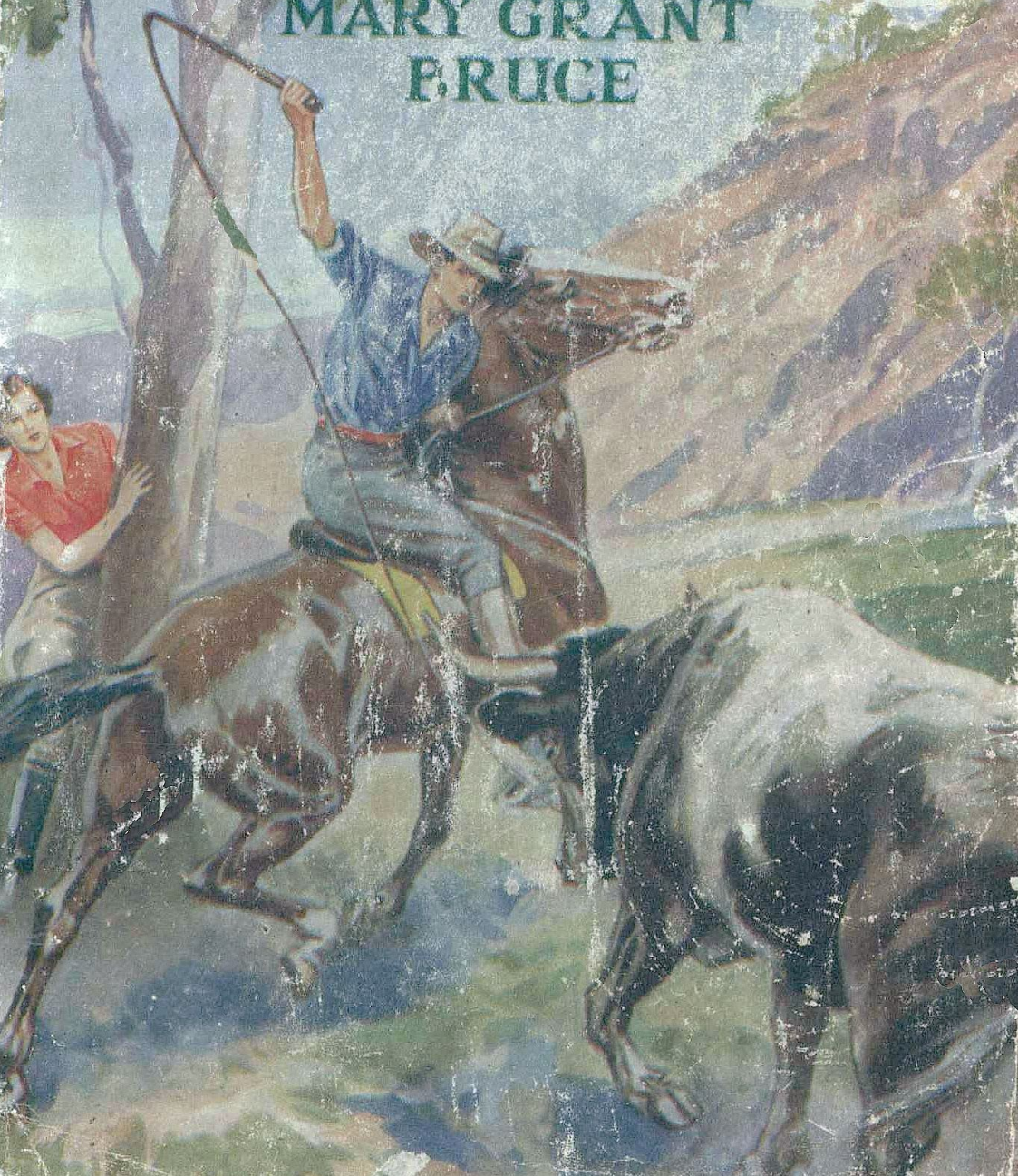


BILLABONG'S DAUGHTER

MARY GRANT
BRUCE



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Title: Bilabong's Daughter

Date of first publication: 1924

Author: Mary Grant Bruce

Date first posted: August 18, 2015

Date last updated: August 18, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150813

This ebook was produced by: Marcia Brooks, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpcanada.net>

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MARY GRANT BRUCE

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MATES AT BILLABONG
NORAH OF BILLABONG
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON
JIM AND WALLY
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BILLABONG'S DAUGHTER
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"Wally swung his stock-whip clear with a crack."

BILLABONG'S DAUGHTER

BY
MARY GRANT BRUCE

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

MADE IN ENGLAND

Printed by Pendragon Press, Papworth Industries, Cambridge.

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Billabong's Daughter

CHAPTER I

NORAH

THE long country road ran eastward, in a straight line of unending weariness. There was nothing to break its monotony; even the few trees that had been spared when the first fencing was erected were sparse and stunted—wind-blown, twisted things, with tall, slender trunks bending away from the fierce west winds; their only foliage, tufts of weak leaves, flung high in air. On either side ran the lines of wire fencing, as straight as though they had been ruled. Grey plains lay beyond them, dotted here and there with clumps of tea-tree, left to furnish shelter for the sheep. A drain, wide and deep, ran north and south across the flat country. Once it had been all morass-land, a shallow lake in winter, in summer a half-dry bog; a good place for snipe and wild-duck, but not to be considered as a profitable holding. Then the estate to which it belonged had passed into new and energetic hands, and the morass had been cleared and drained. Very many snakes had perished in the process, and the wild-fowl for which it had long been a sanctuary had flown away, protesting, to regions further back. The plain had been ploughed, fallowed, and a rough crop of oats had been taken off it: then the estate had been subdivided and sold again, and where once miles of bog had stretched and cranes and herons had sailed majestically, settlers' cottages appeared, and shy little children, three or four on one rough pony, scurried along the tracks to the school-house at Four-Cross-Roads. Which, no doubt, was as it should be; but some of those who had known it of old sighed for the days when, instead of grey plain, hot and bare in summer, there had stretched the cool, green recesses of the morass, a perpetual hunting-ground for adventurous young people who did not mind snakes.

Jim Linton and his friend Wally Meadows had often roamed there; usually accompanied by Jim's sister Norah, whose only fear, throughout her "teens," had been that Jim and Wally might at any time be hampered by remembering that she was a girl. She had managed to obscure this fact so successfully that the boys had always accepted her naturally as a chum, with very few limitations; and even the years of the Great War, which had whisked them all to Europe and played strange tricks with them, had not altered the old footing. Billabong, the Lintons' station, was just the same when they came back to its welcome: the old servants who waited breathlessly for their coming seemed unable to realize that "the children" had managed to grow up. The old routine of work and play claimed them all naturally: and still, to Norah and the boys, there was nothing so good as a sunny Billabong day, with a good horse to ride and the thick grass in the hills and gullies like a green carpet, springing under the galloping hoofs. Motors and telephones and electric light and other commonplaces of modern existence had come to Billabong—sniffed at a little by Murty O'Toole, the head stockman, and Mrs. Brown, who had ruled the homestead since Norah was a baby, and who was regarded by the station as a species of stout angel in petticoats. But the paddocks were the same, with their wide spaces of undulating galloping ground; and when work with the cattle had to be done there was no modern invention to take the place of a daring rider who could swing a stock-whip—of a gallant horse, able to turn "on a sixpence," with an uncanny knowledge of just what a bullock might do. And these things were the breath of life to Jim Linton and his chum Wally Meadows, and to Norah, who was the mate of both.

David Linton, the father of Jim and Norah, watched them always with comprehension in his deep-set grey eyes. The War, that had definitely aged him, with its long strain and its sharp anxieties, seemed to have left them as children. It had caught them on the borderline of childhood, scarcely released from school, and for four years had flung upon them the responsibilities of men and women. Like thousands of other fathers, David Linton had sorrowed over those four lost years of Youth. Then, with the ending of the long strain, when home stretched glad arms to receive them again, time seemed to put back the marching hands of his clock so that they might find their vanished playtime. The years slipped from them: it seemed a kind of dream that there had been fighting, suffering, stern, hard work. The district said, "It's a sight for sore eyes to see them Billabong kids home again!" And not even Jim—it was one of the strangest parts of the dream that Jim had actually been Major Linton!—would have noticed anything peculiar in being called a Billabong kid.

Wally, of course, was Norah's only by adoption, but he "belonged" so completely that there were times when he forgot that he had ever possessed any other home. He had been Jim Linton's chum at school—a shy, lonely little Queensland boy to whom Jim's heart had gone out: Jim having been always a protective person. When he discovered that Wally was an orphan, and had for his only home the house of a married brother, it had seemed to Jim quite necessary to adopt him; and Wally had slipped into the way of spending all his holidays at Billabong. The brother, Edward Meadows, welcomed the arrangement with relief. He was so much older than his happy-go-lucky little brother that he had never felt that he really knew him; moreover, his wife showed no desire to add Wally to her cares, and openly hinted that the management of the boy's share of their father's property, in addition to his own, was as much as should be expected from Edward. So Wally went to Melbourne to school, which made returning for holidays a difficult matter: and Jim Linton did the rest. To Mrs. Edward Meadows, Jim Linton appeared a kind of amiable Providence. She showed her appreciation of him, as well as her affection for Wally, by knitting each a pair of socks when they went to the War.

Occasionally, since their return from England, Wally had suffered from an uneasy feeling that it was time that he set about some regular work in life. But, as Jim pointed out, there always seemed too much to do on Billabong. It was difficult to say where play ended and work began on Billabong, since anything to do with horses always presented itself to the boys—and Norah—as "a lark": but in one way or another Jim and Wally contrived to be perpetually busy, and were never without jobs ahead that seemed to demand all their personal attention. They had learned much from Mr. Linton and Murty O'Toole: the squatter had always been determined that when the time came for them to manage places of their own they should not be ill-prepared. Men at the sale-yards knew them as good judges of cattle. When Wally developed periodical fits of uneasiness, declaring that he was only a loafer on Billabong, Jim would kindly offer him weekly wages as a jackeroo: which generally ended the matter, for the time being, in a cheerful scrimmage.

Then there were their friends to be helped along the path of land-management in Australia—Bob Rainham and his sister Cecilia, better known as "Tommy," who, being English and "new-chums," had been partially adopted by the Lintons, who had helped them to settle on a farm a few miles from Billabong. Ill-fortune had fallen upon Bob and Tommy, for a bush-fire had come along one New Year's Day, and had burned them out within a few months of their settling in; a disaster which they had met with such dogged determination that it seemed more than ever necessary to help them. The boys and Norah were constantly at the Rainhams' farm, to save them, as they loftily explained, from the consequences of having been born in England. This remark also was apt to lead to a scrimmage.

To-day Jim and Wally had been to a sale of stock with Bob, and Norah had spent the day with Tommy, making marmalade. This undertaking had ended well; the marmalade was the right colour, it had "jellied" beautifully; and, after a cup of tea in Tommy's spotless little kitchen, Norah had set out for home.

She was riding a horse of Jim's, Garryowen, whom Jim considered no longer equal to the task of carrying his great length and weight. Garryowen was not in his first youth, but his spirit was as gay as when Jim, a lanky schoolboy, had first raced him over the plains; and to-day he was clearly of opinion that he had not been ridden enough. He pranced and gambolled round the Rainhams' stable-yard when Norah had mounted him, until the gentle soul of Tommy was filled with dismay. The Lintons had taught Tommy to ride, but she still regarded all horses with awe, and many with distrust. Just at the moment she distinctly distrusted Garryowen.

"Norah, do be careful! I'm sure that horse isn't a bit safe!"

"Why, he's as safe as a rocking-chair!" Norah had responded, cheerily. "It's only his playful way, Thomas dear—don't worry."

"I'd rather he played with all four feet on the ground at once," Tommy had answered. "Are you sure he's all right, Norah?"

"Why, of course he is—he only wants a gallop. He hasn't had enough work, and he thinks he's a four-year-old again. I'll tell you what I'll do, Tommy: I'll take home the long way, by the Bog Road; I can let him out along that grass track, and he'll be tame as a rabbit afterwards."

"All right." Tommy's answer had been a shade doubtful. "But do take care, Norah darling, for he really seems extremely mad, and that road is so lonely." She had held the gate open as Garryowen sidled through. "Bob says there are new settlers on one of those bog farms: English, he hears. I want to go over and see the woman, some day soon. I never was a lonely Englishwoman in this country, but I can imagine that if I had been I'd have been very lonely!"

"Right—we'll go and see her together. Good-bye, old girl." Norah had given the impatient Garryowen his head, to which he responded by breaking into a canter that felt as though he had a spiral spring in each hoof.

Half an hour later she pulled him into a walk at the end of the long road that had once been all bog and now ran beside the deep channel that drained the old morass. They had had a satisfying gallop, and Garryowen had sobered considerably, and had ceased to pretend that he was a half-broken colt. Norah's face was flushed and happy.

"Well, I'm glad Jim doesn't think you're up to his weight, old man," she said, "for I don't think there's a horse on Billabong to touch you." She patted his hot neck. "It's certain you're up to mine, anyhow: my arms feel as though they were half pulled out. Hullo—that looks like a runaway!"

She checked Garryowen, shading her eyes with her hand, while she looked across the flat, bare paddocks. A light sulky had spun round a corner and was tearing along at a furious rate: its occupants, so far as Norah could see, a woman and a child. The woman appeared to be holding the reins, but so far as the horse was concerned, she had no part in the management of the vehicle. The road they were upon was a short one: presently they flashed round another corner, the sulky taking it on one wheel and righting itself miraculously, and went off in a direction that took them away from Norah, who knitted her brows anxiously.

"What on earth had I better do?" she asked herself. "If I gallop after them that silly horse will only get madder and madder. He'll tire himself out on these quiet roads but he may tire out that poor soul first. I'll canter after them, anyhow. I wish he'd turn into the blind track that leads to Gardiner's: he'd have to stop, then." She shook Garryowen into a swift canter.

In the sulky, the driver, a little woman with a keen dark face, clung to the reins, endeavouring to brace herself against the floor, but finding her legs all too short to steady her. She was silent, her lips tightly pressed together. Beside her a little girl of about ten years bounced on the seat, clinging tightly to the iron rail. At intervals the little girl said firmly, "Bad scan to the baste!"—to which her mother invariably responded, "Don't be talkin' now, but howld tight!" They bumped and rattled along the uneven track, narrowly missing the side fences of several culverts. Once the little girl asked, "Will he do this all night, do you think, now?"

"I dunno will he, at all," panted her mother.

The yellow horse in the shafts appeared ready and willing to run away all night. Each corner round which he bolted seemed to supply him with fresh energy. He laid his ears back, stretching out in a lumbering gallop that rocked the sulky wildly from side to side. Finally, however, he chose a corner turning into a grass track, almost unused, which ended in a fence right across: seeing which obstacle the woman gasped, and said, "Howld tight, now, Mary-Kate, when he leps it!"

"Bad scan to the baste!" said Mary-Kate; and held tight.

The yellow horse, however, preferred discretion to steeplechasing. Seeing the fence that checked his heroic career he slackened his pace, dropping from a gallop to a lurching canter, then to a trot: and finally pulled up with his nose about a yard from the fence, over which he looked uncertainly, as if to say, "I could jump it if I tried!"

"Hurry out, now, Mary-Kate!" ejaculated the mother. "'Tis the way he'll take a twisht round and start off on us again, wance he gets his breath!" She held the reins while the little girl made a flying leap to the ground: then she followed, leaving the yellow horse to his own devices.

That animal appeared to have lost all desire for further exercise. The sweat dripped from him as he stood, head hanging, feet planted widely apart: as limp as the reins that trailed on the ground beside him. He seemed unconscious that his wild career had come to an end, or that his passengers had got out and were regarding him with unfriendly eyes. Lower and lower drooped his head. He went to sleep.

"If I was a man, an' had a gun, an' could let it off, I'd shoot that horse," said Mary-Kate solemnly.

"Don't be talkin' that way, an' your father after payin' five pounds for him," rebuked her mother. "Well, indeed, I knew there was something wrong when he told me that was all they asked for him, for 'tis the good out of a horse he is. Blessed Hour, I was in dread he'd jump that fence!"

"If he had, now, d'you think he'd have taken us an' the little car with him?"

"He would not."

"Then what would have happened to us?" Mary-Kate demanded.

"I dunno. Something would have bruk."

"'Twas the devil's own luck he didn't," said Mary-Kate. Her eyes kindled suddenly. "But wouldn't it be the grand thing now, to see him do it, if only it wasn't ourselves that was in the little car!"

"Howld your whisht, now," said her mother nervously. "There's that much wickedness in that horse I'd not put it past him to hear you, an' start off. There was a man I knew in Tipperary had one that colour, an' there was no end to the devilment he had in him. Whatever you didn't expect was the thing he'd do. There's no known' the treachery of a yalla horse."

"I dunno why would Father want to be buyin' one, then," grumbled Mary-Kate.

"'Twas by reason of his cheapness," said her mother simply. "Indeed, and the poor man knew there was something wrong, but there wasn't another horse for less than double as much, so he chanced it. 'We'll hope for the best,' says he: 'if he don't kill anny of us we'll maybe get the price out of him,' he says. And now he's nearly killed the pair of us; an' how to get home I dunno."

"Will you not drive him again, Mother?"

"I will not," said her mother firmly. "Never did I think I'd be out of that little car without me four bones bruk, nor yours neither: 'tis not meself I'll trust meself in it again. An' I don't even know where the house is. I wonder why did we leave Ireland, at all?"

Mary-Kate twirled on one foot, looking over the level landscape.

"All these roads is like each other, with the weary length of them, and their wire fences," she said. "Wouldn't you give something, Mother, to see a twisty bit of an Irish lane, with the high hedges each side and the red fuchsia comin' out in them?"

"I would so," said the woman. In the three words there was a world of homesickness.

"Glory be!" said Mary-Kate suddenly—"is it a hunt?"

"Where? What do you mean?"

"There's some one leppin' fences, anyhow. 'Tis a lady, I believe—look now, Mother, she's comin' at a fence! Watch, she's rushin' him at it—ah, the beauty, he's over! Isn't that a flippant lepper, now!" Mary-Kate, her own plight quite forgotten in the Irish love of a good horse, stared open-mouthed, her thin little face glowing.

Norah, in the pursuit she dared not make too close, for fear of exciting the yellow horse to increased energy, had come across some paddocks where old log fences still existed. They were a good way from the bog now, and she knew her bearings—many times had she and the boys coursed hares over these paddocks. So she cut across country, taking the fences as they came, to the great contentment of Garryowen; and presently, pulling up for a moment, saw the sulky with the yellow horse, and the woman and child standing near it.

"Well, they aren't killed, anyhow," she said, with relief. "Some of the harness broken, I suppose. I'd better go and see."

She took Garryowen over two more log fences, and in the paddock beside the blind road where the derelict sulky stood, found her way barred by wire again. She checked her horse, looking about her: and then saw that the strange child had raced along the lane and was holding a gate open, uttering excited shrieks.

"Hurry, now, ma'am! Hurry! I'll shut it behind you!"

Norah was not clear as to the words, but it was evident that she was needed quickly. She cantered briskly across the paddock, pulling up outside the gate.

"Have you lost him, ma'am?" queried Mary-Kate anxiously.

"Lost what?" Norah asked, bewildered.

"The fox."

"I'm not after a fox," Norah said, laughing.

Mary-Kate's face fell.

"I thought 'twas part of a hunt you were," she said; "an' 'twas the way the fox had got away on you. Isn't there any more of you, at all?"

"Not a soul," laughed Norah. "To tell you the truth, I was after you!"

"After me, is it?" Mary-Kate's mouth opened wider yet.

"Well—your sulky. I saw your horse bolting, and it seemed to me I had better come after you; and across country was the quickest way. Neither of you hurt?"

"We are not," said Mary-Kate; "an' small blame to that misfortunate horse that we're not in the ditch this minute. He bolted as long as he wanted to, and when he

was tired of it he just stopped and went to sleep. An' there's no knowin' the number of times he near had us over, nor the posts we missed by the skin of our teeth. But"—suddenly she looked up at Norah, her Irish eyes unexpectedly twinkling—" 'twas the grand drive it was, entirely!"

Norah gave a little laugh of comprehension.

"You weren't frightened, then?"

"I'd not say I wasn't," said Mary-Kate. "First I was frightened, and then I was annoyed. But you couldn't help enjoyin' the drive, ma'am!"

"And your mother?" asked Norah. "It is your mother, I suppose?" She had dismounted, and with her bridle over her arm was walking towards the woman who still stood beside the sulky.

"Yes, 'tis me mother. She was too frightened to be annoyed, but she'll be wild to-morrow. An' now we don't know how to get home, for there's nothing'd take me mother into the little car again: an' more by token, we dunno where home is, we've gone round so many corners!"

"Where do you live?"

"Beyond Four-Cross-Roads. That's the school I'm to go to when we get settled."

"Oh, I'll get you home," Norah said.

Mary-Kate looked doubtful.

"Thank you, ma'am, but I dunno will you ever get me mother up into the little car. She's a wee woman, but terrible determined."

"And would you go?"

Mary-Kate's eyes danced.

"I would so," she stated, emphatically. "When I'm bigger I'll not let a horse say he'd had the best of me. Fine I'd like to see that one taught manners!"

"We'll teach him manners," said Norah, laughing. "What is your name, little Miss Ireland?"

"Me name's Mary-Kate Reilly," responded that lady. "I dunno how would you know 'twas from Ireland I am." There was a quick note of suspicion in her voice. Her keen eyes looked sharply upward at the tall girl. Then she grew reassured. No, this new Australian person was not laughing at her.

"Well, you see," said Norah, "I have been there." She smiled down at her.

The change that came over little Mary-Kate Reilly was remarkable. For a moment she stared unbelievably; then her mouth slowly widened into a delighted grin, and she shot from Norah's side, racing forward to her mother.

"Mother! Mother! The lady isn't in a hunt at all, and it's ourselves she's after, to take us home—and she's been to Ireland! Mother, she's been to Ireland!"

Norah turned aside to slip Garryowen's bridle over a post. Then she came across the grass with her quick, light step, to where they waited for her. "And it wasn't until I saw their eyes," she told Wally later, "that I knew what homesickness could be."

"How are you, Mrs. Reilly?" she said cheerfully. "I'm Norah Linton—a neighbour of yours, as neighbours go in our country."

"Mary-Kate's after sayin' you know ours, Miss," said Mrs. Reilly.

"I wouldn't say I know it," Norah said, smiling. "I've travelled round it a bit, and I stayed a good while in Donegal. Long enough to make good Irish friends. And there isn't a bit of it that I didn't love, Mrs. Reilly."

The little woman drew a long breath.

"I was born in Donegal," she said, simply. "Tell me, Miss, were ye ever at a wee place called Cragheghey, in the Rosses?"

"Why—I drove through it," Norah cried. "We didn't stay there, but we got out for an hour. A lonely place near the sea, where they grew tiny crops on little patches of land among the stones—there were stones everywhere in that country. Wee crops, a few yards square: we saw some of the men cutting them with a reaping-hook. No one in this country would believe it, if one told them."

"Ay," said Mrs. Reilly. "And if you'd been there at other times you'd have seen the women carryin' seaweed up to those little patches of soil—carryin' it in big baskets up the hills from the shore. 'Twas the only thing we could get to hearten up the poor cold soil. Three feet deep, them baskets was; we carried them on our backs, with a strap goin' across our foreheads: and the seaweed's no light weight. We brought it, an' the men burned it an' dug the hot ashes into the ground, an' sowed the seed as quick as they could before 'twas cold on them. Quare little crops, Miss. But people lived on them—an' the fishing."

"I know," Norah said. "There were little clean, whitewashed cabins everywhere: the storekeeper at a place near told my father he had eleven hundred names on his books—and they all paid, he said. Why, if you gave all that country to an Australian he'd think he couldn't make a living off it. My father said he wouldn't have believed it, if he hadn't seen it."

"No—ye learn what work is in the Rosses," said Mrs. Reilly. "An' did you see the women knittin', Miss?"

"Rather—Dad and the boys bought socks from them. Beautiful knitting, too, and they never stop doing it. You see them walking on the roads or sitting on the stone walls; but always knitting."

"We couldn't afford to stop, when I was a girl," said Mrs. Reilly, a trifle grimly. " 'Twas no grand price we got for it, either; the big English shops bought our knittin', though we didn't know it at the time; their agent was Micky Breheny, that had the shop in Glenties, an' 'twas there we had to walk with our knittin'—twelve miles there an' twelve back, carryin' the work an' bringin' home the groceries that Micky paid for. The English shops paid him cash, an' he paid us in goods: that was the way of it. They sent us the wool, an' we knitted it while we'd be carin' the sheep on the hills. One-an'-six a dozen pairs they paid."

"For knitting a dozen pairs!" exclaimed Norah.

"Yes, Miss. 'Twas a dale of knittin', an' it didn't look a big price when we saw it in Micky's groceries—though they were heavy enough by the time we got home. An' threepence-ha'p'ny for knittin' a pair of long stockings like the gentry do be wearin', with the fanciful tops. They sold them stockings in the big shops in England for eight-an'-six a pair. But we didn't know anything about that. All we knew was, times were mortal hard, an' 'twas something if we gerris could earn a bit of food. I heard tell they learned the value of work better, afterwards, an' got better paid: but that's the way it was when I was a gerril."

"Did you leave the Rosses when you were married?"

" 'Twas before that, Miss. Me father and mother died, an' all I had left was me sister, that was married an' livin' in Cork. So I went to live with her, an' I tuk a place in an officer's house, an' there I met a boy of the Munsters—he was a corporal when he married me, but he was sergeant-major before the end of the War." The little woman's head lifted proudly.

"That was splendid, Mrs. Reilly," Norah said. "My brother saw a lot of the Munster Fusiliers in the War—and the Dublin Fusiliers, too. Great fighting regiments, he said."

"Never anny better," said little Mrs. Reilly simply.

"So he'll be extra glad to welcome your husband as a neighbour," went on Norah, in her pleasant voice. "Now, the question is, how to get you home."

"I declare, I'd forgotten home," said Mrs. Reilly, waking to her surroundings with a start. "Six weeks I've been here, Miss, an' yourself is the first woman to say a word to me—an' then you talked about the Rosses! Well, indeed, it's a treat I've had—an' all along of the yalla horse! Could you tell me now, Miss, the nearest way home—it's the place that was Duncan's, past Four-Cross-Roads. 'Tis walkin' it Mary-Kate and I must be, for I'll not again trust meself in that quare little car."

Norah laughed.

"Well, the yellow horse seems quiet enough now, Mrs. Reilly. I don't think he'll do any more bolting."

"There's no knowin'," said Mrs. Reilly darkly. "Whin he started before he was goin' along as kind and confidential as possible. I was just after sayin' to Mary-Kate that I'd been mistaken in the look of his eye."

"I wonder what set him off," Norah pondered. "A motor-cycle?"

"Oh, no, he's bruk to them," said Mrs. Reilly. "No, 'twas the new milk-can I'd bought, bad luck to it: I'd tied it on behind the car, an' it started rattling—I suppose 'twas workin' loose it was. I was just thinkin' of pullin' him up, the way I could get down an' have a look at it, when bang! it went, down on the ground. An' the little horse stretched out his nose and bolted!"

"Then you've lost your milk-can, too?" said Norah sympathetically. Milk-cans were serious items in a settler's outfit.

"I have, an' I dunno what'll Dan be sayin' about it, at all. He was terrible set on havin' that new can."

"'Tis all I wish we'd lost it sooner," said Mary-Kate. "'Twas the way the rope held for a bit; an' the can came along behind us, boundin' in the air, an' rattlin' furious. That was what annoyed the yalla horse. I wouldn't blame him."

"I wouldn't, either," Norah said, laughing. "Then, I suppose, the rope broke?"

"It did, Miss, an' there was great quietness entirely. But the little horse was that annoyed by that time, I dunno did he notice the can had stopped or not. *He* didn't stop, anyhow," said Mary-Kate with a grin.

"Well, you really can't blame him, Mrs. Reilly," Norah said. "Any horse would have bolted. And he looks now as if he hadn't a thought in the world but sleep. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll drive him up and down the lane, and if he goes quietly you can get in and I will drive you home."

"I'll not risk your neck, Miss, when I'm scared of my own," said Mrs. Reilly firmly.

"I don't think there's any risk," Norah said, smiling. She walked over to the yellow horse and patted his nose; and he opened one eye and looked at her sleepily, shutting it again at once. Norah gathered up the reins and jumped into the sulky, despite agonized protests from Mrs. Reilly. The yellow horse still slumbered: in fact, he had to be touched with the whip to make him realize that life was not all a dream. Then he submitted to being turned round and trotted up the lane, but without enthusiasm. The yellow horse was not in the bloom of youth, and he had galloped several miles with a sulky behind him. He longed only for rest.

Norah turned him round presently and drove back to where Mary-Kate and her mother waited uncertainly.

"See, he's as quiet as possible, Mrs. Reilly. That long gallop has taken every bit of mischief out of him. I'll drive you home."

"But your horse, Miss?" queried Mrs. Reilly, relieved but doubtful.

"If you'll lead him he'll follow like a lamb," Norah answered. "He's perfectly gentle. Do you think you could lead him across to me, and I'll hold him while you get in."

Mary-Kate was off like a flash, the mother watching her nervously.

"Is it all right, Miss?"

"Quite all right," Norah smiled. "He has had a long gallop himself, and he feels as lazy as your horse. See how quietly he's coming."

Mary-Kate returned in triumph, leading Garryowen, who seemed to realize that good manners were expected of him. She handed his bridle to Norah and hopped into the sulky, turning a beseeching face upward.

"Could I lead him, ma'am? I—I do like the feel of leading him."

"Yes, if your mother says so," Norah answered, smiling.

"May I, Mother? Say I may!"

"I dunno is it safe for you," Mrs. Reilly said.

"But he follows beautifully, Mrs. Reilly," Norah said. "Hold him loosely, Mary-Kate, so that you would let him go easily if anything made him pull back. Only, nothing will."

"Is it to let him go?" Mary-Kate demanded. "I'd not do that!"

"But you'd have to, if he pulled back—unless you went too," Norah laughed. "If he really wanted to go none of us could hold him. But he'll be all right, you'll see."

"Then is it orders, ma'am, to hold him loosely?" demanded Mary-Kate unwillingly.

"Orders?" Norah looked doubtful, and little Mrs. Reilly smiled.

"'Tis what his father says, Miss," she explained. "Some things he'll let her have her way about, for he's an aisy-going man with a child. But if he says a thing is 'orders'—then there's no more argument about it, and she knows it."

"Oh, I see," said Norah, laughing. "Well, yes—it's orders, Mary-Kate, or I can't trust you with him. Now won't you get in, Mrs. Reilly? I'm sure your husband will be wondering where you are. I'll truly promise to take you safely home."

Thus entreated, Mrs. Reilly got in as nimbly as Mary-Kate, and the yellow horse, responding unwillingly to a gentle touch of the whip, set off again. It was evident that no more undue energy was left in him: he went with a gloomy reluctance that said clearly that not a whole battalion of rattling milk-cans would induce him to bolt again. Mrs. Reilly clutched the arm of the seat nervously at first; then, deciding that caution was unnecessary, she let go, and lost her expression of extreme anxiety. Mary-Kate had no room for any nervousness. She had twisted her small body half round, and was regarding Garryowen with complete happiness; while Garryowen, on his part, probably wondered why he was condemned to jog-trot at the heels of a sulky drawn by such a very inferior beast, whom his mistress had, for some unaccountable reason, elected to drive when she might have been riding homewards on Garryowen himself.

"And you live hereabouts, Miss?" Mrs. Reilly inquired presently, when it seemed certain that the yellow horse did not mean to bolt.

"Our place is Billabong—about five miles from yours," Norah said. "It's one of the old places here. My brother and I were born there. You must come and see us, Mrs. Reilly—you'd love our old housekeeper, Brownie. She's really Mrs. Brown, but every one calls her Brownie. I was only a baby when my mother died, and she has always looked after me. Brownie's a good hand at looking after anyone."

"I'd be proud to come, Miss," Mrs. Reilly answered. "It's terrible lonesome out here."

"Haven't you any neighbours?"

"There's a few men, livin' here and there, that me husband has met. But I don't think there's a woman nearer than Four-Cross-Roads; an' that's only three or four houses. An' no one has been near me."

"How long have you been out?"

"Two months, Miss, since we landed. Indeed, there do be times that it seems more."

"I don't wonder, you poor soul," said Norah warmly. "But you'll find nice women once you get to know them, Mrs. Reilly. Mrs. Gardiner is one—she lives not far from where the yellow horse tried to take you; and there is Mrs. Scott at Four-Cross-Roads, where the school-teacher, Miss Wright, lives—you'll like her, Mary-Kate, she's such a jolly girl. And your nearest neighbour is Mrs. Tulloch, I suppose: she's a good soul, too. They're really not meaning to be unkind, only they're all very busy, and they don't quite realize how lonely a new-comer is."

"If they did, they couldn't keep away," said Mrs. Reilly bitterly. "You'd not know the meaning of loneliness, Miss, till you found yourself in a new country, an' never a woman to hold out her hand to you. An' I didn't know how the childer'd treat Mary-Kate here, so I've kept off sending her to school—but I know she'll have to go."

"Well, you needn't worry about that," Norah said briskly. "I'll see Miss Wright, and I'll make sure that Mary-Kate will get a welcome if you send her."

"They told us on the ship that we'd be called 'Pommies,' an' no one'd be friends with us," Mrs. Reilly said. "I dunno, at all, what a 'Pommy' is, but I never heard tell that I was one. Isn't it true, Miss?"

Norah flicked the yellow horse reflectively.

"There are silly people everywhere, Mrs. Reilly," she said, "and some of the women in the cities and the little townships aren't friendly to new-comers. But out in the country we know too well how lonely it is, and people are glad enough of new neighbours. All the women about here are sensible—they're all the wives of hard-working farmers, and if they are a bit slow in making friends, once they do know you, you can always depend on them. Why, it would be too silly if we didn't welcome British people out here—weren't most of our grandfathers and grandmothers emigrants themselves?"

"I'm told they forget that, Miss."

"The sensible ones don't," Norah said warmly. "My grandfather was an Englishman and my mother was Irish; and though I'm proud of being an Australian, I'm prouder of them, because there wouldn't have been any Australia but for the people who had the pluck to come out here. Don't you worry, Mrs. Reilly: I'll see that you find friends." She turned to the little woman suddenly, her face breaking into a smile. "Why, I believe it must be you my friend Miss Rainham was speaking about to me, only this afternoon: she told me there was a new-comer out in this direction, and she wants to come and see you. We agreed to go together. Won't she be surprised when she hears I've made friends with you already? Only she thought you were English."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Reilly tolerantly, "I'd not blame her for that—how would she know, at all? Indeed, Miss, I'd be real proud to see any friend of yours. An' I'd

be more than grateful to have you speak to the lady at the school. Dan's after saying to me we must send Mary-Kate next week."

"It will be all right for her, Mrs. Reilly. You want to go, Mary-Kate, don't you?"

"I do," said Mary-Kate firmly. "I'd like fine to know the sort of games them children do be playing in this country. An' if they call me a Pommy I'll teach 'em manners, so I will. If 'tis a Pommy I am, then I'm the sort of Pommy that can hit hard!"

"Don't be talkin' like that," said her mother. "What'll Miss Linton think of you, at all? You're to go to school to learn to have behaviour, not to fight." To which Mary-Kate made no reply. But in her eye gleamed, unsubdued, the light of battle.

"That is your gate, isn't it, Mrs. Reilly?" Norah asked, pointing with her whip to a battered white gate ahead.

"It is, Miss. An' there's himself waitin' for us!" Mrs. Reilly's face fell as she saw a tall man at the gate, looking anxiously up the track.

"I suppose he has been pretty anxious," Norah said. "Oh, well, he'll be so glad to see you safely home, he won't think about the milk-can. And most likely you'll get it back, Mrs. Reilly. Do you remember where it dropped off?"

"I do. 'Twas near the little bridge over the river after you pass a pair of big white gates. That's where the rope bruk."

"Oh, yes—that's Harkness's. I'll telephone to them when I get home and ask them to look for it. No one will have taken it, I'm sure."

"I dunno will it be anny good, Miss," Mrs. Reilly said. "You'd not say so, with the unmerciful banging it had, draggin' behind the little car."

"Oh, milk-cans are tough. They have to be, to stand the way the porters at the stations fling them about," Norah laughed. "Anyhow, don't worry until you know for certain: I'm sure Sergeant-Major Reilly would say so."

She handed over her charges to the soldierly man by the gate, leaving his women-folk to explain matters to him.

"Good-night, Mrs. Reilly. I won't forget to telephone about the can: and Miss Rainham and I will be over very soon. And I'll see Miss Wright. Thanks so much for leading Garryowen, Mary-Kate."

"But I—I loved it!" said Mary-Kate, her small face flushing.

"You must have a ride when you come over to Billabong," Norah told her.

"Is it me?" said Mary-Kate faintly, in ecstasy.

"Rather! Good-night, everybody—I must hurry home." She swung herself into the saddle, the bewildered ex-sergeant-major rushing forward just too late to hold her stirrup. The long road stretched before her, lonely in the darkening twilight: she gave Garryowen his head, and he went off at a hand-gallop, glad to escape from jogging in the dusty wake of the yellow horse. The wind seemed to spring to meet them, roaring in her ears. Norah settled her hat firmly, giving herself up to the joy of that perfect gallop, and the miles fled by under Garryowen's eager hoofs.

CHAPTER II

OLD MEMORIES

DARKNESS had nearly fallen when Wally Meadows came cantering down the homestead paddock at Billabong, and pulled up at the gate. For a moment he sat motionless, listening; but no sound came out of the gathering gloom, save that, in a tree across the flats, a mopoke was beginning its monotonous call. Wally smiled a little, remembering certain homesick evenings in England when nightingales had poured out their song around him, and when he would have given them all to hear the dreary double note of the mopoke. Nightingales were all very well in their way, and you wouldn't really feel satisfied unless you heard one, when you got to England. But mopokes were simply part of an Australian night: just to remember the queer song made you think of the gum-trees, gaunt shadows against a star-lit sky, and brought to your nostrils the aromatic scent of their leaves. Nightingales were certainly wonderful; so were Melba and Tetrazzini, only you didn't want to hear them every day. But no Australian ever grew tired of a mopoke.

So Wally Meadows thought, at any rate; and with one side of his mind he liked to hear the long "Mo—poke! Mo—poke!" that came drifting across the flats. But the other side was worried at the moment, and his brows were knitted in the effort of listening, as, having passed through the gate, he checked his impatient horse. Norah had said she would be home at six; it was now nearly eight, and there was no sign of her. Wherefore, Wally had left Jim to put the cattle they had bought into a little paddock, and had cantered down to the gate to see if there were any sign of a damsel in distress.

Presently there came to him the drumming of distant hoofs, and he straightened his shoulders with a little sigh of relief. That was Garryowen: he would know his gallop among a thousand. So he opened the gate again; and when, in a few moments, Norah checked her speed near him, she saw his tall figure looming in the darkness. The horses greeted each other with shrill whinnies.

"Is it you, Jim?"

"No, it's me," said Wally ungrammatically. "Jim's putting twenty-five new bullocks to bed, and tucking them in, and I'm a search-party. We began to think something had happened to you, Nor."

"I'm so sorry," Norah said. "Was Dad worried?"

"Well, a bit. If his leg hadn't been troubling him I fancy he'd have been after you himself. He thought you might have foregathered with Jim and me, and he wasn't too happy when he found you hadn't. Nothing wrong, was there, Norah?"

"No—only a very mild adventure. I'll tell you about it when we get in; let's hurry now, Wally. You were a brick to come to meet me."

Wally did not answer this, having other views on the subject, and together they raced up the smooth grass beside the wheel-track. Norah suddenly broke into a song as they rode, and Wally joined in: the cheery voices carried, as she knew they would, to the homestead verandah, where her father watched uneasily. From above Jim's voice floated down.

"Hear them, Dad?"

"Yes; nothing wrong there," David Linton said, much relieved. "I wonder what has kept her. Tell them to change as quickly as they can, Jim: you must all be starving for tea." He turned and went back into the lighted room behind him; a tall man, with grizzled hair and beard, but with shoulders as erect as those of a youngster. Just now he limped on a stick, his horse having put its foot into a rabbit-hole and fallen with him a few weeks before. He had tried to make light of the injury, but it had been painful enough, and promised to keep him out of the saddle for weeks to come: a prospect by no means acceptable to David Linton. He had turned over most of the management of Billabong to Jim; but he loved the run, and, day after day, mounted on his great black horse, Monarch, he rode about it, watching his big shorthorn bullocks, keeping an eye on the fencing, riding along the river to watch for fresh signs of the intrusion of the rabbits they fought perpetually. Jim and Wally did all these things, and many others, and did them well. He did not question their management. But because he loved Billabong David Linton loved to do them, too.

Jim and Wally came in presently, laughing at some joke of Wally's: well-groomed fellows, with the drilled shoulders that spoke of four years of war. Jim's great stature made him notable in any crowd: Wally, shorter and slighter, was yet over six feet. He had the swift liteness of an animal; his gay brown eyes, that saw everything, were rarely without a twinkle. Nothing came amiss to Wally Meadows: he laughed at life just as he had laughed at Death, when it came near to touching him. Only when trouble threatened the Billabong folk did it seem to him a thing to be seriously considered. Nothing else in the world really mattered to him.

"Well, you found that girl of mine, Wally?" David Linton said, looking up at them from his chair. "What had kept her?"

"Nothing of any importance—at least, nothing wrong, she said," Wally answered. "She wouldn't tell me any more, as at that moment she discovered that you had been worrying, and then she just galloped and sang loud ditties to let you know there were no bones broken!"

"I heard them," the squatter said, laughing. "I won't say it wasn't pleasant hearing, either: I was beginning to get a bit uneasy. It's not like Norah to stay out so late. Well, I suppose she had a reason." He turned to his son. "Satisfied with the cattle, Jim?"

"Oh, everything is dog-poor, of course," Jim answered. "Nobody has any grass, and nothing is looking well. There were a lot of stock in, but mighty few buyers. I got twenty-five nice enough young bullocks, if they had anything on their bones; they'll do well enough on what grass we have until the rain comes. Bob bought sheep: he says he has a good picking still left along the Creek."

"Plucky chap, Bob," remarked Mr. Linton. "But he'll come out all right."

"Some of the old hands at the sale were prophesying rain coming," Jim observed. "Old Joe Howard, for one."

"The old hands begin to do that about February," Mr. Linton said, with a laugh. "Old Joe told me three weeks ago that rain was near, but we haven't had a drop. However, it will come in time, if they go on prophesying long enough."

"I believe it's coming," said Wally. "There's a queer, hot feeling in the air."

"There is," said Mr. Linton dryly. "I've noticed it several times this summer!"

"People always laugh at me when I try to be a prophet," Wally said, his voice resigned. "However, when you awaken to hear the rain bounding off your parched roofs you can remember I foretold it!"

"I will—if I awaken soon enough," said the squatter. He turned as a new-comer entered the room: a very fat old woman with grey hair and cheeks like rosy apples. "Yes, Brownie—what is it?"

"Miss Norah's very anxious as you should begin tea, sir," said Brownie. "She's nearly dressed, but she knows Mr. Jim and Mr. Wally must be hungry." She beamed on them both: nothing was more gratifying to Brownie's motherly soul than that "the children" should devour enormous meals.

"Well, I *am* hungry, Brownie," remarked Jim. "I could eat a giraffe!"

"Well may you be hungry, and tea near two hours late," Brownie said. "And Mr. Wally, too."

"As a matter of fact, I'm hungrier than he is, Brownie," said Wally, "only I don't talk about it."

Brownie gave a fat chuckle.

"A nero, that's what you are," she said. "A brave nero. Well, shall I send in tea, sir?"

"I think you had better, Brownie," said Mr. Linton, "or he may cease to be a nero." He rose stiffly, knocking his stick over, and smiled as the two big fellows dived for it. Wally was a shade the quicker. He retrieved the stick and handed it to its owner.

"I'll be jolly glad when you don't have to use this old thing, sir," he said. "It seems all wrong to have you limping about."

"I'll have to use it altogether soon, I expect, Wally," the squatter said, laughing. "Old age, you know."

"Old age be hanged!" said Wally swiftly. "You're a better man after an awkward bullock than any one else on Billabong, isn't he, Jim?"

"He is," said Jim, in the deep, pleasant voice that was like Norah's. "And I wouldn't care to take him on without gloves, would you, Wally?"

"Rather not!" Wally said. "There was an old chap at the sale who was telling us yarns about you to-day, sir."

Mr. Linton looked alarmed.

"What secrets of my black past have you been hunting up?" he demanded.

"Oh, very interesting stories," Wally answered, grinning. "There was one about a Masonic ball, years ago—I ask you, Jim, to notice the look of guilt!"

"Did you ever go to a Masonic ball, Daddy?" Norah asked. "And what did you do there?"

She had come in, unnoticed, and now she went up beside him, rubbing her cheek against his arm—a slender figure in white, with a blue band in her brown curls. Very tall she was, like all the Lintons, and with a kind of steadfastness in her face that had not been there before the War called upon her to endure long months of sorrow and suspense. But her grey eyes were still the merry eyes of a child. Once, Wally thought, looking at them, he had believed they had forgotten how to laugh—in the grim days when they believed that Jim had gone for ever. He still remembered how they looked on that night of miracles when Jim came back.

The gong in the hall boomed suddenly.

"There," said Mr. Linton, with evident relief. "Tea!—and though Jim gets sympathy because he could eat a giraffe, and Wally is a nero—Brownie says he is; in fact, she said he was a brave nero—no one gives me any sympathy for being hungry." He limped off, decision in the sound of his stick. "Come and pour out tea, young woman, and give an account of yourself for being so late!"

They trooped after him. There were savoury odours from the dining-room, where Brownie was putting a huge pie in front of her master's place. It was a handsome room for hungry people: a long room, panelled in dark wood, above which hung a few good pictures. The table, with its exquisite linen and gleaming glass and china, stood near a window, where the curtains were drawn to shut out the chilly autumn night. Brownie ran her eye over it inquiringly.

"I can't never be sure what Annabelle's forgot to put on," she murmured, half to herself. "As if a girl could be a good housemaid, with a name like that! Annabelle, indeed! Her grandmother 'ud have been plain Ann, and all the better for it."

"Well, if Annabelle had forgotten everything else it wouldn't mattered much, so long as you hadn't omitted that pie, Brownie," Jim remarked, looking approvingly at its glossy brown surface. "That's a very noble pie. Got one for Mr. Wally, too?"

Brownie chuckled.

"Get on with your joking, Mr. Jim," she said. "There's two fine young roosters in that pie, to say nothing of other trimmings. It ain't none of your old war pies. Only I'm dreading it'll be dried up to nothing."

"Not it," said Jim. "It has been reserved for a nobler fate, Brownie. Oh, by Jove, I forgot something!" He rose and left the room, going upstairs three steps at a time. When he came down again, as swiftly, Brownie was in the hall, her broad face turned inquiringly upwards.

Jim put a little package into her hand.

"That's for you," he said. "Pills. A chap at the sale told me they were perfectly gorgeous for rheumatism—cured his in two twos. Just you go and take them—two after each meal, he said."

"Why, my dear!" Brownie was stammering. "But that sale wasn't in Cunjee—it was at Holderson's, you said."

"Well?" said Jim. "Go and take your pills, Mrs. Brown."

