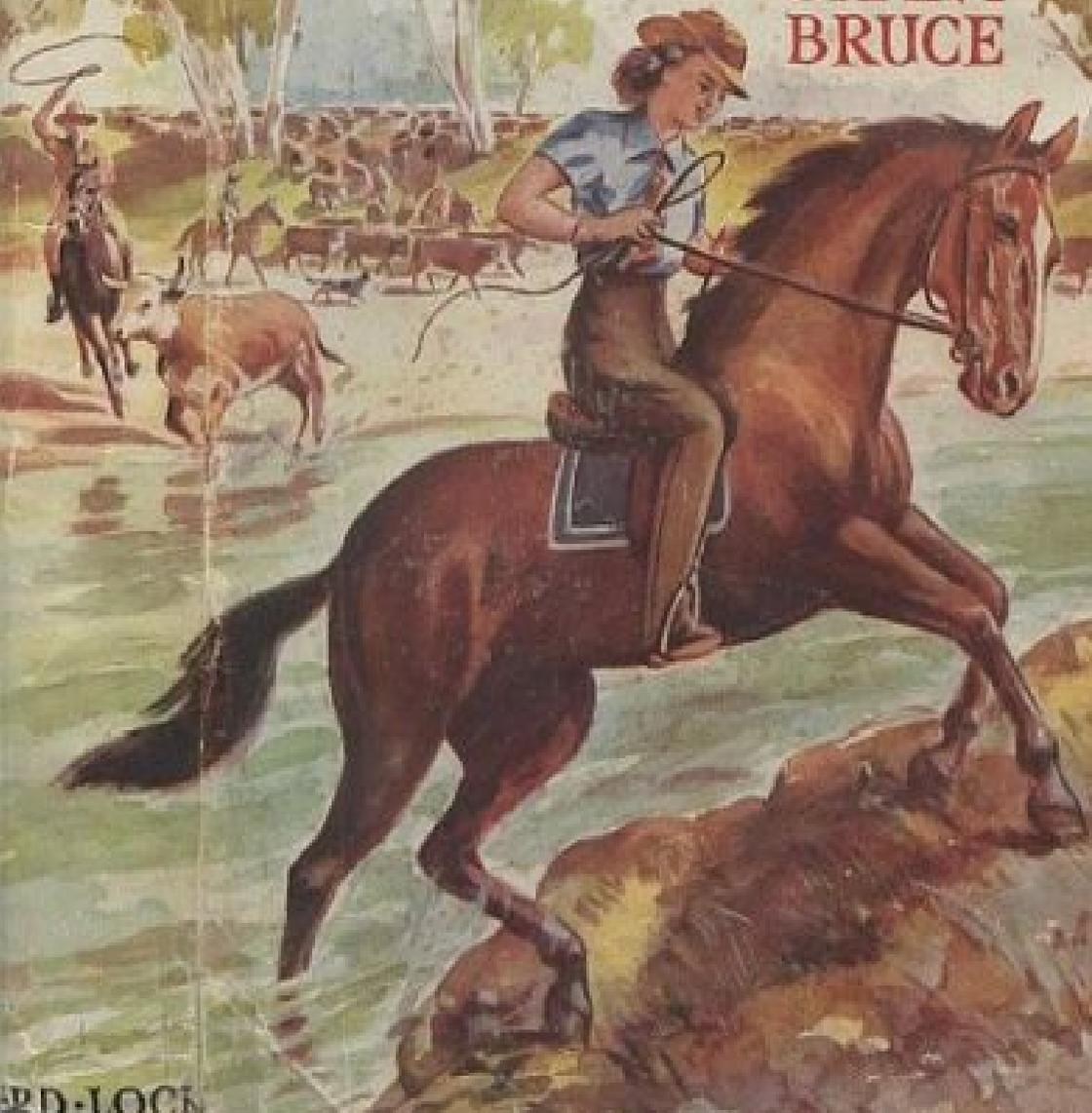


THE KING  
RIDERS

# BILLABONG RIDERS

MARY GRANT  
BRUCE

MARY  
GRANT  
BRUCE



RD-LOC

**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* Billabong Riders

*Date of first publication:* 1942

*Author:* Mary Grant Bruce (1878-1958)

*Date first posted:* Sep. 5, 2017

*Date last updated:* Sep. 5, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20170904

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



# BILLABONG RIDERS

BY

MARY GRANT BRUCE

*Author of "Mates of Billabong," "Norah of Billabong,"  
"Robin," etc.*

WARD, LOCK & CO. LIMITED

LONDON AND MELBOURNE

REGISTERED AT THE GENERAL POST  
OFFICE, SYDNEY, FOR TRANSMISSION  
THROUGH THE POST AS A BOOK

*Copyright. All Rights Reserved*  
*First published 1942*

*Wholly set up and printed in Australia by*  
*William Brooks & Co., Limited, 99 Pitt St., Sydney*  
*For WARD, LOCK & CO. LTD., London and Melbourne*

TO

CHARLES S. BLIGH

Manager, Ward, Lock & Co. Ltd., Melbourne

*Remembering many years of friendship and help.*

MARY GRANT BRUCE

# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. HOW IT BEGAN - - - - -	<a href="#">11</a>
II. THE PLOTTERS - - - - -	<a href="#">25</a>
III. BUSH HOSPITAL - - - - -	<a href="#">37</a>
IV. THE START - - - - -	<a href="#">49</a>
V. FIRST CAMP - - - - -	<a href="#">65</a>
VI. ROB - - - - -	<a href="#">77</a>
VII. ON THE ROAD - - - - -	<a href="#">94</a>
VIII. STAR - - - - -	<a href="#">107</a>
IX. OUT-BACK COUNTRY - - - - -	<a href="#">122</a>
X. JACKY - - - - -	<a href="#">133</a>
XI. THE HOLLOW HILLS - - - - -	<a href="#">144</a>
XII. DAYTIME CAMP - - - - -	<a href="#">160</a>
XIII. STORM - - - - -	<a href="#">171</a>
XIV. CRANKY - - - - -	<a href="#">183</a>
XV. RAIN AFTER STORM - - - - -	<a href="#">195</a>
XVI. ROUNDING-UP - - - - -	<a href="#">207</a>
XVII. THREE SCOUTS - - - - -	<a href="#">221</a>
XVIII. A SCOUT ALONE - - - - -	<a href="#">232</a>
XIX. THE LAST SEEKING - - - - -	<a href="#">248</a>

## CHAPTER I

### HOW IT BEGAN

**D**AVID LINTON of Billabong leaned on a gate-post, watching a boy on a pony.

The pony was a small black Shetland with easy paces; quiet enough for a very small boy to manage, but a free mover. No child of Billabong had ever been taught to ride on a slug; and the tall man who watched could remember many children whose first riding lessons had been given in the little paddock round which his grandson was now trotting. His own boy and girl, and the friends they had brought home in their school days; his mind went back, seeing pictures of scurrying, shouting youngsters, full of the joy of being free of a leading-rein. The saplings he had planted along the fences were tall trees now. They had been planted when Norah was a baby, and Jim just able to toddle beside him as he worked.

Jim topped him now by half a head: and it was Norah's son who was trying to urge the Shetland into a canter. David Linton believed that none of the young riders he remembered had shown better promise than his grandson. The small boy sat very straight, his hands well down, his touch light on the bit. His hat had blown off; but then, no hat ever stayed long on Davie Meadows' black curls. He rode bare-back; the erect little figure in brief shorts and white jersey seemed part of the pony.

The Shetland responded at last to the urgent drumming of his rider's heels, breaking into a canter. They swept past the watcher near the gate, down to the far end of the paddock, and turned to come back.

There was a log lying near the fence on the homeward run. Davie had long regarded it as a log to be jumped when he became a free agent. This seemed as good a time as any. David Linton straightened himself with a quick movement as he saw the pony headed for it. He checked back a warning shout. "Might as well let him begin to learn," he muttered. But he moved forward.

It was only a small log: the Shetland pricked his ears and romped over it with a foot to spare. Davie had not expected anything so energetic. The pony seemed to disappear from beneath him in a most bewildering way: the earth rushed up to meet him. He rolled over and over on the short thick grass. The pony, almost as surprised as the rider, pulled up and looked at him enquiringly.

"That was a bump, old chap," said his grandfather, arriving at a run. "Any damage?"

Davie picked himself up, scarlet with anger. Tears were very near, but he

kept them back. He twisted away from his grandfather's hand and ran to catch the pony.

"Want to get on again." His voice trembled. "Want to go back an' do it pwop'ly!"

David Linton picked him up and swung him to the pony's back. He kept a hand on the rein.

"Who are you cross with, Davie? Yourself or Dumps?"

"Mineself," he muttered.

"That's right. Dumps jumped it well. You didn't. But it's no use being cross. Just remember what I told you, next time: lean forward a little and grip with your knees. You leaned back too far at that jump; and you mightn't have had any knees at all, for all the use you made of them. So, of course, you just rolled off, do you see?"

"'M," said Davie. "Want to try again."

"Go ahead. But don't feel cross, or Dumps will know it, and he mightn't jump so well." He stood aside. "Canter round the paddock again, and you'll take it like a bird."

Dumps went off at a canter, as if realising what was expected of him. As they went along the far side of the paddock a big car rolled quietly up to the gate. Jim Linton, who was driving, called to his sister in the back seat.

"Look at that son of yours, Norah."

Out in a hurry came Norah and her husband—Wally Meadows, tall and dark, with black hair and brown eyes like Davie's. They looked eagerly at the small rider.

"Sits well, doesn't he, Nor?" said Wally, as the Shetland swung round the bend. "By Jove, the little beggar's going to jump that log!"

Norah's hands clenched for an instant. She watched in silence as the scampering pair came towards her. Davie was remembering his lesson; there was no mistake this time when the pony rose at the log.

"Over!" shouted his grandfather. "Good lad!"

Dumps slackened speed. Davie trotted him to his teacher, his face radiant.

"Vat all wight, Gwandad?" Suddenly he caught sight of the watchers by the gate. "Gwacious, vere's Muvver an' Dad!" He dug his heels into the pony's sides and raced to meet them.

"Well, you old steeplechaser!" said his father. "Was that your first try?"

"No—mine felled off first time. Didn't matter," said Davie airily. "Only mine plenty silly, didn't sit pwop'ly. Gwandad said go again an' do it more better."

"And you did," said David Linton, coming up. "Let him go, now. Got a thistle for him?"

"You bet!" He jumped down, slipping off the bridle. Dumps followed him

along the fence to where a milk-thistle, carefully brought from a clump Davie knew, was hidden behind a post. He took it from the boy and munched it while the small hand patted him. The ceremony was always the same at the end of a ride. It was believed that Lee Wing, the old Chinese gardener, cultivated milk-thistles for Davie's special use.

"Will you come home in the car, Dad?" asked Jim.

"No. I'll walk back with my cobber, thanks. We'll be there by the time you've off-loaded. Had a good run, Tommy?"

"Yes, splendid," said Jim's wife—who was called Tommy because her name was Cecilia. She looked very small beside Jim's great form; English by birth, with blue eyes and fair hair, the hottest Australian sun had never succeeded in making her look tanned. This dainty appearance, however, was deceptive; Billabong had good reason to know that Tommy was equal to any emergency she had met in Australia.

Wally and Norah also decided to walk home. The car slid away across the grass; Davie was induced to leave Dumps, and they strolled towards the homestead, a big red house with wide verandahs, surrounded by trees. Many out-buildings straggled away from it, as near every station homestead. A few hundred yards away, concealed behind a belt of gum-trees, was another house—Little Billabong, Norah and Wally's home. But it was never quite clear which was really "home" to Norah. Certainly Little Billabong held their personal belongings; but Big Billabong held their hearts.

"You're coming to tea?" David Linton asked.

"Yes. There's a letter Jim and Wally must talk over with you. But it will keep till after tea. Oh, and we met the doctor in Cunjee, Dad. He told me to say he hoped you were resting your leg. I said you were resting as much as we could expect—which didn't seem to satisfy him much."

"Well, so I am resting the darned leg," the squatter defended himself. "I haven't been on a horse for a fortnight."

"I told him that, but he didn't seem to think it was enough," said Norah. "He said, 'When a horse rolls on a man's leg, that man ought to do more than leave off riding for a bit. But when that man's David Linton there's not much chance of his being sensible!'"

"Rubbish! Nothing's so good for bruised muscles as exercise. I said I wouldn't ride, but I'm not going to turn into an invalid. Do you want me to go to bed and let that leg grow stiff?"

"No, Dad," said Norah meekly. "But I'm not a doctor, you see."

"Well, you've more sense than doctors about most things—so forget my leg. I'll have forgotten it myself in a couple of weeks."

"I haven't doctored three obstinate men for years without knowing how far I can go," said his daughter. "As long as you don't ride too soon I'm not

worrying. Have you been running round that paddock after Davie?"

"Not I; he managed for himself, didn't you, Davie? We've had a very good time, and we reckon we've earned our tea."

"Vere's Bwown," said Davie suddenly. He ran ahead to the open gate of the back yard, where Jim and Tommy were carrying in parcels. Down the path, bent on helping them, came a stout figure in print dress and white apron: Brownie, who had mothered two generations of children on Billabong. They heard Davie's shout to her.

"Bwown! Mine's afther jumping a log!"

"Did you, then, my lamb! An' stuck on?"

"Once mine didn't, an' ven mine did."

"An' that's not bad for a four-year-old," said she, carefully concealing her pride. "Take that parcel from Auntie Tommy, Davie—it's too big for her."

He whirled round. "You shouldn't cally big fings like vat," he said sternly, grasping the parcel—somewhat astonished to find it weighed much less than he expected. Brownie had already noted that it dangled by its loop from one of Tommy's fingers, and might therefore be carried by a gentleman four years old. She believed in the Billabong doctrine that men couldn't be trained too early to look after their women-folk.

The early spring evening had grown chilly; when they gathered in the smoking-room for tea it was pleasant to find a log fire crackling in the grate. David Linton sat down in his big easy-chair with a little sigh of relief, glad to rest the leg of which he had spoken so scornfully. He wondered privately if it might be wise to follow the doctor's advice. There was a busy time ahead for Billabong when a mob of store cattle from Queensland would arrive. Already they were on the road from his northern station: he had no wish to be out of the saddle when they came.

"What's this letter we've got to discuss, Jim?" he asked, stirring his tea.

"Rather a nuisance, I'm afraid," said Jim. "It's about the Queensland cattle. They're in a bit of a fix. Bill Parker was in charge, as usual, and they travelled well until they crossed the New South Wales border. Then they struck trouble. Some fools shooting ducks from cars at night startled the bullocks; they tried to stampede, and Parker's horse fell with him as he was galloping to head them. And now he's in hospital with a broken leg. He's getting on all right, but he's badly worried about the cattle."

Mr. Linton looked grave.

"Parker's the one man we couldn't spare," he said. "Who's his second-in-command?"

"Fellow named Gribble. Parker says he's fairly good under somebody's direction, but mighty little use on his own. Parker didn't feel justified in letting him travel the cattle. He managed to get a week's grass for them, so they're

just camping. The gang's short-handed, too. Some of the men went off to a township and didn't come back: one of 'em was the cook, worse luck. So things are just anyhow, with poor Parker doing all he can from a hospital bed to straighten 'em out." Jim fished in his pocket. "Here's his letter."

It was a long letter, written laboriously in pencil. Mr. Linton read it slowly.

"He's a good chap," he commented, folding it up. "Most men would think a broken leg was enough to think about; but not Parker."

"We'll see he doesn't lose by it," said Jim. "Well, Dad, Wally and I reckon we'll have to go up and take charge of the mob. This fellow Gribble doesn't seem much to depend on, and we can't chance the cattle with an unknown man—even supposing Parker could find one."

"Certainly we can't. No, you'll have to go, boys. It's a nuisance, but it can't be helped. I'd go with you, but for this fool of a leg."

"'Wish you could," said Wally. "It would be like old times to do a bit of droving with you again. What about taking Murty, since we can't have you, Dad?"

"That's a good idea," agreed Mr. Linton. "Murty isn't as young as he was—and neither am I, for that matter—but he's still hard to beat after cattle. A first-rate chap in a camp, too; he has his own ways of dealing with grumblers. You didn't send any word to Parker, I suppose, Jim?"

"No. I only read his letter after we left Cunjee. I'll ring up presently and send him a wire to put his mind at rest."

"Will you fly up, Jim?" asked Norah.

"No need, I think. The cattle are having a spell; and we couldn't take our gear by 'plane. There'll be plenty of time if we leave in a couple of days. You girls can have the job of hunting out all our camping outfit to-morrow," he added generously.

"I knew you would hate us to be out of it," smiled Tommy. "Would you like your boots greased, too?"

"It's a kind thought, but I did them myself yesterday. Otherwise, you might begin on them at daybreak. But don't worry: we'll find lots of other dainty jobs for you. You'll need a day's rest by the time we get away."

"We'll take it—don't you worry," Norah assured him. "I wonder how long it will be before our time of rest is over?"

"Hard to say. Depends on the condition of the bullocks, the feed along the route, and whether we have any drawbacks—like the one that landed poor old Parker with a broken leg. You probably won't see us for a few weeks, at any rate. By the way, Nor, Parker hasn't anyone belonging to him, I believe—how about sending him a parcel of oddments?"

"Books and magazines," nodded Norah. "And a cake, I think, don't you, Tommy? You can see that he has plenty of tobacco, Jim, when you get there."

“A good new cardigan,” suggested Tommy. “They’ll let him wear it as a bed-jacket in the hospital, if he needs one. We’ll probably think of lots of other things when we put our minds to it.”

“I knew you’d have ideas,” said Jim. “Well, I’d like him to feel there was someone to spare a thought for him; it’s the least we can do, seeing he got knocked out in our service. Easy enough to fix up the money side of it, but I don’t think that counts as much.”

“And weeks of being helpless can’t be a cheerful prospect for a fellow who spends most of his life in the saddle,” remarked Wally. “Well, we’ll try to cheer him up, anyhow. Norah, don’t you think it’s time we collected our son and went home? I’ve got quite a lot of things to see to.”

They found Davie sitting on the kitchen table talking earnestly to two of his best friends: Murty O’Toole, head stockman of Billabong, and Lee Wing, the gardener, who was also capable of turning his hand to many things. Billabong had been their home for more than thirty years: they were part of the family, bound up in the interests of the people they loved. Since Davie spent much of his time with them and with Billy, the native “boy” who was now grey-haired, his language was a curious mixture of Irish, Chinese and blackfellow pidgin-English, often confusing to strangers.

“Hallo, Murty,” said Wally. “Are you game to go overlanding after cattle again?”

“’Twould be all in the day’s wurrk, Mr. Wally, wherever it is. I wouldn’t say no to bein’ on the roads wance more.”

“It’s the Queensland mob. They’ve got into trouble, and Jim and I want you to take a hand with them. And us,” added Wally.

“Is that so? I’ll be ready whenever you are. I wondher, now, what sort of horses they’ll be givin’ us?”

“Not too bad, I expect. But we’ll have to take our chance of that. Lee Wing, you’ll have to keep an eye on my family for me.”

“Too li’ I will, Mas’ Wally. I leckon I better camp over at Li’l Billabong.”

“That’s a good notion. I’ll feel all right about them if you’re there.”

“Well, *I* reckon,” said Brownie, “that we’ll transplant them over here, same as we’ve done often enough before. Billabong ’ud be lonesome for the Master and Mrs. Jim, all by themselves.”

“That welly thue,” agreed Lee Wing. “But me camp at your place all-same, Mas’ Wally.”

“Can mine go wiv you, Dad?” demanded Davie.

“Not this time, old chap. You’ve got to grow a bit before you go droving. Come on home.”

He swung him to his shoulder. The three old servants of Billabong watched them as they went into the dusk.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PLOTTERS

THE worst of being married," said Wally, "is that a man doesn't want to leave home."

"But some do, I believe," remarked Norah.

"They're the poor mutts who picked the wrong wife. I was pretty careful about that. I watched mine for years before I decided she was worthy of the honour of becoming Mrs. Meadows—ouch!—let my hair go, Norah, you vixen! I was only paying you a compliment."

"I don't think so much of your compliments," said his wife. "They generally have a queer twist in them."

"That's because you've got a warped mind. I was giving you the highest praise I could think of—and I don't believe you deserve it, after all. I ought to be glad to be leaving you. But, somehow, I'm not."

"It's the meals," said Norah. "I've made you too comfortable. Large meals at regular hours—when you happened to be there to eat them, that is. And now you just can't face camp cooking, with a cook who'll probably give you chops three times a day, followed by stale bread and jam."

"And well seasoned with dust," agreed Wally. "I know it all; you needn't rub it in. You may be a tyrant, but even you could learn a lot from a drovers' cook. He knows he's boss, and that he can't be replaced, so he does just what he likes. And for all we know, we shan't have a cook at all—didn't the letter say the cook had cleared out?"

"I expect they'll have found another by the time you and Jim get there. If not," said his wife unfeelingly . . . "Well, you learned to cook quite nicely when we camped out on our honeymoon!"

"I'll keep that well to myself. I was a simple young lad in those days; and then, I had a pretty severe boss. Bossed me ever since, too, haven't you?"

"Have I?" asked Norah—and smiled at him.

"Oh, I can stand it," he said. "Even if I'm down-trodden, I certainly do hate the idea of going away for weeks. Queer, isn't it?—a few years ago I'd have jumped at the chance of having a droving trip again, especially with Jim. But when it means leaving you and Davie . . . well, it isn't so good. We seem to have got into the way of doing things together, don't we, Nor?"

"Well, we've been practising that since we were pretty small," she said. "There were interruptions, of course, but they never lasted very long. By the way, the last time you went off after cattle to Queensland you left me behind.

And—of course—you got into trouble. Don't you dare do that again! I had to race up to Queensland to look after you.”

“You did it pretty thoroughly,” said Wally, grinning. “I've never been a free man since!”

“And you don't seem to like the prospect of being free again. Poor old slave!” she laughed. “The truth is that when you're once on the roads with a mob of cattle in front of you, you'll enjoy every minute of it. New horses to ride, new country to see, new dogs to watch at work. And who knows what adventures!”

“Gosh, I hope not!” said Wally fervently. “The one thing a man hopes for when he's droving is no adventures at all. All you want is the same old crawl, day after day, with nothing to disturb the bullocks. Adventures can't mean anything but stampedes or trouble of some kind with the cattle—and that means losing beasts or getting them hurt—knocking the condition off them, anyhow. Don't you go wishing me adventures, young Norah!”

“Bless you, I wasn't wishing you any,” she laughed. “Only the fact is, they seem to come to this family of their own accord. We've always had them, and I expect we'll go on having them. But you really ought to be safe from them this time. Especially as you'll be extra well looked after.”

“Is that Jim's idea? I'll bet you that Tommy will be expecting me to watch over him like an old hen. And you know just how easy it is to keep an eye on Jim! If there's any trouble about, Jim's sure to spot it well ahead of anyone else—and be up to his neck in it.” Wally sighed. “He's beaten me to it much more often than I've liked!”

“Oh, it's not Jim's idea,” she said. “He gave up trying to keep you out of mischief long ago. No, it's the result of a heart-to-heart talk between Tommy and me this afternoon. Tommy and I often get hold of the same notion without saying anything to each other. Then I dash to tell her what I've thought up; and generally I meet her coming to tell me the very same thing.”

“You can't have any private minds of your own at all!” stated Wally with conviction. “What villainy have you been hatching now?” He glanced out of the window, hearing feet on the gravel. “Here come Jim and Tommy—and Jim looking as solemn as an owl. He's just oozing disapproval of something.”

“He would—at first,” said Norah. “But he'll come round. Wally, you've got to back us up——.”

“If I had the ghost of an idea as to what I'm to back!” said the bewildered Wally. “You might at least——.” He broke off as Jim and Tommy came in. Jim certainly looked disapproving. His wife wore what Billabong called her “angel-child expression”: a mixture of extreme sweetness and serene determination. There was a twinkle in her eye as she looked at Norah.

“Jim is not a bit pleased with our plan, Norah. So I thought we had better

come and tell you.”

“I should think I’m not!” stated Jim severely. “Wally, don’t you think it’s a mad idea?”

“Oh, rather!” said Wally. “Quite mad. Nobody’s told me yet what it is, but I don’t suppose that matters. If these two cooked it up, it’s bound to be mad, so the less I know about it the better.”

“Hasn’t Norah been breaking it to you? I thought you’d know all about it. Tommy’s been trying to get round me, so I came over to get you to help me make her see reason.”

“And I would,” said Wally patiently. “I most certainly would, if I thought there was any chance. Not that there often is, but I’d try. All the same, it would be easier if someone told me just a little about it. Only a rough outline, if you haven’t time for details!”

“It was such a good little plan, we thought, Wally,” said Tommy. “Quite simple, and so easy to carry out. Norah and I could not see any flaws in it at all. We thought we might be really useful.”

“And now you’ve found that there’s no chance you ever will be? I do feel sad for you both,” said Wally sympathetically. “But you can always keep on trying, you know, Tommy.” He gave her a searching look. “Speaking from the depths of my ignorance, of course, I’d say you hadn’t nearly finished trying about this whatever-it-is you’re hoping to bring off!”

Tommy gave a soft chuckle, and said nothing. Jim broke in impatiently.

“They want to come droving with us, Wal. D’you wonder I said it was a mad idea?”

“Gosh!” said the startled Wally. “Who thought up that one?”

“I told you it was a mutual brain-wave,” said Norah. “It shook me a bit at first, but as soon as I talked it over with Tommy I saw how easy it was. The gang is short-handed; and we’re quite handy with cattle. They’ll have plenty of spare horses; if we got tired of riding we could travel in the cook’s waggonette. It would only mean taking another tent, and you boys will have to take one anyway.”

“I am not so handy with cattle as Norah is,” put in Tommy. “But I might be very handy as a cook!”

“If you think I’m going to let you cook for a bunch of drovers——!” exploded Jim. “You don’t realise how rough it may be. All very well to help with cattle on Billabong: it’s mighty different to be on the roads all day in any sort of weather, and with no real comfort at night. And we don’t know what this gang is like. They may be quite the wrong sort for you two to travel with. Very nice to work with our own men here; but a strange gang’s quite another matter.”

“They would be quite meek with you and Wally there,” said Tommy.

“That’s all you know about drovers. They’re not a meek brand of men, as a rule: and they mightn’t care for having women in the camp.”

“But we needn’t be in their camp, Jim. We could have our own little camp at a discreet distance—until we got to know them. After that, I expect we’ll be invited over for sing-songs!”

The sudden conviction that this would, indeed, be extremely likely, for a moment deprived Jim of speech. Tommy went on calmly.

“You aren’t making allowances for the soothing influence of women about a camp. We would soothe from a good way off at first, of course——.”

“I’ll say you would!” uttered Jim.

“Certainly. But as time went on you would see these rough men becoming changed: checking their language——.”

“With *bullocks*?” gasped her husband.

“We would be careful to be out of the way if the bullocks were annoying them very much. Norah and I are so tactful. But when things were calm we would soon make friends. You wouldn’t mind if they brought us little gifts of bush flowers, would you?”

“If I could see *that* spectacle, I’d die happy!” said Wally solemnly. “Some of ’em may be abo’s, Tommy—you wouldn’t mind if their tokens of affection were eatable, would you? A nice young goanna, or a few fat witchetty-grubs.”

“I’d grill them for you,” she promised.

“But joking apart, Norah,” said Jim, “you do see the difficulties, don’t you? I know you’ve roughed it now and then, but Tommy hasn’t. If she were to knock up——.”

“As if I would!” put in Tommy. “You have no idea how tough I am!”

“I know you’d crack hardy until you were ready to drop. But if you had to give in—what then?”

“Well, we aren’t going into altogether uninhabited country,” said Norah. “There are nearly always farms and stations not very far from the stock-routes, aren’t there?—and most stations have telephones now. We could be dropped off at some friendly place and get a car to take us back to something like civilisation. That’s supposing one of us did knock up. Only, it’s not going to happen.”

“Jim,” said Tommy with great meekness—“if I promised to tell you directly I felt that I was within several days of knocking up . . . when I would still have plenty of strength to ride away with Norah to civilisation? Would that make you feel better?”

“I doubt if you’d ever do it. And anyhow,” said Jim, shifting his ground, “what fun do you two think you’ll get? You’ve no idea how deadily dull droving can be.”

“But that’s what we hope to save you,” said his wife. “We’re going to

make sure you're never dull!"

"Wally, can't you convince these lunatics that they *are* lunatics?" Jim's voice was despairing.

Three pairs of eyes were turned on Wally. He looked from one to the other, hesitating.

"Well, droving can be a dull enough game, as you say, old man. I believe it might give it quite a spot of interest to take a couple of loonies along. Even if they only lasted a week . . . well, we could stick it for that long. And there's one thing—once they'd had to give in, they'd never dare to argue with us again. We'd be in our rightful places as lords and masters!"

"I . . . wonder!" said Tommy softly. Norah said nothing: but her mouth twitched as she met his eyes.

"Well, have it your own way," Jim said. "I think it's mad, but we'll give it a go. Now we'll have to start planning on a new scale. You girls will need your own saddles: I wouldn't let you use the oddments of saddles that the camp will have for spares."

Tommy perched on the arm of his chair, leaning against his shoulder.

"Jimmy, when you give in you're very nice," she said. "You just start arranging things as if you'd wanted us to go all along!"

"Bless you, that's just what I did!" he said. "Only I was a bit afraid for you. Never mind—we'll knock all the fun we can out of it. You can't take much kit, apart from bedding and saddlery. One suit-case apiece. Bathing togs and towels. No frills of any kind. Better pack a first-aid outfit. Anything else?"

"Camera and films," said Wally. "I wouldn't miss the chance of snapping Tommy as a drover. We'll bring home pictures they'd give worlds to suppress!"

"Two can play at that game!" she warned him. "Jim, do we take our own cooking outfit?"

Jim did not answer for a moment. He was pondering an idea that had come to him.

"Tell you what," he said at length. "Say we take Lee Wing as cook for our party? That would simplify things very much, and there would be no question of intruding on the drovers' camp, where you two are concerned—and that's the very thing I want to avoid, with a gang I don't know. And I don't want you at the mercy of any old cook they may have been able to pick up."

"You're a brainy lad!" stated Wally. "This is going to be camping made easy."

"Well, we might as well be fairly comfortable—with two lunatics in tow," grinned Jim. "Lee Wing will jump at the chance, and it will certainly make all the difference to have him in charge of the tucker department. That old sinner can scare up a meal out of nothing more quickly than anyone I ever saw."

He got up, pulling Tommy to her feet.

“Come on home, you managing woman! If we stay here any longer they’ll probably suggest taking Davie, too. And that would be about the last straw for the unfortunate bunch of drovers we’re going to astonish!”

## CHAPTER III

### BUSH HOSPITAL

GOSH, I was glad to get your wire, Mr. Linton!" said Parker.

He wriggled a little in the bed to ease his aching leg; a gaunt, dark-bearded man, his face puckered with worry. A nurse, passing by, paused to arrange his pillows more comfortably.

"I'm glad you've come to stop this patient fretting himself into a fever," she said. "We've been afraid he'd try to go after his bullocks, broken leg and all. He needs someone large to deal with him." She glanced with approval at Jim's huge form and his serene face.

