions for vigilance! I think that some underhand business was going on, but that the interruption on the first night scared the offender permanently." Whereat Wally groaned with extreme bitterness.

"Cheer up!" Jim said, smiting him on the back in the privacy of their cabin. "I'm not going to give in; if he's there, we'll get him yet." But though they watched as much as youth and sleepiness would let them, the nights went by,

and there was no further appearance of the mysterious signals.

CHAPTER X.

THE EMPTY CABIN.

"JIM! Wake up, you old sinner!"

Jim, in his sleep, was riding after a bullock on the Billabong plains. The bullock was speedy, and he and Garryowen were doing their utmost to catch and turn him. They drew near—he swung up his arm with the stockwhip, and met a soft obstacle that surprised him effectually from his dream.

"By Jove, you can hit, old man!" said Wally, in a sepulchral whisper, rubbing his side. "Call yourself a pal? Wake up?"

"I'm sorry," Jim said, struggling to consciousness. "Did I hit you? What's the matter, Wal?"

"Be quiet, fathead, can't you?" whispered Wally, impatiently. "I've been trying to wake you silently, and you'll raise the ship. Get up—the signaller's at work!"

Jim was out of his berth in a moment, and at the port-hole. Far down the side of the ship they could see fitful gleams of light.

"By Jove!" he said, bringing in his head. "We'll get him this time, Wal. Awfully sorry I was so hard to wake."

"Well, you've had about six hours' sleep in the last three nights, so it's much wonder," Wally answered. "Generally you wake if a fly looks at you." They were struggling into coats and slippers in the dark. "Come along!"

They hurried noiselessly down the passage, and turned into the narrow alley-way leading to the little empty cabin near Norah's. The port-hole had been left open, and they peered out in turn.

"There's no doubt this time," said Jim, excitedly; "he's signalling for all he's worth. No lady with curling-tongs and a spirit-lamp about that chap! he means business."

"What's the plan of action?"

Jim considered.

"I don't believe the captain would like us to tackle him alone," he said. "I don't think he'd get away from us—but he might, if he's that big, powerful Swede. We want witnesses and authority, anyhow. I'll mount guard at the entrance to that alley-way, Wal, and you go and rouse Mr. Dixon."

"H'm," said Wally. "And if the beast rushes you?"

"Well, he must rush," said Jim, philosophically. "We can't both stay, and I'd better be the one, being the stronger. Clear out, old man—look sharp! I wouldn't let old Dixon miss seeing those flashes for a fiver!"

The entrance to the alley-way leading to the suspected cabin was dark and silent, and no faintest glimmer of light came from the skylight over the shut door. Jim took his stand in the narrow passage, bracing his muscles in case of a rush in the dark. No one could get past him, in so small a space; but a strong and determined man would, he knew, make short work of him in a wild dash for safety. Jim was grimly certain that the Swede might go over him, but not without a struggle. He clenched his fists, watching the door—imagining each instant that he heard a stealthy movement, or the slow creaking as the handle turned.

Mr. Dixon, roused from health-giving slumber, was incredulous and wrathful.

"You kids are a first-class nuisance!" he said, sleepily, getting into his coat. "If this is another false alarm, Wally, I'll have you keel-hauled!"

Wally possessed his soul in patience while his body shivered—the wind on the officer's deck blew keen and shrill, and Mr. Dixon was far too annoyed to offer him the shelter of the cabin. The boy's teeth were chattering when the chief officer emerged and ran up the steps to the bridge. He returned in a moment, followed by two of the watch.

"Now, where's this precious spy-hole of yours?" demanded he.

They hurried below; past the empty drawing-room and along silent corridors, where the stillness was broken only by an occasional snore. Wally turned down Norah's alley-way and led the way to the empty cabin, running ahead to glance out first through the port-hole, in sudden fear lest the flashes should have ceased. He made way for Mr. Dixon with a relieved little sigh.

"You can see for yourself," he said, shortly.

The chief officer's face was invisible, after he had peered out—but the change in his voice was laughable.

"Well, I back down," he whispered, "I guess you kids knew more about it than I did. There's certainly some little game going on there." He leaned out for another long look. "I believe it's Morse code," he said, finally; "it's hard to tell at this angle. But it's signalling, safe enough."

"Well, hurry!" Wally said. "Jim is mounting guard alone, and if it's that big sailor, he'll simply wipe him out."

"Sure thing," Mr. Dixon agreed. "Larsen is a holy terror when he gets going." He gave hasty directions as they tip-toed up the alley-way.

"All right, Jim?" Wally whispered.

"All serene," Jim answered. "Haven't heard a thing, and there's no light coming from over the door."

"Oh, he'd be quite cute enough to block up the skylight!" Mr. Dixon agreed. "Well, you boys had better keep back and guard the mouth of the alley-way, and leave this thing to the men and me."

"Us!" said Wally and Jim together, in a sepulchral duet of woe. "Not much—it's our game! We've got to see it out, sir!"

"Well, duck if he begins shooting," said the chief officer, resignedly. "Stay where you are, Hayward—you follow up, Bob." He went noiselessly as a cat down the narrow alley-way to the cabin door.

"I don't think I'll try it," he mused under his breath. "Better to go in unannounced." He looked back over his shoulder. "Wally, you get the light switched on as soon as you're in the cabin."

In his day Mr. Dixon had played Rugby football; in later years he had been mate of a sailing ship, and had learned in that rough school how to use his weight effectively. He drew back a pace or two now, and then flung his shoulder against the door. The carefully-weakened hinges gave, and the attacking party crashed into the cabin.

They had a momentary vision of a flash of light; a guttural exclamation came from the port-hole. Then there was black darkness and the sound of men struggling. Jim was close at Mr. Dixon's shoulder; Wally, groping round the ruined door, was endeavouring to find the electric-light button. Then came another flash of light, and a report that sounded deafening, in the tiny cabin.

"You brute, you've got me!" said Mr. Dixon, between his teeth.

Light flashed out as Wally found the button. The cabin was dim with smoke, and acrid with the smell of gunpowder. Jim saw a levelled revolver-barrel gleam in the blue haze; then he sprang past the chief officer, and hit wildly at a face above it. The revolver clattered to the floor. There was a thud, as the man who held it went down in a corner.

"Hold him, Wally!"

The boys were both on the struggling form; the sailor, behind them, gripping the man's legs. The unequal fight was only momentary.

"I give in," said the man. He was suddenly limp and powerless in their hands, panting heavily. His face was turned from them as he huddled in the corner.

"Got any more revolvers?" Jim asked.

"Nein—no. You can search me."

Jim kept his grip on his wrists, as he glanced up at the chief officer.

"Are you much hurt, Mr. Dixon?"

"I don't think so," said Dixon, a little doubtfully. "Only grazed my arm—it's bleeding a bit—and deafened me. Oh, Lord, there's the old lady in the next cabin—I knew we'd have the ship about our ears!" He went out into the alley-way, and they heard his voice patiently. "No, it's all right, madam—nothing to be alarmed about. No, it's not a German warship. You're quite safe. Go to sleep."

He came back.

"Shut the door, Bob. Prop it with your shoulder. Now we'll have a look at this gentleman. Stand up there, will you?"

The huddled figure twisted round and struggled to his feet, facing them defiantly.

"Great Scott!" said Dixon weakly. "Why, I thought it was a decent Swede!"

The boys gaped in silence. The short figure, dusty and bedraggled, was Mr. Smith. He stood looking at them, pale, with a black streak across his face; in spite of it—in spite of his stout, panting, dishevelled form—there was something not ignoble about him. He was not at all afraid.

"On the whole, it was foolish of me to fire," he said. "I am glad you are not hurt."

Dixon broke into a laugh.

"Awfully decent of you!" he said. "Why do you carry a revolver if you think it foolish to use it?"

"I do not think it foolish to use it," Mr. Smith answered deliberately. "But I had meant it for myself—if I failed. Then, in my excitement, I fought with it. That was foolish. One cannot always think quickly enough."

"I'm glad you aimed too quickly!" said Dixon grimly. "It might have been awkward for some of us if you hadn't——" He broke off, with a shout. "Watch him!"

Mr. Smith had sprung towards the port-hole, a dark object in his hand. Jim was just too quick for him. He caught the up-raised arm. The little man fought fiercely and silently for a moment; then he gave in, yielding what he held with a little sigh.

"Pocket-book," said Jim, examining it.

"I'll take it, for the captain's perusal," said Dixon, holding out his hand. He had twisted a towel round his arm, and his face, streaked with blood, looked sufficiently grotesque. "Before we go any further, I think we'll search you, Mr. Smith."

Beyond the bulky pocket-book which had so narrowly escaped a watery grave, there was little of an incriminating nature to be found on the prisoner. Dixon took charge of any papers in his pockets, and of his keys; and in a corner of the cabin Wally picked up an electric torch—a powerful one, of new and elaborate design.

"Signalling apparatus," said Dixon, glancing at it. His anger suddenly blazed out.

"What do you mean by it, you cowardly hound? Who paid you to sell your own people to the enemy?"

"The enemy?" said Mr. Smith. "My own people?" He glanced round with sudden pride. "My people are your enemies, and I am one of them. I am a

German!”

“Oh, are you?” said Dixon, weakly.

“But you don’t talk like one,” Jim blurted.

“No—why should I, when I do not wish? I have lived much in England; English is as familiar to me as German. But I have but one country, and that is the Fatherland.”

“Then it’s a pity you didn’t keep off a decent British ship,” said Dixon, wrathfully. “It makes me sick to think of you on board, making friends with every one—and doing your best to get us sunk. Women and kids, too.”

“Our ships do not send people down with the ships they sink,” said the German, proudly. “For the rest—it is war. If you were on a German ship you would be glad of a chance to do as I have tried to do. War cannot be made with kid gloves. If I sink you—then I have done a service to Germany. There is not any more to be said.”

“Glad you think so,” Dixon answered; “but I fancy you’ll find there’s rather more. However, it’s the captain’s business now.” He called the sailors. “There’s an empty cabin in the next alley-way; put this man in there and watch him. He’s not to go out under any pretext whatever.”

Mr. Smith disappeared, marching proudly between his captors, his head held high. Dixon looked after him.

“Rum little beggar,” he said. “Wonderful what a lot they think of their precious Fatherland. I travelled through it once, and I certainly didn’t want to stay—their beastly language gives a man toothache! Well, that’s a good job done, and thanks be to Morpheus, the ship is quiet. A single revolver shot doesn’t make much noise, and we weren’t noisy, except for that.”

In answer to this cheering reflection, two heads appeared in the doorway.

“We’re bursting with curiosity,” said Grantham and West. “Can’t we be told anything?”

“Oh, Lord!” groaned the chief officer. “Any more of you?”

“No, I think not,” West said. “I happened to be awake, and heard your sounds of revelry; so, apparently, did Grantham. We thought of butting in, but when we heard your voice in explaining to the old lady, we came to the conclusion that we weren’t exactly wanted. But there is a limit to one’s forbearance. Can’t we be told?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Dixon answered. “Only keep it quiet. Also, these boys can tell you, for I’m off to the captain.”

“I guess you’d better let us see to that arm of yours first,” Jim put in. “I’m a first-aid man; let me tie it up, unless you’d rather go straight to the doctor.”

“Well, we’ll have a look at it,” said Dixon. “Come along to my cabin—there’s room there and we can speak out—I’m sick of whispering!”

The arm was found to be bruised and grazed only, and the patient declined

to disturb the doctor's slumbers. Jim tied it up in his best style, while West and Grantham, sitting on the victim's bunk, heard with unconcealed envy the story of the night.

"Some chaps have all the luck," West said, sadly. "Why shouldn't we be in it?—and we sleeping next door! And who'd have thought it of meek little Smith!"

"I expect his name's Schmidt if every one had his due," said the chief officer, rising. "Thanks, Jim. Now I guess you youngsters had better turn in—there's nothing more for you to do. I've got to see that that battered cabin door is fixed before curious passengers get asking questions in the morning."

Mr. Smith was officially reported as ill next day, and his absence caused no comment; a hint that his ailment might be infectious kept any benevolent people from offering to visit him. The nervous old lady was inclined to be garrulous about the midnight disturbance, but as she was known to be a person of hysterical tendencies, curiosity was not excited. Mr. Dixon, appealed to, spoke vaguely of a wave dashing in at the port-hole and making "no end of a row."

"But I heard voices!" protested the old lady.

"Yes, ma'am—you would, if the stewards were cleaning up a wave. It makes 'em fluent!" said the chief officer.

To the Linton tribe, assembled in his cabin, the captain was more communicative.

"Schmidt is his name—Hans Schmidt. There's any amount of evidence against him in the papers; the pocket-book he tried to throw out of the port contains much full and true information about our transports, a complete cipher code of signals, and translations of various other codes. It's evident that the police were on his heels in Melbourne—that's why he joined so hurriedly. He covered his tracks well, too; made them think he had gone to Brisbane. Otherwise, they would have caught him on the *Perseus* at Adelaide."

"What did he hope to do?" Mr. Linton asked.

"Well, there was always a chance of his attracting a German cruiser. I don't think it was a strong one—but of course you can't tell. It would have simplified matters for him greatly; put him safely among his own people, and he would have done his beloved Fatherland a mighty big service in betraying a prize like this ship into its hands. He says he knew he was taking big risks for small chances, but apparently that didn't trouble him. I don't consider he's to be blamed from his point of view, except in using his revolver; and that seems to distress him more than anything else. He asked for Dixon this morning, and apologised!"

"If he could have used it sufficiently, I don't suppose it would have troubled him," observed Mr. Linton.

“Oh, if he could have taken the ship, of course it wouldn’t!” the captain said, laughing. “Patriotism would have risen beyond any claims of mercy then. No—it’s because it was so futile to use it, and he risked damaging Dixon and the others for nothing. That consideration is really weighing on his mind. He’s one of those careful beggars who can’t bear making an error of judgment, I fancy.”

“I think I’m a little sorry for him,” Norah said. “After all, it was his own country he was battling for.”

“That’s so,” said the captain. “Put one of our fellows to play a lone game on a big German liner, and I fancy we’d be quite proud of him if he managed to signal a British cruiser. The shooting’s inexcusable, of course. Well, I’ve got to take him to England—I can’t have the ship delayed at Durban over a trial. And as the mouthpiece of the owners, I say, ‘Thank you very much!’ to Miss Norah and you two boys.”

The three thus marked for fame looked down their noses and felt uncomfortable.

“Glad we got him,” Jim said, awkwardly. “I wonder what about his nephew in our contingent, by the way?”

The captain laughed.

“I rather fancy you wouldn’t find that nephew,” he said. “If he exists—well, he’s probably in a trench, fighting in France, with a name like Johann and an unpleasant propensity for beer!”

CHAPTER XI.

DURBAN.

THE *Perseus* was coming gently in to Durban Harbour, past a long breakwater and a high green bluff that towered sheer from the water. Some one had just told Norah that it swarmed with monkeys, and she was straining curious eyes upwards, trying vainly to pierce the dense growth that covered it.

"Well, it may," she said aloud, in accents of disappointment. "But I can't see a sign."

"A sign of what?" asked Wally's cheerful voice.

"Monkeys. Mr. West says they are there, and I did want to see them. To see them . . .

" 'Walk together.
Holding each other's tails,' "

quoted Wally, dreamily. "It would be lovely; only they're not supposed to do it in the middle of the day. Personally, I don't like monkeys."

"Well, neither do I," Norah said. "But it's all so wonderful—to think I'm actually coming to a place where there can be such things walking about, and not in a zoo. Wally, doesn't it make you feel queer?"

"Yes, rather," admitted Wally. "I've been pinching myself, to try and realise that I was really coming to Africa. Africa has always seemed so awfully far off—a sort of confused dream of Scipio, and Moors, and dervishes, and lions, and King Solomon's Mines, and the Mountains of the Moon. The Boer War brought it nearer, of course, but even so, it was still pretty mysterious. You know, I was in Tasmania last year, and Edward's car broke down near a saw-mill on the Huon. I was poking about while they fixed her up, and I sat down on a pile of sleepers."

"Yes?" said Norah, as he paused. "Why wouldn't you?"

"No reason—only I got talking to one of the men, and he told me those sleepers were being cut for the Cape to Cairo railway. That made me feel awfully queer—to think I'd been sitting on a sleeper that was going to lie out in the middle of Africa, and have fiery, untamed lions and giraffes and elephants strolling across it."

"For all you know it never got further than a Cape Town suburb," said Jim, unfeelingly.

"Oh, get out!" Wally uttered, in disgust. "If I like to think of the zoo walking over it, why shouldn't I?"

"Why not, indeed—when it began with a donkey sitting on it?" grinned

Jim. “Anyhow, here’s old Africa; and I don’t see that this part of it is unlike any other old wharf I’ve seen.”

They were slowly coming in towards the pier. On the left lay a grey warship, workmanlike and trim, with smoke coming lazily from her four funnels; they could catch glimpses of white-clad sailors on her deck. There were many ships lying at the long wharves. Ashore, the streets were bare and brown and dusty. It was Saturday afternoon, and there were few people about.

“It doesn’t look exciting,” Wally admitted. “Not much of King Solomon’s Mines about this outlook, anyhow. But you can’t judge any place by its wharves. These seem much like the Melbourne ones, only dirtier. You would think Melbourne was awful enough if you judged it by its ports.”

“It looks lovely back there,” Norah said, indicating a long semicircle of green hills that rose behind the dusty town.

“That’s the Berea, where all the lucky people of Durban live,” said the doctor, coming up. “You must take a trip round there. Going to stay ashore, Miss Norah?”

“Yes—Dad says so,” Norah answered. “The captain advised him—he says that it would be horrid to be on the ship here for two days.”

“And she coaling!” said the doctor, feelingly. “It’s horrible—dirty, noisy, and hot, and your cabin has to be always locked, because the Kaffir boys are everywhere, and they’d steal the clothes off your back or the pipe out of your mouth.”

“That’s what the captain said. So we’re going to a hotel.” Norah gave vent suddenly to a little jig of delight, principally executed on one foot.

“Why, what’s the matter?” the doctor asked.

“Look!” said Norah. “They’re Kaffirs, aren’t they? I haven’t seen any before.” She pointed to a group of men coming across the wharf yard—muscular, brown fellows, bare-footed, many of them stripped to the waist, and all chattering and laughing among themselves.

The doctor stared.

“Yes, they’re Kaffirs,” he admitted, without any enthusiasm. “And a low set of animals they are, too.”

“They don’t look exactly lovely,” Norah said. “Only you see, it’s so queer to me to be in a country where there are coloured people everywhere. I can’t help feeling excited.”

“And it’s within my memory,” said the doctor, “that an Australian boy came to my school—and we English boys were all quite indignant because he could speak our language, and because he wasn’t black! We had a kind of idea that every one in Australia was black!”

“But how queer!” said Norah, laughing.

“That’s what we said when we discovered that he was white. But you have

seen your aborigines, haven't you, Miss Norah?"

"Oh, I've seen them, of course!" Norah answered, "some of them, that is. There are not so very many left now, you know, especially in Victoria; they are dying out fast, and the remaining ones are principally kept in their special settlements. And I never remember enough of them to make it seem that they were really the people of the country."

"Poor wretches!" said the doctor. "It makes one feel a bit sorry for them."

"It wouldn't if you knew them," Jim put in. "They're a most unpleasant crowd—the lowest, I believe, in the scale of civilisation. Useless, shifty, lazy, thieving—you can't trust many of them. They will steal, and they won't work."

"But I've heard you speak of one that you employ," said the doctor.

"Oh, Billy! But I always tell Dad that Billy is the only decent black fellow left. And he, like the curate's egg, is only good in patches. He's very fond of us, and rather afraid of us, and so he works well—on a horse. But if you take him off a horse he's a most hopeless person. Now those fellows"—Jim indicated the gang of chattering Kaffirs—"may not be perfection, but at least they can be made to work."

"Oh, they'll work well enough!" admitted the doctor. "But they're rather like animals. Watch them, now."

He took out a penny, holding it aloft for a moment. The ship was nearly alongside the wharf, and his action was instantly noticed by the noisy black throng below, who broke into imploring shouts. The penny, flung among them, fell on the wharf, burying itself in coal-dust; but almost before it had fallen the Kaffirs had hurled themselves upon it, shouting, fighting, scrambling, packed somewhat like a football "scrum," with bare, brown backs heaving and struggling. Those unable to get into the mêlée hovered on the outskirts, relieving their feelings by beating the backs of their friends wildly. For a few moments complete pandemonium reigned. Then a big fellow heaved himself out of the press and sprang aside, brandishing the penny aloft, and grinning from ear to ear. The others took his victory in perfect good part, grinning as widely themselves, and making no attempt to interfere with the victor as he tucked away his booty in some obscure corner of his ragged and scanty clothing.

"Losh!" ejaculated Jim. "Never did I see such exertion over one small penny!"

"It would be just the same over a halfpenny," the doctor said. He threw one —and the scene was reenacted, with equal vigour. The successful combatant was a mere boy, who executed a dance of triumph as he concealed the spoils of war.

The other passengers on the *Perseus* had taken up the game by this, and

coppers fell freely on the wharf; some caught in the air, others made the centres of more wild struggles.

"Big animals—that's all they are," the doctor said, looking at the heaving mass of brown backs. "It's all very well when they scramble for coppers; but they will fight in precisely the same way for the most disgusting-looking refuse from the cook's galley, flung into the coal-dust as those pence are flung. The winners gather up their prizes and proceed to eat them, coal-dust and all. It isn't an edifying sight. You wouldn't think it pretty if they were pariah dogs—but considered as human beings, well——!" The doctor left his sentence eloquently unfinished.

Along the deck came Mr. Linton, hurriedly, his face full of joy.

"Dad's got news," Jim said, quickly.

"News!—I should think so!" said his father. "We've got the *Emden*!"

"No!"

"Yes—and it's the Australian ship that finished her—the *Sydney*. Caught her off Cocos Island."

"Our ship!" came in a delighted chorus. "Oh, that's too good to be true!"

"It is true, all the same—and more power to our baby Navy!" said the squatter, beaming. "Of course, there was no real fight in it; the *Emden* was hopelessly outclassed. Still, the *Sydney* was all there when she was wanted. It's worth being without news for so long, to get anything as good as this."

"Rather!" said Jim. "Thank goodness that blessed little wasp is out of the way of the transports!"

"She was near enough to be dangerous," said his father. "And she ran up a big enough butcher's bill for us before we got her." His face darkened; the exploits of the predatory German cruiser had not made pleasant British reading. "She has a mighty big bundle of scalps to her credit."

"Well, she played the game," Jim said. "As far as I can see, she'll go down to history as almost the only chivalrous fighter the Germans had. I reckon her captain must be an uncommonly decent sort—he had to be a pirate, but he was such a good fellow with it. You can't help respecting him."

"No—nor being glad he's out of business," Wally said. "I'm not keen on being sunk by any pirate, no matter how gentlemanly. But, of course, though the *Emden*'s captain did treat people awfully well, not even a German would sink ships regardless of human life"—wherein Wally spoke without foreknowledge of later German tactics. "Any other news, Mr. Linton?"

"I haven't seen any papers yet, but I believe there is nothing special—a sort of deadlock everywhere," the squatter answered. His eyes widened suddenly. "There's an ornamental person! What do you think of him, Norah?"

Norah turned, following the direction of his gaze. A man drawing a rickshaw had just trotted gently to the wharf, and, putting down his shafts,

stood erect. Without doubt, he was an ornamental person. He was a Zulu, considerably over six feet in height, and of powerful build, with well-cut features, and a bearing proud enough to be something more than a mere human horse. His dress was striking. A close-fitting tunic of scarlet and white stripes, over short scarlet knickerbockers, only served to outline his mighty frame. Across his back and chest were criss-crossed strips of bright-coloured embroidery. There were bangles on his arms, from wrist to shoulder, and bangles above his knees. He was bare-footed—but his legs were painted in white from the knees downwards in an elaborate design to represent boots and gaiters.

