

# BILLABONG ADVENTURERS



MARY·GRANT·BRUCE

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*Title:* Billabong Adventurers

*Date of first publication:* 1927

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

*Date first posted:* Nov. 22, 2017

*Date last updated:* Mar. 29, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20171134

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

STORIES BY  
MARY GRANT BRUCE

Published by  
WARD, LOCK & CO., LTD.

“Mrs. Bruce has a story to tell, and she sets about doing it in her own straightforward way, without resort to padding. Her style is never laboured, it matches its subject in its naturalness. Smiles and tears, humour and pathos, blend in her books as they do in life itself.”

—*The Queen.*

JIM AND WALLY  
NORAH OF BILLABONG  
TIMOTHY IN BUSHLAND  
GRAY'S HOLLOW  
GLEN EYRE  
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON  
A LITTLE BUSH MAID  
'POSSUM  
DICK  
CAPTAIN JIM  
DICK LESTER OF KURRAJONG  
BACK TO BILLABONG  
THE STONE AXE OF BURKAMUKK  
THE TWINS OF EMU PLAINS  
BILLABONG'S DAUGHTER  
MATES AT BILLABONG  
THE HOUSES OF THE EAGLE  
THE TOWER ROOMS  
BILLABONG ADVENTURERS

# BILLABONG ADVENTURERS

BY  
MARY GRANT BRUCE

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED  
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

# CONTENTS

- I [GOLDEN FLEECES](#)
- II [A DISH OF GOSSIP](#)
- III [A BILLABONG DAY](#)
- IV [NORAH'S WEDDING-DAY](#)
- V [THE VALLEY IN THE HILLS](#)
- VI [THE CAMP](#)
- VII [BUSH DWELLERS](#)
- VIII [HORSESHOE VALLEY](#)
- IX [THE SKY-LINE](#)
- X [WHAT THEY FOUND](#)
- XI [CHEN LUN OF LITTLE BOURKE STREET](#)
- XII [OF PLOTS AND A PLAN](#)
- XIII [LI CHANG, GENTLEMAN](#)
- XIV [HOW THE GODS CAME TO HELP](#)
- XV [HOW THEY KEPT FAITH](#)
- XVI [LI NING'S HIDING-PLACE](#)
- XVII [HOW LI CHANG SANG A SONG](#)
- XVIII [HOW THREE WENT HOME](#)

# Billabong Adventurers

## CHAPTER I

### GOLDEN FLEECES

IT was the last day of the shearing on Billabong station, and the men were beginning to work in leisurely fashion, knowing that the long job was nearly done. No woolly sheep remained in the yards outside the great shed; the last stragglers now waited their turn in the little pens beside each shearer, where they huddled, bleating and distressful—watching, with what emotions only sheep may know, the swift blades that ripped the woolly coats from their contorting brethren already undergoing treatment. The steady hum of the engine filled the shed with a dull roar, mingled with the rattle of the shears and the sharp click-click of the tiny hooves on the slabs. Boys ran hither and thither, gathering up the fleeces as they were tossed aside, and hurrying them to the tables where the masses of soft wool were swiftly folded into shape before they were carried to the presses where open bales yawned to receive them. Every few minutes a shearer straightened himself, slipped his shears on a hook, and urged a shorn victim through the tiny gateway before him, to rejoin companions too bewildered and unhappy to be able to luxuriate in being free. Their chorus of protesting bleating came steadily from outside.

Three girls, laden with heavy baskets and billies, came in through the main doorway, and putting down their loads, stood watching the busy scene. Near them, a tall, grizzled man was pressing a bale of wool, bringing down the lever with easy strength, the muscles standing out on his bare arms. Beyond him was a great stack of finished bales, neatly sewn and symmetrical, bearing the big stencilled brand of Billabong, with the “L & S” that stood for Linton and Son. The lever went home with a click, and David Linton turned and smiled at the girls.

“Smoke-oh?” he asked. “You’re a little ahead of time, aren’t you, Norah?”

"Just a few minutes," his daughter answered. "We were afraid of being late, and we hurried. You've nearly cut out, haven't you, Dad? We saw all the dogs lying asleep under a tree, so we thought their job was over."

"Yes—we've only the sheep in the pens to do, and they won't take long. Not tired of a shearing-shed yet, Tommy?"

Tommy Rainham, whose baptismal name was Cecilia, smiled up at him.

"I never could be—I love each minute of it," she declared. There was the faintest hint of a foreign intonation in her voice. "Sheep and I, we have something akin: I think I must have been a merino in some previous existence, because I seem to know all they are feeling."

"Then you beat most sheep-men," David Linton said. "To me a sheep always seems something compounded of obstinacy and sheer idiocy in equal parts—and I fail to see that there's anything resembling you in that mixture, Tommy! Give me bullocks: I'd rather see one good Shorthorn than all the sheep in creation. What do you think, Jean?"

Jean Yorke, who was pretty and fair and plump, sniffed delicately.

"I'm only a 'townie,' so I don't know much about it," she answered. "I like them all, when I see them in paddocks. But how you poor men can bear the smell of this awful shed, day after day, and the grease and the dirt——! Jim made me feel a fleece yesterday, and it was horrid; I didn't think I could ever put on a woolly garment again!"

"Oh, we get used to it," said her host, laughing. "I believe Tommy likes it."

"I do," said Tommy, sturdily. "I like the nice greasy wool—and the nice fat cheques it brings! Bob is going to get a car if his wool sells well; and I feel it is going to, for it was such lovely wool!"

"Now she goes out in the paddocks every day and broods over her beloved shorn merinoes, and begs them to hurry up and grow new coats," said Norah, laughing, as she slipped her arm through her friend's. "Dad, I'm sure it's time for smoke-oh—and Wally has almost finished a sheep!"

"Which makes it time, I suppose," said David Linton, a twinkle in his eye. He blew a whistle sharply, and in a moment a tall young fellow took the low fence of his pen in his stride and came over to the group by the door.

"Hallo, everybody! Girls, you don't know how glad I am to see you!"

"Or the afternoon-tea—which?" queried Tommy. "I believe it wouldn't matter a bit if we let Lee Wing and Hogg bring it over, so long as it came—don't you, Norah?"

"We might experiment, by coming without it," Norah observed. "But I'd tremble for our popularity if we did."

"Anyhow, you won't be able to try dangerous experiments, because it's the last day," said Wally Meadows, comfortably. He pushed his hat back, thereby lending a pleasing touch of greasy streaks to an already excessively grimy



face. "Norah, you look as if I were grubby."

"I didn't mean to—but you are," Norah answered. "More than grubby. But it shows that you are an honest, hard-working young man, so I really don't mind!"

"As if I needed to get dirty to prove that!" lamented Wally. "I am frequently at my best when unusually clean, but no one recognizes it. Here's Jimmy—he has been creating a record with that old ewe he's just turned out, ever since the whistle blew. Did you take off much mutton, Jim?"

Jim Linton grinned.

"I believe there's a scar or two on her, here and there," he said. "She was an obstinate old wretch, and wouldn't keep still; and I was afraid you'd have all the tea finished."

"He looked longingly at it, but we wouldn't begin until you came," said Norah. "I don't know if you two would scorn it, but I filled the basin outside with clean water. This isn't a hint, merely a statement."

"Whichever it is, I'll accept it," said her brother. "I never did like the mingled flavour of sheep and scone. Come and wash, Wal: you aren't fit to be seen."

"This is how Norah likes me," said Wally, going nevertheless. They returned in a few moments, with hands and faces startlingly clean in comparison with their grease-soaked dungaree shirts and trousers. The engine had stopped, and the men were crowding round the tea, while the girls ladled out steaming cups and dispensed scones and great slabs of "brownie." Every one was in high spirits at the near approach of "cut-out." Billabong was primarily a cattle-station, and though a certain number of sheep were kept, nobody regarded them as the serious business of the run. The stock-men took part in the shearing because they would have cheerfully undertaken any job, no matter how distasteful, for the "Boss." But they rejoiced exceedingly when it was over, and they were able to get back to the real life—life that was lived mainly in a saddle.

Murty O'Toole, who had grown grey in David Linton's service, came over from sewing the bale his master had pressed. Murty could not shear. He was as willing as anyone: but just as some men are incapable of learning to milk, so Murty had never been able to master a pair of shears. He had struggled heroically: so had the sheep that he chipped and sliced in his well-meant efforts; and finally it had been agreed that the attempt was useless. Murty, deeply indignant with himself, had offered to take on any job in the shed, from tar-boy to rouseabout, and had ended by doing three men's work. But he loathed shearing-time with his whole soul.

He wiped his hands upon his trousers as he approached, looked at the result with some disgust, smelt them, and finally turned aside to polish them on a

clean bale.

“Basin of water outside, Murty,” sang out Wally.

“Yerra, I’ll do,” said the stockman. “Washin’ the hands is only to be scratchin’ the surface: it’s in a tub of hot water I’ll be this night, with a bar of yellow soap along with me.” He accepted a cup of tea from Norah with the quiet courtesy that sat gently upon him, and then put it down in order to find a passably-clean petrol case to serve her as a seat. Had it been a dirty one Norah would not have refused it—from Murty. They had been friends since her babyhood: he had carried her before she could walk, had guided her first toddling footsteps, proudly, and had held her, yet more proudly, on her first pony: had been her ally in a hundred tight places. Now, because he was soon to lose her, his eyes rarely left her. She was “the little Misthress,” as her dead mother had been, more than twenty years ago; and it was partly because of Murty that Norah had never realized the loss of that mother whose arms had held her such a little while.

“Nearly finished, Murty?” she said.

“We are—praise the pigs. Great practice I do be having with the sewing this year, Miss Norah: I’ll not be asking Mrs. Brown to patch me old pants any more, I’m that distinguished with the needle!”

“I’ll give you a job, Murty,” said Dave Boone, exhibiting a long rip where a shear-blade, kicked aside by a struggling sheep, had slit his trousers-leg down from the knee.

“I cud do it,” said Murty, with the conscious superiority of an artist. “But I’m not taking on any contrhacts. Did it get your leg as well, Dave?”

“It did: but a dab of tar fixed that. Wish I could mend the pants the same way,” said Dave, grinning.

“Great stuff tar,” said Jim. “Do you remember the old chap that took us out in a curragh on the Shannon, Wally? That’s the queerest sort of boat you ever saw, Dave—built of laths, with canvas stretched over them, and the whole thing tarred; they look like a big black cigar, and they hold six or eight people. This one leaked pretty badly, and Mr. Wally and I were hard at it baling all the time—she shipped water in bucketfuls, and it was pretty exciting, because the river is about a mile wide just there, and there was a very lively sea on. We landed on an island we wanted to explore, and I spoke my mind to the boatman for bringing us out in such a rotten craft. He said, ‘Ah, now, sir, don’t you mind—sure I’ll aisy mend her with a coal of fire!’ He did, too.”

“Go on!” said Dave, unbelievably.

“Oh, he mended her all right. He got a little fire going, up-ended her, and held a burning stick so that the tar melted and ran over the holes. She came home as dry as a bone. The part that annoyed us was that he hadn’t done it before we started.”

"Them's the boats," said Murty; "you'd be very safe in a curragh. Many's the time I've gone out, when I was a slip of a gossoon, after mackerel with the Kilkee fishermen. Dancing over the tops of the waves they'd be, and if you didn't know them you'd think they'd be swamped every minute, for they're only like a big cockle-shell; a curragh that'd hold six men 'ud only be a weight that two could aisy carry up the strand. But you'd never be anxious in one, barring you'd the bad luck to meet a rock with an ill-conditioned little point on it that'd tear the bottom. I've seen them come in loaded down with mackerel—an' the boats the full of green and silver fish, and the women 'ud be cryin' them in the streets before breakfast. 'Mackerel! Fresh mack-erel!' Them was the great nights for a boy!"

"Doesn't seem to fit in much with this," said one of the shearers, glancing round the long shed, with its reek of greasy wool and the peevish bleating of the penned sheep. "That ol' ewe I'm goin' to shear next'll be callin' worse than 'Mackerel!' at me if I keep her waitin' much longer." He nodded sideways at one of his mates. "Race you who cuts out first, Bill." In a moment the engine was humming again, and the work was in full swing.

The three girls climbed to the top of the stacked wool bales and sat watching the busy scene. Refreshed by "smoke-oh," the men were suddenly seized with ambition to end the job quickly: they flung themselves at the sheep with a will, and the shear-blades flashed as the grimy wool fell in long folds, revealing the crinkled creamy-white masses below the matted brown surface. One after another the pens were emptied, and the men gradually collected round the two last, where Bill and his mate, Joe Burke, were racing. Bill was the "ringer" of the shed: a professional shearer, no man could touch his record; but Joe seized his last sheep a moment ahead of his friend, and for a few minutes it was a neck-and-neck race. The sheep were an even pair in weight of wool; the men were both good workmen. Woe to the unlucky sheep that kicked or fought in those last few moments! Finally Joe urged his sheep out a second ahead of Bill, amid a shout from the crowding men, and the Billabong shearing was over.

"That's a new 'at you owe me, Bill, ol' son," said the victor, grinning.

"Reckon I can stand it," said his mate. "You'll make a shearer yet, ol' chap, if you stick to the game." They hurried off to the men's hut to clean up and change before coming up to the house to draw their cheques. Half an hour later they were spinning down the road on their motor-cycles, to the next shed, twenty-five miles distant, where another job awaited them next day.

Jim Linton and Wally Meadows gathered up the empty baskets and billies and strolled homeward with the girls, rejoicing in feeling free to be lazy after the strenuous weeks that lay behind them. The wool-shed paddock was the scene, at the moment, of hundreds of domestic tragedies. Woolly lambs,

hungry and distressful, sought urgently for their mothers, failing to recognize, in the lean white figures that sought them no less fervently, the comfortable brown matrons they had known.

"Look at that poor old ewe," said Jim, laughing. "She has just found her lamb, and said to him, 'Billy, come here, you little beast—don't you know your own dear Ma?' And Billy said, 'No, I don't—you've got Ma's voice, but you aren't her!'"

"That's not grammar!" said Jean.

"Well, lambs don't learn grammar. Anyhow, Billy has fled from her sight, and she's just longing to spank him. I don't see how ewes can ever bring up their children properly, since they can't administer punishment when it's due."

"No one ever accused a lamb of being brought up properly," said Wally, with some bitterness. "Their conduct all through life proves that. Thank goodness we've done with them for awhile, anyhow. I want to get on a horse to-morrow and ride out to look at bullocks, just to refresh my mind."

"I'm with you there," said Jim. "Let's all go—unless you and Norah want to go bullock-gazing all alone. But you'll be able to do that to your heart's content in a week, so you might as well be sociable now."

"Rather!" said Norah. "We haven't the least wish to be unsociable, have we, Wally?" They smiled at each other. Wally was no figure of romance at the moment, in his torn and filthy dungarees, but there was something very handsome about his twinkle.

"These two are going to have the most original honeymoon, Jean," chaffed Jim. "They're going to drive up and down country roads all over Victoria and New South Wales, looking at cattle. At short intervals they will be found leaning over fences and quarrelling violently over the respective merits of Herefords and Shorthorns!"

"Not so—because we both prefer Shorthorns," said Wally, cheerfully. "Otherwise the picture is entirely correct. Sometimes we will separate for most of the day while Norah goes to purr over a poultry-farm, which I decline to look at, or while I depart to inspect pigs, which she loathes."

"And we'll speed up furiously and break all limits when we have to pass a sheep-run," added Norah. "That's one of the few points on which we shall be completely agreed. And then we'll be stopped and prosecuted, and no local magistrate will be in the least moved by our plea that if we hadn't scorched, Wally would have felt that he had to get out and begin shearing!"

"Well, that isn't the sort of honeymoon that will suit me, if I'm ever so foolish as to get married," said Jean. "I think it sounds dreadful. Me for Sydney and 'The Australia,' where you meet all sorts of exciting people from England and America, and see wonderful frocks——"

"Won't that thrill your husband!" breathed Wally.

"It will thrill me, anyhow," returned she. "And there will be new theatres, and dances at The Ambassadors, and balls on the ships. You just can't be dull for a moment in Sydney. It will have to be warm enough for surfing, and for picnics—I know heaps of jolly people in Sydney, and we'd be asked everywhere and have a splendid time. As for driving round dull country roads, all ruts and potholes, and looking at cattle——! But you always were like that, Norah. Even when you were at school in Melbourne you'd get quite sentimental over a cow!"

"Always!" said Norah, lightly. "I could stand the surfing part of your programme, Jeanie, but not the rest. If I notice Wally beginning to yearn for society and frocks, I'll send him off to Sydney alone, and continue to meander among cattle!"

"Now, that's very thoughtful of you," said Wally, gratefully. "I'll practise a suitably yearning expression, in case I need it—if I copied that old ewe over there I think it would do the trick. She looks as if life were all one long yearn."

"If you do it near meal-times Norah will merely think you're hungry, and suggest boiling the billy," said Jim. "I've often seen you look like that in France, when the Huns managed to delay the rations. By Jove, doesn't the lagoon look tempting!"

They had topped a little rise, coming in sight of the backwater from the river that widened out into a deep, still lagoon. At the far side it was marshy, and wildfowl paddled among the rushes that nodded to their reflections in the shallows; but nearer the homestead nothing ruffled the dark surface of the dreaming water. Under spreading trees, where the bank was high, stood the boat-house and bathing-shed, whence a couple of spring-boards ran out over the deepest part. Beyond was Billabong House, of mellow red brick, nestling in its deep green of shrubbery and orchard, with flashes of colour from the flower-beds that were the pride of old Hogg, the Scotch gardener. To the eyes of the tired boys it was a very heaven of coolness and rest after the long day in the reeking wool-shed.

"Tempting!" echoed Wally. "Oh, and I'm so dirty! Jimmy dear, I'll soon be an old married man, burdened with responsibility—that's you, Norah—and you'll be just a care-free young lad, as usual; but before my fate descends on me, I'm game to race you across to the far side, just as we are!"

"Clothes and all?" asked Jim, laughing.

"And boots. Goodness knows, they all need washing. Are you game?"

"Me!" said Jim. "Catch this dunnage, Norah!" The girls suddenly found themselves encumbered with the baskets. They stood laughing as the two tall figures pounded across the grass, with heavy boots thudding. Together the boys reached the landing-stage and darted out upon the spring-boards, taking the water in clean dives to which boots and flapping dungarees lent a curious

effect. They thrashed across the lagoon with powerful over-arm, strokes, neck and neck for most of the way; then Jim drew ahead and came out upon the gravelled bank, a couple of yards ahead of his friend, with a shout of triumph.

They returned to meet the girls, their soaked clothes clinging to them, while the water squelched in their boots at every stride.

“Gorgeous!” uttered Jim.

“Too good to leave,” said Wally. “We’re going in again—minus boots. Norah, if you were the nice young person I have always believed, you’d bring us down clean shirts and trousers. It will take all the water in this lagoon to make Jim clean!”

“You don’t deserve it, for calling me a nice young person,” said Norah, laughing. “But, yes—you do look as if you ought to go in again. You’ve gone all streaky. There’s soap in the bathing-house, if you’d care to use it, and I wouldn’t say that it would be a disadvantage!”

“Race you for it, Wal!” Jim cried. They squelched across to the sheds, while the girls went on to the house. Ten minutes later, when they returned, with armfuls of clean clothes, all that could be seen of Jim and Wally was wildly bobbing heads at the far side of the water, whence the waterfowl had risen in dismayed flight. Much soap-lather had collected in the tiny bays near the sheds, and on the gravel lay the meagre remains of a large piece of soap which had evidently been pulled in two with some violence.

“And to think that one of them is going to be married next week!” uttered Jean. “Norah, it’s ridiculous! Wally may be whatever age you say he is, and he may have gone to the War and killed people and come home a captain—I suppose he did, as he got the M.C. But he isn’t grown-up, or anything like it!”

Norah was collecting the remnants of soap and stowing them in the bathing-house. She came out and stood on the landing-stage for a moment before answering—a tall, slender figure, with brown curls round a brown face, and eyes that were at once merry and steadfast. She looked at the two bobbing heads. But it was at Jim’s that she looked longest, and there was a shade of wistfulness in her eyes.

“Wally never will be grown-up,” she said. “He is Peter Pan. But, Tommy dear—promise me you won’t let Jim get grown-up, either, while we are away!”

## CHAPTER II

### A DISH OF GOSSIP

“I ALWAYS knew,” said Murty O’Toole, “that Billabong House was a trifle elastic. But even so, Mrs. Brown, ma’am, it fails me to guess how you’re goin’ to stow away all the people that’ll be in it, at all.”

Mrs. Brown, housekeeper, nurse, and presiding genius of Billabong for thirty years, smiled comfortably.

“P’f!” she said lightly. “Easy enough, Murty, when you put your mind to it. Mr. Jim and Mr. Wally are goin’ to pitch tents for themselves, down in the shrubbery—that gives us two rooms extry, to start with. There’s the best spare-rooms for the uncles and aunts and Mr. Wally’s people—that Mrs. Meadows from Queensland has got to have the best, as I’m told she’s particular. Well, she won’t have anything she can turn her proud nose up at, at Billabong. And the east balcony will be curtained off as a dormitory for all Miss Norah’s friends, and they can use Mr. Jim’s and Mr. Wally’s rooms for dressing-rooms—we’re clearin’ them out to-day to make room for all their clo’es. Dresses don’t take up as much space as they did when I was young, an’ now that there ain’t as much ‘air on any ten girls’ ‘eads as ‘ud make a decent bun, they don’t need near as much in the way of lookin’-glasses.”

“Don’t they!” said Murty. “What about all the powdther an’ stuff they’re after puttin’ on their faces?” He grinned, delighted to show that although he never went away from Billabong he was still a man of the world. “I’m told that gerrils use that much powdther nowadays you’d think they washed their faces in the flour-barrel!”

“Too right, they do,” agreed Mrs. Brown. “But they carry that about, Murty, in portable boxes, with a little glass fixed ‘andy in the lid. Miss Norah, she was give no less than three of ‘em last Christmas. Didn’t she offer me one, sayin’ she was always too busy to remember to use ‘em!” She gave a fat chuckle. “Me, to be powderin’ me nose!—not as I’ll say it doesn’t need it, particular after an ‘eavy batch of cookin’. An’ they carry little choobs of red stuff for their lips. Well, there ain’t much ‘arm in it, if they like it. It ain’t no more silly than them crinoline-things their gran’mothers used to wear.”

“People move with the times,” said Murty, wisely. He gave a sly glance downwards. “I mind the time, Mrs. Brown, when I’d never have known you had an ankle on you, yourself!”

Brownie chuckled again.

“Me mother ‘ud have thought it was a fair disgrace to have shown your

ankles, once you'd put your 'air up," she said. "Funny, it didn't seem to matter to 'ave 'em until then; but the minute you bought your first packet of 'air-pins, your ankles disappeared for ever." She gave a twitch to a fresh print skirt which, viewed by modern standards, was distinctly demure. "Well, thank goodness, Miss Norah persuaded me to become up-ter-date. Many's the time, gettin' up from lookin' into the oven, I've caught me 'eel in me skirt an' sat down sudden. Gives you a shock, when you're my weight, Murty."

"It would, so," said Murty, sympathetically. "Yerra, an' if it had been annywan else than Miss Norah that had been the first gerril to go about here in boots an' breeches, I'd have criticized her pretty sevar, so I would. But 'twas herself, so I cud only see the sinsibility there was in it."

"Makes all the difference," agreed Brownie. "Fancy me, now, Murty, in boots an' breeches!"

"I can't, ma'am," said the Irishman, truthfully.

"Well, you won't have the chance. Me apron an' a good print is right enough for me."

"An' if there's annywan looks betther than yourself, Mrs. Brown, in them big white aprons, I'd like to see them!" Murty hastened to reassure her. "Me ould mother wore them, an' I do be thinkin' they make a tasty finish to a dress. Nowadays the gerrils wear quare flowery things that don't show the dirt—I'm thinkin' they'd all be the betther of a visit to the wash-tub."

"So they would," agreed Mrs. Brown. "Well, then, Murty, there's the barracks for all the young gentlemen that's to be here for the dance the night before. A mercy we've heaps of spare stretchers and blankets. An' the housemaids'll sleep down at Mrs. Evans's, an'—oh, well, if anyone unexpected turns up, there's always the loft! Mr. Jim offered to sleep in the big car. He said he could easy twine his legs round the steering-wheel!"

Murty gave a crack of laughter.

"I'd like to see the six-fut-four of him doin' it," he said. "But he'd sleep in the pigsty if he thought it would be anny convanience to you, so he would." His honest face grew grave. "I do be thinkin' long an' often, Mrs. Brown, how's it goin' to be with Mr. Jim, with Miss Norah and Mr. Wally gone. The Masther's ould, an' when you're ould things don't matther as much. But them three have always been together. It'll hit Mr. Jim hard, for all he's that cheery about it. Them two, in the long evenings, each on wan side of the fire-place, with their pipes goin'—it'll be different, entirely, from now, with Miss Norah and Mr. Wally up to some nonsense all the time. I dunno why couldn't they have all gone on livin' at Billabong just the same as ould times."

Brownie shook her grey head in its neat white cap.

"I don't hold with that at all," she said briskly. "Young people starting married life had ought to be in a home of their own. Bless you, Murty, it'll be



near as good as their bein' here when they get settled—the new house won't be half a mile away, an' they'll be in and out of Billabong all the time. An' some day Mr. Jim'll be gettin' married himself. Send it soon, I say! I'm all for people gettin' married," said Brownie, with determination.

"Mr. Jim! Yerra, who'd be good enough for him?"

"No one in the world, in your opinion an' mine, Murty. But he'll marry some one, sure as fate—an' you an' me'll have to make the best of it, an' be glad he's happy. You wouldn't have him a sour old bachelor like yourself, now, Murty?"

"Well, I would not," said Mr. O'Toole, grinning. "Truth is, Mrs. Brown, I don't seem able to hould with them growin' up at all. They're just the children always they were, in my eyes, an' there's something quare an' unnatural in talkin' of marryin'. But I suppose it's like powdtherin' noses—one must move with the times. I'll be powdtherin' me own before I know where I am! Tell me now, have ye all the arrangements made for next week?"

"Gettin' on nicely," said Brownie. "The weddin's to be in the drorin'-room, of course, with the big foldin' doors open into the dinin'-room—that'll hold every one quite comferable. An' the presents'll be in the billiard-room for all the people to see. Such things she 'ave give 'er already, Murty: there's an outfit of table-silver as 'ud move your 'eart, from Mrs. Linton in Melbourne, though Miss Norah she don't seem to set much store by it, beside that Eytalian leather-work Mr. Jim give her. That's Mr. Jim's little special present—of course he's giving them both the new car they're goin' travellin' in. It ain't come yet, but by the picksher Miss Norah showed me, it's a beauty."

"Trust Mr. Jim," said Murty. "Well, they can't show the Masther's present—it 'ud be a big billiard-room that 'ud hold a house that isn't built yet!"

"Wise, ain't you!" scoffed Brownie. "I don't b'lieve the Master looks on the new 'ouse as a present at all. He's give her a wonderful dressin'-case, apart from that."

"An' what might that be?" asked Mr. O'Toole, politely.

"Oh, a big leather case, all fitted up with tortoise-shell brushes an' bottles an' things."

"That 'ud be a pleasant thing to have," said Murty, plainly mystified. "Would it be in it she would get to dress, Mrs. Brown, an' she thravellin'?"

"Murty, you'll be the death of me some day," said Brownie, giggling. "It's a thing you'd carry in your 'and—to hold all the oddments a lady like Miss Norah needs."

"I'd have said Miss Norah wasn't needin' that many oddments—whatever they might be," said Murty. "But it's ignorant I am about the ways of women, the saints be praised! Tell me more about the arrangements, Mrs. Brown, me dear. Well, yes, I cud do with a cup of tay—talkin's dry work."

"Let me 'ave a look at me cake, an' I'll sit down," said Brownie. She bent to peer into the oven, rising with heightened colour and closing the door gently. "Rose on me somethink beautiful, it 'as—the Master's talkin' of gettin' me an electric stove, but I tell him I wouldn't change me old range for all the new-fangled stoves in creation." She poured out a cup of tea for herself, and sat down at the snowy kitchen-table. "Well, now—after the weddin' the big lunch is to be in the barn. You'll have to get all the men decoratin' it on Monday, Murty."

"Mr. Jim's afther tellin' me. He says we've got to beat all our own records for makin' the barn gay—an' we done it pretty thorough for the welcome to them all when they come back from the War. I dunno will we beat it; there wasn't a man or woman on the place that didn't put their backs into it then. But we'll try."

"You'll have Mr. Jim with you this time," said Brownie. "He'll have lots of ideas—I know he's sent to town for Chinese lanterns an' flags an' things. There'll be the big dance the night before, with all the districk 'ere; and then the weddin' is to be at twelve next day, so's to give plenty of time for anyone that wants to get into Cunjee for the afternoon train. An' then we'll sit down an' feel flat!"

"An' how long is it they'll be away?"

"Miss Norah and Mr. Wally?" Mrs. Brown shrugged her fat shoulders. "Goodness only knows. They'll wander in that car all over Victoria and New South Wales, I b'lieve. There's nothink to 'urry them. Before they come back the Master's goin' to see his sister in Tasmania, and Mr. Jim'll be off to stay with Mr. Paxton in Queensland. Mr. Paxton's due on the weddin'-day, Miss Norah told me this morning: he can't get here any sooner. Goin' to fly in an airyplane all the way from the North of Queensland!"

"The boys do be leppin' mad with excitement about that same," remarked Murty. "Much work I'll get out of any hand on the run when that airyplane's due. I never seen wan o' them things yet, only in pictures in the papers. Fine care I'll take to have all the horses in a paddock with trees too thick for him to land! I wance knew a steady ould horse that dropped dead in his tracks at the sight of an elephant; there's no reason why annywan of them shouldn't do the same when they see an airyplane for the first time—an' I'd hate it to be Monarch or Miss Norah's horse."

"I suppose they're safe—them flyin'-machines," said Brownie, doubtfully. "They seem to go all over the world with them, and not get killed more often than people get killed walkin' in a street. But I don't mind tellin' you, Murty, I'll be relieved in me bones when that thing's safely landed. I keep thinkin' in bed at night, what if it got out of control an' came down on top of the 'ouse!"

"Yerra, woman, it 'ud hurt the airyplane more than the house!" said the

astonished Mr. O'Toole. "Pretty solid, Billabong House is; I'd back it agin a flyin'-machine, any day."

"Somethin' would be damaged, even if it was only the poor young gent," said Mrs. Brown, despondently. "It 'ud cast a gloom over the 'ole thing, as you might say. Oh, well, it's wrong not to hope for the best—but I'll be glad when he's safely on earth an' eatin' his dinner at Billabong."

"Unchancy things, I'd call them," remarked Murty. "Mr. Jim's all for flyin' back to Queensland with Mr. Paxton, but it's wishin' I am the Masther 'ud persuade him against it. Earth's a fine substantial thing to have undher your feet. These modrun inventions turn life upside down, so they do. In a way I'm broke-in to mothor-cars, seein' there's no denyin' they're handy at times—but give me a good high buggy with a pair of fresh horses, an' there's no finer means of gettin' over the ground. But the way things are goin', a horse'll be a curiosity shown at the Zoo in fifty years!"

"And I'll go to see him when I'm a doddering old lady," said a fresh voice at the door, "and I'll tell people I used to ride one once, and that a bad old Irishman taught me. And they won't believe that such a feeble old woman ever did anything so mad!"

Murty was on his feet.

"Is it yourself, Miss Norah? Sure, Mrs. Brown an' meself was discussin' the ways of the world."

"And making out that it's a bad world, Murty?"

"Sure, not with yourself in it, Miss Norah," he said gently.

"Oh, Murty, there's no one that says things so nicely as you!" Norah said. "Sit down—I'm going to have a cup of tea with you and Brownie. You want some more too, don't you? Keep still, Brownie, or I'll be cross." She brought the teapot, and filled their cups before pouring out one for herself. Then she sat down and smiled at them both.

"The others are all playing tennis, so I came to find you. I didn't know Murty would be here, but, as I went to the stables first, and his saddle and stock-whip were both in their places, I thought there was a fair chance of finding him in these parts."

"I do be an ould woman for a cup of tay and a gossip, Miss Norah," Murty said, with a grin. "An' there's no denyin' that wan gets the best of both from Mrs. Brown!" At which Brownie wagged her head at him, and told him to get along with his Irish tongue.

"I agree with him, all the same, Brownie," Norah said "Think of all the good gossips we've had in this old kitchen—and all the cups of tea we've brewed! Do you think I'll ever get anyone to keep the new kitchen as you keep this? I don't."

"I've an idea, Miss Norah," said Brownie, excitedly. "Whenever your cook

goes out I'll get the Master to let me go over to you for the day——”

“So that you can do my work? No, you won't do that, Brownie darling; but you'll come, and we'll have a cooking together, and pretend that it's old times. And it will be as good as a picnic!”

She put a smooth brown hand over the worn, work-gnarled hand on the table.

“But you needn't think—either of you—that the old times are gone,” she said earnestly. “It will be just the same as it always has been—we'll never be one bit less friends, and I'll always want you both. You see, we all belong to each other on Billabong, and we can't alter. Mr. Wally knows that just as well as I do.”

“My dear!” said Brownie.

“There's no man, woman, or child on Billabong that wouldn't give their heads for you,” said Murty, gruffly. “That's the way it always has been, and 'tis the way it always will be. I'm thinkin' it won't be very long before the track to the new house is worn very bare, with the thrassic there will be on it.”

“I'm sure of that,” Norah said. “Think how lonesome I should be without you all. I'm quite certain that when I'm out after cattle with Mr. Wally I'll just naturally come back here for lunch, quite forgetting that my own lunch is waiting for me at the other place. And think how annoyed my cook will be!”

“Let her be annoyed!” said Brownie, loftily. “Would she have you never come near your own people, the proud thing! I pray very 'ard not to be jealous of Mr. Wally, but I know well I'll never be Christian enough not to be jealous of your cook!”

“Poor thing, I haven't even got her yet, or even a kitchen to put her in—and when I do get her she may be as tame as a rabbit,” laughed Norah. “So don't worry about being jealous of her, Brownie, for she'll probably eat from your hand. Anyhow, it's ages before I need think of housekeeping, and when I do I am coming to you for advice every five minutes.”

“I taught you to cook when you were twelve, so I don't reckon as 'ow you'll need much advice,” said Brownie, laughing. “An' you ran a house in England in that old War, an' I'll always be jealous 'cause I wasn't there to 'elp. But as long as you keep pretendin' you need advice an' come over an' tell me about it, I'll manage to get on.”

David Linton's big form loomed in the doorway.

“Are you trying to keep a hold on her, Brownie?” he asked. “As far as I can see, we are each making a special pair of hobbles, so that she will never get too far away.”

“I won't need the hobbles,” Norah said, laughing. “Perhaps you'd better give them to Wally, to keep me at the new house!”

## CHAPTER III

### A BILLABONG DAY

WEDDINGS are supposed to end stories, but, because this book is not a love-story, the wedding comes out of its usual setting and becomes a jumping-off place for the events which were to follow. This is not to say that it is not a story about people who loved each other. For Norah Linton and Wally Meadows had done that almost all their lives, beginning with the lonely orphan boy's affection for the little girl who was kind to him, and who was half a boy herself; so that when they grew up, the deeper and truer relationship came to them so naturally and simply that it seemed as if it were the only thing that could possibly happen. They were very sure of each other; but, being matter-of-fact people, they did not become sentimental. They lived their love-story, but they did not talk much about it; and as it was entirely their own affair, they did not give me permission to write about it. But as to what happened to them after they were married—well, that was simply a proof that adventures may come to the most matter-of-fact people; and there is no harm in setting down the tale.

Until the last two days it was very difficult to realize that there was to be a wedding at Billabong at all. Every one went about the daily work in the usual way: Norah and Wally rode and picnicked and bathed in the lagoon with the others just as they had always done, and helped to muster cattle and draft them with the concentrated energy of people who asked no better job. Wedding-presents, which might have rolled in daily, to induce a wedding atmosphere, were checked in their headlong course by the fact that Cunjee, the nearest post-town, was many miles away, and nobody seemed to have time to go in for them. Mrs. Brown was certainly engaged in a terrific orgy of cooking, assisted by Mrs. Evans, the overseer's wife, and Mrs. O'Reilly, whose husband had a small farm, and who sternly declined to be absent from any of the preparations. But then, orgies of cooking were not unknown at Billabong, which, like all lonely station-houses, had its seasons of lavish hospitality; so that the feverish activity in the kitchen scarcely counted as evidence. Jean Yorke, who had come from Melbourne to act as a bridesmaid, openly lamented the absence of the correct spirit.

"But what do you expect me to do?" Norah protested laughingly. "Sit in a corner and look languishingly at Wally? But he'd think I was mad. Besides, there's too much to be done on the run—you see, shearing has put aside all the ordinary work with the cattle, and we want to help while we're here. Also, we

both love going after cattle!”

“Oh, I know—and of course it’s fun,” Jean answered. “But that’s just your ordinary life, and I did think you’d be a bit different. Every other girl would be simply wild about her presents and her trousseau, and you—why, you haven’t got a trousseau at all. And you don’t seem to care!” Her voice was a wail.

“But I don’t want a trousseau,” Norah said. “I’ve got heaps of clothes. What would I do with them if I went and bought a heap of new things I didn’t want?”

“Every one wants clothes,” said Jean in a voice of hushed solemnity.

“Well—naturally. But I’ve got them—quite nice clothes, too. Where would be the sense of buying a new outfit just because I’m going for a motor-tour with Wally? I’ll get new frocks when I want them. As for wedding-presents—well, of course I love them, and I think people have been wonderfully good. But somehow, just now, Billabong seems to count enormously to me, and I want to be a part of it as long as ever I can. Do be understanding, Jeanie.”

“I’ll try, but it’s hard,” said Jean, mournfully. “After all, you’re only planning to get married once, and as far as I can see, you’ll muster old bullocks all your life, precisely as you’ve always done. I should think you’d get tired of anything with horns and a tail! Thank goodness, you’ve got a perfectly scrumptious wedding-dress; I was horribly afraid you’d want to get married in riding-kit!”

“I might—but Dad and the boys wanted me to have a white frock,” said Norah, laughing. “And you can’t say a word against my going-away things, either, young Jean!”

Jean sniffed delicately.

“Good and plain, like a family cake,” she answered. “You always did know a good bit about tailor-made things, Norah, though I’ll admit I’d have liked something a bit more fussy. Still, for the very peculiar honeymoon you’re having I suppose it’s the best thing. But one oughtn’t to choose one’s going-away dress just to be useful.” She brought out the last word with a fine scorn.

“Consider all the bacon and eggs I’ll be frying in it!” murmured the bride.

“Not much, you won’t!” retorted Jean, with surprising discernment. “It’s my belief you’ll live in a coat and breeches throughout the trip!” She sighed. “Old ones, at that!”

“I hoped you wouldn’t guess that—but I might have known you would,” said Norah, meekly. “They’re ever so handy, for cooking.”

“I should let Wally cook,” said her friend, with firmness.

“Poor Wally will probably be lying on his back under the car, inspecting its vitals,” said Norah. “And I’m not quite sure how he cooks, either, so I think I had better take on the job. He can clean the frying-pan.”

“Well, it’s a queer way of having fun,” meditated Jean. “But you always

were queer, Norah, though you're an old dear all the same. Are you ever going to send in to Cunjee for more presents? I'm certain that the station is simply clogged with them!"

"Gracious, I hope not!" Norah ejaculated. "Just think of all the letters I'd have to write—and Dad says he's ruined with buying stamps already. But the cart is going in to-day, as well as the car; ever so many people are coming. And Wally and Jim are going to bring out the new car. You had better go too."

"Well, I'm glad something is beginning to happen that at least dimly suggests a wedding," said Jean. "It's high time, since to-day is Monday, and I'm told the affair is fixed for Wednesday! It would be fun to go in. Won't you be coming too?"

Norah shook her head.

"No—I want to stay with Dad. It's the last day we'll have together, so we're going for a long ride, ending up with tea with Tommy and Bob. I know you won't mind, Jean dear. We'll have a wild time opening presents to-night, if the number is as terrible as you seem to think."

"I hope it is, at any rate," said Jean. "Do we go before or after lunch?"

"Before, because Jim and Wally want to spend a few inquiring hours with the new car before they come out. Jim is haunted by awful fears that we'll break down in lonely places—not that it would matter enormously if we did, since we'll be prepared to camp out. You will have to lunch in the township, and I warn you that to dine at the Cunjee hotel is an adventure in itself. It isn't quite like your beloved 'Australia.' "

"I shall eat an egg," declared Jean, delicately.

Long before the car came round Norah and her father made their escape. They went across to the stables, finding Murty putting the finishing touches to their horses—Monarch, Mr. Linton's great black, and bay Garryowen, who whinnied at the sight of his mistress and came nosing about her pocket in search of the apple that never failed to be there for him. The sunlight glinted and rippled on their satin coats as they stamped and switched their tails at the flies. Murty held the stirrup as Norah swung herself into the saddle.

"Will you be ridin' him again, Miss Norah, before you go?"

"I'm afraid not, Murty," Norah answered regretfully. "I expect I shall have to stay at home to-morrow—there will be people here, and I shall be busy."

"I thought that 'ud be the way of it. Well, he's fit as a fiddle to give you a good day, Miss Norah; and I'll see that he's just as fit for you when you come home."

"I'm certain of that, Murty. You won't let anyone but yourself ride him, will you?"

"Yerra, if annywan barrin' meself puts a leg over him I'll want to know the reason why," declared Murty—"unless 'twas the Masther or Mr. Jim, an' it

won't be either, because he's not up to their weight. I have the advantage of them, in ridin' light. That Billy 'ud give the eyes out of his black head to ride him; 'tis himself has always the great wish for Garryowen. Never a gate he'd open if he was on him; he'd go out of his way to find fences to be puttin' him over!"

"I'd rather he didn't have the chance," said Norah. "Billy can ride, but he's too mad when he gets on a good horse. You might lend him Monarch, Dad!"

"I have too much respect for Monarch's legs," said her father. "There he is now, the black villain! Billy!" He gave a sharp whistle, and a black "boy" of uncertain age, who had been hovering modestly in a stall, came out and favoured his master with a look of innocent inquiry.

"I thought I told you to take the cart in to the station," said Mr. Linton, severely.

Billy's air of pained surprise was a study in expressions.

"That pfeller Tom plenty gone," he said. "Boss, you plenty tell me take cart get gum-tree."

"I did not, and you know it, you rascal," replied his master. "Tom was to take the cart out for bush."