"Well, he's got nothing to bother about now," said Jim. "I've inherited all his worries, and he can just lie still and let you fatten him."

"I'll bet *you* won't get fat on the job," Parker told him. "Drovers aren't what they were once—not by a long chalk. There usen't to be any difficulty in getting a good crew when I was younger, but it's darned hard now to find men you can trust." The nurse moved away: he dropped his voice. "I'd like you to keep a pretty sharp eye on Sam Gribble, Mr. Linton."

"Got anything against him?"

"Not exactly. He came to me with a fairly good recommendation. But there's something about him I don't like. He's work-shy—never does more than he can help. And he's made pals of the wrong sort of men. Not that they're a bad lot of chaps . . . but you know how it is with a gang; always one or two you'd just as soon get rid of."

"And Gribble's pals weren't among the men who cleared out?" asked Jim.

"No, worse luck. One of 'em came to see me, and he said they left because they weren't going to work under Gribble. He'd got the wrong side of them somehow. But I got him back," added Parker with a grin. "I'd just had your wire, so I was able to tell him that Gribble wasn't going to be his boss. That quite altered his outlook. Couldn't get the others, though; they'd gone off after another job. But you'll find Danny Tucker's a good fellow. Decent of him to come and see me, wasn't it?"

"He sounds the right sort. And you say Gribble's engaged two others?"

"Yes. I wish I'd had the choosing of 'em. He says one can cook: I hope to goodness his cooking's good enough to keep the men in a good temper. I say, Mr. Linton, it was dashed good of your wife and your sister to send me those parcels. It knocked me all of a heap to get them. I'll write and thank them as soon as I can."

"You won't have to," said Jim. "Fact is, Parker, we've brought my wife and sister with us. They'll be here to see you, presently."

"Gosh, that was a long trip for them to take! Are they going on to the station when you move the cattle?"

"Not they." Jim grinned a little uncomfortably. "They're going with us. Mad keen on taking a hand with the droving."

"Well-I-never!" said Parker feebly. "But I say . . . Mr. Linton!"

"No holding them back. They're masterful people. Certainly they're pretty useful with cattle, especially my sister. She's been at the game all her life. Anyhow if they knock up or get sick of it, they can drop out."

"Heaven send that Gribble's found a cook that washes a saucepan occasionally!" said Parker with fervour.

"Don't worry about that. We'll run our own little camp: we've brought an old Chinese of ours who's cooked for us before this in camp. And Murty O'Toole, too—you met him at Billabong last time you brought cattle down."

"By George, I haven't forgotten old Murty!" said Parker, greatly relieved. "Why, there's a regular army of you! I reckon I can make my mind easy now. You an' Mr. Meadows an' Murty can handle things, even if Gribble an' some of the others aren't up to much. But I expect they'll toe the mark once they take a good look at you three. About the ladies . . . I dunno; it's not much of a game for ladies, drovin' isn't. You take my tip, Mr. Linton, an' persuade 'em to give it best after a few days."

"You never saw two people less easy to persuade," Jim said grimly. "What about transport, Parker? Will there be room for our kit? We have cut it down as much as possible."

"Oh, we're well fixed; got a spring-cart with a canvas tilt for a chuck-waggon, as well as the old waggonette. Your stuff will go in all right. I'd advise you to take over the waggonette if your cook can drive it, and let the rest of the outfit use the cart."

"Good scheme—Lee Wing can manage it all right. How far away are the cattle, Parker?"

"About five miles. I had luck, getting grazing for 'em, Mr. Linton—only bit of luck I did have. Pretty good grass, too. They won't like leavin' it for the roads. I'd have felt properly stuck but for that Mr. McLaren offerin' me a paddock; with the bullocks all upset after the stampede I just couldn't have trusted Gribble to take 'em on. He's the man that picked me up an' brought me in to the hospital: he saw I was worried stiff, an' he said he could clear out a big paddock an' take 'em in. A mighty big load off my mind, that was."

"Well, I'm thankful you found someone to look after you," Jim said. "It couldn't have been a very easy journey in, Parker."

"Not too good. But they've looked after me real well here—you can't beat

a Bush Hospital. The doc. says my leg'll be as good as ever it was, thank goodness."

"Yes, he told me that. Nice clean break, he says, and you're so healthy that you'll mend quickly."

"What, have you been to see him?"

"Oh, he was our first port of call. I'd have got you down to Sydney if I hadn't been satisfied about you. But the doctor was quite certain on that point—though he suggested that you'd improve more rapidly if you thought about something else than bullocks."

"Well, that was darned good of you, Mr. Linton," said the drover. "I never was looked after like this in all me born days. I'll be able to quit worryin' now. Though I wouldn't mind gettin' a post-card from you now and then just to let me know how the mob's travellin'."

"You'll hear all right. How are you fixed for money? Shall I let you have some now?"

"I've plenty to go on with, thanks. Later on, you might let me have a cheque for what's due to me since I started."

"Better let me give you that before we leave. And, of course, you understand you're in our pay right through the trip—we're just carrying on as your substitutes."

"Oh, but that's all rot, Mr. Linton! I'm not goin' to take money I haven't earned——."

"You're the one who's talking rot. You got smashed up trying to save our cattle—do you think we're going to let you suffer for it more than we can help? Have sense, man!"

"We-ell," began Parker unhappily, "I don't see it that way at all——."

He stopped. The door had opened to admit other visitors; Norah and Tommy, with Wally's tall figure behind them.

"I'm glad you've come," said Jim, getting up. "The patient's beginning to rave."

"That means you're disagreeing with him about something, Mr. Parker," said Norah. "Never mind—I'm sure he's talked to you long enough. Everyone tells us you're getting on splendidly—but we're terribly sorry for your bad luck, all the same."

"Well, it makes a man feel better to see you all," said Parker, looking from one to another as they greeted him. "You all look that cheerful—no one 'ud guess you'd had to race up from Victoria to take on a job of work. An' Mr. Linton tells me you two ladies are actually goin' to turn drovers!"

The ladies in question said modestly that they meant to try.

"Well, I like the game—but then, I was broke in to it young" he said. "Can't see meself doin' anything else. Do they sing well, Mr. Meadows?"

“Oh, well . . . they sing,” said Wally, guardedly. “Why, Parker?”

“’Cause a good drover ought to be able to sing to the bullocks sometimes. When they get restless at night, hearin’ things we don’t hear, or maybe a storm comin’ up makes ’em fidgetty . . . it sort of calms ’em down if the night guard rides round ’em slowly singin’. I got no voice at all, an’ I’ve often wondered that my old croak doesn’t make ’em feel worse instead of better. But it seems to soothe ’em. I dunno how they’d act if they heard a nice high sopranner voice like I’m sure you’ve got, Mrs. Meadows!”

“No, you’re wrong there, Mr. Parker. Mine’s a deep croak, too: they’d probably take it for yours. But Mrs. Jim’s is a soprano, and she sings French songs. How would those act on bullocks?”

“I’d hate to think,” said Parker. “Those bullocks haven’t much education: I don’t think I’d risk it if I were you, Mr. Linton.”

“She can try it in daylight,” said Jim. “No night work for raw hands like these two.”

“Might be safer,” agreed the drover. “By the way, there’s another raw hand in our outfit. He’s Syd Flynn’s nephew—Syd’s the chap that drives the cart, an’ a pretty poor fish he is, too. But I had to take him, ’cause I couldn’t get anyone else; an’ that meant takin’ young Rob as well. He’s an orphan—got no one belongin’ to him but Syd. I believe he’s thirteen or fourteen, but he doesn’t look as much. Quiet little chap; he drives along with Syd an’ he’s quite handy in camp. Sam Gribble’s a bit inclined to order him round, and I used to keep an eye on him on that account. Easy enough to have a youngster like that put upon, you know.”

Jim nodded. “We’ll look out for him.”

“I’d say that kid’s had a tough time,” said Parker. “Before he came with us, I mean. You hardly ever hear him speak, an’ he’s got a sort of hunted look . . . lonesome. An’ Syd Flynn’s not much comfort to any lonesome youngster. I reckon he’d be glad of a kind word now an’ then from you ladies. Someone told me it was only lately his mother died.”

“We’ll remember, Mr. Parker,” Tommy said.

“He’s as shy as a bush-rat, but I reckon you’ll know how to make friends with him.” Parker looked at her gratefully. “There’s another thing: the spare horses aren’t a bad lot, but I don’t know much about their paces, and it means a good deal to have an easy horse when you’re ridin’ day after day. I’ve got two, an’ there’s not much fault to be found with either of ’em: both steady, with plenty of pace if it’s wanted. I was terrible afraid old Lancer was hurt—he’s the one that came down with me. But he wasn’t—only a bit shaken up. An’ it wasn’t his fault we came down: I’d never known Lancer put a foot wrong. But what can you do when a bullock turns a somersault right into you in the dark?”

"You go too," said Wally feelingly. "That happened to me once in Queensland—and it wasn't in the dark, either. I just didn't know a thing about it till I hit the ground; and neither did my horse."

"Nor me," said Parker. "But nobody could blame old Lancer. Well, what I mean to say is, there's my pair, Lancer an' Trigger; an' I'd take it as a real favour, Mrs. Jim, if you an' Mrs. Wally 'ud ride 'em."

"That takes a weight off my mind," said Jim. "Well, I'll guarantee they won't give them sore backs, Parker."

"I reckon no one from Billabong ever yet gave a horse a sore back," grinned the drover. "Well, there's not much to choose between my pair: one's as good as the other. I'd advise you ladies to ride 'em turn about, like I do: it's a relief to be able to change horses when you're in the saddle every day for a long time. An' if you want to drive for a spell, you don't need to think of either of 'em: they'll follow along like a dog. Pretty well all our horses'll do that, but my two are as sensible as human beings. More sensible than some human beings I know."

"We'll take great care of them, Mr. Parker," said Tommy. "Also, I shall be very thankful to feel they're taking care of *me*—I'm not a bush-woman like Mrs. Wally, you know. I was greatly wondering what sort of a horse I should have to tackle."

"She's quite equal to tackling most of ours," Norah told him. "But this means we're going to enjoy ourselves very much more. We brought our own saddles, so it doesn't seem now that we've anything left to wish for!"

"Except fine weather, good water, nothin' to scare the bullocks, an' the wind always blowin' away from you!" said Parker with a dry smile. "A head wind's no fun: you eat the dust of the mob all day. But I reckon you'll worry through all right."

"And when you're better," said Norah, "will you come to Billabong to pick up your horses? That's only an excuse, you know: we should like to have you there as soon as you're fit to travel, and to stay until you're perfectly well. You'll want a little looking after when you leave the hospital."

"Aw, I say, Mrs. Meadows," the drover protested. "I couldn't go givin' you trouble like that. I'll be a bit of a crock when they let me out."

"You wouldn't give any trouble at all—Murty and the men would look after you like nurses. Not that you'd really need nurses by then," she added. "No, we all want you: Dad said I was to tell you he wouldn't take 'No' for an answer, and that he'd meet you with the car in Melbourne. That would make the journey much easier. Will you promise to come?"

"Well . . . when you put it that way, Mrs. Meadows," he said—"what can a man say?"

"Then that's all arranged," stated Jim, "and now we'll have to be getting

along. I've sent word to Gribble that we shall be out very early in the morning. So we'll be on the roads to-morrow, bullocks, new hands and all."

"Well, it's been great to see the whole lot of you," Parker said. "I feel tons better. But don't I wish I was goin' along with you!"

## CHAPTER IV

### THE START

THE drovers' camp had been pitched in the corner of a wide paddock. A creek ran along one boundary, with wattle-trees fringing its banks: otherwise the paddock was bare, except for the cattle thickly dotted over its whole expanse. There was a small yard, where already the camp horses were mustered.

The tents had been struck. Men were busily rolling them up and stowing them away in the cart. The breakfast fire still smouldered; near it the cook, bent over a kerosene-tin of hot water, was hastily swilling plates and enamel mugs, handing them to a boy to be wiped with a grimy towel.

"That's the lot," said the cook, straightening himself with a sigh of relief. He emptied the water over the remains of the fire. "Pack 'em up, Rob, and sling the box into the cart. I'll go an' find out when we're to get a move on."

He lit a cigarette and strolled to where two men were sitting on a log. One was short and thick-set, with olive skin and dark curly hair: the other a big red-haired man, powerfully built.

"My stuff's ready," said the cook. "What about harnessin' up, Sam?"

"Oh, I'm not goin' to do anything about makin' a move until Linton turns up," said the red-haired man. "An' there's no knowin' when that will be. Plenty of time for you to get goin' when we start to round up the bullocks, Fred."

"Suits *me*," rejoined the cook. "The shorter my day is, the better I like it. Three of 'em comin', aren't there?"

"So he said in his letter. Him and his brother-in-law an' one of their men. I'd just as soon he'd left the job to me; but I suppose he knows his own business. Hope he's not one of those cock-sure young squatters who reckon nobody knows anything but themselves. Parker wasn't hard to get on with, but I don't fancy the fine-gentleman sort."

"Most likely he leave mosta da work to you, Sam," said the dark man.

"I wish he'd left the lot to me—I'd have made more out of it then," said Sam Gribble. "I wouldn't have minded drawing the pay Parker got. Still, we may not do too badly, Tony. You'll have to watch your step—I expect he'll have his eye on you, wonderin' why I took on a Dago."

The Italian grinned. "Oh, I watch it all-a right. Not the first time I done drovin', Sam." He rolled a cigarette with deft fingers. "Danny Tucker not too pleased, seein' me here, eh?"

"An' I wasn't too pleased to see *him* comin' back. This trip wouldn't have been too bad if I could have got just the crowd I wanted after Parker was knocked out. Oh, well, I suppose we'll get through well enough."

"Well, here they come, anyhow," said the cook. "My word, they must be bringin' plenty of stuff!—there's a car as well as a utility. They're goin' to do it in style all right."

They got to their feet as the cars stopped near the fence. Jim was the first out: he turned to give his hand to Tommy. The watching men gaped in amazement as the passengers appeared.

"Gosh, they've got women with them!" exclaimed Gribble. "What on earth's that for?"

"Oh, just comin' to see 'em off," suggested the cook. "Look pretty business-like, those girls." He stared at the trim figures in coats and jodhpurs. "Pity we can't all have such luck!"

Jim was coming on alone, casting quick glances round him. Gribble went forward to meet him.

"Are you Gribble? I'm Linton." He put out his hand with a smile. "I see you're getting ready to start."

"That's right. I wouldn't disturb the cattle until you came," said Gribble. "Thought I'd rather you counted them with me. We've only lost one beast so far."

"Yes—Parker told me one went lame. Bad luck that Parker should get hurt, wasn't it?—it must have made it very awkward for you, especially with men clearing out. We should get on all right now; there are five of us altogether to lend a hand."

"Five?" Gribble raised his eyebrows.

"Yes: my wife and my sister thought they'd like to come along. They can't quite count as regular hands, but they'll be useful."

"Queer job for ladies, isn't it? The camp'll be a bit rough for them, I'd say."

"Oh, we'll have our own camp—we've brought an old fellow as cook. Camping is not a new game to any of us. Here's my brother-in-law—he has done more droving on this route than I have."

Wally had helped to unload the baggage and bring it inside the paddock. Murty, once that job was over, had made a bee-line for the stock-yard to look over the horses. On a mound of rolled tents and blankets sat Norah and Tommy, watching Jim and his companions.

"That must be the somewhat-doubtful Mr. Gribble," remarked Norah. "He's casting looks of anguish towards us. I think we're a distinct shock to him."

"We're that to everyone," said Tommy serenely. "They're all gazing in our

direction as if we were something out of the Zoo. I begin to understand why Jim wasn't keen on our coming."

"Oh, they'll get used to us. Jim's evidently explaining our plan of campaign to Mr. Gribble—he's pointing at the waggonette. And what a waggonette!" said Norah, looking at the remains of what had once been a smart station vehicle in the days before motors. "Its cover looks as if it would let in any weather. I hope we shan't do much travelling in that contraption, Tommy."

"I hope not—but the front seat might be fairly comfortable. If Wally sees you and me and Lee Wing in that, he'll certainly want a snapshot. Now they're all marching over to inspect the horses. I do trust that Mr. Gribble hasn't been hoping to ride Mr. Parker's pair. If he has, he'll be disapproving of us more than ever."

"I'm hoping Jim will find a horse that's up to his weight," Norah said. "He's been rather anxious about that. It's rather awkward, you see; all the men have already picked their special horses for the trip, and that only leaves the oddments. And whether an oddment will carry Jim is a bit doubtful. Mr. Parker said they were all pretty good—but Jim's no light weight."

Jim was quietly sizing up the men with whom he was to travel. His cheery "'Morning boys!" as he came up to the yard had brought a pleasant enough response; the men came to the fence to meet him, and he chatted for a few minutes about the cattle and the details of each hand's duties. A mixed lot, he thought, glancing from one tanned face to another: a few you could trust, a few you'd want to know more about, a few you'd just as soon not have. But it was always that way with a gang, and it wasn't wise to make judgments in a hurry. Some of the drovers he and Wally greeted by name, men who had brought other droves to Billabong: and there was no doubt about the friendliness of their greetings in return. They would be men on whom he could rely.

"Well, we'll get going, boys," he said presently. "You all know your own horses; get them out, and Mr. Meadows and I can choose a couple. My wife and my sister are going with us—Parker has lent them his pair. I expect Murty has his eye on one already—trust him to get ahead of us!"

A grin went round: Murty had managed to make friends within a few minutes of reaching the yards. Several of the men looked relieved; the Boss had power to take any horse he wanted, and few riders cared to give up mounts to which they had become accustomed. Bridles were taken from the rails, and in a few moments the drovers had caught their horses and were leading them away. One man hung back until the others had gone. He came over to Jim.

"I've been riding that chestnut, Mr. Linton. But he's more up to your weight than any of the others, an' you're welcome to him if you like."

"That's jolly good of you," Jim said warmly. "I'll admit I've been feeling a

shade too heavy for this lot. Sure you don't mind?"

"Not a bit; I'm two stone lighter than you, I reckon. Not that I'd say the chestnut was really up to you, but he's the best of the bunch."

"What's your name?" asked Jim.

"Tucker."

"Danny Tucker? I've heard of *you* from Parker, Danny."

The man grinned.

"Parker told me a lot about *you*, Mr. Linton. I wouldn't have left the show if I'd known you were coming. An' Gribble wasn't keen on takin' me on again, either."

"That so? Well, I know you're one I can rely on, and I'm glad you came back. What horse are you taking now?"

"I'd like that brown fellow. The bay in the corner 'ud suit Mr. Meadows well: I've ridden him meself. They're all pretty good, you know." He hesitated. "Parker's two are tied up under the trees: I saw him in the hospital last night, an' he told me the ladies were goin' to ride 'em. So I just told Gribble he'd lent 'em to you; an' I gave 'em a bit of a groomin' while we were waitin'."

"The ladies would like to thank you for that themselves," said Jim, smiling. "Would you mind taking the horses over to them?—you'll find them near the gate, saddles and all. I'd be glad if you would see them fixed up."

"Sure I will." Tucker went off, and when Jim and Wally rode up presently, the girls were already mounted. Everywhere was activity. Cart and waggonette were loaded up, ready to start. Lee Wing was in his driving seat, his face stolid, but his keen, beady eyes taking stock of each man. The drovers were all in their saddles; dogs moved about restlessly, waiting for their work to begin. The drivers were given their orders; they moved off slowly, to get well ahead before the cattle were on the road.

"You two all right?" Jim asked.

"Quite. What shall we do, Jim?"

"You can help to get the cattle out. We'll count them as they go through the gate. Wait for me then: I've got to ride to the house and settle up with the owner, and you might as well come too."

Men were riding away slowly to get behind the cattle; Norah and Tommy followed. Quietly the bullocks began to move, stopping now and then to feed. A few had to be brought out of the shallows of the creek: once or twice a whip cracked, to urge on a bullock that tried to break back. On the road a horseman waited to turn them in the right direction as they came stringing through the gateway. Jim and Gribble on one side, Wally and Murty on the other, counted them, their eyes quick and watchful. All were out at last. The gate was shut, and Jim came back to the girls.

“Nice quiet start, and all of us agreed on the count, thank goodness. Now we’ll go and pay our debts. The house is across the creek—there’s a bridge at the far end of the paddock.”

They cantered across the empty space that half an hour before had seemed full of cattle. Jim eyed the girls’ horses keenly.

“You two are in luck. Parker certainly knows how to pick a horse.”

“They’re beauties,” said Norah. “What about yours, Jim?”

“Oh, he’s fair. Good enough for ordinary work, but if we had any trouble I should need something better. Give me anything before a light chestnut, in a tight place. Oh, well, I may never have to try him out.”

They crossed the creek and came in sight of a long low house on a rise. As they neared the stables, a man came out; a big, broad-shouldered old fellow, who turned when he saw the riders.

“Can you tell me if Mr. McLaren is in?” Jim asked.

“I’m McLaren. And you’re Linton, of course. I was hoping you would come in: I met your father at the Melbourne Show three years ago. You were riding a big black that year—got first prize with him, too, didn’t you? But I didn’t expect to see ladies. Not stock hands, are they?” he asked, smiling.

“Just that,” said Jim. Explanation and introductions were made, and the squatter insisted that it was time for morning tea. A black boy took their horses; they walked through a trim garden to the house.

“I came to pay my debts, but even more to thank you,” Jim told him. “First, for looking after our man, and secondly for taking in our cattle. Parker has told us how you looked after him.”

“Well, I did little enough. Poor beggar, he almost forgot the pain of his leg in worrying about the cattle. I was glad to be able to graze them, especially when I learned whose they were: I’d known a good deal about your father, even before I met him. Parker going on well?”

“Quite well, thanks: and very grateful to you. He’d have been in a bad way if they’d had to get him to hospital in that jolting old cart.”

“My utility was certainly better, but even so it wasn’t a joy-ride for him. He’s a plucky chap: it was hard luck for him to smash up. Hard luck for you, too: but a good thing you decided to come and take over. I don’t think much of that fellow Gribble. Here we are—we’ll have tea on the verandah. I’m an old bachelor, so you’ll have to excuse me while I tell my housekeeper.”

He was back in a moment, making sure that the girls had comfortable chairs.

“Might as well take it easy while you can. You won’t have much comfort on the roads, but I expect you’ll enjoy it. My mother often went overlanding with my father’s cattle in old days. Said she wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

“Mr. McLaren, you are very comforting,” Norah said. “Everyone else thinks we’re a little mad—even Jim!”

“Rubbish!” said the old man. “Why shouldn’t strong young women take a hand? Don’t take any notice of them.”

“They never do,” said Jim, laughing—“and they’ll be worse than ever after your encouragement. I can see I shouldn’t have brought them here.”

“I wish I had known they were coming, and I wouldn’t have let any of you stay at the hotel,” said their host. “Gribble told me he was expecting you, but he wasn’t sure when.” Tea appeared, and he waited on them himself, refusing any help from Norah.

“You say you don’t think much of Gribble, Mr. McLaren,” Jim remarked. “Any special reason?”

“He’s a shifty sort of fellow. I don’t know anything about him, but I’ve been to their camp a few times, and I sized him up. And I’m not generally wrong about a man. He may be quite all right under your eye, but I’m glad you didn’t trust the mob to him. Is that chestnut you’re riding the best they could do for you, Linton?”

“Yes, worse luck,” said Jim. “You see, I’m rather an out-size: it’s not too easy to fit me with a horse. As it was, one of the men very kindly gave up his claim to the chestnut.”

“I had a look over their horses; and I didn’t think much of that one,” said the old man. “He’s not what I’d care for myself if I were on your job.” He thought for a moment. “Look here—you and I must ride about the same weight, and I’ve a few good horses here. Let me lend you a reliable one; I’ve a big roan that will never make a mistake with you. He knows every trick cattle are up to. You’d have a very comfortable trip on my old Roany.”

“Oh, I couldn’t——,” began Jim protestingly.

“Why not? I’ve more horses than I need. Wouldn’t you or your father do as much for me if I struck Billabong on the wrong sort of horse for a heavy job?”

“But if he got hurt in any way——.”

“He might do that in his own paddock if a limb fell on him. Tell your husband to have sense, Mrs. Linton!”

Tommy said, “I wish he would, Mr. McLaren. I know the chestnut isn’t at all Jim’s type of horse.”

“Finished your tea? Then come and have a look at some of mine.”

He led them into a small paddock beyond the house. There were half a dozen horses there, big, upstanding and well-bred: the kind of horses that made Jim sigh enviously, for each might have been picked for him. Mr. McLaren gave a low whistle. A big roan, standing half-asleep under a gum-tree, looked up quickly, pricking his ears: then came slowly across to his master.

“See that?” The old man rubbed the horse’s neck. “He’ll come to my

whistle at any time, and I guess he'd come to yours after you'd been riding him a week, Linton. It's not every man I'd lend him to—but I had my eye on you when you were riding in the Show. You two would be pals. Give him to John Traill to bring back on his way home: Traill's a good man with a horse."

"*Well . . . !*" said Jim under his breath—and looked longingly at the roan. "I could wish you hadn't let me see him!"

"You can't resist him now!" said Tommy with a little chuckle. She was rubbing Roany's nose; the big horse muzzled her hand in a friendly way. "Norah—isn't he just built for Jim!"

Norah said, "Well, I know how Jim feels about borrowing a horse . . . but it's a wonderful offer, Jim."

"There's no moral support to be had from either of you!" said Jim. "And the more I look at him, the weaker I get. Well, Mr. McLaren, I don't see how I can refuse—I don't need to tell you I'll take extra care of him."

"Oh, I know he'll be in good hands." The old man looked delighted. "Come along, Roany, there's a job after your own heart ahead for you."

He gave his low whistle again as they turned. The big horse followed just behind him until they reached the stables. A halter was slipped on the chestnut's head, and Jim transferred his saddle and bridle to Roany.

"We'll meet in Melbourne some time, I hope, sir," he said, gripping McLaren's hand. "And if you could ever come as far as Billabong there would be a mighty big welcome waiting for you. I'm a bad hand at saying what I feel . . . but you and I know what this horse is going to mean to me."

"That's why I made you take him. Well, good-bye, and good luck to you all. Don't ever go past my gate if you come this way again."

They rode down the rise. Jim turned a severe eye on Tommy.

"You shameless woman! I never saw anything like the pleading eye you turned on that old chap!"

"No," agreed his wife serenely. "I meant it to be pleading. And I don't care a bit. I'd have done anything on earth to get you off that washy chestnut!"

## CHAPTER V

### FIRST CAMP

A FEW miles ahead they caught up with the slowly-moving cattle. The road was very wide, with trees and light scrub growing between the fences on either side and the unmetalled, dusty track that ran like a grey ribbon among them. It was easy driving, with no need to guard the cattle from straying. Some of the men rode ahead: the others brought up the rear, a few walking beside their horses. The spare horses followed quietly, stopping now and then to graze, but always catching up at a jog when they found themselves getting too far behind. The chestnut whinnied sharply to them. Jim took off the halter, and he trotted to join them.

Gribble, riding alone, looked round in surprise as Jim came up.

“What, you’ve got another horse!”

“Yes; I had a bit of luck in finding a friend. This fellow will carry me better.”

“I’ll say he will!” Gribble agreed. “You can’t beat a roan horse for steadiness and sense. I’ve seen McLaren on him after cattle—that horse could pretty well do the job on his own. He can jump, too. One of McLaren’s men told me he’d won lots of jumping prizes at shows.”

“Well, I don’t suppose I’ll be wanting to jump him on this trip. But you never know.”

They fell into talk about the cattle, Jim quietly taking stock of his companion. A man of more education than most drovers, he thought: a glib talker, with a pretty high idea of his own capabilities. Not the sort of man you’d care to ride with day after day. But luckily that wouldn’t be necessary: Gribble had his own friends, and while Jim was careful to treat him as second-in-command, he meant to make friends, so far as possible, with all the men. And there would always be their own little circle to fall back upon.

The bullocks were fresh and fit after their spell in the paddock: they made good progress. There was little to disturb them. Sometimes they shouldered each other aside as a car came through them slowly; sometimes a laden bullock-waggon plodded along the track, its driver walking beside with his long whip, keenly scanning the mob. A little wind blew from the west, carrying the dust across the paddocks. Towards mid-day the pace of the cattle quickened a little.

“Water ahead,” remarked Gribble. “I told the drivers to boil the billy at a creek half a mile further on.”

A turn in the road showed a bridge, already blocked by the bullocks. Some had ignored the bridge, and were knee-deep in the creek, with others crowding down the sloping banks—flattened by many mobs throughout years of droving. The dogs slipped through the fences to find clear drinking places where the bullocks could not go. Smoke from two fires drifted lazily upwards. The men in the lead had drunk their tea and were riding slowly on, to keep watch ahead, eating rough sandwiches as they went. The others gathered near the chuck-waggon, throwing themselves down on the grass, while the cook and his mate rapidly handed out food and mugs of steaming tea.

Lee Wing had made his fire at a little distance. Wally and Murty were not there when Jim rode up with the girls.

“Mas’ Wally him say not comin’,” said Lee Wing. “Him get tucker ’long chuck-waggon, all same makee fliends dlover-men. Murty him leckon always do that. Him say no good be in two camps.”

“Sensible man, Murty,” said Jim, passing round sandwiches.

“This is where I can see the chance of our being a nuisance,” Norah remarked. “The men won’t want us with them, and yet they won’t like feeling you boys keep away from them. It’s like having a drawing-room and a kitchen, instead of everyone being free and equal.”

“Oh, they’ve got sense,” said Jim. “They’d certainly feel hampered if we all fed together, but they’d think it very queer if we left you to feed alone, with Lee Wing waiting on you. Wally and I will let them see we like to join them pretty often. Just now they’re rather puzzled and stand-off, but they’ll get used to you in a day or two. You’ll show them you want to be friendly, and they’ll come to heel like lambs.”

“There are some I do not wish to come to my heel,” said Tommy. “One is Mr. Gribble, and another is a greasy little Italian who looks as if he belonged to a fried-fish shop.”

“Yes, he’s a queer little specimen, Jim,” remarked Norah. “He’s the last man one would expect to see with cattle.”

“Well, he may be all right—you can’t tell until you watch him at his job. I’d say, keep on as you’re going to-day, but to-morrow try riding with some of the men and yarn to them. You’ll soon find out which of ’em you care to ride with. I reckon there aren’t many who won’t enjoy a talk with a woman. But for pity’s sake don’t make favourites, or you may split the whole bunch!”

“I could easily make a favourite of Danny Tucker,” Norah said. “He saddled-up for us this morning as if he loved doing it.”

“Well, you’ve got him as an ally already, so you needn’t waste valuable time on him,” remarked Jim practically. “One of you might try that glum-faced chap who rides the only grey horse in the lot—Bill Fenton’s his name. I gathered from Gribble, that the only friend he’s got is his dog. Good dog, too,

with a bit of dingo in him—bluey-grey, with dark specks in his coat.”

“Would it be better to make friends with the dog first?” smiled Tommy.

“You’d better be very careful with that brute. I wouldn’t trust him a yard unless he really knew you. A dog of that kind is generally a one-man dog, no friend to anyone else. But Gribble says he’s a wonder after cattle: works silently, and knows just when to bite.”