But his glory was in his head-dress. A tight-fitting skull-cap was crowned with the most amazing erection that ever bewildered a newcomer. Above his brow curved away two enormous bullock-horns, dyed scarlet. Between them, a straight aigrette of porcupine quills quivered with every movement; and behind, a long plume of pampas grass, of vivid yellow, streamed downwards, until it touched a monkey-skin, which, fastened to his shoulders, trailed down his back. From different angles long scarlet feathers stuck out; and above each ear was fastened a native snuff-box—a gourd the size of a tennis-ball, profusely ornamented with brass. He was a heartsome sight.

"Good gracious!" Norah gasped. "Are there many like him?"

As if in answer a second rickshaw came round the corner of a wharf building. The Zulu who drew it might have been the twin brother of the first man in size and features; but his dress was blue and white, and one of his bullock-horns curved up, and the other down, which gave him a curiously rakish appearance. They were dyed scarlet and black, and his feathers were of every colour of the rainbow. The first man broke into a rapid torrent of guttural, clicking speech, and for a moment they chattered like monkeys. Then they looked up, catching sight of the watching passengers on the *Perseus*, and each broad, black face widened into a smile from ear to ear, while they beckoned invitingly towards their waiting chariots.

"Many!" said the doctor, laughing. "Oh, any number, Miss Norah—that is the cab of Durban!"

"Daddy!—do we go in them?"

"Would you like to?" said her father, regarding the peculiar equipage with some distrust.

"Rather!" said Norah, breathlessly.

"I don't think I'd look well in one," said Mr. Linton, doubtfully. "Surely they're meant for the young and frivolous, doctor?"

"Not a bit," said the doctor, laughing. "Every one uses them—they're awfully handy things. You can't possibly keep out of them!"

"That settles it!" said Norah, thankfully. "We'll go, Daddy. Can we go

soon?"

"That red and white chap has put the evil eye on Norah," said Wally, laughing. "She's bewitched, and small blame to her—did you ever see such an insinuating smile? Don't let us keep her waiting, Mr. Linton, or she'll turn into a black cat and disappear for ever—in a phantom rickshaw!"

"We may as well go," said Mr. Linton, laughing. The gangway was down; already a swarm of Kaffir boys were coming on deck, unsavoury enough at close quarters to cure even Norah of undue hankerings after this particular brand of noble savage. Their bare feet left tracks of coal-dust on the spotless decks, at which the doctor shrugged disgustedly.

"Poor old ship—she'll be coal from end to end soon," he observed. "Are all your cabins locked, by the way?"

"Yes—we handed them over to the steward's care," Mr. Linton answered. "Suit-cases all on deck, boys?"

Everything was ready, and in a few moments was delivered to the hotel agent, a busy half-caste who came on board suffused with his own importance. Then, with no heavier impedimenta than cameras, the Billabong party went ashore—to be received with a delighted air of welcome by the rickshaw "boys." Mr. Linton and Norah boarded one rickshaw, Jim and Wally the other; the steeds gripped the shafts, said authoritatively, "Sit ba-a-a-ck!" and started on the long jog to the city, the little brass bells on their wrists jingling at each stride.

The rickshaw of Durban is an enticing vehicle. It holds two people comfortably: it is well-cushioned, with an adjustable hood, and has rubber tyres; and both it and its "boy" are as clean as polishing can make them. The "boy's" bare feet are almost soundless on the well-paved roads; the rickshaw runs smoothly, with no apparent effort on the part of the big Zulu. He is a cheerful soul, with a keen eye to the main chance; his smile is always ready, and he passes other "boys" with a quick volley of chaff that appears to give equal delight to both. Very certainly he will demand double or treble fare if he thinks there is the slightest chance of obtaining more than his due. He loves to appear quite ignorant of English, once he has caught his passenger, and will jog on serenely into space, oblivious of any command to stop, knowing that he is piling up the sum to be paid him eventually. For these reasons, it is as well to learn from the steward a few elementary native words of command, which are apt to imbue the "boy" with a painful regard for his fare's might and learning. Failing this, a stick or umbrella long enough to prod him is of much value.

With all these small drawbacks, the rickshaw "boy" is a delightful person, combining the heart of a child with the business instincts of a financier. Even when there is strong reason to suspect that he has grossly overcharged you, it is

quite impossible to be angry with him, his smile is so friendly and his manner so insinuating. The effect might be less marked if he were not so extremely ornamental. But a chocolate-coloured, highly-polished Hercules, clad in shining raiment, jingling with brazen ornaments, and crowned by a head-dress calculated to excite envy in the Queen of Sheba, claims affection in a fashion denied to lesser mortals.

Norah found her red and white-clad steed wholly delightful. She gave to his great back, with its flowing monkey-skin, more attention than to the dusty streets through which they were passing, though they, too, were not without their special interests—groups of natives, Kaffir women with their brown babies tucked into the corner of their bright shawls, little native boys with the splendid uprightness that comes from many generations who have carried loads on their heads, Indians in gaudy, flowing draperies, and slouching half-castes, with evil, crafty faces. Other rickshaws passed them, taking passengers back to ships at the Point, or jogging down, empty, in the hope of picking up a fare. There were long teams of mules, in Government ammunition carts; and in a railway yard they caught sight of a train painted with the Red Cross, and suddenly remembered that South Africa, too, was at war. Women were sitting in the dust by the roadside, with great baskets of fruit—the travellers from the land of fruit sniffed disdainfully at its quality; and there were hawkers of cool drinks and ice-cream, which appeared to be of a peculiarly poisonous nature. Then the unsavoury streets widened to a fine road on the sea-front—and they ran past imposing hotels and clubs, which looked out on a fleet of small yachts, lying at anchor or lazily sailing before the light breeze; and then came a sharp turn into a broad street, past a square where statues were surrounded by beds of flowers that blazed in the afternoon sun, and a great building, the beautiful Town Hall, shone on the further side; and the "boys" dropped the shafts in front of the Post Office and grinned by way of explaining that this was the heart of Durban town.

"I'd give half my kingdom," said Wally, as they met on the footpath, "if I could import that turn-out to Melbourne and drive down Collins Street on a Saturday morning. Just fancy that gorgeous black chap—and the look on the Melbourne policeman's face as he caught sight of him!"

"Just fancy the horses!" said Jim, laughing. "Wouldn't there be an interesting stampede!"

"Look at them now!" said Norah delightedly. A long row of rickshaws stood on the other side of the street, waiting to be hired, their "boys" chattering in little groups or brushing their miniature carriages with feather dusters. A man approached them, bearing the unmistakable tourist stamp, and immediately every "boy" sprang to attention—patting the rickshaw seat, whistling softly, yet urgently, waving their bright dusters, while some, between

the shafts, pranced wildly, apparently overcome by the sheer joy of being alive. There was a storm of guttural pleading. “Take me, sar!” “No, me—he no good!” “Me is fast boy, sar!” “Me is faster!” The great bronze faces were vivid with excited impatience; white teeth flashed, and rainbow plumes nodded.

“And it’s all for a sixpenny fare—and they’re cab-horses!” ejaculated Mr. Linton. “By Jove, just fancy an impi of those fellows under Cetewayo going out to battle—with broad spears instead of feather dusters!”

Jim whistled under his breath, watching the row of child-like giants. Then he burst into a laugh. On the far side of the row was a Zulu who had been unable to get round in time to join in the general effort to attract the tourist. He was contenting himself by stooping and peering between the wheel-spokes, grinning from ear to ear as he beat upon them in the hope of catching the passenger’s eye. The effect was indescribably ludicrous.

“Isn’t he lovely!” laughed Norah. “Oh, Jimmy, can you imagine a stolid Melbourne cabby playing ‘Bo-peep’ behind his wheels like that!”

“I’d give a lot to see it,” Jim said, “especially if I could dress him in that kit first. I wonder what’s the duty on one rickshaw complete with Zulu—it would be rather a lark to import one to Australia after the war!”

“You couldn’t do it—the cabmen would rise up and slay you,” Wally said. “Well, I want to go inland, and see those chaps on their native heath. Great Scott, what fighting-men they’d make!”

“Once,” said Mr. Linton. “Not now—since they learned the ways of civilisation. But what they must have been! Did you ever hear of the impi that failed in battle, under Chaka? He mustered them afterwards and told them their punishment. There was a cliff half a mile away, with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet into a rocky gorge; at a signal their officers gave them the word to march, and took them straight forward, over the edge!”

“And they went over?” Norah was wide-eyed with horror.

“Every man. The king stood near the edge to watch; and as they passed him they tossed their shields aloft and gave him the royal salute—‘Bayété!’ Then they went down, like warriors. They knew it was the only thing left to them; it was not possible to fail the king and to continue to live.”

“He gave one impi a chance, though,” Wally said. “They were a very famous fighting regiment, and in some way or other they disobeyed him. Chaka didn’t want to kill them—possibly he was short of recruits, like Great Britain! But he paraded them and told them that because of their previous good record he would spare their lives, under one condition—that they left their assegais in the kraal, went out into the bush, and brought him a living lion, full-grown, with teeth and claws perfect!”

“What—with their bare hands?” Jim asked, incredulously.

“There wasn’t a weapon among the whole crowd; all they were allowed

was rope to bind him. They did it, too; marched out into the bush and caught their lion and brought him in to the king. It must have been something of a job. Forty were killed, and over two hundred clawed. You'd call those chaps warriors, wouldn't you?"

"And now they haul one round in rickshaws! Doesn't it make one feel small!" Jim ejaculated. "Well, Chaka was a cruel brute, but he must have been a good deal of a man himself to be able to handle such men as those fellows, and send them marching to death, saluting him. Leaders like that don't seem to get born nowadays."

"Let me commend to your notice, Norah, that method of doing your hair!" said Mr. Linton, indicating two Kaffir girls who were passing. Their hair was drawn tightly back from their faces and dressed in a kind of hard club, about a foot long, that stuck out stiffly from the backs of their heads, slanting upwards.

"Good gracious!" said Norah, weakly.

"Do you suppose they take that erection down every night?" Jim asked.

"No, indeed—it looks calculated to last for years," Norah answered. "I wonder how on earth they build it, and why."

"It's a handle," Wally said, solemnly. "Their husbands pick them up by it when they're tired. Also it might be used as a flag-staff, or a hat-peg: you could find ever so many uses about a house for it. And then it saves them for ever from buying hats. They might possibly make a forage-cap sitting on one eyebrow work in with that hair, but no other kind of head-dress would fit on. Think of the economy!"

"Think of trying to sleep in it!" said Norah, gazing sympathetically after the retreating brown ladies. "It could only be comfortable if they lay on their noses."

"Well, their noses would rather give you the impression that they did," Jim said. "Most of them are as flat as a pancake. I say, do we stand on the steps of this post office all day? Because I saw a shop with a touching legend about strawberries across the street; and I haven't seen a strawberry for nearly a year. Let's explore."

They explored, and found the Durban strawberries so good that the exploration was indefinitely prolonged; then they sought curio-shops, and rummaged among assegais and knob-kerries, rhinoceros-hide shields, Zulu trinkets, Kaffir wire-work, ostrich feathers, and queer carved figures; and Norah found herself the delighted possessor of a little silver box with top and bottom of beautiful dark-blue agate, veined with white. It was very hot, and the city streets, crowded and dusty, were not inviting; so they hailed rickshaws, and soon were running smoothly along a wide road that led away from the town and towards the ocean beach. There was a steep pull up a long hill, which made the passengers strongly inclined to get out and walk, except that no one

else in rickshaws seemed to think of doing so. The "boys" went up it at a good pace, though panting audibly. At the top they came in sight of the sea; a long strip of beach, on which big rollers pounded incessantly. On the left the steep slope down to it was terraced in lawn and garden, with seats here and there, summer-houses overgrown with gay creepers, and fountains, throwing aloft sparkling jets of water. The clean salt air blew strongly towards them.

"Sit ba-a-a-ck!" said the "boys" suddenly.

The Australians obeyed, not too soon. The rickshaws tilted back alarmingly as they shot down the hill. The Zulus rested their elbows on the shafts and balanced themselves in the air, their legs taking strides that were apparently gigantic, but never touching the ground with their feet. It was a spectacular performance—by no means comfortable, and distinctly nerve-shaking. Faster and faster went the rickshaws, and further and further back they tilted.

"If I get out of this alive," said Jim, "I guess I'm born to be hanged!"

They came to the foot of the hill, and swung round a corner so abruptly that to find themselves still intact seemed almost a miracle. The Zulu came down to earth and the rickshaw to a horizontal position; the occupants righted themselves with sighs of relief. Still under the impetus of that wild descent, the "boys" raced along a level strip of roadway, and drew up at a big hotel that fronted the beach. They let down the shafts gently, and turned to their passengers, each chocolate countenance bearing a grin from ear to ear.

"My is a nice boy!" said Norah's steed, modestly.

"You are," said Mr. Linton, getting out. "You're also closely related to an assassin, I think. How many people do you kill in the year?"

The Zulu grinned yet more widely, apparently under the impression that his acrobatic efforts were receiving the praise they merited.

"Two shillin'," said he, blandly, and accepted the coin with an air of condescension, while his companion did the same. They trotted off smartly, lest their passengers should discover that they had paid double fare and take steps of vengeance.

The hotel was cool and spacious, with big rooms and wide verandahs. Norah's window looked out upon the sea, stretching to the misty horizon over which they had come. Beneath her, the life of the beach surged. War, people said, had made Durban quiet; few of the up-country settlers had followed their usual custom of coming down for the bathing, since most of the men were fighting, and every one else was busy guarding property. But Norah thought she had never seen such a busy beach. Motors, carriages, and rickshaws passed and repassed on the wide road beneath her, with clanging, noisy electric trams; further down, the terraces were thronged with people, and the cafes showed a stream of customers going in and out. Children were paddling and digging in

the sand; in a rotunda a military band was playing softly.

In the sea itself, a semicircular pier curved right out into the water, surrounding a stretch of surf. Men were fishing from the far side of the pier; Norah could see immensely long rods, and once a gleam in the air as a big fish was landed over the rail. But her interest centred on the enclosed water, where hundreds of people were bathing in the breakers that came rolling in from the sea. Durban bathing was famous, the doctor had told her, since it combined the excitement and delight of surfing with perfect safety. Norah watched them, fascinated. Some would wait, waist-deep, for the breaker to come in behind them and carry them on its crest ashore; others would face it, and as it came, dive right through it, to swim in the more tranquil heave of water behind the crest. There were old and young men and women; boys and girls, and tiny children, most of them daring the deepest water, while a few paddled cheerfully near the edge, sat down and shrieked when a wave came tumbling in, and, if they did not swim, at any rate became extremely wet and happy.

"Why do women always yell when they bathe?" asked Jim, coming in. "I knocked three times, by the way, but you didn't hear me."

"They don't," Norah said indignantly, ignoring his apology. "At least sensible ones don't."

"Then it's the insensible ones that bathe," Jim said, sticking to his point. "At least nine-tenths of the women there scream when a wave hits them—and it's the same in any place you go to. I often wonder"—reflectively—"how they break themselves of the habit sufficiently to avoid screaming in the bathroom at home!"

"Jimmy, you are an ass," said his sister, politely. She looked up at him with pleading. "It's hot, and the sea looks lovely; I won't yell, if you'll take me to bathe."

"That's what I came for," Jim answered. "Dad is deep in the last three weeks' papers, and Wally and I are pining for a swim. Come on!" They plunged downstairs, found Wally awaiting them on the verandah, and hurried down the terrace to the sea; and in five minutes Norah was having her first taste of surfing, getting knocked flat by waves and buried temporarily beneath what seemed thousands of tons of water, coming up to the surface, breathless, but happy, and swimming wildly until another breaker came over her; and learning in a very short time to meet them and make use of them, diving through their green curves and coming gloriously ashore upon their hollow backs. They stayed until the sun left the sky, and the water grew chilly; then, damp and hilarious, and exceedingly hungry, climbed up to the hotel.

Mr. Linton was standing on the verandah, looking out.

"I'm glad to see you," he said; "you were so long that I've been mentally recalling the treatment of the apparently drowned. Had a good bathe?"

“Oh, glorious!” said the bathers. “Is it time for dinner?”

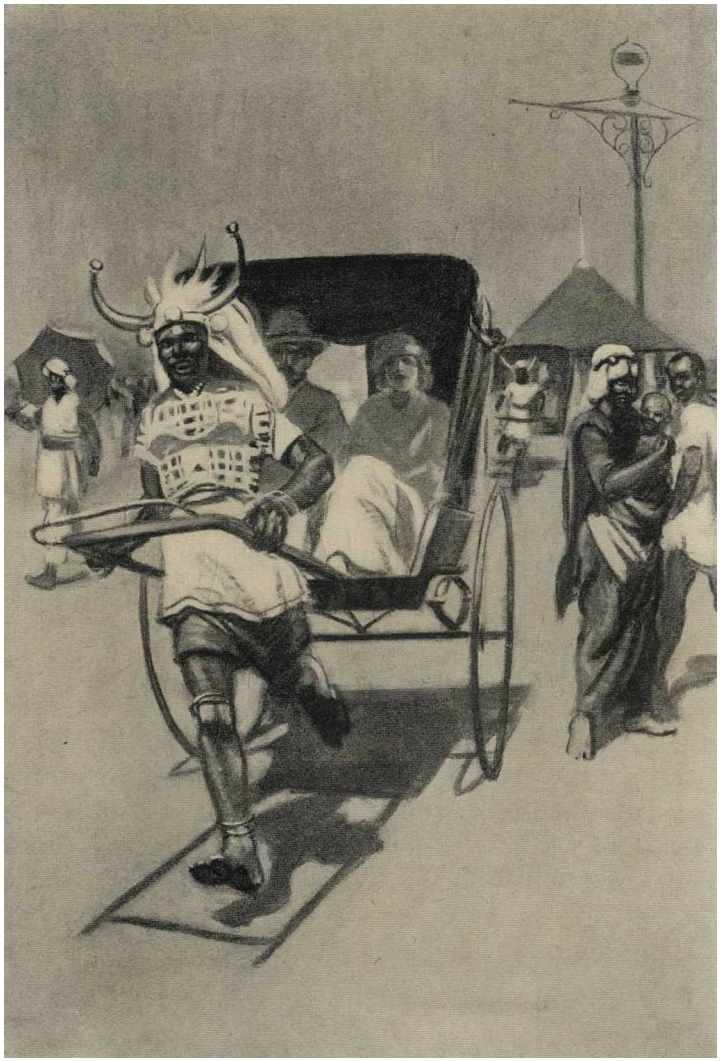
Ten minutes later they were enjoying it in a big dining-room that was open on one side to the verandah, and to the darkening sea. Lights began to flash out all round the semicircle of the pier, and along the terraces—though the waiter, a bare-footed Indian in white clothes, told them regretfully that since the war the fountains no longer were red and green at night, but were turned off when dusk fell!

“It seems a rum tribute to war,” Wally said. “But I suppose it’s all right.”

“Yes, sar—certainly, sar,” said the waiter.

The hum of traffic did not cease, and the shouts of the bathers came up plainly from the surf. The Billabong party strolled along the beach in the hot dusk, and watched the heads bobbing in and out of the breakers, mysteriously seen in the streaks of light cast by the lamps on the encircling pier. Gradually the heat lessened and a pale moon climbed into the sky. They turned homeward when Norah was discovered yawning.

“Well, the sea is lovely, and all that,” Jim said, stretching his long frame as he rose. “But I think it’s loveliest when you’re off it. It’s good to feel tired again—I’m getting flabby with doing nothing on that old ship. Three weeks of solid sea certainly makes you enjoy land!”



"They hailed rickshaws, and soon were running smoothly along a wide road."

CHAPTER XII.

EXPLORING.

WALLY awoke in the early dawn, under the stimulus of a damp sponge pressed firmly against his face.

"Beast!" he said sleepily, and hit out in a wild fashion which had, very naturally, no effect. He opened his eyes, to see Jim, in his pyjamas, grinning at him over the end of the bed.

"Of all the restless animals!" said the injured Mr. Meadows. "Why ever can't you stay peaceably in bed on the rare occasion that you've got one to stay in—instead of a creaking shelf? There can't be anything wrong, or you wouldn't have a grin like a Cheshire cat!"

"There is not," said his chum, affably. "Only I couldn't sleep, and it seemed such a pity for you to be slumbering. Let's get up."

"Get up! Whatever for?"

"Oh, just to be up! It's too hot to be in bed—and everything out of doors looks so jolly. I've been out on the balcony for ever so long."

"Go to Jericho!" said Mr. Meadows, with finality, and turned over to slumber anew. This laudable desire was frustrated by the gradual withdrawal of all bedclothes; then, as the victim seemed resigned to sleeping on the bare mattress, Jim rolled him up in it and deposited him head-first on the floor. At this point slumber left the scene finally, and the outraged Wally gave himself up to vengeance.

Calmness was restored a little later, and the dishevelled combatants regarded each other.

"You hit like the kick of a pony," said Jim, with respect, rubbing his shoulder. "Isn't it ripping to have space to move again? People of our size aren't meant for ship's cabins."

"I was meant for bed," said Wally, bestowing an affectionate glance on that once placid retreat. "And you are meant for the gallows—and some day you'll get there! Now, what do you want to do? I'm awake."

"I'd noticed it," said Jim, still handling his shoulder carefully. "Wonderful how well you wake up when you make up your mind to it! Oh, I don't quite know what to do! But come out, anyhow."

"Well, we haven't got very much shore time, so we may as well make the best of it," Wally assented, searching among the débris of the room for his socks. "Land certainly does feel good under one's feet once more. Do we go for a walk along the beach, or what?"

"No, I don't want any more sea-views for a bit," Jim answered. "We'll have plenty for the next month. I vote we go into the town and explore a bit. There may be nothing to see, but it's full of such queer people that you never know what you may run into if you go off the beaten track—and of course we can't do that when Norah is with us."

"No. It sounds as if it might be interesting," Wally said. "Jim, you great camel, one of my socks is in the basin!—I hope to goodness I packed up another pair." He dived for his suit-case, and sighed with relief on finding a further supply. "That saves your skin, old man. By the way, what about the native market?"

"I was wondering," said Jim. "Of course, it's Sunday—but one doesn't know how our Sunday affects these brown and black gentry. The doctor said it began at some unearthly hour, and I think he said it was always open, so it might be available on a Sunday."

"We might try," Wally said. "Markets are generally best if you catch 'em in the very early morning. Do you know where it is?"

"Only that it's the other side of the town from here," Jim answered. "We may pick up a stray rickshaw; or if not, we'll find some one to ask. Anyhow, it will be an exploration."

"Right-oh!" Wally agreed. "Durban seems to me much like any other place if you omit the people—those queer coloured mixtures are the most interesting part, by a long way. I'd like to find that market."

"Same here. It will be a walk, anyhow—and then we'll get back in time for a swim before breakfast. No need to leave a note on the pincushion, like the eloping young ladies in novels, I suppose?"

"Oh, we'll be back before they're awake!" Wally said. "Anyhow, your father would understand that we had gone off on a voyage of discovery."

They dressed hurriedly and went downstairs through the quiet house. A sleepy Indian boy let them out. The streets were empty save for a few native sweepers; already there was promise of a hot day, but the morning was cool and fresh. The sea a sheet of rippling blue that creamed at the edge in long, slow rollers. The boys turned off the main thoroughfares, and struck downwards to the city.

Everything seemed asleep. There was no movement in any of the houses they passed, and no traffic in the streets. Occasionally a sleepy dog barked from a verandah, but without energy. There were many sleepers on these verandahs; often they caught glimpses of stretcher-beds behind bamboo blinds, where open-air enthusiasts had slumbered in outdoor freshness through the hot night. "Quite like Australia," said Wally, approvingly. "This place isn't so much unlike Brisbane, in many ways."

"So I was thinking," Jim observed. "Brisbane is a bit grubbier, and has

more smells, and not such a mixture of races; but the Kanakas you see there are not unlike the Kaffirs here, and the place itself has a good many points of resemblance. It's a kind of half-way house to the Old World Cities, I suppose." He took out his pipe, and looked half regretfully at his friend. "I wish you smoked."

"Not me!" said Wally, sturdily. "You waited until you were nineteen, and I'm jolly well going to. Don't you bother."

"Oh, I don't want you to start!" Jim said. "I think it's a fool game to begin too young. But I just wish you could, that's all—it would be sociable, and I feel rather a pig; you must be hungry. It was feeling hungry that made me want a pipe."