"Plenty that pfeller Tom he mix-up," Billy murmured

"You didn't mix-up, Billy, and you know it. What for?"

Billy was silent a moment, digging a bare black toe into the dust. Then he looked up with a grin that held something wistful.

"Boss, me plenty want get gum-tree Missy Norah weddin'."

"I thought as much," said David Linton—"so you got Tom to swap jobs. What did you give him, Billy?"

"Gibbit plenty bacca that pfeller," said Billy, grinning. "Mas' Wally him gibbit me plenty big plug. Now Tom got."

"An' it took him an hour to get round Tom," said Murty, laughing. "Billy can't argue much, sir, 'cause he has to fall back on 'plenty' for every second word. But he sat on an old bucket and held the baccy out towards Tom until he gave in. He's been leppin' mad to be in the job of fixin' up the barn, an' it clean broke his heart to be ordered off to Cunjee."

"Don't be cross with him this time Dad," pleaded Norah. "You won't do it again, will you, Billy?"

"Plenty not," murmured Billy. He put a black hand on Garryowen's neck, raising his dog-like eyes for a moment. The squatter hesitated. Then he laughed.

"No use being cross, I suppose, with the first wedding in the family coming off," he said. "I might have remembered that he'd want to be in the thick of it. All right, Billy—but don't you disobey orders again. You take the other cart out, and mind you bring home good bush."



Billy dived into the stable and emerged with an axe ground to razor sharpness. He ran his thumb over the glittering edge.

"Make him plenty sharp," he said, grinning from ear to ear. "Mine bin poddy up this pfeller, cut bush for Missy Norah."

"An' that's throe enough, sir," Murty put in. "The black image has been puttin' an edge on that axe for days!"

"Thank you, Billy," Norah said. She leaned from her saddle and patted the black boy's shoulder. "You'll bring home the best boughs on Billabong, won't you?"

"Plenty!" said Billy, eagerly. He sprang to hold the gate open as they rode through, and returned to whet his axe anew, a black vision of dog-like loyalty.

Norah and her father rode in silence for a while, until the home-paddock was left behind, and a fold in the hills hid the homestead from them. Then they gave the impatient horses their heads, and cantered steadily towards the hills, the eager hooves brushing through the deep rye-grass and clover underfoot. Sleek bullocks lifted lazy, incurious eyes as they passed: but there were no dogs to-day, and no whip spoke, so they knew that they were not to be disturbed, and returned placidly to their grazing. A flock of plover rose near them, trim and dainty spurwings, spruce and well-groomed in their close-fitting suits of brown and black and white; farther off a heron sailed slowly across towards the marsh where the ceaseless "cric-crac" of countless frogs sent him an invitation to dinner. No touch of summer had come to mar the freshness of a late spring: everywhere was greenness and plenty and the sense of energy and growth. It was Billabong at its best and loveliest: Billabong, which had always been the heart of the world to the girl who rode across its familiar plains. There was no tree on all its acres that Norah did not know: no bush-grown gully or cleared hill that had not held the spirit of adventure and delight since first she had ridden over it on a dumpy Shetland pony, ablaze with pride at being her father's companion. And if Billabong were the heart of the world to Norah, to David Linton Norah was the heart of Billabong.

The horses slackened of their own accord as they neared the belt of timber by the river, beyond which rose a low range of scrub-covered hills. A cattle-track ran along the bank; they followed it in single file, noting unconsciously every detail of the bird-life around them, the flowers that spangled the grass or climbed riotously in the tea-tree, but saying nothing. Norah was trying to realize that this was her last ride as Norah Linton; that when she came back things would have changed, in some mysterious manner—that Billabong would no longer be all that mattered most. It did not seem a possible thing; she put the thought from her after a while. Even if she belonged to Wally, was not Wally altogether a part of Billabong? And then, too, she remembered a time when Wally had been in the valley of the shadow of Death, and she had

known, suddenly, that nothing in the world counted, except to bring him back.

They camped by the river to eat the sandwiches they had brought. As they sat down in the shade of a clump of scrub David Linton cast a keen glance at her troubled face.

“Not worrying, Norah?” he asked.

She put out her hand in an old gesture that had been hers from childhood, rubbing his coat-sleeve.

“Daddy—it isn’t going to make any difference? We’ll always be the same, you and Jim and I?”

“Life can’t go on without change,” he said quietly. “I’d willingly have kept you all children for ever, but I know that couldn’t be. The only thing to do is to welcome change for the good there will be in it. So if there is a difference, my girl, it will be all for the best, and we’ll get new happiness out of it. You’re not to worry about Jim and me, because we’re happy in your happiness.”

“You’re such dears to me,” she said. “There never was anyone like you and Jim.”

“Well—we’ve had you,” he said dryly. “And don’t forget that the working partnership remains unchanged, except that I’ll have a new son. After all, I’ve had great luck. You might have married a strange Englishman when we were over yonder, and given me a son-in-law to whom I should have had to be respectful! And as it is—I have Wally. I’m not asking anything better, Norah.”

“When you say that, everything is all right,” she said.

“Of course I say it. When you have watched a boy from his childhood: seen him grow up straight and clean and honest: seen him answer to a test when a big call comes—well, you don’t mind giving him your daughter, even if she is—you. But, my goodness, how I should have mistrusted that strange Englishman! You don’t know how I dreaded him, all the years we were in England!”

“And the poor man never turned up!” said Norah, laughing.

“Just as well for him. He would have had to face three fierce guardians, in Jim and Wally and me. And just think how Murty would have turned up his nose at him!”

“And I’d have come to Billabong on occasional polite visits,” said Norah. “Good gracious, it doesn’t bear thinking of! How very relieved you must have been when you found that it was only Wally!”

“I was,” said David Linton. “So I think it would be better if you put all foolish thoughts out of your curly head, and tried to realize that a wedding should be—and is going to be—a very cheerful affair. Jim and I are quite cheerful, because we don’t intend to lose you at all.”

“And I certainly don’t intend to be lost,” said Norah. “So that’s all right. Life is going to be more fun than ever, and we’ll have to be tremendously busy

when we come back, with all the new country the boys are going to develop. Wally is mad to try irrigation on some of his part, and make an enormous fortune out of lucerne. He has visions of fattening bullocks as they were never fattened before, and beating you at every sale!”

“Nice sort of son-in-law!” said her father, with a chuckle. “I’ll begin to regret the Englishman.”

“Yes, won’t you? And the building of the new house will be exciting, and making the garden. Hogg is planning to work out all his pet schemes over it—he seems to take it for granted that you’re going to lend him to us. I don’t see why, between gardens and lawns and vegetables and orchards, we shouldn’t stretch right across to Billabong after a while!”

“And run a ring-fence round the whole—that’s rather a bright idea,” said the squatter. “And as I get old I will solemnly propel my wheel-chair between the two houses, backwards and forwards, all day!”

“Don’t be horrid!” returned his daughter. “You’re never going to get old.”

“Well, no sooner than I can help, at any rate.” Mr. Linton rose, stretching his long limbs. “Come on—we have been lazy long enough, and there’s a good deal of country to see yet before we get to the Rainhams’.”

They caught the grazing horses, unhobbled them, and saddled up; and, crossing the river by a ford where the water rippled to the girths, struck into the hill-country beyond. Here were young store-bullocks, wild and restless, that broke into an uneasy trot as the riders approached and vanished, galloping, down stony gullies; and once they caught a glimpse of a little mob of unbroken young horses, learning to develop sure-footedness among the hills before the time should come to yard and handle them and train them to stock-work.

“Some good ones in that lot,” said the squatter, eyeing them keenly. “We’ll edge a bit nearer and get a look at them; that big chestnut should be up to Jim’s weight or mine in a few years, and there’s a black mare I have my eye on for Wally. Slip off your horse, Norah; we’ll get nearer them on foot.”

They tied their horses within view of the mob, to hold its attention, and crept quietly across a gully and up a rough hill-side, taking cover wherever possible. Soon they obtained a vantage-ground above the young horses, where they could peer between rocks without being seen. The youngsters were plainly uneasy: they watched the saddled horses, moving restlessly and pawing the ground. The big chestnut colt was in the lead: his coat was rough and matted, and he moved yet with the awkwardness of youth, but he gave promise of being a magnificent horse. Near him, Mr. Linton pointed out the black mare of which he had spoken: a slenderly built thing with the head of a racer, full of fire and nerves.

“She’s a beauty!” Norah breathed. “And I like that bay fellow, standing apart, Dad. May I have him?”

"If he's good enough for you: I'm just a little doubtful on the point. He'll make a useful horse, at all events, even if he isn't showy. We must get them in next year for Dave to tackle: I'll bet that mare will take some handling. She'd be utterly spoiled by rough treatment, but Dave will understand her. Ah, they're off!—I thought they were nearly at the end of their courage."

The big chestnut had suddenly decided that the intruders were there for no good purpose. Uttering a loud snort, he wheeled and galloped away up the valley, his followers at his heels. Kicking and bucking, they vanished, the thudding of their hooves mingling with the clatter of stones long after they were out of sight.

"I hope they won't break any of their precious legs!" said Norah.

"No fear—they're as sure-footed as goats. Nothing like living in the hills to teach them that. Well, I'm glad we had a look at them, for they are often very hard to find, and harder still to get near." They made their way back to Monarch and Garryowen.

It was nearly four o'clock when they cantered up to the garden-gate of Creek Cottage, where Cecilia Rainham and her brother Bob lived and daily bore testimony to what may be accomplished by emigrants with a little capital and a plentiful capacity for hard work. Bob Rainham, working in his shirt-sleeves in the garden, greeted them with a cheery hail, and took a short cut across rows of beans to the gate.

"Tommy has been looking out for you for an hour," he said, shaking hands. "We began to fear that preparations for the wedding had engulfed you."

"Not it—we ran away from the preparations," Norah said, dismounting. "We've had a lovely day, and I've inspected the run so thoroughly that I feel I can safely leave it to Dad and Jim for a time! Is Tommy inside, Bob?"

"Yes—go in, Norah, while I put the horses in the stable. You too, sir."

"I'll come with you," David Linton said. "When Tommy and Norah first meet, their confidences are not for any mere man—and I want to have a look at your crop."

"Only a little look, Dad, because we really must go home soon," Norah warned. "Think of the assorted aunts and uncles at Billabong—and Mrs. Edward!" She ran up the garden-path, between masses of flowering stocks that made the air heavy with their fragrance, and met Tommy hurrying out of the doorway.

"I saw you coming, so I ran to make sure that Sarah had the teapot heated," said she. "Norah darling, you look just as happy as you ought to look, and the worry-line has gone away." She put a dainty finger on Norah's brow. Everything about Tommy was dainty, from her trim head to her little feet, and she wore her simple pink frock as a Frenchwoman wears her clothes—with an air: which was not to be wondered at, seeing that she had been brought up in

France. No one, looking at her casually, would have thought her the extremely capable young person she undoubtedly was. Norah towered over her by a head, and looked up to her in every other way.

"It has gone for good. I've had a talk with Dad—not a long talk, but he just made everything seem all right. Dad is a very comfortable person."

"I'm so glad, because I knew you were worrying. Now you will be nothing but happy. You have been riding all day?"

"Yes, and we drank river-water, and I'm dying for a cup of tea—and nearly dying for a wash. Lead me to the bathroom, Thomas darling, like a staunch friend. I must look at least tolerably clean when I get home, because all the relations will be there, feeling that I should certainly have been on the doorstep to receive them. But this was my day for Dad—and Billabong."

"I should think so," said Tommy, fussing about her with hot water and clean towels. "Come and comb your hair in my room, and leave your hat there. Now you look fresh and cool, and fit to inspect the table-mats I have just finished for you."

"Tommy, you angel!" Norah exclaimed over the exquisite bits of linen and embroidery. "I never saw anything so lovely. I'll be scared to use them."

"If you dare!" threatened Tommy. "Why, they will wash like rags. I'm so glad you like them, Norah. I made them blue, because you always have blue things; but when you are away I am going to make you an orange-and-brown set, and you will use them with bronze wall-flowers and forget that you ever liked blue!"

"I shan't do that, but I'll love them both," and Norah hugged her friend. "Tommy, couldn't you and Bob come over to-night? There will be people to entertain and presents to open, and I'll feel so supported if you are there. You were coming in any case to-morrow—why not to-night?"

"I don't see why not," responded Tommy. "Even if Bob has to come back, he can drive me over to dinner and leave me."

"Oh, make him stay. I want every minute of you that I can have. Jean is a dear, but she's so worried because I haven't a proper trousseau. I believe she'd like Wally to be married in a top-hat, and I'm perfectly certain Mrs. Edward Meadows would. Can you, by any stretch of your imagination, picture Wally in a top-hat?"

"My imagination quails at the sight," laughed Tommy. "I like Wally in shirt and breeches and his very oldest felt hat."

"Whisper—he's going to take it with us!" Norah confided. "He promises that he will take it off and sit on it if we meet a policeman, because no strange policeman would ever believe that anyone could wear such a hat and be respectable! But Wally does love it so."

"It is a very admirable hat," Tommy said solemnly. "Now, here is Mr.

Linton, and also tea, and I have made his special cake, so I hope he is hungry.”

“He certainly will be, when he sees it,” Norah assured her.

“Tommy, if Jim ever turns me out of Billabong, I’m coming to live here,” said David Linton, sinking into a deep chair. “This little room is the most restful place I know. Tea? Yes, rather, if you please. And, Thomas, what a cake! Is this your own doing?”

“Yes, and I shall be terribly nervous if you do not eat a great deal, because I dread that it is soggy in the middle,” Tommy told him, dimpling. “Once before, when you were coming, I made this cake, and a cow got into the garden just at the wrong moment, when I should have been brooding over it like an old hen. But there were young peas, and I had to chase the cow. So the end was very sad, because the pigs dined off burned cake, and you had only scones!”

“What a tragedy!—and I never knew anything about it,” laughed the squatter. “But I’ll wager that the scones were good, because I’ve never had a bad tea in Creek Cottage. When are you coming over to support the bride?”

“It was to have been to-morrow, but the bride wants us to-night. Can you manage that, Bob?”

“I should like to, thanks, Norah,” said Bob. “Yes: can do, if I come back for an hour or so to-morrow, to finish a fence. I’ll bring Wally with me, if he shows signs of stage-fright; fencing has a very steadying effect on the nerves! I suppose you won’t mind having him out of your way, Norah?”

“Why, I never notice him about!” said Norah, with an innocent air that brought a laugh from every one.

“It would never surprise me if they forgot all about the wedding on Wednesday,” said Bob. “We’ll have to detail a search-party, when they will probably be found placidly mustering the Far Plain bullocks. Have some cake, sir; it’s really better than it looks.”

“I was going to say that couldn’t be, but I believe you’re right for once,” Mr. Linton answered. “This will support me to-night, Tommy, when I’m carving for about twenty people, with the carver’s usual reward of a few congealed fragments, bolted hurriedly so that the next course won’t be kept waiting.”

The sun’s rays were slanting across the paddocks when the riders came up to the stables again, after a quick burst from the homestead gate. Murty was waiting as Norah dismounted.

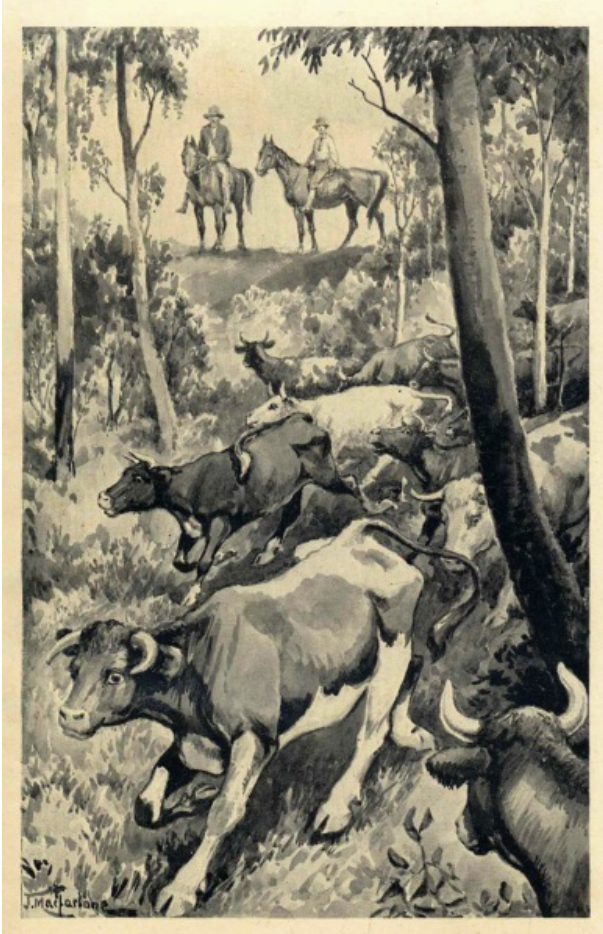
“Had a good day, Miss Norah?”

“Beautiful,” she said. “Will you get me an apple, Murty? I’ll take his saddle off myself to-night.”

She slipped off saddle and bridle, and returned to give the big bay his apple, patting his neck as he munched it. Garryowen arched his neck under the

feel of the hand he loved.

“Good-bye, old man,” she said. “I’ll ride you the very first day after I come back.” But she did not know how long that day would be.



“Here were young store-bullocks, wild and restless, that broke into an uneasy trot as the riders approached.”

Billabong Adventurers]

[[Chapter III](#)

## CHAPTER IV

### NORAH'S WEDDING-DAY

“**N**ow tread we a measure  
Expressive of pleasure,  
For we're to be married to-day.  
To-day!”

sang Jim, meeting Norah on the way to his bath. He was a huge figure in crumpled pyjamas, his thick brown hair a tousled mass: she was fresh as the morning, her blue frock crisp and dainty. Jim seized her in a bear-like hug.

“I am not washed, but as it's your wedding-day we'll forget that fact,” he said, holding her at arm's-length. “What do you mean by being up and dressed at six o'clock? I thought all good brides hid themselves from view on the morning of their wedding and contemplated their wicked past?”

“Not the best brides, like me,” returned Norah, modestly. “I'm after morning-tea, which I mean to have first with Brownie in the kitchen, and then with Dad.”

“I never heard of such shameless greed. Are you afraid you won't get enough wedding-feast?”

“Certainly not—I'll see to that. Where's Wally? Is he contemplating his past in the correct fashion?”

“I left him contemplating his wedding-boots, which some one seems to have packed full of rice,” said Jim. “No, it wasn't me, so you needn't look at me like that. I suspect Cecil and Dick. Anyhow, Wally is quite peevish about it, though his peevishness is tempered with thankfulness that he found it out before he wanted to put them on. How are you, old girl? Feeling fit?”

“Perfectly, thanks. I don't feel in the least like any other day, and I'm ever so hungry. I don't believe I'm a proper bride, after all!”

“Certainly you're not,” said Jim, looking at her severely. “All the brides I ever heard of toyed delicately with their food on their wedding-day, with recourse to smelling-salts between nibbles. And their women friends are supposed to gather round their pale forms, to braid their hair and make sure they're not shaky on the responses in the service, and other homely duties. How are you on the responses, Nor? I don't believe you've ever studied them!”

“Oh, I know as much as is necessary,” said Norah, laughing. “Wally vows I won't say ‘obey,’ and says he means to make Mr. Carrington put it in writing



for me to sign. As for braiding my hair, you can't do that with a shingle. I suppose that's why my handmaidens are remaining comfortably in bed."

"It's not a proper wedding," mourned Jim. "I doubt it will never be legal!"

"If you're not out of that bathroom in three minutes, you won't get a chance of going in until I've done!" said a crisp voice from a half-open doorway. "Hunt him along, Norah; he's made my morning hideous with singing, until I don't believe I've got strength enough left to get married. No one should be allowed to sing to a bridegroom before six o'clock, but I think he imagined he was an early magpie."

"He looks more like a fretful porcupine—every hair is on end," laughed Norah.

"A porcupine, perhaps, but never fretful," said Jim, cheerfully. "And my hair is only standing on end because of what Wally said about his boots. He has a great turn of eloquence when really moved. All right, I'll go—you can come whenever you like, Wal."

"Yes, and be wiped out of existence by your galumphing form doing physical jerks—I know you!" said Wally. "There's no room in one bathroom for you and anyone else. Norah, did I hear you mention tea?"

"Only for people who are nicely dressed," said Norah, cruelly. "I'm off to the kitchen for mine; Brownie is sure to have an early brew. You'd better hurry up."

"It would show a proper spirit if you laid a cup at my door on my wedding-day," said Wally. "With three scones. Next time I get married I'll train my bride properly, beforehand. Don't you think a man needs nourishment after dancing half the night?"

"I know a woman does," returned Norah. "So I'm going to look for it. There may be an odd scone left, if you hurry." She went on her way past the bathroom, whence issued sounds as of an elephant splashing, mingled with snatches of song; and arrived in the kitchen, where Brownie greeted her with an exclamation of amazement.

"I near dropped the teapot! My lamb, what are you doin', up at this hour?"

"Why not?" asked Norah. "It's a lovely morning. Now, Brownie, you're not going to talk nonsense about the way brides ought to behave, are you?"

"I'd hoped you'd sleep until eight o'clock," said Brownie, with concern. "Goodness knows it was late enough before you got to bed, my dear, and you must have danced 'undreds of miles! A bride had ought to look fresh at her wedding."

"Don't I?" laughed Norah.

Old Brownie looked at the vivid face, and sighed, and smiled.

"Well, indeed, there's no one could look fresher. Did you sleep well, darlin'?"

"I slept like a top, but I woke early," said Norah. "And I've had a swim, and my things are all packed, and I've nothing to worry about—and I did want to have a cup of tea with you this morning, Brownie dear. The boys will be here presently: they're wandering round already—but we won't wait for them. I'll pour out tea, if you will cut me a large piece of bread-and-butter. Crust, please."

"Well, there's nothing amiss with your 'ealth, Heving be praised!" said Brownie, piously. They sat down and gossiped over the teacups.

"Didn't the barn look jolly last night?" Norah said. "I never saw such gum-tips as the men had brought in—and Jim's flags and balloons and Chinese lanterns were beautiful. Even Mrs. Edward Meadows said it was lovely."

"So it were," Brownie answered. "That's a proud lady, now, Miss Norah: I was fair glad I 'ad on me black silk when the Master entry-juiced me to her. An' she shook 'ands with me, with three fingers, an' said, 'Ah, Mrs. Brown! I've 'eard of you quite often!' as condescendin'-like as if she'd been Queen Mary. I didn't feel as if I could 'ave any sort of conversation with 'er. An' when she saw Mr. Jim an' Mr. Wally makin' me take the floor with them in the Lancers an' quadrilles 'er face was a study of 'orror. Mr. Wally saw it: I know, 'cause 'e bowed so extra low when 'e 'anded me back to me place. I 'ad a quiet laugh at it, all to myself!"

"Just you ask Mr. Wally whom he would rather dance with—his sister-in-law or you," smiled Norah. "I think he finds Mrs. Edward hard to live up to."

"Well, I believe I know without askin'," said Brownie, with a chuckle. "Though, why on earth them two dear boys should find any pleasure in draggin' a fat old woman like me about, I dunno."

"Jim says you're lighter on your feet than half the girls he knows."

"Well, I was a dancer in me time," admitted Brownie. "I was trained on step-dancin'—reels, an' jigs, an' Highland flings, an' 'ornpipes; not the queer kind of mournful walk they call dancin' nowadays. An' when you've been trained proper you never lose the 'ang of it, even when you're old an' fat. Me feet start tappin' of their own accord, the minute I 'ear so much as a concertina."

"Mine, too," said Norah. "Didn't Miss Tommy look pretty, Brownie?"

"Barrin' yourself, there was no one to touch 'er," Brownie replied. "She 'ave such a way with 'er—olds 'erself so pretty an' gracious, with what you might call dignity, for all she's such a slip of a thing. One time I'll admit I was prejuiced agin Miss Tommy, 'er bein' English with a dash of French, which ain't quite accordin' to Australian taste; but I lost it from the first day I see 'er workin' in the kitchen. She an' Mr. Bob are just as good Aussies as anyone else, now." Having reached the limit of high praise, Brownie paused.

"Miss Jean's pretty too, an' she 'as nice manners; but, some'ow, I dunno—

she don't seem quite the same, for all she's Australian born," she went on. "Town's 'er place, if you ask me: she likes bein' 'ere, but always I've the feelin' she's got a little laugh at the country, sort of up 'er sleeve. Like Mr. Cecil Linton, though 'e's got a good deal more sense, since 'e went to the War. Goodness knows, 'e needed it. 'E'll never be popilar on Billabong, not if 'e'd been to forty wars: the men'll never 'ave any time for 'im. It's a fair treat to see Murty an' Dave tryin' to be polite to 'im. Ah, well, one gets a good deal of fun in life by sittin' back an' watchin', as one gets old!"

"There's not much you don't see, Brownie," Norah told her, laughingly.

"Not much on Billabong, certainly, my dear. Well, after all, Billabong's me life, an' I don't want any better; as for Melbourne, with its trams an' motors an' 'buses peak-trafficking all day long, it gives me the 'orrors. Never do I want to see it again, since the last time I went down to the Show, an' a smart young policeman grabbed me by the arm an' said, 'Now, Auntie, you can't camp right on the tram-track—this ain't Woop-woop Gully!' Him an' his sauce—an' me all bamboozled with trams coming four ways at once! Well, that showed me where I belonged, an' I jus' caught the next train to Cunjee an' tallyphoned for Murty to come in an' meet me an' bring me 'ome. I never was so glad to see any place as me old kitchen, when I got back!"

"I'll go and take care of you, if you ever want to go again, Brownie," Norah told her. "I won't have policemen being saucy to you, even if they do happen to be saving your life at the moment." She rose, patting the vast old shoulder. "Now I'm going to have tea again, with Dad."

"Darlin', you'll spoil your breakfast!"

"Not much!" said Norah. She prepared a little tray swiftly. "This is only a tiny tea, just to be sociable with Dad. Don't make yourself tired this morning, Brownie dear, will you? There are plenty of girls to do the rushing about."

"As if I'd let any girls do my part on your weddin'-day!" Brownie said under her breath, as the tall figure disappeared. Sounds of joy came from without: Jim and Wally, spick-and-span in white flannels, encountered Norah and her tray.

"That for us? Thank goodness she has developed a proper spirit, Jim!"

"Indeed, it isn't for you at all—it's for Dad and me. Hold him, Jim—he looks wolfish! Brownie may give you some, if you're good." And Norah made her escape, hurrying upstairs, to find her father already dressed.

"You up?" he said. "This is an honour for a bride to pay her old father. I'm glad you brought a cup for yourself. Suppose we have it on the balcony." He took the tray and led the way out through the long window. To them presently appeared Jim, bearing a cup in one hand and a huge scone in the other.

"Brownie's instructing Wally on how to behave when getting married," he said; "and as I'm not needing that advice, I thought I'd come and find you

two." He perched on the balcony railing, and waved his scone towards Norah in salute. "Hail to the Bride!" he said, and took a deep bite.

"Thank you kindly," acknowledged the bride. "It only needs Dad to play the Wedding March on the mouth-organ!"

"Not while I'm having morning-tea," said Mr. Linton, hastily. "I do not play the mouth-organ well at that time. Going to work this morning, Jim?"

Jim looked at him reproachfully.

"Do I look like it?"

"You look more like a tennis-party," said his father, laughing. "Weddings are very disorganizing. I'm not accustomed to seeing my off-sider dressed like the lilies of the field before breakfast."

"I thought something was due to the occasion," Jim answered. "Cecil, I presume, will come down to breakfast in a tail-coat. And to think we've all got to make ourselves pretty again before twelve o'clock! What a lot of unnecessary fuss there is about these matters. I think you and I had better change our fine raiment and go out after cattle as soon as the show is over—don't you, Dad? It will make the day seem more natural."

"It's tempting, but we shall have too many people to look after," his father said. "You will have to make yourself useful by driving some to the evening train: Mrs. Meadows, for one, wants to get back to Town."

Jim beamed.

"Nothing I should like more," he responded heartily. "Oh, I'm afraid that doesn't sound hospitable—but truly, that lady is a heavy load to entertain. She wears an air of disapproval that weighs me down—you can see Wally positively wilt whenever she approaches him. I don't think she was ever young." He stopped abruptly, listening. "Do you hear anything?"

"No," said Norah, doubtfully. She listened for a moment. "Yes, I believe I do, Jim. Is it a motor-cycle?"

"It's Freddy's 'plane, or I'm a Dutchman!" ejaculated Jim. He put down his cup and took two strides across the balcony, disappearing within the house. They heard him shouting for Wally as he ran.

Norah and her father were on the lawn almost as soon; then, finding their view restricted by shrubbery, they hurried out to the paddock, where all the station-hands were gathered in an excited group. The low droning was clearly in the clouds above them; presently, as a white mass drifted they caught a glimpse of an aeroplane, flying low, and a shout went up from the men. A little figure aloft waved a hand; and then the great bird swooped lower and lower, while every horse and bullock within a mile of the homestead fled madly in affright. Nearer and nearer it came; a gay aeroplane, flying little flags wherever they could be secured.

"Yerra, he has her dressed up for you, Miss Norah!" Murty ejaculated.

“She do be as gay as a gerril at a fair!”

Slowly and more slowly the 'plane sank. She came to earth near the lagoon, and taxied swiftly over the paddock towards the waiting throng, halting fifty yards away. The pilot got out, divesting himself of his head-gear, and came forward, grinning broadly.

“How are you, Norah? and everybody? 'Fraid I've disorganized your cattle horribly, sir—they thought I was the evil spirit of all the butchers that ever died, and they'll knock all the condition off themselves before they stop runnin'!”

“Oh, they'll put it on again,” said David Linton, laughing. “Very glad to see you, Freddy, my boy. We were beginning to think you were never coming, and half a dozen weddings wouldn't have made up to the men for your failing to turn up. Look at them now!” He pointed to the men who were crowding excitedly round the aeroplane.

“Catch me not turnin' up!” said Freddy Paxton, who was patting Wally vigorously on the back. “I couldn't let this fellow get spliced without having a finger in the pie.” He looked at Norah, doubt and inquiry dawning in his gaze. “It is the weddin'-day, isn't it? Or have I miscalculated?”

“Oh, it's the awful day, right enough,” Jim told him. “Why?”

“Well—seein' your sister. . . . Sorry, Norah, only I'd an idea brides never honoured people with a look at them before the parson turned up!”

Norah broke into laughter.

“Every one I have met this morning has expressed amazement at seeing me, and now you must drop from the clouds and say the same thing, Freddy,” she said reproachfully. “I'm not a proper bride, I suppose, but I simply decline to shut myself up in my room just because it's my wedding-day!”

“Jolly sound,” said the flying-man. “Why not be in the fun? Say you and I go for a little flip in the old 'bus this morning, just to buck you up thoroughly? I'd guarantee to bring you back in time to dress!”

Jim took him firmly by the shoulder.

“I suppose you think you're young Lochinvar, up-to-date?” he asked. “‘So light to the cockpit the fair lady he swung,’ and all that sort of thing! No, you don't, young Freddy. Dad and I are getting rid of our heaviest responsibility, and we're not taking any chances of the wedding not coming off. I'd put a bullock-chain round the propeller, Wally, if I were you.”

“Or on Freddy,” said Wally, placidly. “You've made a remarkable object of the 'bus, old chap.” He nodded towards the flag-decked machine. “Is it a signal—‘England expects that every man this day will do his duty’? Or what?”

“There's ingratitude and lack of appreciation, if you like,” said Freddy, disgustedly. “I stopped in Sydney just to buy all that bunting, to give the old girl a weddin'-garment—and he takes it for an attempt at signallin'! They're a

mixed lot of flags, but I thought the effect was jolly fine, myself! You might say you like it, Norah!”

“I do—I think it’s too beautiful for words!” Norah laughed. “But you haven’t flown like that all the way from Sydney, have you?”

“Not much: I stopped somewhere near Ballarat last night, as it was gettin’ late, and I didn’t know what sort of a landin’ I’d have here. Then I trimmed her up before startin’ this mornin’, to the immense joy of about fifty small boys. That was a jolly good map you made me, Jim, old man. I came straight to Billabong, like a homin’ swallow!”

“Good man! I didn’t think we’d see you until after breakfast,” Jim said. “You must have made an early start—and you ought to be ready for a feed. Come along: it’s nearly breakfast-time.”

“Just let me get my bag. I suppose those chaps won’t cut chips out of her, for souvenirs, will they?”

“Not they; they’re far too much in awe of her. Take him in, Wally; I’ll bring his things.” They went towards the house, while the stock-men clustered round the aeroplane, deaf to the breakfast-gong that pealed from the men’s hut.

Every one was in high spirits at breakfast. Even the severe countenance of Mrs. Edward Meadows, Wally’s sister-in-law, could not dispel the merriment; and as that grim lady found a kindred soul in one of Norah’s aunts, they retired to a corner on the verandah during the morning and comforted their souls with talk of cities and of the iniquities of servants, coupled with comments on the improper ways of modern brides. The house hummed with excitement and bustle. In the barn the men were renewing, under Jim’s direction, the decorations which showed any signs of fading, and bringing in long trestle-tables for Brownie and her assistants to lay the wedding-feast. There was a shout from the men when Jim and Bob Rainham carried over the great bridal cake that Brownie had made, preceded by Freddy and Cecil Linton as escorts, while the proud author of the cake brought up the rear, trembling with anxiety for the tottering top tier of the erection. Then Tommy and Jean came to wreath the cake and the table in delicate ferns and clematis. Mr. Linton was busy in a dozen ways, looking after his guests; a bevy of girl-cousins and friends were filling the house with flowers.

“There’s nothing for me to do!” wailed Norah, meeting Wally in the hall. “They all say, ‘Go away—you’re not in this!’ I never was without a job in my own house before. I don’t think I like weddings!”

“Me, too,” said Wally. “Murty fairly hunted me when I tried to restore a somersaulting gum-branch in the barn. The only sane person is Lee Wing, and he’s hoeing vegetables as if no one were going to be married this side of Kingdom Come. I was thinking of going to help him.”

“We must do something,” said the worried bride.

"I know!—let's go for a paddle on the lagoon," suggested Wally. "Nobody wants us, and I need exercise. Come along, Nor, and we'll forget all about the wedding!"

"We'd better remember in time to dress," said Norah, accepting the suggestion with enthusiasm. "Got your watch?"

"Yes. Hurry up, and we'll slip out through the shrubbery. If anyone sees us they'll think we've decided we can't face the music and are eloping."

He caught her hand, and they hurried out by a side-door and made their way, unnoticed, through the garden and over the paddock to the lagoon. The boat lay on the bank, the oars already in her. Wally pushed her out, and they jumped aboard and floated out on the broad sheet of still water. Wally took the oars and worked off some of his superfluous energy in a sharp pull for ten minutes, going round the deepest part of the lagoon again and again. Then he shipped the paddles, lit a cigarette, and stretched himself out luxuriously.

"I feel better. Isn't this peaceful, Norah?"

"Yes. Pity we've got to go in and get married, isn't it?"

They smiled at each other.

"I suppose it wouldn't do to disappoint the glad throng," Wally said. "They have come a long way for a wedding, and I suppose they'd be aggrieved if they didn't get one."

"How about substitutes? They might marry Brownie to Lee Wing!"

"No, I don't go as far as that," said Wally, thoughtfully. "You're rather horrid about it, but I want to marry you, all the same, if only to show my courage. But it would be rather jolly if the parson would come down to the bank and do the job—we could answer quite nicely from the boat. Not half so embarrassing as standing up in the drawing-room before all those people. Then I'd have nothing to distract my attention, and I could keep my eye on you and make sure that you said 'obey' when you should!"

Norah laughed softly.

"You wouldn't dare to move if I didn't say it," she gave back. "This old boat isn't built to allow remonstrances by indignant bridegrooms. And as Mr. Carrington would not know what was worrying you, the ceremony would go on, unhindered. I think this idea of yours has some sense, Wally. A pity we didn't think of it before!"

"I see I will have to leave it to the future," he said. "Then—a stick, Madam, will be my argument!"

The distant hoot of a motor struck across their talk, after a while.

"People are arriving," said Norah. "In dozens. And we ought to be up at the house to receive them, and we aren't, and nobody knows where we are—and, by the way, Wally, what is the time?"

Wally looked at his watch and gave a great start.

"Golly!—it's after eleven. And we've got to toe the mark at twelve! All very well for you, but I've got to put links in a clean shirt, and I'm blessed if I know where I put the ring! I must pull as bridegroom never pulled before!"

He did so, sending the boat spinning through the water. At the third stroke the unexpected happened. One old oar snapped clean off at the rowlock, and Wally caught a crab of the most complete nature, landing on his back in the bottom of the boat with a mighty crash. For a moment the amazed bride contemplated the waving feet of the bridegroom, and it is to be chronicled with regret that she went into helpless peals of laughter.

Wally struggled back to his seat, and joined in her unfeeling mirth.

"Nice sort of person you are!" he said, when he could command words. "I've a bump on the back of my head as big as a pumpkin. Now I'll have to paddle with one oar, and you'll be late for your own wedding, just as I always said you'd be! Never mind, I'll be late too. What a lark!"

He paddled hard for a few moments, standing up in the boat. Then he uttered an exclamation.

"Seems to me my feet are getting damp. Golly, the boat is making water hand over fist. That bump must have started a plank. Bale, Norah, as hard as you can, or we'll be drowned on our wedding-day!"

Norah sought hurriedly for a baling-tin, and, finding none, did the best she could with her hat, which, being of a porous nature, made little headway against the inrush of water. The boat filled rapidly, and presently sank gracefully beneath them. The water closed over their astonished heads.

They bobbed up together, sputtering and laughing.

"Well, we're a nice pair!" gasped Wally, treading water. "Can you swim, in that voluminous skirt of yours, or shall I save you?"

"I can swim, thank you," returned Norah. They struck out for the bank, which was luckily not far away; and presently, finding some sort of a footing, tramped heavily ashore. Since the footing was chiefly mud, of a clinging and viscous nature, they presented a sorry spectacle by the time they reached dry land.

"Oh, and your flannels were so nice!" uttered Norah.

"So was your frock. Well, nobody could say we look nice now!" responded Wally, grinning.

It was painfully true. Drenched and muddy, they gazed at each other, and went off into peals of laughter.

"Oh, well, there's nothing to do but get up to the house as quickly as we can, and pray that no one will see us. But I don't like our chance," Wally said. "Don't we have exciting wedding-days!"

"And to think Jim wouldn't let me go flying with Freddy!" remarked Norah, cruelly. "Why, flying is ever so much safer than boating with you!"



"I like that!—considering it's all due to the unseaworthy craft you Lintons keep on your lakes," retorted her escort. "I might have met a gravey wart—I mean a watery grave, and then you'd have been a lone widdy all your life, for no one else would ever have had the pluck to marry you!" He slipped his arm through hers. "Anyhow, you can never say you're dull when I take you out!"

Up at the homestead the absence of the principal people of the day was beginning to cause inquiry. Guests were rapidly arriving; motor after motor purred up to the door, disgorged loads of gay people, and moved off to the parking ground near the stables, where the aeroplane was the centre of a ring of admirers. The clergyman made his appearance, and at once demanded the bridegroom, to sign necessary documents: which revealed the fact that the bridegroom was not to be found. This drew attention to the absence of the bride as well, and general bewilderment ensued, while Jim and Tommy sought in all likely and unlikely places.

"I knew they'd go off after cattle!" bewailed Jean Yorke. "We oughtn't to have left them alone for a minute."

"Couldn't—there are no horses in," replied Jim. "Otherwise I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd gone for a ride. Well, I suppose they'll turn up presently. You and I will have to fling Wally into his wedding-garments, Bob, or he'll never be in time: it takes him ages to dress when he puts on decent things."

"I shall speak severely to Walter," said Mrs. Edward Meadows, grimly. "Such lack of consideration to you, Mr. Linton. I——"

She broke off on the word and remained open-mouthed. As luck would have it, most of the party had wandered to the side-verandah, occupying the very point by which Norah and Wally had hoped to gain the house unseen. Therefore, to the horrified onlookers appeared the spectacle of the bride and bridegroom, modestly slinking up the path, clad in soaked garments, with black mud plastered thickly, almost waist-deep and much mud upon their faces. They paused in horror at the sight of the waiting group, and the water ran from their clothes as they stood.

"Norah!" gasped Mrs. Geoffrey Linton. "Where have you been?"

"Boating, Aunt!" murmured Norah. The murmur ended in a chuckle of helpless mirth. Jim and Bob echoed it, and then a roar of laughter went up from the verandah. Under cover of it, the bride and bridegroom dived through the shrubbery and gained the back door, while Tommy and Jean fled to Norah's aid, and Jim and Bob raced to do what they could for Wally.

"Well, I suppose we shall have a wedding some time to-day," said Mr. Linton, when coherent speech was possible to him. "Meanwhile, shall we walk round the garden?"

"Disgraceful conduct!" Mrs. Edward was heard to ejaculate. Words failed

her, and she remained on the verandah, muttering tragically.

What efforts were made by the four assistants can only be guessed at. Certain it was that they were prodigious, for twelve strokes had boomed out on the old grandfather clock only a moment before Norah came up the long room on her father's arm to meet her bridegroom. She came through the ranks of the people who loved her: Murty O'Toole and Dave Boone and Jim Shanahan, with every man on Billabong behind them, down to black Billy; O'Reilly and his wife, with their elfish daughter, Mary Kate; Mr. and Mrs. Evans; and a throng of neighbours from the little farms round Billabong. Women who had been maids in the Billabong service twenty years before had come to see Billabong's daughter married; the maids of to-day clustered in a group and smiled on her as she passed; and Norah had a smile for each.

Brownie was not in the group. Norah had seen to it that her chair was up at the very top of the room, among the guests she most delighted to honour. Freddy Paxton had assumed special charge of her: he sat next her, and once, when the old woman's tears were stealing down her cheeks—happy tears they were, of which, nevertheless, Brownie was desperately ashamed—she suddenly found her hand taken in a large, consoling grip and held firmly until the tense moment was over. "As kind as if he'd been Master Jim himself," Brownie told Murty later. "It 'elped me wonderful."

It seemed to Norah a long way up the crowded room. But at the end a patch of sunlight came through the window. And in the sunlight, tall and straight, and very grave, was Wally; with Jim behind him, no less good to look upon. Norah smiled as she met their eyes.

Then, wonderfully soon it was over, and she was going back again, but this time by Wally's side; and there were people standing up everywhere, and smiles on every face. And no one—not even Mrs. Edward Meadows—seemed to think it at all peculiar that Norah and Wally paused with one accord when they came to Brownie, and hugged her very heartily. They left the proudest old woman in Australia behind them as they passed on.