“He doesn’t sound as if he’d care to be petted.”

“He would not. I don’t know what line you could take with Fenton, as he doesn’t make friends with anybody, either. But I’ve no doubt you two will get inspirations. You know,” said Jim, “I was dead against you girls coming, but now that you’re really here I’m keen to see it turn out a success. I don’t want you to be bored stiff.”

“We’ll never be that,” Tommy smiled at him.

“Well, I want the whole thing to go happily. I’ve never been in charge of a big outfit before, and I feel responsible all round. But you two are going to help, I believe. And now I’ve got to get things started. No need for you girls to hurry if you’d rather loaf here for half an hour. You can’t lose the mob!”

They sat on the grass, watching the start. Already the vehicles had gone ahead; the men were swinging into their saddles. Dogs came reluctantly from the creek, a few quiet words setting them at work. “Fetch ’em along, Fizzer!” “Get round ’em, Darkie!” with a jerk of the hand in the right direction—and the dogs trotted silently to get behind straggling bullocks, watching closely until the whole mob was moving forward. One beast suddenly found that he wanted to turn back for a last drink. Fenton’s blue dog, unbidden, slipped down the bank like a shadow, came between him and the water, and the bullock wheeled in his tracks and hurried after the others, convinced that he had made a mistake and didn’t want a drink at all.

Norah and Tommy had no intention of seeming to appear casual workers. They mounted as soon as the mob was fairly under way and caught up with the rear riders. Tommy found herself near Fenton, who edged his horse further away with an evident wish to escape from her. But a man on Norah’s right hand deliberately came within speaking distance.

“Nice day,” he said. “Bit of a change for you ladies, bein’ on the roads, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes. But a change is always interesting.”

“It’s a change for us, too. We’ll have to mind our manners now.”

“I hope you won’t worry about that,” she said with a smile. “It would make us feel most uncomfortable if we thought we interfered with you. Our main idea is not to get in your way.”

“An’ most of us wonderin’ how we could keep out of yours!”

“You won’t have to try,” she said. “We hope to be a little use, if we can,

and not bother anyone. If we find ourselves a nuisance, well, we shall just drop out.”

“That’s a new way of lookin’ at it,” said the drover. “We were all a bit taken aback when we saw you, I’ll admit. Sort of a shock, like.”

“I don’t wonder,” Norah said calmly. “It can’t be very easy to settle down under a new boss, once a trip has started. But when that boss brings along a whole outfit, including women—well, I wonder you didn’t all take to the bush!”

The drover gave a deep chuckle.

“Some of us was near it, includin’ meself. But I feel less like it now. You understand things pretty well, Mrs. Meadows, don’t you? I reckon it’ll go all right—if it isn’t too much for you.”

“Then we shall drop out, and go home to my small boy. But I don’t think that will happen.”

“You got a small boy?” His face lit up. “I got two at home. Six and five, they are; bit of tricks, too. How old’s yours?”

Thereafter, there was no need to feel strangers. Within half an hour Norah knew all that was to be known about Dick Hallam’s boys, and he had learned a good deal concerning Davie. They found that they agreed on methods of training the young, and that horses and dogs must enter largely into it. By the time Norah went off to rejoin Tommy, Hallam was firmly convinced that she, at least, was fitted to be a member of any expedition.

They reached the site of the night camp an hour before dusk. Lee Wing had picked a good spot in a grassy hollow near a creek, a hundred yards from the main camp. He had unpacked the baggage and cut tent-poles, and pegs; a pile of firewood lay beside the fireplace he was building with flat stones. They off-saddled and rubbed down the horses. Jim was busy with Gribble, setting night guards and making sure that the bullocks settled down quietly: but Wally and Murty were soon at hand to put up the tents and the stretchers of poles and sacking.

“’Tis a routine ye’ll want to be learnin’,” Murty told the girls as they made the beds. “There’s little time to be wasted in the mornin’s; let ye have wan place for every single thing, an’ kape that thing in it. Then when ye strike camp there’ll be no runnin’ round lookin’ for this an’ that. An’ let each of ye have her own jooties to do, an’ do them the same way each time. Then the whole thing’ll run like a machine, wit’ no over-lappin’. We have lazy camps when we go campin’ on Billabong; an’ annybody takes on anny job that’s goin’. But drovin’s like a regiment on service, iverywan fittin’ in to his own bit of the plan.”

“Yes, Murty,” said the girls meekly, in chorus.

“But don’t let me see either of ye liftin’ a thing that’s too heavy for ye,”

said he, sternly. "Me own bit of wurrk at the big camp is aisy done; I'll be over to lend a hand here at whatever's goin'. An' I'll bring the horses—though I'm thinkin' Danny Tucker an' Dick Hallam may be batin' me to them."

"Yes, Murty," said Tommy. "And would you mind telling us if you're leaving us any duties at all?"

"Yerra, none that I can spare ye!" he said, smiling down at her. "But I niver knew ye not find plinty f'r y'rsilf, Miss Tommy."

"You'll come and have a yarn by our fire some evenings, Murty?" asked Norah.

"I will so. But not for a few nights; an' I'll take all me meals over with the others. 'Tis better that way, Miss Norah; I wouldn't have that lot thinkin' me privileged. We're newcomers to them, an' they're sizin' us up. But I'll have me eye on ye all the time!"

Lee Wing looked up from roasting potatoes in the ashes of a second little fire.

"Murty—s'pose you catchem Mas' Jim, tellee him tucker welly near cook."

"Is it me, to be tellin' the Boss that? Sure he'll come whin he can, these times—an' there'll be times whin he'll want his tucker between the two halves of a shplit second! 'Tis y'rsilf will have to be leppin' then, Lee Wing."

"Can do," said Lee Wing, stolidly.

But Jim came in early that evening, and there seemed no cares on his mind. The cattle had settled down quietly: the men were in good spirits at being on the roads again.

"And that roan of old McLaren's is as good a horse as ever I put a leg over," he said happily. "Gosh, that was luck!"

They ate their supper in the open; chops, grilled over the coals, potatoes, and relays of flapjacks made as only Lee Wing could make them. Afterwards it grew cold enough for overcoats to be brought out: they sat talking round the fire, hearing the men's voices from the other camp. One of the drovers brought out a banjo and played it softly: he seemed to know only two or three tunes, but the drovers made him play them over and over. The thin, reedy notes drifted across the dusk: presently the men were singing. Before long shadowy forms moved across the dull glow of the fire as they went to their tents.

"Time to turn in, I think," said Jim, yawning.

Norah lay awake for an hour. This was like no other camp in which she had slept. There was the same feeling of adventure in being almost in the open, seeing the starlit sky from where she lay; the same sounds she had often known, creaking of branches, flapping of strips of bark against the trunk of a gum-tree, the call of night-birds, and the steady hooting of a mopoke. But in this camp were other sounds; movements of many cattle, slow and gentle;

sometimes a heavy snort as a sleeping beast woke, or a quiet “moo-oo-oo.” Now and then a dog yapped suddenly. The night guards were whistling softly to keep themselves awake, whistling the tunes played by the man with the banjo. Good sounds, Norah thought, hoping that every night would be as peaceful. She drifted into sleep.

## CHAPTER VI

ROB

IT WAS Sunday afternoon, and most of the camp was asleep. To-day's journey had been a short one; there was a long stretch ahead to the next water, and Jim had decided to rest the cattle after the noonday halt. The feed was better than usual here. The bullocks grazed contentedly, with only a few men on duty to make sure they did not stray too far.

Jim and Wally had turned into their bunks after eating, advising the girls to do the same. But Norah and Tommy declared themselves not tired.

"Why should we be?" asked Tommy. "This droving business is easy—for pampered women without night work. Norah and I feel like exploring."

"Well, don't get bushed," said Jim, yawning. "We were on duty last night, so we've earned a sleep." He disappeared within his tent.

The girls took the line of the creek that ran eastward. Some of the men had seized the opportunity to wash clothes; they looked up from splashing in the shallows and called cheerful greetings to Tommy and Norah. Only Fenton, after one quick glance, kept his eyes fixed on the shirt he was scrubbing.

"Nothing companionable about Fenton," said Tommy. "He even washes as far as he can get from the other men. As for us, he just can't bear looking our way."

Norah said, "I've given him up as a bad job. Three times I've tried to get him to talk, but it's no use: he gives one or two unhappy grunts and fades away quietly. He's really very like that dog of his in the way he moves when he walks."

"And just about as friendly. Never mind; the others are getting used to us. I think they just count us in as hands now. You, certainly, Norah, because you were quicker than any of them after that bullock that broke away yesterday."

"That was thanks to Lancer—he noticed the bullock a second before I did. And that horse knew, I'm certain, that no dog happened to be on that side just then: he wouldn't have bothered himself if a dog had been there. I don't wonder Parker said his two horses knew their business."

"Well, we have had four days on the road now," said Tommy. "And I don't feel like knocking up, and, of course, you don't, Norah. But nobody could say we earn our tucker. We ride along quietly all day, and we do little jobs in camp. But they could get on just as well without us."

"I said that to Wally last night. He said, 'Yes, and you could say as much for a lot of the others: but that's because it has all been smooth going. If we

had any trouble we should need every hand we have.’ Wally is rather comforting sometimes.”

“Oh, well, I like it, at all events,” said Tommy. “There’s something in being on work one has never done before—even if there’s no real work in it! I like talking to the men; and I’m getting so many new points of view. And I feel I’m qualifying as a real Aussie.”

“You began to do that almost as soon as you struck Australia,” Norah told her. She stopped as they came round a bend into an open patch of ground. “Look!”

Across the grass was a clump of low bush; and under it, his face hidden in his arms, lay a boy. He was so still that for a moment the girls were afraid something was wrong. Then he wriggled impatiently and sat up, staring towards the creek without catching sight of them.

“It’s young Rob,” whispered Tommy.

Young Rob looked like a boy who had nothing to hope for. His face was set in grim lines; there were marks of tears on his cheeks, and his whole body slumped heavily. Something in the miserable face caught at Norah’s heart. She went forward, speaking quietly.

“Well, Rob—you’ve got further than we have.”

The boy was on his feet in a flash, as if prepared to run. It was clear that to be intruded on was the last thing he wanted just then. His eyes, startlingly blue in his dirty, tear-stained face, glared at them. Then Norah was beside him, her hand on his shoulder. It was a very thin shoulder under his blue shirt.

“Are you in trouble, Rob?”

“Aw, no,” he muttered. “I’m just off back to the camp.”

“There’s no need to hurry,” she said. “Everyone’s asleep there. Sit down with us for a little.”

“No, thanks—I’d better be going.”

“We want you here,” she said. The hand on his shoulder was firm; he was afraid to disobey. Somehow he found himself sitting on the grass near them. He looked hard at his boots, his breath coming unevenly.

“We have been wanting to get to know you,” Norah told him. “But you’re a very hard person to catch—we hardly see you except when you’re driving in the chuck-waggon.”

“Well, I’ve got jobs all the rest of the time,” he muttered defensively.

“Yes—you’re pretty useful, we think. But we want to know you, all the same: and this is a lazy afternoon for everybody. How are you liking the trip, Rob?”

“Aw, it’s right enough,” he mumbled.

“I thought you might find it a bit dull, driving all the time. Can you ride?”

“’M. But Uncle Syd said I’d got to go with him.” The words were scarcely

audible.

“Well, that might be arranged, I think,” said Norah, watching his face. “I could get Mr. Linton to talk to Uncle Syd.”

She was astonished at the sudden eagerness with which he looked up at her.

“I . . . I . . .,” he hesitated. His head went down on his arms; he broke into low sobbing. Norah said nothing for a few moments. Then she patted the heaving back.

“I think something is bothering you pretty badly, Rob,” she said. “Suppose you let us help: Mr. Parker asked us to have an eye to you. And Mr. Linton can smooth out most things. Tell us what it is.”

Little by little the broken words came, choked and incoherent. Nobody could do anything for him . . . there was only Uncle Syd, and Uncle Syd didn’t want him. Only when Mother died he had to take him.

“When was that, Rob?” asked Tommy.

“Last month.” The voice failed again: it was a minute before he could speak. Uncle Syd said he was a darned nuisance, but he’d have to tag along with him until he could earn his own living. “I could do that now,” said Rob, with sudden fierceness, “if anyone ’ud give me a job. I’m fourteen.”

“But isn’t this the beginning of earning your own living?” Tommy suggested. “You might get a real job afterwards.”

“Uncle Syd says no one ’ud take me: I’m too small. An’ I’d rather be dead straight away than go on bein’ with him. It . . . it’s just beastly, drivin’ all day with him an’ the cook. I hate the way they talk. They never speak to me, of course, an’ I don’t want ’em to. They just forget I’m there. But I hate havin’ to listen to them. And I hate them, too . . . both of ’em.”

“It’s no use hating people, sonny,” said Norah. “Hate only hits back at you and makes you feel worse; and you don’t get anywhere. It’s better to start making plans to get away from what you hate.”

“But what chance have I ever got now?” he asked miserably. “I’ll be tied up to Uncle Syd for simply ages. An’ . . . an’ . . . I don’t want the kind of job he’d get for me when I do start work.” He knitted his brows as if the problems of life were beyond him. “It’s all so *different* now. Mum an’ I had lots of plans. She took in sewing after Dad died . . . when I was little, that was. She was keen on me getting on well at school . . . wanted me to go on to High School. We used to plan the sort of house we’d get when I earned a lot of money. Mum never had any time for Uncle Syd. He wasn’t her sort.”

He was silent for a moment.

“I keep thinking . . . in the cart with those two . . . how she’d hate it. Hate me to be there, I mean. She’d never mind how hard I had to work; an’ neither would I. But I’m not working. I’m not doing a single thing she’d want me to

... like I promised her I would,” he ended, almost in a whisper.

“But you’re remembering that promise—and I expect she knows you are,” said Norah. “I think we’ll have to arrange things differently, Rob. Do you think Uncle Syd would mind if we made a change? Mr. Linton might let you ride—part of the time, at all events.”

“Oh, gosh, if he would!” uttered the boy.

“And you could be in the waggonette with Lee Wing sometimes. We could say that he would like an offside. And all boys like Lee Wing.”

“Uncle Syd ’ud be glad to get rid of me,” Rob said. “He’s told me so, often enough. Would your old Chow mind?”

“Not a bit. But I’d rather you said ‘Chinese’—or just ‘Lee Wing.’ We have a great respect for our Lee Wing, you see. Some day I’ll tell you some stories about him, and you won’t wonder that we’re fond of him. And now, do you feel a bit better about things in general?” She smiled at him.

“My word, I do!” he said.

“I think,” said Tommy, “that you had better run down and wash your face in the creek—just to wash the last of the cob-webs away. Then we’ll walk on for a bit, and you must come, too.”

He gave her a grateful look and raced away, returning presently with his face glowing. They followed the creek until the ground became too rocky for walking: then turned up a hill and worked round towards the camp. As they skirted the edge of a deep gully Rob suddenly stopped.

“Did you hear something, Mrs. Linton?”

They halted, listening. A sound came presently from below them; a low whine.

“That’s a dog,” said Norah. “I wonder what he’s got.” She whistled softly; again the whine came, with something of urgency in it.

“He’s in trouble,” Rob said. “I’m going to see.” He plunged down the side of the gully, the girls close behind him.

A thin stream trickled through rocks and rank grass in the bottom of the gully. They parted the low-growing bushes, searching here and there. No sound came to guide them until Norah stood still and whistled again. Then they heard a whine that was half an angry snarl, a little to her right.

She parted the bushes carefully. There, stretched at her feet crouched Fenton’s little blue dog. One hind foot was caught in a battered trap: the grass was clawed away in front of him by his efforts to pull himself clear. As they looked, he twisted himself round, making savage efforts to bite at the thing that held him prisoner. That was useless; his head came round again, and he snarled at them viciously.

“The poor little wretch!” uttered Rob, stooping towards him. Norah pulled him back.

“Careful, Rob. You don’t want to get bitten—and he’s half mad with pain and thirst. Get some water in your hat—quickly.”

She crouched down, just out of the dog’s reach, speaking to him gently.

“Poor old chap . . . poor old Spotty. Lie down now . . . quiet, Spotty.” She put the back of her hand out to him, not offering to touch him. He gave a quick snap: the hand did not move. “Nobody’s going to hurt you, Spotty: keep down, now.”

The low voice seemed to soothe him. His nose pushed forward, almost touching the steady hand.

“Take care, Norah,” breathed Tommy.

“He’s all right.” She let him sniff at her hand. Rob came running back, and she called to him gently.

“Come where he can see you, Rob—don’t get behind him. Put that where I can reach it.” The dripping felt hat, half-full of water, came beside her hand; she pulled it under the dog’s nose. His hot tongue lapped it greedily. As he drank, she edged a little forward and began to rub behind his ears. For a moment he ceased drinking, jerking his head with a half-snarl. But the rubbing went on, and again he began to lap. His tense body relaxed a little.

“Good, isn’t it Spotty, for a poor little dog? There, now, we’ll have you out of that beastly trap in a moment. You lie still, Spotty.” Both hands were on his head now, firm and soothing; the quiet voice went on in the same gentle tone. “You two take a good look at the trap: see how it’s caught him, and try to open it without putting any more strain on his leg. Wedge a bit of stick into it if you can, in case it springs back on him—and look out for your own fingers. Yes, we’re helping you, Spotty . . . quiet, now, boy.”

“Mrs. Meadows, watch out for yourself!” whispered Rob anxiously. “We’re bound to hurt him.”

“Yes, but he knows it. He’s got sense, haven’t you, Spotty? I’ll have hold of his head. Quiet, boy . . . you’re all right, little dog. Don’t hurry, Tommy, or you’ll pull at him.”

She wished she could see what they were doing; a rusty rabbit-trap was a new thing to Tommy, and she knew it would be hard to force its cruel jaws apart from the torn leg. But Rob had set traps before; she heard his voice, telling Tommy where to grip it.

“Mind your hand, for goodness sake, Mrs. Linton; I’ve got this side. Hold him, Mrs. Meadows . . . steady now, Spotty.” There was a sick moment when the blue body stiffened, and a sharp whine came; then a quick “That’s got it!” from Rob, and the leg was free. The dog tried to struggle to his feet, but he went down again helplessly with a yelp of pain.

“Steady, lad: no walking for you just yet. More water, Rob. You didn’t hurt your hands, Tommy?”

“Not a scratch,” said Tommy. She was down beside the dog, stroking him. “He knows quite well we’re friends, Norah—look, he’s licking your hand!”

The water came: Norah soaked her handkerchief in it and bathed the leg. Spotty whined softly, but lay still as she handled it.

“Not broken, thank goodness,” she said.

“That was his luck,” said Rob. “Look, there was a dead stick caught in it when it sprang—it took the worst of the bite, or his leg would have been a goner. Bad enough as it is, but you might have been worse, Spotty, old chap.” He fished in his pocket and produced a broken biscuit, which the dog accepted politely, but dropped without interest.

“I’d like to get running water on that leg,” Norah said. “Come along, Spotty; you’ve got to put up with being carried.” She put her hands under him and lifted him gently: he was clearly astonished, but made no effort to struggle. Rob ran ahead to find a place where the water ran with more force; and Norah knelt on a stone, getting rather wet in the process, holding the injured leg in the stream. Spotty winced and wriggled a little; but by this time he seemed convinced that everything she did was for the best.

“There!” she said presently. “That ought to have washed most of the rust out of it. The trapper who left that thing to catch a decent dog deserves to have got caught in it himself.”

“Too right, he does!” agreed Rob, helping to put a fresh wet bandage on the leg. “I say, Mrs. Meadows, he added anxiously, “you can’t carry him all the way home.”

“Well, I think it will be easier for him to be carried by one person,” she said. “If he gets too heavy for me, we’ll try it together. But there’s really not much of Spotty: he’s all skin and bone. Come along, old dog.”

She eased him into a comfortable position. They set out for the camp, going slowly over the rough ground. It was hard walking, burdened by the inert weight in her arms, feeling that every stumble meant pain to the little dog. Tommy watched her anxiously—and presently spoke to Rob.

“See, Rob—run ahead and find Mr. Fenton, or any of the men. We’re a long way from camp still.”

“Too right!” said Rob, and was off like a shot. The scrub hid him in a moment. He ran fast, taking his bearings to find the shortest line, jumping logs and stones as they came in his way. A few minutes later he heard a whistle ahead of him. There was no one to be seen: but in a moment the whistle came again.

“That’s Fenton’s whistle,” muttered the boy. “I’ll bet he’s looking for Spotty.” He ran on in the direction of the sound, hearing it again and again. Presently he caught sight of Fenton on a ridge above him, walking slowly, glancing from side to side. Rob coo-eed; the man turned sharply, saw him, and

came plunging down the hill.

“Seen my dog?” he shouted.

“Yes—he’s hurt. Got caught in a trap.”

“Where? Is he bad?” Fenton’s face was sharp with anxiety.

“No—not too bad. Mrs. Meadows got him out.”

“*What?*” The tone was unbelieving.

“Yes, she did, then. ’Least, she held him while Mrs. Linton an’ I got the trap open.”

“She . . . *held* him? Didn’t he bite her?”

“Not he. She understands dogs. An’ she washed his leg in running water an’ tied it up.”

“Is his laig broke?”

“She says not. Anyhow, she’s carrying him home now, an’ I reckon you’d better hurry. He’s too heavy for her, if you ask me.”

Thus it was that Norah, resting for a few moments on a log, saw help arriving more quickly than she had hoped. Fenton came running, Rob panting some distance in the rear. Spotty gave a short bark as he saw him and tried to wriggle from her knee.

For a moment Fenton took no notice of the two girls. He went down on one knee and unwrapped the blood-stained bandage, examining the wound carefully, feeling up and down the dog’s leg: while Spotty twisted in an effort to get free to reach him.

“Quiet, Spot.” He replaced the bandage and stood up.

“That’s nice an’ clean. Trap very rusty?”

“Very,” said Norah. “But a bit of stick was caught in it, so it didn’t close altogether. That saved him.”

“I’d like to get me hands on the man that set it—an’ then left it,” Fenton said savagely. “Give him here.” He gathered up his dog; Spotty nestled contentedly against him. The drover looked down at the two on the log.

“Well, I got no manners,” he said awkwardly. “Fact is, I just had to get me hands on that laig. Spotty’s the only cobber I’ve got.”

“I don’t think you could have a better cobber,” said Norah, gravely.

“No, I couldn’t. But I might ’a remembered to say thank you. Look here, I don’t believe many men would ’a cared to handle that dawg when he was caught in a trap. An’ you two done it—an’ the kid here.”

“We couldn’t have left him,” said Norah, smiling. “And Spotty was perfectly sensible. I’m sure he’d have preferred you—but he put up with us.”

“‘Us’ is wrong,” put in Tommy firmly. “Mrs. Meadows did all his handling, Mr. Fenton. Rob and I worked under orders—well in the rear.”

Fenton’s grim face relaxed into something like a smile.

“Well, anyone who helps to get a dog like Spotty out of a trap risks gettin’

bitten,” he said. “I . . . I’m darned thankful none of you did. An’ I hope I get the chance of doin’ a good turn to any of you.” He glanced at Norah’s jodhpurs and looked distressed. “I say—you’re all wet. You must ’a been right in the water with ’im.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” she said.

“Well, Spotty had luck to be picked up by someone who knew what to do. That runnin’ water may save him a heap of trouble.”

“That was only first-aid, though.” Norah stood up. “I think we ought to take him home at once—my brother has some antiseptic ointment that works magic on a wound. Come along, and we’ll dress the leg properly.”

Jim and Wally, coming out of their tent some time later, saw something that caused them to utter low whistles of astonishment. Under a tree not far-off sat the two girls, deep in conversation with Fenton. They were all having tea together: Rob was passing their guest a large slice of Lee Wing’s “brownie” cake. Near them, his head close to Norah’s knee, lay the dog about whom Jim had advised her to be careful. His leg was scientifically bandaged. Norah’s hand went out to him as she talked, and Spotty licked it affectionately.

“Would you mind pinching me, Wal?” said the astonished Jim. “I’m dead certain I’m still asleep and dreaming!”

## CHAPTER VII

### ON THE ROAD

TO young Rob Flynn life had become suddenly changed. No longer was he a silent prisoner in the chuck-waggon, driving slowly along day after day, listening against his will while the two men he still hated talked of unsavoury things—most of which seemed intimately connected with beer. No longer was he utterly lonely and homesick.

In his first weeks on the road he had almost forgotten the sound of his own voice. Except for Parker, nobody had spoken to him, apart from giving him orders—quickly rapped-out commands to do odd jobs. It was not altogether unkindness. The men were in the saddle nearly all day, tired at night; there was no reason why they should concern themselves with a boy who was shy and silent, mainly intent on keeping out of everyone's way. Anyhow, he was Syd Flynn's boy; and nobody cared much about Syd Flynn and his business.

Rob had never before known loneliness. Always there had been the mother who had tried to make him a man, given him responsibilities, talked to him as if he were a man. The memory of those talks was never to leave him. Long evenings after his lessons were finished, while her hands were busy at her ceaseless sewing: long, happy Saturdays out in the bush, where his mother seemed almost as young as himself. "Mum" was a great reader: she would talk to him of the things she read, trying to widen his mind beyond the limits of the little township where they lived. She made everything so interesting that no boy could help listening and remembering. And there was laughter, too. Things were hard enough with them at times; but "Mum" had always made a joke of them. Even when she was dead, as he had looked at her it seemed to him that at any moment the still lips might break into a smile.

And then, after those weeks of bewilderment and misery, Uncle Syd, rough, unfriendly, coarse in word and thought. Rob had seen him only twice before. He knew Uncle Syd had never been like the father he hardly remembered: that he had run away from home as a boy, scarcely ever seeing his own people. Twice he had been to their home; Rob's mother had been very glad when he went away. With all his heart Rob had wished that his uncle had not turned up unexpectedly just after "Mum" died. People had talked of sending him to a Boys' Home. He had dreaded that: but he knew it would have been better than belonging to Uncle Syd. At least they would have taught him something worth while . . . given him the chance of such work as his mother would have wanted him to do.

And now the nightmare of belonging to Uncle Syd was over, at least for the present. Mr. Linton, who seemed to Rob rather like a friendly Emperor, had put out a large hand and plucked him out of it. That, Rob knew, was due to the two girls who had found him in the scrub; but he didn't think anyone but Mr. Linton could have done it so thoroughly.

Jim had not hesitated when Norah and Tommy appealed to him.

"I haven't been easy about the boy myself," he said. "That precious pair in the chuck-waggon are no companions for a youngster. And he seemed to be everybody's dog in the evenings, and some of his jobs were too heavy for him. There has been some knocking about, too—I've seen Flynn hit him more than once."

"He didn't say a word about that," Tommy said. "And he never complained of work. It was just loneliness—and a sort of horror at the life he was living."

"I'd have a pretty definite sort of horror myself if I had to drive day after day with his uncle and the cook," said Jim. "But I'm glad he didn't make a song about anything else—shows he has grit. Well, don't worry, girls; I'll fix it."

Jim talked to Lee Wing before he "fixed it," and found him anxious to help. Lee Wing had seen more than he had talked about: and there was a warm corner in his heart for all boys.

"Them two welly no-good fellows," he said. "Welly lazy; makee boy do thlee parts their work evely day when we campee. Cuttee wood, makee fi-ah, cally water, muchee too heavy young Lob, Mas' Jim. Him good boy, always welly civil to me. Them two swear at him mos' times, kick him too much. I see plenty bluisen on Lob one time I catch him bathe in cleek."

"I'd like to put bruises on that pair!" growled Jim.

"Do 'em plenty of good. Say you makee him offsider for me? Me no want offsider," said Lee Wing, with a grin, "but no mattah."

"You'd have him in the waggonette with you?"

"To li' I would. Tlavel with me, campee with me. Him b'long our lot then, an' Missee No-lah and Missee Tom-mee have eyes on him. Welly good luck for Lob if they do."

It was certainly good luck for Rob. Flynn had made no objections, merely growling that he'd be glad to get rid of the dashed kid. The cook had seemed less pleased, doubtless thinking of extra work thrown on his shoulders; but Jim had not consulted the cook. Rob found himself transferred to the waggonette, allowed to drive the two old horses when he chose, given a tiny tent of his own: no longer to dread nights in the tent he had shared with Uncle Syd.

Rob had never known a Chinese. There had been one in his township, an old market-gardener; the boys at the school used to speak of him as "old

Chow” or “old Chink,” and some of the rougher ones would call out “Ching-Chong-Chinaman!” as he drove by in his cart. If there had been any other way of escape from the chuck-waggon Rob would have preferred not to travel with Lee Wing—though he remembered several times when he had been kind to him. He couldn’t imagine talking to a queer old foreigner whose English was so peculiar that he couldn’t even pronounce the letter “R” in his name.

It surprised him to find how companionable Lee Wing could be: that even to a boy of his age he was unfailingly gentle and courteous. That quiet, gentle manner was very restful after the rough loud voices of his former travelling mates. But under it was humour and shrewdness, and a curious understanding of how a boy felt about things. Rob soon grew used to his queer English, and he learned to like the thick sing-song voice. Sometimes a quaint pronunciation made him smile. Lee Wing was quick to notice it, and not at all offended.

“That all li’—you laugh at me here, but if ever you go to my countly they laugh at you, allee same. Welly hard talkee there for you. I laugh at you now if you call me Chinaman.”

“Why, Lee Wing?”

“Not makee sense. Why you not call Mas’ Jim Austlalia-man? You say England-man, Germany-man, Aflica-man? Eh?”

“No, of course I don’t,” said Rob slowly, light dawning on him.

“Well, no more sense in say China-man. Welly silly, eh? More better say Chinese. Always much more better tly to understand other-countly peoples, not turn up nose at them. That way wars come.”

“Oh, steady on, Lee Wing! Wars just because people turn up their noses?”

“That jus’ way of speakee. But you think, Lob: if all peoples tly hard to understand other-countly peoples, they get fliendly, help each other—not glab and cheat an’ tellee lies. Then they not want to makee fightee. Whaffo’? Can do plenty better than if have war.”

Rob thought it over.

“Yes, I reckon that’s sense,” he admitted. “Mum always said wars were just silly.”

“Too li’, they are. Silly waste. You think whole lot about that, Lob. Then some day p’laps you be Gov’mant man, fightee hard to stop wars.”

Rob hooted at that.

“Me a Government man! I’ve got a hope!”

“Never can tellee,” said Lee Wing. “Evely Gov’mant man a small boy once. But small boys that begin thinkee much welly often glow into Gov’mant men. ’Cause they use blains. More you thinkee, more blains get bigger. You lember that, Lob.”

Rob “lemembered” it at night, lying in his little tent. It was queer, he thought: there was I, turning up my nose a bit because I had to travel with an

old Chow, and I thought I was better than he was because I was white. And that old chap gave me the only real thing anyone's given me to think about since Mum died. I've travelled with two white men for weeks, and all they gave me to remember were horrors. Mum always said she liked being with people who didn't only talk about things that happened, but about ideas. He grinned to himself in the darkness—it certainly was a queer idea that he could ever be a "Gov'-ment man." But he went to sleep believing that his mother would have liked old Lee Wing—and knowing that he was looking forward to driving with him again next day.

