

# TOLD BY PETER



MARY·GRANT·BRUCE

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BILLABONG'S LUCK  
SEAHAWK  
WINGS ABOVE BILLABONG  
CIRCUS RING  
BILLABONG GOLD  
TOLD BY PETER

# TOLD BY PETER

BY  
MARY GRANT BRUCE

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# Told by Peter

## CHAPTER I

### HOW IT BEGAN

SIX weeks ago I should simply have hooted if anyone had suggested to me that I might as well write a book. For that matter, I did hoot when Binkie first came out with the notion. It was easy to see that Binkie didn't think much of it herself, and that it wasn't her own bright idea at all, because she got pretty confused when I said what I thought of it.

Nevertheless, she stuck to the point, for Binkie is like that; all she needs is a bit of opposition, and then she is apt to drive in her toes like a mule and argue that black is white. Dad says it's a way women have, but Binkie is beginning rather too early, if you ask me.

Well, I hooted, and we argued, and presently it came out that it was really Miss Tarrant's idea. Miss Tarrant is Binkie's governess, and even if she is a girl she is a pretty good sort—unless she happens to be teaching, when Binkie says she is a holy terror. Luckily for me, I do not see her at those times. Outside the schoolroom you would sometimes think she is quite young. She swims better than most people, and she can take us both on at tennis and beat us 6-3. Even at cricket she isn't too bad; she bowls under-arm, but she manages to get a nasty screw on the ball and sends it down fairly fast.

When she came to Weeroona she didn't know the first little thing about a horse, and she was deadly scared of bullocks and cows. But I'll admit that she was game. We had no end of fun teaching her to ride. I have always regretted that we didn't keep a tally of the number of times she fell off, because that sort of a record is very useful when any kind of argument grows heated. But she stuck to riding, even if she couldn't always stick to the saddle, and now she is quite useful on a horse.

Altogether, Binkie and I have found out that it's worth while paying

attention to what Miss Tarrant says when she's serious, though of course we have never let her see this; and when Binkie admitted that it was her notion that I ought to write a book it set me thinking. Not that I gave in to Binkie. I just told her she was a silly ass, and so was anyone else who had such a rotten idea.

Binkie got annoyed at that, and she picked up my lunch-tray and made for the door, remarking as she went that I'd won the Junior Essay prize at my silly old school, and if I could do that, there was no earthly reason why I shouldn't write something a bit more interesting. She was so worked up that she caught the tray on the side of the bedpost, and the cruets things flew in several directions, and the lid of the pepper-pot came off. I had no idea how pepper could spread. I ducked under the sheet a second too late, and for some time there was nothing to be heard in my room but loud and prolonged sneezing.

Well, when that was all over, and gosh, it was funny to see Binkie trying to sweep up the pepper and sneezing more and more the harder she swept, I started thinking. Of course it was all rot about the Essay prize. That was for writing about General Clive, and I mugged it all up in the School library—there was a chap called Lord Macaulay whose book was very useful. If everyone had their rights that prize ought to have gone to Macaulay, but I think he's dead. Writing that sort of bilge isn't like writing something really decent like a book of adventure, and I had sense enough to know it. But it struck me that it might be fun to try what I could do in the adventure line.

Not what you would call fun at ordinary times, of course. I can't imagine anything more awful, if I had two legs in working order. But when a fellow is planked into bed for simply ages, with one leg stuck out in front of him under a sort of wigwam, and the leg and all the inside of the wigwam are often absolutely full of aches—well, you get a different notion of fun. Fun becomes something—anything—that keeps you from feeling the aches and from remembering things. Things like the horses, and bathing, and the cricket season going on with you knocked out of the Second Eleven, and mighty little chance of playing football next winter. And lots more.

Mother says the way to dodge those thoughts is to swop them for other thoughts; she knows jolly well it's no good just saying "Don't think about them." But she says one can practise the swopping business. When I'm feeling blue she has a way of strolling in with a new jig-saw, or a wire-puzzle outfit, or something. There was one pretty bad day when she came along to get me to help her to design a play-house she wants me and Binkie to build for ourselves when I'm better. Some play-house, too; we added all sorts of ideas to it as we went along, and it will be big enough to keep all our private possessions in. It will have a verandah with built-in bunks so that we can sleep there when we like. It was Mother's suggestion that grown-ups should only be admitted to it

by special invitation of the owners.

We spent all that afternoon drawing plans, and when we'd got it just right I coloured it, and it looked gorgeous. I made an awful mess of the bedspread with the paints, but Mother didn't seem to care, she was so keen on getting the job done thoroughly. I was thinking about it, going to sleep that night, and it struck me it had all been part of her idea of swopping unpleasant thoughts for jolly ones. Well, it worked that day, anyhow; I'd enjoyed myself frightfully.

But Mother is too busy to spend many afternoons like that, and she can't always have something new up her sleeve, no matter how hard she tries. Me being like this gives her a heap of extra work in any case, though she never lets on that she's tired. So I began wondering about this book notion of Miss Tarrant's, and it seemed to me there might be something in it, if only I could get interested enough.

Miss Tarrant herself came in while I lay there thinking. She had a present for me. Rather a jolly thing, a writing-board made of a bit of three-ply covered with blue cloth. It has a large-sized writing-pad fixed on to it, and there is a loop of stuff that holds a ripping Eversharp pencil.

"There!" said Miss Tarrant, "I've made you your whole trade-outfit, and there's nothing to hinder you from becoming an author immediately."

I said it was jolly good of her, but that the author part was all tosh, and people with smashed legs didn't write books.

She said: "That's all you know, Peter." She told me about a chap called Henley; she didn't know for certain if he'd had a smashed leg, but probably he'd never had time to have one, because he was always too busy having operations. There was hardly any part of him that doctors weren't constantly carving up in sections. She said he never knew what it was to be free from simply awful pain, and he knew he never would be, so he wrote things to keep his mind happy, since his body was past praying for. Poetry chiefly. I'm not much on that sort of thing, but it sounded pretty good when Miss Tarrant told me some of it, with her voice very low, the way she always says verses. There was one line she gave me specially to think about:

"My head is bloody, but unbowed."

"That's for you," she said. "Your head may not be bloody at the moment, but that's because you have such an energetic mother when it comes to mopping up damaged sons. There was an occasion, though, when it really was quite a nasty mess. So Henley's line fits your head well enough—and now your job is to keep it unbowed, in spite of all the aches under the wigwam. And you will, too, Peter."

"Tough job sometimes," I said.

"Yes, tough enough, I know. I believe it will help—really—if you make up

your mind to write down the whole story. A pity not to write it, too, because it certainly was an adventure. Have a shot at it, at all events; I'm told that authors become so worked up when they once start that they fling their ink-bottles at anyone who dares to interrupt them, even with a tea-tray. That's the only reason I haven't given you an ink-bottle."

I said: "Well, I could fling this writing-board, if you think it would stand up to it."

"Oh, do try it!" she begged. "Try it on your father first. Only please let Binkie and me know, so that we can take up a handy position in the offing to see the show."

"Will I just!" I said. "One broken leg is all I want at one time. But truly, Miss Tarrant, it's awful rot to think of me writing a book. Why, I'd never be able to think up a title, to start with."

"Don't you worry about that," she said. "I'm told that all the best authors find their titles come to them quite unexpectedly—just like a broken leg. They float to them out of the blue."

"Is that how you imagine broken legs come?" I growled. "Mine came out of——"

"Sh-sh!" she said. "Don't give it away yet, you donkey. You must always keep the exciting surprises to the last when you're an author. Think of your poor readers, and have a heart!"

"My poor readers!" I said. "I should jolly well think they *would* be poor. In a lunatic asylum, I should say."

"Oh, not until after they've read your book," she assured me. "It's perfectly frightful to think what authors do to their readers. I knew an author once who wrote a very sad tale, and a girl wrote to her and told her that at one painful happening in the book she had cried so hard that the gold stopping in her front tooth fell out!"

So I said that if I could only pull that off on her it would be worth writing a book, and she said, "You can't—I haven't got a gold stopping. If I had I would gladly lay it at your feet." And then we became quite impolite to each other, until I was laughing too much to think up any more insults. Miss Tarrant suddenly gasped, and looked at her watch.

"Oh, my goodness!" she said. "I left that unhappy Binkie to copy out French sentences, and by this time she's probably raving. Peter, you have an appalling effect on me. Get on with being an author, and I will go and try to justify my overpaid existence." She put her hand on my head for a second. "'Bloody, but unbowed,' old man," she said, and her eyes looked all funny. Then she went for her life to the schoolroom.

Well, that didn't get me any nearer to becoming an author. So I reckoned I had better put the word "author" out of my mind altogether, because it could

never be me, and just think about writing down all that happened these last hols. That was easier, since I need only write for myself, and no eye but mine would ever look on it, and I needn't put in any flowery patches like I, I mean Macaulay, did about Clive.

And I could write just as I liked, too, and use bad grammar and slang if I wanted to, with no reader to say me nay like form-masters do. So it really wouldn't be a book at all, but just a record of a very queer time; and perhaps if Binkie behaved herself I might read it to her in our new play-house when we'd built it.

This made it seem a much less alarming job, and I thought that anyhow I would write a little bit of it, perhaps just one chapter, to see how I got on. But I did wish I could find a title first, because then it would feel as if I'd really begun. I tried hard to think of one, but they all seemed to have been used before; or else they gave away the secrets, which is an infuriating thing many authors do, and always puts me right off a book.

So I gave it up at last, because I wanted to make a start before tea, and I got the Eversharp ready and tried it on the cover of the writing-pad. It worked all right, so I turned back the cover to really make a beginning.

And there, on the first page, was my title, painted in red and blue, the way Miss Tarrant paints things, with idiotic little drawings all round it—bucking horses, motor-boats, skulls and cross-bones and performing seals and aeroplanes looping and people diving off rocks, and lots of things that hadn't a thing to do with my story. And one of me in bed with my leg under the wigwam—me looking at the writing-board in horror, and sucking the pencil, with all my hair standing on end. The title was this:

**TOLD BY PETER.**

## CHAPTER II

—AND WENT ON

I THOUGHT when I began that I could jump straight into my story. But it isn't quite as simple as that. Because of having the title, I think. I mean, when you find a title ready waiting for you, all trimmed up with aeroplanes and skulls and oddments, you just can't wade into the thing as if it was a diary and write "Jan. 8th: Went to . . ." wherever it was I might have gone. A title seems like a sort of challenge, and you feel you've got to live up to it. This may be the way real authors feel, for all I know, and if they do I'm sorry for them.

So I shall begin, anyhow, by telling something about ourselves, as if I was meaning to write a proper book, but I'm not going in for descriptions and stuff like that, no matter how many skulls Miss Tarrant drew. Binkie is the only person who will ever have a chance to see it, and I expect she might be awfully offended if I tried to describe her. In real books girls' hair and eyes always get a lot of description; and though I know Binkie's hair is a sort of dark bay and curly and generally untidy, I haven't the foggiest notion what colour her eyes are.

Therefore, all long descriptions will be skipped. But now that I have a title I shan't mind letting myself go over interesting details, if any; and if occasionally some of the flowery phrases I mugged up in Macaulay for my essay drip by accident off my pencil, I shall let them drip. By this means I may be able to discover whether there is anything really authorious about me or not. I think, too, it may be as well if I try to imagine that I have a reader, and not merely Binkie, because that will keep me up to the mark better than Binkie has any hope of doing. And he will have to be a patient reader.

The worst of the Macaulay business was that when I won that prize, and told them how, it started Miss Tarrant on to reading Macaulay with Binkie. They must have read him very hard, for they are now absolutely soaked with him. Not to improve Binkie's mind; she has the sort of mind that doesn't improve that way. They did it simply to be able to hurl bits of him at me if they wanted to annoy me. So if the patient reader meets either of them saying something to me that couldn't by any possibility be original, he will know that it is a remark of Macaulay's. It may not make any sense whatever, but that never troubles Miss Tarrant or Binkie.

Well, there are five of us at Weeroona: Dad, Mother, Binkie, Miss Tarrant

and me. The reader may wonder why I put Miss Tarrant among the family, since I revealed in Chapter I that she is Binkie's governess, and governesses are usually endured with difficulty during term, and fade away in the holidays, regretted by none.

But Miss Tarrant is not like that. She hasn't any people except a married brother whose wife has innumerable young, and when she goes to stay with them they welcome her with open arms and give her all the children to take care of and all their clothes to mend. Thus, when she has a nice holiday at her brother's she comes back to Weeroona looking like nothing on earth. So Dad and Mother found out that she would far rather have her hols here, and as we all like her awfully we just keep her.

Mother says she feels a bit guilty over it, because Miss Tarrant does heaps to help her all the time, but Miss Tarrant only laughs and says that nobody could want a better holiday than merely ceasing to teach Binkie. I need not describe Miss Tarrant further except to say that she makes no secret of being pretty old, nearly twenty-four, and that my cousin Gerald, who comes here sometimes, says she is an eye-ful.

Dad should really have been introduced first, I suppose. He is six foot four, and he was Captain of the First Eleven when he was at my school. He does not mind ragging with us, but if he says a thing in a certain tone of voice you jump to it. Mother is quite impossible to describe, I find, but if the patient reader perseveres with this book he will no doubt find out for himself what she is like.

Binkie was christened Barbara, but Mother called her Binkie because she was so afraid that otherwise she would be called Babs. Dad says that this was jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, but Mother does not agree. Anyhow, Binkie doesn't mind, and when we are in a hurry we call her Binks. She is a year younger than me, and we did everything together until I went to school, which of course makes a difference, especially in the first two or three days after I come home. After that it becomes very hard to impress Binkie with anything about school, which just shows you how narrow-minded people get who always stay at home in the country.

I went to school because Dad did, and Binkie has a governess at home because Mother did. I mean, Mother went to school, and she was awfully brainy and passed a whacking lot of exams; and she says much good Latin and maths did her when she got married when she was twenty and had to run a house in the country. I mean, of course, it can't help you much to know Latin when a bullock is killed for beef and you've got to understand all about joints and oddments, and look pretty lively, too, in case any of it goes bad. Mother had some ghastly times when she was learning about really important things like that. So she made a vow that if she had a daughter she would make sure that the daughter knew how to run a place with one hand tied behind her, if

necessary, and a sub-vow that the daughter must learn to speak French, even if she couldn't write it, so that she wouldn't feel a lost soul if she ever went to France. Mother reckons that those are the only things that really matter for a girl. So of course Binkie was for it when she arrived, and I will admit that she can cook. I'm not so sure about her French. She and Miss Tarrant jabber it much too fast to be natural. Dad says how about Mother's theories of education if Binkie had wanted to be really a swot and go to the University; and Mother looks at him, and then at Binkie, and says there was no danger.

Well, that is all the family. Except the men about the place, of course, but they live in the men's hut. Some of them are awfully good sorts, but the patient reader will meet them later. Sometimes we have a cook and a housemaid, and sometimes we have not, because cooks and housemaids in Australia are what Dad calls a fleeting population. They come and go; and often there is a long interval between the going and the coming.

If it wasn't that Mother and Miss Tarrant and Binkie have to work too hard, Dad and I like it better when there isn't a cook, because cooks are always tempermental, and you have to be jolly careful in the kitchen, and often the cooking is tempermental too. But just now we are lucky, for when the last cook suddenly said she was fed up to the teeth with being out of reach of a picture-theatre, and packed her box and went to find one, Eva the housemaid revealed the fact that she could cook, and took on the job. Mother says she would like to think that it was because she loves us, but she fancies that Joe, one of the stockmen, had something to say to it, because he takes Eva out riding every Sunday. Otherwise she might have fled to find a picture-theatre, too.

Weeroona is a cattle-station, and Dad has the best lot of pedigree Herefords in the district and takes lots of prizes at shows. I could write heaps about Herefords, but I am afraid no reader would be patient enough to stand it, so I will merely say that there is no breed to touch them, and when I leave school I am going to run the station with Dad until I get a station of my own. Binkie says she is going to run it too, and of course I laugh at her, and she gets annoyed. She is terribly disappointed because she isn't a boy, and she tries to get over the fact of being a girl by wearing riding-breeches or shorts practically all the time, unless Mother puts her foot down. If you want to see how furious Binkie can get, you have only to say, "Be lady-like, Barbara!"—and then the feathers fly.

It must be much easier to write a book that isn't about one's own people. I mean, there are lots of things I could say about Binkie, but she will see what I write, and it would be rather giving myself away. Anyhow, you can't put down some things in cold blood, and Binkie would hoot if I did. So I will restrict myself to saying that when I go to other fellows' houses in term-time and meet

their sisters I generally come away wondering how on earth the other fellows can stick them, because they do not seem to have any sense at all; and Binks really has a bit. In fact, in quite a lot of ways she is nearly as good as a boy. I may decide that it is prudent to take out this bit later, but at present I will let it stand, because it is helping out this chapter. I am working up deep sympathy for authors now, because, until I tried, I never realized how hard it is to write all the dull stuff at the beginning before you come to the real story. It has to be done, of course, but if you ask me, patient reader, it is quite a job of work.