"I daresay we'll pick up some grub somewhere," Wally said, cheerfully. "I'm not hungry enough to worry about." He looked at Jim keenly. "I believe there are ever so many times that you don't smoke just because I'm there, and you don't think it is sociable. Go on, you old donkey."

"Donkey yourself," returned Jim, somewhat shamefacedly, but fishing in his pocket for his tobacco-pouch. "I never did anything so stupid." He changed the subject with thankfulness, having in common with his chum a great horror of any conversation that approached what they called "softness." "Look at that jolly little kid!"

A small, brown person sat on a doorstep and looked at them with grave eyes. He might possibly have been two years old, but his gaze had the solemnity of extreme old age. He was clad in a very brief pink nightgown, and his mop of curly hair was standing erect, just as he had tousled it in sleep.

"Good morning," said Wally, stopping and addressing the baby with a gravity equal to its own. "I hope you're well. Will you shake hands?"

The baby contemplated the outstretched hand for a moment, and glanced again at the boyish face. Then he put his hand into Wally's and permitted himself the ghost of a grave smile.

"I've seldom seen a better-mannered gentleman," said Wally, stepping back. "See if he'll be as civil to you, Jim."

He was, and the smile broadened, though apparently he had no speech—as Wally said, his grin made him independent of words. Jim produced a penny and put it into the tiny paw that matched it in colour. Then the door behind opened suddenly, and a Kaffir lady, evidently the baby's mother, and clad in a nightgown strongly resembling his, appeared in search of her family—and at sight of the two boys, uttered a refined shriek and disappeared as quickly as she had come. The baby, regarding this performance as a circus, laughed very heartily; and Jim and Wally fled.

In the business part of Durban itself there was even less sign of life than among the cottages they had left. The shop-fronts were closely shuttered, and

everywhere there was silence. Once, down a side-street, they caught sight of a native policeman, trim and smart in his dark blue, close-fitting uniform, his shapely brown legs bare from his knickerbockers, and a jaunty blue cap on one side of his close-cropped curly head; but he did not see them, and they went on. Jim paused for a moment.

"We might ask that fellow where the market is," he said. "What do you think?"

"Oh, he's rather out of our way, isn't he?" Wally answered, easily. "And policemen have such a knack of moving off when you go after them; and you have to chase them for blocks. We're sure to come across somebody soon." To which Jim acquiesced; and thereby lost a chance of saving a good deal of trouble.

It was not an interesting city. The streets were dusty and untidy, and in the gutters was a litter of rubbish that spoke eloquently of Saturday night shopping. As they drew further and further away from the business centre there were signs of more foreign occupation—queer inscriptions in divers languages over the doorways of shuttered shops, and occasional glimpses of Oriental wares in dingy windows belonging to shops that did not rise to the dignity of shutters. Sometimes they had a brief vision of curious eyes regarding them from behind half-drawn curtains. They met an old Kaffir slinking along the gutter in search of some unsavoury booty, and questioned him about the market; but either he knew no English, or did not wish to understand them, for he only blinked and uttered guttural and unintelligible words, holding out a knotted old hand for money. The boys gave him some coppers and strolled on.

"Well, Durban takes some beating, for laziness, if not for religious fervour," Jim said, at length. "I never saw a place more painfully quiet—there may be a mixture of races, but they all observe the Sabbath so far as sleeping goes. We'll have to give it up and turn back, pretty soon, since apparently we shall have to walk all the way home; trams and rickshaws are as sound asleep as the inhabitants."

"There's a chap who may know something," said Wally, quickly.

They had turned into a narrow street, and a rickshaw was coming slowly along towards them, drawn by a big Zulu. It was a shabby rickshaw, and the Zulu himself bore none of the adornments of his brethren in more fashionable regions; he wore ordinary knickerbockers and a blue jumper, and a single black feather was stuck through his tight curls.

"What a dingy-looking beggar!" Jim said. "He looks as if he's been up all night."

"Probably he has, and he's tired," Wally answered. "Anyhow, he's safe to know about the market."

They hailed the Zulu, who did not, at first, seem inclined to stop. He

regarded them with sleepy, unfriendly eyes, but without curiosity—though the tall, fresh-faced boys, in their light flannels and Panama hats, were sufficiently unfamiliar figures in that mean street in the early morning, before folk were awake. They repeated their question—in answer he grunted ill-temperedly and resumed his slow walk.

"Oh, bother!" said Jim. "I'd better give him something, and loosen his tongue."

He drew out a loose handful of change and selected a small silver coin, holding it out to the Zulu. The man's eyes lit up, and he stopped and backed to the footpath.

"We may as well take him, if he wants a fare," Wally said. "It isn't a luxurious-looking chariot, but it will do."

"Market?" queried Jim. "You know the market?"

The Zulu looked vacantly at them for a moment.

"Gen'lemen want go to market?"

"Yes—native market; not white man's," Jim explained. "You know it?"

The man still hesitated.

"Yes," he said at length. "You been there?"

"No," said Jim, impatiently. "We want to go. Is it open on Sundays?"

"Yes," said the Zulu, after a pause. "Take you?" He looked at them keenly.

"Yes—go ahead," Jim said. They climbed into the rickshaw, and the Zulu jogged off.

He seemed to know his way readily enough. Up one poor street after another he trotted, his slow strides covering a great deal of ground. The locality grew more and more depressing: mean houses gave place to ramshackle cottages, many of them mere huts, separated by tumble-down fences, occasionally interspersed with grimy shops that were little more than stalls. Depressed-looking fowls scratched in the gutters, and mangy curs lay about every doorstep.

"Well, this is about as unpromising an approach to a market as one could imagine," Jim remarked. "I'm glad we didn't try to bring Norah—that kid hates smells."

"Probably he's taking us by short cuts," Wally said; "he's evidently tired, and this unsavoury rabbit-warren may lead out into the market-place. It can't possibly be the usual approach; it's too narrow, and there is no sign of much traffic."

"I expect you're right," Jim answered. "Or else his happy home is in the locality, and he doesn't mean to go past it. I'll have a word to say to him, if he leaves us here."

"You may, but it's doubtful if he'll understand you," Wally grinned. "The conversation of these gentlemen is limited—though I fancy they understand a

good deal more than one would think. Now, what's his game?"

The rickshaw had swung round a corner, and into a yard, through an open gate. A closed house gave no sign of life; across the yard was a stable, and over the half-door a mule poked out a sleepy head. The Zulu put down the shafts and turned to the boys, saying something that was only half intelligible.

"Not can do?" Jim said angrily, catching his drift. "What do you bring us here for, then?" He got out, followed by Wally.

"Short cut," said the man, apologetically. "Can show market—through there." He pointed to a door in the high board fence. "Me bad feet—gone too many trips."

"He looks footsore enough," Wally said, scanning the slouching form. "No good bothering about him, Jim—let's pay him and clear out."

Another Zulu had come out of the stable, in which he appeared to have slept with the mule. The first man shot a short, clicking sentence at him, pointing to his feet.

"Well, I don't know what he expects, but that's all he's going to get," Jim said, handing the sullen Zulu some money. "Now, where's your market?" he added, sharply. "Hurry up!"

"Market close through here, sir," the man answered, more respectfully than he had yet spoken. He led the way to the door in the fence, the boys at his heels, and stood aside for them to pass through.

"Why, it's another yard——" Jim began, turning.

He had no time for more. The Zulu's fist shot out and took him between the eyes, and he staggered through the doorway. At the same instant a violent blow on the back of the head sent Wally headlong on top of his friend. They went down in a heap together, unable to defend themselves. A shower of blows with heavy sticks beat them back as they struggled to rise. Jim tried to shout, but his voice died away helplessly; he flung out his hand, finding only Wally's face, strangely wet. Then he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT CAME OF EXPLORING.

"GOOD morning, Dad." Norah came out upon the wide portico of the hotel; a cool, fresh vision in a white linen frock.

"Good morning, my girl," said her father. There was a line between his brows. "Have you seen the boys?"

"No—aren't they down yet?"

"I don't know where they are," David Linton said. "They don't seem to be in the hotel."

"Oh, they're bathing!" said Norah, with comfortable certainty. "It's such a hot morning—I wanted ever so much to go myself, only I woke so disgracefully late."

"No, they're not bathing. I've been down, and there was no sign of them. I suppose they have gone out somewhere. They might at least get back in time for breakfast."

"They won't be long, you may be sure," Norah answered. "I never saw such hungry boys! Let's go in, Daddy; it's late, and you ought to have your breakfast. The boys will turn up before we are half done."

"Oh, I suppose they're all right!" her father said, leading the way to their table. "They are quite big enough to look after themselves at any rate; if they miss breakfast it's their own look-out."

"Jim won't miss breakfast," said Jim's sister. "What he has may be queer, but he'll have something. I expect they've gone for a tram ride or a rickshaw trip, Daddy, and it has taken longer than they expected; if they find themselves too far from home when they get hungry, they'll buy something."

"I suppose so." Mr. Linton beckoned to a waiter. "Tell the young gentlemen, if you see them, that we're at breakfast."

"Yes, sar," said the waiter, a tall and immaculate Indian, in white clothes and a scarlet sash. He departed, to return presently.

"Young gen'lemen gone out, sar. Very early—before light. Not yet returned."

"It's very annoying," Mr. Linton said, as the waiter withdrew. He laughed a little. "Jim has spoiled me, I suppose; he so rarely does anything eccentric that when he does, I feel injured."

Norah answered his smile.

"Jim's awfully dependable," she said, with the quaint gravity which was wont to make Wally declare that she mistook herself for Jim's aunt. "He'll

stroll in presently, Daddy, looking nice and calm, just as usual. They must have gone out exploring; the time here is so short, and it's their first foreign land, so they want to see all they can."

"Well, we don't waste much time," said Mr. Linton, still unappeased.

"No. But I expect they want to run free a bit. You know boys can't want a girl with them all the time," said Norah, sagely.

"I have not observed," said her father, "that having you with them has made much difference to Jim and Wally's fun in the past."

"They're awfully good about it," Norah answered. "But I know other girls' brothers object; most of them say they can't be bothered with girls. Of course, Jim and I grew up mates, and that makes all the difference; I don't really think he minds. But in a strange place they may want to go exploring, and a girl might be in the way."

"Oh, possibly! All the same, I don't know that I'm very keen on their getting too far off the beaten track, in a place like this—full of all sorts of natives. However, worrying does no good, and I suppose they'll stroll in presently." Mr. Linton applied himself to his breakfast. "This South African fish has a queer name, but it's good, Norah; I'll have some more."

They looked up eagerly as each newcomer entered the dining-room. Breakfast was going on in the lazy, haphazard manner common to all hotels on Sunday. People strolled in at long intervals; mostly brown-faced people from up country, in summer raiment—linen and silk suits, and muslin frocks. Even in November Durban was very hot. But, though they spun out the meal to the greatest possible length, breakfast ended without any sign of the absentees. Mr. Linton went out on the verandah at last, and lit his pipe, while Norah cast fruitless glances up and down the white road, and across the terraces to the beach.

"Well, you say I mustn't worry, but I should like to have your permission to be annoyed!" Mr. Linton said, when the pipe was satisfactorily working. "I want to go out, not to hang round the hotel. And what are we to do about those young rascals?"

"I don't know," Norah answered, doubtfully. "It is funny, isn't it, Dad? I'm perfectly certain they are all right—but it's so unlike Jim." She hesitated. "We can't go and find them—that's certain; and Jim would be wild if we waited for him, and missed anything. I think we'd better go by ourselves."

"So do I," returned her father. "We'll leave word that we'll be in to luncheon, and if they come while we're out they can amuse themselves; they are sure to want a bathe. Run and get your hat, lassie." They went off presently, a rather forlorn looking pair.

It was about that time that Jim, in the darkness of the shed where he had been flung, stirred, and opened his eyes. His head throbbed furiously, and

when he tried to sit up he found himself suddenly glad to lie back again. For a little while he remained still, trying to remember what had happened to him—with vague recollections that seemed to wander between a savage black face and an earthquake. He was not very sure about either.

A rustle in the straw close by startled him—and in a flash he remembered Wally, and forgot his aching bones. An instinct of prudence kept him from speaking. Slowly he raised himself on one arm, and felt in the darkness until he found a face, half-buried in straw. Wally stirred again.

"That you, old man?" he whispered weakly.

"Ss-h," Jim cautioned. "Are you hurt?"

"I—don't know," Wally said, feebly. "I ache a heap—and my head's queer."

Jim set his teeth and managed to sit up. His head swam violently, and for a moment he wrestled with nausea; then he managed to steady himself, and began to feel Wally gently.

"Wish I dared strike a match," he muttered, "but my hand is too shaky—and in this straw. Wal, you've no bones broken, old man, I think."

"I don't think so," Wally answered. "Let's wriggle." He did so, and it evidently hurt him, for Jim heard the swift intake of his breath. "No, I'm all right," he said. "How about you?"

"Oh—battered a bit!" said Jim, to whom memory was returning slowly. "Can I help you up, do you think? Great Cæsar, how this place smells!"

He worked an arm under Wally, and helped him to a sitting position—an effort which nearly lost consciousness for them both. They found the wall near, and leaned back against it thankfully, until giddiness subsided. Jim made further discoveries.

"My watch has gone," he announced. "Nice people! Likewise my money—likewise my coat. How about you?"

"A clean sweep, I think," Wally said, faintly. "I don't seem to have anything but my shirt and trousers."

"That was their game, I expect," Jim said. "Steady, old man, you're slipping—slip this way, and lean against my shoulder. They've taken all they could get, and I expect they've cleared out."

"You don't think they'll have ideas about ransom?" Wally hazarded.

"Not vermin like those—and in a city. No, I'll bet they're making for Zululand or wherever they belong, by this time. Eh, but I was a fool!" said Jim, bitterly. "And I thought I knew how to look after myself!"

Wally groaned in sympathy.

"Well, they fell on us like a cyclone," he said. "I don't seem to remember anything beyond an appalling bang on my head and falling on top of you. The beggars got me from behind."

“Mine began in front—but it was so sudden,” Jim said. “He looked such a sleepy, tired lout—one never dreamed of suspecting danger. Well, it will teach us a bit of sense. The question is, what are we going to do?”

“Do you think we’re locked in?”

“Very probably, but before I see, I’m going to get my muscles in something like working order,” Jim said. “Try moving a bit and rubbing your arms and legs—don’t stand up yet, or your head will swim.”

“It’s got a lump on it the size of a golf-ball,” said Wally, feeling his pate respectfully. “By Jove, I am stiff!”

“My face is as stiff as the rest of me,” Jim answered. “Feels like much dried gore. Well, thank goodness they didn’t break any bones.”

The boys rubbed energetically for a while, a process involving severe pain, since they encountered bruises at every touch. It did them good, however, and after a little time Jim was able to stagger to his feet, and to help Wally up.

“I don’t suppose we could put up much of a fight,” he said. “But we may not have to fight at all—they can’t get any more from us. Let’s see if we’re locked in.”

They felt carefully round the walls of the malodorous building, stumbling in the filthy straw which covered the floor. Jim’s fingers, groping in the darkness, at length discovered a latch; but the door refused to yield. They experimented noiselessly at first and then, made bold by indignation, shook it violently—without result.

“It’s a stable, evidently,” Jim said. “This door’s in two halves, and the top one is the one that is jammed—the lower half is pretty rickety. Well, if any one is about, we’ll get visited—and if we don’t get the door open we’ll certainly smother. Let’s try kicking it together, Wal.”

They kicked, with what strength was left them; and at the third onslaught a panel of the shaky door started outwards, letting in a gush of fresh air and light:

“Hurrah!” said Jim. “We’ll probably have the neighbourhood here in a minute, so we may as well go on kicking. Can you manage it?”

“Rather!” Wally panted. They attacked the next panel with fury. It fell out in a moment, leaving a hole wide enough to crawl through.

“No one in sight,” said Jim, putting out his head. “My word, the air is good. Come on, old man, I’m going to chance it.”

“Take care you don’t get another bang on the head,” Wally warned, watching his chum squeeze through the narrow space, and realising how helpless he would be in case of an attack. It was with immense relief that he saw Jim safely through, and, stooping, watched him scramble to his feet.

“No one in sight,” Jim said. “Everything silent. Can you get through, Wal?”

"Oh, yes!" said Wally, trying to steady his swimming head. He crawled through the hole, finding Jim's arm waiting to aid him to his feet. For a moment they blinked at each other in the strong sunlight. Then, weak and aching as they were, they burst out laughing.

"Great Scott, Jimmy, you do look lovely!" Wally gasped. "Am I like that?"

"I don't know how I look, but I'm ready to swear that you're worse!" Jim answered. "They were certainly thorough, those Zulu gentlemen!"

They had been thorough. The immaculate lads who had strolled out of the hotel in the morning were tattered scarecrows, clad in shirt and trousers only—and those garments torn, and filthy from the straw on which they had been thrown. Nothing whatever of personal property remained to them. They were ghastly pale, their faces streaked with blood which had flowed freely from cuts and wounds, and had mingled with dirt into a remarkable colour scheme. Jim, in addition, possessed a pair of black eyes that could scarcely have been surpassed in richness of hue; while any German duelling student would have envied the cut which seamed Wally's cheek.

"Even a native policeman would arrest us at sight as rogues and vagabonds," Wally said. "Can't we clean up a bit?"

"Don't know," Jim answered. "Let's see."

There was no sign of any occupant in the dingy hovel across the yard. The boys peeped fruitlessly through a shuttered window, tried the door, and found it locked, and could find no trace of either the rickshaw which had brought them there or the mule they had seen in the first stable. It was evident that the Zulus, after securing their booty, had hastily decamped. Further search, however, revealed a tap, dripping in a corner. They drank from it thirstily, and bathed their heads and faces for some time, with the aid of fragments torn from their tattered silk shirts.

"You look as if you had once been respectable," Wally remarked. "At least you would, but for your black eyes. I know I'm hopeless, so you needn't bother to say anything!" He dabbed at his cheek, which washing had induced to bleed again.

"You've improved tremendously," Jim said. "Cold water is certainly not much good for dirt of this degree of grubbiness, but we don't look quite such banditti as we did. How do you feel?"

"Better—only top-heavy and stiff. How about you?"

"Oh, I'm much the same—with a champion head ache; about the first I ever had, I think!" Jim answered. "Do you feel up to walking?"

"I wouldn't choose it for pleasure," said Wally, his old smile sitting oddly on his white face. "But I can manage it all right. What shall we do?"

"I think the only thing is to get back to the hotel," Jim answered. "I thought of going to the ship for fresh clothes, but all our keys are at the hotel. No

policeman would listen to us for a moment, looking like this; we'll be lucky if we don't get run in by the first we meet. It's an abominably long way for you, old man—sure you can manage it?"

"Rather!" Wally said, cheerily. "We'll prop each other up. Come along."

They went out into the street. A few brown children were playing in the dust, and looked at them curiously, and some loutish Kaffir boys of fifteen or sixteen jeered at them from a verandah; but the houses were all shut, to keep out the heat, and they encountered very few passers-by—all natives, who showed little curiosity. The sun blazed fiercely on their bare heads; there was no shade in the street, and already they were again painfully thirsty. Wally staggered frequently from weakness, and was glad of Jim's arm—though he put so little weight upon it that Jim abused him roundly. They made their painful way back towards the city.

"I'd be almost glad to meet a policeman," Jim said, at last. "We'll never walk all that way; you're done now, old chap."

"Not me!" Wally gasped. "Come on."

They turned into a wider thoroughfare. It was nearing noon; Durban was waking up. Along the street, on his way to the principal square of the city, came trotting a very smart rickshaw boy—a vision of scarlet and white, and nodding plumes and towering bullock-horns. Jim looked at him hungrily.

"There's the very fellow we had yesterday," he said. "I suppose he'd howl if we tried to stop him."

He gave an involuntary hail, and the Zulu, amazed at the crisp tone of command, stopped dead, looking at them doubtfully.

"What you want?" he said.

"Your rickshaw," Jim answered. "Hotel King George." He dragged Wally forward.

The Zulu grinned widely.

"Not much!" he said. "Got money?"

"At the hotel—not here."

Something was puzzling the rickshaw "boy." He looked questioningly from one to another of the white-faced lads. They were scarecrows—but he knew enough of the tourists he dragged round Durban to be certain that these belonged to the race that employed him. Jim's disfigured face was full of authority. Wally, beyond any mere speech, leaned against the rickshaw, gripping the rail.

"You been hurt?" the "boy" ventured.

Jim explained curtly. There had been a fight, they had been robbed. They must get to the Hotel King George for clothes and money; moreover, this rickshaw must take them. "We had you yesterday," Jim finished. "From the Point."

Light suddenly flashed into the Zulu's eyes.

"Blue Funnel ship?" he exclaimed.

Jim nodded. "Four of us. Will you take us? We'll give you five shillings."

The Zulu nodded so alarmingly that it seemed certain that his head-dress would fall off.

"Me take you," he said. "Get in." He came to help to get Wally into the seat. Jim climbed in thankfully.

"Go by back streets," he commanded.

So it was that Norah, standing disconsolately on the hotel verandah, saw a strange rickshaw-load approaching—and after a hurried glance, fled to meet it.

"Jim—are you much hurt?"

"I'm all right—Wally's about done," Jim said. "Pay this chap, Norah; we're going in by the back way. You'd better come too, to lend an air of respectability."

Norah ran beside the rickshaw, choking back further questions. In the back yard of the hotel she encountered the manager, and a brief word of explanation brought help from half a dozen quarters.

"That chap has done us a mighty good turn," Jim said, indicating the Zulu. "Give him ten shillings—I promised him five. You tell dad—we've been in a scrimmage, but there's no need to worry—none whatever." A sudden giddiness came over him, and two waiters caught him swiftly and bore him off in Wally's wake. Norah, half-sobbing, heard him feebly informing them that he was never better able to walk.

An hour later the boys held a reception in their room. Hot baths and strong soap had done wonders for them, and the doctor Mr. Linton had insisted on summoning had declared that they had sustained no serious damage. A few strips of sticking-plaster adorned them, and Jim's blackened eyes lent him a curiously sinister aspect.

"I never thought bed could feel so good," Wally declared.

"Bed is good," said Jim, from across the room—"but bath was better. What did that Zulu who brought us home say to you, Norah?"

"He was too overcome by his half-sovereign to say much at all," Norah answered. "And as it was mainly Zulu-talk, I didn't gather a great deal of what he did say." She twinkled. "I think he meant to assure me that you were a great chief—no matter how grubby you looked. And as he has done nothing ever since but parade up and down the road in front of the hotel, I believe he means to attach himself to us permanently."

"Tell him, if you see him, that we'll have him again to-morrow," Jim said. "He's a good chap."

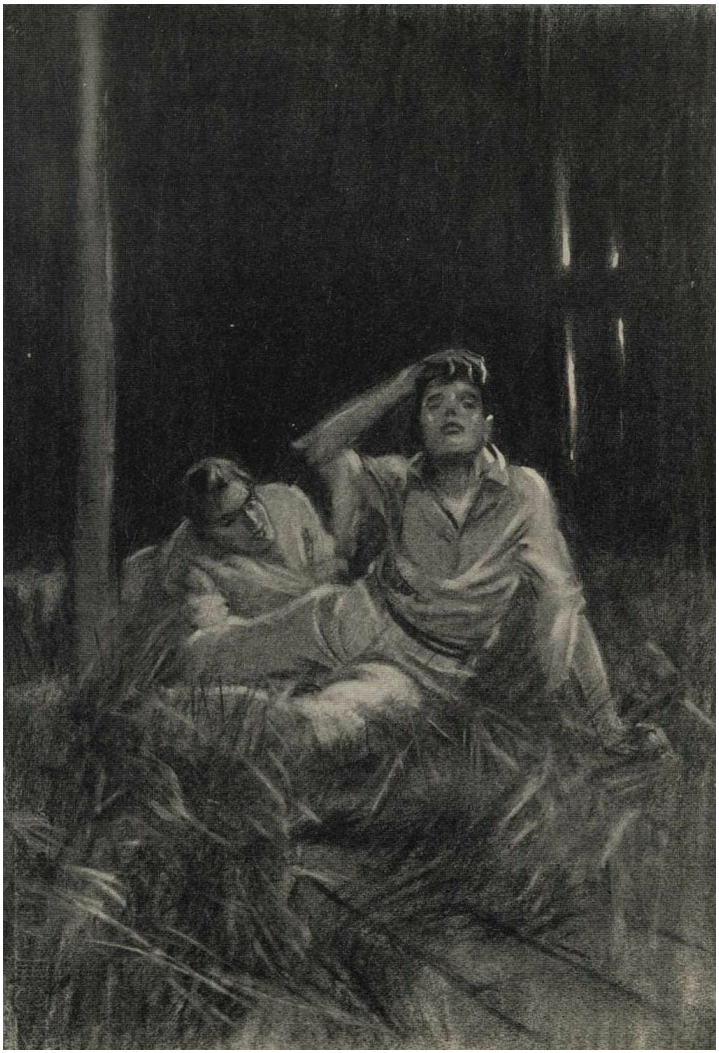
"I don't think you will do much rickshaw driving to-morrow," Mr. Linton said.