Lee Wing didn't always talk about ideas. He told him stories of China; of Chinese boys and girls, and of brigands and pirates who afflicted good Chinese, but always came off worst in the end. He told him much about a place called Billabong, where his new friends lived: Rob gathered that, except for his own far-off country, Billabong was the only place in the world that mattered to Lee Wing. Stories came of Norah and Jim and Wally when they were children—sometimes Rob felt that, for all they were so big now, to this old man they were children still. Billabong became a very real place to him as he listened.

"My word, I'd like to go there!" he said once.

Lee Wing looked down at him, smiling.

"But that jus' where you going now, Lob."

"What do you mean?"

"Whaffo' you think Mas' Jim an' the others come? All this mob for Billabong: they come for take 'em there. You not use your blains, Lob."

"I . . . I never thought about it. I just knew we were going to Victoria somewhere. Then I'll really see this Billabong place!"

"Too li' you will."

"Gosh!" he breathed. "That's something to look forward to!" Then his face fell. "Only I suppose Uncle Syd'll take me away as soon as the job's over."

"I leckon you better not wully your head about that yet," Lee Wing advised. "Never can tellee what come. Job not over yet; not by long way."

Rob found that there was a new pleasure in being in the lead of the cattle. Up to now he had travelled in the back of the chuck-waggon, finding what space he could among the rolled-up swags of the drovers: not a cheerful place, but better than being on the seat in front between Uncle Syd and the cook. From there he had always looked backward, seeing the crawling mob a long way behind, half-hidden by dust, or blocked-out altogether by trees. There had been nothing to do, nothing to read: only long hours to think unhappy thoughts, trying to puzzle out what he could do in the future.

Now he never looked backward, for if he did he saw the chuck-waggon; a good way behind the waggonette, but something he did not wish even to glance at. Life had become forward-looking again, with Lee Wing. There was

interest in seeing the country open out, noting where the bullocks might be able to get a drink, or where better feed might tempt them to linger. Lee Wing had always his orders as to the time for camping, but now and then a drover might come cantering to overtake them with a message from Jim to make the halt earlier. That, in a treeless stretch, might mean a quick look-round for firewood for a mid-day camp; the horses pulled in to a slow walk, Rob jumping out to pick up every stick he could find, throwing them into the back of the waggonette and running off to pick up more. At these times there was grim delight in glancing back to see Uncle Syd out on the same job, and in hoping he hadn't left him much to pick up near the track. But when he said as much to Lee Wing, the old man shook his head.

"That no-good, Lob. Fi-ah for big camp more wanted than fi-ah for l'il camp. If you an' me keep dlovers waitin' for tea, we catchee touble. No can think about people; only think about what's best thing for cattle. You all-same cattle-man now, plan out what Mas' Jim want, not what Lob want. Savvy?"

Rob thought it over, and began to understand. Nothing mattered but the care of the bullocks when you went droving: so nothing must delay the feeding of the drovers. If you let private feelings interfere, you were letting down your job. That meant failing Jim Linton, who had pulled you out of a tight place: a rather horrifying idea. After he realised this, Rob used to hunt just as briskly for firewood; but if he found at the halt that the cook was short of it he would hand over his stock to him meekly, and trust to luck for finding more.

They had another passenger in the waggonette: the dog Spotty, who lay at their feet on a bed of sacks, his bandaged leg well padded against jolting. Fenton had thankfully accepted Lee Wing's offer to take him.

"I was hatin' the notion of puttin' him in the waggon," he said. "Them two are scared of him, an' they'd never do a hand's turn for the little dawg, even if they weren't scared. Spotty's taken to young Rob, an' I know you'll be good to him. Thanks a lot, Lee Wing."

That was a long speech for Fenton, who never spoke unless he had to. Norah and Tommy found him almost as silent as ever. But he showed his gratitude to them in a dozen little ways. Their horses were brought in and groomed and saddled daily before even Murty could get to them; Murty, observing this, decided it was good for Fenton, and kept out of the way. When camp had to be made in rain, it was the silent man who ran to help Lee Wing to have a tent ready for the girls when they rode in. If the drove camped near a good creek Fenton would disappear after supper—which meant that Lee Wing might find a little pile of blackfish ready to be cooked for breakfast. Fenton never waited to be thanked for anything. He worked as his dog worked, silently and effectively.

Spotty's leg was healing well. Norah supplied fresh dressings daily; each

evening Fenton brought him to the little camp and all the heads bent over the patient as the wound was unwrapped and treated. Spotty accepted them all as friends now; but to Norah he gave an especial degree of friendliness. She was careful not to pet him much, well aware that a drover likes his dog to be a "one-man dog" always. Fenton watched them one evening as Spotty muzzled her hand.

"I reckon that dawg 'ud do as much for you as he would for me," he said.

"Oh—while he's an invalid, perhaps," she smiled. "But I'll never give him an order when he is well, Mr. Fenton."

He gave her a quick look.

"That's sound, as a rule, with someone else's dawg. But if ever you need him to do a job when he's on the road again . . . well, you just order him. An' there's no one else in the show I'd say that to. I've got my own special whistle for Spotty, like Mr. Linton has for that roan horse of his. It's a good thing to have, if you want to call a dawg to you when he's out of sight. Spotty 'ud drop anything he was doin' an' come to me like smoke, any time he heard it. He knows it's a hurry call. Like this——." He whistled sharply: three distinct notes, rising higher each time. "Nearest thing to a S O S I could teach him."

Spotty pricked his ears and gave an excited bark, wondering why his master should send out his S O S when he knew his dog had only three legs in working order.

"You lay down ol' man," Fenton said. "Well, that's his signal, Mrs. Meadows, an' if ever you happen to need a bit of help with the cattle, you use it."

"I'll remember that, even if I don't take advantage of it," Norah said. "I might be very glad of it some day." She did not dream how glad she was yet to be that Spotty was not altogether a "one-man dog."

## CHAPTER VIII

### STAR

WE might put Lee Wing's offsider on a horse to-morrow, if you like, Norah," said Jim one afternoon. "I thought it was as well to leave him driving for a few days, so that he'd get to know Lee Wing thoroughly. But they seem real cobbers now."

"So they are; but I know Rob is longing to ride."

"Well, we don't know what his riding is like, so we'll give him that brown mare—she's the nearest approach to a pony that we've got, and very steady. But keep him under your wing until you're sure he has sense on a horse." He called to Rob, who was helping Lee Wing to wash up after the evening meal. The boy came running.

"Would you like to take a turn at riding to-morrow, Rob?"

He flushed. "My word I would, Mr. Linton!"

"Right. You can have the brown mare with a white star—Murty will show you. No scurrying round, remember: keep near Mrs. Meadows and you won't go wrong."

Rob went off delightedly to tell Lee Wing. Jim watched him as he ran.

"That youngster looks a different being," he said. "It makes me feel rather ashamed to see what a few days' happiness has done for him. I ought to have taken a hand earlier."

"Well, you had a good deal on your mind in the first week," Norah said. "And Rob certainly didn't put himself in your way—or in the way of anyone else, poor little chap. It was luck that Tommy and I found him off his guard. He's a good boy, Jim."

"Lee Wing says so," observed Tommy. "Rob never misses a chance of helping him. I fancy Lee Wing wouldn't care to be without his offsider now."

"They yarn together like a couple of old men," Jim said. "I heard them in their tent the other night—as if they hadn't enough of each other by day. But one hardly hears the boy's voice if he isn't with Lee Wing. I expect he'll open out a bit to you girls when he's riding with you—and that would be no bad thing for him, I think. This life's pretty hard on a boy who has always been with his mother."

"He has pluck," Norah said. "I wonder sometimes what his thoughts are—what he thinks lies ahead of him with that uncle of his."

Jim said, "Well . . . something will have to be done about that. Hallo, Murty—come for a yarn?"

“’Tis a messenger I am,” replied Murty, coming into the fire light. “The bhoys were wondherin’, Miss Norah, if you an’ Miss Tommy an’ the others ’ud come over an’ visit them this evenin’? They’re wishful for a sing-song, an’ they’d be grateful if you’d help them out.”

Norah looked at Jim. He nodded.

“We’ll be very glad to come, tell them, Murty.”

“Then anny time you’re ready, they’ll be waitin’. All hands they said, so I’ll tell Lee Wing an’ the boy, too.” He went over to the dish-washers; Norah, watching, saw Rob shrink into himself and shake his head. “Oh, I think I’ll be going to bed early,” he muttered.

She waited until Murty had gone back. Then she strolled to her tent, calling Rob to her as she passed him.

“Rob—I want you to come with us to-night.”

“Please, Mrs. Meadows, I’d rather turn in,” he said unhappily.

“I know you feel like that. But the men have done a friendly thing, and they said ‘all hands.’ You needn’t be with your uncle—we’ll keep you with us. You can slip away if you feel sleepy: nobody would mind. But I want you to come. It doesn’t do to stand out when people are friendly.”

He hesitated, struggling with himself. Only he himself knew how he had hated the other camp. But he looked up at her bravely.

“All right—I’ll come. And . . . thanks, Mrs. Meadows.”

“Well, make yourself tidy and put a coat on. We’ll call you when we’re ready.”

The girls always changed into frocks for the night halt, glad to be free of breeches and boots. The evening was mild: they carried coats over their arms as they went towards the other camp. Jim noted with approval that most of the men had made an attempt to spruce themselves. A big fire blazed and crackled, sending up showers of sparks into the gloom, the flames lighting the bronzed faces gathered round it. Gribble came to meet them.

“Glad to see you, Mrs. Linton. The boys reckoned it was time we had a concert, and there’s not a whole lot of talent in our lot. But we can put up a few choruses.” He led them to the place of honour—a blanket spread on the ground by a fallen trunk. “Not very comfortable, I’m afraid, but you’ve something to lean against. We only thought this up after supper, so we hadn’t time to make preparations.”

“But this is luxury!” Norah said. “I haven’t leaned against anything since I became a drover.” A grin went round: somebody called out, “And a pretty useful drover, too!” They sat down; Tommy put Rob beside her. He cast a quick, nervous glance round the circle. A little sigh of relief came from him as he saw that Flynn and the cook were not there.

“Playing cards in their tent, I expect,” he thought. “I hope to goodness

they'll stay there!"

There were no other absentees except the men on duty, for the drovers were glad of any change in their dull routine. Even Fenton's dour face could be seen: he sat well back, smoking in silence. Several blackened billies stood not far from the fire—evidently there was to be tea later on, thought Rob, noting also a long line of pannikins on a log.

They began with choruses that all the camp knew: "Waltzing Matilda," "Tarpaulin Jacket," "Good Old Jeff." Many of the men had good voices—not that it mattered, since those who had not sang just as lustily as those who had. The volume of sound seemed to roll away through the tree-tops, making far echoes. Then a wizened little man, called on by Gribble, "obliged" with a long recitation concerning a race-meeting; the drovers had probably heard him give it often before, but it brought a round of clapping. A pause followed: Jim broke it by asking, "Where's your man with the banjo? We always like hearing him."

"It's bad luck—he's on night-guard," Gribble said. "An' nobody else can play it."

"How about letting my wife have it?" suggested Wally. "She can do strange things with a banjo."

Loud cheers greeted this suggestion. Someone dived into a tent and came back with the banjo, handing it to Norah with a low bow.

"But will the owner mind?" she asked. "I don't like using it without his permission."

"Not he!" shouted many voices. A man added: "He nearly swapped it for a dog the other day, he's that sick of playin' his three tunes. But the man that owned the dog thought better of it."

Encouraged by this statement, Norah plucked at the strings gently for a moment. Deep silence fell on the circle as the men watched her. Then she nodded to Wally and broke into the tune of "The Stockrider's Song."

Wally's deep baritone came in with the words. Few of the men knew the song; but every word was clear, and they listened as if spell-bound. Jim and Tommy joined in when the refrain came for the last time. The voices grew low as they ended:—

*"For we're riding—riding—riding,  
Riding home again!"*

There was a storm of applause, cheers, whistles. Nothing would satisfy the drovers but to have it over again at once; and this time there were many voices joining in.

"Well, if that song wasn't made for us!" shouted a man. "What about a third issue?"

Norah shook her head at that, laughing.

"No: it's time somebody else took a hand. What shall I play?"

The little Italian, Tony Malotti, answered her quickly.

“You play-a ‘Juanita,’ meesis?”

She nodded; with the first notes he began to sing—in Italian. That was rather beyond the drovers, but the voice was out of the ordinary, and held them all silent until the last verse, when first one, then others, took up the words in English. Malotti was not at all pleased at finding his voice drowned by a language not his own. He sat scowling, leaving the song to the drovers, and shook his head when they demanded an encore.

“And after that,” whispered Tommy to Jim, “do not dare to suggest that I should sing in French. There might be a war!”

Choruses, they felt, were safer: Norah played all that she could remember, and the men sang themselves hoarse. Lee Wing slipped off with Murty after a while to make tea; the pannikins went round, together with huge slabs of brownie. Then the guests said good-night and went home, followed by cheers and loud shouts of “Come again.”

“Well, that was a success, I think,” said Jim, lighting his pipe. “You two are fairly accepted as members of the outfit—I fancy the concert was arranged to show you that.”

“I seem to remember that Norah prophesied that we should be invited to sing-songs,” said Tommy.

“Don’t remind her of it—she’s proud enough as it is of being the star performer,” said Jim. “I only hope they won’t demand concerts too often. But there will have to be at least one more—the poor beggars on night guard won’t like having missed this one. It must be fairly tantalising to be out there in the cold, hearing other people having a good time.”

“Especially for the owner of the banjo,” Wally added. “I can see you becoming his tutor in spare moments, Nor!” To which Norah responded with dignity that she would make sure there were no spare moments.

Rob woke next morning in a state of inward excitement. He had enjoyed the concert; much to his own surprise, he had found himself singing in the choruses, and it had done him good. A few of the men had given him a kindly, off-hand word: and there had been no sign of the two he dreaded meeting. All that was to the good, helping him to feel less of a lonely outsider. And to-day he was to ride for the first time, taking his place with the other riders. He might have felt uneasy about it but for knowing he would be with Norah and Tommy. They would see him through, he knew.

He raced through his work, afraid of being late in getting his horse, yet knowing he must help Lee Wing until the waggonette was ready to start. But he need not have been anxious. Murty rode over to speak to him while he was scouring the frying-pan.

“I’m after puttin’ the saddle an’ bridle on y’r little mare, Rob. She’s tied up

along with Lancer an' Trigger over beyant."

Rob dropped the frying-pan. He stammered out thanks, his blue eyes shining.

"Well, go aisy on y'r first day," advised Murty. "No thricks; an' don't get too near the bullocks, or someone'll be knockin' your head off. You watch what Miss Norah does, an' you won't be makin' anny mistakes. Good luck!" He gave him a friendly smile and rode off.

"Gosh, he's nice;" said Rob to Lee Wing, scouring with new fury. "Fancy him catching a horse for a kid like me!" For Murty was to Rob a great man; only a degree less great than Jim and Wally, for whom his awe was such that he was almost tongue-tied if they spoke to him.

Lee Wing said, "S'posin' kids have sense, use blains, then Murty welly ni' man to them. S'posin' they not have sense, then he not have time for them at all. Murty got eyes evelywhere. He see you work plover, then he leckon you man, not jus' kid; like help you." He bent his gaze on the frying-pan. "If you sclub that fellow much more, p'laps him bottom fall out. I leckon you better pack him up, Lob."

The waggonette moved off presently. Rob made sure that the last embers of the fire had ceased to smoulder, then raced towards his horse. Norah and Tommy were already mounted; he felt them watching him as he slipped the bridle off the post. Then he forgot them for a moment: for this was a new horse, one with whom he must make friends. He patted the mare's neck, speaking to her in a low voice, before he tested the girth and swung himself into the saddle. There was a pause while he adjusted the stirrups to his length.

"He's all right," Norah said in a low voice. "I'm glad he didn't jump on his mare as if she was a block of wood. I do like a boy to show decent manners to his horse!"

"Young Rob has good manners in most ways—when he isn't too shy to show them," said Tommy. "I think his mother must have been worth knowing. Suppose we ride on, and let him get on terms with the mare. It's just as well for us not to seem to be watching him."

They went ahead slowly. Presently Rob came cantering to catch up. His face was glowing.

"How does she go, Rob?"

"Oh, she's grand!" he said. "Easy as a rocking-chair; I believe she's quite glad to be used again. I was thinking the other day it must be jolly dull to be one of the spare horses, crawling along all day as if they were just bullocks!"

"Well, they get more chance to feed that way," remarked Tommy.

"Oh, yes. But feeding isn't everything. I'm dead certain I'd want to be on my job, if I was a stock-horse. Perhaps not every day, but pretty often. I reckon horses think, don't you, Mrs. Meadows?"

“Of course they do. Especially those you handle a lot; those who are your friends. And as for a good stock-horse—why, he often thinks ahead of whoever is riding him.”

“Well, I’m going to be friends with Star,” he said. “D’you think that’s a good name for her? I asked Mr. Traill what she was called, and he said she’d never been christened, and I could call her what I liked.”

“It suits her very well, I think: that star is the only white mark she has.”

“And if ever she shoots you over her head we’ll re-christen her Shooting Star,” put in Tommy.

Rob chuckled, hoping inwardly it would never happen. It wouldn’t be much fun to be slung off a horse when he had just begun to feel that he belonged to the company of drovers. He had seen two men come off, and heard the volley of rough chaff that had greeted them from their mates. But that was in the early days of the trip when the horses were fresh, ready to play up on a cold morning; now they had settled down, going almost as steadily as the bullocks. He felt that he and Star were going to be friends.

He had never owned a horse. But riding was in his blood, and all his life he had taken a chance of a ride whenever he could. Boys at his school had lent him their ponies—he had paid them back by working out their sums—and there had been holidays on farms when he had been in the saddle nearly all day. Droving was slow work, compared with the memory of those rides: yet it was happiness just to have the feel of a horse under him, to know there were good days ahead when he and the little brown mare would get to know each other better and better. “I’m dead lucky that she was a bit too small for most of the men,” he thought.

To-day, too, there was an extra job, not mere tailing after the cattle. A township a few miles off the route had to be visited, since stores were needed and there would be letters and newspapers to collect. After lunch Lee Wing astonished his old horses by demanding something more than a jog from them, turning away from the mob along a dusty track. Norah, Tommy and Rob cantered ahead of the waggonette, the horses seeming to enjoy the rare chance of fast going. There was one long stretch of smooth grass at the edge of the track where Tommy looked ahead longingly.

“I think this is where we gallop!” she said.

She touched Trigger with her heel. In a moment they were all galloping, hooves pounding the turf, the horses stretched out with pricked ears and flying manes and tails. Norah glanced at Rob; he rode beside her, leaning forward, his face alight with a happiness she had not seen on it before. She smiled to herself, remembering its set misery a few days ago. The cure was certainly working. She knew that he must have depths of loneliness beyond her helping; but much could be done by friendship and laughter and the joy of a good

horse.

The township seemed almost exciting after being so long out of sight of houses. Shops to be visited, a pile of letters stowed away, a smaller pile posted; Lee Wing drove away with the back of his chariot stacked with bundles and Spotty contentedly gnawing a fresh bone presented to him by the butcher. The girls and Rob went in search of tea, and found also ices, so that tea was a prolonged feast. The sun was getting low when they had finished; they let the horses have their heads on the way back whenever there was galloping ground. The tents were pitched when they rode into camp. Murty was leaning against a tree, smoking. He came to take the girls' horses.

"Ye have them in a shweat," he observed. "'Tis an extra rub-down they'll be needin'. Was it a good ride, Rob?"

"Oh—gorgeous!" uttered Rob. He slid to the ground, and patted the little mare's neck. "She's just a beauty, Murty."

"Ye'll be shtiff to-morrow," said Murty. "I'm thinkin' ye'll be glad of a seat beside Lee Wing again."

"Not me!" retorted Rob. He hesitated, remembering other days of stiffness after a first long ride. "Well . . . even if I have to, it'll be worth it!"

## CHAPTER IX

### OUT-BACK COUNTRY

THE mob pushed its way slowly south. They were out in wilder country now, far from any settlement. There were no longer fences; they travelled along the wide stock-route that wound over great plains and through stretches of low hills. Seldom did they meet anyone on that lonely trail. Now and then, when it curved east or west to a place where the cattle could drink, they came within sight of a house that told of a cocky farmer making a struggling living; at the camp that night he might ride over for the luxury of a talk with strangers, and hoping for an old newspaper. Sometimes children came too, on rough ponies: small boys and girls, bare-footed, far too shy to speak, but watching everything with curious eyes.

The bullocks, now that there were no fences to restrain them, scattered out widely, always trying to feed as they went. There was more work to be done both by dogs and drovers; riders were spaced along the flanks of the mob, keeping it in a loose formation, urging on stragglers, moving the whole band steadily forward. Everything was done quietly: placid, unflurried cattle meant cattle that made the most of every mouthful of feed throughout the day and settled down quietly at night. And that meant fulfilling the ambition of every drover—to keep the bullocks fit, and to deliver them in good condition at the end of the long journey to Billabong.

So the riders moved quietly, well out from the cattle as they poked along; and when a beast hung back too far, or strayed out on the side, no horseman turned to deal with it. There would be a low whistle, a jerk of the hand; and a dog would trot gently to the rear of the straggler in an unconcerned way, well knowing that his silent presence was enough to put him in the way he should go. The bullock would move towards his companions; the dog would drop to the grass lazily, as if he took no further interest in the matter. But his ears would be pricked, his eyes watchful; only when the straggler had merged among the other bullocks would he get up and trot after his master.

There were a few dogs that seldom seemed to need an order. Fenton's Spotty was one: he kept his own watch, judging the right moment to take action when a beast strayed. There was not a bullock in the mob that did not know him. Other dogs they might ignore until the last possible moment; but when Spotty slipped like a blue shadow in their direction their heads went up quickly and they never waited for him to get near them. Not that they hurried; they well understood that he had no intention of hurrying them. Apparently

they ignored him, just as Spotty, crouching at their first movement, appeared quite unaware of them. But they knew, as he knew, that it was time to get back to the mob.

“That dog can do every blessed thing but talk!” said Wally, watching his methods one day. “And I’m not too sure that he doesn’t talk . . . to his owner.”

Spotty’s leg had healed well; a few days had seen him grow restless and try to use it. Lee Wing had been sorry when Fenton allowed him to go back to work. “Him allee same good comp’ny,” he said: which was hardly what most people would have thought of that particular dog. Still, Spotty’s social circle had widened. Lee Wing, Norah and Rob were his friends; to a lesser degree all the Billabong party could be considered acquaintances, worthy at least of a wag of his tail. “Not exactly what you’d call gushing,” said Wally. “But it means a good deal—from old Spotty.”

Rob had been stiff enough after his first ride to be glad to take a day in the waggonette with Lee Wing, but stiffness was forgotten now. He had his own post out on the wing of the mob, not far from Norah and Tommy; since they had no dogs, Jim had posted Fenton on the same wing. Day after day they travelled slowly, often walking beside their horses for a change, ready to mount if necessary. They grew to know one bullock from another among the moving hundreds. There were the quiet ones who kept near the centre; plodders who had their own mates, and were never far from them. They would stop to feed, but needed no dog to set them moving again. Then there were “looney” bullocks, wilder by nature, more inquisitive, who liked an independent life and scattered as far as they dared out on each side. They were the ones who needed watching, the “bad boys” of the mob; apt to be restless at nights and on their feet early in the morning, hoping for a chance to slip away unnoticed—a chance that never came.

Rob and the girls knew all the looney bullocks soon. There was one lean Hereford that had been christened “Cranky”; the men said he would always be lean, because he was too busy exploring the world to remember to feed. A quarrelsome beast, Cranky: many of the quieter bullocks bore marks where he had used his long horns in a crowd. He was the most daring of all the stragglers; and when a dog was sent to fetch him in he sometimes showed fight, lowering his head, stamping, half-prepared to charge. The dog always avoided his horns, slipping behind him: Cranky would decide that he had better give in, and would return to the mob at a hard trot, head up and tail switching defiantly.

There was more wild life than Norah and Tommy had known in Victoria. Mobs of kangaroos fed on the plains, taking no notice of the cattle unless the men came too near, when they went off with great flying leaps. Once, near a patch of mulga, when Rob was far out on the wing, he rode near a little family:

father, mother and half-grown joey. Rob pulled up. The big kangaroo straightened himself sharply, facing the horse and rider angrily, ready to defend his family. The doe and her little one swerved aside and made for the bush in double-quick time, the mother keeping behind her baby. Until they were safe in the hiding of the scrub the "old man" remained on guard, watching Rob; then he whirled and went after them at the top of his speed in leaps that carried him high over the bushes. Rob was rather relieved to see him go; he had looked far too fierce and threatening for a small boy on a not very big horse.

There were euros and rock-wallabies among the hills, and kangaroo-rats hiding in the grass, dodging out when danger came too near and scurrying to fresh cover. Big goannas were an ordinary sight; they would come upon one sunning itself on a stone and watch the frantic haste with which it would dash to climb the nearest tree, never pausing until it reached a high limb. Then it would twist its head round and look down at them with a comical air of enquiry, as if it had never seen anything so peculiar in its life.

Birds were in myriads among the trees; leatherheads, magpies, warblers, honey-eaters, and little diamond-birds in flocks, showing flashes of red and gold as they flew: even more beautiful, the fire-tailed finches, barred with black and patched with scarlet. Brolgas, ibis and herons haunted the lagoons and waterholes, wading in the shallows. There, too, might be found wild duck swimming; a couple of men would ride on ahead of the cattle when they neared a good lagoon, and a few shots would mean duck for next day's supper. It was a welcome change, for "salt horse" and bacon were the main foods of the camp now that townships were far away. Kangaroo-tail stew varied the meals now and then, and there were pigeons for the shooting—if anyone had time to prepare them. Few of the men cared for them; one quickly grows tired of pigeon as a food. Lee Wing had his own methods of making them eke out a stew, but the drovers' cook said flatly that if anyone wanted pigeon he could cook it himself.

Nobody grumbled at the dulness of the food. It was the accepted thing: all that mattered was to get enough of it. Days and nights in the open air meant ravenous appetites, especially at the evening meal, when salt beef and potatoes vanished in huge quantities, followed by masses of stewed prunes and other dried fruits: possibly, if the cook were in a good humour, flapjacks covered with treacle. And always, morning, noon and night, the bushman's unfailing stand-by: tea, hot and strong and sweet, cup after cup, until the last big billy was drained to its dregs. If a drover had been forced to choose between having food or tea, the tea would have always won.

Now and then they came across a few wandering blacks; two or three men with their wives and some half-naked children, together with mangy dogs that

bristled at the sight of the drovers' dogs, and kept well out of their way. That was wise, for if a drover saw an abo. dog approaching his Bluey or Spotty neither the intruder nor his owner would have been safe. The lubras and children hung together in the background; the men were bolder, offering information as to feed and water ahead for the cattle, and ending with the invariable "You got baccy, Boss? You gibbit tchugar?" They always appeared at camping time, knowing that no pickings were to be had while the chuck-waggon was on the move.

"Cunning as foxes," said Gribble. "They'll dodge about in the scrub all day, keeping level with us, never letting us see them until we camp. And if we're soft with 'em they'll send up smoke signals to let another lot know we're good people to call on. I've known 'em turn up day after day when I was with a chap that handed out tucker freely. I'm hanged if I'd give 'em a bite of anything—dirty, miserable brutes they are!"

Jim frowned, lighting his pipe.

"Well, we took their country," he said. "I reckon we owe them something. We left them mighty little to live on."

"Aren't there the missions? They don't need to go without anything. They'd get fed and clothed if they'd stay put anywhere. There are plenty of stations where they could get work. Only there's not one in a hundred that will stay put, or that you can trust to work. Steal and loaf—that's all they're good for."

Jim said, "If you'd been brought up as they were, wandering always in their own territory, never wanting to do anything but wander—well, you'd find it hard to sit down in one place near men whose ways you couldn't understand. It's in their very bones to walk about. The only work they were bred to was finding food; they did that well enough before the white men came. Now we've driven away most of their food. I don't wonder they try to get some from us when they have a chance."

"Well, I don't suppose you feel like giving them back the country," said Gribble with a sneer.

"No, I don't; and it wouldn't be any good to them if we did give it back. We've spoiled it for their use. Oh, I admit it's a mighty big problem; too big for me to solve. But I'm darned sorry for the abo's, and they're welcome to a bit of tucker when they ask for it, if they come my way."

He turned to the blacks. They were watching closely: Jim wondered how much of the talk they had understood.

"You come alonga me," he said.

They followed him to the Billabong camp, watching eagerly while Lee Wing ladled flour and sugar into the boat-shaped wooden pitchis the women carried. Jim handed out tobacco while Norah found some sticks of barley-

sugar for the children: at which the lubras looked so longingly that they had to be given a share.

“Plenty you good, Boss,” said the man who seemed to be the leader. He jerked his thumb contemptuously in Gribble’s direction. “Him too much rude pfeller yabber, mine tinkit. Me all-same station boy, long time—only walkabout now little time.”

“What name you got on station?” asked Jim.

“Name Jacky back there. Go back some day. My boss him know me wantem go walkabout too much. Not sulky pfeller at me. Him know orri’.”

“I expect he does,” said Jim. “Well, you go back after walkabout, Jacky, and work well. Boss give you blankets in cold weather?”

Jacky nodded vigorously.

“Plenty him gibbit we-all blankets—tucker too, clo’ too, you bet.”

“Well, off you go,” Jim said. “No campem you-all too near bullocks, mind.”

The black face broadened in a smile.

“Not me, Boss—savvy bullocks too much.”

“And I needn’t have said that,” remarked Jim as the little party straggled off. “I’ll bet that fellow knows all about cattle. Probably a good man on a station—and why shouldn’t he have his walkabout when the urge comes on him?”

“Queer how they want it,” remarked Wally. “Some of our abo’s in Queensland used nearly to starve when they went walkabout: they’d come back all skin and bone. But you couldn’t keep them once the urge came, men and women alike. I believe they’d die if they didn’t go. And some of them had been born on my father’s place, and had never known any wild life.”

“It’s a deeper thing than we can understand—like a lot of their secrets,” said Jim. “Natives in any country could teach white folks a lot, I believe—only we’re too superior to learn. Well, I don’t feel at all superior when I’m with blacks; I feel rather like a usurper. There was one in my crowd in France in the war, and I’d never want a better man beside me in a tight place than he was. The hotter things were, the cheerfuller he became. I wonder would our friend Gribble do as well?”

“Gribble?” said Tommy scornfully. “I think Mr. Gribble would be heading for the rear as fast as he could travel!

“Too li’ he would!” said Lee Wing.

## CHAPTER X

JACKY

WE'LL have a short stage to-morrow," said Jim one evening. "This waterhole isn't much good, and there's a big lagoon a few miles ahead: good feed there, so the mob can have a lazy time. If we make an early start we ought to be there by one o'clock. They'll travel well, knowing the water is ahead."

"How do they know, Mr. Linton?" asked Rob.

"Well, what wind there is looks like coming from that direction, Rob: and that sends a radio message to cattle far more quickly than it does to us. It's extraordinary how far away they can smell water. Even without any wind at all, they seem to know—especially if they've been some time without a good drink."