Oh, I forgot the horses. Even if you couldn't be expected to want to hear all I could say about Hereford cattle, you will have to bear hearing about the horses, because they come into the story, if I ever get so far. We have a lot, of course, like most stations, and none of them are bad, for Dad can't bear the sight of scrubbers. His own special ones are beauties; it takes something out of the ordinary to carry anyone his size. Binkie and I naturally think our ponies are hard to beat. They are pretty big and nearly thoroughbred. Mine is a black mare called Roona, and Binkie's Hurricane is dark bay with black points; and both of them can jump like stags. Nobody but ourselves is ever allowed to ride them, so when I am at school Binks has to use them in turns, or else it would take half the holidays to reduce Roona to order. Mother does not ride much now: she says the car is more fitting for old ladies. That, of course, is nonsense, because no one in their senses would ever dream of calling Mother old. In many ways she is just about the age of Binks and me.

I don't know how many dogs we have. Between the working ones and the house ones and oddments belonging to the men there is quite a mob. Binkie has a Sealyham she thinks the world of, and I think the same of my red setter Bran. That dog knows as much as a human being. For instance, he always knows when I am coming home. They don't tell him, but a day or two before I come he begins to get what Binks calls his "feelings," and he wanders in and out of my room and almost talks to them about me. Then, when the real day comes he gets so excited that he's never still; and when Dad gets the car out he jumps on the running-board and nothing will shift him. He rides on it perfectly safely, and it's funny to see him leaning in or out when the car goes round corners, never losing his balance for a moment. When they pull up at the station he's off like a shot; he tears down the platform to watch for the smoke of the engine coming over the hill, and when the train slows down old Bran is always the first thing I see, racing along beside the carriage and barking his head off. But unless I am at home he will never get into the car at other times.

Well, that is all about Weeroona and its population, but there are two other people I must tell you about. They are Clem Hardy and his father, and Clem is my best friend. Mr. Hardy is an Englishman. His wife died when Clem was a little chap, and they have a rather doddering old housekeeper, Mrs. Sarah

Green, who looks after their house—more or less. Mother says it's less. They have a little place just beyond Weeroona, not far from the sea: hardly any land, because Mr. Hardy isn't strong enough to manage farming or anything, so he lives on his income, and it is a very small income. Often Mother is worried about them, because she knows how hard up they are, and Mr. Hardy has attacks of some illness that lay him out for a week at a time, and sometimes more. We reckon he ought to go and see a specialist in Sydney, but he hasn't enough money for specialists, and he's far too proud to let Dad help him, as Dad would love to do.

Clem has to work pretty hard, though he is only a few months older than me. He gets up very early and milks their cows and feeds the pigs and fowls and does all the odd jobs. Then he has five miles to ride to school, and it isn't much of a school, and he hates it. Clem has got brains, and it's a rotten shame that he can't go to a school like mine; it doesn't seem fair that I can, when everybody knows I have no brains to speak of, except about cattle and horses. Dad and Mother have always wanted to help about school for Clem, but Mr. Hardy has a sort of fierce pride, and it was no use trying. But he couldn't stop Dad giving Clem a decent pony on his last birthday. It is a great pony, and Clem loves it nearly best of anything in the world.

They're lonely people, the Hardys. We are their only neighbours, and they don't seem to have anyone belonging to them. Clem told me once that his mother had been utterly cast off by her people because she went and married Mr. Hardy against their wishes. They hadn't any decent reason; it was just because they thought he wasn't good enough for their family, or some high-and-mighty excuse like that. Anyhow, Clem said they only amounted to his old grandmother and an aunt somewhere in England, and from what his father said he reckoned they were both Tartars, so he didn't waste any trouble over them. But he wished his father had had some Hardy relations, instead of being an only son and an orphan at that. I knew Clem worried a bit about what might happen if his father got worse, or even died. Clem feels awfully responsible for his father.

I could have told him he needn't worry too much, because if anything like that came to pass Dad and Mother would simply adopt him. There's heaps of room on Weeroona for another boy, and they like Clem as much as Binkie and I do. But as that meant that his father would have to die first I thought it mightn't be a very comforting thing to say after all, so I held my tongue.

And now I have told the patient reader all he needs to know, and I can get on with the real story. I hope he is at least half as glad as I am.

. . . . .

Binkie slipped in when I had got this far and dropped a little parcel on my bed. She didn't wait for me to open it.

That was as well, because what came out of it was a little pocket dictionary. Simply an insult, because the only thing I can ever beat my form at is spelling. Not that it's any credit to me, of course; it's just that some people are born able to spell, and some aren't. And of course the form isn't any too brilliant.

So I would have made ready to buzz the dictionary at Binks when she came back, only I found another thing in the parcel—a slab of that new chocolate that's all full of little bits of fig. So I forgot my wrath and ate it.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Note by Author:* Chocolate is a great aid to literature.

## CHAPTER III

### ENGLISHMAN NO. I

I DIDN'T come straight home at the end of last term, because I had to get some teeth fixed up. I stayed at my uncle's in Sydney, and had a pretty good time going to shows and doing Christmas shopping, which made up for some unpleasant interviews with the dentist. So it was Christmas Eve before I got back to Weeroona.

Christmas morning was the usual medley of presents and excitement, and after that was over Binkie and I went up into the Crowsnest. This is a very special place of our own, which we have had for years. It is at the top of a sort of pine-tree, the kind that grows very thick branches close together, so that when you are up in it you can't possibly be seen from the ground. It got struck by lightning in a big storm once, and all its top was split and generally knocked about. So Dad said we could do what we liked with it, and we had great fun fixing it up.

Each lot of boughs comes out from the same level on the trunk, spreading like the spokes of a wheel. We cut away the broken bits and lugged up planks with a rope and built a platform. It was rather a job to do it round the curves, and we were both pretty young at the time, so there are a few gaps, but nothing to bother about once you know them. We left a hole big enough to climb through. I mean, we forgot that at first, and nailed on the planks so that we were trapped up there and hadn't any way of getting down. We didn't realize it until Mother called us down to tea; and that day we didn't have any tea. It took a long while to saw through the boards and make an opening large enough to escape. This was nothing but an accident that might have happened to anybody, but the family still make a tactless joke of it.

Anyhow, when what Dad called the initial agonies of construction were over, the job was quite a good one. The platform is big enough to hold a lot of people if it had to, and after we had each fallen through the hole a few times we made a trap-door to cover it when we were up there. We fixed up two boxes with water-tight lids to hold books and games and tins of biscuits and other useful things, and they made seats as well. It's rather jolly to sit up there. The ends of the branches stick out beyond the platform so that you are in a big ring of green, and the whole thing sways gently when there's any breeze. And you can see miles and miles: all over the paddocks on three sides, and far out to sea on the fourth.

Our greatest treasure is a telescope. It is a real ship's telescope, one that belonged to Uncle Edward when he was captain of a liner. When he came to stay at Weeroona we took him up to the Crowsnest, and he was awfully impressed. He said it only needed one thing to furnish it completely, and he would send us that thing when he went home. We hadn't the ghost of a notion what he meant, and we guessed nearly everything under the sun, but he wouldn't tell us. You can just imagine how we felt when the parcel came and we unpacked it with palpitating fingers. It was one of the most wonderful moments of our lives when that gorgeous thing appeared. Even Dad just looked at it and said, "Whew! You kids ought to be proud of yourselves."

We were, too—at least we were proud of the telescope. It lives in its leather case wrapped up in an old mackintosh in one of our boxes in the Crowsnest, and we keep its brasswork polished as well as Uncle Edward did, and that is saying something. When he comes here he is our guest of honour up aloft. Dad and Mother say he comes oftener than he used, and they think it is because of the telescope. He is a bit stiff in the joints, and he says he can't climb as easily as he did when he was a boy in sail, but every fine day he goes aloft and sits looking out to sea, telling us marvellous yarns of sailing-ship days. Binks and I liked the look he gave us the first time, when he took the telescope out of its case and the brasswork gleamed at him. But of course he didn't say anything.

I had a long look through it on Christmas morning. It was great to see all the paddocks again, stretching away over what seemed miles, and the river winding through them. Lots of golden wattles were still masses of flower, with the river glittering in between. I don't know one garden flower from another, and I don't want to: there was never any flower in a garden that could come up to wattle. Uncle Edward says that at the other side of the world they call it mimosa. Extraordinary what people will do, isn't it?

I looked at the paddocks, and at the bullocks knee-deep in the long grass and at the horses standing under the gum-trees swishing their tails at the flies. Roona was there, but of course I'd been out to see her before breakfast. The men were bathing down at the billabong: I saw Joe dive in off the spring-board and come a gorgeous flop—flat as a pancake. You could hear the others roaring with laughter at him. I looked at the orchard, where the big black-heart cherries seemed so near that you would have thought you could put out a hand and pick them, and I thought it would be a pretty good plan to visit the orchard fairly soon. Then I looked out to sea.

Ours is a lonely bit of coast, and you don't often see boats except our own. The beach is very wide, but the cliffs hide most of it from the Crowsnest: I could see just a bit of clean sand with the waves rippling up on it. The sea was very calm, and as blue as blue. Out by Castle Island there was a school of

porpoises playing. I could see the shine of their wet bodies when they curved out of the water in big leaps.

Castle Island isn't far from the shore. I don't suppose it really has a name, but we always call it that because it looks just like the old castles you see in pictures—big solid masses of rock coming sheer down into the sea, breaking at the top into crags like chimneys and pinnacles. To look at it from the Crow'snest you would think nobody could land there, but we know several landing-places on the far side. It is a rather exciting island, with little caves and rock-chambers, and it's a ripping place for scrambling, though you have to watch your step pretty carefully. But Binkie and I have known it since we were small, and we always reckon it belongs to us. Dad and Mother taught us to climb there. They said we were sure to climb anyhow, and we might as well be taught how to do it with sense. That is rather a sample of the way Dad and Mother treat us. They don't say many "Don'ts" about things, they say, "Do it—properly." And they jolly well see we do.

Well, when I had looked through the telescope until my eyes felt all screwy, I gave it to Binks, and she had a look at a bird's nest she had been watching for weeks on one of the ledges on the Castle Island cliffs. She said the young ones were nearly ready to fly. I had rather a job to make them out, but then I haven't got eyes like Binkie's. Even without a telescope she can see farther than anyone I know. So after that we just sat on the boxes and felt lazy, the way you do on Christmas morning.

"Clem and Mr. Hardy are coming over to dinner, of course, aren't they?" I asked her. (They always do on Christmas Day.)

Binkie nodded.

"They've got a strange man staying there," she said. "He's coming too."

"Who on earth's he?" I said in great surprise, for, as I have related, the Hardys never seem to know anyone.

"He's an Englishman," said Binkie. "Sort of cousin of Clem's."

"Then he must be a cousin of Mr. Hardy's, too," I said.

"No, he isn't. He's a relation of Clem's mother—I mean, he would be if she was alive. His name's Mr. Smedley."

"What's he like?"

"Oh, he's right enough, I suppose," she said. "We haven't seen much of him."

"Clem never told me," I said. "I had a letter from him ten days ago."

"Well, he hadn't come then. He turned up last week, quite unexpectedly. At least, he wrote to Mr. Hardy from Sydney to say he'd come out from England on a tour, and he'd like to see them, so of course they asked him to come and stay."

"He's not going to get in the way these hols, I hope," I said. "Will Clem

have to take him round everywhere and show him things?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Binkie said. “You see, Mr. Hardy can’t go about much, and Clem can hardly let a stranger mooch round by himself, can he?”

I said I supposed he couldn’t. All the same, I thought it was a jolly nuisance, and Binkie thought so too. Grown-ups can be awfully in the way, even if you know them well; and when it came to a perfectly strange Englishman you can understand that we felt he might easily be a blight on the hols. Not that some Englishmen aren’t real good sorts. We’ve had a lot at Weeroona, and we know. But when you get the kind who look down on everything Australian, and don’t trouble to hide their feelings, they’re not so good. We had one last year who gave Dad lots of hints on running a station, and he hadn’t an idea how funny he was.

“Oh, well, he may be a sensible one,” I said. “Anyhow, we’ll have to back Clem up. After all, if he’s Clem’s cousin he ought to be all right. Can he ride?”

“Clem says he’s not too bad on a horse. And he can swim, and he likes fishing. I expect he’ll do,” Binkie said. “And I don’t think he means to stay long, anyhow. He has a friend coming from somewhere or other in a motor-boat, and they’re going for a fishing-trip along the coast.”

“Good for them!” I said. “I hope it will be soon. But I suppose it’s rather a treat for Mr. Hardy to have him.”

“Well, do you know, Peter, I don’t think it is,” answered Binkie. “He looks pretty solemn, anyhow. Clem says he thinks his father doesn’t want to be reminded about that family at all. You know they were perfectly beastly to Mrs. Hardy.”

“What, this man too?” I exclaimed, beginning to feel hot.

“Oh, no—he couldn’t be old enough for that. He isn’t at all a near cousin, and I don’t know if he really ever saw Mrs. Hardy. But he belongs to the crowd, anyhow, and it can’t be much pleasure for Mr. Hardy to see him.”

“For all we know, he may be a sort of messenger,” I suggested. “Like it would happen in a book—sent out to Australia to find the poor and ill-used relations, and end up by giving them pots of money.”

Binkie said there was not a hope. She believed Clem’s grandmother had the pots of money all right, only she hadn’t any intention of letting any of them come Mr. Hardy’s way. She and her unpleasant daughter hated the very name of Hardy. Indeed, they seemed to make a habit of hating most people—this Smedley cousin had told Clem that they didn’t like him either, and wouldn’t have anything much to do with him. Binkie said that this gave Clem quite a fellow-feeling for Mr. Smedley. Clem and his father would have shied off anyone who was matey with his grandmother and aunt.

It’s not much wonder they felt that way. When Mrs. Hardy was ill they

were awfully poor, and Mr. Hardy had put his pride in his pocket and written to ask them for help, so that he could get proper treatment for her. And all he got by way of answer was an envelope addressed in his sister-in-law's writing, and inside it his own letter, torn in two. And Mrs. Hardy had died. So after that Clem and his father looked on them as no better than murderers, and you couldn't blame them.

Not that they ever talked about it. It was before they came to live near Weeroona: after they got really friendly with us Clem told Binkie and me, and we knew Mr. Hardy told Mother. Perhaps it was because we might have asked awkward questions, because they're not the sort of people to talk much. We hadn't said much either, but they knew how we felt. Then the matter had dropped altogether, and we hadn't spoken of it for years until this cousin had come along and sort of revived it. I could understand how Mr. Hardy wouldn't have wanted it revived.

Well, Binks and I agreed that the whole show was rather a pity, and that the Smedley man might just as well have stayed at the other side of the world instead of butting in to rake up old sores; and then we beat it to the orchard to sample the cherries. Then Binkie had to get dressed for dinner, much to her disgust, and presently I saw Mr. Hardy's buggy coming up the paddock. Clem was riding, and he'd waited to shut the gate. Then he came up as hard as he could lick and passed them. We met in the stable-yard, and pounded each other on the back, and it was jolly good to see old Clem again.

I rather liked Mr. Smedley, though I hadn't quite expected to. For one thing, when Dad took Mr. Hardy into the house he insisted on staying behind to help unharness the buggy-horse and give it a feed: and you can generally judge by little things like that. He wasn't patronizing and matey with Clem and me, either, and he didn't ask me any questions about school; in fact, he just behaved as if we were ordinary human beings. He did ask some questions, but they were about cattle, and quite sensible.

Rather a good-looking fellow, too; not tall, but well-built, and he looked very fit. A bit like Clem, with fair hair and grey eyes. It's funny, you know: I'm quite vague about what Binkie's eyes are like, or most people's, for the matter of that, but I could never forget Mr. Smedley's. Sometimes they looked quite pale, but there were other times when you'd wonder how you could ever have thought they were anything but very dark. I don't know anyone else with eyes like that.

Well, I summed him up as not half so bad as he might have been, and I could see Clem was on very good terms with him, so I knew it would be all right. We had a tremendous Christmas dinner. The day was blazing hot, so all the dinner came out of the ice-chest. Mother said she was afraid Mr. Smedley might miss the regulation English hot dinner, but he said that the very idea of a

steaming plum-pudding made him shudder, and when the trifle came along he treated it nearly as unmercifully as Binks and I did. He was good fun, too: he told two or three stories that made us rock with laughter, and one of them was all against himself. That was the only one he laughed at; over the others he was as sober as a judge.

Afterwards we rested. Binkie and Clem and I rested in the orchard under a cherry-tree, and I don't know what the others did. Later on we packed tea-baskets and all of us went down to the beach. It is a good beach, with big masses of red rock here and there, so that you can always get shade, and there are natural dressing-rooms among the rocks. Mother has quite a swagger one, with a door that Dad and I built on to it, but the rest of us don't worry about doors. We all had a swim, except Mr. Hardy: poor chap, he can't ever bathe. It must be pretty ghastly to have to sit on the beach and watch other people larking in the sea. But he never seems to mind, and when we came out he had the billy boiling ready for tea.

We ate so much that Mother wouldn't let us go back into the water for awhile, so we lay flat on the hot sand and let the sun soak into us. Mr. Smedley sat up when he was thoroughly cooked. He looked out to sea and gave a big sigh of happiness.

"And to think," he said, "that last Christmas Day, and all the other Christmas Days of my life, I've spent the afternoon crouching over a fire—unless I was hardy and put on two mufflers and an overcoat and went for a nice brisk walk! Mist and snow and ice and driving wet gales—and now, this! Why must I ever go back to England!"

