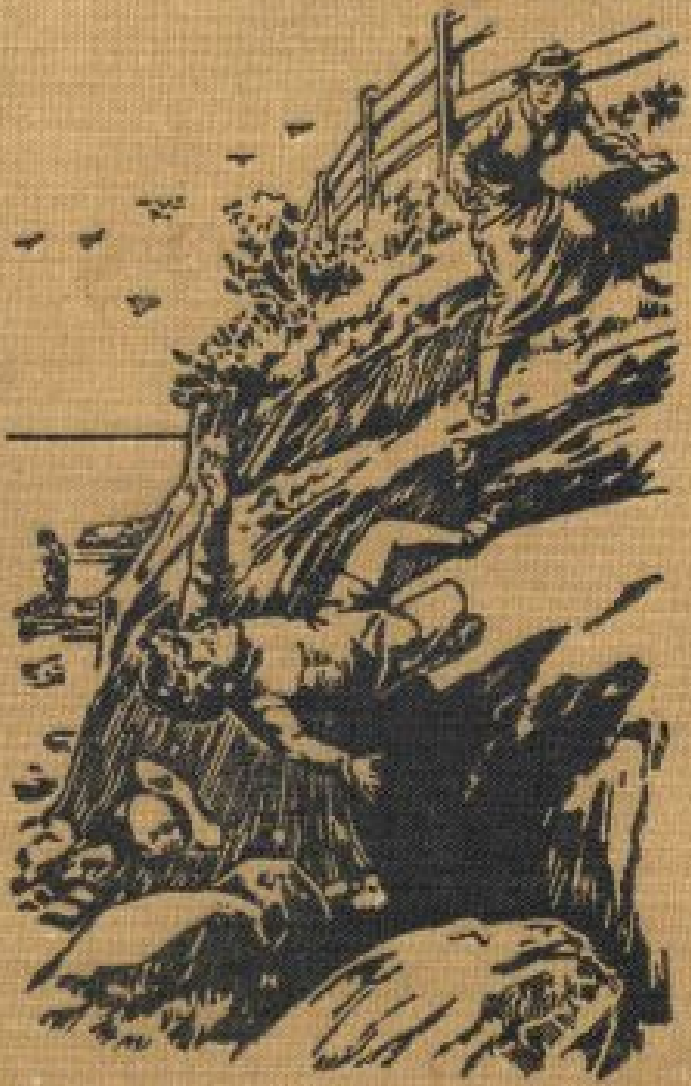
SON OF BILLABONG



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STORIES BY

MARY GRANT BRUCE

Published by
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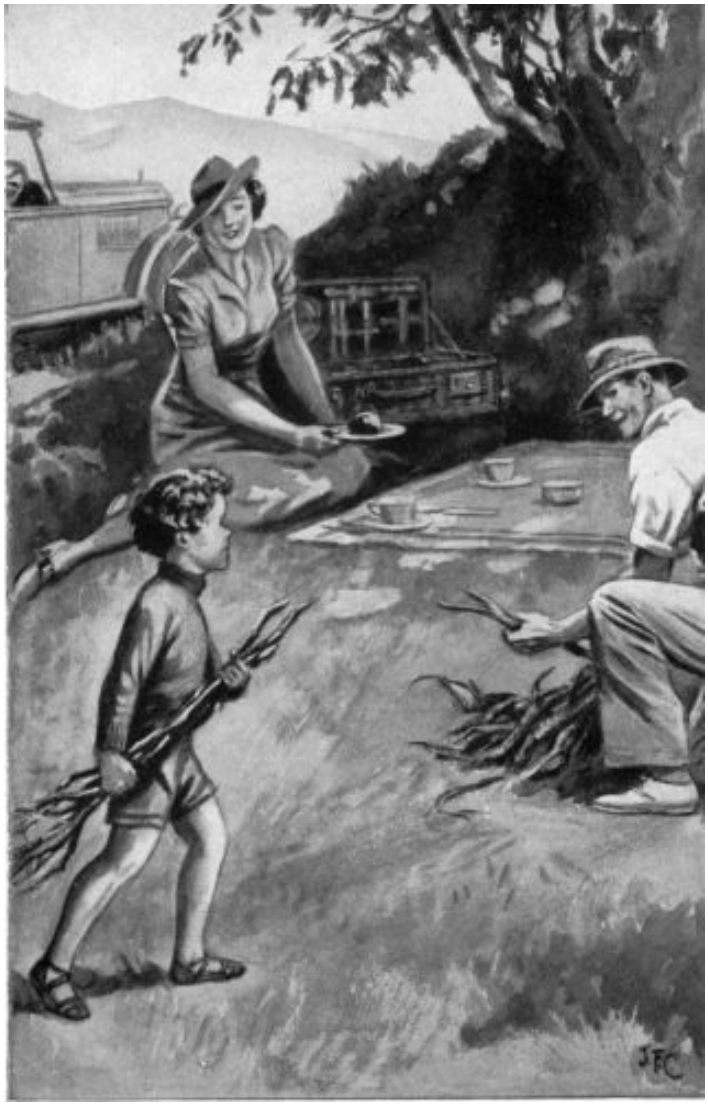
"These books should find a place amongst English stories; they bring a touch of something strange and yet akin to their readers here, and may help to awaken new interests."—*The Times.*

JIM AND WALLY
NORAH OF BILLABONG
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON
A LITTLE BUSH MAID
CAPTAIN JIM
DICK LESTER OF KURRAJONG
BACK TO BILLABONG
BILLABONG'S DAUGHTER
MATES AT BILLABONG
THE HOUSES OF THE EAGLE
THE TOWER ROOMS
BILLABONG ADVENTURERS
GOLDEN FIDDLES
THE HAPPY TRAVELLER
BILL OF BILLABONG
ROAD TO ADVENTURE
BILLABONG'S LUCK
BILLABONG GOLD
CIRCUS RING
SEAHAWK
WINGS ABOVE BILLABONG
TOLD BY PETER
SON OF BILLABONG



"The midday halt was always a long one."
(Chapter XI.)
Son of Billabong] [*Frontispiece*

SON OF BILLABONG

BY

MARY GRANT BRUCE

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Son of Billabong

CHAPTER I

THE STRANGE WOMAN

THE Court was crowded. It was not often that a case of assault and cattle-stealing, coupled with an attempt at another robbery, came to enliven the Victorian country town, and each of the benches available for spectators was tightly packed. Already the air was close and heavy. The spectators bore it as best they could, looking forward hopefully to cool drinks at the break for lunch.

In more than one way the district considered that this was not an ordinary case. To begin with, it was associated with a new discovery of a gold-field, in itself a thrilling matter in Australia; already hundreds of men were digging feverishly in the wild hill-country where the first lucky man had carelessly kicked over a stone with a gleaming yellow streak some months before, and had since found enough to warrant big headlines in the city papers.

Then, too, the place was well known. The reef had been found on the outlying parts of Billabong Station, and David Linton of Billabong and his family had a popularity that went far beyond their own district. It was a happy station, where there were old hands who had worked half a lifetime for David Linton and were valued as friends: where new-comers met a friendliness that made them settle down with every intention of becoming old hands. There were no labour troubles on Billabong. The shearers who visited it yearly knew its reputation; knew they were coming to a place where they found a welcome, with everything arranged for smooth working. Throughout the district the name of Linton stood for justice and kindliness; which meant far more to the owners of Billabong than the fact that a gold-mine had been discovered on the station.

Gold, however, brings very different types of men in its train. The rush had

scarcely affected the main station of Billabong, since its hill-country was more easily reached from the north. There was no prospect of a find to tempt diggers into the fertile plains where the Lintons' sheep and cattle still grazed undisturbed. But into the hills had poured all sorts and conditions of men, good and bad: among them some who dreamed only of getting rich quickly, and had few scruples as to how it should be done. Trouble had come; and the man standing in the dock to-day was learning, much against his will, that to make trouble is not always a paying game.

He was a huge man, singularly unpleasant in appearance. Dirk hair grew low on his forehead; his fierce and brutal face was marked by the scars and the deformed ear that were the badges of a prize-fighter. Someone had likened him to a gorilla, and no description could have fitted him better. He slouched against the rail of the dock, looking savagely round the crowded benches; bitter hatred in his eyes as he stared at the three tall men of Billabong, David Linton and his son and son-in-law.

They did not look at him at all. The trial was necessary, the prisoner richly deserved all that was coming to him; but the whole affair was hateful to them, and they longed for it to be over. The long-drawn-out process of swearing-in the jury had been wearying, and the opening speeches and preliminary evidence seemed to take a needlessly long time. "Pity they can't push things along a bit and put the poor brute out of his misery," muttered Jim Linton, as one constable after another clumped in and out of the witness-box. "Can't imagine how people find any fun in crowding in to stare at this sort of thing."

"Queer taste," agreed Wally Meadows. "I'd feel better if I could smoke." He fingered his pipe longingly.

There were few women in the Court: none at all from Billabong. Here and there a brightly-coloured hat broke the lines of bareheaded men; their owners looking rather self-conscious and stiff. Only two among the feminine spectators were too deeply interested in the proceedings to care who looked at them. They were strangers to each other, but chance had put them together in a corner and from time to time they exchanged whispers.

One was a tall, thin woman with a hatchet face and dark eyes that held a twinkle. She was dressed in a faded jumper and riding-breeches, a battered felt hat pulled low on her forehead; so manly, at the first glance, that the constable on duty had been on the point of sternly instructing her to remove her hat in Court. He had checked himself just in time, which perhaps was as well for him, for the masculine-looking lady had a tongue which was no respecter of policemen.

Her neighbour was sturdily built, and had once been pretty. She was still young, but her face was lined and her eyes, set deeply, were haggard and anxious. She gripped her hand-bag as it lay on her knee so that her knuckles

showed white. The thin woman had looked at her curiously when she came in, hurrying as if she feared to be late.

"Not started yet?" the new-comer had said, looking at the empty dock.

"No, but the Judge'll be in pretty soon now."

"Where—where's the prisoner?"

"Oh, they don't bring him along yet. Know anything about him?"

The other had shaken her head. "I'm a stranger here. Just thought I'd look in."

"Well, you picked a good show. I wouldn't miss it for all the tea in China. You've read about it in the papers, of course?"

"Yes. I suppose there's no doubt he did all they said, is there?"

"All, an' a lot more. He's got no defence at all—reg'lar farce tryin' 'im, if you ask me. But I s'pose they've got to: the Law's funny that way. Anyhow, it's a real 'oliday for me to see 'im there. I seen plenty of him on the diggin's, an' the more I seen the less I liked 'im."

The other was silent for a moment, looking down.

"Do you know the . . . the people who got him run in?"

"Know 'em?" ejaculated the thin woman. "You bet I do. They're friends of mine. That's old Mr. Linton over there on the front seat, an' Jim Linton's the big chap on one side of 'im. The dark fellow on the other side is young Meadows, what married 'is daughter. They're real white men, they are—done me many a good turn. An' the two kids are young Bill Blake an' 'is pal; it was them that trapped McGill at the finish. They don't look half scared, do they? They reckoned it was goin' to be a lark to come to Court, but I'll bet they'd be glad to be out of it now. But Bill'll give his evidence all right, or I'll eat me 'at. Plenty of backbone, Bill's got."

"Did—did McGill hurt them?" asked her neighbour, watching the two fresh young faces beside Jim Linton.

"Well, 'e wasn't ezactly gentle with 'em. But they got their own back all right: I reckon 'e's sorry 'e ever met them. There's the chap he really hurt—the ol' Chow over yonder, next to the black fellow. He came close up to killin' ol' Lee Wing, an' that's what got the Lintons real mad. Lee Wing's worked on Billabong for donkey's years, an' they think the world of 'im. He's such a little bit of a chap, too—you'd 'ardly think that even a brute like McGill would 'ave gone for 'im, twice 'is size as 'e is, would you?"

"I suppose he must have been sort of desperate."

"Desperate bad-tempered, if you ask *me*," said the thin woman scornfully. "He'd had the father of a lickin' from Jim Linton the day before, an'——"

Her neighbour started. "Linton *licked* him?"

"Good an' plenty," stated the thin woman, with great enjoyment. "I seen it all. Fought foul, too, McGill did, but that didn't 'elp 'im. Why, you look real

shocked, missus. You take my word, 'e deserved all 'e got."

"Oh, I just didn't know," stammered the other. She stared at Jim Linton with hard eyes. "What did *he* want to go fighting for?"

"Lor', 'e 'ad enough reason——" the thin woman began hotly. She fell silent suddenly as a stir in the Court heralded the entrance of the Judge.

The strange woman had watched restlessly for the appearance of the prisoner. Her eyes dwelt on him with a kind of hungry questioning; but when he looked her way he showed no hint of recognition, glancing aside indifferently. He had swaggered in, defiantly careless of being the centre of attraction to the crowd: possibly even enjoying it.

"Narsty-lookin' beggar, isn't he?" whispered the thin woman.

Her neighbour did not seem to hear. She was looking intently at the Judge, as if wondering what chances of mercy lay behind his keen face. She was very tired. In a half-dream she listened to the opening stages.

Counsel for the prosecution stated his case. The accused had come to the diggings with a number of men he had gathered, to try their luck. They had worked claims, but had found no gold. Food had been difficult to get; there was a long and rough journey to the nearest township. Young cattle were running in the hills, close at hand; a temptation to men who scarcely saw fresh meat. The Lintons had suspected for some time that calves were being killed by McGill's party, and at length McGill himself had been caught red-handed. A Billabong stockman, a trusted aboriginal tracker, had been detailed to watch him. This man would swear that he followed the accused in the scrub and had seen him shoot and kill a calf and skin the carcase. Many witnesses had been present when he brought the meat back to his camp.

Counsel for the prosecution paused and drank a little water—possibly reflecting that his wig and gown were trials that no man should be expected to endure in a stuffy Court on a hot day.

"Even for this," he continued, "the owners of the stolen cattle were not willing to call in the police and make a charge against the accused. They contented themselves, after a . . . er . . . somewhat heated interview, with warning the offending party off the diggings. Most of the men left next day. But the jury will be told that the accused did not go with his men: that instead, he visited the headquarters camp by stealth and made a brutal attack on one Lee Wing, an old Chinese employed as cook by Mr. David Linton, causing him grievous bodily harm; and that, leaving him unconscious, he made a desperate attempt to possess himself of gold belonging to the original finders of the reef; having, by threats, violence and intimidation, compelled two young boys to lead him to its place of concealment in a cave. But for the adroitness of these boys he would probably have succeeded in his project."

The faces of the pair beside Jim Linton became extremely red at this point.

They looked down modestly, wishing themselves anywhere else—even back at school.

Counsel's voice droned on without any change of expression. He sat down presently: policemen gave evidence as to arrest of the accused, with the usual formalities. Proof of ownership of the cattle and the gold was given by a short, fair-haired young fellow, Robert Rainham. The thin woman nudged her neighbour as he left the witness-box.

"He's English—sort of partner of the Lintons. Jim Linton's goin' to marry his sister next week. Good sort, Bob Rainham—he's the chap as found gold first of all."

It did not interest the stranger. She looked at the Billabong party resentfully, glancing from them to the hulking figure in the dock. They all looked so sure of themselves, so prosperous: and he was an outcast, without a friend in Court. Even the foxy-faced little lawyer for the defence looked as if he did not like his job. He had had no questions to put to the witnesses so far. But as Jim Linton's name was called he looked more interested.

Jim towered in the box, almost as big a man as the prisoner. He gave his evidence in a quiet voice, making no attempt to enlarge on the accused's doings. Yes, they had for some time put up with the cattle-stealing which they knew was going on. They were all very busy on their claims; it did not seem worth while to take steps. It was only when it became more daring that they had decided that something must be done about it, and had put a black stockman on to track the accused. He was able to report the shooting of a beast in time to enable them to meet McGill at his camp when he rode in with the meat in a sack.

"Did he admit his guilt?"

"No. He said he had shot a wallaby."

"I presume," said Counsel, "that it is not possible, to confuse the carcases of a calf and a wallaby?"

"Quite impossible," said Jim gravely. There was a sound of suppressed laughter from the body of the Court.

"You had the meat examined before witnesses?"

"Yes. Most of the men on the diggings were there."

"Did the accused give any explanation?"

"None at all."

"And you did not threaten prosecution?"

"No. It did not seem worth while. I warned him and his gang that they had better clear out, and the men did so next morning, leaving McGill behind."

The thin woman muttered something under her breath impatiently. She was clearly disappointed. The stranger, trying to catch what she said, could only hear, "Wot about the fight?" in despairing tones. She gave her attention to the

witness again.

"We found Lee Wing, our old cook, unconscious at our camp," Jim was saying. "He must have been quite alone when he was attacked. He was very badly knocked about—kicked, as well as beaten. It was some time before we could bring him round. When he was able to speak he told us that McGill had surprised him half-asleep."

"Welly bad luck, that!" said Lee Wing from his seat—and was hushed into silence by a shocked policeman.

"Where did you find the accused?"

"In the undergound passage leading to the small cave where we stowed washed gold. He remained there until the police arrived."

Counsel intimated that he had no further questions to ask. Counsel for the defence had only one.

"Can you swear that so far as your personal knowledge goes the accused had entered the caves for the sole purpose of stealing gold?"

"Certainly not," said Jim blandly. "He *might* have gone there either for concealment or for exploration!"

Derisive laughter in Court was sternly checked, and Jim left the box. The thin woman showed exasperation.

"Why, they haven't brought out half they could!" she whispered. "Not a single word about the fight, or when ol' Lee Wing caught him tryin' to rob their sluice-boxes! Clean daft, I call it——"

Walter Meadows was called. The little lawyer looked at him keenly. Younger than Jim Linton, more boyish, and he looked strained and tired: easier to handle than the big, grave fellow who had settled thankfully into his seat beside little Bill Blake. His evidence was mainly in support of his brother-in-law's; he had been with him when the battered and senseless form of Lee Wing had been found. Wally believed that his ordeal was over. But Counsel for the defence stood up, ready for warfare.

"I should like to ask this witness if he can deny that before the alleged cattle-stealing he was on bad terms with the accused."

Wally frowned.

"I did not consider myself on any terms whatever with him."

"Yet you visited his camp and acted with violence and threats?"

"Not with violence. I told him what I thought of him for offensive conduct."

"Possibly my client might have had something to say to you on the same score. I suggest that almost from the time he came to the diggings there was a deliberate attempt on the part of you and your friends to stir up bad feeling against him."

"That's not true!" said Wally hotly.

The little man smiled unpleasantly.

"Is it true that when my client visited your home and asked for food, relying on the customary Bush hospitality to strangers, your wife refused it?"

"My wife had excellent reasons for what she did," Wally retorted, his dark face flushing.

"But she *did* refuse it?"

"Certainly. He was offensive——"

"It is so natural for wealthy land-owners to consider any poor man offensive when he may be suspected of wanting a share in their gold-field," said the lawyer gently. "Were you present when he was turned hungry from your doorstep?"

"No, but——"

"Then of course you have no direct evidence to give on the point——"

Counsel for the prosecution protested hotly. The Judge ruled that the questions had nothing to do with the case against the accused, and directed the Counsel for the defence to keep to the matter in hand. This the Counsel for the defence, having gained exactly what he wished, was quite ready to do. He fixed his eyes on Wally again, realizing happily that he was extremely angry.

"You were with your brother-in-law when the Chinese was found unconscious. Have you any proof that the accused was the man who attacked him?"

"Why, Lee Wing's own word, of course."

"Yet Lee Wing was half asleep, we are told, when he was rushed. And he is an old man, easily able to make a mistake in his alarm and confusion."

"Lee Wing is not the man to feel either," said Wally flatly.

"That remains to be proved. Moreover, he is your servant, very ready to suspect the one man who had fallen out with you."

"But they exchanged words before McGill knocked him down."

"With anyone present?"

"How could there be? Lee Wing was alone."

"Then there is only the word of a Chinese against the word of a white man ——"

"I'd take Lee Wing's word against a hundred white men's," exclaimed Wally furiously.

"But a jury of white men might not be so ready," the suave voice gave back. "Does it occur to you that a good deal of the evidence alleged against my client depends on the statements of an aged Chinese and a totally illiterate blackfellow? And that both are the devoted servants of those who accuse him?"

"Yes—and as honest as the day," retorted Wally. "And there is more evidence than that."

“Can you supply it?”

“No. You’ll get that later.”

“Let us hope for the sake of the prosecution that it will be more convincing. I have no further questions to put to you.”

Wally went back to his seat, seething with anger: conscious of having let his temper get the better of him and bewildered at the way in which he had been handled. Somehow or other the fellow had contrived to create an atmosphere of suspicion against them: he had dragged his wife into it as if he knew that none of them would willingly let Norah appear in Court to give evidence. Who would have dreamed that he would bring up that matter of McGill’s visit to Billabong?

He glanced across the Court-room and met the eyes of a woman he did not know. She was deadly pale, but the eyes blazed at him with such an intensity of hatred that he forgot the lawyer in his astonishment. He knitted his brows, staring at her questioningly. Why on earth should a perfect stranger look at him like that? Then the fierce eyes drooped, and the woman slumped forward and slid to the floor.

There was mild commotion in the Court. The thin woman was bending over the stranger, trying to help her. The Judge gave a sharp order: two constables moved quickly and the unconscious woman was carried out. The Judge glanced at his watch.

“The Court is certainly very hot,” he remarked—and adjourned for lunch.

CHAPTER II

THE RETURN OF THE WITNESSES

DAVID LINTON had prudently arranged that his party should have lunch in a private room in their hotel; and there his daughter Norah and her friend Tommy Rainham awaited their menfolk with what patience they could command. This, in Norah's case, was not a large amount, since she knew her husband's profound distaste for making his appearance in a witness-box, and had grave doubts as to whether the nervousness of Bill Blake and his ally Dick Yorke would not deprive them of all power of speech. Tommy, more placid by nature, and possessing a firm belief that things come out well if given time enough, was comparatively free from anxiety. She knitted a sock calmly, assuring Norah that it was much too soon to watch from the window.

"Well, you never know," said Norah, continuing to look out. "I suppose the Judge, or whoever he is, stops proceedings when he happens to feel hungry. It would be lovely to find that they've finished up the whole thing before lunch, wouldn't it? Then we could get back to Billabong to-night."

Tommy shook her head doubtfully.

"Lovely; but Jim said he didn't think it could possibly happen. All the preliminary part takes so long. Norah, wouldn't you have liked to be there?"

"N-no—I think not," said Norah. "I should only be terribly jumpy, and that would spread to Wally and he would probably get very annoyed when he was cross-examined. And I'd rather not see the Gorilla in the dock. I don't like the idea of docks—too much like cages for human beings. I think criminals should not be present to be stared at while they're being tried. Much kinder to keep them in a cell and let the verdict be taken to them by a nice fat policeman."

"I should have liked very much to be there!" said Tommy. "It would be very interesting, and one need not have given the Gorilla more than a passing glance. Not that I have any pity for him! He is just a nasty piece of work."

"To look at you, so yellow-haired and little and all that, and so very busy with the heel of that old sock, one would never dream of the depths within you, Tommy," said Norah, laughing. "Did you tell Jim?"

"No, he would have thought me bloodthirsty. And I suppose I am—when I think of Lee Wing, and of the boys in the cave with the Gorilla. And of the day when he found you and Davie alone."

"And the day he tried to knock Jim out?"

"No. Jim is large, and he can look after himself. That was just man to man, and Jim came out on top. But the other things are quite different, so I would

have enjoyed the trial. But Jim says women ought to keep out of Courts, so I was meek."

"Will you always be meek with Jim, I wonder?"

"No—only now and then. One has to choose one's moments of meekness. Look out of the window, Sister Anne, and see if anyone is coming."

"Not a soul," said Norah disgustedly. She pulled back the heavy maroon hotel curtains with an impatient rattle of their wooden rings. "These abominations smell as if they had hung here for twenty years without being shaken once. Oh, I do hope poor old Bill isn't quivering under some stern lawyer's eye! We never thought the Gorilla would trouble about having a lawyer to defend him. It makes things so much more complicated—and it isn't as if he had the slightest chance of getting off."

"No, but Jim says a lawyer may be able to wangle a shorter sentence for him, if he's clever enough," Tommy answered. "I should think it would need a very great deal of cleverness, though."

"Mountains of it," agreed Norah. "I suppose I'm all wrong, but sometimes I wish he had managed to get away altogether. The time before a wedding ought to be so jolly, instead of having this hateful trial mixed up with it, and waiting for months for it to be held."

"We shall forget all about the trial after to-day," Tommy said cheerfully. "And the Gorilla will be much better under lock and key than roaming about looking for somebody else to devour——"

"They're coming, Tommy!"

The sock went to the floor and Tommy was beside her at the window. A crowd was leaving the Court House. But it was some time before the Billabong party came into view. The girls watched closely as they drew nearer.

"They look rather grave, Norah."

"Yes, and Wally is angry about something," added Wally's wife, studying as much of his face as could be seen under a wide felt hat. "And Dick and Bill are marching in silence. It looks bad."

"It does," agreed Tommy. "Perhaps it is only the effort of being in blue suits and white collars and their best school caps, instead of the most ancient shirts and shorts they can find. Bill told me this morning that it was awful to have to wear Melbourne clothes in the country."

"Well, you can hardly call it a country visit for them this time, poor lads; arriving last night and rushing back to Melbourne as soon as the trial is over. It may make them feel very important amongst the other small boys at school, but I suppose that only means that some bigger boy will smack their heads for swanking." Norah sighed. "I wish we could have kept them for a week."

"Oh, they will be back next holidays—unless their long-suffering families make plans for them that don't include Billabong."

"There will be at least two rebels if that happens—and here they come now," said Norah as feet clattered up the stairs. Bill and Dick burst in together.

"The others are washing their hands, but we didn't bother. We haven't given evidence yet, but Jim and Wally have, and Bob too, and there's a perfect little beast of a lawyer. My word, Norah, you ought to have heard him badgering Wally!"

"Ought I?" asked Norah faintly, her worst fears realized. "How did Wally get on, Bill?"

"Well, he got as wild as a meat-axe now and then, but he gave the sweep a few good ones. Mean little wretch—he actually brought you into it, Norah. Like his cheek!"

"*Me?* But how on earth——?"

"Oh, tried to make out you'd all got a down on McGill from the first, and that you'd refused him food. My word, he was cunning, wasn't he, Dick? Never said anything about it to Jim, just saved it up for poor old Wally. He and McGill must have planned it all out between them."

Bill ran out of breath. His face was scarlet, his red hair tousled by the violence with which he had flung off his cap.

"I'm scared stiff about what he's going to do with Bill and me," said Dick. "He's the sort of little swine that would make you say your own grandmother was a murderer!"

"Well, I'm not scared of him," Bill shouted. "I bet he's not going to make me say anything about Norah or anyone else, 'cept Lee Wing and old McGill." The door opened, and he flung round. "Jim, he can't ask me——" He broke off, seeing only a bewildered waiter with a large tray.

"I knocked twice, Madam, but you didn't hear me," said the new-comer apologetically. "The gentlemen told me to hurry with the lunch."

"Yes, of course," stammered Norah. There was a soft giggle in the background from Tommy. Then the rest of the party trooped in. Wally's usually cheerful expression was lacking; he glowered at the back of the hurrying waiter as if he were a personal enemy. But Jim was his calm self: the little smile he gave Norah was comforting. They restrained their impatience until the door had finally closed behind the waiter and his assistant.

"Do tell us what has happened."

"Nothing much at all," Jim said; "not enough to make us let lunch get cold. There's not much time, so we'll have to talk with our mouths full. It's just that McGill has got a sharp little lawyer from Sydney, and he's trying to work up the idea that his poor unfortunate client has been badly treated by a lot of unfeeling capitalists."

"But he can't hope to prove that he isn't guilty, surely, Jim?"

"No, of course not. That's out of the question. All he's trying to do is to

create some kind of a defence that might lessen his sentence. Mustard, please, Bill."

"It's only annoying," said David Linton, "because he has dragged in your name, Norah. He might not have done it if you had been in Court; I expect he had worked all that out with McGill. With you not there it was plain that you weren't to be called as a witness, so he went ahead. This is how he put it." He sketched the cross-examination briefly, while the girls listened in blank amazement.

"But it's *too* funny——" began Norah.

"It wasn't one bit funny," Wally rapped out, furiously. "He led me on, never giving me a chance to say what I could have said. And of course I was in a hole, because whatever happened I wasn't going to have you put into that beastly witness-box. He'd like nothing better than the chance of tormenting you there; but he's not going to get it."

"But I don't think I'd mind in the least," said his wife. "We can't let him get away with a slander on Billabong." She smiled at him. "That seems to me to be the only thing that matters."

"Well, I feel that way too," said Jim. "I know no one in the district would believe it, but this thing is going to be in the Melbourne papers. It isn't good enough. But we've been talking to the lawyer who's handling the prosecution, and he doesn't reckon there would be any need to call you as a witness. He wants to recall me this afternoon and let me make a statement."

"Gosh, I hope you'll give the other man beans, Jim!" uttered Bill fervently.

"I'll give him all he wants. But our man thinks you ought to be in Court, Norah, just in case they ask for your evidence. He doesn't think they will, but there's a chance. And Wally is like the nigger who no 'gree for dat."

Wally, who had eaten scarcely anything, pushed his plate away.

"No, I should think I wouldn't. To have Norah standing up there before a gaping crowd with that appalling little swine twisting every word she said ——"

"But he wouldn't twist me, Wally. I should be prepared for him, and you weren't; and there would be nothing to hamper me in telling what happened."

"Norah, I couldn't stick it!" he said miserably.

"Well, there are two things I can't stick," she said. "One is anything said against Billabong. And the other is that he should get away with having put you in a false position. That makes me really see red, Wally. You were afraid of dragging me into it, but I don't have to be afraid of anything."

"Well, you never would be. But . . ." He flushed deeply. "Lord, I do hate the idea—and I know jolly well what a fool he made of *me*!"

"Not a bit," said David Linton. "You were in a hole, and I consider you managed very well in difficult circumstances. But people who know us might

consider we were really letting Norah down by keeping anything back now."

"That's quite a possibility," said Bob Rainham, speaking for the first time. "And there's another thing—if McGill is not bowled out over this part of the business there's more chance of his getting away with denying that he was the fellow who slogged old Lee Wing."

"Which," said Jim, "is the one and only reason, so far as we're concerned, that McGill is in the dock to-day."

"Yes, you're right there," admitted Wally, after a moment of unpleasant thought. "That's a point that hadn't struck me. McGill's got to be shown up for what he is. Well, I give in, Nor, if you really don't mind facing the music."

"Not a bit," she said. "How lucky it is that I've had no time to brood over it—at the moment I feel ready for anything."

"Are you ready for the sweet, sir?" asked the meek voice of the waiter in the doorway. He blinked at the shout of laughter his harmless words brought, and retired hastily.

"Ready even for hotel port-wine-jelly, which it's sure to be," said Norah. "I'm beginning to feel thrilled. And Tommy will have to come to support me beforehand, won't you, Thomas?"

"Oh, there's not the slightest need to bring Tommy into it," Jim said decidedly. "That's out of the question."

"I feel I shall need her," Norah affirmed. "You don't know what it would be like to be without another woman on such an occasion."

"Great Scott, aren't there enough of us to look after you? You," said the bewildered Jim, "who never needed any looking after in your life—until Wally began putting ideas into your head."

"But this is so different. And then, you see," said Norah, feeling her mouth beginning to twitch at the corners, "Tommy has wanted to be there all along."

"Not really, Tommy?" uttered Jim.

"Yes, truly, Jim. Only you seemed to think the idea was so dreadful I didn't like to mention it. But I do like seeing new things; and a trial would be something I had never managed to see." Her blue eyes looked up at him appealingly. Wally gave a chuckle.

"Well, now you know how to keep her happy on the honeymoon, Jimmy. Start her on a good burglary case, and work her up to something out-of-the-way in murder trials. Did you know she had these horrible longings, Bob?"

"She's hidden them from *me*," said Tommy's brother. "I don't believe she had 'em until she came to Australia—it must be associating with you people."

"She's going to be harder to manage than I ever dreamed of," mourned Jim. "What a life I'm booked for!—and only one more carefree week left! And you look much more the sort of person who would swoon delicately in a nasty place like a police-court, Tommy."

“Well, I may do that yet,” she said.

“You may indeed—a woman went and did it most thoroughly this morning,” put in Bob. “Collapsed all in a heap. She was sitting next Mrs. Walker, and Mrs. Walker had to give her first-aid until the police-force removed the body.”

“That was a queer sort of woman, too,” Wally remarked. “I’d been noticing her all the morning. She wasn’t getting the fun out of it that you’re expecting, Tommy; she seemed utterly miserable, even when Mrs. Walker was entertaining her with gay chat. And just before she fainted I saw her looking at me as if she hated my face. Gave me the most awful glare, and flopped over.”

“I don’t suppose she was really aware that she was looking at you,” said Jim. “I’d noticed her too: she struck me as far too ill to be in a stuffy Court. Rum how women will go to that sort of thing—I say, Tommy, I beg your pardon: I suppose I mustn’t say that now!”

“Certainly not,” said she. “I suppose the poor woman was just an earnest student of humanity, like me, and humanity in the mass proved too much for her. Will you stand by to catch me if I swoon, Jim?”

“Not much!” he said. “What’s the police-force for?”

CHAPTER III

FURTHER EVIDENCE

PEOPLE hurried back to the Court House in good time after lunch. Rumours had gone round that McGill's lawyer had been trying to spring surprises; that it was possible that the case was not going to be so easy as it looked. Fresh interest was given to the spectators by the appearance of Norah and Tommy, who sat between David Linton and Wally, looking about them with frank curiosity: careful, when McGill was brought in, to keep their eyes from his direction.

Dick Yorke was unhappy. Bill had impressed on him, walking back from the hotel, that there was nothing to be scared about. Bill had been so fierce that Dick privately wondered if he wasn't a bit scared himself of what the foxy-faced lawyer might do to them.

"Don't you see, you old ass, Dick, we can't go wrong? We've got so little to tell, but it all counts. And we know every word of it. Jim says I'm to be called first—you've only got to stick to every word I say."

"And suppose you forget anything?"

"How on earth can we forget? We've only one story to tell, and each bit fits into another. Bob says the beginning's the worst, until we get used to the sound of our own voices. And we'll have the decent lawyer for that part. By the time McGill's bird begins to ask questions we'll be feeling right as rain."

It had sounded cheering enough then, but Dick wasn't so sure now, sitting in the stuffy Court and looking at the foxy-faced enemy, who showed not the slightest interest in them. To their horror, the counsel for the prosecution came presently and chatted to him in a most friendly manner; after which both boys held the unshakable view that no lawyer was to be trusted a yard.

Then things were beginning again, and the once-respected Counsel was on his feet and asking for permission to recall James Linton: and Jim was in the box looking perfectly unconcerned, while both lawyers squabbled fiercely—the enemy protesting against the reopening of a matter which had already been put aside as having no bearing on the case. Finally the Judge ruled that as accusations of an unfriendly feeling had been made, they might be answered. Jim was asked to state what had occurred between his sister and the accused.

"I think," he said in his slow, pleasant voice, "that the accused is the only man who has ever been refused food at Billabong. And he would not have been refused it if he had asked for it civilly. But he and one of his men came to the house, and unfortunately found my sister alone, except for her little son.

Later our old housekeeper appeared; the rest of us were out in the paddock. The men, and in particular the accused, were rude and threatening; they had not come for a meal, but—in their own words—to have a look round. The accused, however, went further, and ordered my sister insultingly to prepare a meal for them——"

Counsel for the defence broke in, hotly protesting that this had nothing to do with the case in hand.

"The witness may proceed," said the Judge, who was clearly interested. Bill and Dick, having momentarily clutched at each other in dismay, breathed freely again.

"My sister refused. Her child was in her arms; the little fellow had shown that he disliked the accused's manner to his mother. The accused ordered her to give the boy to him, declaring that he would teach him a lesson. He seized his arm to pull him away from her. Fortunately the child's scream was heard by a dog who is devoted to him, and the dog arrived in time to prevent further trouble. Except, that is, for the accused."

A ripple of laughter went round the Court.

"Were you present at any part of this scene?" asked Counsel for the prosecution.

"I arrived in time to find the accused in some confusion. The dog was . . . er . . . attached to his leg."

The emotion that broke out in the benches at this moment had to be sternly repressed. Counsel for the defence, looking sour, rose in his turn.

"Did your sister incite this savage dog to attack the accused?"

"She did not. It was not necessary: the dog knew his duty."

"It seems curious," said the little lawyer with a sneer, "that this story was not ready to be told when the matter was before the Court this morning."

"It was not told because my brother-in-law had no wish to bring his wife into the Court. Moreover, he was not present, so his evidence would only have been hearsay. We saw no reason to mention the incident; it had nothing to do with the charges against the accused. We considered that our dog had punished him, and that ended the matter. But my sister is now in Court, if her evidence is required. And Mrs. Brown, our housekeeper, could be brought to corroborate her statements."

The lawyer sat down, accepting defeat. The Judge referred to his notes and put a question on his own account.

"It has been suggested in previous evidence that your brother-in-law visited the accused's camp and spoke to him with violence. Was that in connection with this incident?"

"Yes. My brother-in-law went alone to their camp when he heard of it, and offered to fight any or all of them."

"Was that challenge accepted?"

"No. The other men seemed unwilling to meet him. The accused, unfortunately, was lame at the time."

"Was his lameness due to the action of your nephew's dog?"

"I think it probable, sir," said Jim gently.

Once more laughter in Court had to be checked. It was doubtful if the Judge's mouth was quite under control. He bent his head over his notes for a moment before looking up sharply.

"There is no need to call further evidence in this matter. Next witness."

Norah drew a long breath of relief. She felt Wally's hand close hard over hers: they smiled at each other. The little lawyer was very far from smiling. He was reflecting bitterly on the pitfalls of acting for a client who kept back vital facts from his legal adviser—but his bitterness was slightly eased by the knowledge that the dog had bitten the client.

Billy, the black stockman of Billabong, was next: and Billy in the witness-box was a problem for any lawyer, since his English, limited at any time, almost deserted him in his hour of need, and he merely gaped at the questions and muttered unintelligibly, casting agonized looks at his employer. Finally the Judge suggested that Mr. Linton might act as interpreter, and Counsel thankfully agreed.

"Billy," said David Linton, quietly. "You remember tracking some fellow shooting calves in the scrub?"

"Plenty mine remember orri', Boss."

"Well, you just tell me about it. You tell true, mind, Billy. Where did you start?"

"Mine start from gold-camp, trackem that pfeller," said Billy, indicating McGill with a contemptuous jerk of his thumb. "Him ride about in scrub long time, mine bin plenty dodge round, walk about, watchem close. Him nebber spot this pfeller—him plenty sulky chap, plenty stupid. Him findem calf longa gully, shootem quick, sit down longa calf an' skinnem, cut 'em up calf quick, takem camp. Mine bin run back camp one-time, tellem Mas' Jim."

"I hope that is clear, sir?" asked Mr. Linton.

"I think I may say that I caught his drift," said the Judge guardedly. "Has the jury been able to understand this part of the evidence?"

The jury consulted together, and the foreman stated that they had understood. He desired to ask if Mr. Linton could guarantee the black witness as a man to be relied on.

"He has been with us over thirty years, and I would trust him with anything on Billabong," said David Linton. "I could bring a dozen witnesses to swear to his character."

Even the Counsel for the defence shrank from dealing further with Billy,

and he was allowed to go. Old Lee Wing took his place, a small, broad-shouldered figure, his yellow face placid. He told his story quietly. He had been resting after dinner at the camp near the caves, waking up suddenly to find McGill near him. McGill threatened to kill him if he called out. No, he did not call—not because of McGill, but because he knew the little boys were in the cave, and he was afraid they would come out and get hurt. McGill was very angry with everybody, and said he was going to have the last laugh. He shook him and dragged him about: then he knocked him down. Lee Wing did not know anything after that until he found Mas' Jim and Mas' Wally looking after him.

"Can you swear that it was the accused and not some other man?" asked Counsel for the defence.

"I swear *that*, all li'. No other man's so big—not even Mas' Jim."

"Was there any other man who was not friendly to you?"

"No. All camp welly fliendly with Lee Wing." He smiled. "Any digger sick, Boss lettee me cally um soup."

A large digger at the back of the Court was here understood to remark "You bet he did," but was instantly suppressed.

"Had the accused any special reason for attacking you?"

"Welly good leason." For an instant the slanting brown eyes were fixed on the man in the dock. There was indeed a cause for making McGill long to hit Lee Wing's head whenever he could safely do so, but at the moment the last thing he wanted was to hear it detailed in Court. He quailed visibly under the steady gaze.

"Look at me, please, not at the accused," said the lawyer sharply. "What was that reason?"

"Me cave-guard. Evelyone else away at shaft. S'pose me see him go cave, me makee hollible shindy, evelyone come one-time. Muchee more better for him he bash me. Keepee me quiet."

"Did you make any resistance?"