"You'd never be able to tell what cattle know," Murty said. "They hear things we don't hear, an' they see things we don't see. But there's more to it than just seein' an' hearin': they feel things. 'Tis a kind of radio, I reckon: leastways I dunno anny other way to put it. There's been manny a time, ridin' round a mob at night, an' it sleepin', that I've wished bullocks cud spake an' tell me what they dhrame of."

"Do you reckon they dream, really, Murty?"

"Sure they do, Rob. Whin ye see a baste lyin' deep asleep; an' suddenly he's up on his feet, stretchin' out his head as if he saw somethin', an' thremblin', an' then givin' a long, lonesome bellow—what's that but a dhrame he's afther havin'? There's nothin' near him but his friends, an' he doesn't look at them, nor he doesn't move away; but it may be an hour before he settles down."

"Well, not many of them would settle down to sleep at all if we had to camp on those hills ahead," Wally said. "That's one reason why we're camping just before we reach them. We want to make sure of getting over them in daylight."

"Why's that, Mr. Meadows?" Rob asked. "They don't look steep."

"No; but cattle don't like them. They're limestone, what we call "hollow country"; caves and hollows underground. You and I would never notice anything if we rode over them. But when hundreds of bullocks are moving across, they hear echoes underneath them, below the sound of all those hooves. It scares them blue sometimes, and they're never happy until they're off them."

"Like the Haunted Hills in Gippsland," Murty said. "They say the blacks in

the ould times gev them that name—anyhow, the blacks didn't like them no more than bullocks did, so I've heard. 'Twas the divil's own game gettin' cattle across them. They'd hear things . . . rumblin's an' shakin's; the heads 'ud go up, an' you'd see their eyes gettin' wild. Then they'd break into a jog, an' next thing they'd be gallopin' as if they saw Ould Nick afther them. Wance that happened it 'ud be as good f'r ye to thry an' stop wild elephants. Every bullock that was in it 'ud be leggin' it as harrd as he cud go, an' not lookin' where he was going, neither. I've come near to breakin' me neck on them Haunted Hills more than wance, thryin' to steady them. But you'd never steady them until they were clear out on the plains beyant."

"Didn't they hurt themselves? My word, it must have been exciting, Murty!"

"Too excitin' altogether f'r a quiet man like me, Rob. They hurt themselves, all right: there was pretty thick timber everywhere, an' the roughest of goin' underfoot. I've seen a bullock charge into a tree as if it wasn't there, an' break his neck; an' there was lots that 'ud go down over fallen trees. Ye might well call them Haunted Hills—haunted by all the ghosts of the cattle that were kilt on them."

"Well, I hope our bullocks won't go mad on these hills," Rob said anxiously.

"Yerra, not they. These aren't like the Gippsland ones, an' the mob's thravelled long enough to be as steady as ould Time. Only they wouldn't settle down quietly at night; an' that's no good for them. So we'll just put them over quietly by day."

They reached the big lagoon even earlier than Jim had expected. The wind blew towards them; the cattle, thirsty after the muddy water which was all they had had the night before, ceased to feed and pushed on steadily, drawing closer together. Horned heads, sniffing the message brought them on the air, rose here and there over the great mass of moving backs. When the first gleam of the lagoon showed as they topped a low hill the looney bullocks became excited. They trotted down the slope, led by Cranky: then the big Hereford tossed his horns suddenly, hunched his back, kicked up his heels, and broke into a gallop. The other loonies followed him: heads stretched forward, tails up in the air, they went bucking across the plain. The steadier bullocks took no notice of them. They wanted the water, but they were not thirsty enough to behave like loonies.

There was no need now for either drovers or dogs. The mob marched straight towards the silver stretch of water, fringed with reeds, with Cootamundra wattles growing near its banks. The bullocks scattered as they reached it, wading in until they were girth-deep. Down went their heads, and they drank, gulping and sucking noisily: little clouds of spray flew sparkling

when a beast blew deep breaths as his nose entered the water. The heads came up; they stood resting for awhile until it was time for another long drink. When each could drink no more he turned and tramped lazily ashore. They strung out among the trees to feed; soon many were lying down, chewing the cud placidly.

“I wish we could keep them here for a week,” Jim said. “Anyhow, we can all get a sleep to-night: nothing would tempt them to stray far from that lagoon.”

“Not even Cranky?” asked Tommy.

“Cranky is mad enough to do most silly things, but even he wouldn’t have the heart to leave it on his first day. If he did,” added Jim, “well, I think I’d just leave him. I wouldn’t be sorry to see the last of that mad-headed brute. He’ll never make good beef if he lives to be a hundred.”

“What happens if a beast gets lost?”

“Oh, he may stray away into the bush and join up with other scrubbers like himself: there are plenty knocking about in the ranges. Or he may happen on some out-back cocky-farmer’s place, and that poor cocky takes him as a gift from Heaven—sells him after awhile, or just makes beef of him and says nothing about it. An odd beast isn’t worth bothering about—he’s seldom much good. The good ones hang together, and feed steadily: they don’t go poking off on their own.”

“Well, I think Tommy and I will now poke off on our own,” Norah said. “Something tells me that the men are longing for a swim, and they’ll probably feel happier if we disappear.”

“You’ll get top-marks for that thought,” said Wally. “There will be heads bobbing all over the lagoon as soon as you’re out of sight.”

They left their horses and strolled away into the scrub that fringed the foothills. Soon they were out of sight of the lagoon. It was very quiet there; the breeze had dropped, scarcely stirring the silvery leaves of the peppermint-gums. Birds hopped near them, unafraid, peering at them with bright inquisitive eyes from the low branches. The girls went along in silence, their feet almost noiseless on the soft grass. It would indeed be a good place to camp in for a week, Norah thought.

Rounding a boulder they halted suddenly. Three small black bodies dived into hiding among the bushes. Against the rock was a rough wurley, a blackfellow’s hut built of sticks and boughs. A blackened quart-pot stood beside the ashes of a fire; round it were the well-gnawed bones of euros and wallabies, and over all was the smell that is part of every aboriginal camp. From the wurley peered the startled face of a lubra just roused from sleep. She crouched in the low entrance, her dark eyes gleaming, almost covered by her wild hair.

“That’s one of the ladies who called on us last week,” said Norah under her breath. “She’s Jacky’s lubra, I think.” She smiled at the woman reassuringly, raising her voice. “Good day, Mary. You all right?”

“Plenty,” muttered the lubra, not moving.

“Where’s Jacky?”

“Longa scrub.” Her anxious face changed to a look of relief as the bushes parted and Jacky came quickly across to the wurley. Evidently she did not feel equal to entertaining guests alone.

Jacky greeted them with a wide grin. He had been fishing; a couple of huge eels hung over his shoulder. Norah guessed that, in the furtive manner of his race, he had dodged away from the lagoon at the first sight of the cattle; keeping out of sight in the hills until he could rejoin his family. There was no doubt of the friendliness of his welcome; and presently the piccaninnies came sidling back to squat near him and finger the eels he had flung on the ground.

“Want any tucker, Jacky?”

“Got plenty eel, wallaby. Missus gibbit flour, ’baccy . . . little bit?” he said hesitatingly. From the wurley came a pleading voice, “Tchugar-stick?”

“Come down to the camp this afternoon,” Norah smiled, seeing the eager eyes of the children. “Small camp, not big one, mind.”

“You bet.” He nodded with meaning. “Small camp Boss camp. Big camp he belong too much sulky pfeller. You wantem eel, Missus? This pfeller spearem plenty eel one-time, you eatem.”

“No, thanks, Jacky. But come along before sundown.” They moved on, hearing happy jabbering that broke out as soon as they were out of sight.

“Well, they certainly seem to be keeping level with us, as Gribble said,” was Jim’s comment when told of their meeting. “But they’re not sponging on us: they have had plenty of time to come and beg for more tucker. I’m glad you told them to come for some. This is probably the last time we shall see them; they’re not likely to cross the hills. We’ll give them an extra-good hand-out to-night, Nor. They deserve it, for letting us alone since the first time.”

Norah fancied that the black family must have hoped for the extra-good hand-out, for when they appeared at the camp before sunset the lubra carried two pitchis. She became ashamed of her suspicion, however, when it turned out that one of them was a gift for her; a special pitchi, made of mulga wood and roughly carved.

“That woman belonga me, she gibbit you,” said Jacky—his wife having no words at her command for such an occasion. He traced a line of the carving with a dusky finger. “This pfeller cut, him say ‘Good luck.’ All same good luck mob belonga you-all.”

“It’s a beautiful pitchi,” Norah said, turning over the canoe-like bowl and examining every part. “You makem, Jacky?”

“Yowi,” he nodded. “Makem for you.”

“I’ll keep it in my house,” she said. “And we’ll remember the ‘Good luck,’ Jacky. I’m sure we shall have it. Thank you, Mary.”

Black Mary giggled happily, her eyes straying towards the tent that had produced tucker on her last visit. She was quite pleased that her lord and master had thought fit to make a pitchi for the white Missus, but she felt it was time that something really worth while appeared. It came, of course: Lee Wing had packages ready, and Jim and Norah produced “baccy” and barley-sugar: from which moment Mary lost all interest in the camp, wishing only to get away with the parcels to examine them. Norah checked her as she turned to go.

“Wait a moment, Mary.”

“Yowi, Missus.” The words were a little indistinct, since she had a sugar-stick stuck in her mouth like a cigarette. She watched eagerly as Norah went to her tent; the dark eyes sparkled when she reappeared with a bright handkerchief for her.

“Oo-oh, Missus!” The sugar-stick fell out of her mouth in her excitement. A piccaninny dived for it, but his mother was quicker: she picked it up, regardless of the dust and scraps of grass that covered it, replaced it in her mouth, and grabbed the handkerchief. For a moment she studied its colour delightedly; then, tucking it into the neck of her ragged and filthy cotton frock, she mumbled thanks and went off.

“She plenty like,” said Jacky approvingly. “She be smart pfeller orri’ when she go back alonga station.” He followed his family.

“Good chap, that,” said Jim, handling the pitchi. “He’s put a lot of work into this for you, Nor. The lady was only thinking of the loot, of course, but I don’t think Jacky was; he really wanted to please you.”

“I think,” said Wally, “Jacky understood pretty well all you and Gribble were saying when he came the first time. Those station blacks know a lot more English than they speak; and he looks more intelligent than most of them. You spoke up for his people, and I believe he tried to pay you back by doing something for Norah. If he understood that Tommy happens to be your wife, I expect he’d have given it to her—but he probably looks on Norah as the Missus because she handed out the grub.”

“In that case,” suggested Tommy, “I think it would be a suitable gesture if Norah presented me with the pitchi!”

“You think again!” said Norah.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE HOLLOW HILLS

THEY struck camp early next morning. The journey over the hills meant heavy going for the vehicles: Jim gave them a good start before rounding up the bullocks. Mustering them took longer than usual, for they had spread out round the big lagoon, and had no wish to leave the water and the good grass; but at last the most obstinate stragglers were brought in, and the mob moved reluctantly towards the hills, stopping to feed whenever the dogs were out of the way.

“We’ve got to keep them closer together to-day,” Jim told the girls. “If they get far apart in the timber half of them will get down into gullies, and we’ll have no end of a job to get them out. Just the sort of thing the looney bullocks love doing. They’re fools in most ways, but they’re quite smart enough to make off down a gully and double back to the lagoon. So keep your eyes skinned, for its easy enough to miss them among the trees.”

Rob felt excited. This promised to be the most interesting day’s droving he had yet known. Up to now he had felt himself of little use with the cattle; but as he looked at the tree-covered rises ahead he realised that every pair of sharp eyes would count to-day.

Some of the drovers had ridden ahead. The bullocks followed them slowly. There was not much feed to tempt them; under the trees the long, dead grass that had outlasted the winter was still matted above the sparse new growth. The first rises were easy ones, dipping into low gullies, with higher slopes beyond. There was no track; they might have been climbing into country where no one had ever gone before them.

It was the hottest day since the beginning of the journey. They were glad of the shade of the trees, though even there the air was still and close. No breeze fluttered even the topmost leaves. The bullocks tried to stray along each gully, vaguely hoping for water, unwilling to face the next rise; the riders on the wings were kept busy, heading them upwards. Cranky slipped away once into a thicker patch of timber and turned down hill. Rob, well out on the wing, tried to turn him back; but he had no dog, and the Hereford was quick to realise it. He wheeled away from the brown mare and plunged down the slope they had just climbed—only to find that Spotty, coming at an angle, was waiting to meet him. They faced each other for a moment before Cranky gave in and turned back on his tracks.

He went angrily. He had never been bitten by a dog, and in his puzzled

bullock-mind he did not understand why these interfering creatures, smaller than young calves, should have the power to make anyone of his size and weight feel suddenly afraid. Men had whips that stung; Cranky had felt them several times during musters on the station where he was born. But dogs had nothing that he could see—not even horns to match against his own long sharp pair. Yet when they looked at him with a silent, threatening glare, something within him went weak, and he could not face them; he had to turn and obey. He hated them all, but especially the smallest of the pack, the little blue dog that had checked him so often. Perhaps, in his angry heart, he had visions of being brave enough to charge Spotty one day; to get his horns under him and send him flying into the air, as he had once done with a less formidable dog on the station. It would be a comforting thing to do.

But meanwhile he was trotting back, too angry and stupid to save his strength uphill; and there were riders near to see that he did not break away again. Puffing and heaving, he reached the top and lumbered down into the next gully. There were steadier bullocks there: he eased his wrath by giving one a dig with his horn, only to find himself roughly jostled aside. Cranky decided that all the world was against him. He grunted in bad temper as he tackled the next slope.

“Nice handful you are in a mob!” muttered Fenton, watching him. “I’d put a bullet through your ugly head if I was the Boss.”

Something new began to worry Cranky. It was not only physical discomfort as they climbed higher—though his sullenness, together with his unnecessary exertions, had made him hot and panting while more placid beasts were still travelling easily. Cranky, jogging and trotting while the others walked quietly, was aware of sounds that troubled him. When he planted a hoof with a thud, an echo of the thud seemed to come back to him in a way he could not understand, as if a ghost-bullock far underground trotted with him. He had never known anything like this before, no matter how hard he had galloped when the musterers were after him. That had been on ordinary ground, good solid earth that felt safe and natural underfoot. But these strange hills were different . . . frightening.

He lost his desire to break away and make back to the lagoon. Tempting as it was, the lagoon seemed very far away now, with lonely hills separating him from it; there was more comfort in being with his own kind. He edged in among the other cattle with a vague instinct of finding protection. Even with them he could not walk steadily: he broke into a jog constantly, flinging up his head and switching his tail, blocking his neighbours by sharp little runs among them. The bullocks resented it, even though they gave way before him: one landed a kick that made his shoulder tingle with pain.

And the noises that he was trying to run away from were with him still,

though they were different. The ghost-bullock no longer trotted with him; instead he seemed to hear a great company of ghost-bullocks that walked with echoing steps, deep below. He tried to tell his companions about them, but they would not understand. Cranky gave them up as deaf and stupid. He made his way through them to the wing, hoping to find stragglers, looney bullocks like himself, who would feel as he felt.

Two were there, well out from the mob, going quietly. He stood for a moment, looking towards them, relieved to find that the strange noises had died away; then he jogged slowly in their direction. But just as he neared them a dog appeared suddenly, sent to drive the stragglers back. The looney bullocks, startled, went off at a canter, and Cranky joined them as they headed towards the mob.

That was terrible, for the ghosts underground cantered with them. The loonies heard them too, and quickened their pace to get away. They dashed in among the bullocks, dropping to a walk thankfully. But each went with quick short steps: their heads high, their restless eyes turning in every direction as if they expected the unseen enemy to appear at any moment.

Something of their fear began to spread through the mob. They ceased to feed as they went; within ten minutes not a bullock had his head down peacefully. There was no panic: only a restlessness that made eating seem uninteresting. Jim, watching them from the wing, rode over to Fenton.

“That darned Hereford’s doing his best to upset them, Bill. You might take a couple of men and dogs ahead, will you? Gribble’s in the lead—tell him and the others to watch out when the mob gets to the top. They’ll need help there to steady them if they try to go down in a hurry. We’ll stop for smoke-oh before the top, and they may settle down then.”

“Well, we won’t be further from our horses than the end of the bridle,” Fenton promised. He jogged off to the west, out of sight of the mob before he turned his horse upward again through the timber.

The waggonette and the chuck-waggon waited on a little plateau below the last ridge, with food and tea ready for the drovers. They did not take it in a body; some remained on their horses, spaced round the mob, watching them closely. As soon as a man had fed he went off to relieve one of the sentries. The bullocks were outwardly placid: they stood quietly for the most part, though few attempted to feed, and not one lay down.

“They know there’s something queer under the ground,” said Wally to the girls. “And Cranky and his pals are trying hard to spread the news.”

The looney bullocks were never still. They moved nervously among the mob; always their heads showed over the hundreds of scattered backs, Cranky’s broad white face highest of all, like a flag of distress.

“He’s a stormy petrel, all right,” said Jim. “I wish we could cut him out

and leave him, but he wouldn't go if he could help it. He'd make for the middle of the mob and raise Cain among them." He turned to the drivers. "Get away as soon as you can, Lee Wing—we want you to be well ahead."

The last man drained his pannikin and handed it in. The drivers moved off. They crossed the plateau, taking a rough track that zig-zagged up the ridge. A hard pull it was for the horses; Rob felt relieved when at last they reached the top. A moment more, and they were out of sight.

Jim was in no hurry. There were no underground echoes to trouble the cattle while they were standing still: they were growing more peaceful, and here and there a beast put his head down to feed. He waited another half-hour before mounting his horse.

The bullocks went slowly up the hill. It was steep enough to check even Cranky's desire to move out of a walk: and here there seemed no echoes to trouble him. But he was the first to reach the top. There was a wide space there before the descent began; the leading riders had crossed it and now sat waiting for the cattle, giving them time to get breath after the climb. They dipped out of sight, and the mob followed.

On this side the hills were less steep, the gullies between broader and more shallow. The cattle spread out again in looser formation, quickening their pace. They knew that below them were far-stretching plains that meant easier going and better feed, and the water they wanted badly, after their long climb on an airless day.

Cranky felt his spirits rise. The hopeless drag of toiling up hill was over, and the ghost-bullocks had gone away. No dog had threatened him for quite a long time. It was time, he thought, to be independent again. So, instead of dipping into the next gully with the other cattle, he wandered off along its edge to the right, on top of the bank.

The gully came to an end in a cleft in the hill. Scrub grew thinly there; Cranky paused when he came to the turn and stood looking down into it. Two hundred yards away were the cattle he had left, their broad backs looking like a dappled river flowing down the slope; spreading out as water spreads when they reached the bottom. Some went on towards the further bank: others turned and came poking along towards him. Cranky stood on his high place, not in the least anxious to join them. It was far more interesting to be a rover, free to explore new country. Those timid explorers below him would turn back presently to plod along with the herd, while he had nothing to keep him from going wherever he wanted.

From the further side of the mob Wally glanced up and saw the staring white face, the wide horns.

"There's that blessed Hereford playing he's king of the castle, Rob!"

"I wish I could get behind him and shove him over the bank," uttered Rob.

Almost as if he had been able to hear the words, Cranky turned and vanished in the scrub. It grew more thickly just beyond: he pushed through it, impatient to see what lay on the other side—and came out almost on top of a dog.

The dog snarled, leaping at his nose. All Cranky's dreams of one day attacking one of his persecutors vanished: this dog was capable of doing all the attacking that was going. He whirled away from the leaping fury, bolted back through the bushes and went crashing down the steep slope. Rob, still looking in his direction, cried triumphantly, "Gosh, he's done it!"

It was a very alarming descent for Cranky. Every stride and leap loosened stones that gave under his hooves, so that he almost fell a dozen times. Part of the time he slithered helplessly, spreadeagled, his legs beyond his control. He gathered them together near the bottom of the drop, where a line of rocks barred his progress. There was no time to stop. He made a violent effort to jump, hit a rock, and landed on the ground below on his side. The impact of many hundredweights of beef is considerable. Cranky's landing seemed to shake the gully.

It did something far more alarming to Cranky. It woke up all the ghost-bullocks that he hoped had gone away for ever. Deep below him came echoing rumblings that filled him with blind terror. He scrambled to his feet, gave a long agonised bellow, and bolted wildly towards the mob. With each stride, as his hooves pounded, the ghost-bullocks galloped too.

Right through the stream of cattle he went, knocking them aside by the force of his coming. His terror spread to the bullocks: bellowing rang out as they took to their heels and raced up the slope. Cranky swerved and raced with them. They could all hear the underground echoes now; the vague nervousness that had oppressed them all day swelled to panic. Like a torrent they bolted towards the plains, horned heads tossing high, tails waving.

But there were good men and good dogs ahead, and rough, steep going to check them. The rear riders were on their flanks, edging them inwards: the leading riders turned back as the uproar broke out, riding hard to cut them off from the quieter cattle ahead. Three gullies the terrified bullocks stormed over, their speed lessening with each upward slope; in the fourth the men held them. They huddled together with heaving sides and staring eyes, foam dripping from their lips. Only Cranky remained unconquered; he charged up the gully, took the bank in great leaps, and disappeared in the bush.

"And may you stay there!" uttered Jim. He was panting a little: the pace had been hot while it lasted. He turned to Rob, who had pulled up beside him on Star. "Rob, you rode darned well—you turned that roan bullock just in the nick of time."

Rob grew red. He said, "I didn't have a thing to do with it, Mr. Linton. Star

just took charge of me and did it on her own!”

“Well, between you, you were useful.” He raised his voice calling to the men on the bank above. “Carry on, some of you; we’ll hold them here until they’ve cooled down, and follow you to camp.”

Cranky took his own line to freedom. There was no one to interfere with him; all the men, all the hated dogs, were much too busy with their own affairs to spare him a thought. He raced along the side of the hill for a long time, always hearing the ghost-bullocks galloping below; raced until his pumping heart and faltering legs could do no more. His gallop fell to a canter, then to a trot. At last he came to a standstill.

He stood under a tree, legs wide apart, head hanging. His red coat was matted with sweat and dust, his sides scarred by scratches from rocks and broken boughs; there was a bleeding cut across his face where he had run into a limb. All of him felt sore and miserable and utterly tired.

The longing for water roused him into action. Water, he knew, he could find only on the plain; he made his way slowly downwards, moving stiffly. The rough going hurt his aching bones. Often he stopped, listening with suspicion as a stick snapped in the bushes, perhaps under the weight of a wallaby. Cranky’s one fear was that it might be a dog. Now that he went so slowly, the ghost-bullocks seemed to have gone to sleep. But a dog could never be depended upon to be asleep, or to leave a bullock to plan his own affairs.

He stumbled down the last of the foot-hills and came out upon the plain. The instinct to hide was still strong within him; he wandered towards the west, keeping close to the hill. There was scrub enough there to conceal him; the plain was more open in that direction, and he was afraid to leave shelter. But no water was there; after a time his thirst made him bolder and he turned south, heading for a clump of trees.

There, at last, he found water. It was but a muddy little hole among the trees, but Cranky was in no state to be critical. He waded into the middle; it came only to his knees, but its cool touch made him feel better. He drank until he could hold no more; rested awhile, then found he could drink again. It was hard to leave the water; but there was green grass beyond it, so he tramped out heavily, his legs covered with black mud, and began to feed. The grass was good, but there was not much of it; he cropped it bare, and then lay down. For a little while he chewed the cud, but his jaws moved more and more slowly. He went to sleep.

When he awoke the sun was setting. He lumbered to his feet, hollowing his

back and stretching. He was still stiff, but strength had come back to him. There was no sign of either man or beast anywhere; he had all the freedom he had hoped for. And he found that he was very lonely.

He raised his head at last and gave a long melancholy bellow. It echoed among the hills and died away; he gave another and another. There was no answer. He might have been the only bullock in Australia.

He stared eastward, bellowing at intervals. Trees blocked his view, but he knew that in that direction were the companions from whom he had run away. He wanted them badly: so badly that at last he had to go and look for them. Slowly at first, and then with quickening steps, he went across the plain. For awhile the trees swallowed him up: but when he came out of them he could see lights twinkling, and to his nostrils came the smell of cattle. He called again, and this time came an answering bellow.

That was enough for Cranky. He broke into a run and trotted steadily towards the lights. There was no need to call now; he was nearly home. There were the tents and the camp-fires, but they did not interest him. All he thought of was the beautiful smell of the mob, the prospect of companionship, the certainty that his loneliness was over.

A dog barked sharply, but he knew it was not a threatening bark. The cattle were camped: most of them were lying down, but among the few still on their feet he could see the looney roan bullock that he had run with so often. The roan was waiting for him, he knew: he gave a low bellow of greeting, and a quick answer came. Cranky waited until the night-guard, slowly riding round the cattle, had gone by, his dog at his heels. Then he slipped into the mob and made straight for the roan bullock. They rubbed against each other. Presently, with long grunting sighs, they lay down.

The night-guard grinned, meeting his mate as he rode.

“The Boss’ll be pleased in the morning—I *don’t* think,” he said. “The cat’s come back!”

## CHAPTER XII

### DAYTIME CAMP

I 'D spell them to-morrow, if I was you," said Gribble that evening to Jim. "That bunch that played the fool in the hills need a rest; there's a dozen of 'em limping, what with cuts and strains. Wonder was there weren't a few broken legs, the way they came racing up and down those gullies. It was dead lucky there were enough of us to stop them."

Jim grunted assent. Gribble had been with the lead during the trouble. Murty had reported privately that he had not done much to help matters.

"Took up a commandherin' position on a ridge, he did," Murty had said, a twinkle in his eye. "'Twas a shmall piece to the right of where the real work was. Shoutin' orders he was, an' crackin' his whip very fanciful. If we hadn't held 'em in the gully above they'd have gone past him without noticin' he was there at all."

"He showed up quickly enough when we got them stopped," Jim had said.

"He wud." Murty's voice held scorn. "That wan's a dale quicker at takin' credit f'r a job than at doin' the job itself. But to hear him talk on the way down ye'd gather that if he'd been in the rear there'd niver ha' been anny trouble whatsomiver. I towld him 'twas wishful the poor bastes were to get down to him, that always looks afther them so well. So we had no more chat afther that."

Remembering this conversation, Jim was not inclined for any unnecessary chat with Gribble himself. He had already decided to give the mob a day's rest. Not only on account of the limping bullocks; the others were still excited and nervous, and they had eaten little all day. A quiet spell would put them all in better condition for the road.

"Yes, we're camping all day to-morrow," he said. "They'll want extra watching to-night, Gribble; if you'll see to that for the first half of the time Mr. Meadows and I will go on duty after midnight. Don't put on any of the men who had the job of stopping the cattle—their horses will need a rest, even if they don't."

"I wonder if he'll put himself on," said Wally as they walked over to the camp. "He looked pretty sour, didn't he?"

"The idea of extra work always makes that chap look sour. No, of course he won't put himself on—if he did it would infer that he hadn't been among the hard riding. But I fancy Gribble knows I've a pretty fair idea of how much, or how little, he does. He's always civil, but he doesn't like me a little bit."

“He doesn’t approve of any Billabong people at all, if you ask me,” Wally said. “Oh well, we can stand it. I’m as hungry as a hunter; as soon as Lee Wing feeds me I’m going to turn in, seeing that you mean to drag me out of my nice warm bunk at midnight.”

“You won’t need much of the warmth,” returned Jim. “We haven’t had as close an evening as this since we started. If it doesn’t bring up rain, I’m a Dutchman.”

But the rain held off, though next morning the sticky heat increased. The cattle had spent a peaceful night, except for a few looney bullocks who prowled about now and then, bellowing at the moon: the lame ones were better, and were attending to their own cure by standing girth-deep in a small lagoon. The mob spread out among the trees; some wandered across the plain, watched by a few riders, but they came back to the shade after mid-day.

No one had enough energy to move far from camp. It was a day for washing and mending; here and there men sat in a patch of shade laboriously stitching patches on to trousers, and washing hung from many boughs. A few plaited green-hide into stockwhips: others passed the hours with greasy packs of cards, or slept heavily.

Cranky had recovered his energy after his night’s sleep, but he was still sore from his fall and his bruises, and inclined to be bad-tempered. He had even had a difference of opinion with his friend the roan looney; they had fought with locked horns, shoving hard, grunting defiance at each other, while Rob looked on from a safe distance, earnestly hoping the roan would win. He had his wish: the roan was the heavier, and Cranky not at his best. The Hereford found himself pushed steadily backwards. He gave in at last, shaking himself free and swerving to one side; the roan came at him again, but Cranky had had enough. He trotted away with a lofty air that failed to deceive anyone—even himself.

“Good enough for you, you old goat!” shouted Rob triumphantly.

Cranky naturally had no idea of the small human’s meaning, but the voice served to increase his sullen anger at being beaten. He mooched away to the lagoon, where a much bigger bullock shoved him aside roughly, taking the very spot where he had planned to drink. Cranky splashed out wrathfully and walked round to the opposite side, annoyed to find that there the water was muddier. He stood in the lagoon for a long while, twitching his ears and switching his tail to drive away the flies. Then he slouched to find shade, and spent a lonely day poking about among the trees, well away from all the other cattle.

“I’d like to paint his picture and call it ‘Nobody Loves Me,’” said Rob. “Will you go after him if he doesn’t come home, Mr. Linton?”

“Not much!” Jim said firmly. “I wouldn’t care if he drowned himself, Rob

—not that there’s any place where he could drown. But he’ll come back of his own accord. He wouldn’t give us the satisfaction of losing him.”

Rob managed to enjoy his day’s holiday, hot as it was. Jim and Wally took him with them when they rode slowly over the plain and through the bush, looking over the bullocks. Since yesterday they seemed to accept him as a man, one of themselves; they included him in their talk, and taught him many points about cattle that he stored up in his mind—having already decided to possess cattle of his own some day. They talked, too, of horses, and told him yarns of good horses they had owned at Billabong. They promised to show him two of their best jumpers going round the steeplechase course they had made there; seeming to take it for granted that he would have time enough to see them. Rob wondered dismally what Uncle Syd would have to say about that.

Uncle Syd remained the one unpleasant fact in his new life. He seldom spoke to Rob; when he did, there was no kindness in his tone. He had been only too willing for Rob to leave his companionship, but now he made it clear that he resented the way in which the Billabong people had made him one of them. Only the afternoon before, he had spoken roughly when Rob had paid him a visit, seeing him sitting alone in the shadow of the chuck-waggon.

“Well—what do you want?”

“Nothing,” said Rob. “I just came to see you, Uncle Syd.”

“You needn’t have bothered. I don’t want you hangin’ round me. Too grand, aren’t you, since you took up with the toffs!”

“They’re not toffs,” Rob gave back hotly. “At least, they don’t act as if they were any different to me. They work as hard as anyone else—harder than some, I reckon.”

“Better tell the men that, an’ see how they like it,” said Flynn. “Well, you carry on bein’ a fine gent while you got the chance. It won’t last long. I can see I’ll have a nice job of breakin’ you in when I’m unlucky enough to have you on my shoulders again.”