"But—do you mean to say you went on five miles into Cunjee to buy them?"

"I never said any such thing," said Jim, laughing.

"But you did. You know you did, Master Jim!" Whenever Brownie was moved she went back to the boyish "Master."

"Oh, Brownie, woman, go and take your pills—I want to go and take my pie!" protested the big fellow, laughing.

She put her hand up to his coat-sleeve in a little gesture half-shy, wholly loving.

"Well, it was like you to do it, an' I can't say more than that!" she said, looking at him with misty eyes. "Yes, go on, my dear—don't let the pie get cold. An' thank you, Master Jim."

Murty O'Toole, head stockman, was in the kitchen. To him Brownie proudly showed her pills.

"An' the beauty of it was, I never said a word about me rheumatics," she said. "Not a word, Murty, I tell you. But I know me old knee was pretty bad this morning, an' he saw me limpin' at breakfast. Says he, then, 'Can't you make one of the girls give us breakfast when we have to start out early? A couple of eggs 'ud do us,' he says. Me, that's never let 'em go out early or come without a real good 'ot meal for 'em. 'Don't you know yet as 'ow I like me job?' says I. An' not a word passed between us about me old knee. But that's what he done. Ten miles ride to a long day's work for an old woman's box of pills!"

"Well, it's that sort he is," said Murty, stretching out his long legs towards the glowing stove. Murty was always a privileged person in the kitchen at Billabong: moreover, he loved warmth, and winter fires had not been started in the men's hut. "From the time he was a ship of a wee gossoon he'd think of anyone else barrin' himself. Didn't he come every night last winter when I had the lumbago, an rub me till he had every bit of skin rubbed off of me back? 'I dunno,' says he, 'am I doing ye good or harm, Murty, old chap.' 'Tis good ye are doin' me,—but I don't believe I can sthand anny more of it,' says I. An' I got Dave Boone to put on some ointment he was affher gettin' for Garryowen's hock. But where's the Boss's son, on any station ye can name me, as 'ud do as much for an old stockman?—unless 'twas Mr. Wally, an' he'd do it just as quick."

"He would so," said Brownie. "There's mighty little to choose between them when it comes to kindness. How is it for a cup of tea, Murty? I've 'ad me tea these two hours, but it seems I got to 'ave another meal so's I can take me pills after it."

"Tis meself can help you with the tea, Mrs. Brown, me dear," said Murty nobly. "I'll not be interferin' with the pills."

In the dining-room the pie was waning under a determined onslaught in force; and Norah had given the account of herself demanded by her family.

"I couldn't leave the poor soul on the road, could I, Dad?"

"Oh, no, you couldn't, of course," David Linton said. "Only next time you befriend a stranded lady, couldn't you stop somewhere and telephone to say you'll be late home?"

"Indeed, if I'd had a scrap of sense I'd have got Miss Wright to do that for me," Norah admitted. "I met her near Four-Cross-Roads, and stopped to talk to her about the little girl; of course she says it will be all right for Mary-Kate. None of the children about here have the slightest prejudice against immigrants' children—they're rather interested in helping them along, Miss Wright says. But she is horrified to think of that poor little Mrs. Reilly being here so long without having seen anyone. She means to go and see her herself on Sunday, so that she will feel happy about sending Mary-Kate to school on Monday; and she will tell other women about her."

"I'll ride over and see Reilly as soon as I can," Wally said. "Coming, Jim?"

"Rather!" said Jim heartily. "Fancy seeing a man of the Munsters again! There were three of them in my first prison-camp in Germany; awful good chaps—they kept every one of us laughing. We must tell Murty there's another Irishman in the district. What sort is the kiddie, Nor?"

"Oh, the queerest wee elf," Norah answered. "Very small for her age, with a keen, dark little face like her mother's, and big dark eyes—eyes that change so that you can't quite tell what colour they are. Such a twinkle in them, too! I should think she has any amount of pluck—at all events she is ready to fight the school if it fails to treat her properly. I fancy Mary-Kate will make her mark in a peaceful Australian school!"

"Her class shouldn't be dull, anyhow," said Wally. "Another pie, Jim?"

"Thank you, I will not have another helping of pie," said Jim sedately, looking at the remnants of the noble structure wherein the two ill-fated birds had slept their last sleep. "Norah, is that jelly I see near you? Wally wants some."

"Meaning that you want some yourself, I suppose," said Norah, laughing. "Jelly, Wally?"

"Thanks, I've embarked on scones," said Wally. "Pass it to Jim—he really isn't at all concerned about me. I say, Mr. Linton, what about that Masonic ball you were discussing?"

"I'm not aware that I ever mentioned one," said the squatter manifestly uneasy. "If you boys begin listening to all the stupid talk round a sale-yard, you'll believe anything!"

"I believe there's a mystery!" said Norah. "Own up, Daddy. What did you do?"

"I've forgotten," said Mr. Linton, looking at her with anxiety. "If I ever went to one it must have been at least forty years ago—in the days when we danced Varsovianas and Circassian Circles, and Polka-Mazurkas. You people who jazz and one-step don't know the thrill it gave one to polka-mazurk! Dances aren't what they used to be—and dance-tunes aren't either. Nowadays you dance to music that sounds like a lot of donkeys braying accompanied by the banging of tin-trays!"

"That's true enough," Jim agreed. "It's a bit different to the jolly old waltz-tunes; I can remember those. But all this burst of eloquence, true as it is, doesn't relieve you from the necessity of telling us about the Masonic ball. It merely goes to show us that you really remember it very well!"

A twinkle came into his fathers eyes.

"It's an awful thing to be in the hands of the Philistines," he said. "What did the old man at the sale tell you about it, Wally? And who was he?—do you know?" He glanced round the table. "By the way, you have all finished, I think—even you, Jim? Then ring for Annabelle, Norah, and we'll have this matter out in the drawing-room."

They trooped in after him, and Norah arranged a hassock for his lame foot: an attention to which her father submitted nightly, although he generally kicked it away with the sound foot as soon as he thought Norah would not notice. Even when lame, David Linton was not broken to hassocks.

"I don't know exactly who the old chap was," Wally said, lighting his pipe. "That is, I don't know his name. He looked like a groom; a little wizened fellow, with a face like a very wrinkled apple. And when he heard Jim's name, he just purred. Said he'd known you ages ago, and told us all sorts of interesting stories about you. Then old Bassett, from the other side of Borrodaile, chipped in, and they swapped yarns about you."

"Old Ben Bassett!" said Mr. Linton. "Yes, he and I knew each other well enough. Good old Ben; I haven't seen him for fifteen years, I should think. How does he look?"

"He's grey, but he's as straight as a dart, and looks as if he were good for many a long day's work yet," Jim said. "A great old man. He called the little old chap Andy, Dad, if that conveys anything to you."

"Did he so?" said his father, much interested. "Then it would be little old Andy McLean, who was groom at the hotel in Borrodaile long before any of you were born. To think of his being alive still! Why, we called him 'Old Andy' then. But he was the sort of man who looks as if he had been born old."

"Well, he told us to ask you if you remembered a Masonic ball. And when we wanted him to tell us more, he just chuckled and chuckled as if he were wound up and couldn't stop. So we naturally came home a bit curious."

"Well, I never thought that old story would rise up against me," said Mr. Linton. "It's hard luck that it should, seeing that I was only a bit of a youngster when it happened. I don't think I was more than nineteen—and people of nineteen aren't supposed to have much sense."

"No. Go on, Dad," said Norah, as he paused. "We're all over nineteen, so of course our sense has come!"

"Has it?" queried her father, with interest. "I'm glad you told me. This Masonic ball took place in Borrodaile, forty miles from here. I'd been droving; three of us brought some cattle down from Queensland to a station near Borrodaile, and I said good-bye to my mates an rode into the township one evening with nothing in the world to do. I was a big lump of a boy, I had money in my pockets, I was nineteen, and I was idle. And that's a very good start for getting into mischief."

"There was a fellow I knew in Borrodaile named Baker, and I went to see him. He was a bachelor, with an old housekeeper: she let me in, telling me Baker would be in soon, and she showed me into his room to wash my hands. Lying on his bed was some Masonic kit; blue apron and a big jewel affair. I didn't know much about them, but the old housekeeper told me that they were Baker's and he was going to wear them at a Masonic ball that evening. That was the first I knew of it—and I was mad on dancing. I asked the old lady could anyone go—mostly anyone *could* go to bush dances in those days, and I had some respectable clothes with me. But she knew about as much about it as I did, and she shook her head and said she thought only gents with the Masonic kit could go. Wherefore I sorrowed, and envied Baker."

"Time went on, and Baker didn't turn up. As a matter of fact, Baker never did put in an appearance until next day, for his horse had gone dead lame twenty miles from home, and he couldn't get another. But I sat and waited, and I could hear the music—two fiddles and a concertina—going in the hotel across the street, and at last I got desperate. It seemed an awful pity for those elegant Masonic affairs to be wasting on that bed. And the end of it was I told the old lady to tell Baker I'd borrowed them, and he could come after me and get them. And I put them on: first and last time I ever wore an apron! I covered them up with my overcoat and dodged across the street, and I can tell you it took some pluck to go in. However, in the hall I met a girl I knew, from one of the stations, and so I sailed in with her and danced. Then, of course, I saw that there were lots of other fellows without the Masonic regalia, but by this time she had chaffed me so about them that I wouldn't take them off. She introduced me to other girls, and I had a splendid time."

"But what about the other Masons, Dad?" Jim inquired, laughing. "Didn't they interfere?"

"I tried very hard not to catch the eye of one of them," said his father, laughing. "I was afraid they might have some mysterious glance or password I couldn't respond to; and as long as they didn't actually encounter me, there was always a hope that they might think I belonged to some other township. They were all pretty busy having a good time themselves. But the trouble began when one of my friends—she was a cheery soul—persuaded me to let her wear the jewel. That put the fat in the fire at once. We were dancing together when an angry young Mason—he was secretary or something—came up and told her she must take it off. That annoyed me, and I told her to keep it on. So we had an argument about it, and it ended in my giving my partner my apron as well as the jewel, to take care of, and the secretary and I retired to the back-yard to argue it out. I suppose that was where old Andy came in: most of the township lads were there, I heard afterwards. We must have been something of a counter-attraction to the dance."

"I'll bet you were!" said Jim, laughing. "Could he fight, Dad?"

"Indeed he could. We were pretty well matched, but I was in better training. I'd had five months on the road with cattle. The dance was nearly over before we began; and that was as well, for neither of us could have gone back to it. We damaged each other pretty considerably: as I remember it, it was a beautiful fight! I beat him at last, but there wasn't much between us. Then we shook hands and made friends, and I told him how it had happened and he was very decent over it. We got washed up until we looked as respectable as possible—I'm not saying we were ornamental!—and I sent a messenger to get Baker's things. To my horror he brought back word that everybody had gone home—my partner among them!"

"I knew her name, and the secretary—his name was Wilding, by the way, and we're friends yet—knew that she was a farmer's daughter, living fifteen miles out in the hills. He offered to show me the way, and we got our horses and set sail just as it was getting light. I was half-asleep most of the way, and Wilding wasn't much better. We got there at last, and found the girl's brother outside, and he told us she was milking down in the shed. So she was, with two of her sisters. She was a bit relieved to see me; for she hadn't known what to do with the things, an she hadn't liked the responsibility of them. 'Just you go on with the cows, and I'll go up and get them,' said she. 'I'm late with them now, and Dad'll be wild if they're not done soon.' So Wilding and I tied up our horses and sat down to milk; and she didn't turn up until the last cow was in!"

Jim gave a crack of laughter.

"Pretty cute, Dad!"

"She was," said his father. "Then she put a meek face round the doorway and said she'd had no end of trouble finding the things, but they were all ready in a parcel, and Mother said we were to come in to breakfast. Jolly glad we were to do that, for I'd had no supper at the ball, except a sandwich a girl had brought out to me—I wasn't going to trust myself in the supper-room with all those dangerous Masons! And that's all the story, except that I was uncommonly pleased when I put back Baker's regalia, safe and sound: and I've never pretended to be a Mason since. Little did I think that old Andy would cast my wild youth at me forty years later!"

"I'd have been pained if you hadn't won the fight," said Norah. "But as it was, I don't quite see why you should worry about it."

"Oh, I never worried," said her father, smiling. "It was part of the day's work, and they were free-and-easy times, forty years ago. Now I am old and reverend, and I have to keep you young people in order: and how am I to do it if the boys bring home wild yarns about me?"

"Anyhow, you had us taught boxing," Jim said.

"That showed my peaceful instincts," said Mr. Linton. "The fellow who knows how to use his hands scientifically is the one who gets into the fewest fights, and comes out with the least amount of damage. And boxing teaches you to control your temper, which is no bad thing for anyone. An occasional fight is pretty good for a boy, so long as he fights fair, and he can only do that if he has been trained."

He got up stiffly, leaning on his stick.

"Well, Brownie has to rub this old knee of mine, so I must be off," he said. "Come and see me as you go to bed, Norah."

Norah nodded.

"I won't be long, either, Dad; I'm sleepy. Tommy and I made the most heavenly brew of marmalade to-day."

They heard him going slowly upstairs.

"I wish you'd heard that old Andy and old Bassett talking about him, Nor," Jim said. "You would have liked it."

"Tell me what they said, Jimmy."

"That would take a good while," said her brother. "They said there was no man in the district who could beat him at boxing, and very few who could ride like him. And they said he was always going out of his way to do some one a good turn—any lame dog who wanted a lift over a stile had only to go to David Linton. And his word was as good as any other man's bond."

"But we know that," said Norah, elevating a proud young nose.

"Yes—but you'd have liked to hear the way they talked about it."

"Yes, I know I would. I'd have loved it, Jimmy." She slipped her hand into her brother's.

"Norah," said Wally, "they said a man met him on a lonely bush track one evening, riding his hardest for a doctor—his wife was very ill. He hadn't much of a horse, and your father had a good one; so he sent the poor chap back to his wife while he went after the doctor himself. It was a pretty awful ride, over very wild country,—there was an easier way, but it was longer, so your father took the short way, and he took it in the dark. You know he has always had an instinct for country; they said he used to be as good as a black fellow in getting about country he didn't know. Anyhow, he did it in the dark—hills and gullies all over thick scrub, and two pretty bad rivers to cross. He got to the township he wanted in the small hours of the morning, and found the doctor. And the doctor was drunk!"

Norah drew her breath sharply.

"Wasn't there any other? But of course there wouldn't be—not in those days."

"No—there wasn't another within fifty miles. Your father found the doctor's house first, and his wife told him how things were. So he told her to get her husband's medicines and things ready—every doctor then had his bag with all sorts of kit, ready for the bush—and he set sail after the doctor, and found him in a back room in the hotel. He was fighting-drunk, but Mr. Linton was fighting-sober. He took him out to the back and held him down while another fellow pumped water over him. They say they nearly drowned him between them. Then your father tied him on to a horse some one else had brought—half the township was awake by this time, but they say Mr. Linton never spoke a word, except to give orders. 'And I can tell you we jumped when he gave us orders,' old Andy said."

"Go on, please, Wally," said Norah. Wally's pipe was out, and he was regarding it reproachfully.

"He had sent some one else for the doctor's bag, and he tied it on his own saddle, and they set off. The others thought he'd go the easy way, this time, and when they saw him take the track that led to the bush some of them yelled, and a man tore after him and begged him to go by the road."

"There isn't time," he said.

"'You'll never get through—not with that lump on the other horse,' the man cried."

"Hang it, man! I've done it in the dark," said your father. 'It will be easy in the light—lump and all. Anyhow, I'm going!' And he set off at a gallop, with the wretched doctor bumping all over the saddle. But he had been very well tied."

"It must have been a pretty awful ride for the doctor. He told his wife afterwards that he never thought they'd come through alive. He begged Mr. Linton to stop, and threatened, and said everything he could think of, and your father never answered a word, only dragged him through the scrub, and across everything that came in his way. They had a fearful time crossing the rivers, but somehow or other Mr. Linton always managed to keep the doctor's bag dry. They came in sight of the house they wanted in the early morning, and just then the doctor's horse stopped—dead beat. They couldn't get another yard out of him. Your father untied the doctor—he was sober enough by that time—and put him on his own horse. 'Your job's there,' he said. 'And if you don't pull her through I'll take you back the way I brought you!' And he gave his horse a whack and sent him off."

"And what happened?" Norah asked breathlessly.

"They were in time—but only just in time. Half an hour later, the doctor said, they'd have been too late. And if they had come by the road they'd have been two hours later."

"And he pulled her through?"

"Oh, yes. He was a good doctor when he was sober. He came out into the yard afterwards, and found your father chopping wood. Mr. Linton was dead-beat himself, and his clothes were torn to ribbons, but there wasn't any wood cut, so he was chopping some."

"How exactly like Dad!" said Norah.

"Yes, wasn't it?" said Jim, smiling. "Go on, Wal."

"And the doctor thanked him, and told him he'd never touch another drop of whisky. He didn't either, old Andy said: he was as sober as a judge always afterwards. It's not a bad little story, is it, Nor? I knew you'd like it."

Norah looked at him and failed to find any words.

"Jim wanted to tell you, but I said it wasn't fair," said Wally, laughing. "It's quite enough for you two to own him, so I bagged telling the story."

"As if you didn't own him, too, old chap," said Jim.

"Do I?" said Wally, his merry face a little wistful. "It's rather jolly to think I do, at all events—especially when you hear people talking like those two old chaps at the sale to-day. I tried to look as much like Jim as possible, but the bottom fell out of that when old Andy said to him, 'I'd know you for David Linton's son any day, but you'—to me—'ain't no more like him than a crow!'—and I had to admit that my name was Meadows. Andy seemed quite annoyed about it, and devoted himself exclusively to Jim."

"Well, it doesn't matter a bit, because we're all one family," said Norah airily. "And it was just a lovely story, Wally; I'm ever so glad we've heard it. One of you will have to tell Brownie."

"I bagged that privilege," said Jim, with decision. "Wally can't have all the limelight."

"Well, don't leave Murty out of it," said Norah. "You'll probably find him in the kitchen now; I'm going up to Dad. Good-night, boys. Oh, are you going out early to-morrow, Jim?"

"I am not," said Jim. "Seven o'clock breakfast this morning and eight o'clock tea to-night means pretty nearly a day's work. There's nothing very urgent to do to-morrow, and I shall do it with leisurely elegance."

"Is that how you're going to brand those new bullocks?" demanded Wally.

"I shall brand the new bullocks, gently but firmly, after breakfast," said Jim, blandly disregarding this question. "Then I shall take my little gun and shoot at rabbits until dinner-time; and after dinner I am going over to help Bob muster his sheep: in all of which I shall desire your assistance, young Wally."

"And having mustered the sheep, you'll turn up for afternoon tea at Creek Cottage, I presume?" said Norah.

"Why—with luck," agreed Jim.

CHAPTER III
TOMMY HAS A CALLER

IT was a dry autumn, following a long, hot summer, and for miles the country lay bare and brown. Billabong itself fared better in time of drought than most places, for it was well watered naturally, and David Linton had irrigated much of the land near the creeks and the river: but the upper plains were parched, and the cattle had drawn further and further back into the low ranges that formed the northern boundary of the station. Here there was at least a picking of the sparse native grasses, and so long as the creeks ran the cattle would not starve. Other landholders were worse off, and the smaller settlers looked gloomier and gloomier as week followed week and still the long-expected autumn rains did not come. Tanks and dams dried up; there were reports everywhere of water being carted for household purposes. Busy mothers, already overtaxed by the ceaseless round of country duties, bewailed the shortage of water that meant a new unpleasantness added to their burdens.

The Rainhams' holding lay along the bank of a good creek, and Bob Rainham and his sister Tommy often blessed their luck in having had David Linton's advice to buy it. They had held it for over a year, and already had improved it considerably. Even the bad luck, which had seemed so crushing, of having been burned out during their first few months, had turned to good fortune, for the countryside had learned to like and respect the dogged young Englishman and his sister, and had come to their aid in a series of "working-bees" that had more than repaired the damage. Creek Cottage, which Bob and Tommy regarded privately as the finest edifice in Australia, had risen from the ashes of the old house, and was certainly a curiosity in house-building, since the Lintons, the Rainhams, and Wally had all been free to work out their own ideas in its architecture. It represented all that was to be known of labour-saving and common-sense. Brownie had been heard to declare that if Fate did not intend her to die at Billabong she hoped it would be in a little place the very moral of Miss Tommy's.

The paddocks around Creek Cottage were bare enough, but there was plenty of green about the cottage itself, and Tommy's garden flamed with dahlias and asters. A windmill brought water from the creek, so that the garden was never parched. The trees that had been scorched by the fire had not been killed; the flames, carried in a rush through the long, dry grass, had only burned the leaves, so quick had been their passage. Jim Linton had cut them all back, and next spring they had broken out into masses of exquisite young growth. Tommy and Bob were riotously proud of their home. Wally declared that on any moonlit night they might be found walking round it, purring loudly.

To-day Tommy expected the Linton family to afternoon tea. Early in the afternoon they had called on their way into Cunjee in the car, asking her to go with them. But Tommy had just finished compounding something new and unusual in the way of cakes, and it had been popped into the oven for the hour's baking which the recipe demanded. She shook her fair head.

"I couldn't leave the cake, truly," she said. "And it would only be gadabouting if I went, for I've nothing to do in Cunjee—Bob and I were in yesterday. But I'll tell you what—hurry up and finish your business, and come back here for some tea; the cake will be out then, and you can sample it. You know you love hot cakes, Wally!"

"I do," said Wally, who was at the wheel. "Hot cakes appeal to all that is finest in my nature. Say we may come back, Norah!"

"Of course I'll come," Norah said. "We haven't much to do, so we won't be long. Don't you dare spoil it in the baking, Tommy."

"I'm going to brood over it like an old hen!" returned Tommy. She stood watching the big car as it slid noiselessly down the track, and hurried in to make certain that her little sitting-room was in its usual exquisite order. There was never anything that was not dainty in Tommy's house; but when the Billabong family came to see her she liked things to be extra-perfect—being a house-proud little person.

She had fussed over the sitting-room, changed into a fresh linen frock, and ascertained with joy that the cake was progressing successfully through the first stages of its existence in the oven, when Sarah appeared in the kitchen. Sarah and Bill were the "married couple" who helped in the work of the Creek Farm. They inhabited a little two-roomed cottage across the garden. Their baby girl was also supposed to inhabit this abode, but as she and Tommy adored each other she was more often to be found in the main building.

"Yes, I thought I'd find you 'ere, me lady," said Sarah triumphantly, swooping upon her daughter, who was placidly licking out the mixing-bowl, under the kitchen table.

"She is all right, truly, Sarah," said Tommy, laughing. "See, I put on her feeder. And the cake is not a rich one—besides, I am too stingy to leave much in the bowl!"

"Just as well for 'erself," said Sarah, hugging the sticky mite—a proceeding which made Tommy shudder inwardly. However much she adored the baby, she generally managed to wash her before she kissed her. "I say, Miss Tommy, Bill's just come in—e's finished 'is job of fencing. It's such a lovely afternoon; would you be nervis if we went over to Billabong? I ain't seen Mrs. Brown for a month of Sundays. Mr. Bob told Bill he'd be in quite early."

Tommy hesitated for a moment. Bob made a rule of never leaving her alone; if by any chance no one were with her he always left his dog, a powerful sheep-dog with a rooted dislike to strangers. But this afternoon she knew that Bingo had gone with his master. Still, Bob might be back at any moment, and the Billabong car was certain to arrive very soon. So she smiled back cheerfully at Sarah.

"Yes, of course, Sarah. I'll be quite safe. Miss Norah and the others are coming to tea with me presently."

"Oh, I ain't goin' out if you're goin' to have people to tea," exclaimed Sarah, her good-natured face falling. "Not me. I'll stay and get things ready."

"But, indeed, you will not," said Tommy. "Miss Norah will help me—and that is it, to set a tea-tray? There is Bill to be considered, and I am not going to disappoint Bill when he wishes to take out his wife and daughter. Run away, Sarah, and be sure you put Myrtle's blue frock on—the one that is the colour of her eyes."

"Well, I don't like leaving you," murmured Sarah, giving in. "But it is a lovely day, ain't it now, Miss Tommy—an' Bill's that anxious to go. All right, Myrtle—drop the spoon, now, like a pretty. Oh, well then, keep it, an' we'll take the bowl over 'ome an' wash 'em up there. I'll bring 'em back this evening, Miss Tommy." She smiled at Tommy, knowing that if she left them the greasy bowl and spoon would certainly be washed up before the visitors arrived. Then she hurried off, and in a surprisingly short space of time Tommy saw them driving off, Myrtle, resplendent in the blue frock, sitting proudly between them.

Tommy prepared her tea-tray, cutting the dainty rolled bread-and-butter that she knew Mr. Linton liked. The cake proclaimed itself done, on being investigated with a broom-straw, and was left to air on a wire stand; and Tommy went out to the verandah to watch for the motor, taking with her some of the fine embroidery that had been part of her training in France, where most of her childhood had been spent. So intent upon it did she become that she did not hear a horse's hoofs on the grass, and only looked up when a man rode past the garden fence.

She gave him a swift glance. He was a young man, dirty and shabby-looking, with a sullen, lowering face; and her first thought was that the horse he was riding looked far too good for him. Her next was a sudden wish that either Bob or Bingo were at home.

The stranger got off at the gate of the back-yard and came up the path to the kitchen door. Tommy decided that she would rather meet him in the ope—unpleasantly aware that her heart was beating rather quickly. This, she reflected, would not do, for a soldier's sister and an Englishwoman. So she held her little head high as she walked round by way of the verandah.

"Good afternoon," she said gravely. "You wanted my brother?" There was always in Tommy's speech the little hint of her French upbringing, and the man stared at her curiously.

"Yes," he said.

"He will be in a few minutes. Will you sit on the bench there, and wait?" Immediately she was very angry with herself. Why had she been so foolish as to let him know that Bob was out?

"Afraid I haven't got time to wait, thanks," said the man. "Can you let us have a bit of tucker?"

"Certainly." She hesitated, feeling that she did not wish to go into the house, leaving this evil-looking man where she could not see him. Yet no one in the bush ever refused food to a stranger—that had been taught her from her first week in Australia. She temporized, knowing that it was permissible to ask for work in exchange. "Will you cut some wood for me?" she asked, pointing to the wood-heap.

The man gave a short laugh.

"I'm lookin' for tucker, not work," he said. He felt sure of his ground now: there was evidently no one in the place but this little pink-and-white girl, who was certainly not an Australian. "Hurry up—I've no time to waste. An' I want some money too, so hand over what you've got."

Possibly, had he whined or begged, Tommy's tender heart would have been moved to compassion, and she might have given in. But the stranger had his own reasons for haste, and he saw no need for tact. Tommy's head went up at his tone of rough authority.

"You are rude," she said quietly. "I shall give you nothing—certainly not money." She drew back, longing to get round to the side of the house where she could watch the track whence help might come. But she had scarcely turned the corner when he sprang after her, seizing her by the wrist.

"Let me go!" she panted.

"You needn't be afraid," he said hurriedly. "I ain't goin' to hurt you—I wouldn't 'a' laid a finger on you if you'd done as you was asked. But I got to have money and tucker, an' I can't wait. Hand 'em over, or I'll jolly well go an' help myself!"

"You can go," Tommy told him loftily. Fear suddenly left her as she became aware, in some curious manner, that this man himself was afraid. "I will give you nothing. And I warn you that my brother—yes, and Mr. Linton—will be here at any moment."

He released her wrist at that, flinging it from him with a rough exclamation; and turning, ran into the house: and with dismay Tommy remembered that in Bob's room was a sum of money unusually large for them to have in the house, drawn from the Bank the day before. She caught her breath with a little sob. Oh, if only he did not find it!

A cheery whistle fell on her ear—never had there been such music!—and she turned to see Jim Linton walking across the grass towards the garden. He looked huge enough to deal with a regiment of young men with weak and shifty faces. With a little cry of relief Tommy fled to meet him. Unfortunately, the burglar heard the cry, and realized that it boded him no good. One glance from a window revealed to him that prudence demanded immediate flight, and he dashed from the kitchen towards his horse.

"Why, Tommy, what is it?" Jim's whistle died away as the distracted figure opened the garden gate.

"Jim—there's a burglar! Catch him—Bob's money!"

Jim gave a roar like a lion and sprang towards the house, just as the man emerged from the back door. But the odds were all in favour of the burglar, whose horse was only a few yards from him. He scrambled into the saddle, urging the horse into a gallop before Jim could turn the corner of the garden fence. Nor did he stop for the gate of the paddock; instead, he put the horse at the fence and cleared it easily, disappearing over a rise. They watched him for a moment, bewildered. Then Jim swung round to Tommy.

"Tommy—he didn't hurt you?"

"No, but he frightened me very badly," said Tommy. "And I do not like being frightened—it makes me feel so—so vulgar!" Whereat Jim suddenly shouted with laughter. "But yes—it does. Gentlemen are not cowards, and I was very badly a coward then. Oh, do come, Jim, and see if he has found Bob's money!"

He had not; and Tommy drew a great sigh of relief.

"Nothing else seems to have gone—ah, yes, my little purse, which lay on that table. It had only five shillings inside, so it will not help him much. See, Jim, he has not touched my silver things, or my jewellery: they are all safe."

"He only wanted cash," said Jim. "We heard of this beggar in the township, you know, Tommy; he's the first criminal who has been in the district for years, so they are quite excited about him. He 'stuck-up' a bank in Borrodaile, and hurt a young bank-clerk pretty badly; the boy managed to defend the money until help came, but he got laid out for his pluck. Then the swine stole a horse belonging to George Atkinson, and was seen heading this way; I expect that his idea is to get up into New South Wales. That's Atkinson's horse he was riding, of course; a big bay with a white blaze. It's one of the best horses in the district."

"I thought the horse was too good for the man, when he first rode up," Tommy observed.

"You never made a truer guess," Jim said grimly. "Now, tell me just what he did here, and how you came to be alone."

Tommy told her story, ending by demanding to know how Jim had contrived to drop from the clouds just as he was wanted.

"That was quite simple," Jim said. "The car picked up old Mrs. Harkness in Cunjee; she was tired of waiting for her husband, so we gave her a lift out. And it struck me, as I passed your gate, that I might as well come in and help you get tea, and tell you the others would be here presently."

A short, broad-shouldered figure, accompanied by a dog, came in sight near the stock-yard.

"There's Bob!" exclaimed Tommy. "Now we shall see how cross he will get!"

Bob Rainham was indeed cross when he heard of his sister's peril.

"You had no business to let Sarah go," he said. "Oh, yes, I know it was a lovely afternoon—another time, just you remember that it is on lovely afternoons that unpleasant callers come!" He put his arm through Tommy's—the ruddy colour had faded from his face. "It makes me sick to think of your being here alone—and that brute—!" Words failed him. He held her arm very tightly.

The motor arrived, and the story had to be told again—at which Tommy suddenly broke down, and, being whisked into her bedroom by Norah, cried a little, her head on her friend's shoulder.

"You must telephone to the police at once, Bob," Mr. Linton said. "Headed north, did he? Tell them to warn all the places in that direction. They ought to catch him easily enough: a man who doesn't know the ranges would find it very difficult to get across them, especially if he hadn't food."

"He's got a rattling good horse, Dad," remarked Jim.

"That will help him, but even a good horse isn't much when the telephone and telegraph get busy. Oh, they'll get him. I suppose Tommy can describe him accurately—or did you get a good view of him, Jim?"

"Well, I'd know him again, I think," Jim said; "but I couldn't give a detailed description of him. We'll ask Tommy—poor little soul, she's had a rough time. I wouldn't have had it happen for a hundred pounds,"—and Jim's cheery face was dark as he went in search of the girls.

Tommy had got hold of herself, and was brewing tea in the kitchen, aided by Norah. She was able to describe her assailant minutely, even to a large wart on the side of his nose—a facial adornment which, being detailed through the telephone to the police-sergeant in Cunjee, drew from that official a pleased grunt.

"That's the man!" he said delightedly. "Our description from Borrodaile says a large wart on left side of nose. No, nose, not nose. No, nose. Are you there? Shake your telephone, please, Mr. Rainham!" The telephone gave a long whirr and the voice of the sergeant came in a far-away whisper. "Did you say a wart? No, hang it! Central, don't cut me off—the matter is important, I tell you. Put me on to Mr. Rainham again—I don't know his number."

"Are you there?" said Central in an aggrieved voice in Bob's ear. "Don't go away again, please."

"I never went," said Bob resignedly, hopelessly aware of the uselessness of trying to argue with Central.

"Are you there, Mr. Rainham?" The voice of the sergeant came, crisp with impatience. "You were saying the accused has a wart?"

"Yes," said Bob. "He still has it."

"On the left side?"

"Of his nose," said Bob. "Nose, not nose."

"That's the man all right," said the sergeant. "We'll warn all the stations near—not that I suppose he'll have the pluck to go near another house."

"So far as we can tell, he has no food," Bob said.

"That may bring him to heel. Good-bye, Mr. Rainham. One of our men will be out at your place presently." The telephone was abruptly silent, and Bob hung up the receiver and went to join the others. Tea was in progress on the verandah, where Tommy, looking rather white, was installed in a long chair while Norah and Wally plied her with food.

"Telephones are exhausting things," said the owner of the house, sitting down limply. "And sergeants of police are so impatient! Thanks ever so, Norah; I'm dying for tea." He took his cup, with a grateful glance. "The sergeant's ever so happy over your wart, Tommy!"

"My wart!" said the justly incensed Tommy. "But indeed, I have never had a wart!"

"Oh, I don't mean you, but the one you saw on your burglar. It appears to be the mark of the beast, so be sure you don't forget just where you saw it—on the left side, you said."

"I will not forget," said Tommy placidly. "I saw it on the left side while I was wondering about Wally's cake."

"My cake?" asked Wally.

"The hot cake, I mean. I had told him he could go and look for himself, and I was immediately so sad because I knew he must find the hot cake I had left on the table. I was sad for you and for myself, for I had wanted to taste it. One does not waste new recipes upon a burglar—if one can help it."

"It would have been a tragedy if you had," said Wally. "It's a poem of a cake!"

CHAPTER IV

THE BOG COTTAGE

BUT as the days went by it seemed that Tommy's burglar had managed to give the police the slip. He had ridden away northwards, calling at a lonely farm on the way, where he found a woman alone, scared her very badly, and managed to get from her, not only a good meal and a supply of food, but a gun and a pocketful of cartridges. The police were hard upon his trail: Jim and Wally helped them to scour the ranges for three days, but with no result. There were tracks enough as far as a little river that bubbled out of the hills beyond Billabong; there they ended.

Finally the police gave up the hunt, sending word to watch for the fugitive among the townships on the border, where there were several false alarms, and at least two perfectly innocent persons were arrested on suspicion because Fate had equipped them at birth with warts on the nose. Then one day the great bay horse limped back to Atkinson's with a badly strained fetlock; without a bridle, but still carrying under him the broken remnants of what had been a saddle. Atkinson's men, doctoring the cruel galls on the hide that had never known a blemish, were loud in their threats of vengeance; and the hunt began again for a few days.

Nothing came of it, however, and the disappointed men went back to the stations. It became generally believed that Barlow, the missing man, had been thrown by the horse, and that possibly his body would be found, perhaps years hence, in some deep gully in the ranges. After all, not very much harm had resulted from his outbreak into crime, the men said; a few women frightened, a horse damaged, a gun missing. The little bank-clerk had recovered, very proud that he had been able to foil the attempt to rob the bank, even if he had been injured over it; openly rejoicing over the whole affair, since it had won him promotion. "They say he was always a pretty decent chap before," said the little bank-clerk—"then he got gambling, and he was in a hole for money. Poor beggar! I don't mind if he's got away!"

Billabong and Creek Cottage were not quite so easy in their judgment, since one of their own girls had been in danger. However, Tommy had escaped lightly, thanks to Jim's timely arrival, and she herself was willing to forget the whole thing, and was extremely thankful when the police ceased to haunt the Creek Farm, apparently with the view of making her describe even more warts on her visitor's nose. There were too many things in Tommy's busy life to allow her to worry over a thief who, after all, had not managed to steal anything.

The two girls rode over to call on little Mrs. Reilly a few days after Norah's first encounter with the bolting yellow horse. Brownie had already gone, driven by Murty, who had talked blissfully of Munster with the ex-sergeant-major while his wife and Brownie exchanged views on cooking, in a kitchen spotless enough to win the visitor's complete approval. "An' may I never 'ave a better cup of tea than the one she give me, Miss Norah," reported Brownie—"made with the water just come to the boil, the way tea had ought to be. An' scones I couldn't beat myself, an' butter she'd just made—good enough to put in the Show! Well, some people call the Irish shiftless, but there ain't much shiftless about that little Mrs. Reilly! Showed me all over 'er 'ouse, too, an' not a floor you couldn't have eaten off!" And since Brownie was something of an autocrat among the women of the district, it appeared that Mrs. Reilly's reputation was made. "Lemme hear of any one callin' her a Pommy, that's all!" said Brownie darkly.

There was no bitterness left in the little Irishwoman's face as she came out to greet Norah and Tommy.

"To think of you ridin' all that way!" she said. "Tired, are ye? Sure, I wouldn't wonder. Come into the parlour now, an' I'll have a cup of tay for ye in a minute."

"I'm sure you weren't sitting in the parlour, Mrs. Reilly," said Norah, smiling. She glanced down at the spotless apron over the neat dark dress.

"Well, I was not, but finishing me bit of ironing. 'Tis late I am this week, for himself had to cart wather for me to wash. The tanks do be terrible low."

"Do let us come in while you finish, Mrs. Reilly," Norah begged. "I *love* kitchens; Miss Rainham often gives me tea in hers when I go over to see her."

"'Tis not fit for the likes of ye," protested Mrs. Reilly.

"Indeed, Brownie told me all about your kitchen," said Norah, laughing. "I believe she thinks your table is whiter than hers—and I didn't think that was possible. Do let us come in with you—it's much more sociable than sitting in the parlour. And I know what a nuisance it is to stop when your irons are hot—just as you're in the middle of something special. It always happens that way!"

"Well, indeed, 'twas doin' his Sunday shirt I was," admitted Mrs. Reilly. "An' me iron is just what it ought to be. If 'tis sure ye are ye don't mind——?"

"We're coming," said Tommy decidedly. "I'm always wanting a lesson in ironing a shirt." At which Mrs. Reilly gaped, looking at the trim, tailor-made figures in breeches and linen coats; and, still a little doubtful, led the way into a kitchen that fully justified all Brownie's praises. Once there, however, the pride of the artist in himself's Sunday shirt rose superior to anything else. She seated her guests in home-made arm-chairs, seized an iron from the stove, tested it rapidly, and began passing it over the bosom with workmanlike strokes.

"Me mother taught me that if I left a shirt in the middle o' the ironing I might as well put it back in the tub," she said. "An' she niver said a truer word. I'm terrible glad to finish it, though it do seem a queer way to entertain gentry when they come to see you."

"I want to watch," said Tommy, leaving her chair and coming to the table.

"Ah, now, Miss, 'tis funning you are! What'd the likes of you be doin', to be ironing shirts?"

"But you never know," said Tommy. "I keep house for my brother, and if we haven't any help I'll be horribly ashamed if I can't do his shirts. I'm learning things all the time, am I not, Norah?"

"You are," said Norah. "But I don't think there's much left for you to learn now. She's a great worker, Mrs. Reilly."

"I can iron soft shirts," said Tommy, her eyes never leaving the swift iron. "But I've never tried to do one of Bob's evening shirts yet, for the simple reason that he hardly ever wears one—only when a dance comes along. And then Sarah's done them. But I've been telling myself I must learn, for it is only the things one does not know how to do that make one afraid."

"Yerra, Miss, if it's really wantin' you are to learn, 'tis meself can teach you, though I do say it," said Mrs. Reilly. "I went into a laundry meself to learn; a wee place in Evergreen Road—that's in Cork, Miss. None of your steam-laundries for me, where they, do everything by machinery, an' tear the clothes to pieces, too. A hand-laundry this was, where they treated the clothes tenderly; an' 'twas there I learned. An' if so you have the irons hot and the starch just right, an' the shirt damp enough, where's the difficulty—supposin' it do be washed proper to begin with? There, 'tis done, Miss, an' I'm finished, an' thank you kindly." She straightened herself up, and suddenly caught at her side, the colour fading round her lips.

Norah was by her in a moment.

"Is there something wrong, Mrs. Reilly?"

The little woman did not answer for a moment. Her hands gripped the table so that the knuckles showed white. Presently she forced a smile.

"Yerra, 'tis nothing but a quare old pain I do be havin' sometimes. Miss—beggin' your pardon. It tuk me breath for a minute. 'Tis all right now." She whisked away the shirt and began folding up the ironing sheet.

"It was a pretty bad old pain, I think," Norah said quietly. She took the sheet quietly out of the work-worn hands and gave it to Tommy; then she put her strong young arm round Mrs. Reilly and half-carried her across the room to a battered old couch.

"You're just to lie there for a few minutes," she said, lifting up her feet. Mrs. Reilly opened her lips to protest, and then shut them tightly. For a moment she wrestled with the pain in silence, closing her eyes. She opened them in a moment, and met Norah's anxious ones with a smile.

"'Tis gone now, Miss. That's the way it do be comin' this good while; sharp an' quick enough to make you feel all of a weakness for a few minutes—then it's gone altogether. Very like I'll not have it again to-day."

"Have you asked a doctor about it?" Norah inquired.

"Is it me, to be incommodin meself with doctors?" demanded the little woman. "Not while I have me two arms an' me two legs to do their work. I don't howld with doctors at all. They'd be cuttin' me up to see where the pain was, as if I couldn't tell that widout 'em; an' who'd look after himself an' Mary-Kate?"

"There's a very good doctor in Conjee," Nora told her gently.

"Let him stay there!" said Mrs. Reilly valiantly. "I'd not be interferin' with him. Now, I'm all right, Miss, an' I'll get up an' get a cup of tay. There's nothin' like a good cup of tay to make you forget a pain."

"You're going to lie still while we get it, then," Norah told her. "No, you're not going to get up!"—at the little woman's horrified protest. "Miss Tommy and I are quite handy. Come, now, Mrs. Reilly—won't you give us the pleasure of getting it for you? We'd only be horribly worried if you don't lie still."

"I never done such a thing in me life," said the little woman feebly.

"It is now you will begin," said Tommy, laughing—"just to please Miss Linton and me. See, now, Mrs. Reilly, it will be great fun. And when you have had your tea and you feel quite better, will you show us your cottage?"

"Indeed, then, I will. But I'm quite well enough to get up this minute!"

"I'd hate to sit on you, Mrs. Reilly," said Norah. "But I'll have to, if you don't be good. Now just pretend we're Mary-Kate and you're ordering us about. Shall I bring this little kettle to the boil?" She looked respectfully at a glossy black kettle that told of infinite polish, with a gleaming brass knob on its lid.

"Thank you, Miss. It do be fresh water that's in it."

"Right," said Norah, putting the kettle in position and diving outside for more wood. She burst out laughing at the sight of Mrs. Reilly's miserable face.

"Oh, Mrs. Reilly, you're not to look like that, or we won't enjoy ourselves. And we're ever so happy to see you lying still—you know you need it. Do please order us about and let us have the satisfaction of seeing you rest!"

It dawned slowly upon the bewildered little Irishwoman that these two strange guests were really happy in looking after her. There was nothing of condescension in them—just as there was nothing free and easy in the way they moved about her sacred kitchen, not caring to touch anything except under her direction. And the pain had been very bad; so bad that it was like Heaven to lie still, if only she had not been wanting to entertain "the quality." But "the quality" seemed anxious to do the entertaining themselves; and after all, there was something of satisfaction in feeling that there was nothing to be ashamed of in her kitchen; that the clean cloth, fresh and glossy from the iron, was ready to hand; that the freshly baked scones in the tin were extra light and flaky, and that yesterday's butter, firm and golden, was under its fresh cloth in the dairy window. They found everything so easily and quickly; she grew quite merry over directing them. Norah made the tea, and did not forget to ask how many spoonfuls to put in; and then she put a chair by her side to serve as a table, and helped her to sit up so tenderly that the little woman's eyes grew misty.

"Thank you, Miss—tis very kind ye are," she said simply. "I do be thinkin', sometimes, when I'm alone, what it'll feel like to have Mary-Kate helpin' me like this when I'm old."

"Mary-Kate is luckier than I am," said Norah very softly. "She has a mother to look after." Their eyes met for a moment.

Over the tea they were very cheerful. Himself, it appeared, was away ploughing at the end of the farm, and Mary-Kate, now established at school, would not be home until five o'clock. "And then she'll come in roarin' for food," said Mrs. Reilly, delightedly. "'Tis herself has the grand appetite entirely since she came to Australia. At home, to pick a bit here and there was all she'd do. Burstin' out of her dresses she is; 'tis the way I'm lettin' them out every week for her."

"Does she like school, Mrs. Reilly?" Norah asked.

"There's nothin' 'ud keep her from it," said the mother. "No matter what the weather 'ud be I'd have me own troubles if I wanted her to stay at home. Miss Wright—that's a lovely woman, now, Miss Linton!—came to see me the Sunday after you met us, an' she made great friends with Mary-Kate. I felt aisy in me mind after that. Sure, when you've only one child it's a terrible care to you; I'm thinkin' the women that has ten or a dozen must have aisy minds!"

"Well, there's always something to come and go upon if there are a dozen, I suppose," said Norah, laughing. "Another cup of tea, Mrs. Reilly?"

"I will, please, Miss. No, no more scone, thank you. I'm never hungry after that old pain. But a good cup of tay is a grand thing—and 'tis yourself knows how to make it, Miss!"

"That's easy enough," smiled Norah—"with good tea and a brown teapot."

"That's what I do be thinkin'," agreed Mrs. Reilly eagerly. "There's no tay to aiquel what comes out of a little brown pot. But we've a silver one, Miss, that the sergeants' mess gave Dan when he left the regiment, and when I've company I'd like to be usin' it."

"Thank goodness you didn't get it this afternoon," said Tommy solemnly. "We have one, too, Mrs. Reilly, my brother and I, but it's wrapped up in tissue paper. And we just love a little brown one like yours." Which fully completed the conquest of Mrs. Reilly.

The girls washed up the tea-things and restored the kitchen to order, while its mistress lay protesting vigorously that she was well enough to rise and scrub the house. Only when all was finished was she permitted to get up—which she did after the manner of a Jack-in-the-box.

"Never did I think I'd be lyin' about while young ladies worked themselves to the bone lookin' after me," she said. "I dunno at all what Dan 'ud say to me."

"Doesn't he know anything about that pain of yours, Mrs. Reilly?" Norah asked.

"May the saints forbid!" said the little woman. "What with the dry weather, an' settlin' down in a new country, there's enough to worry a man without my old pain. 'Tis all I hope I can keep it from him, Miss. You won't tell him, will you now?" Her eyes were full of sudden pleading.

"I won't, if you say so," said Norah slowly. "But I don't like it, Mrs. Reilly. It seemed to me a bad old pain, and I think you should have it seen to."

The little woman's lips were firm.

"'Twill be all right," she said. "Don't you give it another thought, Miss."

"H'm!" said Norah. "Will you talk to Brownie about it, if I send her over to see you?"