"Whaffo?" said Lee Wing, with a shrug. "Him top-size bigger. Me watchee his eyes, dlop back as him hit, all-same not get quite killee." The thick slow voice made every broken word clear; there was no listener who could not picture the giant towering over him, see the great fist driving into his face. Counsel for the defence regretted that he had asked the question. He sat down.

"Call Percival Blake."

Bill had not expected that, and it shook him badly. The hated name of Percival might have been left out, he felt; even if mistaken godfathers and godmothers had saddled him with it, to Billabong he was just Bill. His cheeks matched his hair in redness as he marched across to the box. Also his heart was pounding curiously, and there was an unpleasant dryness in his mouth. Would

he be able to speak at all? Then he caught Jim's eyes. Jim was looking at him steadily, reassuringly, and the eyes were smiling.

"Your name?"

"Percival Blake." Beastly to have to say it right out in front of everyone: he managed little more than a whisper.

"Age?"

"Twelve."

"Do you know the nature of an oath?"

"Well, rather!" said Bill, with memories of bullock-drivers and shearing-sheds. He saw Jim's mouth twitch: everyone was laughing. Gosh, was he going to make a fool of himself from the start? He pulled himself together with a violent effort, staring at his questioner.

Counsel for the prosecution was kind: so was the Judge. They might almost have had boys of their own. They let him tell his story his own way, without a lot of fool questions. That wasn't so bad, once his tongue began to feel that it belonged to him again.

"Dick Yorke and I were in the little cave way back in the hill where the gold was kept—there's a long twisty passage leading out to the big front cave. It's got a big gap in the floor in one place, with two planks for a bridge. We had two torches and one got smashed, so we came back to get another—there's always a lot kept in the front cave. We're never allowed to be in the inner cave without two torches, in case a battery conks out. It's black dark in there.

"So we came out into the big cave, and McGill was there, and he grabbed us. He said we needn't yell, 'cause Lee Wing couldn't hear us if we did. He said, 'He won't move for a long while.' He twisted our wrists and said he'd deal with us one at a time unless we showed him where the gold was hidden. So I said I'd show him. And we got a torch apiece and went back to the little cave. McGill got a bit excited when he saw the bags of gold, and I got my chance to knock his torch out of his hand, and it smashed on the ground and the bulb broke. And Dick and I dodged behind him and beat it for all we were worth back along the passage."

He glanced at McGill. The eyes that met his were so savage that it was a relief to look back quickly at the Judge.

"Your action left the accused in complete darkness, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He came after us, but he only had matches, and they're not much good in those places. We scooted to the gap in the floor, and when we got across we pulled the planks over to our side so's he couldn't cross it. We ran on a bit and waited till he showed up, and we held our torches so's he could only see our faces and yelled out to warn him about the gap."

"Could he have jumped it?"

Bill grinned broadly.

"Oh, yes, easy—if he'd had the pluck. But he couldn't see very well by match-light, and we told him the rock was cracked at the edge, and might give under him. It might, too," he added reflectively; "he's a good weight."

"Go on."

"I . . . I don't think there's any more, sir. Oh, we talked a bit, and he offered us a fiver if we'd put the bridge back. So we said what we thought of *that*, and we cleared out, and he just stayed there. We went like smoke to see what he'd done to Lee Wing, and he was just coming round, and Jim and Wally were giving him brandy. That's all, sir."

Counsel for the prosecution remarked that he had no questions to ask this witness. Counsel for the defence stood up. He made an attempt to shake Bill's evidence over the words used by the accused about Lee Wing.

"Did the accused say definitely that he had hurt the Chinese? Be careful how you answer."

"No," said Bill, reddening. "He said Lee Wing wouldn't hear us, no matter how we yelled. And that couldn't mean anything except that he was knocked out."

"You are not here to tell us what anything could or could not mean. We want facts. I suggest that you were ready to jump to the conclusion that the accused had hurt him."

"So would anyone be who knew McGill," the boy gave back.

"Ah—then you *did* jump to the conclusion. But that is not evidence. On your own showing, no admission was made by the accused."

"Yes, there was. He said Lee Wing wouldn't move for a long time."

"That is no proof that the accused was the man who made him incapable of moving. How many more conclusions did you jump to?"

"I never jumped to any," muttered Bill sulkily.

"Did you not? What proof have you that the accused meant to steal the gold?"

Bill gaped at him.

"Why—why, what else was he doing there?"

"You are here to answer questions, not to ask them. What proof have you?"

"*Well*——!" gasped Bill. Words failed him: he could only stare at his tormentor helplessly.

"Just so. I suggest that there is something a little too good about this story of yours. Do you expect the Court to believe that you had all your course of action planned out—to strike the torch out of the accused's hand and contrive to trap him?"

Bill's head went up.

"Yes, of course. Ages ago."

"What does that mean?" rapped out the lawyer.

"Well—wouldn't *you*? That's my own private cave for playing smugglers in, and bushrangers and things: I've thought and thought of the things I could do if ever I got stuck up in there. Just for a game, like thinking what you'd do if you heard burglars in a house. And of course the only thing when you aren't very strong is to trap 'em in the dark somehow." Bill's voice was growing louder and angrier. "There's never any light in that cave 'cept torches or hurricane lanterns, and lanterns would be pretty hard, so I always planned it out with torches. And it just worked out like my game, so there!"

The Court roared. Even stern policemen were helpless for a moment. The Judge dropped his notes, dived for them, and was some time before he found them—reappearing with a rather flushed face. When order was restored it was seen that Counsel for the defence had sat down, desiring nothing further of the witness. Bill retired, redder than ever.

Dick, entering the box with his heart in his shoes, found himself let off lightly, since his story merely confirmed that of his chum in every detail. There were no more witnesses. Speeches by the lawyers followed, one side driving home all the evidence, the other struggling manfully to prove that his client was an ill-used man. The Judge summed up; the jury retired. They were not long absent, returning with a verdict that surprised nobody—"Guilty."

Applause broke out among the rows at the back—to be silenced by the majesty of the Law. McGill, his face set in savage lines, stared at the floor while the Judge spoke. His speech was mercifully short. It laid some stress on the prisoner's previous record as shown by the police. It was not a pretty record. The verdict of the crowd was that he got off easily now with a sentence of five years' penal servitude.

. . . . . .

"Well, thank goodness that's over!" said Jim in heartfelt accents.

They were back in the sitting-room at the hotel. In contrast to the dreariness of lunch it seemed quite festive now: even the dusty maroon curtains had ceased to offend Norah. Tea was ready on the table: they gathered round, suddenly discovering that they were hungry. Norah was busy at the tea-pot.

"I feel quite young again," she said. "This horrible trial has been a weight on my mind for months. Now we'll just forget all about it. Bill, do look after yourself and Dick and eat a huge tea. It will be late before you get home, and I don't think either of you ate much lunch."

"Well, we had three goes of port-wine-jelly, anyhow," said Bill.

She wrinkled her nose. "Did you like that stuff as much as all that?"

"No, it was foul. But we thought port was the sort of stuff to buck us up

before we gave evidence!"

"My poor blessed lambs!" she said. "Why didn't I guess! Bill, dear, all the port in that compound came out of a packet."

"Of glue," added Tommy solemnly.

"Well, how were we to know? Anyway, we both felt bucked." He hesitated. "At least, I thought I did, but not in my tummy."

"You wouldn't," Jim said. "Three goes!" He regarded the heroes with admiration. "All the same, something bucked you, old man: you got through your show all right."

"That lawyer-chap was a beast," said Bill. "He made me feel like nothing on earth for a bit. It's an awful feeling when you don't know how he's going to turn the least little word you say inside out, and you haven't got time to think up an answer properly."

"It's all that," said Wally in heartfelt tones.

"Well, he had a hard row to hoe," remarked Mr. Linton. "Few lawyers can have had less chance of saving a client's skin. I suppose he just grasped at anything he could think of. McGill must be sorry now that he wasted his money on employing him. Possibly he has friends who put up the money—he never struck us as having much himself, did he?"

"Well, he's got a fiver, anyhow," put in Dick. "The one we wouldn't take."

"Fivers go a terribly short distance with lawyers," Bob said. "By the way, I was talking to Mrs. Walker as we came out of the Court House—she's in deep gloom because McGill only got five years, but then, she would be. She has an idea that the woman who sat beside her this morning, the one who fainted, you know, has something to do with McGill."

"Well, I suppose he has belongings somewhere," observed Mr. Linton. "But I don't envy them. They ought to have a nice rest for five years now." He looked at his watch. "You and Dick haven't much time, Bill. Are your things ready?"

"Just about," said Bill, swallowing half a cake in a gulp. "We'll get 'em."

They all piled into the big Billabong car, Jim at the wheel. The station was not far away: people were hurrying through the entrance. On the platform Dick and Bill espied the foxy-faced lawyer, suit-case in hand. They hastily removed their belongings to a distant spot.

"Catch me travelling in the same carriage as that blighter!" stated Bill.

"I fancy he will be feeling the same thing," said Tommy. "I don't believe he liked you, Bill."

"He's not much better than McGill, if you ask me," retorted Bill. "There she comes, Dick! Let's grab an empty carriage if we can."

They did so, and leaned out of the windows, glaring fiercely at any would-be traveller who came near. None paused: all were travellers who preferred a

peaceful journey.

"Good-bye, everyone. It's been ripping fun—in spots."

"Good luck at school, both of you. Come back next holidays."

"Rather! Wish we could be at your wedding, Jim. It's jolly mean of you to get married in term time. Can't you make him put it off, Tommy?"

"He's terribly difficult, Bill dear. But we'll be here when you come back."

"You'd just better. Give Davie a pat on the back for me, Norah. Wish I'd seen him."

"He would have liked that too," said Davie's mother. "Queer how he likes you, Bill!"

"Yes, isn't it? But he's got more sense than you'd think—considering who his father is." The red head ducked just too late to save his cap from a long arm.

"You give me back that cap, Wally. It's the only decent one I've got for school to-morrow."

"Take it," said Wally, tossing it in. "I'll deal with you when you come back. Keep your eye on him, Dick—he doesn't behave well on train journeys. Get him to tell you about his first trip to Billabong. It's a sad story."

There was a long whistle from the engine.

"Good-bye, old offsider."

"Good-bye, Jim. 'Bye, everybody. Cheerio!"

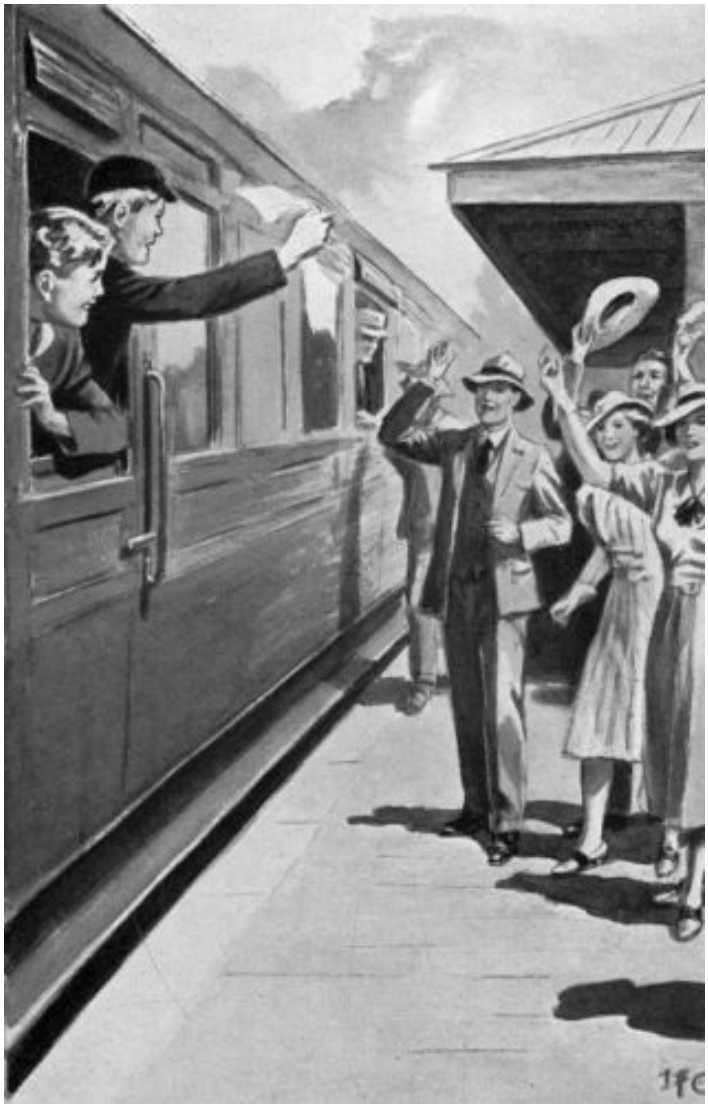
The train drew out slowly, the red head and the fair one framed in the open windows, handkerchiefs waving wildly.

"And that's that," said Jim. "What next? Do we go home to-night, or do we spend it in that most uninteresting hotel, where I slept last night on a feather-bed ten inches too short for me?"

"Is it too far for you girls?" asked David Linton.

They said eagerly that it was not. Norah murmured something about being expected by Davie, and Tommy appeared ready to sleep cheerfully in the car if need be.

"Well, midnight should see us home," said David Linton with relief. "Let's telephone to Brownie that we're coming, and get on the road."



"The train drew out slowly . . . handkerchiefs waving wildly."
Son of Billabong] [*Chapter III*

CHAPTER IV

IN THE HOSPITAL

THE policemen who carried the fainting woman out of the Court found her a difficult problem to deal with. For one thing, there was no accommodation in the back rooms for insensible people. They laid her upon a bench with a folded tunic under her head, but it did not seem a comfortable couch. They applied what first-aid they could, but she obstinately refused to come round. Perspiring and anxious, they stared at her, wondering what to do next.

"This means a doctor, I reckon," said one. "We'd better look slippy, too, in case she dies on us—she looks queer enough. An' we'll have the sergeant here any minute to know why we aren't back in Court."

"Well, you go and ring up a doctor—I can't go outside without me tunic," said his mate. "And for goodness' sake don't be long—I don't like the look of her."

"O.K. Stand by in case she rolls off the bench. A bump on the floor wouldn't help her much."

She was still unconscious when the doctor arrived. They watched him as he bent over her.

"Do we have to stay, Doc?" one asked plaintively. "We're on duty—an' it's a fair shame to miss the case that's on."

"You needn't worry—the Court's adjourned for lunch," said the doctor. "I may want one of you."

"Well, you'd better stay, Alf, 'cause she's got your tunic," decided the messenger. "I'll go an' get me dinner." He left hurriedly. The shirt-sleeved one sighed.

"Nasty colour, ain't she, Doc? Like a suet pudding. But she's never let go of her bag. I expect she's got the rent in it."

"Do you know who she is?"

"Never set eyes on her before, but she's been in Court all the morning."

"And the air in Court as thick as usual, I suppose?"

"Thicker. Packed to the doors."

"Well, you keep quiet while I listen to her heart, can't you?" demanded the doctor irritably. The young constable raised his eyebrows as if protesting against the injustice of life and wondered when, and if, he was to have any dinner.

She stirred under the doctor's hands and opened her eyes. "Joe," she

muttered.

"Joe's all right. Lie still: you'll be better in a moment." He was busy with a bottle and a tiny glass. "Drink this. Slowly, now—I'll hold your head."

She drank, glad to let her head drop back again. Her eyes closed. The doctor watched her closely, a finger on her pulse.

"Can you tell us where your home is?"

The head moved feebly. "Sydney."

"But where are you staying here?"

"Only . . . only got in this morning. Car."

"Bother the woman, she's gone off again," muttered the doctor. "Well, I can't stay here much longer—I'm over-due at a case as it is. She'll have to go to the hospital. Can you get an ambulance?"

"Too right I can," said the constable thankfully, and fled. Two ambulance men returned with him presently.

"She tried to say something more about a Ford car," the doctor told the policeman, "but I couldn't make sense of it. Anyhow, if you find a stray car unclaimed it will probably be hers. I've looked in her bag: she's got money, but no papers or address."

"If she's drivin' herself she'll have her licence. Ought to, anyway."

"Probably left it in the pocket of the car for the first person to steal. Carry on, boys: I'll ring the hospital doctor about her."

The men lifted the still body gently and tramped out to the ambulance.

. . . . . .

Even when she woke to the blessed peace of a cool bed in a quiet room she was too tired to think. Easier to shut her eyes again and drift back into that borderland between sleeping and waking where neither dreams nor thoughts can come. Sometimes came the dim ghost of a thought—"If only I need never wake up!"—and with it she would slip down, down into the darkness. It held her closely, gently, as though a cloud enfolded her in peace.

But it could not last. Life began to flow again in her body, and with it her mind became capable of feeling once more. Of remembering. At first all she could think of was the car. Driving, driving hard, hour after hour, over roads where the old Ford bumped and rattled and groaned, until weariness made her unable to distinguish a pot-hole from a patch of shadow, and she knew she must stop or come to grief. Pulling off the road to the grass; huddling in the back of the car to fall asleep instantly; waking stiff and unrefreshed in the dawn and struggling back to the wheel again. She drove through those long days, over and over, as she lay with closed eyes; hearing voices now and then, but too weary to attend to them.

Then came clearer memories: the Court with its rows of packed benches, the hard faces, the woman who had sat beside her and talked. And all alone, the face of the man whom the crowd had come to see. A fierce, brutal face; she knew that well enough. But what did that matter, if you had known the face before it grew wicked—if it was still the only face in the world that mattered to you?

What had they done to him? She did not know how long she had been in bed, or how she had come there. She had no memory of falling: only of sitting on the bench in the Court, feeling a tide of blackness slowly creeping over her. Something must have happened to her then. For that, she cared nothing—but what had they done to the man in the dock?

There was a sound by her bed. She forced her eyes to open slowly. A nurse was there, bright and starched, with a determined air of cheerfulness.

"Waked up at last? Well, you've had a nice long sleep, and no mistake. Feeling better?"

She tried to nod. "Thirsty."

"I'm sure I don't wonder," said the nurse. "Well, we'll see to *that*. Hungry, too, I hope, presently."

Another nurse came; they fussed about her bed, gave her hot, comforting drinks, and presently she fell asleep again, too tired to ask questions. A day went by like a dream: waking now and then, each time to fuller consciousness, with nurses coming and going. It was evening before she found herself free from that overmastering drowsiness.

"Not going to sleep any more?" said the nurse, taking away her cup. "Right. Now just a little washing-up, and then the doctor will be coming along to see you."

"Am I in a hospital?"

"You certainly are. But that's nothing to worry about. We hadn't a bed vacant in the women's wards, so we had to pop you into this little private room."

"But I'm not ill. I'm never ill."

"That's the spirit," said the nurse approvingly. "Carry on like that and you'll be leaving us in no time."

"But how did I come here?"

"Well, you were just brought, that's all. You fainted, and somebody picked you up; and as nobody knew who you were, you were given to us. I think you were just dead tired. But there's no need to bother your head about that; the doctor will have a talk to you." She tucked her up briskly. "Now you're all brushed-up and ready to receive visitors. He'll be along presently." She whisked away.

She had half an hour in which to think before the doctor came, a middle-

aged man in a white coat. A kind face, she thought, studying it while he made his examination; I wouldn't mind asking him questions. When he had finished he sat down by the bed.

"There's not much the matter with you, but you'll have to take care," he said. "Your heart isn't all it might be—perhaps you know that already."

"Oh, I've known that for years. But it doesn't trouble me if I take care."

"You don't seem to have done that very successfully lately," said the doctor. "You were brought here in a state of collapse from extreme exhaustion. I don't know what you had been doing, but certainly a woman in your state had no business to be sitting in a crowded building." He looked keenly at her. "Was it necessary for you to be there?"

"Yes," she said.

"When you were unconscious you talked a bit. No, don't worry—" as he saw swift alarm flash into her eyes; "only enough to show that you were in trouble of some kind. You did not give away any secrets. But it is bad for you to bottle up trouble. If I can help you in any way, just tell me what's on your mind."

"What did they do to him, Doctor? The . . . the man at the trial."

"McGill? He got off more lightly than many people expected. Five years."

"Five years!" she gasped. "Hard labour?"

He nodded. "You must have expected it, surely? There was no real defence."

"I didn't know . . . all the details. I . . . I hoped it wouldn't be as bad."

She lay silently fighting for self-control, clenching her teeth. The doctor put his hand on her wrist.

"Much better let yourself go. Cry if you want to: nobody will hear you. It would do you good."

Instead she gave him a twisted smile. The doctor would have preferred tears.

"I haven't cried this ten years. Not that I've not had reason enough; but somehow I just can't manage it. Many's the time I've wished I could."

He nodded. "I know. It's bad luck for you. Suppose you unburden yourself in another way and tell me your troubles."

"I believe I'd like to," she said. "Living alone like I do I never speak to a soul. There are times when I feel as if I'd go mad just for the want of it."

"Worst thing possible for that heart of yours," he told her. He lit a cigarette, leaning back in his chair. "Very unprofessional to smoke, but this is a private room. Now you can pretend I'm your father-confessor. Is McGill your husband?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much. But Benton is the name on the driving-licence nurse

found in your coat-pocket."

"That's his real name," she said. "He started calling himself McGill when he went in for prize-fighting." Suddenly she looked alarmed. "Will it matter that I've told you? The police——"

"Oh, we'll leave the police to look after their own affairs," said the doctor comfortably. "This is between you and me."

"We got married fourteen years ago," she said. "My friends told me I was a fool, but he wasn't a bad man then: he truly wasn't, Doctor. And I had nobody belonging to me, and I believed that even if he did drink a bit I could keep him from it after we were married. There's lots of fools of girls think that."

"Any number," said the doctor.

"Well, I suppose ninety-nine out of a hundred pay for it, like I did. I didn't keep my little dream for very long. Not that we weren't happy enough for a bit. But he began to go out at night to the pubs after the baby came. He wasn't a strong baby, and he cried a lot, and you know what some men are about a crying baby. Joe never wanted him, and I don't think he ever liked him. And he drank more, and lost one job after another. But you must have heard heaps of stories like that," she said wearily.

"Well, it's your story, and I'm interested," the doctor said, his voice kind. "So——"

"So things went from bad to worse—though mind you, Doctor, he always seemed to care for me, in a sort of way. But Bertie bothered him. I believe he felt ashamed of him—Joe's so big, and he seemed to think it was all wrong for Bertie to be such a little bit of a thing, with arms and legs like sticks. But you never saw such a loving little thing as he was to me. Not to Joe—he was afraid of him, though Joe never put a finger on him. Oh, well, he died when he was just four."

"Poor soul!" said the doctor gently.

"Joe was away when he died; he'd begun to go in for boxing. He'd have done well at it, too, if he could have kept off the drink. He won a lot of fights, and I had all the money I wanted. As if money mattered to me, and Bertie gone! He had luck with betting, as well. It was then that I got him to buy me the little bit of a farm I've got, because I just had to have something to keep me busy. He'd always give me money when he had it: I've plenty in the bank now, and he bought the car for me."

"He did not live at the farm?"

"Oh, no. He was mostly in Sydney or Melbourne. Now and then he'd come; and sometimes in a hurry, unexpected-like, and I knew it had something to do with the police. He was in gaol several times. I've never known what it was to have an easy mind these ten years. Never knew what I'd hear. Nights were the worst—he'd turn up after dark when he was in trouble, and I'd be

sick with fear in case anyone had seen him come."

"But you don't live quite alone on a farm, do you?"

"I've an old man-of-all-work, but he'd never say anything. He works well enough, but he's not quite all there. Well, I hadn't heard anything of Joe for over eight months. I gave up taking a newspaper; it was too much bother to drive in to a township for it, and . . . well, I was always scared of what I might see. It was only by chance I came on one last week, and there was a piece in it about this trial. It didn't say much: only just the outline. I suppose there was a lot about it in the papers when first it happened?"

"Yes—quite a lot. So you came here at once?"

"I had to drive night and day to get here in time. You see, I thought he might need money—and anyhow, I *had* to come. It was hard driving—a lot of bad roads, and I just snatched a bit of sleep in the car when I couldn't keep awake any longer. I only got here an hour before the Court opened. Got into the front row, so that Joe would know I was here if he wanted anything. He saw me, right enough, but he just looked at me as he'd never met me in his life. That sort of hurt, you know, Doctor."

"Well . . . it may have been out of consideration for you. You could have done nothing. I hear he had a lawyer."

"Yes: that was a relief to me. Joe's got friends in Sydney: I expect they saw to it. And the lawyer was making a good fight for him just when I had to make a fool of myself and fall down."

"Well, you've had a tough time, Mrs. Benton," the doctor said. "But take it from me, your husband earned his sentence: and perhaps it will teach him a bit of sense. You may find him glad to go back to the farm when he comes out—give him work to do, if he comes. And what about yourself?"

"I feel a lot better for having talked. You were very good to me, Doctor—must have been dull enough for you. But I've lived with it all day and night, with only my own thoughts for company . . . I tell you, I've often thought of ending it all in the creek."

"I suspect you have too much pluck for that. And now you're going back to the farm, with a few more thoughts for company. That won't do. I wonder if you will take the advice I'm going to give you?"

"What's that, Doctor?"

"Adopt a child, Mrs. Benton. No"—for she had flinched like a wounded animal—"don't take it like that. Don't think of yourself: think of some poor little orphan youngster in a city, to whom your farm would be heaven. Get a baby—you'd learn to love a baby you tended. Think how different your life would be then: no more loneliness, new interest every day."

"Doctor, I couldn't ever do it!"

"Well, I didn't expect you to say you could, until you had time to think it

over. But turn it over in your mind. You've no need to act in a hurry. Give it fair consideration from every standpoint."

He stood up, smiling at her.

"About time you had something to eat, I think. You'll be well enough to leave here in a couple of days, but you'll have to promise me to take that journey home very slowly, and to have real sleep at night—no curling up in the car."

"Yes, I'll do that, Doctor," she said gratefully. "You've been an awful help to me."

"Well, I'll see you to-morrow. Sleep well." He paused. "And when you're thinking over my advice, you might keep one thing in your mind—that though it's a hard thing to be a mother without a baby, it's sometimes very much harder to be a baby without a mother."

. . . . . .

In the corridor a couple of nurses were chatting. They looked at him enquiringly.

"Sorry if I've kept you waiting, Sister," he said. "You'll find her ready for a meal, I think. Oh, and Sister—you might give a hint to anyone who is looking after her to keep off the subject of that cattle-stealing trial. Not a healthy subject for that patient. Let 'em talk about babies to her—borrow one from the children's ward and let her nurse it, if you can."

"I'll see to it, Doctor."

"Thanks." He went off quickly, glancing at his watch.

"And you wouldn't think," said the Sister, "that that man has been on the go since he operated on that accident case, before breakfast, and he's got mountains of work to do yet. And he's spent all this time with a stray case who'll be gone in a few days! Well, some people are just about too good for this world."

"But who'd be a doctor's wife!" said her friend.

CHAPTER V

PRISON WALLS

MRS. BENTON her car in a quiet side-street and walked slowly for five minutes before she came to the frowning walls and the great iron-studded gates of the prison. She gave a little shudder, looking up at it. Would she ever get farther than the walls? It looked just as hard to enter it as to escape from it.

Even to walk along under those spiked walls gave her a sense of shame. She had never willingly looked at a prison: now, hesitating by the gates, it needed all her courage to ring the bell. When she had pressed it she felt a childish impulse to run away before anyone could come in answer.

A small door set in the gate opened a little, and a warder looked at her in some astonishment.

"I've a letter," she stammered. "For the doctor."

"All right: I'll let him have it." He put out his hand to take it. She grasped it more tightly.

"No, please, I'm to give it to him myself. It—it's a special letter from the doctor at the hospital."

"Well, I don't know if he can see you," said the warder. "Better come in, and I'll find out if he's in his office." He opened the door a little more widely.

She found herself in a great square courtyard. The main building was opposite, with rows of barred windows set in a high wall. To her right was a lower building with many doors. More warders could be seen in a room close by: one, shouldering a rifle, marched slowly up and down on sentry duty. She was taken into a small room, very bare, and told to wait.

Ten minutes went by while she sat on the edge of a chair, holding her letter. Then another warder looked in.

"The doctor'll see you. Come this way."

She followed the trim figure in the neat blue uniform along a passage. The prison was an old one, built of grey stone. Everything was grey and cold, with a dreadful cleanliness and an all-pervading smell of disinfectant soap. The tramp of her guide's marching feet echoed back from the stone floor. He paused in front of a closed door, knocked sharply, and ushered her in.

This was a more human place, she thought; the windows were large, even though they were barred, and sunlight streamed in, making a chequered pattern on the big coir mat that covered the floor. There were roses in a bowl on the doctor's table. She was to remember them afterwards as the only patch of

colour that she saw in the prison.

The doctor was an elderly man, erect and brisk. He looked stern; but then, she thought, a prison doctor couldn't be anything else but stern. He certainly looked as if she had no business to be there.

"You have a letter for me?"

"From Doctor Gordon at the hospital, sir. He . . . he hoped you wouldn't mind me bringing it."

"Sit down." He read the letter, knitting his brows: evidently it did not please him.

"Doctor Gordon says you are the wife of the prisoner McGill, and you want to see him."

"If I may, sir. I know he's to be sent away from here, and it's my only chance. I couldn't see him before the trial."

"Why not?"

"I live a long way from here, sir, and I couldn't get here until the day of the trial. I . . . I only saw him in the dock." Her voice was almost a whisper. "Just for a few minutes, if you could manage it. I'd be ever so grateful."

"It's against the rules, you know. He is not supposed to see anyone until a certain part of his sentence is served."

"Doctor Gordon told me that. But he thought there might be just a chance. I shan't see him for five years, you see . . ."

"Well, I don't know," said the doctor, hesitating. "It's not for me to decide, and I would not consent if anyone but Doctor Gordon had suggested it." His manner softened a little as he looked at her strained face. A decent, good-looking woman, he thought; how on earth she came to be the wife of a ruffian like McGill would puzzle anybody. "Oh, well, I'll see what the Governor says. Wait here."

She was left alone in the quiet room. One wall was covered with bookshelves bearing long rows of big medical books: she counted them slowly, one by one, to steady her mind. But they did not help her much. It was better to gaze at the roses on the table, gold and scarlet and pink: the gallant colours seemed to give her courage. A long wait, longer than in the first room: it was indeed a hard business to force one's way into a gaol. She started uncontrollably as the door opened.

"Well, you're to have a short interview," the doctor told her. "Special concession, for Doctor Gordon's sake. They've gone for your husband: a warder will take you to him presently." He shot another of his penetrating glances at her. "Been ill, have you? You don't look up to much now."

"I'm just a bit shaky, sir. It's nothing, really."

"H'm," said the doctor doubtfully. He went to a cupboard and mixed a draught. "Drink that and you'll feel better. A gaol is a depressing place when

you see it for the first time, eh?"

"It's grim," she said. "Does it get better when you're here every day?"

"Not very much, but one gets used to it. I've been here fifteen years, and I couldn't stand it without my garden."

"They're lovely," she said eagerly, pointing to the roses. "I've been looking at them hard to cheer me up."

"Well, I hope they have done their job. Don't worry too much about your man: he has a chance to pull himself together and make good now. How about yourself? Have you anything to live on while he's inside? You don't look fit for work."

"Yes, I'm all right for money, thank you, sir. I expect I'll be better once I settle down to things. It's been a shock, you see."

"Well, don't brood over it. Grow roses instead." A knock came: the warder entered.

"Ready, sir."

"All right. Bring the visitor back to my room when she has seen the prisoner."

"Yes, sir."

Again she was following the blue back along stone-floored passages. There was dead silence everywhere, broken only by the sound of their feet. All doors were shut: she wondered what went on behind them. Light came only from electric bulbs very high up, each caged in strong wire. The place seemed shut very far away from the daylight.

The warder opened a door into a long narrow room. A guard sat inside: across the room ran a heavy, narrow table with a chair on each side of it. On the farther side, blank amazement on his face, sat her husband.

"You sit opposite him," she was told. "You can shake hands, but nothing whatever is to pass between you—no note, nor money, nor tobacco, nor anything else, see? Leave your 'and-bag where I can see it—better take your 'ankerchief out," added the warder, reflecting that most wives were likely to need one. "Ten minutes is your limit: I'll warn you when you've a minute left."

She was glad to sit down; her knees were shaking.

"Well, what on earth brought you here?" was McGill's greeting, spoken angrily.

"I had to see you, Joe. I couldn't bear not to."

"You'd much better have stayed away. What's the use of coming to see a man in a hole like this?"

"I had to know how you were . . . if you wanted anything I could get for you. . . ."

"Cigars and whisky?" he said bitterly. "They don't allow 'em here, much

less where I'm goin'. You'd have been a darned sight better to have stayed on the farm. What did you want in that Court House? You were the last person I wanted to see there. Bad enough without your white face lookin' at me."

"Don't be angry with me, Joe," she pleaded. "We've no time to waste on that."

"You shouldn't have come," he persisted. "An' then you had to scare me blue by faintin'. Are you all right now?"

"Yes, I'm all right, Joe dear. Don't worry about me."

"Did those Linton people know who you were? I saw them lookin' at you."

"No: nobody knew. How could they?"

"I'll get me own back when I come out!" His voice dropped to a fierce whisper. "All those rich swine that framed this up on me—I'll make 'em pay if it takes me years to do it! I'd no chance against their lies an' their influence; but wait till I'm out, an' I'll make 'em sorry they ever ran up against me!"

"Oh, don't, Joe—don't talk like that. They're too strong for you."

"I suppose you'd like me to swallow everything an' say 'Thank you.' Much *you* care——!"

"I do care," she said, trembling. "I'd punish them myself if I could. . . . I've lain awake thinking about that woman that wouldn't give you food. I'd love to pay her out for that."

"Set her dog on me, too, the fine lady did!"

"Joe! She never!"

"Didn't she, though! A great savage brute of a cattle-dog—he was on me before I could do a thing. She'll pay for it yet!"

"Joe—did the dog hurt you?"

"What do you reckon a savage dog does?—kiss you? I was lame for days after. Got the mark of his teeth on my leg yet."

"My goodness!" she breathed. "An' just because you asked for tucker! I wouldn't have believed a woman could do a thing like that. Your lawyer made her husband look silly, anyway, Joe."

He looked at her sharply for a moment.

"Yes—that was just before you flopped over, wasn't it? Best bit of the trial, that was. I suppose you've read all the papers since?"

"No. They took me to hospital, and I was too sick to read. I tried to get a paper this morning, but they hadn't any left in the shops—it's four days ago now, you see."

"Well, let 'em go. I'd just as soon you didn't read 'em. Pretty rotten reading for a man's wife, I reckon. You let 'em alone, d'you hear?"

"All right, Joe dear—I won't read them. Joe . . . you will do your best in . . . in gaol, won't you? They'll let you out sooner if you're a good-conduct man. And I'll have everything as nice as I can on the farm for when you come

home. Do come back and work it with me. Sydney's no good for you."

"Isn't it? Lord, if I could only see Sydney now!" he uttered. "Farmin' 's the last thing I could stand, old girl. I'll have better fish to fry: I'm goin' to pay the Lintons out if I swing for it."

"Too much whispering there!" said the warder sharply. "Cut it out!"

"Sorry, boss. But I won't see me wife again for five years."

"Well, you've only one minute more," said the unmoved warder.

"Joe, you'll write when you can, won't you? And I'll have the car waiting for you the day you come out, and your good clothes ready and everything you'll want . . . you just write and tell me when you're coming, and I'll be there. . . ." The words fell over themselves in her eagerness—so little time, so many things they might have said instead of useless things. Ten minutes out of five years!

It did not seem to trouble McGill.

"Nothing like comin' out like a real gent, is there? I'll be doin' it in style, car an' all." He laughed loudly. "We'll go an' paint Sydney red for a start!"

"Time!"

The warder stood up. They looked at each other across the table. McGill's eyes were mocking, the woman's full of bewilderment and shame. She found herself stumbling from the room. The door closed behind her: she leaned against the cold stone of the wall, panting.

"Here, you hang on to me, Missus," said the warder gently. She was glad of his strong arm round her: it had not occurred to her that a warder could be kind. But he was just a friendly lad as he supported her, going slowly back through the passages to the doctor's room. "Don't you worry, Missus: they always take it a bit hard at first, but they settle down soon enough. His time'll slip by before you know where you are." In which the warder was more sympathetic than truthful, since it was already agreed by the staff of the gaol that whoever had the handling of McGill for the next five years would handle a packet of trouble.

"She's bit all in, sir." He put her carefully into a chair, glancing over her head at the doctor.

"Yes, I thought that would be likely. Right, Ford, you can go. Take your time, Mrs. McGill. This is my time for morning tea: I told them to send in two cups. Just lean back and relax—don't bother to talk."

She was thankful for the order, closing her eyes as she slumped in the chair. Her brain raced with bewildered thoughts. The visit, planned with such care and difficulty, had been only pain and disappointment. She had pictured Joe's pleasure at seeing her, his astonishment that she had been smart enough to contrive it: pictured herself able to give him a little comfort, heartening him with dreams of a new future. The astonishment had been there, certainly, but

there had been no welcome in his eyes or kindness in his voice. That he had wasted their time with railing and threats against his enemies was nothing, compared to the crushing certainty that he had given her no word or look of affection.

"Even when he asked me if I was all right now, he rapped it out just like he'd ask about a dog," she thought. "If I died before his time's up I don't believe he'd be a bit sorry. Very likely he'd be glad."

The door opened again: there was a heavy step, the clattering of a tray: the door shut. She did not open her eyes. Presently the doctor's voice came.

"Here's your tea, Mrs. McGill."

She was on the point of correcting him about her name, but she checked herself just in time. What did it matter? Dr. Gordon had probably only said that she was the wife of the prisoner, and she might as well let it stand at that. Better, perhaps, if she dropped right out of Joe's life, if he did not want her. The less she told anyone about herself the better. Joe would know where to find her—if he cared enough.

The hot tea brought at least physical comfort. Some of the deadly coldness left her limbs, and she ceased to tremble. The doctor talked quietly; she found herself wondering how she could ever have thought him stern and hard. He talked of gardens; with his words came a sudden homesick longing for her own little garden on the farm, and she felt that she could not get back there quickly enough.

"That was lovely, Doctor." She put her cup on the table. "Nothing like a good hot cup of tea, I always say—specially when you're in trouble. I'll be going now."

"Got far to go?"

"Back to New South Wales," she said vaguely. "I'm driving."

"Alone?" She nodded. The doctor raised his eyebrows.

"Not what I should have prescribed for you, just out of hospital as you are."

"Oh, I'm all right. I'm used to it."

"Well, I suppose you know your own business, but you would be wiser to put off starting until to-morrow. This business hasn't been too good for you. Why not take it easy to-day?"

"I couldn't," she said. "I couldn't stay in this town, Doctor . . . it's too near . . . everything. I'd not be able to sleep for thinking of . . . this place." The last words were a whisper.

"H'm—very likely. Well, be sensible about it, Mrs. McGill: drive very slowly until you come to the first township that looks inviting, and rest there for twenty-four hours. It will pay you in the long run. I suppose Doctor Gordon has given you medicine? He explained the condition of your heart in his

letter."

"Oh yes, a big bottle. I'll do as you say, Doctor, I promise. I know I'd better." She stood up, stumbling over words of gratitude. The doctor brushed them aside.

"That's all right. We're not really ogres in gaol, you know. Try not to worry: it's a good plan to practise looking beyond a trouble, not into it. Here, take these with you to keep you company in the car."

He took the roses from the bowl, and wrapped their stems in paper, putting them into her hand; refusing to listen to her stammering protest.

"I've plenty more. Come along: I'll see you out."

She loved him for that. Had he guessed, she wondered, that she had hated the prospect of being escorted out of the gaol by a warder, for passers-by in the street to turn and stare curiously? So different, to go out walking beside the Doctor himself, carrying a bunch of roses, with wardens saluting as they passed. And he did not stop at the little wicket in the great gate: he went out upon the footpath first and helped her through: stood there bareheaded, chatting to her for a minute, so that anyone who saw her could never dream she was a convict's wife. Almost she was able to forget it herself in her gratitude.

"You don't know how you've helped me, Doctor. I'll . . . I'll remember it always." She did not dare to put out her hand, but that did not matter: she found it gripped comfortingly.

"You're a brave woman, I know," he said. "Carry on, and remember what I told you." He watched her for a moment as she walked slowly away. "Much too good for that animal inside, eh, Smith?" he remarked to the warder as he dived back through the wicket.

"Too right, sir," said the warder. "But then the wives that come here mostly are!"

CHAPTER VI

HOME AGAIN

"NEAR home, old girl," said Mrs. Benton.

In much lonely driving she had acquired the habit of talking to her old car as if it had a living personality. It was part of her fancy that the car knew and responded, and this time she felt certain that it quickened its pace like a tired horse nearing its home paddock—though hard-headed people might merely have held the view that her foot had pressed a little more heavily on the accelerator.