“Won’t we!” said the patients, in chorus; and Jim laughed.

“I’m awfully sorry we made such asses of ourselves, and worried you, Dad,” he said. “But it’s bad enough to waste one shore day; we’ll be fit as fiddles to-morrow, and ready for anything—if you don’t mind going about with two battle-scarred objects.”

David Linton smiled a little grimly.

“There’s only one thing I should really mind,” he said—“and that would be to let you out again alone!”



"Jim set his teeth and managed to sit up."

CHAPTER XIV.

GOOD-BYE TO DURBAN.

NORAH and her father left their patients sound asleep, after luncheon, and went out to Umgeni on the top of an electric tram—seeing Kaffirs innumerable, in gala Sunday dress, and, at the end of the long run, the shallow, winding river that seems to be always cutting for itself new channels among its mud-flats. A long bridge crosses it; they stood there, watching the bare-footed native boys who strolled through the river rather than trouble to climb up to the bridge.

"So much more sensible!" said Norah, envying them openly.

They found a hotel with a big garden sloping down to the river, and little tables with basket-chairs scattered about it. Two were in the shade of a big clump of bamboo; and there they had tea, and watched the queer, cosmopolitan crowd that filled the place—travellers, passengers from all the ships lying at the Point, soldiers and sailors, and the youth and beauty of Durban itself, out for the afternoon. The Indian waiters flitted about, busy and noiseless. There were long-legged birds in the garden, walking with ridiculous solemnity near the river-bank; and a big wire-netted house that held innumerable pigeons—exquisitely marked birds, whose cooing filled the air. Plants and flowers grew there which they had never seen; and there was a tree with tiny red-and-black seeds like jewels.

They strolled further up the winding road, and came to Umgeni village itself, where almost every coloured race seemed to nourish together. The deep bush grew on both sides of it, right up to the straggling street. All the people were out in front of their houses.

"Aren't they the nicest children!" Norah uttered.

They were everywhere—cheery babies just able to crawl; mites of two or three in bright scraps of clothing; and bigger children who played their own solemn games without paying much attention to the strangers. One ridiculous person of perhaps four years came strutting down the middle of the street after his mother, his small form framed in a gigantic yellow umbrella, which he held open behind him. The best of all, they found in a patch of grass under a tree—half a dozen mothers with tiny babies, who tumbled about in every direction.

"Could I photograph them, do you think?" Norah asked.

"I don't suppose they would mind," her father replied. "We'll ask them."

To ask was one thing, but to get an answer, another. The Kaffir ladies were rather alarmed, and plainly regarded the small black box Norah held as a very

bad kind of magic. They caught up their babies, and jabbered together, while Norah stood, half-laughing, making no attempt to photograph them without their permission. Help came in the person of a brisk rickshaw "boy," who took in the situation at a glance, and explained to the anxious mothers that the white young lady merely wished to pay them and their children a high compliment in making a picture of them—whereupon the mothers subsided immediately, and held up the fat, brown scraps of humanity, who struggled wildly, like babies all the world over before a camera, while their anxious parents addressed to them the Kaffir equivalent of "Look pleasant, please." The rickshaw "boy" stood by, beaming like a full moon, and uttering words of encouragement. Afterwards the travellers engaged him and his rickshaw—a contingency which he had probably foreseen; and they jogged lazily back to Durban, arriving at the hotel towards evening. Two tall figures, rather sheepish and pale-faced, rose from verandah lounges and came to meet them.

"You bad boys!" Norah exclaimed.

"Do you think you two should be out of bed?" Mr. Linton asked.

"Rather!" Jim answered firmly. "We stayed there until they brought us tea—but they didn't bring half enough food, so we got up and went to find more. We're all right."

"It sounds as though you were!" Norah said, laughing. "How are the bruises?"

"Oh—a bit stiff. Exercise is the best thing for them." The subject was evidently sorer than the bruises, and Jim changed it, demanding an account of their day.

"I've a letter from the captain," Mr. Linton announced, when they all met at breakfast next morning. "The ship is leaving earlier than we thought—we have to be on board at noon."

"Bother!" said his hearers, as one man.

"It's a bore, but there are compensations. The warship we saw at the Point is going ahead of us to Cape Town—and that means no war precautions for a few days."

"Open port-holes!" said Norah, blissfully. "Deck lights—no more stuffy saloon! Lights in one's cabin——!"

"Which you're sure not to need, since you can have it," Wally interpolated.

"I'll have it, anyhow," said Norah, laughing. "It would be almost worth toothache!"

"I thought you would be pleased," her father said. "There is also a letter from the police department, Jim, stating that their inquiries about your friends of yesterday have been fruitless. They have hunted up the house, but, as you suspected, the birds had flown."

"Oh, they're up-country by this time!" Jim said.

"So the police think. They say they may be able to track them by means of the list of stolen property we gave them, but it's hardly likely."

"Well, it doesn't matter much," Jim answered. "I shouldn't be here to identify anything, and unless I could get my hands on the man who hit me I don't know that I'm thirsting to hear of his being caught."

"Only gore would satisfy us!" murmured Wally.

"Just so; failing gore, there's not much satisfaction in hearing that they've put the poor brute in prison—except to teach him to let unsuspecting white people alone in future. I suppose that ought to be done," Jim said, reflectively.

"Decidedly it ought—but the police don't see much chance," said Mr. Linton, folding up the letter. "Has any one any wishes as to occupying the morning?"

"I don't know if you'll think us a little insane," Jim said—"but Wally and I consider that our honour, or what's left of it, is, to a certain extent, at stake. We want to find that native market!"

"My dear boy, haven't you had enough of that particular hunt?" asked his father, looking at his bruised face.

"It's really harmless," Jim explained. "We've been asking the manager; he says the place is quite near the city, and any rickshaw fellow knows it—we can choose one sufficiently ornamental to be respectable this time. And it's an interesting place—he says Norah ought to see it."

"Oh—can I go? Joyful!" said Norah, delightedly.

"Well, if it's really all right, we'll tackle it," said Mr. Linton. "The doctor said it was a place to visit, I remember. We'll send off our luggage to the ship at once, and then we'll have a free hand."

A spectacular figure awaited them in the road when they came out a little later, ready for exploration.

"I told you that gentleman had attached himself to the family," said Norah, laughing. "Look—he's just beaming at you, Jim!"

The Zulu "boy" who had befriended them the day before stood at attention, his broad, black face lit from ear to ear by a smile of welcome. His scarlet and white adornments were spic-and-span, and his headgear even more glorious than before.

"Gen'lemen allright?" he queried, as the boys approached. He cast a keen eye on their still visible signs of battle.

Jim nodded.

"Thanks to you for bringing us home, my friend, we are," he said. "You know the native market?"

The Zulu grinned. "Oh, yes, sar!"

Jim hailed another rickshaw, and the four travellers boarded them and trotted off. Never was there to be seen anything so proud as the boys' Zulu. He

had evidently made up his mind that he belonged to them, and had betrayed some anxiety until certain that they were to be his passengers; but when this point was satisfactorily decided, he gave vent to the pride that was in him, and pranced off like a high-stepping circus horse—throwing out his feet, resplendent in a new coat of white paint, with his head well back, his feathers streaming, and his whole bearing full of vainglory.

"He looks as if he wanted to say 'Bayété!'—whatever that means. And he certainly thinks he owns the road," Wally said, watching the magnificent figure.

"I wish he'd moderate his transports," Jim said, laughing. "He's making every one look at us—and I prefer not to attract undue attention with a pair of black eyes like these—to say nothing of much sticking-plaster. However, I suppose it's no good talking to him in English, and I don't want to hurt the poor chap's feelings—but this sort of thing makes one feel like a circus procession. One only needs a band and an elephant, to be complete!"

The "boy," however, calmed down presently, and merely showed the depth of his emotion by going at such a pace that the other rickshaw steed fell far in the rear, and was justly indignant at his compatriot's unreasonable energy. They raced through the town, and for a time followed the streets through which the boys had strolled the day before; but instead of turning into the poorer quarter, a turn brought them to a wide road where many mule-carts and shabby rickshaws blocked the way. Before a big building was a collection of smarter rickshaws—but their Zulu attendants were nowhere to be seen.

"That the market?" Jim called to his "boy."

The Zulu paused.

"No sar—that eating-house. Gen'lemen like to see it? Market next door."

"We might as well," Jim said. "Wait for us." Mr. Linton and Norah appeared, and they dismounted.

Within the big building Kaffirs squatted on the ground, working with wire at the native bangles that every South African traveller knows. Some were plaiting the wire into sjambok handles, in intricate patterns, laying the bands of wire among strands of raw-hide, or capping the finished handle with an elaborate "Turk's head"; others had piles of bangles on the ground beside them, in all sizes, from those fitted for babies' wrists to the big circlets worn above the knee. The work was wonderfully fine.

"I'm really glad to see those fellows," Mr. Linton observed. "So much 'native' work is really made in Birmingham or Germany nowadays that one never knows what is genuine."

"No," said Wally. "One of my girl cousins was out with a camping-party in the wilds when she was staying in British East Africa, and they came across a few natives who offered curios for sale—rough carvings, bits of ivory, and

things like that. Enid was awfully keen on genuine things, and jumped at the chance—as she said, you don't often find the really untutored savage in these times. One of the things she bought was a big ivory bangle. I think she got it from a woman who was wearing it. Enid was very proud of it. She said it was so real."

"It certainly should be, bought in those circumstances," said Mr. Linton.

"It should. She was very annoyed on the voyage home when one of the officers rather doubted it. So they had a bet—he was to put a match to it, and pay up if nothing occurred. But when he applied the match poor Enid's 'ivory' sputtered and went up in flame—and behold, there was no more bangle!"

"Celluloid!" Jim grinned.

Wally nodded. "Made in Birmingham or some such place, and shipped out by the gross to the untutored savage. Hollow world, isn't it?"

Norah had bought bangles—fresh from the maker's hand—and they turned away. A long table ran down the centre of the building, with rough benches drawn up to it; and here sat numbers of Kaffirs and Zulus, breakfasting. Many were of the rough coolie type, dressed in ordinary clothes; but here and there a blaze of colour marked the smart rickshaw steed—and in one corner where half a dozen were eating together their rainbow head-dresses were like a flower-bed, the brighter because of the dinginess all round them. On a separate table were immense bowls, heaped with steaming masses of curry and rice and weird-appearing stews. A man would come in and sit down, calling impatiently; and in an instant a native waitress would bring him a gigantic helping, supply him with an iron spoon, take his payment—a small copper coin—and rush off to a newcomer.

"You'd live cheaply here," Wally remarked, watching a native boy attack a heap of curry like a miniature mountain.

"Yes, but you wouldn't live long," Norah answered. "Did you ever see such poisonous-looking food? I don't think I want to watch this—it's rather like the zoo at meal times. Let's find the market."

A stream of people going in and out guided them to the bazaar. It was almost entirely Indian, so far as the stalls were concerned, though the people who thronged it were of many nationalities. There was an impression of light and colour and cheerfulness. Indian women in bright draperies went up and down, many carrying tiny wise-eyed babies. There were stalls for the sale of native jewellery—gaudy, tinselled stuff that looked appalling as it hung to tempt the passer-by, but somehow became exactly the right thing when worn by the dark-eyed coloured women. It was mingled, however, with cheap jewellery of the kind that England and Germany turn out by the ton—and this did not fit in anywhere, but stood out among the native wares, blatantly vulgar. Then there were stalls for post-cards, and for strange religious pictures—gaudy

representations of temples and gods and sacred animals; others covered with weird cooked foods, in bowls and dishes, and with cakes and high-coloured sweetmeats—all appearing, to Australian eyes, extremely unpleasant and indigestible, but apparently devoured with amazing appetite by the children who thronged the bazaar. Almost more interesting were the vegetable stalls, since here were piled such growths as the Australians had never heard of; curious green, twisted things like French beans run mad, masses of salad materials, equally novel, and oddly-shaped gourds of different colours.

Nobody took much notice of the Billabong party. Tourists were nothing new, and every one was too busy to trouble over them. Chattering, buying and selling, gossiping and eating, went on incessantly, with no time to spare from the business of the moment; it was evident that the market was the great occasion of the day to most of these cheery, chattering people. It was too crowded to keep together. Wally and Norah strolled on ahead, while Jim and his father paused to look at a stall devoted to the sale of different kinds of dried grain, not one of which they had ever seen before.

"Steady, old lad," said Wally, stooping to pick up a fat black baby whose mother had placed it by the side of the path, giving it a horrible-looking cake to keep it occupied. A stray dog had annexed the cake, and the baby, staggering after it in helpless wrath, had fallen in the midst of the path, and lay there among the hurrying feet, uttering shrill cries.

"I'll get it another," said Norah, swiftly departing. She came back, gingerly carrying the delicacy, which the baby accepted gravely. The mother bore down on them, evidently anxious, but relieved by her offspring's contented face.

"He's all right," Norah told her, smiling—the mother understanding the smile more than the words. Norah put a penny into the little hand not occupied by cake, and they strolled on, turning out of the crowded part towards a less frequented corner where they could see Mr. Linton and Jim.

"What rum beasts babies are!" said Wally, meaning no disrespect. "Some of 'em—the brand one knows—have to be brought up in prams by nurses, all sterilised and disinfected and germ-proof; and others tumble round in the dust among dogs, like that jolly little black imp, and grow up just as strong. I don't understand it; I suppose I'm not meant to."

"It is queer," Norah admitted. "I suppose it's what they're used to."

"But a baby can't be awfully used to anything—except howling!" dissented Wally. "And these kids——"

"Block that man! Block him, Wally!"

Jim's voice rang out over the din of the market as Wally had heard it many a time on the football field at school—and he swung to answer it just as he had learned to obey it there. A big Zulu was charging down the path; he saw Wally's tense face, realised how thick was the crowd beyond him, and turned

up a side alley. Jim put his hand on a long table and vaulted across to cut him off. He braced himself as he landed; then his left hand shot out and took the Zulu neatly on the point of the jaw. The big black crumpled up into a heap, and in a moment Jim and Wally were on top of him.

The market boiled as an ant-heap boils, stirred up by a careless kick. People came running and shouting, blocking every passage; many with threatening faces, looking angrily at the white lads and the struggling Zulu. Then two soldiers in khaki forced a way through the crowd.

"Guess this is where we lend a hand," said one, securing the wrists of the prisoner in a workmanlike grip. "That was just about as neat a hit as ever I seen. I'd like to know who taught you, young feller. Lie still now, will you?" and the Zulu subsided, muttering unpleasant things.

"Get hold of a policeman, will you?" said Jim. "Wally, you go."

"Oh, he's wanted, is he?" said the second soldier, sitting comfortably on the Zulu's legs. "I thought you seemed to know him."

"I ought to," Jim answered. "He gave me this pair of black eyes yesterday."

The soldier whistled.

"No wonder you was anxious for him," he said. "Well, I guess you've paid him back—he won't eat comfortable for a week." Then Wally and two native policemen came back through the chattering throng, and Jim handed the prisoner over to the care of the law.

They made a procession to the police-station, the Zulu maintaining a sullen silence, while a crowd gathered and followed them. Jim's rickshaw "boy," who had evidently learned the whole story from the hotel, was a centre of attraction —he dragged his empty chariot behind Jim, loudly explaining the matter to those about him, and proclaiming his undoubted belief in Jim's chieftainship. The hero of the moment nursed badly-bruised knuckles and looked as unhappy as his prisoner.

At the station matters were swiftly dealt with—law in Durban did not believe in detaining a party of white tourists over a native case. A white-haired old Scotchman, authoritative and kindly, put swift questions.

"Ye canna identify any of y're property, I suppose?"

Jim grinned.

"If you take off his tie you'll find 'Jones & Dawson, Melbourne,' branded on it," he said.

"Eh, but it's so," said the inspector, examining the adornment in question, which the native policemen had swiftly removed from the prisoner's collarless neck. "Wull ye be wantin' it back?"

"I will not," said Jim, hastily. "Give it to him, with my blessing when he comes out—and I hope you won't be hard on him, sir."

"H'm. Ye're a fulish young man," said the inspector, severely. "Just

because ye've got in a bonny wee hit on the jaw, ye're satisfied—but there's law an' order to be kept, an' me to see it's done. D'ye think I want the next pair of eejiotic young Australians laid out in a stable?" Whereat Jim and Wally blushed, and interceded for the prisoner no more.

They signed various legal documents, and at length escaped.

"I don't want him punished, poor wretch," said Jim; "that smite on the jaw made me feel like a Christian lamb. But I suppose it's got to be done."

"Well, I didn't get in at all, so I don't feel half so godly," returned Wally. "I think he's well out of the way, and I only wish we'd caught his mate—the gentleman who attended to my head in the rear."

"My sentiments, entirely," Mr. Linton remarked. "And now we'll get back to the ship. I trust every port isn't going to supply us with as many sensations as Durban!"

CHAPTER XV.

MIST AND MOONLIGHT.

"AS you know, Miss Norah," the captain said gravely, "I discourage early rising. It's a bad thing—leads to chronic attacks of superfluous energy, and embroils passengers with the deck-hands."

"Especially the last!" said Norah, laughing.

"Well—possibly. Deck hands are busy people and passengers are not; therefore passengers should remain peaceably in bed until they won't be in the way. Which remarks are not intended to apply to you, Miss Norah."

"How would they?" Jim laughed. "There's nothing of the Spartan early riser about Norah."

"I'm delighted to hear it," the captain said. "All the same, I'm about to advise you to turn out early to-morrow. We'll be in Cape Town about six in the morning, and you mustn't miss the sunrise over the mountain. It's one of the finest things in the world."

"Oh, I'm glad you told me, captain," Norah said. "I'll tell my steward to call me."

"Yes—don't forget. The harbour is an interesting one altogether; but the mountains are grand, and coming in, the view changes each moment. We shall probably be going out in the dusk, so you must be sure of seeing the entrance."

They had had a quick and uneventful run round the Cape of Good Hope from Durban, missing altogether the dreaded "Agulhas roll" which is the bugbear of the sea-sick. Every one had revelled in the luxury of lit decks and open port-holes, in the security lent by the knowledge that a British cruiser was just ahead of the *Perseus*. To-morrow night the old restrictions would be in full force again—but first there would be Cape Town, and twelve hours ashore. Norah had always had vague longings to see Cape Town; no port on the homeward route interested her half so much as the city nestling at the foot of Table Mountain. She went to bed early, leaving everything in readiness for the morning start—determined to waste nothing of that precious twelve hours.

It was still dark when she awoke, with a start, from a confused dream, in which she had been chased by an apparently infuriated motor, shrieking defiance at her. As she tried to collect her scattered faculties the sound she had heard in her dream came again—a long, hoarse shriek.

"What on earth——?" she queried, sitting up. She switched on her light—it was two o'clock. Voices were heard along the corridor, to be drowned by another evil howl.

"Something's wrong," Norah decided. "It can't be boat-drill for us, 'cause that's two short, sharp whistles. Everything's funny and dim—I believe something has gone wrong with the electric light supply." She jumped, as the long scream came again.

Then she heard her father's voice, quiet and steadying.

"Awake, Norah? Not scared, are you?"

"N-no, I don't think so, Daddy," Norah answered, not quite certain if she were speaking the truth. "Is it the Germans?"

"It's fog, I think," Mr. Linton said, coming in. "My cabin is full of it—and so is yours."

Voices were breaking out everywhere, drowned at regular intervals by the long howl.

"What's the matter?"

"Is it the Germans?"

"We're wrecked, I suppose." This was an elderly lady's voice, in lugubrious certainty.

"It's boat-drill—hurry up!"

"We're signalling for help!"

"Henry—where are my slippers?" And Henry's voice—"I haven't got 'em on, my dear!"

Jim was in Norah's cabin, suddenly.

"Thought you might be scared, kiddie," he said. "But it's only fog, I think. Great Scott! doesn't that siren make a row!"

Then came the voice of the third officer, very bored and patient; and a dozen voices assailing him.

"No—fog only, I assure you. No danger at all. No—there isn't a German within a hundred miles. Merely fog-horn, madam. Yes, it's quite thick. Certainly you can come on deck, if you really like fog; you won't see anything. No, we don't expect to run on any rocks. I should advise you to get back to bed. The fog-horn blows every half-minute."

"But it's waked the baby!" came on a high note of grievance.

"Sorry," said the third officer's bored voice, still polite. "I should recommend the baby to get used to it." They heard his quick footsteps retreating up the corridor.

"Well, there's nothing to stay up for—and isn't it cold!" Jim ejaculated. "I hope to goodness this will have gone before morning; it will be a nuisance if it spoilt the entrance to the harbour, so far as view is concerned."

"Don't speak of such a horrid thing!" said Norah, sleepily, snuggling down among the pillows. "Go back to bed, Daddy dear—you'll get so cold. Thank you both for coming." For a while she stayed awake, while the clamour in the ship died down gradually, and only the slow hooting of the siren was heard. It

was not exactly a soothing lullaby, but nevertheless Norah fell asleep.

Her steward's face peered at her some hours later. He had switched on the light, but the cabin was eerie and dim.

"I didn't like not to call you, miss, as you said," he remarked. "But as far as gettin' up to see the view's concerned, there ain't none. There's nothin' but fog anywhere."

Norah uttered a disgusted exclamation.

"Oh, I did want to see the entrance!"

"Well, there ain't no entrance neither, miss. Captain, he won't risk tryin' to get in—why, you can't see your 'and in front of you. We've just got to lie about until the fog lifts—an' goodness knows when that'll be. If I was you, miss, I'd just go to sleep again till the ushul time to get up—an' if the fog clears before, I'll come an' tell you at once."

"Well, if there's nothing to see, I suppose I had better do that," said Norah, yawning.

"There's much worse than nothin', miss," the steward said, his voice as gloomy as the cabin. He went away, after turning out the light.

"It's absolutely disgusting!" Wally declared when breakfast was over. It had been a queer meal, eaten in a kind of dim half-light; and now they were on deck, wrapped in heavy coats, yet shivering a little. All about them was a dense white wall of mist. It was impossible to see more than a few yards in any direction; people who passed them loomed dimly first, then came out of the wall more clearly, until quite visible, and in a moment were swallowed up again as their footsteps died away. The fog swung in wreaths between them as they talked, whenever a breath of light wind came; but for the most part there was no wind at all, and a heavy stillness seemed to weigh upon everything. At half-minute intervals the hoarse scream of the fog-horn roared out above their heads, in a hideous, discordant howl; and from all around them came similar shrieks, some far off, some so near that at any moment it seemed that the fog might part and show a ship drifting down upon them.

The *Perseus* herself was drifting. Part of the uncanny stillness was due to the absence of the familiar throb of the screw. Inch by inch she slid through the oily water, of which no trace could be seen even by peering over the side. There was nothing but mist. The wet decks were slippery with it; there was no dry corner anywhere. Through it the gigantic blue shape of the funnel loomed dimly, but its top was quite lost; they could not even see the bridge, where a double watch was being kept. The captain had not left it since the first fog-cloud had rolled up out of the sea.

"It isn't safe to speak to an officer," Jim declared. "Poor beggars, they're all on duty; it must be cheery to have responsibility in this sort of weather. I found MacTavish right up in the bow, straining his eyes into the fog, and put a

timid question to him—I wouldn't have wondered if he had snapped my head off, but he was pretty civil. He says there's not the slightest prospect yet of its lifting, unless a wind gets up—and there's no sign of a wind!"