"Well, indeed, I might, then," said Mrs. Reilly. "'Tis a great comfort to chat about one's pains to another woman; and you'd be long meeting a kinder one than old Mrs. Brown. When she has time, Miss. But don't let a word of it get to me husband. What could a man do? an' he bothered enough already. Didn't I spoil his new milk-can on him? That's enough from me in one month, I should say?"

"But you got the can back?" Norah asked. "Mr. Harkness picked it up, didn't he?"

"He did, Miss, an' we got it back from him after you tallyphoned—an' thank you kindly. But Dan have no pride in it. It doesn't leak, but 'tis that banged and battered and dinted you'd say it was tin year old!"

"Well, I wouldn't worry if it doesn't leak," said Norah. "It seems to me he's rather lucky to have you, or Mary-Kate, or the can—considering the way that little horse of yours went. I'll send Brownie over, Mrs. Reilly; she'll love to come. And will you just remember, if that old pain gets worse, that if we can do anything at all to help you, you can count on us."

"I will, Miss, and thank you," said Mrs. Reilly. "But sure, it won't get worse."

She took them through her spotless little cottage; it had but four rooms, but it was clear that no king ever thought more highly of his palace. There was the patchwork quilt that had been her grandmother's, on her own bed; Mary-Kate's little room, "too good for the likes of her," said the mother delightedly; and the sitting-room that had treasures of Irish bog-oak and Connemara marble, and a photograph of Killarney that Norah remembered and greeted affectionately. Also there was a verandah, which had puzzled Mrs. Reilly a good deal at first.

"I never seen one of them trimmings on a house before I came to Australia," she said. "But I'm gettin' used to it, now, an' I'm not sayin' it isn't a good place to sit and knit in the afternoon—especially since himself put the ferns there in the old boxes."

"You get yourself to put you one at the back too, Mrs. Reilly," said Tommy. "You'll be very glad of it when the wet weather comes."

"I might, now. But do we ever get wet weather in this country?" Mrs. Reilly asked innocently. At which the girls laughed.

"Oh, the rain has forgotten us for awhile. But when it does come you'll have enough of it."

"I could shtand it," said the little woman. "Tired I am of washin' in a cupful of water; and the dust on the roads is that deep ye'd bog in it!"

She said good-bye to them a little wistfully.

"Will ye come again some time?"

"Indeed we will, Mrs. Reilly. And you must make himself bring you and Mary-Kate to Billabong."

"I'd be proud to come," she said.

"And I'll send Brownie over," Norah said. "Do rest if that pain comes back."

"I will, Miss—if himself is out." She smiled up at them bravely—and then uttered a cry of alarm as Garryowen danced wildly, impatient to get home.

"Oh, howld on now, Miss! He'll kill you, so he will!"

"Not he!" said Norah, laughing. They waved a cheery good-bye, giving the horses their heads across the paddock.

"I don't like that pain," said Norah thoughtfully. "Let's see—Brownie is going into Cunjee to-morrow, to the dentist. But I'll get her to go and see Mrs. Reilly next day. Brownie's as good as most doctors."

But events moved more quickly than they had foreseen. Norah was working in the garden next afternoon when a brisk step came along the path and she turned to meet a tall man whose face was vaguely familiar. Somewhere she had seen him, she felt sure. But wherever it had been she knew she had not seen that look of haggard misery.

"I'm Reilly, Miss," he said shortly. "They told me I'd find you here."

"Oh—Reilly!" Norah said—and then she knew. "Is it your wife?"

The tall fellow choked.

"She's mortal bad, Miss," he said. "I came in this morning, after the little gerri had gone to school, an' I found her faintin' on the floor. An' when I brought her round, an' she on the couch, the pain came on—awful pain, God help her!—an' she fainted again. I gev her brandy, an' when she was a little better I galloped to Four-Cross-Roads and tallyphoned for the doctor."

"What did he say?"

"He came in his car, Miss, an' he took her away. 'Tis a case for an operation, he says, an' it'll go harrd with her. He had to tell her, or she wouldn't lave. An' then she kept cryin' that she couldn't go, by reason of the little gerri. 'I can't lave Mary-Kate!' she'd say, over an' over, till I was fair desperate. An' then she remembered you—she's tuk a powerful likin' to you, if you'll excuse her, Miss—an' she said, says she, 'Take her to Miss Linton—Miss Linton said she'd help me.' An' I promised her I would."

"I should think so!" breathed Norah. "Where is she now, Reilly?—Mary-Kate, I mean."

"Outside, beyant there, in the little car, Miss," said the tall man. "I gathered up her things the besht way I could, an' I brung her from school. She doesn't know how ill her mother is, the creature!" He stopped, his face working.

"Oh, Reilly, I'm so sorry! But you're not to lose heart—Dr. Anderson is very clever, and he has such a good hospital. When is it to be—the operation?"

"To-morrow morning, Miss. At eleven."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I must go back home, Miss. They won't let me see her again—they're kaping her asleep for the pain. An' there's the cows to be milked. But I'll get in to Cunjee as early as I can to-morrow, if the little yalla horse'll do it—he's half-knocked up with the ploughin'. But if I can lave Mary-Kate here, Miss, 'twould be a godsend, for what else to do with her I dunno." He looked at her with the pathetic helplessness of a man whose household affairs have always been ordered for him.

"But of course you will leave her here. I'll love to have her, and Brownie and I will take great care of her," Norah knitted her brows. "It's you I'm thinking of; you can't go back there alone." She looked up at his drawn face, and a sudden thought struck her. "Reilly—when did you have anything to eat?"

"I misremember," he said stupidly. "Oh, at breakfast, I suppose. 'Twas affther that I found her." His face worked again.

"I thought so," she said. "Now you are to come in and have some food, and I will see what we can do."

"Ah, I don't want anything, Miss!" His voice was a cry of despair.

Norah stamped her foot.

"You're not to talk like that!" she said. "I know you're only thinking of your wife; but you've got to think of to-morrow—she may need you badly then. And you've got to be ready to give her all she wants—you can't do that if you're shaky from want of food. Just you come with me and do as I tell you." She smiled up at him, her eyes full of sympathy. "Mary-Kate—has she had her dinner?"

"She always takes it to the school, Miss."

"Then we needn't worry about her just yet," Norah said. She led the way to the kitchen, deserted in Brownie's absence, and hurriedly put food before her guest, brewing a pot of strong tea. He found himself unable to eat at first; but after a cup of tea food became once more a possibility. She left him eating while she went in search of Murty. The boys were out, driving Mr. Linton. But in any case, it was Murty Norah wanted now. She told him swiftly how matters stood.

"Wirra, now, but that's cruel luck!" said Murty. "That nice little woman! An' he says 'twill go harrd with her, Miss Norah?"

"Yes—but we're not going to think of that," Norah said firmly. "Murty, we can't let him go back there alone—and he can't be tied to his cows to-morrow—not after the morning. He may be wanted in Cunjee. I was thinking, if you went back with him to-night, with the light buggy and a good pair of horses—you'd help him better than anyone else, being an Irishman. You could stay the night with him, and drive him in to Cunjee early. And then he must stay there—we could manage to send a man over twice a day to milk for him, couldn't we? Mr. Jim or Mr. Wally would do it if there is no one else."

"Yerra, I'll do it myself, Miss Norah."

"Would you, Murty?" She looked up at him gratefully, for head stockmen belong to a race of men who do not milk cows—by choice. "That is very good of you."

"'Tis not," said Murty. "Isn't he a Munster man?—an' with that nice little wife, too! I'll run up the browns, Miss Norah, an' they're that fresh they'll travel near as fast as that big motor-car of yours! An' I'll tell him I'll ride over night an' mornin' to milk, as long as he wants to stay in Cunjee. Poor chap! Wirra, I hope there isn't sorrow ahead for him!"

"Keep him up as much as you can, Murty," Norah said. "Make him talk about Ireland, and his farm. He may want all his strength to-morrow."

"I will, Miss Norah."

"He'd be a dear, Murty," Norah said warmly. "If all goes well, he could come out here after to-morrow, so that he would be on the telephone."

"He could then, An', Miss Norah"—Murty hesitated a moment—"ye'll need to have the little gerri to Cunjee to-morrow, won't you? Sure, the mother may be askin' for the little thing."

"Yes—I know, Murty. I'll take her in the car."

She went back to the house. Reilly had finished his meal and was sitting at the table, his head buried in his hands. Norah touched him on the shoulder.

"Now, you're not to worry about anything that we can help, Reilly. I can't tell you not to worry at all—but you must keep a brave heart and be ready to help your wife if she needs you. Don't take it for granted things are going badly with her. Think how strong she is."

"I do be thinkin'," said Reilly, "of all the pain she's had. She towld the doctor that she'd had it this long while back—gettin' worse lately. And niver a word, niver a look, to let me know she had it. I dunno at all how did she keep it from me; I thought I watched her pretty close. But she was always cheery—always tryin' to buck a man up."

"Well, you're to buck up now, as she would want you to," said Norah. "Murty's going over to spend the night with you, and he'll drive you in to Cunjee early in the morning. And he will milk your cows as long as you want to be in the township."

Reilly stared at her, unbelievably.

"I've been thinkin' of them cows all day," he said—"wonderin' how I'd manage for 'em. If they died on me I'd have to be in Cunjee to-morrow!"

"Well, they're off your mind," said Norah practically. "Now we'll come and get poor little Mary-Kate; I didn't mean to leave her so long, but I had to find Murty. And we'll let the yellow horse go, for Murty's taking a fresh pair that wants exercise. He'll be all right here until you want to take him home; and you can always get a lift out here in the motor—I'll take Mary-Kate in to-morrow, and any day her mother wants her. She's sure to want her—lots of days."

There were no words left to poor Reilly. He tried to speak, and could not. They came in sight of Mary-Kate in the sulky, and Mary-Kate immediately made her presence felt.

"Daddy! Daddy! Come here, now, an' step quiet. Sure, he have the rein under his tail, an' I not darin' to draw a breath these ten minutes past, for fear he'd bolt on me. An' the more I try to pull the rein out, the more he tucks his tail in!"

Reilly put his hand on the yellow horse's bridle.

"Jump out, now, Mary-Kate," he said. "Miss Linton's goin' to keep you here; an' she'll take you in to Cunjee to see Mother, she says."

"Now?" demanded Mary-Kate.

"No—to-morrow. Let you be a good gerrl, now, and give no trouble; an' don't go strayin' off annywhere by yourself."

"Will I have me mighty?" queried his daughter.

"Whisht, now!" said Reilly, much shocked. "Have behaviour, can't you? I have all things for you in the little box there. I'll bring it in for you in a minute. I'll take the little horse round to the yard, Miss Linton, shall I?"

"Yes—just across there: Murty will show you," Norah answered. "Go with your Daddy and help him, Mary-Kate. I'll be back in a moment." She ran to the house, struck with a new idea.

When she came out, Mary-Kate's box was on the verandah, and beside it Mary-Kate herself stood patiently. Beyond, Murty and Dave Boone were trying to hold the brown horses while Reilly and Mick Shanahan fastened the traces. The browns were as fresh as Murty had said, and every one was busy.

Norah ran across to the yard just as Reilly accomplished his task.

"I've just telephoned to the hospital, Reilly," she said, in a voice that was only for his ear. "And she's sleeping calmly—having a lovely rest, they said. So don't worry more than you can help."

A great wave of colour swept over the man's haggard face. He looked at her dumbly.

"All aboard!" Murty sang out. "These horses won't wait, Miss Norah!"

"No, of course they won't, Murty," Norah answered. "Jump in, Reilly."

"I——" he stammered, looking at her.

"Jump in, man, quick! D'you want them horses to tie themselves in knots?" demanded Dave Boone.

Reilly gave it up, and swung himself into the buggy. The horses sprang into their collars with a scatter of hoofs, and they whizzed down the track, the high wheels flashing back the sunlight. Not until they were well out on the road did the Irishman find his tongue.

"There's not wan thing that little lady of yours didn't think of an' plan for me," he said. "Not wan thing—an' then to finish by tallyphoning about Delia the last minute. And I like a dumb fish that couldn't get a word out of me—not so much as to say 'Thank you.'"

"Yerra, that's as well," said Murty. "If there's wan thing Miss Norah hates more than another, it's back-chat!"

MARY-KATE was prancing with joy on the verandah as Norah returned to the house.

"See them go!" she shrieked. "Did you see them, now, Miss? Weren't they beautiful when they stood on their hind-legs! I never seen horses like them in me born days. Fine I'd like to be dhivin' with me dad—that is, if I wasn't here, Miss," she added politely.

"Would you rather have horses than a motor-car, Mary-Kate?" Norah asked.

"Wouldn't I just! Motors is handy when you're in a hurry, I suppose—nasty, smelly things! But there's nothing like horses."

"That's what I think, Mary-Kate," said Norah. "We'd get on comfortably together. Now, what shall we do? I can't take you to your room, because until Brownie comes home I don't quite know where to put you. Shall we go and see the place?"

"I'd love to do that same, Miss," said Mary-Kate. There was something unsatisfied about her expression. Suddenly Norah remembered the words of little Mrs. Reilly. "When she comes home from school she do be roarin' for food!"

"Oh—are you hungry, Mary-Kate?"

"I could do with a piece, Miss, and thank you," responded her guest politely.

"And tea?"

"Me mother won't let me have tea. Milk's what she's always giving me."

"Then come along to the pantry," said Norah. They set forth presently, Mary-Kate having consumed two glasses of milk. In one hand she bore a buttered scone, in the other a huge slice of plum-cake. She took bites from them alternately. Perfect peace was written on her face.

There ensued a busy time for Norah. They explored the lucerne-paddock, and the herd of well-bred Jerseys; the creek, now only a chain of holes; the vegetable-garden, where the Chinese gardener raised a bland face and smiled upon them, to the instant alarm of Mary-Kate, who, to Norah's great surprise, had never before seen a Chinaman—and apparently never wished to see another. They passed on to the fowl-yards, and the guest bleated with joy at the spectacle of ducks in a duck-pond, declaring that it reminded her of Cork. The front garden excited only mild enthusiasm, although the vivid colours of the dahlias held her for a moment; but another novelty was an orange-tree loaded with golden-red fruit, and, being allowed to gather one for herself, she remarked that it was like being in heaven in a dream. But all these minor attractions paled into insignificance beside the stables. There, no corner was left unexplored; she climbed to the great loft overhead, fragrant with piled masses of sweet hay, in which Mary-Kate rolled luxuriously; and then, descending once more to earth, pranced delightedly from feed-room to harness-room, from buggy-house to cart-shed, and finally ended with rapture among the stalls, where Garryowen and Monarch, Mr. Linton's great black horse, together with Butterfly, Wally's beautiful chestnut mare, and Jim's big iron-grey, Struan, were enjoying their evening meal. Over these four aristocrats Mary-Kate's condition amounted almost to delirium. Norah took her into each stall and allowed her to pat the occupants: all save Butterfly, at whom the small person tilted her already upturned nose.

"She's beautiful, but I'll not pat her," she said. "She's yalla: an' I hate yalla horses."

"But she isn't really yellow," said Norah, looking admiringly at the chestnut's glossy coat. "Not bright yellow. She's a dark chestnut."

"She is, then," admitted Mary-Kate grudgingly. "But she's yalla, all the same: an' I do despise yalla horses. Would you let me go an' stroke Garryowen again, Miss? He's the darlin' of them all!"

"Can you ride at all, Mary-Kate?"

"In Ireland I'd be ridin' a little ass whinever I got the chance," said Miss Reilly. "But that wasn't often, more's the pity. An' the asses about Cork have no spirit left in them, they're that hard-worked. You'd nearly as well be ridin' a fence-rail, an' it to be walkin' along. An' since I come out here I've tried three times to ride me daddy's yalla horse. But that's the cunning one—I'm hardly on him before he puts his head down an' shoots the tail part of him up in the air, and it's over his head I am! But I'll best him yet."

Norah laughed. She began to sympathize with Mary-Kate's distrust of yellow horses.

"There's a quiet old pony in the big paddock," she said. "I'll get the men to run him in for you, if you like, Mary-Kate. You could easily learn to ride on him. I'll promise he won't shoot you over his head!"

Mary-Kate gasped.

"D'you mean it, Miss? You're not funning."

"No, of course I'm not," said Norah, smiling. "I'll teach you to ride, and then you'll be able to laugh at the yellow horse. Listen—I hear the motor. Come and we'll meet them."

Mary-Kate detached herself with difficulty from Garryowen, and they went across to the great gate of the yard just as the car came up. David Linton got out slowly: his knee still gave trouble, and much to his disgust the doctor forbade him to think of mounting a horse. Brownie followed, with an air of relief. Circumstances occasionally compelled Brownie to travel in a motor, but she always felt that she took her life in her hands when she did so.

"Well, my girl," said David Linton. "Got a visitor?"

"This is little Mary-Kate Reilly, Dad, from beyond Four-Cross-Roads. Her mother is sick, so she has come on a visit. Did the dentist hurt you, Brownie darling?"

"No—dentists is wonderful gentle nowadays," said Brownie. "Pulled out me old tooth so quiet you wouldn't 'a' known it was comin'! It's a reel luxury to go to a dentist these times, compared to what it used to be."

"Therefore we are endeavouring to plan a visit for you, Norah," said Wally, laughing. "Here's the way to manage it. Catch!"

"Chocolates!" said Norah, with unction, catching the box deftly. "O-oh, Wally—with almonds inside! Bless you!" Her eyes met his with an answering smile. "What have you been buying, Jim?"

"Figs; they're somewhere about, or what is left of them," Jim said. "A dried fig will always get me into a trap. I wish Wally didn't like them, too—we'd have brought you more home if he didn't."

"Indeed, I only trifled with them!" said Wally, much aggrieved.

"Oh, is that what you call trifling? Well, I'd hate to see you in real earnest," said Jim, laughing. "Parcels all out? Hop in, Mary-Kate, and we'll run you across to the garage." And Mary-Kate, always ready for a new experience, hopped in.

Norah left her to the boys, and going into the house told Brownie her story.

"Poor thing!" said the old woman. "And that poor little girl! Yes, we must take her in to-morrow, Miss Norah. It wouldn't do for her not to be there if the mother asked for her."

"And Mary-Kate doesn't know anything about it, Brownie," Norah said. "She thinks her mother just a bit sick—not enough to be worried about. She's just bubbling over with happiness. Need we tell her, Brownie, do you think? I didn't know what to do, until you came."

Brownie pondered.

"I don't know as it would do any good," she said. "Time enough to-morrow, if things really go badly with the poor woman: what's the use of making the little girl miserable to-night? We'll see what the doctor says in the morning, shall we? Let 'er sleep comfëtable to-night, that's my advice. Where did you think we'd put 'er, Miss Norah?"

"I thought in the little room next yours," Norah said. "Then you could keep an eye on her, couldn't you, Brownie?"

"The very thing I was going to sejest," said Brownie. "Send 'er in to me, Miss Norah, an' you can go and talk to your Pa."

Mary-Kate appeared after tea, her face scrubbed to a fine polish and her hair tightly strained back and tied with a red bow; and being taken by Norah to listen to the gramophone, sat in a state of rapt delight until Brownie came to say it was time for bed. She left reluctantly, remarking that it was a terrible weeshy box to have so many tunes inside it.

Norah went into the little room after Brownie had put out the light. In the dim glow that filtered in from the hall Mary-Kate's head bobbed up excitedly.

"Is it you, Miss? You wouldn't know what a bath I've had!"

Norah sat down on the bed.

"Was it a good one, Mary-Kate?"

"'Twas heavenly," said the guest solemnly. "Near as long as you are, Miss, an' all shinin' white, with silver taps and things: I never seen the like. And Mrs. Brown sayin' she was sorry she couldn't give me much water; but there was as much as we'd dare use for a week for the three of us at home! And the loveliest soap, that smelled like flowers; and a towel big enough for a sheet on me bed. 'If the quality do be havin' baths every day like that,' says I to Mrs. Brown, 'then 'tis no wonder they'd look clean.' 'Pout!' says she, 'you can be as clean as that if you had to bath in a tin basin!' An' that's no lie, for 'tis a tin basin me mother's after usin' since the tanks went too low for her to have the wash-tub: an' she's as clean as any quality, beggin' your pardon, Miss. But a person'd get the height of enjoyment out of a bath like yours!"

"I'm glad you liked it," Norah said, laughing. "Quite comfortable now, Mary-Kate?"

"'Tis a beautiful bed, Miss, an' the pillow-case smells as lovely as the soap. Only"—the small voice faltered for a moment—" 'tis a weeshy bit lonely without a person's mother."

"Yes, I know it is," Norah said, putting her hand on the child's arm. "But Mother is being made better, and she wanted you to come here, you know."

"That's what me Daddy said. But I'd have liked to stay at home an' look after him—I know I could do it like Mother does. Leastways, I'd try. But Daddy said it was 'orders,' so of course I had to come—an' indeed, it's fine bein' here, Miss, an' you're terrible good to me." She gave a little sigh. "'Tis only when it gets dark I get thinkin' about me mother. Will she be long in that old hospital, Miss?"

"I don't quite know," Norah said gently. "You must just be patient, Mary-Kate: to-morrow we'll go in to Cunjee and see if she is well enough to see you."

"To see me!" The child's voice rose incredulously. "Why, there never was any time that Mother couldn't see me! She'd hate it if she knew I was there an' they wouldn't let me in."

"But sometimes doctors have to keep a sick person very quiet, Mary-Kate," Norah said. "It wouldn't be that Mother would not want to see you—only it might be better for her to go to sleep. You must try to understand that. The doctor will just do what he thinks will make Mother well most quickly."

"Oh, well, if he does that I won't mind," said Mary-Kate resignedly. "Me Daddy'll be mighty lonesome over there without her."

"Your Daddy may come here, too—wouldn't that be jolly?" said Norah. "Now, I'll tell you what I'll do, Mary-Kate: just you shut your eyes and go to sleep, and I'll sit here until you're quite in Dreamland."

She bent down and kissed the brown cheek. Mary-Kate snuggled into the pillow that smelled like the soap, with a little luxurious sigh; but presently a small, lonely hand crept out of the bed-clothes, and when Norah took it the little fingers curled round hers, and she heard a sigh that was half a sob. Norah held her hand closely until, after a few minutes, the childish grasp relaxed, and deep breaths told that little Mary-Kate was asleep.

Brownie met her as she went softly along the corridor.

"I was goin' to look at the little girl," she said.

"She's asleep. Brownie. Poor little soul!" Norah's voice was very troubled. "She's such a baby; and she can't even realize that she may not be able to see her mother to-morrow."

"Time enough to fret when there's need," said Brownie practically. "If we jumped over all our bridges to meet trouble, why, we'd be always in the air! Just you go early to bed, Miss Norah, my dear, an' have a good sleep: I'll keep me eye on Mary-Kate. Bit of quicksilver, if ever there was one; 'twas all I could do to stop 'er turnin' somersaults in the bath!" And Norah went her way, somewhat comforted.

But the drive to Cunjee next morning seemed one of the longest she had ever known. Mary-Kate had awakened in high spirits, quite convinced that by now the hospital would have effected her mother's cure, and that a day or two more would see her back at the farm. She confided to Brownie at breakfast that in all probability a visit from Mary-Kate herself would go far towards her mother's recovery. "Wasn't it herself was never happy when she was ill on the ship if I was to be a minute out of her sight?" she demanded. "If that ould doctor says I'm not to go in, you'll tell him so, won't you, Mrs. Brownie, dear?" To which poor Brownie could only nod assent, and tell her to go on with her porridge now, like a good girl.

Wally drove the car, and Norah put Mary-Kate beside him, to her great delight. The sound of her quick, low chatter came ceaselessly to Norah and Brownie as they sat in the back, looking at the bare, brown paddocks as they spun past. Here and there a man was trying to plough; but in most places the ground was too hard and dry, and the farmers shook their heads ominously when they met, and muttered gloomy predictions about their next crops. Then they came within sight of the outskirts of Cunjee, and presently Wally slowed down and glanced backwards.

"Eleven o'clock," he said. "Shall I go to the hospital?"

Norah, too, had been looking at the watch on her wrist. Eleven was the hour, Reilly had said, for the operation: and they could not tell how long it might take. She did not want to sit outside the hospital with Mary-Kate impatient to go in: and yet she dared not have her far away.

"I suppose it would be better," she said. "Drive slowly past, Wally: Reilly may be there."

Reilly was there. He was standing in the little garden of the hospital, looking about him as a man may look who comes out of a trance: and when he saw the big car slowing down, with his child's glowing face in front, he gave a great start and began running down the path. The latch of the gate hindered him: he put his hand on the post and vaulted it lightly, hurrying out into the road. When he came near they saw that the tears ran down his face unchecked.

"'Tis all right!" he said, catching hold of the car. "Glory be to God, 'tis all right with her!"

"Reilly! It isn't over?"

"It is, then. Eleven, the doctor told me, but they did it at ten, God bless them! An' the nurse has just been out to tell me she'll do well."

"Is it Mother?" asked little Mary-Kate, suddenly trembling.

"It is, as thore. Very ill she's been, but please God she'll soon be back with us."

"Can I see her?" demanded Mary-Kate.

"I dunno can ye, But that's no matter."

"But me mother'll want to see me!" said Mary-Kate, in a high, strained voice. It pulled her father together suddenly.

"The little thing!" he said under his breath, looking at her pitifully. "Listen here, now, Mary-Kate. Neither you nor meself will see Mother till the doctor says so. What good wud it do for great lumpin' things like you an' me to go disturbin' her, when it's sleep she's wantin'? So no more of it. 'Tis 'orders,' Mary-Kate!"

Mary-Kate shut her lips obediently. Dr. Anderson, coming up quietly behind Reilly, glanced at the small, set face.

"Very satisfactory business," said he, nodding at them. "Jolly good thing I got her in time, but she'll do well. Now, Mary-Kate, your mother's in the best sleep she's had for a month, and if any of you so much as peeps at her I'll—well, I'll give whoever does it the worst and biggest dose of medicine in my surgery. But this afternoon—well that's another matter. Staying in, Norah?"

"Yes, if you like, Doctor."

"Just as well to let the mother have a peep at her—she's very much on the poor thing's mind. Bring her about four o'clock—only for a minute, mind. Longer to-morrow afternoon, if you can manage to come in."

"Why, of course," said Norah.

"That's all right, then. You're in the township, I think you said, Reilly?"

"I'll not be far from the hospital, sir."

"Very well. You'll be able to go home in a day or two, with an easy mind. And no excitement when you see her—just be natural, and tell her it's a fine day; and, well, then the best thing you can do is to go out again! She's had a hard time, and rest is all she wants."

"I'll remember, sir."

The busy doctor said hasty good-byes and went off to his car. Wally turned to Norah.

"Now, what are we going to do? Got any shopping?"

"Not a thing," said Norah. "And nearly five hours to do it in!"

"That's what I thought," Wally remarked cheerfully. "I'll tell you—let's go and raid the town for food, and we'll have a picnic somewhere along the river. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Mary-Kate?"

Mary-Kate said nothing.

"Lovely idea!" Norah exclaimed. "I was wondering how we'd put in five hours in Cunjee. What do you think, Brownie?"

Brownie sighed.

"I never did see why people went for picnics," she said. "Leavin' a comfereable 'ome an' good, sollud chairs an' tables, to go an' sit on the ground, among ants an' centipedes which get into your tea, may be fun for some people. Not to me. But seein' as it's that or Cunjee for the 'ole day, well, I s'pose we might do worse!"

"Cheer up, Brownie," Wally said. "You've a good, solid motor to sit in, and I'll keep the ants and centipedes off you myself with a stick! You won't come, I suppose, Reilly?"

"I'll not leave the town, sir, thank you kindly."

"Well, we'll see you this afternoon." Wally put out his hand suddenly, his brown face flushing. "And I'm ever so glad it's all right, Reilly!"

The Irishman gripped the offered hand—and then Norah's.

"They said we were comin' to a lonesome country," he said. "But I never knew of any country where I'd find friends like this!"

They left him standing in the street and went off to the shops. There were not many in Cunjee; shopping for a picnic did not seem a very satisfactory pursuit—that is, if one had large ideas. But the baker's yielded fresh bread and big soft sticky buns, well supplied with currants; and the baker's wife, who loved Norah, insisted on lending them cups and knives, on hearing that they were going to have a picnic lunch. The general store supplied sardines and butter and tea, and packed them in a new tin billy; and the baker's wife came hurrying after them with a bottle of milk.

"Which completes," said Wally, with dignity, "the essentials of a good meal, Brownie!"

"H'm!" said Brownie, who despised food that came out of tins. "An' the worst of it is, with that poor-spirited Annabelle at 'ome in charge of me kitchen, there's no knowin' what we'll get to-night after it!"

Trimmings for the good meal were added at the fruit-shop, which also sold chocolates; and then, as there was nothing left to buy, the car was turned out of the town, and they headed up a quiet track which ran beside the river. Like all tracks in that dry autumn it was deep in dust; but after a few miles they turned through a white gate into a grassy reserve, planted and kept in order by the patriotic citizens of Cunjee as a perpetual picnic-ground. There were no other pleasure-seekers on this quiet noonday: they had the place to themselves. Wally drew up the car under a big tree and jumped out. He drew Norah aside.

"Nor, do you know that little kiddie has never said a word since we were at the hospital? Something's worrying her."

"I thought she was very silent," Norah said, looking hastily at Mary-Kate, who had left the car and was wandering along the river-bank. "I'll go and see what's wrong."

"Do," said Wally. He turned back, confident that whatever was wrong Norah would put it right. The boys had great faith in Norah.

"Mary-Kate, dear! What is it?"

Norah put a hand on the childish shoulder. She felt her stiffen for a moment, resisting her. Then she swung round, raising a white, miserable face.

"There's somethin' I've not been told!" she said in low, gasping tones. "Something wrong with me mother. I thought 'twas only a bit sick she was—an' then I saw me father's face, an' he cryin'. *Cryin'*, he was. Is me mother goin' to die?—is she——?"

She flung herself down on the grass, her whole body shaking in a passion of sobs. For a minute Norah let her cry. Then she sat down beside her and patted her shoulder.

"Stop crying, Mary-Kate, and I'll tell you."

The sobs ceased presently, and the child sat up, digging her fists into her eyes.

"Now, listen to me," Norah said gently. "Your mother has been terribly ill. She has been ill for a long time, but she hid it from you and your father. He found it out yesterday because she couldn't hide her pain any longer; and when he got the doctor he had to let him take her away. We couldn't tell you how ill she was, because we didn't know ourselves until we saw the doctor this morning: he had to have time to find out. Do you understand that?"

Mary-Kate nodded.

"But will she die?"

Norah hesitated, seeking for words to answer that passionate demand for truth.

"We are nearly sure she won't. You could see for yourself that the doctor is satisfied. But for a few days she will be very ill; and then it will be a long while before she is quite better. So you must just do all you can to make her well. When you see her to-day she will look ill and white, but you must pretend you don't notice that—don't say anything about it: just kiss her and be very quiet. To-morrow she will most likely look much better, and you will be able to talk to her a little, and in a few days I hope there won't be any worry at all. Only for a long time she will be weak."

"An' what'll she do, at all, when she comes home? I'm too little to look after her properly!"

Norah smiled. This was easier ground.

"Oh, we'll plan that," she said cheerily. "We can't let her go home until she's quite well, can we? Suppose we bring her to Billabong, and you can help us to take care of her there?"

"Oh!" said Mary-Kate. "Oh!" And had no more words to say.

"Now, I think we'll come and wash your face, because it isn't exactly a picnic-face," said Norah, laughing. "And then I expect Mr. Wally will be ready to give you a lesson in lighting a fire in the bush. You have to be very careful in this weather for fear of the fire getting away from you."

"An' how would it do that, Miss?" asked Mary-Kate in bewilderment.

"Good gracious!" said Norah, dumbfounded at such ignorance. "Why—it just runs away through the bush, of course. Like—well, it just burns everything as it goes, and jumps from tree to tree."

"That 'ud be a grand sight, Miss!" remarked Mary-Kate politely. At which Norah felt unequal to any further explanation, and led the way to the river.

The stream swept round in a wide bend, in which the reserve nestled; and here a wide, sandy bank shelved gently to the water in a natural bathing-place. Mary-Kate yelped with delight at the sight of the sand, and was with difficulty removed from it to wash her face.

"I never seen sand, only in wan place before we got to Australia," she said, scrubbing her face with her small petticoat. "'Twas a quare place called Durban: we got to it when we'd been more than two weeks on the ship. An' you'd never guess, Miss, what we thravelled in there."

"What was it, Mary-Kate?"

"The quarest wee carriages, Miss, an' no horse in the shafts of them, but only a great black man! Dozens of them, like outside-cars in the streets of Cork, or cabs in Melbourne: great naygurs in striped clothes, an' their heads covered with feathers and with bullocks' horns stickin' out. An' they beggin' you to ride in their cars!"

"And did you?" Norah had been in Durban, but this did not seem to her the moment to announce it.

"Me mother nearly throw a fit at the notion. 'I'll lose me life,' says she, 'before I see meself in one of them!' But me father knew all about them, an' he persuaded her, so she went with him, an' a friend of his, Mr. Murphy, tuk me. Yerra, that was the grand ridin'! To see the great black legs of them poundin' up and down, an' the feathers an' ornyments noddin' on their heads! An' they ran like as if they'd never be tired."

"Did your mother like it?"

"I dunno if she did, at first. She held on tight, wan hand on the edge of the car an' the other on me father's arm—an' he said 'twas black an' blue he was! But she got used to it afther a bit, seein' everywan else in them, as unconcerned as you please. An' they tuk us to a great beach where the big breakers came rowlin' in; an' that's

where I saw the sand!" finished Mary-Kate, triumphantly.

They came back along a scrub-grown track, to find Wally and Brownie yarning happily, seated on a log which appeared good and solid enough even for Mrs. Brown. Wally cast a quick glance at them, looking relieved at Mary-Kate's cheerful face.

"We think it's time to boil the billy," he said, jumping up. "We've cleared all this district of ants, and centipedes, and scorpions, and horned toads and other things, and Brownie says it's good enough to lunch in. Come along, Mary-Kate, and you and I will do the work!"

They went off, hand in hand, to the river to fill the billy, returning with an armful of sticks; and Wally showed the small immigrant how to light a fire in dry weather—clearing first of all a wide space all round and making the fire as small as possible; and even then watching carefully lest a spark should fly into the dry grass. When the billy boiled he separated the fire, carefully stamping out every ember: and they carried the billy to the log under the big wattle tree, where they ate bread and butter and sardines, and finished up with buns.

"And if there's a pleasant sight," said Wally, "than Brownie sitting on a log eating a bun, I've yet to see it!"

But it was a beautiful picnic, every one agreed; and no one seemed to desire anything more to eat. They washed up the cups and knives, rejoicing that the equipment was so simple; and in coming back from the river they encountered the crown of Mary-Kate's day—her Great Adventure. They were in a clear patch when Wally, who was a yard ahead, suddenly put his burden of cups down gently and turned to the girls.

"Quiet!" he said. "Want to see a snake, Mary-Kate?"

"Is it safe?" she whispered.

"Quite—for you. Look!" He pointed to where, a dozen yards away, a small snake was coiled on the grass. Wally picked up a stick.

"An' is it alive?" breathed Mary-Kate.

"It is—very much alive. Try to pat it, and you'll see!" grinned Wally.

"To pat it, is it?" returned Mary-Kate, with surprising venom. "I'd like to kill it! Wan of them things near bit me father last month."

"Well, suppose you kill it. Here's a stick."

"Is it me?" quavered Mary-Kate. Then her lips tightened. "Well, I will so. How do I do it?"

"Wally, you shouldn't!" This from Norah, in a reproachful whisper.

"Why not?" queried Wally. "She's ten, isn't she? And she's quite likely to see a snake any day going to school. The sooner she learns the better; and that chap is half torpid. Sure you're not scared, Mary-Kate?"

"I *am* scared," said she truthfully. "But I will do it. Tell me how."

"Good kid!" said Wally approvingly. "Go up to it gently—it's coiled, and it's so lazy it probably won't uncoil before you get there. And if it does it will only try to get away. Don't get in front of it, if it does. And just hit—hard: and then hit again. I'll be alongside of you with another stick in case you miss; but you're not going to miss."

Thus urged, Mary-Kate did exactly as she was bid, and discovered how easy it is to kill a snake. The reptile, made torpid by the chill of the autumn nights, did not stir until she hit it. Then, to be sure, it stirred vigorously, thrashing wildly round in the dry grass: and Mary-Kate, with one more wild hit, turned and fled back to Norah. At Wally's laugh she turned, half-resentful, half-relieved, also, to find that the snake was not in hot pursuit. Wally had not moved. He stood watching the wriggling snake.

"Well, that's very good," he said, speaking aloud for the first time. "Great work for a new-chum! But why did you go away?"

"Isn't he after me?"

"He is not. He wouldn't be, in any case, even if you hadn't broken his back."

"Me! Me broke his back?"

"Sure thing," said Wally.

"But he's wriggling now!"

"He is," said Wally, contemplating the gyrating snake. "But the part you hit isn't moving; its moving days are done. Come and finish him—he's quite safe."

Mary-Kate returned slowly to the charge, and being convinced that the snake was no longer capable of pursuit, smote him again and again, very thoroughly, while Wally expounded to her the most approved way of killing a snake without risk to oneself: his instructions punctuated with so many incoherent exclamations of triumph from Miss Reilly that Norah subsided upon a log, weak with laughter.

"Now you've something to tell your dad!" said Wally. "Come along."

"Can't I bring him?"

"The snake?"

"Yes. I want to show Mrs. Brownie."

"She'll probably take three fits if you do," responded Wally. "You can tell her about it."

"But I want to show her!"

"Mary-Kate," said Wally solemnly, "'tis not meself will be a party to carrying a snake near Mrs. Brown, dead or alive. She has views on snakes that nothing can alter. Go on and tell her: and if you find she wants to look at it—which she won't—you can lead her gently by the hand and bring her here. But don't you touch him yourself. Whether a snake is dead, or whether it isn't, you keep away from his head."

"I will, sir," said Mary-Kate obediently; and rushed off to find Brownie. As she went she uttered short yelps of triumph. Wally laughed.

"She'll scare Brownie blue before she meets her," he said. "You didn't mind my letting her kill it, Nor?"

"I was a bit scared at first," Norah said. "But I saw that it really was the best thing to do; the finest safeguard against snakes is knowing you can kill them. And I might have known you'd keep her safe."

"You might," he said; and smiled down at her.

"Only she's such a little thing," Norah said, "and she's in my charge, you know, Wally."

"You're both in mine," he said masterfully. "And as for being small—was it six you were, or seven, Miss Linton, when you killed your first snake?"

"Six, I believe!" admitted Norah meekly. Whereat they both laughed; and, having gathered up the cups, made their way to the log, where Mary-Kate was recounting her adventure to the astonished Mrs. Brown.

"You never killed a snake yourself! Don't you tell me, Mary-Kate!"

"I did! I did!" shrieked Mary-Kate. "They let me. Mr. Wally was there, but 'twas me killed him. I hit him a shkelp with this stick—here it is before you!—an' then another, an' then I ran as if the Sivin Divils were after me. After that, I went back an' killed him some more. Didn't I, Mr. Wally?"

"You did," said Wally, laughing. "'Twas nobly done. Will you go and see the victim, Brownie?"

"You'd ought to know better than ask me that," said Brownie darkly. "Snakes is the one thing I cannot tolerunt! An' you let that child kill one!"

"She'll never learn younger," said Wally. "Every good Australian should know how to kill a snake—and Mary-Kate's going to be an excellent Australian."

"I am not," said Mary-Kate unexpectedly. "I'm Irish. But I'm terrible glad I've killed a snake, anyhow."

"Well, I 'opes I'm an Australian," said Brownie, with dignity. "But it's never fallen to me lot to kill one, an' all I can say is, may it never!"

"May I always be handy to kill them for you, Brownie, old dear!" said Wally, his merry voice gentle.

They came back to the hospital later on, to find Reilly cheerful. His wife had awakened, taken some nourishment, and now was fast asleep again: they might peep at her, the doctor said. So they tip-toed in, the father and daughter, holding each other's hands, and looked with awe at the face on the pillow—the little face that had grown so strangely small and white. Then a masterful nurse took them out, evidently much relieved to get them from the room without the patient having stirred. Once out, she became human and smiled at them kindly.

"You're sure 'tis doin' well she is, Nurse?" whispered Reilly. "You're not just tellin' us?"

"Why, she's doing splendidly," said the nurse brightly. "Come to-morrow, and she'll be able to talk to you." She looked at him keenly. "And you go home and get some sleep. Don't you dare to come walking in here to-morrow looking like a great, long ghost—I'm not going to have my patient scared out of her wits at the sight of

you!"

CHAPTER VI
OF A ROAN BULL

"I 'm going to muster those cattle in the back paddocks, Dad," said Jim Linton, putting down his empty coffee-cup. They were all at breakfast at Billabong. "Wally and I reckon it's a good while since we saw them, and more and more of them are getting back into the hills, now that feed in the paddocks is so scarce."

"Well, they are as well in the hills as anywhere," said his father.

"Yes, I know. But I'd like to round them up and make sure that none are missing—there's always the chance of a beast being hurt in those rough gullies. Besides, there's that roan bull that was put in there by mistake: if he takes to living in the bush he'll be as wild as a hawk. We might as well run them all in: it isn't much trouble to muster those paddocks, now that we have the yards built out there."

David Linton nodded agreement. The yards in the bush were an improvement Jim and Wally had recently carried out; indeed, they had built them themselves, with very little help, and were secretly rather proud of them. Murty had been heard to say that they were rattlin' good yards: and certainly they simplified the work of mustering the rough paddocks, since it was not necessary to drive the cattle nearly so far.

"Well, I wish I could go with you," he said. "Nothing I like better than a day out on those hills. I suppose you'll all make a day of it. Or are you too busy teaching Mary-Kate how to be an Australian, Norah?"

"Indeed, I'm not," Norah said. "When it comes to a day's mustering, Mary-Kate must sit back and play with Brownie. When are you going, Jim?"

"To-morrow, if it's fine. You've certainly got to come, Nor. And what about Tommy and Bob?"

"The more the merrier," said Norah. "More coffee, Jimmy?" She smiled at him. "Let's see; if I take Mary-Kate to see her mother to-day, I could call on the way and persuade the Rainhams to come: it's better than telephoning. Then I could pick them up on my way back and bring them here for the night. That's the easiest way for them. I think they'll come."

"Well, that seems to work out all right," said Jim.

"And we'll have a dance to-night, by way of getting ready," suggested Wally. "May we, Norah?"

"Rather! We haven't had a dance for ages. But I wish we could discover a third girl!"

"So do I," said Jim. "Could you put Mary-Kate in training, do you think?"

"Too young," said Mr. Linton. "Also, if you people are going mustering to-morrow you must finish your dance early. I'm not going to have my head stock-women too exhausted to gallop after that roan bull if he gets away."

"Oh, we'll finish early," Norah said. "Tommy and I have to dance every dance, so we get far more tired than the boys—one of them gets a rest every time."

"I have heard these remarks before," observed her father: "but I always notice that I am the one who has to stop the dance! When I was young——"

"You went to Masonic barks," said Jim unkindly. There was laughter at the expense of Mr. Linton.

"I don't know why you should dig up these wholly unnecessary recollections," said the squatter plaintively.

"Andy McLean played me a scurvy trick when he put me in your power over that blessed ball!"

"Why, we're awfully proud of you about it!" said Norah.

"Which shows distressing lack of judgment on your part," retorted her father. "If I'd brought you up well, you'd be shocked. And now I haven't the very least idea of what I set out to say before Jim interrupted me!"

"You said," said Wally, "something about 'when you were young.'"

"Therefore," went on Jim, "it is safe to bet that the missing remark is something entirely to our discredit. You did something ever so much better, didn't you, Dad?"

"I did," returned the squatter decidedly. "I danced ever so much better—and ever so much longer! I'd have scorned to knock off dancing early so that I could be fresh for my work next day. We danced all night, and, by Jove, we were fresh for our work next day! So there!"

This astounding series of bombshells reduced his family to speechlessness. They gaped at him in awe, until a helpless gurgle from Wally broke the spell, and they all shrieked with laughter.

"There's something so beautifully unexpected about you," said Jim, at last recovering the power of speech. "You know you never thought of saying all that at first."

"No, of course I didn't," said his father. "But I forgot what I did mean to say—and I forget it yet—and suddenly the extreme truth of my later remarks flashed into my mind; and so you got them! I don't quite know what the moral of it all is, and perhaps you'd better not look for one; anyhow, Norah and Tommy are certainly not going to dance all night. You boys can, if you like."

"Thanks—not for us," Jim said, with decision. "Presumably you had partners in those brave days of old when you kept it up until morning. Wally and Bob and I haven't, so we'll go to bed."

Tommy and Bob Rainham greeted with enthusiasm the idea of a day in the saddle.

"Just what I've been aching for," remarked Bob. "I'm sick of trying to plough in ground as hard as iron; and the sheep only look at me reproachfully when I go round them, and ask me when rain is coming. I haven't got enough work to do. When that happens to Tommy, she makes a new kind of cake; but I can't make a new kind of furrow—not until the ground softens. I've tried fancy kinds of fencing, but I've nothing left to fence."

"Poor old Bob!" Norah said, laughing. "Well, we'll give you plenty to do to-morrow. You can be ready about five, Tommy?"

"Oh yes, thanks," Tommy said. "How is the mother, Mary-Kate?"

"She do be gettin' on fine, Miss. The doctor says mebbe he'll let her get up next week."

"That is splendid. And then what is to happen?"

"Oh, that's all planned," Norah said. "Then Mary-Kate and Brownie and I go in for her in the car, and we bring her out, ever so gently, for fear of the bumps, and we plant her in the verandah-room at Billabong. And Brownie and Mary-Kate will feed her all day!" At which Mary-Kate grinned a wide grin of joy.

"An' me daddy'll ride over between milkin's, an' see us every day!" she said. "An' when she's quite better we'll take her home—but first of all Mrs. Brownie an' me are goin' over to clean up the house. Me daddy thinks he's keepin' it clean, but"—confidentially—"you know what men are. An' Mrs. Brownie's teachin' me to cook, the way I can manage things when I go home."

"Aren't you the lucky girl!" said Tommy. "Mrs. Brownie taught me, too—oh, ever so much!"

"An' she taught Miss Norah, too. She says when Miss Norah was twelve she cud cook a dinner that 'ud do for anny man!"

"There you are, Norah!" Bob and Tommy shouted with laughter, while Mary-Kate looked with pained dignity from one to the other, quite unable to see what she had said to excite such mirth.

"Well, I don't believe I ever did for one, anyhow," said Norah, her voice shaking. "After that, we'll move on while I have any character left. Five o'clock. Tommy dear, and be sure you don't forget to put in dancing shoes, 'cause I can't lend you any; mine are miles too big for you!" The car purred off.

"Most girls don't say things like that about themselves," said Bob Rainham, with a little smile.

"But Norah would," answered his sister, with conviction. "And if her feet are a size bigger than mine, they're the prettiest I ever saw!"

Norah dropped Mary-Kate at the hospital, and went about her shopping, returning, later on, to find the invalid promoted to being propped up in bed. A little colour was beginning to show in her cheeks. She wore a dainty dressing-jacket of fleecy Shetland wool.

"Me to have such a thing!" she confided to Norah. "Sure, I couldn't imagine 'tis meself that's in it! Miss Tommy made it for me her own self, an' brought it to me yesterday. I've told them nurses I'll ate the face off them if they spill so much as a drop on it!"