In any case, it was not a place in which to accelerate, and she had to say, "Steady there, you old silly!" so that the dusty Ford slackened obediently. She had turned off a road into a by-lane. Its entrance was so masked by scrub trees and undergrowth that most people would have driven past it without any idea that it even existed. The driving surface was a brown ribbon of stony ground, winding in and out of the bushes; a cart-track only, with the three deep ruts made by horse-drawn vehicles. It was not easy to keep the Ford's wheels in the two outer ruts: it bumped and lurched, slipping out of the rut at a curve, sliding back heavily. A poor apology for a road. But Mrs. Benton went along it with the ease of long practice, scarcely noticing its deficiencies; automatically slowing to a crawl over places where a spring might be expected to give way if a driver were rash, but, for all that, regarding it as a perfectly good road. The best of all roads at the moment, since it was leading her home.

It was several days since she had left the gaol, though on that first morning she had gone only a short distance. An unassuming guest-house on the edge of a township had tempted her; they had a room to spare, a garage for the Ford. Kind people, who saw that she looked ill, and did not trouble her with questions; she thankfully accepted the suggestion that she should go to bed at once, smiling at the idea that it was any trouble to bring meals to her room. She remembered their kindness, but very little else; it seemed to her that she had slept almost all the time she was there.

In the days of slow driving that followed she had tried to concentrate on the road and the country, putting aside everything else. It was necessary, she realized. There had been a terrible moment on the second day, when, lost in memory of the bitter ten minutes with Joe, she had taken a corner carelessly and by a hair's-breadth had escaped running over a child. The white-faced mother who had screamed, rushing into the roadway, had not blamed her. "I've always told him he'll get killed," she had said, clutching her scared yet defiant

four-year-old: “nothing on earth’ll keep him off that road if my back’s turned.” But Mrs. Benton, as white as the mother, knew that she had driven without even realizing the existence of the corner.

After that she had forced herself to take an interest in the country-side and in the little townships through which she passed. For years she had lived in complete loneliness on the farm, seeing no strange faces except when it was necessary to make a journey for stores. Now she tried to take an interest in people she did not know, and in their houses. She would leave the car in a street and prowl about a township, finding it much more to her liking to study gardens than the people who owned them. And pleasant things sometimes happened: people who saw her looking over their fences would come and talk to her about their flowers, perhaps offering her cuttings or roots—there was quite a bundle of such offerings in the back of the car now. More than one woman, on learning that she was travelling, had insisted on taking her into the kitchen for a cup of tea. She would drive away curiously refreshed in mind as well as in body.

“Fact is, old girl,” she told the car, “there’s more kind people in the world than you’d think. My goodness, that time in the gaol ought to have taught me that—when I think of the doctor, and that nice warder, and the way they looked after me—! The last place in the world where you’d expect to find anything like it!” But it was better not to dwell on that morning, since the memories would come creeping back of the one person who had not been kind.

She knew that the effort to keep her thoughts from her troubles had done her good. Each day she had felt stronger, her head less confused; to-day, although it had been the longest stage of her journey, had scarcely tired her. She was later than she expected in getting home, but that was due to a puncture, the first that had happened. Even over that, luck had been with her. The tyre had gone flat in a lonely stretch of country, far from any help. But as she wrestled with the spare wheel, very much doubting whether she could manage it, a mob of sheep had come in sight, travelling in charge of two young bushmen. They had taken the matter in hand at once, leaving their sheep to the dogs while they changed the wheel: joking with her as they did it in dry, clipped sentences. “Young things like you hadn’t ought to be out on their own!” one had told her. Mrs. Benton had found herself laughing with them; and wondered, driving on, how many years it had been since she had laughed for the last time.

The sun was setting as she came to the gate of the farm. There was scrub on both sides of it; the track wound through it and crossed a little rise before she came within sight of the house, a quarter of a mile away. A shabby little house, set in the dip of the valley, with a creek at a short distance from the garden fence. Round that fence grew a ring of pepper-trees and mahogany

gums, almost hiding the building. Sheds were scattered here and there in the untidy way of a bush homestead; she could see two cows walking slowly away from the milking-shed, and old Barney going over to the house, carrying the milk in two buckets made from kerosene-tins. She put out her hand to press the hooter, but drew it back.

"Ten to one if I hoot he'll give such a jump that he'll drop both buckets!"

The old man had put down his load to open the yard gate when he heard the rattling car descending the slope. Simultaneously, two dogs broke into violent barking, racing into view round the curve of the garden fence. At sight of the car the threatening sound changed to delighted yapping as they tore to meet it. The old man stood open-mouthed for a moment: then, as she halted near the shed he waved his tattered hat and came over at a shambling run, laughing like a child.

"Hullo, Barney! Everything all right?"

"Yes, all right, Missus. You too?"

She nodded. "Seen anybody?"

"Not a soul. The red bullick's laig's better."

"That's good. Got any bread, Barney?"

"Clean out, Missus. Made some scones to-day, though; there's plenty left."

"Right. You carry on with the milk. I'll put the car away."

She ran it into a shed where there was just room for it beside a spring-cart. Suit-case in hand, she came out to meet the uproarious welcome of the two half-bred collies.

"Yes, you're glad Missus is back, aren't you? Good old Blackie—now then, Nick, keep your paws off my skirt." They rubbed against her joyfully: she stood upright, drawing a long breath of pleasure. It was something, at least, to have a place that was all her own; to be welcomed home, if it was only by the dogs and by poor old Barney; not quite "all there," but entirely faithful.

She found him fussing about the kitchen; he was methodical enough as a rule, but a sudden arrival always flustered him. A fire was burning in the stove and he had filled the kettle; there was a plateful of scones on the table with a half-empty jam-tin and a huge mound of butter. "Churned yes'day," he told her. He was looking mournfully at the stringy remains of a leg of mutton.

"Not much on that, Missus."

"Can you do with it, Barney? I'll have an egg."

He was clearly relieved. "Lots of eggs, missus." He hurried to the pantry and came back with a basketful, holding them out to her. She looked them over as if they had been a collection of choice peaches. "That looks a nice one, Barney, doesn't it?" He grinned happily as she picked it out. "It's a bonza one, Missus—do y' good." Muttering contentedly, he returned the basket to its shelf.

"I'll come and boil it in a few minutes, Barney. You can make tea."

She went to her own room. It was not large, but a door with glass panels opened upon a little verandah sleep-out, enclosed with mosquito-wire. The room was neat as she had left it, a faint film of dust showing on the furniture—Barney never came beyond the kitchen. Mrs. Benton wandered through the rest of the house; two small bedrooms, never used, a tiny dining-room, a sitting-room, larger than any of the others. They seemed to welcome her silently. She unlocked the front door and went out on the verandah: Nick was beside her in a second, wagging his tail.

"Been on guard at the sleep-out already, old chap? I believe you have," she said. When she was at home he would sleep nowhere but in front of the wire-netting door near her bed, nor would he move in the morning until she woke to speak to him. There had been a time, long ago it seemed now, when Joe had been uneasy about her being alone with no more protection than old Barney, who slept like the dead in his hut at the end of the yard: but she knew she was safe with Nick on the watch. Once a swagman, realizing that she was alone, had demanded money threateningly. Nick had settled that. She had whistled to him; he had shot round the corner of the house, and no swagman had ever left with such undignified haste as her visitor. She remembered it now, smiling to think of his frantic flight across the paddock, with the black terror at his heels.

Old Barney remembered that too; it had been very satisfactory to watch. He was bringing home the cows when he saw the intruder going towards the house—too far away to get there in time, though he ran as fast as his stiff leg would let him. And then had come the delightful spectacle of Nick taking on the job, infinitely more thoroughly than he could have done it. But it troubled Barney's confused mind that Nick was never allowed to deal in that way with the big man he called Boss, whom Barney hated with all his heart. When Boss came the house seemed full of his loud voice: he roared at Barney and the dogs, and very often at Missus; and nobody was happy. It could all have been settled so easily if Missus would only sool Nick on to Boss as she had done with the swagman.

However, Boss had not come for a long time now, and Barney hoped some other dog had got him—though that was hard on Nick, who would certainly have liked the job. Nick deserved it too, for Boss had kicked him so often.

To-night Barney was very happy. Missus was back, and although he managed to get on well enough when she was away, the place always felt strange and lonesome without her. He was nearly twice her age, yet he felt like a child whose mother had come home. And she had come alone. That meant everything. For one could never tell when she might bring Boss back with her; the possibility hung over Barney like a cloud from the moment she went away, and when the car reappeared his heart would stand still for fear that the great

figure of the man he dreaded would get out of it. The joy that flooded him when he knew for certain that he had not come was so great that he could scarcely find words to greet her.

She came into the kitchen presently and asked all the questions he was hoping for while she prepared her meal. Yes, he had ridden all round the fences and mended two weak rails, and counted the young bullocks, and there were eleven of them as usual. And he had hoed up rag-wort, roots and all, and collected them in a heap for burning when they were dry enough. Thistles too: they were getting a bit thick on the creek flat. "Can't have thistles gettin' ahead of y'," said Barney with an air of wisdom. He knew it was the right thing to say, because Missus had so often said it herself. And he had weeded the vegetables, and they were doin' fine: she'd see a lot of growth since she went away.

He loved telling her everything, sitting on the edge of his chair and looking up at her with dog-like affection in his eyes; a little old man, with bushy white hair and beard, very clean and trim. He had found time to hurry to his hut and change his working dungarees for the old suit he kept for Sundays and evenings. His eyes were blue, the eyes of a child. Something had snapped in Barney's mind years ago when he had been knocked down by a careless young man in a sports car: his stiff leg was also a memento of that encounter. But he was strong still, broad-shouldered and big-muscled; able for a good day's work, so long as nobody worried him with too many orders or tried to push him beyond the pace he made for himself.

Mrs. Benton understood him very well. She had found him tramping the roads, carrying his swag, after vainly trying to hold down jobs that were too much for him; the limping, exhausted figure had stirred her pity, and she had stopped the car to offer him a lift. It was not what a woman by herself would ordinarily do where a "swaggie" was concerned, but a glance had shown her that this man was in some way different. Ten minutes' talk was enough to disclose other differences; about which Barney had been quite frank.

"I run away from Green's place," he said. "Green, he says I'm loony. Says I'd ought to be put away. That's 'cos me head goes round. Well, I can't help it goin' round, but that don't hinder me from workin', if people'll on'y let me alone. On'y they don't. That Green—he's a terror to shout. I like people that speak quiet, same's you, Missus, or I like animals, 'cos they don't speak at all, not so's you've got to listen, anyway." And he had cried a little, as a child cries, partly because he was very hungry indeed, and partly because it was so wonderful to find someone with a voice that did not hurt his head.

Mrs. Benton had never found out where the obnoxious and loud-voiced Green lived: it must have been a long way off, for Barney had been wandering a good while. She had a way of making quick decisions; she took the old man

home with her and installed him in the hut at the bottom of the yard, shuddering to discover the extent to which his feet were blistered. He had begun to make himself useful before he was fit to travel—hobbling to the kitchen, uninvited, to peel potatoes or scour saucepans, quick to find any job for himself. Mrs. Benton made up her mind that he was too good, and too defenceless, to be cast on the world again, and Barney had become a fixture.

With renewed strength and no longer afraid, he proved himself far more than a mere roustabout. He seemed to have forgotten his past altogether: to try to remember anything hurt his head. But it must have been a past that included farm life, for he had a natural eye for cattle and sleep, and he was wonderfully deft at dealing with their ailments. He forgot many things, but rarely things that really mattered. Sometimes, wherever he happened to be working, he would sit down and dream, unconscious of his job. Mrs. Benton was careful never to disturb him at such moments—reflecting thankfully that at least he never did it when he was milking!

He watched her now, a shade uneasily, as she prepared her tray. He had suddenly fallen silent: a sure sign that there was something on his mind. She wondered what it was: it was wise to lift even little burdens from Barney's mind as quickly as possible.

"Something's bothering him," she thought, watching her egg in the bubbling saucepan. "It can't be Joe: he never worries once he sees me come home alone. And if I ask him he'll only shrink into his shell and feel worse." She glanced at him: he was sitting with knitted brows, smoothing his hair absently. Light came to her, and she smiled to herself as she lifted out the egg.

"Well, it was about time I came home, I think, Barney," she said cheerfully. "That hair of yours will be in your eyes if I don't get busy at it."

He beamed at her.

"Mobs of it, isn't there, Missus? Can't keep it tidy no-how."

"No, of course you can't. Never mind, we'll soon have it off in the morning. Now you come and have your supper."

He jumped up at once, a happy child again. She heard him whistling tunelessly to himself as she took her tray into the dining-room. A funny old chap about his hair, she thought: he hated it to be long, but he had a dread that he could not explain of going to a barber. The mere idea of letting a man touch his head threw him into a panic. She had found out his queerness in this respect soon after he had come to the farm; and ever since, she had acted as barber herself. He loved to have it done, but she had always to suggest it: nothing would make him ask her to get the scissors.

A funny old chap. Yet somehow, she found herself thinking more of Barney than of Joe as she lay awake that night on her bed on the verandah, with Nick on guard at the door and the moonlight falling across her bed. How

glad he had been to see her, to tell her all the things she might want to know; how pitifully relieved at seeing that she had come home alone. Very well she knew how his feet would have dragged, coming towards the car, if Joe had been there too—and with what good reason.

"Poor old Barney!" she thought. "He'd go nearly off his head with joy if he knew he wasn't going to set eyes on Joe for five years."

Five years! With the words a host of memories came rushing back: memories of a man who, whatever he might be, loved sunlight and freedom like other men. Five years before he would know either sunlight or freedom again: and he was hers, and she could do nothing to help him, nothing to ease his bitterness. And he did not want her: even when he was free she knew in her heart that he would not turn to her again. No peace would come to her when they let him out of gaol; he would set about fulfilling his vow of revenge against the people who had worsted him, and she would live in sick dread of what she might hear. She tossed restlessly on her pillow. It was nearly morning before sleep came to her.

CHAPTER VII

DAVIE

MURTY O'TOOLE, head stockman of Billabong, sat on a log and spoke his mind.

"If ye ax *me*," he said, "I'd be sayin' it doesn't seem like a weddin' at all."

"Ah, Murty," protested the bride, "don't be so gloomy about it. I promise you faithfully I shall have my marriage-lines!"

"Ye'd be gettin' as much as that if ye went into wan of them registher's offices wit' not a sowl to kape you company——"

"Except Mr. Jim, Murty!"

"Ah, him!" retorted Murty darkly. " 'Tis support that a bride's wantin', I'm towld, whin she's gettin' married; an' sure, he might be the shakiest of the pair of ye, big as he is!"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Norah.

"Nor me neither. Haven't I known men that was as brave as a lion thremble like dandelion-heads whin they shtud up before a priest? An' the throuble is, how can a man tell how he'll be, until he's afther doin' it wance?"

"He can't," said Tommy. "Between ourselves, Murty, I'm looking forward tremendously to seeing him tremble. But after all, it is not quite as bad as a registrar's office—he will have several people to prop him up. You for one, old Murty!"

"Is it me, to prop anny wan his size? Yerra, 'twould be too big a conthrack for me," said Murty with a grin. "He'll get through somehow. But 'tis not the sort of weddin' we gev Miss Norah, at all. We did that in shtyle, didn't we, now? All the house full to the top with people, an' odd wans campin' in tents, an' folk comin' from the ends of the earth like Queensland an' Tasmania. An' Mrs. Brown cookin' like mad for weeks before—sure, that wan was in her iliment, wasn't she, Miss Norah?"

"She was Murty. It was a great time."

"An' the big dance the night before in the barrn—all the men on the place cuttin' ferrns and gum-boughs to hide the walls, an' the power of Chinese lanterns an' flags an' banners that was in it! Not a sowl in the disthrick that cud be there kep' away that night—nor to the weddin' the next day neither. Yerra, the place was like an ant-heap with them! An' that's how I thought it would be whin Mr. Jim got married on us—as big a hullabaloo as Miss Norah had, or maybe bigger."

"Poor old Murty!" said Tommy. "But you know it's his own fault. He just

won't face a big crowd."

"It's quare," Murty agreed mournfully. "Him that never flinched from annything in his whole life, from the time he cud walk, an' to be that retirin' now. Sure, I tried to talk him out of it, but he acted like a young fawn!"

"I should like to have seen *that*," said Tommy with enjoyment.

"I did not. 'Twas an eye-opener to me, to see what a man could come to. Mind ye, Miss Tommy, he tried to bluff me off wid big words, but annywan cud see the dhread that was in him that he'd find himself thrapped after all. An' he might have been, then, so he might, if only the Masther wud have backed me up," ended Murty sadly.

He became aware of a somewhat fixed expression on the faces of his hearers. Turning his head with sudden suspicion he found Jim behind him, grinning broadly.

"Is it there ye are?" said Murty, unperturbed. "Creepin' up behind a man, the way ye wouldn't be hearin' anny good of y'rsilf. Well, ye know now what I think of ye!"

"And that's a thing you've never hidden from me, old chap," Jim said. He put a hand on the old man's shoulder, stepped over the log, and sat down beside him. "Not since you taught me to ride—and I seem to remember you spoke your mind pretty freely then. I saw these two people standing meekly in front of you, listening to your words of wisdom, and it seemed a pity to miss any of them. Smoke, Murty?"

Murty took the offered pouch and filled his pipe slowly. Norah and Tommy sat down on the grass.

"Ah, well, I suppose ye know ye're own minds," he said. "But Billabong's niver done things in a shmall way, an' why wud you be the wan to begin it at ye're own weddin' I dunno at all."

"But he's marrying such a small person, Murty," said Tommy.

"He may be—but I'd not wonder if she was the wan to manage him."

"Then you oughtn't to wonder if I have my own way for the last time," Jim said. "Aren't you an old ass, Murty? Who on earth do I want at my wedding except the people who count? Why should I have a lot of people prowling round who don't matter one little thing to me? They'd all wear swagger clothes and the place would be cluttered up with cars, and half of them would be almost strangers, and I'd have to be polite to the whole darned lot! And as it is, we're going to have the perfect wedding: just Billabong and Billabong people, and I'm not even going to wear a new suit. Think of it, Murty!"

"An' will Miss Tommy wear wan of her cookin' overalls?" suggested Murty gently.

"It won't worry me if she does. All I care about is to get the whole business over without any fuss and to have nobody there but our own people. Every one

of them, from you and Brownie to Billy and Lee Wing. That's my notion of a good send-off, and strangers would simply be in the way." He laughed at the old Irishman. "Don't you dare find fault with my plan, Murty!"

Murty said slowly, "When I shpoke me mind to ye about this before there was a lot of chaff an' fine words out of ye—but not what ye're afther sayin' to me this minute."

"Bless you, you were enjoying that grievance of yours too much. But the show's to-morrow, and you might as well know how I feel about it."

"And I too," said Tommy softly.

Old Murty looked from one to the other, and his eyes were moist.

"Well, 'tis something for an ould man to remember when he's past work," he said. "If 'tis the way ye want to make it just a great day for the people that care about ye . . . well, 'tis themselves'll be proud." He was silent for a moment; then a little chuckle came from him. They looked at him enquiringly.

" 'Tis thinkin' I am. Suppose, now, we'd been told . . . Mrs. Brown, an' Mick an' Dave an' me, an' the rest of us . . . a few years ago, that some day you'd be bringin' an English girl to be the misthress of Billabong—*English*, mind ye!—how'd we have taken it, Masther Jim?"

"You'd have hit the roof!" answered Jim promptly. "Can't I hear you all doing it!"

"We wud so. An' now . . . is there a wan of us that isn't goin' round as proud as a paycock 'cause it's Herself that's comin'?"

"Ah, Murty!" said Tommy, turning pink.

Jim said nothing—only put a hand on the old man's knee. In the silence that followed came a gay little voice talking very fast, and the swish of a horse's hoofs through the dry grass. Wally jogged up to them on a stout pony, his son perched before him.

Not yet three was Davie Meadows; a slip of quicksilver, brown-eyed and black-haired like his father. Rosy cheeks and clear tanned skin; long-limbed and erect, looking much more of an energetic small boy than a baby. Until he was two years old he had been master of very few words that were intelligible to anyone but his mother, but with the passing of his second birthday speech had come to him in a rush. There was now, as Norah said resignedly, very little that he wanted to say that was beyond him, and occasionally some of it would have been better left unsaid. Since he spent much time with Murty, Lee Wing and black Billy, traces of Irish, Chinese and blackfellow talk mingled with his English, to say nothing of terms more distinctively Australian, gathered from the stockmen—who had learned to be careful when he was near, after one or two expressions dropped by Davie had electrified callers in the Billabong drawing-room.

Life was a gorgeous game to Davie. It held discipline, since nobody was

allowed to spoil him except old Brownie, who, it was recognized, was quite incapable of doing anything else. With all other people he knew he had to toe the line; but the line was not ruled with a rigid straightness. Within it were dogs and horses and cattle, and a number of people who seemed bent on giving him a good time—which usually consisted in simply letting him be with them at their ordinary occupations.

Toys did not mean much in his good time, except on wet days. Davie was generally too busy for toys. He possessed a stockwhip, a miniature gun, a mixed assortment of tools: serious things for daily use, such as all sensible people had, and people saw to it that he used them in a workmanlike way. Three months before, his unfeeling father had cast him into a warm shallow pool in the lagoon, where, with much spluttering and protest, he had learned to swim. It was strongly suspected that Wally sought the society of people outside Billabong for no other reason than to make this fact public: and that nobody believed him.

They rode up together now, and Davie scrambled off and subsided on the grass beside Norah. Kim, Jim's old cattle-dog, who was rarely found far from Davie, lay down at a little distance, keeping an eye on the two people for whom he felt responsible. Since they were near home, Wally unsaddled the pony, dismissing her with a slap on the flank. She walked away, and Wally lay flat on the ground, using his saddle as a pillow.

"We are exhausted," he said. "At least I am, and Davie ought to be. We've ridden miles and counted all the bullocks we met."

"Fifty fousand," stated his son. "An' wolling fat," he added professionally.

"Optimist, aren't you?" remarked Jim. "Jump any logs, Davie?"

"Wather. Bigly ones, only Dad wouldn't jump the bigliest. There was three once, each befwont of the other, so we had a steeplechase, like you do, Muvver." He rubbed his head against Norah's knee. "Would it be the way vere would be anyfing to eat out here?"

"Not a thing," said his mother. "You'll have to go home if you're hungry, old boy."

"Well now, if I was to look very searchin' I might be findin' a shmall somethin'," drawled Murty. He fished in one pocket after another, pretending to despair. Davie watched anxiously.

"You never twied that top-side pocket, Murty!"

"Did I not? Yerra, 'tis a mercy ye noticed that." He drew out a tiny packet of butterscotch and looked at it. "Wud this be allowed, Miss Norah?" The old hands of Billabong were prepared to call Tommy Rainham Mrs. Jim after to-morrow; but Norah's marriage had not altered the name by which they had known her all her life.

She nodded, smiling. Davie caught the packet Murty tossed to him and fell

to work upon it, nobly offering a bite to anyone in need. It was believed by the family that Murty had established something resembling a small grocery-store in his quarters since Davie had learned to talk.

"Well—this time to-morrow ye'll be off on ye're thravels, Mr. Jim," the old man said. "Is it Tasmania furust ye'll be seein', or New Zealand?"

"Tasmania, Murty. That's to get our sea-legs before the New Zealand trip—for Miss Tommy's sake, of course," he hastened to add.

"So he says, Murty," put in Tommy darkly. "But Mr. Wally has told me things about his first voyage to England. Distressing things!"

"I wudn't wonder," said Murty. "Sure I'm no friend to the say meself, nor it to me. When I kem out from Ireland as a boy 'twas on a sailing-ship, an' that wasn't so bad afther the furrst bit. Shorrt-handed they were, an' they put me in a watch an' paid me to worrk: I'd no time to be sick afther that. When ye're up aloft in a capful of wind, hangin' on by yere toes an' yere teeth, needin' three hands to do yere job, ye become indifferent to the say's goin's-on."

"I'd love to believe it!" said Jim.

"Well, it's true, Mr. Jim. I've slid down to the deck afther an hour like that aloft an' made me way for'ard hangin' on to a life-line, an' green seas washin' over the old hooker till ye'd think she'd never rise herself out of them: an' squatted down in a corner, soaked wet as I was, to eat luke-warm greasy fat pork an' beans. Me, that was sick if I so much as wint out in a curragh on the Shannon! An' the wonder was that the cook cud get the food even half warrm, seein' his galley was awash all the time. Shorrt-tempered, he was, that cook, I remimber." He chuckled. "Me an' another lad had a way of dodgin' into the galley whin he wasn't there an' availin' ourselves of odd thrifles of the cabin food. Sure it was a nice change from what we had in the fo'c'sle."

"Did he catch you, Murty," asked Davie, wide-eyed.

"He did not. But mind ye, Davie, we were bad boys, an' 'tis not the sorrt of thing anny little gintleman wud ever do," said Murty, hastily realizing that it might be as well to point a moral for the benefit of the young. Davie looked disappointed, and reapplied himself to his butterscotch.

"Yes, I got the betther of the say-sickness on that ship," Murty went on. "But little good it did me in the latther end, for next time I wint to say 'twas to do what ye are goin' to do, an' that's go to New Zealand."

"With a bride?" demanded Jim.

"Divil a bride—I beg y'r pardon, Miss Tommy. 'Twas alone I wint, same as I did most things till I struck Billabong. An' I was very cocksure about mesilf, rememberin' the old hooker an' the fat pork. Yerra, I'd have been glad to forget them on the New Zealand boat: fat pork's not a thing you'd want to be thinkin' of whin ye're the way I was that voyage. An' it kept croppin' up in me memory." He sighed. "Begob, I had that memory to live on all the way to

New Zealand, an' sorra a thing else. 'Twas a steamer that time; a wallowin' old thramp she was too. There wasn't a corner of her that didn't reek of dirt an' hot oil. I lost me appetite altogether—an' iverything else."

"Murty," said Jim firmly, "I do not like your stories. For anyone about to put forth to sea they're most discouraging. Look at poor Miss Tommy—she's turning pale green."

"Ah well, ye'll both have time to get over the voyage wance ye're there. It's a nice place, an' nice people that's in it. I stayed in a Maori village for a bit, an' I might be there yet only I cudn't get used to some of the things they'd be atin'. Great folk, them Maoris. I had the father of a fight with a white man that miscalled one of them that was a friend of mine. Called him a nigger, he did. It's quare, y'know," said the old man reflectively, "the way people look at things. That white man—he was about as low a fella as ye'd meet in anny slum in a city; somethin' the cut of McGill, an' he had no education at all. An' my Maori pal was a great tall lad, very light in colour an' as han'some as paint. Carried himself like a stag, an' 'twas the look of a king he had on him: an educated fella, too. I was proud 'cause he made a friend of me. An' that apology f'r a white man called him a nigger! Well, he was sorry f'r it before I'd finished with him."

"Was the Maori there, Murty?" Jim asked.

"Yerra, no—the other man 'ud never have dared to open his mouth agin him if he had been. He was a prudent man . . . only not quite prudent enough. I was young then, an' handy with me fists. That's a thing ye'd need to remember, Miss Tommy, whin ye're away—just kape Mr. Jim far from annywan who might be wishful to fight him; think of poor McGill, who was afther thinkin' he cud ate him alive!"

"Murty!" growled Jim threateningly.

"I won't forget," Tommy smiled. "But what shall I do to stop him, Murty?"

Murty pondered over this.

"Well, now, I'd say ye'd betther just faint flat out. For there's nothin' else I can think of that might howld him back. An' perhaps not that itself, if he saw there was anny woman about, to take the care of ye off his mind."

Jim tapped out his pipe.

"Of all the remarkable advice to give a bride——!" he said. "And me a man of peace, about to set out on my honeymoon and learn how to knuckle under all the time! I expect I'll be meek enough when you see me again, Murty. And now we're all going over to the house for a drink. You too, Murty; Dad's orders. Final effort to buck me up for to-morrow, I think."

He stood up. Sitting on the log, he had been unable to see more of Wally than his long legs, as he lay on the grass behind the girls. The movement brought him within sight of his head. A look of complete astonishment came

over Jim's face.

"Look there, Nor," he said. "Did you ever see Wally do anything like that before?"

They all looked. Wally was fast asleep, his pipe gripped in one hand. His head had rolled off the saddle, perhaps in protest against so uneasy a pillow; but he was unconscious of it. So still was he that for a moment Norah's heart jumped.

"Is he all right, do ye think?" asked Murty.

Davie settled that question. He scrambled across to his father and beat joyfully on his chest with both little fists.

"Wake up, Dad! We're going home."

Wally opened his eyes, yawned heavily, and caught the small boy by the back of the neck, rolling him over on the grass, while Davie shouted with laughter. The happy sound was a relief, breaking the tension that had fallen on them for a moment. Wally sat up.

"Hullo, I believe I've been asleep!" he said with the air of someone who makes a profound discovery. "Sorry, everybody—have I missed much?"

"Yerra, only a foolish ould man lettin' his tongue run away wid him," said Murty. "I'd be enough to put annywan to sleep. But we're undher orders from the Masther to go an' dhrink healths, so ye'll have to rise up now." He watched Wally's face closely as he spoke; stooping, he possessed himself of the saddle and bridle.

"Let you go on over to the house, Masther Wally. I'll put these away an' follow on afther ye." He went off towards the stable-yard.

Wally got up, looking rather dazed.

"Stupid of me," he said, a shade of irritation in his voice: then he laughed. "Rotten bad manners, too, Tommy, hiding behind the bride's back. Never mind, I'll drink your health twice to make up for it." He slipped his arm through Norah's. Jim swung Davie up on his shoulder and they went slowly back to the house.

CHAPTER VIII

WEDDING-DAY

THE house that had been built by Wally and Norah Meadows was, in their opinion, everything that a house should be. It was the outcome of much intensive planning on their parts, aided by the whole family, and it did not matter at all to them that it had been the despair of their architect.

Into it had been worked all their varied dreams of houses. It had a flat roof and an internal courtyard, and might therefore have been considered partly Moorish in style; after which it strayed into features that belonged to no known school of architecture but were entirely satisfactory to its owners. There were wide verandahs, planned to suit every season and every direction of wind; which was necessary for people who lived far more in the open than within walls. The kitchen and back premises had been the outcome of weighty conferences between Norah and Brownie in long evenings in the Billabong Kitchen. Brownie, inspecting the completed work, declared that it fulfilled a cook's dream of heaven.

A very satisfactory house. Yet it was one which often found itself neglected: and if a house can have a kind of consciousness, as some people believe, it must have been rather puzzled about it. Certainly it must have known that its personal appearance was not allowed to suffer, within or without; and equally it must have been certain that it was loved, or it could not have had any consciousness at all. But the people who loved it so often ran away from it.

This would not have happened if the parent house of Billabong had not been so near—only separated from Little Billabong by part of a paddock and a belt of big trees, through which ran a very well-worn track. This meant that the two houses were only to be regarded as semi-detached; and as Norah could never be anything but part of Billabong, and Wally scarcely less, since he had been almost adopted by it since his first school-days, being married had not made much difference. They had built Little Billabong because it seemed the sort of thing newly-married people ought to do. But they were never quite sure which house was really home.

It would be different now, Norah thought, cutting roses very early in the morning of Jim's wedding-day. All the best roses in the big garden of Billabong had been saved for the occasion; she had left Wally and Davie having a before-breakfast consultation in their pyjamas, and had come downstairs to secure the buds while the dew was still on their half-opened

petals. Before long Tommy would be here as mistress: there would no longer be the same need to come back to keep Jim and Dad company. The rooms at the old house, where they still kept some of their clothes, where beds were always made up, would have other uses. Always, she knew, the people of the two houses would continue to drift backwards and forwards; but Little Billabong would at last have a chance to know that it was home.

Over that she was serenely content. Her lifelong companionship with Jim had been as near perfection as possible; with their father and Wally they had been a four-square alliance that had grown stronger with the years. Norah's marriage had done nothing to shake it, nor would Jim's: it would become five-square, if such a mathematical irregularity could be. She had longed to see Jim's complete happiness, and it was going to be as sure as her own. "Oh, weren't we lucky to find Tommy!" she thought.

Fate had cast Tommy literally into their arms years before, hurrying through Liverpool to catch the ship that was bringing the Billabong family back to Australia, and from that day Tommy and Bob had been adopted too, finding the help and friendship new settlers need, giving back loyalty and affection that had knitted them firmly into Billabong's life. Fate had indeed done a good job that day. Jim might have found a girl who did not like the country, who would have thought the old house cumbersome and old-fashioned and hated the idea of living with her father-in-law still holding the reins. But Tommy was like a daughter already. David Linton, very ready to take himself out of the way or to build Jim another house, had found himself met with such a storm of bewildered protest that nothing was ever again heard of so preposterous a notion.

Yes, it was all working out wonderfully: and if Norah had not had one small private worry there would have been no cloud on her contentment as she filled her basket with roses. Even that shadow fell away as she heard a step on the gravel and a low whistle that had always been a signal between Jim and herself. She whistled back, and in a moment he was striding towards her along the wide clipped grass path between the rose-beds: tall and straight in white flannels, his face so full of quiet happiness that her heart leaped to see it.

"Well, you look exactly as a man ought to look on his wedding morning," she said as he kissed her.

"Feel it, too," he said briefly. "That is, I feel about six years old, but it's all right, anyway. I heard an awful uproar going on upstairs, so I looked in and saw Davie and Wally having a pillow-fight. Your room's a shambles, but I don't suppose that matters."

"Not a bit," said Norah contentedly. "I suppose they'll struggle out of it in time for breakfast."

"Trust Davie for that. Anyhow it's ages before breakfast-time." He took

the basket from her. “You’ve got quite enough of those things: come and walk.”

He put the roses under the shade of a bush, and they walked up and down the long path arm in arm, as they had walked so many times; not speaking much, because there was no need for that between Jim and Norah. But Jim had something on his mind, and presently it came out.

“I say, Nor, are you quite satisfied that Wally is all right? Because I’m not.”

“No, I’m not altogether satisfied,” she said. “He isn’t quite himself.”

“I’ve been thinking it for some time,” said Jim—“I asked him once or twice, but he only put me off. Seemed almost to resent being asked—which didn’t make me feel any better, because it’s so unlike Wally. And I was completely taken aback that time yesterday when we found him asleep. With any other man on earth no one would have even noticed it. But *Wally*—! I ask you? All the years we’ve been together I’ve never known that restless old chap go to sleep like that, and in the middle of a crowd of us, too.”

“Well, he was rather on the outskirts,” Norah said—“and you know Murty was doing most of the talking; and his soft old voice has a soothing kind of sound.”

“Ye-es,” said Jim slowly. “But . . . well, the idea I got, looking down at Wally, was that he looked so darned tired he’d have gone off to sleep in the middle of a bombardment. I’ve seen men do that in France. You remember he said when he came in, ‘We are exhausted.’ Of course that’s the sort of fool thing Wal does say, and one never notices it. All the same, I believe it happened to be true.”

“He has been dropping off to sleep like that in the daytime fairly often lately,” Norah said. “These last few months have tried him a good deal, Jim. Wally would want to fight anyone who accused him of having nerves, but you and I know he has them; and that wretched trial has been badly on his nerves. He hated the prospect of it for months—and the actual trial didn’t make him feel any better.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Jim agreed. “Of course a great lumbering animal like me can hardly understand how Wal feels about some things, but I’ve always known that he’s more highly strung than the lot of us put together. And he’s worked furiously hard out at the diggings. Chiefly, I believe, because he was so keen to have the claims proved, so that he could get back to you and Davie. He’s worried badly about being away from you ever since McGill paid that visit to Billabong.”

“I know he has. Nothing I could say would make him stop worrying.”

“Not it. And . . . well, I don’t want to add to your own bothers, old girl, but we’ve got to remember the time he was nearly killed in Queensland. A bash on

the head like that may leave traces we don't realize." He hesitated. "You would drag him to a specialist if you thought there was any need, wouldn't you? Of course, you've only to say the word and Tommy and I will stay on in Melbourne and help you to do the dragging. We can easily put off Tasmania."

"Bless you!" she said. "You *would* be the one to disorganize your honeymoon quite gaily, wouldn't you?—and Tommy would be exactly the same. That's the sort of thing that makes it so perfectly satisfying that you're marrying Tommy. But, Jim, I honestly don't think there is any need. Of course I should make him get overhauled if I thought he should be, and Wally won't refuse it if I want it. I think that the only thing he needs is a change—to get right away from here for a little while."

"Well, go off together on your own and have another honeymoon yourselves," said Jim, rather relieved. "After all, you had a pretty good time on the first one—even though you did land in a spot of bother at the finish!"

"And made you come and help us out of it," she told him, smiling. "Yes, I think a trip of some kind would make him all right, but it will have to be a honeymoon of three: I wouldn't leave Davie."

"Why, you've left him with Brownie many a time. And Dad would be here, of course, and Bob most of the time—when he wasn't careering off to Melbourne to buy a plane."

"Yes, but I'll need Davie. He helps Wally more than anyone just now: when they're together Wally forgets about gold-mines and McGill. Don't be worried, Jim; I'm quite sure that he is only over-strained, and that rest and complete change will give him all he needs. As long as he is on the station nothing can keep him from working: I'll take him somewhere where work doesn't exist."

"Well, just you write regularly and keep me posted about him," ordered Jim. "Even if you did marry him, I've never got over feeling responsible about Wally since I was fifteen."

"And the remarkable thing," smiled Norah, "is that he feels just the same about you!"

"Oi!" called a voice from the balcony.

They looked up and saw Wally, still pyjama-clad, with his son sitting astride his neck.

"Are you two mooning about and crying over the days when nobody wanted to marry you?" he called. "Jolly bad taste, in full view of Tommy and me."

"Just that," said Jim, grinning. "Can't you have the decency to leave us alone to cry?"

"I could, but Brownie's the trouble," stated the voice from the balcony. "Tea's going, and she's hunting for you everywhere."

“Why worry them?” Tommy appeared beside him in a kimono, cup in hand. “We’ve got ours, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Brutes!” said Jim. “Come along, Nor.” He seized her arm and galloped her madly across the garden and through the house. They arrived panting in the kitchen, where Brownie greeted them with a wide smile.

“There, I knew you’d turn up: I saw you goin’ out ages ago.”

“We’ve been doing the roses,” said Jim virtuously, “and we’ve earned lots of tea. Brownie. Oh, and I’ve seen the bride, and in her dressing-gown too, and I believe that’s awfully improper. But she looked as ordinary as ever.”

“You wouldn’t dare let her hear you say that,” said Brownie, chuckling as she waddled towards the tea-pot. “Better make the most of his freedom, hadn’t he, Miss Norah?—he’ll be subjued enough when he comes home again.”

“Subjued is the word for it,” said Norah with relish. “Is that toast I see, Brownie?”

“Well, I thought you could per’aps pick a bit, so I popped it in the oven to keep ’ot,” Brownie said. “No, don’t you worry, dearie, I’ll get it.”

Norah brought the plate from the oven, putting it within reach of where Jim sat on the table. They ate comfortably, and the old woman who had helped to bring them up looked at them.

“There’s one nice thing about weddin’s in this family——” she began.

“Only one?” demanded Jim.

“None of your sauce!” said Brownie. “No, wot I mean is, you two’ve sat on my table an’ ’ad food as long as I can remember: an’ we might so easy’ve been ’avin’ it this mornin’ feelin’ all sentimenteral-like an’ sayin’—or thinkin’, if we didn’t say it—‘This is the last of the good old times.’ An’ it ain’t, an’ we know it ain’t; you an’ Miss Tommy’ll come an’ sit here when she’s Mrs. Jim, just like Miss Norah an’ Mr. Wally do now. I mean to say,” finished Brownie, somewhat overcome with words, “nothin’s ever different, only better.”

“True for you. Brownie,” said Jim. “If you think a whole pack of wives could keep me out of your kitchen you have another think coming.”

“Don’t you spring a pack on me—I couldn’t tolerunt that,” Brownie warned him. “You’ll find one enough to keep your ’ands full. Oh, Master Jim, don’t be out of the way this mornin’ when I want the weddin’-cake taken in to the table. You’re the only one I’d trust to carry it.”

“I’ll be there,” he promised. “Is that all we get to eat, Brownie?”

“Don’t you worry about what you’re goin’ to get to eat. Not as I’d call it a proper weddin’-breakfast,” said she mournfully: “it’s no more than a nice cold lunch. But that’s Miss Tommy’s fault, not mine. Said she wouldn’t eat a thing if I went fussin’ over ’ot cookin’ instead of takin’ things easy an’ ’avin’ plenty of time to put me silk dress on.”

“She’s a masterful woman, isn’t she?” grinned the bridegroom. “Do you want that last piece of toast, Norah, or do I?”

“You do, I know,” said Norah; and took it hastily. Jim made a snatch almost at the same moment, and the ensuing tug-of-war made washing at the sink necessary for both.

“*And* butter on my clean frock!” wailed Norah. “And my poor roses still sitting under a bush out there—bring them in, Jimmy, while I run up and change. Goodness knows what they’ll be like, but it’s all your fault!”

“Well, I don’t mind—I got most of the toast, anyway!” said Jim proudly. They vanished, and Brownie turned to the matter of preparing breakfast, chuckling deeply as she pondered on people who declined to grow up.