"Well, why must you?" asked Clem. "Plenty of room in Australia."

"I don't know why," he said. "There really doesn't seem any good reason. Perhaps I won't."

He got up and walked down to the edge of the water. We thought he was going in, but he just stood there, looking out to sea for what seemed quite a long time. Clem and Binkie and I got tired of waiting, so we made a move. Mr. Smedley turned round when he heard us.

"Have you any diving places off your rocks?" he asked.

"Rather!" I said. "We'll show you."

Well, I'll admit he showed us. At ordinary swimming he was nothing extra: I could beat him in a race, and I certainly wasn't prepared for the way he could dive. He had the best clean straight dive I ever saw, and when it came to fancy work there was nothing he couldn't do. Of course, we hadn't a spring-board, but even without it he was wonderful. And he was decent about it, too: no showing-off. He took a lot of pains trying to teach us a complicated sort of somersault that he said he'd invented for himself. We hadn't a hope of doing it, but he was ever so patient.

“Only wants practice,” he said. “I’ll teach you every day while I’m here if you like. You’ll soon get the knack.”

I didn’t feel as if I’d get knack like his in a hundred years, but we practised until we were too sore to do any more. Mother was beginning to pack up by that time, so we dressed in a hurry and went home. The visitors stayed for supper, and we had a sing-song afterwards. Mr. Smedley was useful at that too: he sang jolly well, and he could play the piano like a wizard—all the tunes you ever knew, made up into medleys. We didn’t turn on the radio once.

Mr. Hardy was the only one who didn’t seem to be having a good time. He kept very quiet, just smoking and watching us. Of course, he’s never very well, but that night he looked even whiter than usual. I saw Mother keeping a wary eye on him pretty often. About ten o’clock he got up.

“Sorry I’ll have to drag you away, Mervyn,” he said to Mr. Smedley. “Mrs. Forsyth knows I have to keep early hours.”

Clem and I went out to see to their horses. Clem wanted to know what I thought of Mr. Smedley, and I said I liked him. I thought Clem looked a bit relieved.

“I’m glad you do,” he said. “Father will be, too. I’ll have to knock round with him, and we thought it might be a nuisance if I brought him over here much.”

I said that would be all right, and it was rot to talk about being a nuisance. I asked him wouldn’t Mr. Smedley think it a bit slow to spend his time with people of our age, and Clem said he knew he wouldn’t. “He’s keen on seeing something of station life,” he said. “Your Dad has offered to lend him a horse, and he’s looking forward awfully to going round with us.”

“Well, you bring him over to-morrow,” I said. “I don’t mind how often he comes if he’ll teach me to do that blessed dive of his.”



"Binkie had a look at a bird's nest she had been watching for weeks."

*Told by Peter)*

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## CHAPTER IV

### WE GO HUNTING

I NEVER knew any time go quicker than the first few weeks of these hols. There is always a lot to do when I come home, for Dad keeps jobs for me like shifting bullocks from one paddock to another or mustering scrub cattle in the back country. He says it's part of my education, and I rather fancy he thinks it's the most important part. I know it's what I like best. I have to keep my wits about me, remembering bullocks I haven't seen for three months and looking them over to judge how they have come on in the time, and Dad puts me through a regular exam. about them. But it isn't like exams. at school, where you sit and chew the end of your pen and wonder how masters manage to set questions that don't seem to mean a single thing to you.

Generally the days go on quietly enough, working times among the cattle mixed up with picnics and bathing, and sometimes a run in the car to the township if there happens to be a decent picture at the cinema. But this doesn't often happen, because that township is a very one-horse place, and twenty-five miles on a bad road isn't much fun unless you have something worth going for. Most times we'd rather knock about at home, because even if it is quiet, it's never dull. But in these hols unusual things happened almost from the start.

The first thing was one day when we'd all gone out to the far end of the run, taking lunch with us. It is mostly bush out there, very dense near the river, and thinning out when the country begins to rise in low hills. Beyond our boundary there's scarcely any settlement for miles, but a few people have taken up land and manage to scratch up a living somehow. It must be hard scratching, too, because it really isn't farming country. Mother says the selectors' wives are the pluckiest people she knows. Sometimes she has gone out to look after a sick woman, and she says they seem to live chiefly on pumpkins and burgoo. That is porridge, in case you don't know, patient reader.

Well, this day we had ridden all the morning, and it was pretty late by the time we all got together and camped for lunch near the river. We made a fire, and the billy was just boiling when suddenly the dogs began to prick up their ears as if they heard something. We listened, and presently we also could hear something coming towards us in the scrub. We thought it was a bullock, but Bran jumped up and started barking, and he never barks like that for cattle. Darkie, Dad's old cattle-dog, joined in; we shut them up, but they growled and didn't like it. The noise came nearer, a regular crashing, and presently a man

dashed out of the scrub. We had to hold the dogs back then, but he didn't seem to notice them.

He was an object. His shirt and trousers were in rags—not just worn, but ripped open everywhere, with flaps of stuff hanging down. He must have gone through the bush without noticing it—there were scratches and weals all over his face and arms. For a moment we thought he was mad, he looked so awful, and we all got up in a hurry. Then Dad recognized him as a man from one of the little farms.

“What's up, Dickson?” he asked him. “Not bushed, were you?”

Dickson shook his head: he was panting too much to speak at first. Then he gasped out:—

“My kid. He's lost.”

Then he went all queer, and Dad just caught him in time. He gave him some brandy out of his flask, and when he was able to sit up we made him drink some tea. The poor beggar wanted it horribly, but we could scarcely force him to drink it: his only idea was to go on looking.

Dad had to be stern with him. He said, “Look here, Dickson, don't be a fool. If you knock up in the scrub what chance has your youngster got? When did you have anything to eat last?”

“Last night,” said Dickson. “Leastways, we were just sitting down to tea when we found he was missin'. Me an' the missus have been huntin' all night.”

“Where's your wife?” said Dad quickly.

“I made her turn back towards home a few hours ago. Told her he might be there. But he isn't—I know he isn't. The only tracks we could find led towards the river.”

We couldn't look at his face when he said that. But Miss Tarrant took some sandwiches and put them into his hand. She said, “You eat those, and tell us where to look.”

He told us, between bites—when he once tasted the food he began to know how hungry he was. He said little Timmy was five, and generally he had sense and never went away from the house. But he had a young puppy, and when Mrs. Dickson was busy in the kitchen he came in half-crying and said it was lost. Mrs. Dickson said, “Oh, rubbish, Timmy—you run and find it”; and he went off. She never dreamed he'd go beyond the yard. Then Dickson came in from milking, and she was helping with the milk and getting tea ready, and they never thought of Timmy until it was time to call him in, and he didn't come. So they went out, and there was no sign of him, but presently the wretched puppy crawled out from under the wood-heap—it must have been there all the time. And the marks of Timmy's little boots were in the dust of the path leading down to the river.

“But the river’s a good way from your house,” Dad said. “You didn’t track him right down to it?”

Dickson said no, they hadn’t. The track was faint, and pretty soon they lost it. They knew he might easily have turned off into the scrub. They hunted until it was dark, and then they came back for lanterns and went out again. They went in opposite directions, arranging to meet at the house in the morning; and whoever found Timmy was to hurry home with him and fire two shots with Dickson’s gun as a signal that he was all right.

“Every few minutes I kept thinkin’ I heard a shot,” he said. “You’d never guess how many sounds there seem to be in the scrub at night—I’d stand still an’ hold my breath listenin’ for the next shot. But it never came. The missus said she was just the same. She was nearly all in when we got home this morning. It was pretty late, and the cows were bellowing like mad to be milked. So I milked ’em; there’s only three of ’em, but it seemed to take about a year. I left the milk in the buckets an’ went straight out again.”

Miss Tarrant said, “And your wife?”

“Oh, she didn’t have to milk, so she didn’t wait at all. She’s huntin’. An’ I’m further than I should be; Timmy couldn’t have come this distance. But I heard one of your dogs bark, an’ I knew it could only be some of your people from Weeroona, an’ you’d help. I came like smoke, for fear I’d miss you.”

We held a council of war, though Dickson went off almost as soon as we’d begun. Dad wouldn’t let Binkie stay, no matter what she said; she’s a bit young for a job like that. And he didn’t want Mr. Smedley, because an Englishman would only lose himself; so he said Binkie mustn’t go home alone, and would Mr. Smedley take her and help Mother to raise the district to come and help. Miss Tarrant flatly refused to go back.

“I won’t stay in the scrub all the time,” she said. “I’ll get to the farm and have things going there—food ready and all that. And I’ll milk. My goodness, Mr. Forsyth, when I think of that wretched man having to sit down and milk those three cows——!”

“But why did he?” asked Mr. Smedley—and that was about the only stupid thing I ever heard him say. We left Binkie to explain it to him if she wanted to. Clem and Dad and I stuffed all the food we could carry into our pockets and Miss Tarrant took the rest—we knew there wouldn’t be much to eat at the farm. We let our horses go; Dad said we’d only be hampered by them. He told Miss Tarrant how to get to the farm—she had only to keep to the line of the river and strike north when she came in sight of a pointed sort of hill that was once an old volcano.

Poor old Binks looked frightfully unhappy. She whispered to me that she was coming back, and I said, “Mother’s sure to come with food supplies—she’ll bring you.” Binks looked a bit better at that idea, and she fairly ran to

saddle her pony. I heard her telling Mr. Smedley to look sharp as we four went off in Dickson's track.

Dad wasn't too happy about Clem and me. He gave us strict orders never to lose our bearings with regard to the river, and to keep in touch with each other if we could. We thought at first he was a bit fussy, but when we got into the scrub we soon found out how easy it would be to get bushed. Landmarks are no good to you when you can't see a dozen yards ahead; and after you've wasted ten minutes in fighting through a specially bad bit it's quite possible to find yourself heading in the wrong direction. Or, what's worse, to be heading in the wrong direction, and not to find it out. We—that is, Clem and I—lost a lot of time at first by trying to cover too much ground. When you're on a hunt like that, you feel as if you must explore everywhere; whereas the only sensible thing to do is to keep to one line as much as possible, leaving the man on each side of you to do his share. Dad made that clear to us, without sparing our feelings either, after we had strayed on to his line once or twice. After that we kept to our own country: Dad nearest to the river, then Clem and then me.

Dad had the worst of it, of course, but even where we were it was hard going. There was any amount of low-growing dogwood—mixed up with all sorts of creepers; and plenty of clumps of prickly Moses, which is fairly awful to get through. The only thing was that we didn't have to hunt into it, because no kid would go near prickly Moses, no matter how daft he was. Everything else had to be explored—every stump and hollow tree, and every log, because a tired kid would be likely to curl up against a log or under a bush and go to sleep. It made one feel pretty queer to think that that five-year-old had been alone in such country, for over twenty hours.

I tried to reason out what kind of a line he would have taken—he'd have strayed along, dodging all the thickest parts, just hoping to come out in some clear place where he could see his home. But I had to remember that he could get through spaces that I couldn't, so I tried to allow for his height. But you really can't do much reasoning like that when you're dodging about here and there: you can only keep your eyes skinned and hope for the best.

Dickson had told us Timmy was wearing a blue shirt and grey knickers. Grey melts into the colour of the scrub, but I knew that blue would be easy to see—and of course I imagined I saw it hundreds of times, and went racing to the place, only to find I'd dreamed it. We kept calling as we went along, "Timmy! Timmy!" and listening in case he answered. We'd arranged how to signal by coo-ee if we found him, and I kept thinking how gorgeous it would be to catch sight of him and then nearly to burst my lungs coo-eeing.

Bran stayed with me all the time. I would tell him to get for'ard and find, and he'd go off as hard as he could, thinking I meant a bullock. Presently he'd come back looking ashamed of himself. It wasn't the game he knew, and he

was awfully puzzled. Probably he thought I was mad, but I kept on sending him, because I knew he would bark if he came in sight of a strange boy and he would be quicker to see than I could ever be.

Gosh, it was hot. It was one of those blazing January days that are all right when you are out in the open on a horse, but on foot in the scrub it was simply breathless. I was dripping all over before I'd gone half a mile. Bran felt it too, and whenever I wasn't looking at him he would lie down under a bush with his tongue out, panting. It got harder and harder to make him go for'ard, and it didn't do any good to get wild with him; he'd only crouch down on his tummy and come wriggling to me, wagging his tail, with his eyes asking me what on earth I meant by it all. I was sorry for the poor old chap, and I would have been a bit sorry for myself but for the thought of Mrs. Dickson. She'd been at this game ever since they found that the kid was gone. And Timmy was the only kid they had.

I was ploughing along between the bushes with Bran just ahead of me, when suddenly he gave a yelp and sprang to one side. He twisted round and growled savagely, and I jumped too—as hard as I ever jumped in my life. I was only just in time. A big tiger-snake came shooting at me—Bran had made him angry, and I was right in his track. Most snakes will get out of your way in a hurry, but you never can tell what a tiger-snake will do if he's annoyed. I dodged and grabbed up the nearest stick and made a smack at him, but the rotten thing broke, and he very nearly had me: his head just missed my leg. Then old Bran dashed in and snapped at him, and I was simply scared to bits for fear he'd get bitten. I yelled at him to get back, and caught up another stick—luckily it was a tough one this time. The snake had become more angry with Bran than he'd been with me, and Bran had not taken the slightest notice of my order. I saw the beastly flathead come up, ready to strike, with Bran's nose only a foot or so away, and I jumped in and hit as hard as I could. That settled him: it broke his back just behind his head, and all he could do was to thrash round until I finished him up.

Bran and I looked at him. He was big as tiger-snakes go, and I'd never seen one so bright in colour; the stripes across his back were almost golden. And suddenly I thought of little Timmy Dickson meeting one like that, and it made me feel a bit sick, for there's precious little hope for anyone who gets bitten by a tiger. So we left him in a hurry and went on hunting.

There were other things in the bush, too, that might have frightened a kid. I saw several big goannas and now and then a grey wallaby: harmless of course, but young Timmy might have thought they were dangerous. I kept thinking of him meeting one and running away, not seeing where he was going: perhaps going head-first down a hole, or over a rock. There were plenty of places where a little chap could have been hurt. And I wondered how soon he had

begun to be thirsty. I hadn't been in the scrub long, but I knew just how thirsty I was.

Well, it didn't do any good to think about those things, so I just went on looking. Ages, it seemed. At last the scrub grew thinner, and I caught sight of Clem a good distance away. I was pretty glad to see him, too, because we'd forgotten all about trying to keep in touch—not that we could have done it, anyway. I'd begun to worry about him, because he isn't as strong as I am, at least as I was then, and he hadn't been used to the bush all his life. But he was sticking it like a good 'un, ranging along like an old dog, with his eyes everywhere. We waved to each other and went on. It began to grow dusk, and a little breeze sprang up, which helped; but it was awful to think that night was coming and Timmy not found.

We heard a whistle, and Dad came into view, with Darkie at his heels. He signalled to us to stop, so we joined up and waited for him.

"We'd better get up to the house," he said. "No use hunting in the dark."

It was quite dark before we reached the farm. There was a light in the window, and as we came up we could see Miss Tarrant working in the kitchen. She came running out to meet us. I think she'd hoped we might have Timmy with us, but she didn't say so. She showed us where to wash—there was a tin basin and soap on a bench near the pump, and weren't we just glad to see them. Then we went into the kitchen where Miss Tarrant was making tea.

"Mrs. Dickson's lying down," she said. "She came in half an hour ago, hardly able to drag herself, just to see if there was any news. She wanted to go out again, but while we were arguing about it she fainted. I think it was just as well. So I put her on her bed, and now she's asleep, poor woman. Dickson came in for a lantern and went out again. Have you people any food left? There's hardly anything in the house."

We had nearly all we had taken—it had been too hot to eat in the scrub, with nothing to wash it down with. Everything was in a hopeless mash, but we were hungry enough to eat anything, once we'd had some tea. Clem looked as if he had been in the wars, because he'd put a ripe tomato in his shirt-pocket and it had squashed. We drank all the tea, and Miss Tarrant made some more, and we drank that. It was great.

"There are no beds, you know," she said. "The cottage has only two rooms—this, and the bedroom. I'm going to lie down on Timmy's bed, and then I shall hear Mrs. Dickson if she moves. She simply must not go out again—her feet are badly blistered, for one thing. There's a shed outside with hay in it, and I've found a couple of old rugs. Can you manage there?"

"First rate, for the boys," Dad said. "There's a second lantern, isn't there? I'm going out again."

We wanted to come too, but Dad wouldn't hear of it. And it honestly

would have been silly, unless we'd had more lanterns. All the same, it felt not too good to see him going off into the dark while we went to bed like kids.

Miss Tarrant came with a candle to show us where we had to sleep. It was only a little shed, half-full of hay. There was a roof, but no sides, but even then it was hot. We pulled off our boots and lay down on our rugs, and she went back to the house. I could see the stars getting brighter, and I wondered if they were sort of keeping young Timmy company. I was hoping they were when I went to sleep.

## CHAPTER V

### SCRUB

CLEM and I woke just before sunrise—pretty bewildered we were, too, just at first, wondering where we were. And not too comfortable, because there are lots of insects in hay, and most of them seemed to have got inside our shirts. We hurried over to the house.