In the great barn was merriment and feasting; and the bride and bridegroom, in defiance of custom, ate their luncheon with a heartiness of appetite brought on, as Wally remarked, by a morning swim. Then Jim produced the sword Wally had worn in France, and Norah cut Brownie's cake with it, mentioning under her breath that she considered it an unwieldy tool. There were speeches: lengthy and eloquent by the clergyman, and mercifully brief by every one else; and finally Norah escaped, to hand over her white frock and veil to Brownie's loving care, while she thankfully donned the coat and skirt that Jean had likened to "a good, plain cake."

Wally found no fault in it. He was waiting as she came out, and together they ran downstairs to meet a hail of rose-leaves and good-byes. Later, Jim

asserted that Norah had kissed black Billy; to which Norah replied that if it were not so, at least Billy was the only one she had not kissed! At the last, she clung to her father a moment by the car.

“Take care of her, Wally, my son.”

Wally, standing bareheaded, gripped his hand.

“All my life, sir.”

Then they were off, with Murty’s hat in the air, and Murty’s voice leading the cheers. The car swung through the gate and down the homestead paddock. There the gate stood open, but Wally pulled up. He got out and made a tour of the car, returning with an assortment of various objects retrieved from its outlying parts.

“Six flags—from Freddy’s ’plane, I suspect. Three slippers. One old boot.”

He stowed them carefully in the letter-box by the gate, and came back to the car. Removing an extremely smart and new hat, he put it in the back, and produced from a corner a battered old felt. He put it on, looking at her with a twinkle.

“That feels better!”

“It’s more like you,” said Norah, laughing. “Now we’re ready for adventures!”

“Rather! One can’t look for adventures in a new hat. Ready?” The car took the open road.



“ . . . presently, finding some sort of a footing, tramped heavily  
ashore.”

Billabong Adventurers]

[[Chapter IV](#)

## CHAPTER V

### THE VALLEY IN THE HILLS

SIX weeks later the little Singer came to rest on the top of a great hill, up which she had mounted steadily for half an hour, by a succession of zigzags and hair-pin bends. Wally switched off the engine.

"That was a great pull!" he said. "And didn't she take it like a bird? Suppose we get out and look at the world."

They walked to the edge of the hill and stood looking over the wide expanse below. They were far above the tossing tops of tall gum-trees, the young leaves of which showed crimson and bronze and scarlet against the afternoon sky. Below, tier on tier, rugged sandstone cliffs rose, clothed in stunted trees that found a precarious footing and scanty nourishment between the stones; the rocky summits, bleak and bare, defied all vegetation, standing out like the great walls of a giant's fortress. Between the cliffs they looked down a wide valley, where a foaming river ran. A few farms were dotted here and there; farthest of all, where the hills closed in, stood a red house, half hidden in trees among which its white-painted roof gleamed sharply.

"That's our destination," Wally said, pointing to it. "The fellow at the garage in the last township told me we could easily pick it out from here by its white roof. Tired, Nor?"

"Only comfortably tired," Norah answered. "But I shan't be sorry to get in; we've done a good day's run."

"Nine hours' pretty steady driving, and all hill-work," remarked Wally. "And it certainly has been warm. I wonder do they run to baths. If they don't, there's always the river."

"The river would be nice, but I want a bath; a hot bath, with enormous quantities of soap," said his wife. "The so-called bathroom at that little so-called hotel last night was too awful: I cast one look at the bath, and fled. I think they must use it to store potatoes!"

"When you and I write an account of our tour we'll class hotels, and boarding-houses, and guest-houses, and rest-houses and hash-houses under two headings—those that have decent baths and those that have not," Wally said, laughing. "And the have-nots are in the majority."

"Yes, and aren't they queer? They all say proudly, 'Oh yes, of *course* we have a bathroom!' and you feel ashamed because you asked. And you find a room with a full-sized bath, and either it evidently hasn't been cleaned since the house was built, or the tap won't run. But if they'd only say, 'No, ma'am,

we haven't a bathroom, but we can offer you a nice plain wash-tub and a kettle of hot water'—how one would love them!"

"One would," said Wally. "How many kitchens I have attacked politely for shaving-water for me and hot water for you, and have been given a pint jug! And you always took all the pint!"

"I like that!" Norah said. "Didn't I buy you a beautiful spirit-lamp and billy, so that we'd be free and independent! There's no gratitude in husbands. Worn out I was, to hear the way you'd be battering at kitchen doors!"

"You would have borne that well if I'd brought back more than a pint," said the discerning husband. "However, I won't argue with you; I've learned that already. A brawling woman in a wide house is nothing to one in a Singer car! How does a Mormon husband manage, I wonder?—hires a char-à-banc, I suppose, and sends 'em all out with the chauffeur. And goes fishing himself. Norah, asthore, doesn't that river look as if it held trout?"

"It does," said Norah. "It looks beautiful. So does that red house with a white top. Come on, Wally; it's getting late, and we don't know what kind of a road we have ahead of us."

"Except that it stands on one end for a while—that's certain. I suppose we had better be off." They climbed into the car and set off down the hill.

The road did indeed stand on one end. They crawled down precipitous slopes, often barely wide enough for their passage, ending in blind, right-angled turns where the hill towered high above them and a drop of five hundred feet lay on the other hand: and because they were young, and bad roads held no terrors for them, they sang cheerfully as they went, their voices echoing among the rocks. Once, coming round a corner where the road was fortunately a little wider than usual, they came suddenly upon a wood-carter's dray, the driver of which, seated on one shaft, was apparently unaware that motors existed. His horse backed with such sudden force that the carter fell off into the road, whence he picked himself up, annoyed and dusty, and glared at them. Wally had applied his brakes with some vigour, but even so, the Singer's bonnet and the nose of the horse were scarcely a yard apart.

"Didn't you hear me hoot?" demanded Wally, heatedly.

"No, I never," said the countryman, sulkily. He regarded the car with bitterness. "Wonder the ol' horse didn't put me over the drop. Motors hadn't ought to be on this road. Well, you'll have to git by on your wrong side: *I ain't goin' to try an' pass yous on the edge.*"

"H'm," said Wally. "Can you back him at all?—the road is a shade wider behind you."

"I s'pose I can try." He took the horse by the bit. "Woa, ba-ack, Ginger!" he said, and managed, not without skill, to back the load until it grazed the cliff. "Got room?"

Wally left the car and examined the edge of the road critically.

"Just do it—the edge is sound, thank goodness," he remarked.

"Well, you'd better make the lady get out, 'case the edge isn't as sound as you think," said the carter, despondently. "Not much good for the two of yous to go over."

"Not a bad idea. Hop out, Norah."

"The most foolish idea I ever heard of," responded his wife, cheerfully. "Hurry up, or I shall have to take her past by myself!" She met his eyes with a smile, and Wally answered it with another as he took the wheel. Very carefully he crawled past the dray, the axle almost touching his wheel-cap, while the car seemed to hang over the precipice. He breathed more freely when they regained the middle of the track.

"Nervous work taking one's wife about," he said, as they went on. "I would have gone past that dray cheerfully on top-gear by myself. What a dodderer I shall be in a few years' time!"

"Oh no; you will have got used to me, and you'll see me risk my neck without a qualm," returned Norah, placidly. "Thank goodness, there's the end of the hill. Life on this road is one continuous hoot—and then the populace doesn't take any notice of one's hooting!"

They met a rider, as they neared the flat; a man encumbered with a sack of groceries, whose horse displayed agitation and distrust at the sight of the car, and plunged up a low bank so vehemently that his rider dropped his load with a loud crashing of what seemed to be tins. This alarmed the horse yet further, and he pig-jumped wildly among the low bushes. When he was restored to something like calmness, Wally got out and returned the sack to its owner.

"Sorry I scared him," he said, patting the horse's neck.

"Oh, 'e's young, an' 'e likes playin' the goat," said the rider. "My fault, for not watchin' the road; but we don't see many cars round this way."

"Well, I hope there's nothing broken." Wally helped him to adjust the heavy sack comfortably.

"Nothin' to break, only bread an' tinned stuff. If a tin of jam's punctured it'll save me spreadin' me bread an' jam, that's all," said the philosophic bearer of burdens. "It ain't every motorist as 'ud 'ave taken the trouble to pick up a feller's swag—and it ain't too easy to get it up on this chap by oneself. Thanks, boss." Despite his load, he contrived to raise his hat to Norah as the car went gently by him.

The road wound down into the valley, between fences half hidden by sweet-briar roses, their scent fragrant in the evening air. Soon they were running beside the river, which here was a wide stream, still hurrying from its descent from above, and broken by stretches of rapids where the water chattered and foamed over unseen stones. They passed the scattered farms and

entered a belt of timber; tall trees that met overhead, and cast a deep, cool shade over the track. When they emerged from its gloom, the white-roofed house was close at hand. A small boy, sitting on a gate-post, jumped down to swing the gate back to let them through.

"Can I ride on the step, Mister?" he shouted.

"Rather. Hang on tightly over the bumps." The urchin grinned at him, clinging to the side of the car as it jolted over the uneven track and stopped before a white gate that led into a garden that was gay with poppies and foxgloves. A little woman, merry-faced and dumpy, came down to meet them as Wally got out. He lifted his hat.

"This is Valley House, isn't it?" he asked. "Mrs. Jerrold?"

"Oh yes—we got the message that you were coming, and we have been looking out for you. Come in, Mrs. Meadows." She smiled at Norah. "What a long journey you've had—you must be tired. I know what that road is like! The men are out, Mr. Meadows, but if you will bring in your things Benny will show you where to put the car. We haven't a proper garage, but there is a good water-tight shed."

"That's as much as any car asks," said Wally. They followed her round a creeper-clad verandah, while Benny toiled in the rear under a suit-case as large as himself.

"There's a little sitting-room where you can have your meals—the rooms aren't much, I'm afraid, but at least they're airy." She led the way to clean, bright rooms that seemed paradise to the travellers after a lengthy experience of doubtful, and more than doubtful, township hotels. Wally disappeared with Benny, and Mrs. Jerrold fussed happily over Norah.

"You must be dying for your tea: it will be ready as soon as you are. But wouldn't you like a bath first? I'm terribly afraid you'll be horrified at the bathroom. Benny *would* dance in the bath, and the bottom fell out of it, and we haven't been able to get a new one yet—carting over the hills is so difficult. But there's a big tub, and you can have as much hot water as ever you like, if only you can manage." She broke off in some amazement as Norah gave a gurgling laugh, and then explained.

"We were saying an hour ago how heavenly it would be if some one would offer us hot water and a wash-tub," she said. "Did you have a brain-wave, Mrs. Jerrold? We have learned to shudder at the sight of hotel baths."

"And me afraid to tell you about the tub! You see, I've only begun to take boarders since last year, when the bush-fires nearly ruined us, and I'm terribly afraid of every one that comes—this is such a funny, old-fashioned place, and city people seem to want so much. It's lovely to find anyone who understands."

"I think it's beautiful," Norah said. "So clean and airy and restful. You



mustn't let us give you too much trouble, Mrs. Jerrold."

"Oh, nothing troubles me if only people are satisfied. But I had one gentleman and his wife from Sydney—rich Jews they were, with the most wonderful car—and they turned up their noses at everything until I was just discouraged. You should just have heard them over the tub—and I don't think they ever used it! See, here's the bathroom," and she led the way into a bare little room with a clean, scrubbed floor, furnished simply—and, to Norah's eyes, exquisitely—with a big clean tub, a bath-mat made of hessian and edged with red Turkey twill, a chair, and a sink in the corner. Still talking, she disappeared, to return in a moment, staggering under the weight of a steaming kerosene tin.

"Now, that's the last time you're to do that," said Norah, firmly, hurrying to share the load. "If my husband catches you carrying that he will be very angry, so I warn you, Mrs. Jerrold!"

"But I'm used to it: I couldn't dream of letting him do it." She splashed the water into the tub, where Norah regarded it hungrily. "I have the copper going, so there is any amount more for Mr. Meadows when you've finished. And then your tea will be waiting for you. Benny and I caught the trout ourselves to-day."

"Trout!" ejaculated Norah, faintly. "I'll hurry!" She fled to prepare for her bath.

"We've fallen into Paradise, Nor," Wally told her, an hour later. Clean and refreshed, they sat in deck-chairs on the verandah outside their sitting-room, watching the dusk come down on the fragrant garden. "Such a place—and such a tea!"

"Such trout!" said Norah, dreamily—"and such scones!"

"And such a landlady! I found her trying to empty your tub, and she was horrified because I wouldn't let her: and she followed at my heels, bleating protests, when I went for my own hot water. I was afraid she was going to do battle for the tin. I think we'll stay here for a year—would you mind?"

"Ask me in a month," said his wife. "Until then, I don't want to think: I'm too contented. Oh, and, Wally, she says there is a beautiful bathing-pool just below the garden, very deep, with a spring-board and bathing-boxes! She apologized because the bathing-boxes are built out of tea-tree. And she thinks we're the nicest ever, because we haven't grumbled yet!"

"I'm glad you've restrained your discontented spirit," he said, laughing. "There she is now"—as a faint clatter sounded from the room behind them. "Surely she isn't bringing us another tea!"

"I've put some milk and cake on the table for your supper," said the cheerful voice of the lady of the house. "Now, do tell me if there's anything else you would like."

"Indeed, you don't give us a chance to need anything," Wally told her, jumping up to get another chair. "Come and sit down, Mrs. Jerrold, and tell us where we can find trout like those beauties you gave us at tea."

"Oh, thank you—well, just for a minute." The little woman sank thankfully into the chair. "You'll find good fishing all along the river: some places are overgrown, and some must be waded, but there's plenty of open water where you can fish from the bank. The river is swift, but there are big pools where the trout lie by the rocks. Benny knows them all."

"We'll borrow Benny," said Wally.

"He'll be only too willing to be borrowed. There is no school near, and I teach him as well as I can—but I'm afraid he gets a great many holidays when I am busy. You're not in a hurry to go away?"

"We've forgotten what hurry means," Norah said. "We have been travelling for six weeks in Victoria and New South Wales; just lazy travelling, drifting from place to place, and staying a few days here and there."

"It sounds lovely."

"It has been delightful. But we're beginning to think it would be rather nice to settle down for a little."

"We want to look at the same place for a bit, Mrs. Jerrold," said Wally. "You can't imagine how many varieties of lovely country we've visited: but we're beginning to feel a little dazed with it. Like the bored young man who wouldn't come out of his cabin in the Bay of Naples: he said he'd seen scenery! Well, we've seen scenery too, and we've used up all our stock of suitable words. When we come to a new wonder, all we can do is to gasp and say 'Oh!' like people at fireworks."

Mrs. Jerrold nodded wisely.

"You'd get like that. And there's always packing, and unpacking too, even if it's only a small suit-case for the night. I did a tour with some friends once, and do you know, Mrs. Meadows, I got that way I hated the sight of my tooth-brush when I packed it every morning!"

"I know," Norah agreed. "We have had a great trip, but I'm beginning to feel a little sympathy for the Bedouin women who always lead a wandering life. Fancy your husband saying every morning, 'Hurry up, Rebekah, the camels are waiting!'"

"Well, I never say anything like that!" Wally defended himself.

"No, but you blow the horn, and that's the same thing," Norah laughed.

"What a woman!" Wally looked at her in comical despair. "Says 'Hoot when you're ready,' and I hoot, gently and submissively, because I'm told. Then I smoke two pipes, and then she comes out—perhaps. Never mind; I'm used to being browbeaten. May we take Benny out to-morrow, Mrs. Jerrold? Then I shall at least have the support of another man!"

"Certainly you may. I will pack your lunch quite early, and Benny can carry a billy—I'm sure you won't want to come back to lunch." She bade them good night cheerfully and trotted off.

Then ensued a fortnight of long, happy days. The fishing proved all that heart could wish, for the river was seldom fished and the trout were eager and hungry. Benny was an efficient guide; and when, to his unconcealed disgust, lessons claimed him, they went farther and farther afield, exploring the country on days when it seemed too much trouble to carry rods and fishing-baskets. It was a wild and fascinating country. On either side of the river-valley the hills rose steeply; sometimes towering in almost unclimbable piles of rock, sometimes broken by great clefts, filled with boulders, where sparse scrub clustered wherever it could find a foothold. There were caves among the rocks: one they found, running so far into the hill-side that they could not penetrate to its end, for it curved and twisted away from the daylight until they found themselves in utter blackness—at which point they prudently retreated.

From the top of the cliffs they looked across rolling plains. A little township nestled in a hollow: across the level expanse a railway-line ran, so far below that a train looked like a crawling insect, its smoke a long trail of thin white wool. That was too civilized, they decided; they preferred their valley, where the sentinel cliffs gave a never-ending field of exploration, and new surprises awaited them each day. They were like boys together, eager for each day's adventures, finding fun in every trivial happening. Dressed alike, in silk shirts and breeches, they might have passed as brothers; brothers almost equally matched in slender length of limb, in lithe agility, in wiry endurance. Their gay comradeship was a never-ceasing delight to little Mrs. Jerrold, who found the utmost difficulty in remembering that they were married!

"I've been thinking . . ." said Wally, one afternoon. They were perched in a rocky nook in the side of a cliff, high above the river that brawled and hurried along its boulder-strewn bed. Wally had been unusually silent for what was for him a long while: now he turned towards Norah, a half-questioning look in his merry eyes.

"So I saw," Norah answered. "And you're simply bursting with a plan."

"How did you know?"

"You just looked like it. There is always something brewing when you don't speak for ten minutes. And now it has been quite half an hour."

"Nice entertaining sort of animal I must be," said Wally, laughing. "Anyhow, you didn't speak, either."

"I didn't dare," said his wife, modestly. "And now, please go ahead and tell me the plan."

"Well, I didn't know whether you would like it. We're so comfortable at Mrs. Jerrold's, and of course we're having a ripping time, and it is a good rest

for you, and all that . . .” He paused again.

“It’s all very true,” said Norah, twinkling. “Not that I feel in any special need of rest, however, in case that is weighing on your mind. Where did you want to move, and when? I’m ready any time you would like to go.”

“Never did I see anyone so accommodating,” declared Wally. “Well, it’s just for you to say, Nor; I’m really quite contented if we stay here indefinitely. Only—Jerrold has been talking to me about the country farther west, and it is certainly fascinating.”

“The unexplored part?”

“Yes. This valley runs a good way farther west, and then it ends in a great horseshoe of cliffs; the track is pretty bad after the first few miles, and he says very few people have been up even so far as the head of the valley. Beyond that the cliffs are too steep to be climbed except in a few places; but there are two or three rough tracks, principally made by mountain sheep and cattle.”

“But people don’t run stock up there, surely?”

“Oh no. But from time to time a stray beast finds its way up the valley, so that there are a certain number of half-wild sheep and cattle in the hills. Now and then, Jerrold says, a few men go up to see if they can run in some; but the country is so rough that it makes mustering almost an impossibility, unless they happen to come upon a little bunch that may have strayed downwards.”

“And what happens when you get to the horseshoe cliffs at the head of the valley?”

“Well, they can be climbed, as I said. There are at least two tracks where good hill-ponies can get up, and more ways where people on foot might climb. All rough, of course, but not dangerous.”

“And when you get up to the top?”

“There’s a big plateau that is practically unexplored. Most of it is rock—sandstone, like all this—but there are patches of light scrub. The soil is very poor: Jerrold says no one could make anything out of it, so that’s why nobody bothers about it. People prospected there for gold in the early days, but they never found any trace. There are a few springs, but on the whole it is too dry to be any use. All the same, he says it is attractive country for people who aren’t busy!”

“Meaning us?”

Wally smiled at her.

“What do you think? There’s no need to knock ourselves out over it: we don’t want to explore every bit of it. Jerrold says the plateau stretches for miles and miles—he’s rather indefinite as to its extent—and then ends in a succession of low rocky hills that gradually merge into the plains beyond. You know, ever since I saw a bit of the wilder part of Queensland last year I’ve had a hankering for the places that civilization hasn’t quite got hold of yet. Had I

remained single”—he sighed heavily—“I should probably have become a celebrated explorer, but as it is——”

“As it is, I think you are safer married,” remarked his wife, unfeelingly. “I seem to remember that even in Queensland you managed to get yourself nearly killed when you ventured out of sight of a town!”

“You’d better cultivate a spirit of wifely reverence, or I won’t take you camping,” returned Wally, grinning. “Oh, now I’ve gone and given away my nice plan, just as I was leading up to it so gently!”

“I like the way you hide your surprises,” Norah laughed. “Did you think I expected to find a large and palatial hotel on top of the plateau you are regarding with such hungry eyes? Suppose you were to cease gently preparing me, and tell me all the plan like a brave little man.”

Wally rolled over in search of a more comfortable place, and regarded her with admiration.

“I always knew the detective instinct was strong in you,” he said. “Well—what would you say to taking the car as far up the valley as we can get her—that’s about ten miles, Jerrold says—and using her as a sort of base camp for supplies? Then we could go ahead, riding: Jerrold can get us some good hill-ponies, and we could camp for a bit at the head of the valley, under the horseshoe cliffs, and explore there, and find the tracks up to the plateau above, and finally get up there and poke about in the unexplored part. We might not find anything very interesting, but the whole thing would be rather a lark.”

“Quite a lark, I think,” Norah agreed enthusiastically. “We could load up the car with food—bacon and flour and tinned stuff and dried fruit, and all that: and as long as we were near the river there would always be fish.”

“And the place will probably be full of rabbits. My bunny-stew is one of my finest efforts,” Wally said. “Reminds me—take large bag onions.” He began hurriedly to jot down notes on an old envelope.

“There seems something wrong,” said Norah, pensively, “when a man can think so soulfully of onions on his honeymoon!”

“There would be something very much wrong with my bunny-stew if I didn’t,” returned her husband. “Pepper, mustard, salt——”

“Celery-salt,” said Norah.

Wally arrested his swift pencil and looked at her sternly.

“Young woman, you can’t load up the car with luxuries. You’ll want *pâté de foie gras* next.”

“Celery-salt, or I don’t go camping,” said his wife, firmly. “How can I face your stews without it?”

“When you’ve been camping three days you’ll face bully-beef without an effort,” Wally told her. “Oh, well, have your old celery-salt. You won’t get it in the town of Meerim Flat, anyhow.”

"Then I'll write to Melbourne. Come on, Wally, and don't be so obstructive. Put down baking-powder—I can make gorgeous flap-jacks. Do we cook in billies?"

"Yes—we'll take a nest of different sizes, and they'll pack into each other. And a good hefty frying-pan that will hang over the fire."

"I'd like two," said Norah. "One for fish only."

"We'll need a motor-van," sighed Wally. "I never had a wife with such large ideas. How many frocks do you want to take?"

"None," said Norah. "But I want a big tin of dripping. Mrs. Jerrold will fix that up for me, I know. Put down a wire grid-iron, Wally, and some enamel plates and mugs. We won't want many, because we'll use my patent picnic-plates—squares of grease-proof paper pegged down on a bit of board with drawing-pins. You eat with the board on your knees, and it never wobbles like a plate; and when you have finished you tear off the top paper and burn it, and you're all ready for the next course. No washing-up. Noble idea."

"You have your points," conceded Wally, generously. "Not that I mind how much washing-up there is, so long as you do it."

"You'll need a wire mop," said his wife, ignoring this suggestion. "The porridge-pot will give you no end of trouble without one. How long is the list now, Wally?"

"As long as my arm. But I don't quite see what we can cut out of it, except your celery-salt."

"It's nothing to what it will be when Mrs. Jerrold and I discuss the matter," said Norah, laughing. "Did you put down soap?"

"I did not," said Wally, rectifying the omission. "Will moddam require washing-soda and blue?"

"Moddam will not—she doesn't propose to run a laundry. Oh, Wally, isn't it going to be a glorious lark! When do we start?"

"As soon as we can get things ready, I think. Mrs. Jerrold told me this morning that their cart was going over to Meerim Flat in two or three days; they can bring back our supplies. I don't fancy it will take Jerrold long to get the ponies, and anyhow, we don't want them at first. We can easily run back in the car after a few days at the end of the road, and collect them; you can drive the car back to camp and I'll bring the steeds." He jumped to his feet and pulled her up beside him. "Come along home, and we'll begin to make arrangements."

Mrs. Jerrold proved sympathetic and interested, but not, on the whole, approving.

"It isn't only that I'm going to lose you," she said—"though, of course, I shall simply hate that. But it's a lonely place for you two young things to explore all alone. The country is terribly rough, and as far as I can see, there'll

be nothing but discomfort for you, not to speak of danger. Suppose one of you were to fall over a rock and get hurt, where would the other be?"

"Picking up the bits, I suppose," Norah answered laughing. "But we're not going to do anything so foolish, as falling over rocks, really, Mrs. Jerrold. Wally gets jumpy if I go into dangerous places, so, of course, he can't tackle them himself. We mean to be ever so careful. And when we've explored we are coming back to you to be fattened up after our own cooking."

"And you'll be in need of something solid," said little Mrs. Jerrold, gloomily. "Fried foods I never did hold with, and well I know what it is when people go camping—the frying-pan is all they'll ever bother about."

"Don't you believe it, Mrs. Jerrold," Wally told her. "I learned how to concoct all sorts of stews in France, and I'll make her as good a cook as I am before I've done with her!"

"You!" said Norah, scornfully. "I'd like Brownie to hear you. She taught me to cook dinners when you were a small boy!"

"A forward child you must have been," remarked her husband. "Anyhow, between us we shan't be likely to starve. We'll quarrel horribly as to who is the head chef, but we'll come back as fat and jolly as ever—see if we don't, Mrs. Jerrold."

"Jolly you may be, but fat——!" Mrs. Jerrold lifted her eyebrows comically, looking at the tall, slender pair. "I don't see that either of you are any advertisement for that Billabong station I've heard so much about. And if you don't come back when you say you will—who'm I to send word to? Nothing like being prepared."

"If we don't turn up, just get on the long-distance telephone to Mr. Jim Linton at Billabong," said Wally, laughing. "There's no unexplored mountain big enough to hide Norah from him. But I don't think we'll have to call in old Jim this time—eh, Nor?"

"Certainly not," said Norah. "But wouldn't it be a joke if we had to get him to rescue us? We'd never hear the last of it."

"Mightn't be such a joke as you think," said little Mrs. Jerrold, gloomily. "Oh, well, no use meeting trouble half-way. Come on, Mrs. Meadows: you and I had better make up a list of groceries—men are no good at that."

"Absolute libel," said Wally. "At all events, I'm going to check your list to make sure you haven't forgotten my onions!"

## CHAPTER VI

### THE CAMP

IT was five days before the cart returned from Meerim Flat with its load of stores, during which time Wally overhauled the camp gear carefully, making sure that tent and tarpaulins and ground-sheets were in order, sharpening the axe they carried in the car, and giving the faithful Singer itself a thorough overhaul. Personal belongings were simple, though Mrs. Jerrold hovered over Norah's packing like a fussy old mother-hen, insisting on sufficient changes of raiment—apparently convinced that the explorers meant to fall into the river at least three times a day. She also busied herself in the preparation of a mighty hamper of cooked food, finding consolation in the assurance that at first they need not depend on their own efforts to keep body and soul together; and she loaded Norah with such quantities of excellent advice that the victim at last fled to Wally and begged to be allowed to help in greasing the car.

The Meerim Flat store proved astonishingly equal to the demands made upon it, even to the matter of celery-salt; and early on the morning following the return of the cart the explorers were ready to start. The Singer might easily have been mistaken for a hawker's van as it stood at the door while Wally gave a final tightening to the lashings of the load. Groceries, suit-cases, and bedding filled the rear, with what Wally termed "an overflow meeting" of petrol cases of fruit and vegetables on one running-board and the long roll of the tent on the other. A big tarpaulin covered the whole, tied tightly down, with the frying-pan, which had stoutly resisted being packed anywhere else, gracing the top.

"At least it can't rattle there," said Wally, ceasing from his labours. "I know the blessed billies will begin clashing soon, and then I shall think it's something gone wrong with the vitals of the car, and get badly rattled myself. All set, Nor. Good-bye, Mrs. Jerrold—you'll see us back for the ponies within a week."

"Good-bye, and do be careful, my dears," said Mrs. Jerrold. "Mind you don't camp on damp ground, whatever you do, and always keep a look-out for snakes!"

"Very dangerous, damp ground and snakes, if you get 'em together," said Mr. Jerrold, with a chuckle. "Never saw anyone with such an eye for risks as my old woman."

"Indeed, then, you never can tell," returned Mrs. Jerrold, darkly. "Forearmed is forewarned, as the saying goes, and it's very true, too!" At which Norah gave a little gurgle of laughter that she tried, with indifferent



success, to turn into a cough. She dropped a kiss on the kind little woman's cheek.

"Good-bye—at least, it's only au revoir," she said. "You have been such a dear to us, Mrs. Jerrold. We're certainly coming back if you will have room for us, and if you haven't we'll camp in the garden!"

"And welcome as the flowers in May, my dear," said her hostess. She stood waving as long as the car was in sight, while Benny shouted good-byes lustily from the top of the gate-post.

The good road up the valley had been made only as far as the Jerrolds' farm, which appeared to be the end of civilization; beyond that it became a mere track, which grew rougher and rougher as they went on. Bullock-drays and wood-carts were the only vehicles that had ever made their way along it, and the deep ruts left by their wheels formed anything but easy going for a motor. Wally groaned for his springs more than once as he edged the car round great boulders, dropping into second gear when deep holes and half-exposed roots of trees barred his way. But the little car held on gallantly, and the pride of its owners mounted as one difficulty after another was negotiated.

"Bless her, she'll climb where she can't wriggle," said Wally; "and where she can't climb she'll jump. But I'd hate to have this track on the side of a hill, with a long drop below. There's great security in being in the bottom of a valley."

"And how about yonder merry little water-course?" inquired his wife.

Wally whistled gently, bringing the car to a standstill. A little stream, almost dry, crossed the track just ahead. It rippled gently through soft-looking sand; the banks, low and dry, had treacherous sharp edges that looked as though they would crumble away at a touch.

"Methinks I will explore," said Wally, putting a long leg over the door and feeling for a footing among the fruit-cases. He examined the sand carefully, and returned to the car.

"Here comes in my trusty spade—to say nothing of my faithful axe," he said. "If you like, you can cut a few boughs while I do some levelling, Nor. I don't think we could trust her weight across it as it is. Only if you feel really energetic, of course; there's no need for you to do anything but sit in the car like the Queen of the May, if you prefer it."

"I don't," said Norah, jumping out. She took the axe and cut light boughs while Wally levelled the crumbling banks, flinging the sand into the bed of the tiny stream. Then they laid a track of boughs transversely, heaping them up until they were almost level with the edge of the water-course and the thin trickle of water was hidden far below. Wally surveyed the pile approvingly.

"She'll do it, I think. Better not get in, Nor, until I try it—every extra ounce will tell." He got into the car and drove forward slowly. The boughs cracked

and sank as the sand beneath them yielded, but they held together, and Wally gave a whoop of triumph as he gained the firm ground on the farther side.

"Nobly done!" said Norah, jumping across the stream, and joining him in the car. "I thought for a moment that she meant to sink, but thank goodness she decided to go on."

"'Twas a great road we built, and I hereby appoint you wood-cutter-in-chief to the expedition," said Wally, cheerfully, putting the car again in motion. He cast an inquiring glance in his wife's direction. "You might say you're pleased!"

"I'm merely overwhelmed with 'the burden of an honour unto which I was not born,' thank you," responded Norah. "Might I venture to ask what you will be doing while I'm cutting firewood and cooking and washing-up?"

"Mine will be the higher duty of organization, coupled with meditation," said he. "The leader of the party cannot be disturbed by the performance of minor services."

"He may be, if I'm to perform them," Norah commented crisply. "I foresee an unending difference of opinion as to who is really the leader of this expedition. She appears to have all the best of the job."

"He, you mean," corrected Wally.

"She, I repeat," responded his wife.

"I decline to be dragged into a vulgar brawl," said he. "But water always finds its own level, and solid worth will tell in the end. Mark that, young Norah!"

"You sound like the Book of Proverbs."

"I feel like it. When you have got yourself into a few really bad holes, and have learned how easily my manly strength can pull you out of them—whew-w!" He wrenched the wheel round in an unavailing effort to escape a yawning pit that suddenly revealed itself, half concealed by a tall grass tussock. The car sank gracefully to one side as the sand gripped it, and came to a standstill.

"If that wasn't a judgment!" said Norah, when she could speak for laughter. "What next, oh, Sub-Leader and Extricator from Holes?"

"We reverse," grinned Wally. "At least, we try." He tried, and the wheel spun furiously, but the car did not move. Invited to go forward, she remained equally unresponsive. The expedition rocked with mirth.

"Pile out, Nor, and I'll get the jack," said Wally. He produced it, together with a square piece of stout hardwood planking, at which Norah looked inquiringly.

"Platform for the jack," he explained. "'Member how it bogged in that mud we got into in the first week? I made up my mind then that I'd never travel without something it could stand on." He jacked up the car and looked ruefully at the sandy hole.

"It'll take a lot of filling up," he said—"and of course she *would* go down in a place where there's hardly any timber." Together they studied the problem.

"And you were in France, too!" said Norah, suddenly.

Wally favoured her with a searching glance.

"You mean something, I've no doubt," he said. "The question is, what? Has it anything to do with tin helmets, or high explosives, or plum-and-apple jam? Because I warn you I haven't any with me."

"Much simpler. Give it up?"

Wally pondered heavily.

"Duck-boards would be useful," he mused, "but there aren't any growing here. And a bomb would probably shift her, but other things would get shifted too. Oh, well, I give up. Out with it, you annoying woman!"

"Sand-bag," said Norah, concisely. "There's a perfectly good wheat-sack over the fruit-cases: if we took that off and put it into the hole we could fill it with earth and ram it until it was as hard as wood. Then she'd move out as gently as never was!"

"Oh, brainy one!" said Wally, respectfully. He unpacked the fruit swiftly, and together they made a hard wad of the earth-filled sack under the wheel. This time the Singer did not fail in her duty. There was a moment's anxiety when her weight first pressed the sack, which threatened to burst; then the tyre gripped the rough surface, and in a moment the car was on firm ground.

"I take off my hat to you, Nor," declared Wally. "It's wonderful what association with me has done for you!"

"I like that!" responded she. "Who couldn't think of sand-bags?"

"Well, you wouldn't have thought of them if it hadn't been for my having been in France," he declared. They laughed at each other and took the track again.

It was past noon when Wally stopped the car on a good patch of ground near the base of the rocky hill-side.

"I think this is as far as we ought to take her," he said. "This is a good spot for a temporary camp: we're near the river, and there's plenty of shade. And beyond this stretch there seems only a bridle-track. Also, there's a little nook in the rocks just over there which would form a natural garage for the car when we go forward with the horses: we could leave her practically under shelter. What do you say, Nor?"

"We couldn't do better, I think," Norah agreed. "And certainly, no one could call this ideal motoring country: I'm a mass of bumps and bruises, and I shudder to think what may have happened to the breakables."

"The breakables I'm worrying about are springs and tyres," said he. "Well, we've done twelve miles, and I don't think it's more than ten more to the head

of the valley. Jerrold didn't think we should get the car more than eight miles up from their place. So we haven't done badly. We'll pull in under that tree near the river. There's good grass there, and plenty of saplings for tent-poles."

He ran the car into the shade, close to an outcrop of flat rock that formed an excellent platform for unloading their stores, being comparatively free from ants. They unpacked with some anxiety, finding, however, that the only casualty was a bottle of pickles, the ruin of which was fortunately restricted by the fact that its wrapping of brown paper was tough and stout. The pickles, an oozy package that clinked dolefully, having been laid aside for decent burial later, they came with joy upon Mrs. Jerrold's hamper—a large tin which had originally held tea, and now contained a noble piece of cooked corned-beef, half a ham, apple-turnovers, an egg-and-bacon pie, and a bewildering assortment of cakes: at the sight of which luxuriance, unpacking was suspended forthwith.

"This is where we lunch," said Wally, firmly. "The rosy blush of that ham calls to me like a clarion. Not that I ever heard a clarion, but I feel sure it's like a ham. Go fetch water from the brook, Norah, ashore, while I chop some wood." He presented her with a billy, with a low bow, and seized the axe.

"I thought I was to be wood-cutter-in-chief," Norah demurred.

"Certainly you are, but not in ordinary," said he. "Do not dally with that billy, or you will discover that a hungry man is an angry man. And don't fall into the river, because you might lose the billy, and I couldn't bear it!"

The ringing strokes of the axe woke a hundred echoes in the hills as Norah went down to the river. When she returned, smoke was already curling upwards from a fire built between two boulders, and a respectable pile of firewood was rapidly growing. Followed a frenzied hunt for tea, which permitted itself to be found just as the explorers were becoming dismally certain that it had been forgotten; and soon they were lunching luxuriously at a flat rock which Nature had evidently designed for a table. Then, the remnants of the feast packed away, Wally lit his pipe, and they spent a lazy hour by the river, which ran and tumbled in its rocky bed, widening here and there into calm pools that gave promise of perfect bathing. Wally gathered himself up at last and stretched his long limbs with a sigh of utter content.

"Isn't it glorious to think that time simply doesn't exist for us!" he uttered. "Nobody cares what we do: we eat when we like, and sleep when we like, and, best of all, get up when we like, and no sooner. All the same, I think I had better go ahead, and get camp fixed. Suppose you have a sleep while I get the tent up?"

"That is one of the most foolish things you have said to-day," returned his wife. "How do I know what mistakes you will make if I'm not there to oversee matters?"

"You!" said he. "The arrogance of some people! Oh, well, come along and help. But don't let me catch you lifting any weights, or the consequences will be unpleasant." He slipped his arm into hers, and they went back to the car.

Evening saw the camp in shipshape order. The tent, light, but strong, was pitched near the car; in front of it a tarpaulin was stretched between young trees, roofing in a patch of thick, soft grass where the camp-beds were placed—since the tent was to be used as a sleeping apartment only in bad weather. From the branches of a tree near the car dangled the camp meat-safe, a square board equipped with hooks and covered with a long drapery of butter-muslin, tied below with a string. A camp-table and two collapsible chairs made a home-like corner near the car, the spot-light of which was adjusted so that it would illuminate the open-air room. The car itself formed the store-room for groceries, carefully packed against marauding insects—since no Australian makes the mistake of underrating the little black ant of his native land. Personal belongings were bestowed in bags and pockets on the tent-walls; and when Wally solemnly hung their tooth-brushes to the ridge-pole he declared that the only thing lacking was a card bearing the words, "God Bless Our Home."

They slipped into bathing-suits when all the work was done, and explored the nearest pool, finding it deep enough for swimming in most parts, while at one end diving was possible from a shelf in the rock; and there they frolicked like young water-dogs until the lengthening shadows, coupled with an insistent vision of food, brought them, dripping and merry, back to camp. Over their evening fire they grilled chops, the handle of the wire grid-iron lashed to a long green tea-tree stick, so that it was possible to cook without being cooked as well: and having eaten hugely and made all tidy, Norah brought out her banjo, and they sang in the moonlight, possibly to the great astonishment of night-wandering rock-wallabies and wombats and native bears, who, it may safely be believed, had never before been privileged to listen to so cheery a medley of ancient and modern ditties. Finally, Wally yawned widely and declared it was time to turn in.

"You may wake me with my morning-tea," he said. "There will be no need to hurry: eight o'clock will be soon enough. I like a nice piece of hot buttered toast with it."

"To hear is to obey," said Norah, meekly. "Any other orders, sir?"

"Only to see that my shaving-water is hot at eight-thirty. My bath I will take cold, and you can serve breakfast immediately after. Eggs and bacon, and more toast."

"You can dream of them all," said his wife. "In fact, I should advise you to do so, and then at least you'll have the dream!" They looked at each other, and laughed: and then, arm in arm, they walked to the edge of the camp and stood

looking out into the night.

"It's our first home," said Wally. "Not much of a one, some people might think, but I don't seem to want anything better just now, Nor."

She rubbed her cheek against his sleeve.

"It's the dearest little home," she said. "Don't let's go exploring too soon, Wally: I don't believe there's anything better to find."

They said their prayers together, like little children, and Wally was soon asleep. But long after his deep, quiet breathing told her that he was wandering in dreamland, Norah lay wide-eyed, looking out into the quiet night. The moonlight lay softly on rocky ridge and winding valley, the trees black against its dim radiance. Down in their sheltered corner all was very still; but far above, a distant wind stirred the tree-tops on the heights, and the sighing of their far-flung boughs came to her like a message from another country. An owl hooted sharply: it ceased, and the silence of the valley seemed more profound, broken only by the hurrying song of the river, chattering over its boulders in its haste to reach the far-off sea. Then, from a distance came the bird-song of the night that never fails to wake memories, wherever an Australian may be: "Mo-poke! Mo-poke!" the full notes came, over and over, as the little brown owl called to its mate. "Mo-poke! Mo-poke!" The sound was like a lullaby, and Norah's eyelids drooped.

A faint rustle startled her into wakefulness again. Just outside their open-air room a grey wallaby stood, in a patch of moonlight: his ears delicately pricked, his fine nostrils quivering as he sought to find out what might be this strange invasion of his domain. Norah watched him, motionless, as the bright, bewildered eyes peered this way and that under the canvas roof, the whole body of the animal poised in hair-trigger readiness for immediate flight, should danger be lurking. Then, becoming reassured, he looked round; and in a moment a doe was beside him, with a half-grown young one. They hopped noiselessly to join him, coming like bush-ghosts from the concealing shadows. Together they peered, with growing confidence; man came so seldom into their lonely valley that fear of man had never gripped at their hearts. All they knew was the inborn caution that is the heritage of all the People of the Wild, in whatever country: and even caution seemed unnecessary here, were it not that the quivering nostrils knew that the scent of unknown animals hung upon the night air. And though danger may never have threatened, there is always fear in the presence of the unknown.

Wally stirred in his sleep, and uttered an indistinct word: and in a moment the three visitors were gone, as silently as they had come. Across the moonlit grass Norah could see their flight—great, noiseless bounds that carried them swiftly towards the shelter of the scrub clothing the bottom of the cliffs. The little wallaby kept between his mother and father, who shortened their leaps to

stay with him. Scarcely a twig cracked as the bush took them back into its dim recesses.

“Pity,” murmured Norah, drowsily. “You were nice people—I wish you had stayed. I wonder what sort of a story you’ll have to tell all the other wallabies.” She cuddled her cheek down into her pillow, and in a moment was asleep.



“... together they made a hard wad of the earth-filled sack under the wheel.”

## CHAPTER VII

### BUSH DWELLERS

“TEA, ma’am!” said a merry voice.

Norah opened her eyes drowsily, and immediately closed them again.