On the way Norah encountered her son, who was coming downstairs by the simple process of sitting on each step and dropping heavily to the one below.

“Dad barfed me, but he didn’t make me have any soap,” he told her: adding that he was on his way to the garden to shoot tigers. Norah wished him luck and went on to her room. She found Wally hastily beginning to remove from the floor large numbers of things that did not ordinarily belong there.

“Yes, I know it looks rather like a hippopotamus-wallow,” he said, grinning at her. “Blame your son, not me. I told him lots of times you wouldn’t like it.”

“Somehow, though you wouldn’t know why, I rather do like it,” she said. She resisted his efforts to find out what she meant, and they restored order together and made merry over the job. Norah was light-hearted as they went downstairs; caring nothing if the whole house looked like a hippopotamus-wallow, when there was no longer a shadow upon Wally’s face.

. . . . . .

Billabong had no shadows that day. Sitting near Wally, with Davie between them, to watch Jim’s marriage, Norah felt that her happiness was overflowing. It was a moment of complete peace. There were no guests to think of; except the old clergyman, who had known them all their lives, the rose-decked room held only the folk of Billabong; themselves and the people who worked for them and loved them. Not one of those was missing. She watched Jim and Bob walk through their midst to the end of the room and stand waiting; watched her father’s face a moment later as he came with Tommy; and knew that David Linton’s contentment was as great as that of his children.

That dream-like peace held her through the service. Certain words came with a little shock of surprise—“I, James, take thee, Cecilia”—which seemed for a moment to have nothing whatever to do with Jim and Tommy, though the

deep voice was certainly Jim's. Tommy's clear, steadfast responses fell softly. To neither did it seem to occur to be nervous—why should they be when it was all so ordinary, so home-like?

Lunch was ordinary too, with no ceremony and no speeches, thanks to the fervent entreaties of the bridegroom; nothing out-of-the-way except the triumphant splendour of Brownie's wedding-cake. There was, indeed, great feasting and noise in the kitchen, where Brownie and Murty presided over heaped tables and the station hands sat wherever they could find room: and wild enthusiasm when Tommy and Jim carried out a silver dish piled with pieces of wedding-cake, with everybody else following to drink healths all round; and Murty made a valiant attempt at a speech, which was lost in cheering.

They crowded round the car to cheer again half an hour later. Jim held Norah tightly for a moment.

"Good luck, Jim dear."

"I've got it," he said. "Norah, you'll let me know if you want me?"

"Yes, of course—but there'll be no need."

The car moved away amid the shouting. From its rear hung specimens of foot-wear that bobbed wildly as the speed increased.

"Smart work, to get those on at the last moment," said Wally with a grin. "I don't believe Jim saw them. Remember our lot, Nor?—we put 'em all into the letter-box at the paddock gate."

"I wonder if Jim will carry them as far as that—and he with eyes in the back of his head!" she said.

Jim did not. As they watched, the car came to a standstill. Jim got out: they saw his hand go to his pocket. He cut away the old shoes and piled them in a neat heap in the middle of the track: looked towards the house and waved his hat derisively. The car whizzed away.

"Billy," said David Linton.

"Yes, Boss."

"You go one-time alonga track, findem rubbish, makem tidy. Savvy?"

The black face split in a wide grin. "Plenty savvy, Boss," said Billy.

CHAPTER IX

SETTLING DOWN

MRS. BENTON sat in her little dining-room, waiting for Barney's knock, which always signified the end of his day and the beginning of her evening. The old man never allowed her to do the rougher work of the kitchen —she knew better than to linger there after she had carried out her supper-tray. It made him happy to feel that he took charge then, going through the nightly routine of washing-up and stove-cleaning, singing his tuneless little songs as he scrubbed saucepans and polished the gleaming row of tins that made the mantelpiece his special pride.

She would hear his gentle tap on the inner door when he had finished. He would stand waiting until she came in answer, and the procedure was always the same.

"Going to bed now, Barney?"

"Yes, Missus. All done." He would watch her eagerly as she looked about her: she never hurried that inspection, knowing that he hoped she would miss nothing.

"It does look nice, Barney. Everything ready for the morning—fire laid, and all." He would smile and nod delightedly.

"Yes. I got 'em all done for a good start to-morrow, Missus."

"You have so. Well, good night, Barney."

"Good night, Missus." She knew he paused on the back verandah, waiting until he heard the key turn in the lock: then would come the little jog-trot of his feet across the yard, and in a moment there would be a light in the window of his hut. She had been uneasy about that light when he first came to the farm, wondering if he could be trusted with a lamp; but soon she had realized that there was no danger on that score. "He may be a bit loony," she had decided, "but he's more careful about fire than I am myself."

Always the same routine. She would go back to the sitting-room wishing that something would break it. Until she had returned from Joe's trial it had not troubled her, but now the unvarying words seemed to set her on edge. She had tried changing her own, but the old man had looked puzzled, half-protesting, and had slipped back into his set phrases. No groove once established in that confused mind could be easily altered.

Now that there was no longer any chance of seeing Joe appear suddenly, she realized that her life, too, was likely to set into unalterable grooves. There would be no more surprises; certainly not for five years, and she doubted if

they would come even after those years had dragged by. Joe did not want her, unless he needed to make use of her. Money? He might come for that. Most likely not, though: for years he had had his own sources of supply—she never asked about them, knowing they were shady enough.

"He might turn up if he wanted to hide, like he's often done," she thought. She was certain that was the reason he had picked out so lonely a farm to buy for her. He had scouted the idea of a farm at first: refused altogether, roughly. Then he had seemed to be struck by a new thought and had sat thinking for a long while in silence. "Might be a good notion after all," he had muttered, and her heart had leaped with pleasure because he was willing to give her what she wanted so badly. But he had made his own choice, driving far and wide until he had found the sort of place he wanted. She had wondered a little, but it was always prudent to give in to Joe's whims: one protest from her, and he might have taken her back to the dreary little flat in Sydney and told her to stay there. It did not matter to him that the very thought of the Sydney flat made her heart grow cold, since it was there that Bertie had died. Joe did not share that memory.

So he had bought this hidden little place to which a man could so easily come by night and remain for weeks without his presence being suspected by the outer world. To all that outer world he was McGill, but the farm was bought in the name of Kate Benton; he had been firm on that point. "It's your show, an' I'm not goin' to be mixed up in it," he had said. "Not goin' to be responsible for your rates an' taxes, see?"—in a laboured attempt at a joke.

Within the first year she had realized how useful the farm was to him. But would he come to it now? Would it now be a safe hiding-place for him? With a sinking heart Kate Benton realized that by her own actions she might have made it unsafe.

Her life with Joe had given her a deep-rooted dread of the police and of how far police knowledge might extend. Until this month nobody had known anything about her or suspected that she was Joe's wife—not, at least, the wife of the man who passed in the outer world as McGill. He had been rigidly careful about it since she had left Sydney for the farm.

"McGill's my name in the ring. You don't want to be mixed up in that at all, an' I'm not goin' to have you mixed up in it, see? It's no great shakes for a woman to be known as a prize-fighter's wife. You're Mrs. Benton, an' you don't know a thing about me unless I come to the farm, an' then I'm Joe Benton, same as I was born." He had forbidden her to write to him except in case of real necessity and even then the letter must be sent under cover, addressed to one of his friends. She had never written—being doubtful as to what Joe might recognize as "real necessity."

What was the position now, she wondered nervously. For the first time in

her life she had come into direct contact with the police. They knew that she was Joe's wife: so did the hospital doctor, though to the hospital she was known only as Mrs. Benton. She had had time to think before they had asked her for any personal information; the habit of secrecy concerning the farm on which Joe had insisted had made her silent about it, and when they wanted her address she had given that of her old flat in Sydney. It did not seem a thing that mattered: the hospital would never want to trace her there. She breathed more freely; perhaps, after all, she was just a vague figure that had drifted into contact with the police and drifted away again, leaving nothing by which she could be identified. Joe, she was certain, would never tell them anything about her. Even if they pressed him, knowing now that he had a wife, he would give them a false address; and if they were to tell him that they had failed to find her there, he would only shrug his shoulders in the way she knew so well and ask them how on earth he was to know where she had gone.

So it might be even yet that the farm would be undiscovered, still a refuge for Joe. Her mind grew easier—what a mercy she had remembered in time to give that old address!

And then, with a start of dismay, she remembered something else.

The car! The police had taken charge of it while she was in hospital, putting it into a garage. She had had no difficulty about reclaiming it; they had asked to see her driving-licence as a matter of form, but that was in the name of Benton. But police, she believed, always took the number of a stray car, and the police were terribly clever; if for any reason they began to make enquiries she could be traced. There was never any getting away from the police once they had their eye on you.

"Not that I've any reason to be afraid of them myself," she muttered. "They can't pin anything on me except a false address—and I could say I gave that sort of mechanical-like, being so sick at the time. But I'd be connected-up with Joe for good-and-all with them, and he'd never dare to come to the farm again."

A new thought struck her. Why, that was probably the reason for Joe's being so angry when he saw her in the gaol! He'd reckon she'd given the whole thing away; told them who she was, where she lived, and all the things he had always tried to keep hidden. Perhaps he believed she had even told them that McGill was not his real name.

"I've gone and butted into the middle of all that part of his life he's always been so set on keeping me out of," she thought. "No wonder he treated me the way he did. I never disobeyed him before, and now I've done the very last thing he'd have wanted me to do. I don't blame him for being savage with me —poor old Joe!"

Because he was all that life had left her to cling to, it was at once a relief to

feel that she need not judge him harshly: she clung to it from that moment, making a hundred excuses for him. She had misjudged him: she had failed him just when he needed most that she should be understanding: she had been a fool to thrust her way into the gaol, stupid and thoughtless to imagine that a woman could do anything whatever for a man who had just got five years. There he was, helpless, raw with irritation against injustice and oppression; the sight of her must have been the last straw.

With that conviction came a rush of anger. Those people who had been responsible for it all! No wonder he hated them, swore he would be even with them yet. Rich people, needing nothing in the world, yet finding a gold-mine they wanted to keep to themselves: hounding a poor man down when he had only come to dig as he had a perfect legal right to do. Hadn't Joe's lawyer brought it all out, showed them up properly! Those station people had given him no chance from the start; stirred up bad feeling against him, done all they could to put him in the wrong. One had thrashed him: even one of their women had turned him away hungry from her door and set a savage dog on him.

"I know that sort of fine lady," she muttered. "I've seen 'em often enough in Pitt Street and going in and out of the Australia and all the swell places. Fur coats and diamonds, and plastered with lip-stick and powder . . . none of them caring a hang about people that have to scrape for a living. Turn a dog on my Joe, would she! I'd give something to be able to turn Nick on *her*!"

Ordinarily Kate Benton was a level-headed woman; and she knew her Joe. She made an effort to estimate what there had really been against him, aware that a man was not likely to get a heavy sentence unless he had deserved it. Her knowledge of the case against him was scanty. The newspaper she had by chance seen had given only a very bare outline of the charges; it was just a paragraph saying that the trial was to be on a certain date. Then there was that woman who had sat next her in Court—she was dead against Joe, but then she had said straight out that she was a friend of Linton's crowd. Queer sort of friends they must have, reflected Mrs. Benton, remembering the hatchet face and shabby clothes of her neighbour.

There was the cattle-stealing. That was not denied. But take the circumstances, she mused. It wasn't like ordinary cattle-duffing, for men starved for fresh meat to help themselves to a few calves. Hadn't the first lawyer said something about it in Court . . . something like that? Her head had been so confused, her weariness so great, that morning that she couldn't follow everything he said, but she remembered vaguely that it had not seemed a very bad crime. And surely, if Joe had taken fifty of their wretched calves the Lintons wouldn't really have missed them. Only cruel people would send a man to prison for a little thing like that. And that big Linton fellow had licked him, as well as calling in the police. She could not remember half that the thin

woman had whispered excitedly, but the licking was an item she could never forget, and never forgive.

What next? She tried hard to follow again in her mind the progress of the evidence, finding her memory constantly leaving gaps: no wonder, with the black waves of faintness that had risen in her again and again, making the Court and the witnesses only a dull blur before her eyes. She could not recall the face of the big Linton man at all, though she remembered angrily that at one time he had made everyone laugh. Easy for him to joke, she thought—*he* wasn't the one to stand in the dock.

Memory grew clearer over the next witness, that tall dark fellow Joe's lawyer had browbeaten. That scene had roused her to full consciousness. How that smart little man had dragged out of him things the Lintons would have given anything to hide! made him admit threatening Joe, admit that his fine lady of a wife had refused to give him food. He would have told about the dog, she felt sure, if only the Judge hadn't stopped him—and doubtless the Judge was backing up the Lintons. But he couldn't stop him bringing out facts about the Chinaman and the blackfellow. Much justice there was in the world when people would take the word of a Chink and an old nigger against a white man's!

If only she hadn't fainted just then! She shuddered, living again the moment when the last black wave had slowly engulfed her, blotting out the handsome, angry face she had stared at furiously. She could see it now: his eyes had met hers, looking puzzled at the intensity of her stare—he'd have understood it well enough if he'd known she was Joe's wife.

She sighed impatiently, aching to know more of what had followed. Joe had asked her not to read the papers, and she had promised. It was the only time in their ten minutes that his voice had been even a little kind; she could not refuse, and the promise would be kept. After all, what did it matter? it was easy enough to imagine. The other people were too strong for him; they'd have had lots of witnesses ready to swear black was white. Hadn't Joe told her that the whole thing was a frame-up? she thought. "You could see it was, too, when the lawyer was making that young Meadows admit as much as he did." But even young Meadows, hot and flustered as he was, had told him he'd get more evidence against Joe later on. They had it fixed up, all right. People like that had all the power—hadn't Joe always said so?

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed slowly, its sound startling in the deep silence of the room. She glanced up at it.

"My goodness!—it's more than two hours since Barney said good night. I suppose I ought to go to bed myself."

She felt too listless to move: the long effort of thinking had tired her physically. But her mind felt clearer now that she had thought everything out,

and she was happier. Years of being linked with her husband, evil as in her heart she knew him to be, had not been able to kill her loyalty to him. Whatever he was, he was still her man. It had lifted her burden to find she could make excuses for him and try to understand him better. Easier, a hundred times easier, to pity Joe than to blame him, for with pity came a new springing of loyalty and a different outlet for bruised feelings. Joe slipped back into his place in her mind that he had always held; her man, who had never quite ceased to need her. And all the pain and resentment that hurt so badly when they were directed against Joe could be directed against his enemies now—a comforting thing to do. She did it thoroughly.

"He'll never forgive them, and I don't blame him. I'll bet he'll keep his word and try to pay them back when he gets out—yes, and I'd help him, too, if I could. It 'ud be mad, I suppose, but my goodness, wouldn't it make one feel better!"

She fell to dreaming of ways in which she could do it: a great thing if she could manage it herself, a wonderful thing to be able to tell Joe when he came out. It was all wild make-believe, like a boy's dreams of defeating pirates and brigands single-handed; but a boy gets satisfaction out of his imaginary battles and strategy, and so did the lonely woman fighting her way back to a new command of life. She had put "paid" to the enemy account in a dozen convincing ways before she became too sleepy to carry on the fascinating exercise.

She got up slowly, yawning and stretching herself.

"My word, it's late—and aren't I just nothing but a silly ass, making up fairy-tales that can't ever come off!" she said aloud. "But it's sort of comforting, all the same." She dragged herself to bed, smiling as Nick thumped his tail on the verandah to let her know he was on duty.

But she knew that dreams of vengeance were poor stuff to live on, and from the next morning she flung herself into the work of the farm. The house itself never took much of her time: it was very barely furnished, and there was nobody to disarrange it. Meals were of the simplest; neither she nor Barney cared what they ate. It was, indeed, a good thing that she had the responsibility of feeding Barney since she realized that the old man needed care: for his sake she cooked more nourishing food than she would have troubled to prepare for herself alone. Even so, she was free of the house for the greater part of the day.

The farm consisted mainly of rough paddocks where young cattle grazed until fit for sale. There were a few pigs and milking cows, some bee-hives, a straggling flock of fowls and turkeys that scratched for a living, needing little feeding except in winter. Vegetables grew like weeds under Barney's tending; the kitchen garden, stretching down towards the creek, was the pride of his heart. They lived almost entirely on the produce of the farm. Barney never

went away from it. He had developed a nervous dread of the outside world; even when she offered to take him for a drive in the car he would shrink back, muttering that he was too busy to go gallivantin'.

There was scarcely need to go outside their own boundaries, for bread was baked at home. Now and then Mrs. Benton drove to one of the little townships for stores or meat. There were several within driving distance; Joe had suggested that she should visit each in turn. "Just as well," he had said: "they don't get to know you that way, and you don't want to take up with a lot of strangers." It was true enough: she shrank from meeting people who might become familiar, might ask questions about an absentee husband. She had made an arrangement with a butcher over her cattle; he came when she sent for him, taking away those that were fit for sale. When her stock grew low she used to ride her old pony to the nearest township where there was a cattle-market, buy what she needed, and drive them home with Nick's aid. She had been brought up on a farm and had never lost her eye for cattle; her purchases turned out well. The men at the sale-yards used to look at her curiously, soon learning that she discouraged friendly questioning. The district knew her vaguely as a queer sort of woman who ran her own show and lived like a hermit; hard-working farmers, they had no time or inclination to intrude where they were not wanted. The hidden farm was left to itself and forgotten.

. . . . . .

The old routine claimed her again now, and for a time she worked from morning until dark, hoeing thistles and rag-wort in the paddocks, mending the shaky old post-and-rail fences that were always needing repairs, clearing out drains—all the hundred-and-one jobs of a bush holding. Physical strength came back to her rapidly: even her heart seemed to have lost the troubling symptoms that had made the Sydney doctor warn her after Bertie's death that she must be watchful. She wondered sometimes if the improvement were not due to the knowledge that no longer was there any cause to listen at night. For years, as soon as dusk fell she had listened: reading or knitting in the quiet room, part of her had always been listening for Joe. The far-off sound of a car, the chug of a motor-cycle's engine, had made her suddenly sit bolt upright, straining her ears and trembling. Joe had always brought fear with him. Fear fell upon Barney and the dogs: fear held his wife as long as he remained on the farm, since she knew he never came unless he himself was afraid.

Now that the worst had happened there was no more need for fear. With that knowledge came a dull sense of peace. She could settle down in the evenings, knowing that no sound could come to make her heart pound and flutter, her breath come uneasily. Joe had certainly not been good for a shaky

heart.

When there were no odd jobs of farm work claiming her she turned to her garden. There was peace there, too. It was not large: part of it had been left half-wild, with trees and rough grass and native flowering bush where birds were always busy and at night 'possums climbed in the tall gums. They robbed her bushes of rose-buds sometimes, if Nick slept soundly enough, but she had plenty to spare: roses ran riot, covering the fences, climbing up the verandah-posts, hiding the tool-shed with a curtain of scarlet. There were beds blazing with other flowers, but the roses came first in her heart. They bloomed for her as if they knew she loved them: there was no month in the year when she could not find opening buds.

She thought peace had come to stay. But as work slackened—and she had to be careful not to hurt old Barney's feelings by taking on herself too many of the jobs he considered his own—she found herself becoming restless. Work healed, but it was mechanical and did not keep her from thinking. The vision of Joe in prison haunted her—she knew him too well not to be sure that he would give trouble, fighting against his punishment. There would be no good-conduct remissions for Joe. Worse still was her never-resting anger against the people she blamed for his downfall. She hated them with a fierceness that almost surprised herself; hate had never before entered into her life, and now she lived with it night and day. Working in the scented garden, knitting in the quiet room at night, she thought of Joe's enemies and dreamed wild schemes of revenge.

Common sense asserted itself now and then, telling her she was foolish. "It's bad for me, I know," she thought. "I'm just getting into a groove, and goodness knows where it may land me. I've got to shake myself out of it somehow—get away from the farm more, see fresh things. I might go clean off my head if I go on this way."

She thought of the car. Yes, that might be a good thing; it had helped her on the long drive home to force herself to be interested in what she saw on the road. For a time her vague dread of the police had kept her from using it, but now that dread was dying away. She got it out and began to clean it: the work brought a new desire to drive again. Barney, coming into the yard, looked at her nervously.

"Not goin' away again, Missus?"

"Only for a drive, Barney." She saw the fear in his eyes, and knew its cause. Well, she might as well put the poor old chap in peace.

"Barney," she said. "Boss has gone right away. He won't be here for a long time."

Light flashed into the faded blue eyes.

"Right away, Missus?—true?"

"Yes, ever so far. No need to think it's him at night if the dogs bark now."

"Go-orn!" uttered Barney, in profound relief. "That's good-oh, isn't it? Gorn right away!" He thought over it, satisfaction in every line of his face. "Happen he'll never come back any more, Missus," he suggested hopefully.

"I shouldn't wonder. Don't you worry any more about him, at all events, Barney." She rubbed hard at the windscreen. "You'll be the only man on the farm now."

"Bonza!" he breathed. "My word, Blackie an' Nick'll be glad!" He went off, muttering happily; leaving Mrs. Benton wondering at him.

"Queer," she thought. "He's such a meek, respectful old chap—he's never once said a word to me about not liking Joe, all the time he's been here. I suppose he was just that pleased he couldn't keep his tongue quiet."

She finished cleaning the car and took it out on the roads for an hour, coming back refreshed, her mind calmer. Yes, it certainly paid to go out—the mere effort of driving, obliged to keep her attention on things outside herself, had done her good. She slept well that night.

After that, she fell back upon the car as a refuge. Whenever thought hounded her, when the feeling of being caught in a groove grew too strong, she drove for hours; skirting townships when possible at first, but gradually becoming indifferent to them. Nobody knew her—what did it matter who saw her? No policeman ever gave her more than a passing glance. People with whom she came in contact were always friendly: so friendly that the farm seemed lonelier than ever when she came home to it at night.

Sometimes she dwelt on the advice the hospital doctor had given her—to adopt a child. It would be good for her, she knew: occupation, interest, new love. The very thought of holding a little body again made her ache with longing. But the longing was for Bertie, whom she could never hold again. Could she put another child in his place?

"I might get used to his not being Bertie," she admitted to herself, driving slowly along a bush road. "It would have to be a boy: a girl couldn't ever be the same, somehow. A boy that would be little and loving at first, and I'd train him to be kind when he grew up. He'd look after me then." It was not easy to imagine the unknown boy grown-up—all she wanted was someone so small that she would be all his world.

But there were difficulties. She put Joe aside: if he ever came back he would have to accept the arrangement. Curious, how Joe seemed to fade into the background when she thought of a child. Still, he was not the only consideration: she believed you had to go through all sorts of formalities before you could adopt one; there would have to be people to vouch for you, and of course it would mean a visit to Sydney. She could not face that prospect—yet; could not see her way clear. A woman who had a convict for a husband

would have to be very cunning before she could manage to get hold of an orphan.

"If I'd thought of it a year ago, it would have been easier. Joe was out of gaol then . . . those Linton people hadn't come across his path. Now he's a convict—and what chance have I got!" The old hatred of the Lintons swelled up anew, and did not die down. There was now a new grievance to keep it alive.

With this new longing eating at her heart she took to driving more and more, going farther afield. Sometimes she flung some clothes into a suit-case and remained away for a night or two, warning Barney to expect her when he saw her. He did not mind: nothing troubled him now that he knew the dreaded Boss would not come back. That joyful certainty had given old Barney new life. He was brisker, more able to think and plan his work. She believed he realized himself happily as the Man of the House.

Journeying farther from home, Mrs. Benton found that she could reach the sea within a couple of hours. It was a good day when she found it: she had not known how much she missed the blue water that had been so near her in Sydney. There was pain in it, since it brought memories of Bertie, very small and thin, yet always able to be merry when they played together on the sand of the Harbour beaches; but the pain was a quiet one, easier to endure than some of her other memories. Now, when she left the car and went down to the edge of the water in some lonely little bay, sitting for hours among the rocks, she could almost imagine that Bertie was near her.

"Perhaps he is," she thought. "How can anyone tell where they go when they die? I don't know much about Heaven, but I suppose it's there all right—and how would it be Heaven to a kid if he couldn't ever have a look at his mother? Bertie 'ud want one now and then, anyhow, and I bet he'd manage to get it." And sometimes it seemed that Bertie came away from the beach with her; was close to her in the car on the long drive home.

CHAPTER X

MARCHING ORDERS

"ME?" said Wally Meadows scornfully. "*Me* in failing health? That was what you said, wasn't it, you foolish woman?"

His wife sat on the arm of his chair and laughed at him.

" 'Failing health' sounds terribly interesting—I wish I'd thought of saying it, only I didn't. I hinted as gracefully as I could that I thought you were hardly your usual robust and hearty self. That's all."

"Not a graceful idea in the least," he said. "And great nonsense. Did you ever know me off-colour in your life, unless I'd run up against something hard and heavy, like that time in Queensland? And you can't count that against a man." He checked her as she opened her mouth to speak. "Oh, yes, I remember that time in the War, but you can't count Wars either. Anyhow, I beat you to it!"

"I'm not troubling to dig up your murky past," said Norah loftily. "The present is quite enough for me, and so are you when you won't listen to me sensibly."

"If I did, I believe you'd have me in a hospital before I knew where I was," he retorted. "Just to give idle doctors a little fun with X-rays and what not. Not if I know it, young Norah!"

"It's the last thing I'd dream of," she said. "Think what it would cost, for one thing! I know very much better ways of spending money."

"Me too," agreed Wally, his face suddenly lighting up. "I say, Nor, did I tell you I saw an awfully good two-year-old pony at Pinkerton's the other day? Small, well-bred, and exactly what we'll want for Davie in another year or so. Pinkerton's not keen on selling him, but I believe he'd weaken if I made him a decent offer, and really, he's the best——"

His utterance was cut off by a hand laid firmly on his mouth. A slight struggle ensued.

"Well, will you be good and keep to the point?" asked Norah. "Billabong has fully a dozen colts and fillies growing up to be ready for Davie, and every man who has picked one out has sworn that it was the best ever foaled. How the poor lad is going to use them all I can't imagine, unless he runs a circus!"

"And why not? If he begins early enough it might be a world-beater——"

The hand was replaced on his mouth.

"If we begin discussing Davie and his future we'll never get anywhere," she said firmly. "It's you I want to talk about. Do be serious for two minutes,

Wally. I'm not the only one who notices that you aren't as fit as usual. Why, Jim was nearly ready to take you away with him, just to keep an eye on you!"

"If Jim is weak in the head there's no reason why I should be. And it sounds exactly as if I were a parcel. 'Wanted on the Voyage' and all that." He glanced at her: something in her face made him immediately serious. "Nor dear, you're not really worrying, are you?"

"I have not been quite happy about you for some time," she said—and rubbed her cheek against his hair. "I'm not going into all your symptoms, because you know them just as well as I do, to say nothing of any you may have hidden from me. Don't you think you could take all that as read, so that we can see what we had better do?"

"Well . . ." began Wally; and stopped for a moment. She waited in silence.

"Oh, I'll admit I've been feeling a bit of a wet rag lately," he said, with a trace of annoyance. "I get sleepy when I shouldn't, and lie awake when I want to go to sleep: and food's rather a burden, and so is work. But that's all there is to it, Norah, and I'm hanged if it's anything to make a fuss about."

"Most certainly we won't fuss; I know much better ways of getting you fit than that."

"Oh, I'll get fit all right. After all, we've gone at pretty high tension ever since the gold was first struck. Hang the gold!" burst out Wally. "We've never really enjoyed life since then, I believe. And this business about McGill has been a perfectly beastly finish-up, just when we thought we could say good-bye to the mine and leave it to take care of itself. I get wild when I think it ended in a wretched man's landing in gaol for years. A messy thing, gold, if you ask me, Nor."

"Yes, a bit messy," she said, stroking his hair. "It was queer how it brought violence and trouble into Billabong from the very first day. But it's all finished now, Wally, and good has come out of it as well: Jim's happiness, for one thing. Tommy would never have left Bob as long as he was poor and struggling. We have to think of that side of it. And you know as well as I do that McGill is better where he is—a man like McGill could only bring evil and suffering if he were free."

"I know that all right, only I wish somebody else had been concerned in getting him jugged," said Wally. "And I just could not stick having your name dragged in."

His eyes closed under the quiet movement of her hand on his hair.

"Oh well—let's stop thinking about the rotten business. I'm sick to death of it."

"Yes, let's," she said. "Only—I believe we should find that easier somewhere else. Wally, before we go back to settle down at Little Billabong what would you say to a wander?"

"Go away? Oh, honestly, Norah, I don't feel . . . I mean, we might as well be quietly at home, don't you think? It strikes me as rather a fag to start packing and all that. I promise you I'll take it easy at home, if that's what is worrying you."

"That's a thing you'll never do at home. We needn't pack much, Wally—just a few old clothes and a picnic basket. We'd never go further in a day than we felt inclined: just dawdle along and watch other people being busy, and find new scenery. When we found any place we liked we'd stay there as long as we liked it. There might be beaches," she said dreamily, "and bathing. We haven't bathed in salt water for ages."

"Sounds peaceful," said Wally with a sigh.

"The feel of hot sand and a sea-breeze," she said. "And rocks with pools among them, full of sea-anemones and things. And seeing Davie sliding down hummocks."

"What—you'd take Davie?"

"Oh, I don't think we'd really enjoy it without him. If we meant to drive fast and go long distances it would be no fun for him, but a quiet trip, just mooching along, would be just the thing for a small boy. And he hasn't had any change of air since . . . why," said Norah, beginning to laugh, "not since he was born!"

"Gosh, you are a shameless woman!" said Wally, chuckling. "I never knew anyone so full of guile in my whole life. Here I sit, all meek and tame, with you dangling baits in front of my nose—until your invention-streak petered out, and you had to laugh at yourself. You needn't think I wasn't up to you all the time. I was, but I couldn't say anything, I was so interested in seeing how far you'd go."

"Yes, I thought it was that way," she said contentedly. "Well, how about it? Don't say that all my eloquence has been wasted."

He pulled her down on his knee.

"You'd like it, Nor? That's all that matters."

"Yes, I'd love it," she said. "We haven't been away for so long, and never with Davie. It would be good for all of us."

"What about your father? A bit dull for him alone at Billabong."

"He would be quite happy, and Bob would often be there. He wants us to go, Wally."

"Oh, you've consulted him, have you? That's right—arrange everything behind the victim's back and then break the news to him! I suppose Billy and Lee Wing know all about it too—I can't go unless I know they approve!"

"You'll have to ask them yourself," she said: very content to hear the old cheerfulness in his voice again. "But I think you'll be met with loud cheers. Murty has been like an old woman about you since you went to sleep that day

in the paddock. He said it was the onnathuralest thing ever he seen, and that you'd be the betther of a change, or a wastin' sickness 'ud get you, and in the latther end we'd be sorry. Do you wonder I took action?"

"I've known jolly well that you had your stern eye on me," he said. "Not that you ever planted it long or heavily, but I knew it was there when I've tried to hide most of something I couldn't eat under my knife and fork. So difficult, too; they don't make those tools big enough. Or . . . when I've been like a bear with a sore head."

"Ah, never then," she said quickly.

"No, not once: it was only my own guilty conscience, because I knew I was being a beast, and I didn't quite know what to do about it. It used to take me unbeknownst, and I'd go away feeling I was getting like McGill."

Norah, her head against his shoulder, gave a soft chuckle.

"All very well, but you don't know . . . it's a pretty rotten feeling. Gosh, I am glad we've had it all out," exploded Wally, looking rather like a small boy. "If I'm a beast now, and I warn you I may be if I can't find my studs when I'm packing, you'll be able to tell me just where I get off. Will you, old Nor?"

She put her hand up to his face. He held her tightly, and for a while they did not speak.

"We'll go to-morrow," Norah said at last.

"I say! Can we?"

"Everything's ready," she told him. "That's why I got Billy to clean the car yesterday. And if you're really anxious about your studs I may as well tell you that they're packed, and all your other dunnage too. Also Davie's and mine. Oh, and my hair's washed too!"

"I knew *that*," he said, his face against the shining brown waves.

"And Brownie is spreading herself over picnic baskets and things, and Dad filled up the car with petrol when your back was turned, and what's more to the point, he's filled up your Income-Tax form—the one you threw behind the sofa after you'd wrestled with it and it came off best."

"Lord, what a father-in-law!" came in a voice of deep emotion.

"And . . . and . . . well, I don't think there's anything else except to fling the things and me and Davie in after breakfast, and hang the billy on somewhere, and just go."

"What does a fellow say to you all?" he murmured. But there seemed no need to say more.

"Where shall we go, Wally?"

"Oh, just anywhere at all," he said largely. "There's so much room in Australia! I thought we were to be purposeless vagabonds."

"Well, up to a point. But a car's not like a horse—you've got to steer her in *some* direction."

“That’s a true word,” he said. “Well, there are four. Their names are North, South, East and West.”

“How you do grasp a situation!” said his wife admiringly. “Let’s see. If you go West you’ll end up in Perth, and that’s a shade far for Davie. North—no, the desert is bad travelling and I’m told there are bumps in it.”

“Two perfectly good points of the compass are now wiped off the map,” remarked Wally. “I bar South and East—too crowded, and we might meet people we know, which I should hate at the moment. That leaves no points of the compass at all. So what?”

“It’s awkward, isn’t it?” she laughed.

“Dashed awkward. Makes you feel as if you were suspended between Time and Space. But we’ll have to do something about it.” He pondered the matter. “Tell you what, Nor—we’ll go slantingdicular—strike north-eastish until we hit the sea. How’s that?”

“Do you happen to know what towns we shall meet on the way,” she enquired.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. None at all, perhaps. Do you mind?”

“Not one bit: it’s just what I want—to go wandering off into the blue, not knowing what we’re going to see.”

“Well, you can be certain it’s all civilized,” he said. “You’re not hankering after the great open spaces, are you? Not with young Davie?”

“Goodness, no!” said Davie’s mother hastily. “We’ll do that by ourselves some time—that would be rather fun, by the way, wouldn’t it? No, I’m really hoping very hard that we shall find clean beds every night, since we’ll be sleeping just wherever our luck takes us. I can stand many things, but I’ve a preference for a clean bed.”

“Oh, luck has never let us down yet,” was Wally’s easy answer. “Lots of bush pubs are quite decent, and goodness knows I’ve met enough of them. We’ll manage somehow. Prudence will make me take a map, though; there’s no sense in missing a good place just because one doesn’t know it happens to be there. Gosh, Nor, this is going to be a lark, isn’t it! I wonder how young Davie will like being on the road.”

“Davie likes everything,” she said. “Thank goodness he has been brought up to take things as they come, and not to make a fuss. Let’s go and tell the others it’s all settled, shall we?”

“I don’t want to move, even though your weight has long removed all feeling from both my legs,” he said—“I say, you shouldn’t have bounced off me like that—it’s very dangerous to remove heavy pressure from an object unexpectedly. It should be done by easy stages, so that the object can expand gradually back to normal. Pull me up now, and support me till sensation returns.”

Laughing, she put out her hands and pulled. Wally came to his feet with a lithe movement. They looked at each other.

"I'm mighty little good at saying things that go deep," he said. "But if ever a man had more luck than he deserved, I'm that man. Let's collect Davie and go and tell everybody that the victim has given in meekly."

CHAPTER XI

THREE GO TRAVELLING

OF their first fortnight on the roads neither Norah nor Wally remembered many details later on. They were heading for that vague place "Anywhere," and being in no hurry to get there they took any road that beckoned and allowed luck to decide where they should halt.

Norah drove all through the week after they left Billabong. Sometimes all three sat together on the roomy front seat of the big open tourer: more often Wally was in the back, where his long legs could stretch out freely. Often, glancing round, she saw that he was asleep: discovering which, Davie would cease chattering at the top of his voice and find an outlet for his feelings by pointing out, in a violent whisper, the innumerable things he found to interest him.

They travelled slowly, making brief stoppages now and then where sunny slopes were tempting places for a very small boy to run about. The midday halt was always a long one: the billy was boiled, food prepared over a spirit-lamp for Davie, and they ate in the happy leisure of those for whom time has ceased to exist. Then Davie slept in the back of the car for an hour, and his father and mother lay on rugs on the warm grass, which usually meant that Wally slept again. But Norah had ceased to be troubled by his unnatural drowsiness, for she realized that his over-strained mind and body were working out their own cure. At home he had been ashamed and irritated by falling asleep in the day-time; now, helped by her complete understanding, he let himself relax thankfully and awoke with a smile at her. "By Jove, this is lovely!" he would say, turning on his back, stretching his limbs vigorously. "Do we have to go yet?"—and knew that her answer would be—"Only when we feel like going."

They found a queer assortment of places to spend their nights. Little bush inns sometimes, in tiny townships, where the accommodation was rough enough, but the welcome always kindly. Larger towns meant driving round to look for guest-houses, which they preferred to hotels for the sake of quietness. Wherever they stayed Norah managed to make friends with the mistress of the house and would disappear with her into the kitchen in the evening, to plan food for next day's picnic lunch—since it was no part of her programme that her two menfolk should be without proper nourishment. Meals interested Wally little at first, but as the days went on his appetite began to come back, and Norah thankfully, but without comment, packed larger supplies.

Davie was completely happy. Life on wheels meant that each day was full

of new and exciting things. It was true that even in the quiet life of Billabong he never failed to find excitement, and occasionally to give it to other people, who became curiously wrought-up when he managed to escape from them and went off on unlawful excursions of his own. Still, at Billabong he knew everybody and every animal; now he was on strange roads where unfamiliar sights and different faces might be seen at every turn. Moreover, he recognized himself in a new way as no longer a baby. He was a traveller, treated as one of a trio, on equal terms. He had responsibilities; it was his job every night and morning to see to his own tiny suit-case, known as "My 'Sponso," just as he was expected to help with the picnic baskets, to gather sticks for the midday fire, to take part in the careful extinguishing of that fire which Wally told him was the duty of every good bushman. "Dad" might deal with the smouldering embers, but the small sandalled feet trampled sturdily round the blackened patch of ground, making very sure that no spark should get away into dry grass.

Independence came to him rapidly. Billabong held many people who delighted to do things for him; Brownie spoiled him shamelessly, Billy was his black slave, and Lee Wing his yellow one. There were large men everywhere who asked for nothing better than to hold him on a horse, to put him on their shoulders and take him among the cattle he loved, or to go boating with him on the lagoon. But as a traveller he quickly realized that he was expected to be independent and to act as did his two fellow-travellers. Davie leaped to the idea joyfully. It was quite easy, he saw; he had only to imitate "Dad" in everything "Dad" did. He modelled his walk on Wally's, crammed his sun-hat on his black curls at the same angle as Wally's old grey felt, went about his tiny jobs in the rapid, purposeful way that Wally brought to every task. Norah found herself with a new protector: the authoritative little voice that commanded, "Sit down vere, an' I'll bwing you a cushion!" was so like his father's that she could do nothing but obey. There was half a sigh behind her smile as she watched him dragging a cushion too large for his small arms to hold: already her baby was making strides towards manhood.

Luck gave Davie two days of unexpected delight. They were late on the road one evening, having taken a turn that, so far from leading to "Anywhere," seemed to lead to nowhere at all. Dusk was coming on, and the road, never good, grew rapidly worse. Wally began to feel uneasy about his family.

"I don't much like this," he said. "It's nearly time the boy was in bed, and there's no sign of a township—not so much as a light showing from a farm, even. I think we'd better turn back, Nor."

"I've been wondering that myself," she said. "There's a corner ahead, Wally: suppose we drive round it. We may see a light or meet someone who can direct us."

They drove on. Round the bend the gloom was deeper, trees so closely hemming in the track on either side as to shut out the glimmer of daylight that remained. Wally switched on his headlights.

"The place is a regular tunnel," he said. "Hullo——!"

Ahead of them round another bend sounds of scurrying hoofs and lowing of cattle broke out. A man's voice came sharply—"Oh, *hang* all motors!" The exasperated words merged into shouting at the cattle: they heard running feet. Wally dimmed his lights and braked to a standstill.

"Someone's very annoyed with us. Wait here, Norah, while I see if I can lend him a hand."

He was out of the car as he spoke, hurrying round the bend. The trees ended; in front of him the road ran between wire fences. A gate was open into a paddock across which a track led to a house on a rise. The owner of the angry voice was disappearing into the dusk in hot pursuit of a number of cows; he was short and fat, and the cows had easily the best of the race.

"Much chance he's got of heading them," muttered Wally. "No wonder he was annoyed!"

He slipped through the fence and cut across the paddock, running like a hare. Fortunately the road curved again: his short cut brought him out upon it just in time to head the cows. Their lumbering gallop slackened at the sight of the shouting figure in the middle of the track: a few active moments and he had turned them. He drove them back quietly, finding their owner in position to block them from going beyond the gate. Realizing the situation, the cows turned into the paddock as if it were the one thing they had wanted to do from the first.

The owner pushed back his hat and mopped his brow.

"Well, you're a white man, mister," he uttered. "Lor, you can run! I thought them ol' brutes had me beat altogether. I brought 'em from a paddock up the road, an' they were dead keen on gettin' back to it—I was darned thankful when I seen you scootin' across the paddock, though I never thought you could block 'em in time."