Miss Tarrant was hard at it. She had the fire going, and she was stirring a big black pot of porridge. She didn't look as if she had slept much.

"Mrs. Dickson's still asleep," she said. "The others haven't come back. Will you boys milk the cows? The porridge will be ready when you come in."

We went off, feeling very blue. Somehow we'd made sure Dad would have found Timmy. The cows were close up to the milking-shed, and it didn't take long to finish them. We fed the pigs and calves, and then Miss Tarrant came out and whistled to us softly. We had porridge, topped up with scones and jam. Miss Tarrant couldn't find anything but flour and oatmeal, but she had made the most of them. She had another big batch of scones in the oven, ready for the next people who wanted breakfast.

"There will be plenty of food soon," she said. "Your mother will get here early, and I know the kind of car-load she will bring. I do wish your father would bring poor Dickson in. Though for all we know they may never have come across each other all night."

We knew that was likely enough, and we went on bolting our breakfasts. Miss Tarrant fixed us up with packages of food to take out, and she gave each of us a little bottle of water.

"Timmy's," she said, smiling at us. "He'll need it when you find him." It made Clem and me feel better, the way she said it.

A sound came from the bedroom, and she dropped her parcels and sprang to the door. Mrs. Dickson came out. She was a little bit of a woman, very thin, and I hope I'll never see another face like hers was when she looked round the kitchen and saw that Timmy wasn't there. She could hardly stand. There was an old couch in the corner; we put her on it, and she lay looking at us in a dazed way.

"I must go out," she whispered.

"Not just yet," Miss Tarrant said. "Breakfast first. There are other people looking now, Mrs. Dickson—you've got to be fit to take care of Timmy when they bring him in. These two hunters are just off." She made a sign to us to

clear out, and we grabbed our packages and went.

But outside the house we stopped short, for there was the Weeroona car bumping along the track leading from the gate. Mother was driving, with Binkie and Mr. Smedley squeezed into the front seat beside her. Behind were Jack and Charlie, two of our men, simply submerged under boxes and bundles and parcels. Jack and Charlie had a side of bacon lying along their knees: we had to lift it off before they could get out. Binkie yelled, "Have they found him?" and we just shook our heads.

Mother had everything people could need: water-bottles on straps, and tiny brandy-flasks and chocolate, all fixed up for easy carrying. She said, "Don't wait, boys," as she handed ours over. "Binkie can go with you—but she mustn't wander away by herself." I don't think it was more than two minutes after the car stopped before we were heading for the scrub again. Already we could see clouds of dust along the road beyond the farm—more people coming to help. Mother had kept the telephone busy from the moment she heard what had happened.

"You must have left home before dawn," I said to Binkie.

"Just at dawn," she said. "We had breakfast before that. Peter, they can't help finding him, can they? There'll be dozens of men here soon."

I said I didn't see how they could miss him. The only question was if his strength could hold out—or if he was hurt. And then, there was the river. But we didn't want to talk about that.

Mr. Smedley asked where Timmy's track had been seen, and we showed him. He stood still and had a good look round the country.

"I'm trying to imagine myself a small boy looking for a puppy," he said. "He'd naturally keep on downhill, and when he got into the trees he would probably take the simplest way among the bushes. I can't see him deliberately turning uphill; he would be tired very soon in any case. Of course, I don't know how much strength your bush youngsters have."

"They're pretty wiry," said Clem. "But this youngster knew he mustn't go near the river."

"But once he was in the scrub he wouldn't realize he was near it," Mr. Smedley said. "He'd lose all sense of direction. I'm not saying he has fallen in. But I believe he's far more likely to be near it than on the higher ground."

"So do I," said Binkie. "I vote we keep near the river—I'm going to, anyhow."

So we went off that way, and spread out in a line. We didn't see much of Mr. Smedley. He kept to the edge of the bank, and half his time he was in the shallow water, looking in holes where the bank shelved over. The river was very low; except in winter there's never very much water in it, and in the hot weather it is scarcely more than a creek. Mr. Smedley must have explored

pretty thoroughly; by the time we did come across him he was soaked up to his waist and covered with mud.

Clem and Binkie and I kept in touch, because we were deadly scared of losing Binks in that tangle. It was worse than yesterday's going: I take off my hat to Binkie for the way she stuck it. Of course, she was wearing breeches and leggings, or she could never have got through. Bran seemed to understand better that morning; he went poking about the bushes on his own as if he was really seeking, just as we were. Now and then he got terribly excited over a snake, so perhaps it was only snakes he had in his mind. There were plenty about. Each of us carried a good whippy stick, and we killed several browns and blacks, though we never saw a tiger. I don't suppose any of us saw a snake without wondering if young Timmy had met one.

Before long the bush seemed full of voices. Men had come from all round the district, with a sprinkling of women, and we could hear voices and whistling from every direction, and dogs barking, though actually we only met a few men, the scrub was so thick. We saw Dad once. He looked nearly done, and he had his arm round Dickson, half-carrying him. He wouldn't let us stop to help him. Dickson didn't speak: he was moving like a man half-asleep, scarcely able to lift his legs, but his eyes kept roving in every direction.

About one o'clock we three got together and decided it would be sensible to go down to the river and have lunch: we were horribly thirsty, and of course we couldn't drink the water in our bottles. We whistled for Mr. Smedley and managed to head him off. He knew a good clean pool close by, so we camped beside it for half an hour, and I think we drank it nearly dry.

"It beats me," Clem said, "how that kid can keep out of sight. There are goodness knows how many people searching for him by this time; you'd hardly think it was possible they could all miss him."

"And only five years old, too," said Mr. Smedley. "I should have imagined that most youngsters of that age would just have sat down and howled after a while—and stayed sitting and howling until somebody came."

Binkie said, "Mother was telling me of lots of cases where lost kids don't seem to have had as bad a time as you'd think. She knows of some who wandered an extraordinary distance, eating blackberries and drinking from puddles in little hollows, and the queer thing was, they hadn't been afraid. Almost as if, somehow, they'd felt someone looking after them."

"But how could they?" Clem said.

"I don't know," said Binkie, "But it's what Mother told me."

I said, "Well, I hope it's the way with young Timmy. He'd need it badly enough." And we all got up and went on the hunt again.

It got to feel more and more useless as the afternoon dragged on. I suppose we were all getting a bit tired, what with the heat and the flies and being

always thirsty. It was an effort to keep calling Timmy's name. I don't think any of us still listened for the sound of shots from Dickson's place that would signal that someone had found him. We just went on in a dogged way, with the feeling that every place had been searched over and over. My shirt was nearly as ragged as Dickson's had been, and the strap of the water-bottle had worn it through and was like a hot bar on my shoulder. So if I felt uncomfortable, Binkie and Clem must have felt a long sight worse.

Binkie did look pretty well finished when I ran into her about five o'clock. I wanted her to knock off and go home, but I might as well have talked to a gum-tree. So I got her to sit down on a log with me for a few minutes. She was very despairing by this time, and I believe she was close up to crying. This is most unusual with Binkie, and I expect I shall have to scratch out that bit if ever she is allowed to see what I am writing.

She saw me looking at her, and she said crossly, "You needn't look like that. It's only because I'm hot, and . . . and I'm so sick of snakes. I've seen dozens."

"Well, you never care a hoot for snakes," I said. "You've been killing them ever since you were six."

"Oh, I know," she said. "Only, somehow they make me think to-day . . . you know . . . if a snake has got Timmy." Just then Bran barked sharply, and she glanced up. "Look, there's another—do kill the beastly thing, Peter."

Sure enough, there was a black snake slipping through the grass, very anxious to get away from Bran. He made for an old stump a few yards away, and I picked up my stick and went after him. But I caught my foot in a tangle of creeper and came an awful cropper, landing against the stump with a bang that fairly shook me. The stick went in one direction and the snake in another, and that was the last we saw of that particular snake.

I picked myself up: most of the breath had been knocked out of me and I was rather glad to lean against the stump for a moment. Binkie was a bit scared, because she thought I was really hurt. She came over and wanted to feel if I had any bones broken, and I told her not to be a donkey. I was feeling a pretty good imitation of one myself, and it made me a bit wild.

Binkie turned away without saying anything. I knew I had hurt her feelings; even though I knew, too, that she wouldn't have dreamed of being hurt if she hadn't been so tired and miserable. So I was preparing to say something to make her feel a bit better, when I heard her give a sort of gasp.

"*Peter!* Oh, look here!"

I swung round. The stump was hollow; she was on tiptoe beside it, peering down into it. And there, curled up among a lot of bracken fern, was little Timmy Dickson.

His eyes were shut, and for a moment we clutched each other, afraid that

he was dead. But there was nothing dead about Timmy. As we stared down at him he wriggled and rolled over, and then opened his eyes and looked up at us, and grinned all over his dirty jolly little face. Then he looked puzzled and said, "Where's Mum gone?"

"We'll take you to Mum," Binks said.

"Want a dwink," said Timmy. "Let me out."

I said, "You bet we'll let you out, old man," and I climbed over the edge of the stump and slid down beside him. I had to be careful, for there was only just room for him and me. Binks had her water-bottle ready; I sat down and held him on my knee, and there wasn't much left in the bottle when Timmy had finished with it. I felt him all over. There was nothing wrong with him, beyond a bruise or two from falling down inside the stump. So I put him on my shoulder and Binks lifted him out and hugged him.

"Yell, Peter!" she said.

In our first astonishment we'd actually forgotten to coo-ee, but we made up for it then. I stood in that stump and coo-ee'd until I had no breath left, and then I climbed out and began again. Binkie never stopped at all. Bran looked at us in amazement, and then began to bark for all he was worth. Nobody answered at first, and I put Timmy on my back and we started for home, Binks feeding Timmy with bits of chocolate—and did he wolf them!

Then Clem came running through the scrub. You could see he was nearly done, but he forgot about it when he saw what I was carrying. We went along together, trying to find out from Timmy what had happened to him. But he hadn't much to tell. He'd wandered about in the scrub and slept all night in a hollow tree; now and then he'd found a little water in a hole in a gully. He didn't seem to know how long it was since he'd climbed up the stump and fallen down inside it. We reckoned he must have stunned himself and lost count of time. But the queer thing was that he seemed so little the worse for it.

It was slow going, carrying him, and presently Binkie had an idea.

"Look here," she said, "we've got to get the news quickly to the Dicksons. You're the fastest runner, Peter—you go on ahead, and Clem and I can take turns to carry Timmy."

"Timmy can walk," said Timmy. But when I put him on the ground, just to see, his legs crumpled up and he sat down immediately, looking very surprised. I left him to Clem and legged it for the farm as fast as the scrub would let me.

That wasn't as fast as I'd have liked it to be. I hoped I'd meet a man who could go harder than I could, but I didn't, though goodness knows there were enough searching. I hadn't any breath to spare for coo-eeing, either. It just seemed ages before I got through the worst of the scrub and came out into clearer country. In the bush I'd begun to feel that I couldn't go much farther,

but the air was fresher outside, and I got a bit more energy. But I could only raise a jog by the time I got near the Dicksons' paddock.

Dickson was standing at the fence. I mean, he was leaning on it as if he needed it to hold him up. He had his arms on the top rail, and his face hidden in them. I yelled, and put on a bit of a spurt; and he lifted his head and stood there, hanging on to the fence and staring at me as if I was a ghost. I waved, and tried to grin at him, to show him that everything was all right, and then he did exactly what Timmy had done: his legs crumpled under him and he sat down. At first I thought he had fainted, but he hadn't: it was just that he didn't have one bit of strength left.

"We've got him!" I shouted. "He's right as rain."

Dickson did what I've never seen a man do before, and I don't want to see it ever again: he began to sob like a kid. It made me feel awful, and my own voice went queer. I got through the fence and said, "They're bringing him along—I'm off to tell Mrs. Dickson." He didn't even look up, poor beggar. I knew I couldn't do him any good, so I went on, but I couldn't run any more.

Then I saw Mother, and gosh, I was glad. She came out of the Dicksons' back door and looked down the paddock and saw me. I stood still and collected all my breath and yelled "He's—all—right!"—hoping frightfully that she would hear the words, because I had no more breath. She heard. She waved at me, and turned and ran back to the house. I didn't know she could run so fast. In a minute I heard two shots fired.

Well, I sat down then. In fact, I lay flat on my back on the grass, feeling absolutely lazy. It was a fool thing to do, if only I'd thought a minute, because the next thing I knew was Miss Tarrant tearing down to see if anything was the matter with me. She'd actually brought some weak brandy and water, and she made me drink some, though I told her flatly I didn't want the beastly stuff.

"You take it," she said quite fiercely. "You've got to get up to the house and tell Mrs. Dickson all about Timmy."

I said, "Oh, all right—but you'd better go and give the rest to Dickson. He needs it more than I do." So she went on to the fence, and I went to the house, feeling rather light-headed, and had some difficulty in making Mrs. Dickson believe that Timmy wasn't damaged in any way worth talking about. She was lying on the old couch in the kitchen, holding Mother's hand; Miss Tarrant told us afterwards that she'd hardly let it go all day. I had to tell her everything I could think of about Timmy: she simply couldn't realize that he wasn't crying or frightened, even when I said how he had laughed and gobbled chocolate and asked about his puppy. To tell the truth, I had been a bit surprised that he had never said a word about his mother, so I was glad she didn't ask if he had.

When I'd finished she started trying to thank me, but of course I told her I

hadn't a thing to do with it—it was entirely Binkie's doing. If you come to that, I suppose it was really the black snake's; but for him we'd never have gone near the old stump. It made me feel rather shuddery to think we might have gone past that stump a dozen times and never guessed that it was hollow: it looked perfectly solid from the outside. She wanted to know how Timmy had managed to climb up it, and I told her it had a lot of knobs that made footholds for him. After that she didn't say anything for a bit. Then she said:

“Well, it just looks like as if he was guided to it. Just the sort of place he likes climbing, an' so easy for him to tumble down inside. An' there he was, potted up like, quite safe, waiting until you an' your sister come along. If he hadn't been there he might of been killed in a dozen ways, or nobody mightn't ever have found him—not in time, at least. Lor', Mrs. Forsyth, don't it look as if something looked after little kids in the bush?”

Mother said, “Well, why not? It's a good thing for mothers to believe, at all events.”

And then we heard voices and cheering, and I ran out. There was a regular procession coming up the hill: someone had come across Binkie and Clem and Timmy and began coo-eeing, and then the shots had been heard, and everyone had made for home. Timmy was perched on Dad's shoulder, and two men were helping Dickson; and all the others seemed to be making as much row as they could.

Everyone crowded into the kitchen and Dad marched in and put Timmy down on top of his mother. Timmy said a funny thing. He said, “Hullo, Mum—why did you go away from my stump?” Then he put his face down in her neck, and she held him tight. The men brought Dickson in, and we all cleared out.



“I yelled at Bran to get back, and caught up another stick.”

*Told by Peter)*

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## CHAPTER VI

### MANNA FROM ABOVE

ALL the people who had come to hunt for Timmy got away as quickly as they could. Most of them had a long way to go, with cows to milk when they reached home. What with buggies and cars and horses, the Dicksons' place looked as if there was a funeral or an auction-sale going on, but in twenty minutes there was only the Weeroona car left out of the lot. They didn't go inside; it would only have meant fussing the Dicksons and having them try to thank everyone.

We discussed what we'd better do. You see, the Dicksons couldn't be left without help. They were both knocked out, and Mrs. Dickson's feet were so blistered she couldn't walk. Dad sent Jack and Charlie to milk while we talked it over.

Miss Tarrant wanted to stay, but in the long run we decided that it had better be Binkie and Clem and me. Mother said it would be simpler for the Dicksons than having a grown-up, especially as there was no place for a grown-up to sleep. Binks could camp on the little couch in the kitchen, and Clem and I had the hay-shed. Binks and I could have managed everything by ourselves, of course, but we thought it would be far more fun to have Clem, and he was awfully keen to stay: and Mr. Smedley said he would see to all his jobs at home.

We thought that was very decent of Mr. Smedley, because you wouldn't have expected it of a stranger, and most Englishmen don't know how to milk. But he said he could manage that all right. He looked very tired, and there was no doubt he had worked as hard that day as any man in the crowd; and it was tougher going for him than for people used to rough country. He had fallen into the river several times, and though the heat had dried him very quickly he was caked all over with mud. He told Mother he was far too dirty to be in her car, which amused her a good deal.

As for the food question, that was settled for the Dicksons for quite a long time. People had come that morning knowing that the hunt for Timmy might go on for days; and as everyone knew there was nothing to spare on a place like the Dicksons', everyone had come prepared. Even the men who rode had had saddle-bags full of tucker, and the wives of men who'd come in cars and buggies had sent everything they could lay their hands on to Mrs. Dickson. In fact, while we stayed at the farm it was a case of eating all the perishable stuff

as hard as we could because the Dicksons were so horrified at the idea of any of it being wasted.

Mother and Miss Tarrant went in after awhile and made tea, and we all had some; and then Mother put Mrs. Dickson to bed. Timmy had a bowl of bread and milk, and looked quite cheerful, only very sleepy: Mother tucked him up in his little bed beside his mother after Miss Tarrant had given him a bath in their wash-tub. She carried him in wrapped up in a towel so that Mrs. Dickson could look him all over and see for herself that there wasn't a scratch or a bite on his body. She said that it was the only time Mrs. Dickson cried, and I am not too sure that Miss Tarrant and Mother didn't keep her company.