Mary-Kate was pouring out tea, full of pride in her task.

"I towld them you'd be comin', Miss Norah," she said. "So they've brought three cups."

"Oh, you shouldn't have bothered the nurses, Mary-Kate," Norah said.

"Ah, what bother? Didn't I get all the trays ready for them meself, when the doctor was talkin' to Mother?" For Mary-Kate was now a privileged person in the hospital, and knew the arrangements of the pantry as well as the nurses themselves. "More be taken, this is Mrs. Brownie's sponge-cake, an' it not half ate yet! I put a big lump of it on the tray for the boy who's hurt his leg, an' another for the man that's gettin' over pewmonia." Mary-Kate took a keen interest in the male patients, and contrived to smuggle many extras on to their tea-trays. The women failed to attract her. "They do be wearing them dhroll little nightcaps!" she said, with finality. "I don't like them!" And nothing would induce her to enter any of their rooms.

"I'm terrible afraid 'tis getting spoilt you'll be, Mary-Kate," said her mother anxiously. "You wouldn't let her be bold an' forward, now, Miss, would you? You an' Mrs. Brown are that kind, I'm in dread you'd make her think too much of herself."

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Reilly," said Norah, laughing. "Mrs. Brown doesn't stand any nonsense, and I'm the sternest person you ever saw. Isn't that so, Mary-Kate?" In answer to which Mary-Kate merely giggled delightedly into her tea-cup.

They danced that night at Billabong in the dining-room, where it was the work of only a few moments for the boys to push the table aside, and to whisk the Indian rugs off the floor of polished red jarrah. There was a definite system about these dances; since there was one gentleman too many, the "odd-man-out" presided at the gramophone and furnished music—with, occasionally, caustic comments on the dancing methods of his more fortunate friends. The "turn" over, he wound up the gramophone, set the next record in position, and sat like Patience on a monument until five minutes had expired, when he rushed to claim his partner. For the two girls, procedure was even more simple. There was no possible risk of being a "wallflower," and the one unpardonable offence was to dance twice running with the same partner, since to do so upset the whole routine.

There was an unusual touch of warmth in the air that night; they opened wide the long windows, letting in the cool air from the verandah, where Brownie and Mary-Kate were watching—the little girl in an ecstasy of enjoyment. Never had she seen anything like it—the long room bright with flowers, the polished floor reflecting the light in glowing pools on its glossy surface; the tall, cheery lads with their quiet, well-bred manner; and the girls, altogether lovely to little Mary-Kate in their dainty frocks. People said, much to Mary-Kate's astonishment, that Miss Tommy was the prettier; and certainly there was little fault to be found with Miss Tommy's pink-and-white skin, that Australia had so far failed to tan; with her dainty little figure, or with her hair that was like gold in the sunshine. But to the little Irish girl there was no one like her own Miss Norah, who was not exactly pretty, but something better; whose face was bronzed, with a touch of clear colour in the cheeks, while in her brown curls were glints of bronze and copper. No one, too, she was convinced, had ever danced like Miss Norah, with just that fairy lightness and that look of happiness. Billabong was far from town, and they had not forgotten all the old-world dances. They were dancing a waltz now—Mary-Kate could not have told you that, but she knew that the music was a drifting, swaying melody, with a sob in its refrain; and Miss Norah was dancing with Mr. Wally, and they moved together as if the very spirit of the music were in their feet. Miss Tommy danced it well, too, but she was with Mr. Jim, and Mary-Kate considered he was too tall for her; why, 'twould be a miracle if her nose didn't rub against his top waistcoat button! Her eyes went from them, back to that other tall pair, brown-faced and merry-eyed, who looked as if they had been made to dance together. Then the music stopped with a jar, and they drifted apart, and little Mary-Kate Reilly came back to earth.

"Oh, Mrs. Brownie, darlin'!" she whispered—"I'd give anything if I could ever learn to dance like that!"

"Humph!" said Brownie, with a snort. "Much better be thinkin' o' learnin' to cook!"

True to his threat, Mr. Linton hunted them off to bed at an early hour. Dancing was all very well, he said; but mustering was one of the serious businesses of life; and they said good-night, Jim mournfully protesting that in some mysterious manner he had been done out of a dance. Over their hair-brushing in Norah's room the girls lingered, chattering, until a stentorian voice from the squatter's room demanded to know if they intended to go to bed that night?—at which the culprits gasped, switched out their light, and fled to their beds on the balcony. Only one further remark fell from Norah.

"I suppose," she said reflectively, "even Esquimaux fathers have to say that sort of thing!"

Seven o'clock found them in the saddle, cantering through the dew-wet grass of the homestead paddock. Once, there had been log fences surrounding it—fences full of perfect places for jumping, from the low broad logs over which Jim and Norah and Wally had raced on their ponies as children, to the high jumps that needed a good horse and a fearless rider, where they had schooled Garryowen and Monarch when ponies were outgrown. Now the old log fences had gone; bush-fires had swept away some, and those that remained had been cleared away when the first rabbits had invaded Billabong, since they were even more fitted for housing the grey, furry armies than they had been for steeplechasing. Wire-fencing was everywhere now on the station—long lines of rabbit-proof steel, with netting sunk below the surface of the ground; but in every paddock the boys had built jumps into the fences, so that adventurous people could still sail across country without the fatiguing necessity of going round by gates.

"Feel up to jumping, Tommy?" Jim asked. Tommy was mounted on Bosun, an old favourite of Norah's, who quite understood that this light-weight rider was not quite as his own mistress had been in the saddle. For a girl who had never mounted a horse until two years before, Tommy was a pupil to be proud of, and she was, as Jim said, "all pluck." But she knew her limitations.

"If the top rail were down, Jim," she said, a little ruefully. "And I simply hate you to stop to do that. Do let me go round with Billy, by the gates." Black Billy, a resigned figure, mounted on a quiet old horse laden with bundles, was already jogging gatewards. Billy hated carrying lunch, and deeply disapproved of the days when the girls came out. When Jim and Wally went alone with him they carried packages of sandwiches in their pockets, and all three steeplechased across the fences; which was very near black Billy's idea of heaven. But when Garryowen and Bosun were saddled, Billy knew that his fate was a quiet horse, wriggly bundles with cups inside them, and—worst of all—a quart-pot.

Jim laughed.

"Why, you old stupid!" he said. "It's half the fun, to have you in it. Look here, I'll tell you what we'll do—we can all go ahead first, and then I'll get the top rail off for you."

Tommy agreed, more or less cheerfully. She knew quite well that nothing would induce the others to leave her, but she hated being a drag upon them. At times she comforted herself with the reflection that if they did not really want her they would not arrange to get her over to share their excursions—and, somehow, it had become a recognized thing that no Billabong excursion could take place without Bob and herself. Still—it was hard to feel oneself an outsider among this cheery, hard-riding band. Even Bob had learned to ride as a small boy, and could hold his own. She was the only one out of the fun—the only new-chum.

But Jim had a calm way of over-ruling difficulties, and he seemed quite unable to regard her as an outsider. He led the way across the first fence, and then, wheeling, jumped off, leaving Struan's bridle trailing. Struan utterly refused to be tied up, and invariably pulled back and broke his bridle if that indignity were offered him; but when his reins were pulled over his head and left on the ground he never moved until his rider came back. Jim had bitter recollections of a day in Cunjee when he had left him "ground-anchored" in this fashion, and had gone into the Bank; and a well-meaning passer-by, thinking that the reins had slipped from the hitching-post, had tied him up, at which Struan had broken the bridle and bolted for home, not pausing until he was at the gate of Billabong!

The others came across the fence without a mistake, except that Wally's young mare chose to make rather a fuss about jumping and tipped the rail with one foot, then Jim slipped the top rail out of place and Tommy charged it valiantly, clearing it easily; it was no great jump for Bosun, who had been only anxious to follow over the top rail in the wake of the others. Billy had come through the gate and lingered near to watch the jumping—seeing which, Jim had a brilliant idea.

"You put 'em rail up, Billy," he said. "Then you follow on and put 'em all up till we get to the back paddock. Savvy!"

"Plenty," said Billy sadly. This was the last straw. He clambered down slowly while Jim and Tommy raced away across the paddock.

There was not so much time lost now, for Jim was back in the saddle as soon as each top rail was down, and much of the ground lost in jumping they made up in galloping. There were no horses on Billabong fletcher than Struan and Bosun; they were not far behind the others when the last fence was jumped and they found themselves in the first of the bush paddocks. Here was jumping of a different kind; logs of all shapes and sizes, that had been left on the ground when the undergrowth had been cleared away. Tommy loved logs—she joined in the wild scurry round the paddock, Norah in the lead, the others doing "Follow-my-leader" after her; galloping across clear stretches, zig-zagging here and there so that logs should be missed. They pulled up where the standing timber began—laughing, cheeks flushed, eyes sparkling. Jim pointed his whip-handle at Tommy.

"There's that impostor!" he said. "Says she can't jump the top in a fence; and I give you my word she's just been jumping logs as high as any top rail, and as broad as they're high!"

"But—but I cannot see the daylight through the logs, Jim!" pleaded Tommy. "And the logs seem different somehow. I know Bosun will not touch them."

"You can be jolly well certain he won't put a toe on a rail, either," said Jim. "Never mind. Tommy; we'll have you over fences yet. Now then, everybody—no more larking! Scatter through the timber and work everything you see down to the new yards." He rode off, but, in a moment, turned in his saddle to speak again. "Look out for that roan bull, all of you; he's a nasty-tempered brute. I want him specially. Tommy, you keep between Bob and me. Don't play any tricks with him, Norah, if he tries to get away; you couldn't handle him. Coo-ee for me or Wally."

Norah nodded, riding off. Now and then there would be warnings like this about some beast in a muster, and she would be told to be careful; but it always ended in the same way: the suspected animal joined in, meekly, with the others, and gave no trouble—unless it might be later on at the yards. She forgot the roan bull and his bad character in the beauty of the morning and the joy of her work; the delight of being on a good horse, grass underfoot and, all around, the scent of gum-leaves and the sights and sounds of the bush. A laughing-jackass perched on a limb near her, regarding her with solemn, friendly eyes; overhead, a magpie broke into song, and a pair of herons sailed slowly away to their fishing-ground in the lagoon. Honey-eaters darted from bough to bough; a hundred birds she could not see chirped and fluttered in the trees about her. Then she saw a red bullock standing under a she-oak, whisking his tail to keep away the flies; and she came back to her job. She trotted gently towards him, cracking her whip lightly. The bullock looked at her as if he did not like her, hesitated a moment, and then decided that he had better do as he was told. He jogged off slowly, seeing one of his mates, startled by Wally, heading through the trees. Somewhere in that direction were yards: horrible dusty places, where fences met you at every turn. Men, these queer creatures who rode on four-legged beasts called horses, liked to put bullocks in yards and badger them about—no one in the bullock-world knew why. But men had a horribly commanding way with them; also had whips and dogs. No wise bullock resisted them, since they always won, sooner or later, and resistance was generally made unpleasant for the bullock. It was best to sigh and, even before you sighed, to head for the yards.

The morning went by cheerily. Bit by bit the paddocks were explored and their cattle safely yarded. Now and then the workers met, exchanged brief comments on the progress of the work and the condition of the bullocks, and went off again. By lunch-time most of the work was done: there only remained a very rough paddock and some wild range-country behind it, where riding was difficult and slow.

"If you and Tommy and Bob, Norah, could muster the paddock, Wally and I could take the dogs into the hills," Jim said. "We'd finish more quickly that way—and the hills are rough for you girls."

"I love them—but of course we'll do it, Jim," said his sister. "When we finish, may we come after you?"

"Yes, of course, if you want to. Only, look out on those hill-sides: the dry weather has loosened the stones, and it's awfully treacherous going. We'll coo-ee as soon as we've finished. Possibly we may be done before you."

"We'll hurry," said Norah. She loved riding in the hills, where Garryowen and Bosun, sure-footed as cats, picked their way daintily among the stones, and, where necessary, spread out their feet and slithered down steep declivities in a way that would have done credit to circus horses. She looked across at Wally, whose young mare was, she knew, not trained to hill-work.

"Butterfly will be a nuisance to you on the hills, Wally," she said. "She's hardly ever been on them. Will you let me ride her, and you take Garryowen?"

"She'd buck you off, Nor," said Wally lazily.

"She would not. You're funning, as Mary-Kate would say. Seriously, you'd better have Garryowen, Wally."

"No, thanks," said Wally. "Jolly good of you, Nor, but young Butterfly has got to learn. She's getting a lot of education to-day, and the hills are going to top it up."

"All very well for you and Butterfly," remarked Jim. "But where do I come in? I'll be wrestling with a mad-headed bullock, and just as I want your help you will be dancing somewhere on that yalla mare, teaching her to two-step on a hill-side!"

"Never mind," Wally said imperturbably. "You'll have heaps of fun watching us—and think of the satisfaction you'll feel in doing the job alone!"

"H'm!" said Jim. "Precious poor sort of satisfaction, especially if the bullock gets away from me." They grinned at each other affectionately, and Jim gathered up his long form.

"Well, if I'm to muster the ranges alone I'd better get to work," he said. "Come along, Wally, get your yalla mare and start her education! You get along to the yards, Billy; I'll want you there afterwards."

"We may as well start, too," Bob said. "Ready, girls?"

Billy had re-saddled the horses; they mounted and rode off into the timber. For awhile their way lay in the same direction, and Norah and Wally rode together. Then Jim struck aside towards the hills, and Wally followed him, waving a good-bye with an extremely battered old felt hat.

"Take care of yourself, Nor," he said.

Norah waved in answer, and immediately turned up a narrow gully, with steeply precipitous sides. A little moisture still lingered in its bottom, where, in seasons less dry, a tiny creek ran: the way was slippery with stones covered with dry moss. A trail of sarsaparilla hung down from a tree above, and, as she brushed it aside, one of its tendrils twisted about the handle of her whip and twitched it out of her hand. It fell with a little clatter on the stones.

"Bother!" said Norah. She checked Garryowen, slipping from the saddle.

The whip had fallen under him, where she could not reach it. She backed him a little, a movement which Garryowen resented, since it brought his hind-quarters unpleasantly into contact with a trail of blackberry ramble, thick with sharp thorns. He threw up his head, plunging. Norah's foot slipped on a stone, and she fell, losing his rein—which flapped up against his head, and completed his bewilderment. He made a scrambling turn, his heels just missing Norah, and trotted out of the gully, uttering a sharp neigh as he reached the open ground.

Almost immediately Norah saw the roan bull. He had been scratching himself under the trees in the gully, a little higher up, and at the unwonted sounds, so near his hiding-place, he came cautiously out to see who was there. Already his nerves were shaken, and his temper was on edge; all through the morning he had heard sounds he hated—voices of men, cracking of whips, barking of dogs; and he knew they had come for him. When Norah looked up and saw him, he was not far off, switching his tail and pawing up the dust with his fore-feet: undoubtedly a very cross bull.

She retreated slowly, keeping her eye upon him, hoping with all her heart that Garryowen had not gone far. It was not like him to run away; he was the sort of horse you could always count upon. Probably he had stopped close by, and was somewhat ashamed of himself for having left his mistress. But she knew well enough that, even had he pulled up and been waiting for her to mount him, the bull might be able to make mounting easy matter, if he felt as unpleasant as he certainly looked. In that case, a tree might be her only chance. Norah wished devoutly that she were out of the gully and could look about for a tree.

As if he guessed her thought, the bull began to move towards her slowly, with a kind of low, growling bellow, too low, Norah feared, to be heard by the others. No one was likely to worry about her: they were well accustomed to letting her ride into scrub-covered places. No one would suspect danger. And then Norah thought of Tommy. She had just been about to coo-ee, but the cry froze on her lips. Whatever happened, Tommy must come.

She was nearly out of the gully, and the bull was unpleasantly close, before the strain became too much for her. Until then, she had felt that if she turned her back on him he would charge immediately, and that therefore she must continue to look him in the face; now she knew that, no matter what he might do, she must turn and run. She darted out of the gully, and as she did so the bull bellowed and charged.

Garryowen was standing thirty yards away, in the open; Norah knew that she could never reach him in time. A she-oak-tree, a little to the right, gave a better chance; she twisted towards it, running wildly. The bull was close behind her; she sprang to one side, dodging round the gnarled trunk, and he shot past her, unable to stop his charge. It was only a moment's respite, however; he wheeled, scattering the earth under his hoofs, and came trotting towards her. To Norah, there was something more dreadful in his slow pace than before. One might hope to dodge the blind fury of a charge: never this slow, relentless trot.

Then, as she caught her breath hopelessly, Wally came, riding like a madman. He shouted furiously as his mare raced down the timbered slope, swinging his stock-whip clear with a crack that echoed among the trees, sharp as a rifle-shot. It stopped the bull for a moment; but he lowered his wicked head, and came on again, while Norah watched him, ready to dodge. Then Wally flashed between them, and as he came his whip spoke again, the heavy lash catching the bull between the eyes. He wheeled his mare, pulling her back almost on her haunches, and again and again the lash came down, while the chestnut plunged and reared in terror.

The bull stood it for a moment. Then a specially vicious cut found his eyes, and he turned, bellowing with rage, and lumbered away among the trees. Wally followed him for a moment, using his whip until the timber became too thick to swing it, and the lumbering trot was a headlong gallop. He wheeled then, and raced back to Norah.

He flung himself from his horse, his face white.

"Norah—you're all right?"

She nodded, unable to speak for a moment, smiling at him.

"Thanks to you. He—he'd have had me but for you, Wally."

"I thought I'd never get here in time," Wally said, his voice shaking. "It was Garryowen I saw first, just as I topped the rise, and I thought I'd better hurry back—I knew something was wrong. And then I saw you run out. Norah—Norah, I never thought I'd be in time!"

The agony in his voice made her forget her own fear.

"But you were," she said. "Nobody else would have come so quickly, I believe."

"It seemed about the longest ride I ever took," said Wally. He put out his hand towards her; then it dropped to his side, and he stood staring at her. "I—I can hardly believe yet that you're safe." He pulled himself together, drawing a long breath. "I must get after that brute and yard him," he said, commanding his voice with an effort.

"What about you, Nor dear? Are you up to riding?"

"Why, of course," Norah said. Her colour had come back in a wave. "I'm all right. I'll hold Butterfly, Wally if you'll get Garryowen."

That steed was calmly feeding, and allowed himself to be caught without opposition. Wally mounted Norah and swung himself into the saddle.

"You're to keep back," he said.

"I can help you," said Norah, astonished.

"No—you're to keep back. Please, Norah. I just can't stick the idea of that brute going near you again. You ride along that spur and see if there are any cattle there; I'll have the bull in the yards in two-twos."

She gave in, and pushed up along the spur, whence she could see the ground below. The bull was standing in a clearing, still nursing his wrath: he had pawed up the ground all round him, and his low, venomous bellowing was almost continuous. To him appeared Wally, a vision of vengeance. He wheeled behind him, swinging his stock-whip; the bull broke into a gallop as the lash fell on him, and so Wally raced him to the yards, the long kangaroo-hide thong filling this way and that as the fugitive tried to dodge to right or left. His hide was marked with many strokes when at length he reached the haven of the yards and found himself suddenly in a dusty peace.

"Well, it's some comfort to have taught you a lesson, anyway," said Wally, between his teeth. But when he rode back to Norah his careless voice was as merry as ever.

"Sure you're all right. Nor? Not feeling shaky?"

"Is it me?" asked Norah, in the voice of Mary-Kate. "Sure, I am not."

"Then I'll be leavin' you to get on with me job, or your brother will ate the face off me!" returned he. "You can't meet any more bulls, because there are no more to meet. I can see your mates: Tommy is on that ridge to the north, and Bob on the spur beyond that; they're both bringing down cattle."

"Then I'd better get busy or they'll think I'm slacking," Norah said practically. She met Wally's eyes with a little smile; somehow, it did not seem so easy as usual. But that was, of course, nonsense. It was enough to make anyone upset, to have seen Wally so queer, and white, and shaken—Wally, who made a joke of everything.

"Go on," she said. "Don't forget you have to see to the education of the yalla mare. It will be a long while before you give her a better example of whip-work, anyhow—so there!" She gave him a little smile, and cantered away.

CHAPTER VII
THE HOLE IN THE HILL

JIM LINTON had ridden into the hilly country without the slightest idea that anything unusual was happening behind him. Had he suspected that Norah could be in any difficulty he would have come racing back as swiftly as Wally had come. But he had a start of Wally, and a stretch of good ground had tempted him to canter: he was out of sight and earshot, behind a big hill, before Norah had met the bull in the narrow gully, and no faintest echo of her cry for help had reached his ears. He heard the stock-whip, certainly; but that was a sound to be expected on a mustering day. He went on his way, singing in sheer lightness of heart.

It was not really difficult to muster that hill-country, if you had a good dog. Without a dog the work was likely to be long and tedious, since it meant climbing up and down steep hills with loose slippery sides, where stones were apt to give under your horse's hoofs and go rattling far down into the gullies below. It took a clever horse to keep his footing on some of those hills. Not only were there loose stones and sliding earth, but here and there were broad patches of smooth rock, exposed by landslips—unpleasant places for a horse, especially if you were going fast after an unruly bullock.

With a dog, matters were different. Then you sat at ease in a gully, lit your pipe, and sent your dog up to do the work, and a good dog was interesting enough to watch, even if you were not concerned in the result of his work. He knew so well what was expected of him, and he never wasted time.

Jim had a dog whose fame had gone far and wide in the country round Billabong. Nothing much to look at was Kim, and no one would have dared to say that he was of any particular breed; but he had an uncanny instinct concerning the ways of cattle. He was a silent worker, rarely heard unless the matter was so urgent as to have gone beyond silence; and then his bark was a quiet one, but it carried undreamed-of possibilities of terror to the heart of a bullock. He adored Jim and tolerated Norah and Wally: to anyone else he was coldly aloof, and he could be an active terror to strangers. It was generally considered that Kim was almost as dear to Jim Linton as were any other members of his family.

He jogged at Struan's heels to-day, a silent, black shadow, showing no sign of interest in anything, but in reality alive to Jim's slightest movement. When Jim checked his horse under the shoulder of a big hill, Kim was at his side in an instant, his ears pricked, his whole frame alert. He waited for orders.

"Up you go, Kim!" said Jim, jerking his hand towards the hill. "Fetch 'em out, boy!"

The dog turned, dashing into the low scrub that covered the hill-side. Jim shook out his stock-whip and cracked it two or three times. The echoes took up the sharp reports and repeated them until they ran in a rattling volley round the hills, sufficient signal to any bullock in hearing that trouble was afoot for him—that his ancient enemy Man was waiting to drive him out of his hill-fastness.

Jim sat motionless, whistling gently, one leg half-crooked over the saddle. He watched the green curtain of dogwood and undergrowth that hid from him what was happening on the hill-side above. Presently, in a gap, Kim's lithe form showed for a moment, leaped over a bush, and was gone. A few moments more, and the dogwood parted, and a big white bullock came out and stood looking about him uncertainly, as if wondering what to do next. Another followed him; and presently came another, so abruptly that he cannoned into the others and set them moving again. A rough track, scarcely visible, led downwards; the bullocks followed it naturally, and soon a string of them could be seen, steadily emerging from the scrub and making their way down into the gully, where they turned into the better-defined path leading out of the hills. Then came Kim, trotting gently at the heels of the last one. He came up to Jim and looked up at him, his head a little to one side, his ears pricked.

"Well, old chap," Jim said, "got 'em all out?" And nothing would have convinced Jim that Kim did not answer him.

Again the stock-whip rang out, galvanizing the bullocks on the track into a trot. Jim left them, then; he knew that they would not take to the hills again that day. He rode round the foot of the next hill, sending Kim again to his task; and gradually the rises were cleared, and there was a steady line of bullocks striding along the track that led to the yards. The work was very silent, save for the whip-cracks; now and then Kim's low, quick bark was heard at an obstinate beast, or a bullock lifted his head as he trotted and gave a long, amazed bellow that set the hill-echoes to work in good earnest, but Jim rarely spoke, save to give Kim his orders—and often a jerk of his hand served for that. Struan put his head down, pulling at the harsh native grass, raising it now and then in mild surprise as a bullock broke out of the scrub near him. It was a still, perfect day. The smoke of Jim's pipe drifted lazily in a faint, blue cloud.

A rattle of stones caught his ear, and he looked up quickly. Wally was making his way down a hill, his mare Butterfly slipping and floundering, and evidently much alarmed at the peculiar place in which she found herself. Butterfly was only accustomed to soil which stayed still.

"Hullo!" said Jim. "I thought you were lost, until I heard your whip awhile ago. Anything wrong with the mare?"

"No—except that she's learning how, and she's stupid. But I was delayed at the start. Norah met the old bull, so I stayed to deal with him."

Jim looked up sharply.

"Was he nasty?"

"Not too pleasant," Wally said. "He's an evil-tempered old brute; I'd get rid of him if I were you."

"I mean to," said Jim. "That's why I was anxious to get him in to-day. I rather thought we'd find him in these hills. Did you put him in the yards, Wally?"

"Yes," Wally answered. "I put him in the little yard with the high fence—I wouldn't trust him not to jump out of any other. He was trying to dig holes in it when I left!"

"Old brute," commented Jim. "Well, I'm glad you were with Norah when she found him—he'd be quick enough to realize he had a girl to deal with. Oh, well, it's a good thing he's yarded; he'd never drive in as quietly as these chaps are going, if we had found him here. Did you clear any rises as you came over?"

"Yes," said Wally. "I saw where you'd been, and met your cattle, so I struck across to the east, clearing the rises as I came. Had to cross a hill myself, to avoid sending yours back. I've got all the bullocks out of those spurs,"—pointing to the direction from which he had come. "Mulga's working behind me now—oh, here he is."

A long, lean cattle-dog, patched with black and white, came out of the scrub quietly and stood beside his master.

"Good dog!" said Wally, and Mulga wagged his tail delightedly. "Well, I suppose I'd better keep on in this direction, Jim. Meet you up at the boundary fence?"

Jim nodded, and Wally rode away round the shoulder of the next rise, with Mulga at his heels. As he went, he pondered. He and Jim were wont to tell each other everything, to the least detail; and yet, he had not wanted to tell him the whole story of the roan bull. Something had seemed to make him silent, he did not know why. Stupid of him. Norah would certainly tell Jim, and Jim would wonder at him. He wished he had not felt so queerly tongue-tied; he wished that, even now, when he thought of Norah running out of the gully with the bull just behind her, he did not feel so sick with helpless horror; his mouth suddenly dry, his hands clutching. They were accustomed to make light of danger on Billabong, especially since the War had made them look on life as cheap. But that was for men—not for girls you had known as little children; not for Norah.

Wally set his teeth and sent Butterfly flying over a log that lay in his path—which, seeing that it was an awkward jump on a hill-side, very nearly ended in disaster for them both. The ground gave under the mare's feet as she rose at it; she struck it heavily, and, in her rider's own phrase, tried to fall for about twenty yards on the other side, in a long slither, sending showers of earth and stones below. Wally looked more like his cheery self as he pulled her up.

"Oh, well, I'll tell him going home," he thought.

Jim worked on steadily, until his part of the work was almost done. There was only the last hill to be cleared, with a deep and wide gully at its foot, the bed of a dry creek. A bullock or two might well be up there, Jim thought, looking at its dim green recesses. He motioned Kim towards it.

"Fetch 'em out, Kim!"

The dog dashed up the gully, while Jim lit a fresh pipe and pondered on many things. So deep in thought was he that he did not notice that Kim had barked twice—an unusual thing. Then he awoke to the fact that no bullocks had come out of the gully, and that Kim had not returned.

"Wonder if he's found a rabbit?" he thought. Still, Kim never chased rabbits when on duty. Then another bark sounded, and Jim started. Kim only barked like that when he was in trouble. He gave a sharp whistle. The bark came again; clearly, to the ears that knew, an unhappy bark. Jim was out of the saddle in a moment, flinging Struan's bridle over his head. He ran up the gully, crashing through the bushes.

Kim was standing in front of a hole in the side of a hill, where once a big rock had lain; years, perhaps centuries, before, it had fallen, and now lay in the dry bed of the creek. A tangle of bracken masked the entrance, but it was clear that the dog saw something there, something that made him stand with his legs apart and the coarse hairs on his spine bristling. He did not look round as his master came up; only he gave a deep, menacing growl.

"Hullo, Kim, old man—what have you got there?" Jim demanded. "A wombat?"

Kim growled again. Jim stooped, looking into the hole. For a moment he could make out nothing; then, shading his eyes, he saw a movement. Then he knew he was looking into a face, pale under its tan and grime—a man's face, with deep-set, glittering eyes. Jim whistled.

"What on earth are you doing in there?" he demanded. "Not hurt, are you?"

For a moment there was no answer. Jim bent forward, striking a match so that he could see better. Then he gave a little laugh.

"It's you, is it, Mr. Barlow?" he said. "I thought we'd get you, sooner or later. You'd better come out."

"You let me alone!" said the man in the cave sullenly. "I never 'urt you."

"No, but you hurt other people. What about the boy you knocked out at Borrodaile—and the women you frightened? Come out of that, I tell you!"

Barlow wriggled a little farther back.

"You clear out," he said, in a threatening voice. "Don't you try to interfere with me—I've got a gun!"

"Yes, I heard you had a gun," said Jim pleasantly. "Stole it from a woman, didn't you? Plucky chap you are, Barlow. Well, gun or no gun, I wouldn't advise you to think of shooting. I've an extremely unpleasant dog here, a mate just round the corner, and three more a little way off. Take my tip and come out. You'll find it the least trouble in the end."

"I ain't comin' out," said Barlow. "Think I want to be 'anded over to the police?"

"Well, the police are certainly waiting for you," said Jim. "What's more, they'll wait until they get you. Patient crowd, the police. And you haven't the very ghost of a show now. You can't very well kill five of us and get away with it—certainly not in these ranges. Five's a tall order, to say nothing of the dog. Oh yes, and there's a black boy, too; I'd forgotten Billy! Better chuck it, and come out, Barlow."

"I'll see you 'anged first!" said Barlow savagely.

"Why, I don't think I'd be the one to be hanged," said Jim. "I wouldn't talk about a hanging-party, if I were you. Good Lord, I should think you'd be glad enough to get taken, after the time you've been out here! It can't have been fun."

"Well, I ain't comin' out, at any rate," said Barlow. "I don't want to use me gun on you, but I sure will, if you try to touch me; or any of your mates either. I don't believe you've got no mates. An' with a gun I ain't afraid of you, big as you are."

"Well, I can bring one mate along if I coo-ee once," Jim said. "Not that I want to argue about it. I'm sorry you don't believe me, that's all. Gun or no gun, I believe I could get you myself, Barlow—you don't look as if you could shoot straight."

"I can shoot straight enough for a mark like you," Barlow answered. "You get along—I've warned you once." He brought forward his gun threateningly.

Jim leaned forward a little, looking hard. His eyes had grown accustomed to the dim light of the cave now. It had been said by his battalion in Flanders that he could see farther in the dark than most men. He straightened himself up, laughing a little.

"Well, you won't shoot far with that gun, Barlow," he said. "It was a good bluff, if you hadn't moved; I mightn't have seen that she was broken! Well, we've yarned long enough, don't you think? Will you come out, or shall I fetch you?"

There was a moment's hesitation, and Barlow crawled out, flinging the useless gun from him.

"You got eyes like an 'awk," he grumbled.

He stood in the sunlight, a mean enough little figure. His clothes hung loosely about him, in rags; his boots were almost cut from his feet. Under the torn rim of his felt hat his eyes gleamed wolfishly. They were like deep caverns in his thin face.

"Well, you don't look as if you had had much of a holiday," Jim said.

"No," Barlow answered. "It ain't no 'oliday, 'iding in these 'ills."

"It wouldn't be. What have you lived on?"

"Rabbits, mostly. A bird now an' then. Till the old gun give out, that is. I fell over a rock, and hit her agin another rock, an' broke 'er."

"When was that?"

"Three days ago. I dunno why I kept 'er—she was 'eavy enough to carry, goodness knows. Only . . . she was kind of company!"

"You poor beggar!" said Jim. A thought struck him. "I believe you're hungry."

"'Ungry?" Barlow's look was wolfish. "I could eat you, I believe. An' the smell of your pipe made me fair desparate. I ain't had no tobacco these two weeks."

Jim's pouch was out of his pocket before he had finished speaking. "Got a pipe?" he asked.

"Yes—if she ain't chewed to bits. That was company too—just to have her in me mouth." He filled his pipe swiftly, ramming the tobacco in with fingers that were like claws. Taking Jim's matchbox he lit it, inhaling it with long, deep breaths. "That's 'evnly! I believe I'll sit down." He did so abruptly. "Things began to go round a bit," he explained. "I'll be better in a minute. I ain't 'ad much in the way of food since I broke me gun—an' the first whiff of the pipe sort of made me queer." He smoked awhile in silence. "Well, if I do finish up to-night in a cell, this pipe's about worth it!"

Came a coo-ee from where Struan was standing, outside the gully.

"That's my mate," said Jim. He looked perplexedly at his prisoner. "Lie down, Kim—watch!" he commanded, and Kim at once obeyed, fixing his eyes on Barlow.

"I'll be back in a minute," Jim said. "Better not get up."

"Me get up? Wot, with this pipe?" retorted Barlow. Jim left him leaning back against a rock, inhaling luxurious clouds of tobacco, and strode down to meet Wally, who whistled on hearing his story.

"Nice to get him, I suppose," he said doubtfully. "But what on earth are we going to do with him?"

"I'm blessed if I know," Jim answered. "There's no chance whatever of his walking far; the poor beggar's weak as a cat, from hunger. I suppose we'll have to get him to Billabong and then let the police know. But it's a beastly job, and it utterly spoils the afternoon!"

"What on earth did you want to find him for?" queried Wally, laughing.

"I didn't want to; it just happened. Don't imagine I'd have been so tactless as to go up that gully if I'd had the slightest idea what Kim was barking at! Hang him, anyhow; I trained him for cattle, not for burglars!" said Jim, laughing also. "Here am I, wanting to draft those bullocks, and I've got to deal with Barlow instead, and there'll be police-court business, which means trips to Borrodaile, and—oh, hang it!—Tommy will be dragged into it. I wish to goodness Barlow hadn't stayed on our side of the hills!"

"H'm!" said Wally, pondering. "Yes, it's all pretty beastly. And to complicate matters, here comes the family!"

Voices and laughter were heard coming up the track, and in a moment Norah and Tommy and Bob appeared.

"We thought you were lost," Norah said. "We found all your bullocks heading for the yards, so we poked them on their way and came hunting for you. All ours are mustered and in the yards, with Billy sitting on a post looking at them—that life suits Billy!" She broke off, looking at them. "Is anything wrong, Jim?"

"Why, not exactly," said his brother. "Only a jolly nuisance." He explained briefly, and had just finished when a dismal wail came from the place where he had left Barlow.

"Great Scott!" said Jim, "that means Kim's got him!" He disappeared up the gully with great strides, followed by the others.

Mr. Barlow had, unfortunately for himself, arisen. Kim's warning growl at his first movement he had merely regarded as a pleasantry, and was considerably shocked and startled when, on standing up, Kim had immediately seized him by the leg. Hence his cry. He welcomed Jim's appearance with a pleasure which, a little earlier, he would not have deemed possible.

"Make 'im leggo," he cried urgently. "Make 'im leggo! 'E's 'urtin' me—tike 'im off!"

"Down, Kim!" said Jim angrily. Kim released his prey with reluctance, and Mr. Barlow at once sat down, and rolled up his trouser-leg to inspect his injuries. These appeared, fortunately, to be but slight—Kim having merely held him as a precautionary measure, without desiring to taste him.

"Well, I told you to keep still," said Jim, deeply annoyed. "Next time, perhaps you'll believe I'm in earnest." The remainder of the party arrived at this moment, much to Mr. Barlow's horror. He gazed at them in dismay, which was completed when he recognized in Tommy the girl whom he had encountered at Creek Cottage. This

discovery reduced him to a state of dumb anguish; he opened his mouth, and remained with it wide open, staring at her, apparently in doubt as to whether she were a ghost.

"Seems to like the look of you, Tommy!" Bob murmured. "He evidently regards you as the spectre of his sins, risen to confront him."

Tommy looked at him half-pitifully. He had frightened her badly: she had remembered him with feelings of dread that now seemed unwarranted, so small and meagre a villain was he. Certainly, at Creek Cottage he had never looked so miserable. There was nothing of defiance left to him. Then, at least, he had been truculent and well-fed; now——

"Jim, I believe he's dreadfully hungry," she said. "He looks starved."

"He is. And so he deserves to be!" said Jim unsympathetically. Alone with Mr. Barlow Jim's own heart had been stirred to compassion, even to a hasty offer of tobacco; but now that Tommy stood before her one-time adversary, Jim's fountain of pity dried up. All he remembered was a small pink-and-white girl who had run to him, calling for help. He glared at Mr. Barlow.

"When did you have any food?" said Tommy in her clear voice.

Mr. Barlow shut his mouth abruptly. He met her eyes for a brief glance, then looked away again.

"Day before yesterday," he muttered.

"Oh, Jim!" Tommy's voice was full of distress.

"Well, I can't help it," Jim said. "Bless you, Tommy, I didn't put him out here. It's his own fault. He oughtn't to have come into the hills if he wanted to find a hotel!"

"But we can't let him remain hungry, Jim!"

This sentiment interested Mr. Barlow strongly. He raised his head and looked at Tommy, his mouth opening again, a gleam coming into his dull eyes. Nothing that had been said appeared to him to have so direct a bearing on his case.

Norah put a hand on Jim's arm.

"There's heaps of food at the yards," she said. "We didn't eat nearly all the lunch."

"Won't Billy have thrown it away?"

"Not he! If we left a ton, Billy would pack it up and take it home. He probably has orgies at night with it in his room."

"Oh!" said Jim. "That means, I suppose, that I ride over to the yards and get it."

A swift hope leaped into Mr. Barlow's countenance. He clearly showed that he considered Jim had construed the case rightly.

"Oh, all right," said Jim resignedly. "Apparently the first thing to do when you catch a criminal is to feed him."

"*You* gimme a smoke, first!" said Mr. Barlow unexpectedly. The others grinned delightedly. It was so like Jim.

"Well, I did, but I couldn't help it," Jim defended himself. "The mere smell of my 'baccy nearly had him in tears. All right; I'll go, and I'll bring back Billy's mare for him to ride. Thank goodness, it isn't necessary to explain matters to Billy—that's one less strain on my brain. You people can have a council of war and see what we're to do with the prisoner. So long!" He strode away, and in a moment they heard Struan clattering down the gully.

He was back in an astonishingly short space of time, bearing packages at which Mr. Barlow's heart leaped high.

"There you are!" said Jim, tossing him one. Together they drew back, with an instinctive desire to let him satisfy his hunger alone.

"How did Billy take it?" asked Wally.

"Poor old Billy!" Jim gave a short, deep laugh. "He was sitting on the fence, as happy as a moping owl, and I told him to give me his mare and walk home. He just gapsed. Then I gave him the quart-pot, to keep him company; if there's one thing I hate carrying on a horse it's a rattling billy. He said 'Plenty,' and went off. I don't know what thoughts stirred his dusky mind, but he certainly won't tell 'em to anyone, so that's all right." Jim chuckled. "Poor old Billy; I felt a bit of a brute. Never mind. I'll give him an old felt hat to-morrow!"

"Can you spare it?" Wally inquired.

"Not this one!" said Jim, removing an extremely ancient hat and gazing at it with affectionate pride. "This is one of my best. I've a far older one than this!"

"Great Scott!" said Bob. "Billy will be bucked!"

"He certainly will," said Norah. "Before we went to the War, Billy had a hat that wore out—really wore out, I mean, Bob, not what you mean. Billy's ideas are those of Billabong, not of Piccadilly——"

"Do you mean to insinuate," said Bob indignantly "that I——"

"Certainly not," said Norah, laughing. "Anyhow, it was worn out; it had no crown left. So he re-crowned it with a bit of rabbit-skin, with the furry side out, and it looked as if he had suddenly grown brown and white hair and it was coming through the top of his hat! I was truly grieved not to see that hat when we came back from England."

"Well, apart from Billy's millinery," said Jim, "what about the prisoner? What do we do with him?"

Everybody hesitated. It was Tommy who spoke first.

"Jim," she said, "must we give him to the police?"

"Why, what else can we do with him?" Jim demanded. "I'm sick enough about it. I hate the idea of police-court business for you——"

"Oh!" said Tommy, with such a comical face of dismay that they all laughed. "I had not thought of that!"

"But it will mean that," said Jim. "You and I are the only ones who saw him at your place—I'll have to swear to his getting away on Atkinson's horse. It's going to be a most beastly nuisance. And apart from that I hate the idea of handing the poor brute over as if he were a parcel."

"That is the part I hate," said Tommy. "He looks so young—and small."

"So do you, for that matter," said Jim, amused. "It's a fellow-feeling you have, I suppose? But what's the alternative?"

"You gutter do something with me," remarked Mr. Barlow. He had come upon them unheard, as they discussed his fate. "I can't stick it out here no more. Me gun's broke, an' me boots are in bits, an' me clo'es are all tore. An' I can't get no more food. I ain't goin' to do no more of this bush-life. It ain't no good to me."

"Then what would you have done if we hadn't found you?" demanded Jim.

"I d'no. I was tryin' to make up me mind to crawl in an' give meself up."

"Well, I wish you'd do it now," said Jim gloomily.

"I don't care if I do. Only I wanted to know one thing—what become of that kid I hit in Borrodale? The bank chap, I mean."

"He's better—no thanks to you."

A look of relief came over Barlow's face.

"Well, I don't suppose you'll believe me, but I'm glad," he said. "I never meant to hit him. I was fair desperate for money, along of losin' all me mother had, backin' 'orses. An' I seen lots of movin' pictures about stickin' up banks; it seemed an awful easy game. I never meant to 'urt anyone. They don't, gen'ly-as-a-rule, in the pictures. They grabs the money, an' gits. I'd 'a' done it too, but for that kid. 'E got in my way, an' I wouldn't have got clear if I hadn't hit him. As it was, I never got no money."

"Then why did you take Mr. Atkinson's horse?" Norah asked.

"It was that or get caught. The 'orse was there, an' I knew the police'd be on me tracks in a minute—I 'ad to take him, I tell you! An' I reckoned I could cross the ranges on 'im, but I knew I 'ad to 'ave tucker an' money—money for when I got to New South Wales. That's why I went to your place—to Tommy——an' to the other lady's. But the 'orse slung me in the ranges, an' cleared out for 'ome, an' me boots give out an' I couldn't get no further. I don't care if you do give me to the police." He lifted his thin, young face with a rather pitiful air of bravado. "It's a fool game bein' on the run like this; an' a lonesome. Gosh, but the bush is lonesome!"

The weary, drawing voice ceased, and his hearers looked helplessly at each other. Then Jim spoke:

"Come away and talk, you people," he said. "Sit down there, Barlow; we'll be back presently."

Out near the horses they paused.

"What on earth are we to do?" he burst out. "I can't put that poor little wretch on a horse, and cart him off to the police. I tell you, I can't do it! Lord, didn't he look a poor little misery!—and didn't we look a lot of big, well-fed animals listening to him." His eye wandered to Miss Rainham—"all but Tommy!"

"I may not look big," said Tommy. "But I emphatically look well-fed. And so I agree with you that we cannot possibly put him in prison, Jim. We just can't."

"I don't suppose he's ever had much show," said Wally. "But how are we to give him one? You can't take him home—it's not fair to bring Mr. Linton into it. There are too many people there to keep his presence a secret. Got any ideas, anyone?"

"I've been thinking," Norah said. "Once you cross these hills, it isn't far to the northern railway line, is it, Jim?"

"Not more than twenty miles."

"There's the old hut in the bush paddock," said Norah. "Couldn't we keep him there for a few days and feed him up? Then we could get him some decent clothes—an old suit of yours would do, Wally, if I cut a yard off the legs!—and give him enough money for a start, and you boys could give him a lift nearly to the railway. Then he'd have to take his chance."

"By Jove!" said Jim. "It sounds a chance. Trust old Nor to compound a felony if it's possible!"

"It's simple enough to be a good chance," said Wally. "The police on the other side won't be looking so keenly now, and anyhow, they'll have their eyes skinned for a miserable object in the sort of clothes he has on at present; give him a suit of semi-decent togs and an old Panama hat, and some little bit of luggage, and ten to one they'll never spot him. Norah, you have the great administrative mind!"

"Have I?" said Norah. "Well, it seems like making hardened law-breakers of us all. Anyhow—we can't ask him, of course—but I don't believe Dad would think it was wrong. I don't know what he might have to say. But I believe he would think in his heart that we were doing the decent thing."

"I believe he would," Wally said gravely.

Having made up its mind to defy the law and all the Borrodale policemen, the party came back to Mr. Barlow much uplifted in its mind. It had stood before him and heard his sorry little confession with downcast eyes, feeling puzzled and unhappy; now it came back light of step, ready to regard the whole business as a cheerful adventure. Jim made known their plans to Mr. Barlow, who heard them with blank disbelief.

"Gimme tucker, an' cash, an' a fresh outfit, an' start me orf for New South!" he ejaculated. "Ah, go on. Whatcher pullin' me leg for?"

"We're not pulling your leg," Jim responded. "You can have the chance, if you want it."

"But there's some catch. There *must* be," said the bewildered Mr. Barlow. "Where's the string tied to it?"

"What does that mean?" asked Tommy, much puzzled—at which the boys suddenly choked. "'A string tied to it.' Who would tie a string?"

"You're gettin' at me," said Mr. Barlow sullenly. "I mean, you ain't goin' to do all that for me for nothin'. Is it the police on the other side of the border you're goin' to give me to?"

"We're not going to give you to the police anywhere," Jim said with some impatience. "You can take our offer if you like and, as soon as you're fit, we'll let you go, near the railway. You have a chance then of going into New South Wales and getting a job—they'll take men on the farms without a character. If you don't like our offer, there's a quiet mare out there—you can get on her and ride in and give yourself up to the police in Borrodale. But we're not going to do the handing over. Now, you'd better make up your mind, because I've plenty of work to do this afternoon, and I've wasted a good deal of time on you already."

Gradually, it dawned upon Mr. Barlow that he was not the object of a merry jest. He stared at them all, and a slow flush crept into his face.

"Well, it beats me!" he said, and stopped. "I dunno why you do it. I ain't done nothin' to make you treat me decent." He gave a short laugh. "Reckon I didn't know any people ever were as decent as that—not to chaps like me, at any rate."

"Well, that's all right," said Jim, cutting him short. "Better get on the old mare and I'll take you across to the hut; it's not far from here. Will you come, too, Wally? You others might get the rest of the bullocks into the yards; we'll be after you as soon as we can."

The girls and Bob nodded a kindly "good-bye" to Mr. Barlow and rode off, while Jim and Wally escorted their still-bewildered prisoner to the hut, an old building used by shepherds in days gone by. It was still quite habitable; now and then men on fencing repair-work camped there, and though the roof might leak a little in wet weather, there were a sacking bunk, a fireplace, and some boxes and kerosene-tins. It looked a sufficiently habitable place to the lonely man who had camped so many nights in the open scrub.

"You'll be safe enough here," Jim said. "We'll leave you all the food; and the river is not far off. To-morrow or next day we'll come out with some more tucker, and in a few days we'll bring you clothes. It's lonely enough, but that can't be helped."