"The least I could do, after scaring them with my headlights," Wally said, laughing.

"Well, them lights was about the last straw," admitted the other. "I aint got a dog, y'see: my ol' dog's sick, an' don't the cows know it! They been dodgin' me at this gate for twenty minutes, an' I just was pattin' myself on the back thinkin' I'd got 'em started through when your lights flashed in the trees, an' they just acted like rabbits. Well, thanks a lot. Got time to come up to the house for a drink?"

"Sorry, but I'm late already. Can you tell me how far I am from the nearest township?"

“Township? There’s none of any sort this way—only a few farms, an’ the road peters out into nothing five miles up.”

“H’m!” said Wally. “That ought to teach me to keep a map handy. Fact is, we haven’t been bothering much about maps lately. I’ll turn in your gateway, if you don’t mind—there’s no room where the car is. How far have I got to go back on my tracks before I find some sort of a hotel?”

“Well, the nearest place is ten mile, but I can’t say much for the pub,” said the farmer. “Slummocky sort of place that pub is. I’d do another ten mile or so if I was you, an’ you’ll strike Wynton. That’s a shade better.” He hesitated. “Got some other people with you?”

“Yes—my wife and a small boy. Time he was in bed, too, so I’ll get going.” Wally raised his voice. “Norah! Drive on here—we have to turn.”

The car came in sight in a moment, moving slowly. The farmer gave a low whistle at the sight of the tiny figure beside the driver.

“Lor, you’ve got a baby with you!”

“Don’t you let him hear you say so,” warned Wally, with a grin. “Well, good night.”

“Aw, I say, look here!” said the farmer. “You can’t go stravaigin’ round these roads lookin’ for bush pubs with a kid that size, at this time o’ night. You just come up to our place an’ camp.”

“Thanks awfully, but we couldn’t dream of quartering ourselves on you,” said Wally, much embarrassed. “The boy is quite used to travelling—we’re all right.”

The farmer took no notice. Instead he advanced to the side of the car.

“ ’Evenin’, Missus. I was just tellin’ your husband it’ll take you ages to find any sort of a pub. An’ it won’t be anything you’d like when you do find it, neither. You three better turn in here an’ stay the night with us. Not a bit of trouble—we’d like it.”

“Oh, but we couldn’t——” Norah began.

“Now, look,” interrupted the man of cows. “I got kids meself, an’ I’d be darned sorry to take one of mine huntin’ for a bed in the dark over these roads.” He looked at Davie. “Gettin’ sleepy, son?”

“A bit,” confessed Davie. “Want tea first.”

“I’ll bet you do. Well, there’s lots of tea up there at the house, an’ bed after it. You tell Mum to carry on through that gate.”

Davie was not to be drawn into giving orders to a parent. He looked up at her enquiringly, and Norah laughed.

“You mustn’t tempt my son,” she said. “It’s so very kind of you to ask us, but we could not dream of giving so much trouble. Think of your poor wife, landed suddenly with three strangers!”

“Nothing she’d like better—she doesn’t see a stranger once a month out

here. An' there's a room all ready, as it happens. We've got people comin' to stay next week, an' my old woman she's a terror for takin' time by the fetlock —she went an' got their room ready this mornin'."

"Wiv a lickle bed for me in it?" demanded Davie hopefully.

"You bet there is, son. One just your size. Look here, mister," urged the farmer, turning to Wally, who appeared acutely unhappy—"it's pure cruelty to animals to keep him travellin'. We ain't much in the way of swank, but you'll get a clean bed——"

"Good Lord, man, I wasn't standing off on that account," Wally broke in. "Only it's too much to put on your——"

"Too much your grandmother—you wait till you see my old woman. She'd never let me hear the end of it if you went on in the dark. You just hop in an' give me a lift up to the house."

Norah and Wally looked at each other, and at Davie, and gave in; and a few minutes later found themselves ushered into a large, bright kitchen where four shy children drew together and stared at the intruders, wide-eyed, and a plump, motherly woman grasped the situation almost before her husband had time to speak.

"Let you go lookin' for a pub? My word, I'd have had something to say to Fred if he'd done that! An' the poor mite—just look at the curls of him! You come an' get your things off an' have a nice wash—Fred, bring a big dipper of hot water, an' then you can look after the gentleman."

She picked up Davie—Norah noted that he showed no unwillingness, though as a rule he fought shy of strangers who tried to touch him. The room to which she led the way was spotless. Walls and floor were of bare pine, and the little bed in the corner was a home-made stretcher, but it was a haven of rest to tired people. The dressing-table was contrived from a big packing-case draped with gay cretonne; the only seat was a long box covered in the same way. Through the open window the evening breeze brought the scent of gum-trees.

"It's not much," said their hostess. "All home-made, barrin' the bed. All I can say for it is, it's clean."

"I think it's a lovely room," said Norah, sighing happily. "Davie, aren't we lucky people!"

"Plenty!" said Davie. "Can I have bare toes on?"

"What? take off his sandals; does he mean? Why, of course you can, son." She took them off, fussing over him joyfully. "My baby's nearly four—I'm always sorry when they get big. Mr. Wallace, he's different; by the time they're able to sit up he's lookin' forward to them bein' out with him in the paddocks an' doin' their bit to help."

"I go out wiv Dad after cattle," Davie told her. Suddenly he was

conscience-stricken. “Gwacious, I never bwought in my ’Sponso, Muvver!”

“What’s that, dearie? a puppy?” asked Mrs. Wallace; at which Davie yelled with laughter, and Norah hastened to explain. Wally appeared, bearing his family’s luggage, and their hostess hurried off to the kitchen.

“Now, I know what that woman’s going to do,” Norah said, washing her hands rapidly. “She thinks she’s going to make company of us, and I’m off to see that she doesn’t. Carry on with Davie, Wally—he’s very grubby.” She was gone.

In the kitchen she found Mrs. Wallace hastily stacking cups and plates on a tray which already bore a clean folded table cloth. The eldest boy, a lanky ten-year-old, was carefully lighting a second lamp.

“Clear everything off the sittin’-room table, Sam,” his mother was saying. “You an’ Nancy can lay the table, an’——” She broke off, a little taken aback at seeing her guest.

“Don’t you dare!” smiled Norah. “With your table all ready here, and lots of room for three thin people like us. If you make us feel like strangers we’ll be horribly uncomfortable.”

“Aw, I couldn’t have you in here, in all this clutter,” protested Mrs. Wallace. “It won’t take me two shakes to get the sittin’-room ready, truly.”

“And how are we to get to know you all, if you send us off into another room?” demanded Norah. “We’re going to stay here and make a little more clutter—though why you abuse a kitchen like this I don’t know. It’s a lovely kitchen: I’m perfectly certain you won’t be able to get my husband out of it.” She looked at the long table, covered with spotless white oil-cloth, all its preparations made: plates and cups in readiness; home-made bread, a huge crusty loaf: dishes of scones and cakes, the gleam of jams and honey. “If you only knew how nice that looks!” she said, and took from the tray the folded table-cloth. “Sam, this really isn’t wanted, you know—where does it live?”

“In here,” said Sam with a broad grin, opening a drawer of the dresser.

“Well, you put it there. Now, Mrs. Wallace, just give me a job.”

“Well, if you ain’t a one!” said Mrs. Wallace, yielding.

Thus Mr. Wallace, coming in a little later, suppressed a whistle at the sight of his kitchen. Davie and the two younger Wallaces were at the table, eating hard, watched over by Nancy. At one side of the range Mrs. Wallace stirred a stew, at the other Norah fried potatoes; between them sat Wally, making toast, handing each browned slice to Sam to be buttered.

“Like watching the cooks in a ship’s galley,” said the startled Mr. Wallace. “Each with his own half-yard of space, an’ not an inch to spare. Is that the way you treat visitors, Emma?”

“It’s the way they treat me,” returned his wife serenely. “No use arguin’ with ’em, Fred. They’re just masterful. You go an’ get washed quick—we’re

just about ready."

It was a very cheerful meal, and it lasted a long while, since Mr. Wallace had a way of beginning to tell a story and quite forgetting what was on his plate. The children finished quickly, anxious to join the little group in a corner where Davie was discovering for the first time in his life what it meant to have small playmates. It was an exciting discovery; he had no wish to end the game. But the day had been a long one, and his bed-time was much over-due. Norah, eyeing him with some concern from the table, saw his interest flagging. He yawned, scrambled to his feet and came to her side.

"This pfeller plenty sleepy, Muvver."

Nancy, shy but eager, was beside him.

"Let's put him to bed," she begged. "I can give him a bath."

Norah hesitated.

"You let her, Mrs. Meadows," said Nancy's mother. "She's well used to it, goodness knows. You an' Sam put all the little 'uns to bed, Nancy."

Never had Davie been bathed except by members of his household. Norah expected a protest. But he agreed with surprising meekness, demanded to be led to his 'Sponso that he might extract his pyjamas therefrom, and went off with an escort of three, while Sam lugged cans of hot water from the stove. Shouts of mirth, coupled with much splashing, soon echoed from unseen regions; and when Norah at last escaped from the table she found a smiling son sitting up in bed, thoroughly scrubbed, and having his curls brushed by Nancy. The two smallest Wallaces, shining with soap, perched on the end of his stretcher, plainly hero-worshipping. A scuffle at the window hinted that Sam had been one of the party but had hastily fled by that exit on hearing the guest's step.

"He was that good!" said Nancy. "I didn't let him get his hair wet. At least, not very."

"Muvver!" said Davie, pointing at the youngest Wallace boy. "Vat boy is Pe-tah. He's goin' to show me his wabbits."

"Ter-morrer I am," said the youngest Wallace boy in a deep drawl. "An' me dawg." He looked up at Norah. "He's a bonza kid, ain't he?"

They trooped out. Davie said his prayers and cuddled down into his pillow to be tucked up. "Vis is a woffaly place!" he said. "Could vere be kids evely night, do you fink, Muvver? Plenty mine likit kids."

"I wish there could," Norah said. She went back to the kitchen to find Wally scandalising his host by insisting on sharing the washing-up. Mrs. Wallace seemed to have got beyond the stage of protesting at anything the visitors might do.

They settled down in armchairs to talk; and Norah and Wally soon realized what it meant for these lonely bush people to meet friendly strangers. Remote

as their farm was, they were not self-centred; their weekly papers were read from cover to cover, their wireless kept them alive to the interests of the outer world. But neither radio nor newspapers, as Mrs. Wallace said feelingly, made up for real people. They were hungry for talk, for an inter-change of views and experiences, for the sympathy that exists between all country-dwellers. Norah and Wally, grateful for the ready hospitality that had swept them from the dark roads into the light and friendliness of a home, exerted themselves to make the only return that could be accepted; with the result that it was very late before their hostess suggested a move.

"Well, I'm sure you poor travellers must be gettin' sleepy," she said. "It's a shame to have kept you up to this hour. But I must say it's a treat to have someone to yarn to. Fred an' I haven't had such an evenin' for years, have we, Fred?"

"Too right we haven't," agreed Mr. Wallace. "I say—must you really go on to-morrow? You said you were only wanderin' round sort of aimless-like. Why not camp here for a day or two?"

"As if you hadn't done enough for us——" began Wally.

"Lor, what have we done?" demanded Mrs. Wallace explosively. "I bet you'd do as much, an' more, if you found us stranded near your place. It's just been a fair treat to have you—an' the youngsters are cracked about little Davie. Aw, do stay, Mrs. Meadows. Better for the wee chap than bein' on the roads every day. An' I know Fred's achin' to show his Herefords to Mr. Meadows—an' you an' I could find lots to talk about yet, I believe!"

"I know well we could," smiled Norah. She exchanged glances with Wally.

Wally said: "You're just working on the lazy side of my nature, Mrs. Wallace, and it's only too well-developed already."

"Well, I never saw anyone that had got less fat on bein' lazy," retorted his hostess. "Anyhow, a few days won't make you so much worse, an' I don't reckon your wife's very anxious about it. Does he loaf much at home, Mrs. Meadows?"

"Not so that anyone would notice it," Norah said. "He sometimes sits still at meals, but not always. He broke a leg once, but even then he managed a good deal by hopping."

"I'll bet he did!" said Mr. Wallace. "Well, how about it? Give us a couple of days, if you won't spin it out as long as we'd like you to."

"Then you would have to let me help you, Mrs. Wallace," Norah said firmly.

"I've a good idea that I couldn't stop you if I tried!" said that lady.

So they stayed, and while Wally roamed over the farm with Mr. Wallace and found a dozen jobs at which he could help, Norah and Mrs. Wallace shared the work of the house and talked without ceasing. Davie came into a

new kingdom. Sam and Nancy, loudly regretting the necessity of being educated, disappeared on their ponies each morning in the direction of the bush school five miles away, but returned at full gallop as early as possible. But "Pe-tah" and his small sister Rosie were left, and never had a young visitor more energetic attendants.

"You can trust him with 'em," their mother told Norah. "They've got sense; I've got no time to run round after 'em, an' they know how to look after themselves, an' him too. So long as you don't mind him gettin' dirty, that is—I won't promise that they'll keep him clean."

That was the last thing Norah minded. She watched contentedly from the verandah, seeing Davie taught to play in new ways—the ways that a child cannot know without children as teachers. Rosie and Peter were very polite to him at first, giving in to his every whim; but she was glad to see this unnatural attitude fade away before long. Davie had to learn how far he could go, and without any ceremony.

"You drop that tomahawk!" she heard Peter say.

"S'ant. Mine likit that little pfeller axe."

"You aren't let. Give it here, Davie."

"You get out." The tomahawk, swung airily by a small hand, went dangerously near Rosie's ear. Peter grabbed it.

"Look here—you can't come with us if you're silly. Can't you have a bit of sense?"

That was a phrase Davie knew—did not Dad say "Have sense, son," when he did unlawful things? He bargained.

"Well—can mine have a whip, ven?"

"You bet you can. Come along an' we'll make you one." Hand in hand the trio trotted off together. They were shortly to be seen careering towards a shallow water-hole, Davie driving his friends as a team; and from the water-hole they returned only when summoned for dinner by Mrs. Wallace, whose simple method of mustering her family was to place two fingers in her mouth and emit a whistle that echoed round the hills.

Even Peter and Rosie looked a trifle uneasy as they came up to the verandah. They were muddy—very: but they were clean beside their guest. There was no part of Davie that was not mud. From his hair to his toes he was caked; his face bore long streaks where he had stroked it with encrusted fingers in sheer lightness of heart. He grinned unrepentantly at his mother.

"Makem woffaly mud-pies, Muvver! Been sit down longa mud—you look!" He turned round. It was true.

"He *would* do it, Missus," said Rosie, looking up at Norah. "But he was awful happy."

"Well, I reckon that's the main thing," said Mrs. Wallace, appearing with a

basin of water. “No harm in a bit of clean mud, is there, Mrs. Meadows? We’ll just let ’em wash their hands an’ faces, an’ they can have their dinner on the verandah. No sense in cleanin’ ’em up altogether—they’ll be just as bad half an hour after. Scrub yourselves up, kids, ’cause dinner’s waitin’.” And nobody was so tactless as to watch how the scrubbing was done.

In this care-free atmosphere Davie flourished exceedingly. For the moment “Dad” was forgotten, and he modelled his ways on those of “Pe-tah,” adding touches of his new friend’s language to his own peculiar mixture of pidgin-English. It was a mixture that gave special joy to Mr. Wallace, who chuckled deeply as he listened to him, and declared that he was a fair trick. Not that Davie gave much attention to Mr. Wallace; or, indeed, to any grown-up. He had four children to occupy his mind; and that was enough for Davie.

He mourned openly when the time came to go. It was altogether wrong to find himself clothed respectably and sitting in the car while his friends stood at a little distance, looking gloomy. “Not going to leavem Pe-tah all a-hind?” he asked anxiously.

“We’ll come back and see Peter and everybody some day, old man,” Wally told him. They had been made to promise that the farm should be visited on their return journey: but even so, they were all a little sad at saying good-bye.

“I never enjoyed any visitors so much,” said Mrs. Wallace. “The place’ll seem real empty without you. An’ I’ve been that spoilt I don’t know meself. If you ever want a reference for washin’-up, Mr. Meadows, you just come to me!”

“I’ll give you another for general handy-man,” offered her husband. “Thanks to you, I’ve done stacks of jobs I’d been puttin’ off for ages. You just turn in at our gate any old time.”

“You can bet on that,” said Wally. “You’ll see us all back in a few weeks, after we’ve found the sea. We began by setting out to look for it, but somehow, it hasn’t seemed worth while to hurry over the job.”

“Oh, you’ll find it easy enough—you’re no great distance from the coast now,” said Mr. Wallace. “You try that little place I was tellin’ you about—Ryan’s Cove. It’s quiet enough for anyone, an’ if you go to Mrs. Thompson’s she’ll make you real comfortable. A great place for the boy, too. I’m always plannin’ to take my crowd there when times get a bit better.”

“We’ll find it.” Norah promised. “I won’t forget to send those snap-shots when they’re developed, Mrs. Wallace.”

“I’m lookin’ forward to them—it’s pretty excitin’, when I’ve never had a chance before of seein’ what my family look like in a photo. My, I do hope they come out well!”

“All the same, I think you might have left out the one of me wrestlin’ with the old pig!” Mr. Wallace protested. “That wasn’t fair, Mrs. Meadows—an’

me not knowin' a thing about it."

"If that one doesn't come out well I shall weep," Norah laughed. "It ought to be the best of the bunch—nice unstudied picture of life on a farm."

"I'll be surprised if I'm able to tell which is him or which is the pig, they were movin' that rapid," said Mrs. Wallace. "But I'll keep on hopin'!"

CHAPTER XII

RYAN'S COVE

"I THINK," said Wally, "that this is the goods. How about it, Davie?"

He had stopped the car on the edge of a low cliff encircling a little bay. Near them it was broken by a deep, narrow gully where a shallow stream trickled down from inland, finding its way among a jumble of boulders, to lose itself in a wide stretch of sand. Here and there were masses of red rock, giving promise of cool shade on hot days and of enticing pools left by the retreating tide. Beyond, the sea lay calm and blue in the afternoon sun.

Davie knitted his brows, staring at it.

"Welly good big lagoon, Dad," he uttered in astonishment.

"It is that, old chap. Biggest you ever saw."

"What's vem fowls?" demanded his son, pointing a stubby forefinger at Gulls strutting on the sand.

"Sea-fowls."

"Well, I *do* see vem," replied Davie. "What name they got?"

Norah laughed, slipping an arm round him.

"They're gulls, sonnie. And the big lagoon is called the sea."

"Oh!" said Davie, still puzzled. "Whaffo' isn't vere any gwass on ve gwound? It's funny gwound."

"It's a new kind of ground, called sand——"

"And the only way to find out anything about it is to get down to it—with bare toes on," stated Wally. "Come along, old chap, and we'll show you what it's like."

They left the car, hurrying down by the post-and-rail fence that separated the track from the gully: pausing at the edge of the beach to get rid of shoes and stockings. Davie wriggled impatiently from his father's knee and made a leap into the sand—and gave a yell of astonishment as his feet sank into it. He sat down abruptly. His hands met the sand, clutching it, and his amazed face as he watched the yellow grains trickling between his fingers drew a shout of laughter from Norah and Wally.

"*Welly* funny gwound," he uttered. "It's all hot—an' mine can pick it up!"

"Mine can roll in it, too," said Wally, and rolled him over gently: from which exercise Davie emerged with a broad grin and much sand in his hair.

"You don't eat it, and you'd better be jolly careful to keep it out of your eyes," he was told. "Otherwise, it's awfully good stuff to play with. Come for a walk on it."

They went down towards the sea slowly, Davie digging his toes in at every step. He announced presently that it was getting harder, and wanted to know if anything was the matter with it. Reassured on this point, he marched on until they were near the edge of the water.

"There you are," Wally said. "Plenty big lagoon, isn't it? Like to paddle?"

Paddling was a familiar game in the shallows of the lagoon at Billabong; and in recent days Davie's eager feet had explored with great thoroughness the muddy depths of the Wallaces' water-hole. He waded in without hesitation. But this was a new kind of water. It was restless stuff that ran to meet him and climbed up his legs. Davie gave a startled yelp and fled to the shore.

"The lagoon's chasing me!"

"That's only its little game," said Norah comfortingly. "Sea water likes playing with small boys—but it only chases them a little way. Let's hold hands and play its game too."

It became clear to Davie that Dad and Mother, being all-powerful in every matter, were well able to boss the sea. They swung him up in the air when a wave ran at him, so that he could kick it contemptuously, when the wave at once ran back, admitting defeat. It was a good game, and they were all rather wet when it was over: glad to go back to the warm sand to dry. It was explained to him that only with large people was the sea docile: small ones must keep back, taking no liberties. Davie rarely needed to have anything explained more than once: he nodded gravely and promised that he would take no chances. Then hunger fell upon them all, and they returned to the car and went in search of Mrs. Thompson's.

They found a wide bungalow set in pleasant grounds, and a buxom landlady who greeted them warmly. Already she had heard of them; a letter from Mr. Wallace had told her they might come.

"Nearly scared me too, with his letter," she said, laughing. "Told me to give you the best in the house, or he'd want to know the reason why. I began to wonder if he was sending me a duke and duchess, only I remembered Fred Wallace would have sent the likes of them to a hotel."

"Not he," said Wally. "Fred Wallace seems to hate sending people to hotels. We begged him to direct us to one, but all he would do was to lead us into his own kitchen!"

"And much better off we were," Norah added. "Have you any room for us, Mrs. Thompson?"

"I've all the house. It's off-season: very few people about the place. That's the time I like Ryan's Cove, even if it's bad for business. But I hope you won't find it dull."

They assured her that crowds were discouraging to them, and Wally went off to garage the car. He returned to find Norah unpacking in a big airy room

with windows that looked far out to sea.

"I think we're in luck," he told her. "Good garage, and we're no distance from the sea—there's a track leading down to the beach just beyond the garden. Jolly garden, too—plenty of grass and trees. And our hostess seems a good sort."

"The very best variety, I think," agreed Norah. "She likes children; Davie has been told to run about wherever he likes. He's making friends with a puppy in the back yard now."

"He is not," said Wally, grinning. "I came through that way, and hearing my son's voice raised in pleased accents, I put my head round the door of the kitchen. Davie was sitting on the table eating sponge-cakes."

"My goodness!" said Norah, in alarm. "Did anyone give them to him?"

"Mrs. Thompson—with great energy. She told me to run along, adding that she knew all about children. I had a sort of feeling that she meant me as well as Davie. Very lowering to a father!"

"Well, you ought to look more grown-up," she told him. "No, I don't mean that, really. It's been rather nice to watch you growing young again ever since we became wanderers."

"Do you know, I feel that myself?" said Wally. "Before we came away I was feeling I'd never be able to play the fool again, and it was a horrible thought. Now there's no knowing what I'll do, so you may as well be prepared, young Norah!"

"I'll take the chance," she laughed. "The years are dropping from me, too—we'll be the same age as Davie here, I believe. Wally, I don't want to hurry away from this place. I think it's exactly what we came away to find."

"Same here," agreed Wally. "We'll unpack everything and shove the suit-cases where we can't see them. And we'll live on the beach in bathing-kit—as long as this gorgeous weather holds, anyway. Nor, is that woman going to give us any tea? Because, if not, I shall storm the village and buy a large bag of buns."

"You needn't—it's coming. And she has the most expansive views about supper, and it can be any time we like to have it. There's nothing hard-and-fast about Mrs. Thompson."

"Bless her heart!" said he. "Most landladies expect me to be hungry at a fixed hour, and if I'm not, well it's just too bad, but I needn't expect anything after it. All the same, I believe I'm going to be hungry all the time at Ryan's Cove."

"That's as nice a thing as I've heard for some time," she said. "And there's a gong, so I suppose it means tea."

"Lead me to it!" uttered Wally.

The tea that awaited them in a big sitting-room seemed to have been based

on the belief that all seaside visitors had large appetites. Davie did not appear; Mrs. Thompson reported that he was getting all he wanted in the kitchen, and Norah could only hope that it was not too much.

"You needn't ever worry as long as he's with me," said the landlady, perhaps guessing the unspoken thought. "I've had six of my own, though they're all out in the world now. And he's a nice little feller—understands that when I say 'No' I mean it."

"I hope you will say it regularly," said Davie's father. "Don't let him be a nuisance."

"Not me—I like youngsters too much for that. They're what you make 'em, I always say: spoil 'em, and you've only yourself to blame. But that one's not spoilt. He's a trick, isn't he, with those black curls? and I never heard a kiddie talk so funny. Where's he get it all from?"

Norah explained that Davie's friends were of different nationalities.

"Well, I guessed he must know a Chow and an abo., but it's queer when he mixes up a bit of Irish in it, along with good Aussie talk. Pity he can't meet a Frenchwoman I had staying here last week—he'd have picked up a bit from her as well."

"Heaven forbid!" gasped Wally. "People find him hard enough to understand as it is. And, it's only in the last few months that he's begun to be eloquent, so goodness knows what he'll be capable of in the future. Words are a sort of game to Davie—when one takes his fancy he picks it up and plays with it."

"He'd have great chances if my boys were at home," said Mrs. Thompson darkly. "Just as well they're not, perhaps. Well, there's deck-chairs outside if you don't feel like going down to the beach again this afternoon. I keep the garden mostly as a sort of wild place—visitors like the native trees and shrubs, and there's plenty of space for youngsters to play. You just make yourselves at home anywhere, inside or out."

"Can we get photograph-films developed anywhere?" Norah asked. "We have a lot on hand. You might like to see some we took at the Wallace's."

"Too right I would," said the landlady. "Fred and I have known each other for years, but I've never seen his wife or his family. Hope she's good enough for him; Fred's one of the best."

"You'd be satisfied if you knew her. I'll tell you all about them some time."

"I dunno can I bwing vis lickle pfeller pup into vis room," said a slightly aggrieved voice. Davie appeared in the doorway, somewhat unsteady under the weight of a fat puppy. "Him an' me bin etten evelyfing."

"No pups in the house, son: you take him out into the garden," said Mrs. Thompson firmly. "Here, I'll show you the way." She disappeared, and when

Wally and Norah went out they found boy and puppy blissfully happy together on the grass. They sank into deck-chairs and basked in the sun until the puppy, tired out, went to sleep, and Davie looked about him for more worlds to conquer.

"Can I go an' find vat sandy place?"

"A bit late to-day, old man," said Wally, rousing himself. "I think Mother's tired, too."

"Only shockingly lazy," said Norah, yawning.

"Be lazy, then—it will do you good after the wretched tea you ate," Wally grinned. "Tell you what, Davie: you and I will leave Mother to sleep, and we'll go and find the township and leave films to be developed. Did she say whether we could get it done, Nor?"

"I don't think she did. She became lost in talk of Mr. Wallace."

"Well, I'll go and ask." He went off, Davie at his heels, returning presently with his pockets bulging with rolls of film.

"It's all right—she says there's a good place. Anything you want bought, Nor?"

"I don't want anything in the world at present," Norah said sleepily. "Probably I'll remember lots to-morrow—but you can always go again!"

"Mere body-slaves, aren't we, Davie? Well, sleep it off, old thing, and we'll go and explore."

Under the brim of her hat Norah watched them go down the sloping path to the gate; the tall lithe figure shortening its strides to suit the tiny one trotting alongside. Davie gripped his father's forefinger tightly: he poured out a rapid stream of talk which seemed chiefly concerned with the puppy. She heard the clear little voice after the tall hedge hid them from her sight: and hearing it, fell asleep smiling.

Wally and his son marched down the only street of the Ryan's Cove township; and there may have been pride in Wally's heart, but he hoped he concealed it, as passers-by turned to look at his small companion's eager face. They visited the chemist and came away with a promise of developed films next day. They bought picture post-cards, wrote the usual messages of travellers upon them, and sent them to everybody at Billabong, and to Jim and Tommy in New Zealand. They found an ice-cream seller, agreeing that it would be well to sample his stock to make sure that it would be fit for Norah: after which, being of one opinion as to its excellence, they sampled it again.

"Welly good," pronounced Davie, licking his fingers carefully. "Say I take a lickle pfeller one home in mine pocket for Muvver?"

"She mightn't like it that way," Wally said. "We'll bring her here to pick the sort she likes. And now we'll buy a ball."

"But we're afther bwingin' a ball in ve car," said Davie practically.

"Not this kind. We've got to have a sea-ball. You come and see."

They went back to the stationer's shop where they had bought their post-cards. The balls hung from the ceiling, a cluster of green, scarlet, blue and yellow. They were brought down for Davie's inspection, and he fingered them delightedly.

"You bounce one," said the shopman, detaching a red monster. Davie grabbed at it without success.

"Too big—mine can't pick it up. Whaffo', Dad?"

"To swim with. You'll be able to punch it along in the sea."

"Try a kick, son," advised the shopman—and leaped aside as the ball shot from Davie's foot and grazed his nose. Davie's peal of laughter echoed through the shop. Wally rescued the ball and paid for it hastily to avoid any further accidents. They issued from the shop triumphantly.

"Him all-same good football," remarked Davie, dropping it as he spoke. It rolled a little way; he ran at it and kicked, and the ball sailed into the street, narrowly escaping a swift end under the wheels of a passing car, the driver of which roared "Foul!" with a broad grin.

"You'll be Public Enemy Number One in Ryan's Cove if this goes on, my son," observed Wally when he had retrieved the ball. "The beach is the only safe place for us, I think. No, you don't—I'll carry it for the present."

The main road to the shore was not far off. They went down it gaily, kicking the ball before them, finding an empty beach and a tide well out. A great place for a small boy's first lessons in football; they played until a careless kick brought a howl from Davie as the red globe went high into the air and dropped into the sea.

"H'm," said Wally, looking disgustedly at the bobbing speck. "Too far to wade, darn it."

"Get him back, Dad—hully!" begged Davie anxiously.

"Easy, if I had bathing-togs, old chap. The question is, is it simpler to let it go and buy another."

"I want vat one. It's mine best ball," said Davie stoutly. " 'Tis yourself could get it, Dad."

"Well, I don't like being beaten, and that's a fact." Wally pondered the situation. "Look here, Davie—if I leave you sitting up there on the dry sand will you promise not to move while I run up to the house and get my bathers?"

"All-same this?" He sat down abruptly, his legs stiffly in front of him.

"Yes, all-same that: only farther back. Not to get up for anything. Promise?"

"Twue's life!" said Davie solemnly. It was the only form of taking an oath that he knew, and once taken, nothing could induce him to break it.

"Right, old man. Off you go, and I'll take the short cut to the house."

The short legs pounded up the slope to the soft sand near the track. Wally cut across the beach diagonally, turning to shout. “That’s far enough—I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He ran up the path that wound steeply along the face of the cliff.

As he disappeared a dark form climbed from a deep cranny in one of the jumbles of rock and came out upon the sand. Davie, staring anxiously at his ball, did not notice the new-comer; neither to him nor his father, absorbed in their game, had come any idea of a hidden watcher. He looked round without curiosity at the woman who walked towards him: and having been taught to be polite to strangers, he remarked, “Hallo!”

“Lost your ball, have you?” she asked.

“No, him’s only gone for a lickle swim. Dad’s goin’ to bwing him back one-time.”

“That’s good,” she said absently. “What’s your name, son?”

“Davie. An’ Meadows,” he added as an afterthought. That, Davie knew, was one of the queer things about strange grown-ups: they always asked your name.

“Live here?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Lo-ong way away. Comed in car.”

“From Sydney?” The dark eyes seemed to bore into him; he wished uneasily that Dad would come back. She was a queer lady. He shook his head again.

“Where from then?”

“Oh, just Billabong,” he said impatiently. His eyes went past her: suddenly they lit up as he saw Wally on the cliff, striding towards the path. Davie forgot all about the queer lady as he shouted to him.

“Dad! Can I get up?”

“Yes—come along, old man,” came back the deep voice. The small figure scrambled up and raced to the foot of the path as Wally took the last of the descent in a flying leap to the sand.

“Good man!” said his son approvingly. “Him’s swimmin’ all ve time, Dad. You all-same hully.”

Wally found a nook in the rocks for a dressing-room, changed swiftly, and ran down to the sea. The ball was a good way out: Davie watched anxiously as the black dot in the waves drew nearer to the red one. They were together now; an arm shot out and the red dot turned obediently towards the shore. He shouted joyfully. Wally came back, punching the ball before him. Wet and glistening, it landed on the sand at Davie’s feet.

“Don’t let it go in again, old chap.” Wally stretched himself out on the beach. “Eh, Davie, that water’s gorgeous!”

“Couldn’t mine have one lickle pfeller swim, Dad?” begged his son.

“No togs, old man.”

“Well, mine could swim in mine tummy,” said Davie helpfully.

Wally hesitated.

“I don’t know what Mother would say,” he began. “Oh, hang it, that’s what all fathers get into the way of saying, if they’re not careful!” His eyes danced. “We’ll chance it; there’s nobody about to worry whether you’ve got togs or not. Come along!”

Over Davie’s head came the blue silk jersey, off came the tiny knickers. The small white form capered wildly on the sand, the red ball forgotten. There was one faint squeak at the first shock of the water: then they were men together, sharing the freedom of the sea, swimming, splashing. It was over all too quickly for Davie, but Wally had some remnants of prudence left.

“That’s enough for a first swim, lad—we’ll have a real one to-morrow. Off you go to the rocks—hard as you can run.”

Above on the cliffs the woman who had spoken to Davie watched with hard eyes as the two raced across the beach. She did not move until they came from the rocks a few minutes later, clothed now, and bursting with high spirits. Wally picked up his son and carried him on his shoulder. They sang gaily as he strode towards the track that would bring them close to where she leaned on the fence near the gully, staring down at them.

She did not wait for them to come nearer. Muttering to herself, she turned away abruptly and hurried towards the township.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WATCHER IN THE ROCKS

RYAN'S COVE was only one of several little seaside places that Mrs. Benton had found in her lonely driving, but it was the one she liked best.

It was too small, too far from Sydney, to become fashionable and crowded. One shabby hotel served it, together with a few scattered guest-houses: no railway line ran near it. The tribe of hikers had not found it out. When Kate Benton came there she was free from the lurking dread that she might encounter people she had known in Sydney.

She had paid it several visits of a few days. Not that she stayed in the township: she was still oppressed by the nervous dread of people getting to know her. A larger place five miles up the coast made her headquarters for bed and breakfast. Each morning she bought food for the day and drove to the Cove, returning after dark. Nobody asked questions; her comings and goings seemed to excite no interest.

To-day had been the first of a new visit, and she had looked forward to it keenly. She had been delayed in leaving home, so that it was late afternoon before the Cove came in sight. Leaving her car in a side road near the beach, she wandered on the sand for awhile before settling down with a book in her favourite nook in the rocks.

It was a perfect hiding-place: often she had sat there unperceived by people on the beach below her. To reach it needed a little climbing between tall pillars of broken rock, a squeeze through a narrow place, and then she emerged upon a smooth ledge that sloped backwards, forming a comfortable seat. Mrs. Benton had grown to feel that it belonged to her. Even if other explorers, scrambling among the rock masses that littered the beach, climbed near her, they did not trouble her. There was room for only one person on the ledge, and no temptation to stay.

When she sat there it was easier to forget the past, to put aside the hard thoughts and useless longings that tormented her at home. She could cease to think of Joe and to plan revenge on the people who had sent him to gaol. Such thoughts and wild dreams did not fit in with thoughts of Bertie, who always felt nearer to her by the sea. Ryan's Cove had become a place of escape for her, where her day-dreams held only peace.

She was half asleep on the ledge that evening when voices below roused her, and she saw Wally and Davie running on the beach. To Wally she gave scarcely a glance at first, for no man could hold her attention when a little boy

was in sight. She watched Davie eagerly, smiling at his delight in the red ball. "That's a great little feller," she murmured, her eyes never leaving him as he dodged and ran and kicked, shouting joyfully. Then their game brought them nearer; Wally kicked the ball almost to the foot of her rock and ran to get it back. As he turned from picking it up she saw his face clearly.

She knew him at once. Never could she forget that dark boyish face that had confronted Joe's lawyer in the witness-box, flushing with hot anger at his questions. Not for a day since her visit to the gaol had it left her memory. Round it she had built her most bitter dreams. She had longed to be revenged on all the people she knew vaguely as belonging to Billabong; most keenly of all on the man who had been forced to admit his enmity to Joe. And on that man's wife—the woman who had set her dog on Joe when he asked for food.

Her whole body stiffened as she watched him. To think that he should come here, to spoil the one place she had learned to care for! As if he had not done enough already to ruin her happiness, she thought, slow rage creeping over her as that care-free figure on the sand ran and played with his child. He had everything, she nothing; even the sight of his son was bitter to the woman who had not been able to keep her own.

She stared at them until the ball went out to sea and Wally left Davie on the beach. That was her chance to make sure, and some lingering remnant of justice in her heart compelled her to hurry down from the rocks and find out the boy's name. Meadows was but a vague name in her memory; the only clear one was Linton. But when she heard the word Billabong she knew she had made no mistake.

Common sense told her to keep away from Ryan's Cove: why scourge herself by going back to look at the happiness of people she hated? Yet she could not keep away. She lay awake throughout the night, arguing with herself, but knowing she would go back, if only to see the face of the woman she had not yet seen—the woman who had set her dog on Joe.

Early next morning she was at her post in the rocks. Norah and Wally and Davie came to the beach soon afterwards; they carried picnic baskets and bathing-kit, settling themselves not far from her. Fiercely Mrs. Benton stared at Norah. No doubt as to who *she* was; her face brought back vividly the face of the big Linton man who had given his evidence against Joe. The man who had licked Joe in a fight, according to the woman who had sat beside her on that dreadful morning. Hate seethed within her again. It seemed to her half-crazed brain that there was no justice left in all the world. They were cruel people, heartless to the poor—and my goodness, weren't they happy!

"They've no right to be—they've a right to suffer, like I've done," she muttered. And instead they were like children together, playing with not a care in their lives. They taught Davie the art of building sand-castles, romped in the

shallow rock-pools with him, took him farther out to swim. Mrs. Benton gasped to see the tiny figure striking out alone—she had uttered, "Heavens, they'll let him drown!" before she remembered that it did not really matter if harm came to the child of such people. She forgot them again in the excitement of watching such a baby swimming.

"Wonder if I could have taught Bertie?" she thought enviously. "It never even entered my head, and him so little." But she knew she could not have done it. Bertie had never had the sturdy limbs of the brown youngster frolicking in the sea beneath her.

Day after day she came to watch them, tortured by seeing them, but unable to keep away. Her comings and goings were carefully timed; they did not suspect her presence until the fifth day, when they caught sight of her, sitting in her perch. But it was only an idle glance, and she had seemed to be reading. There were other people about sometimes, but none had any real existence for Norah and Wally. The Cove was big enough for all in the off-season: nobody came very near them. Later in the afternoon Wally glanced up at the rock-ledge, but the quiet woman was not there.

She was driving hard at that moment, going home. There was no use, she had decided, in remaining there to rack herself with the sight of their happiness, making her own loneliness the sharper. She could hate them just as well at home . . . better, perhaps, for she had found it curiously hard to hate them as the time went on. They looked so young, and it was clear that they and their boy meant everything to each other. It had made her ache to see Wally doing for Norah the little courteous things that Joe had never thought of doing for her: and the boy was like his father in all those things.

"I'd have said they were nice if I hadn't known too much about them," she thought. "Oh, well, it's easy enough to be nice when you've got all you want in the world." But she had often had to remind herself sharply of what they had done to Joe, so that she might keep her anger alive. Especially where Wally was concerned—there had been times when she had found herself almost laughing at his antics with Davie. With Norah it was easier, and hate flamed readily; it had been Norah who had hounded the dog on to Joe.

That, she realized, was the deepest of all her grievances. She knew her husband well enough to suspect—in her calmer moments—that he had earned a good deal of his sentence. He had tried conclusions with a hard set of men, and they had been too much for him. He was paying for that. But that a woman should do what she believed Norah to have done was the unforgivable sin. She knew that if Fate ever put Norah in her power she would have no mercy for her.

So it was wise to go home, since she was powerless to do anything but look at them—and looking brought her no peace. At the farm she could at least

tire herself out by hard work; she worried old Barney badly by the tight-lipped energy with which she flung herself into the hardest jobs, over-taxing her strength in a dozen ways. That lasted for a week: and then she gave up the struggle abruptly and went back to Ryan's Cove.

Not hate drove her this time, but the longing to see Davie. Until she had watched him playing on the beach she had not realized how bitter was her longing for a child. She had tried to forget the advice of the Hospital doctor, since the business of adopting a child seemed too difficult to attempt; but it had simmered below the surface of her mind, and she could not crush back the dreams it brought. That unknown boy companioned her in work on the farm, paddled in the creek, played on the sitting-room floor in the long evenings. He was no longer the baby she had dreamed about at first; he had grown like Davie, a little manly boy, able to take care of himself and to begin taking care of her. And in this week he had grown so real that she could no longer restrain herself from going back to look at the boy who had made him alive in her mind.