Dickson didn't protest when Dad told him we were staying. We were afraid he would, but he just seemed to be sort of numb. Dad said it was the result of shock and being exhausted, and he told him to get to bed straightaway.

"And stay there in the morning, too," he said. "The youngsters will look after everything, and they'll make a picnic of it. Tell the boys anything you want done on the place, and then forget about it—and help your wife to forget about the last two days."

"Forget?" said Dickson, and just looked at him.

"I know well enough there's no forgetting," Dad said. "But don't dwell on it, man: you've got your boy back, and now you've to look after your wife. Off you go: you'll all feel better in the morning."

So Dickson went, and we all felt relieved when the door of the bedroom was shut; and then our car got on the move. Mother wouldn't let Dad drive. She packed him into the back seat with Charlie and Jack, and they said he was asleep before they'd gone half a mile, and only woke up when they reached Weeroona. And that says something, for the roads for the first twenty miles really aren't roads at all.

We three were left alone, and when we tidied up the kitchen and got wood ready for lighting the fire in the morning all we wanted was bed. But Binkie said nothing was going to make her sleep in the kitchen; and you couldn't blame her, because there had been a fire there all day and it was simply stifling. So we carried the little couch over to our shed and put it in the part that was clear of hay. Mother had known someone might have to stay, and she had brought some sheets and blankets, so we were all well off. Not that we needed blankets over us; we lay on top of them on the hay, and fortunately they absorbed most of the insects.

It was still daylight when we turned in, and the next thing we knew it was broad daylight again next morning, and Binkie was sitting up and calling to us in a voice of horror.

"Boys! For goodness' sake wake up—it's eight o'clock! The cows!"

We said, “Gosh!” and tumbled out of the hay in equal horror, because it is a serious thing to leave cows unmilked as late as that. We were all in dread that Dickson had got up and gone to them, but we needn’t have worried on that point; when Binkie scooted over to the house all was still. She lit the fire and fixed up breakfast while we did the jobs; and we ate our breakfast out in the yard for fear of disturbing our sleeping hosts. Besides, it was nicer there. Bran and the farm dog had made friends, and they had breakfast with us. Everything felt very peaceful. We three were so stiff that we creaked when we moved, but that was only a detail that would wear off.

Well, do you know, that family slept all day! They woke at intervals, and we fed them, and Binks put fresh dressings on Mrs. Dickson’s feet; then they would go off to sleep again like three babies. We began to feel really ancient, looking after them. Dickson said something once, in a drowsy voice, about thinking it was time he got up; and Binks took his cup away and patted his shoulder and said, “That’s all we want from *you*, Mr. Dickson!” in a voice like a professional nurse’s, and he lay back meekly and gave a big sigh and shut his eyes. We slept a good bit ourselves, lying on the grass in the yard under a wattle-tree. It was the queerest, laziest day I ever remember, but somehow we felt very cheerful.

Next day our patients began to come alive again. Dickson turned out in the morning, but he was very shaky, not able to work yet: Mrs. Dickson was still a bit of a wreck, and it was rather a good thing that her blisters weren’t healed, because they kept her in bed. As for Timmy, he was full of beans. His legs were still inclined to crumple, but he begged to come outside, so we put him on a rug under the wattle-tree. He talked a lot about his wanderings when he was lost, and it was as Mr. Smedley had guessed: he got down to the river. That was the only thing that seemed to have scared him: he knew he shouldn’t be there, and he doubled back like a shot.

But it was funny to hear him talk. He had the queerest idea that his mother had been with him, on and off, nearly all the time. There was no sense in arguing with him: we just let him talk. He said she had pulled him away from a snake “two times,” and carried him out of a gully that was choked with prickly Moses. When she went away—he said “when she wasn’t there any more”—he hunted for her; and it was one of those times that he was hunting that he climbed up the stump and fell in.

Only he didn’t put it that way. He got quite cross when we spoke about his falling in. “I *never* felled,” he said. “Mum was there inside the stump an’ she lifted me in. An’ she cuddled me up, an’ I went to sleep. An’ next thing, I was awake an’ you two was lookin’ at me, an’ I couldn’t make out where on earth Mum had got to.”

Well, what could we say? Of course the poor kid must have got light-

headed or dreamed it all, but it made us feel a bit creepy to hear him chattering about it in that ordinary way. When we told Mother about it at home she didn't say anything for a minute. Then she just said that dreams could be very merciful sometimes. I reckon that dream was.

Our people came over on the second day to see how everything was going on, and Dickson wanted us to go home with them; he was getting a little jumpy about taking up our time. But we didn't feel that way about it, and we knew Mrs. Dickson would try to start working as soon as we left, so we said we'd stay a day or two longer, and Dad and Mother thought so too. And were we glad we did!

You'd have considered that the Dicksons had had enough excitement in one week for quiet people; but there was more coming to them. It happened on the afternoon of the third day. Mother had remembered to bring over our bathing things, and as all was going well at the farm we went down to the river in the afternoon and had a gorgeous swim. We could have stayed there for hours if there hadn't been the cows to think of, but we didn't want Dickson to go after them, so we started home in good time.

The cows were in an outer paddock, so we came back that way to drive them home. Just as we got near the fence we heard a 'plane droning some distance away. Binkie and Clem don't see many 'planes, so they were quite excited. There was a lot of white cloud about, and it was some time before we could spot it. Then it came out of a big cloud-mass, going very fast, a long way to the east.

"Oh, I do hope it's coming right over us!" shouted Binks.

It certainly looked as if it was. The sound of the engine grew louder and Dickson's cows, which weren't used to 'planes either, began to take notice. It came nearer, and Dickson's old horse started careering about, swishing his tail—and I really hadn't thought that a whole squadron of bombers could put any energy into that old screw. We were laughing at him, and looking at the Dicksons—even Mrs. Dickson had limped out, and they were all in the paddock near their back yard—when suddenly the engine stopped.

You could almost hear the silence then. One moment the roar was filling the air, and the next there was nothing. The horse stopped short, with an astonished air, as if he was ashamed of himself. We stared up at the 'plane. It was losing height rapidly, coming in our direction: a single-seater Gypsy Moth, painted blue, with silver wings.

"What's he doing?" Binkie asked. "He's never going to land, is he, Peter? What gorgeous luck if he does!"

I was beginning to think that the pilot, whoever he was, might not be thinking that way. It wasn't the sort of place any pilot would pick out for a landing. Dickson's paddocks were anything but flat, and there were stony

gullies here and there, and plenty of trees and logs. The home paddock was the best, but it was very small, with the house and sheds in the middle of it. Still, bad as it was, the farm was the only place where a landing could be made: beyond it on every side was dense bush or rocky hills.

“I believe his engine’s conked out,” I said. “We may have to dodge if he comes our way.”

The ’plane was circling now, as if the pilot was looking for a place to land, and not finding anything he liked the look of. It had dropped a lot: I thought I could see him fumbling at his straps as he banked, but I couldn’t be sure. Then it seemed to come with a rush, straight at the house. We all stood rooted to our spots. But the pilot got the nose up a bit; the ’plane slewed, dipped in a sickening way, and then righted itself. It skimmed over the fence of the next paddock; the wheels touched the ground and it bounced high and came down again, going across the paddock in leaps. The cows ran, but not fast enough. The ’plane crashed into them; and that was the end of two cows.

The ’plane came to rest on its side against the bodies of the cows, and the pilot was flung clear, yards away. He lay quite still.

I said, “You’re not to come, Binks—cut up to Mrs. Dickson.” I didn’t know what we were going to find when we got to the pilot, and, anyhow, there were the cows. Clem and I raced over, and Dickson was there nearly as soon as we were.

Well, he wasn’t dead, though we thought he was for a minute. He had been flung out on one of the very few soft patches of ground, and he was only stunned. We felt him all over for broken bones, but there weren’t any. In a few moments he opened his eyes and lay looking at us in a dazed way. Then he said, “Much damage?”

“Mostly my cows, I reckon,” Dickson said. “How about you?”

The pilot moved his arms and legs about gingerly, and looked relieved. Then he tried to sit up, but promptly went flat again.

“Head’s swimming still,” he gasped.

Clem got up and went to the house as hard as he could for water: and Dickson walked away to see if the cows were out of their misery. They were—in fact, they’d never stirred after they were hit—and he came back slowly. I glanced up at him; there was nothing in his face to show what he must have been feeling. He knelt down again beside the pilot and lifted his head gently, just enough to slip his soft hat under it for a pillow. The pilot opened one eye, said, “Thanks, old man,” and shut it again.

He was a short man, thick-set, and not very young. Rather ugly, but his mouth turned up a bit at the corners, so that he looked as if he was used to laughing. He was wearing jolly good flying-kit, which made us hopeful that he’d be able to pay Dickson something for his cows, only you never know with

flying men: so many of them have put every penny they own into their 'plane. He lay very still, breathing quietly and deeply; I think he was treating himself in some way, and didn't want to interrupt it by speaking. Anyhow, when Clem came with the water he was able to sit up with Dickson's arm round him, and he looked much better after a drink. Pretty soon he got to his feet, and said to me, "Give me a shoulder, will you?" He was rather groggy, but he leaned on me and went slowly over to the 'plane.

He gave one look at it, and then at the cows; then he said, "Rotten luck. Is the owner your father?"

I said, "No, he isn't—and he can't afford to lose cows." I must have sounded rude, but I was wild to think of this happening to the Dicksons on top of all they'd had that week.

The airman looked at me in a funny way, and said, "That so? well you can tell me all about it presently." He had another look at the 'plane, and said under his breath, "Not too bad." Then he went back to Dickson, who was standing where we had left him.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "Fact is, I was so taken up with trying not to hit your house that I muffed things badly at the finish. You must tell me the value of the cows, and I'll make it all right."

Dickson nodded: he still had the stunned sort of look that he'd never lost since the business about Timmy. "Better come over to the house, Mister, an' have a cup o' tea," he said. "Can you walk that far?"

"Oh, rather, if this fellow doesn't mind lending me his shoulder," said the airman.

So we went over, and Mrs. Dickson looked at his head and fixed up a cut on it. Clem and I went off to milk the one cow that remained, and a nice job we had with her, because her nerves were simply shattered. There was mighty little milk to bring in. We all had tea together, and the airman—Garfield, his name was—was very nice to everyone. He couldn't quite understand the household you could see; there were such a lot of us for a two-roomed cottage, and he looked at Binkie and Clem and me in a puzzled way as if he wondered where we belonged. And what was puzzling us was where on earth the man was going to sleep. You see, the Dicksons didn't really seem to be taking hold of things yet, and there was nobody but us three to arrange things, yet it wasn't as if we were in our own house.

However, Mr. Garfield made it easier. When tea was over he asked me to slip across to the 'plane and bring his kit: and when I came back he was waiting for me outside the yard gate.

"Look here," he said, "I wish you'd explain to me what kind of a place I've dropped into. It's not your home, is it? And what's the matter with my unwilling host and hostess? Is anything wrong? I know I must be a confounded

nuisance, but they won't lose by it. And any man may have an accident."

So I told him how things were, and that he needn't think the Dicksons weren't willing to do anything they could for a person who'd had a crash, only they were still like people half-asleep. And his coming as he did was just one shock on top of another, especially for people who were deadly poor and had only three cows. He looked at me hard all the time I was telling him, and his pipe went out, but he didn't seem to notice it.

"By Jove!" he said. "I should think I *had* put the lid on everything. Poor souls." He lit his pipe and seemed to be thinking hard. Presently he said:

"Well, Peter, I seem to remember something about manna falling from above; I fancy I'll have to make my old 'plane look like manna. And I'll need your help."

I said, "Oh, they know you mean to pay for the cows——"

"Paying isn't everything," he said. "They need milk, and that poor chap isn't in any shape to go cow-hunting. Where can I buy cows, Peter? And when I say cows I mean good cows. It's a long while since I had anything to do with animals, but I should say from my brief inspection that the two I assassinated could not by any stretch of the imagination be called good. Could they?"

I began to like Mr. Garfield more and more. I said, "No, they were awful scraggs. The one that's left is the best, and now she's got nervous prostration."

"Poor dear!" he said, wrinkling up his nose in a funny way he had when he laughed. "Well, she'll have to be pensioned off. Where can I buy brand-new ones?"

"Well," I said, "that's not so easy. There's only one dairy-farm I know about here that might sell some, but I believe theirs are mostly pedigree Jerseys."

"Well, what's wrong with pedigree Jerseys?" he asked.

"Nothing but the price," I said. "One of theirs is worth six of Dickson's—and then some."

"Don't you worry about the price," said he. "That's my affair. Where's the place, Peter?"

"It's every bit of ten miles. And the only way to get there is in Dickson's buggy——"

"Does his horse match the cows?" interrupted Mr. Garfield anxiously.

"He's worse," I said. "You can see him if you turn round."

"I couldn't bear it," said Mr. Garfield. "Your word suffices. Ten miles! and I've got to collect a mechanic somewhere to help with the 'bus. Peter, be helpful—where can I get to a telephone and lay my hands on a car?"

I remembered there was a little post office about five miles away where there was a telephone, and I offered to ride Dickson's horse there if he liked and order a car from Kurungi. He was very pleased.

"I don't like to condemn you to ten miles on that bag of bones," he said. "But I'm not quite as spry as I was before I crashed, and I doubt if I could do it. To-morrow I'll be ready for brisk action. And that reminds me, Peter—do I sleep anywhere? I do not ask for beds of down, but is there a stray pig-sty?"

"Well, we're all in a hay-shed," I told him. "Binkie can move into the kitchen, and there'll be lots of room for you, if you can stand it."

"I ache for it," he said—and I rather reckon that was the exact truth, for he had come an awful smash. "I hope Binkie won't mind very much. Oh, and there's another thing. One cannot leave the corpses of one's victims cumbering the ground, especially in hot weather. How do I arrange a funeral?"

That was a point which had been worrying me, and I was jolly glad he had remembered it.

"He can't bury them," I said. "We'll have to burn them. That means hauling a lot of wood, but he's got working-bullocks. We could all help."

"Little man, I'll have a busy day!" said Mr. Garfield. "You've found my weak spot, Peter: I have driven many things, but never a bullock. Does one need a long apprenticeship? It took me ages to get on terms with a camel in West Australia, and to the end he never really loved me."

I said Clem and I could manage that part, which bucked him a good deal. By this time I was liking him so much that I didn't mind what I did. I mean, he was jolly, and made fun of everything in a sort of way, but underneath it you could see how sorry he was for the Dicksons. And when I thought of those Jerseys I could have turned handsprings for joy, because that meant the most wonderful lift for the Dicksons. They would be able to sell high-grade milk, and when there were calves they'd be valuable, apart from the value of the cows themselves. But I knew Dickson would nearly die rather than sell them.

Mr. Garfield wrote my instructions on a leaf of his pocket-book. I had to send two telegrams, and then to get on to the telephone and arrange for a car to come out with a good mechanic and a load of petrol. Then I was to telephone to the farm, so that they would have some cows ready for inspection. He gave me money, and told me to be sure and get myself an ice when I'd finished, and I grinned and asked him did he think ices grew on bush post offices?

He laughed too. "Stupid of me," he said. "Never mind, it's only a postponement—when you're back at school I'll look you up and we'll paint Sydney red. We'll make a date before I leave here."

We did too. I wonder when I'll be able to keep it.

## CHAPTER VII

WE BUY THINGS—

DICKSON said I could have the horse, and I left him and Mr. Garfield arranging about cremating the cows. Poor old Dickson seemed awfully cheered because it was being planned. I believe that cremating business was worrying him nearly as much as anything; and he was so used to doing everything on his own that he couldn't realize people wanting to take the job off his hands.

Binkie and Clem came with me to catch the horse. They had seen how the sleeping would have to be arranged, and they'd already carried the couch back to the kitchen. Binks was quite resigned. She had raked the fire out, and she said the kitchen was cooling down. She made me promise to look in and see her when I got back. I told them, in confidence, about the Jerseys, and it left them simply speechless.

It was rather jolly to be riding in the cool of the evening, even if the old horse was as rough as bags. Of course, it was after office hours when I got to the place, but nobody minds that in the bush. The postmistress must have been thinking of going to bed, for all her front hair was in curling-pins, but that didn't cramp her style. She knew all about Timmy, and was full of sympathy for the Dicksons. The news of the 'plane crash excited her greatly; she stood beside me while I was telephoning, and interrupted now and then, and was altogether matey.

It took some time to get my calls through: being so late, the garage in Kurungi was closed, and I couldn't be connected. But the fellow at the Kurungi post office was very decent; he said he knew where the owner was, and he sent someone to fetch him; a thing nobody would dream of doing for you if you were telephoning to Sydney. And the postmistress put a kettle on her oil-stove and made tea for me while we were waiting, so the time wasn't wasted altogether.

I got everything fixed up at last, said good-bye to the postmistress, and went out. And there I got a shock. The old brute of a horse had pulled away and broken his bridle and made tracks for home!

The postmistress must have heard the remark that was wrung from me at this discovery, for she bolted out.

"Aw, gee!" she said. "The old cow! Look here, son, he can't have gone far—I seen him through the window not ten minutes ago. You nip on to my bike

and lick after him as hard as you can go. I'll come after you an' bring the bike back."