"It won't be too bad at all," said Barlow cheerfully. "Thank goodness them bundles is wrapped in newspaper; I'll feel like a lord, with something to read! Oh, and, Boss, would you mind bringin' out a bit o' soap with you?"

"Rather!" said Jim, approving of his captive for the first time. "By the way—have you got a pouch? You might as well put this tobacco into it." He emptied his own pouch, and tossed a box of matches upon the box that served as a table.

"My word, you're a white man!" ejaculated Mr. Barlow helplessly. "Look 'ere, Boss, I don't suppose you'll believe me if I make any promises, but I swear I'll go straight after this. I never was crooked before, s'w'elp me!"

"Well, I'm not going to ask you for that sort of promise," said Jim. "That's your business. The only promise I'll ask you for is, that if the police do get you—they won't get you through us—you'll say nothing about our share in getting you away. We don't mind for ourselves, but we don't feel we've any right to drag my father into it."

"I reckoned there's no one as'll hear about it from me," said Barlow earnestly.

"That's all right. I wouldn't stay in the hut all the time, if I were you, just in case anyone should pass this way—though it isn't likely. Good-bye."

They galloped off through the trees, leading the old mare.

"Nice game, this being a good Samaritan!" grumbled Jim. "It's ever so late, and we've got to draft the cattle yet, and I've got to lead old Tulip home. Why did I ever send Kim up that gully!"

CHAPTER VIII
WALLY GETS NEWS

It was a week later, and Jim Linton and Wally Meadows were riding slowly homeward across the Billabong plains. Their horses were tired, and a third horse, that Jim led, hung back wearily on his bridle, making the task of leading him anything but a pleasant one. He was saddled, the empty stirrups tied together above him: they jangled a little now and then, the sound curiously loud in the still air.

Jim and Wally also were tired. They had risen at dawn, leaving the station before even the men were up, so that no one would notice that Jim carried an extra burden in the shape of a light saddle. Two paddocks from home they had stopped to catch a horse which had left there days before, and, having saddled and bridled him, had ridden hard to the lonely hut at the out-station where Barlow awaited them—a changed Barlow, scrubbed, shaven, and decently dressed. Even his hair had been cut—by Wally, who remarked, in applying to Norah for her scissors, that it was a pity to spoil a good job by letting their criminal go away looking like an unshorn sheep. Jim had said, surveying the job, that it would be a good thing if Barlow kept on his hat!

So far as they could see, they had neglected no precaution against discovery. No one had been near the out-station save the boys themselves on their journeys to take food and clothes to the runaway. Norah had contrived the food—an easy enough matter in a household of the size of Billabong, where Brownie was always prepared for unexpected visitors. Clothes had gone out by degrees, the last instalment in a battered little Gladstone bag, not too large to carry on a horse: there was a razor, a tiny mirror, a brush and comb. When Barlow had finally discarded his own old rags, he had burned them in the fireplace in the hut—taking care, first of all, to cut off the buttons, which he threw into a hole in the river.

It had all been rather fun, save that everything had to be done without Mr. Linton's knowledge—a matter that considerably worried Norah and the boys. Still, there was no help for it: whatever happened, the conspiracy must be kept a secret from him, in case of the whole thing becoming public. "We don't count enormously," Jim said. "But Dad's David Linton of Billabong, and if there's one thing he hates it's his name in the papers—unless he's topping the market for fat cattle!"

"And that's something for which you couldn't possibly mistake Mr. Barlow!" said Wally solemnly.

Nevertheless, if not fat, Mr. Barlow was a much-improved person on the day of his final flight. Good food and peace of mind had worked wonders in him: his furtive, hang-dog expression was gone, and when he swung into the saddle for his ride across the ranges he might easily have been taken for a decent young stockman—in a coat a good deal too big for him. Jim knew the tracks over the lonely hills, and they had lost no time, finally putting down their charge a few miles from a little town where he could easily catch a train after nightfall.

"Don't try to dodge anyone," had been Jim's final counsel. "People—and especially constables—want to look at a fellow who's trying to dodge. Hold your head up, and go straight ahead, and keep your tongue quiet, and there's no reason why anyone should suspect you."

"I'll remember, Boss," Barlow had said. He tried to stammer thanks as they shook hands with him, but Jim had cut him short.

"Go straight—that's all that matters," he had said curtly. Jim did not greatly care for this business of concealing a criminal. He had unpleasant visions of the little bank-clerk and his broken head.

They had made all the haste they could on the homeward journey, but the hills were rough riding-ground, and it was almost dark when they stopped in the outer paddock and let Barlow's horse go.

"Thank goodness we've got rid of that pulling brute!" Jim ejaculated. "My arm's stiff. I'll take the saddle, Wal."

"No, you won't," Wally answered; "I'll carry it. I'll leave it on the fence near the yard before we get in, Jim; then we can easily take it in after dark."

"Good idea," Jim said. He had been riding in silence for some time, apparently sufficiently occupied by the led horse. Now he turned towards Wally and broached a subject that had been in his mind all day.

"You're a queer chap, Wal. Why did you never tell me about the trouble you and Norah had with the roan bull?"

Wally was glad that it was nearly dark. He hesitated a moment, trying to make his voice careless.

"Oh—I don't know. Did Norah tell you?"

"She only told me last night. By Jove! it must have been an awfully near thing! She reckons she'd have been killed, to a certainty, if you hadn't turned up. Was it as narrow a shave as that?"

"Yes, it was pretty narrow. I don't want to see anything closer." To his disgust Wally found it difficult to speak in his ordinary voice: again came that dryness of the mouth, the sick horror, that always swept over him at the memory of Norah's peril. Jim glanced at him curiously.

"But why didn't you tell me anything about it?"

"I—I'm hanged if I know," Wally said.

"Well——" said Jim, and stopped. The shade of hurt surprise in his tone cut Wally like a whip. It was unthinkable that any misunderstanding should come between him and Jim.

"I don't know why," he said desperately. "I—I couldn't talk of it, somehow. It was too close. I——Oh, hang it, old man, can't you understand? Norah——Well, I can't even think of it easily. I care too much."

For a moment there was utter silence. Then Jim's great hand caught at his chum's and wrung it.

"Why, Wal!" he said. "Dear old chap!"

"Well, that's that!" said Wally. "I only realized it myself a little while ago, and I've been pretty miserable ever since."

"But why?" said Jim. "Why shouldn't you care for her?"

"It would be simple enough if we hadn't been brought up together," Wally said. "Then I could sail in and take my chance. But it isn't a fair thing to her, or to your father. He's made me like a son here always, and he never can have dreamed that I'd think of Norah as anything but a sister. I never thought I would, either. But one grows up."

"Yes," said Jim. "One grows up. And what about Norah?"

"Why, of course she hasn't the very slightest idea of such a thing," said Wally wretchedly. "She looks on me as a sort of second-best brother; and I'd rather cut my hand off than risk hurting her by suggesting anything else. I've an idea that if it's anyone, it's his Bob."

"Oh!" said Jim. "Have you, indeed?"

"Well, it would be natural enough, wouldn't it? Bob's a rattling good chap—a far better fellow than I am. I'm only a sort of loafer; look at the way he works! And besides—well, don't you see it's made everything wrong? I can't stay here, with your father trusting me as he does, and Norah not dreaming that I'm not the same as I was when I was twelve!" He gave a short laugh. "I don't know that I'm not: she was always the only girl that mattered. But—I must go away."

"Go away? But why on earth——"

"Oh, don't you see I must?" Wally said impatiently. "They trust me, and I feel like a cur. I can't be the same as I've always been. She looks at me queerly even now, sometimes."

"But you haven't—said anything?"

"To Norah!" said Wally in astonishment. "What do you take me for? She'd only look on me as a sort of brother who'd gone mad, and I'd lose the friendship I've got. And Mr. Linton would kick me out. No, old chap, I think I'll go without waiting to be kicked."

They had reached the fence near the yards. Wally dismounted, putting the saddle he carried on the top rail. He did not mount again, but walked on towards the yard, leading Butterfly; and Jim slipped off and walked beside him.

Black Billy came out of the dusk near the stables.

"Take the horses, Mas' Jim?"

"All right, Billy," Jim and Wally preferred, as a rule, to unsaddle their own horses, but to-night they were late. "Rub them down well."

"Plenty!" said Billy.

They went over to the house. Jim slipped his hand through Wally's arm, and they walked together, silently. The gate of the back-yard clicked as they approached, and Norah came out, her white dress gleaming in the dusk.

"I thought you were never coming!" she whispered. "Is it all right, Jim? You got him off?"

"Who?—oh, Barlow!" Jim's tone was puzzled: he had, for the moment, utterly forgotten Barlow. "Oh, yes; quite all right, Nor. Never saw a soul, and we dropped him near Ashfield. He meant to camp near the creek until dark, and then stroll in, in time to get the nine o'clock train. He's off our hands, thank goodness!"

"That's a mercy!" Norah ejaculated. "Come in, boys—don't wait to change. You must be tired and hungry."

"Well—a bit," Jim admitted. He was still bewildered by Wally's confession. Jim's mind moved slowly; it was not easy for him to adjust himself to any new situation—not, at any rate, a situation so new and surprising as this. "Come on, Wal; we'll have a wash-up in the bathroom. Tell Brownie we won't be three minutes, will you, Norah?"

"Everything is ready for you," Norah said. "Dad and I finished long ago." She hurried off to the kitchen, and the boys dashed to the bathroom, clattering downstairs a few minutes later.

Mr. Linton was speaking through the telephone in the hall. He hung up the receiver and turned away as the boys reached the lowest step, looking at Wally with a concerned face.

"Wally, my boy, I've just been taking a telegram for you," he said. "Your brother Edward is very ill: they want you at once."

"Edward ill! Did they say what is the matter, sir?"

"Pneumonia," Mr. Linton answered. "It seems very serious, Wally; the telegram was an urgent one. Your sister-in-law sent it. I suppose you'll catch the early train? We'll motor you in."

"Thanks, sir. Then I can get the express from Melbourne in the afternoon, and be in Brisbane on Thursday. Poor old Edward!" Wally's face was anxious. He had never seemed to know his brothers very well, but the tie of blood was there, and in trouble it is the tie that holds.

"Well, come in and have your tea, at all events." The squatter led the way into the dining-room. "You can't do anything to-night, except pack; and you won't want to do much packing. After all, it may be nothing alarming; Mrs Edward is a nervous woman, isn't she? You may find your brother out of danger when you arrive. I'm sorry you have to go, Wally, old chap, but we'll have you back before long."

"I hope so, sir," Wally gave him a little smile. He ate quickly, in silence. Perhaps this was to be the parting of the ways. It might be best—he did not know. At any rate, Bob Rainham could have his chance.

Norah came in, presently, from saying good-night to Mary-Kate. She heard the news in silence, a hint of dismay in her grey eyes.

"Poor old Wally! I'm sorry! But you may find everything all right when you get there," she said. "I'll see to your clothes: there's a button missing from one of your silk shirts. You'll want cool things up there, you know."

"Bless you, he won't want much," Jim said. "He'll be back in no time."

"One never knows," said Wally. "Thanks, Norah."

"No, one never knows," Norah agreed. "You mustn't go with buttons off your things, anyhow. Mrs. Meadows would think we didn't look after you."

"What—Laura?" said Wally. "She won't worry. I'll be the one who worries, Nor!"

"Then you shan't have reason to worry." She smiled at him, hunting with swift fingers through her work-basket. "Don't be in too great a hurry to come up and pack; I'm going to have a great hunt for missing buttons." They heard her light, firm step going up the stairs.

Mr. Linton had gone into the drawing-room. The two friends looked at each other rather helplessly.

"I don't believe," Jim said slowly, "that I've ever thought of Norah as grown-up."

"She isn't grown-up," said Wally doggedly. "She's just a kiddie; and she looks on me as a younger brother who has to be mothered. Look at her now; she's a little sorry I'm going away, but her real thought is for my buttons. She's sewn on my buttons and darned my socks since I was a small boy."

"That's true," Jim said heavily.

"And now I want more than socks and buttons, and she simply hasn't an idea of it. Well, I'm not going to spoil things, Jim. I've got to play the game."

"You'd always do that," Jim said.

"I've got to. She's perfectly happy now; I'm not going to put problems and worries into her mind. She would hate to hurt me; as much as I'd hate to hurt her. There's your father, too: do you think I could ever forget what he's been to me all these years? I was nobody's dog till you brought me here."

"Well, there isn't any need to talk about that," Jim said. His mind was in a state of puzzlement, but here, at least, the ground was clear. "You've been like another son to Dad: I honestly believe he forgets, at times, that you're not his own son. You've given us as much as we gave, Wal."

"That's bosh!" said Wally, smiling. "Even a lost dog is faithful when he gets a good home. Anyhow, he doesn't go making a disturbance in the kennel!"

"Old ass!" said Jim affectionately. "Look here, Wal—I've never thought about it, you know. But—you don't know how Norah feels about things. What if she cares, too?"

A deeper touch of red crept into Wally's brown face.

"Care!" he said, with an odd bitterness in the voice that was always merry. "Care! Why, she cares—for my buttons!"

Jim gave a great sigh.

"Oh, well——!" he said. "We'll see how things are when you come back." A swift alarm surged into his face, and he turned sharply on his friend. "You don't mean to stay away, Wal? You'll come back?"

"Some day," said Wally.

Brownie came in, her kind, broad face full of concern.

"I thought you'd finished," she said, and hesitated.

"We have, Brownie. Come along. Sorry to have kept you waiting," Jim said.

"And I'm real sorry to hear your news, Mr. Wally, my dear," said Brownie, moving about the table. "Not as 'ow it mayn't be a false alarm. Don't go ahead to meet trouble's my motter, 'cause she comes fast enough to meet you. Well, we've 'ad troubles before, but most of 'em come to nothink—even when Master Jim was took by them Germans. An' if there's anythink you want washed an' ironed to-night, Mr. Wally, my dear, you've only got to say so."

"To-night! Why, great Scott, no, Brownie!" ejaculated Wally. "And thank you all the same, you old brick!"

"Well, I didn't know as there mightn't be," Brownie said. "I can't ezactly pack you a napper, like I used to do when you went away to school, but I felt I'd like to be doin' somethink. Oh, well, we'll 'ave you back soon, an' I'll 'ave pikelets ready. You never refused a pikelet, did you, my dear?"

"Not when they were yours, Brownie." The big fellow patted her on the shoulder as he followed Jim from the room; and then suddenly amazed her—and himself; for he turned back and kissed her. Then he was gone.

"Well!" said Brownie. She put her hand to her cheek. "An' 'im so big an' all! Well, thank goodness, they've none of 'em grown up!"

Breakfast was ready in the chill of early morning, when Jim and his chum came downstairs; and seated behind the coffee-pot was Norah, very fresh and dainty in her blue frock. Wally flushed suddenly at the unexpected sight.

"Norah! Now, you've no business to get up so early!"

"Why not?" said Norah, smiling at him cheerfully. "It's a good thing to be up early; it keeps you from getting fat."

"That's a risk that must worry you considerably, I should think," said Wally, laughing; his eyes tender as they looked at the lithe, slender form. "Anyhow, you've lost quite a lot of your beauty-sleep, which ought to worry you, but apparently doesn't."

"No: I've got beyond it," said Norah, with resignation. "Goodness, coupled with a lean and hungry look, is all I can hope for now. Give him some eggs and bacon, Jim, or he'll look hungry, too. I haven't made your coffee very hot, boys, because there isn't a great deal of time to spare. I don't think you had better talk, either; you

must eat a lot, or Brownie will be very hurt.”

She watched them through breakfast, keeping their plates and cups well supplied. The big car was by the back gate of the yard: she came out to it with them. Wally's luggage was already in. Jim took his place at the wheel.

“We must hurry,” he said.

Norah put her hand into Wally's. He gripped it tightly.

“Good-bye, Wally. And good luck. We'll be very anxious for news.”

“I'll wire,” he said. “Good-bye, Norah—dear.” The last word was very low: so low that Norah scarcely heard it. She rubbed her right hand—it tingled almost painfully—watching the car as it slid round the bend in the track, taking Wally away from Billabong.

CHAPTER IX

RESPONSIBILITIES

MELBOURNE greeted Wally kindly, for, as he swung down Collins Street, uncertain how to fill in the hours before the Sydney express left, he encountered two old friends: boys who had been at the Grammar School in his time, had played in the same team in one of the memorable years when "Grammar" had been champions, and, later on, had shared with him the greater game of war. They greeted him uproariously, smiting him on the back and calling him by old, half-forgotten nicknames; and hauled him off to lunch at Menzies', gathering up other friends on the way. They made a cheery tableful; the air hummed with their talk and laughter—old memories of school-days, matches lost and won, fights for Head of the River; and, coming to later days, they tossed back and forth a hundred stories of war-time. People at the neighbouring tables found themselves listening; waiters hovered near, discreetly suppressing smiles. Then, having lunched mightily they descended upon the smoking-room in a body, and smoked no less mightily, while their tongues wagged the more. Some—reluctantly—were claimed by duty; the others supported Wally until it was time for his train, escorted him to it, and waited until it moved out of the station. He leaned out of the open doorway to wave good-bye to the cheery, sunburnt band.

"Good chaps!" he muttered. He turned into his compartment, finding his seat in the corner heaped with magazines—the band's parting offering. They had made the hours of waiting pass very easily. His spirits, low enough when he left Billabong, had risen considerably; it was easier to believe that Edward was better, that all his perplexities would come right.

Sydney next day was less hospitable. He strolled about the streets, looking in vain for a face he knew; and, finding none, boarded a ferry steamer and went across to Manly, and sat watching the tumbling seas as they crashed down upon the long stretch of sand. He lunched at Manly, and came back to the city afterwards. Ordinarily, he loved the crooked, narrow streets, that seemed always full of a hurrying crowd; to-day it somehow was the loneliest place on earth to him. He was glad when it was time to go to the station again.

The night passed restlessly. It was hot, and the man in the other sleeper snored, and kept him awake: the train roared and rattled and jerked, making a terrific business of starting and pulling up. When he slept he dreamed queer confused dreams in which he was a little boy again, and Edward was a grave young man who did not seem to care for little boys: and then, curiously, they were together in a trench, and he was ordering Edward over the top, but staying behind himself. That seemed incredible to him in his dream, and he saw clearly his brother's face, always grave, always inquiring; and suddenly little Mary-Kate Reilly was there, saying that it was all right; it was "orders."

He woke, a little comforted. Daylight was beginning to show through the shuttered windows, and the carriage was intolerably hot and stuffy. Wally climbed out of his berth, and washed and dressed, without disturbing his still-snoring neighbour. The smoking-car was empty: he sat there with an empty pipe in his teeth, until they rattled into the silent station at Gleninnes, where he went in search of tea, and drank two cups. That made him feel better, and he was ready for breakfast when they reached Wallangarra two hours later. But the day passed slowly, and his sense of depression deepened. He had no feeling of surprise when, at Toowoomba, a messenger with a telegram came along the train, shouting his name.

He took the message, knowing, as he opened it, what he would see. Edward was dead. He leaned back, folding the paper slowly; hating himself because he could not feel any sharp sorrow. Edward had always been kind enough to him, in his absent-minded, elderly way: he had even come down to Melbourne to see him off when he had gone to the War—which had amazed Wally very much, for he really did not know Edward well. He had always seemed infinitely older than the little brother: Wally could not recall a time when he had not felt that he was rather a nuisance to Edward, and, in a still greater degree, to Herbert, the brother who lived beyond Rockhampton, and whom he had hardly ever seen. "People shouldn't get born twenty years after their brothers," Wally reflected. "I suppose, if Father and Mother had lived, it would have been different." But his father and mother had died when he was a tiny boy, after Herbert and Edward had gone out into the world to make a start for themselves; and from that time Wally had known that he was "nobody's dog." It was from being nobody's dog that the Lintons had saved him.

Now, he knew, things must be different. Edward had been content to manage his property: there were one or two stations, together with shares, bonds—all the queer things that earned you comfortable dividends. Wally knew very little about them. Herbert stood apart: his share had been divided from his brothers' at their father's death. Now that Edward had gone there would be plenty for Wally to do. Mrs. Edward was shrewd enough; her interests must be carefully looked to. "I only hope Edward has left her heaps, and that he's cut it all off from mine," thought Wally, in his ignorance of business. He had a wholesome dread of Mrs. Edward, a lady with an unpleasant tongue. Wally had not loved his brother; but he had nevertheless resented the way Mrs. Edward spoke to her husband.

His thoughts went back to Billabong and to all that lay behind him, and just for a moment he had an intolerable longing for the care-free, happy life that had always been his there. Then he abused himself mentally. Only two days before he had said to Jim that a change must come, and now, swiftly and unexpectedly, the change was upon him. He had a man's duties, a man's responsibilities, to face. Even if he wished, it must be long before he could go back to Billabong. That was, perhaps, as well: and Bob Rainham could have his chance.

He forced his thoughts from Billabong, and made himself think of what awaited him, wishing that he knew more of business matters. There would, of course, be lawyers to advise him, though he knew in his heart that he had a profound dread of lawyers—men who cloaked the simplest remark in language that read like an anthem, and who declined to use any punctuation. Bankers there would be, too: that was comforting, for he knew more about bankers, many of whom were very homely personages. The Cunjee banker sometimes came out for a week-end's shooting at Billabong: he was a very decent sort, Wally reflected, even if he couldn't ride for nuts. And there would be men who knew the business details of the stations. He felt that he could manage well enough but for Mrs. Edward, the very thought of whom made him feel chilly. Then he took himself to task sharply again. A brute, that was what he was—with poor Laura in horrible trouble, and sending for him to help and comfort her. Well, he would do it. He would do his very utmost to carry on as Edward had done.

There was not much of the old, merry-faced Wally in the stern-looking young man who got out at Brisbane at sunset. He was stiff and weary from long sitting still: glad to stretch his legs as he walked up the long platform. There was no chance of going further that night, so he hailed a cab and drove to the Shelborne, longing for a bath and clean clothes.

Brisbane was stuffy and dusty. He got on a tram, after he had dined, and travelled out as far as it would take him; returning to stroll on the river-bank, seeing the lights reflected from the houses on the other side. A piano throbbed out across the water: they were playing the old waltz to which he had danced with Norah in the dining-room at Billabong, on the night before they mustered the cattle in the ranges—was it years ago? His pipe went out as he listened to it. The piano became silent, and one by one the house-lights went out: and Wally walked slowly back to his hotel. The clerk in the office hailed him as he passed through the hall.

"There's a gentleman waiting in the lounge for you, Mr. Meadows."

"For me?" Wally queried, in surprise.

"Yes—elderly gent. Been waiting a long time."

Wally went into the lounge, considerably puzzled. A grizzled little man, very dapper and precise, rose from an arm-chair and came to meet him.

"You are Mr. Walter Meadows, I think?"

"Yes," said Wally; and waited.

The stranger took out a card.

"It is years since I saw you," he said. "You would not remember; you were only a little boy. But that's my name: I am Adam Grenville, of Grenville & North, solicitors. I was your father's man of business, and, after his death, your brother Edward's."

"I remember hearing your name, sir," Wally said. He put out his hand, and the other shook it warmly.

"I thought I should find you here to-night—I knew you had been sent for," he said. "Poor Edward! it's a great shock to every one. He'd been ill for a fortnight, but they thought he was getting better; then a bad turn came. Very hard on his wife. You know your sister-in-law, of course?"

"Only slightly."

"Ah. Yes. Yes. Well, there's a good deal of business to be seen to, Mr. Meadows, and I thought you might be glad of a chat about it to-night. I'm going up in the morning—to the funeral, of course. You'll be catching the early train, no doubt?"

"Yes—of course. Do you know how my sister-in-law is, sir?"

"Well, I believe—that is, fairly well." The old gentleman polished his glasses. "I'd like to talk to you this evening, though it's late to worry you with business, for I may have no time with you to-morrow, and I must get back to Brisbane as soon as I can. Your brother made his will a few months ago, and I believe I am right in thinking he had not discussed it with his wife. A just will—I consider it. He leaves all his property to his wife during her lifetime; after that, as they have no children, it passes to you."

"To me!" Wally uttered. "But I've enough of my own, haven't I?"

The lawyer smiled dryly.

"I would think so—for a young man of ordinary tastes. However, that was your brother's wish. He provides, too, for the selling of the stations as soon as possible, and that is where I must ask for your assistance, Mr. Walter. Your poor brother had not been very well for a year; he had left all the management of the places to men he employed, and from what I hear they've earned their money very easily. Marindah, where he lived, is not so bad, but I don't think the northern place, Burrin Downs, has paid anything for a long while. We'll need a competent man to look into matters on both places. The question I wanted to ask you is, are you competent?"

Wally considered this carefully.

"Why, I think so," he said, at length. "I know a good deal about station-management. Mr. Linton has taught me a lot, both on the book-keeping side, and in the management of the stock. We—Jim Linton and I—keep the books: we always work out the income-tax papers." He grinned, remembering anguished days of wrestling with the intricacies of taxation schedules. "Of course, if you can put a good man on with me, it might be better."

Mr. Grenville sighed.

"That's the difficulty," he admitted. "I don't know of anyone: it's a delicate business, for it isn't every-one one wants looking into the books of a place. Well, Mr. Walter, that's a relief to me. I suppose you'll make arrangements to go over the two properties as soon as possible, and make what changes you like. They must stand close inspection before they're put on the market."

"Yes: I'd better do it as soon as I can," said Wally. "But if the books are complicated I may need an accountant to go over them with me."

"Oh, certainly—certainly. An accountant is different. But—to tell you the truth, Mr. Walter, I have been anxious for some time. Your brother was not the sort of man one could question easily: still, I knew that the reins of management were slipping more and more from his grasp, and that very much was left in the hands of his overseer, Dobson. And I do not trust Dobson. A clever man—too clever for his position. Keep your eye on him, Mr. Walter." Old Mr. Grenville polished his glasses again. "Dear me, I'm afraid you look very young for all these worries!"

"Do I?" Wally said, laughing. "Oh, I'm not so awfully young, if it comes to that. And, anyhow, Mr. Grenville, if Dobson has been running crooked he may have feathered his own nest a bit, but he can't have made away with the property."

"No," agreed Mr. Grenville; "he can't. But you will understand, Mr. Walter, that the last thing we—you and I—want is to give Dobson a chance of saying anything against your brother. He will be quick to do it if he is suspected. No one but himself knows what orders Mr. Edward gave him: if there have been any shady transactions he will endeavour, if he is found out, to put the responsibility on his late employer. And even if we could disprove it, we don't want anything like that."

"No, by Jove, we don't!" Wally said. "Then if I can find Dobson out in something shady I must have absolute proof—and then get rid of him as quickly as I can. Is that the idea, Mr. Grenville?"

"An excellent idea, I think," said the lawyer. "But be careful, Mr. Walter: be careful. And another difficulty is that Mrs. Meadows likes Dobson. And she is not an easy woman to deal with."

"H'm!" said Wally. "This is getting interesting. Tell me, Mr. Grenville, is there anyone on either of the stations that I *can* trust?"

"I really do not know what men are employed now. You will understand, Mr. Walter, that I have not been much at Marindah lately. Mrs. Meadows and I are—well, scarcely congenial. And I have never been to Burrin Downs at all: it is fifteen miles further north. But I think Mr. Edward still employs an old man who was in your father's employment—William McGuffie. If so, I am sure you can trust him. Your father thought very highly of him."

"He wasn't at Marindah when I stayed there after the War."

"No: but he may be at Burrin. You don't remember him as a little boy?"

"No, I don't," Wally answered. "You see, I was nearly always in Brisbane, after Father and Mother died, until they sent me to Melbourne to school; and then I scarcely ever came home. The Christmas holidays were the only ones long enough to make the journey to Queensland worth while; and then it was too hot to be on the station, my sister-in-law said, and she generally took a house at the seaside. So I know very little about Marindah. I feel like an absolute stranger, butting in where I've no right to be."

"I don't wonder," Mr. Grenville replied. "Well, don't let the matter worry you too much; if my suspicions are wrong no great harm is done. We must just get the two places in order and put them on the market as quickly as we can. And I really feel I should apologize to you for intruding upon you at such a time with business. But I wanted you to understand how matters stood before you encountered Mrs. Edward and Dobson."

"I'm very glad you did, sir," Wally answered. "It's much better for me not to be quite in the dark. Only you must remember I'm not a detective, and Mr. Dobson may be too clever for me. But at any rate I can guarantee that there will be no more shady work; and I can see that the places are in proper order. I'll have a complete muster of all the cattle as soon as I can, and see if they tally with the books." He gave a short laugh. "I don't suppose they'll be much worse than my company accounts were—and they'd have turned me grey but for my sergeant-major!"

"Your company?" said Mr. Grenville, slightly bewildered. "Oh yes, I see—I had forgotten you were a Captain. Dear me—and so young! I should, I suppose, have asked for Captain Meadows?"

"Indeed, you shouldn't," said Wally quickly. "That went off me with my uniform."

"Ah, I see: I am afraid I do not know much about military matters." He permitted himself a dry smile.

"At any rate, it reminds me that you have not been without experience in handling men! I feel more confidence in your dealing with Dobson." He stood up, putting his glasses carefully into their case. "And now I think I have kept you out of bed long enough. Good night, Mr. Walter. I shall see you in the morning."

"Can I offer you something, sir?"

"Oh, no, no—thank you. My housekeeper will have some coffee for me when I reach home." He shook Wally's hand warmly. The boy went to the door with him and watched him down the steps.

"A nice lad—a nice lad!" the old lawyer muttered to himself as he hurried along the street. "And courteous too—why, he called me 'sir.' But terribly young, I fear; terribly young!"

Upstairs, in his bedroom, Wally sat on the edge of a table and tried to arrange his thoughts.

"Well, it's only three days since Norah was showing clearly that she regarded me as a small boy," he pondered. "And now I've got to be a landed proprietor, and a detective, and an accountant, and a stock and station expert, all in one. Oh, well, I suppose it's about time I began to grow up!"

“ARE you busy to-day, Walter?”
“Not if you want me, Laura.”

Mrs. Edward Meadows buttered a piece of toast deliberately.

“I was hoping you could find time to drive me into the township. There is some shopping that must be attended to. But, of course, if you have made other plans, it can wait.”

Wally hesitated. He had come to breakfast in riding-kit; a fact of which Mrs. Meadows was aware.

“I was only going out on the run,” he answered. “But I can do most of what I wanted before lunch, and be at your disposal afterwards. Will that do, Laura?”

“I had rather hoped you could have driven me in before lunch. It tires me a good deal to go in and out in the afternoon. We could have lunch at the Cliftons’, and it would give me plenty of time afterwards.”

Wally suppressed a sigh nobly. The little town of Weardale bored him unspeakably. He knew very few people there, and had not found those he had met interesting: there was nothing to do, nothing to see. His excursions there with his sister-in-law generally meant that he read a book in the car while she shopped, or found his way to the Mechanics’ Institute and browsed on very ancient papers—boring enough, but better than lunch at the Cliftons’, a rite to which he had been dragged twice before. Mr. Clifton was a delicate, studious man, with a passion for geology, and spent most of his time in his study, browsing on sections of rock. His wife, a brisk and chatty lady before whom Wally’s soul quailed in dismay, was Mrs. Meadows’ chief friend; they were devoted to each other publicly, and criticized each other freely when apart. There were two daughters, of the type that Jim and Wally regarded with profound dismay: advanced young ladies, who converted normally wholesome skins into an unhealthy mauve with cheap French face-powders, used lip-stick until they fondly imagined that they had induced their mouths to resemble a Cupid’s bow, and talked with great freedom upon a variety of subjects they did not understand. When Mrs. Meadows lunched at the Cliftons’ he was given over as a helpless captive to the society of these two damsels. It was a cheerless prospect.

“I’ll take you in, with pleasure, Laura,” he said. “You won’t mind, will you, if I don’t go to lunch at the Cliftons’? I don’t know them very well, you see. I’ll knock about and have a look at the yards—there may be some cattle there—and get lunch at the hotel.”

Mrs. Meadows looked down her nose.

“Oh, of course, if you prefer it,” she answered resignedly. “Only I must say it does seem queer, and the Cliftons will naturally wonder. You cannot get to know people unless you go to their houses. And of course I cannot go to many houses now. But the Cliftons are amongst my oldest friends. However, you must do as you wish. I think, however, in that case, I will not go in until after lunch. I cannot lunch at the hotel, and I do not care to have the Cliftons ask me why you prefer to do so.”

Wally capitulated. He had feared all along that capitulation was merely a matter of time.

“Oh, I didn’t know you felt like that about it,” he said pleasantly. “Of course I’ll come, Laura. I only meant I—well, I’m pretty busy just now, and not much fun for the Clifton girls.”

His sister-in-law raised her pale eyebrows. She was a tall, thin woman, with sandy hair and complexion. Her desire in life was to be “elegant,” which she achieved as far as possible by the use of trailing draperies. In her clinging black gown she looked pathetic and interesting, and Wally’s generous heart was perpetually smiting him for failing her when she needed sympathy.

“I naturally was not thinking of fun,” she said. “It is a matter which hardly concerns me now. For you, of course, it is different. It is just a little change for me to go to the Cliftons’. But it does not matter at all: we need not go.”

“Why, of course we’ll go,” Wally said, flushing. Laura had an extraordinary facility for touching him on the raw. “It will be really good for you. Just say what time you would like to start, and I’ll have the car ready.”

“Oh, well, if it really will not be irksome to you we might start about half-past eleven,” Mrs. Edward said. “That will give us plenty of time. But what about your ride?”

“My ride? Oh, I was only going to look at some bullocks in one of the far paddocks. They can wait until to-morrow.”

Mrs. Meadows rose, and went slowly to the French window that opened out on a high verandah. All her movements, like her voice, were deliberate: in which she was a striking contrast to her young brother-in-law, who was totally unable either to speak or to move slowly. She turned back towards Wally, a faint line of irritation on her forehead.

“I don’t know why you bother yourself so much about the bullocks,” she said. “You really give yourself a great deal of trouble for nothing: Dobson is well able to do his work.”

Wally was filling his pipe with quick, nervous fingers.

“Oh, I think it’s just as well for me to get the hang of the place, Laura.”

“I don’t know why it should be.” She smiled delicately, as if to ensure that her words carried no sting. “The place got on for quite a long time without you, you know!”

Wally reddened.

“Why, of course it did,” he said. “I shouldn’t have dreamed of interfering when—when Edward was here. But as it is, don’t you think——?”

“The master’s eye?” queried Mrs. Meadows gently. “Doesn’t it strike you, my dear Walter, that you are in rather a hurry to assert yourself as master?”

The flush on Wally’s cheek deepened.

“I’m sorry you think so,” he said. “I really haven’t any ideas like that—your interests are concerned even more than mine, you know, Laura.”

“It is so good of you,” said Mrs. Meadows, with a faint sneer. “But if it’s for me, I do wish you wouldn’t worry. Dobson is a very capable man: poor Edward trusted him implicitly, and so do I.”

“Quite so,” said Wally vaguely. He lit his pipe, making rather a long job of it.

“And I think Dobson—well, resents just a little that you seem so anxious to assume control. He was speaking to me about it yesterday.”

“About what, Laura?”

“Well—about your wanting to examine everything. The books and all that. Of course, as Dobson says, poor Edward was in ill-health for so long it was no wonder if the books were neglected: he hadn’t the strength to see to them, poor dear. But Dobson has been trying hard to get them in order.”

“Who kept the books, Laura? Edward or Dobson?”

“Why, Edward, of course. At least, so I understand.”

“I haven’t been able to see all the books yet,” Wally said. “Dobson is pretty slow about bringing them out. But in what I *have* seen there are a good many entries that are not in Edward’s writing.”

“But that is what I tell you,” Mrs. Meadows said. “Dobson helped. He has always tried to help. He’s so considerate. No one could be more considerate than Dobson has always been to me. He is not one of those men who think a woman cannot understand business: he has always deferred to my judgment on all sorts of points. And of course he is a middle-aged man, who knows his business thoroughly. It must naturally hurt his feelings to have his work critically examined by——” She hesitated.

“A youngster like me?” suggested Wally, smiling pleasantly.

“Well, my dear Walter, you are not very old yet, are you?” retorted Mrs. Meadows. In some subtle way she contrived to make a simple statement of fact into an accusation. “And Dobson is an experienced man, twice your age. I really think you might be a little more tactful about it. Of course I know it must be pleasant to feel that you can assume authority: I can’t question your right to do it. But I would be so glad if you would exercise just a little more tact.” She sighed, effectively. “After all, the home is soon to be sold; it really cannot matter so very much.”

A maid came into the room.

"Mrs. Clifton's just rung up, Mrs. Meadows," she said brusquely. Mrs. Meadows was in the habit of complaining that her maids' manners were always so bad. "She says she'll be glad if you and Mr. Walter will be in at half-past twelve, as Mr. Clifton's going out, and they want to have lunch early."

"Very well, Amy," said Mrs. Meadows, in some confusion; under cover of which Wally made his escape, smiling inwardly.

"So the Clifton arrangement was all made beforehand!" he thought, as he strode over the lawn. "Queer soul, Laura: I believe she's utterly incapable of doing anything in a straightforward manner. Wonder why she couldn't have told me last night. Oh, well, poor soul, she isn't having an awfully good time; I needn't grudge what I can do for her."

Across the lawn a path turned away, curving between great palms. Wally turned into it, strolling along under the broad leaves that met over his head. The smoke from his pipe floated lazily on the still morning air.

"Bother it!" he muttered. "I wanted to get a count made of those bullocks to-day. By to-morrow, it will be easy enough for Dobson to have turned others in among them. Oh, well, the only thing is to have a complete muster of the run, and make him help me; he can't very well count cattle twice over if I'm with him all the time. And he has rung the changes more than once already, or I'm a Dutchman." He pondered. "I'd give sixpence to know if my friend Dobson had anything to do with Laura's capturing me as a chauffeur to-day. I wouldn't be surprised; if he gave her a hint last night that I was bothering him she'd think it was quite a clever thing to get me out of my way to-day. Any of the men could have driven her."

He thought over this aspect of the matter, his face setting into hard lines—looking more like the Wally that his men in France had followed cheerfully into tight places than the light-hearted boy of Billabong. His mind was full of suspicion about the way the place had been run. Sales of bullocks had apparently been few: cattle bought did not seem to be on the run, and were not otherwise accounted for, and the place was much understocked. Dobson met him with outward civility, but with an under-current of opposition to everything he did. Whenever at a deadlock to explain the absence of any particular lot of cattle, the overseer had but one remark:—"Oh, they'll be over on Burrin." There seemed to have been a good deal of coming and going of stock between the two stations; and yet Burrin Downs was rougher country, which would ordinarily be used mainly for young cattle or store-bullocks, before transferring them to the richer pastures of Marindah. There was a screw loose somewhere. "If I keep looking long enough with my little screw-driver, I'll find it," Wally thought.

He strolled over to the stable-yard. One or two men were visible, moving about lazily; their movements quickened as he approached. Dobson came out of the saddle-room: a burly, middle-aged man, with a heavy moustache and pale eyes, that were oddly small, set in his broad face. He nodded at Wally coolly; then he noticed his riding-breeches, and his face fell.

"You aren't going out to-day, are you?"

"I thought I had said I was," Wally responded blandly.

"But Mrs. Meadows said——" The overseer pulled himself up in time, seeing his mistake.

"What did she say?"

"Oh, I thought you might be going out with her," Dobson said, evidently floundering. The cool gaze of Wally's keen eyes was disconcerting; beneath it his own eyes fell. "She—I knew she wanted to go into Weardale to-day. A run in the car's more fun for you than riding round bullocks."

"That's a matter of opinion," Wally said. "I happen to prefer the bullocks. But of course if Mrs. Meadows wants me, I'll go with her."

Dobson looked relieved.

"Well, it's pleasanter for her to have you, isn't it?" he remarked, with a desperate effort to be friendly and conversational. "And the bullocks will do any day."

"Oh, yes," Wally answered lightly. "No hurry. It wouldn't be a bad idea to have a general muster some day, would it? I'd like to see them all in a mob." He watched Dobson's face narrowly. A flicker of something like anger came into the overseer's little eyes, but he had his features well under control.

"Ye—es?" he said. "I don't know that that's necessary until the sale. Rather a pity to knock the cattle about, isn't it? We don't want to take any condition off them before buyers come out. Just as you like, of course."

Wally affected to consider this.

"Well, of course, there's something in what you say," he remarked. "Still, if we bring them in quietly there's really no reason to knock them about."

Dobson grinned.

"Ah, you're used to steady-going Victorian bullocks. Queensland cattle aren't nearly as tame—they won't drive slowly. I've heard that bullocks on those little stations in Victoria will pretty well come and eat out of your hand."

"Have you, now?" queried Wally, with interest. "I'd love to see it. They don't do it on the place I come from—not so that you'd notice it, anyhow. And the Marindah cattle seem fairly steady; I don't know what they're like on Burrin Downs."

"Oh, there's not much on Burrin," Dobson said shortly. His eyes searched Wally's face, wishing he knew what were the thoughts in the cool, young brain. Possibly he was all wrong in thinking the boy was suspicious—but he certainly had a genius for putting his nose into what Mr. Dobson thought were his private concerns. And very urgently Mr. Dobson desired to keep him away from Burrin Downs.

"This is a slow place for a young fellow like you," he volunteered affably. "I wonder you bother to stay here. Of course I know you've got to be on hand until everything is fixed up; but why don't you take a run down to Brisbane and have some fun there? I can easily get the two places in order for the sale. Then you could come up beforehand and have a look round with me."

Much to his satisfaction, Wally appeared to think this brilliant suggestion worthy of his attention.

"That's an idea," he admitted. "Anything to do in Brisbane?"

"Well, I suppose it seems a little place to you after Melbourne. But, yes; there's fun enough there, if you know where to look for it. I could put you on to a few nice chaps who could show you the ropes." Glorious visions were surging in Dobson's brain: if the "nice chaps" he knew once got hold of this interfering young upstart and showed him "the ropes"—of pony-racing, shady hotels, and such places, where a lad might easily and quickly go down-hill—he would be sufficiently discredited to make any further interference with Mr. Dobson himself an impossibility. His eagerness showed in his face.

"You think about it. Of course I know you feel you've got to be on hand and take your brother's place. Very nice idea, and all that. But it would be just as effective if you were in Brisbane; and I must say it seems a pity for you to waste your time in this dull old hole. Young chaps want to see a bit of life." He grinned at Wally unpleasantly.

"But my sister-in-law? It doesn't seem quite the square thing to leave her alone," Wally objected, his face as child-like as only Wally knew how to make it.

"Mrs. Meadows? Ah, take it from me, she's all right. Nothing broken-hearted about Mrs. Meadows. There wasn't a whole heap of love lost between them—poor beggar, I used to be sorry for him. I'd never be surprised, if you went to town, but that she might go too: she likes a fly-round among the shops."

It was, perhaps, fortunate for Mr. Dobson that he did not guess how near he was to total extinction. Wally thrust his hands abruptly into his coat-pockets that their sudden clenching might pass unnoticed. For a moment he could not trust himself to speak. He affected interest in the movements of a man who was cleaning the car outside the garage.

"Well, I'll think over what you say," he observed. "There really doesn't seem much sense in my staying on if my sister-in-law would feel more free without me."

"You bet she would," said Dobson cheerfully. "Just you hop off to Brisbane, and leave it to me to get things ready here. I'll let you know when everything's tidied up—books and all." He hesitated. "By the way, once everything is in order, I may not wait until the sale: I've got an offer of another billet, and I'd rather like to take it, if you don't mind. Of course I'll fix everything first."

"Oh, that's just as you like," Wally said. "Neither of us would care to see you lose the chance of a good opening. Then, if I go down to Brisbane, you'll let me know in good time to come back? I may want to stay as long as I can, once I get there."

"That wouldn't surprise me at all," Dobson said, knowingly. "Oh, yes, I'll let you know. You fix it up with Mrs. Meadows, and I'll give you my friends' addresses."

"Thanks," said Wally. He tried to infuse some gratitude into his tone, but was extremely doubtful if he succeeded. "Well, I suppose I'd better get ready to take the car out. I'll let you know as soon as I make my plans."

"You do," said Dobson agreeably. "And I'll guarantee you the best time on record!" He stood watching the tall, loosely-built figure as Wally strolled away, and his little eyes narrowed with a look of malevolence. One of the men who had been working came round the corner of the stables, and looked at him inquiringly. Dobson's answering grin had a touch of triumph.

"I've choked him off, I believe, Dan," he said. "The young fool's only poking about for want of something better to do. Thinks he's very important, and all that, but he isn't really on to anything. I've got him pretty well set to go down to Brisbane and knock about."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Dan, much relieved. "I was beginnin' to think we'd 'ave to check 'is curiosity with something 'eavy!"

"So was I. But there really isn't any danger. He's only had an attack of sense of duty." Dobson laughed unpleasantly. "I've persuaded him that Mrs. Edward would be happier if he wasn't here—and that's true enough; and that duty lies in Brisbane. We'll see the last of him in a day or two."

"Well, 'e can't go soon enough for my taste," remarked Dan. "We gotter get over to Burrin before 'e goes explorin' there."

"Oh, he won't go exploring. He'll go off to Brisbane, and I'll send for him to come back when I've everything nice and ready for him, *in-cluding* the books." Dobson gave a deep chuckle. "I'm looking forward to those books."

"Well, I'd rather you 'ad the job of cookin' 'em than me," said Dan.

"Bless you, they're nothing when you're used to them. I'll defy anyone to notice anything queer about them when I've finished." Dobson lit his pipe and sat down on an upturned bucket with an air of profound relief. A great burden of anxiety was lifted from him. He decided to take a holiday.

Wally's holiday, which was compulsory, did not tend to raise his spirits. He clothed himself in immaculate raiment, and duly drove his sister-in-law into Weardale, where he found himself given over, body and soul, to the two Clifton girls—a shade more mauve of face and more loud of speech than he had dreamed them to be. His efforts to talk to his host were foiled by his complete ignorance on the subject of rocks, outside which Mr. Clifton did not seem to have any topic of conversation; having tried Wally with a couple of feelers on signs of glacial action, and encountered no response worthy of his notice, he subsided, and restricted his attention solely to his plate. His daughters then took charge of Wally and engulfed him in a flood of small talk. At his best and brightest Wally did not shine at this species of conversation: to-day, with his mind awlwhirl with perplexities, and the sinister figure of Mr. Dobson dominating them all, he found himself dismally unable to stem the flood. He did his best to sparkle in response to the gossip of Weardale and the march of social events in Brisbane; and found himself wondering how much top-dressing of mauve powder went to the square inch. Being naturally courteous, he was rather horrified at himself, and tried the harder to live up to what was expected of him. But it was with profound relief that he saw Mrs. Meadows rise to depart.

"Such bright girls, are they not?" remarked Mrs. Meadows, as they drove away.

"Awfully bright," said Wally, with conviction.

On the way out he put a careless question to his sister-in-law.

"Wasn't there an old chap called McGuffie on Marindah once, Laura?"

"Yes, there was," Mrs. Meadows said. "A horrid, rough old man. Edward never would part with him—he used to say he had been there in your father's time. That always seems to me a very poor reason for keeping a man on if he is not worth his wages."

"But he's not on Marindah now?"

"No. He's at Burrin Downs, I believe. Past work, Dobson says, but he lives in the cottage there, and does a little pottering with the cattle. I suppose he may as well stay there until the place is sold." Mrs. Meadows cast an inquiring glance at Wally; it took very little to awake suspicion in her cold mind. "Are you interested in McGuffie, Walter?"