"Well, that is pretty cheery," uttered Wally. "However, it's all experience."

"Confirmed optimists like you ought to be sat on three times a day!" Jim said. "A little of this sort of experience goes a long way—and doesn't make up for missing the sunrise on Table Mountain."

"Never mind—it will give you something to talk of for ever so long," Wally answered. "You can't possibly talk about sunrises to a girl you're dancing with, but you can make awfully good yarns out of a fog like this. Cheer up, Jimmy; you'll be ever so much more interesting in the future!"

"I'm not proposing to do much dancing, or talking either," said Jim, laughing. "So the prospect doesn't console me. At the moment, it would console me more to batter someone—preferably you. Norah, you're cold!"

"I know I am," said Norah, shivering. "This old fog gets into one's very bones. Doesn't it make you homesick now to think of old Billabong, and the sunlight out on the Far Plain!"

"And a bogged bullock, with a note like that fog-horn!" retorted Wally. "It's too cold to stand still, I think—let's walk."

They walked, arm in arm, with Norah between them, finding it necessary to talk loudly to avoid collisions in the fog, as their rubber-soled shoes made no sound on the deck. In the fore part of the ship a few bedraggled sea-birds had floundered into the rigging, and now sat there, crouched and miserable, afraid to set off again into the white horror all round them. A magpie, brought from Australia, which ordinarily lived in the bow and made cheerful remarks to the whole ship, was crouched in a corner of its cage, dismally squawking, while its deadly enemy, a sulphur-crested cockatoo with which it was on most disrespectful terms, had no spirit left to insult it, but drooped on its perch. The ship seemed dead; none of the usual cheery bustle was going on, since all possible tasks were discontinued to leave the crew free to watch. Weary watching it was, straining overside in dread of seeing a dark hull loom out of the fog, knowing that it would then, in all probability, be too late to avert disaster.

A monotonous voice led them to the side of the ship. A sailor was standing on a tiny platform over the rail, secured by a leather band round his body. He leaned well out, heaving the lead with a practised hand, his voice chanting the depth tonelessly—"By the deep—by the mark!" Seen in the mist that clung in beads to his blue guernsey and tarry trousers he seemed unnaturally large—and the dreary call was more depressing than the ceaseless hoot of the fog-horn.

They gave up the deck at last, and went below, where the passengers were gathered in the lounges and smoking-rooms, trying to make the best of the

weary day. The fog was everywhere; it crept through every open doorway and port-hole, and filled cabins and alleyways, so that jocund humourists went along hooting, for fear of being run down. Every electric light was on, as though it were midnight; they gleamed through the hanging mist, globes of dingy yellow. Babies howled dismally—sleepy and heavy, but kept awake by the incessant fog-horn; their mothers, pale and anxious, tried vainly to soothe them. Norah secured her own especial baby, bore him off to her cabin, and tucked him under her grey 'possum rug; and then, to her own immense surprise, fell asleep beside him, and slumbered peacefully until the luncheon gong came into competition with the siren, and the baby woke and demanded nourishment.

There was no sign of the fog lifting. They lunched in silence; conversation was impossible, and the stewards, flitting about in the misty gloom, spoke in sepulchral whispers. No officers were visible; the empty chairs at each table bore mute witness to the urgency of their watch. The doctor made a valiant effort to maintain cheerfulness, and succeeded in dispelling a fraction of the depression in his particular corner. But even the doctor was incapable of spreading himself over an entire saloon, and his efforts to be, as he pathetically said, a sunbeam, were local and not general. Nobody seemed happy, and the meal was finished in half the usual time.

Afterwards, the doctor bore down upon the Billabong party, his face full of determination.

"This won't do," he said. "I shall have all the ladies on board developing nerves. You youngsters must come and help me—get Grantham and West and that long New South Wales fellow, and we'll start some sort of a game in the lounge. The fog is thicker than ever, and the only thing we can do is to make people forget it."

"Right-oh, doctor!" Wally answered. "It would be easier to forget it, if we weren't eating it all the time—but we'll do our best." So they organised an uproarious game that gathered in every one, even to the mothers and the babies; and by working the piano to its utmost, succeeded in supplanting for a time the incessant shriek of fog-horns. Tea found a ship's company considerably cheered, and with more appetite.

"It's wearing, but it pays," said the doctor, cheerfully. "You've all helped me nobly, and next time I have to organise a band of sunbeams, may you all be shining lights in it! There's a vein of pure idiocy in Wally that I appreciate most highly."

"I'm overcome," said Wally, bowing.

"Don't mention it," said the doctor, affably. "True merit ought always to be acknowledged. No, I think you're all dismissed from duty now; the mothers will be thinking of bathing the babies, and most of the others are exhausted—

and small wonder. I'm thinking of going to sleep myself; the noise kept me awake last night."

"Let's go up on deck," Norah said. "I'm tired of being shut up, below—and it's almost as foggy here as anywhere. The ship is full of fog."

On deck the white curtain seemed more impenetrable than ever. Everything was dripping wet, with an unclean clamminess far worse than honest rain. All round them came the wailing of fog-horns from invisible ships; sometimes the sound came from far off, approached gradually, and then went by them in the mist—unseen. Most of the ships were drifting, no faster than the *Perseus*; but evidently some captains had kept the engines going, in the hope of steaming slowly out of the fog.

"Beastly dangerous," John West said. "It would be the easiest thing in the world to pile up a ship on this coast—apart from the chance of collision. It is far too near the shore to take chances. We are not five miles out."

A siren sounded directly ahead: a long, half-heard note at first, and then a quickly-increasing sound; and suddenly the fog-horn of the *Perseus* broke out in a wild, continual clamour, incessant and urgent. Passengers rushed up on deck. The other ship was drawing nearer and nearer; so far as sound could testify, she was directly in a line with the *Perseus*. They heard quick voices on the bridge. From the bow came long shouts of warning.

Norah gripped the rail, feeling her father's arm come round her in the gloom. Jim came up on the other side, watching keenly, his face lined and anxious. Ordinary danger was one thing; this creeping horror, coming relentlessly out of the unseen, was another matter.

Then the white wall of mist wavered and parted slowly, a dark shape loomed high, and almost upon them they saw a great ship. She was so near that they could see the strained faces on her decks. Her fog-horn was answering the *Perseus* in a very frenzy of alarm—and suddenly the *Perseus* was silent, as if realising the uselessness of warning now. On she came, slowly, slowly; it seemed that by no possibility could she avoid crashing into the huge, helpless liner. They were almost touching; people on both ships held their breath, waiting dumbly for the end.

Then the great black bow edged off as if by magic, and the ship slid past them, only a few yards away. Slowly as she had come, her passing was slower yet; it seemed hours that she was beside them, almost touching, with the risk of her stern swinging to crash into the *Perseus*. But no crash came. The fog took her and swallowed her up as mysteriously as she had come.

"Phew-w!" whistled Grantham. "I don't want anything nearer than that!"

Norah was shaking a little. A lady passenger further up the deck was indulging in mild hysterics, to the indignation of the doctor and her husband's deep shame. The fog-horn broke out again in the long monotonous wail, at

half-minute intervals, that had gone on all day.

They sat on deck, wrapped in rugs, watching. No one wanted to go down—bad enough in the open, it was better to be there, and to see as much as could be seen. Now and then a little breeze came, and the wall of mist parted ever so little, blowing away in trails like white chiffon; and once, in one of these moments, they caught a glimpse of a sailing ship, drifting by, with bare, gaunt masts. The fog closed round her again, blotting her out utterly.

Then, towards evening, there came a quick succession of sharp hoots, unlike anything they had heard; and a motor-launch came into view and darted alongside, under the bridge. A man in blue uniform shouted swift questions.

"I'll bring you a tug!" he cried, at last.

They disappeared again, and the delay that followed seemed intolerably long. Then the launch hooted its way back, followed by a bluff shape that resolved itself into a steam-tug. She hung about just ahead. The *Perseus* came slowly to life; the screw throbbed slowly. They began to crawl through the water after the tug. Once she disappeared, running on a little too quickly—and the great liner began to hoot anxiously, like a frightened child crying for its nurse, until the tug came back. So they crawled together through the clinging mist-curtain until dun lights showed ahead, and voices from the shore came to their ears.

"That's the wharf at Cape Town," said the doctor. "You have to take it on trust. Why, the fog is thicker here than out at sea!"

They crept in slowly. Passing a ship already docked, they had a weird impression of her, apparently hanging in the air—a grotesque ghost of a ship, the surrounding mist like the vague halo that sometimes shows round the moon. She was only a dim wraith, her powerful electric lights glimmering like smoky lamps, although they were within biscuit-throw of her. Even when alongside the wharf they could not see the people waiting ashore; voices came up to them clearly, but it was impossible to see to whom they belonged. So, like an exceedingly helpless invalid, the *Perseus* came into port.

"Eight o'clock," said Mr. Linton, consulting his watch. "H'm; we've sat in that old fog for eighteen solid hours."

"Isn't it a relief not to hear the fog-horns?" Norah said. "Daddy, are we going ashore?"

"I don't know," hesitated her father. "It hardly seems worth while to-night."

Jim, who had been away, returned quickly.

"I've seen the second officer," he said. "It's awfully unsatisfactory. Orders are to leave here at daylight, or as near it as can be managed, and they're going to work cargo all night. Poor beggars! they've all been on duty for eighteen hours at least—and the captain has never been off the bridge during the time."

"Poor fellows!" Norah said. "I think, too, it's poor us! Then we won't see Cape Town at all?"

"MacTavish advises us to go ashore," Jim answered. "He says that the fog may not be so bad in the city itself—it's some distance away—and that if we take the mountain tram ride we'll probably get right above it. In any case, the ship will be unbearably noisy, as they have to handle cargo."

"Then we may as well go," declared Mr. Linton; and Norah fled delightedly to get ready.

They stumbled through the fog across confused yards and round dim buildings, and presently found a train waiting in a casual fashion by a platform which appeared to be part of the street. They climbed in, and the train woke up hastily and decided to go, as if encouraged by their arrival. Its progress, however, was less hasty than its departure. The fog impeded it, and it crept towards the city with a shrieking of the engine, a grinding of brakes, and a rattling of the carriages, which made the *Perseus* seem luxuriously peaceful by comparison.

"We'll drive back," said Mr. Linton tersely.

The fog was much lighter in the town itself. Passers-by in the street were heard grumbling at it—but to the mist-sodden seafarers who had wallowed in its heart for eighteen hours, it seemed only an echo of a fog. The streets were bright, well-lit, and crowded. Natives were not so frequent as in Durban, and there was a general air of prosperity. Wally exhibited signs of alarm at the spectacle of more than one top-hat.

"I suppose we'll have to get used to them in England," he said, dismally. "I feel in my bones, Jim, that I'll see you in one yet!"

"Me!" said Jim. "I'll have to turn undertaker first!"

A friendly policeman directed them to their tram, and soon they were rattling along quiet suburban streets, where the fog was thicker than in the city —or where there were fewer electric lights to dispel its gloom. The suburbs, however, did not last long; they emerged from brick and mortar regions into open bush country, and began to climb into what seemed the heart of the mountains.

They climbed from mist into light. As the tram wormed its way higher and higher, they left the fog below them—looking back, they could see it lying in a dense bank, blotting out the city. But the travellers came out above it, and into the pure radiance of a perfect moon, that sailed in a clear sky of deep blue, dotted with innumerable stars. The moon was full, and her light, in the clear mountain air, was almost dazzling. It showed them the sinuous tramway track, curving away into the heart of the bush, which stretched on either side, dark and fragrant; it lit up deep glens and clefts, and high peaks that towered overhead—the "Twelve Apostles," Signal Hill, the Lion's Head—all black and

rugged against the perfect blue of the sky.

Sometimes a wind blew up strongly as they climbed, bringing with it masses of fog from below, which surged lovingly round the tall peaks, rested upon them, and often drew a soft veil over them, hiding them altogether; and then it surged again, and was tossed up in masses like breaking waves, until it fled altogether, dropping back into the valleys, and leaving the peaks clear. The bush on either side grew more and more dense, and mingled with the rugged crags into a scene of extraordinary wildness. It was impossible to imagine that they were near a great city—not in the heart of the Africa that held "King Solomon's Mines." Were not these, indeed, the "Mountains of the Moon"?

Nobody spoke much, for, indeed, the wonder of the journey took away speech, even from the boys. But just as they were turning back towards civilisation a thick veil of mist hovered over the edge of Table Mountain, standing clear-cut against the blue and silver sky—and then settled upon it and draped it, hanging in uneven folds of purest white.

"There!" said David Linton. "You've seen the famous 'Table-cloth' come down on Table Mountain!"

Norah leaned against him, putting her hand in his.

They ran down to the city—found a restaurant where coffee was still obtainable, and then a motor that hurried them smoothly back to the ship. The fog was still heavy at the wharf. The *Perseus* was noisy with the clamour of cargo-machinery and shouting men, and the decks hummed with hawkers, chaffering over ostrich feathers and native karosses and curios. There was little sleep for anyone on board.

Very early next morning they were off. The fog hung densely over the city. The tug took them out through the dim harbour, and beyond to the open sea—and about twenty miles out they suddenly ran out of the fog-belt into sunlight, and blue sea and sky, all sparkling to greet them.

The captain, heavy-eyed after his long vigil, paused beside Norah's deck-chair.

"Well, Miss Norah—you evidently weren't meant to see the beauties of Cape Town!"

"I don't know," said Norah, soberly. "I think I had the best view of all. And it was worth the fog!"

CHAPTER XVI.

WAR!

THE passengers of the good ship *Perseus* were holding what they bravely called a gymkhana. Their numbers had been slightly reinforced in South Africa; some people had left the ship, but those who had joined had brought the total to nearly forty. The newcomers included two or three cheerful girls, and some energetic young Englishmen, who declared frankly that they found the ship far too quiet, and entered with vigour in the process of waking things up. They organised dances in the moonlight, to the strains of the captain's gramophone; concerts, at which most people performed extremely badly, amidst the enthusiastic plaudits of the audience; and finally a sports committee, which drew up an ambitious programme of deck-game competitions, to culminate in a "special-event" day. No one was allowed to stand out. The quiet ones grumbled and fled to the sanctity of the boat-deck—where no games were permitted—in the intervals of making themselves look more or less foolish at deck billiards or bull-board. The younger members grew enthusiastic by force of example, and things went merrily enough until the day of the final display.

The officers—especially the captain and the doctor—looked with approval on the new activity. At all times the journey up the West Coast of Africa is dull and long. No ports are touched at between Cape Town and Las Palmas; and it was quite possible that even the latter would be forbidden the *Perseus* by wireless orders by the time she arrived at the Canary Islands, since German ships were known to be active in the neighbourhood. The long and dreary stretch included the crossing of the Equator, and a spell of tropical heat which, if not so bad as the Red Sea, was apt to be sufficiently trying under ordinary circumstances, but ten times more so when complicated by the lack of fresh air entailed by war precautions. Therefore the Captain, keeping a silent watch on his passengers' nerves, and the doctor, directing his guardianship more particularly to their livers, smiled on the games, and incited them to antics yet more enlivening.

War seemed very far away. The first few days out from Cape Town had been hard to bear in their complete isolation from news—especially as Cape Town had provided an assortment of rumours, principally unconfirmed, which gave unlimited food for tantalising speculation. But gradually war talk slackened for lack of any food, and people agreed that it was really more practical to be as busy as possible, and wait as patiently as might be for definite news at Las Palmas. What risk there was, was accepted as part of the

general routine; to speculate on it was useless, to worry about it as practical as worrying over a possible earthquake or cyclone. Any smoke on the horizon might be a German man-of-war; it might also be a peaceful British tramp steamer, jogging down to Australia. But they were far off their course, and scarcely a sign of a ship had been seen since leaving Africa—two or three dark smoke smudges many miles off, a timber ship which went close by them, and once a collier, with a couple of lighters in tow: useful black slaves, the captain said, waiting to coal British cruisers. All the coast was well patrolled by the Allies' ships; they kept out of sight, but sometimes the wireless operator, listening at his own silent instrument, heard their code signals, comfortably close at hand.

The gymkhana was more remarkable for energy than for any special skill. It drew a crowded house, most of the audience being required from time to time as performers—a circumstance that is apt to restrain criticism, since critics can be really untrammelled only when pleasantly certain of not having to face the limelight themselves. There had been potato-races and obstacle-races; they had chalked the pig's eye—a competition won gloriously by Mr. Linton, who had at least succeeded in placing the eye in the porker's snout, whereas no other blindfolded competitor had gone nearer than his hind leg. Gentlemen in sacks had run, and tripped, and fallen, and writhed helplessly, amid unfeeling laughter; ladies had driven blindfolded gentlemen between zig-zag rows of bottles, with the customary results to the bottles; other gentlemen, greatly daring, had raced for parcels of feminine attire, and, donning it in a manner highly unscientific and interesting, had held it about them miserably, and fled for home. There had been races in pairs, wherein ladies had to tie their partners' neckties and light their cigarettes; blindfolded fighting; egg-and-spoon scurries—in short, all the paraphernalia of what the natives of India call a "pagal" gymkhana—pronouncing the adjective "poggle" and signifying by it a revel of much buffoonery.

It was nearing tea-time when the competitors took their places for the last event, which the doctor, much overheated by his exertions as umpire, called a concession to the fine arts. Music was its basis, and it was run in pairs—the lady sitting meekly on a camp-stool while her partner raced to her, and whistled in her ear a tune which it was her part to recognise. This done, she wrote down the name and handed the document to the whistler, who turned and raced back with it. It was a competition in which musical ability was less likely to score than an ample supply of breath and fleetness of foot.

Norah and Wally were paired together, their most dangerous opponents being Mr. Grantham and a cheery Cape Town damsel whose acquaintance with rag-time airs was little short of the black art. Jim and his partner had survived one heat, but had gone down in the second—owing to the lady's insisting that

"Pop Goes the Weasel" was "God Save the King." Jim had liked his partner, and his faith in human nature was shaken. He exhorted Norah to "show more sense," and took his place by the rail to cheer her and Wally on to great deeds.

There were three couples, their male halves being somewhat equally matched in speed. Norah braced herself to her task as they tore down the deck to the waiting ladies on the camp-stools—feeling in her heart that she would much rather race than wait. There was too much responsibility about the feminine part of the business—since no man would ever admit that he had failed to whistle correctly. The flying figures arrived, pell-mell—she lent an anxious ear to Wally's musical efforts, thankfully recognised "Tit Willow," and saw him turn to race away, at the same moment that Grantham received his document and started home.

"What tune did you hear?" she asked Edith Agnew, the Cape Town girl.

"Oh, an easy one—'Tipperary.' But isn't it hard to hear!—they puff and pant, and every one laughs, and the sea is noisy—and altogether it's enough to make Wagner sound like a musical comedy! And they look so funny I can only laugh, instead of writing. Look—it's a dead heat, I believe!"

It was—Grantham and Wally breasted the tape together, and returned presently, somewhat crestfallen.

"We're awfully puffed, but it's the last thing on the programme—we might as well run it off," Grantham declared. "You don't mind, Wally?"

"Not a bit—my cheerful lay is naturally so unintelligible that a little puffing can't hurt it much," Wally laughed. "Come on—ready, Norah?"

They went back to the starting-point and received the umpire's instructions; then came flying down the deck. Norah struggled hard to recognise a tune that sounded like no melody she had ever heard, partly because it would persist in mingling with the one which Grantham was whistling desperately to Miss Agnew. Wally came to the end of the verse, and began again, breathlessly. Light dawned on Norah in a flash.

"Oh—I am stupid!" she uttered, grasping her pencil and scribbling "Bonnie Dundee" wildly. A half-second earlier Miss Agnew gave vent to a shriek of intelligence, and wielded a distraught pencil. It was almost a neck-and-neck race—but Grantham was a nose ahead.

"You've won!" said Norah, laughing. "Well done!" They shook hands cheerfully; to stare in surprise, a moment later, when the doctor picked up his megaphone and announced in stentorian tones that the winners were Miss Linton and Mr. Meadows.

"But how?" queried Norah. All the spectators had left their places—they were the centre of a laughing group. Wally arrived, triumphant, and pumped her hand anew.

"That was my telegraphic partner!" laughed Grantham, in mock wrath. "I

whistled ‘Rule Britannia’ like a nightingale, and all she wrote was this.” He held out a crumpled scrap of paper with “Brit” inscribed on it in hieroglyphic letters. “Naturally, the umpire wouldn’t accept it—so they disqualified me.”

“I’m awfully sorry!” Miss Agnew laughed. “I was overcome—and you whistled so very badly—and I was sure Wally meant to start.” She tilted a pretty nose. “I’m sure ‘Brit’ is good enough for that old tune, anyway.”

Jim Linton swung round suddenly.

“Is that the wireless?”

From overhead, as every merry voice hushed to silence, broke out the crisp, familiar crackle—the wireless, spitting its message over the sea. No one moved for a moment. Then came another sound—a long, heavy “Boom-m!” that ran echoing round the horizon. Women screamed, and ran for their babies. Men looked at each other dumbly. The quick spitting of the wireless went on—a tiny sound, following the crashing “Boom,” but even more full of meaning.

“Boom-m-m!” Another heavy crash; and the spell that had fallen on the laughing group of passengers broke suddenly, and there was a stampede round to the starboard side of the ship. Norah, running, found Jim’s hand on her shoulder.

“Steady, kiddie—keep back till we know what it is.”

“I can’t, Jim!”

“Yes, you can—keep Dad back. Wally and I will find out.”

“Boom-m-m! Boom-m-m! Boom-m-m!”

Ahead of the *Perseus* something struck the water heavily, and almost simultaneously great splashes like waterspouts shot up a ship’s length away. Turning the corner of the deck, carried along by the crowd, Norah saw a grey ship lying not far off, so close that she could see the evil mouths of the guns that looked out from her side. Flame and smoke sprang from them as she stopped, breathless. Again the long crash echoed, and water shot into the air from three great splashes near the big liner.

“Good heavens—they’re shelling us!” a man exclaimed.

The passengers huddled together like frightened sheep, uncertain what to do. There had been no signal for boat-drill, and no officer was visible, except upon the bridge. The crackling of the wireless had stopped—and suddenly they saw the Marconi operator spring up the bridge-ladder.

The doctor took swift command.

“Every one muster on the port side!” he shouted. “No need to risk flying splinters here!”

He hustled the women before him, back to the side from which they had come. A few children were crying pitifully; but there was no disorder, and the women obeyed quietly, those who had no children turning to help the mothers.

Stewards appeared, and the doctor sent them through the ship to collect stragglers; the stewardesses came up and took their places quietly.

From the bridge, the second officer came hurrying down. He joined the doctor.

"There's no danger," he said, so that every one could hear. "They put those shells across our bows to stop us using the wireless—but Grey got a certain amount away first. Then they signalled that they'd sink us if we sent any more; so naturally, we didn't."

"What happens now?"

"Their orders are, to follow them at full speed. I don't know what they mean to do—but the Captain says that every one is to prepare to leave the ship. It may or may not be a case of taking to the boats; they are being got ready now. Not much luggage can be taken, but every one must bring all available rugs and wraps; the nights are cold. Be ready to obey the boat-drill signal."

Mr. Linton's party had prepared for such emergency early in the voyage; it was only a few minutes before they were ready, suit-cases locked and wraps rolled up. Jim came to carry up Norah's belongings to the deck. She cast a wistful look round the cabin. It had grown very homelike, and the familiar photographs of Billabong and Bosun and her school chums looked curiously out of place and forlorn amidst this sudden realisation of war. She shut the door upon them with a little sigh.

On deck everything was as usual, save that sailors were working busily at the boats, provisioning them, and getting them in readiness to swing out from the davits. The horizon was empty of ships; only ahead of them steamed the grey German warship, her smoke making dark plumes across the sky. The *Perseus* followed meekly. Norah could see the captain on the bridge—and a great throb of pity for him surged up within her.

"He's so responsible!" she said. "And he has such a lovely ship. It must be dreadful to think of losing her."