“I don’t want ever to be on your shoulders again—never in my life,” muttered the boy. “I’ll get a job for myself, and you needn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Jobs are pretty scarce these days for grown men,” Flynn said. “What sort of a chance do you think a skinny little rat like you would have of gettin’ one? Not a hope. No, I’ll have to be your lovin’ uncle whether I like it or not, and a darned nuisance you’re goin’ to be to me. But you’ll have to toe the line, I can tell you that. You’ll do everything I tell you, or I’ll know the reason why.”

Rob had gone away with dragging steps to take refuge in the scrub, feeling he could not face even the Billabong people just then. Norah and Tommy had seen him go, and had told Jim and Wally later on what they had seen.

That—though Rob did not know it—was the reason that Jim and Wally had taken him with them to-day. If he had known it, he would have thought the unhappy interview with his uncle worth while, since it earned for him a wonderful afternoon. He forgot all about Uncle Syd in the joy of being treated as a friend by the two tall fellows whom he looked on as superior to any other men he had known. It was almost bewildering to have them talk to him, to be included in their jokes and laughter as well as in serious business, like matters concerning cattle. He found himself joking easily with them now and then—years alone with a mother who loved laughter had given him a quick tongue. The dread of Uncle Syd might come back to him to-morrow; to-day Uncle Syd simply didn't exist.

“Rob looked much more cheerful when you brought him back,” Norah told Wally and Jim that evening. “You must have given him a good time.”

“He's a nice youngster,” Jim said. “Plenty of sense—he has shown that all the time he has been riding, and he was really handy when the cattle broke away yesterday. He may say what he likes about his mare doing the job, but he was uncommonly plucky in the way he headed that bullock. I like young Rob.”

“I never heard him laugh until to-day,” said Wally. “We were fooling with him a bit—I thought I'd try to make that grave face of his relax. And he went off into a perfect howl of laughter. Did one good to hear him, poor kid. He made us laugh, too, more than once.”

“Daylight camps aren't much good to Rob,” remarked Tommy. “He doesn't like to quarter himself on us—he's very careful not to intrude at any time. But he hates going near the men's camp. So that leaves only Lee Wing, who generally sleeps a good deal when we camp in daytime. It usually ends in his wandering away into the bush by himself.”

“Unless you two take pity on him and march him off for a walk—I've noticed your ways,” said Wally, smiling. “Well, he can come with us any time we're not too busy, if we're by ourselves, can't he, Jim?”

Jim nodded assent. He was listening with one ear to sounds that drifted across from the cattle-camp: little restless sounds that only a bushman's ear would catch. The bullocks were moving more than was usual after they had been rounded up for the night. He heard the pad of feet, occasionally a faint clash of horn against horn as two bullocks got up close together: now and then a low bellow.

“They're uneasy this evening, Wal,” he said.

“No wonder, in this weather,” Wally answered. “There hasn't been a breath of evening breeze; it's closer than ever. It must be jolly hot over there, with all those big bodies close to each other.”

“I'll bet it is. Let's stroll over and have a look at them,” Jim suggested. “You girls had better turn in—it's long past bed-time.”

“Too hot to go to bed,” Norah said. “It’s close enough out here; I don’t feel a bit like going into a stuffy little tent.”

“Well, remember you’ll have to be up mighty early in the morning,” Jim warned them. “Why not bring your blankets outside, if you’re not keen on the tent? It’s what I mean to do myself when I come back.”

They went off into the gloom. The moon was up, but there was still deep shadow under the trees where they sat. Soon it would be high enough to turn the branches ghostly white and throw a chequered pattern of light and shadow on the ground. At this time the air was usually full of little rustlings of leaves overhead. But to-night not a leaf stirred in the still air, nor were there any sounds of birds. Only the restless movements of the cattle and the clink of hobble-chains as the horses shifted their positions. They too were uneasy to-night.

Jim and Wally came back presently.

“You two not in bed?—silly coots!” said Wally, politely. “Jim and I think we’d better go on guard. What a life we lead, don’t we!”

His tone was careless, but he moved quickly to get their bridles. Jim gave the low whistle Roany’s owner had taught him, and in a moment the big roan was heard coming quietly towards him. Wally did not wait to find his own horse among the little mob: he caught the first he met. The girls had the saddles ready, and in a few minutes they were riding away.

A new sound came to Norah and Tommy presently. The boys were singing as they circled round the cattle in the moonlight: a waltz song with a steady rhythm that never varied. The deep, low voices came clearly across on the still air. After awhile it seemed to the listening girls that the bullocks were quieter; certainly no longer was there any anxious bellowing.

“I believe they’re settling down,” Norah said. “Tommy—is that a breeze?”

She stood up. There was the faintest rustling of the dry leaves overhead. The breeze was coming: not enough to be called a wind, yet enough to bring a feeling of refreshment and coolness. Hobble-chains clinked as the horses turned to face it.

“Thank goodness!” Tommy said. “They’ll be back soon, Norah; we shall get into trouble if they find us out here still.” They dived hurriedly into their tents.

## CHAPTER XIII

### STORM

WELL, that breeze last night was a fraud, after all," said Wally. "I hoped it meant that the weather was changing, but to-day is worse than yesterday was."

"I've nothing to say against that little breeze," remarked Jim. "It helped to settle down the bullocks, and so we got half a night's sleep. Only it wasn't a sticker. We'll get no relief from this weather until it brings up rain."

"No—and the sooner it comes, the better, though I hope it will come gently. Not much chance of that, I'm afraid; if it doesn't end in a storm, I'm no weather-prophet."

"Oh, well, we've had storms before, and they haven't done us any harm," Jim said. "A good one would lay the dust and make travelling a lot easier. There's no temptation for the bullocks to feed when dust is lying thick over every bit of grass. They've lost a lot of condition in these last three days."

Wally knew more than his friend about the quality of storms in this region, but he saw no point in going into details. They were not always like the milder storms of Victoria, to which Jim was accustomed. Here they could be much fiercer, super-charged with electricity, hard for man and beast to endure until their fury had passed. This was one of the days when he wished that the girls were not with them. They were as cheerful as ever, but Tommy, who never grew tanned in the open-air life, had lost most of her colour this morning. Not much wonder, thought Wally, with the air like hot pea-soup. He had suggested that she should take a day in the waggonette with Lee Wing, but she had laughed at him.

"I'd far rather be on Trigger. Jim had your idea, too; but when one is riding there's less time to think about feeling hot and sticky. Just land us to-night at a nice creek where we can swim, Wally, and we shall all feel new little dogs."

"I wish to goodness we could," he had said. "But there's no flowing water until we're over this plain, and that's three days' going. I'll promise you a bucket of hot water from the lagoon we ought to strike to-night, if that's any help."

"Cold will do—you mightn't feel inclined to heat water if we're late in camping. Don't worry about me, Wally: I'm as fit as a fiddle."

Tommy would always be like that, Wally reflected; riding as steadily as Norah, never letting on that she was tired. She had pluck enough for anyone three times her size. But this unusual weather was trying even for tough

Australians, and the English girl must be feeling it more than any of them. It must add to Jim's worries; Jim watched her carefully, he knew, but there was no way of easing things for her. That was the trouble about droving; the Boss couldn't consider any individual—only what was best for the cattle.

He straightened his shoulders, half-angry with himself for being troubled. What was the use of worrying? The girls had gone into this with their eyes open, knowing they'd have to take the rough with the smooth. It's only this foul weather that's making me feel like a fussy old woman, he thought. I'd better take a pull at myself and think of something else.

There was nothing very uplifting to think about that morning. The cattle had gone fairly well when they started, when dew was still on the ground; but as the sun climbed higher and the grass became dry they dropped to a slow crawl. There was little enough grass, and what there was did not attract them; tough, wiry stems with scarcely a trace of green. The plain had looked faintly yellow when they started: now it was grey with the drifting dust kicked up by many hundreds of hooves. A wind would have carried it away, but in the motionless air it drifted, a low grey cloud through which the riders in the rear could scarcely see the plodding forms of the cattle ahead.

Far and wide over the plain the cattle straggled. The riders on the wings kept them from straying too far out, but giving them as much space as possible—the less they were concentrated together, the less dust rose, although that seemed only a figure of speech by the time the drovers gathered for lunch. Dust lay thick over everything: the faces of the riders were grimed, the colours of the horses and cattle dim under a grey coating. There was no water for beasts; the chuck-waggon carried a supply for tea, but that was all, except for a short allowance for the dogs. One after another the dogs came in answer to their masters' whistles, drank thirstily from a tin dish, and went back to the nearest patch of shade.

"It's banking up in the south," Jim said. "I believe we'll get a change before night."

"It'll be a corker when it comes," remarked Gribble. "I never saw a day like this that didn't end in the father of a storm. What about the ladies travellin' under cover with your Chow? They'll get a soakin' if they don't."

"I suggested that, but they won't hear of it," Jim answered. "Anyhow, the old waggonette is a long way from being rain-proof: Lee Wing will get nearly as wet as any of us."

"That welly blue," agreed Lee Wing. "Feel pletty good to be wet, I leckon. But could stow ladies in the back, Mas' Jim."

"They won't be stowed, Lee Wing," Norah said cheerfully. "A wetting won't hurt us, and we've a change of riding kit if we get really soaked."

"An' you'll need 'em," was Gribble's grim comment. "When it rains out

here, it rains.”

“How about you, Rob?” asked Wally. “There’s plenty of room to stow you away behind Lee Wing.”

“Oh, please not, Mr. Meadows,” the boy said eagerly. “I’d much rather stay with the cattle.” He looked up at Wally, his face anxious. There was nothing he wanted less than to be treated as a small boy and placed under cover.

“Please yourself, old chap. Got things to change into?”

“Yes, lots, thanks.” Rob slipped away to where Star stood under a tree, fearing that if he stayed where he was the grown-ups might change their minds about him. He breathed more freely when Lee Wing climbed to his seat and drove after the waggon.

The dark bank in the south mounted very slowly as the afternoon dragged on. Hour by hour the sweating bullocks plodded along, heads down, the pretence of feeding completely abandoned. There was only water to hope for in their dull minds; until they could drink, feeding was out of the question. The hope of water drove them steadily ahead, giving riders and dogs nothing to do. The looney bullocks were as subdued as the rest: even Cranky kept to one line, without spirit enough to do anything but plod.

The dust-haze floated up gradually until the sun looked like a great ball of copper seen dimly through a golden mist: the earth grew shadowed. Far off a bullock lifted his head and gave a moaning bellow. It was answered by another in the centre. A change came over the cattle. As if moved by that lonely sound they began to draw together, seeking companionship. They went forward still; but those on the outskirts changed direction, taking a slanting line that slowly brought them inwards. The riders on the wings followed them. Slowly the scattered ranks of cattle closed up until they had merged into one great mob, a sea of dusty backs with switching tails. Drivers and dogs kept well out from them, watching them closely.

Up and up the clouds mounted in the south, piled masses of purple and deep blue. They were spreading round the horizon now, blotting out the sun altogether: and still the air seemed to grow hotter, more breathless. With the disappearance of the sun the bullocks showed more definite uneasiness; heads tossed aloft, and here and there low bellowing broke out.

“Hope it comes before we get too near that timber,” said a man, looking at a dim line of trees ahead. “It wouldn’t be any fun to be caught among them trees.”

“I’ll say it wouldn’t!” said his mate fervently.

The cattle saw the trees through the haze. They began to press on, with a vague idea of seeking shelter as the clouds rolled higher and higher. Men rode to the lead, trying to steady them, their dogs trotting across the front rank of

the mob. The bullocks hesitated, irresolute. They were not yet prepared to ignore the warning presence of dogs ahead of them.

A low rumble of thunder sounded, far to the south. It ran round the sky, waking a hundred echoes. In the stillness that followed the air grew suddenly colder. Then, without warning, came wind: a shrieking, tearing wind with clouds of thick dust. It screamed through the tree-tops and over the mob, bearing with it strips of bark torn from the trunks and clusters of leaves, that stung when they hit a rider's face. The bullocks could not face it. They stood for a moment, feet planted firmly, heads down. Then they whirled, trying to escape by the way they had come.

There were dogs in that direction too, and quickly-moving men: the sharp cracking of stockwhips broke out whenever a beast tried to break away. A dog leaped at a bullock's nose as he blundered forward in the lead; the beast swerved back, feeling a sharp nip on his heel that sent him faster. As suddenly as it had come, the wind dropped. The cattle stood irresolute. Then their first instinct asserted itself again—water. Water lay ahead, in the direction in which they had been marching all day. A troubled lowing, thirsty and anxious, ran through them as they yielded to the urging of the drovers: each beast swung round again, heading for the trees that showed dimly through the dust, far ahead.

Jim, riding down the wing, called Rob to him and spoke quickly.

“Get back to the ladies, Rob. Tell them I say they're to keep well out—they're not to come too near on any account. If the cattle break they can't stop them—they're not to try. More use if they watch which way they go. And you stay with them.”

He wheeled his horse and was gone. Rob, looking downcast, took his message to the girls, who received it without any pleasure.

“That means we're just passengers,” said Tommy sadly. “Well, he knows best, of course, but one would like to be a little use. How far out is ‘well out,’ Norah?”

“A bit further than this, I'm afraid,” Norah said. “We've got to obey orders, Tommy, but never mind. We may be in for a job of work, wherever we are. Don't be far from us, Rob, and watch out in case Star doesn't like thunderstorms.”

“Well, *I* do, so she'll just have to like it,” Rob said doggedly. “Gosh, I wish I had a dog and a stockwhip! It's awful not to be a man!”

The sky had grown black in the uncanny stillness that had followed the wind. Again came the deep rumble of thunder rolling round the sky . . . again and again. Once more the stillness followed, oppressive, choking. They felt their skins tingling; beads of sweat ran down their faces. The cattle had halted after going a hundred yards, and stood still, wild-eyed and anxious, every head

lifted. Cranky suddenly ran out on the wing, bellowing. A dog was at him in a flash, and he plunged back into the mob.

“It *would* be Cranky!” said Rob bitterly.

As he spoke a vivid streak of jagged lightning seemed to split the sky, lurid against the blackness. It was gone: they tightened their reins instinctively, waiting in a tense silence. Then came a crash of thunder, directly overhead it seemed, terrifying in its nearness. Mingling with its echoes rose the roaring of hundreds of bullocks, bellowing and panic-stricken. Another flash, another burst of thunder; and the mob was off at a gallop, a frantic torrent of bucking backs and clashing horns.

Every horse was galloping as soon as the bullocks; every dog knew exactly what it had to do. There was no stopping that racing mass of blind terror, but there was hope of keeping the cattle from crashing into the timber. Dogs raced to the leading bullocks, leaping at those that galloped on the edge; with every leap a bite showed on the sweat-matted hide. Behind the dogs came the racing stockmen, whips ringing out as they fell across the faces of the leaders. The bullocks swerved inward in their fright and bewilderment, jostling into those behind them; as each gave way, dogs and riders gained ground, galloping with the cattle but always edging them away from the trees. It was a near thing; the timber was only a few hundred yards away when they swung westward.

And still the line of riders raced with them, and the whips rose and fell: still the dogs leaped at their flanks, lithe streaks of silent fury that unnerved them more than even the flashing lightning and the rattling thunder. They found themselves milling in confusion, as the drovers circled them; too tightly packed now to gallop, meeting each other head to head as the ring closed in. They slithered to a standstill, sides heaving, eyes glaring; subdued for the moment, but ready to break away at once if a chance offered.

“Jove, that was a quick thing!” Jim said to himself. “And there’s plenty of fight in them yet.” He patted Roany’s wet neck. “You’re a great horse, old man. If only the blessed rain would come!”

The rain was slow in coming. The dry storm went on, increasing in violence: there seemed hardly any interval now between lightning and thunder. All round the sky the lightning flickered and leapt; jagged flashes pierced the gloom overhead, blinding in their sudden brightness. And the thunder that rolled almost continuously was punctuated in the same way by sudden claps that seemed to shake the earth. With each clap panic mounted in the bullocks. Even the stock-horses, trained as they were, showed signs of nerves, starting and trembling as the unearthly display went on.

It was a crash of terrific violence that set the mob going again after ten minutes of tenseness; and this time they did the thing Jim had most feared. The mob-spirit forsook them; it became a matter of every bullock for himself.

Cranky was the first to set the example. He flung up his head, bellowing, and dashed into the open, followed by a line of half-maddened beasts; another looney bullock did the same at the other side of the mob. No spaced-out ring of riders could hold them then. The cattle fled in a dozen different directions, radiating out across the plain, and it would have taken an army to stop them.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CRANKY

WHEN Jim had ordered Rob and the girls to a place of comparative safety and inaction, he had reckoned without their horses. The riders had been prepared to obey orders, however little they liked them. The horses, trained to stock work from their first breaking-in, knew nothing of orders. They knew only their job; and they did it.

With the first great clap of thunder Lancer, Trigger and Star were ready. They had stood watching the mob intently: as the rush of bullocks went forward they sprang into a gallop. Before their riders could realise it they were in their places on the flank, racing with the cattle.

There was nothing they could do about it, except to keep well outside of the men and the stockwhips; and this, luckily, the horses seemed willing to do, though probably puzzled by not being in the thick of things. Still, there was work for them: several times a bullock, trying to strike out for freedom, found his way blocked by horses whose unarmed riders drove at him with yells of fury, so that he wheeled back into the mob.

Jim and Wally never saw the three who had become mutineers in spite of themselves. Their eyes and all their energies were given to their task of swinging the mob away from the timber. Other men saw them, and admitted to themselves that they certainly had pluck. As for the three culprits, once on the job they thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Norah was not far from Wally when the cattle broke away for the second time, headed by Cranky. She hesitated, uncertain what to do; with the mob split up into so many sections there seemed almost too many opportunities of work. But Wally set sail after Cranky and his followers, followed by Fenton and Spotty. Norah decided instantly that her work lay where Wally went.

Lancer was in his stride in a moment. Cranky had headed for the timber, his band at his heels. They had a fair start, and the distance was not enough to give the men time to turn them. They were half mad with terror and excitement; to be in the shelter of the timber would give them their only chance of escaping from their pursuers. Into it they dashed, fifty yards ahead of the men.

Wally pulled up for a moment.

“We’d better get round them quietly, Bill,” he told Fenton. “They won’t run far in that thick stuff, if they don’t hear us behind them. I’ll go right if you go left—Spotty will be as good as ten men inside there.”

“Good-oh,” Fenton agreed. He hesitated. “Seen your missus?”

Wally looked round sharply. Norah had just pulled up behind him. She met his eyes, trying to look meek. But her twinkle somewhat lessened the effect she hoped for.

“Nor, you’ve no business to be here,” he said. “Jim told me he’d sent you people word to keep out of the way.”

“And so we did—only the horses thought differently,” she told him. “They just took charge of us and did as they liked. After all, Wally, you couldn’t expect Mr. Parker’s horses to keep away from a job like that. But we had quite a good time.”

“Well, for goodness’ sake get out of it now, and take Tommy with you,” he said impatiently. “And young Rob too. Go ahead and find the waggonette if you can, before the rain comes. We’ll be out all night, I should think, unless Jim decides to leave the cattle till the morning: the brutes have us fairly beaten this time. Anyhow, I’m going to get this bunch out and see what comes next. But do get away to camp, Nor, or I’ll be worried stiff about you.”

Very much Norah wanted to stay and help him. But she looked at his strained face and realised that she could help him best by doing what he asked.

“All right, dear; I’ll go,” she said. “Come after us as soon as you can; I don’t suppose the camp is far away. Jim will never be able to round up the cattle to-night: he might as well get the men under cover before the rain breaks. It will be a deluge when it comes. Why not leave this bunch where they are and go to consult him?”

Wally’s face set in obstinate lines.

“No, I’m going to get them out,” he said: “and I hope I’ll get a chance of using my whip on that mad-headed Hereford. Jim can do what he likes then. Get along quickly, Nor, while I go and deal with him.”

He went off to the right. Norah watched him until he wheeled his horse into the scrub. In the thick gloom of the evening, under the storm-laden sky, it looked very dark inside the timber belt. Only when flashes of lightning lit it up could she see any distance among the trees. The going was rough there, with plenty of fallen timber; not a nice place to search for half-distracted cattle, with an electric storm in full blast. And as if in answer to her thought came a rattling peal of thunder that made Lancer start and shiver.

She hated riding away. All her being cried out to be in there with Wally, sharing his job as they had shared so many others. It was her half-joking belief that danger only threatened him when he went away without her. Not that she had any false ideas about taking care of him; Wally was the last person on earth to let a man stand between him and danger, much less a woman. Yet somehow it had happened that when they had been together danger had sometimes come close, but had never hurt them: the hurts had come only when

he was alone. Wally always declared that this was the right way for things to happen—a view which made no appeal at all to Norah.

She let Lancer take his own pace as she went back to look for Tommy and Rob. The horse, too, seemed to feel he should not be going away; there were cattle in the timber who had no right to be there, men and horses were looking for them, and Lancer knew he should be on the job with them. He went slowly, ears pricked, glancing back once or twice. “If I gave you half a chance you’d be after them,” Norah told him.

Out on the plain were galloping men and the thunder of hundreds of hooves, now growing fainter in the distance. The gloom was growing deeper; she could see only a little way except when lightning illuminated the whole plain, revealing the flying bullocks. They were scattered in every direction; the men had dashed off separately in the heat of the moment when the mob broke away, or surely they would know, Norah thought, there would be no possibility of mustering them to-night. Perhaps at any moment she would hear Jim’s shrill whistle, calling in the men.

A flash of lightning showed her where Tommy and Rob sat on their horses some distance away. Jim must have seen them and ordered them to stay behind: now they were waiting as patiently as they could until she came to join them. “Well, we’d better make for camp as fast as we can, Lancer,” she said aloud.

Then, suddenly, she knew she could not go. Something called within her, tugging at her, urging her to turn back. She resisted it for a minute; had she not promised Wally that she would go? She pictured the hurt surprise on his face if he saw her coming to join him in the timber. And there was the chance that she might do exactly the wrong thing, blocking the bullocks just as the two men hunted them out into the open. That thought brought another picture—the wrath and amazement of Wally and Fenton if the cattle broke back again into the scrub.

But no pictures, however vivid, could compete with that sudden, overwhelming impulse to turn back. There had been other times in Norah’s life when such impulses had come to her: she could not understand them, but if they persisted she knew she could do nothing but obey. She gave way now. Lancer was quick to respond to her touch on the rein. He turned, trying to break into a canter, but she held him in. “Less chance of interfering with the cattle if we go quietly, old boy,” she said.

Before they came near the timber she knew that Wally and Fenton had found the cattle. She heard the pounding of hooves among the trees and a sharp yap from Spotty; an unusual sound from a dog who always worked in silence, but anything unusual might happen in the electric atmosphere of that evening. Whatever made him yap, he must have had his revenge; a sudden bellow of

angry pain told of his teeth getting home on a bullock's heel. No bullock ever kicked Spotty when heeled by him: the blue dog knew to a hair how to flash after a galloping beast that he must stop; to bite the heel of the leg that held the bullock's weight, and to drop flat instantly, so that the savage kick of retaliation passed harmlessly over him. "Well, he got home that time," Norah said. "I do hope it was on Cranky."

She pulled up a little way from the trees, uncertain of what to do. It was clearly unwise to go into the timber, and she had no impulse to do so; instead there was a curious sensation of peace in being where she was, as if she had found the right place. Lancer stood quietly, undisturbed by the constant flashes and flickerings of lightning or the rolling of thunder; she supposed he was getting used to the storm. It did not trouble Norah herself; like Rob, she had always loved a thunderstorm. This was certainly one of a kind she had never known; but its effect on her was not fear, but a subdued excitement. "I think the air is full of radio messages," she told herself. "Perhaps it was one that sent me here."

The noises in the timber grew louder, nearer. The bullocks were galloping; she heard crash after crash as they cannoned into overhanging boughs. Behind them came the heavier sound of horses. They would be out in a minute now, she thought, her hand tightening on the reins as Lancer stirred in expectation. Like her, he was wondering what was his job.

Then came an angry shout from Fenton.

"He's broken back—get out in front an' block 'em. I'll fetch him out."

"Right you are!" Wally sang out.

A knot of bullocks broke from the scrub, bolting past Norah. A moment more, and Wally followed, riding hard, his hat jammed over his eyes. He did not notice Norah as he shot by her; all his attention was bent on the cattle. He swung out to head them.

Behind him, Cranky came out of the timber. He trotted a few yards, then stopped. Clearly he was in the worst of tempers; he pawed the ground and snorted loudly. There were whip marks on his hide, and his heel smarted like fire where Spotty had clamped his jaws on it. "Fenton's missed you in the scrub," Norah thought as she looked at him; not knowing that Fenton at that moment was off his horse, looking for his hat, swept from his head by a low bough.

The cattle Wally had driven out swerved suddenly, confused by a brilliant lightning flash. Back they came, until they saw Norah on Lancer; they propped, in horror at this new enemy, and dashed aside. After them came Wally. Cranky flung up his head as if prepared to show fight; and suddenly Wally's horse put his foot in a hole and rolled over, flinging his rider over his head. Wally made an effort to rise, groaned, and fell back.

Norah flung herself from the saddle and ran to him. He was unconscious; she felt him quickly, dreading to find a broken limb. Then a sound made her glance up from where she knelt beside him.

It was Cranky, bent on revenge. He came with lowered head, his long, sharp horns ready for action; not fast, but with a deadly purpose that made her shudder. She sprang to her feet, waving her arm at him, shouting; he hesitated, but only for a moment. Norah picked up Wally's big felt hat and flung it with all her strength. It hit the Hereford across the eyes: he gave back a yard, then saw how useless a thing it was, and poked it contemptuously with his horn.

"If I only dared to get Lancer!" Norah uttered. But she knew she dared not run those few yards and take time to mount. Not for one second could she cease to interpose her body between the half mad bullock and the senseless man on the ground. If she could check him for a few moments surely Fenton, hearing her cries, would come.

As she shouted again, she remembered Spotty. Would he come to her whistle—Fenton's whistle, that he had told her she might use? It was worth trying. She drew a quick breath and sent out Fenton's call . . . again . . . again: stopping to shout and wave her arms as Cranky moved forward threateningly. The lowered horns were very near; he was gathering up his anger to rush her.

From the scrub came a flying blue streak, silent and vengeful. Spotty flashed between her and the horns, whirled, sprang, and caught the bullock by the nose. He hung on grimly as the Hereford tried to shake him off: there was no loosening that grip. Cranky fell to his knees, grunting and snorting furiously; Norah put out all her strength to drag Wally out of their way, shouting for help as she tugged at his inert body.

Quick hoof-beats echoed in the scrub, and Fenton rode out. He bit off an amazed exclamation and spurred his horse between them, swinging his stockwhip free.

"Let him go, Spot. Down, will you!"

The dog dropped back, twisting aside as he released his grip. Cranky struggled to his feet. The stockwhip rose and fell with a ringing crack: he swerved from it and bolted away, bellowing as he went. The sound of his going died away in the dusk.

Fenton dropped to the ground and bent over Wally.

"Is he hurt bad, d'you think?"

"I can't find any broken bones," she said. "His horse fell with him——"

"Didn't roll on him?" he asked sharply.

"No—he fell quite clear."

"Then I reckon he's only stunned," said Fenton. "He's tough. Gosh, I wish we had some water! Look, he's comin' round, I believe."

There were new sounds: Tommy and Rob, coming in answer to Norah's

shouts for help. They sprang off their horses.

“We heard you, but we thought you were working with Wally in the scrub, shouting at the cattle, at first. Then we knew something was wrong.” Tommy was beside Norah, an arm round her: her fingers on Wally’s pulse.

“It’s quite strong, Norah dear.” There was a catch in her voice.

“Strong as a horse, I’ll bet,” said Fenton gruffly. “Can’t knock that one out for long with a clean fall.” And as if in answer, Wally’s eyes opened and he looked at Norah and smiled.

## CHAPTER XV

### RAIN AFTER STORM

I 'LL say your old Chow's a wonder!" said Fenton.

The ride to the camp had not been a pleasant one. Wally had declared, after a few minutes, that he was quite able to ride; his horse, having picked himself up after his fall, had stood quietly at a little distance, shaken but unhurt, and Wally had mounted without assistance. But he swayed several times in the saddle as they went along. Norah and Fenton kept closely on either side, keeping a constant watch on him.

"You two might ride ahead and let Lee Wing know we're coming," Norah told Tommy and Rob. "Tell him to have hot tea ready—and fix up Wally's bunk if he hasn't had time to get it done."

Wally was understood to mutter that he was perfectly well able to see to his own bunk when he wanted it—a statement of which his companions took no notice. The advance party cantered off, glad to have a job.

Thunder and lightning and a man who could hardly keep himself in the saddle were not the best companions for a ride, Fenton considered. He was thankful when the lights of the camp fires showed through the gloom after they had skirted the timber belt, half a mile further on. The horses saw them and pricked their ears, almost forgetting the storm now that the prospect of rest was near. Still, it was nervous riding; Norah sighed with relief when it was over and they had steadied Wally to the ground.

The drivers had found a fortunate place to camp. A long outcrop of rock ran east and west, high enough to break the force of a southerly storm. The vehicles were drawn up in its shelter: on either side of them the tents were pitched. On such a night there could be no question of making two camps; they were lucky enough to have found a sheltered place for one.

Lee Wing had left nothing to chance. Every rope and tent-peg had been tested and, where necessary, reinforced. His cooking shelter was erected in front of a deep niche in the rock where he had made his fire, secure from rain when it came: pots were simmering round it already. The squat figure in blue shirt and earth-stained trousers was labouring to complete a system of storm-water trenches round the tents. He dropped his spade and hurried forward when the riders appeared.

"You all li', Mas' Wally? Put yo' arm lound my shoulder. Bunk all leady." He helped him into the tent, and Wally found that he was glad of the strong arm round him; glad to find himself on his bed. Fenton had come too; he

astonished them by stooping to pull off Wally's boots, unheeding their owner's horrified protest.

"Aw, you lie still until your head stops spinning," he said severely. "A mug o' tea'll fix you up. Not a move out of you until you've had a sleep, mind. I'll see to all the horses, Mrs. Meadows."

She looked at him gratefully. "Come back for a cup of tea with us afterwards."

Fenton hesitated. "Aw, I'll wait for the other chaps," he said awkwardly.

"No, you won't," said Wally, with surprising energy. "You come back, Bill, or I'll get up and bring it to you!"

"Gosh, if you're goin' to do that I s'pose I'd better come," said the stockman. "Well, thanks, Mrs. Meadows—tea'll go down good just now. I guess we've all got throats like lime-kilns."

"Waterhole jus' beyon' locks," Lee Wing announced. "Can of hot water leady for you two, Misse No-lah." He gazed at their faces critically. "You all welly dirty."

"Lee Wing, you're a dear!" said Tommy. "I want a wash even more than tea. And *how* I want tea!"

They were all much cleaner when Fenton returned; he, too, had found time for a wash. They crowded into Wally's tent, where Lee Wing handed round mugs and slabs of cake. Fenton sat cross-legged on the ground by the entrance and made his statement that Lee Wing was a wonder.

"Not a thing he don't think of—an' he'll do anyone a good turn, even in our camp. He's as faithful as my old Spotty. An' talkin' of Spotty, Mrs. Meadows, how did he come to be where you wanted him this evenin'? I thought he was with me in the trees—I never knew that dog leave me before."