“No, you don’t!” Wally said. “Wake up, lazy-bones. Or else I warn you that I’ll drink your tea as well as my own!”

“Not time to get up, Jim,” murmured Norah, protestingly.

“Jim isn’t here,” said Wally, “so you needn’t address your remarks to him. If he were here, it’s my belief that by this time he’d have pulled you out of bed. Just because I am gentle and kind——”

“Did you say you had tea?” demanded Norah, suddenly becoming broad awake. “Where?”

“Here—but you’ve got to sit up and be polite before you get any. Nice, thankful sort of a person you are! I drag myself out of bed in the cold dawn and light a fire and make you tea and toast, and all you do is to call me Jim!”

“Toast!” said Norah, blissfully. She sat up, rubbing her eyes. “Oh, what a gorgeous plateful! But where’s yours, dear?”

Wally grinned.

“This is mine,” he explained. “I had visions of sharing it with you, but the conviction is forced upon me that you don’t deserve a crumb. The fire is still alight, however. If you hurry, I think it will last until you make yourself a little.”

Norah capitulated.

“Do I say I’m sorry?”

“Not unless you really feel it. Judging by the way you’re looking at that toast, you would say anything whatever——”

“I would, too. I’d say you were beautiful and kind and generous, and that there never was a cook like you, and that I’m quite pleased that I married you, and—and I will really be dreadfully sorry, Wally, if I don’t have any toast. Do I get some?”

“If I were sensible and firm, as well as being all the other things you mentioned, you shouldn’t have any. But as I’m not—well, here you are, little as you deserve it.” He put the plate between them, and they ate and drank happily until not a crumb remained.

“It seems to me,” said Norah, thoughtfully, “that this meal might very well be called breakfast. It’s after eight o’clock now, and by the time we have bathed and dressed, it will be very late to think of a real breakfast. I would



think it an excellent plan to have a useful morning-tea like this, and let our next meal be breakfast and lunch together, at twelve o'clock. At least"—her look was that of a dreamy cherub—"I would think so, if—if there were more toast!"

"I guessed it," said Wally, in accents of resignation.

"You said the fire wasn't out, didn't you? I don't believe it would be, because you make such *good* fires, Wally—and such good toast."

"We agreed to lead the primitive life, I thought," said Wally. "And in the primitive days the man always provided the food with his bow and spear, and his woman arose and cooked it for him. If she didn't, he beat her with a club. I will go seek me a club—one with knobs on." He rose slowly.

"But you hadn't a word to say to this food with your bow and spear. It was Mrs. Jerrold. And you know you're ever so much handier with a toasting-fork than with a club, Wally. Also, you know you want more just as much as I do!"

"That's the first sensible reason you've given this morning," said he. "Well, there seems no chance of getting it unless I make it myself, so here goes. I warn you that if I find you asleep when I come back I'll eat it all myself."

"Don't burn it," retorted Norah. "The last was just a little bit hard!" She laughed at his disdainful air as he strode off: then, jumping up, she put on slippers and a light coat, and became very busy about the camp. When Wally came back, beds were made and everything was in apple-pie order. The sunlight glinted on Norah's well-groomed head as she moved about in the open, clearing away sticks and fronds of dry bracken that littered the grass.

"Did ever I see such a burst of energy!" ejaculated her husband. "Do stop being noble, and have your tea while it's hot. I seem to know you better when you behave badly." He led her firmly to a chair. "What does one do to-day, Nor?"

"One bathes, and one fishes, and one explores; and so does the other one," responded Norah. "Perhaps one reads, but I'm not sure. It doesn't really seem to matter if we don't do anything at all."

"No—it's a peaceful valley, and there's plenty of food without hunting for it. We can be as lazy as we like."

"That's all very well in theory, but you know very well you simply can't be lazy," said Norah. "Jim and I can loaf when we get the chance, but you're the most wrigglesome soul alive. I think in a previous existence you were a restless flycatcher."

"I shouldn't wonder—he's a bird I always admired," said Wally, comfortably. "Never wastes a moment. What bird were you?—oh, I know: a cormorant. Have some more toast?"

"I can't compete with you when you sink to vulgar abuse," responded Norah. "Especially as camping-out would make anyone feel like a cormorant."

She took another slice of toast, and a comfortable silence fell between them—helped, perhaps, by the silent peace of the quiet valley. Here and there birds hopped about the scrub, looking at them with bright, fearless eyes: but nothing else stirred. The sun was already hot: its rays turned the topmost leaves of the young gum-trees to scarlet and bronze. Late wattles made a blaze of fading yellow by the river, where the ground was littered with the fallen balls of fluffy gold. Very far overhead, an eagle sailed, apparently motionless in the blue.

“We seem to own the whole country,” remarked Wally, stretching out with a great sigh of contentment. “No doubt that old chap up there”—he pointed to the eagle—“thinks it’s his very own valley, but we know better, don’t we, Nor?”

“Much better,” Norah agreed dreamily.

Wally looked at her for a moment without speaking. Then he said:

“Ever get homesick, Nor?”

“Why, no,” she said. “How could I? Of course, I sometimes feel that I want to see Dad and Jim again—perhaps ever so badly, just for a few minutes. But that’s only natural, isn’t it, Wally? Even on a honeymoon one couldn’t help thinking about them, because we’ve always been together. Don’t you sometimes feel that too?”

He smiled at her.

“Yes, I do,” he said. “Getting married couldn’t break the old Billabong partnership that we’ve always known. Why, even with me there seems no part of my life worth remembering that isn’t connected with Billabong—I was such a little shaver when you adopted me. Our marriage has brought something new and wonderful into it for us, but it isn’t going to lessen the old tie. And they’ll want us just as much, don’t you think?”

“They’ll want us more.”

“Of course they’d want *you*. That’s one of the things that go without saying. But in my case—well, I’ve had all sorts of dreams. Sometimes they were bad dreams, when I was certain they’d look on me as an interloper and a robber, for taking you away. Then I grew to see that I needn’t really worry about that. And then the good dreams came. When you’ve no memories that really count of your own people, it’s a pretty wonderful thing to feel that you do belong to some one. And your father and Jim have let me see so plainly that I belong now. Goodness knows, they were always bricks to me—never let me feel myself an outsider. But it’s different now.”

“I know,” Norah said. “You’re just son and brother now. They told me so. I used to be afraid—just a little bit—but now it seems to me that we have only tightened up the partnership. And when I came to think it out I saw that one really couldn’t imagine Dad and Jim taking it in any other way. Ever since Mother died when I was a wee girl, the only thing Dad has really cared about

has been that we should be happy; and Jim told me that they had both been afraid that I would marry some one who would take me right away from them. And so it's just all perfect, isn't it?"

"Just all perfect," Wally assented quietly. "And when we've explored that old plateau we'll go back to them, shall we, and let them see we've wanted them all the time."

But the days slipped away, and they seemed no nearer exploring the plateau. The head of the valley loomed above them, miles away, its cliffs higher than the rocky ramparts on either side. Now and then they spoke, with more or less determination, of going back to the Jerrolds' farm for the ponies, and shifting camp; but each day was so full of its own occupations, and there were so many new places to explore near the camp, that it was easy to put off the matter. They shot, and fished, and bathed and climbed, returning to their canvas home with the appetites of hunters and the spirits of light-hearted children; and each day the little canvas home grew dearer, and harder to leave. Even twenty-four hours of pouring rain did not daunt them; indeed, it proved interesting, since it showed that the camp was sound and water-tight, and that the storm-water drain which Wally had dug round the tent was equal to all requirements. They paddled about in the wet, clad in bathing-suits, cooked and ate enormous meals, and took credit to themselves for being good campers; and rejoiced, when the sun shone again, in the new depth of the diving-pools and the increased hunger of the trout. The road back to the farm became more and more unpleasant to contemplate. "We should certainly bog," said Wally, solemnly. "Let's wait until it dries up nicely." It was easy counsel to follow.

They had been in camp almost a fortnight when, just as their twelve o'clock meal was almost ready, they were startled by the sound of hoofs, and in a moment little Benny Jerrold galloped up with a shout, his eyes shining with excitement.

"Hullo, Mr. Meadows! I told Daddy I could see your camp-smoke!"

"Why, Benny, where did you spring from?"

"Home. Daddy's just behind—he's bringing your ponies along. There he is!" and in a moment Jerrold came in sight, riding a lean grey mare and driving three ponies before him. Two were saddled, while the third carried a big pack. Wally and Norah went to meet him.

"Nothing wrong, is there, Mr. Jerrold?" Norah asked anxiously.

"Well, not that I know of. But we were beginning to ask that question about you people," said Jerrold, dryly. He looked from one brown face to the other. "I guess you're all right. I told the old woman so, but she wouldn't give me any peace—she was all for it that you said you'd be back in a week, and, as you weren't, you must be drowned or bushed or something. I says to her, 'Don't you worry; all that's the matter is they've forgotten to take an almanac

along with them.' But she's a champion for imagining things, my missus is."

"Oh, I'm so sorry she has been anxious, Mr. Jerrold," Norah exclaimed.

"Bless you, she's one of those women who enjoy a good worry," said the bushman. "There's lots like that. Anyhow, she would have it that I'd better ride up and see if you were alive; and that being the case, I thought I might as well bring your ponies along—save you a trip back. No catch, this road for a motor: I don't know how you managed to get as far as you did."

"It was jolly good of you to bring them," Wally said heartily. "You're right: it isn't exactly the track one would choose for a car, and I wasn't looking forward to taking her over it again, and a double trip at that."

"I saw where you'd been doing a bit of road-mending," said Jerrold, with a grin. "That part is better now: the rain seems to have settled it. We'd a nice drop down at our place; crops needed it, too. Didn't get flooded out did you?"

"No—we were quite dry. Well, you are just in time for dinner, Mr. Jerrold, and fortunately this is my day to cook," Wally said, laughing.

"Well, now, and I was hoping it 'ud be Mrs. Meadows' day," said Jerrold, with a grin. "Just in case it wasn't, Mrs. Meadows, my wife sent along a few things; they're in the pack."

"That is an unmerited insult," said Wally, gloomily. "But there's no doubt that Mrs. Jerrold's insults are easy to swallow! All the same, I've a stew to-day that I'm ready to uphold against anyone. Hare and rabbit and pigeons mixed, Mr. Jerrold, to say nothing of onions and macaroni!"

"I don't know about the Italian trimmings, but the rest sounds hard to beat," said Jerrold. "I'll just hobble the ponies and slip off the saddles, Mr. Meadows: it makes a man real peckish to hear you talk."

"Benny and I will dish up while you help Mr. Jerrold, Wally," said Norah. "You didn't bring us any bread, I suppose?" she asked of Jerrold.

"I didn't dare come without it," said he, grinning. "Been camping pretty often myself, and I know what the longing for bread gets to be, after a while. I'll get some out, Mrs. Meadows, soon as I let the ponies go."

Benny was a delighted assistant, and while the men off-saddled the ponies and hobbled them, he and Norah spread the meal on their table rock, making the most of the limited supply of plates, knives and forks. Nobody grumbled at deficiencies; to grumble, indeed, in the presence of so noble an achievement as Wally's stew, would, so Jerrold declared, be flying in the face of Providence. It was a stew of an unbelievable excellence: they ate it to the last drop of gravy, thriftily sopped up on their plates with crusts of bread. Over the apples that formed dessert Mr. Jerrold produced a large packet of letters, in which Norah and Wally immediately lost themselves: emerging only when they had extracted every item of news that concerned Billabong.

"We have no manners, but I'm sure you will forgive us, Mr. Jerrold,"

Norah said. "I have a huge letter written to my home: I must just scribble a line to finish it, so that I can ask you to post it for me."

"Pleased, I'm sure," murmured Mr. Jerrold. "I suppose they know you're out on the Wallaby, so that they won't have been looking for letters?"

"Oh yes; we told them we were going camping, and that letters might not get to them for quite a long while." She disappeared within the tent, in search of writing materials, and Wally and Jerrold lit their pipes, while Benny wandered down to the river.

"And what are your plans now, Mr. Meadows?"

Wally laughed.

"We have been trying to make no plans at all, because we didn't want to go back for the horses."

"Didn't you?" asked Jerrold with interest. "Perhaps I'd better take 'em back."

"Not much! We're just as keen as ever to go exploring, only we were too comfortable here. Now that we have the ponies, we'll have no excuse for staying. So we'll move on in a day or two: we mean to camp at the head of the valley and do some exploring from there."

"It won't be as good a camp as you've got here."

"Not by a long way. Still, we don't mind roughing it a bit, and it's rather fun to get into some country that every one doesn't know."

"Well, every one to his own idea of fun," quoth Jerrold. "I've been on the roads, droving, too long to think that camping-out anywhere is much of a lark. Give me four walls and a galvanized-iron roof, and then I don't care what the weather's like. The missus is awful scared about Mrs. Meadows. She thinks the world of her, y' know; there's no one ever came to our place that my old woman took to like she did to your wife. We all did, for that matter—she's that simple and friendly-like, and the kid's fair dotty about her. Time and again the missus wishes she had her back again."

"Tell Mrs. Jerrold I'll look after her," said Wally, smiling.

"Yes, I'd bet on that. Well, I guess you'll find me mooching along to see how you're getting on if we don't hear of you soon. I'm dead certain to get no peace if I don't. I'll bring some bread if I come, and then I'll be sure of a welcome!"

"You'll be sure of that in any case," Wally told him. "But you really need not worry about us: we don't mean to go in for anything rash."

"Oh, I ain't worrying; but you know what women are. Leastways, you will when you've been married ten year. Well, anyhow, when you do make up your minds to come back, don't bother about the ponies: if you take the hobbles off and turn 'em loose, they'll come home all right. And there's never any need to lead that old pack-pony: she'll follow just like a dog. Saves a lot of trouble on

a narrow track.” He knocked the ashes from his pipe and got up slowly. “Well, here’s Mrs. Meadows with her letters. Benny and I had better be jogging along home.”

Benny was recalled from the river with some difficulty. To him the camp represented the one perfect way of living, and he openly bewailed the necessity of returning to the civilization of four walls and galvanized-iron roofing.

“I’ll bring Mum campin’ some day—you just see if I don’t!” he said stoutly. “I could easy do it when I’m a bit bigger; I b’lieve I could jolly well do it now. Couldn’t I, Mrs. Meadows? If you say I could, most likely Daddy ’ud let me, ’cause he thinks you’ve got lots of sense!”

“Get along to your pony an’ don’t yabber so much,” said the embarrassed Mr. Jerrold. “Don’t you take any notice of him, Mrs. Meadows. That kid’s been allowed to talk a darned sight too free.”

“Well, you did say so, Daddy,” averred Benny, unabashed. “You do think I’m big enough, don’t you, Mrs. Meadows?”

“I’m quite sure you will be, pretty soon,” Norah temporized. “But Mother is the one to consult about it. Give her my love, Benny, and tell her she was just a dear to send us so many nice things, and that I nearly wept with joy at the sight of the butter. And tell her not to worry about Mr. Meadows, because I shall look after him very carefully!”

“I like that!” ejaculated the outraged Wally. Mr. Jerrold emitted a deep chuckle as he herded his son before him to their horses. They rode away, Benny turning to wave farewells before a bend in the road took them out of sight.

“And when do we move camp?” Norah asked, a little later. They had tidied the camp, and, clad in bathing-suits, were sitting on a rock beside the river.

“This morning I would have felt like saying ‘Never.’ But now that we have the ponies, I feel an attack of ‘go-fever’ coming on,” Wally replied. “What would you say to riding up to the end of the valley to-morrow, not to stay, but to decide on a good place to camp? We could take the pack-horse with a load of things and make a few preparations. I don’t see that we can manage without two loads, in any case.”

“Good idea,” Norah agreed. “Mr. Jerrold says it is only six miles, so it would not mean a long day. And it will be rather jolly to be on a horse again.”

“It will,” Wally said. “But, then, everything’s jolly. It was even jolly to see old Jerrold and Benny, though I didn’t want them to stay. This camp is jolly, and the next camp will be more so, and goodness only knows how jolly the plateau is going to be. And the river is heavenly.” He rolled to the edge of the rock, where he lay, balancing insecurely, looking as though a touch would send him into the pool below. The temptation was irresistible. Norah applied the touch, and Wally disappeared into the river with a loud yell.

“If I don’t duck you!” he gasped, reappearing. Norah waited until he had almost gained the top of the rock, with a just desire for vengeance written on his dripping face. Then she went into the water with a quick dive. Wally followed, and the pool became a whirling mass of foam in the crowded few moments that ensued. Finally they regained the rock, weak with laughter, and quite out of breath.

“You promised, I believe,” said Wally, severely, “to honour and obey me. I wish I could see the slightest chance of its coming off.”

“And *you* promised,” said his wife, “to cherish me. I’ve never quite understood what cherishing was, but I don’t believe your treatment of me in the pool recently had anything to say to it.”

“And so,” Wally chanted mournfully, “they realized that their marriage had been a Miserable Failure. Therefore they resolved——”

“——To end it——” mourned Norah.

“By——”

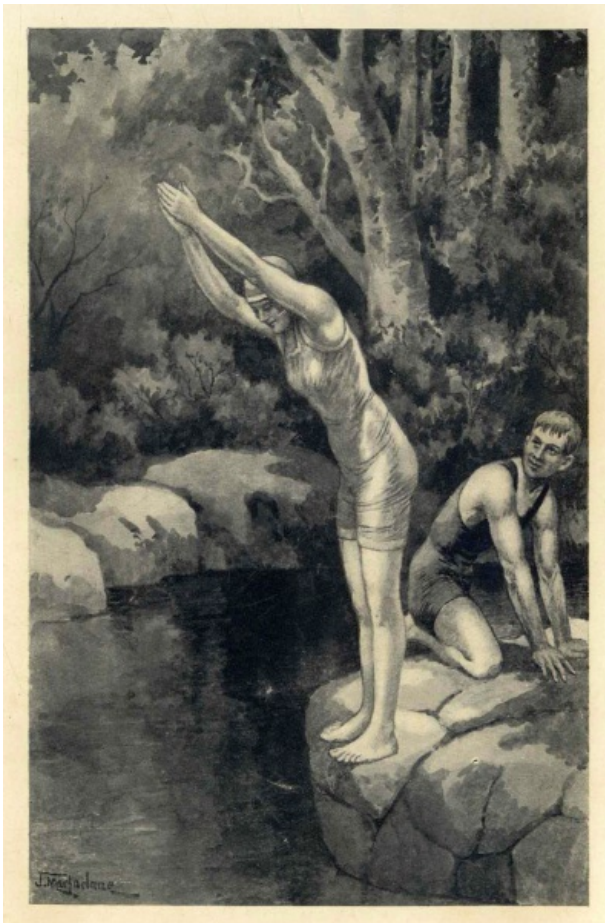
“Suicide!”

“And they flung themselves——”

“——Together——” She clasped his hand.

“In the sea!” finished Wally, on a deep bass note. The splash that followed the last words was monumental. They emerged from the river, still hand in hand, and looking somewhat bewildered.

“’Twasn’t the sea at all!” said Wally, wrathfully. “And I decline to drown in a two-by-six mountain creek. Come home, woman, and cook your husband’s tea!”



“Then she went into the water with a quick dive.”

Billabong Adventurers]

[[Chapter VII](#)



## CHAPTER VIII

### HORSESHOE VALLEY

NEXT morning the campers were early astir. Breakfast was disposed of as soon as possible, and the horses were saddled, the pack-pony being loaded with as many necessities as they could spare from the base-camp. The dew was still on the grass as they mounted and rode away. Spiders' webs, bespangled with a thousand diamond drops, festooned the bushes, drawing a gleaming veil over trails of clematis and wild convolvulus; and all about them birds twittered their morning song. It was a day of clear sunshine and blue sky: a day whose beauty seemed to welcome them into the unknown country.

As they pushed on, they saw that the valley narrowed gradually. The river, which had worn a winding course, seeming to flow just where it chose, now flowed under one of the cliff-walls; and the opposing bank grew steeper and more rocky, shutting in the hurrying water. Between the pools were many miniature falls, over which the stream hurled itself, covering the boulders in its bed with a smother of white foam; and there were stretches of stony rapids, where the water raced and chattered, broken by a hundred eddying currents. "If that river comes out of the hills up yonder," remarked Wally, "it must do so in something of a hurry."

Between the river and the wall of the valley was now only a narrow space, broken here and there by tumbled masses of rock, but fairly well grassed and making easy going for the ponies. The scrub was sparse and stunted, as if the trees had lacked sufficient sunlight to give them strength. Wild raspberry and blackberry brambles grew in tangled masses against the base of the cliffs, masking the entrance to holes and deep caves in the sandstone. There was something eerie in the great gorge; the cliffs seemed almost as though they might topple over, so high and frowning were they.

"I don't think I care much for this bit of country," Norah observed. "It's too grim and dismal: not a place for a cheerful camp. Do you think it will widen out again?"

"It's hard to say." Wally looked at the towering cliffs ahead. "We seem to be getting to the end of all things, but I fancy from Jerrold's description that it must be better than this. Anyhow, we'll go to the end, and see."

"We can't be far from the end now."

"No; we must have covered nearly six miles. Oh, it must get better: no one in his senses would come to a place like this to camp. And there seems no way whatever of getting up these cliffs to the plateau—yet we know there are

tracks. I think I can guarantee you a change of scene presently, moddam!"

"It can't come too soon for moddam," returned Norah, laughing. "This crack in the earth is making me feel all creepy."

A belt of the scanty scrub blocked their view ahead. They pushed through it, following a dim cattle-track in single file, and emerged to find that the valley turned sharply to the right, the rock-wall jutting so abruptly that for a moment they thought they had, in Wally's phrase, arrived at the end of all things. But the river swept round almost at an angle; and following its bank they came into what was like a new country.

After the dimness of the gorge it seemed all light and space. The valley widened into a great semicircle, the cliffs suddenly becoming much lower and forming a wide horseshoe. It was the end of their journey. Ahead of them the river issued from the base of the cliffs, running swiftly at first, then checked by rocks into a wider pool than any they had yet seen, and finally crashing over a ledge in a thundering fall, before some mysterious vein of hard rock forced it to take the sharp turn into the narrow canyon. Trees dotted the green expanse, making it like a meadow. The ponies put down their heads thankfully and began to crop the sweet native grasses; they knew that they had arrived at their halting-place.

"By Jove, this is jolly!" Wally exclaimed. "Look at the river, Nor. I never saw anything like it."

They cantered over to the great circle of the wall and looked at the water. Where it came from no one could say, nor for how long it had run its course underground. It flowed swiftly from a wide rift at the bottom of the cliff; the lip of rock just above it was fringed with slimy green weed that floated and eddied on the surface of the dark, swiftly-flowing water. Overhead the wall of brown sandstone rose smooth and sheer, its surface almost unbroken until it ended in one tapering peak. But on either side of the river the cliff fell away in a jumble of rounded boulders that looked as if ages ago a mighty rock-slide had taken place. Wally scanned these places keenly.

"One could scramble up there," he said. "But it would be difficult, especially carrying packs. I think that an easier way would be farther to the right on this side of the river: there seem faint signs of a track there. Oh, well, we'll have plenty of time to find that out. Meanwhile, how does this place strike you for a camp-site, Nor?"

"It couldn't be better," Norah said. "Plenty of grass for the ponies, good water, shady trees, glorious holes in the rocks for store-rooms. What more could anyone ask? Let's unpack."

They unpacked gleefully, hobbling the horses and turning them out to graze. Most of the load they had brought consisted of stores and clothing, which fitted comfortably into a deep hole in the cliff four feet from the ground.

Wally masked the entrance with a dry bush, in case, as he said, fierce mopokes should roost there; and they boiled the billy by the river and ate their lunch while they watched the swift mysterious stream and tried to picture the underground caverns through which it ran before it suddenly came out into the daylight.

“Rum old things you might find there,” Wally pondered. “Skeletons of dinosaurs and brontosaurus and all those other queer creatures. Indeed, they might not be skeletons, but very much alive. Who’s to know what curiosities are wandering about under there? It must be a network of great caves.”

“That’s a shuddery idea,” said Norah. “If they are there, for all we know they may be roaming about on the plateau as well: those caves you seem so sure of might quite well have exits towards the top.”

“That *does* set one thinking,” said Wally. “We may be on the verge of great discoveries. Fancy boiling our billy peacefully, up there, and suddenly finding a dinosaur giving you the glad-eye over a clump of tea-tree. Would you run, Nor?”

“I would,” said Norah, firmly. “I have no use for dinosaurs. The bare thought of one cooing to its young gives me the shivers. Do they eat people?”

“They ate whatever they could get, I believe. You might expect anything from a lizard about a hundred feet long—or was it two hundred? Anyway, measurements would not seem to matter much when you got over fifty feet.”

“No—the only measurement that would affect one much would be the size of one’s own leaps,” Norah laughed. “However, I don’t fancy we are going to find anything more exciting than a wombat. Finished your lunch? Then suppose we pick out a good place for the tent.”

There was no difficulty in finding camping sites in Horseshoe Valley, as Norah christened the green semicircle ringed by the cliffs. They fixed on a place where the rock would shelter them, should wind spring up, conveniently near good store-holes in the sandstone. Wally had brought the axe, with which he cut tent-poles in readiness for next day, as well as a stack of firewood. When he had finished his preparations he looked longingly at the cliff.

“I’d love to find that track,” he said. “Not to go right up, of course, but just to form an idea of what it is like.”

“I’ve been scouting,” said Norah. “There are several ways that look as though they might be possible, but we know there are places where cattle go up and down, so they should be fairly easy for humans. I can’t find any hoof-marks, but there is a place over here that looks as if it might have been worn down by hoofs.”

She led the way behind a boulder that had evidently fallen from above long ago, and now lay a few feet from the wall. Behind it was smooth hard sand. They edged round more stones, and soon found themselves mounting steadily.

Although there was no trace of a path, it was a way that would have been quite possible for cattle, if taken slowly. Sometimes it was necessary to work back in the direction from which they had come, but always the way turned again, following a rough diagonal line across the face of the wall towards a point where the summit dipped sharply. Wally called a halt when they were about half-way up.

"I think this is certainly the right track—if you can call it a track," he said. "We may find a better, but I'm sure this would take us to the top. But I think we have gone far enough for to-day."

Norah looked at him and smiled.

"You wouldn't say so if I were Jim," she said. "Nothing would keep you from that sky-line, if only you hadn't me. And I can easily do it. Do go on, Wally: you know you are aching to get up there."

"That's an ache that can very easily wait its turn," said he, cheerfully. "The top of that old hill has been where it is for quite a while, and it isn't going to move within the next few days. I'd much rather do it when there's a comfortable camp down at the bottom. Therefore, with all due respect to you, ma'am, we will not ascend farther. Let's sit down here for a few minutes and then make for home."

They sat on a boulder and looked down upon the wide, green stretch of Horseshoe Valley. Far below them the ponies could be seen, looking no larger than sheep. Two were placidly eating: the old pack-pony was luxuriously rolling on the grass. The roar of the fall came faintly to their ears.

"I've a feeling in my bones," said Norah, "that we're going to find adventures here."

"Haven't you been finding them already?" he demanded.

"Travelling with anyone as wild as you must always be an adventure," responded his wife, sweetly. "But, somehow, this is a different sensation. I've been jumpy all the afternoon—as if something were hidden in these old cliffs."

"Rock-wallabies," said Wally, promptly. "Loads of 'em. But seriously, Nor, is anything the matter? It isn't like you to be jumpy."

"No, I know it isn't, and I've been wondering at myself. Oh, it's only a silly notion; I don't suppose I shall ever think of it again when we come up here. And it will certainly be a tremendous lark if we do meet with any adventures. You and I have never had any wild experiences."

"Not together," said Wally. "I don't know that I want 'em. I've had the War, and there I had all the wild times I wanted; and then, after I had hoped to spend a blameless life of peace, what must I do but get bashed nearly to death by a lunatic in Queensland! Adventures like that aren't really a bit of fun when you're actually having them. They sound well in books, I know. But in real life they're just too darned uncomfortable."

"You're not to have any more unless I'm there," said Norah. "It's much too harrowing to be the one left behind."

"Then I hope our adventures will be distinctly mild," said Wally. "I've promised Jim faithfully that he's not to be out of any excitement of the kind in future—he has never forgiven me for getting into that mess in Queensland without him. But my one ambition now is to be a man of peace."

"Jim would be a comforting person to have handy if anything went wrong, wouldn't he?" Norah reflected. "He would always be so quiet and so reliable."

"I guess we knew that in France," Wally answered. "If there's any better man than old Jim in a tight place, well, the battalion never came across him. And he's so quick! With all his slow movements and his quiet ways, he's capable of covering ground more swiftly than most people if there's any necessity—and he thinks as quickly as he can move. My word, Nor, you know it will be awfully good to see old Jimmy again!"

"Yes, won't it?" Norah agreed. "We had better not talk too much about it, Wally, or we shall be getting homesick. And that would never do before we have climbed over that sky-line of yours."

"Then the sooner we climb over it, the better," remarked Wally, sagely. "Once you begin to feel Billabong tugging at you, I know I'll never be able to keep you away. Therefore, the best thing is for us to move camp as soon as we can; and to do that we've got to get back." He rose, pulling her to her feet. "Let's climb down to flat country and catch those ponies."

The next day was a busy one. They struck their tent in the early morning and stored in the Singer all the things that it was impossible to transport by pack-horse to the new camp: and, with rolls of bedding on their saddles, and the pack as heavy as the old pony could reasonably be asked to march under, they set out again for Horseshoe Valley. By night they were established in their new home: not by any means as comfortable a dwelling as the first camp, but neither of the explorers was inclined to grumble at minor inconveniences. The beds were of green bracken, which makes a springy couch not to be despised; their bags of spare clothing formed their pillows, and their sleep was far too deep to be disturbed by an odd button or buckle developing itself in place of feathers. There were no chairs, but then it was universally admitted that the best campers did not use them. If some of the battery of cooking-pots had perforce been left behind, the frying-pan had travelled with them, and no epicure could have tilted a haughty nose at the dish of brown trout that formed their first evening meal. Norah planned great deeds of cookery with the frying-pan—upheld by the fact that no consideration of time or space had sufficed to separate her from the celery-salt!

Having made the new home, the desire for the sky-line seemed to leave Wally for a time, and they spent peaceful days in Horseshoe Valley. The

weather grew suddenly hot, so that a tough climb was not a tempting prospect, especially as to climb meant that they must leave their beloved river. The heat provided a new element of excitement by bringing out snakes. Horseshoe Valley was free from these unpleasant visitors, but they were both numerous and lively in the narrow gorge round the bend of the river, where their presence made a day's exploring full of sudden incidents. Between them Wally and Norah accounted for ten, a bag which afforded them no special joy.

"This is not good hunting," ejaculated Wally, when the tenth reptile had fallen to his stick—a big copperhead which had struck at Norah's hand and very narrowly missed it. "That brute was far too near you."

"One needs eyes in the back of one's head in this country," Norah answered. "I don't think it's much fun to climb over very hot rocks with a serpent lying on top of each and more preparing to crawl up."

"Beastly place," Wally agreed. "Also, I don't like its being so near the horses. Of course, there's nothing on earth to tempt a horse to leave the good grass round the corner and wander into this rocky hole; but experience has shown me that horses will always do the most unlikely things if there's a particular reason why they shouldn't. I think I'd better fence it off, Nor, don't you?"

"Do you propose fencing off the snakes from the horses, or the horses from the snakes?"

"Both, I think. The space is very narrow just at the corner, where the river swings round, from its bank to the cliff. If I ran up a light dog-leg fence across there I could block it underneath with prickly-Moses; there's plenty of the beastly stuff here. Of course, it would not be snake-proof, but I don't believe that many of the brutes would want to crawl through: and it would certainly keep the ponies from straying round into the gorge. I should feel much easier about them when we climb up to the plateau; they're hobbled, but a hobbled pony is rather likely to stray back towards his home when he finds himself alone. They certainly won't tackle a prickly-Moses barrier."

There were plenty of long thin saplings to make the work easy, and in the cool of the evening they constructed their "dog-leg" fence—crotched sticks set upright in the ground with long poles laid in the forks to form a top-rail. Underneath they packed the thorny prickly-Moses so tightly that when it was finished they agreed that it might very well be considered snake-proof. Horseshoe Valley was now shut off, for where the fence ended at the river the banks were too steep to climb. "If Jerrold comes up as far as this to look for us," Wally remarked, "he won't be a bit pleased when he meets that little erection."

"It wouldn't take long to pull it down," Norah said.

"No, it wouldn't. But a man hesitates to start pulling down another fellow's

fence. Anyhow, I'll feel more comfortable about the ponies. Do you notice that the wind has changed, Nor? We're going to have a cool day to-morrow, I fancy."

Norah pushed back her felt hat.

"That will be no bad thing. I don't like these bursts of early summer. And does the idea of a cool day mean that you are looking hopefully at the sky-line?"

Wally grinned.

"How about it? We mustn't put it off too long, for the weather may grow rapidly hotter. Also we shall become fat and lazy if we stay here indefinitely."

"Then let us climb," Norah said. "I cannot bear the idea of your becoming either lazy or fat. Do you think of making a day-trip, or of staying up there?"

Wally linked his arm in hers and they strolled over towards the tent, the axe on his shoulder.

"What I propose for your honourable consideration," he said, "is to go up, more or less prepared to stay. From what Jerrold said, I don't think we should have any trouble in finding a cave to sleep in, so we won't want the tent. Let's load up with what we think we can carry; if we get tired we can dump it on the way and go on empty-handed—or I could come back from the top and bring your load up."

"I can't say I think much of that idea," said his wife. "I trust to reach the top, complete with load, under my own steam."

"Well, you're not going to break your back over it," he said. "There's no sense in getting up there, worn out: the game wouldn't be worth the candle. So you're to be sensible, Nor."

"I will," promised she. "But you have got to be sensible too, and not attempt to turn yourself into a baggage-camel." She looked a little wistfully at the tent as they neared it in the cool dusk.

"Don't we move often!" she said. "As soon as I become attached to a home we seem to pack up and go."

"Would you rather stay?" Wally asked swiftly. "I'd be just as happy here, truly, Nor."

"Goodness, no!" she answered. "I want to see the sky-line just as much as you do. But I do begin to feel like people who live in furnished flats, moving from one flat to another whenever they get restless. When we do settle down I shall want to be quite certain that you have lost the Wandering-Jew feeling. Or else I'll never dare to plant a garden."

"We may be wanderers," said Wally, loftily; "but I ask you, do you know any other bride whose husband has provided her with so many residences? We've one home down at the base-camp, another perfectly good one here, and now I'm proposing to offer you an unlimited number of caves in the hills. I

would like to suggest, madam, that any adverse criticism of my expansive generosity would be very bad taste on your part. Some wives simply don't know when they're well off!"



## CHAPTER IX

### THE SKY-LINE

“WE’RE nearly up,” Wally said. “Do put down that beastly pack, Nor, old girl, and have a rest.”

He slipped his own load to the ground as he spoke, and eased her lighter pack from her shoulders. Norah nodded her thanks a little breathlessly, and subsided upon a rock.

“I do wish I hadn’t let you try it,” said Wally, anxiously. “I’m certain it’s too much for you. Look here—stay where you are until I get to the top, and then I’ll come back for you and your bundle.”

“No, indeed,” said Norah, stoutly. “Truly, I’m all right, Wally: I only was a little bit out of breath. But I’m not tired, and I’d hate to give in now.”

“I don’t like it,” he said. “Your father and Jim would have seventeen fits if they could see you crawling up this blessed hill with a load like that. Do as I ask, Nor—just to please me.”

His worried young face smote at Norah’s heart.

“If you really want me to——” she said.

“I really do. I should be ever so much happier about you. It makes a man feel an absolute worm to see his wife turned into a beast of burden—more especially on the side of a mountain. Now you’re a good child, and you’ve taken a weight off my mind.”

“But I’ve put one on your shoulders,” said Norah, ruefully.

“Yes, but my shoulders are strong, if my mind is weak. I had to say that in a hurry, or else you would have said it!” He smiled at her, shouldering his pack, and in a moment was climbing up the steep slope above her.

Norah was glad to sit still. At first she had protested that the load Wally had arranged for her was far too light, and had indignantly demanded more: but he had been firm, relenting only to the extent of allowing her to carry the billy. His own load had seemed, by comparison, gigantic, nor was it as comfortable as Norah’s, for, while hers consisted only of blankets, Wally’s held many knobby articles of food which would neither pack kindly nor ride comfortably on the shoulders. Moreover, he carried the gun—a serious handicap where two hands were often needed in climbing. Still, he was apparently fresh, while Norah had long since realized that the pack which had seemed light to her at first was in reality quite as heavy as her strength could allow. She hated giving it up; but she had to admit to herself that the prospect of climbing unburdened was very comforting.

Wally came back to her presently, his face glowing.

"Had a good rest? That's right. Queer, wild-looking country up there, but I'm not going to tell you anything about it until you've seen it for yourself."

"Seen any brontosaurus?" Norah inquired.

"Not a bront. But very probably one is chewing my pack even now. Come on, and you can throw stones at him while I find a cave." His white teeth flashed in his merry brown face. "I tell you, it would be easy to be a cave-man up there: it's the queerest country I ever saw."

He led the way up the steep cliff-path—scarcely, indeed, to be dignified by the name of path. Even without a pack it was sufficiently hard climbing, for the ground was encrusted with stones, large and small, with stunted brambles twining about them in a manner that made Norah thankful that she wore breeches and leather gaiters, in place of anything more flimsy. Her thoughts went back to Jean Yorke's horror at her lack of a trousseau: she wondered, with a smile, how the conventional bride's outfit would have fitted in with her very unconventional honeymoon—and reflected, after the manner of woman, that it would be rather pleasant to get into pretty frocks once more when they went back to civilization. "I'll go to Buckley's on our way home and buy a frock that will astonish Wally after all this!" she murmured. Then she topped the sky-line and came out upon a new world—one that looked as old as Time.

It was, as Wally had said, the queerest country. Seen from the edge the plateau looked perfectly flat, though later on many unsuspected hollows revealed themselves. Dwarf scrub grew here and there in little clumps, wind-blown and gnarled; but there was scant room for trees among the rocks that littered the surface. Such rocks Norah had never seen. Some looked as though a giant had flung them hither and thither in clumsy playfulness: some stood in groups like mighty monuments, towering as high as a cathedral. They were of all shapes and sizes, worn smooth by wind and weather, lichen-covered, and fretted into strange forms. One, a hundred yards away and forty feet high, was like a great face: another, low and long, resembled a lion, crouching in act to spring; yet another was formed like a ship, with two squat funnels and a sharp bow that seemed just lifting from a wave. Far as the eye could see they covered the plateau, and there was something almost alive about their silent watchfulness.

"Did you ever dream that we had country like this?" Wally asked. He had dropped his pack and stood laughing at Norah's astonished face.

"I can hardly believe it even when I look at it," she answered. "It's like the country one sees in queer dreams—even in dreams you know it can't possibly be real. No wonder nobody has ever tried to live up here."

"It would give one the willies to live among these mad rocks," said Wally, inelegantly. "Jerrold said there were a few cattle and sheep here, but I'm

blessed if I can see how they can exist: there isn't feed for a rabbit. More by token, there *is* a rabbit!—see him scurry down that hole? So we won't go short of food. I should think that if sheep were left up here they would gradually turn into a race of rock-sheep, about the size of a fox-terrier and built entirely for jumping! But we'll see. Feel like camping here, Nor, or would you rather go back?"

"Oh, I think it would be a pity not to stay, now that we have climbed up. But what about water, Wally? We must find one of the springs Mr. Jerrold spoke of, if we are to camp."

"Yes; that's the most important thing. Let's leave our dunnage here and have a wander."

They set off towards the thickest clump of scrub in sight. No water was near it, but when Wally climbed a high rock he could see a green hollow not far off, and they made their way to it. It was only a small place; a shallow, saucer-like depression in the ground; but near it they heard a trickle of water, and, searching, found a spring hidden away among the boulders. It seemed to issue from the face of one, trickling down until it reached a stone below that had once been flat, but which the water had worn, falling for unnumbered years, into a deep basin. The basin always brimmed with crystal-clear water, that ran over its edge, and lost itself among the stones below. Many such springs they found on the plateau: but this one was their first important discovery, and it marked their new home.

Wally produced an enamel cup from his pocket, and they drank thankfully, finding the water icy-cold.

"That was great!" he said. "Now we'll rest a bit, and then we can find a cave. I hope we'll have the luck to find one near this excellent water-supply. It's one of the finest aids to housekeeping I ever saw."

Luck seemed disinclined to smile in their direction for a time, for, though there were many huge crags near the spring, not one showed any trace of a hole that could afford them shelter. At length, casting a little farther afield, they discovered a great boulder that had evidently been struck by lightning. It had been split in two from top to bottom, leaving a space a yard wide between the two portions. Wally investigated the narrow passage and gave a shout of satisfaction.

"Look here. Nor! Two-roomed cottage, all ready for tenants!"

The rock was little more than a hollow shell. The top of one half was perforated with large holes, so that light streamed down into it, showing a wide cave, with a sandy, boulder-strewn floor. In the other half the roof was intact: it was lit only by the light from the passage, but it was fairly airy, and the clean hard sand underfoot was free from all obstructions.

"I should call it a desirable gentleman's residence," said Norah, surveying

this discovery. "Water laid on at short distance, indirect lighting, perfect view—once you get outside, that is. I don't think we could do better, Wally."

"I had pictured a cave with a wide mouth, where you might crouch, clad in skins, to await my return from hunting," said Wally. "And we might find it yet—but meanwhile I think we can be comfortable here."

"Why, I could do all the crouching here, if you're so keen on it," said his wife, laughing. "But why crouch, with plenty of room to stand up?"

"The best cave-women do it, I believe," he said regretfully.

"I'll practise it, since you seem set on it," Norah said. "But skins I will not wear, especially as you haven't got any yet. And if you think I am going to sit at home while you go hunting, you are woefully mistaken. I'm coming too. I think you are rather inclined to overdo the cave-man attitude."

"I've never had the chance before, and I don't suppose I'll ever have it again," said he. "So I thought it might as well be done thoroughly. However, at least we have the cave. We can sleep in the open if the weather is good, and if it's only pretty good we can use the airiest cave, and when it's bad we can retire to the dungeon. It isn't a very dungeony dungeon, anyhow. Let's bring the baggage here, and then we can have lunch before we get everything fixed up."