She looked up and down the long lines of the deck; at the towering mass of the funnel overhead. It seemed incredible that so great a ship was presently to be sunk; as easily might one believe that any splendid cathedral could disappear suddenly into the ground. For weeks they had lived on the *Perseus*, until she had grown like a second home to them, as fixed and stable a thing as any hotel. Now she was doomed; they would fire shells or torpedoes at her, and she would suddenly vanish, never to be heard of again. The blue sea would ripple gaily over the place where she lay—the sea on which she had ridden in splendour. It was too horrible to believe.

Norah looked up at the bridge again, and saw Captain Garth's set face. He was gazing downwards at his ship. When his eyes met hers he smiled and waved his hand slightly, and though Norah greatly despised tears, she felt a hot

lump in her throat and turned away to the rail, blinking very hard. If it were dreadful for her to think of the great "crack" liner going down, what must it be for the man whose pride and responsibility she was?

They stood in a little knot on the deck, watching. Both ships were going at full speed; but presently a line of flags fluttered out on the German ship, they heard the sound of the engine-room telegraph ringing from the bridge, and the throbbing of the machinery of the *Perseus* stopped suddenly. The German turned, steaming down upon them. A little way off, the warship hove to and lowered a boat, containing two officers as well as the crew. The *Perseus* swung out a gangway to meet it.

The boat shot across the narrow strip of sea intervening between the two vessels. The crew were stolid men, with heavy faces; they paid no attention to the jeers or the questions of the crew of the *Perseus* as they rocked on the lazy swell beside her. Their officers sprang quickly up the gangway, keen-looking men, very trim and alert. They cast a quick glance over the passengers, and disappeared up the bridge ladder.

"Overhauling the ship's papers," the doctor said.

"Well, they can't sink us while these men are on board!" remarked an old lady, comfortably. She took out her knitting—a khaki muffler—and began to work. "I do so like the German method of knitting—and now I feel it my duty to use the English fashion. It's so annoying!" she confided to Norah. Her needles clicked busily.

Presently the two German officers came down the ladder, followed by Captain Garth. They went to the Marconi-room, where the young sentry stood his ground for a moment, ludicrously undecided, changing to immense relief as the captain waved him aside with a curt nod. There came sounds of altercation in the Marconi-room—and the young operator, Grey, came out with a thunderous face and joined the passengers.

"Brutes!" he said, explosively. "They've dismantled the apparatus and kicked me out—one of the great beasts threatened me with a revolver. Wish I'd had one myself!"

"A jolly good thing you hadn't, young man, if that's how you feel about it!" remarked the doctor.

There was a wretched feeling of helplessness over every one. To make short work of the two strange men would have been so easy; to think of doing it so futile, with the grey warship lying near, her guns trained on the *Perseus*. They waited as patiently as they might until the officers reappeared; and presently a message came to them to muster on the boat deck.

They faced the Germans somewhat defiantly, the most placid of the company being the old lady with the muffler, who knitted serenely, after casting one glance of withering comprehensiveness at their captors. The

Germans held the passenger-list, and ran over it quickly. They spoke English without difficulty, and with scarcely any accent.

"There is one name not present," the senior said; "Henry Smith, booked for London. Where is he?"

"In his cabin," Captain Garth answered curtly,

"Is he ill?"

"No. He is a prisoner."

"So?" said the German, his eye lighting with interest. "You will have him brought here." He talked to his companion in their own language while the captain gave the necessary orders.

There was a little buzz among the passengers. Many of them had not heard of Mr. Smith; those who had done so had acquired a vague idea that he had left the ship at Durban. Now, as he came up the deck between two stewards, every one craned forward to see him. He was pale and rather thin, and the glance he cast upon Jim and Wally was scarcely one of affection. Then he broke into a wide smile at the sight of the familiar uniform, and uttered a quick German greeting.

The two officers showed some astonishment, which was merged in sympathetic interest as Mr. Smith uttered floods of Teutonic eloquence. Once they glanced keenly at the two boys—and Jim felt a thrill of thankfulness that Norah's part in the discovery of the spy had not been revealed to Mr. Smith, who had evidently devoted his leisure in his cabin to the solace of bearing malice. Finally the senior officer turned to Captain Garth.

"Herr Schmidt will return with us," he said. "Later, we shall require as prisoners these two lads, the officer Dixon, and those of the passengers who are military officers. Meanwhile you will have boats and passengers ready, and prepare to leave the ship at daylight, on receipt of further signals. Until then you will follow us. You will show no lights whatever, and should you attempt to signal, we will sink you without further notice. We will now inspect the crew—the passengers are dismissed."

David Linton stepped forward.

"You cannot mean to take my son and his friend prisoners, sir," he said. "They are only boys."

"Only boys!" said the German, curtly. "Boys of their age and physique are with the colours in our army to-day. But for their attack on Herr Schmidt——"

Mr. Smith shot a rapid sentence at his countrymen. The officer laughed unpleasantly.

"So?—going home to the army, are they? They will certainly be better out of the way, then. That will do, sir—you will only earn them increased severity." And Mr. Linton, certain in his angry bewilderment of only one thing—that he had made matters worse—found himself dismissed, with a finality

that forbade another word.

On the lower deck the Billabong quartet faced each other, at first dumbly.

"Cheer up," Jim said, at last, with an effort. "It's hard luck, of course, but they aren't likely to do anything beyond imprisoning us. Bother old Smith!"

"I wish to goodness we'd left him alone!" said Norah, miserably.

"No, you don't—and we don't," was Jim's sturdy answer. "I'll always be glad we stopped his little game—at any rate we'll have had that little scrap of the war! And we may escape—you never can tell—and come careering over to London to find you. It will be all experience, as you used to say!"

Norah shivered. She had never thought that the "experience" of which they used to talk so light-heartedly would mean this.

"I wouldn't mind so much, to know you were really in Germany," Mr. Linton said. "But to be on that abominable ship——!" He shot an angry, anxious glance at the grey cruiser. Too well he knew her destiny—to prowl the sea, a pirate in all but name, harassing British shipping until she herself was sunk. There would be no getting back to Germany for her—and no consideration for British prisoners on board of her when the inevitable end came. He looked at the two boyish faces, his heart full of blank despair.

Wally glanced over the rail. The German boat was returning to the warship. Mr. Smith sat in the stern with the two officers—a podgy embodiment of triumph.

"Well, the laugh may be on our side," he said, cheerfully. "Anyhow, we needn't pull long faces over it; I'm hoping for another chance to get even with old Smithy. Don't you worry, sir—I'll look after little Jimmy for you!"

Jim grinned down on him affectionately. But to David Linton came memories of Edward Meadows' anxious face—of his last request, to look after the little brother who was "such a kid."

"I'll work every means in my power to get you both back," he said, huskily. "Meanwhile, I can give you plenty of money; and I know you will both try to keep on good terms with them; you'll be better treated if you do. The German sailors do seem disposed to behave as decently as possible."

"There are other people a long way worse off than we are," Jim said. "Dixon's married, I know; he has a wife and kiddie in Glasgow. And Major Edwards and Captain Field have got to leave their wives on the *Perseus*—my aunt, isn't it rough on poor little Mrs. Field, with that troublesome baby!"

Norah jumped.

"That's my pet baby!" she said. "I'll go and see if I can take him for a while."

She fled to the Fields' cabin. Captain Field, a tall, delicate man with quiet ways that Norah liked, was sitting on the couch, his arm round his wife. The baby was howling dismally, as if he understood. Mrs. Field, white and tearless,

was trying vainly to rock him to sleep.

"I'll take him, Mrs. Field," Norah said breathlessly. "He'll be quite all right—don't you worry."

Mrs. Field protested feebly.

"You want to be with your boys yourself," she said. "He will go to sleep presently."

"He'll be much happier on deck," Norah said. She grasped the baby's outdoor attire in one hand, tucked him under the other arm, and fled. The boys and her father had established themselves in a corner of the deck-lounge; and there the baby sat on a table and played with Jim's keys, and became extraordinarily cheerful and contented. Somehow, he helped them all.

"The nicest yearling I ever saw!" said Jim, when at last it grew dusk. He rose, giving the baby one finger, on which he fastened with interest, evidently regarding it as edible. "No, you don't, young man; I've got to go and put my things together; it's time we did it, Wal. You'll come, too, dad?"

David Linton nodded.

"I'll go and tub the baby," Norah said.

She bathed him in one of the big bathrooms, to his great amazement and delight; and then, wrapping him in a big, soft bath-towel until he looked like a hilarious chrysalis, she took him back to his mother. Mrs. Field looked better when she opened the door to receive the sweet-smelling bundle.

"You've bathed him?—oh, Norah, you dear!"

"He was so good," said Norah. "Of course, he hasn't his nightie on, Mrs. Field."

"I must dress him altogether," the poor little wife said. "You know we have to take to the boats at daylight."

"Yes, of course," Norah said. "Oh, and Dad said I was to tell you, Captain Field, that he has made arrangements for Mrs. Field and Tommy to come in our boat, in—in the boys' place; and they will be in his special charge—and Tommy is mine. So you mustn't worry."

"Thanks," said Captain Field; and could say no more. He put out his, hand and shook Norah's very hard.

Dinner was served as usual, and people tried to eat. The captain came in late, and made a little speech between the courses. He was immensely sorry for them all, he told them; it was the fortune of war, and there was nothing to be said. Everything possible would be done for their care and safety, and he told them that he did not doubt that they would aid him in any measures he could take. Breakfast would be served half an hour before daylight; they would be called in time. He urged them all to go to bed early and try to get a good night's rest. The German ship had just signalled renewed warnings against any lights showing—he wished them to remember that they were completely in the

power of an enemy who would sink them without hesitation if orders were disobeyed. He thanked them for their calm behaviour in the afternoon and, in advance, for the equal calmness he knew he might expect in the morning. "We're not a fighting crowd, but we don't show the white feather!" finished the captain, abruptly. He gave a jerky little bow and left the saloon.

"Poor dear young man!" said the old lady who knitted, wiping her eyes.

There was very little sleep on board the *Perseus* that night. People talked together in little groups. All luggage was already stowed in the boats, and nothing remained to be done. In a corner of the deck the Billabong family stayed, not talking very much, since there seemed so little to say, but finding some comfort in nearness to each other. Wally had written letters to his brothers and given them into Mr. Linton's keeping.

"Norah ought to turn in," Jim said, at length. "It's all very well for us, for we'll be in some sort of comfort on the German ship. But it makes me sick to think of you two—in an open boat. You ought to get all the sleep you can."

"Oh, we shall be all right," his father said. "It's such calm weather—and we are no great distance from Teneriffe. We can soon get into the track of ships, and the chances are that we shall not have to spend a night in the open."

"And if we do, it won't hurt us," Norah said. "Don't you bother about us, Jimmy."

"Well, go to bed, anyhow," the boy said. "You're tired as it is. You may as well feel fit when you leave in the morning." So Norah went off obediently; and soon Wally followed her example, leaving Mr. Linton and his son to pace the deck together for hours—in silence, most of the time. The ship's bells had been forbidden, and there was nothing to mark the passing of the night. The *Perseus* cut through the dark water, following her captor, whose grey shape loomed near. Their heavy thoughts went ahead, picturing the parting that must come with the dawn.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT THE MORNING BROUGHT.

DARKNESS still hung over the sea when the little company on the *Perseus* met at breakfast. Most of them were heavy-eyed and pale; but they made a brave effort at cheerfulness and tried to eat—never had a meal seemed so unreal and horrible. It was quickly over, and they trooped on deck.

Dawn was breaking. The German ship, no longer ahead, but a little to the starboard, seemed like a grim watch-dog. No signals had come from her as yet, and the *Perseus* was still under orders to go at full speed. No one knew where they were heading—their course had been peremptorily changed, and the passengers could form no idea of direction. They were like sheep driven in unfamiliar ways; over them all the sense of utter helplessness.

The grey light, creeping over the sea, showed them watching in groups—with all available wraps on, and rugs in readiness. In a corner Mrs. Field sat, one hand in her husband's. He was holding their baby, his cheek resting against the soft little face. Major Edwards and his wife walked up and down a lonely deck-space, not speaking.

An officer made a tour of the ship presently, to see that no passengers were absent, and that all possible preparations had been made. He knew nothing, he said; they had kept by the German ship all night. Now they merely awaited the order to take to the boats; the enemy's boat would, of course, come over to secure the prisoners, and probably to sink the ship by means of explosives placed in her hold, and setting her on fire. "Cheaper than torpedoes," said the officer, "and less noisy. They're shocking bad shots, too, on those armed merchantmen; and it would take a heap of shells to sink the old ship, because of her water-tight compartments. Much easier to blow her up from within."

"Wretches!" said the old lady who knitted. She was still busy at her khaki muffler.

"It's war," said the young officer, hurrying off. On the lower deck the stewards and crew were mustered, awaiting inspection. After answering to their names they took their usual boat-stations, without the ordinary signal. The chief cook was cheery.

"No luncheon to cook!" quoth he, pleasantly. "And no need to abuse any one for not having cleared up properly after breakfast! Well, I've always heard that every dog gets a holiday one day in his life; it's an ill wind that blows nowhere!" He rallied the butcher on his downcast mien.

"Think of all the good meat that's going to the bottom!" said the butcher,

gloomily.

"Wot I think is, that I won't have to 'andle any of it," said the gay cook. "Don't you never get fed-up with the very thought of meat, butcher? Sometimes I dreams of it all night!"

"Ijjit!" said the butcher. He withdrew himself, and sat on the edge of a boat, wrapped in melancholy.

Slowly, faint streaks of pink showed in the eastern sky, and a pale flush crept upwards. The sun came out of the sea, as if reluctantly, unwilling to bring such a bitter morning.

"They'll stop us soon, now," Jim said. "Sure you've got all your wraps, Norah?" He had asked the question three times already, but Norah smiled up at him.

"Yes—and my nice old 'possum-rug," she said. "Won't it be a comfort in the boat, Jim?"

"It ought to help you to get a sleep," Jim said. "Air-cushions packed? You'll have to get Grantham to blow them up for you, since I won't be there; he's in your boat."

"I can do them, thanks, Jim," said Norah quickly. No one else should touch the cushions he had given her.

"Old duffer!" said Jim, very low—understanding well. They smiled at each other.

"I wish they'd end it," Major Edwards was saying to his wife. "This waiting is worse than the actual saying good-bye!"

"I wonder why they don't come," she answered. "They only wanted daylight, didn't they?

"Yes—and the sooner the boats get away, the better, I should imagine," he said. They resumed their hard walk, up and down—up and down.

Overhead, on the bridge, there seemed a mild stir. The captain could be seen, watching the German ship through his glasses. Then he directed them to another point of the horizon, astern. Presently he disappeared, returning almost immediately with a telescope.

John West came round a corner at full speed.

"Smoke astern!"

"What is it?"

"I don't know—another catch for the enemy, very likely. What luck for her if she gets two liners in one day!"

Everybody rushed to see; and made but little of the smudge of smoke, far on the horizon. They came back to watch the enemy. Only the Fields had not moved; Tommy was asleep, his face against his father's.

On the German ship things were stirring. They could see hasty movements of men. Smoke began to pour from her funnels.

"They're coming, I expect," Jim said. He tightened his grip on Norah's arm.

Mr. Dixon left the bridge, and came hurriedly aft. The passengers flocked round him.

"There's a ship in sight," he said, "and we think she's a British cruiser. The enemy evidently think it, and they're getting up steam."

"Not going to stop?" a girl cried wildly.

"It doesn't seem like it." He hesitated. "We trust you to show no panic. It is quite possible that they may try to sink us without taking off the passengers—will you all get to your boat-stations quickly and put on the life-belts the stewards will serve out?"

There were white faces, but no panic. Men and women trooped to their stations, the former stooping to pick up children, and taking babies from their mother's arms—arms that took them back hungrily as soon as the life-belts were adjusted. The boats were swung outward from the davits, their crews in their places; and for a few minutes a very agony of suspense held the ship silent. Every eye was glued to the German ship. People held their breath, watching the guns—each moment expecting a flash and an explosion.

A line of flags fluttered into place on the enemy's rigging, and simultaneously the passengers glanced up at the bridge of the *Perseus*, whore alone the message could be understood. They saw Captain Garth put his glasses down hurriedly and grip Mr. Dixon's hand. Then he caught up a megaphone and turned to them, speaking through it.

"The enemy is leaving us," came the shout. "They signal, 'We will not destroy your ship on account of the women and children on board. You are dismissed. Good-bye.' "

A burst of cheering broke from the passengers. One girl fainted; men turned and wrung each other's hands. Captain and Mrs. Field did not stir for a moment; then they rose, moved by the same instinct, and disappeared within the ship. Mrs. Field staggered as they went and her husband's free arm caught her to him. Tommy had never stirred—his little face lay against his father's cheek.

David Linton put his hand on his boy's shoulder, speechless. Norah had laid her head on the rail, and her shoulders were shaking. Wally patted them hard.

"Buck up, old girl!" he said.

Flags had shot up on the *Perseus*, in courteous answer to the Germans. Mr. Dixon, appearing, was overwhelmed with congratulations and questions.

"It's a British cruiser, right enough, and our friend the enemy has got to show a clean pair of heels," he said. "We're only keeping her back—her speed is knots ahead of ours. We'll know more when we get the wireless going again

—Grey is hard at work on the spare outfit already. We'll hold on as we are for the present, to give the British ship any information we can."

"There is no further danger?" queried the old lady with the khaki muffler.

"No, ma'am—none at all, that I know of."

"What a good thing!" said she, placidly. She knitted on, without any pause.

"The captain sends you all his thanks," Dixon continued, gazing at her in bewilderment and awe. "He says you can shed life-belts and, as the Germans put it, dismiss—it's 'as you were,' in fact. There will be another breakfast in an hour's time—I don't fancy any one ate much of the first one. We'll let you know any news we can," and he hurried back to the bridge.

Already the German ship had forged far ahead of the *Perseus*.

"Aren't her stokers having a time!" uttered Wally, as the smoke poured from her. "It's going to take her all she knows to get away from that cruiser of ours." He was unfastening Norah's life-belt as he spoke, while Jim removed Mr. Linton's. "Are you all right, Nor?"

"Oh, yes," said Norah, turning a strained, white face. She looked up at Jim, and met his eyes, smiling at her. "It's—it's a bit of relief, isn't it?"

Every one was trying to speak calmly, although, now that the long tension had been so suddenly relaxed, there was more appearance of emotion than in the moment of greatest danger. Two or three women had become hysterical, and the stewardesses and doctor were busy reducing them to common-sense. Mrs. Edwards had not spoken at all since the megaphone had cried their reprieve from the bridge. She rose after awhile and slipped away.

The British cruiser was coming up astern, at full speed. Already they could see the grey hull, business-like and determined.

"I expect we'll signal to her as soon as the enemy is a bit further away," Jim said. "I hope to goodness we're going to see the fight!"

"Will there be a fight?" Norah asked, excitedly.

"Why I should think so. She isn't out for her health," Jim answered. "It will be a heartsome sight if she sinks the German, won't it—and great Scott, how annoying it will be for Mr. Smith!"

"Whew-w!" Wally whistled. "I clean forgot our friend Smithy!"

"I doubt if he's as happy now as he was on the *Perseus*," said Jim, laughing. "That British ship is a flyer and no mistake. Nor, old girl, why don't you go and get out of six or eight of those coats before the fun begins? You can't wear them all day."

"No, nor this hat," said Norah, who was dressed for emergencies. "I'll hurry back."

Her way to her cabin led her past the Edwards' and she glanced in, at the sound of sobbing. Mrs. Edwards, who had no children, had borrowed little Tommy Field. She was kneeling before the couch on which she had placed

him, her face buried in his frock, her whole frame shaking with sobs. Tommy regarded her doubtfully—and then, finding her hair soft under his little hands, began gleefully to pull it down, gurgling with joy. Mrs. Edwards did not seem to notice—even though they hurt her; it may be that she found a comfort in the touch of the little hands. At the sight, Norah suddenly found that she, too, was sobbing. She ran on into her cabin.

When she passed, a little later, on her way back, she heard the murmur of voices, and saw Major Edwards bending over his wife. Somehow Norah knew that she was better, though she went by quickly, averting her eyes. Dimly within her, though she had not learned to put the thought into words, Norah knew that the world holds few women whom a baby cannot help—even a borrowed baby.

"Norah! Norah! Hurry up!"

Jim's voice came ringing down the alleyways.

"I'm coming!" Norah shouted, beginning to run. "What's the matter? Anything wrong?"

"No—only the British ship is coming up hand over fist, and signalling like mad. And the German is just tearing away, but I don't believe she can do it." Jim's face was flushed and his eyes dancing. "Losh, but I wish I was on that cruiser! Isn't it the mischief that our wireless isn't ready! Come along—I was afraid you'd miss her." He raced up the companion-ladder, Norah at his heels.

At the top Wally was prancing with excitement.

"Oh, hurry up, you two!" Each boy grasped one of Norah's hands, and they tore along the deck. Every one was hanging over the rail, watching the British ship approaching. Beside the great bulk of the *Perseus*, or of the German ship, she seemed small. But she was built for speed and armed to the teeth.

Mr. Linton offered Norah his glasses—but she found that her hands were shaking too much to use them. The change from despair to relief had, indeed, affected every one; ordinarily grave people laughed and talked excitedly, and the younger passengers were like children released from school. No one would go down to the second breakfast. Stewards wandered round with trays of beef-tea, and people took cups absent-mindedly, and forgot to drink them. The decks, generally so spic-and-span, were littered untidily, since rugs and wraps had been flung down wherever their owners happened to be standing—and the stewards were themselves far too disorganised to perform ordinary duties. For one morning at least, the sober *Perseus* was "fey."

"I'd give something to understand what she's talking about," John West exclaimed, watching the cruiser, which was exchanging rapid signals with the *Perseus*.

"Easy enough to guess," Jim said. "They want to know anything we can tell them, that's all. Look at us"—he glanced aloft—"flag-wagging our

hardest. This is beginning to make up for last night!"

"Yes—you chaps must have had a pretty bad time," West said. "I'm jolly glad rescue came—it wasn't any too soon."

"Oh, a miss is as good as a mile," said Wally. "I'm too cheerful to think of last night. By Jove, I believe they're coming near enough to talk! Isn't it gorgeous!" He seized Norah, and they executed a wild polka down the deck—a proceeding which would ordinarily have attracted some attention, but just now drew not a single glance, except from the knitting old lady, who beamed over her muffler, and said, "Bless them, pretty dears!"—which remark filled Wally with wrath beyond anything he had manifested for the German ship. They came back to the others, outwardly sober, but still bubbling within.

"She's the *Sealark*," the second officer told them. "Light cruiser—about 6,000 tons; and her armament is a dream. I saw her in Portsmouth Harbour last July. I guess she'll make things warm for the beggar."

"How did she come—was it just luck?" Wally asked.

"Luck?—not it! She caught our 'S.O.S.' signals yesterday; a jolly good thing for us young Grey stuck to his wireless as long as he did. Watch her—she means hailing us, I think."

From the bridge, a voice through a megaphone demanded perfect silence on the decks—and every voice was hushed as the cruiser came rapidly alongside, so close that greetings could easily be exchanged. Rapid questions and answers flashed from bridge to bridge. The *Sealark* was ready for action; they could see the cleared decks, and the guns trained in readiness. Bluejackets swarmed everywhere, cheery-faced and alert, and waved jovial greetings to the big liner. Norah found her heart thumping. War! this was war, indeed!

The cruiser drew away, exerting her utmost speed. Mr. Dixon came down to the passengers.

"She wants us to stand by to help with the wounded," he said. "She'll be engaging the German soon. No, I don't think it will be much of a fight; the German is more than twice her size, but she's only an armed merchantman, and the *Sealark's* guns outclass hers hopelessly. We're not going to run risks of shells, of course, but you'll get some sort of a view." He favoured Norah with a special grin. "I shouldn't wonder if you got your friend Smith back, Miss Norah!"

It was half an hour later that the first dull roar of a gun echoed across the sea. The *Perseus* had altered her course, so that she should not be in the line of fire, and the three ships formed an irregular triangle. They saw the puff of smoke from the *Sealark* and then another, and another; but the German held on her way, unchecked, although the *Sealark* was rapidly overhauling her. Then she began to return the shots, and the watchers on the *Perseus* could mark by how much they fell short by the splashes as they fell. The British cruiser

answered, her superior range giving her an immense advantage.