"Well, I took you at your word, Mr. Fenton. I needed help pretty badly, so I sent out an S.O.S. for him. You told me I could use your whistle—though I never expected to want it."

"An' I didn't hear a thing," he said. "There was I, off me horse at the other side of the timber, lookin' for me hat. I was that wild when it got knocked off I pretty nearly left it, but it's the only hat I got, so I had to find it. Spotty's got quicker ears than I have. Queer, how he knew it was you. There's not another soul in the outfit he'd have gone to, no matter how they whistled."

He pondered over it, forgetting his tea. Norah was silent. It was not easy to talk of the moment when Spotty had come to help her.

"Queer, too, about that Hereford. There aren't many bullocks that 'ud attack like that. But he's always been a bit cracked—an' I s'pose this storm made him madder than usual. I never seen anything like it in all me days. It sure did play old Harry with the cattle. Couldn't blame 'em either," he added, as a peal of thunder rattled overhead. "It sort o' makes a bloke feel queer

himself.”

“And how!” agreed Wally. “I feel like an overcharged electric battery looking for an empty torch!”

“Well, I’d never have thought of that, but I believe that’s how I feel,” said Fenton. “All tingly-like an’ queer. If all them bullocks felt that way it’s no wonder they stampeded: there must be a mighty lot o’ loose electricity hangin’ round. But I’m darned sorry for the Boss: I know how keen he was to land ’em in good condition at Billabong.”

Spotty, lying near him, stirred and pricked his ears. He got up and went outside the tent.

“Hears something—I reckon it’s the others comin’ home.” Fenton finished his tea hurriedly. “I’ll go an’ give ’em a hand with the horses. Thanks a lot, Mrs. Meadows.”

Soon they heard the sound of hooves and the jingling of bits as the men rode into camp in a body. Jim came striding up to the tents, his face anxious.

“What’s this about Wally? Is he hurt?”

“Just came down hard enough to make me lazy, but I’ll be all right tomorrow,” Wally answered for himself. “Nothing to worry about. What about the cattle?”

“Gone to glory,” said Jim. He flung his hat off and rubbed the dust and sweat from his smarting eyes. “You never saw such a scatteration! Nearly every darned bullock took a different direction, and the dogs were too blown and too thirsty to be any use. It was a fool thing to go after them at all, but I didn’t realise that at the moment: we were all nearly as cracked as the bullocks. I never saw or felt anything like this storm.”

“Tea, Mas’ Jim,” said Lee Wing quietly at his elbow.

“Bless you, Lee Wing!” He sat down, taking the pannikin. “Stand by with the billy—I’ll drink the lot.”

“Me leave ’um here—got supper cookin’,” said Lee Wing stolidly. He went off.

“Well, this knocks all our time-table sky-high,” Jim said, between gulps of tea. “It may take us a week to round up the mob.”

“Won’t they stop on the plain, Jim?” asked Tommy. “Surely they won’t cross the hills again?”

“In ordinary weather I don’t think they would,” he answered. “But this isn’t ordinary, worse luck—and it isn’t over yet. They were in such a state of panic that the hills wouldn’t stop them. They might not cross, either—they might stray over them when the going got steep enough to check them, wandering round in the gullies. If they do that . . . well, we’ll have our work cut out to find them all: those hills get pretty rough and steep towards the west, not like the easy part where we brought them over.”

He paused, frowning heavily.

"I don't know how many we've lost, as it is. Quite a lot went head over heels on the plain in that last stampede; it was pretty treacherous going, because everything went black for a moment after each flash of lightning. Two of the men came down—didn't hurt themselves, thank goodness, but one of their horses is very lame; the chap had to leave him and double-bank home behind another fellow. There were holes everywhere."

"Yes," said Wally, feelingly. "My horse found one."

"So did a lot of the bullocks. Some of them got up again, but some didn't: my first job when it's light will be riding round with a revolver to put the poor wretches out of pain. And I thought I was going to land home with a really good tally!" he ended sadly. "My first big droving command—and I strike a thing like this!"

Norah, watching his face, had a sudden memory of a school cricket-match when a much younger Jim had dropped a catch that would have meant victory for his side if he had held it. The big fellow in the doorway looked very like that younger Jim now.

"It's no use worrying," she said firmly. "Everyone has a bad streak of luck now and then; and this may be better than you think. Just let the cattle and tomorrow take care of themselves, Jimmy: we won't add up losses until we come to them. And go in next door, where you'll find soap and hot water and a clean shirt. Supper will be ready any minute; we might as well get it over before the rain comes."

"Yes, ma'am," said the camp Boss meekly. He scrambled up, putting his arm through Tommy's. "Come along with me and make sure I've washed behind my ears before I see that woman again!"

The rain came soon after supper. There had been ten minutes during which the hot stillness of the air grew more intense, and the thunder and lightning wilder than ever. Then the first drops fell, great splashes that thumped on the canvas of the tents or sent the dust flying when they hit the ground. There was a pause when all Nature seemed to be listening anxiously: a savage roll of distant thunder; and the heavens opened. The rain came down in a solid sheet, drumming furiously on the upturned billies and tins near the fire-places, beating through the trees with a force that strewed the ground with leaves. In a minute or two Lee Wing's storm trenches were running rivers, with the water pouring madly away down a slope.

"Bless him for them!" uttered Jim, listening to the rushing water. "We'd have been completely flooded out if he hadn't dug them."

A heavenly coolness came into the air. There was no wind; the mass of descending rain drove away all the breathless heat of the day. In the tents it was still hot and stuffy. Norah, peering from the doorway beside Wally, was

suddenly visited by a brilliant idea. She slipped from his side: a moment later she went past him again, out into the open. The light from their hurricane lamp fell on her as she turned a laughing face to him—a dripping figure, clothed in bathing-suit, sou'-wester and gym. shoes.

“Gosh, what an idea!” shouted Wally. “Wait for me—I’m coming too!”

“Do you feel fit enough?” she asked doubtfully.

“I’ll be fit in two minutes when I’m out in that!” came a voice from within the tent.

“Well, I’ll pay a call on the others,” she said. “Hurry up.”

Confusion reigned in the other tent after the first glance at their visitor, as Jim and Tommy hunted wildly for suitable wear for a wet night. Within three minutes they were all out together, drawing deep breaths of coolness, rejoicing in the feel of rain on bodies that had been hot and sticky for so long. They marched away from the camp, their feet squelching on the water-logged ground. Now and then someone gave a sharp exclamation as a bare leg came in contact with a prickly bush: and there was unfeeling laughter when Jim fell bodily into a hollow full of water, his cry of surprise choked as the pool closed over his head.

“Brutes!” he gasped, emerging.

“Do it again, Jimmy!” Norah begged. “We couldn’t see you properly, but you sounded wonderful!”

“I will not,” declared Jim. “It’s not deep enough—I found bottom too soon. Otherwise, I’d throw the lot of you in!”

“Life’s all wrong,” said Wally. “For the last two nights I’ve ridden round those beastly cattle, singing until my throat cracked, and I never felt less like singing. Now, there aren’t any cattle, and all I want to do is to sing—very loudly.”

“No, you don’t,” Jim warned. “We’d have the whole camp out to see if the Boss’s crowd had gone mad. And of course, we have; but I’d just as soon they didn’t know it. I’d be a wash-out for ever if they saw me now.”

“‘Washout’ is just right,” murmured Tommy. “And what a wash! And how you needed it!”

“Well, though it seems incredible, I’m beginning to feel as if I might be chilly before long,” Norah said. “And I’ll certainly sleep to-night. Let’s go home.”

They splashed back happily. At his tent doorway Jim paused, listening.

“Something is moving over there,” he said. A heavy splash sounded, and then another.

“It may be only a dog.” He hesitated. “I don’t suppose one of the bullocks has come home to roost—but it could be. Carry on, Tommy, and I’ll go and see.”

Quietly he picked his way over the wet ground. A few moments later he came back, grinning broadly.

“Well, I thought I was a bit under-clothed, going abroad in nothing but bathing shorts,” he said, towelling his wet back. “But there’s someone out there who made me feel quite over-dressed. Young Rob’s running round in circles, falling into every pool he can find, absolutely happy—and not a stitch on him but his birthday suit!”

## CHAPTER XVI

### ROUNDING-UP

JIM and Wally were on their horses by sunrise next morning. All the storm-clouds had gone and there was promise of a perfect day. Only the sodden ground, with pools of water in every hollow, bore witness to the violence of the rain. The little waterhole had overflowed its banks. Drops still fell from the trees: a cool, fresh scent was in the air.

They rode beyond the timber belt and looked across the plain. Many bullocks were in sight, feeding as placidly as if they had never known what it was to go mad and stampede. Here and there, they had gathered into groups, but the greater number grazed apart from each other still. A few lay motionless, in fixed, unnatural attitudes; bullocks that would never get up again. Each of the boys carried a revolver. They separated, inspecting any beasts that were not standing up: now and then a shot sounded, a friendly bullet ending helpless suffering.

They met again when it was time to turn back for breakfast.

“Well, there are more here than I’d dared to hope, Wal.”

“Yes, and they look pretty fit, in spite of their bad time. Wonderful what rain will do. They’d have looked very different if they’d had another night of sticky heat, with nothing to drink. But there are plenty still missing, Jim.”

“Any number,” Jim agreed. “Well, we’ll cast a wide net over the plain today and round up all we can find. When we’ve counted them we’ll know better how we stand.”

“Here’s Gribble coming to meet us,” said Wally. “It didn’t occur to him that he might come out before breakfast on our job.”

“No: Gribble isn’t likely to exert himself before breakfast. I’ll admit, though,” said Jim, “that he worked like a good ’un yesterday. Never spared himself, especially when the mob broke away the second time. I saw him riding like fury after a bunch that went towards the hills: he must have gone a good way before he gave them best. Tony too; I don’t like that little Dago, but there’s no doubt he can ride. They came home very down in the mouth because they hadn’t been able to head them back.”

“What about your lot, Jim? You were disappearing into the distance with Murty when last I saw you.”

“Oh, we gave them a good run, and then we reckoned it was useless. I believe we could have headed them in time, but what was the point in running them off their legs, just to bring in a single lot? And the dogs were down and

out. Gribble brought his dog home with a strained shoulder, carrying him on his saddle. That dog won't do any work for a few days."

"Bad luck, when we shall need them all," said Wally. "Here he comes—looking pretty gloomy, too."

Gribble rode up, his face tired and anxious. He brightened a little at Jim's account of the cattle.

"Well, if there are as many as that in sight, the rest ought not to be so far away," he said. "I suppose it's all hands out after them directly we can get started?"

"Yes; each man carrying his own tucker—I told the cook last night to have it ready. No use wasting time by coming back to camp for lunch. We'll round up every head we can bring back and get them counted. I suppose you have a fair idea of that bunch you and Tony tried to head last night, Gribble?"

"Pretty fair," Gribble answered. "Between us we ought to be able to know them nearly all."

"Well, suppose you and Tony go after that lot? You know the line they took. Of course, they may have turned and joined the others, but there's a chance that they kept together. You may need help, though, if they've got into the hills."

"They won't have gone far once they struck steep going—even if they ever got there," said Gribble. "Oh, I guess Tony and I can handle them; and I suppose it really would be as well if we went after that bunch. There's a big Shorthorn among them that I could spot a mile off."

"Then you two get away as soon as you can. I'll scatter everyone else round the plain and comb out as much of it as we can cover. The cattle won't give any trouble; they're like sheep this morning."

"About time they were," Gribble said. "It's dashed hard luck for you to have had this happen, Mr. Linton. I'm awfully sorry about it."

"Oh, it can't be helped. Nature got a bit too strong for us, that's all," Jim answered. "And I don't suppose we'll lose many in the long run. They'll make back for their mates. There are not many killed, that's one comfort."

"There's one I'd like to see dead, and that's that infernal Hereford," said Gribble. "I never saw one bullock make so much trouble in a big mob. The only thing he's worth is a bullet."

"Yes; you needn't look his way if you're rounding any up. But I wouldn't mind betting he'll bring himself in quite tamely. He's the sort you can't lose. Well, breakfast ought to be ready, Gribble. I'd be glad if you and Tony got away as soon as you can."

The other riders were in good spirits. To most of them it did not matter if a few bullocks were lost: owners were supposed to be able to stand losses. For themselves it meant a pleasant break in the usual slow routine: no striking of

camp, no slow crawl after the mob. Instead, a day of individual action, beginning with a long canter on a glorious morning. They saddled-up as quickly as possible, pocketed their sandwiches, and went off, keeping to the south of the scattered bullocks on the plain.

Rob, since he belonged to the Billabong camp, felt a good deal of concern about whatever caused worry to Jim and Wally. But his faith in them was deep; he was sure that they would have their own methods of getting back the missing cattle. It was certainly hard luck about the bullocks that were dead, but there was no use in thinking about that. You couldn't bring a dead bullock back to life by worrying about him.

But you could go out to hunt for missing live bullocks; and that was a job after Rob's own heart. He thrilled with excitement as he rubbed down Star, who had celebrated the break in the weather by rolling very thoroughly in the wet mud near the waterhole. Lee Wing had excused him from all camp duties. He had said, "You lide welly far to-day, p'laps, Lob, no can tellee where catchee bullocks, better you get leady start onetime after bleakfast, see?" Rob saw immediately; and raced off to catch his mare. He didn't care how many pots and pans he scrubbed for Lee Wing on ordinary days. But to-day it was certainly uplifting not to be a pot-boy, but a real stockman.

Jim gave them their orders during breakfast.

"I don't want you three anywhere near the hills: if there's hill work we'll need dogs. We're all going west, riding pretty hard for a good way, and then turning to come back slowly and hunt: there's a good deal of timber to be gone through out there. I'm inclined to make scouts of you, and send you east. Don't try to round up bullocks: just cover as much as you can of the country to see if there are any there. That would give us an idea of what to do to-morrow if we don't get the lot to-day."

"Do you think any got away south, Jim?" Tommy asked.

"The only ones were that lot that Wally and Fenton went after. You see, going south meant heading right into the storm; they wouldn't do that, except that they made for the shelter of the timber. We know all about that bunch. Most of them broke for the west and north; I don't think many headed east. But it would certainly help if you scouted out that way and made sure."

"I believe we'll find most of them at the foot of the hills," Wally said. "They'd be pretty sure to turn away from the storm, especially when the rain came."

"Yes, that's likely. Watch out for lagoons or waterholes, Nor. They'll be able to drink anywhere to-day, but as soon as this rain-water dries up they'll make for permanent water. They can always smell it out. Rob, you'll need to use your eyes in every direction to-day."

"My word, I will, Mr. Linton!" he promised.

“Well, don’t get out of sight of each other,” said Jim. “You’ll scatter, of course, but don’t lose touch. And look after yourselves. It’s awkward if anything goes wrong when you’re alone—as Wally might have found out yesterday evening.”

“Too right I might,” Wally said—“that is, if I’d known anything about it.” His eyes met Norah’s; they were still bewildered when they thought of the strange impulse that had sent her back to him in his need. In their tent last night they had talked long about it.

“There’s no explaining it,” Wally had finished up. “We’ve known things like it, more or less, before this, and it’s always baffled us. It’s like radio messages coming out of nowhere that some people can pick up. But who sends out the messages?”

Norah had been silent for a minute before she answered.

“How can we tell? But it’s rather comforting to know that the messages are sent—that somewhere there’s a despatching station that cares a good deal when people need help. Perhaps some day we may realise that every one of us is a receiving station for messages like that . . . if only we keep tuned in.”

“But how can one keep tuned in?”

“Oh—just believe in the something that cares,” she had said, smiling at him.

Riding eastward with Tommy and Rob, Norah wondered if her theory applied to the finding of lost cattle. She came to the conclusion that it didn’t. People had to face that kind of difficulty for themselves, not expecting the help she thought of as “wireless”; there would be no initiative and courage if they thought everything was to be made smooth for them. Bullocks, when you looked at what they really signified, meant money; and Norah had far too much respect for her “wireless” to think it would concern itself with money . . . unless, perhaps, someone was in bitter need. That might make a difference.

But nobody was going to be ruined or very seriously troubled if the bullocks were not found. It would be more a matter of hurting the pride of the men responsible for them. Norah didn’t think the “wireless” cared about pride any more than about money. It concerned itself with deeper things. No; this was their own job, and it was up to them to see it through unaided.

They found a few bullocks in a patch of timbered country not far from the camp; it seemed worth while to get round them and drive them out in the direction of the others. Once in sight of the mob they could be depended upon to join them. Then the riders separated, cantering across the plain.

Rob thought it was a marvellous day. There was pleasure in being able to ride fast, enjoying the coolness and the good scents that came from the earth as it dried after the rain, hearing the birds that had come to life again and were busy in every tree. Best of all was feeling that he was a man, working on his

own account; free to swing off in any direction he chose, responsible for the part of the country over which he worked. His eyes were everywhere, scanning each hollow in the ground that might conceal a bullock that had lain down, each clump of trees where cattle could hide. He had beautiful visions of finding a small mob and driving them out in triumph to let the girls see them.

But they found nothing after the first little bunch had excited their hopes. Far and wide they went, but not a glimpse of a coloured hide rewarded their seeking. Rob made sure that he had come across his mob once when he heard a crushing in a patch of bush as he neared it; but it was only caused by a herd of kangaroos that fled bounding over the plain. When his wristwatch told him it was time to turn for home he was quite certain that no cattle had made their escape eastward.

Norah and Tommy were equally sure. They joined up half a mile from the camp, a disappointed trio of drovers.

“Kangaroos and wallabies, and not another sign of anything,” Tommy said. “Oh, and I saw a mob of emus stalking on the sky-line, one behind the other. Quite exciting to a new-chum like me—but definitely not bullocks.”

“Well, it bears out Jim’s theory that they preferred to go north and west,” said Norah. “I expect we shall find the men have made a good haul.”

So they had; the mob on the plain was certainly much larger when the three scouts came within sight of it. They could see men riding slowly among the scattered groups of cattle, disturbing them as little as possible while they counted them; Jim’s tall figure on the big roan towering over the others.

“No job for us there,” Norah said. “We’d only get in the way if we went near them. Let’s rub down our horses and then see if Lee Wing has a billy boiling.”

Jim and Wally came home at dusk, only half-satisfied with their results.

“We’ve picked up a lot, and there were only three more dead ’uns,” said Jim. “What luck did you have?”

He heard Norah’s report, knitting his brows.

“Well, the lot you started home when you first went out must have joined up, so they’re included in the count we’ve just made. If you three saw no more the whole day, I think we can rule out the east altogether; I never thought they headed there. That means we’re fifty or sixty short. We didn’t miss any on our stretch of plain, we’re fairly certain.”

“What about Gribble?” asked Tommy.

“He isn’t back yet. I’m hoping he will have picked up the lot he was after, though how many were in it I don’t know. If he’s had no luck we can be fairly certain the missing ones have taken to the hills. And that,” Jim ended, “will be a darned nuisance.”

“Well, don’t jump that bridge until you come to it,” advised Wally.

“Gribble and his man are quite likely to come home with their lot. It looks to me as if that’s why they’re so late: they should have been home by now if they had no cattle to drive.”

But when Gribble and Tony reached camp, long after dark, they had only a story of failure. They had searched that section of the plain thoroughly, hoping always to find the bullocks among the timber, but with no result. Late in the afternoon they had taken to the hills.

“We got up to the top of the ridge, reckoning we’d see them somewhere,” said Gribble. “Not a sign of them, though. I thought, of course, we’d be able to track them. But you know what that rain was last night, how it came down in sheets—heaviest rain ever I heard. The ground’s just washed clean. Up in the hills the sides of the gullies must have been like cataracts; there’s fairly deep water in quite a lot of those gullies to-day, where there wasn’t enough slope to run it off. It’s tough going there now, everything’s so slippery: a horse’ll slide back nearly as far as he climbs. A lot of land-slides, too; one started under Tony, and he and his mare finished on their sides down in the gully in a heap of earth.”

“Did you hurt yourself, Tony?” Jim asked.

“Bit shook up, Boss. Nottin’ to fuss about,” said Tony. “De horse she all right.”

Both men looked weary and dejected. Their ride had been a hard one, Jim knew; rents showed in their clothes, scratches on their hands and faces. Tony was mud-stained from head to foot. Such things would have meant nothing to them if their hunt had been successful; they added a good deal to the humiliation of failure. Jim and Wally sympathised fully with that humiliation. Gribble was second in command, and he had made sure of finding the cattle; it could not have been easy to return empty-handed.

“Well, it’s dashed hard luck to have a trip like that and get nothing out of it,” Jim said. “You two would have found them if anyone could have done it, that’s certain. Can’t be helped; we’ll all start out after them to-morrow.”

Wally said, “I think a drink wouldn’t do you two any harm—you look as if you could stand it.” He brought a flask from his tent; the drovers drank eagerly.

“By jove, dat good, Boss!” Tony said. “Putta da life in a man again!”

“I’ll say!” Gribble looked at them warmly. “Gosh, I hated coming back like this—not a thing to show for a day’s work. We met Traill as we came in—he says you’ve got all but fifty-odd, Mr. Linton. And we didn’t bring home a hoof,” he added half angrily.

“Not your fault, I know that,” returned Jim. “You had the toughest job of the lot: ours was very soft going, compared with it. Well, forget all about it for to-night. I told the cook to keep supper hot for you; you’d better go and get it,

and then have a good night's sleep. There'll be plenty of work to-morrow."

"We'll be ready for it," Gribble told him. "Good-night, and thanks awfully, Mr. Linton." They tramped heavily towards their camp-fire.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THREE SCOUTS

I NEVER thought that I could feel sorry for Gribble,” said Tommy. “But I did to-night. He looked so hang-dog and disgusted with himself—and so utterly tired.”

“Well, he had good reason to be tired,” Jim said. “They must have had a gruelling day, on top of some pretty bad days. But I’m like you, Tommy: I couldn’t help being sorry for him. It was rather a surprise to me to find that he took the business so much to heart. He’s been so easy-going about work that I’d have said he wouldn’t care two hoots if we had losses. It just shows you can’t size up a man until trouble comes.”

“And what happens now?” Tommy asked. “All hands to search the hills, I suppose?”

“All the hard and horny hands,” he said, smiling at her. “Not you three scouts, though. You stop at home.”

Tommy’s face fell. Norah sighed, and said, “I was afraid you’d say that, Jimmy.”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? But you needn’t imagine you’re going to sit at home in ease. This isn’t going to be a pleasure-trip for anyone. I want to have every available man, and we must take blankets; there’s a strong chance that we’ll have to camp under the stars to-morrow night. Even Rob’s lazy swine of an uncle will have to turn out with us. He’s pretty useless except as cook’s mate, and not too good at that, but we can put him on a quiet horse with billies and bags of tucker hung all round him. And if he doesn’t find water for our tea in the hills the men will probably take him to pieces.”

“What a painful awakening is coming for poor Mr. Flynn!” murmured Tommy. “Jim, do let me see his face in the morning when he hears his fate. Lee Wing told me he has had such a beautiful time to-day—when he wasn’t eating he was asleep in his tent.”

“I shouldn’t wonder—that would be Mr. Flynn’s idea of a perfect day,” grinned Jim. “He won’t enjoy to-morrow a little bit. I’ll probably have to explain to him that I’m only taking him because he’s too useless to leave. If he were a better man I’d be leaving him to keep an eye on the cattle. As it is, that duty is going to fall on the shoulders of our three scouts, or A.D.C.’s, or whatever you like to call them, with Norah as commander-in-chief.”

“I felt that was coming,” said the commander-in-chief, without enthusiasm. “We ride the range and sing hill-billy songs, I suppose. And the bullocks go to

sleep.”

“Don’t let them sleep too much—I’d rather they were feeding. You really could go to sleep most of the time yourselves; they’re thoroughly enjoying this plain, and they won’t go too far from the water. Still, for form’s sake you can ride round them once a day, just to let them know you’re on the job; and turn stragglers back if they’re too enterprising. Thank goodness we’ve lost your friend Cranky. I doubt if he’d be able to lead them into mischief just now, but he’d certainly try.”

“I have a strong wish never to see Cranky again,” Norah said. “If I do, I hope Spotty will be somewhere handy.”

“I hope he’s broken his neck in the hills,” Jim said gruffly. “Nor, you people needn’t spend too much time looking at the mob. They won’t need it unless anything unforeseen comes along. But you might ride out further to see if any of the missing cattle have come wandering back. There’s always a chance of that happening.”

“That sounds better,” she said, brightening. “It will cheer Rob; he’s been hoping to be taken into the hills.”

“It will also cheer him to see Uncle Syd being taken away decorated with bags and billies,” Tommy said with a chuckle. “What a pity, Jim, that it has to be a quiet horse!”

Jim regarded his wife with a stern eye.

“There’s a streak of wickedness in you, Tommy, that alarms me at times. Do you want to risk our billies and our tucker?”

“Goodness, no!” she said. “Not for one moment. That is why I know it must be a quiet horse. But as far as Uncle Syd goes, I should just love to see him on something that pig-jumped and set all the billies and bundles jumping and banging round him. He’d be so very unhappy—and Rob would enjoy himself so much. He’d give one of his shouts of laughter that does me good to hear—they don’t come often. I think,” Tommy added, becoming suddenly in earnest, “that there should be special unpleasantnesses invented for a man who makes a boy look as Rob did when we found him.”

“You two have made a pretty good job of curing him,” Jim said. “Nobody would recognise that boy now. I was thinking the other day, looking at him—at first I was all against you two coming on this trip, but it’s been worth it, if only because you were able to get hold of that lonely little kid. And of course there have been other advantages,” he added generously. “You’ve kept my socks in wonderful order!”

Rob was somewhat dashed in spirits to find in the morning that he must remain in camp. Jim eased his disappointment by a few words.

“I wouldn’t care to leave Mrs. Linton and Mrs. Meadows here without someone to look after them, you see, Rob. Lee Wing does that in camp, of

course, but I'm relying on you to see to their horses and save them any trouble you can. The cattle will need a certain amount of attention, too: they'll have to be inspected. And it's still necessary to ride out further and look for strays. So you'll have a busy time, and I'll expect to find everything in order when I come back."

"'Do my best, Mr. Linton." He felt rather like a recruit being unexpectedly taken into consultation with a full-blown general. "Gosh, I'd like to find some of those bullocks for you!"

"Well, so you might. Keep your eyes skinned, anyhow, whenever you're riding. Any of them might come poking back to find the mob. At all events, I'm leaving you responsible for doing whatever you can, Rob. You're quite sensible enough to take responsibility."

That was wonderfully good to hear. Rob felt quite two inches taller. And as Tommy had predicted, there was deep gratification in seeing Uncle Syd ride away with the men, jogging in great discomfort, with bulging sugar-bags bumping against him and billies clanking and clattering: his face a study of bad temper and disgust. A drover shouted to him, "Keep back, can't you, Syd? My mare don't like goin' out with a tin-can band!" It was clear from Uncle Syd's expression that the present moment afflicted him almost beyond bearing, while the future was even darker. Rob hugged himself with delight. "I wouldn't have missed that for ten pounds!" he told Lee Wing—who had been equally entranced by the spectacle.

"I leckon him solly him born welly soon," said Lee Wing. "Too li' him have uncomf'tlabubble lide, eh, Lob?"

Norah and Tommy found themselves waited on vigorously: their boots spirited away to be polished, their horses groomed in a manner that must have astonished Lancer and Trigger themselves. Lee Wing had told Rob that he needed no help from him while the camp remained where it was. "You look after ladies, Lob—altee same Mas' Jim and Mas' Wally. You stockman now, not camp-boy, see?" But the girls noted that Rob continued to bring in firewood and chop it for the old man. Lee Wing objected; his protest was met with, "Well, firewood's a man's work, isn't it?"—in an off-hand manner so clearly modelled on Jim's that Lee Wing chuckled softly to himself and said no more. "Lob" was choosing his own responsibilities; and he chose what he thought Jim would wish.

They rode out to the east on the first day, searching always for runaway bullocks, but without success: not that Rob had had any hope of finding in that direction the mob of his dreams and bringing it back to Jim. How should he, when Jim had said he didn't think the cattle had gone to the east? Still, it had to be done, and the ride was a good one, with plenty of fast going and some excellent logs to jump. They came home in good spirits, ready to do full justice

to Lee Wing's cooking; and Lee Wing had shot some pigeons, so that there was a stew of special excellence.

"I want music," declared Tommy as they sat round the fire after supper. "Norah, couldn't we borrow that drover's banjo?"

"Well, he isn't here to be asked," Norah said doubtfully. "I wonder if we ought to take it."

"He wouldn't mind a bit," Rob said eagerly. "I heard him tell another man he had half a mind to give it to you. I know where he keeps it. Do let me get it, Mrs. Meadows."

He was off without waiting for her consent, racing back in a moment with the banjo. The cook, who was playing patience on an upturned box in his solitude, had called out, "Oi! What are you doing with that thing?" There had been satisfaction in shouting back, "Mind your own business—Mrs. Meadows wants it!" The cook came only second to Uncle Syd in Rob's black list. He reflected that it was great to have a chance of being rude to him.

Norah sat with the banjo on her knee for an hour, playing tune after tune. When Rob had heard her before he had been too shy and lonely to ask for the tunes he wanted. To-night everything was different; he could ask without fear, and he begged for so many tunes that the girls wondered at the extent of his choice. They sang many of them. Rob's voice had not yet broken; he sang with a clear sweetness that somehow caught at Norah's heart. There was a new look of happiness on his face as he sat there singing. The thought came to her that his mind was not with them . . . something else held him and made him content.

"You ought to be in a choir, Rob," Tommy said when a song had died away.

"I was, back at home," he said. "In the church choir. I didn't like it much, though."

"I never knew a boy who did," Tommy laughed. "Where did you learn all those other songs?" She asked the question idly, regretting it almost before it was asked, for the boy's face changed. He hesitated.

"Mother knew them all," he said. "She had a fiddle—she could play anything you ever heard. We used to sing lots of things together." He paused, his face hardening. "Uncle Syd sold her fiddle . . . when he came . . . after—"

"The brute!" said Norah under her breath. She thought rapidly, watching him. Should she let him get back into his shell of reserve, thinking his lonely thoughts? Would it ease him, or hurt him too much, to talk of the things he had to hide in his heart?

"Rob," she said—"would it hurt you to tell us about your mother?"

He considered the question for a moment before he answered.

"No, I don't think it would. Of course I used to think I couldn't ever speak

about her to anyone again. There *wasn't* anybody, you see. I didn't think there ever would be anybody."

"I don't remember my mother," Norah said. "She died when I was a baby. But I often think that if I lost anyone I loved a great deal I would want to talk about that one. Suppose it was my little son Davie. I'd just have to talk of him, and keep remembering happy things about him. I couldn't put him out of my life. I would know Davie would hate that."

The boy stared at her. Suddenly he smiled.

"I think that's a great idea!" he said. "I never thought about it that way—I just choked back thinking all the time . . . if I could. And of *course* she'd hate it! Gosh, I am glad you put that idea into my head, Mrs. Meadows! It makes everything seem quite different."

"Well, you tell us just what she was like," Norah said quickly. "So that we can see her in our minds . . . as if we were making friends with her. And about what you did together."