Her decision to go back had been made on the spur of the moment, as were all her decisions nowadays. Digging in the garden, the vision of the small boy on the beach had come suddenly to her, and in a moment her mind was made up. She thrust the spade into the ground and went swiftly to make her preparations. She would be late in reaching Ryan's Cove . . . too late, perhaps to find a room at her usual place after Davie and his parents had gone home for supper. Well, that did not matter; she had slept in the car often enough. She carried out a bundle of rugs and flung them into the back of the Ford in case they were needed. Food did not matter—she was never hungry.

"Goin' away again, Missus?" Old Barney's voice was sorrowful.

"Oh, just for a day or so, Barney. You'll look after everything."

"Yes," he said. "You work too hard, Missus. Better go easy when you come home."

"Oh, I'm no good without work, Barney," she answered impatiently—and softened as she saw in his eyes the shrinking that a quick word never failed to bring. "Never mind, I'll try to knock off a bit. You take care of yourself: I can't spare you, you know."

He brightened at once.

"No, you can't spare old Barney, can you? I'll turn out the kitchen to-morrow."

"That'll be grand," she said absently. "Well, don't forget to eat enough. There's plenty of food in the storeroom. I'll expect to see a lot of it gone."

"Oh, I'll eat it right enough." He giggled happily; orders about food were a never-failing joke to him. He was still smiling as she drove away.

"Well, sometimes I think I'm going cracked myself," she told the Ford.

“But it would be worth while to be cracked if I was as happy as old Barney over it.”

She drove fast, her impatience mounting as she passed each familiar landmark that told her she was nearing the Cove. For once it did not seem worth while to take the car into the lane where she usually left it, at some distance from the main track down to the beach. She was late enough already; after all, who was likely to take any notice of a shabby old Ford? Skirting the township, she stopped the car on the cliff close to where the track turned downwards. She scanned the beach eagerly, and gave a low exclamation of disappointment.

Neither Norah nor Wally was in sight. Instead, a number of children played near the rocks where she had hoped to hide; children who did not interest her in the least, since she wanted to see only one little boy, and he was not there. An older girl was moving about among the pools left by the outgoing tide; now and then turning to call to one of the children when their game threatened to become too rough, or when one climbed to a place that might be dangerous. They took very little notice of her, and she was too engrossed in examining the pools to give them much attention.

“Wonder who they are?” Mrs. Benton muttered. “If that girl’s supposed to be looking after them she isn’t doing much of a job, whoever she is. Surely those Meadows people can’t have gone away!”

She knew no reason why they should not have gone, but her disappointment was so sharp that their absence was like a personal grievance. Never for a moment had she considered the possibility of not seeing them. Angry and bewildered, she stared at the shouting children, hating them for being there. Then, in a desperate effort to find comfort, she began to consider other possibilities.

“I’m only being a fool. Ten to one they’ve gone off round the headland to the next cove—they wouldn’t like this swarm of kids on their beach. Or they might have gone for a drive—why they might only be in the township or up at the house where they’re staying. No sense in making up my mind that they’ve gone right away. I expect they’ll be back here in the morning——”

She broke off with a start. A gay little shout floated up to her, and out from behind a rock ran a small boy in a pale-blue jersey, in hot pursuit of a girl of his own size. He caught her: they collapsed on the sand together in a whirl of arms and legs. Their laughter came clearly to the woman whose face had grown suddenly peaceful.

“Well, if I’m not a fool!” she said. “To think he was there all along, an’ me fussing myself for nothing! Well, the Meadows can be in Timbuctoo now, for all I care!”

"With a startled cry he slipped backwards."
Son of Billabong] [*Chapter XIV*

CHAPTER XIV

COWRIES

"IT seems to me," said Mrs. Thompson, "that that husband of yours is getting restless."

"He is," agreed Norah serenely. "I have seen it coming on for the last three days."

"Not tired of the Cove already, I hope?"

"Oh, not a bit. He loves it: we all do. We think it's the nicest seaside place we have found anywhere. And you make us almost too comfortable, Mrs. Thompson. We're thoroughly spoilt."

"Well, I'm sure it's a pleasure to look after you, because you like everything. Some visitors you can't please, no matter how you try, and they're that stand-off they might be Royalty. Not as I haven't heard that Royalty can be real simple and ordinary when they get the chance, and it must be rather a treat for them, poor things!" added the landlady sympathetically. "But you know the sort of people I mean—too much money, and afraid nobody'll notice it. All starch. But you and Mr. Meadows aren't that sort. Keep me laughing all the time, you do."

"It's easy to laugh here; we don't seem to have a care in the world," Norah said. "We've had quite a lot lately, but they're all gone. And I like to see my husband getting restless, because that's what he is naturally. He was tired out before we left home, and I hated to see him sitting still—it was so unlike him."

"And now he drags you out to walk miles every evening after the boy's in bed, and you're quite happy?"

"Why, of course," Norah smiled. "He has to let off steam somehow after these lazy days on the beach. I want him to get a boat and go out fishing, but he won't leave Davie and me. A pity, because he does love fishing."

"You like it too?"

"Very much—but not with a small boy in the boat."

"Well, it would be good for you both," said the landlady. "I'd say, leave Davie with me, but I know you want him to be by the sea, not hanging round a hot kitchen."

"You're very good even to think of it, Mrs. Thompson; but yes, he ought to be on the beach. All the same," said Norah, "I don't believe in keeping my husband back, even for Davie. I have been wondering if I could find some steady young girl who would come to act as nursemaid in the afternoons."

"You're dead right," stated Mrs. Thompson solemnly. "Lots of mothers

make their men feel they're only a circumstance compared to the kids, and it don't pay, you take my word for it. Let's see, now, there's our postman's eldest girl, Maggie Winn. She's sixteen, and she ought to know all about youngsters, seeing the mob of children Mrs. Winn's got, and all younger than Maggie. She looked after a visitor's two children last year, and I heard the lady was real pleased with her. Gave her a reference and all."

"She sounds all right," said Norah.

"Well, she's not one of the flighty ones. Most of 'em are fair young terrors at sixteen, but Maggie's quiet and simple-like. Mrs. Winn's brought 'em all up well. You might go and have a talk to her, Mrs. Meadows."

Which Norah did, and chanced to find Maggie dealing expertly with the matter of bathing the two youngest Winns in a very small tub. It was an occasion calculated to impress a future employer favourably, and both Maggie and her mother jumped at the opportunity of a job. All that remained was to find out whether Davie would approve of his nurse; and this was settled next day, when he found her capable of telling fairy stories as well as being a notable builder of sand-castles. "He's took to me all right," said Maggie shyly.

"Good sort of youngster," pronounced Wally, when they had watched her methods with Davie for a couple of days. "She seems rather more careful of him than you and I are, Nor!"

"I believe she is," Norah agreed. "Then you and I will hire a boat and catch fish."

It was good to be free once more: to spend long afternoons on the open sea beyond the Cove, finding banks where big whiting waited to be caught and islands near which flathead and schnapper lurked. Good to row home in the evening, to find a laughing son, fresh from his bath, welcoming them excitedly with stories of his adventures with Maggie. There were further excitements, too, for a family of children from another house on the cliff, seeing Davie with someone they knew, came down to join them. "Nice kids, the young Bairds," said Mrs. Thompson: "You can be sure he'll be all right with them, Mrs. Meadows." Norah, hearing Davie's joyful accounts of games, felt that luck was indeed good.

Maggie found her duties light after the little Bairds had made friends with Davie. There was a certain dignity about being sixteen, in company with a band whose eldest member was only nine; sixteen might arrange games for the small fry, not play such games wholeheartedly. Sixteen, too, had to say "Don't" now and then, which was apt to check enthusiasm. The small fry preferred to play by themselves, and made a very good job of it. At first Maggie felt a little resentful of the way in which Davie had been absorbed by his new companions: she was proud that he had "took" to her, and had asked nothing better than to be alone with him. But she was a philosopher in her own

way, and understood the situation. Kids were kids, she told herself, and left them to their play, knowing that Davie would belong to her again when it was time to go home.

She fell back upon her own interests. Luckily, she was in the right place to pursue these. Not being "one of the flighty ones," her tastes were simple; there was little enough to occupy the mind in Ryan's Cove if you lived there all the year round, and had never been twenty miles from it. But she had one passion —the collecting of cowries. Her best friend, Gladys South, shared it, and just then their friendship was almost submerged by rivalry, since they had arranged a competition as to which could collect the greatest number during the summer. Nothing but glory could be the prize of the winner, and there was nothing to do with cowries when you had collected them except to keep them in a box and look at them occasionally; and cowries long out of the sea are dull things. But the competition had raged fiercely for months, and at present Gladys was well ahead, having no tribe of young brothers and sisters to keep her busy at home. Gladys had nearly a thousand, Maggie not eight hundred; Maggie had given up all hope of catching her. Now, she realized, her chance had come: luck had given her a job in the very place where cowries could be found, and the little Bairds had provided her with time to spare.

So, while the small fry played together she prowled among the rock-pools with eyes alert for the tiny wrinkled shells, wet from their journey in on the tide, gleaming with soft colours. Every stone might shelter some, drawn against it as the tide ran out: they lay in the pools, shining up at her. Useless, of course, but a curious fascination in the search: older people than sixteen have lost count of time in seeking for cowries.

Excitement was gripping Maggie on the afternoon that she passed the nine hundred mark. There had been a very high tide: it was going out now, and never had hunting been so good. She had found a pocket in the rocks that held twenty-one; and after that miracle, who was to say that Gladys would hold her lead much longer? Why, with any luck Maggie might go home that very evening knowing that her score had topped a thousand—that fat-sounding, satisfying figure!

The children were all happy, fully occupied with each other. She strayed farther and farther away from them, glancing back at first now and then to make sure they did not need her. It was very clear that they did not; she forgot them for a little, tempted by one find after another. The wet mass in her pocket was growing beautifully heavier. Already she saw Gladys toppling from her pinnacle. Much as she liked Gladys, it was a heartsome vision.

Behind her, the mother of the little Bairds signalled from the edge of the cliff that it was time for her family to go home for tea. She was a mother who made few rules, but some had to be made in self-defence—and very well did

the little Bairds know that any rebel who did not at once obey that signal would find that tea would not include jam.

"Gosh!" uttered Jack Baird—"there's Mum. We'll have to scoot."

They gathered themselves up and raced for the track, Davie trotting at their heels: he had not yet learned to understand why they fled so abruptly each evening. At the foot of the steep path leading to their house Jack looked back.

"You can't come up here, Davie; we're going home. You cut back to Maggie."

They scrambled up the path: in a moment they were out of sight. Davie looked about him uncertainly. He felt lonely, and yet curiously independent. There was nobody to tell him anything he should or should not do.

Maggie seemed a long way off, down there near the water, and she was moving farther away still. He felt no wish to plough through the sand all that distance. The main track that he came down each day was much nearer. Perhaps if he went there he might meet Mother and Dad. He felt vaguely that it was time he went home, since his playmates had gone.

Slowly he moved on until he came to where the little stream came down through the gully. There was no water there now; it had ceased to run, for no rain had fallen for a month. Davie stood looking up the gully, and it struck him as a particularly good place to explore.

"Mine goin' up top-side vere," he said aloud.

He went. The bed of the stream was easy walking at first, flat and sandy, and he ran along it quickly. Presently, however, he encountered big boulders that had to be skirted with care. He climbed upward sturdily, panting as the slope grew steeper. This was an adventure, he felt: hard work, but great fun to be doing all alone. He was nearly at the top now. Ahead he could see the struts of the little bridge on which the cliff road crossed the stream.

The rocks were thicker here. Laboriously he climbed to the top of one where there was a flat space, and stood erect, feeling that he was certainly King of the Castle. He gave an excited little laugh. Never had he known such independence and manhood.

From the fence that ran along the gully Kate Benton looked at him and caught her breath in fear. She had left her car when he had passed out of view below the cliff with the Baird children, pausing uncertainly until she saw them on top and realized that Davie was not with them. What was he doing?—and that girl hundreds of yards away, mooning about among the rocks near the water! She hurried to the track and began to descend, halting by the fence as she saw him making his way up the gully.

Should she interfere? She shrank from the idea. At any time his father and mother might appear—it was incredible that such a little child should be left alone. Or the girl on the beach might realize that he had gone, and come

hurrying to find him. And he seemed well able to take care of himself, small as he was.

"Well, I'll have to stop him when he gets up to the road," she thought. "I can't chance him getting in the way of cars."

But she had to move when he stood perilously on the flat rock: it was too much. She tried to move silently, to reach a position where she could help him down. Very gently she slipped between the wide rails of the fence. But a stone loosened by her foot rattled down on a boulder. Davie looked round sharply.

He did not like what he saw—a strange dark figure, evidently bent on catching him. While not quite afraid, he had no intention of being caught. Quickly he went down on all fours and began to scramble down from his castle.

"Oh, be careful!" she called sharply. "Stop until I come."

That was the last thing Davie wanted to do. His scramble grew quicker; feeling for a foothold, he misjudged it. With a startled cry he slipped backwards and rolled down the slope, crashing against a boulder. Suddenly he was very still.

Kate Benton groaned, plunging down wildly. She ran her fingers over the little body, gasping with relief to find that no bones were broken.

"Just his head," she muttered, touching a grazed place gently. "I don't believe it's much—he's only stunned. My word, they'd only have had themselves to blame if he'd been killed!"

She gathered him up with the tender movements of one who had known well how to lift an ailing little boy. Davie knew nothing as she carried him to the track, easing him carefully through the fence. She glanced down at the beach, giving an exclamation of irritation as she saw that the despised girl still hunted for cowries.

"Well, for all I know she's got nothing to do with him, after all," she said. "What on earth am *I* going to do with you, you poor little dear? I suppose I'd better put you in the car and find out where your people are."

Very slowly she walked to her car, holding him to her. She had no wish to put him down—it was so long since she had held a little body against her heart. Beside the car she stood for a minute, looking in every direction for someone who might be able to tell her where to go. There was nobody in sight. The cliff road ran along the backs of the houses, cut off from them by a hedge: it was little used except in the busy season of summer visitors. A belt of common land stretched between her and the township. Wherever she looked, the place was deserted.

"I might be miles from anywhere," she said. "Where am I to find those precious people? Much right they've got to have me bothering to find them at all!"

With the words sudden temptation gripped her. Why should she bother to find them? Who would know, if she put him in the car and drove home? Not a soul had seen her with him; nobody at Ryan's Cove knew her or anything about her. She gave a short laugh that had a touch of madness in it. Her brain raced. She had been sick with longing for a child—why not take her enemy's?

The little body in her arms was motionless. Her eyes searched his face keenly. Nothing much wrong with him, she was certain: already his lips were a better colour. A bump on the head couldn't kill a sturdy youngster like that—only make him conveniently insensible. He would come round soon. If she were to do this thing there was no time to spare.

On that instant her mind was made up. She laid him on the back seat, hurriedly making a nest of rugs on the floor. Her coat, doubled up, formed a pillow. Gently she lowered him into the rugs, rolling them round him; praying, as she worked, that he would not stir. She shut the door as silently as possible and leaped to the driving seat. Her eyes roved on all sides. Not a soul!

As the car moved away she heard a cry from the beach: a girl's voice, shrill and afraid. "Davie! Davie!" Kate Benton laughed under her breath.

"You can call!" she muttered. Her foot went down on the accelerator and the car shot forward.

. . . . . .

Two minutes earlier Maggie had found her thousandth cowrie.

In the glow of that great deed she turned to share her pride with the children; Jack at least was old enough to understand how she felt. The smile left her face as she saw an empty beach.

"Young monkeys!—they're hiding in the rocks," she thought. But she ran, uncomfortably aware that she had forgotten all about her responsibility far too long. She was at the rocks in a moment, dodging here and there among them—there was no corner that she did not know. No children were there: no sign except a blue dot farther down the beach. She knew it for Davie's linen hat. A sudden panic seized her, and she called him loudly, listening for an answer that did not come.

"Oh, they've taken him up to their house," she said. "My word, they're going to get into trouble when I catch them! I'll be in trouble myself with Mrs. Meadows if she finds out." She searched the beach again, vainly: then ran towards the cliffs.

The Bairds were peacefully at tea when she burst in on them, scarlet with anger and the haste of her running.

"Where's Davie?"

"Down on the beach, isn't he?" Jack looked at her in astonishment.

"No, he's not. Didn't he come with you?"

" 'Course he didn't. We wouldn't take him away without tellin' you."

"Well, where did you leave him, then? You had him when I saw him last."

Mrs. Baird broke in, her voice ruffled.

"And when was that, I'd like to know, Maggie Winn? You're supposed to be lookin' after him, aren't you?"

"Well, an' I was, too. Only I'd just gone a little way along huntin' for cowries. The kids were all playin' together as happy as Larry. Then I looked round, an' they were all gone."

"Where did you leave him, Jack?" demanded Mrs. Baird sharply.

"On the beach, of course. We all scooted for home when you signalled, an' Davie came too, as far as the foot of our path. I told him to go back to Maggie. He never came a bit farther with us. I bet you've missed him down among the rocks, Maggie."

"Well, you bet wrong," flamed the girl. "I've hunted every inch of them." Her lip trembled. "Oh, Mrs. Baird, where can he have got to?"

"Lor, don't fuss yourself, Maggie," said Mrs. Baird, softening. "He's not likely to get into any danger: Jack says he's a real sensible kid. He'll just have gone home—might have had the idea of findin' his people. Which way do you think he'd take?"

"Mrs. Meadows won't let me take him by the steep path—he never goes that way unless his Dad's with him. We always use the main track."

"Tell you what," said Jack. "You go along to Mrs. Thompson's, an' I'll cut down to the gully. There's just a chance he might be there—we were playin' there yesterday an' he wanted to come, but I wouldn't let him cause it's so rough. We came out of it an' took him down to the rocks. He might have taken it into his head to go there on his own."

"Right-oh," said Maggie, somewhat cheered. "Go like smoke, Jack. Will you bring him along to Mrs. Thompson's if he's there?"

"Bet your life," said Jack, and ran.

Mrs. Thompson and Maggie were together in the road when he raced up to them a few minutes later.

"Not a sign of him. Didn't he come home?"

"No." Mrs. Thompson's voice shook. "Maggie—he'd never have gone into any danger near the water, would he?"

"Not he!" said Jack. "We weren't paddlin'. He had his sand-shoes on, an' he can't undo the knots of the laces himself. He'd never go into the water with his shoes on. Davie's only a little nipper, but he doesn't do fool things."

They looked at each other, bewildered, but scarcely able—yet—to feel anxious.

"Well, I know he doesn't do fool things, but he may have taken it into his

head to go exploring," snapped Mrs. Thompson. "Anyhow, he's got to be found before Mr. and Mrs. Meadows come home. Jack, you go down and search every inch of the rocks again—climb up any place he might try to climb, and look in every crack where he could have caught a foot and got stuck. You run to the township, Maggie, and look in every shop—and tell people. Someone may have seen him and thought nothing of it. I'll go to all the houses along the cliff."

"I . . . I'll have to say I didn't watch him," sniffed Maggie, flushing hotly.

Mrs. Thompson said grimly, "I don't care a darn what you have to say, as long as this whole place knows that Davie Meadows is missing. You just fly!"

Jack was already taking the steep path in helter-skelter leaps, calling as he went. Mrs. Thompson cast a glance at the setting sun, knowing how short would be the twilight. She ran towards the nearest house. Ten minutes later the whole of Ryan's Cove had joined in the search.

. . . . . .

Fishing had been especially good that afternoon, and the delight of the outer sea had been hard to leave. It was later than usual when Norah and Wally reluctantly packed up their tackle.

"Best day we've had," Wally said. "Jove, it is gorgeous out here, Nor! And we've far more fish than Mrs. Thompson can use, in spite of all I mean to eat for supper."

"To say nothing of me—and I'm as hungry as you are," she said. "We'll stroll round after supper and give away the extras. Maggie can take a lot home, and Mrs. Baird is always glad of fish."

"I'd willingly keep the Bairds in fish all the time we're here," Wally remarked. "Those youngsters are awfully decent with Davie: just what he needed to make the place perfect for him. He's learning more every day about holding his own with a crowd. It's jolly to see him with them. The worst of having a son is that it demoralizes a man—to tell you the truth, Nor, there are times when I'd rather watch Davie and the gang than go out fishing!"

"And don't we?" she laughed. She looked up at him happily as he stood in the bow hauling up the heavy stone they used as an anchor. He wore nothing but a pair of very disreputable trousers: the muscles rippled under his brown skin as the rope fell into shining wet coils. She gave a contented sigh. How perfect the holiday had been, to have brought back the old gay Wally in all his strength and light-heartedness. She thought of the letter she had posted to Jim that morning, knowing that this week's report would put the final touch of happiness on his wanderings in New Zealand. A long letter, and she would not show it to Wally: he had pretended to be jealous and had gone to the kitchen to

console himself with Mrs. Thompson. The laughter that had drifted in to her as she wrote had got into the letter too. To-night, she thought, a letter as cheerful must be written to Billabong.

Wally's voice broke in crisply upon her thinking.

"If you could dig yourself out of your dreams and consider your unfortunate husband for a moment," he said, "you would know that directly this stone leaves the bottom we'll begin to drift rapidly in the wrong direction. The tide's going out at the rate of knots. You grab the oars, young Norah, and keep her steady."

"Oh—sorry!" she laughed. She took the oars quickly, pulling as soon as the boat felt herself free. The stone came up, hand over hand, and Wally lowered it gently into the bow.

"Right you are. Let me have them."

"No, I'll keep one," she said. "I want to stretch my muscles, and we shall be home sooner if we row together. We're late to-night; I want to see Davie before he goes to bed."

"Well, I could do with that too," said Wally. He settled himself on his thwart, taking an oar so quickly that the boat scarcely lost way. They knew each other's stroke to a hair: settling into it, they swung together. Behind them the sun went down.

A long pull home, with the tide against them, but their hearts were too light to notice it. They rounded the jutting headland that screened the Cove. It was nearly dusk. Norah threw a glance over her shoulder.

"There are people on the beach still, and quite a lot on the cliff," she said. "I wonder why."

"Probably an odd lot of trippers in a char-à-banc," said Wally.

"I suppose so: the local people never come near the beach as late as this. Though it's late in the year for trippers, too."

"Oh, you never can tell: this amazing weather may have brought a party down. Anyhow, they won't be there long—it must be fairly chilly on the beach now."

The oars rose and fell in unison. Wally took up the song they had been singing before they came round the point, and Norah joined in. It was "The Skye Boat Song"—always their signal to Davie that they were coming home. The words carried clearly to Mrs. Thompson, standing alone by the edge of the water.

"*Sing me a song of a lad that is gone . . .*"

She broke into dry sobbing, twisting in her hands Davie's little blue sun-hat.

CHAPTER XV

KIDNAPPED

SO long as there was any chance of a hurrying car being noticed, Mrs. Benton forced herself to drive slowly. People were apt to remember a car flying along, especially with a woman at the wheel. It was hard to check her longing for speed; at any moment she might hear a cry from the little bundle on the floor behind her. She set her teeth, watching the needle of the speedometer; even at twenty-five she felt as if she were crawling at a funeral pace.

It was wasted precaution, for she met nobody. Tea-time, she reflected grimly, was as good a time as anyone could pick who wanted to steal a child; all the folk were gathered round their tables, much too busy to trouble about what was going on outside. Half an hour later there would have been plenty of them strolling round on so fine an evening. Well, she would be far enough away by then.

When the last house was well behind her, her foot went down and the car settled to a steady forty-five. Near the coast the road was good; she made the most of it, knowing that worse tracks were to follow. She studied her route carefully. It was possible to skirt most townships, but not always; in two cases the road ran along the main street, and there was no dodging it. If Davie should choose either of those moments to regain consciousness there might easily be trouble.

She passed through the first, slowing down as she entered it, her heart pounding. The street was unusually full of traffic—or so it seemed to her anxious eyes. She threaded her way among cars and buggies, dreading a check: country townships knew no traffic regulations and the drivers strayed over the wide street just as they chose, not dreaming of how venomously they were regarded by the quiet-looking woman edging along in the shabby Ford. Through at last!—she swung round the corner and shot up the hill leading to the open country.

In the street she had trembled lest Davie should waken: now that she was clear of it she began to chafe under a new anxiety. Was he more badly hurt than she had judged him to be? She had been sure that he was only stunned—surely he should be stirring by now. She slackened speed, glancing back: no movement in the heap on the floor. But she dared not take time to examine him more closely. Peyton was ahead, and until she had run the gauntlet of its main street her fear was too acute for anything but haste. The needle crept up to

fifty.

Two more townships were skirted, and then she came out upon the main road again, with Peyton in view in a valley below. People were coming away from it: there were many vehicles on the long slope that wound downwards. She risked taking it quickly. A bridge came in sight: she slowed down, the Ford bumping over its uneven planking in a way calculated to disturb any sleeper who was not badly injured. Past a church, a school, the police barracks —the sight of the last, with a young constable lounging on the steps, sent her heart into her mouth. The Ford slid from his sight round a bend; in a moment more she was in the main street.

There was less traffic than she had expected. She got through it easily for half the distance; ahead was an intersection, and beyond that was nothing to hold her back. She pressed the accelerator gently. Then, from the side-street came a slow-moving object, and Mrs. Benton caught her lower lip between her teeth.

It was a bullock-dray. She could not see it as yet; only the first two couples of bullocks were in sight, crawling across the street. There was no chance to swing out and get round them; a car coming fast towards her blocked the way. It got through just in time, the leading bullocks half checking as it shot past their noses. The bullock-driver shouted angrily at them, cracking his long whip, and the team plodded on.

The street was completely blocked. The leading bullocks were across now; behind them came the long string, straining under their heavy yokes, dragging a big wagon piled high with timber. Mrs. Benton, the Ford halted as close to them as she dared, counted the bullocks as they came. Three couples—six—eight—ten—twelve. Did ever beasts move so slowly? Their driver, a tall man with a grey beard, strolled beside them, clearly enjoying his power to hold up modern inventions. There were cars waiting on either side of his team, some drivers resigned to the ways of bullocks, some hooting impatiently. People walking in the street paused to watch the team; shop-keepers, busily taking in their wares and putting up shutters, turned to stare from the footpaths.

Mrs. Benton gripped the wheel with shaking hands, her knees beginning to tremble. The dray was immediately before her now, its load swaying and creaking. Near her a passer-by stopped, taking out a packet of cigarettes. He caught her eye and grinned.

“Much old Bill Squires cares who’s in a hurry!” he said. “Good team he’s got, hasn’t he?”

“Splendid!” she forced herself to answer. The voice did not sound like her own, for all her being was straining to listen. Was that a whimper from the back of the car?

It came again, more decidedly this time. The man who had spoken glanced

at the car enquiringly.

Mrs. Benton twisted round, to look into the back. The bundle was wriggling.

"Lie down, Tim," she said sharply. "Quiet, you silly puppy!" She swung back: the way was almost clear. The Ford leaped forward, clearing the back of the great load by inches.

She was a mile beyond Peyton before her heart ceased its terrified thumping. Davie had not stirred again—or if he had, she was beyond hearing him. She must be well into the lonely country before she dared look at him again.

"However did I do it?" she muttered. "I'd never thought of pretending it was a dog there . . . the words just came of themselves. I don't believe that fellow suspected a single thing. My word, I'd have been caught properly if Davie had called out a bit louder!"

But he had not called. That fact gave her a curious new sense of confidence: it was as if Providence was working on her side. For the first time in her flight from Ryan's Cove her brain began to work normally, unhindered by fear. She must plan, and plan hard: there was old Barney to be faced at the end of her journey. Barney might not be quite all there, but he was still to be reckoned with. He would not be expecting her back that night—much less with an unknown child to explain. And beyond the immediate question of Barney, what risks lay?

She was planning quickly and clearly when another sound came from the back. An unmistakable cry this time, terrified and urgent—"Muvver!"

Mrs. Benton thanked Providence for sending it on a lonely road. She stopped the car, jumped out, and came hurriedly round to the rear door. In the dusk she could barely see the child's white face, struggling from the rugs. He cried again, his voice rising to a scream.

"Lie still, darling," she said, and her voice held the mother-note that reached Davie even in his bewildered fear. "I'm taking you home—you hurt your head a little bit, you know. Mother'll be there soon. You lie quiet, or your poor old head will hurt more."

She was arranging the rugs and his pillow as she spoke, with soft expert touches, putting him gently back. His cries died down to a pitiful little whimper for the one person who mattered.

"Yes, Mother'll come. We'll just go on quietly—you have a little sleep before we get home." She patted him softly, soothing him to quietness. "You're a big man, you know: you've got to be brave. That better? Ah, there's a good lad. Now I'll hurry up and drive you home."

Little moans reached her from time to time as she drove on. Kate Benton tried to steel herself not to listen; fought against the prompting of her heart to

turn and take him back to Ryan's Cove. Providence seemed to have nothing to do with her now that she had lied to Davie about his mother.

She set her teeth obstinately, increasing speed, refusing to yield. They had everything, she nothing. And a child soon forgot, if you were kind to it—and who knew better than she how to be kind to a little boy? He was hers now, and she would keep him. No use to weaken, or she would have no head for planning. There was danger everywhere—if not from old Barney, from every casual stranger who might come to the place. She must think out each possibility and guard against it.

Would there be a hue-and-cry all over the country? Certainly there would, if his people dreamed that he had been kidnapped: such a hue-and-cry as took place in America, where kidnapping was common enough. She must face that; if Davie should be found on the farm she must have some story to account for it. Time enough to think up that later. They might land her in prison, but that would be the worst they could do. It seemed a small risk when compared with the joy of having a child belonging to her again.

Somehow, it was easier to think of being found out as a kidnapper than to let her mind dwell on what was far more likely, that they would believe he had been drowned. No real sense in her feeling that way—he was lost to them, whatever they believed. Yet part of her mind shuddered from the thought of the drowning—of Davie's father and mother, who would at that moment be searching the coast in their despair. She must not think of them—or she must only think of the woman who had set her dog on Joe, not of Davie's mother.

There was silence now in the back of the car. That made planning easier, and she wrenched her thoughts to the course of action she must map out. She must do everything that could possibly be done to avert suspicion. Always there was the chance that old Barney would make some innocent remark to a stranger that would cause enquiry at once, if people knew about a missing boy. She turned it over and over in her mind, and suddenly an idea came to her: so simple that she almost laughed aloud.

"Well, why not?" she said. "Heavens, it 'ud be quite easy!"

There would be no boy at the farm. There would be a little girl, her dead sister's daughter. She invented the sister swiftly, christened her, married her, and let her die painlessly in Sydney: invented a husband for her, and made him a sailor, far away on an indefinite voyage. That would be enough for any inquisitive stranger: more than enough for old Barney, for whom, indeed, it was only necessary that the new-comer to the farm should have a girl's name. The planning of every detail kept her almost happy: enabled her to thrust into the background the thought of the shore at Ryan's Cove. She was alert and confident when at last she turned into the hidden lane that led to the farm.

The dogs met her near the house, barking wildly in delight. She ran into the

back yard, leaving the car outside. The place was in darkness, but in a moment Barney's light gleamed in his hut. She tapped at the door, speaking to him reassuringly.

"It's only me, Barney. No need for you to come out. Sorry I waked you up."

"I thought you wasn't comin' home, Missus," said the quavering old voice.

"Oh, I changed my mind. Go to sleep again, Barney."

"Won't I come over an' light up the fire for a cup of tea for you, Missus?" The door opened a few inches: he peeped out at her.

"Indeed you won't. I can boil a kettle on the oil-stove if I want anything. You turn in again, Barney," she said sharply. He shrank back at the crisp voice: the door shut, and in a moment his light was extinguished.

"Good business!" muttered Mrs. Benton. "It wouldn't have been half so simple if he had been still in the kitchen."

She went swiftly to the house. The key was always hidden under a stone when she was away: she unlocked the kitchen, lit lamps, and carried one to her bedroom, turning it low. Running fast, she went back to the car. The dogs were nosing round it anxiously; from within came low crying.

"There!" she said soothingly. "Home now, dearie, and you'll be in bed in no time. Yes, Mother won't be long: don't you fret."

She lifted him out, still wrapped up, and carried him to her room, putting him on a couch. He lay sobbing quietly, too dazed and weak to move: she left him, and ran to the kitchen, finding to her relief that there was still hot water in the big iron kettle on the stove. For an anxious moment she examined the angry bruise on his head before she bathed and bandaged it, while Davie submitted meekly: her low voice was soothing.

"There, it's not going to hurt you any more. It'll soon be better: Auntie'll fix it up. Now you'll be in bed in a minute . . . there's a lovely pair of pyjamas all ready for you."

There was no difficulty about that: everything that her own boy had worn was in the little trunk that never left her room. She put him into her own bed on the verandah, hurried away, and was back in a few moments with a cup of warm milk. He drank it thirstily. "Mine want Muvver," he begged, as she laid him back on the pillow.

"Yes, of course, darling. Just you lie quiet, and she'll come soon."

She knelt beside him, patting him with feather-light touches. His breath came sobbingly for a few minutes: then, as the warmth and comfort enfolded him, it grew easier, and he was soon asleep. Mrs. Benton got to her feet noiselessly and stood looking down at the quiet face.

"Well, I've got you," she said under her breath. "And I swear nobody's going to take you away from me."

Very softly she drew the dark curtains that shut out the sun on hot summer mornings. It was an unusual proceeding: the dog already on guard outside the mosquito screen got up, wagging his tail, and looked at her enquiringly. She whispered to him, and he went back to his mat. There was no movement from the bed. She went to the kitchen, made herself tea, and came back to her room to drink it. For the first time that day she relaxed, growing limp in the easy-chair, from which, through the doorway, she could see Davie's face.

She did not move again throughout the night. Sometimes the boy stirred, and in an instant she was by his side, ready with gentle hand and voice if he needed her: but he did not wake. Towards morning she slept lightly in her chair, with one part of her always on the alert. At dawn she put out the lamp, washed, and changed her dress, and was ready for old Barney when he came to light the kitchen fire.

He came early, a little anxious because her voice had been sharp the night before; plainly relieved to find her not only gentle, but with a new look of peace in her eyes. She made tea; over his cup he studied her face curiously.

"You're lookin' real happy, Missus."

"So I am," she told him. "You'd never guess what I brought home last night, Barney."

"Not Boss?" he asked quickly.

"No. Boss isn't coming again. Someone you'll like, Barney—a little girl."

"To live here?" He looked puzzled and uneasy.

"Yes. She's very little, Barney: you'll have to help me to look after her. But she won't be any trouble. She's my wee niece, and her name's Daisy."

"Can't call her that, Missus," he said decidedly. "Daisy's the Jersey cow."

"Well, I don't see what we can do about it, Barney," she said. She had felt relieved at hitting upon a name so like Davie's that the change might pass unnoticed by its owner: it was disconcerting to have it thrust back at her. "We can't alter a girl's name, can we? Suppose you call the Jersey cow something else?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "She'd never go into the bail for me if I did that. Wouldn't know who I was talkin' to. Say I call the new girl Lassie, after that ol' dorg o' mine that died on me? Lassie's a nice name."

"Well, you can see if she'll answer to it," said Mrs. Benton. "I expect she will, if you're nice to her. And I know you'll be nice, Barney."

Barney sipped his tea, considering the matter.

"I don't like 'em much," he confessed. "There was little girls at Green's, an' they made fun of me. They had bad voices, too—hurt my head."

"This one's too small to hurt anything or anybody, Barney. And you'll like h-her voice: it's happy." She made a mental resolve to practise saying "her" alone: there would be breakers ahead if she continued to think of Davie as a

boy.

"That's good," he said. "Isn't she up yet?"

"No—she's asleep. I've got to keep her quiet for a few days; she had a fall and hurt her head." That was better—four pronouns right in one burst. Easy, if only you kept your wits about you. But a mercy to have old Barney to practise on!

Barney was concerned. Any damage to a head was something he understood.

"Not a car—like mine?"

"Oh, no: just a tumble. But I'll keep her in bed until the bruise goes down. She'll have a bit of a headache for a few days, I expect."

"Poor Lassie!" said Barney. "Well, I'll take her to see the pigs when she's better. You tell her that, Missus."

"She'll be awfully glad," Mrs. Benton assured him. She too was glad; the first obstacle on her difficult course was safely taken. Barney might have been unfriendly to a new-comer—there was never any certainty as to how his mind would work, and he dreaded strangers. But it was enough that this stranger was very small and had a damaged head.

She hurried through her housework, visiting her room constantly to see if Davie had waked up. Anxiety mingled with her longing to hear his voice. How was she to meet his cry for his mother? He might well be terrified to find himself in unknown surroundings; that shock, following on his accident, might make him seriously ill. She could only hope that he would have some memory of being fed and nursed by her the night before, so that he would not turn from her altogether.

The clothes she wore, when there was no chance of Joe's seeing her, had long since ceased to interest Kate Benton, but now it occurred to her that her drab grey dress might easily make her a dismal figure in a child's eyes. Hastily she changed it for one of the gay summer frocks she had worn for Joe, and brushed her hair until it shone, arranging it softly round her face. It heartened her to see the new reflection her mirror gave back to her; at least there was nothing in her appearance now to make him shrink from her.

"And I must remember to smile at him," she thought—"if I haven't got out of the way of it altogether. Goodness knows, I expect my face will creak when I begin!" She tried it on Barney with gratifying success; he stared at her unbelievingly for a moment before an answering smile beamed on his old face.

"My word, you look real pretty, Missus!" he told her. "Do you good to have that little Lassie girl you got."

To her intense relief, when at length Davie woke there was no hint of shrinking from her. He remembered her; and though his first words were "Muvver come yet?" he seemed resigned when she told him no, that their car

had broken down. That was a reasonable explanation, and Davie had been brought up to be reasonable, and not to fret for a thing that could not be. He was a little feverish and languid: his head ached and all his body felt hot and uncomfortable. Kate Benton knew well how to deal with that. There were cool drinks ready; he lay peacefully while she sponged him with scented water and put a fresh cold bandage on his head, brushing his curls away from the bruised place with strokes so light that he scarcely felt them. He smiled up at her when she had finished, and presently was asleep again.

Throughout the day he slept and woke alternately, and with each waking looked for her, just as a child taken to hospital looks for his nurse. She was always there, gay and smiling, quick to give him all that he needed: her touch was gentle, her movements so quiet that there was nothing to jar an aching little head. Towards evening he was better; she drew aside the curtains to let him look out into the garden.

Gardens meant little to Davie except as places to run in, but he gave a joyful little cry—"Oh, vere's a dog!" at the sight of Nick's head looking through the wire mesh of the verandah door.

"That's the dog that looks after me," Mrs. Benton told him. "He's Nick, and he always sleeps there. Like him to come in?"

"Plenty!" said Davie fervently.

Nick came in delicately, like the gentleman he was, and made friends at once, liking the touch of the eager little hands. Kim, Jim Linton's old cattle-dog, had helped in Davie's upbringing; Davie knew just what he might, and might not, do with a dog. He lay back contentedly when their first talk was over, and Nick curled up beside his bed, clearly recognizing him as a new charge.

"Him allee same like Kim," said Davie. "Kim got black coat too."

"Is Kim your dog?"

" 'M." The head nodded. "Jim's too, a bit—when Jim wants him wiv bullocks. That pfeller Kim bin pull me out of the lagoon one day."

"Did you fall in?"

" 'M. Off the spwing-board mine felled. Vat was when mine was little: couldn't swim ven." He chuckled. "Muvver *did* wun, but Kim beat her." He paused, frowning a little. "Muvver comin' soon?"

"Sure to. Your job is to get quite well first."

"Mine is weller now," he said. "Head's better."

"That's because you've been so good, lying still. If you were a baby you'd have cried and wriggled——"

"But mine isn't let do vat. Dad says men don't."

"Sensible man, your Dad," said Mrs. Benton, seeing difficulties ahead in the matter of persuading him that he had become a little girl. Davie switched to

another problem.

"What pfeller these 'jamas belong?" he asked, fingering the buttons of his coat.

"A boy called Bertie," she told him—and wondered at herself that she could speak Bertie's name with so little pain.

"Boy longa this place?"

"No—he's gone away. But he'd like you to wear his pyjamas."

"Him got more fings?"

"I'll tell you what he had—lots of toys. You'll see them to-morrow, if your head is all right."

"Mine would wather see Muvver," said Davie with a sigh. "Will Dad bwing her?"

"Sure to," said Mrs. Benton mechanically. "But the toys won't be bad fun while you're waiting for them. There's a train with an engine, and rails for it to run on. Could you work it, do you think?"

"Mine could twy. Is vere a gun?"

"Two, I believe. We'll see to-morrow." She folded her work. "Time you had some supper, I think."

"Not hungly," he said. "Wants Muvver."

"Well, of course you do. But you know what it is when a car breaks down. One's just got to wait for people then. Nick and I will help you to wait."

" 'M," he agreed. He turned his head and lay looking out at the garden. She caught a little sob, but only one. Davie was standing up to his troubles, even though loneliness gripped him with the oncoming of dusk. She was thankful when he fell asleep after his supper. For a long while she sat by his bedside in the dark, hating herself.