I made her promise not to come far, and said I'd return the bike next day if I didn't catch him soon, and then I went like smoke. It was a champion old rattle-trap of a bike, and too short in the leg for me, and the road was bad, so it wasn't exactly a joy-ride. It was too dark to show up the dust-holes; I had some lovely skids, and two colossal spills. Fortunately, it didn't last long. In about a mile and a half I shot round a bend and came on the old horse, walking calmly along with the bridle trailing its broken reins on the ground.

I went past him, so that I could head him. He was quite easy to catch, and took no notice of all the things I told him about himself. I knotted up the bridle and turned back: he didn't like that much, and it was rather a job to lead the bike with one hand and him with the other, with him pulling back all the time. I was pretty hot by the time I met the postmistress, who was pegging along the track at the rate of knots.

She was quite amused when I told her what a good sort she was. "Lor', you'll do as much for me when I'm in a hole," she said. "Look in an' pass the time of day whenever you're hereabouts," and she leaped into the saddle and was off like a shot.

I thought Binks would be asleep when I got back, but she wasn't, so I sat on the edge of her bunk and yarned to her. She told me Mr. Garfield had had quite a long talk to the Dicksons and had actually made them laugh, and bucked them up quite a lot. And we agreed there was something like manna from above about Mr. Garfield as well as his 'plane. I regret to say Binkie howled with unfeeling laughter when I told her how I'd had to chase my horse on the postmistress's bike.

I had to grope my way to my rug in the hay-shed, because one didn't dare to strike a match there. And of course I fell over Mr. Garfield. After the first alarmed and heated outcry had subsided he was quite decent about it, and remarked that anyhow his luck wasn't right out, because I had taken off my boots. It was frightfully hot in the shed; I heard him tossing and turning for a good while, and wondered if he'd ever had to sleep on loose hay before. It isn't all it might be. You sink right down, and the hay billows up round you, and the smell gets almost choking after a little. Then sharp stems work through the rug and stick into you, and you can't be certain which is hay and which is insects, both being present in large quantities.

I asked Mr. Garfield if he was very uncomfortable; not that I knew what I could do about it, anyhow, but he seemed in need of a friendly word. But all he said was, "Delightful place, but I shall complain to the management—they've forgotten to give me a hot-water bottle!" So I went to sleep.

We got busy very early in the morning. Dickson looked much better: he

yoked a couple of bullocks, and when we had taken a panel out of the fence, the deceased, as Mr. Garfield politely called the cows, were hauled some distance into the far paddock, where there was a lot of fallen timber. Clem and I noticed that Mr. Garfield wouldn't let Dickson touch the cows: he did all the roping himself. They were landed on a rocky place where a fire couldn't spread, and we burned all the grass for some distance round to make sure. Then we got Dickson to go and milk the survivor, and we three hauled timber and made a funeral pyre. There wasn't a breath of wind when we set it alight, and it was soon going well.

"Good-bye, deceased," said Mr. Garfield. "If I had to hit something on this farm I don't believe I could have made a better choice than you two old ladies. Peace to your ashes. Boys, is there anywhere where a man can get a swim?" So we unyoked the bullocks and made a bee-line for the river.

Mr. Garfield tackled the 'plane while we were waiting for the garage man to arrive, and with all hands helping we managed to get her righted. She wasn't much damaged; he reckoned that with the help of the mechanic he could make her fit to fly to the nearest aerodrome. He put Timmy into her while he worked, and that small boy thought he was Christmas. It was rather a topping morning, for Clem and I had never had the chance of seeing all the parts of a 'plane before, and Mr. Garfield was jolly good explaining everything. Then the mechanic turned up, and after a while Mr. Garfield left him to the job, as he seemed to know a good deal about it, and we went up to the house.

He had said he wanted Binkie and us to go with him, and off we went. It was a pretty good car, a big tourer, and you could see Mr. Garfield knew all about driving; but the roads made his hair stand on end. When we dropped into an extra-size pot-hole, and Binkie bounced higher than usual, he advised her very seriously to take to 'planes, since this was no country for cars; and Binkie gently answered that what she had seen of 'planes lately made her think there wasn't much to choose between them.

He chuckled at that and said, "When I fly down to call on you people at Weeroona I'll make you come up with me, and you shan't come down to earth until you've apologized." That was the first we'd heard about his coming to see us, and you can bet we were pleased.

When we got to the Gordons' farm there were a lot of cows ready to be inspected, and old Mr. Gordon was waiting. He knew us, of course, and we introduced Mr. Garfield, who told him what he wanted. He said, "I don't know one cow from another, and I'm going to put myself in your hands. You know Dickson's land, I suppose, and you will understand what he needs. I want him to have cows that will give him at least one pleasant memory connected with this week."

Old Mr. Gordon knew all about Dickson, and he had helped to hunt in the

scrub for Timmy. He just nodded and asked, "How many?" and Mr. Garfield said "Three."

"Three?" I said, thinking he'd made a mistake. He grinned at me and said, "Why, of course; the lady with nervous prostration isn't worth much more than the deceased, is she, Peter?" That had to be explained to Mr. Gordon, and the old man looked hard at Mr. Garfield. "That's a kind thought," he said. "I'll do my best for you."

Some farmers would have reckoned that a stranger in Mr. Garfield's position was just a pigeon handed them for plucking, but we knew old Mr. Gordon wasn't that sort. He picked out three beauties, young cows with calves. I never heard what he asked for them, but I'm jolly sure it wasn't a penny more than he could have got anywhere else.

"You'll be wanting to see Dickson get them," he said. "I've a motor-van I use for taking beasts to shows: I'll send them over this evening. You'll not mind if I come myself to see them landed safely?"

"That's an honour," said Mr. Garfield, and we three knew it was. We went inside and had drinks while the business part was settled. Mrs. Gordon wanted us to stay to dinner, but Mr. Garfield said we had things to do in Kurungi. It was news to us, but by this time we had stopped being surprised at anything.

Well, we put on the pace to Kurungi. The road after leaving Mr. Gordon's was better, and we were all hungry. Still, it shook us three somewhat to find that we were going to the hotel, because we certainly weren't dressed for it. Mr. Garfield had put on an ordinary suit, but we hadn't anything to change to, having nothing but the khaki shirts and breeches that had already done what Macaulay would call yeomen service at the Dicksons'. However, Mr. Garfield said he didn't care a button what we wore, so we had to content ourselves by thinking what a mercy it was Mother had remembered to bring us clean shirts when she came over. Though unfortunately they weren't nearly as clean as when she brought them.

It was sale day in the township, and lots of people were having lunch in the hotel. We knew a good many of them, and some people stared so hard at our clothes that we were glad we were with someone who looked respectable. We all ate a huge lunch, and afterwards we sat in the lounge while Mr. Garfield smoked a cigar.

He told us a bit about himself then: perhaps he thought our people might want to know before he landed at Weeroona. Said he was on the Stock Exchange in Sydney, and he had a flat out at Rose Bay, and he wasn't married. The really interesting things were that he owned a yacht and a speedboat, and was very keen on them both; but what he loved most in the world was flying. The 'plane was his own; he was thinking of scrapping her soon and getting a later model. He said he'd travelled all over Australia, and told us of some

exciting times he'd had with an exploring expedition in the North. That was when he had had to learn about camels: he made us rock with laughter over some of his yarns.

We were fairly thrilled, because he was really the most interesting person we'd ever met, and anyone is exciting who owns 'planes and speedboats and yachts, and doesn't mind talking about them to much younger people. But it was the way he talked that we liked. Nothing bragging or superior, but just like one of ourselves. And he asked us lots of questions about the things we did and seemed just as interested in them as if he'd been an old friend.

Most of the people had left the hotel; on sale days the men hurry back to the stock-yards and the women go and buy hats and things. There were only a few people in the lounge, mostly men who looked like commercial travellers waiting for the afternoon train. We noticed Mr. Garfield glance now and then at a youngish man sitting by himself reading a newspaper. A very ordinary chap, dark, and not bad-looking. Mr. Garfield asked us presently if we knew who he was, and we said we didn't.

"I've seen him somewhere before," he said, looking rather puzzled. "I wish I could remember where. I don't often forget a face, though I'm not strong on remembering names. There's something about him I'd like to place."

"I expect you've met him in Sydney," said Binkie; and he said, "Possibly—but somehow I think it was somewhere else. Oh well, it doesn't matter." He finished his cigar, and we went out. The man in the corner didn't look up from his newspaper, so evidently he didn't recognize Mr. Garfield.

We went shopping. I mean, Mr. Garfield did—we hadn't so much as a penny between the three of us. But he shopped enough for all four, and he asked our advice about everything, especially Binkie's.

We went to a draper's first, and he got one of the saleswomen to help him and Binkie—Clem and I weren't in on that sort of job, so we put in the time at the saddler's shop. But I had to go in for a minute to the draper's, for it seemed he had noticed that Mrs. Dickson was just my height, and he wanted the saleswoman to have something to judge by.

Binks was beaming all over her face when they came out. He'd got a regular outfit for Mrs. Dickson and Timmy; sensible working clothes for the farm, and some pretty things as well—the sort a woman likes to wear when she goes into the township. He knew how to choose too, Binks told me—at least, all the top things. Over the unders, he just turned her and the shop-woman loose, and told them to let themselves go. But everything had to be pretty: he was very strong on that.

"Colour," he said. "Don't be afraid of colour, Binkie. Don't put in a thing that's drab and dull-looking. That farm is all grey—it needs brightening." Of course, he didn't let the shop people know who he was buying for: he just said

“our friends.” He went off into the men’s part of the shop and bought things for Dickson, a whacking great parcel. I never saw half the things, but we three agreed that when next the Dicksons appeared in public they would fairly astonish the natives, considering the sort of clothes they generally wore. But Binks said everything was strictly sensible.

The toy-shop was next, and we were all busy there. We had to choose the right kind of toys for Timmy, and they had to be sensible too, things that would stand up to hard usage. Mr. Garfield was really pleased when Clem suggested a big mail-cart, one of those strong ones with iron wheels that a kid can use to bring in quite a load of wood for the house. I can’t put down half the things he bought, but young Timmy was set up for years: and there were books and painting kit and plasticine, because he planned for wet days too. He was a man to think: you’d have reckoned he had a dozen youngsters of his own.

Then he just prowled round the streets, seeing what else he could buy. Sweets; and tobacco and a pipe for Dickson; and he made Binks choose a few pretty vases and jugs and that sort of junk that appeals to women. Then he pushed his hat back and looked as if all his ideas had worn out.

“Use your woman’s brain, Binkie,” he said. “What next?”

Binkie had gone completely mad by now, and she didn’t hesitate.

“Saucepans!” she said. “She’s cooking chiefly in kerosene-tins, and her frying-pan’s falling to bits.”

“Binkie, you are a genius!” he said. “Come along.”

So that was that, and they got an oil-stove as well. It was a mercy that the car was big, with a strong luggage-grid; as it was, we looked as if we were going for a year’s camping by the time we set out for the farm, and the store had to arrange to send out cases of kerosene, since an oil-stove is not much use without oil. The last thing that Mr. Garfield bought was a huge box of chocolates, which he put on Binkie’s knee.

“We’ll all need a little nourishment on the way,” he said. Jolly good they were, too.

He was pretty quiet after we left, and about ten miles out he stopped the car and turned to speak to us.

“I expect you three understand people like the Dicksons better than I do,” he said. “It’s easy enough to buy presents; not so easy, if a man is poor, to accept them. Am I going to be up against it out there?”

I think each of us had wondered the same thing. People can be deadly poor like the Dicksons, but they can be proud all the same.

“You see, it’s terribly important that they should take these things in the right way,” he said. “If they think it’s just charity, I’m done. I’m thinking mostly of that poor woman. All she has had to bear this week might easily affect her to the end of her life, especially as it’s such a lonely life. And

nobody can do much to help her. But I believe there's no woman who doesn't respond to pretty things: nice things for her home; and seeing her youngster and her man happy. I can dump all this stuff there, and they would have to use it—and much good it will do them, if they do it against their will. But if I can get them to take it happily, as if it came from an old friend—if they'll only *enjoy* everything, as we've enjoyed the buying. How can I manage it, kids?"

Clem is a wise old bird. He said after a minute:

"Why don't you get hold of Dickson by himself first, sir, and say to him exactly what you've just said to us? If you put it straight to him I believe he'll do any mortal thing you want."

"He will, too," Binks put in. "He told me last night he was deadly worried about Mrs. Dickson. I think if you make him think we think . . ." She stopped, being rather mixed among thinks.

"Carry on," said Mr. Garfield. "Take your own time, counsellor."

"I mean, you'll have to make him see it's all a conspiracy to take her mind off horrors and everything, and it can't possibly succeed unless he's right in the middle of it," said Binks, speaking very fast. "Make him see that it all depends on him, and so he simply daren't lose a chance of . . . of, well, repairing her."

"Repairing is the word," he said. "I believe you two have hit it. And you feel that if he'll only take the things as if he enjoyed them, she will, too?"

"My hat! she will," said Binks. "There isn't a woman alive who could resist those saucepans!"

## CHAPTER VIII

—AND WE UNPACK

WE made up our minds not to unpack the car until Mr. Garfield could get a talk to Dickson. But there was one thing there was no hiding, and that was the mail-cart. It was lashed on top of the big packing-case on the luggage-grid, with its wheels in the air; and as the whole affair was painted bright red it was rather conspicuous.

Young Timmy ran out when he heard the car coming, and his people followed him. They were scared to let him out of their sight those days. Timmy propped dead when he saw the mail-cart and said "*O-o-oh!*" in a sort of gasp.

"I think that can come down without any palaver," Mr. Garfield said quietly, as we stopped. "Help me cast her off, boys."

We took down the cart and he ran it up to Timmy. The kid had caught hold of his mother's dress, and was looking as if the sky had fallen and he didn't dare believe it had fallen for him. Mr. Garfield put the shafts into his hand.

"You're strong enough to pull that along, aren't you, son?" he said.

"Is it yours?" Timmy asked.

"Not much—it's yours. See how it goes."

Timmy said, "*Mum*—it's mine very own!" and he ran it a few yards and then began to feel it all over. We watched the Dicksons. I don't think they thought at all about being proud just then. They only looked at Timmy, the way any people would look when they saw their kid with a thing like that. A kid who'd never had a decent toy in his life.

Mr. Garfield said he wanted to see how the mechanic was getting on, and asked Dickson to go with him. It was a good while before they came back. When they did you could see that Mr. Garfield had got what he wanted. Dickson was looking quite a different man. He marched straight up to his wife, who was watching Timmy being pulled round by Binks in his mail-cart.

"Well, Katie," he said, "our friend here's been getting presents for you an' me as well as the boy. It's no use arguin' with him—he's the obstinatest bloke ever I met. So we gotter let him see how much we like 'em, 'cause that's the least we can do."

Mrs. Dickson looked bewildered. What she said I don't know, because we dashed to unpack the car. We got the case off the back and set up the oil-stove out there in the yard. There it stood, all black and shiny, with its bright blue

burners, and the top covered with aluminium saucepans; and Mrs. Dickson flopped down on the edge of the box and gaped at it helplessly.

“My goodness!” she said. “If that isn’t the thing I’ve longed for all my life. Oh, Mister, you shouldn’t of!” She began to cry a little, but it was the sort of crying that didn’t matter. “Oh, Bill, did you ever see anything so lovely as them pots!”

“Too right I never,” said Dickson. “Looks nearly too pretty to cook with, don’t it? But I reckon it’s the end of you havin’ to work in a red-hot kitchen all the summer, old woman.”

We went on unpacking, and it was one of the cheerfulest jobs I ever saw. Having swallowed the oil-stove, nothing else seemed to matter; the Dicksons weren’t only meek, they got excited. Dickson played up well: he admired tablecloths and curtains and oddments like that as if he was an expert; it was downright funny when we came to think about it afterwards, but at the moment it didn’t seem funny at all.

We kept back all Timmy’s toys. Nothing on earth could have put that boy into a wilder state of bliss than he was in over his mail-cart; it would only have been stupid to interrupt him, and the toys could wait. We stowed them away under his bed. And Mr. Garfield wouldn’t have Dickson’s clothes unpacked outside. He carried that parcel into the bedroom himself. But he gave him the pipe and tobacco, and Dickson looked nearly as pleased as his wife had done over the oil-stove.

Binkie became quite demented over that unpacking. Presently she grabbed a big bundle with one hand, and Mrs. Dickson with the other, and marched her into the bedroom. They weren’t long away; but when they came out you wouldn’t have known Mrs. Dickson.

In her ordinary working clothes you’d never have looked twice at her, she was such a drab, tired-looking little thing. But when Binks brought her out again she was quite pretty. She’s very dark, with brown eyes, and Binks had dressed her in a cool yellow frock and a shady yellow hat. Mrs. Dickson had flushed up, just like a shy kid, and she was smiling.

My word, Mr. Garfield knew something when he talked about colour! There was colour everywhere about—her yellow things, and the bright blue of the stove, and Timmy’s scarlet mail-cart; and flowery curtains, and red and blue towels and tablecloths, and pink china things. I suppose some people might have called it an awful mix-up of colours, but when I saw it all, and Mrs. Dickson’s face as she stood in the middle of it, I remembered Binkie’s word that Mr. Garfield had said was just right. Repairing. It was easy to see that she was being repaired.