"Oh, I just seem to have a faint recollection of him, that's all," Wally answered. "I suppose I must have seen him as a small boy."

"I believe he did speak to me about you once," said Mrs. Meadows thoughtfully. "After you stayed with us last year: he was sorry to have missed you. But I never encourage talking with that class of person. Indeed, he would have been got rid of long ago, if Dobson and I had had our way. But poor Edward was full of sentimental notions about old servants and people like that. That may have been all very well fifty years ago, but it doesn't pay now."

"Don't you think so?" Wally asked imprudently. "I can't imagine Billabong without its old servants. They'd go through fire and water for any of us, and every one loves and respects them"

Mrs. Meadows gave a little sniff.

"I think I get just a little tired of hearing about Billabong," she said coldly. "It must be such a wonderful place, Walter, that I really wonder that you can ever bring yourself to leave it!"

Long after the Marindah household was asleep that night Wally paced up and down under the palms, deep in thought.

"I believe I've put Dobson off the scent," was his final conclusion. "He was almost loving to me this evening. And I'm dead certain he doesn't want me to go to Burrin Downs. I'll get a horse and go off there to-morrow on my own, and see if old McGuffie can tell me anything; and if he can't, I may find out something for myself. Things may not be all right on Marindah; but I believe the heart of the mystery is on Burrin Downs."

CHAPTER XI

BURRIN DOWNS

BREAKFAST on a Queensland station is an early meal, and it was not long after eight o'clock next morning when Wally Meadows strolled down to the yards on Marindah. The horses usually kept in the homestead paddock had been run up by a black boy. One or two men were riding away on good-looking hacks, and Dobson was just putting a bridle on a big grey. The overseer nodded in friendly fashion.

"Good morning, Mr. Walter. Want me? I was just going over to see how the fencers are getting on in One-Hill Paddock."

"No, thanks, Dobson, I didn't want you," Wally said pleasantly. "I was thinking of going for a ride, that's all."

"What—more bullocks?" The overseer's face changed a little. Wally laughed, and did his best to look foolish.

"Oh, I think I'll chuck bullocks," he said, "Life's too short to fuss."

"Glad you've taken to looking at it that way," said Dobson. "Particularly as you pay me to do the fussing. Mere waste of time on your part to fuss as well."

"Well, so I think," said Wally. "And I get enough mustering where I come from. We'll have a big muster after I get back from Brisbane, shall we, Dobson?"

"Surest thing you know," the overseer grinned. "We'll do it in style then, and make the paddocks tally with the books." He looked at Wally, speaking deliberately. "I expect, you know, the executors will want to send an accountant out to go over the books, and I'm keen to have everything ship-shape for him. I take a pride in my work, you know."

"I'm sure you do," said Wally, speaking, for the first time, with absolute truth. "Oh, well, there's time enough for the books, and the bullocks, too. I'll just have a canter and see if I can get a few jumps. Got anything really good for me to ride, Dobson?"

"Well, if it's jumping you want, you can't beat that big bay in the corner. He'd jump a house. Good horse to ride, too." Dobson pondered, and then was struck with an idea. "By the way, if it's jumping, you couldn't do better than ride over to the Chollerford racecourse; they've a very decent steeplechase course there—not too stiff. You go out of the homestead gate along the Weardale road and take the third turning to your left; look for a pair of big gates and you can't miss it. It's only about five miles from here."

"That sounds first-rate," said Wally. "I'll go and get a bridle. No, don't worry, thanks, I can easily catch him myself." He went off to the stable, and the overseer mounted the big grey and rode away.

"That ought to keep him quiet," he mused, as he rode. "And if he breaks his little neck over those Chollerford jumps, there won't be any special mourning done on Marindah."

Wally caught and saddled the bay horse, and, leaving him in a loose-box, returned to the house. Amy met him with a package in her hand. Ordinarily a fierce person, Amy had succumbed to Wally's pleasant manner, and was, where he was concerned, as meek as any dove.

"There's your sangwiches, Mr. Walter," she said. "'Am an' tongue. It don't seem much for you to take."

"It's plenty, thanks, Amy. I'm sure they'll be awfully nice. Oh, and, Amy—if I'm not back, will you explain to Mrs. Meadows that I thought I might be detained?"

"I'll tell 'er," said the girl. "Goin' far, Mr. Walter?"

"I'm not quite sure," he said, which was the truth. But Wally did not dream how far he was to go before he saw Marindah again.

He went out, feeling glad to have escaped an interview with his sister-in-law, who might have asked searching questions. By nature Wally was truthful, and to deceive even a creature so low in the scale as Dobson troubled him. Mrs. Meadows might—and probably would—be rather unpleasant about his absence, when they met at dinner that evening. But by that time Wally hoped that any need for concealment would be over, and that he could speak plainly.

Mr. Dobson spent a peaceful morning. He cast a gentle eye on the fencers, inspected the growth of grass in different paddocks, and looked, with considerable pleasure, at certain bullocks in which he took an especial interest. A keen observer might have noticed that they did not bear the Marindah brand. They were doing well, and Mr. Dobson wore an expression of almost unctuous satisfaction as he rode home to dinner. He was leaning over a fence, after that meal, reflectively picking his teeth, when Dan Verrin rode up. His face did not reflect the satisfaction felt by Mr. Dobson.

"Well," he said, pulling up and looking at the overseer sourly. "So your pup got away on you?"

"My pup?" repeated Mr. Dobson vaguely, casting a glance towards the kennel where his cattle-dog slept, plain to view. "What pup?"

"Why, the youngster. Young Meadows, dam him!"

"You're right, Dan," said Mr. Dobson politely. "That particular pup's as happy as a cricket on Chollerford racecourse, jumping fences."

"He's pulled your leg, if you think he is."

Mr. Dobson straightened up, the satisfaction falling from his face. There was no doubting Verrin's tone.

"What do you mean?"

"Mean? Why I seen 'im goin' in the other direction, as 'ard as 'e could go. Streakin' up the road from Weardale way. 'Course, 'e may 'ave been lookin' for fences to jump there, if you say so. But in my opinion 'e was 'eadin' straight for Burrin!"

The remark let fall by Mr. Dobson startled even Verrin. The overseer started towards the stables, but turned back.

"And I've let my horse go! Run them in, as hard as you can, Dan. I want the grey."

"Goin' out after 'im?"

"You bet I am," said Mr. Dobson.

Wally had ridden, as directed, to the main gate of Marindah, and had even gone some distance down the road towards Weardale, in case anyone were watching him; a wise precaution, as Mr. Dobson had taken pains to wait on a little hill that commanded a view of the gate, so that he might make sure that the interfering stranger had really headed for Chollerford. Satisfied on this point, he had resumed his peaceful ride. Had he waited only a few moments longer, he would have seen something different. Wally came to a side-track that led him back again, and he was soon riding hard in the opposite direction.

He knew vaguely where Burrin Downs lay, and luck favoured him, after he had gone about twelve miles, by putting in his path a man with a team of bullocks. This wayfarer directed him to the gate, and told him of a short cut that reduced his journey by a couple of miles. It was not long before Wally had found the gate, where some artistic person—possibly McGuffie—had painted the name of the station in tar. And here he encountered his first surprise. The gate was padlocked.

"Now—I—wonder—why?" he pondered slowly. "Oh, well, old boy, Dobson said you could jump!"

He took the bay horse back a little way, and put him at the fence. It was a nasty jump, and the bay refused it, wheeling round so suddenly that he nearly crushed his rider's foot against a post. Wally's lips tightened.

"Would you?" he muttered.

He let the horse have a good look at the fence and then sent him at it again. This time the bay realized that the person on his back meant business, and he decided that the fence was really not so bad after all. He cleared it neatly; Wally leaned forward, patting his neck.

"Good old chap!" he said. "Now for Mr. McGuffie."

An old wheel-track, which showed but little sign of being used, wound away from the gate through a belt of trees. Wally cantered along it, and in about ten minutes came in sight of a rickety-looking dwelling. It was built on piles, like most of the Queensland houses, to resist the attacks of white ants; but one or two of the piles had sunk deeply into the ground, so that the house leaned sideways, with a curiously weary air. Some ramshackle outbuildings were at a little distance, and near these he saw an old man, who shaded his eyes to see who might be approaching, when the sound of the cantering hoofs broke upon his loneliness. Wally rode up, and dismounted.

"Good morning," he said. "Are you Bill McGuffie?"

"I am," the old man answered. "Did you want me?" Suddenly he uttered a little cry. He came nearer, peering up at the tall lad.

"It isn't—it's never little Master Wally!"

"It is, then, Bill." Wally shook the old hand warmly.

"Little Master Wally! I didn't think you'd remember me."

"I don't," said Wally truthfully. "I expect I was too little a chap when I saw you last, Bill. But I've heard of you; and I know what my father and my brother Edward thought of you. I've been wanting to come and see you before this."

The old man's face worked.

"I'd know you anywhere," he said. "You've the same eyes as ever—I never seen such a little chap to laugh as you were, and it was always your eyes laughed first. And you're the very model of your father. Mr. Edward was like him, but you're more like him still. Eh, but I'm glad you've come, Master Wally. It's time you come."

"You're looking after the place, Bill?"

"Well—you might call it that," the old man answered. "There's three of us: me here, and Tom Wilson and Ben Hunt in the huts at the out-stations. We go round the fences, an' see there's no cattle bogged, or down, or anything. But there's no work done on the place this good while. It's a quiet place, Mr. Wally; a queer place." He looked curiously at Wally, as if asking how much he knew.

"Why do you keep the gate locked?"

"Me? I don't keep it locked. Dobson does that, an' only him and Dan Verrin have the keys."

"But why?"

"They say it's so's no one'll leave the gate open an' let the cattle out. But I think it's as much to keep other people out—an' me in. I'd 'a' been down to see you before this but for that padlock, Mr. Wally. But it's too far for me to walk, an' the only old horse I've got couldn't jump it."

"Then you're practically a prisoner?"

"You might nearly call it that. Tom Wilson an' Ben Hunt are the same, I suppose, but then, they don't want to get out. Tom wouldn't go if you paid him, and poor old Ben's half-cracked. But I'd have given a lot to go an' see you, Master Wally. I told Dobson I wanted to, but he said I'd have to wait. Said he'd sack me if I went without leave. An' where'd I get another place now? I'm a pretty old hand, Master Wally."

Wally put a hand on the thin old shoulder.

"You can take it from me that Dobson will never sack you, Bill," he said. "Dobson hasn't got things all his own way now, and it's just about time he found it out. You were faithful to my father, and I'll see you have a home as long as I live."

"I'd like to work, Master Wally; I'm not old enough to be a loafer."

"Why, of course you'll work!" cried Wally. "Great Scott, there's heaps of work in you yet!"

The old eyes that looked at him were like the faithful eyes of a dog.

"If I could work for you I'd ask nothing better," Bill said, his voice unsteady.

"So you will, and I'll be jolly glad to have you. Now I want to know why they're keeping you a prisoner."

Bill cast a frightened glance about him, before he answered:

"It's because I know too much. There's queer games on Burrin, Master Wally. They think I don't know everything, but they're afraid I may know something."

"What are they up to? I'm here to find out, Bill; don't be afraid."

"They've been duffing cattle steady, these two years past, Master Wally. They began it in a small way, even when Mr. Edward was able to come out here; he wasn't suspicious, an' they did it under his very eyes. Since he's been ailin', of course, they've had a free hand. There's no stock, or next to none, gone off Burrin in the proper way—down to the South, or to Marindah. But I'll swear there's any amount gone North, where it ain't got no business to."

"By—Jove!" said Wally slowly. "Old Grenville knew what he was talking about. How do they manage it, Bill?"

"You come an' I'll show you," said the other. "Me horse is in the yard; I'll have the saddle on him in a minute."

He saddled an old brown horse and they set off. In the saddle, much of his age seemed to leave old Bid McGuffie. He sat erect, the easy seat of the horseman born, and the old brown horse ambled along at a surprising pace. They passed through belts of scrub, with patches of tall trees; over plains and across dry watercourses. Twice a creek had to be forded; the old man rode across carelessly, his horse slipping and stumbling on the unseen stones. He lifted his feet above the water that swirled by, clear and brown.

"They taught you to ride. Master Wally. You got your father's seat on a horse—and your father's hands."

"I'm glad of that, Bill," Wally smiled at him. "It's pretty hard luck for me that I can hardly remember him. I was such a kiddie when he died."

"Yes—an' your mother. She was terrible proud of you. I've noticed wimmen is that when a baby comes to them late in life. She used to ride with you in front of her: there wasn't anywhere she wouldn't take you, and you only a wee scrap of a thing sittin' on a cushion in front of her saddle. 'He'll be a stock-rider yet, Bill,' she used to say to me. I reckon you are, too, only she never seen it."

Here and there they passed little knots of cattle; stores, for the most part, long-horned and big-framed, in very poor condition. But the run was completely understocked; so much was clear to Wally, as they went through one great paddock after another. An hour's riding brought them in sight of a lonely hut close to a clump of great trees. Smoke curled lazily from its chimney.

"That's Tom Wilson's shanty," Bill said. "He's near the western boundary of Burrin. We won't go over; he'll only keep us talkin', and I don't feel as if we'd got any time to waste. Ben Hunt's camp is on the eastern boundary. I'm at the South. That leaves the North clear, Mr. Wally."

"Clear? How do you mean?"

"That's what I'm going to show you."

He led the way into a thick mass of scrub, dotted here and there with groups of cattle. There was no definite track through it, save those worn by the cattle themselves. These wound in and out, and made fairly easy travelling; at times it was possible to canter slowly, but for the most part Wally found himself going at a jog-trot in the wake of Bill's astonishing amble. Sometimes there were little, natural, clear spaces among the trees, and in one they came upon the remains of a hut, now almost a ruin.

"That was the northern out-station once," Bill said. "They used to keep a man here. There's been no one this long while; Dobson he reckoned it wasn't necessary. Suits him and Verrin better that way." He led the way into the scrub again.

They had travelled in this way for what seemed to Wally a long while when they came upon a fence running east and west.

"That's the northern boundary of Burrin," Bill hesitated, turning to his companion. There was an odd look of fear on his face. "Master Wally, did anyone know you was comin' out here?"

"Not a soul, Bill."

"Not Dobson?"

"No. He thinks I went in the other direction."

The old man gave a sigh of relief.

"That sounds all right. But we got to hurry. I don't trust him—he's too darned clever. You come along with me, Master Wally."

He slipped off his horse and led him deep into the scrub, followed by Wally, who, somewhat bewildered, saw him tie his horse to a tree. Wally did likewise, and stood waiting for further developments.

"Now, we don't want to leave no tracks," the old man said. "They'll find 'em if we do. So go steady, an' come after me."

He made his way to another part of the boundary fence, and slipped through the wires. They were still in thick scrub, but in a few moments this ended, and they came out into a wide, cleared paddock. No fences were to be seen; beyond the clear space the timber rose in a dense ring, tall and unbroken. Within this ring there were many cattle grazing; they lifted their heads to gaze curiously at the intruders.

"By Jove!" Wally exclaimed. "That's the best lot of cattle I've seen since I came North. Whose are they, Bill?"

"Yours, I reckon," was the laconic answer.

Wally gave a low whistle.

"Leastways, they're the station's. A man called Wade had this block; he failed, and Dobson bought it off him years ago. Nobody knows about it: Wade got his cash and cleared out—he was broke—an' I don't believe the title's ever changed hands. Dobson didn't want people to know he'd bought it. He cleared this bit inside it an' sowed it down with grass; there's very decent feed now, you see; but if you rode all round the boundaries you'd think it was all under timber. It's a lonely place—nobody ever comes this way."

"And how do they work it?"

"Easy enough. They slip in cattle from time to time, till they get a little mob. Lots come up from Marindah; there's no one to question Dobson and Verrin, an' it's their own business if they move cattle from one station to another. Easy enough to fake brands: an' a good many of the beasts that have gone from here have never had a brand—station-breds, supposed to have died as calves. It's a simple matter for a calf to die," said Bill, with a dry chuckle. "Awful easy to manage the death of any beast—on paper!"

"But what do they do with them?"

"They go North. I dunno, ezactly. There's plenty of markets up North—Rockhampton an' other places; the ships want meat, an' there's always people ready to buy cattle an' not talk about them—if they're cheap. But this is the biggest mob they've ever got together, an' they've been hurryin' it lately—they knew Mr. Edward wouldn't last long. I reckon, an' their chance would be gone once somebody came in as could go round the places an' watch the stock. There's lots of beasts in that mob that could be identified. Verrin was up last week, musterin' the stock near old Tom's hut—there's yards there; an' after he'd gone there was lots of the cattle missing and I tracked 'em up here. They've been getting terrible bold. I reckon they thought there was no one to suspect 'em."

"Some one has been suspecting that everything was not all right," said Wally. "The lawyer in Brisbane warned me."

"There may have been a bit of talk," Bill said. "I tried to drop a word to Mr. Edward, last time I saw him; that was six months ago, and Dobson's been jolly certain I didn't leave the station since. But, mind you, I hadn't no proof, Mr. Wally; an' I'm an old man, with mighty little hope of getting a living if Dobson kicked me out. So I laid low, always hopin' you'd come. I knew you'd come, some day."

"I wish I'd come before," Wally said.

"I wish you had. But, mind you, I never suspected anything until about a year ago; me rheumatics had bothered me an' I was lazy—glad enough of a soft job. I never bothered myself to go far beyond me house: Dobson didn't expect it from me. He told me the chief reason they had me here was to have the place ready if they wanted to camp out here for a few nights. But about a year ago I got better, an' then I took to pokin' about. An' I found things."

He put a nervous hand on Wally's sleeve.

"Come along out of here," he begged. "You've seen 'em now, an' you know. There's a lot of money in that mob, an' I believe they're goin' to lift 'em soon. They've got a track out to the far end of the paddock, an' slip-rails no one 'ud ever suspect: I've been an' found 'em. They must have some one to help them, once they get right away, but Verrin's always been the man to take them: I've seen him come in at night—he never knew I did—an' next morning the cattle were always gone. He's got a wonder of a dog: they call him Silence, 'cause he never makes a sound. I'm watchin' for him every night—him and Silence."

He dragged Wally hurriedly through the scrub, never resting until they had made their way back to their horses, and were mounted.

"We'll get out of here by a different way. Might be as well if we went over by old Tom's hut; that's the nearest. It'll look sort of natural if you've been round the out-stations, in case Dobson turns up. I wouldn't for worlds let him know you've been in the timber."

"But he won't turn up, Bill. He doesn't know I'm here."

"I wouldn't put it past him. He's clever—mighty clever; an' so's Dan Verrin. I'm in luck that they don't suspect me, but even so they've given me no chance to get off the place."

"And what about the other men—Tom and Ben?" Wally asked.

"Oh, they simply don't count. They've got to have men here, for the sake of appearances, but they knew their men. Tom's drunk three parts of his time, and Ben's near as bad: Dobson keeps 'em goin' with whisky, so he knows they'll never want to leave. Me, too——" the old man gave his queer chuckle. "But every bottle they ever brought me's planted behind the bricks in an old broken fireplace: I reckoned they might be sort of evidence some day. You'll remember I told you that, won't you, Master Wally?"

"I'll remember, Bill."

"Ben's mad, you know. Clean cracked. When he's very cracked he won't drink at all. He reckons he owns the station, and Dobson keeps him up to thinkin' it. He was a decent old chap once, an' owned a place of his own; an' now it's his cranky notion that this is his station. He's mighty proud of it when he's sober. Dobson can do anything he likes with him. Pretty beastly, I reckon, the way Dobson's handled old Ben."

"It doesn't sound pleasant," Wally said grimly. There was something rather horrible in the idea of the old man and his pitiful belief—deliberately fostered, deliberately maddened.

"No, it don't. Dobson ain't a pleasant man. I never was scared of much in me life, but I'm scared of Dobson." He drew a long breath. "Now we're out of the timber, an' we'll take a big swing round an' then head for old Tom's. If he comes, he can't be s'prised at your visitin' Tom; he knows Tom'll tell you nothing. Good reason why, he don't know that. I only hope he thinks I don't know any more."

He leaned over and tapped Wally's knee.

"I warn you, you better be careful, Master Wally. There's nothing them two 'ud stop at—nothing. If they thought you and I knew about those cattle I don't believe our lives 'ud be safe. This is a lonely old place, an' there's queer things done in the bush. You got to take care."

"I'll take care, all right," said Wally, between his teeth. "I'll get the police out here pretty quickly."

"An' where's your proof? There's a lot of your cattle on the next block. You can't prove they're stolen. Careless men out here—that's all it'll be. Me, an' Tom, an' Ben Hunt. Let the stock get in through the fence. No, that won't do, Master Wally. You got to get 'em red-handed."

He dropped his voice, for they were nearing Tom Wilson's camp. The old man gave them a surly greeting. He was sitting on an upturned box outside his hut, and was clearly half-drunk.

"No good tryin' to talk to him," said Bill. "We may as well be gettin' along—what say we go an' see old Ben? Or would you rather be gettin' back. Master Wally?"

"I'm not sure that that wouldn't be the best thing, Bill," Wally answered. "If I go back to Marindah now, they won't suspect that I've been here at all, and I'll be able to think out a plan. They're awfully keen to get me off the place; if I pretend to go it will probably give them the opportunity they want to get the cattle away. That ought to be my chance——"

He broke off. "Ah, it's too late."

Across the paddock, coming towards them, was a man on a big grey horse. He was cantering quickly when they saw him first, but as soon as he saw they had turned towards him he slowed down to a walk, as if to show that he was in no hurry. Old Bill McGuffie uttered a troubled exclamation.

"Dobson! Oh, I told you he was clever, Master Wally!"

"He is," said Wally. At the sight of danger he found himself suddenly cool; indeed, he discovered that he was enjoying himself. "Cheer up, Bill; he can't eat us. Remember, I've dragged you round to show me the place, and you don't know much about it. You follow my lead, and don't worry. Oh, and don't call me Master Wally—that would set him thinkin'." He nodded pleasantly as Dobson rode up. "Hullo, Dobson! Fancy meeting you! You see, I found my way out here, after all!"

Dobson's face was dark with anger. He controlled his voice with difficulty.

"So I see," he said dryly. "I thought you were going Cholerford way."

"Well, I started that way," Wally answered frankly. "Then it occurred to me that it was a nice morning for a longer ride, so I took my chance of finding this place, and had the luck to strike it, thanks to a friendly bullock-driver. But why didn't you tell me you were coming out here? We could have come together."

Dobson stared at the unconcerned young face. He would have given much to know what lay behind it.

"Didn't know myself," he growled. "It was just a sudden idea I had—like yours. Pity you couldn't have let me know, instead of coming off on your own."

"But, my dear chap, why shouldn't I come?" asked Wally innocently. "There's surely no need for me to put you to the bother of trotting round after me."

Dobson choked down his wrath. It was all so simple—on the surface: there was nothing he could take hold of; nothing to object to. And yet, he had a feeling that all was not well; that the smooth-faced boy before him knew more than he would admit. For the moment it was certain that he had the whip-hand; he was the master, Dobson his paid servant. A slow, murderous anger seethed in the overseer's soul.

"Well, of course there's nothing to prevent your coming anywhere you like," he said. "Since you *have* come, do you think you've got much fun out of it? Seen all the place?"

"Blessed if I know," said Wally, with a shrug. "I don't suppose so; I haven't been out long enough. Have I seen everything, McGuffie?"

"Not you!" Bill said promptly. "We been round the flats an' as far as Tom's camp; we ain't been up to the timber. There's lots o' paddocks you haven't been on yet. Nor up to Ben Hunt's camp, neither." Under the direct gaze of Dobson's cold eyes he quailed a little, drooping in the saddle, a weary old man. "Want me any more? I s'pose you'll be goin' round with Mr. Dobson, now?"

"No—you can go," said Dobson brusquely. He cast a suspicious glance after the old fellow as he ambled away; then turned his attention again to Wally. "How did you get in?"

"Jumped. This fellow can jump all right, though he's not very keen at tackling a fence. Rum go, keeping the gate padlocked. Why do you?"

"I jumped I'm still in charge here," Dobson answered, his anger almost mastering him. "I don't have to answer to you for everything I do."

"What a queer chap you are, Dobson!" said Wally plaintively. "I do wish you wouldn't be so fussy. I only asked for information." In his heart he regretted having mentioned the padlock at all. To his relief, the overseer's face cleared.

"Oh, well, I didn't mean anything," Dobson said. "I'm a bit short in the temper to-day; those fools of fencers have been bothering me. We keep the gate locked because there are plenty of drovers who'd be only too glad to sneak grass for their cattle on a lonely place like this. What do you think of old McGuffie? Queer old bird, ain't he?"

"Seems a decent old chap, as far as I could tell," Wally answered carelessly. "Said he knew me when I was a kid, but I can't say I remember him. I shouldn't think he does much work, does he?"

"You're just about right there—he doesn't. I'd have sacked him long ago, but your brother had a sentimental feeling for him. But he's absolutely useless, and not to be trusted in anything he says. Drinks, too, like a fish, when he can get it."

"Doesn't seem much sense in keeping him on, does it?" agreed Wally. "Oh, well, his job will come to an end pretty soon, in any case. Well, is your work anything that I can help you in, Dobson? We might as well be getting on, if there's anything to be done."

Dobson looked confused.

"Oh, no," he answered. "I—er—I only came to have a word with McGuffie and to bring him out one or two little things."

"Then I needn't bother you," Wally said, gathering up his reins. "I'm just going to have a look over that bit of country to the east. Don't you wait for me if you're in a hurry to get home: I know you've lots of work on hand."

Dobson looked at him uncertainly, full of doubt. Was this obstinate young fool merely interested in land, or did he suspect anything?

"I shouldn't think you'd find much to see over there—or anywhere else on Burrin. It's a rough bit of country, mighty little good for anything. However, if you want to ride round, I can come with you; I'm not that pushed for time. We'll have to hurry up, though, or Mrs. Meadows will be wondering where you are; remember, we've a fifteen-mile ride home."

"Right-oh!" Wally answered. They rode off to the East, chatting amiably, Wally intent on doing all he could to lull his escort into thinking him harmless. He asked innocent questions about the land and its possibilities, and agreed intelligently with all the overseer's views, letting fall an occasional suggestion that clearly indicated that he himself was completely inexperienced. He flattered himself that he was creating just the impression he wanted; and would very possibly have succeeded, but for an unfortunate lapse. Dobson happened to glance towards him.

"My word, you've got those beautiful leggings of yours well scratched!" he observed. "How did you manage that?"

"Oh, poking round in the timber, I suppose," Wally said, without thinking; and could immediately have bitten out his tongue. To his utter disgust he felt his cheek reddening. When he looked at Dobson the overseer's eyes were hard with suspicion.

"I didn't know you'd been in the timber," he said slowly.

"I didn't go far," Wally said. "Too jolly rough. Nothing to be seen there, I suppose?"

"Nothing whatever." Wally had felt that his explanation was dismally lame, and the overseer's tone confirmed his fears. He abused himself mentally for his stupidity, and for having no more self-control than to flush up like a girl. Well, the mischief was done now, he was certain. The thing was, to decide what to do next.

He rode on, thinking swiftly. It seemed to him that his best chance was to get away—to get into touch with some one who would back him. McGuffie was too old to be considered—indeed, if Dobson suspected him, McGuffie would be in peril also. There was no one on Marindah that he could trust. If he could get Jim! Jim would come like a shot, and together they could manage things. They could set the police to watch the stock-routes to the North, while they remained at Marindah, to checkmate Dobson and Verrin there. If he could only get rid of Dobson now, he could ride by another route to Weardale, and telegraph to Jim. McGuffie's warning came back to him. "There's nothing them two 'ud stop at—nothing!" Suddenly he knew that, whatever happened, he must not put himself in their power by going back to Marindah.

They had made a wide circle through undulating country, sparsely covered with gidyea scrub, and were swinging round towards a little plain, at the edge of which could be seen a hut, whence a trail of smoke went lazily skywards. It was the sight of the hut that brought an idea to Wally.

"That's old Ben's place, I suppose?" he asked.

"Yes," said Dobson shortly. He also had been thinking hard. Like Wally, he had but one desire—to get into touch with Verrin. Between them some plan could be made to put this intruder out of action. But he needed Verrin.

"I've a good mind to stay out here to-night," Wally said.

"Stay out here! What for?"

"Well, I haven't been nearly all over the place yet," Wally said, speaking unconcernedly. "I'd rather like to be able to say I'd ridden all over it; the executors may ask me, when I'm in Brisbane, you see. And I'm certainly not keen on riding out all this way again. Indeed, I'm not sure that I'm keen on a long ride home, I'm a bit tired."

"So you want to stay with McGuffie?"

Wally hesitated. He had foreseen this question. He knew that if Dobson suspected him of knowing too much he must suspect McGuffie too. If possible he must not bring the old man into danger—not, at all events, until he had Jim to back him.

"Oh, no, I don't think so," he said. "It must be a couple of miles to McGuffie's place, and I've seen that end of the property. I'd only have to ride back here in the morning. Old Ben could put me up for the night, I expect, couldn't he?"

"You won't get much luxury from him. Corned-beef and a bit of damper will be all old Ben has."

"Well, that won't hurt me. You could let my sister-in-law know that I'm staying."

Somewhat to his surprise, Dobson offered no objection. He gave a kind of grunt, which might have been construed into anything, and rode on in silence. His cool, keen brain was working rapidly. It was a lonely place, and the old, half-crazy man was a tool that might be ready to his hand. What if the young fool himself had shown him and Verrin the way out of their difficulty? And if the tool failed—then he and Verrin could be out next day, and it would be easier to "arrange" for Wally in these solitudes than anywhere else.

His voice was almost pleasant when he spoke at last.

"Well, you might do worse. There's a second bunk in the hut, and old Ben's a decent enough chap, even if he is a little queer in the head. He'll feed you, after a fashion, and, as you say, you'll be where you want to be in the morning. I'll leave the padlock key with McGuffie as I go out."

"Right," said Wally cheerfully.

They rode up to the hut; Dobson coo-ee'd as he dismounted, and an old man came out, a thick-set old man, with stooped shoulders that had once been powerful.

His hair and beard were quite white, in curious contrast with very blue eyes that had a look of vacancy. There were traces of something like breeding in his features, now sodden by drink and set in sullen lines. He looked up at the new-comers, nodding curtly to Dobson: and when he spoke it was the voice of a man speaking to an inferior.

"What brings you here?"

"My horse, Ben, old chap," said Dobson, "and a desire to know how you were getting on. This is young Mr. Meadows, Mr. Edward's brother. You heard Mr. Edward was dead, didn't you?"

"Verrin told me so."

"Well, this is Mr. Walter. He owns Burrin now." Dobson said the last four words very slowly, and a sudden flash came into the old man's eyes. "He wants to camp here for to-night. You'll give him a bed, of course."

The old man hesitated for a moment, then jerked his head towards the hut.

"There's a bed there."

"Well, that's all right. There's a little yard over there, Mr. Walter; you'd better put your horse in there."

"Very well," said Wally. "Thanks, Ben." He had dismounted, and now he walked over to the yard, leading his horse: walking slowly, for he was a little stiff after his long day in the saddle. Dobson waited until he was out of earshot, and turned swiftly to the old hut-keeper.

"Want any whisky, Ben?"

"No, thank you." The old eyes looked at him proudly. "I'm too busy to need whisky these times, Dobson. Now that Meadows is dead I've enough to do arranging to take over the place. He kept me out of it long enough. I'm glad he's dead at last. Who's this fellow?"

An unpleasant light came into Dobson's eyes. The tool was indeed ready.

"Listen," he said sharply. "He thinks he owns the place now. He means to turn you out of it altogether."

"To turn me out! But the place is mine!"

"Yes. I know that, but he doesn't. He thinks he owns it—and he'll bring the police, and then it'll be a lunatic asylum for you, Ben!"

"I'd kill him first!"

"I wouldn't blame you," said Dobson. "It would be an awful thing for you to be hustled off your own place and put into an asylum. Anyhow, that's what he means to do; and very soon, too. Mind you, Ben, he's cunning; he'll speak pleasantly, and he'll tell you nothing of what he's planning. Don't you be taken in by him."

The old face grew sharp.

"I can be cunning, too—very cunning—and I'm very strong, Dobson. See my arm—it's as strong as yours!"

"It is," said Dobson. "Strong enough to defend your place, eh? Well, if I were you, I'd give him no chance of leaving here. One little tap, Ben, when he's asleep—and there'd be no one ever again to keep you out of your own property. You could live here for ever then. But if he once leaves here, you may never get the chance again."

"He—he'll never leave here," said the old man fiercely.

"Good man!" said Dobson. "I knew you wouldn't let yourself be turned out. But be careful, Ben—very careful. He's strong, too, you know, and very quick."

"Yes, I'll be careful." Suddenly he turned away from the overseer and hurried into the hut.

Wally was coming across the grass.

"There's plenty of feed in the yard," he said. "I don't suppose there has been a horse there for months. I'll take him over a bucket of water, and he'll be all right."

"Right as rain," said Dobson. "And you, too. Oh, well, I'll be getting along. Good-night!" He mounted and cantered away swiftly.

CHAPTER XII
WHAT THE NIGHT BROUGHT

WALLY filled a bucket with water and carried it over to his horse. When he returned, old Ben was standing outside the hut. He looked up at the boy from under shaggy, overhanging brows. Again Wally was struck with the queer contrast of the pale blue eyes and the white hair and beard.

"Well, I hope I'm not a nuisance, Ben," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Dobson seemed to think you wouldn't mind having me here for to-night."

"No, I don't mind." The deep old voice was curiously gentle. "Come in: tea is nearly ready."

Wally had to stoop his tall head to enter the hut. It was a fairly large building, which had evidently been used for two or three men. Two bunks were standing, and another could have been put in. A wide, roughly built fireplace was at one end, and in the middle stood a table, made of heavy slabs of wood. Kerosene boxes served as seats. A huge fire roared in the grate, beside it a billy boiled furiously.

"By Jove, you have it hot here!" Wally exclaimed. The hut was like an oven.

"Is it? I am always cold," said the gentle voice. "Sit near the door. I have only beef and damper."

"It's ages since I've seen a damper," Wally said. "You can make one all right, Ben." He picked up the cake of bushman's bread, baked in the ashes. "I'd like to show this to some of the chaps nowadays, who think they live in the bush, although they've never tasted any bread except baker's. Mr. Linton—where I live—has told me that for years damper was all the bread he ever had."

"And good bread, too," said Ben.

"Jolly good bread, he said. And often a curved bit of stringy-bark was all they had to mix the flour and water in. I suppose you've used that sort of mixing-bowl, too, Ben?"

"Many a time."

"We don't know much about bush-life now, that's a fact," said Wally, making inroads on the beef. "Mighty few of us youngsters know what it is to rough it in any way, and we're not half as good as our fathers were. Did you know my father, Ben?"

"No. He died before I took this place."

"But you knew my brother Edward?"

"Yes. But he is dead, too. They're all dead—all dead."

He looked up with a little sad smile. Wally felt a wave of pity pass over him. Poor old chap! alone in the bush; a gentle, crazy, kind old man. He wondered what would become of him when the place was sold, and made a mental note that he must see that he was looked after. It would be too cruel to let such a kind old chap get into an asylum—and yet that was what would happen if Wally did not arrange otherwise.

He rose to get a second cup of tea, finding Ben regarding him steadfastly as he came back to the table. His hand had rested on the knife with which he had carved the beef, but as the boy turned he moved it quickly. Wally sat down, noticing nothing.

"Many cattle about here, Ben?" he asked.

"Not many. I—I have not much to do with cattle. I let the others do that."

"What others?"

"Dobson and Verrin. They are good men with cattle."

"And what do you do?"

"I watch the place. All the time I watch it, to see who comes and goes. Very few come, but sometimes a strange bird flies overhead, and looks at me, and is gone. Then I know that the place will soon be altogether mine."

"Oh—do you?" Wally thought. "Poor old chap! he's more cracked than I thought." Aloud he said:

"And who brings you food, Ben?"

"One of the men. They bring it every month."

"And pay you?"

The white head went up.

"Pay? Why should I be paid? I watch my own place."

"Why, of course—I forgot," said Wally soothingly. "Is Dobson good to you, Ben?"

"He brings me what I want. Sometimes he forgets himself, and is rude. I shall not keep him much longer—but he does not know that," added the old man, cunningly. He fell to muttering to himself, under his breath—once or twice he laughed aloud. Wally spoke to him, but, getting no response, at length sauntered outside, glad of the fresh air after the stifling hut.

"Well, of all the poor, harmless, crazy loons, my host's the most surprising!" he pondered. "Nice old chap, too, and he speaks as if he'd been decently educated—he looks a fairly well-bred old fellow too." He lit his pipe, and smoked in the twilight, wondering what the old man's story was; what forgotten tragedy lay behind his gentle mask, and the eyes that were for ever the eyes of a child. Somewhere in the dim past there had been a good home, a good school; a start in life full of promise and happiness and pride—and now, this: a crazy hut-keeper on a lonely Queensland station.

"Well, I hope he doesn't remember, that's all," the boy thought. "But it's pretty hard that he's got to move from here, if he's happy in believing that it belongs to him. I'd like to fix him up somehow."

He put the thought of old Ben from him, and began to plan his own course of action. Dobson and Verrin would probably be out next day, he felt sure, although Dobson had said nothing. In any case, he must not go back to Marindah: he must keep out of their way until he had secured help. He made up his mind to get away from the hut before dawn, ride across to Bill McGuffie for the key, and from him get directions as to his road—any road that would take him south and keep him away from Marindah. Then he would telegraph to Jim, see the police, and go down to Brisbane to talk to Mr. Grenville. Even if Dobson and Verrin took the cattle, they could not get far. That was the best thing—to let them take the cattle, to catch them red-handed. It was not such a difficult matter after all. But he must have Jim. Without him, Wally felt somewhat over-weighted: with Jim, he felt he could enjoy himself.

Darkness fell, with a young moon giving a faint light in a cloudy sky. It was a warm, still evening: when Wally went back to the hut he found old Ben lighting a kerosene lamp that smelt abominably. He had put a fresh log on the fire, and the atmosphere of the hut resembled that of the engine-room of a cargo-ship in the tropics—a mixture of strange odours. To sleep there was out of the question; but there was no hardship in sleeping in the open air on such a night, even on the ground. Indeed, Wally had inwardly shrunk, from the first, from sharing the hut with the old man, who appeared to be a kindly, harmless old fellow, but was certainly queer, and undoubtedly unwashed. He swung round sharply now, hearing Wally's step, and in the light of the smoky lamp his face looked oddly fierce for a moment. The look died away, however, so quickly that Wally thought he was mistaken.

"Your room's too hot for me, Ben," he said pleasantly. "I'm used to sleeping outside, so I'll just make myself a bunk out on the grass. I suppose I can take some of these bags?"—he pointed to a pile of empty sacks in one corner. The old man nodded, and Wally picked up an armful of the sacks and went off, bidding him a kindly "good-night." There was no response.

"Queer old chap!" Wally thought. "A bit uncanny to live with for long. I should think. But he certainly knows how to make a damper!"

He chose a little hollow where the grass grew longer, gathered a few armfuls of bracken, and covered them with sacks, bringing over his saddle to serve as a pillow. Two or three bags he put on one side for covering, but at present the night was too warm to make covering necessary. He took off his coat and folded it to make the saddle more luxurious, and completed his preparations by discarding his boots and leggings. As he did so, he saw old Ben standing watching him, his stocky form framed in the dull, yellow glow that came from the open door of the hut. He called out a final "good-night" as he lay down, but the watching figure was silent.

Wally was tired enough, but sleep did not come readily: his unfamiliar surroundings kept him awake, and for a time he was unpleasantly conscious of old Ben, a

motionless form, gazing at him steadily. Then the old man disappeared, but still he lay wakeful. The moon bothered him: it was going down, but he had placed his pillow so that he faced it and, dim as it was, it kept him awake. Finally, with an impatient exclamation, he got up and moved the saddle to the other end of his bed, lying down again with a muttered hope that turning round would bring him luck. Almost immediately he fell asleep.

He was still wrapped in the deep sleep of a tired boy when old Ben crept out of the hut. He came noiselessly as a bush animal, on bare feet. For a moment the lit doorway showed him, a heavy stick grasped in his hand; then he became a thing of the night, a shadow slinking across the patch of grass. Near Wally's bed he waited a little, listening for any sound; but there was nothing but the deep, steady breathing, and he crept nearer and nearer. The light of the stars gave him the outline of the sleeper; he had watched him prepare his bed—watching so keenly, so closely, that he knew to an inch where his head must be. He raised his stick in both hands, holding it for a moment above his head. Then it crashed down.

He had watched very carefully, but there was just one moment when he had turned aside; and it was in that moment that Wally had moved his pillow to the other end of his bed. The blow that was meant for his head fell on his bare leg, half-way between the knee and ankle, the bone splintering and breaking under the knotted stick. He sprang half-up, with a shout of agony. Blows rained upon him out of the darkness; one caught his head, and he felt the warm rush of blood down his face. His senses left him.

The old man stood, trembling. Something was wrong; he had struck where he knew his enemy's head lay, and yet that head had risen, shouting at him. He had hit him again and again, and now he was silent—but who knew that the head might not come again? It was a very terrible head, and hard to kill: Dobson could not have known how hard. He must get away. He ran to the hut, and entered it, stumbling against the rickety table. It lurched, and the lamp tottered and fell, crashing on the slab floor in front of the fireplace. A stream of burning oil ran out, across an old sack that was already hot from the fire: it caught fire, and in a moment was a sheet of flame.

The old man gave a loud cry, staggering backwards. The flames reached one of the empty kerosene boxes, and then another; they leaped to where the blankets hung down from his bunk, wreathing up them like fiery snakes. The walls caught; the tattered hessian that covered them flared into a curtain of flame. Before it he backed into the open, uttering little cries of fear. Punishment had indeed come upon him quickly.

From the yard a shrill neigh of fear cut across the night. Wally's horse was galloping about, in the narrow space, terrified. A sudden idea came to the crazed brain, and the old man turned and ran to the yard. The light from the burning hut made everything clear: it showed Wally's bridle, hanging on a post near the slip-rails. He took it, and managed to catch the horse, speaking to it in incoherent murmurs, and holding the rein tightly while he let down the rails. A saddle was out of the question: there was only one, and it was where that still form lay upon the grass; so still, so very still. Nothing would have made him go near it. He stood by the trembling horse for a moment, looking at the fiercely blazing hut with starting eyes, muttering crazed words of terror. The sight became too fearful for him to bear. He scrambled on the horse's back and galloped wildly away into the darkness.

The dawn was breaking when consciousness came back to Wally. It came with a moment of utter bewilderment; it was as if he were awaking from some partly realized dream of terror. Then he moved cautiously, and in the agony of his shattered leg he fainted again.

Presently his eyes opened. He was cruelly thirsty. His face was stiff and queer, his head ached furiously; there seemed no part of his body that was not bruised. But his senses had come back, and he lay trying to think things out. He had vague memories of the attack in the night—of that terrible awakening that had so soon ended in unconsciousness. He remembered seeing old Ben's figure, with upraised weapon, silhouetted against the light that came from the hut doorway. Where was he now? would he finish his job? He turned his head slowly towards the hut, seeing only a heap of smouldering logs. There was deep silence everywhere.

"I suppose he's burned down the hut and cleared out," he muttered. "Well, I hope he won't come back."

The memory of Dobson came to him: of the ride he had meant to take before the dawn. It was dawn now; already the sun was peeping above the horizon, and soon he would be wishing he were in the shade. He forced himself to think steadily. No one knew where he was, except Dobson, and, perhaps, Bill McGuffie. Dobson might come out; possibly it would be as well for him if he did not. Old Ben might return, to finish his work; but it was no use thinking of that. And if Bill did ride near, he might not come near enough, seeing the place deserted.

"I ought to rig up a flag for Bill," he muttered. "He might never see me, in this hollow."

A stick lay near—near, yet incredibly far. He set his teeth, steeling himself against agony, and dragged himself towards it. Twice he fainted, but at last he managed to get his finger-tips upon it and draw it to him. From the pocket of his coat he had taken his knife and a couple of handkerchiefs; he pointed one end of the stick and made a rude flag. Getting it into the ground was another matter, and an agonizing one: the earth was hard, and resisted his feeble efforts, until he contrived to prop himself on one elbow and dig a hole with his knife, slowly, slowly; it seemed the task of hours. It was done at last, and with infinite suffering he raised the stick and drove it home, pressing the loose soil round it with his fingers. The little flag fluttered out gaily on the morning breeze, but Wally did not see it. He had fainted again.

After a time he came back to a shadow of consciousness. He saw the sky, blue above him, and the flickering green of the tree-tops. The breeze blew in his ears in a little, soft sound. Then it grew louder and deeper, until it had turned to a deep, heavy droning: the whole world seemed filled with it. His aching head rang with the loud, ceaseless sound.

"I believe I'm going mad!" he muttered.

He lay very still, trying to get hold of himself, to conquer this terrible feeling that his senses were floating away from him. But the droning sound only deepened until it was a roaring in his ears, pressing him down. He slipped away into unconsciousness again.

Then, only dreams came to him. He was with Jim, in the trenches in Flanders, among the horrors he had almost forgotten in the clean strength of his young manhood; the scream of shells overhead, and the roar as they burst near; the weariness, the smells, the piteous sight of wounded men. They were going over the top together; he felt the terror of the last moments of waiting for the signal, and then the wild exhilaration of that fierce moment when they charged across No Man's Land side by side, their men running swiftly behind them. Not once had the men failed; they did not fail him in his dream. But suddenly Jim went down beside him: he saw him, all in a flash, lying still, with a bullet-mark on his forehead; his cap had fallen off, and the blue mark was just above the white line where the tan of his face ended. Jim was down, and he could not stop to help him; he must run on, desperately, leaving him among the spitting bullets that kicked up little patches of dust everywhere. He heard himself sobbing as he ran from him, old Jim, whom he loved. How was he going to tell Norah that he had left him there, among the bullets, with that blue mark on his forehead? What would she think of him?

Then, as if his pain were too great to be home, the dream changed, and he saw Norah coming towards him. He was lying on something that hurt terribly, and all about him was a mist of suffering; but it blew away in little wisps as she came, and he saw her face, infinitely loving, infinitely pitiful. She knelt beside him, putting a cool hand on his throbbing brow, and there was no more pain. He looked into her grey eyes, trying to speak, but no words would come; and presently there seemed no need of words, for she had bent and kissed him. And the dream faded into darkness and peace.

CHAPTER XIII
WHAT CAME FROM THE CLOUDS

FREDDY PAXTON had found it hard to settle down to bush life after four years of war. August, 1914, had found him in England, where his father and mother and sisters had industriously visited ruins and cathedrals, and had read guide-books even at meals; while Freddy had spent most of his time at the aerodromes at Hendon and Brooklands, with all his soul rapt in the contemplation of the aircraft that, in those simple days, appeared as magical as the flying carpet of the Arabian nights. Freddy's spirit soared above earthly matters. He made friends with aviators and mechanics, learned a great many technical terms—and for the most part used them wrongly—and had no chance of spending his money in riotous living, since every penny that he could scrape together went in taking trips aloft.