"Ah—she's got home!"

Mr. Linton's quick exclamation came just before a shout from the bridge. One of the funnels of the German ship had tilted suddenly, and remained looking curiously helpless, like a child's damaged toy. The *Sealark* had found her range. Shot after shot crashed; another funnel fell sideways, and a great black stain showed near the stern where a shell had hit its mark. The ships grew nearer together.

"The German's having engine-trouble, I believe," Grantham hazarded. "Her speed is falling off."

"By Jove, she's hit the *Sealark*!"

Almost simultaneously with two vicious puffs of smoke from the German guns there came a commotion on the deck of the British cruiser. Through the glasses could be seen marks of damage, and one gun spoke no more. But, as if in swift retaliation, a series of crashing shots from the *Sealark* shook the air—and the enemy ship seemed to shiver and pause. A gaping hole showed in her side. Again the British guns roared across the water.

"She's done," Mr. Linton said.

The German ship was quite done. She listed slowly, more and more of her hull becoming visible as the deck, with its litter of wreckage and broken funnels, sloped away from them. Gushes of vapour that might have been either smoke or steam poured from her; and then, as the watchers held their breath in suspense, blue wreaths of smoke curled lazily upwards. She was on fire and sinking.

"The *Sealark* is signalling to us," the second officer said. "We're wanted—it's full steam ahead. But she won't last until we get there."

The guns of the British cruiser had ceased. A moment before she had been nothing but a death-dealing machine; now she suddenly became an instrument of mercy, dashing forward to save life. The *Perseus* was no less ready. The water foamed from her bows, as she bore down upon the sinking German.

"She's going!" A score of voices raised the cry.

The German warship tilted still further. Then she gave a long, lazy roll, like a sea-monster seeking rest; her stern lifted, and she dived down, head-first. So quickly was it done that it seemed a dream; one moment the great ship held every eye—the next, and she was gone, and scarcely a ripple marked the place of her sinking.

As she went, black forms dropped from her, looking, at that distance, like a swarm of flies. They could be seen faintly in the smooth water, tiny dots upon the surface of the slow swell.

"Oh—hurry! hurry!"

Norah did not know that she had spoken. Her eyes were glued to those

helpless black specks.

The boats were already swung out. As the *Sealark* and the *Perseus* came near the broken wreckage and bobbing heads, both ships slackened, and the boats shot down to the water. There was a moment's delay as the ready oars came out and they drew away from the side; then they leaped forward, every man bending in real earnest to his work. Once among the wreckage, all but two oars were withdrawn, and the rowers leaned over, intent on their work of mercy. They lifted out one dripping form after another. Their cries of encouragement drifted back to the ships.

"I don't think one other head is showing," said Jim at last. "Poor beggars—what a crowd have gone down!"

They scanned the sea with keen eyes. There was nothing to be seen but spars and littered wreckage.

"The boats are coming back," Norah said, her voice shaking. Not to look had been impossible; but it would be as impossible ever to forget what she had seen.

They came back with their burden of flotsam and jetsam; it was pitifully small, compared to the number who had been on the ship. Some were wounded, many exhausted from shock and immersion. These were busy times for the doctor and his assistants on the *Perseus*. The *Sealark* had but little room for prisoners and the sick, and was glad to turn them over to the great empty liner.

"We're practically a floating war prison," said Mr. Dixon. They had exchanged final greetings with the British man-of-war, and the *Perseus* had resumed her course to the Canaries. "The two officers who called yesterday are with us, bless their jovial hearts! They aren't wounded—and they're not so supercilious either. An exceedingly wet and cold man can't very well be supercilious, even if he's a German—and those chaps were half-drowned rats when we pulled 'em in."

"What about Mr. Smith?" Wally asked.

Mr. Dixon shook his head.

"No sign of him—gone down, poor little man. It's just as well, I suppose; he'd have hated not getting back to his Fatherland. And I, at least, am devoutly glad that I haven't to give up some of my leave to a trial in England." Mr. Dixon gave a cavernous yawn. "I haven't had any sleep since the night before last, and I'm going to turn in; and people who look as tired as you, Miss Norah, should do the same."

"I don't think I'm tired," said Norah vaguely. The chief officer laughed.

"Put her to bed, Jim," he said, nodding his head. "We've enough German patients without a good Australian as well. And you might turn in yourself, by way of experiment—you look as if you could do with a sleep. I'm going to

dream that I’m a prisoner on that beastly German boat, for the pleasure of waking up and finding I’m not—I advise you to do the same!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

LAS PALMAS.

"IT'S the heartsomest sight ever I seen!" said the quartermaster.

They were steaming slowly in to the big harbour of Las Palmas. Jim and Wally were great friends with the quartermaster, although he had once fallen over them bodily, an awkward occurrence that had produced a temporary coolness. He had forgiven them since discovering that their knowledge of knots was beyond that of the ordinary land-lubber passenger, and that Jim carried good tobacco, and frequently had some to spare.

The harbour was gradually opening up ahead—and they were looking at a sight of which the *Sealark* had warned them. Dotted all over the land-locked stretch of dancing blue were ships, great and small; idle ships, with no smoke coming from them except the little trail from the cook's galley. Many bore names well known in the big cities of the world where passenger steamers go. The *Perseus* went so close to some that they could scan their decks, where idle sailors lay about, playing cards and smoking—or leaned over the rail to watch the great British ship come slowly into port. Never had the Australian boys seen such sleepy ships.

"That one looks queer," Jim said, indicating a vessel close in-shore; and the quartermaster grinned.

"She's strolled ashore, an' broke her back," he said, cheerfully. "Good enough for her, too—and for the lot of 'em. Don't it do your heart good to see 'em, miss?"—to Norah, who came up at the moment. "Lyin' there with their dinky little black an' white an' red flags trailin' out over their sterns, afraid to move; an' the barnacles a-growin' on 'em. They grow quick, too, in this nice warm water!"

"Are they the German ships?" Norah asked.

Jim nodded assent.

"Thirty-one of them," he said, an unusual note of pride in his quiet voice. "Most of them have been there since the first fortnight of the war, when all the German merchant-shipping scurried for cover."

"And there they sit," said Wally, happily, "afraid to show their noses out, because they know they'll be caught—and a little British cruiser comes and counts them now and then, like an old dog rounding up a mob of sheep."

"They've sold all their cargoes for food," said the quartermaster. "Ate 'em up, like—an' much them Spaniards ashore gave 'em for the lot! Them Las Palmas dagoes must be pretty wealthy these times. An' the beggars can't get

away, nor do nothink. Must make 'em feel pretty savage, seein' ships like us come strollin' in an' out."

"By Jove, it must!" Jim uttered. "Here are we, worth a million and a half of money—and just the cargo England wants—meat and wool and foodstuffs; and they've got to watch us go out safely! Wouldn't it make you permanently sour!"

"Well, it brings home what sea-power means," Mr. Linton said. "Not a bad thing to remember, this harbour, when things go wrong at the Front—and to realise that the same state of affairs is going on in many harbours. I'd like to know how many German ships are bottled up, all over the world; she can't have much trade left."

"Why, you won't find the German merchant flag afloat, sir," said the quartermaster, "unless it's sittin' tight in a neutral port like this. As for her trade——!" He snapped his fingers. "Well, she's a long way off beat yet; but she ain't doin' any business!"

They had been running for some hours in sight of the Grand Canary, the chief island of the group—its rugged hills and headlands had been a welcome sight after the long stretch of unbroken sea. Since their escape from the German warship there had been a feeling of unrest all over the *Perseus*: the time seemed interminable, and the old sense of security in which they had lived contentedly had altogether gone. People were apt to jump at unusual sounds; books and games languished, for there was a painful fascination in scanning the sea for a smoke-trail that might or might not be another enemy cruiser. Above all, the hunger for news of the war became more and more intense, blotting out all lesser interests.

The *Perseus* dropped anchor in the outer harbour—so crowded with shipping were the inner waters, that the huge vessel would have had difficulty in finding room to turn. Almost immediately the agents' launch was seen hurrying out from the shore. In its wake came a huge flotilla of dinghies, containing every saleable article known to the bumboat-men of the Islands—lace, alleged to be Spanish, fine linen embroideries and drawn-thread work, silks, "sandalwood" boxes—made of any wood that came handy, and soaked in sandal oil to tickle tourist nostrils—roughly carved ivory, Canary knives and ebony elephants—probably of Birmingham manufacture—and a host of other "curios," equally reliable and valuable. In addition, there were boats loaded to the gunwale with oranges and others with vegetables; and some that were top-heavy with an unwieldy cargo of basket-chairs. Until the medical officer of the port had granted pratique to the ship, no one was allowed on board; so the boats clustered thickly on each side, and the men held up their wares, shrieking their prices, and managed to conduct quite a number of sales by the simple expedient of passing the goods up in a bucket lowered from the deck.

Spanish medical officers are generally full of their own importance, but devoid of any inclination to hurry. It was some time before the impatient passengers saw the official boat coming leisurely across the harbour; and a further delay ensued before the pompous Spaniard had satisfied himself that the *Perseus* was sufficiently free from any disease.

"They had small-pox brought to them by a ship once," Mr. MacTavish told Norah; "and ever since they've been so scared that they'd refuse to let any one ashore if we had as much as a case of nettle-rash on board! Judging by the smells of the place when you get there, I should think they bred for themselves all the diseases they'd need."

"He's going back to his boat," Norah said, looking over the rail at the gorgeous, gold-laced official.

"Then I expect it's all right," said the officer. "Just watch those bumboat-men."

Some one had communicated to the boatmen the fact that the *Perseus* was free ground, and the boats were crowding to the gangway in a struggling mass, each striving for first place at the steps. There seemed no rules of the game; they shoved each other aside furiously, edged boats out of the way with complete disregard of the safety of their crews or cargoes, and kept up a continuous babel of shouts and objurgations, coupled with wild appeals to the passengers to wait for the bargains they were bringing.

"Look at that chap!" Wally said, chuckling at a man whose boat had just reached the steps when a well-directed shove from the stern sent it flying lengths ahead. The man subsided in a heap on his wares, which were of a knobbly character and not adapted for reclining. He protested, in floods of fluent Spanish, while his wily ejector, who had promptly taken his place, proceeded to get his own goods on board with much calmness.

"They're awful sharks," said Mr. MacTavish. "Generally they bring on board about three decent things, in case of striking any one who really knows good stuff; the rest is just the scrapings of the Las Palmas shops—all the things they know they'll never sell ashore. You want to be up to their tricks—and, whatever you do, don't give them more than a quarter of the money they ask."

The Spaniards were pouring on board in a steady stream. Some, without wasting time, dashed to vacant spaces on the deck and began to lay out their wares; others rushed up and down, thrusting goods, fruit, and post-cards almost into the faces of the passengers and asking fabulous prices for them. Norah, who had no wish at all to buy a fan for which the vendor demanded five shillings, said, "I'll give you ninepence," and expected to see him disappear in wrath. But the Spaniard smiled widely and said, "Thank you, miss!"—and Norah found herself the embarrassed possessor of the fan, while the seller as urgently begged her to buy an elephant.

"Oh, take me away, Wally!" she said, laughing. "Can't we go ashore?"

"There's a launch coming off now," Mr. MacTavish said. "They'll take you, and bring you back. But don't go unless you're a good sailor, Miss Norah—there's a cheery little lap on in this harbour."

"I'll risk it," Norah declared, laughing.

"Well, it upsets quite a few," said the junior officer. "However, you're ashore in a quarter of an hour, so the agony isn't prolonged."

The launch bobbed cheerily across the harbour, and the "lop" of which Mr. MacTavish had spoken proved quite sufficient for several of the passengers, who were both green and glad when the little boat arrived at the stone steps of the wharf. At the head of the steps enthusiastic drivers proffered their services. The Billabong party, by the Captain's advice, had engaged a guide—a bustling gentleman, speaking very imperfect English, who hurried them to the quaint little carriages of the town—two-wheeled, hooded erections, capable, when rattling over their native cobblestones, of inflicting innumerable contusions on the human frame. They dashed wildly up a long, ascending road, the drivers urging their raw-boned steeds with whip and voice.

Las Palmas, to the hurried tourist, offers but little in the way of sight-seeing. To the leisured, with time to drive away from the white town, up the mountain, to Monte and Santa Brigida, there is opportunity for seeing the best of the island—rolling country with deep little cleft glens running to the sea, banana gardens, and the vineyards among which Santa Brigida nestles—vineyards where the Canary wine of old days was made. Motor-buses run there to-day—unromantic successors to the gay old adventurers who sailed the Spanish Main and drank Canary sack.

The majority of ships, however, stay in the port but a few hours, making the call only for mails and vegetables and a shipment of fruit for London; so that the average tourist can but put himself in the hands of a guide and make a meteoric dash through the city, seeing what the guide chooses to show him, and no more.

"Did you ever see such unfortunate, raw-boned horses!" gasped Norah. "I do wish our man wouldn't beat him so continually."

The guide smiled widely. "De horse she not mind de beat," he said.

"I expect they're used to it," Jim remarked; "it really seems part of the show. Anyway, they all do it."

They hurried through the great Cathedral, seeing vestments three hundred years old; through the fruit and fish markets; and then to the place which the guide plainly regarded as the champion attraction of the town—the prison. It was a gloomy building, entered through a big courtyard where snowy-white geraniums bloomed in startling contrast to the grim stone walls. Within, they glanced at the room where trials were held; and then were conducted along

dim corridors and into a cell where an unpleasant iron framework was fixed above a bare iron chair.

"De garotte!" announced the guide, proudly. "Where dey put to death de murderers!" He sat down in the iron chair, and obligingly put his neck in the clutch of the grisly collar, to show how it worked—whereat Mr. Linton uttered an ejaculation of wrath, and hastily removed his daughter.

"Do they really kill people there?" Norah asked, wide-eyed. It did not seem easy to realise.

"They do—but there's no need for you to look at the beastly place!" said her father, indignantly.

"Well, it looked awfully tame," said Norah. "I suppose I haven't enough imagination, daddy. It was rather like the arrangement they put to keep your head steady in a photographer's!"

Jim and Wally came out, followed by the guide, who looked rather crestfallen.

"Unpleasant beast!" remarked Jim. "He's been showing us a collection of knives and scythes and other grisly weapons, with dark and deadly stains—says various ladies and gentlemen used them to slay other ladies and gentlemen! First you see the garotte, and then what brings you to it. It puts you off murdering any one, at all events in Las Palmas!"

"It makes me feel like murdering the guide!" said Wally. "I never saw any one gloat so unpleasantly!"

They left the prison and rattled back into the main streets of the town. Spanish girls in graceful mantillas looked down upon them from upper windows; and once Norah declared that she saw a Spanish cavalier serenading one, with guitar all complete—which seemed unlikely, even in Las Palmas, in broad daylight. The streets were narrow and dirty, the cobblestones unbelievably rough. At top speed the little carriages bumped over them, their occupants bouncing hither and thither, and suffering many things. They rejoiced unaffectedly when at length they halted, and set out on foot to explore the business part of the town.

The shops were full of fascinating things, to unaccustomed eyes, and their owners did not wait for people to enter, but came to the doorways, or even out into the streets, begging them to buy; each pointing out how much more excellent was his shop than that of his neighbour. Whether they succeeded or failed in making a sale, they were always exquisitely polite.

"You feel," said Wally, "that even if they don't manage to sell you a pennyworth, they're amply rewarded for their trouble, by the pleasure of having seen you!"

In a restaurant overlooking the sea they procured very bad coffee with cakes of startling colours and quite poisonous taste; after which refection every

one felt rather ill, and formed a high opinion of Spanish digestive powers. There were German sailors in the restaurant evidently from the ships in the harbour; they looked sourly at the cheery little party of English-speaking people, and muttered guttural remarks that clearly were not pleasant.

"It's hardly to be expected that they should feel good-humoured at the sight of us," said Jim. "Poor beggars—here since war broke out, with nothing to do, and practically no money; and their ships rotting in the harbour. And they have to watch us go in and out just as we please. It wouldn't excite one's finer feelings, if one were a German."

"Have Germans got any?" queried Wally.

"They're not overstocked, I believe," Jim said, grinning. "But one wouldn't develop many in Las Palmas, anyhow. I've seen more villainous faces here than in the whole course of my previous existence. Our Zulu friend in Durban was a beauty, compared to some of them."

"Yes, one wouldn't care to wander about here alone on a dark night," said his father. "Half of the populace look as though they would quite cheerfully and politely assassinate any one for sixpence. Come on, children; the guide seems to be getting excited—it's time we went back to the ship."

The *Perseus* steamed away in the twilight—the crowd of boatmen chattering and shouting round her until the last moment, and attempting to sell for a few pence articles for which, earlier in the day, they had demanded many shillings. Past the imprisoned German ships they went, seeing the sullen crews watching them, envying them the freedom of the seas. The captain came along the deck as they watched the sunset and the slowly fading white town under the mountain.

"Well, we didn't get much news out of Las Palmas," he said. "One never does. It's all deadlock, anyhow, at the Front; winter has shut down on a lot of activities."

"Judging by my papers, most of the battle area seems water-logged," said Mr. Linton. "It wouldn't give much scope for movements."

"No," the captain agreed. "Personally, the agents have left me completely undecided; we're scheduled to go to London, but they say we may be sent to Liverpool—or anywhere else." He laughed. "Time was when a man was master on his ship—but in war he's not much more than a cabin-boy. There's a hint that the Government want our cargo of meat to go straight to France."

"What—would we go there?" Norah queried, much excited.

"Not much!" said the captain, with emphasis. "Too many mines and submarines about, Miss Norah, to take passengers on cross-Channel excursions. No, I guess I'd have to land you all at some Channel port. They say we'll hear by wireless—meanwhile, I wouldn't advise you to label your luggage."

Mr. Linton looked anxious.

"I'll be just as glad if we don't have the trip up the Channel," he said. "There would be no further danger of cruisers, I suppose; but one does not feel encouraged by the idea of floating mines—not with daughters about."

"Indeed, you catch me letting you meet a mine alone!" said Norah hastily. "Me, that can hardly trust you to change your coat when it's wet!" Whereat the Captain chuckled and departed.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE END OF THE VOYAGE.

PERHAPS the last week of the voyage was the longest of all.

From Las Palmas the *Perseus* ran into bad weather, and the Australians were sharply reminded that instead of their own hot December they were coming to English winter. Ice-cold gales blew day and night; the decks were constantly swept by drifting showers of sleety rain. It was often impossible to keep cabin port-holes open, even in the day-time, since the waves were high; and at night they were definitely closed. Wally, who had opened his on a night that was deceptively calm, was found by Jim "awash," a wave having entered and deluged everything. Wally was equally apologetic and wrathful; he paddled in the chilly flood, rescuing damp boxes from under the berths.

"I'm awfully sorry, old man," he said penitently. "The cabin was so horrid stuffy—and the waves seemed quiet. I think"—hopefully—"that my things have got the worst of the mess, anyhow."

"I wish you'd come out of that and get dry socks on," said Jim, laughing. "You look like an old pelican, wading round there! Here's Scott—he'll fix it up." They fled, leaving the flood to the much-enduring steward, who had probably grappled with such emergencies before.

The evenings were the worst time. By nightfall the closed-up ship was unbearably airless; rather than remain below, it was better to face the dripping decks, to find a comparatively sheltered corner in the inky gloom, and there to sit, wrapped in mackintoshes and rugs, until bedtime—when the keen salt wind would have effectually made every one sleepy. They woke up heavy-headed, and fled back to the deck as soon as dressing could be hurried through. No one could possibly call the deck comfortable, but at least it was airy—though, perhaps, too airy.

News came now each morning by wireless; unsatisfactory news, for the most part, since it told but little and spoke only of the long winter deadlock just commencing. Still, it was something, and the passengers clustered round the notice-board after breakfast, reading the scrawled items hungrily. Daily the feeling of tension increased, as the ship ploughed her way to the end of her long journey. It was harder than ever to be cooped up in idleness when so much was happening just ahead; so much waiting to be done.

They saw no warships, yet they knew that the watch was all round them, vigilant and sleepless. Daily the wireless operator heard the echo of their signals, telling nothing except that the grey watchdogs of the seas were

somewhere near, hidden in the veil of mist through which they went. It was hard to realise, so lonely did the *Perseus* seem, that her position was known—that, somewhere, preparations and plans were being made, of which she was the centre, although even her captain knew nothing. Three days off the English coast the invisible Powers-That-Be spoke to her.

"Orders!" said Jim, dashing into his father's cabin, where Mr. Linton and Norah were endeavouring to pack his belongings. "No London or Liverpool for us, thank goodness! We're all to be landed at Falmouth. It means a day less at sea."

"That's the best news I've heard for a good while," said Mr. Linton. "Six weeks at sea during war-time is enough for any man. Wireless orders, I suppose?"

"Yes—the captain won't disclose whether they're from Government or from the agents—but the officers believe it's Government, and that the ship is going straight to Brest or Cherbourg with her foodstuffs, as soon as she gets rid of us. We get in at daylight on Monday." He rushed off to find Wally.

They could, indeed, have got in on Sunday night, but for the war regulations—that no ships should enter an English port between sunset and sunrise; so, from evening on Sunday, the *Perseus* dawdled along, knowing that she must kill time, and preferring to do it in the safety of open ocean rather than off a rock-bound coast. Then, as if the sea wanted a final diversion with them, a fog came up, and the officers spent an anxious night, "dodging about" in the mist and looking for the unfamiliar entrance to Falmouth Harbour—all the time in dread of hearing breakers on a near shore. Two days before, they found later, a ship had gone on the rocks during the night. The Cornish coast stretches harsh hands to trap the unwary.

Fortune, however, befriended the *Perseus*. Towards morning the fog lifted, and the harbour entrance showed clearly. Norah, lying awake in her berth, saw through her port-hole a rugged headland—and almost immediately a blinding flash filled her cabin with so bright a light that for a moment it seemed on fire. It passed away as quickly as it had come; and Norah, springing to the port-hole, saw a dim coast and powerful searchlight that went to and fro across the entrance. Not even a fishing-dinghy could have slipped in unperceived by its white ray. Then a black funnel came so close to her face that she jumped back in astonishment. Looking down, she could see, below, the deck of a little gunboat, where were men in blue uniforms. A curt voice was hailing in tones of crisp authority.

"What ship are you, and where from?"

"The *Perseus*—from Australia."

"Last port?"

"Las Palmas."

"What are you doing in here?"

"Wireless orders." Norah smiled a little at the evident note of grievance in Captain Garth's voice—as who should say, "I never asked to come!"

The gunboat moved on, until it was directly under the bridge. Norah could hear curt instructions as to anchoring. Then the fierce little grey boat darted away across the harbour.

She dressed hastily. Everything had been left ready overnight, and her little cabin wore a strangely cheerless aspect, denuded of all its homelike touches and with labelled and corded luggage lying about. Jim and Wally found her ready when they looked in on their way to the deck.

"Put on your biggest coat," Jim said. "It's colder than anything you ever dreamed of. To think they're probably having bush-fires on Billabong!"

"I wish we had one here!" said Wally, shivering.

There were yellow lights still showing in the houses round the harbour, but daylight had come, and soon they began to twinkle out. It was a bare coast, with a grey castle on one headland—behind it, on a long rise, a dense cluster of huts that spoke of military encampment. The harbour itself was full of ships; among them, the *Perseus*, largest of them all, was going dead slow. The crew could be heard exchanging greetings with deck-hands engaged in morning tasks on vessels lying at anchor—question and answer ran back and forth; war news, curiosity about the long voyage, and often, "Goin' to enlist, now you're home?" Every one was excited and happy; the crew were beaming over their work; the stewards—most of whom had declared their intention of enlisting—wild with joy at the thought of home after their long months of absence.

The Australians drew together a little; there was something in the bleak grey December morning, in the cheery bustle and excitement, that made them suddenly alone and homesick—homesick for great trees and bare plains, for scorching sunlight and the green and gold splendour of the Bush.