And Dickson was, too. He stared at his wife unbelievably for a moment, and then he just beamed. “My word, old woman!” he said. “Why, you look

like the day we got married! I say, Mister——” and then he seemed as if he couldn't say anything.

Mr. Garfield wouldn't have given him a chance to, anyhow. He was as busy as a barber, unpacking and carrying things in and stowing them wherever he could find room—it was lucky that their kitchen is pretty big. He looked as happy as anything. We got all the packing stuff into a shed and tidied up the yard, which was beginning to look as if an earthquake had struck it. The oil-stove was carried into the kitchen; we put kerosene into it, and boiled up the new blue kettle for tea. I'll always remember Mrs. Dickson's face when she sat at the end of her table to pour out: everything new and shiny on the table, and all of us jolly, and Timmy sitting near her, in his mail-cart, because no power on earth could get him out of it. We three are all pretty glad to have it to remember, instead of her face as she hunted for Timmy in the scrub.

The mechanic came along just as we had finished, looking hot and bothered, because he needed some fitting he hadn't brought. Mr. Garfield told him not to worry, but to bring it out in the morning; we gave him some tea, and he went off in the car. He had hardly gone when we heard another motor. A big wooden van was coming very slowly towards the cow-yard, with old Mr. Gordon sitting beside the driver.

Mr. Garfield had told Dickson he was replacing his cows, but I don't fancy he had said they were coming from Gordon's. He couldn't have told him, or Dickson would not have been so utterly flabbergasted. We went to watch them unloaded; the door at the back let down to form a ramp, with slats across it to prevent them slipping, and the Jerseys came down stepping daintily, as proud as little ladies could be. Their calves were with them, little heifers, and each a picture. And as for Dickson—well, I am no good at describing what he looked like. The only person I can imagine doing it is Macaulay.

Mr. Gordon took Dickson off and had a yarn to him. We learned afterwards that he was advising him about improving his farm: there was a sour, marshy part that only needed proper draining to be quite good land, only Dickson hadn't any means of doing it. So Mr. Gordon arranged to send some of his men over to cut drains and plough it up; and that stretch will about double the value of Dickson's holding.

We could hardly get Dickson in that night. He stayed out in the paddock, looking at his Jerseys, and I expect he was seeing visions of monthly cheques coming in from the butter-factory, and a herd being gradually built up, and all the difference it was going to make for them. When a man has had no earthly prospect of anything but slogging along in the same old rut, barely able to make a living, it must be rather marvellous to be able to have visions like that all of a sudden.

There was trouble about getting Timmy to bed, because he flatly refused to

be parted from his mail-cart, and there was no room for it in the bedroom. So Binkie put a large Teddy bear on his pillow, and then there was no more difficulty. He went to sleep hugging it. When Mrs. Dickson came out from looking at him, Mr. Garfield suggested that she really ought to go and bring her husband home or he might stay in the paddock all night: and then we all cleared off in the opposite direction and sat on a log and yarned in the dusk. We didn't come back until they had gone to bed.

Mr. Garfield did most of the yarning. We came to the conclusion that the Stock Exchange must be able to get along without him quite often, he'd done so much travelling. It seemed quite ordinary for him to go to England, and when he did he went by air most of the way. He had served in the War, but he wouldn't talk much about that. Instead he told us so much about out-of-the-way corners in Europe that I began to think there might be a chance that my geography would improve when I went back to school. I've never been interested in any country outside Australia; but when I said so, Mr. Garfield shook his head.

"That's a mistake, Peter. People who think that way are only also-rans. We might have held that idea a hundred years ago, when Australia was a child-nation: now that she's growing up we can't think like children any more and get away with it. Speed and power have tightened up the world until it's like a jig-saw puzzle, beginning to show that it's all one pattern, each bit affecting the whole picture. We've *got* to understand other countries and the things their people think, if we want to stay in the picture. And I would like to drive that fact into the head of every boy and girl in Australia instead of a good many useless things they're taught in schools."

Written down, that looks a bit preachy, but it didn't sound so when he said it. He was awfully in earnest; and when anyone who is laughing half his time does speak in earnest you somehow want to listen pretty hard. I know I've thought a lot over his idea since then, and so has Binks.

But he didn't stay serious for long. In a minute he had us all rocking over a story of how he'd got himself arrested in Germany through breaking some police regulation he knew nothing about. I would like to tell that yarn, but it might make this book too long for the patient reader.

He must have said something to make the mechanic jump to it, because he was back at the farm next morning very soon after we were up. Mr. Garfield worked with him, and the 'plane was ready about eleven o'clock. We all went to see him take off. The Dicksons were trying to thank him, but he simply didn't give them time.

"I'll see you all again before long," he said. "I promise you faithfully I won't try another landing in your paddock, Mrs. Dickson; but Peter tells me there's plenty of room for me to make mistakes at Weeroona, so I'll come

down there. Don't let my friend Timmy forget me."

"He won't do that—nor none of us," said Dickson. "I reckon luck dropped from the skies when you crashed, Mister."

"If you think that, it's fairer to say that luck began when young Timmy strayed away," Mr. Garfield said. "Don't lose sight of that, Mrs. Dickson—it makes it a better memory. If he hadn't, Peter and Co. wouldn't have been here—and much chance I'd have had of finding out where to look for cows! So even if he did fall over me in the hay I'm grateful to Peter; and even more grateful to the Co., who didn't. So-long, everybody—good luck!"

It was a tricky take-off, with very little room to spare, and the ground nearly as bad as could be; but he managed it, though we had a hair-raising moment when it looked as if he wouldn't clear the fence. When he had gained enough height he came round, circling over the house. I think Dickson would have preferred him not to do that, because he looked anxiously at the cow-paddock, where the Jerseys were feeding peacefully. Mr. Garfield knew what he was about: he was far too high to disturb them. We saw him wave to us, and then he flew off towards Weeroona. He had made me draw a map for him, so that he could pick out the homestead and choose a landing-place for when he came to see us. Binks warned him solemnly that he might expect to see Dad come out with a gun if he crashed absent-mindedly and damaged any of the Herefords.

Well, we began to think it was time we went away, too, for as far as we could see the Dicksons were quite repaired. Clem was beginning to worry about being so long away from his father, too. But there was no means of getting back, for of course Dad had sent the men out to bring in our horses and saddles. Binks suggested that one of us should ride to the telephone and ask for a relief expedition to be sent to collect us, but there was no need—while we were talking about it we saw dust on the road, far away, and out of it came our car, with Mother and Miss Tarrant. So we said good-bye to the Dicksons, and Mother let me drive, because on those lonely roads one doesn't often meet a policeman who might be likely to make rude enquiries about a driving-licence and a person's age.

It was great to be home again. We had heaps to tell, and you can imagine how thrilled they were to hear about the 'plane. They had seen her fly over Weeroona, never imagining how much we'd been connected with her. Dad's eyebrows went up when we mentioned Mr. Garfield's name.

"Why, that must be Hubert Garfield," he said. "He's very well known—explorer and yachtsman and lots of other things. Made rather a name for himself in the War, though he was young then; I've heard that he wangled himself in when he was well under enlisting age. You youngsters have certainly picked up someone interesting." Dad looked at us with much more

respect than he usually shows us. "I hope he'll keep his promise and come here."

"Why, of course he will," Binkie said calmly. "He wants to take us flying."

"Oh!" said Mother. "Does he often crash?"

"And does he make a feature of killing cattle when he crashes?" asked Dad.

Binks said she had told him what he could expect if he did it on Weeroona, and having asked what this was Dad said he would certainly be ready with his gun, and was it likely to happen soon? He was rather disappointed when we told him Mr. Garfield didn't expect to have a chance of coming for at least a month.

"Pity if he doesn't come before the end of your holidays, Peter," he said. "However, I expect you'll be able to worry through them somehow: there will be plenty to do. By the way, we shall have another new chum on our hands for part of the time. Young Smedley's friend has turned up."

"The chap with the motor-boat?" I asked.

"Yes. Fellow named Mount. I went over to see Mr. Hardy yesterday, and he had just arrived. I rather think Mr. Hardy is a bit overweighted with two guests in the house, and certainly his old Sarah is. She was picking apricots as I rode past their orchard, and I've rarely seen anyone look more glum. Said it was about time Clem came home to lend a hand, because she'd never bargained on doing everything for a mob of visitors."

"Bad-tempered old thing!" said Binkie. "She's always grumbling, even when they're alone. Did you manage to soothe her, Dad?"

"I tried, but I'm afraid the effect was hardly noticeable," Dad said, grinning. "I'm a poor hand at soothing women."

Mother looked rather worried.

"I hope it won't upset her to the point of leaving the Hardys," she said. "She's a very poor specimen of a housekeeper, but she's better than nothing—and it's so hard to get anyone for that lonely place. We must take the visitors off her hands as much as possible, Tom."

"Can do," said Dad, "as far as I'm concerned. But it means more work for you and Miss Tarrant."

"So it does," Miss Tarrant said in her best injured voice. "Mrs. Forsyth, will you kindly accept my resignation, because I shall be leaving this day week as ever is?"

Binkie jumped. She said, "Oh, Tarry darling, couldn't you make it just a few weeks later?"

"Tarry a little, in fact," murmured Dad.

"I could not," said Miss Tarrant. "Why?"

"Well, if you did, it would be near the end of the hols. Then most likely

Mother wouldn't be able to find another she-dragon for the whole of next term, and I'd have hols for three months," said Binkie hopefully.

"Little beast!" Miss Tarrant said. "Mrs. Forsyth, I withdraw my resignation. I may be worked to death, but at least I'll have the prospect of making Binks wish she had never been born when lessons begin again."

I said: "Let's take her down to bathe and duck her, Binks."

Miss Tarrant looked at me and drew a long breath. I knew what was coming, because it was her usual preparation for discharging Macaulay at me.

"*His features,*" she said, "*were redeemed from vulgar ugliness only by their stern, dauntless and commanding expression. His——*" By that time I had got round the table, and she took to her heels, with chunks of Macaulay dying away in the distance.

## CHAPTER IX

ENGLISHMAN NO. II

NEXT morning I rode over to the Hardys' to see if they would come out with us. I found Clem at the wood-heap, chopping up logs. He must have been at it a good while; there was quite a stack cut. He looked very hot and not too happy, but he brightened up when I said why I'd come.

"I'd love it," he said. "Sarah's in a shocking bad temper, and if we're out she'll have a chance to cool down. She says she had too much to do while I was away."

"I thought Mr. Smedley was going to do your jobs," I said.

"Oh, he milked, and did a few things. But you couldn't expect a stranger to see all the oddments that wanted doing: and Sarah is the sort of old coot who would do them herself, just so that she'd have a grievance. And now that Mr. Mount has come she's worse than ever. Says she was never engaged to cook for four people—and all that sort of bilge. As if a few days of it would hurt her!"

"Oh, don't worry," I said. "Dad and Mother understand, and they want you to bring them over to Weeroona a lot. We'll go for a picnic to-day."

Clem got a new worry.

"Peter, old man," he said solemnly, "I just haven't got the nerve to ask Sarah for a picnic lunch. And if I start getting it myself she'll raise the roof."

"You don't have to," I told him. "Mother told me to say specially that she was taking out lunch for all hands. You sit down and cool off a bit while I swing that axe."

Clem wasn't sorry. He's really not strong enough for axe-work. He sat on a log while I chopped, and then we took a few barrow-loads up for the house. Sarah was in the kitchen, and she was barely civil when I said good morning to her.

"I'm scared she'll leave," Clem said as we took the wheelbarrow back to the heap. "I don't know how on earth I'm going to manage if she does, with these two men here. And truly, Peter, she hasn't got much to grouse at: I swept out all the rooms this morning and made the beds."

"Didn't the visitors help?"

"Oh, well, you can't let strangers do that sort of thing. Mervyn did come along when I was making his bed, and looked rather astonished, and said he'd finish it. It looked pretty queer when he had, too," added Clem, grinning:

“Mervyn’s got a fine free style of making a bed. They’re not used to it, you see: I don’t suppose he’d ever tried his hand at it before.”

“Well, they won’t be here long, will they, now that Mr. Mount has come,” I said, trying to cheer him up. “What’s the new man like, by the way?”

“Oh, that’s something I meant to tell you,” said Clem. “He’s the man we saw in the hotel at Kurungi the day we had lunch there. The man Mr. Garfield thought he’d known somewhere or other, only he couldn’t place him.”

“You don’t mean it!” I said in great surprise. “Whatever brought him there?”

“He put in there for lunch on his way down the coast, and came on to us later in the day. I thought he looked a bit astonished when he saw me yesterday, and of course I reckoned it was because of our being in the hotel; but he said he’d never noticed us. He’d been running the motor-boat for hours in the sun, and he was half-asleep, he said.”

“Did you ask him if he knew Mr. Garfield?”

“Yes, but he said he didn’t know anyone of that name. He’s a queer, silent sort of chap, Peter; I don’t know that I like him awfully. He’s not in Mervyn’s class, at all events.”

“Eats with his knife and drops his h’s?” I asked.

“Oh, not that sort of thing. But he’s—well, he just isn’t. And I don’t believe Mervyn’s glad he has come, either. I thought they were great friends, but somehow it doesn’t strike me that they are.”

“What does your father think of him?”

“Father wouldn’t say anything, no matter what he thought. But he’s just a shade extra polite to Mr. Mount—not the way he is with Mervyn. That’s always a sign with Father. He’s bothered about Sarah, too, though I don’t tell him a quarter of what she says. I say, Peter, isn’t running a house and a housekeeper a mug’s game!”

I thought so, too, and I was jolly sorry for old Clem, because he has a lot of worries that are hard for a boy to handle, and he’s always trying to hide most of them from his father. I bucked him up as well as I could—there’s one thing, you can nearly always make him laugh. Then we went into the house.

Mr. Hardy and the visitors were smoking on the verandah. Sure enough, Mr. Mount was the man we’d seen in Kurungi. But it turned out that he’d only arrived from England on the same ship as Mr. Smedley, so Mr. Garfield couldn’t have known him after all; and I didn’t think he’d missed much. Not that Mr. Mount wasn’t quite pleasant, and he said he liked what he had seen of Australia and wanted to see a lot more. But somehow, you felt he didn’t quite fit in with the rest of us.

However, we all went for our picnic, and had a good time. We bathed, and Mr. Smedley gave us some more diving lessons; none of us could manage his

special somersault, though we tried until we were too battered to go on. Mr. Mount was no better than we were at that, but he could beat any of us at swimming a distance. He seemed to like Miss Tarrant a lot: most of the time he stayed near her. With the rest of us he hadn't much to say, but with Miss Tarrant he was quite fluent.

It was the same way all through that week. We went out every day, generally riding. Mr. Mount said frankly that he didn't know much about horses, so Dad put him on a quiet mare; he managed her well enough, improving a good deal after the first day or two. Always he tried to ride with Miss Tarrant; it became rather a joke among us. Not that we chaffed her, or anything like that, only the joke was to watch how she tried to ride with someone else, if it was only Binkie or me. But Mr. Mount would come shoving in alongside her, beginning a conversation that rather shut us out, and often she couldn't shake him off without seeming rude.

Miss Tarrant can be beautifully rude if she wants to be, but Mr. Mount was a sort of guest, so she remained polite. We wondered what Mr. Smedley thought about it. He would ride with anyone who happened to be near, always friendly, and ready to lend a hand with a job; but it struck us that he didn't seem as if he was really enjoying himself.

Mr. Mount, however, became very pleased with life as time went on, and just a little inclined to brag about his riding, especially to Miss Tarrant. Well, it was natural, perhaps, because he really had improved; and once or twice he joined us in jumping logs, being terribly pleased when he found he didn't fall off. Not that they were big logs. Still, he was far from being a jockey, whatever he thought himself, and we were rather amused.

But Miss Tarrant's patience was beginning to wear a bit thin. I noticed her expression one morning when he was talking about asking Dad to lend him a better horse. "I think I've mastered this old screw," he said. "I should like something with a bit of go."

Well, I was riding close by, and I was annoyed, because even if his mare Truca is steady she is by no means a screw: none of Dad's horses can be called that. He knew I was within hearing, too, which didn't make his remark any better. I glanced up at Miss Tarrant: the corners of her mouth twitched a bit, but there was a dangerous light in her eye. Binks and I know that look quite well, and we always watch our step when Miss Tarrant has it.

"Probably you're right," she said. "Now that you jump so well, too."

"Yes, I flatter myself I'm up to something better," he said. "I've always heard that some people take naturally to riding, and I suppose I'm one of them."

"It's born in one," said Miss Tarrant solemnly. "How lucky to be like that: now I am one of the unfortunates who had to learn by falling off, as Peter

could tell you—if he were unkind enough to tell all he could.”

“I must have a talk with Peter later on.” He grinned, and I said to myself, “Will you, just!” But I was feeling puzzled about Miss Tarrant.

“Most people need so *much* teaching about jumping,” she said. “But when I watched you sail over those logs of course I realized . . .” She stopped in a vague way, but it didn’t seem necessary to tell Mr. Mount just what she realized. He appeared to feel that he knew.

“I think it’s natural sense of balance,” said he earnestly. “I’m funny that way: it was just the same with a motor-bike. I just got on the thing and rode off. As if I’d been riding all my life.”