Things were easier next day. He was better: able to get up for a time and play with Bertie's toys, clad in Bertie's dressing-gown, with Nick always near. Mrs. Benton sewed vigorously. She showed him the result of her labours towards evening.

"What do you think of that for a coat?" she asked.

Davie looked at it without admiration.

"It do be a funny coat, mine finkit," he said; and from his point of view it was, being, in fact, a small girl's dress. "Plenty long. Is vat for ve Bertie boy?"

"No, it's for you. You see, you knocked your own clothes about a good bit when you fell down. I'll have to fix them up so that they'll be all right when . . . when your mother comes. This is just a working coat for you to wear on the farm. Must have that sort of thing on a farm, you know."

"Must I? But vere isn't any twousers."

"That's all you know. It's got trousers like itself." She produced them from her work-basket: brief blue shorts, made of the same stuff as the coat. Both had

begun life as summer curtains, but there seemed no need to tell Davie that. She held up the tiny garments and laughed at him.

"There—you'll be a real farm-hand when you've got these on, and we'll go and see all the animals. And now I want to look at that head of yours: it's time for a new bandage, I'm certain."

She put him on a chair and examined the bruise, holding his curls away from it.

"The fact is, you've got too many curls," she told him. "They get in the way of the bandage. If I clip off a few it'll get better much more quickly."

She was relieved that he accepted this proposal delightedly.

"Likes havin' mine hair cut," he said. "Muvver does it. Some day she's goin' to make it short, allee same Dad's."

"Well, we'll do our best with it now," said Mrs. Benton. She pinned a sheet round him and got busy with the scissors, talking cheerfully as she cut.

"Round the sore place first—sit very still, and I'll try not to hurt you a bit." The scissors worked delicately. "There—but it looks awfully funny beside the long part. I'll just snip off a little more, to make it even. You'll feel ever so much better when it's not so thick: nothing like thick curls to give you a headache, specially in summer. It can grow again in the winter. Very steady now, while I work round your ears."

Davie sat like a statue. The scissors clipped fast: Mrs. Benton was nervous, and wanted to get the job over. She hated doing it; it seemed a crime to cut away the short thick mop that curled so riotously. But it had to be done: the little girl who was to live on the farm must bear as slight a resemblance as possible to Davie Meadows. Only when there were no longer curls to cut did she cease work.

"Now your head feels nice and cool, doesn't it?" she asked.

Davie was not the person to notice how her voice shook. He rubbed his hand over his head, and his face beamed.

"Mine's shorter van Dad's is!" he announced triumphantly. "Won't he be 'stonished when he sees mine!"

"He sure will," said Mrs. Benton grimly. "With that new blue working suit on you'll be ready for anything, now you've got a head like that." She gathered up the shorn curls in the sheet and set him free, thankful that it did not occur to him to ask to look in a mirror. "I think you'll be able to go out to-morrow, Daisy. That'll be good, won't it?"

She waited for his answer anxiously. Would he notice the difference in his name? But apparently it had passed unheeded.

" 'M," he said emphatically. "Can mine see all ve aminals?"

"Too right you can. And there's someone else you don't know yet, and that's old Barney."

"Who's vat?"

"That's the man who looks after my animals. He's very old, but he likes small people."

"Is mine small enough?" enquired Davie.

"Oh, yes. He likes any small people who've got sense and do what they're told. He's looking forward to seeing you. Told me he means to call you Lassie."

"Whaffo'? Vat isn't name longa mine."

"Oh, it's just a nickname he's got for someone he likes. You mustn't mind old Barney." She watched his unconcerned face; evidently the name meant no more to him than if it had been Harry or Charlie. She hurried on—"He wants to take you to see his pigs."

That entrancing prospect was enough to make Davie forget any proposed nicknames.

"Mine likit pigs," he said. "Any lickle ones?"

"Yes, lots. You'll see them all. You just don't know how much there is to do on this farm until you get outside. And there's a creek, Daisy—just the best creek you ever saw to paddle in, with sandy banks."

"I'll take Muvver an' Dad vere when vey come, won't I?" he said eagerly.

"Yes, of course. Now how would you like a story?"

She had been careful all day to treat him in an off-hand manner, knowing well that the child missing father and mother could find no satisfaction in any endearment from a stranger. All she could do was to establish herself as a friend—and in that she had succeeded beyond her hopes. Now, for the first time she allowed herself to touch him when no touch was necessary. He came to her confidently, tempted by the prospect of a story, and leaned against her knee: she picked him up and he cuddled against her while her quiet voice told him one of the fairy-tales Bertie had loved. This little boy seemed to love it as well as Bertie had. She put her arm across him very lightly, dreaming that Bertie had come back.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LASSIE GIRL

"NICE little girl, isn't she, Barney?"

"My word, yes," said Barney. "Better than them Green girls was."

He looked with satisfaction on the small blue-clad person playing with Nick in the back yard. There had been a good deal of worry in his confused mind after he had heard the new girl had come. Barney had slipped into a very comfortable groove on the farm and the idea of any change of routine puzzled and troubled him, particularly when he remembered the unpleasant ways of the last little girls he had known. But this one was different; Barney knew that, from the first moment, when she had marched up to him with outstretched hand and said "Good day."

And she saw nothing queer in him. Barney's mind might be confused, but he knew perfectly well that he was not like other men; because of which people stared at him and the wrong sort of little girl made fun of him. This Lassie girl accepted him as an equal and at once proceeded to do sensible things with him, such as running in the cows and feeding pigs. It took him some time to get used to her broken English, but when he began to understand it he was delighted with the views she expressed. When the new girl leaned over the pig-sty fence, having scrambled up on a box to make this possible, and scratched one of his pets knowingly with a stick, remarking "Vat's a darned fine ol' sow, mine finkit!" Barney considered her a rare ornament to her sex.

Sensible, too, about the things she liked. The detested Greens had used effeminate things such as dolls: they were to be seen wheeling them about in small perambulators or undressing them in the back yard so that they might wash their clothes and peg them on the line. With little girls of whom he approved, Barney would probably have thought dolls most sensible toys. But since they had been favoured by the Greens he scorned them deeply.

The Lassie girl scorned them too. She favoured guns. Knew how to hold and carry them, too, Barney saw, and never made the mistake of pointing them at anyone. Tools she demanded; he made her wooden ones, and she used them like a workman. To his amazement, she put them away when she had finished with them. A strange girl indeed; she begged for a whip, and when he cut a handle and fitted it with a long lash she swung it round her head like a stockman and produced almost a respectable crack. She dug in the garden beside him with a small spade that Missus had mysteriously produced, and

when the labour grew heavy she was not above spitting on her hands before taking a new grip on the handle. She seemed to know all the correct yells of warning to emit when cows tried to take a wrong direction. And when she had hurt herself, which she did frequently, since she did not move about in a gentle fashion, she refused to cry. She was more apt to rub the place vigorously and say, “Dash ve fing!” The only time Barney saw her on the verge of tears was when a tomahawk was taken from her just when she was thoroughly enjoying chopping a log.

Mrs. Benton watched their friendship with satisfaction, though Davie was never allowed to be long out of her sight. She was constantly afraid at first that Barney might discover that the Lassie girl was not all she seemed, and was glad that it was some time before he understood her peculiar language. But Barney’s wits were not keen: it never entered his head that the new-comer was anything but a girl.

She found herself slipping into the use of the name Barney had chosen. Davie accepted that without question, while more than once he had objected mildly to “Daisy.” “You say mine name a funny way,” he told her, and tried to instruct her in saying it correctly. She made a joke of the lesson, pretending to obey him but failing to manage it; he went into fits of laughter at the contortions of her mouth, and finally agreed with her suggestion that she must have something wrong with her tongue. Because they had talked about it, and Davie might revive the joke at any time, she did not often call him Daisy. To say “Lassie” held no dangers: later on, she told herself, he would forget his real name altogether.

But how much would he forget? she wondered sometimes. After the first week or so he had ceased to sob quietly in bed, in the evening and the early morning; the low sounds used to wring her heart, and they had a curious power to distress Nick. The dog would roam restlessly up and down outside the screen wall, whining softly. Sometimes she fancied that sympathy for Nick made Davie check the sounds of his own grief.

Except in bed, he did not fret. But there was scarcely an hour in which he did not come to her with his unfailing question—when were Mother and Dad coming? She put him off with one excuse after another, realizing that they had to be reasonable excuses, if they were to satisfy Davie. The breakdown of their car could not be made to last indefinitely, for he had firm faith in “Dad’s” power to do anything with cars. She made them very busy at home with the cattle; that idea quieted his impatience at once, cattle being of huge importance in his eyes. He knew well that they could not be neglected—was he not used to riding after them himself, held on a cushion strapped to some grownup’s saddle? He told her all about it at great length, until she realized with alarm that they were talking far too much of the very place she longed for him to

forget.

She invented a motor-journey for them then, taking them to far places. Even that had its disadvantages, for each day he demanded to be told where they had got to now, and how long it would be before they arrived at the farm. There was no way of keeping him from talking of Billabong. Within a fortnight Mrs. Benton felt that she knew everyone on the station and had even a nodding acquaintance with its horses and dogs. The unknown "Tommy" puzzled her a good deal. It was some time before she realized that "Tommy" was a girl.

She made up her mind that her only course was to fill his mind with new interests, keeping him always occupied. That was not hard, for he was naturally a busy-minded person, always on the alert, and his store of energy was unbounded. He shared her jobs in the house in his own fashion, just as he shared work outside; there was soon no animal on the farm that he did not know by sight. The sandy creek was a never-failing joy; she spent hours there with him, sitting on the sand-banks while he dug and played in the shallows and fished tirelessly, not discouraged by the fact that he caught nothing.

It was a restful place, and she needed it, for the strain on her mind and body was heavy. She had not dreamed that she could grow so weary in doing the very thing that gave her joy. Leisure was gone from a life that had held too much of it; now she was always on the stretch, burdened with her responsibility of keeping him happy. That, she told herself, would get better later on, when he had fully settled down. And even if she did get tired, he was worth it, a thousand times over: weariness was nothing, when daily he gave her more affection—when the clear little call, "Auntie!" sounded if he missed her for a few minutes.

She did not dare to take him beyond the farm. Often she looked with longing at the car, knowing what joyful excursions they might make together, but the risk was too great. Even without curls and in a girl's frock Davie's vivid face could not be easily forgotten by anyone who had known him, and she could not tell if the search for him still went on. When she could no longer put off going to buy food she became seriously anxious. To leave him alone with Barney would be dangerous, in case an unexpected stranger came; to take him with her was equally impossible. What was she to do?

She puzzled over it for two days before finding a solution. When it came, it was a simple one. Davie awoke one morning to hear the rattle of a tray, and found her standing beside him.

"Well, old sleepy-head," she said. "You slept so long I've had to bring you breakfast in bed."

That, he decided, was rather fun, with Auntie very cheerful and breakfast an unusually jolly one, especially as she opened the verandah door and let

Nick come in to be given scraps. Nick liked it too, and Auntie did not turn him out after she had carried away the tray. She came back at once.

"I'm going to leave you in bed for a little while, Lassie. I've got to drive over to see a neighbour."

"Can't mine come too?"

"Wouldn't do," she said, shaking her head. "He isn't a very nice man; he doesn't like little people. So I'm going to trust you to stay here. You'll do that for me, won't you?"

"I will so," he promised. "Could Nick stay too?"

"Yes; that's why I brought him in. You can play on the floor if you get tired of bed. I'll bring you some things to keep you company."

She brought an armful of Bertie's toys and picture-books, scattering them on his bed.

"And here's a surprise parcel," she said. "No, you're not to have it yet. You know what the clock says when the big hand walks round to the bottom?"

"Vat," said he solemnly, "is half-past." It was a new piece of learning: he was very proud of it.

"Well, the big hand has just gone past that now. Keep looking at it now and then, and when it gets round to half-past again you can open the parcel. There's something in it for you and something to give Nick."

"O-oh!" said Davie. This was mystery and excitement. "Will it be long?"

"It won't be a minute longer than usual. I'll put the parcel under your pillow. Have a good time, chicken." She smiled at him, and was gone.

The car was ready, her preparations made. She drove fast to the nearest township, annoyed with herself for being so anxious. Never had her sense of responsibility been so sharp. Another woman's child, and she had left him alone in the house!

"As if any harm could come to him!" she muttered. "Nick's with him, and the door into the kitchen's locked—he can't get near matches or the fire. And Barney not a hundred yards away from him. Why on earth am I such a fool?"

But she raced through her shopping, and once headed for home she got the utmost out of the Ford. All was quiet as she neared the house. Barney looked up from his work in the vegetable garden and waved his hand as usual. Nothing could have happened: nothing to make her leave the car without taking out any of her parcels and run headlong to the house. In the kitchen she checked herself, panting.

"Mad," she said. "You're getting quite mad, Kate Benton. Better go in quietly if you don't want to frighten him."

She unlocked the door and went in to her room softly—realizing as she came within sight of the verandah room that she need not have troubled to be quiet. Nothing could have disturbed Davie easily at the moment. He was

kneeling on his bed; beside him, on the pillow, lay the mysterious parcel. He watched the clock with a fixed gaze, talking as he did so to Nick, who sat in front of him, looking perplexed.

"You mustn't be in a such a hully, Nick, it'll be vere in a dweckly minute. Yerra, I fink ve blessed fing's stopped . . . no, it hasn't, it's goin' on. Plenty him slow ol' fing . . . it's nearly vere. I'll stand up, an' p'waps it *will* be vere."

He stood up. The hand quivered on the half-hour. Davie gave an ecstatic jump, caught his foot in the sheet and somersaulted off the bed, landing almost on top of the dog. Regarding this unexpected turn as solely arranged for his benefit, Nick barked delightedly and rolled over beside him, pretending to worry him. Davie emerged from the encounter rather flushed and in a great hurry.

"You silly ol' ass, Nick, mine'll be late!" He scrambled back to the bed and snatched the parcel, unwrapping it, his face alight with excitement. There were two biscuits in it; no treasures could have given greater satisfaction.

"Vere—didn't mine tell you it was somefing' nice? Here you are, ol' man. —Eat him." They ate the biscuits companionably. The watcher in the inner room crept away, wondering why she had hurried home—yet knowing she would make as much haste next time. She had found that there were unsuspected fears in being responsible for another woman's child.

There was loss, too; for as the weeks went on, Bertie, who used to seem near her, grew curiously remote. It troubled her: she wondered if he thought she did not need him now. Silly thought . . . as if any other boy, even one as dear as Davie, could make up for him. You never could get over missing your own baby. And with that knowledge the vision of Davie's mother came sharply to her, and would not be driven away.

CHAPTER XVII

A VOICE SPEAKS

"OLD woman, it's not a bit of good sittin' an' thinkin' about it," said Fred Wallace.

Mrs. Wallace, who had imagined herself concealed behind her magazine, dropped it on her knee and looked at him miserably.

"You've got eyes in the back of your head, Fred."

"Oh, I dunno. You gen'rally read that *Woman's World* at the rate of knots, but you've held it up in front of you for the last half-hour an' never turned a page. An' I know darned well what you're thinkin'."

"Well, I just can't help it," she said. "Goodness knows I've never had them out of my head for a minute since we got Mrs. Meadows' letter; an' it's been worse since you went over to the Cove an' saw Mrs. Thompson."

"Oh, I know," her husband admitted. "Tell you the truth, Emma, there's been times I've been sorry I had to take that trip. I couldn't be there without callin' in on Jane Thompson, of course, only . . . Well, I reckon one's as well off not hearin' too much about some things. An' poor old Jane's that broken-up over it, it relieved her a bit to talk."

"An' if she's broken-up, that only knew the little dear a few weeks, what about his mother an' father? That's what I keep thinkin'."

"Too right," agreed Fred. They were silent for a moment. Their own children were safely tucked up in bed; their thoughts were with the father and mother who had no son.

"If they'd been able to find his body it would have been a shade better, I believe," Mrs. Wallace broke out. "But that waitin' an' searchin'—Lord, Fred, it must have been enough to drive them clean mad."

"They weren't, you know," he said. "Jane said they were pretty wonderful—each of 'em tryin' to spare the other, an' refusin' to let themselves go. Better if they had let go a bit, I reckon. She said the only time she ever saw tears in Mrs. Meadows' eyes was the day they said good-bye to her . . . after they'd given up all hope of findin' the poor little body. An' they were that concerned for Jane, thinkin' it such hard luck that it should have happened from her house, like. Well, how people could have any spare worry for their guest-house at a time like that fair beats me."

"Those two would," said Mrs. Wallace. "An' you said how nice they were to that wretched girl that was supposed to be lookin' after him. Well, I do try to be a Christian, Fred, but I see red when I think of that girl."

"Aw, she's only a youngster, old woman, an' she didn't realize he wasn't safe with the other kids. That's how the Meadows look at it, anyhow—an' I bet it eases things for them a little to be able to. It hurts like the mischief to feel bitter. Though how they can help it I'm blessed if I know," confessed Fred. "An' they drove off with their heads up, smilin' at poor old Jane. Well . . . !"

He filled his pipe slowly, lit it, and smoked for several minutes in silence. Mrs. Wallace made another valiant attempt to seem interested in her magazine, but gave it up when she found that she was holding it upside down.

"Y' know, old woman, I can't get out of my head somethin' Jane told me," Fred said at last. "I didn't say anything about it to you . . . didn't seem to have sense, an' what was the good? But you may as well have it. Jane said Mrs. Meadows simply couldn't make herself believe Davie was drowned."

"Poor thing!" murmured his wife.

"Yes, but she can't even now. Mr. Meadows isn't like that; he knows too well how many holes there are in that place that a little kid could slip into if he went paddlin' when the tide was goin' out. An' other people have been drowned off that bit of coast, an' the bodies weren't always found: there's a queer set to the currents off the headlands. So that says nothin'."

"Well, it's just that her poor brain can't take it in, Fred—an' not much wonder."

"I don't think it's that," he said. "It's a queer belief she's got in little Davie. She doesn't believe he'd ever have gone paddlin' alone. He'd promised he wouldn't, just as he promised he'd keep off the steep cliff-tracks by himself; an' he was a funny little kid—he never broke his promises. He'd be as naughty as any kid over lots of things . . . well, you saw when he was here the mad sort of pranks he'd play. But those were things he hadn't given his word about. She says they hardly ever asked him for a promise 'cause he was so serious about 'em."

"But, Fred, what else could have happened to him? Wasn't the whole place hunted for ten miles inland?"

"Too right it was; combed out as thorough as people could comb it, just like the coast was watched for miles. They've people watchin' yet," he added with a sigh. "Oh, I told you there wasn't any sense in her idea, Emma. But she's got it all the same. An' she told Jane Thompson she never could feel that he was dead: all the time she's got the feelin' that he's alive somewhere."

"Well, lots of people feel that way about those they've lost—even when they've seen them buried."

"Yes, an' I reckon it's true, too. But it's not that way with Davie's mother. She thinks he's somewhere, just as he was here . . . runnin' about an' playin' tricks, an' gettin' grubby. Gosh!" he broke out, "I wish I could hear his funny little talk now! I never heard a kid talk the lingo he did. I keep hearin' it in me

mind when I'm out in the paddocks."

There was another long silence. His pipe went out.

"Well, nothin's ever hit me harder than that little chap's dyin'," he said. "Seemed to belong here, somehow, those three did: dropped on us out of the blue, an' they were that friendly an' easy to know. Took a hand in everythin' as if they'd been here for years, an' just as nice to our kids as ever they could be. An' the parcels of things they sent our youngsters, all chosen that careful—they must have thought out just what each of 'em 'ud like."

"Yes, an' all the photos. Most people would have sent 'em just as they were, but the Meadows had to go an' put 'em in a lovely album. Just like 'em to do a thing like that."

She got up and brought the book from its place of honour on the sitting-room table. It was, indeed, a very plain little album, but the Wallaces were simple folk. She turned the leaves, tears in her eyes as she looked at a picture of Davie having an uproarious time with Peter and Rosie on a haystack.

"Great little kid, he was. Fred, I do wish Mrs. Meadows hadn't that idea about him. It'll only be worse for her as time goes on an' she just has to drop it."

"I suppose so," he agreed. "But perhaps it eases her a bit now . . . I dunno. It's a cruel business, however you look at it. Well, it don't bear talkin' about too much. We'd better turn in, old woman."

There was no time next morning for any thoughts except those of urgent duty, for Sam came in from yarding the milkers to report that the new bull had broken out of his paddock and vanished. Fred Wallace suppressed remarks that sprang to his tongue and ate his breakfast hastily, while his wife cut quantities of sandwiches.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, but only the blitherin' ol' bull knows when that will be," he said between mouthfuls. "He's sure to have headed back for the part of the district he came from, but I bought him in the sale-yards an' I'll have to see the auctioneers an' get the address of the man who sold him. It's a fair step: not much chance of gettin' him home to-night. Darned hard luck on you, old woman, to have to help with the milkin' again."

"Don't you worry: Sam an' Nancy'll do most of it, even if they're a bit late for school," said his Emma serenely. "We'll get on all right. I expect you'll find him in his old paddock."

"Yes, but I'd be happier if I knew just where that paddock was. Oh, well, I reckon I'll get on his track pretty quick." He pocketed his sandwiches and made sure that his tobacco-pouch was full. "Expect me when you see me. You kids look after Mum an' don't let her do too much outside the house."

He rode fast to the nearest town, knowing that travelling would be slow when he had recovered the runaway. There was no difficulty in finding the

name of the previous owner: the auctioneers' accounts were quickly examined. It appeared that the bull had been owned by a farmer named Adams.

"Doesn't often come in, Sid Adams," remarked the auctioneers' clerk. "He's got a rough place a good way out, and there's not much of a road to it. Good land, though, part of it, and he breeds good cattle. Calls his place The Wattles; why, I don't know, for there are enough wattle-trees all over the country. I can put you in the right direction, Mr. Wallace, but you'll have to ask your way as you go along, once you're off the main road."

"I can do that all right. 'Fraid I'll have to ask Adams to put me up if it's late when I strike his place."

"You needn't worry about that," the clerk assured him. "He's a nice chap: I don't suppose he'd let you start back to-night driving a beast, even if you wanted to. Most likely he'll insist on coming a bit of the way with you to give you a good start—that bull may not be easy driving once he's had a taste of freedom."

"Sounds the right sort of man for me," grinned Wallace. He jotted down the clerk's directions and rode away.

The first part of his journey was simple enough, but once he had turned off the highroad his troubles began. The country was rough, and much of it still bore scrub timber: a farm in a valley might have as its only entrance a set of slip-rails in a post-and-rail fence, with a track to it that had never been properly made, winding among trees with nothing to distinguish it from the tracks made by travelling cattle. The wide roads of Australia, designed to give plenty of room for moving herds in the days when country was cheap, give little assistance in lonelier parts to a man seeking for an unknown farm. Their ribbons of brown road wind between stretches of scrub that conceal the paddock fences; settlers' houses, built only with regard to the nearest water-supply, are often far out of sight of the road, even if that road gave a clear view. Fred Wallace turned in to one farm after another to ask his way, hoping each time that he had struck The Wattles; only to be sent farther on.

He was becoming distinctly ruffled in temper, and the afternoon was wearing on, when he came to an overgrown lane leading from the road on which he was riding. He checked his horse, hesitating. It looked anything but promising, for there was more grass on it than bare track, although close inspection showed faint marks of motor-tyres. His last directions had been given by an old woman on a farm where all the men were away in the paddocks: they were directions devoid of any clearness, and his efforts to extract something even moderately definite from her had been unsuccessful. They accounted for his momentary bad temper.

"Well, this doesn't look much of a show," he muttered. "Still, there's certainly been a car along here some time or other, an' for all I know it's the

place the old lady was drivin' at. I'll give it a go, anyhow: I can always turn back if it doesn't seem to lead anywhere. Lord knows I'm used to turnin' back to-day!"

He followed the dim marks into the timber, relieved when before long they led him to a farm entrance. Hope sprang up again; he cantered slowly across the paddock until he came within sight of a house and outbuildings. A decent little place, with a good garden. Very likely this was Adams' house at last.

An old man was near the pig-sty. Wallace rode up and hailed him.

"Good-day. This Adams' farm?"

Old Barney started and looked confused.

"Adams?" he quavered. "No, it ain't Adams'. It's Missus's."

"Oh, is it?" said Wallace resignedly. "Well, can you give me an idea where Adams' place is, mate?"

Barney shook his head.

"No, I don't know anybody. Nobody at all."

"Gosh!" said the weary traveller under his breath. "Well, look here, old chap, is there anyone who can tell me?"

"There's Missus," said Barney, as though that ended the matter.

"I suppose so. Where'll I find her?"

"She isn't in the house."

"Isn't there anyone else at all?"

"Only Lassie; but she's too little."

"Little or big, I'd like to find someone I could talk to," said Wallace impatiently. "Where's the boss?"

"Oh, you can't talk to Boss," Barney assured him. "Nobody talks to Boss now. He's gone right away. I think he's dead," he added hopefully. "He's bad, Boss is. *Very* bad."

Wallace reflected that he had certainly struck a queer place.

"An' there's nobody I can talk to, you say?" he asked.

"Why not talk to Missus?" suggested Barney in mild surprise.

"Why, you said she was out, man!"

"Oh no, I never." The old man wagged his head wisely. "Only not in the house. She's down at the Creek. With Lassie," he added.

"Gosh!" uttered Wallace. "Which way?"

"You just ride round the stable, an' you'll see her down below. But she mightn't know, so per'aps it's no good talkin' to her."

"Well, I'll find that out for myself," said Wallace, turning his horse.

Beyond the stable the ground sloped gently to a shallow creek trickling between low sand-banks. A woman was there, standing on the edge, dressed in a bright cotton overall. On a sandy island a small girl in a blue frock and a white linen hat dug vigorously to make a canal. A black dog was on the island:

another lay near the woman. Both jumped up and barked loudly at the sight of the stranger.

"Bother, there's a strange man," said Mrs. Benton sharply. "You stay there, Lassie: I'll see what he wants."

Strange men did not interest the little digger, intent on the canal that was almost ready to let the water through: a hasty glance, and the spade was plunged into the sand again. Mrs. Benton went quickly to meet the man trotting down the slope.

"Adams?" she said. "No, I don't know him, but I've an idea there's a place called The Wattles somewhere about. I don't know many people. But if you get back to the main road and ask at the first house you see on the left, they're certain to know."

"This is the sort of thing I've been doin' nearly all day," Wallace told her. He wondered who was this nice-looking woman, living alone on a farm with a child and a half-cracked old man. "You've a lonely place here, right enough."

"Oh, it suits me," she said briefly.

"I've been tryin' to get some directions out of your old chap up there." He jerked his thumb towards the pig-sty. "Not very clear in his head, though, is he?"

"No: he had a smash. But he's all right."

Not much small talk to be got out of this lady, reflected Wallace, becoming more puzzled. He tried another tack, glancing at the creek.

"Little girl not goin' to school yet, I s'pose? That's gen'lly the trouble in these lonely places: no school within miles. I've got one myself a bit bigger than her."

"I can teach her myself when she's old enough," was the curt answer. There was a shade of uneasiness in her face: Wallace wondered vaguely if she suspected him of being a school inspector, trying to find out things she did not wish to tell him. Plenty of settlers tried to dodge school regulations. Still, that was no reason why she should be almost rude. His next words were half mischievous.

"Is she your only one?"

"Yes," snapped Mrs. Benton. "Well, I'm afraid I can't give you any help. You'd better try the place I told you about."

That was final enough. He said, almost as curtly, "Well, I'm sorry to have troubled you. Good-day." He lifted his hat and turned his horse up the hill.

From behind him came a gay little shout of laughter. A high voice shouted. "Plenty mine dig'em welly good channel, Auntie!"

Fred Wallace wheeled his horse round with a sharp jab of the bit. He sat staring at the island, where the small girl capered triumphantly at the sight of water flowing through the canal. Down on her knees she went; the white hat

fell off, revealing the back of a round, closely-cropped dark head. That was all he could see, for the woman came between them. She jumped across to the island and replaced the hat firmly.

"Lassie, haven't I told you you must keep your hat on in the sun?"

"Solly," said the culprit: and fell to enlarging the ditch by scooping out handfuls of wet sand.

"Good Lord!" muttered Wallace, turning his horse again and pursuing his way up the hill. "I nearly made a fool of myself then. I didn't think another kid existed with a voice as like little Davie's as that one's. His lingo, too! Well, there's lots of kids come in contack with abos. an' Chinese, I suppose: only I didn't happen to have met 'em."

He nodded to old Barney as he passed him and followed the queer woman's directions. They proved effective; an hour later he had found The Wattles, where the hospitable Mr. Adams insisted on his staying the night. The truant bull was there, having jumped back into his former home that morning.

"I'll help you along the road with him to-morrow," said Adams, as they sat smoking after supper. "I reckoned some one 'ud be here pretty soon when I saw the ol' heathen in his paddock, as large as life an' as innocent-lookin' as a buttercup. You put him in a paddock with barbed-wire fences an' he'll never go near them. Post-an'-rail fencin's just an invitation to him to jump."

"I wish I'd known that when I bought him," mourned Wallace.

"Well, I'd a right to let the buyer know, an' I'm blamin' meself I didn't," admitted Adams. "Fact was, I had the 'flu then, an' I had to get a friend to take the bull to the sale-yards. Darned bad I was, too: I got up too soon, an' I was seedy for weeks. Makes you forget all sorts of things."

"Too right it does," sympathized the guest. "Rough on you, too, bein' a bachelor with nobody to look after you. An' you got precious few neighbours round here."

"So few you just don't notice them. I bet you had a thin time lookin' for this place to-day."

"Oh, not too bad. I've got quite a noddin' acquaintance with half this district by now, through payin' short calls," said Wallace, grinning. "By the way, you've got one queer cocky-farmer in these parts—a woman livin' down the creek with a half-daft old man workin' for her."

"That 'ud be Mrs. Benton," Adams said. "Yes, she's queer, all right. Been here a few years, but nobody knows her—she made it pretty clear she didn't want friends. I wouldn't even know her name if a butcher hadn't told me. He buys cattle off her." He sucked at his pipe. "I see her sometimes drivin' round in an old Ford—she don't look a bad sort of woman, either. Pity she's so stand-off."

"She's got a little girl," said Wallace, whose thoughts had rarely left that

little girl since his experience at the farm. “Little thing about three year old.”

“I never heard she had—though she might have a dozen for all I know.”

“Well, the kid called her Auntie. So she may be just stayin’ there.”

“That’s more likely; even if people don’t know Mrs. Benton they’d be apt to know if she had a kid of her own. Queer, how things do get about in these parts,” remarked his host. “You’d be surprised to hear some of the gossip that works up. People got to do something with their tongues, I s’pose. There’s a rum yarn that I’ve heard about that very same Mrs. Benton.”

“That so?”

“ ’M. Remember a case there was in all the papers some time ago? People called . . . now what on earth was their name? I had it on the tip o’ me tongue, an’ it’s gone. Station people . . . I bet you’d remember the name if I could tell it to you. Place called Billabong.”

Wallace started.

“Oh, *that* case. You bet I remember it; I knows some of those people. Cattle-stealin’ an’ assault an’ all that.”

“Yes. Well, then, you know the feller that got five years over it? Prize-fighter chap named McGill. Well, there’s people about here who say that chap’s been seen more than once goin’ in to Mrs. Benton’s.” He leaned back, enjoying the spectacle of his guest’s astonished face.

“I say, don’t you think that’s all a yarn?” asked Wallace. “That McGill’s record was nearly bad enough to hang him—and she looks a real decent woman. Even if she *is* short in the temper.”

“Well, there’s evidence of a sort—for what it’s worth,” Adams answered. “One fellow who swears he saw McGill turning in to Mrs. Benton’s on a motor-bike had seen him in the ring in Melbourne. He said there wasn’t the slightest doubt it was him. An’ another man saw him comin’ out of her lane—an’ that lane don’t lead anywhere, barrin’ Mrs. Benton’s. He didn’t know who he was, but he remembered his face—not the sort of man anyone could forget, he said. Real heavyweight brute. He seen his photo in the papers, time of the arrest, an’ he said he could swear it was the same man.”

“Well, that’s pretty straight evidence, I reckon,” admitted Wallace. “Poor wretched woman—I don’t wonder she fights shy of people if she’s mixed up with a chap of that sort. Might be her name’s really McGill, not Benton.”

“Too right it might. I wouldn’t blame her for keepin’ it quiet. I’ve seen her lookin’ unhappy enough, drivin’ in her car. Well, that beauty won’t be able to worry her for a good bit, anyhow.”

“That reminds me,” said Wallace suddenly. “I asked that ol’ daftie she’s got for the boss this afternoon, an’ he said he’d gone right away. Seemed pretty happy to be able to say it. He added that the boss was a bad ’un.”

“Well, there you are,” Adams said. “More evidence. It all piles up, don’t it?

Did you say you knew some of them Billabong people?”

Fred Wallace nodded gloomily.

“Young Meadows, the Billabong man’s son-in-law and his wife. They stayed at our place a couple of days with their boy. Nicest people ever we met: they got stranded at our gate one night in their car, an’ we made ’em come in. An’ we’d have liked to keep ’em a month. Gosh, I wish we had—they mightn’t have gone to Ryan’s Cove then,” he finished sadly.

Adams took his pipe out, staring at him.

“Not those people whose little boy got drowned?”

“Too right it was.”

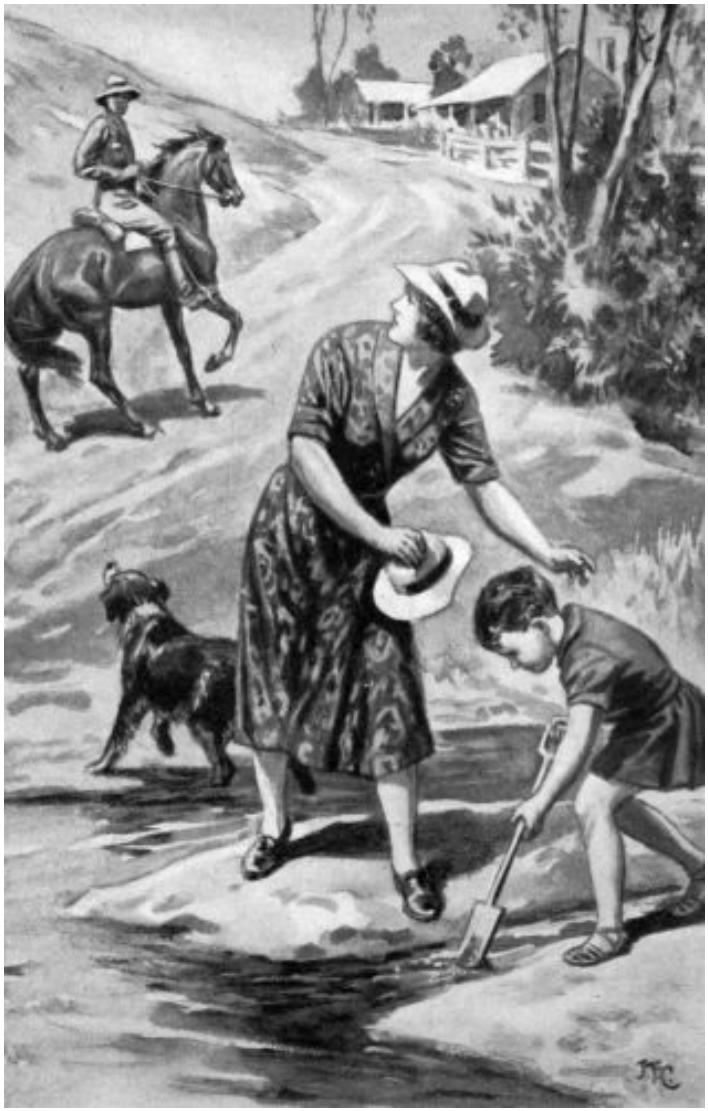
“By George, that was a sad thing!” the other man said. “I seen about it in the papers. An’ to think you knew ’em.”

“Knew ’em!—my wife’s cried her heart out over that youngster. We got four kids of our own, but we all fell for Davie. I didn’t see as much of him as she did, of course, but what I did see was enough. An’ as for his mother, well, my wife thinks the world of her. I s’pose they’re rich an’ all that—their car was a beauty—but she worked in our kitchen like as if she’d been born in one: an’ young Meadows as good in the paddocks with me. Always lookin’ for a job of work, an’ findin’ it, too—both of ’em. They meant to come an’ stay with us on their way home, but I reckon they just couldn’t face it . . . without the boy. Mrs. Meadows wrote an’ said she was sorry. Plucky letter, too, it was.”

“Poor souls,” said Adams. “Ain’t things queer?—you come along to this part of the districk, not knowin’ a soul, an’ you link up with things harkin’ back to that police-court business.”

“An’ McGill at the back of it,” added Wallace grimly. “Mrs. Meadows told my wife that the reason they came on this trip was that her husband had got run-down because of that case: he’d been over-workin’, an’ the worry they’d had in different ways over McGill sorter preyed on his mind. He had a bad accident a few years ago, an’ he’s not as strong as he’d like you to think he is, specially in his head. So but for McGill they’d probably have little Davie to-day.”

“Yes, it’s rum,” said Adams. “You’d wonder why a waster like that should be able to mess up decent people’s lives. Seems to me like a screw loose in the arrangements somewhere.”



" 'Bother, there's a strange man,' said Mrs. Benton sharply."
Son of Billabong] [*Chapter XVII*

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE TELEPHONE

"AN' you never got a closer look at the little girl, Fred?" Mrs. Wallace leaned forward excitedly.

"Why, no, I never, Emma. I didn't want to go starin' at them. The woman had shown me clear enough I wasn't wanted."

"Well, I don't know how you kept from starin'. Why on earth should you bother about that rude thing? A little girl with a voice like Davie's! Where did she pick up his talk?"

"How on earth should I know, Emma? There may be hundreds of kids have it, for all you an' I can tell. Plenty of blacks an' Chinks in Australia. It just struck me all of a heap for a second, that was all." He hesitated. "Hurt me, too, old woman, no end. I'd have sworn it was Davie's voice; if I hadn't known he was dead I'd just have expected to see him round a corner. I kept thinkin' about it the whole day."

"Well, I don't wonder," said his wife. "Tell me a bit more about her. What was she like?"

"I never got a clear look at her face. She'd a big floppy hat on: it fell off when she was kneelin' on the sand, but she had her back to me then. Y'see, I was up on higher ground, an' on a horse: I couldn't see more than a bit of her chin when the hat was there."

"No, of course not," admitted Mrs. Wallace. "Was she dark or fair?"

"Oh, dark, judgin' by her hair. Cut as close as you cut Sam's, it was. An' a bit smaller than our Rosie, an' she had on a blue frock. An' that's all I know about the kid, Emma, barrin' that she talked like little Davie."

"Well, I only hope poor Mrs. Meadows'll never come across that little girl," said his wife. "It 'ud just about kill her, I should say."

"You bet it would. It knocked *me* endways, right enough. Though I daresay Mrs. Meadows 'ud notice differences I wouldn't, knowin' every note of Davie's voice the way she must."

Mrs. Wallace said: "That's likely enough. Still . . . I don't know." She rose and went about the sitting-room, putting it in order as her custom was at bed-time: her mind busy with perplexed thoughts. "And the woman has something to do with McGill. It's the queerest thing, Fred!"

"Oh, I dunno. I thought it was rum, talkin' about it to Adams, but thinkin' over it to-day as I was ridin' home I didn't make so much of it. Even if she's McGill's wife, as they seem to think, what's it matter? I'd only be sorry for

her. The little girl's not hers—she called her Auntie. Must have been a comfort to her to get a child on to the place, livin' as lonely as she is. Adams reckoned the little girl hadn't been there long—not as I can see how he'd know much about it."

Mrs. Wallace took up three ornaments, one after another, and put them down exactly where they were before. Her husband watched her with some amazement.

"What on earth do you think you're doin', old woman? Don't you think you'd better stop fiddlin' with them things an' go to bed?"

"Oh, I don't know what I'm doin'," she said violently. "I'm thinkin', an' I can't get things straight, 'cause my head's in a whirl. But there's somethin' sort of sayin' to me that you didn't go to that place just by chance. Look here, Fred—I don't care if you think I'm mad, but I want to go over this very careful with you, puttin' everythin' together."

"But I don't see . . ." began her bewildered husband.

"Never mind what you don't see. Here's this Benton woman, something to do with McGill. An' she's livin' alone, an' you can bet if she's McGill's wife she's got no love for Mrs. Meadows' people."

"Well, what of it? Do sit down, Emma," he begged.

Mrs. Wallace sat down, facing him. She was panting a little.

"Well . . . she gets hold of a child, an' it seems to be lately. An' Davie was lost lately."

"Drowned, you mean," he said firmly.

"I don't know as I do mean drowned. Oh, Fred, do think with me for a moment! An' you've seen that child, an' it's a bit smaller than Rosie—an' so was Davie. An' you heard that child speak, an' it knocked you endways 'cause her voice was so like Davie's, an' the way she talked. An' she's dark, an' her head's cropped as close as Sam's. Now you just think very careful, Fred—say that little girl in a blue frock was put into a jersey an' knickers . . . a pale-blue jersey, Fred," said his wife, with a catch in her voice—"say she was given a crop of black curls, an' you heard her talkin' . . . who'd you say that little girl was?"