"Doesn't it seem a long way away?" Norah said, very low; and Jim and Wally, knowing quite well what she meant, nodded silently. To them, too, home was a great way off.

They hurried through an early breakfast, and came again on deck to find the anchor down for the last time, and the *Perseus* lying at rest. An official launch was alongside; and presently all the passengers were mustered in the saloon, to answer to their names and declare their nationality and business. It was a war precaution, but a perfunctory one; as Wally remarked, the late Mr. Smith would have had no difficulty whatever in passing with full marks.

Then came good-byes, beginning with the captain, somewhat haggard after his final vigil, and ending with little Tommy Field, who insisted on attaching himself to Norah, and was with difficulty removed by his parents. A tender was alongside; great piles of luggage were being shot down to it. There were

many delays before the passengers, blue and shivering, were ushered down the gangway to the tossing deck below.

Norah looked back as the tender steamed off slowly. Far above them towered the mighty bulk of the *Perseus*, as it had towered at Melbourne so many weeks before. Then it had seemed strange and unfriendly; now it had changed; it was all the home she knew, in this cold, grey land. She had a moment's wild desire to go back to it.

"Well, I am an idiot," Wally said, beside her. "For weeks I've been aching to get off that old ship—and now that I'm off, I feel suddenly like a lost foal, and I want to go back and hide my head in my cabin! Do you feel like that?"

" 'M," said Norah, nodding very hard. "England feels very queer and terrifying, all of a sudden, doesn't it?"

"Don't you bother your little head," said Jim. "We'll worry through all right."

Ashore there came a long Customs delay, since enthusiastic officials insisted on having a lengthy hunt through luggage for revolvers, which were liable to confiscation. They waited in a huge shed, which smelt of many things, none of them pleasant. Finally they were released, and made their way through a bewildering maze of rough buildings and railway lines, until they found themselves at the station at Falmouth, where a special train awaited them.

It was all strange to the Lintons. The very accent of the Cornish folk around them was unintelligible; the houses, packed closely together, as unfamiliar as the bleak landscape and the leafless trees—trees that Norah considered dead until she suddenly realised that she was no longer in Australia, where a leafless tree is a dead tree, and where there is no long winter sleep for Nature. These trees were bare, but dense with growth of interlaced boughs and twigs; not beaten to gaunt skeletons, like the Australian dead forest giants. Norah found that in their beauty of form and tracery there was something more exquisite than in their spring leafage.

"Don't the houses look queer!" Jim said. "We've been travelling for ever so long, and I haven't seen a single verandah!"

Gradually, as the day wore on, the rain drifted up in a grey cloud, blotting out all the cold landscape. It blew aside now and then, and showed empty fields, divided by bare hedges; an emptiness that puzzled the Australians, until they realised that they were in a country where all cattle must be housed in winter. The fields, too, were astonishing: quaint, irregularly shaped little patches, tiny beside their memories of the wide paddocks of their own big land. The whole country looked like a chessboard to their unaccustomed eyes; the great houses, among their leafless trees, inexpressibly gaunt and bleak.

Then, so soon after luncheon that they exclaimed in astonishment, darkness came down and electric lights flashed on throughout the train. The conductor

came in to pull all blinds down carefully.

"War regulations, sir," he said in answer to Mr. Linton. "No trains allowed to travel showin' lights now, for fear of an attack by aircraft—and goin' over bridges they turns the lights off altogether. Makes travellin' dull, sir."

"It sounds as though it should make it exciting," said Mr. Linton.

"Might, if the aeroplanes came, sir," said the conductor, laconically. "They do say them Zeppelins is goin' to shake things up in England. But they ain't come yet, an' England ain't shook up. Might be as well if she wur." He went on his mission of darkness.

The slow day drew to a close. The train made few stoppages, and travelled swiftly; but it was late before the long journey across England was over, and they began to slacken down. Peering out, Norah and the boys saw a dimly-lit mass of houses, so solid a mass, so far-reaching, that they were almost terrifying. They were gaunt houses, tall and grey, crowned with grimy chimney-pots; for miles they ran through them, finding never a break in their close-packed squares. Then came more lights and a grinding of brakes as they drew up; outside the train, raucous voices of porters.

"Paddington! Paddington!"

"London at last!" said Mr. Linton.

Presently they were packed into a taxi, whizzing along through dim streets. The taxi-lights were darkened; there were few electric lights, and all the upper parts of their glass globes had been blackened, so that hostile aircraft, flying overhead, should find no guiding beams. Lamps in shop windows were carefully shaded.

It was a weird city, in its semi-darkness of war. The streets were full of clamour—rattling of traffic, sharp ringing of tram-bells and the hooting of motors, and, above every other sound the piercing cries of newsboys —"Speshul! War Speshul!" Motor-buses, great red structures that towered like cars of Juggernaut, rattled by them, their drivers darting in and out among the traffic with amazing skill. Taxi-cabs went by in a solid stream. The pavements were a dense mass of jostling, hurrying people. And in whatever direction they looked were soldiers—men in khaki, with quiet, purposeful faces.

"Heaps and heaps of them aren't a day older than I am!" Wally declared, gleefully, bringing his head in. "Look at that little officer over there! Why, I might be his uncle! If they are taking kids like that, Jim, they can't refuse you and me!"

"They won't refuse you," David Linton said, gravely, looking at the brown faces—Jim's, quiet, but full of determination; Wally's vivid with excitement. There was no doubt that they were excellent war material—quite too good to refuse.

Norah's hand closed on his in the darkness. The same thought had come to

them both. The long voyage, with its comparative peace, was behind them: ahead was only war, and all that it might mean to the boys. The whole world suddenly centred round the boys. London was nothing; England, nothing, except for what it stood for; the heart of Empire. And the Empire had called the boys.

CHAPTER XX.

THE THING THAT COUNTS.

"LITTLE chap!—you mustn't mind like that."

Norah kept her face from the room, looking out into the hurrying London street. Something quite unfamiliar was in her throat—a hard, hot lump. She felt Jim's hand on her shoulder, but she would not look at him until she had mastered the lump's determination to choke her.

She turned to him in a moment.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy," she said penitently. "I didn't mean to be such an idiot—truly."

"You're weak," said Jim, with concern. "You can't get influenza and be in bed in this beastly hotel for three weeks without feeling it. Never mind, kiddie—you'll be better as soon as you can get out into the country."

"I expect it's the influenza," Norah answered, seizing upon so excellent an excuse, but still despising herself very heartily. "I never was in bed so long before; and it doesn't buck one up. And I wasn't expecting to see you in your uniform, and—and——" She turned back to the window hurriedly.

Jim talked on, as if he had not noticed.

"We'll be able to see quite a lot of you," he said. "It's great luck going into camp at Aldershot—if you're in London we'll be able to run up often; and of course, if you're not, it will be because you've come to live even nearer. We were jolly lucky to have had so much Australian training—it has saved us a heap of fagging here."

"Yes, it was great luck," said Norah, to the window.

"You've got to get fat, by the way;" said Jim. "This little influenza game of yours, has pulled you down—you'll have your shoulder through your dress, if you don't watch it. I was talking to a fellow from Aldershot this morning, at the tailor's: he says it may be months before we go out to the front. Or we may be put on garrison duty somewhere in England. They want us to be as fit as possible before we go." He laughed, shortly. "Fit! and he says that ordinarily a regular regiment reckons that it's two years after a subaltern joins—even after Sandhurst training—before they consider him worth his salt! Well, I hope we won't make a mess of it, that's all."

"You won't make any mess of anything," Norah cried, indignantly, swinging round to face him. "You know ever so much already—drill and shooting and riding—"

"What I don't know would fill a barn," said Jim sagely. "Drill isn't

everything—there's knowing men, and handling them, and finding out what you can do and what you can't. It makes you nearly scared to be an officer, sometimes." He squared his shoulders resolutely. "But I'm going to have a mighty hard try at my job. I believe it's something of a start in the right direction to know that one doesn't know much!"

Norah fingered the star on his cuff.

"Well—there are ever so many more ignorant than you."

"That's the awful part of it," Jim said soberly. "I believe there are—and that says a heap! I know just enough to be sure I've got to start learning and work at it like fun. But one hears that half the fellows think that they can mug up the whole game in a month, and go cheerily out to the Front. Well, it's all very well if you're a private. But if you've even one star you may be responsible for other men's lives." He shrugged. "It's a queer country. Why on earth can't they catch them young and train them, as they do in Australia? It never hurts any of us!"

"Dad says they will have to do it some time."

"So they will. But if they had done it before, there mightn't have been a war at all."

Down the corridor they heard the clash of the lift-door shutting, and then quick steps.

"Here's Wally," Jim said, smiling. "He's been struggling into his Sam Browne belt. You just see if he doesn't look topping!"

Wally burst into the sitting-room like an avalanche.

"Hallo, Norah, I'm so glad you're up! Better?—truly—honest? You look a bit sorry on it—poor old girl. We're going to get you out this afternoon—the sun is actually shining, and goodness knows, it may never occur again!" He brought his heels together with a click, standing before her, tall, and straight, and merry. "How does the kit look, Nor?"

Behind him, David Linton came in quietly. Like Norah, he looked from one to the other; boys only, big and brave in their new khaki with its touches of brass and leather—manhood very close before them.

"You both look beautiful—that is, your uniforms do!" said Norah. "We'll be exceedingly proud to go out with you, won't we, Dad?"

"I'll be exceedingly glad when I get some of the newness off," Jim said. "When one sees people back from the front, a bit stained and worn, it makes one feel cheap to be creaking along, just turned out like a tailor's block."

"From all I hear of Aldershot mud, we won't have long to wait for the stains," said Wally, comfortably. "And London mud is an excellent breaking in—you wait till a merry motor-'bus passes you at full tilt, and you'll get all the marking you want! This city for wet grubbiness in January comes up to Melbourne in the same month for dry grubbiness—think of old Melbourne on

a hot north wind day, with the dust in good going order!"

"But to-day isn't bad," Jim said; "there's really sunshine, and it's not so cold. Don't you think, Dad, we might take the patient out?"

"I'm not a patient any more," Norah disclaimed. "It was bad enough to be one for three weeks—I'm quite well now. Do let us go out."

"I've ordered some sort of a carriage," said Mr. Linton—"having foreseen mutiny on the part of the invalid. It should be ready; get your things on, Norah, and make sure there are plenty of them. The sun here isn't what you would call a really warm specimen of its kind."

It was a watery sun, but it shone brightly enough on Piccadilly as they drove along the splendid street. On either side great smoke-grimed buildings towered high: but above them the sky was blue, and in Piccadilly Circus there was a brave show of flowers, though the "flower-girls"—who are rather weird old women—shivered under their shawls among their baskets of violets and tulips. One had a basket that made Norah suddenly cry out.

"Why, it's gum-leaves!"

They stopped the carriage, and Wally jumped out and ran back, returning presently with a little cluster of eucalyptus boughs, with yet unopened capsules among the grey-green foliage.

"She says it came from the South of France," he said. "But it's good enough to be Australian!"

To Norah it was quite good enough. She held the fragrant leaves throughout their drive—seeing, beyond the roar and grime of London streets, open plains with clumps of gum-trees—seeing their leaves stir and rustle as the sweet wind blew through.

From Piccadilly they turned into Hyde Park. Above the great gateway was a queer erection—the searchlight that every night scanned the sky above London for aeroplanes. Everywhere in the Park were soldiers; companies marching and drilling, some in khaki, and others in any scraps of uniform that could be found for them temporarily—including even the scarlet tunic of other days. Officers were riding their chargers in the Row; and carriages drove up and down with wounded soldiers out for an airing in charge of nurses; men with arms or legs in splints, or with bandages showing under their caps. The Park looked shabby and worn, its brilliant grass trodden almost out of existence by the thousands of men who drilled there daily. Its sacred precincts were even invaded by rough buildings and tents—war stores, outside which stood sentries with fixed bayonets. No longer was it London's most cherished pleasure-ground, but a part of the machinery of War.

Everything about them spoke of War: the marching soldiers, the wounded men, the newsboys who shouted the latest tidings in the streets. The shops were full of soldiers' comforts and of Service kit: the darkened lamps gave

mute testimony to its nearness. There was no topic in all their world but War. Men and women alike were preparing and helping; even children had taken on a new gravity since they had learned how many of the fathers and brothers who marched away came back no more. Boys fresh from school had been swallowed up by its hungry mouth; boys still in the playground were drilling, impatient for the day that saw them old enough to follow their companions.

And they themselves were part of its machinery. War had brought them across the world; and the more nearly they approached the thunder of the guns, the less important became their own concerns, except so far as they touched War. Home—Australia—Billabong; all their little story faded into insignificance, even to themselves. Things which had been important no longer counted: personal grief and happiness, personal success and failure, a wave of great happenings had swept them all away—of all their concerns nothing mattered now except the two cheery lads in khaki who looked with curious eyes at London, and thought no high-souled thoughts at all, but simply of doing the "decent thing."

To Norah the realisation came home suddenly. Dimly she had been seeing and feeling these things during the weeks that she had lain ill while her father and the boys were busied about commissions and uniforms: and now the knowledge came to her that where great matters of duty and honour are concerned, individual matters drop out. The nation's honour was the individual's honour: therefore the individual became as never before, a part of the nation, and forgot his or her own concerns in the greater responsibility. Suffering and trouble might come: but there would always be the help of pride in the knowledge that honour was the only thing that really lasted.

The boys were merry enough as they drove round the Park, and, leaving the carriage, strolled through Kensington Gardens. Peter Pan's statue looked at them from its green background; and Norah found a quaint hint of Wally in the carved face of the boy "who wouldn't grow up." Children in woollen coats and long gaiters were sailing boats on the Round Pond; Jim rescued an adventurous cutter which had gone too far, to the loudly expressed despair of its owner, an intrepid navigator of four. But the ordinary Park games of the children were almost deserted, for there was a daily game of absorbing interest now—soldiers to watch, who manœuvred and drilled and marched, until there were few Park children who did not know half the drill themselves. Small boys drew themselves up and saluted Jim and Wally smartly—to the embarrassment of those yet unfledged warriors: even babies in perambulators crowed at the sight of the uniforms and the cheery sound of bands playing the men back to barracks.

They came upon one ridiculous knot of street urchins—ragged youngsters who had manufactured caps and belts and putties out of yellow paper, and

were marching in excellent order under their leader, a proud lad with a wooden sword. They halted, and engaged an imaginary enemy vigorously; some falling gloriously on the field of battle, the others routing the foe with great slaughter, and finally carrying off the wounded. Jim gave them sixpence, which the captain accepted with the gravity with which a soldier may receive the V.C.

There were other people in the Gardens—women in mourning, and some who wore only an armlet of black or purple. They were sad-faced women; and yet they bore themselves proudly, and their look was high as it dwelt upon the uniformed lads who passed them. It was not possible to see them, and not to know what their proud thoughts were, and what their grief. Men looked at them reverently—women who had given up their dear ones to Empire and were steadfast and brave in the memories that were all they had left.

The afternoon darkened, and a chilly wind began to ruffle the surface of the Round Pond and to fill the sails of the tiny yachts. Mr. Linton hurried Norah to the shelter of the carriage, and they drove back to the hotel, through the roaring traffic of Oxford Street.

"Did you ever see such a jam?" Wally ejaculated. They were halted in a block near Oxford Circus; ahead of them dozens of motor-'buses, around them taxi-cabs, carriages, and huge carts; and all fitted into the smallest available spaces, like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. In front of all a policeman held a mighty, white-gloved hand, huge and compelling. Presently he lowered it, and the packed vehicles began to move across the open space of the Circus, while the released body of foot-passengers streamed over like a swarm of ants.

"You know," said Jim, looking with admiring reverence at the policeman, "a few of those chaps would be very useful at the Front, in case of a rout among our fellows. They would only have to hold up that immense white hand and the flight would stop like a shot!"

"Yes, and in the interval between those duties they could be directing the forward movement to Berlin!" said Wally eagerly. "Let's suggest it to the War Office!"

"I would, if we hadn't got our commissions," said Jim. "As it is, I want to stay in the Army. Reformers always have a poor time at the hands of officials."

The carriage stopped, and they hurried into the hotel, glad to get away from the keen January wind. Jim came last, after paying the coachman; Norah paused in the warm, carpeted lounge to wait for him. As he entered quickly, tall and good to look at, in his khaki, an old lady with a black armlet passed out. Jim held the swing door for her. She looked at him and stopped involuntarily: in her face such a mingling of longing and sorrow that the boy's glance dropped, unable to meet those hungry mother-eyes. For a moment her lip quivered; then, she forced a smile.

"You are going out?" she asked.

"I hope so," Jim answered gravely.

"May I wish you luck, and shake hands with you?" She put out her hand, and Jim took it in his brown paw, gently.

"Thank you," he said. They looked at each other for a moment, and then the mother who had no son passed on.

Norah and Jim went up the staircase in silence. Tea was waiting, and Norah poured it out; the boys waiting on her. She was still weak after her illness: glad, presently to go to lie down, at Mr. Linton's injunction. She wanted to get herself in hand before the parting came: it was bad enough to have even once gone near to breaking down. English influenza, Norah thought, had a depressing effect upon one's backbone.

Jim came in soon, and sat down on the bed, tucking her up warmly. They talked in low voices of the time that was coming.

"So you'll just be the plucky little mate you've always been," Jim said to her, at last. "Remember, it's your job. This thing is so big that there's more or less of a job for every one. Only I think a man's is simpler—at least it's ready waiting for him, but a woman has got to go and hunt hers up. You aren't a woman, kiddie, but you're going to look after your job."

"I'm going to try," Norah said.

"It's hard on Dad," said Jim. "He's getting old, and sometimes I think he isn't as strong as he was. I'll be worried about him all the time I'm away: but I'd be much more worried if you hadn't come. It's a tremendous weight off my mind that I'm leaving you to look after him."

Norah flushed with pleasure.

"Is it, Jim? I'm so glad."

"Why, you're almost everything to him," Jim said. "I'm not going to think of morbid things, because the chances are that Wally and I will come back: but if I don't, I know Dad won't have lost the best thing he has."

"Please, Jimmy," said Norah, very low.

"I won't, old chap," said Jim. "Just don't worry, and try not to let Dad worry: and both of you get busy. There are heaps of relief jobs for people who really want to work. And afterwards you'll be satisfied because you really did your bit in the war. If every one did just their little bit the whole job would be done in no time. It's the slackers that keep it going—and you never were a slacker, Nor. You've always done your share."

"Mine is such a tiny little share," Norah said. "It hardly seems to count."

"Don't you believe it!" Jim answered. "We can't all do a big thing, like Kitchener and Jellicoe; and lots of men never get a chance for distinction—they say half the V.C's and D.S.O's are pure luck. But every one has got some sort of a little row to hoe, and everyone's row counts. Your job is partly to look after Dad, and I believe you'll do it best by getting busy—both of you.

Dad will go to pieces if he's idle, and worrying about Wally and me."

"I won't let him," said Norah, nodding. "I promise, Jim. We'll work."

"Then that's all right," Jim said. "And you'll keep fit yourself; and we'll see you ever so often."

"Oh—do come often!" Norah whispered. They wrung each other's hands. Then Mr. Linton came in, and also sat down on the bed, and they managed to be quite cheerful, and made great plans for excursions when Norah should be quite strong and the boys came up from Aldershot. It might be three months, or three days, before they were sent out to the fighting-line: there was nothing to be gained by speaking of it.

Jim looked at his watch, at length.

"Nearly time we went," he said.

Norah jumped up and made a valiant attempt to tidy her curly hair—on the state of which Wally made severe comments when they rejoined him, declaring that she might have been crawling under the haystack at home.

"I know I've got to remember I'm in London," said Norah penitently, "Wally, why will you be like Aunt Eva!"

"Never mind—we'll bring you a large bunch of assorted German scalps when we come back from the Front," said Wally. "They'll look lovely in the hall at Billabong, among the native weapons!"

"If you bring your own scalps in good order, we'll excuse you the Germans," said Mr. Linton.

"If you leave untidy German oddments about Billabong, Brownie will be annoyed!" said Norah, laughing. "Oh, won't it be lovely when we all go back!"

"It will be just the best spree we ever had—and that is saying a lot!" Wally answered. He looked down at Norah. "There's something a bit unfair about this, you know," he declared. "Norah has been in all our plans ever since she was a bit of a youngster; and now we've got to go and leave her out, for the first time. We'll have to work up something very special when we come back, old Nor, to make up for it."

"The very most special thing will be to go back—all together," Norah said. "And don't you trouble about me—I'll find a job. You'll be a bit—just a little bit—careful about dry socks, won't you, boys? And send me them to darn every week. Aldershot will be terribly hard on socks." She looked at the clock, following the direction of Jim's eyes. "I know it's time you were off," she said, straightening her shoulders and looking at them with a little smile.

David Linton watched the tall young forms dive into the throbbing taxi. It darted off among the traffic, and he went back to their sitting-room. There was a hint of age in his face.

"Well, little mate?" he said.

Norah sat on the hearthrug, and leaned her head against his knee. They fought their loneliness together. And since the fight was for each other, they succeeded.

"It's a big thing," the father said, presently. "I'm glad they're not out of it, Norah, whatever comes. Please God we'll get them back—but if we don't, we'll know they did their best. It's not a bad cause for pride—to do their best, in a big thing."

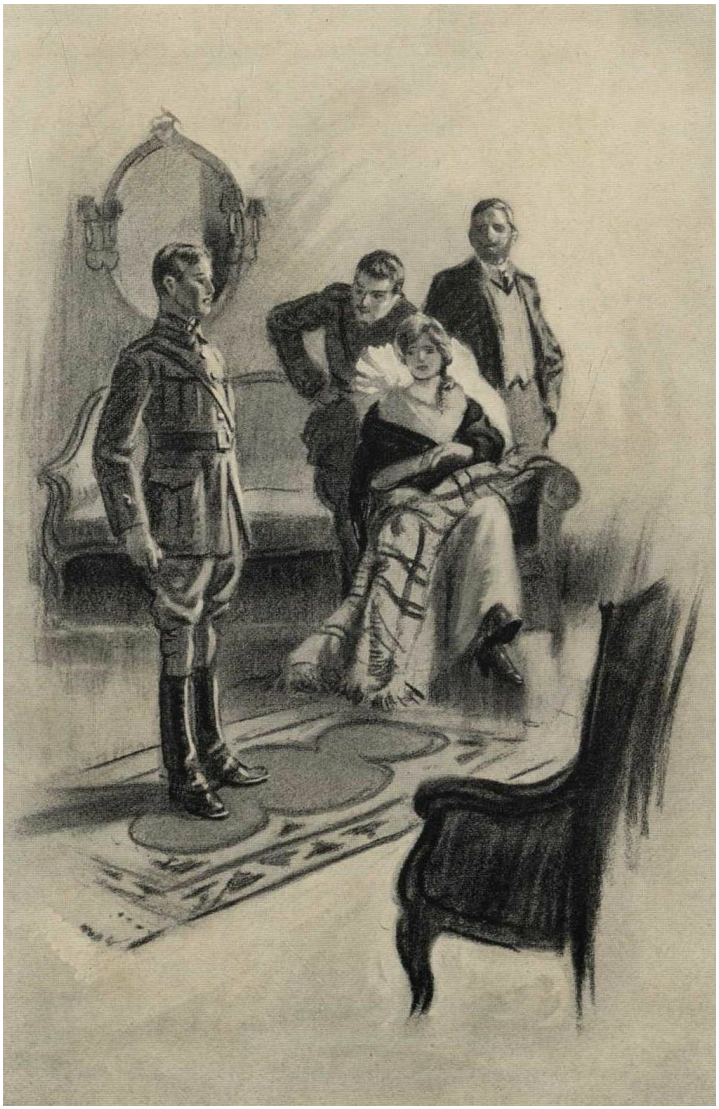
He was silent, his hand on Norah's hair.

"We'll always have that," she said.

"Yes—always. Only it's a bit hard on you, Norah. You have always been such mates."

Norah found his hand and put her check against it.

"We're all mates—always—no matter what happens," she said. "Don't you worry about me, Daddy—I've got my job."



"He brought his heels together with a click."

From Billabong to London] [*Page* 310

THE END.

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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 *From Billabong to London* by Mary Grant Bruce]