They slept that night under the stars, on beds of bracken, sheltered by the rock from the keen wind that every night blew over the plateau; and next day set out to explore. It was a fascinating country in which to wander. Everywhere the great rocks lured them on, so strange and diverse were their forms; a crag that perhaps was smooth and uninteresting on one side might be worn on the other into the most weird shape, or honeycombed with caves and tunnels. The caves were endless in number: some, shallow depressions in the soft sandstone, others running deeply into the hill-side. They could have found a score of homes; but the twin caves of the Split Rock were convenient, and as their belongings were unpacked and stored it seemed waste of time to move, especially as they were day and night in the open.

Very few rabbits were to be seen. Indeed, the absence of all life on the plateau was very marked—even the birds seemed to prefer the shelter of the valley, and eagles and kestrels, floating high, were the only ones they saw. Once Wally caught sight of a few sheep, as wild and timid as hares; they flung up their heads in terror when they spied him, and went leaping away among the crags. There was fair grazing: the hollows and spaces between the rocks held short, thick grass, and there were many wild flowers, mostly of an unknown species. But the absence of all wild life brought with it a queer feeling of unreality: it was as though an unbroken silence brooded over all the wide expanse.

Since rabbits and birds were not to be counted upon, food became a

problem for careful consideration. They had brought with them a fair supply of bacon, flour, tinned food and dried fruits; but two healthy young appetites, sharpened by hill air and hard exercise, made heavy inroads on the stores, and in a few days Wally began to consider the question of re-victualling the camp.

He slipped away early one morning, before Norah was awake, and spent an hour in prowling about the edge of the cliff. The result of these explorations brought him back to camp with a light in his eye. Norah, who was preparing breakfast, greeted him cheerily.

"You've been making discoveries! It's written all over you."

"I have," said Wally. "You know, I've been thinking that there must be a better way up than the track we came by. It wasn't a bad track, for foot-slogging, but I knew that Jerrold had spoken of stock-men getting horses up the cliff. Well, I think I've found out where they do it: there's quite a good track, as hill tracks go, over yonder. I went down about half-way, and as far as I can judge, it would be easy enough to get a pony up."

"That's good news," Norah said. "Would you bring all three ponies here?"

"I don't think so. There's not a great amount of feed, for hobbled ponies, and it's no country for riding: you'd have to be watching all the time among these blessed stones. If they were my own ponies, I might chance it, but I don't like the idea of hurting another man's horse. Don't you think that the best plan would be for me to go down and bring the old pack-pony up with a load of tucker? She's as sure-footed as a goat, and this track wouldn't worry her at all, if the lower half is as good as the part I went over this morning."

"It's certainly much easier than carrying it up oneself," Norah said; "to say nothing of the fact that you could bring up a far bigger supply. And we're beginning to want a good many things. I'm coming too, of course."

"Sure you'd better? It's a rough trip, and I can easily manage by myself."

"Indeed you won't. Let's make a day of it—we can do some fishing as well. A meal of fresh fish would be no bad thing for us," said Norah, wisely. "And, oh, Wally! I do want a swim."

"Me too," Wally agreed. "One can certainly get clean in a tin basin, but no one can say that it's a pleasant process. Right-o: we'll start directly after breakfast, if you feel like it."

They found the new track comparatively easy, presenting no special obstacles for the agile old pack-pony; and, much uplifted, arrived at Horseshoe Valley. Everything was in good order: the stores secure in their hole in the cliff-face, the ponies grazing contentedly, and the new fence still intact. Thus reassured, they spent a blissful day in fishing and swimming, and finally returned to the plateau at dusk, having made an uneventful ascent with the pony and a good load.

Tired with their long day, they slept late, and next morning were

disinclined to go far afield. Norah was preparing dinner when she made a discovery that brought her out of the cave, looking puzzled.

"Wally, did you unpack the flour?"

"I didn't unpack anything, more shame to me," said Wally, uncoiling his long form from the top of a rock where he lay half asleep. "Don't you bother about it—I'll get everything out in a jiffy. I never thought of the old pack from the moment that I dumped it into the cave last night."

"But I've just been unpacking it," Norah said. "It wasn't any trouble; I was waiting about while things were cooking. But the flour isn't there."

"Oh, it must be," Wally answered. "I had it out on the rock down below, all ready to pack—'twas in a little sack. Don't you remember, I put it up again into one of the holes when I went to swim?" His mouth opened suddenly, and he stood looking at her with a comically dismayed face. "And—I—believe—it's—there—yet!" he finished.

Norah gave a shout of laughter.

"Oh, aren't you an old owl!" she said merrily.

"I am," said her husband, meekly. "I am all that, and worse. How on earth could I have been such a fool? Well, that means another trip below, that's all."

"What fun!" said Norah. "We'll go after dinner. It won't be too much for the pony, will it?"

"Oh no; she's as right as rain this morning—never turned a hair. But look here, Nor, I don't want you to go. You had a long day yesterday, and you know that you admitted you were tired this morning. Stay up here quietly, and I'll go. I will even be uncivil and state that I'll be quicker without you."

"That may be—I can't cover the ground as you can." She hesitated: the stiff climb of the day before had tired her more than she had cared to admit, and the prospect of a lazy afternoon was tempting. "But I should feel a horrid deserter, Wally."

"Well, I'd far rather have you fit to-morrow, and ready for a good tramp over the plateau, than have you with me this afternoon," said Wally, practically. "It won't be much of a lark, and I should really like you to rest. Do, old girl."

Norah gave in.

"Very well," she said. "I'll darn socks, and read, and have tea ready for you when you come back. It won't take you very long."

"Not long at all. I must give the pony a bit of a spell when we get down \_\_\_\_\_"

"Just long enough for you to have a swim?"

"Quite so," said Wally, grinning. "Won't you envy me! I won't start very soon, because she'll travel better when it's cooler. But I'll be back by dusk."

He waved good-bye cheerfully from the edge of the plateau, a little later, as

he led the pony down the first few yards of the track, leaving Norah sitting in the shade of a rock, busily darning. A moment later, struck by a sudden thought, he returned and hailed her.

“Oh, Nor! Take the gun with you if you go wandering about.”

“For fear of dinosaurs?” Norah gave back gaily.

“Well—just as a precaution. Even if you are the only person alive on the plateau you might sprain an ankle or something, and then you could let off the gun to let me know where you were.”

“All right,” she promised. “But I don’t think I’ll wander at all—unless I come down to meet you.”

“Then don’t come far,” he called. She nodded, and Wally went back to the pony, which was peacefully picking its slow way down the path.

The flour was where he had left it. He turned the pony out to graze and fished for an hour. There was no element of chance about fishing at Horseshoe Valley: the trout were always eager and hungry, and when Wally reeled in his line for the last time he had a fine string of fish. He stowed them in a wet sugar-bag, and gave himself the luxury of a long bathe; then, loading up, he began the slow journey home. The trip down had been quicker than he had expected. “I’ll be back well before dusk,” he reflected.

Half-way up, the pony suddenly went lame. A stone was in its hoof; and, to his disgust, Wally found that he had left at the camp his knife, which contained a pick for such emergencies. It was an awkward stone, deeply imbedded; to get it out without a pick was a long, slow business. He managed it at last, with the aid of fragments of rock; but the delay meant that dusk had fallen when he gained the sky-line and bent eager eyes towards the Split Rock, expecting to see the cheery glow of the camp-fire. Norah had not come to meet him, rather to his relief. It was better that she should rest.

No red glow gleamed through the dusk to greet him. He went forward quickly, a queer, unreasoning catch of fear at his heart. She must be in the cave.

“Hallo-o-o!” he called.

There was no answer: and suddenly he dropped the halter and began to run, covering the distance to the Split Rock in long strides, his breath coming quickly.

Norah was not there. The cave was silent and empty and dark. Wally struck a match and looked round. The gun was gone from its place—that was something he realized with a sense of relief.

He went outside, looking anxiously over the dim plateau. Darkness was rapidly gathering: in the gloom the tall crags showed like ghostly sentinels. But of Norah there was no sign.

## CHAPTER X

### WHAT THEY FOUND

“COO-EE! Coo-ee-ee!”

The long cry wailed out into the dark. Wally had climbed to the top of the Split Rock, and there stood while he sent out shout after shout, listening with throbbing heart after each, hoping to hear an answering call. But none came.

The old pony whinnied distressfully below: she knew that she had come to her journey's end, and it puzzled and annoyed her that she was not unsaddled and turned out. Wally slid down to the ground and went over to her, speaking gently as he let her go. He carried the flour and fish into the cave, and, coming out again, began swiftly to kindle a fire. There was plenty of wood ready: he gave inward thanks that he had cut a good supply. As he worked, with quick, deft movements, he reasoned with himself.

“There's no need to be afraid—no need at all. . . . She's got the gun, and she can use it better than most people. . . . If you were asked what girl could look after herself if she got bushed you'd say Norah, every time. . . . There's no one but ourselves on the plateau—there couldn't be: we'd have seen some signs of life if there had been any chance of other people. . . . I'm not going to be such a fool as to worry: she'd be the first to laugh at me if she found that I'd been nervous, when she turns up. . . . She's safe to be back any minute: even if she has lost the direction of the camp in the darkness, she'll see the fire and come straight in. I'll hear her coo-ee presently.”

He piled wood on the fire, so that a blaze shot up six feet high; and leaving more fuel in readiness, climbed the Split Rock again and shouted until his throat was dry. Not a sound came. Then he fell silent, struck with the sudden idea that his shouts might prevent him hearing her voice, or even a gun-shot: and he sat down on the rock, lit his pipe, and smoked in silence, listening—listening. The stars came out, and the darkness thickened over the lonely land. He tried to picture where Norah might be; gripping the stem of his pipe savagely, as grim pictures floated before his eyes. Hurt, perhaps; lying at the bottom of one of those beastly rocks with a sprained ankle, or even a broken leg: the gun out of her reach, the distance from camp too great to bridge with her calling for him. He could not bear the thought that she would be calling, longing for an answer, and finding none. At the thought he sprang to his feet and sent long shouts ringing again into the night. But there was no reply. He abused himself again for being a fool to be afraid: dragged up a score of arguments to prove that he need not fear. Yet always at the end of his



reasoning came the same bitter question, robbing him of comfort—why had she not fired the gun?

The hours dragged by. Sometimes the longing to go out and find her was too much for him, and he would heap wood on the roaring fire and wander about the plateau, flashing his electric torch into a hundred dark hollows among the rocks, and calling—calling. But always he knew he must get back to keep the fire going. The fire was their stronghold: the beacon whose light was absolutely necessary to keep both from being lost. If he found her, hurt or insensible, without the guidance of the blaze he could never get her back to camp, among the rocks that were so friendly in the daytime, so terrible at night. And so, wherever he searched, he watched the blaze, and when it faltered he would go running and stumbling back, to build the fire anew.

When his watch told him that it was past two o'clock, he forced himself to cease searching; and the slow, clogging hours before dawn were the hardest part of all that bitter night. Underlying the light-hearted carelessness that would always keep Wally Meadows a boy was a vein of shrewd common sense; and now he faced what was to come steadily, realizing that he must save his strength. Already he was reeling with fatigue; he had fallen among the rocks a score of times, was bruised and aching from head to foot, his brain reeling with sick anxiety. "If I go on like this all night I won't be able to carry her in the morning," he muttered. He had ceased to hope that she was not lying somewhere, disabled; that she would not need all his strength and all his power of clear thought. So he dragged himself back to the fire, and sat by it, keeping it fed; trying vainly to pierce the wall of darkness that lay between him and Norah. There had been black nights in Wally's experience—nights of fear and pain: but never, he knew, would there be so cruel a night as this, among the rocks of the silent plateau.

The dawn came at last. With its first faint glimmer he prepared anew for the search, filling a flask with brandy and another with water, making up a package of food and chocolate, and another of what might be needed from their little first-aid outfit. He winced as he took out the snake-bite treatment—knowing, as he had shuddered to know all through the night, that if it were needed it would already be too late. He packed everything in a haversack, to leave his hands free; and before the sun had risen he was striding away from the camp.

He had no notion of where to go. The rock-strewn land lay before him, wide and desolate; there was nothing to guide him, nothing to tell him in what direction she might have strayed. When he had searched in the night he had tried to be systematic, so that he might leave no part of the wide area unsought; he calculated that he had been over most of the ground to the left. So he struck off to the right with a silent prayer that it should prove to be the way she had

taken.

A quarter of a mile away his first gleam of hope came to him. It was only a feather, lying on the ground: a bright feather from a parrot's wing. He sprang towards it, snatching it up with a little gasp. It was a feather he had picked up in Horseshoe Valley a week earlier: he had idly pushed it into the band of Norah's felt hat, and she had worn it ever since. There were no parrots on the plateau; he could not doubt that this was the feather he had given her.

"At least I'm on the track," he said.

He coo-ee'd long and loudly. No reply came, and deep depression settled upon him anew as he went on. It was slow progress, since he must circle every rock of any size and creep into each cave that might shelter her. He paused now and then to shout, holding his breath as he listened for the answer that never came.

He came, presently, to a steep canyon between two tall walls of rock; a long, narrow passage that curved once or twice, forming a winding alley. Here was no ground at all: the very floor was of rock, water-worn into deep cracks and holes, that made careful walking necessary, even in the broad light of day. He strode up it, his heavy boots ringing on the stones.

As he came round the curve he stopped dead. For Norah was running to meet him: running swiftly, with her face alight with welcome. The wave of utter relief that swept over Wally left him without power of speech or movement: he could only hold her to him, his breath coming and going unevenly, his tall frame quivering. So they stood together for a long time. At last he gave a great sigh.

"You're all right?" he asked, very low. "You're sure you're quite all right?"

"Quite," she said, and clung to him. "Dear one, have you had a very dreadful night?"

"It has been bad," he said. She looked at his haggard face, seeing how bad, how cruel, the night had been.

"I'll tell you all about it in a moment," she said. "But first you must sit down. Have you had anything to eat to-day, Wally?"

At that he gave a short laugh. It was a rather pitiful sound.

"Isn't that like you!" he said. "I don't feel really sure if you're alive yet, and you want to know if I've had my breakfast! Have you had yours? Because I've brought it."

"I might have known you would," she said. "Come and sit down, and we'll have it together. I've got ever so much to tell you."

They sat down on a rock together. There were a hundred questions on Wally's tongue, but he could only look at her. It was Norah who unstrapped the haversack and found the brandy and water. She made him drink some

before she would speak.

"I don't want any," she said. "I have had plenty of water—there's a spring close by. You are to take this." She watched him drain the little cup, and then divided the food.

"We must hurry," she said.

The brandy had steadied Wally.

"Something has happened, Norah," he said. "What is it?"

"I thought I would go for a walk yesterday—I got tired of sitting still, and I knew you would not be home for a good while. So I took the gun, and went off across the plateau, thinking I'd be very clever if I brought home a rabbit. And I didn't see any rabbits, but I had a lovely wander—farther than I had meant to go. I was just at the other end of this queer place on my way home when I slipped in getting over a rock and fell down into a sort of deep gutter the other side."

"Were you hurt?" Wally asked anxiously.

"Not a bit. But I lost the gun. It rolled down a deep crack in the rock, and, try as I would, I couldn't get it. I spent ever so long over it, thinking I could fish it up, but nothing was any good. You will get it easily enough with a piece of bent wire, but I had nothing but sticks and a bootlace, and they wouldn't work. I hated leaving it, for fear of a wet night, but at last I knew I must, so I piled rocks over the crack and started for home. That was near dusk."

"And what kept you?"

"This is where the adventure truly begins. I was coming along carefully—you have to take every step carefully in this queer street of rock, the going is so bad—when I heard a low moan. I thought I was dreaming, but I stood still, and it came again, the moan of a human being. And I was scared, but it wasn't any use being scared—so I hunted round and found a cave just round the corner from here. And, Wally, there's a poor old Chinaman in it, and I think he's dying."

"And you've been looking after a wretched old Chow all night!" Wally went white. "Good Lord, Norah, you don't know what may be the matter with him——"

"I do know," she said gently. "He has been badly hurt—he told me a good deal of the story. There were men after him, and he fell from a huge rock in escaping; his leg is damaged, and he just managed to crawl here for shelter. He must have been crawling a long time, to judge by his hands and knees. He gave it up when he got to this place, and lay down to die: and I think he would have been dead now if I had not happened along. You wouldn't have left him yourself, Wally: nobody could, who had any heart. He could only moan 'Water! Water!' when I found him—it was terrible to hear." She shuddered, slipping her hand into his. Wally held it tightly.

"No, you couldn't have left him, I suppose," he said. "Only—why didn't you come for me? Camp isn't so far off. I—I have been desperate, Nor."

"I knew you would be, and it was the worst part of all," she said. "But I could not get to you. You see, the first thing to think about was water, and luckily I had noticed a spring quite near—just outside these rocks. I hurried back to it and brought my hat full of water—luckily I had my little collapsible cup in my pocket. And then I had to hurry, after I had given him a little water, to make him comfortable before dark—to get some grass and fern for a pillow, and to do what I could for his leg; it wasn't much. I washed his face and hands and took off his boots. He was so pitifully grateful, Wally; so gentle, with quiet courteous manners. He isn't the ordinary type of Chinaman one sees."

She hesitated, and then went on.

"I think, if I had had time to think, that it would have been far more sensible to have left him and hurried back to get you. But I suppose I didn't reason clearly—and he did need help so badly. And the darkness came down like a wall: I didn't realize how bad it would be. I did try to get back to camp, but it wasn't safe: even if I could have found my way I couldn't get out of this place—you see what the going is. I had three falls, and got my foot caught in a slit once, and nearly had to stay the night where I was; but after a while I managed to get out, and I crept back to him on my hands and knees, feeling each stone before me. It was inky-dark in here. And I heard you calling, and called back, but I knew you couldn't hear me." She caught her breath in a sob.

Wally held her closely.

"Don't worry, dear, it's all right now," he said.

"Oh, everything seemed right, once I saw you," she said. "But I feel as if I could never make up to you for the night you must have spent."

"You don't have to try," Wally replied. He laughed, for the first time. "My old Nor! And what about your patient now?"

"He's asleep, or was when I came out to find you. He was awake most of the night, and we talked—there's a queer story for you to hear. At first he was very restless, and then I held his hand, and it seemed to soothe him; I think he just needed to know that he'd found a friend. Towards morning he went to sleep, and didn't waken until a little while ago; and then I got him some water and made him as comfortable as I could, and came for you. If you knew what it was to find you so quickly!"

"I guess I know what it was to find you," he said between his teeth. "Well, shall we go to see if he's awake? He ought to have some brandy, I suppose."

The cave was not more than fifty yards away: a shallow cave, with a wide opening. The man who lay there was still asleep, his face peaceful; but Wally, who had seen Death so often in France, knew as he looked at him that he was dying. A little, old Chinese; not ill-featured, and with a kind of gentle dignity,

even in sleep. As they watched him, he stirred and woke.

Wally unscrewed his flask and gave it to Norah. He knelt down by the sick man, raising his head gently, and held him while he drank. They tried to make him eat, but after a few mouthfuls he shook his head, murmuring, "No can do."

"This is my husband, Li Ning," Norah said. "We will help you in any way we can."

The flicker of a smile crossed the old man's face.

"Already lady help me much," he said. "Honourable lady greatly kind, sir. I vely aflaid she tired."

The voice was little more than a whisper, but the eyes that eagerly searched Wally's face were keen. Apparently they were satisfied with what they saw, for they grew restful.

"She would be glad to do anything she could for you," Wally said. "And I too. We must get you out of this place, to a doctor."

Li Ning made a little movement of dissent.

"No good," he said. "I die, vely quick. But help wanting, one-time. Help greatly wanting for my l'il boy." Again the eyes roved over Wally's face—in them the dumb agony of the man who must trust to utter strangers. "You honest—you blave," he faltered. "You treat l'il boy fairly?"

Wally's reply was quick.

"You can trust us, Li Ning. We'll help, if you tell us what we can do. But I'd like to get a doctor for you first."

"No!" The voice was a wail. "I die while doctor coming—he no good for me now. Let me tell."

Norah put a gentle hand on the gnarled one that was opening and shutting convulsively.

"We will hear everything—don't worry. But I think you had better let me tell my husband all you told me in the night. Then you will not tire yourself so much. You must listen, in case I make any mistakes."

"Vely good plan." He smiled at her. "You tell—I see if you forget."

Norah spoke slowly.

"Li Ning and his grandson, Li Chang, have been hiding on the plateau for some time, Wally. They came from the other side, not the way we came. They have been hiding because three men were very anxious to find them—men who knew Li Ning had some valuable property—diamonds and black opals. Li Ning does not want to tell us how he got these, except that the diamonds came with him from South Africa."

"Too long tell," said the feeble voice. "But all honestly got. All mine, for l'il Li Chang. I swear it by my father's grave."

"Then it's not our business how you got them," said Wally. "Go on, Norah."

"These three men were on Li Ning's track, first in Melbourne and then in Sydney. One is a man he knew in South Africa, a tall dark man with a scar near his left eye, running up above the temple. His name is Davison, but Li Ning says he may use any other name. He is the leader; the others are working under him, and Li Ning does not know their names. Li Ning has been trying to get away to China, but he has been afraid to go, for he says these men would travel on the ship and they would be sure to get hold of the diamonds. So he thought he would throw them off the trail. He used to know this country: years ago he was prospecting for gold all over the plateau. He came up here and hid the diamonds in a safe place he knew, and he and Li Chang camped some distance off and pretended to be prospecting. But he got anxious lest an accident should happen to him, and once he went back to the nearest township and posted a plan of the place where he had hidden the things to a friend in Melbourne—a man he can trust."

She paused and looked at the old man.

"All c'lect—all li'," he said eagerly. "Gentleman give me more blandy, please?"

They gave him brandy, and Norah went on with her story.

"A few days ago these men suddenly appeared at their camp. They pretended to be friendly, to be looking for gold like themselves; but Li Ning didn't trust them, and in the night he and Li Chang ran away. He gave Li Chang money and directed him to go to Melbourne, to his friend there, if they should be separated. They got to within three miles of the township when the men came after them. It was nearly dark, and he made Li Chang run for the township—he knows the way—while he himself led the men off his track. He thinks Li Chang got away safely: he is twelve years old, and a sharp boy. Li Ning dodged his pursuers all that night and during the next day—but in the evening two of them, the tall man and a short one, almost caught him. He ran away, and in the dusk missed his footing and fell over a kind of precipice. He thinks they fancy he was killed; at any rate, they could not find him in the dark. Before morning he managed to crawl, a long way, until he found this cave. That was three days ago."

Wally whistled low.

"Poor old chap!" he said. "And the boy?"

"He will have gone to Chen Lun, the friend in Melbourne. And Chen Lun has the plan of where the jewels are hidden. He is quite honest and he will help Li Chang, but Li Ning says he is old, and could never come up here. And he wants us to go to him and get the plan, and then come back and find the jewels for the boy. Then Chen Lun will help us to send him back to China."

She stopped, looking at Wally with shining eyes.

"It doesn't sound hard," Wally said. "I suppose we could understand the

plan, Li Ning?"

"Plan vely clear," the Chinese said. "Never find without it—except Li Chang. He knows, but a l'il boy forgets. You not hully: give men time look, not find, then go away. But hide Li Chang from them. Plomise you hide him—not let them find him."

"I'll do my best," Wally promised. "Will he be safe with Chen Lun?"

"No—they know Chen Lun."

"Well, we'll stow him away somewhere. We could plant him quite successfully at Billabong, couldn't we, Nor?"

"That is my father's house, far away from Melbourne," Norah answered the questioning eyes. "He would be safe there. And there is one of your people there; a good man who has been with my father twenty years—Lee Wing."

The sudden relief that flashed into Li Ning's face fairly startled them.

"Where a Chinese man stays for twenty years, there are indeed good people," he said. "Vely lucky me and Li Chang that you find me. Now I make letter to my fliend Chen Lun."

At his bidding Wally felt in his pocket, producing a notebook and a stump of pencil; and very slowly and painfully, Wally propping him up while Norah steadied the book, he wrote his letter, in Chinese characters. Once he collapsed, and they thought the end had come; but he rallied, and after another dose of brandy he struggled on again. It was a desperate business: they looked at each other over his head, wondering were they doing wrong in letting him exhaust the remnant of his failing strength. It was done at last. They laid him back on his rough pillow thankfully, and Norah brought more water and bathed his face and hands.

For a time he lay, with closed eyes. They opened again, and he smiled at Norah.

"Feel in inside pocket," he whispered.

Wally obeyed. There was a tiny package wrapped in cotton-wool. The old hands took it and fumbled until a splendid black opal appeared. He held it towards Norah.

"For honourable lady," he murmured.

"I don't want it, Li Ning," she said, in distress. "But I will keep it for Li Chang."

"No—Li Chang will have enough, when you find the others. For you, to bring you good luck—to lember Li Ning, whose going on high you made so easy. Li Ning thanks you—thanks you both. He is your servant—Li Chang is your servant too. Chinese mans never forget."

He put the opal in her hand; a great jewel full of red and black and emerald fire, that blazed and sparkled in the dim cave. Then, smiling faintly at her stammered embarrassed thanks, he closed his eyes for the last time. They

watched for an hour, ready in case he spoke again. But he did not stir; and when Death stole into the cave it was so gently that they scarcely knew when the last breath came.

Wally straightened the tired old limbs. On the still face was a look of dignified peace and contentment.

"I wonder who he was," the boy said as they came out into the street of stone. "There was plenty of breeding in that old chap."

"You would have said so if you had been with me in the night," Norah said. "He was so full of concern for me, and so grateful: it made it very easy to look after him. He worried about you, too; you see, I had to explain to him just who we were, because at first he thought I might be with the men who were looking for him. He told me ever so much more than I repeated just now—I felt I had to cut it as short as possible, because of his weakness, but there is a good deal of detail that I missed out."

"Did he give you any idea of where his cache is?"

"Somewhere north-east from here, and about three miles away, so far as he could calculate. He told me roughly what the place looked like, but he said the plan was quite necessary."

"Then I hope to goodness Mr. Chen Lun has it safely, and will hand it over to us. It's a queer business."

They had reached the spring, where they washed their hands and faces. Norah was white and heavy-eyed. Wally made her sit down near the trickling water.

"It smashes up all our plans, of course," he said.

"Yes—I could see that," Norah answered. "But there's no help for it."

"No. We'll have to get down to the Jerrolds' as quickly as we can; the death must be notified, and there will be an inquest, and, I'm afraid, all sorts of bother and formalities."

"Shall we have to tell everything at the inquest?"

"Not that I can see. It isn't as if the men had injured him; he died from exposure, following his fall, and no one is legally responsible. We need only tell how we found him. If we said anything about hidden jewels we should have half the riff-raff of Melbourne and Sydney scouring the plateau within a week. The old chap trusted us, and we've got to keep our mouths shut. We'll have to go to Melbourne as soon as we are free and see Chen Lun. But there's one person who has to be told, Nor."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"And that's old Jim," he said. "I'm not coming up on this plateau again with you unless Jimmy comes too. Indeed, I'm not sure that I ought to bring you in any case."

"You're not going to leave me behind, Wally," she said, in swift alarm.



"I knew you'd say so. Well, Jim and I ought to be able to look after you anywhere. And I expect that by the time we come poor old Li Ning's three friends will have given it up as a bad job and gone elsewhere, and then all that we'll have to do will be to find the cache and help Chen Lun to ship the boy back to China."

"It will be rather lovely to see Jim again," Norah said.

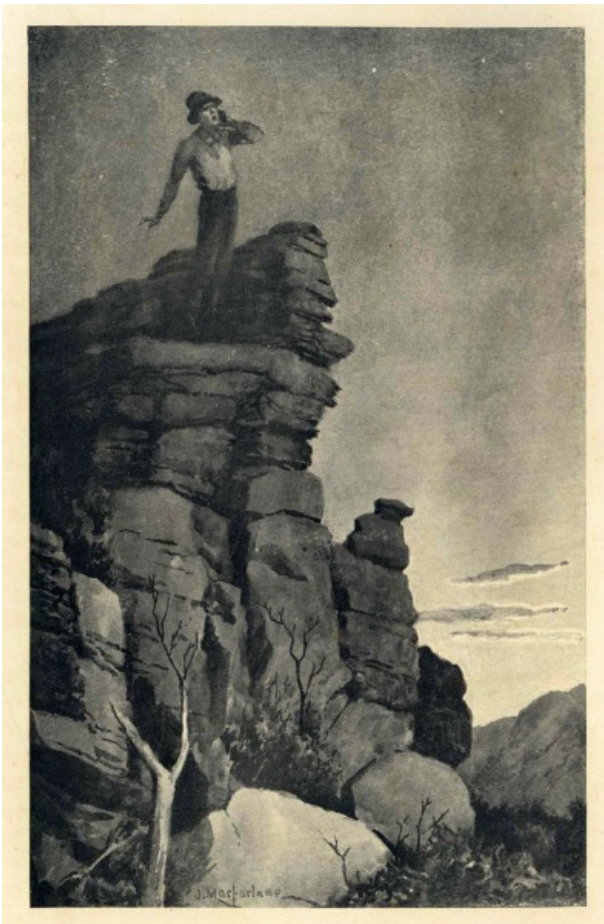
"That's the best part of it," Wally observed, laughing. "We were saying the other day that it was about time we saw him. And now we have to organize a hidden-treasure hunt to get hold of him!"

He rose and helped her up.

"You're to come back to camp, have some hot food, and then lie down for a couple of hours," he ordered. "We must get down to Jerrolds' to-night—but I'm hanged if I go a yard before you have a sleep."

They went slowly down the street of stone, and across the plateau. Far above them, on a great wall of rock—the very rock from which old Li Ning had fallen to his death—a man lay, following their movements through a pair of field-glasses. A tall man, dark and cruel of face, with a long scar above his left temple.

"A nice young pair," he muttered. "Wonder how much they know? Well, I guess I'll make it my business to find out." Wally and Norah passed out of sight, and he rose and began to climb cautiously down the steep rock-wall.



“He . . . climbed the Split Rock again and shouted until his throat was dry.”

Billabong Adventurers]

[[Chapter X](#)

## CHAPTER XI

### CHEN LUN OF LITTLE BOURKE STREET

“IT’s a rum business,” said Jim Linton. “But it ought to be quite interesting as a trip, and there may be a shade of excitement in it, if the three gentlemen who were after Li Ning have not yet given up the hunt for the cache.”

“That’s the only thing on my mind,” Wally said. “Do you think we ought to take Norah?”

Jim laughed.

“Possibly not. But you won’t get her to stay behind.”

“She yelled at the bare idea,” admitted Wally. “And, considering the whole thing was her find, it really would be rather hard.”

“But I don’t see that there can be any particular danger,” Jim said. “Even if those three worthy gentlemen are there, they can’t be armed, or they would have shot at old Li Ning, instead of merely chasing him. And there will be four of us: Norah and the Chinese youngster can keep watch while you and I do the work. Besides, her knowledge of the general run of the hiding-place, from Li Ning’s description, may save us a lot of hunting.”

“I suppose it will be all right,” Wally said slowly. “But I’m glad I wrote to you to bring our little old automatics.”

“By which you puzzled me exceedingly,” said Jim, laughing.

They were in a sitting-room in a Melbourne hotel. The roar of the traffic, the ceaseless clanging of electric tram-bells, came through the open window; it was yet strange to Norah and Wally after the utter stillness of the lonely country in which they had been. Jim, who had arrived from Billabong the night before, lounged in a long armchair. Norah was out shopping, and Jim, having heard the whole story of the plateau before he slept, was now acquiring minor details.

“Then the plan of action is this,” he observed. “We see Chen Lun this afternoon, get hold of the plan and the boy, and start back for the Jerrols’ tomorrow. Work up from there to your old camp, and then make a dash for the cache. You’re sure that’s easier than approaching it from the other side—Li Ning’s way?”

“Well, we know this route, and we don’t know anything about the other. And if the three earnest seekers are still in the district, they are much more likely to be watching Li Ning’s old tracks: they can’t keep a watch over the whole plateau. That’s how Norah and I look at it.” Wally’s smile lit his face suddenly. “Also, we’d rather like to show you our old camps. We had no end

of a happy hunting-ground up there.”

“Rather!” Jim said heartily. “Well, that’s all settled. Got grub?”

“All arranged for; also another light tent in case of bad weather. Jerrold has promised to find you a horse; my feet were precious near the ground when I rode one of his ponies, and yours would simply be trailing,” said Wally, looking at Jim’s huge length. “The Jerrolds were jolly good to us; they took tremendous care of Norah while I was mixed up in all the wretched business of the inquest. It was really rather luck that she was so knocked-out by it all, because it saved her the necessity of appearing at the inquest herself: they were quite satisfied to take a written and sworn statement from her. But nobody was inclined to make any special fuss over the death of an old Chinese prospector; I rather gathered from the local police that they would have been extremely pleased if I’d buried him quietly and said nothing at all about him!”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” Jim said, with a chuckle. “It must have been quite a troublesome business for the police. Good thing the papers didn’t seem to find it of any particular interest. They didn’t give you much space.”

“Nobody worried about us at all,” said Wally, cheerfully. “I told Jerrold a little about it before I brought Norah away: his place is a sort of outpost of civilization, and if those three men are hanging about, they might cross the plateau and make their way down the valley. He’s promised to keep a look-out for them. It would have been rather difficult to tell him nothing; for one thing, though he might have thought it quite ordinary for us to return with you, it might have seemed to him distinctly queer that we should bring a Chinese boy, on top of the death of another Chinese. So I told him the old chap had left some property hidden on the plateau, and we’d promised to see that the youngster got it. Jerrold’s a quiet chap; he won’t say anything, but he’ll help if he can.”

“No bad thing to feel he’s backing you, even if he can’t do anything to help,” Jim observed. “And with Norah and the small boy with us, we can’t be too careful. Here she is——” and Norah came in, with several parcels and a beaming face.

“I got my frock, and it’s a dream!” she said.

“Got it in there?” asked Jim, pointing to a small parcel.

“No, idiot, that’s Wally’s new tie. You didn’t know you have a new tie, Wally, but so it is—a very refined one.”

“Thanks,” said Wally. “Do I wear it up on the plateau?”

“Not if you don’t wish to alarm me. You didn’t take up even a collar-stud last time. This is a highly superior article of gent’s neck-wear: the tailor-man told me so. Oh, Melbourne is so warm and noisy and crowded, and I want a lemon-squash. Do ring, Jimmy.”

“Three lemon-squashes,” said Jim, when the buttoned page appeared. They

sipped them slowly.

"I met Jean Yorke," Norah said. "She was horrified at my depth of sunburn, and also at the hat I was buying: said no self-respecting person wore any brim worth speaking of, nowadays. I said the sunburn would be worse if I didn't, and she was horrified all over again because we were going back to the wilds. So I soothed her by promising to arrange a theatre-party when we pass through Melbourne again. That's why I had to go and buy the frock, and she found that soothing, too. Then she went off to a morning-tea at 'The Wattle,' and I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen you two since breakfast, so I hurried home!"

She smiled at them both. It was very comforting to see Jim and Wally together again: to know their deep contentment in being together. And there were so many questions to be asked about Billabong; so many still to be answered about the months since she and Wally had gone away on their wanderings. The time flew by while they talked. It seemed that they had only touched the fringe of their talk when it was time for lunch, and they went down to the sparkle and clatter of the great dining-room, where many heads turned to look at the three, so tall, so good to look upon, and so obviously happy in each other.

Li Ning had given them Chen Lun's address in Little Bourke Street. It was a somewhat dubious locality, into which, under ordinary circumstances, the boys would have hesitated to take Norah. Slant-eyed Chinese looked at them curiously as they walked up the narrow street, past little shops with dingy windows half concealing jars of ginger, bowls of lichee nuts, strings of dusty Chinese shoes and little chests of tea. Now and then, in a by-lane, they could see women in gay embroidered coats and wide silk trousers, and little children in almost the same dress—bright spots of colour in the grimy alleys. But there was no sign of life about the house near the top of the street, where they stopped presently. It looked gloomy and desolate.

For a few moments no answer came to Jim's knock. Then the door opened a few inches and a Chinese appeared; a man in thin blue clothes and heel-less slippers, with a pigtail.

"We want to see Chen Lun," Wally said.

"Wha' for?"

"We have business with him. Is he at home?"

"No can tell. Him muchee business topside hab got."

"Well, you find him, my friend, and tell him we want him," said Wally.

"Him say 'What name belong?' and 'What business?' You tellee me."

This being precisely what Wally had no intention of doing, he grew impatient.

"Look here," he said, "we want Chen Lun and nobody else. We will tell

him our names and our business when we see him. Just you hop off and fetch him. We can't wait here all day."

The man hesitated, and began to jabber a mixture of pidgin-English and Chinese that was completely unintelligible to his hearers. He was at the height of this outbreak of eloquence when a hand suddenly fell on his shoulder—a well-kept, yellow hand, with long nails.

"Stand aside, Yet On," said a quiet voice. "Who are these visitors whom you keep waiting on my doorstep?"

They saw a very old Chinese, clean-shaven save for a thin moustache with long drooping ends. He wore European clothes and Chinese slippers, and his pigtail was coiled under a blue skull-cap. Very thin and gaunt, he bore something of the quiet dignity that had stamped Li Ning, even in rags and dirt. His slanting brown eyes looked at them keenly.

"Come in," he said. "I regret the rudeness of my servant to honourable strangers."

Yet On, abashed, had melted away. Chen Lun led them through a bare, narrow hall, that smelt, to Norah's nose, of a thousand stale odours, into a small, plainly furnished room. He shut the door and faced them again.

"I think my honourable visitors are Mr. and Mrs. Walter Meadows," he said. "This gentleman,"—indicating Jim with a little courteous gesture—"I cannot guess at. I am Chen Lun."

"Our name is Meadows," Wally said. "And this is my wife's brother, Mr. Linton."

"And you come to me——?"

"With a message from Li Ning, who is dead."

"That I knew," Chen Lun replied. "The papers told me so much: and that you were with him before he died. I think—you were kind to him?" This time he looked to Norah for his answer.

Norah flushed.

"We did all we could—it wasn't much," she said.

"My wife was with him alone all one night," Wally said. "She took care of him and brought him water. He—the poor old chap liked to hold her hand."

At that Chen Lun suddenly smiled.

"I will ask you honourably to come into a more fitting room," he said.

He opened a door, drawing aside a heavy curtain to let them enter, and bowing as they passed him. It was a room that made them gasp with astonishment. Thick silken rugs lay on a floor of polished wood. The windows were of delicately tinted glass, through which the light filtered softly; the walls were hung with alternate panels of carved wood and dull blue silk. Chairs of teak, inlaid with ivory, bore cushions of rich brocade, while more cushions heaped a wide divan in a corner. An ebony screen, seven feet high, was a

marvel of ivory birds and flowers, carved in relief. There were few ornaments: a bowl of red lacquer, some fine bronze figures, a tiny dwarf tree growing in a beautiful porcelain pot. The whole room was a feast of colour and beauty, and over it hung the faintest scent that might have been incense—a strange Eastern fragrance.

Chen Lun motioned to them to sit down. He sat on a lacquered stool, facing them.

“Li Ning was my friend from boyhood,” he said. “We left China together, and though he wandered into other countries, sooner or later he always came back to see me. It was because he feared danger for me lately that he went away, and the Spirits told me I should not see him again. My heart has been heavy for him, for I knew he went to a friendless country. Yet it seems that in the last he found friends. Will it please you to tell me about him? Do not forget even the little things—they are not little things to me. And will the lady tell first?”

So Norah went through the story of the long night in the cave on the plateau: striving to remember every detail, while the old man listened with an impassive face and eyes that never left hers. When she came to the point where Wally had found her, she paused.

“You tell the rest, Wally.”

Chen Lun said nothing, but his eyes went to Wally’s, and did not move during the rest of the story. When it was ended, Wally drew out Li Ning’s battered notebook, and gave it to his friend.

“I think that is all,” he said.

The old man read the scrawled characters, using a reading-glass with a jade handle. Then he rose, and bowed ceremoniously.

“My house is yours,” he said quietly. “The Gods were indeed gracious to Li Ning at his end, to send him such friends.”

“It was nothing,” Wally said, wriggling in his extreme dislike of being thanked—and thanked in Oriental fashion. “Any decent person would have done what we did; we were only sorry not to be able to do more. But I am sure no doctor could have saved him when we found him.”

“Of that I am sure. But you gave him ease of mind.”

“Well, that wasn’t much for us to do. But we gave him our word to see the thing through, and that is why we are here,” Wally said. “I suppose the letter we brought tells you his wishes. We want to take the plan back to the plateau with little Li Chang—his grandfather told us he would be very useful in finding the place. It seemed to us that the job was rather too big without more help, however, and so we got my brother-in-law to meet us here. He and I went through the Great War together, and we rather like tackling a job with each other’s help. You can trust us, Chen Lun.”

"Of that I have no doubt at all," said the old Chinese. "I am glad to take your help, for here I have no men on whom I could depend for such a task."

"Then, if you'll let us have Li Chang and the plan, we'll start back for the plateau to-morrow."

"The task is greater than you think, Mr. Meadows," Chen Lun answered. "The plan is safe, and you shall take it. But the boy I cannot send with you, for he has never arrived."

"Not come!—oh, the poor little chap!" Norah uttered.

"I always thought Li Ning made a bit too sure," Jim said, speaking for the first time. "Apparently he had three pretty clever scoundrels after him: when they separated there was a strong chance of the boy being caught. Do you think, supposing he had got away, that there would be any doubt of his coming to you, Chen Lun?"

"I think, none whatever, Mr. Linton. He is an intelligent boy, and, like all Chinese boys, he would give his grandfather full obedience. I have wondered much about him. The newspaper account of the death of my friend said nothing of Li Chang, and I could only hope I should get news of him through Mr. Meadows. That Li Ning would send me a message I was certain."

"Then what is to be done?" Norah asked.

"Find the poor little kid," Jim said decisively. "We'll comb that old plateau for him—the jewels can wait."

"By Jove, yes," Wally exclaimed. "If those fellows have got him we'll get him back, or know the reason why. The mischief of it is, he knows where the cache is, and they will have had time to get it out of him by now."

"I think they will not get it from Li Chang," Chen Lun said quietly. "But he will need all your help." His keen old eyes dwelt on the two tall, powerful Australians.

"And he is fortunate in having such help. You can go soon?"

"To-morrow."

"But you will not take the lady?"

"The lady won't stay behind, Chen Lun," Norah said, smiling. "We go hunting together."

The old Chinese looked troubled.

"It may be risky."

"I think we can look after her, sir," Wally said. "They can't be armed, or they would have fired at Li Ning. We shall be armed, and we'll keep together. I think Jim and I can deal with three low-down city crooks."

"Do you know anything about the three men?" Jim asked.

"Davison, their leader, is clever and strong. The others I know nothing of, but they must be useful tools. Davison knew of this parcel of diamonds in South Africa, and he has trailed Li Ning ever since. Twice he has almost



succeeded in getting them, and my friend could never shake him off his track.”