"My God!" said Wallace under his breath. "I'd say she was Davie Meadows."

Mrs. Wallace broke into heavy sobbing. He got up and put his arm round her shoulders, holding her against him until she could master herself.

"Emma, old woman, we don't dare jump to conclusions," he said. "Why on earth should a woman do such a thing? How could she manage to do it, even if she dared?"

"Oh, I don't know," choked his wife. "We can't answer any of those questions. We don't even know if I'm not makin' a fool of myself to suspect

anything. It's too serious to chance makin' a mistake, though. The only thing I do know, Fred, is that you're goin' to take me over to that place to-morrow. I'd start now if we could manage it, only I know we can't."

"We'll go after breakfast," he said. "Lucky I got petrol enough. Emma, are you sure you'd know Davie, if he was dressed up in girl's clothes an' his hair cut off?"

"I'd know him if he was dyed green!" she said. "And what's more, if it's Davie, do you think there's any doubt that he'll know me? Of course there isn't! I don't know why he didn't recognize you, Fred. That's a thing that makes me feel uncertain."

"Well, I was a bit away from the creek—and by Jove, that woman came quick up the rise to meet me, as if she didn't want me to come any nearer! An' she got between me an' him in a hurry when his hat blew off. Lord, Emma, there I go sayin' 'him' as if I was sure!" he said, half-annoyed at himself. "An' the kid took precious little notice of me: much too wrapped up in the job."

"An' *that's* like Davie," she said. "When he was busy at somethin' interestin' he'd never have a look to spare for anyone at all."

Her husband digested this, and a slow smile of pleasure dawned.

"Well, now, that's a relief to me, old woman. Once you put the idea into my head that it was Davie I just couldn't stick the thought that he'd forgotten me. I sure did like that kid."

"An' he liked you an' all of us, bless him. You'll see how he'll jump to-morrow when I call him. There'll be no little girl about Davie then!"

"Ah, don't make too sure," he said. "I know it sounds likely, the way you put it, but there's part of me that says we're just thinkin' a thing that's impossible. Like one o' them mellerdrammas on a film. Things like that just don't happen in real life, I believe."

"Don't they? I reckon there's things in the newspapers stranger than this: an' hundreds of things that don't get into newspapers. You just believe you were sent there, Fred, an' don't worry."

They were confident words; but her heart throbbed unevenly as they came near the hidden farm next day. Their car was an ancient one, but it had made light of the distance Fred had found long on horseback. He scanned the track keenly when they entered the lane.

"Fresh motor tracks, I think," he said. "Someone's been over here. What'll you do if Mrs. Benton's out, Emma."

"Wait for her—or get hold of Davie if she's left him at home and go off without waitin' for her. That's what I'd rather do," she added. "I thought last night there was nothin' I'd enjoy more than givin' her a piece of my mind . . . but somehow, I don't know. If she's got carin' for him as much as I did, her punishment's comin' in givin' him up. No room for anyone to add to that with

words."

"I reckon not," he said.

The dogs rushed at them, barking, as they drove up to the house. Barney came out to meet them, looking alarmed. Mrs. Wallace had already decided how to treat the old man: she greeted him with a smile.

"Good mornin'. Mrs. Benton at home?"

"Missus? Gorn away," he said, shaking his head.

"Now isn't that a pity?" she answered. "Never mind, we're lucky to find you, aren't we? An' perhaps the little girl, too. Is Lassie here?"

"No, she took Lassie. I wish she hadn't. I like Lassie."

"I'm sure you do. She must be great company for you. But I suppose they won't be long."

"Days an' days," said Barney mournfully. "Missus said so."

The hearts of the visitors fell heavily. They looked at each other in dismay. Mrs. Wallace was the first to recover herself: after all, the poor old man could easily be mistaken, she thought.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "We did want to see her and Lassie."

"Sure as sure," he said. "Missus took the luggage. Only takes the luggage when she's goin' to be away days an' days. An' nights," he added as an afterthought.

"An' what do you do when she's away?"

"I look after everythin'. Cows an' all. Goin' to whitewash the kitchen this time," he told her proudly. "Missus said I could."

That was proof enough for any woman. Mrs. Wallace rallied under the blow.

"It will look lovely," she said earnestly. "Isn't she lucky to have you to do it! Lassie will like it too, won't she? What's Lassie's other name?"

"Daisy," said Barney promptly.

"Daisy what?"

"Just Daisy. That's Missus's name for her. She told me to call her that when she came. But I couldn't, of course."

"Couldn't you?" asked Mrs. Wallace curiously. "Why was that?"

"Well, how could I, when 'twas the Jersey cow's name? I'd only ha' mixed them up. Missus she said, 'You call the Jersey somethin' else, Barney.' But ladies don't understand."

"What don't they understand, Barney?" Fred Wallace spoke for the first time. His voice was as friendly as his wife's, and the old man responded instantly to its gentleness.

"Well, you know how it is, sir. That cow had just had her first calf, an' she knew her name was Daisy. She'd on'y have been bothered if I'd called her somethin' else when I was bailin' her up."

“By Jove, you understand all right, Barney. So you called the little girl Lassie?”

Barney nodded in a pleased way.

“Yes. It’s a nice name. Missus likes it too now. Sometimes she calls her Daisy, an’ I don’t mind, if the Jersey can’t hear her. But lots of times she just calls her Lassie, like I do.”

“I see,” said Fred thoughtfully. “A good calf, I expect, Barney. Could I have a look at it? I like Jerseys.”

“I’ll show you, sir—she’s in the calf paddock,” said the old fellow eagerly. “Just across here: it’s on’y a step.”

They went off together, Fred suiting his step to the old man’s shambling pace. Mrs. Wallace sat in the car, wondering at her husband’s sudden interest in a calf. She was bitterly disappointed: somehow, it had never occurred to her that they would not find Davie at their journey’s end. All her dreams of taking him back to his mother and father had crashed. But there was no use in dwelling on personal disappointment. She must think only of what to do next.

Fred and Barney returned, equally pleased with each other. They said good-bye, and the car climbed the rise towards the gate. In the lane outside Fred paused to fill his pipe.

“Well, we drew a blank, old woman. But we got one bit of evidence. The old chap hasn’t an idea of time: I tried him, an’ he couldn’t give me any notion of how long the youngster had been here. But that Jersey calf’s just about two months old, if I know any thing about Jerseys—and I ought to.”

“Fred! An’ it’s just that long since Davie . . . went.”

“Just that long,” he agreed. “Queer that there should be a peg for that poor old chap’s memory—the one thing he couldn’t make a mistake over.”

“I do think you’re clever, Fred,” said his wife with unusual respect. “I’d never have thought of sizin’ up the calf. But it points the same way, don’t it? An’ so does the name Mrs. Benton chose.”

“Daisy. Yes, she couldn’t have got nearer to his own. Wonder if the little chap noticed the difference? Emma, what do we do now? Seems to me we’re stumped.”

“Let’s drive on,” she suggested. “I want to think.”

They drove in silence for many miles, turning over in their minds one scheme after another: rejecting all as useless, since Mrs. Benton had vanished into the blue, taking the child with her. Mrs. Wallace made up her mind at last.

“Fred, it’s out of our hands, I reckon. We can’t go to the police on our own: we’ve no authority to do a single thing. The police ’ud be the only ones who could find her, but it’s not our job to tell them.”

“No, I been thinkin’ that, Emma.”

“An’ we can’t say a word to the Meadows without bein’ certain. There’s a

chance yet that we're all wrong. Fancy lettin' them have a hope, an' then it crashin'. Flesh an' blood couldn't stand that."

"But we can't just leave it alone, old woman."

"Of course we can't. But there's that brother of Mrs. Meadows. Jim's his name—Jim Linton. She talked a lot about him to me. They just think the world of him. You know, Fred, Mrs. Thompson told you how he an' his wife were on their honeymoon when they heard about Davie, an' they came home as fast as they could travel. He's the one to tell, don't you think?"

"He's the man," said Fred with relief. "Will we write to him?"

"I reckon we'd better telephone. The sooner they're on Mrs. Benton's track the harder it'll be for her to hide."

"Yes, that's sound. Well, you'll have to do the talkin', old woman. I may know a bit about Jersey calves, but I sure do dread a 'phone."

"I'll do it," said Mrs. Wallace stoutly. "Oh, Fred, what money have you got? It'll cost a mint!"

"Let it cost!" he said recklessly. "I guess I've got enough to see it through."

They stopped in the next township, and after much wrestling to discover an unknown number Fred saw his wife into the telephone-box. "Sure you're all right, old woman?" he asked anxiously.

"I'm all right. But do pray that I won't make a fool of myself an' start cryin', Fred dear!"

The door shut. He leaned against it as if prepared to defend it against all comers. Within, Mrs. Wallace steeled herself to keep her voice calm. Perhaps it was fortunate that the first response to her news that came in the deep tones that reminded her of Norah made her rather angry.

"*Alive!* Are you mad, or is this a practical joke?"

"It's no joke, Mr. Linton. I'd cut my hand off rather than risk hurtin' your sister. My husband's with me—I know the Meadows have told you about us. They stayed with us on their trip."

"Yes, but it's incredible! You say you haven't seen this child yourself?"

"No—Fred did. But it was Davie's voice, the way he talked. There's no child ever we knew as talked like Davie. What other child would say,' Plenty mine dig'em welly good channel'? An' that child did."

She heard Jim say "Good God!" in shaking tones. She hurried on.

"We can't be sure, of course. If I could have only seen him myself—but we went there to-day, an' Mrs. Benton had taken him away. But you could make enquiries through the police. We've other bits of evidence. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, plainly. Don't let them cut us off."

"They won't. I told them to keep me on until I'd finished. We've proved

that this child came to the farm just about the time Davie disappeared. An' she said the child's name was Daisy. That's the nearest she could get to Davie, we reckon, so's he'd answer to it. Dressed like a girl he . . . this child was, an' his hair cut very short. Fred never got a good look at his face 'cause he'd a floppy hat over it—an' Mrs. Benton took good care Fred didn't get near him." She stopped for breath.

"Mrs. Wallace, did your husband think it was Davie at the time? Surely he'd have known one way or the other."

"It never entered his head, Mr. Linton. The child was diggin' a ditch on a wee sand island in the creek, an' Fred was up on the side of the hill, talkin' to Mrs. Benton. The child never took any notice of Fred—I bet you know Davie 'ud be like that if he was terribly busy over something."

"Yes—he would." Again the voice shook. "That's Davie all over. Go on."

"Fred was ridin' away, when he got his ditch finished an' yelled out like I told you. An' Fred near jumped out of his skin. He whizzed round, an' the little thing's hat had fallen off, an' he saw his black head, hair all cut short. But Fred only had a glimpse. Mrs. Benton jumped in front of the child an' shoved his hat on. An' Fred just reckoned it was only a chance, the kid's voice bein' so like Davie's, until he got home an' told me, an' we talked it out together."

"When was your husband there?"

"Two days ago. He was on the roads with a bull all yesterday. That was what took him over to that part. An' he found out another thing, Mr. Linton—there's some connection between Mrs. Benton an' that man McGill."

"*What?*" came the startled question.

"People reckon she may be his wife: anyhow there's somethin'. McGill's been seen near her place more'n once before he got into gaol. An' her place isn't so very far from Ryan's Cove: Fred reckons she could drive it in a couple of hours. She's got a car. Oh, Mr. Linton, don't tell Mrs. Meadows anything, but do come over an' make sure. We can't take any action now, an' we're nearly off our heads over it."

"I'll get to you to-morrow if I smash my car doing it. Tell me where to find you."

She told him quickly. He had another question waiting.

"Mrs. Wallace—do you think this woman is kind to the child? No chance of her hurting him?"

"Lor, no, Mr. Linton. We reckoned from what we heard he's a real pet on the place. Fred said his voice was happy as anything. I know it sounds queer to say it, but we're sorry for her—we just can't help it."

"Sorry! When she's done what she has—if we prove what you think——"

"There's somethin' behind it, I believe. Fred said she'd a decent face. An' she's been good to him. Never mind—tell me how Mr. and Mrs. Meadows

are.”

“Well enough—so far as they’ll let anyone see. Lord, if this is true!—only I can’t take it in yet——”

“Ah, don’t be sure yet, Mr. Linton. Only come and make sure. An’ don’t hate us too much if we’ve put you on a wrong scent.”

“I’ll let you know just how much this house feels towards you two when I can shake hands with you—wrong scent or not. See you to-morrow.”

The line went dead. Mrs. Wallace staggered out of the box, discovering that she was dripping with perspiration. She leaned against Fred’s shoulder, mopping her face.

“He’s comin’ to-morrow. Fred, take me somewhere for some tea—if we’ve any money left!”

CHAPTER XIX

AN OLD PHOTOGRAPH

THE small person in the blue frock finished his canal-making by falling bodily into the creek, much to his amusement. Nowhere was the water deep enough to inconvenience him, but "Auntie" had a rooted dislike to wet clothes. Davie did not share this, but he submitted to being taken home and put into dry things. Tea-time was near; it did not seem worth while to go out again. Mrs. Benton took down a box of oddments from a shelf, and put it on the floor of the sitting-room.

"There's that box I told you you could play with some time, Daisy. Lots of queer things in it. See if you can pick out all the reels of cotton and put them on one side for me."

"All-li," said Davie. It was a job after his own heart. He settled down on the rug happily, and Mrs. Benton sank listlessly into an easy-chair and closed her eyes.

She was very tired. The visit of the stranger had shaken her a good deal; the alarm she had felt when Davie shouted in his hearing had made her heart palpitate in the old breathless way against which her doctor had warned her. She told herself now that it was foolish, for no stray man seeking for directions about finding a place would think twice about a child's broken English. Fortunately for her, she had not seen him turn round and stare in amazement; her only thought had been to cover up Davie's head, and when she had looked back the man had been riding up the hill.

She dismissed him from her mind. There were other thoughts that refused to be dismissed, night or day: she gave full rein to them now, and they rushed over her. She greeted them with a weary impatience, opening her eyes for a moment to look at the little dark head near her on the floor. How happy she might be—if only she hadn't been born a decent sort!

She had got all that she had longed for in the dark days following on Joe's imprisonment, and at first it had seemed better than her dreams. A child who trusted her, cared for her: who each day turned to her happily for all his needs, and for his fun. That was what counted so much more than all the rest. She had learned to laugh again with Davie.

For a month she had lived in unthinking delight, the joy of seeing him more fully hers day by day blinding her to every other point of view. The farm became a new place with the sound of a child's laughter echoing round it. Old Barney went about smiling, showing fresh energy and intelligence. Everything

seemed to have a new meaning: there was something worth while now in cooking, in working in the garden, in all the jobs that had once been burdensome. She had thought in her blindness that it would last for ever.

Now she knew that she had been a fool to think so. Night after night, with Davie asleep in his little bed beside hers, she lived with the thought of the people she had robbed. That father and mother whom she had seen young and joyful seemed to stand by her side, their faces strained and worn with grief. She could have borne it better if they had seemed angry with her, but somehow she could never picture them as angry. Rather they seemed to know all about her, and to be sorry—to give her compassion as well as asking for hers.

Dreams, silly dreams, she told herself. They were normal people, cruelly injured, who would fling her into prison if they only knew, just as they had helped to fling Joe. There could never be any compassion from that father and mother. If only she could forget them! Davie would forget in time, she believed; he talked of them constantly still, always believing comfortably that they were coming back, but that could not last; their faces would grow gradually dimmer in his mind. As if in contrast they grew sharper, more distinct, in hers: and sometimes, when the better side of her nature was uppermost, she faced giving him back to them.

Pride kept her from yielding. Again and again she would marshal her grievances. They had helped to ruin Joe: Davie's mother had treated Joe as if he were less than the dog that she had hounded on to him. Sometimes she wished she could forget that—and a moment later she would deliberately picture it, knowing that it was the sheet-anchor to her pride. Everything else she could have forgiven, but not that.

She had long ceased to feel personal fear. If she gave in, they could do what they liked to her; Joe was in prison, and if she lost Davie she might as well be in prison too. It would not be for long, she believed; days of hard work and nights of sleeplessness had brought back all the symptoms over which the Sydney doctor had shaken his head. And that was another thing to consider. If anything happened to her, what would become of the child she had stolen?

In that sudden anxiety she had got up one night and written out a confession, addressing it to Wally. She put it away in her desk and it gave her new confidence to think that she had safe-guarded Davie. Now, perhaps, she could forget the haunting faces and enjoy him for the time that remained to her. Sitting in the armchair to-day she remembered it and felt more at peace.

A little exclamation from Davie made her open her eyes. He had found an envelope in the bottom of the box, and from it had taken a photograph. An old one of Joe, cut from a sporting paper: she had forgotten it was there and she wished he had not seen it, for it was a picture that had made Bertie afraid.

"Give me that, Daisy," she said sharply.

"All li'." He handed it up obediently. "Vat's ve bad man, Auntie."

"You don't know anything about it. He's not a bad man."

"Too li' he is," returned Davie, unshaken. "Mine know that pfeller—him plenty sulky pfeller, twue as life. Him bin hurt Davie."

"Now you're just talking nonsense," she told him.

"No, mine not." The dark eyes were suddenly angry. "Him come Gwandad's house, allee same cheek Muvver. Mine hit him," he added with satisfaction.

"*You!*" She sat up in astonishment. Suddenly she knew that she must ask more. She forced herself to speak gently.

"Come and tell me all about it, Daisy."

"Mine did tellem." He scrambled to his feet and stood beside her.

"Well, what happened?"

"Oh, him jus' come longa velandah, cheek Muvver, an' mine come out to take care of her. Him plenty hollible man, Auntie."

"But what did he do?"

"Vere was *two* bad mens," said Davie, knitting his brows. "Vis——" he flicked the picture contemptuously—"was ve baddest. Him tell Muvver she hully up one-time an' fetchem tucker. Welly cheeky man. An' mine comed out, an' Muvver pick mine up quick. *She* no catchem tucker for bad mens."

"And what did she do?"

"She say 'No,' an' mine say 'Go 'way!' An' vis man him plenty angly, an' him gwab mine arm, so mine hit him hard. An' him say him teach mine, an' him twy pull mine away fwom Muvver, an' mine yelled. So ven Kim comed, an' we plenty glad."

"Did Mother call Kim?"

"Oh, no, Kim just comed hisself," said Davie, chuckling at the recollection. "Heard mine yell, so Kim comed lound velandah like smoke, all-same him after cattle. An' him gwab ve bad man by ve leg. An' ve bad man dwop down, an' yell!" He broke into a delighted gurgle of laughter. "Vat plenty funny!"

"Did Kim hurt him much?"

"Dunno," said Davie airily. " 'Fwaid not, 'cause Jim comed an' made Kim stop biting. Mine welly solly Jim did vat," he added with regret. "But Muvver told him to, so he did. Wasn't it a pity, Auntie?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Benton savagely. "It was an awful pity."

She was almost frightened at the wave of anger that took possession of her after Davie had gone back to his oddments on the floor. It was anger against herself as well as against Joe. So this was how it had been! He had lied to her, as he had lied so many times, only this time she had chosen to believe him: and the belief had made her do a more wicked thing than even Joe had ever done. "The fool I was—the hopeless fool!" she muttered.

"What's vat, Auntie?" Davie looked up.

"Nothing, darling; I was only thinking," she said, and managed to smile at him.

Well, it was done, and whatever the boy's people chose to do to punish her could not add to the burden she must carry as long as she lived. She had believed that Davie's mother had committed an unforgivable sin, and remorselessly she had made her pay for it. Now she knew that it was Norah who had commanded mercy for Joe, and the thing that was unforgivable lay at her own door.

There was only one course to take, and she must take it quickly.

"Stay here, Davie," she said, getting up. "I'll be back presently."

He gave her a quick glance, and smiled.

"You said 'Davie' vat time."

"I believe I'm learning how to say it," she answered. "Just like you learn things."

He nodded. "More better vat way. Don't you twead on my fings."

"I won't." She picked her way among the rubbish that littered the rug and went into the kitchen. In her clenched hand she still held the newspaper cutting. She straightened it out, looked for a moment at Joe's coarse face, and crushed it roughly into a tight ball, flinging it into the fire. Almost running, she hurried out to the shed.

She overhauled the car carefully, attending to every point: there must be no risk of its failing her to-morrow. Her heart protested as she lifted the heavy tin of petrol and she was compelled to sit down on the running-board and wait until its beating grew quiet again. This would not do, she thought, grimly realizing that it would be little use to make sure that the car was all right if there were a risk of the car's driver collapsing at the wheel. She must hunt up the medicine the doctor had given her for emergencies. The remainder of the work she did very slowly, saving her strength as far as possible.

She put Davie to bed early, wondering if the thoughts that filled her mind had in some way reached him, for he chattered unceasingly of his mother and father, and of the time when they would come. Yesterday it would have hurt her, but now she could almost welcome it. And as if to ease her hidden pain he gave her more affection than he had ever shown her. The unasked hug with which he said good night lingered with her as she sat at her desk looking for the doctor's package.

It took some finding; she had never bothered to make use of it. In her search she came across the confession addressed to Davie's father. She took it out of the envelope and read it slowly. It might as well go to him; it would save her a lot of explaining, and at least it would show them that she had had one streak of decent feeling. She added a postscript to it, with that day's date.

"I might as well say that I never would have done it if Joe had not told me Davie's mother had been cruel to him. He said she refused him food and set her dog on him. I was a fool to believe it, but I did, and it made me wicked. I only knew to-day when Davie told me how it was. It is not any good now to say I am sorry. I can only take him back." The pen hesitated for a long time, then wrote again, heavily. "I have loved him very much."

. . . . . .

They were on the road early in the morning, Davie jigging with excitement at the prospect of a drive. Much of the way she had driven before, on her journey to Joe's trial; in the hospital she had learned that Cunjee was the nearest town to Billabong, thankful now to find from her map that it was a shorter trip than the one it still gave her a shudder to recall. She could do it easily in two days—if her strength held out.

That was her gnawing anxiety. Whenever her heart fluttered she stopped the car and took a dose of her medicine, letting Davie run about while she lay at full length on the grass and willed herself into being better. It seemed to work: they made good progress throughout the day, and when they stopped in a small town for the night she felt stronger than at starting. Perhaps the dull peace that had settled upon her had something to do with it, now that she had ceased all mental conflict.

In the morning there was a surprise for Davie. Instead of the girl's cotton frock, she had put ready the blue silk jersey and the grey knickers he had not seen since his last day at Ryan's Cove. Coming back from her bath Mrs. Benton found him sitting up in bed, fingering them joyfully.

"Here's mine welly own fings!" he shouted. "Is Muvver comin'?"

"Well, you never can tell," she said. "Anyhow, you're not on the farm now, so you really don't need a working suit, do you?"

"Wather not!" he agreed. "Mine likes vese plenty better." He wriggled so excitedly that it was hard to dress him: she had to threaten him with the working suit again. He rubbed his head against her. "Ah, you wouldn't do vat, Auntie!" he said confidently. A pang went through her as she looked at the close-shorn head: she wished she had had time to let his curls grow before giving him back.

The journey went well. As if conscious of its responsibility the old Ford produced no more than its ordinary creaks and rattles, and the tyres, concerning which she had felt many doubts, gave no trouble. A garage hand at a petrol-station gave Mrs. Benton advice about roads that enabled her to cut twenty miles off the distance she had estimated; it was a saving that made it possible to give Davie an afternoon sleep in the back of the car. She was glad

of that. There was excitement ahead for him—he would need all the rest he could get. She sat on the grass by the road, her back propped against a log, and looked at the car, trying to realize that in a few hours he would be gone from her altogether. But it was wiser not to think of that: better, perhaps, to think about the gaol that awaited her, a thought that held no pain.

Cunjee came in sight in the late afternoon. Mrs. Benton had dreaded having to ask her way in the township, where Davie might be seen by people he knew. A teamster drew his bullocks aside to let her pass when she was half a mile from the outskirts, and she stopped the car when they had gone by him. Getting out, so that Davie might not hear the question, she asked the road to Billabong.

"Shorter if you give the township a miss," said the man of bullocks. "Cut across the railway line when you get to the level crossing, an' take the next turn to the right. Fourteen mile out, an' the name's on the gate. Good road all the way."

That was a relief: she thanked him, hurrying back to the car. She watched each person she passed anxiously; the merest glance in their direction made her nervous, and she drove as fast as she dared, so that the glances could only be of the briefest. Even when the township was far behind them there was still room for worry—what would happen if they should meet a car coming from Billabong itself? Perhaps it did not greatly matter; still, she had no wish for a painful scene on the public road.

Davie was looking puzzled. He had grown unusually silent, casting quick looks to right and left. Evidently he felt that he was in familiar country, yet was not sure enough to speak. But as they swung round a bend and saw ahead a white bridge across a willow-fringed creek, he gave an excited cry.

"Auntie! We're goin' home!"

"Well, that'll be nice, won't it?" she answered, trying to keep her tone serene. "Will you be able to tell me when we get to the gate? I've never been there, you know."

" 'M." He nodded very hard. A flush came into his brown cheeks; the small hands clenched themselves. Presently he looked up at her, speaking breathlessly. "Muvver an' Dad vere?"

"I expect so, Davie. We're giving them a surprise, of course, but even if they're not there the others will be."

"Don't want the uvvers," he said in a high voice that held tears. "Mine wantem Muvver an' Dad—now!"

"Well, you don't want them to see you making a fuss, old chap, do you? You've got to be steady until you see them: then you can rampage as much as you like." The words were careless, almost unsympathetic: sympathy was not the treatment for the tense little figure beside her. She made herself smile at

him. “Just you watch out for the gate, or you’ll be letting me go past it. That’s your ’sponso, Davie.”

The familiar word steadied him at once. “All li’,” he said; and from that moment looked only towards the right-hand fence. She glanced at the dial. Six miles yet.

Suddenly she was conscious of intense weariness. Her body sagged: she straightened it with a jerk, concentrating instinctively on keeping in the middle of the road. The glare of the rolled gravel surface seemed to burn into her eyes. With difficulty she drew to one side to let a cart go past: the space she gave was so narrow that the driver shouted at her wrathfully, and Davie gave a gasp. It brought her back to herself; she wrenched her mind to full consciousness.

“Sorry, old chap—did I frighten you? I nearly went to sleep.”

“Ve man were frightened,” said Davie severely. “You nearly squashed him, Auntie.”

“Bad driving,” she agreed. “I’m getting tired, I think, Davie.”

“Muvver will make you go to bed,” he said. “Poor old Auntie!”

She thought grimly that things would not be like that. For the hundredth time she tried to put into words what she must say when she met them; that task had kept her awake most of the night before, and she had not mastered it yet. And now there was no more time; for not half a mile away a white gate gleamed in the long grey line of fencing, and already Davie was shouting at the top of his voice.

“Vat’s our gate! Don’t go past it!”

“I won’t, Davie. Couldn’t miss a gate as big as that one, could I?”

“Mine can’t open vat one,” he said anxiously. “When mine’s a big man mine will open it for you, Auntie.”

The certainty with which he gave that loving promise was almost the last weight on the load she carried. To get out and open the gate, to get back to the wheel and drive through, to get out again to shut it, seemed endless work. She dragged herself back to the car and stood by the open door for a moment, breathing deeply, sending all the force of her will into strength to take her over the paddock to the big red house standing in a girdle of trees.

Davie was bouncing on the seat, begging her to hurry—hurry.

“Just a moment, old chap.” The words were almost a whisper.

That was better; her heart began to slow down. She climbed in carefully, looking at the winding yellow track. Yes, she could do it—she must. She let in the clutch; the car moved slowly forward, taking the bends cautiously. She wished her hands did not feel so strangely heavy on the steering-wheel.

Then she felt her body sagging again, and this time it would not respond when she tried to straighten up. It did not seem to belong to her at all. Her heart was pounding rapidly: a mist grew over her eyes. Dimly she was

conscious that the car had left the track, was bumping over rough grass and tussocks. She heard at a great distance a shout from Davie. It swelled to a scream as they lurched sideways into a hollow. With a final effort of consciousness she flung herself forward and switched off the engine. The car crashed on its side.

CHAPTER XX

RETURN TO BILLABONG

THE telephone at Billabong was in the hall, but there was an extension into the smoking-room; and it was this extension that Jim Linton was using on that afternoon. He had driven home from a neighbour's, leaving his car at the gate, since it was probable that Tommy and Mr. Linton would be visiting Norah. There were few afternoons when they did not: it was easier to go to Norah and Wally in those days than to persuade them to leave home.

Jim meant to follow them presently, but there was a telephone call to be made first. He strode through the empty house to the smoking-room and sat down at the writing-table to look for the number he wanted. For a few moments he spoke to another station, and then replaced the receiver.

Almost immediately the bell whirred again.

"That you still, Mr. Linton?" asked Cunjee. "There's a long-distance number trying to get you."

"Right," said Jim, and waited, hoping that long-distance, whoever he was, would be quick.

But the voice, when it came, was a woman's. He listened, puzzled.

"Mrs. Wallace—from Wandoo Flat? Oh, yes, I think I know. Is it my sister you want?"

"*No!*" said the voice urgently. "Not on any account. She mustn't know I'm speaking. Are you alone there, Mr. Linton? Oh, I do hope you are!"

"Yes, quite alone," said the bewildered Jim. "What's the trouble?"

"Please listen carefully and stop me at once if you can't hear me. It's terribly important. It's about little Davie Meadows." And at that name Jim's face had become rigid, and he had strained his ear to lose no word of the earnest voice, growing more and more impatient until a word had wrung from him his incredulous cry—"*Alive!*"

He pulled himself together, cursing the shaking hand that held the receiver. There was no doubting the honesty of the urgent tones; subconsciously he realized that this unknown woman believed every word she said, that she had appealed to him as the one who could best deal with the matter. Norah had written to him of the Wallaces—in his breast-pocket at that moment was a snapshot of Davie taken with "Pe-tah." Only Jim himself knew how often he looked at that laughing picture.

Torn between utter inability to believe and a hope that grew in spite of himself, he listened and tried to ask the right questions as well as the confusion

in his brain would let him. It was fantastic, incredible—and yet he knew that this was a sensible woman, speaking of what she felt was possible. He did not know how long he had been sitting there, the receiver glued to his ear, the voice from far space bringing hope into stricken lives.

Nor did he hear the door of the smoking-room open. Only at the last was he suddenly conscious that he was not alone. He glanced round, and the receiver crashed on the table as he saw Norah.

Their eyes met in a long look as he wondered desperately how much she had heard. But there was never any concealment between Norah and Jim.

"Tell me," she said under her breath. "Tell me quickly, Jim."

"Nor, dear, it . . . it may be nothing . . ." he stammered.

"And it may be everything," she said. "Jim—you know I've never believed he was dead. Don't keep me waiting."

He put her into a chair and told her, brokenly; unashamed that tears ran down his face as he spoke. Tears had never come to ease Norah; she listened, rigid, the eyes that had grown hollow fixed on his.

"That's all," he ended. "I wish you hadn't heard, Nor—if only I could have got away to make sure. I can't stand your being tortured by what may be a false hope. It would be like a miracle—and miracles don't happen——"

"Don't they?" She smiled at him. "And when a miracle saved you in the War! This may be ordinary, compared to that. You came back to us from the dead—why not Davie?"

"Norah, don't make too sure. These people have so little to go on."

"They are wise people, even if they are simple," she said. "Mrs. Wallace must have been driven by hope before she dared to tell you. You'll get away quickly, Jim?"

"I'll start in five minutes. Norah—what about you and Wally coming too?"

For the first time her lips quivered.

"*No.*" The word was a strained whisper. "It will be terribly hard to stay behind, but Wally mustn't be told anything. He has been so wonderful, but he is sure that Davie is dead. A false hope would almost kill him, I think. I must say nothing, Jim—only wait."

"I know you're right," Jim said. "Wally couldn't stand anything more. Nor, I'll make the waiting as short as I can—you know that. Tell the others I've had to go to Town on business—anything you like. Tommy will understand."

"Tommy would always understand; but I'll tell her everything, Jim."

"Bless you for that," he said. "She'll help you. I'll ring up the moment I have anything definite, but of course the police may have to trace this Benton woman. Lord, I wish she weren't a woman! If it were only a man, that I could get my hands on!"

"Oh, what will that matter, if she has not let Davie be afraid?" she said

with a touch of impatience. “She will be less than nothing, when I have him safe.”

“*Will* she!” said Jim between his teeth. “Two minutes, Nor, while I get hold of some money and things.”

He took the stairs three at a time; she heard him pounding overhead. It did not seem two minutes before he was back. She slipped her hand into his arm, and they hurried out to the car. Beside it he held her tightly for a moment.

“Nor, old girl—I’d give my right arm willingly to bring him back to you.”

“You’d give both—and your legs as well,” she told him, smiling into his eyes. “Bring yourselves both back, Jimmy—all complete. I know you will.”

She shut the door as he sprang into the car. He leaned forward to press the starter. But he did not start. Instead, he spoke in a changed voice.

“There’s something wrong down the track, Nor—someone’s car out of control. Good Lord, they’re over! Well, of all the——hop in, Nor, quickly.”

She was in the car before he had finished. Jim raced down the track, while they strained their eyes in dread of seeing flames shoot up from the wrecked car. None came; they drew level with it, stopped, and leaped out, running across the grass.

The car lay on its side, its windows open. As they neared it a small head, close-cropped, came into view. There was no trace of fear on Davie’s face, but considerable indignation; and that vanished in his shout as he saw them.

“Muvver!”

She snatched him out, holding him to her. Jim’s hands were feeling him swiftly.

“Are you hurt, son?”

“Yerra, no!” His arms were round her neck, his face against hers. From that safe place his voice came muffled.

“Find Auntie. She plenty hurt.”

Jim was already at that job. Mrs. Benton lay in a huddle below the wheel, her face hidden from them. She did not stir.

“You’ll have to help, Nor,” he said. “I hope to goodness I won’t make matters worse.”

He wrenched the door open. Very carefully they drew the still form out and laid her on the grass. They examined her as well as they could, kneeling beside her: Davie forgotten for the moment.

“I can’t find anything broken,” Norah said. “But, her lips are blue, Jim, and she has hardly any pulse. Put your coat over her.”

“There’s a rug in her car,” said Jim, springing to get it. He added it to the coat. “Nor, we’d better not try to put her in our car—I’ll go back for a stretcher and get Wally.”

“Jim, Wally mustn’t come. He doesn’t know about Davie. How are we

going to tell him?—I can't leave this poor soul." She faced him anxiously.

"I'll get Tommy," he said quickly. "She'll know how to tell him. Don't you worry, Nor, we'll look after him. You keep Davie here."

"Yes, that's best," she said. She glanced round. "Where is he?" Suddenly she was on her feet, her face white. "Jim, we're too late—look!"

Down the track from the house came Wally, striding swiftly, aware that something was wrong: and up the track to meet him raced a small figure that shouted and waved its arms and capered as it ran. They saw Wally check like a man shot, and stand motionless; and Norah caught at Jim's arm. Then they saw him begin to run wildly. The distance lessened rapidly between the two racing figures; they heard Wally's broken voice calling Davie's name. Then there was no distance left, and Wally had his son in his arms.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Benton came out of a deep sleep. There had been other awakenings, but they had never lasted long. Each time she had known that people were near her, caring for her: and once consciousness had been clear enough for her to recognize Davie's mother bending over her, holding something to her lips while she raised her head very gently. There was something she knew she must say to Davie's mother, but her tongue would not obey her.

"Don't try to talk," said the quiet voice. "Don't worry about anything."

But the thing she must say troubled her. She managed to whisper a few words.

"Read . . . in my bag . . . read it."

"Yes, I will. I'll see to anything you want. Go to sleep now."

"You'll . . . read?"

"Yes. I promise. Sleep now."

The pillow was very soft, the room full of peace. She closed her eyes.

It was curious to see Davie's mother on those awakenings, for they were like the old dreams, and her face was as she had dreamed it; not angry, only compassionate. And when she awoke to fuller consciousness Norah was there still, sitting near her bed. She was knitting; there was something serene and comforting in her quiet face. As if conscious that her patient had roused, she glanced up. They looked deep into each other's eyes.

"You . . . you read it?"

"Yes. Many times."

"Don't hate me . . . more than you can help."

"Nobody hates you. We are only so sorry for you. Don't worry at all."

"But . . . but . . ." Slow tears of weakness crept under her eyelids. Norah took her hand.

"You are not to think of anything that hurts."

"I took him from you."

"And you brought him back. And you took care of him, and he loves you. Do you think I can hate anyone that Davie loves?" She smiled at her. "Now you are to have some food and go to sleep again. Next time you wake I'll bring Davie to see you."

Brownie came in with a little tray, and Norah slipped out. From the verandah she could see Wally riding towards the lagoon, Davie perched on the saddle before him. Nothing to worry about there: never were two people more deeply content. She watched them out of sight. Then, drawing a long breath of happiness, she went into the smoking-room.

Jim was there, sitting near the telephone.

"I've rung up Mrs. Thompson, and left her slightly delirious," he told her. "When she comes round a little she's going to tell that poor little wretch of a nurse-girl. Now I'm waiting while the Cunjee office gets hold of the Wandoo Flat office to tell them I'm a respectable person before I try to get a message sent to the Wallaces."

"Bless you!" said Norah. "I was just going to do all that myself."

"Well, you've been up half the night, so I think you might as well take it easy. Oh, and we've thought out how we're going to keep all this dark. The newspapers will be nosing round, and we don't want more gossip than we can help. We'll just say that Davie wandered away and had a fall and was hurt. All true. And that he was found by a woman living in the bush who took care of him till he was better, only she was out of the way of seeing newspapers and couldn't leave him to find out who his people were. And as soon as she could, she found out, and brought him home. That's the rough idea, but we think it will work if we're vague enough about details."

"It sounds right enough," said Norah.

"Well, Dad and Tommy worked it out, so it ought to be. They have the brains of this family. How's the patient?"

"Pulling round. She has been able to talk a little; enough to find out that we don't hate her. She's very pitiful, poor soul."

"Life is queer," mused Jim. "Yesterday I would cheerfully have torn that woman limb from limb, if only she hadn't happened to be a woman. And when I think about these two months I begin to see red all over again. But all the same, we're all fussing about her health. Doesn't seem as if we could help it, somehow."

"We're too happy to bother about anything in the world," said Norah. "And . . . well, you've read that dreadful little confession of hers, Jim. Are we likely to add anything to what she has been through?"

"If you and Wally can feel like that——" he began.

“Wally and I are practical creatures,” she said. “To-day we’re so full of happiness that it doesn’t seem we’ve a single thing left to wish for. We’re never going to think back to the last two months. But if we began to plan revenges and punishments we’d keep those months alive, and we’d take the edge off our happiness. Very unpractical. We consider that to be McGill’s wife is more than enough for any woman, and we’re going to leave it at that.”

“It’s sound,” he agreed. “Well, we’ll all pull together, as usual, I suppose, and go back to having a good time all round. Gosh, Nor, wasn’t it gorgeous to wake up this morning and remember everything was all right! You old thing—if you knew how different you look——!”

The telephone jangled at his elbow. He picked up the receiver. It did not seem to give him any satisfaction. From time to time he made an attempt to be heard, his face showing a mingling of wrath and resignation.

“All mad, I think,” he said, after a period during which nothing had happened. “You’d think Wandoo Flat was in Lapland. Can’t get anyone with sense. Can’t *be* anyone with sense in a place called Wandoo Flat—Shush! . . . Yes? . . . Yes, speaking. Oh, is that the postmaster at Wandoo Flat?”

Norah gurgled with laughter at the sudden oiliness of his voice.

“Yes. I wanted to speak to you personally, Mr. Postmaster. I’ve a favour to ask, so of course I thought of you: Postmasters are always business-like. I’m very anxious to get an urgent message to a friend living some miles out of Wandoo Flat; Fred Wallace, on the Tarran Road . . . Yes, I know there’s no postal delivery there, and no telephone. That’s why I’m bothering you. Cunjee’s told you who I am? . . . That’s all right then. Now could you possibly find a special angel—no, I mean messenger—to take out that message? . . . No, of course it’s not ordinary post-office business, I quite understand that—it’s helping me in a difficulty. I’ll pay anything you like to arrange. Perhaps you could find a fellow who could ride out . . . You could? . . . Splendid! Sorry to bother you and all that, but I’m most anxious for Wallace to hear . . . Yes, I’ll dictate it . . . just this: ‘Boy arrived safely, everything all right, our warmest thanks, writing. Signed, Linton’ . . . Yes, you’ve got it correctly . . . Eh? . . . Oh, er, thanks!”

He put back the receiver, grinning broadly. “Silly ass!” he muttered. “Just because I was careful not to give away anything by putting in Davie’s name.”

“What did he say, Jimmy?” asked Norah curiously.

“Why, the fathead chuckled, and said ‘My congratulations!' He believes I’ve been chatting about a new baby!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Son of Billabong* by Mary Grant Bruce]