The outbreak of war checked these aerial aspirations, for the moment. Like every other decent youngster, Freddy enlisted, and for eighteen months did his duty manfully in the particular infantry battalion into which Fate had cast him. But all the time, his soul was in the clouds. He watched the aeroplanes droning overhead with a devotion which he found himself quite unable to give to barrack-square evolutions or the care of the feet of marching men—which, as many a young gentleman learned, with pained surprise, is one of the ordinary duties of the British officer. Behind the lines, when leisure came his way, he haunted the aerodromes, or fell back, for lack of anything better, on the study of the anti-aircraft guns. Over a shattered machine, which had crashed not far from his dug-out, he was said by his fellow-subalterns to brood like an old hen; and he sorrowed when the fragments were removed by callous Army Service Corps men in a motor-lorry. It was only a natural development that later on he exchanged into the Air Force. Luck had brought him through, so far, without a scratch, and it stayed with him during two and a half years of what were to Freddy pure delight. He enjoyed himself riotously, and became mildly celebrated as a terror to enemy airmen. The end of the War saw him with a Military Cross, a French decoration, and—when he said good-bye to his best-loved machine—the heaviest heart in the Army.

His people had returned to Queensland soon after the outbreak of war, and thither Freddy followed as soon as he was demobilized. He found his path in life mapped out for him, and it lay strictly along the ground. His father was the owner of a huge cattle-run in the North, where Freddy had been brought up; it had always been understood that he was to take over its management when he was old enough. He found his father broken in health, his mother lonely and worried—his sisters had married during the years of fighting. There was nothing for Freddy to do but settle down. Everybody seemed to expect it. At once there were a hundred station problems for him to solve, a hundred station plans to make. The station swallowed him; and if he kicked during the process, no one but himself was aware of the kicks.

Then, as if in answer to his dreams of the air—dreams that were his night and day—Fate cast an aeroplane in his path. She was of the type he knew: a two-seater, brought out by a man who had planned much flying in Australia, but had, unfortunately for his ambitions, married a wife after landing at Brisbane. As wives go, this was an excellent one, but she viewed aeroplanes with horror and distrust. People were forced, she knew, to use them in war; but so did people use heavy guns in warfare, without desiring to keep them later on as domestic pets. Therefore she put her foot—metaphorically—upon the aeroplane. Her husband argued, sighed, and yielded before the altogether unfair weapon of tears; and, meeting Freddy Paxton in the Club, slightly assuaged his grief by selling him the two-seater. It took rather more than Freddy's gratuity money, and he considered it cheap at the price.

Freddy, who had come to Brisbane in a particularly evil train, flew home in an ecstasy of delight, alarming his father and mother greatly when he alighted on the plain before the homestead. At first they were inclined to regard the aeroplane from the same standpoint as the wife of the man who had sold it; but they were understanding people, and when they saw Freddy's utter joy in his purchase, and recognized that there was a light in his eye and a spring in his step that had been lacking since he returned from England, they decided to swallow the aeroplane, even as the station had swallowed Freddy. They became accustomed to it in an extraordinary short time. There was something very reassuring in the way Freddy used it, much as he might use a quiet pony, or a bicycle. The run was very large, and he made trips to the out-stations, carrying supplies, between breakfast and lunch, instead of taking two or three days, with a packhorse, over such jobs. He inspected fencing as he flew; the men declared that he could cut out fat cattle in it. It became a regular occurrence for him to fly to Brisbane for an occasional day's outing—to see a cricket-match, or go to the races, and come droning home in the evening like a huge bee. He never succeeded in inducing his father and mother to fly: on that point they were firm. But old Mr. Paxton went so far as to say that no big run was properly equipped without an aeroplane.

It was lonely country for the first hundred miles after leaving the station. Freddy had made a point of flying low and studying the ground carefully, since no airman knows when he may be obliged to make a forced landing; and so he grew to know the scattered homesteads, lonely little islands lying in a sea of plain, or tucked away into the depths of the bush. There were huts, too, here and there, over which he flew—desolate little places, roofed with bark, where men lived on the out-stations without seeing another human face for weeks together. A kindly soul was Freddy Paxton: he used to fly as low as he dared, knowing what a thrill would be lent to the drab day in the lonely places by the sight of his great bird, whirling over the tree-tops. He liked to wave a hand to the bush children as they darted out: there was a tiny school on his route that he never failed to miss, laughing to see the inmates, pupils and teacher alike, rushing forth like ants to look at him. He would circle round and loop the loop for their benefit before rising with a great swoop and winging his way southward.

"I wonder you wouldn't drop some papers for those poor souls, sometimes, Freddy," said his Father, one day. "Goodness knows, we've enough papers. And they get mighty little reading in the bush."

"Good idea!" Freddy had said. "By Jove, I'll do that!"

After that, he never failed to ransack the house for newspapers and magazines whenever he was going to Brisbane, and the lonely places grew to look for his coming more than ever, since it was certain that with the passing of the great, glittering bird a shower of papers would come down, drifting through the air as if she had dropped white feathers for their sake. There were not many of them who ever knew his name; to whom he was ever more than a tiny figure, seen above them, waving his hand, seen for a moment and then gone. He would have been enormously surprised to have been told that they regarded him as an up-to-date species of angel.

There was one little hut on the edge of a belt of timber that Freddy always looked for. One man lived there: an old man, he seemed, bent, with broad shoulders. He used to shade his eyes with his hands, looking up as Freddy skimmed over the plain near him; and Freddy would drop his papers, wondering, with a little laugh, if they made the old fellow neglect the job that nobody but himself ever seemed to see. "Small blame to him if they do!" remarked Freddy to himself.

He was coming down to Brisbane one morning in a hurry: he had started with the first rays of dawn, with the knowledge of a long day's work and play ahead of him. There were no tricks to be played in the air for the bush youngsters that morning; he came down low enough to drop his papers, but in a moment he was nearly out of sight—which was a different wonder for the children, and very interesting in its way. He had his bundle ready to drop, as he drew near the landmarks that warned him of the old man's hut.

But there was no hut there: only a heap of smouldering timber from which blue smoke drifted up towards him. Freddy looked down, puzzled.

"What on earth has happened to the old 'hatter'?" he muttered. "Burned himself out, I suppose. Oh well, I can't help it."

He was over the little plain and heading on his way when his brow knitted with a sudden thought. The old man might be hurt—dead: he could not go on without knowing if he needed help. He swerved, coming round in a great circle and flying low; and then, something else caught his eye: a little white flag, so tiny that it could hardly be seen from the air. It stood out on the clear ground, fluttering gaily; and beside it was something—a man who lay very still.

"By Jove!" said Freddy. "That's the old chap, sure enough. Well, I'll have to land."

He throttled down his engine, flying in small circles and eyeing the little plain doubtfully: landing was easy enough, but to get off again might not be so simple. The tall trees rose thickly on the side near which the ashes of the hut smouldered; on the other three sides were low rises, sparsely covered with gidgee scrub, and a belt of gidgee stretched across the plain, cutting it almost in half. Not a pleasant place in which to manoeuvre a two-seater. However, that had to be considered later on: at present his concern was with the man who lay so still below him.

He came down lightly, and taxied past the little white flag, leaving the machine with her nose into the wind. No, he reflected, as he unstrapped himself, getting off was not going to be child's play, especially in a place so lonely that any mistake might mean very serious difficulty.

"I hope to goodness he's only drunk, and not hurt," he muttered. A drunken man might be sobered sufficiently to be of assistance. Then he remembered the flag, and sighed. Intoxicated gentlemen do not generally fly signals for help.

He climbed out, and ran forward to the prostrate man. Before he reached him he knew that it was not the old hut-keeper who lay there so quietly. He had never seen

his face clearly, but he knew him for a bent, gnarled old man: and this was a long, lean fellow, clean-limbed and athletic, with features keen and well-bred, so far as they could be seen under a general coating of dust and blood. Freddy Paxton surveyed him in bewilderment, and then knelt down to make further investigations, thankful that the War had taught him something of first-aid.

He was not dead—so much was clear. There was an unpleasant wound on the side of his head, caked with dried blood, and he was quite unconscious, his forehead burning, his breath coming and going quickly. Freddy ran his hands over the long form, seeking for further damages. The arms and body seemed sound, so far as could be told without stripping him, although marks on his silk shirt told that many blows had been rained on him. But when he came in his investigations to the left leg, in spite of all his war experience Freddy whistled ruefully.

"By Jupiter, what a beastly crash!" he muttered. He touched it gingerly. "Broken, of course. Now what on earth had I better do? I'm scared to try to handle it!"

He strode over to the smoking ruins of the hut, and looked about. There was no sign of anyone else, no hint of human life; the place seemed desperately solitary. But a little distance away, out of range of the fire, a rough bench still stood, and beneath it were a couple of kerosene-tins, which had evidently been used for carrying water. One was empty, upside down; the other, to Freddy's delight, was three-parts full of clean water. He picked up both cans and carried them across to his patient.

"Dead to the world still!" he muttered thankfully. "Don't wake up till I've done, old man!"

He ran to the aeroplane and dove into the cockpit for the bag containing what he termed his "glad rags" for Brisbane. These included a soft white shirt—he tore it into strips, and soaked some in water, wrapping them round and round the injured leg before he attempted to set it—a task only to be attempted with shuddering and fear. There was wood enough at hand for splints; he tore up the shirt he wore to pad them, and set the leg as best he could, feeling the best to be but a poor job. It was done at last. Freddy wiped his damp forehead before he turned to the wound on the unconscious man's head.

"Well, thank goodness he couldn't feel it!" he muttered devoutly.

The head wound was an easier matter. Freddy used the empty can as a basin and sponged the contused cut until it was at least tolerably clean, extending his ministrations to his patient's face. He looked at it approvingly as it emerged from its covering of dirt and caked blood.

"Jolly good-lookin' chap," he said. "I wonder who he is."

As if in answer, Wally opened his eyes.

"Water!" he muttered.

"Water, old chap?" said Freddy. "Rather. Wait just a second."

There was a tin pannikin on the bench where he had found the tins. He ran across for it, and, filling it quickly, held it to the sick man's lips. Wally drank eagerly.

"Now you just lie quiet a minute," said Freddy, putting down the cup. "I'm just fixing your head; nice old cut you've got here, and no mistake. Never mind, it's cleared up now, and I'll have it bandaged in two-two's. Ache much?"

"A good bit," said Wally. His voice would only come in a husky whisper from his stiff lips.

"I'll bet it does: it's a cow of a wound. The wet bandages may ease it." He wrapped the soaked strips round his patient's head, while Wally lay breathing heavily, glad of the cold touch of the wet linen on his burning forehead.

"There!"—Freddy rose, surveying his work with some satisfaction—"you look a jolly respectable casualty. Feel up to telling me how it happened?"

"Old Ben," Wally whispered. "The old hut-keeper. Came for me while I was asleep—I don't know why. I could just see him, in the light from the hut door. Then I don't remember any more. I think he must be mad."

"Very likely," said Freddy. "These old hatters often go off their chumps. He's cleared out, anyhow, and burned the hut down as a parting kick. Had you a horse?"

"Yes—a big bay. He's over in the old yard." His eyes wandered vaguely. "I'm using my saddle for a pillow."

Freddy uttered a kind of distressed laugh.

"You've only got the ground for a pillow, old chap—you've managed to get a good way from your bed. Blessed if I know how you did it with that leg. And there's no sign of your horse—the old wretch must have taken him. Well, he'll get dealt with by the police, as soon as I can get them on his track. The question is at present, how to get you into the old 'bus."

"The 'bus?" Wally's eyes questioned him.

"Yes. I've got an aeroplane here behind you. I was flyin' over you when I saw your little old flag."

"I... heard you," said Wally, with difficulty. "I thought I was going mad."

"I don't blame you," Freddy answered. "Not the sort of sound you expect in the bush before breakfast. Well, it's there, anyhow, and I'll have you in Brisbane in no time, once I can get you loaded up. I'm horribly afraid I'll have to hurt you over it, too, but I'll do my best. Have another drink." He held the pannikin to Wally's lips again, and the boy took a deep draught.

"That's gorgeous!" he said, speaking more clearly. "By Jove, I was thirsty! Don't you worry about getting me in—I'll be able to help."

"You look the sort of chap who'd try," Freddy muttered to himself, as he walked away. "But it's going to be a dickens of a job. I'm fairly hefty, but I wish you were a few sizes smaller, my friend!" He halted a few yards off and looked about him. "By Jove, if I could wangle the machine alongside that bench it would be a help!"

There had been occasions in France when Freddy Paxton, in haste to be gone, had marvelled that two mechanics should seem to make so much fuss about pulling round the tail of a 'plane. He remembered this now, as he strained to move his machine for the first time alone, and realized the weight of the tail. Big and powerful as he was, the task was almost beyond him. In France there had never been any lack of help; on the station the stockmen delighted in lending a hand whenever the 'plane was moved—even near Brisbane helpers, in flocks, seemed to spring from the ground to assist at a start. Now he was up against it, and in the grip of compelling necessity. He struggled until his great muscles cracked: she moved and, panting and blowing, with frequent rests, he managed to manoeuvre her until the fuselage was alongside the bench.

"That nearly beat me," he muttered. "Now for my passenger."

Wally had been thinking, as well as pain and bewilderment would let him. Presently he must move; and his memories of his last attempts at moving were yet keen. It might well be that by the time he was in the aeroplane no further speech would be possible to him; and something must be done to checkmate Dobson and protect old Bill McGuffie. If he could get Jim! This big airman who had come to his deliverance would help him—if only he could choke down his pain and command his stammering tongue enough to tell him what he wanted. He must do it. He had known men in France with a message to deliver who had held back Death itself until that message was given, and had then died, happy in the knowledge of work accomplished. He—Wally—had nothing big, nothing noble: only the protecting of an old man and the checkmating of two scoundrels. But it was his job.

He looked up eagerly as Freddy came back to him.

"Will you do something for me? There's a telegram that must go—it's got to go, I tell you." His tongue would not do its duty: it was as though a hammer were beating in his brain.

Freddy looked compassionately at the unnaturally bright eyes.

"Look here, old son, don't you worry. I'll see to everything when we get to Brisbane. Time enough to tell me then."

"I may not be able to speak then," Wally gasped. "And there's bad work going on—Bill isn't safe. Bill McGuffie, you know. Send the telegram to Jim."

"I'll send anything you like," said Freddy soothingly. "Hold on a minute until I get a pencil and paper—I chucked off my coat just now." He was back with them in a moment. "Now you tell me—I'll write it down."

Wally collected himself with a tremendous effort. He gave the address slowly.

"Tell him I'm hurt—Meadows is my name—Walter Meadows. Tell him to come at once."

Freddy was pondering as he wrote.

"See here," he said as he finished. "This Jim Linton of yours can't get here before Saturday evening, no matter how hard he goes—and this is Wednesday. Is this bad work you talk of goin' to wait for him? If not, hadn't you better let me take a hand?"

Wally looked at him dumbly.

"I'm pretty capable," said Freddy slowly, as one talks to a child. "Captain, R.A.F., and all that: my father has a run up North. I'm pretty well known."

The hammer was beating hard in Wally's brain.

"Jim can always fix things," he muttered. "Tell him—get into communication—Grenville and North. Jim's a chap you can always depend on—Jim and Norah. No, not Norah—I was dreaming. It's Jim, I tell you—and quick!"

"Tell me, too," said Freddy. "Jim may not be in time to fix things." He looked at him carefully. "Ah, don't worry—it will keep. Wait until you're in Brisbane, and we'll make everything all right. Take it easy now."

But his first words had wakened something in Wally's mind. He made a violent effort to clear away the confusion that clogged his utterance.

"I'll have to tell it," he gasped. "McGuffie may not be safe—and he's old and faithful."

"Not now," Freddy begged. "You aren't fit, old son. Wait till Brisbane."

"No—I can do it. You listen. Have you got your pencil?"

The story came in gasps; with little pauses and gaps where Wally's tongue failed him when the waves of pain surged high and the little hammers beat furiously. Then he would turn beseeching eyes towards the cup of water, and Freddy would hold it to his lips; and after a gulp the slow words would come again. So he forced himself to speak until the story was done and Freddy put down his pencil.

"That's all right," he said. "You needn't worry, old man—you've done your bit. I'll take charge of it until Linton comes." There was a glint in his eye. "Seems likely to be a nice little bit of warfare—I'll let you know how things go. And now we've got to get you into the 'bus."

The mists were gathering again, but Wally came back.

"You help me up," he said. "If I get my arm round your neck I can hop on my good leg."

"I wonder, can you?" Freddy pondered uneasily. "I want to get you to that bench: then I can hoist you on to the fuselage. Can you stick it, do you think?"

"I'm going to stick it," Wally said. With the necessity of moving, his head seemed to grow clearer: it was easier than to think of words—words that would not come.

The little hammers did not beat so cruelly.

Somehow, he was standing, every bruised muscle rebelling against the movement. He leaned against Freddy for a moment, and then, slowly, agonizingly, the journey to the bench began. It was not far, but it seemed miles. He uttered no sound, but his breath came in tortured gasps.

"It's only a yard farther, old chap," came Freddy's voice presently—or was it hours later?

A yard. Four steps; four hideous steps. Then he was sitting on the bench, and Freddy was lifting the smashed leg gently, till it lay on the bench before him. That was easier. He breathed deeply, getting hold of himself.

"If I can get you astride of the fuselage, behind the passenger's cockpit, I think we can manage," Freddy said.

Somehow it was done: neither could quite have told how. A wave of faintness came over Wally in the agony of the movement, and Freddy laid him back quickly, so that he was on his back along the fuselage. He felt his legs lifted again, and stiffened himself to endure.

"I've got your legs nearly into the cockpit now," He heard Freddy's voice, sharp with anxiety. "I'll lift you—try and lever yourself up with your hands so that you can slide down into the seat."

It was nearly the end of endurance. As he sank into the seat the injured leg came in contact with the bottom of the fuselage, and a low moan broke from him—very low, but Freddy heard it.

"Good Lord, you can't stick that!" he said sharply. He slipped off the machine, and dived underneath, pulling out his knife. There was a sound of ripping as he slit the fabric of the fuselage and let the leg come gently through. His troubled face bobbed up from under the machine.

"Is that better, old man? Can you stick it?"

"I can stick it," said Wally. But his face was grey.

Freddy peered into the cockpit anxiously.

"You can't!" he said. "It'll about kill you to have it hanging down like that." He gazed round wildly, and suddenly his eye fell on his own sleeved waistcoat, lying where he had flung it when he was moving the machine.

"I've an idea!" he said. "Just a second!"

He was running like a deer to the nearest patch of scrub. Wally watched him for a moment, wondering, and then the torture of the hanging leg grew too great to be borne. He leaned forward, grasping it under the knee with both hands, to take the strain of the weight. As if in a dream, he heard Freddy's racing feet coming back.

"Look! I believe we can manage that better, Meadows!" He turned the waistcoat inside out, buttoning it up, and thrust through the sleeves two straight sticks which he had cut. Diving into a recess of the cockpit, he brought out a piece of rope. "I can suspend this from the longerons of the fuselage, and make a cradle for the leg—it won't be quite so beastly for you!"

He worked over him with quick, deft movements, and presently the injured leg swung in the improvised cradle. Something of the torment left Wally's eyes.

"That's—better," he gasped.

"Good-oh!" Freddy said. He tested his device carefully. "That'll hold all right. Now I'll strap you in and we'll get her going. We may have a bit of trouble—the engine's cooled off completely. I won't keep you a second longer than I can help."

"How about that belt of timber half-way along the plain?" Wally asked. "Have you got room to rise before you get there?"

"It'll take her all she knows." He set his jaw. "Anyhow, she's got to, so that's all about it."

To Wally it seemed that the engine would never start. He sat with the mist of pain rising about him, at times bringing him to the verge of unconsciousness. Then he would pull himself together, clenching his teeth; whatever he did when once they were headed for Brisbane, he must not delay matters by turning into a limp heap now. Freddy, it was evident, had difficulties enough: he was climbing up and down, turning mysterious switches in the pilot's cockpit, and then going round to the front of the 'plane, putting all his energies into swinging the great propeller again and again. It left him breathless, powerful as he was, for the exertion of getting Wally into the machine had told upon him. He rested a moment once, panting heavily; and, looking up, encountered Wally's anxious eyes.

"Takes the wind out of you," he gasped. "Tough old bird, isn't she?"

"By Jove, I wish I could help you!"

"Don't you worry," said Freddy. "But I hate keeping you waiting."

He climbed up to the engine from the lower plane, and removed the top half of the cowling, peering at the mysteries within. The pain mist crept over Wally. He had a dim sense that the airman was working swiftly, desperately, at something in the engine; but the little red-hot hammers were beating again, and nothing seemed clear. Then he heard the cowling replaced, and saw Freddy letting himself down—saw him run to the front of the machine.

"One—two—three!" Often on the plains of France Wally had heard the mechanics counting before they swung the propeller of a fighting-'plane. It came back to him on a sudden rush of memory as he heard Freddy's muttered voice. "One—two—three!" He swung the propeller again, putting every ounce of his weight into a final pull. A low, deep throbbing came—and Wally crept back to fuller consciousness at the airman's exclamation of relief.

"Got her, the old beauty!"

"All right?" Wally asked.

"Right as rain. She's purring like a contented cat. By Jove, I thought I'd never find out what was wrong! I'm awfully sorry, Meadows, old chap—it's jolly rough on you."

"I'm . . . all right," said Wally.

"Oh, are you?" rejoined Freddy, with a grim laugh. He ran round to the step on the side of the fuselage, with a final look at his passenger.

"Your safety-belt easy? Not hurting you?"

"It's quite comfortable," Wally said. "Engine——"

"She'll go like a bird," said Freddy, scrambling into his seat in front and securing his own belt. "My hat, she was obstinate! It's pretty chilly yet. I'll give her a few

minutes to tick over and gradually warm up—the delay's a nuisance, but it makes things safer. Flown before, Meadows?"

"A few times—in England."

"Well, this is a rotten way to start the game out here," said Freddy. "When you're all right again we'll have some decent flights, shall we? Now, I've got to get as far from that dashed belt of gidyea as I can, before I turn—and even so, there's barely room to get off the ground. I'll have to zoom the trees, I expect, if you know what that means."

Recollections of the talk of airmen came back to Wally.

"That means shooting straight up, doesn't it?"

"Yes—almost vertical ascent. So be prepared for it. The ground's abominable: rough stuff, long grass, ant-beds: it's bound to hurt you when she's taxiing. Just hang on, old chap—I'll make it as quick as I can."

The memory of his kind, troubled look stayed with Wally as he stiffened himself for what was to come next. Indeed, Freddy was more anxious than he cared to admit, for he knew that if they got off the ground safely it would only be by the barest margin. Opening up his engine, he turned the machine down-wind and taxied away from the belt of trees until long grass and ant-beds made further progress in that direction impossible. He swung the machine round, looking keenly at the distance between himself and the trees.

"She'll just about do it—if the grass does not hold her back in getting up speed," he muttered. "But it will be pretty close, and I'll have to zoom that dashed timber—if I don't zoom we'll go bird's-nesting in the tops. Well, here goes!" He set his teeth and opened the throttle of the engine.

The machine shot forward across the grass. For a moment the engine did not answer kindly, and Freddy watched the indicator anxiously as it gained its revolutions. He leaned forward, his face like a mask, muttering to himself.

"Twenty-five revs. below her normal, by thunder! And there's grass a mile long tangling itself round the axles and under-carriage, by the feel of it—and beastly ground ahead. I'd give something to be clear of those trees!"

The roaring machine gathered way, but with merciless swiftness the distance lessened between it and the belt of timber. Suddenly the long grass ended, in ground that had been cut up badly by cattle in wet weather. Freed from the grass, the 'plane gained speed rapidly, shooting across the uneven ground and bouncing like a rubber ball. The faster she travelled, the higher she bounced, until Freddy shook with dread of what would come next.

"Something has got to go!" he muttered. "If a tyre doesn't burst or a shock-absorber break, one of the axles will buckle up. She can't stand much of this!" The machine leaped from a patch of dried mud, and he thrilled with pity for his helpless passenger.

"O Lord, his poor leg!" he groaned.

Wally was gripping his leg with both hands, forgetting pain in excitement and in the nearness of their peril. They were skimming more and more swiftly over the ground: nearer and nearer came the line of timber, until it seemed that no power on earth could prevent the machine from crashing into the trees. He set himself to endure the shock; and then, just as the branches loomed high before them, scarcely thirty yards away, he found himself staring into blue sky where, a fraction of a second previously, he had looked into thick timber.

They cleared the tree-tops with fifty feet to spare, zooming up into the blue. Freddy pushed the joy-stick forward as they rose, and the 'plane flattened out. A gust caught her under the keel she rose with a jerk, and then fell until she seemed almost to touch the trees. Another "bump" caught her, this time, luckily, an upward one; it pushed her up about thirty feet, and soon, climbing at a steady speed of fifty miles an hour, the trees were left behind. The earth fell away beneath them; around and ahead was nothing but blue, and they were roaring smoothly and swiftly to the south.

Freddy Paxton heaved a great sigh.

"Never had a much closer shave!" he reflected. "Great Scott, what a bumping! I wonder how that poor chap is."

He stole a quick glance round, shouting a gay word of encouragement to his passenger, though his voice was lost in the roar of the engine. But Wally's head had sagged down on his chest. The safety-belt held him, inert and unconscious.

CHAPTER XIV
THE KINGDOM OF DELIA REILLY

THE autumn rains had come at last, and all about Billabong the earth was busy making brave pretence of a second spring. Paddock that had been bare and brown were covered with a fresh growth of tender green, amidst which the half-grown lambs frolicked delightedly, and the horses, even to old Tulip, black Billy's mare, kicked up their heels and galloped like yearling colts. The hedges had lost their coating of dust; the gardens were green again, and the roses had decided that there was yet time to wake up and put out a crop of buds. The rivers ran strongly; the creeks, no longer mere chains of muddy holes, rippled and gurgled delightedly between their fringes of fern and maidenhair—which had made believe that they were dead, but now came out in a glory of fresh fionds. Only in the orchards the tired trees had no pretence ready, but threw their leaves away, longing for their winter sleep. But the pale-yellow leaves floated down gently, coming to rest on the springing grass below; and it was so beautiful a death that there was no sadness in it.

It was on one of the most perfect of these autumn days that Mrs. Brown and little Mary-Kate Reilly stood in the kitchen of the Reillys' cottage beyond Four-Cross-Roads. They bore the expression of those who have no more worlds to conquer. Not an inch of the cottage, from the fern-trimmed front verandah to the new back verandah, built by Dan Reilly in the evenings after work, remained to be swept and garnished. They had cleaned and scrubbed and polished and washed; the windows gleamed with a lustre rarely attained by mere glass, the new paint—also applied by the ex-Sergeant-Major in his leisure hours—glistened, the new linoleums apparently considered that they were mirrors, and shone accordingly. Jim had given the linoleums, masterfully declaring that Mrs. Reilly should do no more scrubbing of bare boards. Jim and Mrs. Reilly had become firm allies, and were frequently heard discoursing of Donegal and exchanging fond memories of its hills and bogs.

There were fresh glories in the little cottage. In Mrs. Reilly's bedroom the walls were gay with new paper: a pink paper with little knots of rosebuds and ribbons, most heartsome to behold. There were new muslin curtains, and the big box that did duty as a dressing-table had a petticoat to match them, tied, as they were, with pink bows. Norah and Tommy had greatly enjoyed the decoration of this room. But the crowning wonder was in the kitchen, where of old a stove of very meagre virtues had done its best to break the hearts of those who had cooked with it: a mean stove, old and worn, with an amazing capacity for eating much wood and giving little result: set, too, so low that to look into the oven it was necessary to crouch before it on the floor. Mrs. Reilly had endeavoured to cover up its deficiencies with much blacklead, but she had suffered many things because of it. Now it had gone, and in its place gleamed a new stove of the latest pattern, warranted to cook without any assistance, and to do it upon a supply of fuel that was so small as to be really ridiculous. David Linton had put in the stove, after due consultation with Norah and Brownie. Mary-Kate was still unable to exist without constantly making a tour of all the new wonders in the cottage. But always at the end of the tour she came back to the stove, and purred.

This was the third day that Brownie and Mary-Kate had been over to the cottage, labouring mightily that it might smile to greet its mistress, and to-day everything was ready and she was coming home. Billabong sorrowed at parting with her: every one had grown fond of the cheery, plucky, little Irishwoman. It had become a habit to stroll round to the sunny corner of the verandah where she lay, finding her slow way back to health, and talk to her; listening to the soft brogue as she asked a thousand questions about her new country, or told them stories of the wild, bitter times in Ireland since the War. Always she had faith in Ireland. "They'll get sense back," she said. "An' they'll get rid of all the bad men that's led them an' every nan'll be happy again. Then you'll go back an' see Ireland, won't you, Miss Norah?" And when Norah laughed and nodded, she looked at her with a little wistful smile. "Do you think, now, you could pack me in, too?" she said.

She was no longer lonely, however. The story of her pain and of her journey to the very edge of the dim river of Death, had waked swift compassion among the women of the district, and there was keen regret that she had trodden her difficult path alone. Some of the neighbours had been to see her in the hospital; others, at Billabong, where Brownie made them welcome, letting them clearly see that the little Irishwoman was an honoured guest. Mrs. Reilly said nothing, but in her secret soul she adored Brownie for her manner towards her when she had callers. Then was she served first, as though she were Royalty itself; Brownie putting aside all protests with a wave of the hand; and it was, "Mrs. Reilly, me dear, a little more of the cake—it's one I made special for you"; or, "A little more cream in your tea, Mrs. Reilly—just a shade; you know the Master says that new Jersey cow's cream's to be kept for you, along of it being that rich—you won't disappoint him!" And though nothing would make little Delia Reilly anything but a humble soul, these were certainly soothing moments.

But though she was very happy, and the luxury of being without pain was almost too great to be told; and though the space and quiet of Billabong, and the comfort that surrounded her, were like dreams of Paradise, Mrs. Reilly was by nature a busy, home-keeping person, and Paradise had never been so real and dear to her as her own little cottage, with her tall man and her little Mary-Kate. There had been a light in her eye that morning that Mary-Kate had perfectly understood. She chuckled over it, standing with Brownie in the cottage kitchen.

"She's that pleased to be comin'," she told Brownie confidentially. "She don't know whether she's on her head or her heels, she's that pleased. An' the loveliest part of it is, that she don't know anything we've done. 'You'll have to help me,' she says to me this morning: 'I know I mustn't be workin' hard yet, but we'll do it bit by bit, Mary-Kate,' says she, 'an' soon it'll look like a new pin again,' she says. 'A nan can't keep a house decent, no matter how he tries—we'll not let on we notice anything, Mary-Kate, but we'll get it all nice!' she says." Mary-Kate executed a sudden caracole of delight. "Did ye ever see any new pin look better than we've made this house, Mrs. Brownie?" she demanded.

"Not in me born days," responded Brownie solemnly. "I been all over it since we 'ad our dinner, an' I don't see another place to give a rub to." She carried a spotless taster, which she now folded carefully and placed in the pocket of her apron, as a warrior may lay by his sword in time of peace. "An' your Dad's rakin' the gravel path again, which to my certain knowledge he's raked three times to-day. The poor man's that anxious to do something I near went an' walked over it, so's he'd 'ave somethink to rake; but he's doin' it without that, bless him! That bein' so, Mary-Kate, I wish they'd come."

"So do I," said Mary-Kate, running to the door and looking along the track. "But it's a bit soon: Miss Norah said she'd make her have a rest after dinner, the way she wouldn't be tired when she got here. She do be excited, the wee thing!" Mary-Kate had grown to look upon her mother as something very small and tender; she was fiercely protective towards her. "Oh, Mrs. Brownie, that back verandah's just the loveliest! an' isn't it the fine, big table he's after puttin' there, med out of an ould box!—an' the tap into it from the tank, the way she can get water without soilin' her feet! 'Tis meself knows there'll be no washin' up done in this kitchen, nor anny other work, neither: Mother'll do it all in the back verandah!"

"Well, so she may, if it's fine weather," Brownie said. "Indeed, this room's more by way of bein' a parlour." She glanced proudly about the little kitchen, with its freshly painted walls, its bright linoleum, and the red cloth on the table. They had discussed solemnly whether it should be laid ready for tea; but Mary-Kate wanted that privilege herself, and had pleaded hard for the new red cloth that Brownie had given, and the great pot of geranium that glowed upon it, a mass of pink blossom. It was a colour-scheme that delighted Mary-Kate's barbaric eye. The red fire leaped in the new stove; near it was the little mother's chair all ready—the big, comfortable chair that Dan Reilly had contrived out of a barrel—though you would scarcely have guessed that, so fine was its gay upholstery. A sheepskin rug that he had tanned lay ready for her feet. "Yes, it's a kitchen any lady in the land might be proud of," said Brownie solemnly. "You see that you keep it nice, Mary-Kate, like I've taught you!"

"I will, so," said Mary-Kate, with due reverence. It had been decided that for the present she must go back to school, but remain at home to help her mother: and Brownie had already taken her far along the road of good housekeeping.

"Sure you know all about the food?"

"I think so, Mrs. Brownie." Mary-Kate ran to the safe. "Here's the big bowl of soup that's for tea an' in-between times—glory be, Mrs. Brownie, it's affter settin' in a stiff jelly! An' bacon an' egg to her breakfast, affter her porridge—I can do them all; an' the wee camsole of stew——"

"Casserole, Mary-Kate!"

"Yerra, I do be forgettin' thim ould names," said the daughter of the house with asperity. "'Tis the small, little, brown pot, amnyhow, to be cooked in a slow oven with the lid on. That's for dinner, an' I'm to make a rice puddin'. An' the wee joint of lamb in the hangin' safe outside, for next day."

"You'll have to let your mother look at that when it's cookin'."

"I will, so. But well able she'll be to look—only to look!—an' 'twill be an amusement to her. An' we'll consult between us for that day's puddin'; yerra, she'll open her eyes when she knows all I can cook!" For Mary-Kate's housewifery had been kept a dark secret from her mother.

"Don't you get too cock-sure about it," counselled Mrs. Brown. "Them that's cock-sure often spoils good food, Mary-Kate!"

"I will not," said Mary-Kate humbly. "I know well I'm pretty young yet. Indeed, Mrs. Brownie, I'm after askin' in me prayers last night that I'll never let a stew boil! That's a thing it's terrible easy to do!"

"An' there's older people than you that have done it," said Brownie gently. "Don't you worry, Mary-Kate, an' you'll make a good cook yet. I never wish to see nicer little cakes than that lot you made this morning. There's no 'arm in them for your mother's afternoon tea, not if you give her a dozen of 'em!"

"Oh, Mrs. Brownie, darlin'——!" Mary-Kate's words failed her, for her teacher was not given to compliments, and had, indeed, sound views on the subject of keeping little girls in their place. Then, as she struggled for speech, came a distant sound of a motor-horn, and a loud yell from the one-time Sergeant-Major, in the voice in which of old he had addressed an unruly squad.

"She's comin', Mary-Kate!"

"Oh!" said little Mary-Kate, and fled from the house. Brownie lingered a moment to slip on a voluminous dust-coat and a hat that concealed most of her features, and followed her out.

David Linton was driving the car, Norah and Mrs. Reilly at the back. The garden gate was wide open: without were the prancing Mary-Kate and her father——still brandishing the rake. The little woman got out slowly.

"Oh!" she said. "Don't it look dear an' home-like! If 'twas Ireland itself I couldn't be gladder to come home." Her voice rose suddenly. "Dan Reilly! You're after buildin' me a verandah!"

"I am, so," he said. He looked at the rake in a puzzled fashion, and cast it from him. "Come in, ashore; there's other things to see. An' most of all we're wantin' to see you in your own place that's achin' for you."

They were almost within the gate when they saw that the Lintons were still in the car. Brownie had slipped in beside Norah, shutting the door.

"Miss Norah! You're comin' in?"

"Not to-day, Mrs. Reilly, dear," Norah said, smiling at her. "Just to-day we're going to leave you alone: you're to keep quiet, and not have any excitement with visitors."

"Is it visitors you'd be!" She came back wistfully towards them.

"We'll never be truly visitors," Norah answered. "And we'll come and see you to-morrow. Take her in, Reilly, and make her put her feet up. Mary-Kate, you're in charge, you know!"

The three kind faces nodded at them as they stood together——father, mother, and daughter. Then the big car turned, and Reilly slipped an arm about his wife, half-carrying her up the path. Norah looked back, hearing a little cry as they reached the kitchen door. Mrs. Reilly had entered into her kingdom.

Norah got down to open the gate of the paddock. Her father glanced at her as he drove through.

"Come in front with me, Norah."

She took her place beside him, and the car slid along the straight bog road, while Brownie nodded in the back seat.

"Tired, my girl?"

David Linton looked closely at her. Norah had been a little quiet lately. Something of the spring seemed gone from her step, the happy note from her voice. It was very little, but her father's senses were quick where Norah was concerned.

She smiled up at him.

"No, I don't think so——well, just a little, Dad. I don't know why——laziness, I suppose."

"Sure you're quite well?"

"Oh, perfectly. I'm never anything but well."

He looked at her a moment in uncertainty, and made the ever-new suggestion of helpless Man.

"I wonder if you want a tonic?"

Norah laughed outright.

"Is it me? Why, I never took a tonic in my life, Dad."

"There must be a beginning for all things."

"Not for me and tonics. If I want anything it's a long ride. I haven't had one for ages."

"No, you haven't," said her father. "I don't believe you have been for a ride since the day you all mustered the ranges——the day before Wally went away."

"No," said Norah, and grew silent again. For a moment she was back in the bush paddock, the roan bull coming slowly nearer——and Wally was between them, riding like a knight of old days, to save her. In her room there hung a picture of Sir Galahad. The young face, the lithe figure in the glittering armour, came before her eyes. And it seemed that the face was Wally's.

She roused herself with a start. They were near the gate of Billabong, and riding ahead of them were two figures. She recognized Tommy and Bob Rainham.

"We're just in time," said her father in pleased tones. He liked the Rainhams: their quiet determination and clean pluck. They worked hard, and took their work and play alike with an unconcerned jest; if they had difficulties and troubles, they kept them to themselves, but they shared their laughter with other people. They were the right stuff for a new country.

They waited, holding the gate open for the motor.

"We thought we'd catch you," Tommy cried. "You have taken your patient home? Oh, and what did she say to her house?"

"She yelped," said Norah, smiling. "But we didn't wait——we thought it would be too embarrassing. To-morrow we'll go and see what she thinks of it all. Come, too?"

"I will," said Tommy. "And now we will race you home!" She flashed past them, followed by Bob——at which Mr. Linton gave a gruff chuckle, and made the car leap in pursuit. Bob they caught, but Tommy held her own, aided by her start and the fact that they dared not take the curve too quickly, for fear of cattle straying on the track. She exulted delightedly as they came up; so pleased with herself that she quite failed to notice that her pony was dancing lightheartedly.

"That is the element of surprise," she said, laughing. "Jim has often told me how useful it is in war. If I had not used it you would certainly have beaten me. Dear me, Bosun, what on earth are you doing? Be quiet! Has he the bot-fly worrying him, do you think?"

Norah and her father shouted with laughter.

"He's merely dancing with joy, and if you saw Garryowen doing it with me you would think I was going to be killed!" said Norah.

"Why, I believe I would have been nervous if I had known that!" said Tommy. She slipped from the saddle, and looked with mild surprise at Bosun, who still found it difficult to keep still. Jim appeared from the stables, and she turned to greet him. "Jim, I have been behaving like a circus-rider, and I didn't know it!"

"I've been watching you," said Jim, much amused. "Some day, when your attention is taken off, you will jump the highest top rail on Billabong and think you've merely hopped over an imaginary line. You'd really ride very decently, Tommy, if you would forget you were on a horse!"

"But I do not want to forget," said Tommy. "Occasionally I am afraid of them, but I love them very much." She linked her arm in Norah's. "We are only to stay half an hour."

"That's what I said," remarked Bob. "I know I'll be lucky if I get you away in anything under an hour."

"Meaning——?" asked Norah with an uplifted nose. Bob laughed.

"It does sound pretty bad manners, doesn't it? But it's necessary, for the married couple has gone gadabouting to Cunjee, and I've to milk when I get home. Therefore we came over here so that I might be strengthened for the milking." He glanced at her, smiling. "Am I forgiven?"

"Quite——and we'll see that you're strengthened at once. Tea must be ready, I should think." She turned to lead the way indoors.

"I didn't mean tea, which you know very well," said Bob. "However, what's the use of arguing with a woman! Any news of Wally?"

"None for some days," Norah answered. "Jim had a letter——when was it, Jimmy?"

"Somewhere about the end of last week," said her brother. "He's having a distinctly thin time, I should say: he's up at his sister-in-law's place——well, it's half his, too,

I suppose—keeping her company and looking into things. There's an overseer who doesn't seem to be all he might be, and Wally thinks the books are cooked. He's quite busy."

"It doesn't sound a bit like Wally," Tommy said.

"Oh, you light-minded people have never seen old Wal, when there's a real job of work on," Jim remarked. "There's a general idea in this district that Wally hasn't grown up, but his company in France didn't share it. I'd sooner have him at my back in a tight place than anyone I know. His crowd in France swore by him, and they followed him into some remarkably unpleasant corners, too. I think I'd just as soon not be that overseer-person if Wally gets annoyed with him!"

Norah was dispensing tea, with Bob as her lieutenant. Jim had forgotten tea.

"There's a sister-in-law, too, who must take some handling. Wally's had a holy horror of her since he was a small boy, and apparently she doesn't mellow with time—she sours. Not that he says much—he appears to be on the edge of saying things, and then he remembers she's a widow, and stops. Poor old Wal!"

"Wally will always have hard times, because he is too chivalrous," said Tommy.

"It's better to be too chivalrous, even if it does mean hard times, don't you think?" Norah asked indifferently. "Tea, Jim?"

"Thanks." He looked at her curiously. "The sister-in-law seems to champion the overseer, and Wally must be much hampered by his difficulty in saying what he means to her. The worst of it is, it's going to keep him so long away. There's another station to be examined, as well as the one he's on, and it will take ever so long. And I am overworked and——"

"Disgruntled," suggested Tommy.

"I was going to say lonely, but I don't know that you're wrong. You're certainly impolite!" Jim told her. "I can't shake down at all to Wally being away. There's a horrible blank: he's such a cheery old ass about everything."

"The place does seem queer," Mr. Linton observed. "Jim and Norah and Wally and I are getting old, I suppose, and settled in our ways: we don't like changes. At all events, we'll all be very glad when Wally comes home."

The talk turned to other matters, and presently the visitors declared that it was time to get back, Bob to his milking, and Tommy to what she described as the more serious business of feeding him. The Lintons went out to the stables to see them mount, and watched them canter off round the track. Then they strolled away to visit some new cows, from which it was an easy stage to see how high the water was in the river. There were never excuses lacking for a walk on Billabong. They came up through the golden and russet orchard trees just as twilight came.

Brownie met them as they came into the lit hall. Her old face was troubled.

"There's something the matter, Brownie," Norah said swiftly. "What is it?"

"It—it's only a message for Master Jim, my dear," Brownie hesitated. "A tallygrum, Master Jim: I took it down from the tallyphone."

Jim took the paper, knitting his brows over the pencilled words in Brownie's laboured writing. His face changed suddenly.

"What is it, Jim?" David Linton asked.

"It's Wally," Jim said. "He's hurt."

Only Brownie saw Norah's face whiten. She took a quick step forward, looking over Jim's arm as he read:

"—Walter Meadows badly hurt very anxious you come at once meet you Brisbane Saturday." And the signature was "Paxton," with the address of a private hospital.

"You'll go in the morning, of course, Jim," his father said.

"Of course," Jim answered. He gave a groan. "Lord, what a time it takes to get to Brisbane!"

They looked at each other blankly.

"Wally's tough, my son," said the squatter. "Don't make up your mind that he's down and out."

"It must be very bad, or they wouldn't send like that," Jim said. "Paxton's a doctor, I suppose. What have they done to him, I wonder?—my old Wal! I wish to God I'd gone with him at the start—I always wanted to. Norah——"

He broke off. Norah was not there.

"I didn't see her go," Jim said. "It hits her hard. He—you might as well know, Dad—Wally cares for her."

"For—Norah?"

"Yes. He told me just before he went away. He was going away in any case, because he reckoned it wasn't the straight thing to stay here."

David Linton had sat down, and was looking at him with a bewildered face.

"Has he told her?"

"Oh, no. He seemed to think it was something dreadful to have done—like breaking your trust in him. And he's sure she doesn't care a rush. He thinks it's Bob."

"And do you?"

"I don't know a thing about it. I've never thought of Norah that way. But, after all, she isn't a child any more, Dad: none of us are."

"I suppose she isn't," David Linton said heavily. "Somehow, I've never thought of her except as a little girl. But, as you say, it has to come. And she doesn't care a rush? Poor old Wally; poor boy!"

"Then you wouldn't have minded, Dad?"

"Minded?" His father looked amazed. "Why—do you think I'd rather give her to a stranger than to a fellow who's been like my own son?"

Jim heaved a great sigh.

"Please God I'll be able to tell that to old Wal, anyhow," he said.

He went upstairs with slow steps, and sat down on the edge of his bed, staring out at the darkening paddocks where he and Wally had so often ridden together. What miserable things telegrams were! Why could they not have told him more? For all he knew, Wally might be dying—dying! He put his head into his hands with a groan.

There was a light touch on his arm, and he looked up to see Norah, very pale and quite calm.

"Jim," she said, and stopped. "Jim——"

"Yes, old kiddie."

"Jim—I've got to come. You know that, don't you?—you'll take me?"

"To Wally?"

"Yes." Her eyes met his; the candid, grey eyes of a child, with a woman's pain in them.

"Yes, I'll take you, of course," he said. "He'll want you, Nor, I know."

"I've got to go," she said. Suddenly she leaned her head against his coat with a dry sob.

Jim put his great arms round her.

"We'll go. Don't you fret, old kiddie. And we won't let him die, either."

CHAPTER XV
ON THE ROAD

A MOB of cattle were moving slowly northwards. They were big, half-fat beasts, with the sleek gloss on their coats that brings comfort to the heart of the stock-owner; and they moved contentedly, in unhurried fashion, stopping now and then to graze by the wayside. The road was a grass track, unfrequented; it had excellent picking for the cattle, and the man behind them liked to see them take advantage of it. It was altogether to his interest that they should not lose too much of their bloom before they reached the journey's end. His dog jogged at his heels, well aware that there was no work for him to do at the moment.

The man was Dan Verrin, and he was very contented. For weeks he had been urging Dobson to move the cattle; they were ready, their agents up North were waiting, and the coast was clear. But Dobson had been stupidly afraid of young Meadows, whom Verrin, for his part, considered not worth any grown man's notice. A kid, that was what he was, said Dan: a fool of a kid, with a fancy for poking into what did not concern him, but not really a person to be reckoned with. He—Dan—would guarantee to settle him, quick an' lively.

But Dobson had hung back, day after day. Certainly the delay had enabled them to add more cattle to the mob: which was the only consideration that kept Dan at all quiet. It was the last mob they would lift, so the larger it was the better; still, that would be poor consolation if they delayed too long, and so failed to lift it at all. Then had come the day of young Meadows' secret visit to Burrin Downs, which had annoyed and worried Dobson extremely; he had come back in a black mood, declining to say anything at first. Late that night he had told Dan of his attempt to use Ben Hunt as a weapon to attack young Meadows. Dan had shrugged his shoulders. A good notion, perhaps, but it was a thousand-to-one chance if it came off.