“But why didn’t Li Ning sell the jewels?” asked Norah.

Chen Lun’s face was like a mask.

“That is a story I cannot tell you, Mrs. Meadows. But it is necessary that the jewels should go to China, to Li Ning’s son, the father of Li Chang. I will undertake to get them there, if you can find them, and, I hope, the boy also.”

“Oh, well, that does not concern us,” Wally said. “All we care for is to find the youngster, and after him, Li Ning’s cache. And we mean to do that, with any luck.”

“Is there anything I can do to help you?” Chen Lun asked. “If money is needed, you have only to tell me. I am not a poor man.”

“We don’t need any, thanks,” Wally answered. “But I’d rather like to feel that if we did need help from the police we could rely on you to get it. The nearest local policeman is many miles away and singularly unintelligent: he’d be no more good than a bilious headache—I mean——” He broke off, slightly confused, but grinning.

“That is an idiom I comprehend,” said Chen Lun, with a gentle smile. “You would wish me to——?”

“To get us the right stamp of men sent up from Melbourne. I expect you have your ways of pulling strings—if we wired to you——”

“That could be arranged. But I hope it will not be necessary. There is nothing wrong in all this secrecy, Mr. Meadows, but the matter is a private one. Else would Li Ning have sought aid from the police long ago. But if there is danger to any of you, or to Li Chang, the question is a different one. Telegraph to me if you need help.”

“And there is something I would like to leave in your care, Chen Lun,” said Norah.

She unwrapped the great black opal that Li Ning had given her, and put it in his hand.

“Li Ning wanted me to have it. But I don’t want it: I would rather it was kept safely for little Li Chang. Then he will be sure of some of his inheritance.”

Chen Lun’s eyes held a faint sparkle as he looked at the beautiful stone.

“I should like my friend’s wishes carried out,” he said. “But we can talk of that later: at present I am very glad to take care of it for you, Mrs. Meadows. And now, if you will honour my poor house by taking tea with me——”

He gave an order through a telephone that stood near him on a carved table, speaking in Chinese; and while they waited he showed them a wonderful collection of tiny objects of carved ivory and jade, which filled the shelves of a lacquer cabinet, handling each piece with the loving touch of the connoisseur. Presently a door opened noiselessly, and two blue-clad servants brought in tea;

queer cakes and candied fruit, with pale China tea served in handle-less cups exquisitely hand-painted with butterflies. Norah exclaimed at the beauty of the china, to the old man's evident pleasure.

"Our homes in Australia have no outside loveliness, such as I could show you in my own country," he said. "If ever you go there you must tell me, and I will arrange that you see a China of which the tourist never dreams. But here we can at least have things of beauty in our homes: things that refresh the soul." He smiled his faint, half-contemptuous smile. "And the soul needs refreshment—after Little Bourke Street." Which, as Wally said afterwards, was so painfully true that nobody had any comment to make.

Chen Lun brought out a long envelope when they were ready to go.

"That is Li Ning's plan. To me it means nothing. But it may be clear to you."

Wally and Norah bent over it eagerly.

"It's clear enough as to the general direction," Wally said, when they had studied it. "As to the actual cache, one can't say much without being on the ground and making sure of certain rocks that are marked here. However, with what my wife knows already, we should not have much difficulty."

"And there will be Li Chang to help," Norah said.

"Will there, I wonder?" Chen Lun said sadly. "Ah, I hope so." A thought seemed to strike him, and he turned to a table where there were writing materials. With a courteous word of apology he swiftly covered a sheet of paper with Chinese characters.

"Li Chang is little, but he is staunch," he said. "He will need to be convinced that you are friends—if you find him. I have taken the liberty of telling him how he may regard you: that he is your servant in all things, even as I am myself." He gave the paper to Norah. "Will you keep this for him, Mrs. Meadows? For he is only a young boy, and when he learns that his grandfather has gone on high he will need a woman's kindness."

Norah promised, a lump in her throat. Chen Lun bade them a ceremonious good-bye, taking them to the outer door himself, and presently they were walking down Little Bourke Street, with a bewildered feeling that the beautiful room so near the squalor and smells of that unbeautiful thoroughfare had been all a dream.

They took the nearest lane that gave them a short cut to the wider space and fresher air of Bourke Street, brushing, as they suddenly turned its corner, against a tall man who hurried past them, his eyes on the ground. His hat was pulled low on his forehead—perhaps to hide a long scar that ran upwards from his left temple. None of the three noticed him, and in a moment the crowd had swallowed him, and he was gone.

## CHAPTER XII

### OF PLOTS AND A PLAN

IN the train next day they had the compartment to themselves, and they studied Li Ning's plan in detail. Originally, being intended for Chen Lun only, any writing had been in Chinese; but some one, presumably Chen Lun himself, had added English translations in very fine printing, so that the directions were clear. It was little more than a tortuous pathway, marked among the rocks, winding here and there. Some of the boulders were roughly drawn: others had names—Camel Rock; Lion Rock; Serpent Rock; Temple; Ship; the track was marked with arrowheads, and they followed it up until it ended in a rock marked as a square, and called Small Rock of the God.

"Well, it looks simple enough on paper," Jim remarked at last.

"On paper—yes. But when you get out in that queer rock-field it may not look half so clear," Wally said. "There will be so many boulders to mask all that track which seems as easy as pie when it's on a plan."

"Still, with the plan to help us we should get on to the right trail fairly soon. Once we find the Temple and the Camel and the Lion and all the others, we can't go wrong."

"But it all depends on how you look at the blessed things," Wally objected. "A rock that is like a temple on one side may be like a lion on the other; and there may be half a dozen lions, and twenty temples, and then if you look at them from another angle the lot may look more like a flock of geese than anything else. Oh, I tell you, Nature played some jolly queer tricks with the rock-formations up on that old plateau. I think the whole place is one huge practical joke."

He folded the plan into its long envelope and slipped it into the pocket of his kit-bag, which he locked carefully.

"Well, that can wait a while now," he said. "The main thing is to get hold of little Li Chang."

"Where do you think we should look for him?" Norah asked.

"It seems to me that the best thing would be to go straight for the country near the cache. Not to try for the cache itself; the jewels are far better hidden than carried about with us, so long as we must look for the boy. But if they have succeeded in getting anything out of Li Chang, the men may be near there. Of course, there is always the possibility that they have found the plant already: in which case we shall find the cupboard bare, and they will almost certainly have let Li Chang go."

"You don't think they would keep him a prisoner?"

"Well, they might. It's very hard to forecast what they will do—we're working in the dark. But I don't see why they would want to be hampered with a small boy, if they get their hands on the jewels."

"That may or may not be good reasoning," Jim said. "It's possible that to hold him for a while would be the safer thing for them. If they let him go he will make his way to Chen Lun, and then that astute old gentleman will take a hand in the game. But so long as he is in ignorance of what has happened to either the boy or the jewels, his hands are tied. At present, we are very useful agents for Chen Lun."

"I wonder, supposing your idea to be correct, would they keep Li Chang on the plateau?" Norah pondered.

"They might: it's a good hiding-place. On the other hand, they may fear that Chen Lun will send people up there. Then, of course, there is always the difficulty of getting food—rabbits seem mighty scarce on the plateau, from what you say. I think it is more probable that they would hide him somewhere else—perhaps until they have got rid of the jewels."

"Bother the old jewels!" Wally said angrily. "I don't care if we never find them—but I do want very badly to get hold of that small boy. It's not a pleasant thought, a twelve-year-old kid in the hands of three unscrupulous brutes like that."

"We're like kids ourselves, groping in the dark," said Jim, with a short laugh. "We don't know whether the Three ever got the boy: he may have dodged them, and perhaps by now he has got to Chen Lun."

"Or he may have fallen over a precipice, like old Li Ning," said Norah, her face full of trouble. "I keep thinking of him lying hurt somewhere, with no one to help him. He's such a small boy!"

"It's quite possible, of course," said Wally. "But there's nothing to be gained by worrying ourselves with that thought yet. If it were true, he's beyond help now, poor kid."

"Then, for all we know, the Three may have given the whole matter up as a bad job," Jim said. "Even if they found old Li Ning's body after you left him, they would have gained nothing: they would think it probable that he had the jewels on him, and that whoever had looked after him would have taken them to safety. And, working without a plan, they have had plenty of time to look since—and to have grown discouraged with looking, and gone away. We may find the whole plateau clear before us."

"But that won't help us to find Li Chang," Wally observed.

"No, it won't," Norah agreed. "And Li Chang is what matters most."

"Oh, well, we might swap theories all day, and be no nearer the mark," Jim said, laughing. "I think we had better try to forget all about it until we get up to

the plateau—quite time enough then to begin worrying. One thing I should like to know is, am I likely to get a chance at those trout you’ve been writing home about, in that pet river of yours? They seem to be something quite out of the common.”

“They are,” agreed Wally. “They’re more fun to go after than jewels, any day. Oh, it will be dreadfully hard luck if we don’t manage some fun out of this big-game hunting we’re on now.”

“I see myself carrying a mixed cargo of jewels and young Chinese down to Melbourne,” said Jim, gloomily; “leaving you to carry on your interrupted honeymoon, and casting a melancholy look at the river as I go.”

“Then I would cultivate another vision, if I were you,” Norah told him, with decision. “We’ll all hang together until we have collected the mixed cargo and handed it over; and then we’ll still hang together, and you’ll come back with us to camp in Horseshoe Valley. I seem to think we shall have had enough of the plateau by the time our job there is finished, don’t you, Wally?”

“I agree honourably with all that the gracious lady has said,” remarked Wally, respectfully. “The plateau lost every bit of attraction for me from the night I spent hunting for you: I never want to see the beastly place again after this campaign. But Horseshoe Valley or the Base Camp—well, that’s quite another affair. Let’s plan another honeymoon all over again, Nor, with Jimmy in it this time.” And Norah smiled contentedly at them both.

The cry of “Twenty minutes here for refreshments!” sent them hurtling into a big station in search of lunch; and then they chatted and planned and occasionally dozed through the hot afternoon hours until at last their destination was reached, so far as the railway was concerned. Here the Singer awaited them, in the little garage of a country hotel. Jim and Wally made a hasty inspection to satisfy themselves that she was in good running order, and they set out on the long cross-country drive, to the Jerrolds’ farm.

“It’s only a few weeks since we first came this way,” Wally said, stopping the car on the hill-top where they had paused to look down the valley that was to hold so many experiences for them. “But doesn’t it seem a long while, Nor?”

“It does,” she agreed.

“Sounds as though you had both been rather bored,” remarked Jim, sympathetically.

“We were not. But we’ve packed a good deal into those weeks. Look, Jim, that’s the Jerrolds’ place, ever so far down: you can see its white roof gleaming. And beyond that the valley goes winding up to the Horseshoe; and those cliffs are the edge of the plateau. And now I’m feeling that the adventure is just beginning! It has all seemed rather dream-like so far: but just think, by this time to-morrow we may have found little Li Chang!”

"Don't make too sure of that, Nor," Wally said. "There's a deal of that plateau to go over."

"Yes, but we know the way. And think what an advantage we have, boys: the Three, even supposing they are up there, would certainly have suspected any Chinese whom Chen Lun might have managed to send—but they'll never suspect *us*. We're just campers who have been camping there before, and we can look as innocent as lambs, even if we should happen to meet them. It's quite a pull, too, to have me with you, because they would never imagine you'd take a woman if you were on their trail."

"That's absolutely true," said Jim, laughing at her. "They'd never think we'd be so mad!"

"It's the most sensible thing you've done," said Norah, loftily. "There's no knowing what holes you might get into if I were not there to rescue you."

"Drive on, Wal," said Jim, hastily. "She'll burst with conceit if she contemplates her own virtues much longer!" At which Wally hastily started the car, and they slid down the curves of the long hill.

Darkness had fallen before they reached the Jerrolds', but Benny was at the gate to shout to them, and his father and mother not far behind: Mrs. Jerrold brimming over with excitement and delight at seeing them again.

"And you're looking so well, my dear!" she uttered as she bore Norah to her room. "Quite rested after all that horrible time you had with that old Chinaman. Yes, I know you told me he was a nice old man, but somehow I never could get up any feelings of liking for a Chow. There was a vegetable-John we had in Eaglehawk, once, and talk about cheat! We used to say he charged by weight for the slugs in his cabbages, and goodness knows there were enough. No, there's something un'oly about a Chow!"

"Not this one," said Norah, firmly. "He was a dear old man, Mrs. Jerrold. I'm sure he'd been a gentleman in his own country."

"Well, so you told me. Ah, well, poor man, he's dead, so we'll let him rest, and I'm sure I hope he's the last you'll ever see up this way. And so you've brought your brother all the way from Billabong! Dear me, isn't he a giant! I thought your husband was tall, but Mr. Linton can give him inches. And so nice-looking, and the image of you. It's so exciting to see you back that I'm just letting my tongue run away with me; we've been ever so dull since you left. Three old maiden ladies came to stay, that fussy there was no pleasing them; it hurt them like a pain that there was no electric light. I was real relieved when they went, and I just took and whitewashed the fowl-house next day, I was so light-hearted! There, I'm talking again—and there's plenty of hot water, my dear, but you mustn't have baths to-night until you go to bed, because tea's waiting on you, and I know you all need it."

She paused, reminding Norah irresistibly of an alarum clock that has run

itself down.

"We need it very badly, Mrs. Jerrold," she told the little woman. "And Wally and I know what your teas are; and you know our appetites, but you don't know Jim's. That is going to alarm you, I'm afraid."

Mrs. Jerrold chuckled delightedly.

"Why, wouldn't he have a good appetite, and the size he is! Well, there's plenty to eat, thank goodness: I told Mr. Jerrold he needn't show his face in my kitchen to-night unless he brought me a good dish of trout, knowing how you and Mr. Meadows fancy them. And luckily he got them, all right. And must you go off camping up that old valley at once, or will you stay with us a while?"

"We must go on to-morrow," Norah said. "Jim is very anxious to see the country up the valley. But we mean to stay with you on our way back, if you can have us."

"I'd always manage to put you somewhere, my dear, no matter who I had to turn out," said her hostess, delightedly. "There, now, I hear the gentlemen: hurry them in to tea, Mrs. Meadows, because those trout will be just about right in five minutes' time. And I've made the potato-puffs your husband used to like so much, and I only hope Mr. Linton will like them too."

"Trust him!" said Norah, laughing.

Questioned after tea was over, Jerrold declared that he had seen nothing of any strange men.

"Nobody's come down the valley, I'm pretty certain," he said. "I've kept a fairly close watch, too: been working in the paddock near the road. Stands to reason, if anyone came down from that hungry country they'd look in here for a feed. I took a ride up one day to your camp at the head of the valley, Mr. Meadows; the tent's in good order, and none of the stores touched. No, I don't believe there's any chaps knockin' about. Strangers are that darned rare round here that the word goes round pretty quick if any do turn up."

He lit his pipe and seemed to ponder.

"Thought you were going to bring a Chow kid up with you," he said. "Meant to get hold of some one belonging to that old chap that died on you, up above, didn't you?"

"Couldn't get him," Wally said. "But we're after something old Li Ning had hidden away for him, and we're not keen on anyone knocking about. Li Ning said there were three men on the plateau, but we rather hope they have thought better of it and gone."

"Shouldn't wonder," Jerrold said. "No one 'ud stay up there long who didn't have to. And looking for anything up there 'ud be like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay, unless you had a plan."

Wally nodded.

"We've a plan," he said, "but I don't quite know how much good it will be to us until we get up there. Anyhow, I want to show my brother-in-law the country."

"You won't think much of it, after yours, Mr. Linton," Jerrold grinned. "No fat cattle there like those Billybong ones of yours that we see topping the market so often." He looked at the pair with a twinkle. "Guess that Billybong country raises big men as well as big bullocks," he said.

"I hope it won't put weight on us as it does on the cattle," said Jim, laughing. "I'd never get a horse to carry me over a fence if it did."

"Guess a light-weight hack is not much good to you now—not over fences, anyhow," said Jerrold. "Well, I've got one for you that'll carry you right enough, even if she's not much to look at. What's the plan of action, Mr. Meadows? Want the horses to-morrow?"

"Yes, please, Jerrold. My wife and Mr. Linton can take two each, and I'll drive the car up to our base-camp. We want to make an early start, so as to get on to the plateau to-morrow, if possible."

"That'll be a pretty stiff day. I reckon you'd be best campin' at the head of the valley to-morrow night: but you know your own business best. Don't let Mrs. Meadows knock up, or you'll have my missus on your tracks!" He smiled his slow smile. "My missus thinks the world and all of yours."

"Well, we'd better turn in early to-night," Wally remarked. "I'll go ahead and get some slippers out—I hadn't time before tea, and my feet are sick of boots. Nothing like a couple of days in Melbourne for making a fellow footsore."

He went along the verandah to his room, whistling cheerfully as he lit the candle and fished in his pocket for his keys. His kit-bag was on a chair: he fitted the key and tried to turn it, knitting his brows when the key did not move.

"That's a queer thing," he said, pressing the spring. The bag flew open.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Wally. "I know I locked that in the train." Suddenly a cold wave of apprehension swept over him, and he thrust his hand into the inner pocket. The plan of Li Ning's cache was gone.

Jim and Norah came in to find Wally flinging things hurriedly out of his bag.

"You seem to be unpacking somewhat wildly," Norah said, amused. Then she saw his face. "What is wrong, Wally?"

"The plan has gone," he said between his teeth. "Did you see me lock the bag in the train, when I put it in this morning?"

Jim and Norah answered together.

"Yes."

"Well, I thought so—in fact, I was sure," Wally said. "But I'm glad you



did see me lock it.”

“I remember hearing the click,” Jim said, “and thinking I had never known you lock your bag before. You haven’t been to it since?”

“No. The keys have never been out of my pocket. And I’ve taken everything out and shaken it—twice. Some one has been a bit too clever for us.”

Jim had been thinking.

“You left that bag only once to-day,” he said, “the time when we had dinner in that refreshment station—I forget its name. All the rest of the day it has never been out of reach of your hand.”

“That’s it,” groaned Wally. “By Jove, what a fool I was not to take it with me! It would have been so easy! As it is, it has been very easy for some one who wanted the plan as badly as we did to get it out.”

He sat down and stared dejectedly at the littered floor.

“Well, that’s that,” he said. “No good looking anywhere else: you saw me lock it away, and I’ve no other place to put it; it is too long for one’s pocket.”

“Do you think there’s any chance of its having been touched since we came here?” Jim asked.

“Not the slightest. We know every one on the place. And no stranger can get near without the dogs barking madly. No; it was that quarter of an hour in the train that did it. Lord, what a fool I’ve been!”

“But, Wally, I don’t see,” said Norah, bewildered. “How could anyone in the train have known anything about us or the plan?”

“It’s clear enough, I’m afraid,” Jim said. “You have probably been watched all along, and I suppose the watchers are the Three who finished poor old Li Ning. You saw no signs of anybody near the cave where you found him?”

“Not a sign,” Norah answered. “And we kept a very careful look-out.”

“Yes, but in that country no look-out could be effective. One of the Three may have been perched up behind some rock, stalking you as easily as he’d eat his dinner: if this Davison is the accomplished gentleman he seems to be, it would have been child’s-play to him to trail you ever since. Most likely we were watched when we cheerfully strolled up to Chen Lun’s house yesterday in broad daylight. We’ve been a jolly sight too cocksure, and we’ve taken no precautions.”

“And what precautions can we take now?” asked Wally, despondently.

“The time for them is over,” Jim answered. “It’s all working in the open now, and keeping our eyes skinned. You’ve got a map of the district, haven’t you, Wal?”

He pored over the map that Wally produced.

“There’s the refreshment station, where we believe our friend to have picked the lock of your bag and got away with the plan. And here are we, in

the river-valley. Now, if he left the railway-line as soon as he had the plan, and got a car and went across country, he could get to the plateau from the other side. It would take him a good while, but it's feasible. He certainly didn't come our way: the Singer was the only car on that road yesterday."

"And what can we do?"

"Carry on, of course. The jewels have never been our main objective: what we want is little Li Chang. As a matter of fact, I'm keener now to get the jewels than I was before, just because the impertinent fellow has stolen our nice plan! We'll see if we can't beat the precious Three yet. You know the general direction of the cache, Nor, and we've all three got a certain knowledge of the plan itself. See, we'll have a test-exam."

He dashed to his room, returning with a writing-block and pencils.

"One sheet for each of us. Now, let's each draw the plan from memory. We won't get it right, but what one forgets another may remember."

They laboured over it diligently, with occasional groans for an eraser, which no one possessed. The three drawings that were finally completed were not works of art, but they showed that the study of the plan had not been wasted.

"Not too bad," Jim said, as they compared them. "We've got most of the salient features anyhow, and pretty well all the rocks that Li Ning named. Cheer up, chaps; we may beat the dauntless Three to the Little Rock of the God, after all."

## CHAPTER XIII

LI CHANG, GENTLEMAN

Two men sat in a grassy hollow on the plateau, smoking. Night had fallen, but a half-moon rode high, flooding the land with a soft light, against which the sentinel crags showed misty and ghost-like. A mopoke's plaintive call came on the night-breeze; it was the only sound that broke the stillness.

Behind the men yawned the mouth of a rock-cave, wide and gloomy: so deep that it was impossible to see more than a few feet from the opening. Blankets and fern formed two beds across the mouth; farther in was a third huddled heap of rugs, from which, now and then, came a low moan, such as a tired child makes in its sleep. The men in front smoked in silence, until one stirred at the call of the mopoke.

"Hang that bird!" he said viciously. "It 'ud give you the horrors to hear it yowlin', night after night. Gimme town every time: this is the last country job I'll do, whatever Davison says."

"Whatever Davison says gen'lly goes, I notice," said his companion, with a grin that made his unlovely face less lovely yet.

"He's got the brains, I'll say that for him," said the first. "There's money in most of the things he touches, an' he gets information that lets him take risks. Take this game: he's been on that ol' Chow's track, on an' off, for ages. I dunno how long. An' why? 'Cause he knows it's worth while. There's a big swag in all this. You 'n' me'll get our whack."

"Will we? I wonder?" The speaker spat accurately at a rock. "You trust him more'n I would. There he is, off to get more information from those young fools that found ol' Li Ning. Plan or something—we don't quite know what. An' if he gets it—what's to prevent him lyin' low, an' comin' up here, an' gettin' hold of the swag without sayin' a word to us about it. Quite easy. Then he turns up an' helps us not find it. Quite easy again. Then we're all very sorry, an' we chucks it an' goes home. Nothing ever easier. I tell you, Casey, how are we to know?"

"If I reckoned Davison 'ud do a thing like that I'd settle him somehow," Casey answered, his brow dark. "But he won't: he's always been square."

"So far as you know, that is. Oh, well, you've been workin' with him for years, an' me only for months. But he ain't the sort of cove I'd trust with my own last penny. He's too fond of keepin' us in the dark. It's too much a question of just bein' meek as lambs with blue bows on their necks, an' doin' everything Mr. Davison says. I don't feel extra lamb-like, an' I ain't got much

blue bow out of this yet.”

“Well, what can we do? ’Far as I can see, we’ve got to do as he says over this, or we don’t get nothing. He’s got all the pull,” said Casey, ill-temperedly. “I don’t see what’s the good of startin’ to fuss now. You ain’t been worryin’ up to this, Stock.”

Stock’s rat-like face seemed to grow sharper in the moonlight.

“Because we were all together, an’ we could see what Davison was doing. Now he’s off on his own, an’ we’ve got to wait here day after day; mighty little tucker, an’ poor at that, an’ no certainty as to what’s goin’ to happen next. It’s my belief that nothing may happen, as far as we’re concerned. If that swag’s as valuable as you think it is, an’ if Davison gets a clue that’s goin’ to tell him where it is, do you seriously think he’s goin’ to fetch us to help him pick it up? Not on your life, Casey!”

“Well, what are we goin’ to do about it?” asked Casey, sourly.

Stock smoked for a moment in silence.

“There’s the little Chink,” he said at last.

“Meanin’——?”

“Meanin’ he knows right enough where it is. If we’d worked him properly we’d have got it out of him: we ought to have told him old Gran’pa’s life hung on it, or something like that. But you were fool enough to let on to him that the old chap was dead, and that lost us the chance. He’s as close as wax now. Reckons he’s Gran’pa’s sole legatee, I s’pose: them Chinks has always an eye to the main chance.”

“I expect so,” Casey agreed. “He means to collect that little parcel of jewellery himself, and go home to be a gay dog in China. The Emperor ’ud give him quite a welcome, wouldn’t he?”

“The Emperor ain’t goin’ to do no special welcomin’ of that little Chink,” Stock said malevolently. “I guess you an’ I will have a word to say to that.”

Casey eyed him questioningly.

“Well, I see no sense in makin’ a pet of him,” Stock said, answering the look. “Little boys that have a secret from their kind guardians are bad little boys, an’ their guardians had ought to make them see the error of their ways.”

“You had one try,” Casey said. “His back ain’t healed yet.”

“I didn’t try hard enough, that’s all,” Stock answered viciously. “I won’t make no mistake next time. An’ next time is comin’ mighty quick for Master Li Chang.”

“I won’t be no hand to killin’ the kid,” said Casey, uneasily.

“Killin’—your eye! A dead kid’s no good to us. I’m not a fool. But he’s got to be made talk, Casey, an’ that’s all about it. If he can show us that treasure before Davison gets it, why, we can lift it, an’ then we’ll have the whip-hand, and not Mr. Davison. Indeed, s’posin’ it’s as valuable as we’ve

been led to believe, I vote we don't wait for Mr. Davison. How's he to know we ever got it? We can go an' lose ourselves in Sydney, an' lose the little Chink too, an' Mr. Davison'll be left to promenayde the plateau an' treasure-hunt on his own."

"Don't you make no mistake," Casey said. "You'd never lose yourself from Davison in Sydney—or anywhere else in Australia. He'd find you if you camped on the top of Mount Kosciusko."

"Well, I'm not hankerin' to stay in Australia; I could do with a trip to America. There'd be plenty of money to pay for first-class passages, if half the report of that swag of old Li Ning's is true."

"It's temptin'," said Casey, after prolonged reflection. "Tell you what it is, Stock, I'm sick an' tired of being on the cross. Easy life in some ways, but it's no catch to be afraid all the time. I got married last year, an' I'm gettin' keen on bein' certain of bein' home to tea every night, an' not in a cell. I'd like to be in a country where I could look a policeman in the eye instead of slinkin' round a corner when I seen one coming. If we could get hold of this swag of Li Ning's I'd clear out to America an' never come back. But as long as I'm here Davison has a hold on me, an' I can't get away from him."

"Well, there you are," said Stock, eagerly. "Let's make a shot for it, anyhow. If Davison does head us off after we've got it we may have to split it up—but even at that we'd have a fair division. There'll be mighty little chance of a fair whack if he gets his hands on it first. It'll be Davison first an' the rest can have what he don't want."

"Too right it will," Casey admitted, gloomily. "Well, I'm game to have a try for it if you like, Stock."

"Then how about gettin' Master Li Chang up for a little chat?" asked the other.

Casey hesitated.

"Oh, all right," he said, at length. "But I vote we try an' scare it out of him, Stock, ol' chap. Don't go in for vi'lence unless you have to."

"Never do go in for vi'lence—unless I have to," said Stock, with an evil grin. "You ought to be runnin' an infants' Sunday School, Casey: that's what you're just about fit for. Well, you leave little Li to me; I'll guarantee to deal with him if he tells me any of his little lies." He chuckled at his own wit as he got up and went into the cave.

A candle was stuck by its own grease to a ledge on the wall. Stock lit it, and the wavering rays sent a fitful gleam across the bundle of rugs and showed the sleeping form of a little Chinese boy. He lay on his side, one hand tucked under his cheek: as the man looked at him he moved in his sleep, and gave a little moan. It did not soften Stock's purpose. He stirred the rugs, not gently, with his foot.

The boy woke with a great start, swift fear leaping to his eyes. He looked at the rat-faced little man who stood over him, and his face, softened by sleep, suddenly changed and became like a mask.

"Here, get up, Chink," said Stock, harshly.

"Wha'fo'?"

"'Cause I tell you to. Hurry, now: don't keep me waitin' all night."

The boy rose and stood by his blankets: a thick-set, strongly-built lad, with a broad yellow face and black hair and eyes. There were dark circles of weariness under his eyes, and his breath came and went a little unevenly as he faced his captor. A white boy might have blinked and yawned sleepily at the sudden awakening. But little Li Chang was very wide awake: very much on the alert. He was gathering up all his fighting strength.

"Come over here," Stock said. He led the way towards the mouth of the cave, pausing where the candle would shed its rays on the boy's face; and Li Chang halted, looking small and childlike in his thin shirt and brief knickerbockers. From the opening of the cave Casey watched the scene, without enjoyment.

"Now, see here, Li Chang," Stock said, quietly enough. "Mr. Casey an' I are goin' to get that little parcel of property your gran'father planted up here. We've come a long way for it, an' we don't mean to leave here till we've found it. An' it'll never be safe if we don't get it. There's bad men after that parcel, Li Chang," Stock went on, speaking with perfect truth—with a delicate irony of which he was not aware; "men who'd never let you see a glimpse of it again. But Mr. Casey an' me—we're different. We'll see you get your property. Your gran'father would have reckernized that, if he'd been alive. He'd have liked you to trust us an' put us wise to where it is."

Stock paused, possibly fatigued by the strain on his inventive powers. The boy regarded him with quiet scorn.

"What you say not true," he remarked laconically.

"Little boys had as well not be rude," said Stock. "It ain't safe for them. Now we're tryin' to be kind to you, if you'd only see it. There's very few men as 'ud waste time on you, but we've got little boys of our own, an' we'd hate to see you done out of all your property. The way we look at it is this. If we can find what your gran'father left—soon—we can get ahead of the men who are lookin' for it. There's one very dangerous chap in particular: he's bound to turn up here in a day or so, with all directions for getting to the place. Once he finds it, it's all up with your chances. But you make up your mind to guide us in the morning, an' we'll get the things an' be off this here bit of country before he can put his nose in."

He scanned the boy's face narrowly. Li Chang did not speak, but Stock fancied he saw signs of yielding in his eyes.

"Then we'll get down to Melbourne, or wherever your friends are, and you can just join up with them," he said "Mighty glad they'll be to see you, too, with all your gran'father's property; that is, nearly all: Mr. Casey an' I will have earned a bit of it. Not much, but a bit. You'd be the first to admit that, if we managed it all for you; I've been told no Chinaman ever forgets to pay back a kindness."

"Chinese men never forget," said Li Chang. "Not—anything."

"Well, ain't that what I said? An' you'll have good reason to remember us, all your life."

"That vely tluе." The tone was not enthusiastic.

"Well, there you are," cheerfully said Mr. Stock, whose perceptions were not of the finest. "Now you just promise that as soon as it's light you'll show us the way. If we delay, it's goin' to spoil any chance we got. I guess you're as sick of campin' in a cave as we are, an' we're that painful sick of it you couldn't think. It's only the wantin' to get your property safe for you that's kept us here all this time. You give your word, an' hop back into your blankets, an' you'll be asleep an' happy in two shakes."

"An' that would be behaving like a real sensible kid, Li," remarked Casey, from the doorway, eagerly. "We're your friends, if you'd only see it. The only chance you got in the world is to trust us."

"Well—what do you say, Li?" Stock asked.

There was dead silence for a minute as little Li Chang raised his black eyes to the evil face above him. Whatever fear and dread were in his child's heart, his look showed nothing.

"No can do," he said shortly.

"Aw, yes, you can, Li," wheedled Casey. "Go on: you know just where it is. An' we don't want to hurt you.

"No can do," said Li Ning's grandson. Perhaps, in that moment, he felt that the spirit of the grandfather he loved was near him, strengthening him, for the black eyes suddenly sparkled with scorn.

Stock lost the remnant of the patience that had held him to unaccustomed gentleness so long.

"You'd better jolly quick make up your mind you *can* do, young man," he threatened. "We've done all the arguin' an' soft-soapin' we mean to do with you. Now you take two minutes to think it over and decide not to behave like a lunatic. We're goin' to have that track shown us if we kill you to get it."

Li Chang did not take his two minutes. His answer came sharply and contemptuously, and full of pride.

"You two vely low-caste men. Li Ning not wish ever I tell you his secler. You kill me, all li', one-time, if you like. Much better die than bleak word, for Chinese people."

"I'll learn you to call me low-class!" blazed Stock. He picked up a strap. "You darned cheeky little Chow!"

"Aw, don't hit him—yet," Casey interposed. "Give him a chance. Look here, Li, it's not a bit of good you stickin' out against us. We're goin' to have that secret if we have to cut you up in little bits to get it. You might just as well give in now an' save your skin."

"What's the good of arguin' with the mad-headed little fool?" Stock sneered. "He wants what's comin' to him, an' he's goin' to get it. Now, then, for the last time, young Li—are you going to tell?"

"Not on yo' life," said Li Chang, quietly. He spat deliberately at Mr. Stock.

"You——" said the outraged Mr. Stock, and choked with fury. He took a stride forward, and the strap whistled through the air.

"Oh, crikey, what a little fool!" said Casey, in something like admiration. "Well, you asked for it, Li." Turning, with a shrug, he walked out of the cave, wincing a little at the sound of the whistling strap. Where his pocket was not affected Mr. Casey was a man of tender heart.

Because Li Chang was only a little boy: a little boy, moreover, weakened by hunger and despair, and with a back yet unhealed from his first punishment, it was decreed that his ordeal was not over-long. He stood motionless while the blows rained upon him, falling impartially on his face and body; scorning to raise a hand in self-protection. Stock paused to rest his arm presently.

"Will you tell?" he asked savagely. "For I warn you, it won't be mere thrashin' you'll get to-morrow. There's plenty of things I can do, to which thrashin' is only a circumstance. Tell, you yellow Chow, or I'll——"

"Never I tell—*coolie!*" said Li Chang, contemptuously.

The rain of blows whirled round him savagely. Then, if his heart did not waver, his strength mercifully failed. He collapsed suddenly, falling like a log at his torturer's feet.

"You've killed him, I b'lieve," said Casey, coming in, his face unhappy under its grime. He turned the limp body over.

"Killed your gran'mother!" said Stock, callously. "He's only gone out for a bit. The obstinate young dog! Sling him on his blankets an' let him come to, an' I'll deal with him again."

"Better not to-night," said Casey, uneasily.

"Surest thing you know. He'll speak all the easier when he's weak. These Chows are as tough as a whip; by to-morrow we'd have the job all over again. Not as I mind the job—vulgar little brute, with his dirty abuse!—but we got to think of time. Come on out an' have a pipe—it's hot work usin' that strap. Lor!" said Mr. Stock, in pious tones, "don't them Chows bring up a kid badly!"

They smoked outside for several hours, going into the cave at intervals to



see if consciousness had returned to Li Chang. But the motionless heap still lay where it had been flung on the blankets, limp and senseless; and when Stock lifted the boy's arm it fell back with an inert flop. The man knitted his brows over him at last.

"Wonder if I gave him too much? He looks queer enough, but his heart's beatin' all right. Think he could be shammin', Casey?"

"Not he," said Casey, holding the candle near the pale face. "I warned you you was goin' a bit too strong. If he's off his head to-morrow we got a bright chance of hearing anything we want to hear. He hasn't stirred an inch."

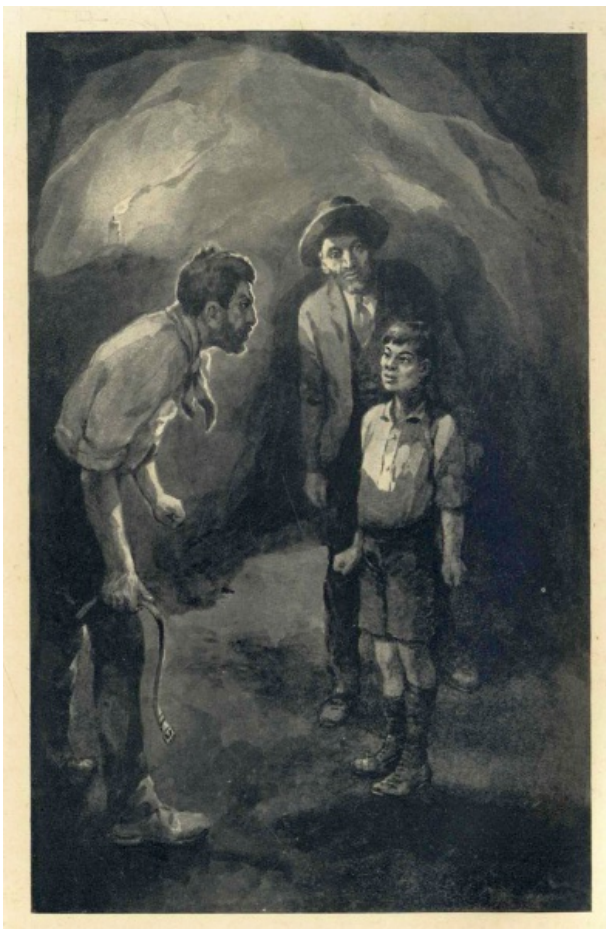
"Them Chows is awful cunning an' treacherous," said Stock. "I'll soon see if he's shammin'." He lit a match in the candle and held the flame against Li Chang's hand. But the boy did not stir, and when the match was half burned out Casey struck Stock's hand away.

"That's a bit too thick," he said harshly. "Cut it out, Stock; there's no fun in burnin' a kid who's down an' out." He looked disgustedly at Stock, whose coarse laugh in answer was a little shamefaced.

"Best to make sure," he said. "You ain't got as much nerve as a chicken, Casey. Oh, well, it's no good waitin' all night, I s'pose: it's long after twelve now, an' I'm nearly asleep. We'd better turn in, an' see how he is in the morning."

He strolled off to his bunk. Casey hesitated for a moment, and then Lifted Li Chang gently to a more comfortable position, covering him with a blanket. He looked at him uneasily—the little body had felt horribly limp as he held it.

"Wish Davison 'ud do his own dirty work," he muttered. Then he followed Stock's example, and in a few minutes both men were snoring deeply.



"I'll learn you to call me low-class!" blazed Stock.

Billabong Adventurers]

[[Chapter XIII](#)

## CHAPTER XIV

### HOW THE GODS CAME TO HELP

THE slow hours of the night crept away. When the first faint grey of the dawn softened the black darkness of the cave a movement came from Li Chang's heap of blankets.

It was so slight a movement that even in full light it would have been hardly perceptible. At first just a faint turning of the head, until the black eyes could see the snoring men on their blankets; and then, inch by inch, the coverlet was pulled aside, and the boy lay free. Then, very slowly, setting his teeth as his bruised and stiffened body revolted against movement, he worked himself into a sitting position, his eyes never leaving the two bunks in front. So sitting, he doggedly exercised his muscles for a few moments, bending this way and that, until the first agonizing stiffness had passed. Then he crawled to his boots, and, knotting them together by the laces, he crept towards the entrance where his enemies lay, pausing for a moment to snatch some food from a rock and to thrust it inside his shirt.

After the first few moments when he had fallen senseless under Stock's beating, Li Chang had never been unconscious. The stoical self-control which is part of the birthright of every Chinese had helped him to stay motionless when his senses returned; and while the two men discussed his condition he had lain like a log, his quick brain working. Only by pretence could he save himself for the moment—that was clear; and so he moved no muscle, even during the hours when they sat outside, smoking; had let his arm drop like a bag of wet sand when Stock pulled it up. That was comparatively easy, even though the ache to change his position became an agony; but Stock's final test of the burning match had been a different matter, especially since he had had no warning of what was to come until the flame was on his hand. He thought he had not flinched: he could not be sure until the worst of the torture was over, and he heard Casey's sickened voice. Then he knew that he had acted up to his breeding and the traditions of his name. The thought lay warm at his heart through the long suffering of the night. These dogs—these coolies—had not been able to wring a sign of feeling from a son of the house of Li.

Casey's act of humanity in altering his position had helped him to endure. He had placed the boy on his side, remembering his bruised and bleeding back; and the covering blanket had kept the air from his burned hand. For that, little Li Chang promised himself that if the time ever came to repay what he had suffered Casey's penalty should be the lighter. There were divers repayments

that he planned for Stock; joyous pleasantries of boiling oil and slow-slicing that helped to make the night hours pass. He planned them with lingering detail; the slow-slicing—the Chinese Death of a Thousand Cuts—was particularly comforting, since in it he could picture Mr. Stock horribly dwindling at the hands of the executioner; a terrifying person with a huge, razor-edged sword, who bore a strong resemblance to Li Chang himself. The white schoolboy who has had visions of himself as a bloodthirsty pirate, superintending the walking of the plank of the master who has given him five hundred lines, can have some faint idea of the solace of Li Chang's imaginings.

But to exact vengeance, and, incidentally, to remain alive, it was necessary to escape; and in the intervals of gloating over Mr. Stock's unpleasant end Li Chang plotted his escape very diligently. His great fear was that he would fall asleep; and when, towards dawn, he felt sleep stealing over him, in spite of a body that seemed all one burning ache, he bit his thumb steadily, with a savage determination to add a new pain that should effectually drive away slumber. Once he fell asleep with his thumb in his mouth, looking very much as he must have looked when his Chinese mother hushed him off to dreamland as a baby in Peking; but he awoke almost immediately, and when dawn came, bringing with it his last hope, it found Li Chang very wide awake indeed.

He crawled along by the wall of the cave, ready to sink down should a sleeper stir. The two men lay across the mouth of the cave, their heads against the wall on either side, their feet touching; so that he could not watch both, but must go forward with a sick dread of the eyes that might open at any moment, on one hand or the other, to shatter his dream. He made up his mind to look at neither: to concentrate every faculty on moving so noiselessly that they should not wake.

Near them he raised himself very slowly until he stood upright, flattening his body against the wall. A minute he stood so, as still as though carved in stone; then, inch by inch, he stole forward. He had to choose over which he should step: and chose Stock, although he feared him most, because he was the smaller. The impulse to make one wild leap across the human barrier and race away into the free world outside was almost irresistible; but he stifled it, and picked his way slowly, studying where it would be safest to place each foot before he dared to put it down. Just as he reached Stock the man stirred restlessly, turning on his back, and Li Chang stiffened into immobility, the sweat pouring down his face. But his enemy only sank into deeper sleep. His snores made music in the boy's ears as he stepped across him.

Even when he was out of the cave he dared not hurry. He must still move slowly and noiselessly, lest a sound should reveal his presence. He tiptoed until he had worked round to the rear—trembling in the ecstasy of feeling that

he was out of sight of those cruel eyes, should they open to find him gone. But Li Chang did not for a moment believe that he was free: he knew his own weakness and weariness, and how little chance he would stand with two relentless men hot upon his trail. Not until he was clear of the plateau could he venture to hope that he had really escaped.