He told them, sitting there with his arms clasped round his knees, the firelight falling on a face that had grown eager. The words came quickly: little memories tumbled over each other in his mind, asking to be released. The girls listened almost in silence: now and then a word or a question led him on. There were memories that set them all laughing; some that gave them a picture of some one who had been courageous—a plucky fighter, always a comrade.

When he ended, he looked at them in an astonished way.

"My word, I've talked a lot! But it's made me feel almost as if Mother was here. I've felt all along as if there was a sort of hard lump inside me, and now it's gone."

"And that's as it should be," Norah said.

"And we feel as if we knew your mother quite well," said Tommy. "That's as it should be, too."

When he had gone to bed they looked at each other.

"You took a chance there, Norah."

"I did," said Norah. "I was a bit scared, but I chanced it. There have been times when I simply couldn't bear the look on that boy's face when he was alone. All that—bottled up inside him, with no hope of release. Poor little chap, with his 'hard lump.' Well, thank goodness it has gone."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A SCOUT ALONE

WE'LL go round the cattle this morning," announced Norah at breakfast. "That is because it has to be done slowly, so it's duller work. Then after lunch we'll hunt round the plain to the west for cattle which I'm convinced are not there. If we have lunch early we might get nearly up to the hills." She stopped.

"Go on, Norah," urged Tommy.

"Go on where?"

"With what was in your mind. I could see it quite clearly. Anybody could. You went as far as 'nearly to the hills.'"

"Carry on, mind-reader," said Norah resignedly.

"So the next thing is, 'And who knows?—we might meet the boys coming home.' You needn't tell me it wasn't there. I was thinking the same thing myself, so that was how I knew." She took another flap-jack and poured treacle on it carefully.

"You look so pink-and-white and delicate," said Norah—"yet that is your sixth flap-jack. Do you think it's your appetite that makes you a mind-reader? It certainly doesn't make you fat."

"I'd almost rather be fat than delicate," Tommy returned. "What I really am is tough. I had to be tough, to tackle all you great Billabong monsters. As for mind-reading—well, which of us is doing most counting of the hours till the boys come back?"

"It's a close thing, I expect," Norah admitted. "What a time it seems since they went away, Tommy! Silly, because it's only twenty-four hours—but as Murty would say, it's square an' lonesome without them."

"And they're probably much too busy to be lonesome without us. I do hope they didn't freeze last night—I'd hate to sleep on the ground in those hills with just one blanket—tough as I am!"

"I had three, and in a tent; and I could have done with a fourth," confessed Norah. "The nights do get cold up here. But the boys won't worry about a cold night if only they find the cattle. Tommy—I'm wondering what they will do if they haven't found them. We can't keep the mob here much longer, and our own food will run out. Still, I don't see how they can bring themselves to put up with the loss of over fifty bullocks."

"I've been wondering about that myself," Tommy said. "I don't believe they'll ever give them up. Even if they decided to move on with the mob, they

would come back as soon as ever they could to hunt for them.”

“And by that time they would probably be gone for ever. There are lots of stories about cattle-thieves along the lonely parts of the stock-routes,” Norah said. “Oh, well—it’s no use worrying. They’ll be back to-night with their plans made, if I know Wally and Jim.”

“And most likely with the cattle too. I don’t see how one little mob could hide from all those men—unless they split up and went fifty different ways.”

“Even if they did, they would get together again. They’d bellow like lost souls and find each other; cattle who have been driven together can’t bear being alone. Like you and Jim and Wally and me. It’s called the mob-spirit,” Norah explained.

“Then I vote we get near the hills this afternoon and bellow!” suggested Tommy. “And there’s Rob bringing in the horses—it’s time we got busy.”

Going round the mob took longer this morning, for the bullocks had scattered out more widely than Norah considered prudent, and had to be driven back nearer the camp. It was later than they had hoped when the three scouts set out again after lunch. They went well out to the west. Once, looking ahead, their hopes were excited by a glimpse through trees of something that looked very like a knot of cattle; they hurried forward, believing that luck was with them at last.

“Blow!” said Rob, as they came into the open. “It’s only a clump of rocks after all. Well, wouldn’t you say they were bullocks?”

The rocks were indeed like animals: curious weathered formations, their rough grey surfaces patterned with coloured patches of lichen. But when the riders moved a few yards, the resemblance vanished altogether; they were just rocks.

“You’ve got to get them at just one angle,” said Norah. “That explains why they didn’t deceive us last time we were out this way.”

“And we’ve ridden nearly half a mile for nothing!” mourned Rob. “Golly, wouldn’t it be grand if we came on the whole lot and had ’em rounded up near camp by the time the Boss gets home! I’d like to see his face when he saw them—and Mr. Meadows’ face too.”

But that was too much to hope for. They scouted for hours, finding nothing. The hills were not far away when Norah decided to turn for home. They had remained still for ten minutes, scanning the slopes carefully, seeing no sign of life.

“It’s no use waiting,” she said. “They’ll come, but probably not until after dark. I know the boys would rather find us comfortably at camp, waiting for them.”

Tommy agreed. “It would be a better homecoming for tired men if they found their wives not looking like stockmen, with a big fire glowing to

welcome them,” she said. “To say nothing of buckets of hot water ready, and clean clothes. Let’s get back and have everything as they’d like to see it, Norah.”

Rob hesitated. It was hard to give up his hope of meeting the returning men.

“Mrs. Meadows . . . couldn’t I just go on by myself to the foot of the hills?” he begged. “They’re so close now. I’d just have a good look, and listen hard, so’s I could hear if they were coming. If there’s no sign of them I’d follow you up to the camp.”

“Well, I don’t see why you shouldn’t, Rob,” Norah said, looking at his pleading face. “Don’t wait long, though. I don’t want you to be out on the plain after dark by yourself.”

“Good-oh! I promise I won’t stay long if I don’t hear anything. Most likely I’ll catch you up in time to unsaddle your horses.”

“You needn’t worry about that,” she said, smiling. “We’re really very capable, even though you’ve tried hard to spoil us, Rob. Well, off you go, and be careful.”

He trotted away joyfully. They heard him shout, “If I’m not home soon, you’ll know it’s because we’re coming with the cattle!” Star broke into a canter; Rob began to sing at the top of his voice, the clear notes ringing over the plain.

“I hope the boys will hear that cheerful sound,” said Tommy. “It would be the beginning of their welcome.”

Rob cast a glance at the sun as he came near the foot-hills. “Plenty of daylight yet; I needn’t be in too much of a hurry to start back, Star,” he told the mare. “You’re as fresh as paint, and we can go as hard as we like when we do start.”

He rode slowly up and down, staring up along the slopes. “If I sing, they’ll hear me, and most likely they’ll coo-ee,” he said hopefully. “And if I see the bullocks coming first, it’s just as well to be here, ready to head them the right way. I bet the Boss wouldn’t be sorry to see them doing that!” So he sang until he could sing no more; and still no sounds came from above that he longed to hear: sounds of hooves, jingling bits and men’s voices: perhaps the crack of a stockwhip, ringing out suddenly. It was maddening to feel that his precious time was slipping away, when he knew that at any moment those welcoming sounds might come.

“I’ll have to give it best soon,” he muttered, glancing at his watch. “Ten minutes more, and I’ll chuck it.”

He stiffened in his saddle. Was that a coo-ee? It did not ring like the ordinary coo-ees of the men. Perhaps it was only the cry of a bird in the trees. Straining his ears, he waited tensely, his eyes searching the slopes. It came

again, nearer this time, and still an unfamiliar sound. He touched Star with his heel and rode nearer to the first rise.

“By Jove, there’s someone up there!” he uttered.

A movement in the scrub caught his eye, a little distance above him, where a gully ran up from the plain. Was it beast or man, he wondered, gazing at the shaking bushes—but it couldn’t be a bullock, for bullocks didn’t try to coo-ee. He pushed his mare up the gully, giving a shout—“Anybody there?”

A dark figure came out of the scrub, leaning on a stick. One arm waved to him: a shout sounded, muffled, yet clearer than before. Rob whistled softly in surprise.

“It’s a blackfellow. I wonder what he wants.”

For a moment he hung back. He was not very big, and strange blackfellows might not be friendly. Then, as the man moved he saw that he was hurt; he limped heavily, with short steps. That sight was enough for Rob. He trotted up the gully to meet him. There was something familiar about this blackfellow as he came nearer: he gave an exclamation of relief when he saw his face clearly.

“Gosh, it’s Jacky! Hullo, Jacky!—what’s up?”

Jacky sat down on a log. He was panting: sweat ran down his face. One bare black foot was bandaged with a ragged strip torn from his blue shirt; there was blood oozing from the bandage.

“Plenty glad you come,” he panted.

“I say, is your foot very bad?” Rob asked. “What’s the matter with it?”

“Rock smash um. This pfeller bin try find white pfellers; plurry rock him fall, catch um. No can hunt white pfellers. Hear you sing, plenty try call out. Got any water?”

Rob shook his head.

“Sorry—I haven’t got a drop, Jacky. Look here, you’ll have to get up behind me. I’ll take you to our camp—they’ll fix your foot there.”

“Baal!” Jacky shook his head violently. “No got time. Better you gibbit me that mare longa you.”

“I’ll see you hanged first!” Rob shot out. He backed Star with a sharp pull on her bit.

The black man did not move. He seemed to struggle for words.

“Lookit here,” he said. “Me not touch you. Me station boy, all-same good-pfeller. You savvy big Boss belonga you?”

“’Course I do,” said Rob scornfully. “What about him?”

“Him looses plenty bullock, no can findem. Those pfeller walkabout hills two day, no good, no see bullock, proper pfeller angry. Mine bin findem cattle orri.”

“You have!” shouted Rob. “Where?”

“Might be too much cheeky pfeller steal em. Mine savvy allabout those.

Can show big Boss. No can walk—foot plenty no good now”. He glanced down impatiently at his bleeding foot as if it were a personal enemy. “Not much time: Boss him go home camp, then him no catchem. You no gibbit mare, then you take mine longa Boss one-time?”

“But I don’t know where the Boss is.”

“Mine savvy that too much. You take mine, we findem Boss plenty quick, up there.” He jerked his hand upward. “Better we hurry.”

Rob did not answer. He was thinking hard. To go into the hills was against orders, and Norah trusted him to follow them home. He realised that none of them knew anything about Jacky—they had no proof that he was really a station hand. He certainly looked dirty and ugly enough for anything—the whole yarn might be a trick to get hold of Star and leave Star’s rider stranded. And yet . . . it might all be true, and Jacky able to put them on the track of thieves who had got the cattle. What on earth ought he to do?

Then a memory of certain words of Jim’s came back to him—words he had treasured all yesterday. “I’m leaving you responsible for doing whatever you can, Rob. You’re quite sensible enough to take responsibility.” He seemed to hear the deep, quiet voice saying them, to see Jim’s dark eyes looking straight at him. Well . . . he would take responsibility now, and chance it.

“Right-oh, Jacky,” he said. “Can you get up behind me if I put the mare beside that log?”

“You bet,” said Jacky briefly. But it was painful work; Rob heard him catch his breath as he swung the injured foot over Star’s back. The mare stood quietly, though she glanced round as if puzzled at the double burden.

Under Jacky’s direction they turned out of the gully and skirted the foot-hills for half a mile. Then they began to climb. The tracks were easy; the black man’s low-voiced orders came confidently. They came upon many tracks of horses, showing where the drovers had passed in their search. But they saw nothing for what seemed to Rob a very long time—though when he looked at his watch it was not so long after all. He wished he felt more sure of the blackfellow; and almost equally he wished that Jacky’s smell at close quarters was less pungent.

They topped a ridge, and Rob suppressed a shout. Across the hollow, descending the opposite ridge in single file, came the drovers. Jim was in the lead, Wally next to him. They rode in silence, their shoulders sagging: tired men, coming back dejected from two days of unsuccessful hunting.

“My word, you knew how to find them, right enough!” Rob told the blackfellow.

“You savvy now I no gammon,” said Jacky. “Cut alonga side of hill, meet ’um down below. Then you tell big Boss I tell you true-pfeller.”

“You bet I will!” said the boy warmly. His heart sang with relief; the

responsibility that had lain on him like a burden was his no longer. Star was safe—and now all responsibility belonged to the man who would know how to bear it.

They came out of the scrub a few yards from the line of horsemen. Jim pulled up with a look of amazement.

“Rob! What on earth——!”

“It’s all right, Mr. Linton,” Rob said. “I had to bring Jacky. He wants to speak to you, and he’s hurt his foot.”

“Let’s have a look at it.” Jim brought his horse beside them; Jacky thrust out the foot for his inspection. “Rock done tumble on him, Boss.” He grinned widely. “No matter, if can ride. Gibbit little-pfeller yabber with you—quick.”

“What’s the trouble?”

“No trouble, Boss.” He dropped his voice. “You tell allabout stop here.” He nodded towards the men, who were crowding round. “Mine tellem you about cattle—plenty too much bad pfellers got ’em all, mine show you.”

“By Jove!” said Jim under his breath. He called out to the men. “Hold on, boys: have a smoke-oh for a few minutes while I talk to this chap. Can you slip off, Rob?”

Rob slipped off by the process of bringing one leg over Star’s neck and sliding to the ground. Jacky levered himself into the saddle and rode aside with Jim. They talked in low voices. Wally dismounted, leaving his horse with its bridle trailing while he sat on a log and filled his pipe.

“What’s all this about, Rob?”

“He knows where the cattle are, Mr. Meadows. He reckons that cattle-thieves have got them.”

“Does—he—so?” said Wally quietly. “Well, it might be; I’ve had doubts about that myself. I wish he’d turned up with his news a bit sooner. He’d have saved us no end of a merry time.”

“I guess it’s been tough going,” said Rob.

“You guess right, son. Some of us are still at it: Gribble and Tony. Those two men have worked their heads off. They’re up on one of the spurs now, so we left them to come on after us. All well at home?”

“Yes, everything’s good-oh. They’re going to have a great supper waiting for you.”

“We could do with it, too,” Wally said. “But if your black friend has really brought news it may have to wait. How did you come to bring him, Rob?”

Rob told his story, while Wally smoked and listened, putting in a question now and then. As he finished, Jim rode back, his face cheerful. He called to the drovers.

“Boys—this abo. knows where the bullocks are. They’re with some clever chaps who have got them bottled up, waiting for us to clear out before they get

away with them.”

There was a deep growl of anger from the men. They flocked round him. One shouted, “Where can we get at them, Boss?”

“We’ll get at them all right, don’t you worry. It means being late home, with nothing to eat till we get there——”

“Who cares a darn for that?” came from Fenton.

“None of you; I know that jolly well. But there will be water; Jacky knows where there’s a spring. And if you’re as dry as I am, you won’t be sorry for that.”

“Too right we won’t!” came in a deep sigh from many voices.

“Well, our game is to carry on until we strike the plain. Then we turn west along the hills—and from that moment, no talking, and keep well apart, going as quietly as possible. Jacky’s spring is somewhere there; he’ll lead us. Flynn, we shan’t need you; go straight home and tell them at camp to expect us when they see us. Don’t tell them anything else at all. Understand?”

Flynn’s face expressed profound relief. He grunted assent.

“Well, we’ll be off in a minute, boys.” Jim rode over to Wally and Rob.

“Rob, old chap, you met that chap in the nick of time. But we can’t keep you with us. You can make for camp now.”

Rob’s heart went into his boots. Adventure had seemed very close; to be sent off like a small boy was bitter indeed. And to ride home with Uncle Syd was a prospect that filled him with horror. He stood dumbly for a moment before he found his tongue.

“All right, Mr. Linton.” He hoped the words sounded natural, but his voice was not quite under control.

“Look here, Jim,” said Wally. “This chap has had rather an anxious time bringing Jacky to us—why not take him along? We can easily park him in a safe corner if there’s any fun going. I think he deserves to be in at the finish.”

Hope rushed over Rob: his heart began to climb out of his boots. He looked up at Jim imploringly; and Jim stood considering the matter. He knew that Wally would not have spoken without a reason.

“Well, all right,” he said at last. “I suppose it would be a bit hard not to see it out. Can you take him up behind you, Wally?—I want Jacky to have a horse to himself, and Rob is the lightest weight to double-bank.”

“Nothing I’d like better,” said Wally. “Come along, old warrior.”

“Gosh, you are good, Mr. Meadows!” The warrior dodged behind the horse to make sure that nobody saw that he was rubbing his eyes with his sleeve.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE LAST SEEKING

THE spring to which Jacky brought them was in a gully like the one where Rob had found him. Water trickled gently over a rock, forming a pool below; it was a relief to find that horses, as well as men, could drink. Jim spoke to the men in a low voice.

“Boys, that abo. has a yarn I can’t altogether swallow,” he said. “I should think part of it is true; he tells me there’s a place hidden away in the hills, not far from here, where cattle stealers have carried on their game for a long while. A queer place it must be, by his account—so far as I can make out his English. You could ride near it, and never find it. Jacky and some of his people came across it on walkabout, and they seem to have studied it pretty thoroughly.”

“Didn’t they tell anyone?” asked Wally.

“They were afraid, he says. However, he seems to have taken a fancy to us for some reason or other, and he decided to let us know. The old sinner has been watching the hide from above for two days. But the part I can’t swallow is this—he says Gribble and Tony Malotti are in the gang.”

Most of his hearers looked astonished and unbelieving. Murty, however, remarked calmly, “Sure, that’s a thing I’d not be surprised at, at all. If iver I saw a man I’d not thrust, that man’s Sam Gribble. An’ his little Dago’s a good mate f’r him.”

“Well, I’ve never cared for either of them much,” Jim said. “But you can’t let personal dislikes make you think men are criminals, Murty. And look at the way those two have hunted for the cattle ever since they were lost.”

Murty said, “Well, now, they’ve seem to have done that same; an’ whenever we were in sight they weren’t shparin’ of themselves. But if you think it over, there was plinty of times they were off on their own. Take that furrst night, whin the cattle got away on us f’r good. Wasn’t it the bullocks that’s missin’ now that Gribble an’ Tony tuk afther, an’ they to be goin’ hell-for-leather to the hills? They came back late an’ said they couldn’t head them. ’Tis urgin’ them on they may have been, f’r all we know. For ’tis in this direction they were goin’, Mr. Jim.”

“By Jove, that’s true!” exclaimed Fenton. “If they had pals here waiting it would have been easy enough.”

“Well, no men cud do much with cattle that night. But you’ll remimber, Mr. Jim, that Gribble an’ Tony were off before anny of us next mornin’. An’ ’tis straight for the hills they wint——”

“Holy Moses!” said Jim with a short laugh. “I sent them there myself! If your notion’s right, Murty, how they must have chuckled!”

“’Twas natural you’d sinder them, an’ they knowin’ that bunch. An’ they didn’t get back until late that night; an’ there was no wan to check up on what they said they’d done all day.”

“But look here,” said Dick Hallam, “It sounds a bit too thin altogether, I reckon. Are you suggestin’ them two were blinkin’ prophets, an’ knew ahead that we’d run into the father of a storm, an’ have a stampede—right up agin’ their pals’ hidin’-place? That ’ud be just *too* convenient. It won’t wash, Murty.”

“Well, not altogether it wouldn’t, Dick. But cattle-rustlers are apt to choose a place for their hide where there’s most chance of a mob havin’ throuble an’ breakin’ away. They don’t choose soft, aisy places—nor they wouldn’t be able to get cattle out of sight if they did, or keep ’em hidden. An’ you tell me wan thing—what’s the place, the whole len’th of this stock-route, where there’s been the most shtampedes since iver cattle were dhruv this way?”

“By . . . Jove!” said Dick slowly. “These blinkin’ hollow hills, of course. You win, Murty, old man. An’ the storm might have been just a bit of extra luck.”

“Well, I’m not going to believe any of my crowd are crooks until I get pretty solid proof,” said Jim. “Anyhow, we ought to know more about it soon. I don’t like even suspecting a man is a wrong ’un.”

“I’d like to know where those two are now, though,” Wally said. “There was no real sense in their going off on their own again, when you come to think of it.”

“H’m,” said Jim, frowning. “Well, Jacky says three men are living in a one-room shack, down in their hide. We’ll have to surprise them if we can: he says we’ll have to do it on foot. When we get to the place he’s heading for, six of us will go ahead, leaving the rest with the horses. Wally and I have revolvers, so we’ll take the lead: the other chaps might collect something useful in the way of sticks. I don’t think it’s in the least likely there will be any shooting, though. I’ve no intention of starting it.”

“But there’s no harm in bein’ ready, Mr. Jim,” said Murty gently.

It was a strange place to which the blackfellow led them. They rounded a steep spur, turning into a narrow opening between it and the next spur. That space, thinly covered by trees, seemed to end fifty yards back in a natural wall of earth and rock. But Jacky rode on steadily, the six men on foot following.

They came to the wall. In one corner, hidden by the trees, loose bush was stacked on end roughly.

“Pull ’um away,” said Jacky softly. “Them pfeller they put ’um fresh there ev’y day, look all-same growin’.”

When the bush was pulled aside they saw an opening, barred by slip-rails. They took them out gently.

“Mine bin stop longa here now,” Jacky said. “Foot him no walk, horse plenty too much row him make. Better you-all go slow, Boss, not kick ’um up stones. House him round bend, cattle too. Mine thinkit drover-pfellers belonga you there now.”

“Why do you think so, Jacky?”

“Not see ’um longa my eye; see ’um tracks,” explained Jacky, pointing to the ground. “Know ’um horses: I bin look ’um. You go steady, Boss. Them plenty sulky pfellers in house—might be them prop’ly angry, shoot quick. Dogs, too. You watch out.”

“Right you are, Jacky. You get back now—and mind that foot of yours,” Jim told him.

Beyond the slip-rails a wide track was cut along the hillside. It curved round a boulder and fell steeply to a deep gully, so closed in that no one could have dreamed that it existed. Narrow at first, it widened a little further on; then turned out of sight among the hills.

“Lord, what a place!” came from Fenton softly.

Noiselessly as they could, they went down the slope and along the gully, in single file, keeping close to its side. They saw nothing living until they rounded the bend. Scrub grew there, enough to shelter them, with cattle-pads winding through it: peering through the trees as they went, they could see bullocks grazing, scattered in a continuation of the gully that ended in towering hill-walls.

“Our lot,” whispered Jim with satisfaction. “See Gribble’s big Shorthorn, Wal?”

“I do,” said Wally. “And there are his horse and Tony’s, tied up near the house. Nice people!”

The shack, roughly built of bush timber, stood a little further on. There was no sign of anyone stirring; but as they advanced, able to look further ahead, they caught sight of three men moving among some bullocks that had been driven into a fenced enclosure. A small fire smouldered near it, and three dogs were close by, eyeing the cattle.

“Doin’ a bit of alterin’ our brands, I’d say,” whispered Fenton. “Let’s try the shack, Boss.”

With Jim and Wally leading, they went on slowly, dodging through the trees. The shack door stood half-open: within, they could see Gribble and Tony, their backs to the doorway, standing by a table. They were drinking; the pannikins were at their lips, but they crashed on the table when Jim’s quiet voice sounded from the doorway.

“You’d better come quietly, Gribble.”

The men whirled round, their faces a study of dismay. Jim and Wally stood there, revolvers in hand; behind them the other drovers crowded, angry and threatening. For a moment the two men stared at them blankly.

“Well, you’ve got us all right,” snarled Gribble with an oath. “I’d give something to know how you managed it.”

“You’ll know soon enough. Put up your hands.”

Gribble hesitated; then his hands went up. The little Italian acted swiftly. A knife flashed across the room; Jim sprang aside just in time, and it stuck in the wall, quivering. Tony followed it up with a stool, hurled in their faces. There was a window near him, a frame only, without glass; he went through it like an eel, and Gribble followed. Murty flung himself upon him, grasping his legs, but a shade too late: a kick drove him backwards and Gribble went headlong to the ground. He picked himself up and followed Tony, racing towards the cattle-yard.

After them came the drovers, running grimly. The dogs began savage barking; the men in the yard sprang round, saw what was happening, and leaped for the fence. Two shots rang out. Fenton chuckled as he ran.

“That’s got the wind up them. An’ they ain’t got a chance of gettin’ to their horses. We got ’em trapped.”

The five fugitives never looked round. Straight ahead they went across the gully, where the high wall of the hill seemed to offer no chance of escape. They plunged into the scrub at its foot.

“Steady when you’re near,” Jim ordered his men. “That little Dago may have more knives up his sleeve.”

They slackened their speed, separating as they hunted through the scrub. The sound of falling stones came to them: looking up, they saw the thieves climbing a narrow path that zig-zagged up the steep face. They disappeared round an angle; and only the stones that rattled down told that they were still climbing.

“Well, we’ll speed them on their way,” said Jim. He fired three more shots into the air; angry curses floated down to them and the stones fell more quickly. The sound ceased: only from the bush on top of the cliff came sharp rustling.

“And that’s that,” said Jim. “Very satisfactory, I think, boys!”

“Wot? an’ they beat the lot of us, an’ got away!” a drover shouted.

“Well, they’ve certainly got away—and I’ll hand it to those two in the shack for quickness. But Gribble, at least, knew well we wouldn’t shoot in earnest. What could we do with wounded men?—why, I’ve been wondering for the last hour what on earth we could do with prisoners, even if they weren’t wounded. They’d have been just a dashed nuisance. We have no men to spare as guards, night and day; and we’d have had to take them along with us for a

week before we struck a police-station. Does any one here want the job of looking after them on the road? I'm hanged if I'd care for it!"

The heat of battle subsided in his little army. They looked at each other and grinned.

"We've got our cattle back," said Jim; "and I'll take every horse and saddle that's here and hand them over to the police when we see them. They won't be able to do much mischief on foot. We'll give the police full details and let them do the hunting down. But I fancy those five beauties will keep off this part of the stock-route for the future. It won't worry me: all I've got to do is to get my mob home in good condition. But we'll have a drink, boys, when we get back to camp—just to celebrate the fight we didn't win!"

There was a roar of laughter. They caught the outlaws' horses and used them to muster everything in the gully, hoping the owners of the horses were enjoying the spectacle from the hills above. If this were so, they were given something further to enjoy. As Jim rode to the curve ahead of his men he became conscious of a glare in the sky. Turning in his saddle, he gave a low whistle of surprise. The shack was on fire, burning fiercely.

"Now, I wonder who lit that," he said mildly. There were chuckles behind him, but no one answered.

Late as it was before the riders came clattering into the camp, there were lights and glowing fires to welcome them. They had driven the cattle fast until darkness fell; then, knowing they would join up with the other bullocks, they left them and made for home, singing as they rode.

At first they were too hungry to talk. Lee Wing pattered back and forth, filling plates again and again, his broad yellow face a study of satisfaction. Jacky sat with his back against a tree, wolfing huge quantities of food such as he had never known before. His foot had been cleansed and dressed by Jim; one of Wally's pipes lay within reach of his hand, together with a plug of tobacco; a warm blanket was spread for him under the chuck-waggon. Somewhere, in a place that only Jacky knew, his lubra and piccaninnies waited his return. But at the moment he seemed to think that he had entered into a blackfellow's heaven.

"I couldn't eat a mouthful more if you paid me, Lee Wing," said Wally at last. "I knew I was hungry, but I didn't know how hungry I was until I began on that stew. What do you mean by having a hot supper ready at this time of night?"

"Evelybody leckon you come," said Lee Wing, grinning. "Not know why, but feel certain. So nobody go to bed, only men's cookee—an' men pull him out, all li', you bet. Missee No-lah, she makee him hab stew too, all leady in

glat pot. So evelybody happy, only cookee. Him no mattah,” he ended with scorn.

“Well, everybody can go easy in the morning,” answered Jim. “We’ve earned a lazy day, and we’ll take it. It’s our last, though: after to-morrow we’ve got to make up for lost time. I’m going to drive this outfit as it never was driven before.”

“Just sit down quietly and light your pipe and tell your story,” said Tommy firmly. “We have been just wonderful in the way we held ourselves in while you——”

“Filled ourselves up,” murmured Wally.

“Yes, just that. Now, begin at the very beginning, and don’t forget anything. We knew, when we heard you singing, that everything must be all right, but we’re aching for details. Flynn looked mysterious when he came home—grunted that you’d had no luck, and wouldn’t say anything more.”

“So of course we knew something was happening,” said Norah. “Go on, Jim please. Rob, don’t you want to go to bed?”

“He can’t,” said Jim—“he’s part of the story. You can go to sleep if you like, Rob, and I’ll wake you when your part comes.”

“Not me!” said Rob happily.

“Well, it was this way,” began Jim. “All we poor drovers were trailing miserably through the hills, coming home with a record of abject failure, scared blue at the thought of meeting our angry wives——”

“What, all of you?” asked Tommy.

“Those of us unlucky enough to have them, of course. Well, there we were, hopeless and starving, when suddenly out of the blue we saw a . . . a noble white lad——”

Rob gave a splutter of laughter.

“—With a captive blackfellow sitting on his crupper. He had wounded him in fair fight on the foot, which dripped with gore——”

“Oh, I say, Mr. Linton——!”

“Hadn’t you?” asked Jim, looking surprised. “Well, it’s your turn now, Rob. You tell how you captured him.”

“I reckon he captured *me*,” said Rob. He told his story. Jim continued it, with occasional assistance from Wally. His audience hung on each word, and grew more and more excited.

“So we came home, and ate happily ever after,” he ended. “Don’t we have fun and games when we go out?”

“You do indeed,” said Norah. “Oh, Tommy, why weren’t we there!”

“You wouldn’t have had any of the best of it, Mrs. Meadows,” said Rob, sadly. “They’d have made you stay in a nice, safe place, like me. It was just awful to hear shots, and not know who was being killed!”

“Must have been welly hollible, that,” said Lee Wing with sympathy.

“Yes, I guessed how the others must be feeling when we disappeared into the mysterious depths,” Wally said. “Never mind, Rob—you can always remember that the fun and games wouldn’t have happened at all if you hadn’t caught your abo.—and we’d still be short of fifty-seven bullocks. We owe you a lot—and when we strike Billabong I think the bullocks’ owner will have something to say to you.”

The question that had tormented Rob’s mind came to his lips suddenly.

“But, Mr. Meadows . . . will I ever see Billabong? Really see it, I mean—not just leave the cattle and go away?”

“Why on earth should you do that?” demanded Wally in astonishment.

“Well . . . Uncle Syd. He’ll be taking me away, of course. He——”

“Oh, Uncle Syd,” said Jim reflectively. He looked suddenly angry. “Uncle Syd has his plans, no doubt. Well, so have we. Do you want to live with him, Rob?”

“I’d rather be dead,” Rob said fiercely.

“And you might as well be dead, I think. We prefer you alive. There’s a decent school not too far from Billabong, Rob. A bit too far to go in every day; but we know a place where a fellow could board during the week, and come out to Billabong for week-ends. And after that fellow had finished with school—well, he could go in for whatever he chose, but there’s always a job to be had on Billabong for anyone who can ride. How does that idea strike you?”

Rob had sat up straight, looking at him. His lip trembled.

“Do you . . . do you mean a fellow like me, Mr. Linton?”

“Well, you’re the only fellow who fills the bill,” said Jim.

The End.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Billabong Riders* by Mary Grant Bruce]