Something, apparently, had come off, however. It was next day at dinner-time that Dobson sought him, excited and triumphant. There was a telephone message that young Meadows was very ill, in Brisbane; how he had got there, or what was the matter, was not stated, and they came to the conclusion that "Brisbane" must be a mistake—it was too far away. Whatever it was, and wherever he was, one thing was certain—he was out of the way. That being the case, why not lift the cattle that night?

Dan had agreed enthusiastically. Young Meadows, ill or well, appeared to him to matter much less than the fact that the cattle were there, ready, and the money for them waiting up North. He had made his preparations quickly: they consisted of running up his favourite horse, with another to serve as pack-horse; obtaining the usual monthly rations for the men on Burrin Downs, most of which he packed for himself; and taking his dog Silence off the chain. So equipped, Dan was ready for the road. They set out together.

They did not enter Burrin Downs at all, but went past it, riding hard, until they reached the block of land beyond it, in the heart of which the cattle were hidden. A thickly-timbered stretch of country it seemed; no one, passing by, would have dreamed that cleared land lay within the belt of timber that ringed it round. But there were few passers-by on that lonely road. They saw no one as they left the track and entered the block by the well-hidden slip-rails they knew. The cattle were mustered at once, and brought out in the moonlight, and they travelled them all night, camping after sunrise in a back-lane where the bullocks could rest and feed.

Dobson left Verrin, after a sleep and a meal. There was no need for more than one man with the cattle, when that cattle, when that man was supported by such a dog as Silence; and both felt that there might be urgent need for Dobson on Marindah. That was Thursday morning, and it was arranged that Dobson should join him again, at a camping-place ahead, during Friday night: if all had gone well on Marindah it would not seem unusual for him to go out to Burrin Downs, ostensibly to muster its bullocks, and to stay a night or two with old McGuffie. On Saturday morning the first of their "agents" would meet them, and a small proportion of the stolen bullocks would be handed over to him. Dobson had no intention of being absent from that transaction. "Honour among thieves" was a proverb not recognized between him and Verrin.

Dan Verrin had spent a thoroughly peaceful day on Thursday. So long as the cattle remained near Burrin Downs he had felt uneasy, especially with young Meadows nosing about. Now that inquisitive young gentleman was safely put to bed, and at last he was on the road with the cattle. He had no further fears. Burrin Downs was on the edge of a long stretch of lonely, unsettled country, and he knew tracks where it was very unlikely that he would meet any prying person. Now that he was out of his own district, he was no longer Dan Verrin, but Alf Carroll, a peaceful drover; even the various "agents" knew him by no other name, and were not anxious that he should know theirs. This sort of thing was very enough to manage, if you didn't lose your head, he reflected, lying at his ease on the grass, while Silence kept a wary eye on the grazing bullocks. It was a kind of added gratification when an aeroplane droned slowly overhead; he looked upon it as something specially for his amusement. "Must be that northern air-mail," he muttered, looking lazily at the big, shimmering thing. "Wonder what's brought her so far out of her track." It amused him to see old Silence looking at it with a kind of puzzled fierceness, though, true to his name, he did not bark.

He got the mob moving again during the afternoon, and they travelled until well into the night, making good progress. Then he camped again, and he made a fire and cooked himself a meal. The dog came and sat near him, eyeing him wistfully; he flung him a piece of meat from time to time, with a word of rough abuse which Silence accepted as a caress. They made a weird picture in the black night: the red glow of the fire, dimly showing the grim, half-savage face of the man, and the patient, watching shadow of the dog, hardly less grim. There was no sound save an occasional movement of the cattle, and the splash of the creek near which they had halted, with, now and then, the clink of the horses' hobbles. When his meal was finished Verrin ordered Silence on watch, and, rolling himself in his blankets, slept peacefully.

Friday broke clear and fine, with a little breeze from the west; a good day for travelling cattle. Verrin decided to push on fairly early in the day, letting the bullocks go as slowly as they chose; he wanted to reach his meeting-place with Dobson in good time, so that the mob could have a long rest and look its best next day. He breakfasted leisurely and soon was on the move, and they travelled gently through the day. Only once did they meet anyone; an old bullock-driver, on his way down-country from a lonely northern station. They stopped and yarned, while Silence took the mob on; Verrin gave a carefully prepared account of his cattle, and listened to the old man's story of his long and solitary journey; he had been weeks on the road, and was glad to be getting near civilization again. They were talking when a deep humming overhead was heard, and presently an aeroplane passed above them, droning slowly away into the distance.

"Seen many o' them?" Verrin asked carelessly. Somewhat to his surprise, the old man had not seemed specially interested.

"Oh, there's a few about," he said. "There's one that carries a mail, only it wouldn't be so far over this way. And two or three fellers on the big northern runs has them; chaps who learned to fly at the War." He spat reflectively. "Give *me* bullocks," he said.

"Rather have a good horse, meself," Verrin remarked. "Well, I must be goin'; so long!" He cantered slowly after Silence and the mob.

It was still early when he reached the rendezvous: the sun was setting, and the night promised to be chilly. Verrin gathered wood for a good fire, for if Dobson did not arrive until after the moon had set he might not be sorry to have a guiding beacon in the darkness. He had halted in an excellent camping-place, where a creek, in making a sharp bend, had formed a long tongue of land, well grassed; the bullocks spread out over it, straggling down to the water. Verrin looked at them with satisfaction: they had come a good way since they left their hiding-place near Burrin Downs, yet they showed very little trace of it. Given ordinary luck, he reflected, with feed as good by the way as it had been so far, they should not lose much condition on their journey; and after to-night, he could take them very slowly. There should be a pretty decent cheque out of it, when everything was settled. And when young Meadows was able to come poking about again, he might look in vain for the mob. Old Bill McGuffie, too; they had doubted whether he was quite as stupid and unsuspecting as he seemed. Well, he had not been able to interfere with their getting this particular mob away; and, since it was the last, old Bill mattered not at all.

"I reckon nothin' matters now," said Verrin, to himself, with deep satisfaction.

He turned and set about getting tea. As he stooped over his fire, now blazing brightly, he was again conscious of the aeroplane's humming sound. It was circling slowly round, as if the pilot were not quite sure where he wanted to go. Verrin looked up with interest. Like most men who have had nothing to do with aircraft, he never dreamed of connecting their movements with anything on the ground. Such an idea would not have entered his head. Had he been asked, he would certainly have said that when a chap was flying he'd need all his wits to attend to the air. That the man in the flashing machine far above could even see him would not have occurred to him. Therefore, he gazed upward, inclined to regard himself as extremely lucky to see an aeroplane three times within two days.

"That chap doesn't seem to know where he wants to go to," he said, staring skyward. "Wonder why he's waltzin' round like that?" For a moment he felt a shade of uneasiness. "Hope he doesn't mean to come down near here," he muttered—"he'd scare the bullocks out of their skins. If he's goin' to smash himself I hope he'll do it somewhere else."

But apparently the airman, if he had been in trouble, had regained control of his machine. As Verrin looked he suddenly rose in a long spiral and winged his way swiftly to the South-east. In a few moments the hum of his engines died away in the distance, and Verrin resumed his placid business of getting tea.

Dobson was late in reaching camp that night. Verrin had just decided to turn in, leaving his accomplice to shift for himself on his arrival, when he heard the sound of cantering hoofs; and, soon after, Dobson rode into the firelight on his big grey. He greeted Verrin curtly and dismounted with the stiff movements of a tired man.

"Like a cup of tea?" Verrin inquired.

"Yes, if you've got it." He unsaddled and hobbled his horse, turning him loose to graze.

"Any news?"

"Nothing that matters. Young Meadows seems to be pretty sick in Brisbane; Mrs. Edward's gone down to see him." Dobson flung himself down by the fire, taking the pannikin of black tea Verrin held out to him. "It beats me how he got to Brisbane. I suppose old Ben must have hurt him, somehow, and he got out and got picked up by some one in a motor. But how did he get out?"

"Didn't he get the key from McGuffie?"

"No, he didn't. Old Bill didn't know a thing about him—in fact, you could see that he was pretty anxious to get news of him. The key had never been touched. Of course, Meadows jumped into the place, but I'll swear he didn't jump out of it, if he was hurt."

"Did you go to see old Ben?"

"No. To tell you the truth, I wasn't keen on seeing him. If he managed to hurt Meadows he might be worse cracked than he was the last day I was there, and the sight of me might only have set him talking. I'll settle him, and old McGuffie, too, as soon as I get this job off my mind."

"Well, for all we know," Verrin remarked, "old Ben never hurt young Meadows at all. I bet you Meadows tried to jump his horse out next morning an' got slung; an' some motor passin' by picked him up an' took him to Brisbane. Though why on earth they should take him so far beats me."

"Yes, an' if that's so, where's his horse?" demanded Dobson.

"Well, that big bay ain't been on Marindah very long. Ten to one, if he found himself loose an' badly scared, he'd go home to Karalla, where he came from."

"Well, he might have done that, sure enough," Dobson said. "Anyhow, Meadows is clean off our hands for awhile; and when he gets better, he can't do anything. Even if he saw these cattle the day he came out to Burrin he couldn't swear to them."

"Especially when they're gorn," said Mr. Verrin, with unction.

"No. They'll be far enough away before he gets out. The telephone seemed to be a bit mixed, Amy told me, but they think he's pretty bad. So that gives me time to tidy up everything nicely before he comes on the scene again—if he ever comes, which I hope he won't. I'll get at the books as soon as this business is finished: they'd have been done long ago if Edward Meadows hadn't had that notion of keeping them himself. Lor, what a lot of bother those two Meadows chaps have given me!" finished Dobson plaintively. "How have you got on, Dan?"

"Oh, first-rate. Not a hitch. Bullocks travelled splendidly; an' everything all serene."

"That's good news, anyhow. Seen anyone?"

"Only an old chap with a bullock-dray, comin' from up North. That's all, 'cept a stray airplane or two."

"I thought I heard an aeroplane this evening," Dobson said. "Not many round this part of the world." He stretched himself out lazily. "I suppose we'll be doing most of our trips in them in twenty years' time."

"We won't lift a mob of cattle like this in one, anyhow," Verrin said, with a deep chuckle. "The horse'll do me, this good while yet." As he spoke, he got up, kicking the logs together with his heavy boot. "Well, it's late, an' we got to be stirrin' pretty early. I reckon I'll turn in. There's a spare blanket for you; I s'pose you won't say 'No' to it."

"My word, I won't!" Dobson answered.

He was astrir first in the morning; unused to sleeping on the ground, he had found the night anything but comfortable. Verrin, happy in the bushman's trick of scooping out a hole in the earth for his hip, slept soundly while his companion strolled round among the bullocks. They were placidly feeding, and looked well; a little way off, the unblinking Silence kept watch, looking sourly at Dobson. There were times when Verrin treated his dog brutally; but he was the only human being for whom Silence ever wagged his tail.

The overseer came back to the camp, and began to light the fire. Verrin woke with a sudden start. Flinging his blankets from him he bounded up; and then stopped and looked sheepish.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Dobson. "Bad dreams?"

"I reckoned you were a constable!" said Verrin. "Straight, I did." He rubbed his eyes. "Must 'a' dreamt something. I suppose—an' not bein' used to 'aving anyone about the camp. Good thing I didn't hit you, wasn't it?"

"A darned good thing—for you," was Dobson's dry retort. "Better hurry up and get breakfast; we got to meet Joe Thompson at eleven o'clock."

They breakfasted alone in silence, and got the cattle on the way again. Half an hour afterwards Dobson looked up at a low sound.

"That your aeroplane?"

It was coming into sight from the South-east, flying low and straight. Right over them it sailed, never altering its course until it passed a great belt of trees. Then it seemed to circle; but so far off was it that they could not tell where it went, although they seemed for a time to hear the low hum.

"I suppose it's the same one," Verrin said. "Can't say I can tell one o' them things from another; I expect they've got brands on 'em, if you get close. But when they're in the air they're as like as so many peas out o' the same pod."

"I reckon it's like sheep," said Dobson. "If you're a cattle-man, like you or me, one sheep's all the same as another; nothing to choose between them. But they say a sheep-man can tell one from another as easy as easy."

"I don't believe it," said Verrin stubbornly.

"Well, they say so, anyhow. And I suppose, if you're a flyin' man, you'd be able to spot quite a lot of differences between those aeroplanes; as much as there is between a Shorthorn bullock and a Hereford. But I'm hanged if I can see it. They're all alike to me."

"Seen many?" asked Verrin.

"Well—five or six," replied Dobson, slightly confused. "Enough to get an idea of them, anyhow."

"Well, I reckon I got a fair amount of pluck," remarked Verrin. "But I ain't got pluck enough to trust meself in one o' them things. There was a chap at the Weardale Show with one: had it in the paddock near the show-grounds, an' 'e was takin' people up—two-pound-ten a go. Some o' the boys tried to get me into it, but I says, 'Not much.' A fair risk is one thing, but I don't see any call to go takin' unnecessary chances. A man's not made to fly, if you ask me."

"Anyone get hurt?"

"No," said Verrin. "An' lots of fools went up, too. Well, gimme a horse."

They kept a sharp look-out for the aeroplane, but it did not reappear, somewhat to Dobson's disappointment; and soon they forgot it, and talked of other things.

Towards eleven o'clock they came to a grass track, turning off at right-angles: a wide track, running between wire fences, but showing no sign of any traffic. The cattle-thieves seemed to know it well; they turned the mob into it, not without casting careful glances in every direction, lest anyone else should be in the neighbourhood. But there was no one: the lonely road and the scrub-covered paddocks between which they were travelling alike seemed desolate.

The new track had been fenced, but no one had troubled to clear it. There were many trees on it, interspersed with clumps of low-growing scrub; while, five hundred yards away, a belt of scrub made a complete screen across it. There were cattle-tracks in this belt, and they passed through it easily, silence driving the cattle before them, making swift, noiseless rushes at any laggard beast that loitered among the bushes. Once through, they found themselves in a more open portion of the road, although the scrub began again a few hundred yards further on. It was almost a natural stock-yard; and in it waited the man whom they were to meet. They rode forward to greet him while Verrin sent Silence ahead to check the cattle.

None of the three had any desire to linger, but a delay ensued while they haggled about price. The bullocks were heavier and better than had been anticipated;

Dobson demanded a higher price, while the “agent,” afraid, yet obstinate, did his best to beat him down. Finally, after they had cut out five-and-twenty cattle from the rest, and the “agent” had ridden round them several times, he gave way, and the money agreed upon was counted out in greasy notes. The stranger whistled to his dog, a half-bred collie that had been looking unutterable things at Silence, and drove his twenty-five beasts on in the way the mob had been going. Dobson and Verrin waited until he had got clear, and turned the remainder of the mob back to the old road.

The bullocks turned meekly and headed for the belt of scrub, with Silence at their heels. Dobson and Verrin were following them, when Verrin halted suddenly.

“Better give me my whack of that little lot,” he said.

“Aw, what’s the good?” Dobson asked. “Can’t you wait and whack it all up when the job’s finished?”

“I guess I won’t,” was the quiet reply. “Just as easy to have it now.” He held out his hand, and Dobson, with a growl, took out the packet of notes and counted out half.

“Thanks,” Verrin said curtly, putting them into the inside pocket of his coat. He turned to ride after the cattle, and uttered an angry exclamation.

“I wonder what that darned dog thinks he’s doing!”

The bullocks were coming back towards them, emerging from the scrub here and there in evident bewilderment, while Silence, clearly as bewildered, made ineffectual little dashes among them. Dobson and Verrin shouted, urging their horses into a canter; and then pulled up, staring.

Two troopers had ridden out of the scrub. A moment they halted, and as they did so, two other men appeared; a tall, sunburnt man who was a stranger to Dobson and Verrin, and another at the sight of whom the overseer uttered a smothered exclamation.

“They’ve got us, Dan! It’s Bill McGuffie!”

The trooper who was evidently the superior officer signed to his man to hold the cattle, and, with the two other men, rode forward. As he came, they saw that he was armed.

“I’ve a warrant for you both,” he said quietly. “No, I wouldn’t try to get away: the road’s blocked at both ends. My men will have your friend back in a few moments. You can swear to the cattle, McGuffie? Take a good look at them. Sure you can swear to them?”

“I can that,” said old Bill, with relish. “If you go through ’em you’ll find I’ve wrote out the descriptions of a good many. An’ I’ll swear there’s a nice few of ’em in Mr. Edward’s books.” He grinned at Dobson with child-like delight. “Didn’t think I’d join up with you so soon, did you?”

“I’d like to know how you did it,” said Dobson, between his teeth. As he spoke he felt on his wrists the click of the handcuffs.

“He-he!” chuckled old Bill. “I thought I’d s’prise you. I bin ridin’ in an airyplane!”

CHAPTER XVI
THE COMING OF NORAH

"I MUST say," remarked Mrs. Edward Meadows querulously, "that I think it's very queer. Here am I, hurried down from Marindah, simply because I thought some one ought to be near Walter, and they won't even let me see him! The matron of the private hospital was quite rude about it yesterday."

"I understand that Mr. Walter is really too ill to see anyone," remarked Mr. Grenville.

"You haven't seen him?" Mrs. Meadows demanded sharply.

"? Oh, no. I have inquired daily."

"Well, those Billabong people he's so mad about are coming on this evening's express," said the lady sourly, "and I'll be very much surprised if they don't see him."

"I understand that he asks for them constantly. He has been delirious, you know, Mrs. Meadows. The doctors are very anxious about him. And there is a possibility that he may lose his leg."

Mrs. Meadows looked unbelieving.

"Oh, I know Dr. Agnew," she said. "He's always an alarmist. He said there was hardly any hope for my father once, and father lived for years afterwards! I would like to know more about this mysterious accident of Walter's, Mr. Grenville. First of all Walter, after being a perfect nuisance on Marindah, and annoying me and Dobson thoroughly—and Dobson's such an excellent man, you know!—goes off to Burrin Downs in the most extraordinary manner, without telling anyone. He got sandwiches from Amy, quite in an underhand way, and told her to tell me, if I asked, that he might be delayed. Why, I nearly waited lunch for him! Dobson was really almost angry about it. He went out after him, very kindly, I thought, and returned alone, saying that Walter wouldn't come back—preferred to camp out there with the old hut-keeper. Why, it wasn't ordinary courtesy to me, Mr. Grenville! And the next thing I'm told is that Walter has been thrown from his horse, and, in some mysterious way, has been motored to Brisbane. Well, I can't say I feel a great deal of sympathy for Walter, but I know my duty as his sister-in-law; so I came down to town to see him. And I'm not allowed to see him. I do think the whole thing is most extraordinary!"

Mr. Grenville had polished his glasses, put them on, and taken them off, several times during this outburst of feeling. He looked at his visitor miserably. It was after one o'clock: high time that any lawyer should leave his office on a fine Saturday in autumn. Already the last of his clerks had gone, and he had heard the front door shut. But Mr. Grenville, for reasons of his own, did not want to leave his office. He had a restless, expectant air, as of one who waits for something. It greatly aggravated his restlessness that he had to listen to Mrs. Edward Meadows.

"I am able, this morning, to tell you more about Mr. Walter Meadows' accident," he said, after a moment's reflection. "He was not thrown from his horse, as I thought at first, but was murderously attacked by Benjamin Hunt, one of the hut-keepers on Burrin Downs."

"Attacked! Why—whatever for?"

"That is something we may never be able to answer, for Hunt is undoubtedly mad," Mr. Grenville said.

"Well, we have known he was queer for a long time," Mrs. Meadows said, leaning forward excitedly. "Dobson was talking about it to me only the other night—the night he came in, when Walter stayed out there. Quite queer, he said. But he has always done his work, and he's perfectly harmless. Walter must have done something to aggravate the poor old fellow."

For once Mr. Grenville's impassive countenance lost its usual calm. He looked up with swift anger in his eyes, and his tone, when he answered, was icy.

"I think that supposition is an unlikely one. We have reason to believe—Hunt, who is now quite calm and sensible, has been in the hands of the police since yesterday—that he was instigated to attack Mr. Meadows by—" he paused—"by your overseer, Dobson!"

Mrs. Meadows jumped.

"I simply don't believe it!" she exclaimed. "Walter has always had a ridiculous prejudice against Dobson—I consider he made himself needlessly offensive on Marindah, interfering with him and questioning his management. As if a boy like him could know anything, compared to an experienced man like Dobson! This is just another example of his extraordinary dislike for him."

"You forget," said the lawyer patiently, "that Mr. Walter has said nothing at all about Dobson in the matter. He was able to say that Hunt had attacked him; the first blow, which was evidently meant for his head, broke his leg, and there was sufficient light from the hut—he was sleeping outside—for him to recognize Hunt's peculiarly broad figure before he was rendered unconscious by further blows. The poor lad never dreamed of suspecting Dobson. Our evidence is from Hunt himself."

"A crazy lunatic! I should have thought, Mr. Grenville, that you, as a lawyer—"

"Quite so. I am perfectly aware that Hunt's evidence will not be considered by a jury. But it is fairly convincing, nevertheless. The police tell me the old man is quite calm and reasonable, and has a pathetic belief that Dobson will be pleased with him for having carried out his suggestion. Dobson, he says, warned him that Mr. Meadows had come to turn him off Burrin Downs, which it seems that the poor old man regards as his own property. Dobson advised Hunt to make an end of Walter while he was in his power at the hut, after which there would be no one to dispute Ben's claim."

"And you believe such nonsense!"

"The police believe it, Mrs. Meadows."

"But why? Why on earth should Dobson do anything so idiotic? What reason had he for wishing Walter out of the way?"

"Ah, that's another story," said the old lawyer.

He hesitated, tapping the table with his pencil restlessly. Suddenly the telephone at his elbow rang, with the fierce, shrill summons that denotes a long-distance call. Mrs. Meadows was mildly surprised at the bound he made to answer it.

"Yes," he said—"yes. Grenville speaking. Oh, yes—it's you, Inspector Macrow? I can hear you—any news?" He listened with a tense eagerness, his fine old face flushing. "Oh, excellent! excellent! You got them both—red-handed—what's that? Oh, a deal just completed with a third man? Yes. Yes. McGuffie can identify the cattle, you say—positively. Oh, excellent!" He paused, evidently listening to a question. "The books? Oh, yes, the Wearable police went out and seized every station book this morning—all papers—they have them all. What's that you say? Oh, yes—evidence enough for any jury—ha, ha! Mr. Paxton is on his way to Brisbane already—he'll come to my office? Very well, I'll wait for him. Yes, I quite agree, Inspector; a very good morning's work. I congratulate you all. I only wish I could have been there—we lawyers get none of the fun. Good-bye—what's that? Oh, Mr. Meadows? Still unconscious, I'm sorry to say. A splendid constitution—we must hope for the best. Good-bye. Good-bye!"

He hung up the receiver and turned again to his table. For a moment he considered Mrs. Meadows without speaking. There was still a light of excitement in his eye.

"I can tell you more now," he said—"in fact, I can tell you everything. It is some time, you will remember, since I warned you that I did not trust Dobson. You refused to credit my warning."

"I should think I did," said she hotly. "You and Walter are absurd about Dobson."

"I never denied that he was a shrewd man," said the lawyer dryly. "He was shrewd enough to make you a staunch ally of his—to flatter you until you preferred his judgment to your husband's."

"Mr. Grenville! You forget yourself!"

"Just a moment, Mrs. Meadows. I warned Mr. Walter Meadows, when he came here, that he must be watchful, and look carefully into things on the stations. He did so—with all the difficulties you and Dobson could put in his way. His reports to me had already confirmed our suspicions, so far as Marindah was concerned; but when he went to Burrin Downs—and to get away from Dobson he had to go there secretly—he found conclusive evidence. Dobson and Daniel Verrin—his accomplice—have been stealing cattle from the stations regularly; and at the moment of Walter Meadows' visit to Burrin Downs they had a large mob concealed, ready to take away. He found it."

Mrs. Meadows' mouth had gradually opened until she sat gaping at the lawyer.

"But who says so?"

"You will hear all the proofs later on. There are plenty. The boy—he is not much more, as you say yourself, Mrs. Meadows—knew, when Dobson followed him out to Burrin Downs, that he must get away and warn the police; and the only way that presented itself to him was to stay at the out-station that night, and make his escape early next morning. But Dobson had a tool ready to his hand in mad old Ben Hunt. I have not the least doubt that Dobson returned to Marindah that night feeling that he had made himself secure—that the old man would see that Walter never gave evidence against him."

"But if that is true, how did he escape?"

"By one of those simple accidents that occasionally seem like miracles. He managed, broken as he was, to rig up some kind of a signal; and it was seen early next morning by young Paxton, the son of John Paxton of Eurowie; he has an aeroplane, in which he flies regularly from the station to Brisbane. He saw the signal, alighted, and did what he could for Walter, and brought him to Brisbane in his aeroplane. But for him Walter would undoubtedly have died. He may yet die."

"In an aeroplane!" said Mrs. Meadows feebly. "No wonder we were puzzled. Dobson said 'Brisbane' must have been a mistake."

"We were very pleased that Dobson thought so. But before he would let Paxton get him into his machine, Walter—knowing that the agony of moving would probably render him incapable of speaking again—insisted on telling Paxton all that he had discovered, so that he could warn me and the police."

Mr. Grenville paused, polishing his glasses. When he resumed, his voice was a little shaky.

"Mr. Paxton has seen much of suffering in the war, Mrs. Meadows, but he tells me that never has he seen anything like the stubborn courage with which that poor lad fought down his agony and his gathering unconsciousness so that he might tell his story. He was desperately wounded—broken, beaten to a pulp, his head laid open; he had lain in his blood all night on the hard ground, and he had dragged himself, inch by inch, to the stick with which he had fashioned the signal. Paxton said you could track each of those terrible inches by his blood. You might as well have these details, for you have judged him harshly. Yet he managed, by what efforts you and I can only guess at, to tell Paxton everything; to arrange for the safeguarding of your interests, and for what was more important to him, for the safety of old Bill McGuffie, who had been faithful to his father. He had learned much from McGuffie, and he knew that, left to Dobson's and Verrin's mercy, there was no help for the old man."

"And what has happened?" Mrs. Meadows' voice was low.

The lawyer leaned back, looking tired.

"You heard me speaking to the northern police just now. The thieves did precisely what Walter expected them to do; lifted the cattle directly they learned that he was out of the way, and started up North with them."

"You mean—Dobson and Verrin?"

"Yes. Paxton dogged them in his aeroplane. They were caught red-handed this morning, having just sold some of the bullocks to a man whom they had arranged to meet. McGuffie, whom Paxton brought away from Burrin Downs in the aeroplane, was able to identify many of the beasts: the station books and papers, which Dobson has not yet had time to alter, since your husband's death, were seized by the police this morning. It was all very neatly and easily done; a very pretty piece of organization. But we do not know yet if the lad who made it possible will live or die."

He was silent, looking at her. She pulled her veil down, and rose to her feet.

"I—I am sorry, Mr. Grenville," she said unsteadily. "I have made everything difficult, through my stupidity. But indeed—I did not understand. Perhaps—if you had told me more——"

"It might have been better," the old lawyer agreed. "But—you will forgive me, Mrs. Meadows—you were not easy to deal with." He sighed. "And none of us realized how quickly dishonesty might turn to tragedy. If I had—if I had!—do you think I would have sent that poor lad out, alone!"

The inter-State express ran into the Brisbane station, and Jim Linton swung himself to the platform before it had stopped. He stood, looking eagerly about him, towering by a head over every other man. A tall fellow, who also had a questioning look, came towards him quickly.

"Your name Linton?"

"Yes," said Jim. "How is he?"

Freddy Paxton's grave face answered for him.

"He's pretty bad."

Jim's mouth set in a hard line. "Just a moment," he said. "Here's Norah—my sister, I mean."

Norah was coming quickly towards them from the train. Jim spoke to her in an undertone, and they beckoned Freddy aside.

"My name's Paxton," he said. "You got the doctor's telegrams at Melbourne and Sydney? But there was nothing fresh—they could only say he was still unconscious. He's never been really conscious since I brought him in, the day he was hurt. But he talks of you—I know your names, for he's always saying them. And once he suddenly said to me, 'You can't mistake Jim—he's as big as a house!' That was how I knew you."

A kind of half-stifled groan broke from Jim. Norah spoke quietly:

"He is—in danger?"

"I'm afraid so, Miss Linton." Freddy could not meet the grey eyes. "There's hope, of course, but the doctors are pretty grave. I want to get you to the hospital as quickly as I can; I know you'll wish to go there first. I've got rooms for you at an hotel, and there's a car outside."

Somehow they were in a motor, gliding through quiet sunset streets. Freddy was giving them details of what had happened, but to Norah it was as though some one unreal were talking in a dream. Once his voice brought her back to herself. He was half-turned towards them, his face alight with some deep feeling.

"He's the bravest chap I ever saw! You wouldn't think anyone on earth could master pain as he did. He was practically unconscious—and again and again he dragged himself back to say what he wanted to say. And he forgot nothing. There isn't a man alive who wouldn't have been glad to let himself slip out of his senses, enduring what he was enduring. But he hung on."

She looked at him gratefully. That was Wally, she knew. It was what Wally would do.

Then the car stopped, and in a moment they were in a dim, cool hall, and the matron, tall and gracious in her white uniform, was holding her hand.

"You can see him, of course," she said. "It's 'Norah,' I suppose? he's always saying your name, and your brother's. He isn't conscious, but he may come out of his stupor at any time."

"And then?"

"Then—well, he must just be very quiet. And you must be brave, my dear." She patted the girl's hand gently.

Norah hesitated.

"May I take off my coat and hat?" she asked. "It will puzzle him if he wakes up and finds me in out-of-door things."

"Yes—that's a sensible idea," the matron said.

She whisked her off into her own room. There was a warm evening; under her light travelling-coat Norah wore a dress of soft, clinging blue. Quickly her hat and coat were off, and the matron was splashing eau-de-Cologne into a basin of water. Norah bathed her face and hands gratefully, and wielded a hair-brush vigorously for a moment.

"I'm ready," she said. She followed the matron upstairs. At the door she paused a moment.

"I may stay? You won't send me away from him?"

"No, my dear," the matron said gently.

Jim was already there, standing by the window with his eyes on the bed. Just for a moment it did not seem as if it could be Wally who lay there, white-faced, with bandaged head that moved perpetually, though the long, powerful body was so still. Then his wide eyes met hers, and for a moment Norah's heart stood still, for she thought he knew her. But the glance went past her unconsciously.

"Jim," said Wally's voice hoarsely. "Where's old Jim? He'll do the job!"

She saw Jim give a quick step forward and then check himself with a hopeless gesture. The dumb misery of his face was a piteous thing to see.

Wally's hands were moving restlessly, outside the sheet. She sat down and took one between both of hers, holding it with a cool, gentle pressure. It seemed to soothe

him a little; she leaned towards him, looking into the brown eyes that had never yet failed to give her smile for smile. It was as though she put all her strength, all her love, into the look. She sat without movement, while the slow hands of the clock ticked round. Jim's figure, huge against the window, was a kind of blur; nothing in the room was real save herself and Wally—Wally, who would not speak to her.

The low, muttering voice died down after a time. Once she was vaguely conscious that a nurse was on the other side of the bed, feeling Wally's pulse; another time, some one was touching him, ministering to him. But nothing came between him and her eyes. The light died in the room, and a nurse switched on a shaded electric lamp; there were footsteps, low voices, but she did not move. Her whole being was a voiceless prayer for him, but only once did words frame themselves in her mind. "If he must die, God, don't let him suffer any more!" And after that it seemed to her that the weary tossing of the head grew less and less; and presently he was quite still, with his face turned towards her, and the wide eyes, that did not see, looking at her own.

She did not know how long it was before she was aware of a change in the eyes. The glassy stare seemed to leave them; something crept into them that was like a shadow of Wally's smile. She felt a nurse's quick movement to the other side; there was a whisper in the room, and Jim took a noiseless step forward. Slowly the smile in the brown eyes seemed to grow, as though the dead came to life. There was a low whisper:

"Norah!"

It was so low that she scarcely heard it. But she did not need to hear, for the eyes spoke.

She slipped to her knees, with her lips against his hand. His fingers tightened round hers, holding them; and gradually the pain died away from his face. As she watched, his eyes closed naturally for the first time, and presently came deep, quiet breathing. There were murmurs of excitement somewhere: voices, and a man came in, bending over them. She knew it was a doctor, and, for the first time, she glanced away from Wally, looking up at him in agonized pleading. He nodded, and she saw that there was hope in his face. A wild throb of thankfulness shook her, but she did not stir.

Jim came beside her soon, sitting down, an arm across her shoulders; and so they watched together, while the hours ticked away, and Wally still slept naturally. So, when he opened his eyes again, the two faces he loved best were near.

He smiled at them.

"Old mates!" he whispered. Then the brown eyes looked into the grey.

"Norah—Norah!" he said. The dream that had been his in the bush had come back, full of happiness and peace. As in his dream, she bent and kissed him.

CHAPTER XVII
"CLEAR SHINING AFTER RAIN"

"I T was the cheerfullest stunt you ever saw," said Freddy Paxton. "The one utterly disgusting part was, that you were out of it."

"Yes, that was fairly bad luck," Wally agreed. "Still, you pulled it off, and that's the main thing."

It was the first day that Freddy had been allowed to see Wally, to whom he alluded gracefully as "my little bit of salvage." He had flown from the North for the express purpose of paying his visit, and was now sitting on the window-sill, a lean, broad figure, with a deeply-tanned face and gay blue eyes. Norah, in an easy-chair near Wally, was knitting, and Jim, in a chair much too small for him, did nothing. There was great peace on his face.

"Of course, the whole show would have fizzled if your directions hadn't been so clear," Freddy said. "Blessed if I know how you managed it, with a smashed head and other drawbacks."

"Well, what happened?" demanded Wally. "I've bare results, but no details. And when I ask, they say, 'Oh, you wait until Mr. Paxton comes!' So I have waited. And if I don't hear soon, I'll have a temperature!"

"Please go on, Mr. Paxton!" said Norah swiftly. "He's been such a trial, with his old temperatures!"

"Well—I packed you into the old 'bus and trundled you into Brisbane—and a gay old time I had getting off with you!" remarked Freddy. "Wow! I dreamed of it afterwards! But she did it all right, and as soon as I landed I got some fellows to telephone for an ambulance for you, and dumped my cargo, so to speak. Then I nosedived for old Greenville, as directed by the said cargo, and told him my little tale. He was awfully sick about the whole thing, and wouldn't talk business until he'd got a car and plunged out to the hospital to see for himself how you were. And you were an awful spectacle. He came back to the car in a state of elderly frenzy, and we headed straight for the police."

"What—in Brisbane?"

"Yes. We got on to some very high-up generalissimo-person—pal of Greenville's—and he set telephones talking, and in about three hours I found myself a kind of extra-special air-constable with half the country police-stations ready to bound when I spoke to 'em. Likewise, they knew they had to keep quiet until I did speak, which was more to the point. It was a proud position for little Willie," said Mr. Paxton reflectively. "Pity it couldn't have lasted longer, for I quite enjoyed it. If ever they start a North-East Air Police Force in Queensland, I'm in it, from the very jump!"

"And what happened?"

"Well, we had a good deal to think of. Mrs. Meadows cleared the coast at Marindah by deciding to come to Brisbane, in response to our carefully-worded telephone message. That left Dobson without anyone to consider but himself. Then, as you had advised me, we got into touch with Amy, who showed a wholesome desire to do anything that would benefit you, and she promised to telephone Dobson's movements, and let us know if he left the station. Meanwhile, a couple of plain-clothes police went hunting on Burrin Downs, aided by McGuffie, and soon collected old Hunt. He had lost your horse somewhere, and was wandering in the scrub, very happy, because he reckoned he owned the whole place now that you were dead. He told them with beautiful detail how Dobson had suggested that he should settle you, and how he did it. The only thing that worried him was that your head apparently lived at both ends of you, for when he had hit it well and truly at one end, it suddenly appeared at the other, and caused him much annoyance. However, he had killed you thoroughly, he said, and Dobson would be very pleased with him; and meanwhile, as he had unfortunately managed to burn down his hut, and had no tucker, he was quite willing to go home with the men and have a meal. So he did; and he's nice and comfy now in Weardale jail."

"Poor old chap!" said Wally. "It's a bit rough on him."

Mr. Paxton stared.

"Well, it may be," he said. "But he's too casual a person with a club to be left lying around loose, and I should think you ought to be the first to recognize it. Anyway, they got him, and they also had a yarn with old McGuffie and made him write down the descriptions and brands of as many of the bullocks as he could remember. He didn't do badly at it, either. They left him, still writing, in a hollow tree, for fear Dobson might turn up and find him taking notes."

"But where were the bullocks?" Wally asked.

"On the track, bless you; and there was this little Willie, in his little old 'bus, trailin' them across Queensland. As soon as I saw them fairly travellin', I let the police ahead know. It seems they'd had their suspicions once or twice before about a man who proved to be one of Dobson & Co.'s assistants; this man turned up casually near a place called Sandy Creek and, having drunk rather more than was good for him, let out that he had an appointment on a certain track on Saturday morning. Unfortunately for him, the gentleman to whom he was so confidential was a plain-clothes bobby; and the rest was very simple. They just threw a net all round and yarded them in as easy as shellin' peas."

Wally sighed.

"It's a pity to have missed it," he said. "I'd have given a good deal to see Dobson's face when he saw the troopers."

"It was worth seein', I can assure you," Freddy said. "The whole thing happened so quick he had no time to say anything. And the crowning part of it was when he saw Bill McGuffie!"

"Old Bill?" queried Wally, bewildered. "How did he get there?"

Freddy began to laugh.

"Well, the police wanted Bill to be on hand, for purposes of identification," he said. "And he couldn't leave Burrin Downs when there was any chance of Dobson turning up, for fear of exciting Mr. Dobson's suspicions. So that was where little Willie had to come in again. We reckoned Dobson was sure to be with Verrin on Saturday morning, so I flew over them pretty early, and sure enough, there he was. At least, there was a strange man; and I knew Verrin by sight pretty well by that time, and I knew it couldn't be anyone else but Dobson. So I sailed off, came round in a circle and dropped down on Burrin Downs, and nearly scared the wits out of Bill McGuffie!"

"You would," said Wally with a twinkle.

"Anyhow, I told him who I was, and he became friendly in less than no time. At least, I mean, I told him I was acting for you; to be accurate, I don't think Mr. McGuffie trusts any man living except yourself. He seems to look on every one else with a doubting eye."

"Well, he knows mighty little about me," said Wally.

"That's why," said Jim, grinning.

"You mustn't distract the patient, or I shall have to turn you out!" Norah remarked, placidly knitting. "Go on, Mr. Paxton." She smiled at Wally.

"I had a letter from the police with me, too, which impressed the old chap greatly. But it was an awful test for Mr. McGuffie when he found he had to fly!"

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Wally in blank amazement, "that you got old Bill into your aeroplane?"

"I did, then. There wasn't any other way, if we wanted to be in time. He jibbed pretty solidly at first, and I had to hammer hard on the point that it was for your sake; nothing else would have done it. At last he gave in, and I got him into the 'bus and started her off before he had time to change his mind again. But I'll always be sorry I couldn't see his face when we were leaving ground. I'll bet it was worth seeing!"

"If you could see him, Norah," said Wally. "If you could only see him! He's rather like Father Christmas, only a good deal wilder in the eye and longer in the beard! How did he take it, Paxton?"

Freddy grinned.

"I was pretty well scared to look at him when we came down near Kalinda, where my head-quarters were," he said. "And there he was, looking round the landscape, with a smile that went from ear to ear. Said he, 'She's as easy as a rocking-horse when you get used to her, an' a terrible free goer. I reckon you didn't have bad fun mustering Germans in her!' And I had to promise there and then to let him fly home that evening!"

"Well, there's great stuff in Mr. McGuffie," said Wally. "What next?"

"Next was, we had to get on to horses that the police had left ready for us, and go like smoke to catch them up near Sandy Creek: which we did, and were in at the death accordingly. And the most gorgeous moment of it all was hearing old Bill casually letting Dobson know he'd headed him off in an aeroplane!"

"I'd like to have seen Dobson's face," Wally said. "It must be pretty hard to look pleasant when the person you have thoroughly despised turns up in triumph just as your house of cards falls to pieces."

"Well, Dobson's has certainly gone to bits pretty thoroughly. His half-cooked books—the police got them from Marindah directly Amy telephoned that he was out of the way—are enough to land him in jail, even if he hadn't been caught red-handed. As for the attack on you—well, it's a thing that can't be proved against him, since a lunatic can't give evidence; but there's not a man in Queensland who doesn't believe that Dobson engineered it, and it's sure to tell in his sentence. Did you know, by the way, that there's been quite a little fuss about you in the papers? Some of 'em wanted your photograph!"

"Mine! You didn't give it to them, Norah?" gasped Wally.

"I did not," said Norah. "Everybody said they hadn't one. Cheer up. And don't get excited like that, or your temperature will rise."

"It rose," said Wally with a relieved sigh. "But it fell again."

"They caught me, though," said Mr. Paxton, grinning. "I'd come down to Brisbane to have a look at you, and was just getting off again when an enterprisin' chap with a camera hopped up from behind a bush and got me, in the 'plane. However, I had goggles on, so it might have been anyone: my worst enemy couldn't have said it was me. Now if I'd only let them get a picture of Bill McGuffie in the 'bus it really would have been worth having. That journalist Johnny will never know what a scoop he missed! Bill—well, he's a simply unbelievable person in an aeroplane!"

"Well, you had a pretty busy week," Wally said. "It's all very well only to look on it as a lark—"

"Which it was," said Mr. Paxton. "Wouldn't you say it was, now, Linton?"

Jim sighed.

"To the end of my days I'll be sore that I was out of it," he said.

"I was a bit sore, too," said Freddy, "on that point. Meadows had been so certain it would all come right if you were here; and I can tell you, it would have been twice the fun if I'd had a mate. I was horribly sorry that things insisted on happening before you could get here; but that was Dobson's fault. It really seems a bit low-down, that I just butted in by accident on a show that didn't concern me, and then got all the fun!"

Wally began to laugh helplessly, so that Norah looked at him in some concern.

"I like your view of it," he said, when he could speak. "Other people might say that you first saved my life, and then took on rather a nasty job of hunting down cattle-dufflers, and pulled it off gloriously, at great inconvenience to yourself."

"Oh, that's all bosh," said Freddy in some confusion. "Some one would have picked you up if I hadn't—"

"Yes," said Jim. "Dobson, most likely. And he'd have finished Hunt's job."

"Not he!" said Freddy, who bore the unmistakable look of one who argues against his convictions. "He'd probably have undergone a change of heart, when he saw you weltering in your gore, and—"

"Any change of heart that was coming to Dobson wouldn't have occurred until after he'd got those bullocks safely away," said Wally firmly. "No; it seemed to me, when I was thinking it out that morning, that something would have to drop from the clouds to save me—and so you did. Blessed if I know how you managed it; getting me in couldn't have been a nice job. I'm glad to say I don't remember a thing about it."

Just for a moment Freddy Paxton's face lost its merriment.

"I'm jolly glad you don't," he said soberly.

"I think we'll cut that part out of the story," said Norah, looking up from her knitting. "It's a horrid part."

"You're quite right, Miss Linton," said Freddy. "Let's give it a miss. By Jove, I'll never forget how the old 'plane travelled to Brisbane that morning! I was pretty anxious to get in and hand this chap over to a doctor, and I just let her out—it's a mercy we've no air speed-limits yet in Australia. Some day, I suppose, we'll have air-policing on beastly, little, swift monoplanes, and they'll lie in wait and time a fellow over a measured mile between the clouds or the stars. But I had the whole of the air to myself that morning, and we streaked down to Brisbane in time that licked anything I ever did in France—barring one night I came home about sunset with five enemy 'planes after me. I beat it in that night; I can tell you—got over our lines just in time. I had rather the same sort of feeling that morning coming down to Brisbane, and the old 'bus seemed to feel it, too. She did let herself go, the old beauty!"

"And I sleeping peacefully!" said Wally in a tone of keen regret. "Well, if that isn't hard luck!"

"Never mind, old man," said Freddy. "We'll have many a trip after you're fit, and we'll see if we can't beat that record. Say I fly back with you to Victoria when you're ready to go? May I, Miss Linton?"

"If you take me, too," said Norah serenely.

"Objection lodged!" said Jim.

"Flying men ought never to get engaged," Freddy remarked regretfully. "I haven't tried it myself, but from what I can see, a fellow can't run a wife and a 'plane together. Which means I'll never be married, and that's awfully hard on some girl. Ah well, she won't know what she's missed!" He slid off the window-sill, and stood upright, tall and brown and merry. "Well, it's jolly good to see you looking so fit, old man; it gave me the dithers to see you as you were when I used to nip down from Kalinda, between trailing the cattle, to have a look at you. And I'm darned glad you've decided to keep that leg. I called it a distinct reflection on my surgery, when they talked about cutting it off!"

Wally grinned cheerfully.

"I never spoke about cutting it off," he said. "Just remember that. I'm not responsible for doctors and nurses. It's a perfectly good leg, and I'm quite attached to it—and I don't intend to be anything else. I don't remember your setting it, praise the pigs, but if it survived that it should be good for anything!"

"I like that," said Freddy. "And I tore up my best shirt for it, too! Isn't he a monster of ingratitude, Miss Linton?"

His eyes met Norah's. There was no lack of gratitude in hers. The big fellow suddenly grew embarrassed.

"Well, I musn't stay too long," he said. "They say I may come again to-morrow. How about that trip of ours, Linton?—coming up with me this afternoon? It's a gorgeous day; I'll take you out over the sea, if you'll come."

"Rather!" Jim answered, getting up with alacrity. "Only, you'll have to land me in time for the express, for I've to meet my father this evening. He's coming over from Victoria to take charge of Norah—she's beyond me!"

His hand rested on his sister's shoulder for a moment, and she put her hand up to it. Jim and Norah were very close together in those days.

"Take care of yourself, Jimmy," she said.

"Don't you worry, Miss Linton—he'll be as safe with me as if he were in a perambulator!"

"Indeed, I'd like to feel he was safer than that!" Norah said, with a glance, half-laughing, half-proud, at her brother's huge form. They said good-bye and trooped downstairs, making great efforts to be quiet.

"Want my pillows fixed—please," said Wally.

She came and fixed them gently, straightening the bed-clothes with little, deft touches, knowing he liked to feel her moving about him.

"You ought to have a little sleep," she told him, sitting down and taking her knitting again. He closed his eyes obediently, but when she glanced at him presently, he was looking at her.

"Norah—when will you marry me?"

"When you are quite better," she said. "But you asked me that this morning!"

"I like to hear you say it," he said with a twinkle. He watched her flying needles.

"I never saw such a girl to knit!" said he.

"'Tis your own socks, sir!" she told him, in Mary-Kate's voice.

"My socks!" he said. "My socks and my buttons! You've scared me blue, the way you've fussed over them always; I began to think you looked on me as a small nephew. Put down that old sock, Norah, and talk to me!"

"I will," she said unexpectedly. She put it down. "And I will tell you something. Do you know, Wally, you've never asked me to marry you!"

"Did I not?" he said. "Great Scott, how careless! I must have forgotten. Does it matter much . . . my girl?"

"Not a bit," said Norah.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.
Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

[The end of *Billabong's Daughter*, by Mary Grant Bruce.]