He felt fairly certain that Stock and Casey would think that he had fled to the side of the plateau he knew, where they had captured him first, after his parting from his grandfather. Therefore he took the opposite direction, running as hard as he could for a time, in the effort to put as many rocks as possible between him and the cave. Not until he had covered a mile did he dare to pause to put on his boots. He sat on a stone while he laced them hurriedly, watching with terrified eyes for a sign of pursuit. But as yet there was none; so he set off again at a steady jog-trot.

The unexplored country lay wide before him: a grim, unfriendly country for a little lonely boy. Li Chang had heard many stories of men lost in the bush or on the great plains: men who had walked in circles, always coming back to their starting-place, until madness seized them and they tore off their clothes one by one, and finally lay down to die. He knew he must be very careful; so he took his bearings, making for the highest rock he could see ahead. When he reached it, after an hour's travelling, he paused to study his position. The site of the cave from which he had fled was marked by a great cluster of rocks, near which grew a clump of stunted trees: he looked at them very carefully, knowing that they must always be behind him, if he kept in the direction he wished to go. Then he set himself another point far ahead and struck out for it doggedly.

He pondered over his chances as he went. They were slender enough to dishearten even a grown man. Few men, indeed, would have cared to walk far, tortured as Li Chang was by his stiffness and his wounds; but it was characteristic of the Chinese boy that he put his bodily sufferings last. Food, he knew, would be his worst stumbling-block. The remnant of the bread and cheese he had stolen from the cave would not take him far, and when it was exhausted he had no hope of anything more. There was no food on the plateau, except a few rabbits; and he had no means of securing even a rabbit. Even his pocket-knife had been taken from him when Stock had searched him after his capture. He did not know where the plateau ended on the side for which he was making. It stretched before him, a dreary waste of rock-strewn land, looking as though it went on for ever.

And if he ever came to the end and made his way to the lower valleys, what then? For all he knew there was no inhabited country beyond—no kindly homesteads where a friendless boy might find succour. He might starve in the valleys, just as certainly as he would starve on the plateau. Supposing he did

find people, there was no surety that they would be good to him. A Chinese in Australia does not make many friends: Li Chang knew the contemptuous terms "Chow" and "Chink" far better than any greeting of gentler courtesy. He had never understood why it should be so: why people like his grandfather, a man honoured and respected in his own country, should be treated as an inferior being by men who were obviously of the coolie class. Li Ning, when he had questioned him on this puzzling matter, had merely smiled and replied that men who allowed themselves to be discourteous were people of low breeding and little understanding, and their attitude need not trouble those of a higher race. "We know ourselves to be superior, and it does not matter if they think that they are," he added. "But see to it, my son, that you do not imitate their manners." It was a difficult philosophy for Li Chang, who had just been jeered at by a butcher-boy for his inability to pronounce the letter "r." He decided that Australia was a puzzling country, and that it would be better to return to China as soon as possible. And Li Ning had said, "The gods will grant us that happiness soon, little Chang."

Now Li Ning was dead, and would never see the country that he loved: and it was very doubtful whether Li Chang would see it, either. He thought, with a catch in his breath, of Li Fuen, his father, and of his mother and baby sisters in far-off Peking; of the bamboos and wistaria in the garden where he had learned his first childish games. It hurt very badly to think of that dear home-garden, set in the beauty of his native land, while he fled, wounded and hopeless, through this grim rock-country. If only he could find his way down from the plateau—surely there would be people somewhere who would not refuse him aid, even though they might look down upon him as a yellow-skinned alien; who would aid him to get to Chen Lun. Old Chen Lun would help him to return to China. And even though he must go back alone and without the treasure of Li Ning, to see China again was like a dream of Heaven to the boy.

All through the long day he kept going, working his way farther and farther from the cave of horrors from which he had escaped. About noon he finished the remains of his bread and cheese; and then he looked for a suitable stick, as he went, and watched for a chance of knocking over a rabbit. Uncooked rabbit is not a tempting article of diet, but Li Chang would have welcomed it. Only once, however, did he catch a glimpse of a furry grey body, and then it had dived into a hole before he could fling his stick. Water he had in plenty from the little springs; and once, finding a brimming rock-basin, he snatched a few precious moments to splash his aching back and cool his face.

Always he was on the alert for signs of pursuit. He would climb a high rock, and scan the country behind him, taking care not to show himself against the sky-line; searching with anxious eyes for moving figures among the stillness of the crags, and climbing down again, his heart throbbing with relief,

when he could see no one. Then he would hurry on again, forcing himself to disregard the weariness that cried to him to rest. They would come, he knew: Casey might give up, but Stock would trail him as long as there was the remotest chance of finding him. And he knew just how much mercy he might expect at the hands of Stock.

Night fell, and he was forced by darkness to stop. He crawled into a hole under a rock, and almost immediately fell asleep; but after a time he awoke from a dream of recapture, shivering and wretched, and then it was long before his stiffness and hunger would let him sleep again. About dawn he fell into a heavy slumber of exhaustion. The sun sent rays into his hiding-place as it mounted, but it did not wake little Li Chang. He lay with his head pillowed on his arm: the tears he was too proud to shed in daylight had made tracks in the dust on his pale face.

It was late in the morning when he stirred, groaned, and awoke. He lay for a moment, trying to recollect, sleepily, where he was; then, with horror, he realized that he had been wasting precious hours, and he crawled painfully out of his hole. He listened, but there was no sound anywhere; then he climbed a pile of rocks to make sure of his direction and to look for the dreaded approach of his pursuers.

Almost immediately, he saw them. They were scouting among the boulders a long way off: little busy figures that moved industriously hither and thither, leaving no corner unsearched. Some distance separated them, but they were evidently working on a definite plan, so that they combed every yard of the country. He saw them approach each other, then turn and beat back again, yet always advancing gradually upon his line.

Li Chang turned to look in the other direction. Nothing was to be seen but the wide sweep of boulder-strewn country, with its clumps of low-growing scrub. There was no hope or help anywhere. Still, he could flee in no other direction, and he climbed down from his rock and ran.

It was a poor attempt at a run. He staggered as he went, stumbling over stones and roots that ordinarily he would have taken in his stride; now and then steadying himself by a tree, in a moment of sudden giddiness. Because he was nearly finished, his brain no longer working clearly, he did not try to take cover, or to hide on top of a rock; all that he could think of was to put as great a distance as possible between himself and his foes. And so it was not long before Stock, climbing a crag to get a longer view, spied him, and, shouting to Casey, began to run.

Li Chang looked round and saw them coming, still some distance away, running with the easy confidence of men sure of their quarry. There was nothing to keep them from him now: he was nearly spent, his head whirling with weariness and fear. In that moment he saw his duty as it lies clear to

Chinese eyes. A Chinese boy of good parentage is taught from his cradle that self matters nothing beside the higher claim of what is due to his father and the elders of his house; that death is preferable to any failure in obedience. He had faced the probability that, under torture, he might speak in spite of himself and betray his grandfather's secret—that secret which he looked upon as the honour of his house. Had he possessed a knife, little Li Chang would have died then and there. As it was, having nothing but his bare hands, he made for the nearest high crag, whence he might fling himself head-foremost on the rocks below and cheat his enemies of their final triumph.

But he could not reach it. His legs failed under him, and he went down on his knees, tasting the supreme bitterness of failure as he fell. The earth, it seemed to him, was spouting foes: Casey and Stock were coming up behind him, and through a mist he saw three other figures ahead, who saw him and began to run. It did not matter now how many there were. He looked at them in dull despair.

They reached him first: two tall fellows with set faces, and with them a third whom Li Chang took to be a man until he heard her voice—a voice full of pity and anger. She came to him swiftly and fell on her knees beside him, putting her arm round his shoulders.

"Oh, you poor little chap!" she said. "Don't worry, Li Chang: we'll take care of you."

"Bad men come—come vely quick," he gasped.

"Let 'em come," said Jim Linton. "We'll deal with 'em, Li Chang." He glanced at the strained, childish face. "Give him a little brandy, Norah—not much."

A cup was at Li Chang's lips, and something like liquid fire ran through his starved body. In a moment he felt stronger; able to sit with his back against a rock and look at his deliverers. They were, he felt sure, gods who had come to his rescue, so tall and strong they seemed, so full of quiet authority. Their voices were kind and courteous, giving him confidence—there are, perhaps, no people who respond to intonation in a voice so quickly as the Chinese, whose language is one of tones as much as of words. Whether they were gods or mortals, Li Chang felt no more fear.

Casey and Stock halted at a little distance, their faces dark with anger. They conferred in low voices for a moment and then came on.

"G'day, boss," Stock said, his surly voice belying the civility of the greeting. "Glad you caught that little thief of a Chink."

"Ah, he's a thief, is he?" Jim said.

"You bet your life he is. We been travellin' with him, an' he hooked our money an' lit out from our camp. Me mate an' I've lost a whole day lookin' for him."



"Yes?" said Jim. "Bad luck for you. He looks a bit of a desperado, we thought. I suppose you would like to hand him over to the police?"

They were terrible words, and yet they did not frighten Li Chang. He looked up at the tall god questioningly, and waited for Stock to speak.

"Aw, well," said that worthy, "he's a bit young to be landed in gaol. Not as he don't deserve it, but we'd rather not be hard on him. We'd rather take him back an' return him to his people. His father's a decent ol' Chink market-gardener down-country, an'——"

"Liah!" said Li Chang, calmly.

"That'll show you the sort of kid he is," said Stock, angrily. "Can't keep a civil tongue in his head for two minutes together. But them Chinks is all alike—low-down yeller skunks, all of 'em. Anyway, boss——"

Li Chang's stolid voice cut in again.

"Him tell plenty lies," he said. "In my country my honourable father not give him job, even as camel-boy. The Gleast Ones know that—they not believe him." He looked with adoration at the "Great One" who leaned negligently against a rock, and Jim smiled down at him—not having the least idea that he was regarded as a god, but liking the utter trust in the steady black eyes.

"Talk the leg off an iron pot he would," said Stock, a snarl in his voice. "It don't matter how kind you are to 'em, a Chink'll always turn dawg on you."

"Kind, were you?" asked Wally. "What hurt his face?" He pointed to a blue bruise on the boy's cheekbone.

"Fell an' bumped himself on a rock," Stock answered. "Why, we been looking after the little beggar as if he was our own. Nice handful he is, too; it don't pay anyone to treat a Chink well." He spat savagely at a boulder. "Well, I guess we'll be gettin' along with him, boss. Thanks for catchin' him for us."

Li Chang got to his feet unsteadily.

"Me show the Gleast Ones how him tleat me kindly," he said, fumbling at his buttons.

He pulled out his shirt and peeled it over his head. It did not come easily, because it had stuck to his back, but the boy did not hesitate for that. He turned from them, and Norah cried out at the sight of the little body, while Jim and Wally bit off a quick exclamation. Their faces grew grim as they looked. He was scarred with a network of great weals and livid bruises, the skin broken and bleeding in many places; there seemed scarcely an inch of him that had not suffered. Li Chang turned back to them, with a little smile.

"You see?" he said. "All over plenty same like that—because me not tell secler of my old honourable glandfather. Then say kill me nex' day. So me lun away." Then he staggered, and Norah caught him and held him gently.

"You unutterable hounds!" said Jim, between his teeth. "A kid like that!"

Stock flamed into fury.

"Aw, what's it got to do with you?" he snarled. "The little brute stole from us, an' he got what he deserved. You mind your own business an' hand him over."

He made a rush forward, as a cornered rat will show fight suddenly. Wally was the nearer, and his left fist shot out and took Mr. Stock squarely in the face, so that he turned what appeared to be a complete somersault. He sat upon the ground, holding his bleeding nose with one hand and feeling for loosened and missing teeth with the other: and Li Chang broke into a little laugh—a child's laugh of complete satisfaction.

"That vely gleat hit!" he said contentedly. "Gleat One plenty stlong."

"I'm not keen on hitting a man smaller than myself," remarked Wally, dryly. "But some one had to hand you something, my friend—and I'm not sure that I'll be able to hold myself in from giving you more, if you stay long." He glanced at Casey. "Do you want yours? I'm ready to take you both on, whenever you like."

Casey shrank before the blazing eyes.

"Not me," he answered hastily. "I don't want ever to see the darned little Chink again. All the same, b'lieve me or not, boss, I never hit him."

"That tluе," said Li Chang.

"Only looked on and enjoyed the merry sight, I suppose," Jim said contemptuously. "You're a precious pair of scoundrels. And where's your chief—Davison?"

Most of Mr. Stock's face was still modestly concealed behind a very dirty handkerchief, so that it was difficult to see what emotions were stirred within him at the unexpected mention of his leader. But Casey's start of surprise was unmistakable.

"He—he ain't with us now," he stammered. Over the handkerchief Stock shot him a glance of fury.

"Not back yet?" asked Jim, pleasantly. "Oh, well, I don't suppose he'll be able to deny himself the pleasure of your society for long: you'll probably meet him soon."

He took a step forward, looking grim and huge enough to terrify braver men than Stock and Casey.

"I'm not going to hand you over to the police," he said. "Not because you don't richly deserve it, but because it doesn't happen to suit us at the moment; we've other work that's more important than dealing with scum like you. And after all, the police will get you sooner or later, so we needn't worry. You can clear out the way you came, both of you. My advice is to get off the plateau as soon as possible, for I warn you that if we catch you again you'll get all that's coming to you. And you can pass on the advice to Davison, if you meet him. This plateau isn't big enough to hold him as well as us. Now get out of sight as

hard as you can, if you don't want to get what you gave Li Chang."

Stock and Casey slunk away in silence. But when he judged that he was at a safe distance, Stock's venom could no longer be contained, and he turned and spat a threat at them.

"You think you're mighty clever! But you wait—I'll pay you back before I've done with you—an' the girl too. I'll——"

He saw Jim stoop, and ran for cover. But the clod that Jim picked up was a large and hard one, and years of throwing a cricket-ball had made his aim true. The clod whizzed through the air, catching the fleeing Mr. Stock between the shoulder-blades. His yell of pain as he dived behind a boulder, brought another short laugh from Li Chang.

"Vely lubly thlow," he said delightedly. He collapsed in a heap at Norah's feet, unable to stand longer; but the beady black eyes twinkled at the three "Great Ones" as they gathered round him with concerned faces.

"What is it, old fellow?" Wally asked.

"Legs queer," stated Li Chang. "No food, muchee run, plenty flightened." His eyes became wistful. "Food hab got?" he begged.

Norah slipped the boy's shirt over his head.

"Pick him up, Wally," she said. "There isn't going to be any treasure-hunting before this warrior is fed." And throned in the arms of the Great One he most revered, since he had laid his enemy low, Li Chang found himself carried off among the rocks.

## CHAPTER XV

### HOW THEY KEPT FAITH

“**A**ND what are we going to do about him?” Jim questioned.

“He certainly does complicate matters,” returned Wally.

They were sitting in the patch of shade cast by the Split Rock. Within the darker cave little Li Chang slept peacefully, so secure in the protection of his new friends that no evil dreams came to trouble him. He dreamed, indeed, but it was of China—that Flowery Land where his father’s house, wide and spreading, its queer upturned eaves gilded so that they caught the sunlight and flashed them back, nestled in the midst of a garden more beautiful than any he had seen in the new country where he had suffered so much. His father and mother and the little sisters were there; they welcomed him so gladly that Li Chang smiled in his sleep.

Fear had gone from Li Chang. The “Great Ones,” who, he had gradually realized, were not gods, but very human and gentle, had tended him as his own mother might have done. They had bathed him and anointed his burning back; had robed him comfortably, if curiously, in towels, and he had seen, marvelling that one so mighty could so demean himself, how Wally had washed his blood-stained clothes and spread them on a flat rock to dry. This he saw while Norah fed him, a little at a time, with food that seemed more delicious than anything he had ever eaten, though Norah privately considered it anything but suitable for a small boy who needed special nourishment. However, Li Chang had not eaten much, for his head had suddenly nodded, even as he swallowed a mouthful, and he fell fast asleep.

Jim had carried him into the cave and put him into his own blankets—almost afraid to touch him for fear of hurting him. But Li Chang had not flickered an eyelash. They left him to his dreams and came out to hold a council of war.

While they tended him Li Chang had told them his own story: how he had missed his way in the darkness after his grandfather had left him, and had wandered, lost, on the plateau for nearly two days before Stock and Casey found him. Davison was not with them; but he had learned from their talk that the leader had found Li Ning’s body after Norah and Wally had left it in the cave, and had come back to his followers to order them to wait for him at their own camp—the camp to which they took the boy. “Him watch you and Missee allee time you with my honouable glandfather,” Li Chang told Wally.

“*Did he?*” said Wally, with interest. “I wish I’d known.”

"Him see you go, so him come back after him search Li Ning, find nothing. Him know Li Ning tell you evelrything, and him leckon you go Chen Lun. So him go Melbun, all same, wait for you—tell those men wait, him come back. They vely pleased when they catch me. Me not pleased," said Li Chang, quaintly.

"I guess you weren't, poor kid," said Wally.

Casey and Stock had not been unkind to the boy at first. But as the days went by, and they heard nothing more of their leader, they grew impatient. Davison they did not trust at all; they knew well that if he gained information that would lead him easily to Li Ning's cache he would come back secretly and rifle it without telling them. They were merely there, they guessed shrewdly, in case unexpected difficulties made it necessary for him to have help: tools, whom Davison would either use or throw aside as occasion demanded. And as time slipped away and food began to run short, Casey and Stock rebelled more and more against the notion of being merely tools.

It was then that they decided that Li Chang might be able to guide them to his grandfather's hiding-place. They did not question him directly: Stock was too shrewd for that. But they led him on, with apparent careless kindness, to speak of his wanderings with Li Ning, and they soon gathered that the boy had been deeply in the old man's confidence. There came a time when Li Chang realized that their talk always led up to a certain point; at which, terrified lest he should have unconsciously said too much, he became uncommunicative and endeavoured not to talk at all. Perhaps the change was too sudden: apparently it had confirmed Stock in his suspicions as to the boy's knowledge. Therefore he had thrown aside pretence and questioned him directly.

Li Chang had stoutly denied all knowledge of the cache. Truth was to him quite a minor matter beside his loyalty to his grandfather; he was ready to be cut in pieces rather than reveal any of his secrets. He did not seem to have had any thought of personal gain—desire for the treasure was quite swallowed up in his grief for the grandfather whom he had loved. Besides, having been his grandfather's, the treasure was now his father's; and he, with Chen Lun's assistance, must be the person on whom the duty devolved of taking it back to China, and restoring it to its owner. It was doubly a matter of honour that he should tell nothing.

Stock, weary of threats and questionings, had lost his temper and thrashed him very thoroughly a few days before: thrashed him until Casey had intervened, apparently actuated more by prudence than by kindness. After that, they had kept him a prisoner in the cave, on the smallest possible allowance of food: promising further beating should he not speak. "For two nights they wait," Li Chang said. "Then on third night Stock wake me up and beat me again, all same me tumble down." The black eyes glittered. "For that, some

day, I kill Stock. No have got chance now, but some, day——” There was no need to finish the sentence.

All this they had pieced out from Li Chang’s broken English as they carried him slowly back to the Split Rock. At the first halt—the journey was a fairly long one—Norah and Wally had told him gently all the details of his grandfather’s death, and of their mission to Chen Lun; had given him Chen Lun’s letter, and told him of the theft of the plan. The boy had listened with shining eyes.

“My honouable father will thank you,” he said quietly. “He will say the house of Li always your servants—never able pay back. First old honouable Li Ning, then this no-good Chang. We not know so good Austlialians as you.”

“Mighty little we could do, old chap,” Wally said. “But we did what we could, and we’ll finish the job now, if it’s any way possible.”

But how to finish the job was exercising their minds very deeply as they sat outside the Split Rock caves. Davison, it might fairly be reckoned, if not already on the plateau, must be very near it. They had made all haste from the Jerrols’ after discovering the loss of the plan, and were in the act of making a quick dash for the neighbourhood of the cache when, that morning, they had encountered Li Chang and his pursuers. That encounter had thrown them back to their starting-place; and now, not only were they delayed, but seriously hampered with a child who had borne too much for a child’s strength and was utterly unfit for any further exertion.

“He needs nursing,” said Norah, knitting her brows: “nursing and good food. And we have nothing here but hard biscuits and tinned things to give him: and I’ve very little ointment for his poor back, and no more bandages. I want to get the jewels just as much as you do, boys. But I know Li Chang’s father, whoever he is, would rather have a sound son than a sackful of jewels.”

“Then what do you think we should do, Nor?” Jim asked.

Norah sighed.

“I’m afraid there’s only one thing to do. We can’t keep him up here: it’s out of the question. Apart from food, we’ve got only the barest possible allowance of blankets for ourselves, and that poor back of his must be as comfortable as we can make it. He has had shock piled on shock, apart from his sufferings. A white boy of his age would almost certainly wake up feverish and ill: I don’t know much about Chinese, but whether he is white or yellow, he is only a small boy. If he should be ill we’d be in a very bad fix up here.”

“That’s quite true,” Wally agreed. “Then, do you think we ought to get him down to the Jerrols’ place?”

“I don’t think so. It’s a long and rough trip, and I really would be afraid for him to take it. No—what we must do is to take him down to Horseshoe Valley as soon as he wakes. I have everything there that I need for his back, and he

could be very comfortable.”

“What about his food?”

“Well, we can get fresh fish and rabbits there, and there are soups and other things among the stores. Probably a few days’ rest and quiet in the camp would make him all right.”

“Well, if you think so, that’s all about it,” Jim said. “You know more about illness than we do, and he certainly is a very battered small boy. We could take it in turns to carry him down on our backs, Wally; it wouldn’t hurt him very much.”

“That’s easy enough,” Wally answered. “The only pity about the whole thing is that it leaves the way clear for Mr. Davison. And I certainly would have liked to get even with that gentleman for stealing my plan.”

“I suppose there is no doubt that it was Davison?”

“Who else could it be? He saw us with Li Ning, and no doubt he tracked us until we left the plateau, when he would know that we’d report the death to the police and that an inquest must follow. All he had to do was to keep track of our movements and watch for our coming to Melbourne to Li Ning’s friends. A man like Davison has plenty of spies: plenty of ways of finding out all about people who interest him. I have not the slightest doubt that we were followed from the time we reached Melbourne until we left it again.”

“And when we left it,” said Jim, “ten to one Davison was in the same train, waiting for his chance.”

“I could kick myself to think how easily he got it,” Wally answered, frowning. “Can’t you picture friend Davison’s glee when he saw us get out at that refreshment place without our luggage? I can see him gaily ambling up to our compartment and going through our things—he probably didn’t bother himself about any bag barring the one that was locked. And a skeleton key would have made short work of that. Oh, it was all just as easy as falling off a log, to Mr. Davison. I hope I’ll get square with him some day. It won’t be my fault if I don’t.” Wally’s usually merry face was almost savage.

“I want you to try to get square with him now,” Norah said quietly.

“No hope of that, I’m afraid, Nor. By the time the little chap is well enough to climb up to the sky-line again, Davison will have explored the cache at his leisure and departed to other spots. All we can do is to get into communication with old Chen Lun and see if his organization can head off Davison in Melbourne or Sydney.”

“I’d like you and Jim to have a dash for him yourselves first,” said Norah.

Wally knitted his brows.

“You mean——?”

“Well, there’s no need to stay with Li Chang and me in Horseshoe Valley. I can’t leave him, of course. But once you have landed us there, what is to

hinder you and Jim from coming back here and trying for the cache?" She laughed at their amazed faces. "Don't look at me in that pained way—don't I know it's exactly what you're both longing to do, only you didn't like to say so!"

"Oh, that wouldn't do at all, Nor," said Jim, rather weakly. "We couldn't leave you and the youngster all alone."

"Rubbish, Jimmy! It's ever so nice and careful of you, but there isn't the least need in the world for you to stay. The cache is over towards the other side of the plateau—we know that: and that is the side Davison and Co. work from. They would never come to this side, because of the difficulty of getting down the valley, even if they knew the track. Li Chang and I will be as safe as though you were here."

"I don't like it," Wally said uneasily. "I wouldn't have a quiet moment until I got back to you."

"Well, for that matter," said Norah, quietly, "I shan't be very comfortable about you and Jim. I shall imagine all sorts of things—things I wouldn't even think of if I were with you myself."

"Great Scott!" Jim said, laughing. "Aren't we big enough to take care of ourselves?"

"Yes, I know you are, but accidents happen, and you are up against very bad men. That's why I shall worry, even though I feel you alone would probably be more than a match for the three of them. And you and Wally will worry about me, because of the little off-chances of trouble, although you know I really can take care of myself and a small boy. But you'll go, all the same, won't you?"

"We've got the youngster safe," Wally said. "And as you yourself observed, he's more important to his father than a sackful of jewels would be. I don't give a hang about the jewels, now that we have him. If it were not a question of leaving you, I'd go, just for the lark of it. But as it is——" He paused, reading something in her eyes he could not fathom. "What else are you thinking of, Nor? Out with it!"

"Well—we made a promise," Norah said quietly. "We told old Li Ning we would see the job through."

"Yes—by Jove, we did," said Wally, flushing under his tan.

"A promise to a dead man seems to me horribly serious," she said quietly. "And it was the first big thing we came up against—together. I—I somehow wouldn't feel we'd have much luck, Wally, if we didn't try to keep it—all through."

Wally put his brown hand over hers.

"You always see things straight, old Nor," he told her. "Well, we'll go, shall we, Jim?"



Jim had been watching them curiously.

"I'm afraid I'd let the promise rip if I thought there were any real risk for Norah," he said. "As for that, risk for Norah means risk for the boy, and you'd have to choose the best way of keeping your promise. But upon my word, I can't see why you shouldn't keep it all through, as Norah says. They won't come down to Horseshoe Valley. And she has the gun, and her own little revolver; and she's pretty useful with both, if I do admit it to her face, which will make her very uplifted."

Norah tilted her nose at him, and laughed.

"'Tisn't the number of compliments I get from you that will make me uplifted," she answered. "But go on, Jimmy; your words are full of wisdom, for once."

"They always are," he said, grinning. "Well—I'm all for making a dash for it. You have told us all you know about the directions that the old man gave you, and Li Chang can tell us anything he knows when he wakes up. Then we have our rough plan: it isn't as complete as the one Davison has, but I think it would be a pretty fair guide. We have a sporting chance of getting there before Davison turns up; as for the other two worms, they are probably legging it for the down-country as hard as they can go, and if they meet Davison they'll all be so busy killing each other that they won't have time to think about us. That's a little mix-up I'd rather like to see, by the way."

"I'd rather be in it myself," said Wally. "Davison and Stock need slaying, or at least hurting unpleasantly. Go on, General."

"My idea is this," Jim said. "Let's take Norah and the boy down to the camp by the river, as soon as we can: fix them up comfortably, and get back to the plateau before dark. That will enable us to make a daylight start in the morning. We can travel very light, as there is food up here, and we should reach the cache some time to-morrow. And we can be quite easy about Norah to-night, because there are only two tracks down, and we can sleep where they begin. No one is likely to get past us. But there will be no one there to try. Stock and Casey aren't likely to be within miles of this place, and Davison is bound to keep to the side he knows, where he can fall back on his lines of communication."

"And if, by any chance, we head them off in this direction later in the game, we'll be so close on their heels that they'll have no chance to get here ahead of us," said Wally. "I think you and I could beat those gentry in a quick thing across-country, eh, Jim?" He stretched his great shoulders. "By Jove, it's going to be rather a lark! Only it's dashed hard luck that you're to be out of it, Nor."

"I'm quite sorry for myself, but, as a matter of fact, I know you'll be much better off without me," Norah answered. "I might only hold you back—you

will have to go quickly, and I know I can't compete with those long legs." She hesitated. "You will be careful, boys, won't you? Remember those abominable men may lie in wait for you behind rocks."

"The one certain thing is that they won't meet us in the open, if they can avoid it," said Jim, smiling. "Well, we've both had some experience of a wily enemy in Flanders: if Davison and Co. have more tricks than the playful Hun, I'll be surprised. And we'll be jolly careful, Nor: I'll promise you that. Davison may be armed, but I doubt it: Li Chang says he saw no signs of weapons with the other two. And remember, Nor, even animals like Davison don't murder people lightly. They may talk an awful lot, but they've always a wholesome dread of consequences."

Norah rose, and carefully turned Li Chang's shirt and trousers on the rock. The day was hot, and the thin khaki was almost dry.

"It will be very good to see you both back safely," she said.

"If we're not back in three days, you can get down to the car on one of the ponies and go on to Jerrold's," Wally told her. "Jerrold will have half the country up on the plateau in double-quick time. But we'll be back, Nor. You needn't have any fear. I'll be too anxious to see how you have been getting on."

Li Chang woke presently, languid and a little feverish; but he roused himself pluckily to be dressed, and they started for Horseshoe Valley. The little Chinese declared himself able to walk, and made a stout attempt to carry out his statement. Twenty yards, however, showed that he was wrong, and Wally, who had been watching him keenly, put out a quick hand to steady the staggering little fellow.

"That's enough, old chap," he said. He lifted him gently on a rock, stooping before him. "Just you hop on to my back, and we'll get on ever so much better."

"Too much tired hab for gentleman," said Li Chang, unhappily—clutching at Wally's shoulder as he spoke, to save himself from falling.

"Too much plenty hurt for you," said Wally, laughing. "Cling on, old man; you're only a bit of a featherweight." He held the boy's legs carefully, knowing that every touch must pain him, and swung on towards the edge of the plateau.

The path down the hill-side, never an easy one, was doubly difficult with such a load. Wally and Jim took turns in carrying Li Chang, while Norah went ahead steadily. She was soon out of sight on the twists and turns of the steep path, and when the boys finally panted into camp she had a bed ready in the tent, a fire blazing merrily, and soup warming in a billy, while, in another, water was heating. Li Chang's wounds were washed and dressed anew, and presently, warmed and comforted by the soup, he was fast asleep. He

murmured drowsy thanks even as his eyelids drooped over his tired eyes.

"Nice little beggar," said Jim, coming out of the tent in a crouching position and expanding in sections. "There's a sort of dignified courtesy about him that's almost uncanny in a small boy—same sort of thing we noticed in old Chen Lun. They must train them well in China. He's the gratefullest youngster I ever saw—doesn't take a thing for granted. Norah, we breakfasted at an early hour, and now it's long after three o'clock; how about a little food? I feel as though I could eat a horse!"

They raided the stores and ate an extraordinarily assorted meal, compounded of many ingredients from many tins; after which, replete and happy, they rested for an hour, discussing their plan of campaign. A long swim followed, during which they successfully contrived to forget that they had any responsibilities; and at last, when the sun's rays were beginning to slant, Jim and Wally prepared to go.

"Nor, you're to promise me one thing," Wally said.

"Only one?" asked Norah, laughing.

"Only one that matters. Promise me you'll carry your little revolver all the time. I know you'll find it a jolly nuisance, but it will make my mind easier. And have the gun ready for action always, and not far from you. You're not likely to need either. But if you need them at all you'll need them quickly: and it's better to be sorry you've got them, than sorry you haven't."

"I'll promise, Wally," she said.

"The gun would be far better, of course," said Wally. "A revolver doesn't carry as far, and in any case a scattering charge of shot is better than a bullet. Keep a good look-out all the time. I wish to goodness I had a dog to leave with you: I hate the idea of your being alone at night."

"No one is coming down that cliff in the dark, so you can make your mind easy on that score," Norah said. "I'm not a scrap afraid, and you'll find Li Chang and me very cheerful when you come back."

"I wish I were back," he said. He knelt down to fasten his bootlace, and Jim beckoned Norah aside.

"Don't worry about him, Nor, old girl," he said. "I'll look after him, and bring him back to you in good order."

"Thanks, Jimmy," she said. They hugged each other. Jim went off, whistling, towards the cliff-path, and Wally came over to Norah.

"You mustn't worry about Jim, you know, Nor," he said, as they bade each other good-bye. "I feel horribly responsible about him, and I'll take jolly good care he doesn't go into any unnecessary danger—not for all the jewels that ever came out of a mine."

"I know you will," she told him.

She sat on a stone to watch them thread their way in single file along the

lower windings of the steep track—both so steadfast in their loyalty, and so dear. There was a mist over her eyes as she thought of their last promises. They were so exactly like Wally and Jim.

She was still with them in thought that night as she lay on her bed of ferns in the little tent, where the silence was broken only by Li Chang's heavy breathing. Somewhere above her, on the sky-line, they were lying, she knew, guarding the two downward tracks: each wrapped in his blanket and thinking of her and of her safety. Never were two guards more watchful, with no thought of self. She felt that no danger could touch her—so long as Jim and Wally stood between.

## CHAPTER XVI

### LI NING'S HIDING-PLACE

IN the grey of the dawn, before the sun had sent the faintest pink flush above the eastern horizon, Jim and Wally met at the Split Rock—both very sleepy, and—at the moment—without any enthusiasm for treasure-hunting.

“Sleep well?” Jim asked, yawning cavernously.

“Fairly. The ground seems harder than it used to seem in Flanders,” said Wally, rubbing his sides. “I scratched a hole for my hip in the most approved fashion; the trouble was my hip wouldn’t stay put in it, when I went to sleep.”

“You’ve been leading a life of idle luxury,” said Jim, with a grin. “In Flanders one was so tired that one would have snored happily on ploughshares. Well, jewels or no jewels, I’m not going hunting without a cup of tea.”

“Several cups,” said Wally, firmly. “You fill the billy, Jim, while I get a fire going.”

Breakfast banished the last shreds of sleep. They packed their haversacks with as much food as they could conveniently carry, deciding to trust to finding a fairly warm cave to sleep in and to manage without blankets. Each carried an electric torch, an automatic pistol, and a supply of ammunition. Wally cut a couple of heavy gnarled sticks from the nearest clump of trees; and, being fully equipped, they lit their pipes and set off on their quest.

Li Chang and Norah, between them, had made their direction fairly clear. A tall pyramid of rocks, far off to the north-east, gave them a mark for which to steer, and they made for it at a steady pace. There had been no dew: the grass in the hollows was dry and springy, the air as refreshing as a cool draught on a hot day. Here and there, astonished rabbits scurried out of their way, justly annoyed at being surprised at their morning meal, at which time danger from a swooping eagle was all that they had ever learned to fear: but otherwise the plateau, as usual, gave no sign of life.

“Jerrold said there were sheep and cattle up here,” Wally observed. “But we haven’t seen any traces of them this time.”

“Possibly they have drifted farther west,” Jim answered. “If Davison and his crowd, to say nothing of the two Chinese, have wandered about much, the stock would certainly move away: they must be as wild as hares up here, and the sight of men would scare them in a way that nothing else could do. I wish we could sight some cattle: if they were moving in a definite direction it would give us a clue to the whereabouts of our friend Davison.”

“I’d give something to know if he’s ahead of us,” Wally said.

"It's quite likely that he isn't. He has had a very roundabout journey to get here, and my belief is that he won't rush the cache: he'll go canny until he makes sure that Casey and Stock are not likely to see him. You see, he doesn't need them at all: the plan is simple enough, and, so far as we can tell, he would not require any assistance in getting the jewels. That being so, Mr. Davison will ask himself why on earth he should share the plunder with anyone else—even with such merry-hearted souls as Casey and Stock."

"And he may just lie low until he can make certain of getting to the cache unseen."

"That's my idea. No doubt haste will be necessary to him—he'll want to get away from the plateau as soon as he can, especially as the worthy man will be very uncomfortable; he can't be carrying bedding, and he certainly won't dare to light a fire. But too much haste might spoil his chances altogether, and we can be sure he won't risk that. Of course, this is all just guess-work, and probably it's all wrong. We're working very much in the dark. But it's always rather interesting to try to size up what the other side may do, even if you go astray in your estimates."

Wally agreed, and immediately began to look at the matter from different angles, suggesting other possible courses of action for Davison: with the result that they wrangled in friendly fashion while their long strides covered miles of the plateau, and arrived at what Jim called a condition of complete mental jumbledom.

"Not that it matters a ha'porth," Wally said cheerfully. "We've only to keep our eyes skinned and cultivate the habit of looking in thirteen directions at once. We're simple Boy Scouts, setting out on a hike, and living up to our motto by being prepared for anything that turns up—including the completely unexpected. Somehow, the one thing I don't expect is that we'll find the jewels."

"Got any reason?"

"None at all. Just a sort of notion. I suppose it's partly because finding them easily would be too good to be true."

"You're a nice little optimist to go hunting with," said Jim, laughing. "Now, I've just the opposite idea. I feel it in my bones that we're going to succeed, and pack young Li Chang off to China with his diamonds in the lining of his coat. By the way, I suppose your promise to his grandfather doesn't include personally conducting the small boy back to China?"

"My hat, no!" uttered Wally. "All we have to do is to hand him over to Chen Lun, with or without his valuables. Chen Lun does the rest. All the same, I fancy that if Norah ever wants another honeymoon trip, we might do worse than go to China. I believe the family of Li would give any of us a pretty considerable welcome. You know, I've always heard that no Chinese ever

forgets any service done for him or any of his relations—just as they would wait a lifetime to pay back anyone who had done them a bad turn. On the whole, I'd prefer to be in a Chinaman's good books, any day. They have uncommonly long memories."

"I rather think you young people have had enough of honeymoon tripping," said Jim, in the manner of the heavy father. "You seem to get into nice tight places when you go off on your own: it's time you settled down, and let Dad and me take care of you. As for going to China, where you'd certainly have to learn to eat rum things like birds' nests and sharks' fins and hashed puppy-dog, if a Chinese family took you in hand, I don't see any points in it, and you'd better abandon the notion that you hear the East a-calling. Billabong is a-calling you far louder, if you ask me."

"I guess Billabong won't have to call long," said Wally.

They paused, about noon, to eat and to rest for a little while. Not for long, for in both was the urge to hurry; to strain every nerve in the effort to reach Li Ning's hiding-place ahead of Davison. At the best, progress was slow, for prudence made it necessary to scout among the rocks that held so many possible hiding-places for their enemies, and constantly they found themselves hundreds of yards off their course. They kept as near to each other as they could, considering the nature of the ground: which meant that often one had to stop and wait for the other to work back within hailing distance, should it be necessary to call. They went in silence, moving as noiselessly as possible. Each pile of rocks, each thicket of low scrub, was a danger to be approached carefully; whenever they saw a cave they must examine it to see whether it held any traces of recent occupation. After they passed the rock pyramid that had been their landmark, their way became indefinite. All they could do was to press on, keeping Li Ning's plan in their minds—seeking to find in each boulder some feature that would justify the names the old man had given to the rocks near his cache.

It was towards evening that Wally hesitated before a rough crag and then signalled to Jim. He went to meet him, speaking in an excited whisper.

"I say, Jim, this old hump of sandstone is mighty like a camel."

Jim looked at it critically, and walked round it twice.

"I believe you've hit it," he said. "The head and the hump are distinctly camelious. Now we've got to face north-west and look for the Serpent. It doesn't look very near it on the plan, you remember."

"Probably the Camel ran away from the Serpent," grinned Wally, pulling out his pocket-compass. "Come along: I'm sure we're on the right trail."

They went on cautiously. A few minutes' walking brought them to a long low outcrop of stone, that curved sinuously.

"The Snake, or I'm a Dutchman!" Wally uttered, suppressing a whoop of

joy. "Carry on—this is getting thrilling. Treasure Island wasn't a circumstance to this old plateau!"

"The Lion next," Jim said. "Steady, Wal: we can't afford to be seen now. We'll have a good look round before we go any farther."

There was no sign of life anywhere. They cast round in a wide circle, returning to the Serpent with the comforting assurance that no one was near them, and pushed on to the north-west. Very soon they came upon a rock which might, with some stretch of the imagination, be considered like a lion. The Temple took more finding, for so many boulders bore a resemblance to a building of some kind: but at length they came upon a square stone, the front of which had been weathered by the centuries into rough pillars. Wally leaned against it, fanning himself with his hat.

"Old Li Ning's plan is working out like a dream," he said. "There are only two more rocks, Jim; the Ship, and the Small Rock of the God."

"And there's the Ship!" said Jim, pointing.

It was a lucky find, for, while most of the guiding rocks had been bold and prominent features, the Ship was so small that it might easily have been passed by, unnoticed. As it chanced, Jim happened to be standing on the one spot from which it could be seen from the Lion. It stood in a narrow space between two large crags; a little rock shaped like a schooner, with tapering masts, one of which had been broken. A queer little rock, just a slice of stone cut off, as it were, from one of the two between which it was hidden. Old Li Ning had chosen a cunning link in his chain of guiding-marks.

They went over and looked curiously, for they had never seen a rock like it. Had it been in an exposed position it could not have withstood the action of the weather, but must long ago have crumbled away; but the great crags sheltered it, so that it had remained almost intact.

"This sandstone is uncanny stuff," remarked Jim, "but that schooner is certainly one of the most life-like we've seen. It doesn't look as though it led anywhere, however, does it, Wal?"

"I—don't—know," Wally answered slowly. "Do you suppose the old chap meant anything by that?"

He pointed to the ground just ahead of the schooner's bow. The broken piece of the mast lay there, certainly not in the position where it would have been had it fallen naturally from the broken stump. It slanted across the narrow space; and driven in on either side of it, almost hidden in the hard, sandy soil, were two fragments of stone, as if to ensure that no quick feet of a running rabbit would knock it out of place.

"Wonder if it's a pointer?" Wally said. "We may as well make sure."

The sliver of stone slanted towards what looked like a crack in one of the larger rocks. They edged past the ship and followed its direction; to find, when



they reached the crack, that it was masked by one projecting edge that had hidden its width from them. What looked like a narrow slit was a space large enough to admit a man's body—supposing that man to be not over-stout.

"By Jove!" said Jim, excitedly. Wally was already in the crack, and he squeezed through after him.

They found themselves in a clear space, ringed round by high crags. Across it, on the ground at their base, was a squat rock, not two feet high, roughly shaped like an image of Buddha. The featureless head gave a curious impression of watching the new-comers silently.

"The Small Rock of the God, sure enough," Jim said. "Why, we might have hunted for years and never found it, if you hadn't noticed that broken mast."

They were on their knees beside the stone Buddha, feeling, with eager hands, for a possible hiding-place. It was firm and solid, bedded deeply in the ground, with short grass growing round its base. For a moment they were puzzled: then Wally's searching fingers found under the knee a hollow space into which his hand slipped easily, and he gave a smothered cry of triumph. The hollow was rounded and smooth; large enough to have held a child's head. Jim watched him, tense and eager, while he crouched near. Wally's hand came out slowly.

"Davison's beaten us, old chap," he said. "The cache is empty."

"You're sure?" Jim flushed deeply with anger and disappointment.

"Feel for yourself. There's nothing there but this."

"This" was a tiny fragment of newspaper—possibly torn from the wrapping of whatever had been hidden in the cache. He looked at it as though the grimy scrap had some secret to reveal, while Jim explored the empty hollow thoroughly and finally sat back on his heels with a grunt of disgust.

"Well, that's that!" he said. "Hard luck, Wal: I made sure we were in time."

"Let's look for tracks," Wally said. "Precious fools we were not to look before we trampled over here with our great feet."

They searched carefully, on hands and knees. As Wally had feared, their own tracks had covered much of the ground: but presently they came upon a distinct footmark, pointing outwards: a mark which could not have belonged to either Wally or Jim.

"There you are!" Wally said. "Friend Davison's visiting-card without any doubt: it has been made by a much better boot than Stock or Casey wore. I happened to notice their boots, and neither had a toe anything like as pointed as this. Mr. Davison evidently patronizes gents' natty bootings. So, that, as you say, Jimmy, is that. And now, what's the next thing to do?"

"Find the swine," said Jim, between his teeth. "Come along, old chap: he

may not have gone far yet, and we'll do as much as we can before dark."

They hurried out into the open with feelings very different from the eager hope with which they had entered. Jim took his bearings with the compass.

"He's bound to head for the way he came," he said. "Our one hope is that he has been held up somehow; in this country there's always the chance of a hurt ankle, or something like that. Or Stock and Casey may have taken a hand. Let's spread out a bit, Wally, and go as hard as we can."

But the darkness fell, finding them hunting without success. Twice, an indication had shown them they were going in the right direction: once a broken stick, the other time a footmark that again showed the pointed toe that spoke clearly of Davison: but of the thief himself there was no sign. Jim called a halt at last.

"We'll camp here," he said. "There's a fairly good cave, and the rock it's in will give us a good view over the country round us, so that we can watch for a camp-fire's glow."

"He won't light one," Wally objected.

"No, I don't think he will—but you never know. People make queer mistakes sometimes, and he may think that, having lost the plan, we chucked the whole business. At all events, we can't afford to lose a point. Eh, but I'm glad to get that haversack off my shoulders!" Jim tossed it to the ground, and sat down, looking up cheerfully at Wally's face.

"Don't look so blue, Wal. After all, it's only a parcel of stones, and Li Chang's people seem quite able to support him without them."

"Oh, I don't worry about Li Chang greatly," Wally said. "But Norah's so dead keen on getting the things, and I do hate to disappoint her. And we certainly promised."

"You promised to try—you couldn't be certain of succeeding. And no one can say you haven't tried, old man—from the minute you found Li Ning dying. Honeymoon gone to the winds, plans all upside down, and now the bride sits in a tent and nurses a heathen Chinee while the bridegroom and the best man scour a lonely plateau for a criminal who disgustingly refuses to be caught. Oh, you've kept your promise, right enough! You might as well remove that look of haggard woe and sit down and be companionable." And Jim lifted his head like a dog baying the moon, and chanted, "I want—to be happy," in a minor key, until Wally laughed, besought him not to be an idiot, and sat down.

Morning brought with it renewed hope, as morning usually does. They set off early, since a breakfast of cold food and spring water does not invite one to linger, and pushed on until at last they reached the point where the stones of the plateau gave place to low rolling hills, leading gradually down to the plains. Here they found the marks of a motor which had evidently stopped and turned before going back by the way it had come: a rough track, but quite

possible for a car with a careful driver.

"Davison's car, for certain," said Wally, disgustedly. "That finishes us, I suppose."

"Not necessarily," Jim replied. "The car that brought him must have been a hired one: it wouldn't wait indefinitely. Probably it dropped him and went straight back. There are only two sets of tracks."

"He might have hired a car without a driver," Wally objected.

"If so, he has certainly got away. But I think the other is more likely. However, we can only hunt round on the plateau as long as our food lasts, and that won't be more than a couple of days. So it's no good discussing what the enemy might or might not do—let's turn back and see if we can't get on his trail again. I've got a feeling he's behind us yet."

All that day they roamed the plateau, keeping to the side where they expected Davison to have planned his escape: but not once did they come upon the slightest trace of their quarry. If he were still there he was securely hidden. It was weary work, hunting in and out among the boulders, always with the uneasy feeling that any of the three men might be watching them from some secret nook. To Wally in particular this idea brought an irritated feeling that made him almost bad-tempered as the day wore on—if a person with so cheery a nature as Wally Meadows could ever be considered bad-tempered. Jim chaffed him on his rueful countenance.

"I'd be quite happy if I could have a square go at them, even if they won," Wally said. "But so far, Davison has played with us just as he liked, and it makes a fellow feel small. I can't stick the notion that he's watching us somewhere, chuckling at the way he's come out on top all along—just as you'd look at little kids playing about. Blessed if I know how you take it so contentedly."

"No good doing anything else," Jim answered. "And we're not certain yet that he has won. The laugh may be on our side before we've finished."

Perhaps, if Wally's mind had been free from anxiety, he might have been as philosophic as his chum. But he was torn with uneasiness about Norah, and as the day drew to a close his longing to know how she was faring became almost more than he could bear. Jim, serenely confident of his sister's ability to take care of herself, declined to worry: Norah was no fool, he said, and he had no doubt whatever that she and Li Chang were having quite a good time at the camp in Horseshoe Valley. Wally could feel no such comfortable assurance. He stretched himself on the ground, in the cave where they camped that night, with a feeling of profound thankfulness that to-morrow would finish their hunting, since their food was almost exhausted—mingled with impatience against the weary twenty-four hours that must go by before he could satisfy himself that all was well at the camp.

Throughout the next morning they hunted steadily, still without success: and when they met to lunch on the last fragments of their food even Jim had lost his belief that they could be successful.

"I don't think we'll do any good by going far from our own track back to the Split Rock," he said. "It's two o'clock now; if we make for it slowly we have as much chance of picking up their trail as if we hunted anywhere else. One thing is certain—we must get back to the stores to-night: we could have eaten three times as much as we had for this meal." He filled his pipe and lit it, emitting a great puff of smoke. "Well, thank goodness we've got tobacco!"

"You might gimme a bit, boss," said a meek voice. Casey's head, tousled and unkempt, appeared on the top of the rock by which they had sat down, and the boys jumped simultaneously, their hands going to their pockets.

Casey noticed the movement and laughed sourly.

"Y' needn't be afraid of me. I been up here this good while, watchin' for Davison."

"Is he about here?" burst from the boys.

"Not far off, the low swine. He come here three days ago, an' he tried to dodge us—Stock an' me. But we got on his tracks, an' he's led us a lovely dance. All we could do was to keep between him an' his getaway: we're pretty well sure he's found the ol' Chow's hide. But he's been too quick for us to catch him."

"And why do you come to us now?" Jim asked sternly.

Casey shrugged his shoulders.

"Stock's hurt," he said. "Fell over a rock an' hurt his knee. He can't do any more runnin'. An' we ain't got any more food an' 'baccy, and I'd just made up me mind to chuck the whole thing an' get out, when I saw yous comin'. I didn't mean to speak to yous. But the smell of your 'baccy near broke me heart, an' I just had to."

Jim tossed up his pouch to him.

"Here, help yourself," he said.

"Thanks, boss." Casey filled his pipe hungrily, and gave back the pouch. The boys looked at him doubtfully. He was lean, ragged, and plainly bored with life.

"How are we to know this isn't a plant between you and your precious mates?" Jim demanded. "I wouldn't trust any of you a yard."

"An' I wouldn't say you *could* trust us—not as a general thing, so to speak," returned Casey, dryly. "But just now I'm fed-up. An' Stock's over there, only able to hobble. An' I'm that dead sick at seein' Davison sail in an' best us that I'd risk the police meself to see him put in his box. He ain't no class: he'd let a pal down if he made sixpence out of it." He looked wearily from one to the other. "Strewth, I'm playin' straight with you, boss. You can

search me if you like.” He climbed down from the rock and stood before them.

“I’m not taking any chances,” Wally said grimly. He ran his hands over Casey, encountering no weapon more serious than a pocket-knife, and nothing that even remotely resembled a package of jewels. Jim inspected the rock-top from which he had descended, and found it bare. They drew apart and conferred, watching him keenly the while.

Evidently Casey did not mind being watched. He leaned back, smoking with a hungry enjoyment that left no room for other emotions; and grinned at the boys as they returned to him.

“What about Stock?” Jim asked. “Can’t he travel at all?”

“Oh, he can hobble all right. All we want is to get orf this beastly tableland an’ work down to a farm we know. We can manage for ourselves. But I’d like to think yous took on Davison.”

“We’re quite willing to do that, so long as you can satisfy us it isn’t all a put-up job,” said Jim. “Where do you say Davison is?”

“I seen him move into that clump of trees an hour ago,” said Casey, eagerly, pointing to a patch of scrub a long way off. “ ’Course, he may have dodged out the other side, but I don’t fancy he has. He’s got a torch, an’ I reckon he’s goin’ to take his chance of dodgin’ past us in the dark. It ain’t safe to move a yard in this country after dark without a torch: the blessed rocks seem to spring at you out of the ground, they do. That’s how Stock got his, last night; fell over an outcrop of rock an’ bashed his knee. Say, boss, yous better come with me an’ see Stock. Then yous’ll know I’m playin’ straight with yous.”

“You wait here and watch that scrub, Jim,” said Wally. “I’ll go and inspect Stock.”

“Well, for goodness’ sake look out, and have your little gun ready,” Jim said uneasily. He cast a glance at Casey, before which that worthy quailed. “My friend is as quick a shot as I know, so I advise you not to try any tricks.”

“I ain’t got no tricks left, boss: I’ve threw in me hand,” said Casey sadly.

He went off, followed by Wally, while Jim climbed the rock and essayed the difficult task of keeping one eye on the scrub and the other on his chum. He spent a wretched half-hour before Wally came striding back—alone.

“Well?” Jim asked.

“I believe it’s all right,” Wally said excitedly. “Stock’s far more venomous than Casey, of course, but he’s down and out: his knee is twice its proper size, he looks pretty well starved, and he hasn’t any more weapons or worldly possessions than his mate. He won’t have at all a pleasant walk to the farm they talk about, though he says he can limp along well enough. They’re genuinely anxious to chuck up the whole thing and get away, or I’m a Dutchman. Casey didn’t let Stock know that he had been the one to accost us.

He inferred delicately that we had captured him after a desperate resistance. But Stock isn't sorry to have his hand forced. He's had enough of evil-doing for the moment."

"Of course," Jim said uneasily, "there's the chance that the whole thing may be a plot. Our sweet friends here may be on just as loving terms as ever with Mr. Davison, and he may be waiting behind a rock fifty yards away, marking time until his mates have drawn us off the scent. Then they'll all slip away happily together. I'd give something to know what we ought to do. One does hate to be fooled."

Wally was watching the patch of scrub. Suddenly he started violently.

"Quick!" he said. "You can see better than I can, from up there. Don't you see a movement, down at the southern corner?"

Jim was round in a flash.

"No—yes, by Jove, there is!" he exclaimed. "A man is making his way towards the rocks beyond. Davison, for a fiver, Wal! He's crouching down, taking cover wherever he can—only a man who wanted to hide would go the way he's going."

"Then he's ours," said Wally, briefly. He tightened his belt. "Come along, Jimmy, and we'll see if friend Davison can teach us anything about running."

"Well, be careful, in case he's armed," said Jim, coming down by the simple process of sliding. "Don't get within range too recklessly—remember, I'm responsible to Norah for you. I promised her I'd bring you back whole."

"So did I, about you," said Wally. They laughed at each other as they began to run.

It was not long before they knew that the hunt was up. The rocks to which Davison had been making did not afford much cover: evidently he could not dare to be caught there, for they caught sight of him presently, slinking away. And then there was no chance of hiding, unless he could outstrip the pursuers, for they were too close upon his track.

Still, he had a good start, and the boys were soon aware that as a runner the man they were after was very nearly their equal. He ran as a fox runs, twisting and dodging, taking advantage of every feature of the ground that would put them off his trail, and, when he was forced to trust to his legs alone, showing a turn of speed that fairly astonished them. Once they thought he had thrown them off the trail altogether, and for an anxious hour they hunted among the rocks, fearing that he had found some cranny that they might not be able to discover before darkness gave him a fresh chance of escape. But at length he was forced to leave his refuge, and they saw him running again, and were after him with a whoop of delight—a whoop that came to their quarry's ears and caused him to swear savagely under his breath.

They kept always between him and the country he wanted to reach, and

gradually, as the afternoon drew on, they worked him nearer and nearer to the Split Rock. It was easier going now for the boys, for Wally knew this part of the plateau well, and was able to anticipate Davison's moves: and at last they had him out in the open, and the pursuit became a race. Jim dropped behind after a time: his strength was enormous, but Wally's lighter weight made him the fleeter. The man ahead ran doggedly: Wally, behind him, came like a tireless hound, lengthening his stride as they neared the edge of the plateau. Li King's jewels were forgotten now: he could only think of Norah, below in Horseshoe Valley: Norah, whom the mean scoundrel ahead must not be permitted to approach.

He shouted as they passed Split Rock and drew near the edge of the plateau.

"Stop, or I'll fire!"

Davison did not turn. Wally put his hand into his pocket. Then his racing feet caught in a twisted bramble, and he tripped and fell, his pistol jerking out of his hand and landing on the ground ahead of him. Before he could scramble to his feet Davison had disappeared over the sky-line.



“Stop, or I’ll fire!”

Billabong Adventurers]

[[Chapter XVI](#)



## CHAPTER XVII

### HOW LI CHANG SANG A SONG

AT the Horseshoe Valley camp matters had gone smoothly and pleasantly. Li Chang had slept for twenty hours without moving, from the time Jim had put him to bed in the tent. Norah had hesitated as to whether she should wake him, to dress his back and give him food; but had wisely decided that, in the Irish phrase, "his rest was more to him." She herself was badly in need of rest; and though she had had visions of waking in the night to look to her patient, when once her head touched the pillow she knew nothing more until next morning, when the gurgling laughter of a kookaburra disturbed her, and she woke to find sunlight streaming into the tent. Li Chang was sleeping calmly, unheeding any ribald kookaburra; his yellow face was serene and peaceful, his breathing as calmly regular as a baby's.

"No fever about him, thank goodness!" thought Norah. She slipped out and ran down to the river to bathe—casting, as she went, an eye at the frowning sky-line above her, and wondering how Jim and Wally were faring in their campaign. Long ago, she knew, they would have been upon the war-path.

It was noon before Li Chang stirred: and then he lay quietly watching the triangular peep of tree-dotted grass that showed through the flap of the tent-door. He smiled at Norah when she looked in a little later.

"Missee all li'?" he asked.

"Quite all right, thank you, Li Chang. You've had a lovely sleep, haven't you? How does the back feel?"

"Vely better," he told her. "But vely hungly inside."

"I should think so," Norah said, laughing. "I'll bring you some food in a moment."

She came in presently, prepared to feed him, but Li Chang sturdily refused to be considered helpless any more. He sat up, despite Norah's remonstrances: ate a mug of soup in remarkably quick time, demanded another, and after that suggested something more solid. Norah, with some inward misgivings, brought him a trout which she had caught during the morning; and returning a little later found every vestige of it gone, save only the bones; while her patient lay back with an air of blissful repletion.

"I don't believe there's much wrong with you, old chap," said the astonished nurse.

"Me allee same klite well," responded the patient. "Honoulable Missee not wash dishes: me wash them always my glandfather, one-time. If could have

clo'?" He had discovered that he was simply attired in a silk shirt of Wally's, a world too wide for him: not a garment in which a son of the house of Li could go forth.

"Presently," Norah said, "though you're not going to do any work to-day, Li Chang. We'll have a look at your back."

The back, examined, proved wonderfully better; Norah could not have believed that healing was possible in so short a time. Clean blood and healthy youth, coupled with long and peaceful sleep, had worked a cure beyond the power of any doctor. The boy was still stiff and sore, but the angry inflammation had disappeared, and cuts that yesterday had been raw and bleeding were now almost closed.

"Well, you're a first-rate patient, old chap," Norah told him when she had bandaged him freshly. "You'll be all right in no time."

"Missee first-late doctor," said the boy. "Me nothing hab to do but lie still, feel comf'lable, get better. Now me work for Missee."

But when Norah had helped him to dress and he was free to go out, Li Chang found that his legs were by no means his servants yet. They gave way under him, and he was glad to catch at Norah's arm to steady himself, and to let her help him into the open air, where he sat on a stone, looked about him with immense satisfaction, and declared the valley a far better place than "countly up above." Norah cut him a pair of stout sticks and left him to exercise his limbs by short walks that began by being a few yards at a time and soon lengthened to more ambitious efforts. But she kept a watchful eye upon him, and directly her work about the tent was finished she put him on her back—Li Chang violently protesting—and carried him to the river, establishing him on a rug in a grassy hollow. There he lay, supremely content, while she caught fish for their evening meal: and presently slept again, the sunshine helping in his cure. Later, he watched her swim, finding his broken English quite insufficient to express his feelings when she dived from the rock above. For the first time, in all probability, the rocks of Horseshoe Valley heard a flood of rapid Chinese, delivered by an excited small boy who had, for the moment, forgotten that trouble and responsibility had ever sat heavily on his shoulders. He did not notice that before Norah entered the water she placed her revolver carefully on a ledge of rock where it was never far from her.

Next day saw Li Chang almost well, with a body healed of all but scars and an appetite that would not have shamed Jim Linton. To keep him in bed was out of the question; he was as restless as a flycatcher, and insisted on exploring every inch of the horseshoe, and on making friends with all the horses—a detail which finally won the way to Norah's heart. She found him a wonderfully companionable little lad; bright and eager, with a quick mind that constantly sought information and never failed to respond to a joke. They had

long talks while they worked together—the boy insisted on taking his full share of the camp duties, and saw to it that that share included any messy details. “Misee not get pletty hands glubby,” he remarked, as he scoured a frying-pan cheerfully or cleaned fish with a quick skill that showed that he was no stranger to the task. No white boy could have been a better camp-mate.

He told Norah much about his home while they sat by the river when the work was done and his legs began to feel as though they needed rest. The house of Li was no mean family, she gathered: they were proud of name and race, and loyal to China with every fibre of their bodies. Li was the surname. “In my countly we put family name first, own pick-name last; all same you be call Mead-ows No-lah,” he explained, boggling, with little giggles of merriment, over the “r” in her name. “Then honouable blother all same, Linton Jim.”

“Then I shouldn’t call you Li Chang,” Norah said.

“No, if honouably not mind. Me like you call this worm jus’ Chang; all same you be call jus’ No-lah. Vely ni’ name, No-lah; all same like name in my countly.”

“Oh!” said Norah, weakly. It had not occurred to her that there was anything Chinese in her name. But as Chang said it, it was certainly true. He gave the two syllables a kind of singing intonation that was rather attractive.

He talked about his home, and became just an ordinary, homesick little boy as he told her of the wide, rambling house with its many rooms and enclosed courtyards, beyond which his mother and little sisters rarely went, except into the garden. Such a garden it seemed! A stream ran through it, spanned by quaint bridges; a stream where little fish leapt and waterfowl swam, and where wistaria-wreathed willows drooped above the tinkling water. There were winding walks and dense shrubberies; beds of flowers that were all dazzling colour and long stretches of smooth lawn where Chang used to play with his little sisters. “My mother, she play too,” he said. “Always she vely happy, vely laughing.” Then he fell silent for a time, and Norah did not ask him to speak.

When he did it was to ask her about her own home, and she told him of Billabong; of the cheery station-life, with horses and dogs and cattle part of each day’s plan, and freedom and space the very key-notes of existence. Chang tried to understand, but it was clear that it seemed a strange freedom to him, so definitely opposed to the high stone wall that ringed his father’s garden and the teeming life of the densely populated country outside it. Norah found herself trying to catch his point of view on a good many puzzling matters. It was something of a shock to realize that to him all Australian women—all white women—were positively ugly; that their skins were almost repulsive, compared with the honey-coloured Chinese faces. She could not resist asking him a searching question.

“You think I’m ugly, Chang?”

He looked at her for a moment before replying, a dog-like faithfulness in his black eyes.

“In my countly honouable Missee be leckoned vely ugly,” he said simply. “But me know her all same beautiful. Always she be beautiful to all house of Li.”

To speak of his grandfather evidently hurt him. Norah gathered that Li Ning had left China many years before, and had wandered far; and that, at length Li Fuen, his son, taking his boy with him, had gone to find him and bring him back to China. Li Ning had been willing to go, but averred that he was not ready yet; the reason for the delay was, Chang thought, something connected with the missing diamonds and black opals. Business had recalled Li Fuen suddenly to China: he had left the boy as a kind of hostage, the old man promising to bring him home. “Perhaps himself he not come,” said Chang. “But he plomise bling me, so then we know he come some day, keep him plomise.” And Li Fuen had been glad to pledge his only son to ensure getting his father home.

Of the jewels themselves Chang had little to say. Whatever secret there was about them, whatever mystery, it had been Li Ning’s, and no one had sought to fathom it: now it had died with Li Ning, and no one would ever know. Because it had been the old man’s wish that the jewels should go to China, Chang—or any member of the Li family—would have been quite willing to die, to carry out that wish. For in China a grandfather is a person of intense importance to his family, and they pay him a reverence that exalts him almost to the position of a god. To serve Li Ning had been honour beyond words for his little grandson. He had loved the gentle old man tenderly; but he had also leapt at his lightest word of bidding. And now that he was dead he assumed, in the boy’s eyes, all the honour of a household god. Norah, even though she began to comprehend something of the Chinese mind, could scarcely realize what it would mean to little Li Chang if he could obey his grandfather’s wish and take the diamonds to China.

The third day found her growing nervous. Until darkness fell the night before she had hoped that the boys would be back; that they did not come was proof in her mind that Davison had forestalled them. That meant danger: how much or how little she could only guess at, but her conjectures were enough to keep her uneasy, although she tried hard not to be anxious. If they did not appear during the day it was her task to get hold of Jerrold; she laid her plans for an early morning start. Fortunately, Chang could ride—he had already spent cheerful half-hours on one of the ponies, trotting and cantering in the big semicircle of the Horseshoe Valley. It would not take them long to reach the car, and then she could only hope that the road would not hold them back in

the last dash for the Jerrollds' house.

Chang, apparently quite himself again, and scorning to be bandaged any more, kept at her side throughout the day, probably understanding something of the uneasiness Norah tried to conceal. He had begged to be allowed to bathe with her, and she had contrived to fit him out with the trousers of Wally's swimming-suit, in which he splashed happily in the pool and practised diving—having very little skill, but plenty of pluck. After dinner he offered to teach her Chinese in return for a story—she had already discovered in him the keen delight felt by all his countrymen for a tale. So she told him "Cinderella" and "Jack the Giant-Killer," watching the black eyes glow whenever the recital grew thrilling; and then almost forgot her anxiety in her efforts to repeat Chinese words, than which no more difficult sounds exist, since alterations of tone play a part in word meanings that the British tongue can scarcely follow. Chang giggled delightedly over her mistakes, and as Norah grew more and more determined to succeed, the lesson lengthened out, until at last it finished in helpless laughter, and they went off to bathe again.

"I'm going out, Chang," Norah called, after a time. "Coming?"

He shook his round, black head.

"Please not yet, Missee. Vely ni' in water—land vely hot. Can stay?"

"If you like," Norah answered. "But don't get cold."

"No can do," said Chang, decidedly. "No possible when so hot. You call me, I come one-time."

"Very well—I'll coo-ee when I want you," she said.

She left him delightedly splashing, and went up to the tent. All the uneasiness she had endeavoured to put from her came down like a cloud while she dressed; she had a queer feeling that she should not be where she was unable to watch, and she hurried out as soon as she had flung on her clothes, turning her eyes, as she had turned them so often during the day, to the frowning sky-line. If she could only know where were her boys!

A crashing stone rattled down not far from where she stood, and suddenly Norah turned and sprang for the gun—it had never been out of her reach throughout the day. A man was coming down the steep hill-path with great, reckless strides: a tall man, dark and sinister of face. He was hatless, and she could see a white scar on his temple that made a livid mark in its grime. For a moment her breath seemed to stop; then she knew that she must not fail the boys. She levelled the gun and called to him quite calmly.

"Stop!"

He pulled up, staring at her as though she were a ghost. The tent had only just come within his view; she saw his eyes glance quickly here and there as he tried to see if she were alone. Apparently, he was satisfied that no man was there, for he began to move again.

"I'll fire if you come any farther," she called. "And I can shoot straight."

"You'd better get out of my way," he shouted. He was panting heavily; it was evidently an effort to make his voice carry across the distance between them. "I don't want to hurt you. Put that gun down."

Norah smiled.

"I tell you, I'll fire if you come down any more."

"You daren't fire!"

"I'll certainly fire—at your legs. Turn round and go back the way you came."

"I can't go back," he called. "I swear I won't touch you—let me pass!"

For answer he heard the click of the gun as Norah cocked it. He hesitated a moment, scanning the ground below him. Norah blocked the way where the path ended near the tent; the unwavering blue barrels of the gun looked straight at him. To the right the sheer hill-side sloped towards the river. Davison thought quickly. If he could get to the river there might be a chance—the girl might not fire unless he came directly at her. But it was a break-neck descent. Then he heard a shout behind him, and knew that his pursuers were on his trail again. With a curse he sprang from the path, ducked behind a rock, and went crashing down the hill.

Norah held her breath. It did not seem possible that anyone could win safely down the boulder-strewn slope, thick with sliding rubble that made each step a new peril. To fire was to run the risk of killing him, since no careful aim was possible; and she had no longer any fear, for she, too, had heard Jim and Wally shout, and knew they were close at hand. She put down the gun irresolutely and stood waiting.

The impossible happened. Davison kept his feet until the last ten yards, and then crashed to the bottom in a cloud of flying earth and stones. He lay still for a moment; then he picked himself up and dashed towards the river.

And Norah remembered Chang.

She bit off the cry that rose to her lips, raised the gun and fired. The smoke blew aside and she saw Davison running still. Before she could fire a second time he had plunged over the bank and disappeared.

Li Chang, in the water, peacefully floating on his back, had heard the shouting. He swam ashore hurriedly, and was climbing through the bushes that fringed the bank when he saw Davison racing towards him. There was but one course open to Chang—being a prudent lad, where prudence was permissible to one of the house of Li. He fell back through the bushes and into the water, standing against the high bank with his head in the midst of a trailing branch; and so standing, held his breath while Davison dashed, panting, into the water, not a yard from him. A moment he paused; then he splashed through the waist-deep shallows and round the bend, just as Norah came racing to the bank.

"Chang!—are you safe?" she called.

"Me all li', Missee," The black head poked out from its concealing bush. "Him not hurt you?"

"No. Where has he gone?"

"Him go lound bend. Plenty hully. Who fiah gun?"

"I did," said Norah. "I was afraid he'd get you, Chang."

"Hi-yah!" said Chang, delightedly. "You lun hard, Missee, fiah again! Leckon you hit him this time!"

"I don't want to hit him," confessed Norah—and for ever lowered herself a little in the eyes of Li Chang. "The boys are coming, Chang—they'll catch him."

She heard Wally shout and ran up the bank. The boys were nearly down the cliff. They greeted her with a quick call.

"All right, Norah? Which way did he go?"

"Down the river," Norah cried. "He can't get away from you." Wally flashed a smile at her as he shot past her, running like a deer. She saw them clear the dog-leg fence at the entrance to the valley, taking it almost in their stride. Then, unable to remain behind, she followed.

There had never been much chance for Davison, and there was none now. He left the river as soon as the bend screened him and dashed along the bank, not fifty yards ahead of his pursuers. But they were running freely, and his boots and trousers were water-logged: they gained upon him rapidly. The end came when he slipped on a rock over which he had tried to take a short cut, and went hurtling over another boulder to the ground. He sat up, groaned, and fell backwards.

Wally came upon him first. The man on the ground looked up at the tall fellow with an evil smile.

"Well, you've got me—and much good may it do you," he snarled. "You'll have a nice job getting me out of here, anyhow, for I've broken my leg."

"Broken it, have you? Or is that another of your tricks, Davison?"

"Not much it isn't. You can see." He nodded towards an unpleasantly twisted leg. "You and your pal have been interfering a good deal in my affairs—now you can try your hand at doctoring me."

"Oh, we'll do that, after a fashion," said Jim, who had arrived in time to hear this speech. "It won't be especially comfortable for you, but we'll get it done. First of all, though, you can hand over Li Ning's property."

Davison's smile was malevolent.

"You can search me," he said. "I haven't got it, though."

"Oh, that be hanged for a yarn!" said Jim. "We know you took it—we tracked you. Hand it over."

"You know so much, my dear young friends," said Davison, softly.

“Whatever I may have had—and you made it exquisitely easy for me to get it—I certainly have not got it now.” His voice took a bitter edge. “Why, you young fools, do you think I was going to be caught with anything on me? I scrapped it up on the plateau yonder as soon as I knew you’d probably get me—scrapped it in a place you’ll never find if you hunted for ten years. And you thought I was going to hand it to you tied up with blue ribbon, I suppose! You poor fools!”

Jim stooped and searched him without speaking, while Davison lay, still smiling.

“He doesn’t seem to be telling lies this time,” said Jim, rising. “Well, we’d better set his leg, Wally, and get him up to camp. Let’s go and fix up splints and a stretcher.” They went off without casting a glance at Davison. The evil smile faded as the man lay in the silent bush.

“Here’s Norah!” said Wally, and hurried to meet her.

“Did you get him?” she asked breathlessly.

“We got him—he’s a pleasant gentleman with a broken leg, caused by somersaulting over a rock. We’re going to get things to fix him up. You’ve been all right, Nor? And the youngster?”

“Quite all right: he’s very well.” She was clinging to them both, her face alight with the joy of getting them back. “And the jewels?—you found them?”

“Davison got them first,” Wally said, slowly, hating to tell her. “And we haven’t got them, Nor, worse luck. We thought we had, until five minutes ago. But the brute chucked them away up on the plateau when we were after him, and looking for them would be worse than hunting a needle in a haystack. We’re horribly sorry. Nor.”

“You poor old boys!” she said. Her voice was warm with sympathy. “I did think you would have the satisfaction of getting them. Well, we’ve done our best to keep our promise, Wally, and we can’t do any more.”

“You’re a dear to take it that way,” he said. “But I know how much you wanted them, and I’d have given a lot to bring them back to you.”

Norah took an arm of each, and they went back to the camp. A little figure sat on a rock near the tent.

“Well, the youngster seems quite fit again, that’s one comfort,” Jim said. “Listen to him singing!”

Li Chang was singing to himself, a high, tuneless chant that carried no melody to Western ears, though it may have been soothing to a Chinese. Yet it was not a soothing chant: rather it held a note of barbaric triumph, and it was not difficult to imagine it being sung to an accompaniment of brazen gongs.

“Seems pleased we’ve got his enemy,” said Wally. “Poor little chap, he won’t be so pleased when he finds that the enemy has done us in the eye!”

Li Chang did not get up to greet them as they approached. Instead, his



queer song rose higher. He did not even look at them. His gaze was centred on something he held cupped in both hands, over which he bent as he sang, rocking his body to and fro. The sunlight flashed on what he held; it sent out flashes of white fire, mingled with deep gleams of red and gold and emerald green. Norah sprang forward with a sharp cry.

“Chang! You blessed infant—where did you get them? Boys—look!”

The Chinese boy lifted his face. It was quite grave, but his eyes blazed with triumph.

“Vely bad man, that,” he said solemnly. “Him jump past me in water: me hide in bush one-time, keep still, all li’, you bet. Bad man him take out my old honouable glandfather’s li’l bag, dlop vely careful in water under piecee lock. Then him lun away one-time. So me wait till evelybody gone, dive in, find l’il bag of my old honouable glandfather. Hi-yah! Hi-yah!” The barbaric chant broke out irrepressibly as the boy bent over the winking diamonds and opals of Li Ning.



“His gaze was centred on something he held cupped in both hands, over which he bent as he sang, . . .”

Billabong Adventurers]

[[Chapter XVII](#)

## CHAPTER XVIII

### HOW THREE WENT HOME

IT is to be feared that the next few days were anything but agreeable to Mr. Davison. The setting of a leg by amateur Red Cross workers, however gentle, is never a pleasing matter for the patient; nor is it enlivening to be carried for six miles on a roughly made stretcher over ground so strewn with boulders that the bearers cannot avoid frequent stumbles. Jim and Wally, who were the bearers, did their best; and to them the journey was by no means a pleasure-trip. But any inconvenience it caused Jim and Wally was a mere circumstance beside the unhappiness that was the portion of Mr. Davison.

More was to follow for this misguided man. The law could not touch him, since his captors were anxious that no publicity should be given to the matter of Li Chang and his property. To the outer world Mr. Davison was merely a prospector for gold, who had injured himself in the bush and had been nobly succoured by Jim and Wally. The nurses in the hospital where he eventually found himself, after another long and painful journey from the Jerrolds' farm, were distinctly pained that their patient showed so little natural gratitude towards his benefactors, but instead snarled when they were mentioned; and having thus acquired a hearty dislike for the patient, paid him as little attention as was consistent with their duty and cared not that his days were long and dull. Dull and long indeed they were, for the break was a bad one, and had been aggravated by hard and rough travelling; and when Mr. Davison, after three months' enforced seclusion, during which he was seldom out of pain, emerged from hospital, he walked with a limp that he would never lose. A man with a limp cannot move very quickly, and is, moreover, an individual easily marked by the police; therefore it is to be feared that Mr. Davison's future career in his chosen profession of helping himself to other people's goods was likely to be sadly hampered.

All this was hard to bear. But it was as nothing compared to the morning that he left the Jerrolds' farm for the long journey to the hospital. The sweetness of his imagined triumph over his captors had not abated. He rarely saw any of them without his malignant smile, and it was especially evident when Wally and Jim came into his room, with Li Chang at their heels.

"Come to say good-bye?" he asked unpleasantly. "You didn't come out on top after all, did you?—for all you thought yourselves so smart."

Jim lit his pipe before replying.

"We feel we can do without saying good-bye to you," he remarked. "But

we would hate you to go without seeing something Li Chang is taking back to China shortly. Come here, Chang.”

Li Chang came up obediently. He was as solemn as ever, and he said nothing: only he looked at Davison with hatred and bitter contempt that were startling in a child’s eyes.

“Oh, take the little yellow Chink away!” said Davison, uneasily. “He makes me tired.”

“What he has to show you may make you even more fatigued,” Wally said.

Li Chang put his hand in his pocket and drew out a little chamois leather bag, at the sight of which Davison started and bit off an exclamation. The boy untied the string that bound its neck and emptied its contents into Jim’s huge palm. For a moment there was complete silence in the little room. Fury held Davison speechless, as the vision he had cherished of returning to find the jewels he had hidden in the river vanished before the glittering stones Jim held. But bitterest of all was the knowledge that, after all, he had been the loser throughout—checkmated by the boys he had held in contempt.

“You vely clever sneak-thief,” said Li Chang, quietly. “You jump in water, close where me hide—you never see me watch you hide tleasure under stone. And me watch—and me laugh vely much—and when you lun away me take it out again one-time. So we all laugh.”

He paused, and when he spoke again his voice was even more gentle.

“You kill my old honoulable glandfather,” he said. “For that, some day me, or some other of the house of Li—we come back from my countly and kill you. You never forget that. In five years—ten—some time we come, to pay you what we owe.”

Davison’s face was grey. Jim put his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“No more, Chang, old chap,” he said. They went out, leaving Davison to his own thoughts.

\* \* \* \* \*

A carefully worded letter to Chen Lun, in Melbourne, brought a reply even more guarded in its nature, asking them to take Li Chang to Sydney; and thither they journeyed slowly in the car, Wally and Norah generally in front, while Jim and Chang sat in the back seat and talked of many things, and became great friends. Chen Lun met them at a Sydney hotel, explaining that he intended to take Li Chang immediately to China, and had not cared to run the risk of letting him come to Melbourne, where, for all he knew, his house was watched. “Davison has many confederates in his trade,” he said. “The jewels have already cost one life, and we take no more chances.”

That night they dined with Chen Lun at the house of another Chinese—a stout and impressive merchant, who bade them welcome ceremoniously, presided at a dinner which included many strange and alarming Chinese

dishes, and afterwards, with a thousand apologies at removing his unworthy person from visitors so more-than-honourable, left them to talk—which was just what they desired. Chen Lun sat smoking, his face impassive, while he listened to the story of their adventures on the plateau, until it ended with Chang's final encounter with Davison.

"I thank you," he said courteously. "Li Chang has already told me much, but to hear a story from those concerned is always best. Still, he has told me some things which probably I could not hear from you; of kindness, of gentleness, of friendship. There are no bounds to the gratitude of Li Chang."

They told him, flushing, that there was no need for gratitude.

"That is the way of your people in looking at such matters," said the old Chinese. "To you such things are gay adventures—what you call to yourselves a jolly lark. You risk much, and for yourselves you gain nothing."

"We have the adventure," said Norah, smiling at him. "And it was the biggest adventure we ever had."

"And to be adventurers is enough, you think. Well, at least, you will let us have our gratitude. Chinese gratitude does not seem much in this country, but it remembers long: like Chinese vengeance, which the man Davison will find out. But you three, who came across the path of unknown foreigners—foreigners whom your people despise, even while they call them 'Yellow Peril'—and, putting your own business aside, made their cause your own and championed the weak—what am I to say to you?" He rose, and bowed to them gravely; and though he was just a meagre old man, there was nothing ridiculous in the action. "So long as there is a Li or a Chen, your names will be remembered with honour. And if ever a time comes when you need help, will you let me work off a particle of my debt by telling me?"

They promised, embarrassed and awkward; and, a little later, made their escape, feeling that their wildest moments on the plateau were nothing compared to the horror of being ceremoniously thanked. It was strange to come from the richly furnished Chinese house, from manners and food and speech that made them feel as though they were in another country, and then to swing down Pitt Street, brilliantly lighted and full of the gay, jostling crowd that throngs Sydney streets when the theatres are over. They turned into a restaurant where a band was playing, and people were dancing up and down the space between the tables, and sat over their coffee discussing the curious evening they had spent.

"Makes you feel as if you were zigzagging between two different worlds!" said Wally at last. "I'll be glad to get out again for a long day with cattle, won't you, Nor? That's the best thing of all. I'd rather hear old Murty making remarks to a refractory bullock than listen to all the flowery speeches ever thrown off by an old mandarin like our friend Chen Lun. I know he means

well, but he made me go all hot under the collar!"

"Same here," said Jim. "Look, they're turning out the lights. Doesn't it strike you we'd better make tracks for the hotel? Or is it a cave you're keen on camping in to-night?"

Li Chang had exacted from them a promise that they would see him off, and three days later they boarded the Chinese steamer at Circular Quay. The boy was looking out for them eagerly: a highly respectable Li Chang, in a new blue suit—very different from the tattered scarecrow they had rescued from Stock and Casey on the plateau. He led them along the crowded deck.

"Honourable Chen Lun asks you come see him in cabin, top side," he said.

It was the best stateroom on the ship to which he conducted them. Chen Lun, also correct in European clothes, sat placidly in a great basket-chair. He rose and bowed to them deeply.

"We are honoured that you come," he said. "You brought the photographs for which I ventured to ask you?"

He had written to them—a queer, stilted little letter—to ask for their photographs, to take to Chang's people. Norah produced them, rather shamefacedly, and the old man inspected them with deliberation.

"They are good, but not altogether good," he said. "That is because you are people of action, and you laugh much, and your faces crinkle with smiles when you talk: so that in repose there is something that is not quite familiar. Some day I hope that you will give me pictures of yourself on the great horses you love to ride, as Chang has told me. But these will go to my friend Li Fuen now, and for ever be kept with honour in his house."

This information naturally deprived the three Australians of all power of speech. Chen Lun looked at them with a little smile.

"It distresses you when I tell you what we feel," he said. "So I will try not to tell you any more. But there is one little thing for which you must have patience. I have allowed myself the happiness of sending to your home a package of gifts—small and unworthy things by which I hope that you will remember your Chinese friends."

They stammered awkward thanks. Later on, when, at Billabong, they unpacked Chen Lun's little package, they blushed to think how feeble the thanks had been—looking at two wonderful screens inlaid with ivory figures, a cabinet that matched the screens, and such objects in bronze and lacquer as no Australian city could show. Perhaps it was as well that they did not know at the moment, for the old man had not finished.

"And this is my honourable friend Li Ning's gift to you, Mrs. Meadows," he said. "I have taken the liberty of having it made ready for you to wear."

The little open case he put in her hand held Li Ning's opal. It hung upon a slender platinum chain, caught by a diamond clasp; its many-coloured fires

blazed within a setting of diamonds, small, but perfect. Norah caught her breath at the beauty of the jewel.

"Ah, you shouldn't," she exclaimed. "It is far too good for me."

"For you?" It was the first time they had seen Chen Lun's impassive calm fail him. He took a step forward, his face working. "For you, who sat beside my friend through the darkness and eased his journey on high? For that alone, had you done nothing else, there is nothing too good for you."

"All visitors ashore!" A steward came along the alley-way, beating a gong as he shouted his warning.

"It is time you go." Chen Lun gripped their hands in turn. They left him in his cabin and made their way to the deck, with Chang beside them. The boy said good-bye wistfully. His eyes filled with tears as he held Norah's hand.

"Goo'-bye, Missee No-lah. Me not forget."

"Good-bye, Chang, old chap. Take care of yourself, and come back to Australia some day."

He shook his head. Chang's memories of Australia were not such as to induce a wish to come back.

"More me like you come visit me in China," he said. "Always me hope you come."

They turned to look at him when they had gone down the gangway. He was leaning over the rail, his yellow face sad, as he waved his straw hat to them. The crowd hid them from his sight.

The three threaded their way along the wharf and reached the street beyond. Jim turned to Norah and Wally.

"And what's the next thing, Adventurers?" he asked. "I'm off home in the morning to take delivery of a thousand head of cattle Dad's just bought, and of course there's a job if you want one. But perhaps you're off on your own again, looking for fresh adventures? Don't let me interfere with your pleasant plans; you certainly dig up a very venturesome adventure when you set your minds to it, and I'd hate to cramp your style."

Norah looked at Wally, and they both laughed.

"We be three adventurers together," she said. "Somehow, it seems a pity to split up the firm again; it never makes a really satisfactory arrangement. And it's ages since we saw Dad and everybody. Suppose we all find the little old car and go home quietly to Billabong!"

THE END.

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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Billabong Adventurers* by Mary Grant Bruce]