“And riding is riding, isn’t it, whether it’s a motor-bike or merely a horse?” She looked at him with great admiration in her face. “As you say, just natural balance. And complete confidence, of course. But how few people have both without long practice! I don’t suppose you would mind *what* you jumped now, Mr. Mount?”

“Oh, well, I wouldn’t altogether say that, you know. But I’ll give you a lead over some bigger logs if you like this afternoon,” said Mr. Mount recklessly. “I’m game for anything this old screw will jump. I suppose she isn’t likely to fall down, is she?” he added, becoming prudent for a moment.

“Oh, never. I used to ride her myself, and not once did she fall with me. I fell off her myself, but I’m sure it wasn’t Truca’s fault. Only my lack of natural balance—and of course *you* need never have any anxiety about that, need you?” And she smiled at him in a way that would have caused him great anxiety if he had known her as well as Binks and I did. As he didn’t, however, it only went to his head.

“You’d give any fellow confidence, Miss Tarrant. Well, shall we go off together this afternoon, you and I, and have a little jumping practice.”

“It would be nice,” she said, looking down her nose.

By this time I was beginning to enjoy myself very much. I didn’t know what on earth Miss Tarrant was up to, for never in my life had I heard her talk like that; but it was as good as a play to watch them. It made me realize what queer streaks there are in people. Ordinarily Mr. Mount wasn’t at all a fool; in fact, we found out later how very far from being a fool he was. But that day he just mopped up all Miss Tarrant said, never realizing that he was being led up the garden path. I suppose it was because she’s a girl, and pretty at that. Well, I’m blessed if I’ll ever let myself be fooled by a girl in that fashion.

We were near the place where we had arranged to camp for lunch, and already the others were waiting for us. When he came from unsaddling the horses with me Mr. Mount looked round anxiously for Miss Tarrant; but she was sandwiched between Mother and Clem, so he had to sit by Mr. Smedley and content himself with gazing at her from afar. We had lunch and Binkie

insisted on taking snapshots of us all. When that was over Miss Tarrant touched my arm gently and said she wanted to speak to me. We strolled away into the scrub.

“Peter,” she said, when we were hidden from all eyes, “I am becoming very bored with that young man.”

“You!” I scoffed. “Why, you’ve been buttering him up like——”

“Like anything, haven’t I? But it was for a deep and deadly purpose, Peter, because really he is making life a burden to me. I haven’t had a decent ride since he came to blot the landscape. He is a blot, isn’t he?”

I said, “Well, I think he’s a bit of a blot, but I don’t know what to do about it. Anyhow, he’ll be going away soon, I suppose.”

“But he shows no sign of going,” she said. “Why, he’s making plans for more and more rides and more and more horses——”

“That’s because of his natural balance,” I said, grinning at her. “Much hope he’s got of making Dad put him on any other horse—unless he gives poor old Truca a sore back, which may happen at any time.”

“In which case he will probably borrow Roona.”

“Roona!” I yelled. “Are you off your head? Before I’d let him get on her I’d——” Then I heard her chuckle softly, and realized she’d been pulling my leg just as she’d pulled Mr. Mount’s. So I said, “You win. What’s your deep and deadly plan?”

“I thought we might do a little jumping,” she said. “A little gentle jumping.”

“But that’s *his* plan. Just you and him, off on your own together. It would be nice”—and I looked down my nose like she had.

“You little wretch!” she said. “You don’t seem to have missed much. No, I mean to improve on his plan, Peter. I prefer jumping with a crowd. Can’t we rig up a jump with saplings and let everyone in for a competition?”

“We can, of course—only I don’t see so very much in that,” I told her. “I thought from the way you spoke that you had some really snappy idea—something that would take the conceit out of him. Goodness knows he needs it.”

“I learned most of my riding on Truca,” she said. “And I learned to jump logs on her—after some painful experiences which need not be dwelt upon. But only logs. Don’t you remember her little peculiarity, Peter?”

I stared at her for a minute before I remembered. Truca wouldn’t jump anything except logs. She’d tackle almost any old fallen trunk, but no one on the place could get her over an open fence of any kind—not even a low hurdle that she could quite easily have hopped over. One of the stockmen had bet another fellow a new hat that he could make her clear a sapling jump one day: and he could ride any horse that ever looked through a bridle. Truca beat him.

He battled with her for half an hour and then she simply lay down with him.

I began to shake with laughter.

"I might have known you had something up your sleeve," I said. "What a howling lark!"

Miss Tarrant looked dreamy and said:

*"I am induced to take this step, not by any personal or national malevolence, but by a just and profound policy——"*

"If you sling Macaulay at me I won't help you!" I warned her.

"I won't, because I can't remember any more just now," said she. "A pity, because he does fit in so nicely. Come along, Peter, and we will see the wicked brought low. Not that the poor thing is wicked, I suppose, but he's terribly boring, and sometimes that is even worse."

We had camped not far from a lane that day, because Mother and Dad had brought the car. They were going on to Kurungi, and being well used to seeing us jumping our ponies whenever we had a chance, they had no wish to stay to watch the performance when we said we were going to build a jump. I thought this was all to the good, for Dad certainly wouldn't have forgotten Truca's little peculiarity, and it would have been a pity to spoil the surprise for Mr. Mount.

So they went off, and I got hold of Binkie and told her the glad news. She was delighted, because we really had begun to be a bit worried about Miss Tarrant, and we agreed that it was time someone did something to improve matters. Clem and Mr. Smedley were quite pleased at the idea of jumping, though Mr. Smedley said, "I warn you I shall fall off if you make it high, Peter."

We promised we wouldn't, and that anyhow it would only be a light jump which would fall to pieces if a horse kicked it. Mr. Mount was quite cock-a-hoop at the prospect: it was clear that he thought it was a topping chance of impressing Miss Tarrant. "We can easily build it up higher as we go on," he suggested. And Binks said yes, of course we could.

Well, we fixed it up in a flat gully where the going was fairly soft, with plenty of grass in case anyone fell off. Luckily there is always an axe in our car, because with roads like ours one may be wanted at any time, and I had used it before the car left to cut and point the uprights; just sticks with a fork at the top to hold a cross-bar. We built a wing at each side to discourage any horse that might try to run off; and when the cross-bar was in position we tied slender bars under it so that it wouldn't look too open. It was quite a good job when we had it finished; I expect it's still standing. Mr. Smedley said it wasn't half so terrifying as he had feared it might be.

We would not have made it a difficult jump, if only on Mr. Smedley's account. He was always very modest about his riding, and none of us would

have dreamed of playing any trick on him. Besides, there was no need; it wasn't difficulty in a jump that ever discouraged Truca, only her little private crank about fences.

As it was, when we lined up on our horses Mr. Smedley showed us the way. He went off suddenly like a shot and put his horse at it: and of course old Sergeant jumped it like a bird. Indeed, thanks to the way his rider shoved him along, he jumped quite a lot higher than the bar, and there was much daylight visible between the saddle and Mr. Smedley, who landed on his neck and lost a stirrup and only got back into the saddle with a struggle. All the same, it was a plucky jump for a man who'd never done much jumping, and there was no need for Mr. Mount to burst into a roar of laughter and shout to him, "Better have some glue on the leather next time, Mervyn!"

That annoyed us four, and we clapped and cheered Mr. Smedley, only to find by Mr. Mount's expression of gratification that he thought we were cheering his bright remark. Miss Tarrant's wrath was very funny when she realized this. She called out to Mr. Smedley, who was turning back, "Stand by to pick me up, Mr. Smedley—I know I won't get over it as well as you did." And she sent her horse very steadily at the fence and went over it in a most tame fashion: and Binks and Clem followed her lead—trotted up and popped their ponies over like little kids.

So only Mr. Mount and I were left, and I looked at him and said, "Shall I give you a lead?" He said proudly, "No need, thank you, youngster." And he kicked Truca and went off at a gallop.

Old Truca knew her job. She went along pretty fast for a moment, and then began to slow down. He kicked her on and flapped his bridle, and that annoyed Truca. She made straight for the jump—for a second I was afraid she was actually going to take it, but I might have known her better. She slewed suddenly just as she reached it, propping dead, her head over the wing.

More than Mr. Mount's head went over it. He soared through the air with the greatest of ease, like the man in the song, and landed in a mixed collection of bracken fern and brambles that happened to be just where it was wanted.

I followed over the hurdle, and we all got off and rushed kindly to his assistance. We four were choking with laughter; Mr. Smedley was scared for a moment, but he soon saw there was no need to be. We managed to keep our faces straight as we hauled the sufferer out of his lair; he was stuck head downwards, with his legs kicking helplessly. I never saw a crosser man than he was when we got him right way up.

We picked the blackberry thorns out of him, at least those that we could see, and asked anxiously if any part of him was cracked or misplaced. He glared and stuttered; it was clear that Miss Tarrant and Binkie being there was an awful handicap to him in saying all he wanted to. He could only get out

abuse of Truca; and when we asked him if he wasn't going to make her go over the jump, he said no he wasn't: he'd had enough of jumping. Then he looked at Miss Tarrant and I suppose he saw that her emotion was almost beyond her control; and just then Binks turned away and made for her pony, and it was painfully clear that she was spluttering. So he shook us off and went to catch his mare.

Truca was grazing peacefully, and had no objection to being caught. He grabbed the bridle, jerking her head round savagely. Then he kicked her as hard as he could.

We all sprang forward, but Miss Tarrant was quickest. Truca, completely astonished, had tried to pull away: he hung on to the reins and was just lifting his foot to kick her again. Miss Tarrant caught the bridle and said, "Don't you dare do that again!"

"I'm going to teach the old brute——" began Mr. Mount.

"*You* teach Truca!" she said. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself—kicking a horse because you can't stick on. Get on the mare and treat her properly, unless you would rather walk home!"

Well, do you know, he got on quite meekly—and I don't wonder, for none of us had ever heard Miss Tarrant's voice cut like it did. I believe it would almost have scared even Dad. Mr. Mount rode off, his face as black as thunder.

Mr. Smedley looked worried. He said, "I'm awfully sorry he did that—Harold's a queer-tempered fellow . . . by Jove, didn't he look funny when he came off!" And then we all let ourselves go and laughed until we had to sit on the grass and hold our sides.

All the same, though the plot had worked, and Miss Tarrant wasn't likely to be bothered again, it hadn't been all a laughing matter. We had only meant to take Mr. Mount down a peg or two; we'd never reckoned on his becoming really unpleasant. I didn't feel too comfortable about the whole business. I thought of telling Dad everything, only I didn't want to bring Miss Tarrant into it; and later on I learned that she had wanted to do just the same, only she didn't want me to get into a row. So none of us said anything, and next time we went out Mr. Mount seemed just as usual, except that he left Miss Tarrant alone. But I had a notion that he was only biding his time.

## CHAPTER X

### THE BLAZE

THAT week Binkie and I found a joint letter for us when the mail-bag came in. It was from Mr. Garfield; quite a long one, too, and very jolly. He said that the 'plane had behaved splendidly all the way to Sydney, and that he had now bought a new one, in which he hoped to come some day to see us, but he didn't say when. He sent us a snapshot of her, and several taken in the harbour, showing his yacht and speedboat; and quite a nice one of him sitting half-drowned on the hull of his yacht when she had turned turtle in a squall, and one of the yachtsmen racing to his rescue had unkindly snapped him. Dad remarked that this man seemed to make a habit of being tipped out of one thing and another; but we could see that he was pleased with the letter.

The worst of it was that he had demanded letters in reply, so Binkie and I spent a laborious evening writing to him. Of course, there wasn't much to tell him, but we raked up all we could, and put in some Weeroona pictures as a make-weight, hoping he would be able to feel interested in cattle. We were very sorry that circumstances hadn't allowed us to get a snapshot of Mr. Mount taking his header off old Truca, for Mr. Garfield would certainly have thought that one a winner.

It really seemed as if nothing was going to run as usual those hols. Generally they are quite calm and uneventful, nothing of any excitement coming along. Clem said that everything seemed to have changed with Mr. Smedley's arrival, and we began to think so too, especially after the fire on Mr. Hardy's place.

The only good thing about that was that Mr. Hardy was right out of it. Otherwise we don't know what would have happened to him: he certainly isn't well enough to fight a fire. But that day Mother had taken him out for a drive, and he knew nothing about it until it was all over.

The rest of us were out in one of the far paddocks that afternoon. It was a blazing hot day—we hadn't had any cool weather at all since Christmas, and as all the place was bone-dry Dad was keeping a very close watch everywhere. We were coming home slowly, thinking how good a bathe was going to be, when we saw the smoke mounting up towards the west.

You can bet we galloped. We couldn't be sure at first just where it was rising from, and it looked very near the homestead; but as we topped the last ridge we saw that it had broken out in one of our paddocks and was spreading

across the Hardys' land. The flames were simply ripping through the long dry grass. Our only chance was to get round it to try and save the house, and we rode for all we were worth. When we got near it Dad made Miss Tarrant and Binkie take all the horses and let them go in the Weeroona homestead paddock to shift for themselves; we knew they could take to the big dam if the fire spread in that direction. The rest of us grabbed green boughs from the nearest tree and ran.

Women are funny, I think. Old Sarah at Mr. Hardy's had done nothing but grumble about extra work all through the hols, making poor old Clem miserable—wouldn't you have thought that to see a fire coming, and she alone in the house, would have been enough to discourage her altogether? Not she! She had seen the smoke just after it started, and her first act was to leg it as hard as she could to open all gates and let out the pigs and calves and fowls. Then she headed the lot out of the gate opening on the road—and how she managed to handle a mixed mob like that is still a mystery. But she did it. The pigs and calves took more than a week to round up after the fire, and some of the fowls are not home yet.

Then she rushed back to the house and shut all the windows. She knew that if the fire once crossed the garden the place would go like tinder, but she had once heard of a house being set on fire by burning fragments carried on the wind floating in at a window and setting a curtain alight, so she guarded against that chance. We thought it was a very brainy idea when we heard of it afterwards.

Dad considered that her next effort showed that her brain was wearing a little thin, though of course we kept that to ourselves. The washing was hanging on the lines in the back yard and would certainly have gone with the rest if the house had caught fire. But Sarah did not dwell on that point. She dashed out with a clothes-basket, and when we reached the yard fence she was working like a nigger, with all her hair hanging down, rescuing the washing. She bundled it into the house, banged the door on it, and looked round to see what she could do next.

Our job was to get a fire going through the grass to meet the advancing fire, so that it would die away for want of anything to burn before it got to the house. Luckily Mr. Hardy had burned a fire-break round the garden fence earlier in the season, so there was only short grass there, still green: and what wind there was helped us. We scattered to different points and lit the long grass, coaxing each blaze until they joined up in a long line, and watching all the time for fear it broke away behind us. We weren't a bit too soon. The main fire was horribly near when at last ours took hold and raced to meet it. The smoke billowed over everything, with flames licking up out of it. Then it died down, leaving only a stretch of blackened smoking ground, with the paddock

fence blazing away beyond it.

The house and yard were safe, but farther away the fire had reached the pig-sties and cowshed. There wasn't a hope for them; they were ramshackle old affairs and they seemed to go alight all at once, roaring like a furnace. Thanks to Sarah, there were no animals in them, and the horse and cows had long before galloped like mad things through the open gate and down the road. We didn't have to worry about them, but we had all the worry we wanted over the barn and buggy-house. Sparks from the burning sheds were driving towards them; what was happening on their far sides we didn't know, but the grass-fire had gone right past them. Then a long plume of smoke went up, and we knew the buggy-shed was alight.

By this time we were all pretty tired, with our eyes nearly useless from the smoke. We couldn't possibly have saved them if reinforcements hadn't come from Weeroona. Binkie and Miss Tarrant were the first—Dad shouted to them to go back and watch the house and yard in case of flying cinders. It was a good thing he did, for a burning bit of the cowshed roof was caught in the updraught from the flames, sailed through the air, and landed in the yard at the edge of the wood-heap. Binkie got to it in the nick of time; three minutes later the whole heap would have been a furnace, and there wouldn't have been the slightest chance for the house.

Behind the girls came the stockmen. They were fresh and fit, and they charged down on the buggy-house. There was a tank beside it: Charlie got on the roof and the others passed up buckets of water and wet sacks, and between them they smothered the place where it had caught. Farther away some men riding by had attacked the fire in the grass just before it got to the road, and had managed to beat it out before the fence had begun to blaze. There was nothing more to do except to watch the sheds burn themselves out; and that didn't take long. They were smoking ashes ten minutes after they went alight.

It did look desolate—sheds gone, fencing ruined, and all the big paddock jet-black, smouldering here and there: and the fact that it might easily have been a thousand times worse didn't keep one from thinking what a shock it was going to be to Mr. Hardy when he came home. Dad thought of that. He called one of the men and told him to get a horse and ride along the Kurungi road to meet the car and tell them, so that they wouldn't come on it suddenly.

Most of us wouldn't have done as messengers, we were such scarecrows. Our faces were nearly as black as the paddock, our eyes bright red, and there were plenty of burns on our shirts. Of course, it was only a grass-fire; a very small thing compared to fighting a real blaze in the scrub: I've had some of that, and I know. But even as it was, nobody could have said we were looking our best. I was really sorry for the two Englishmen. They always turned out in much smarter kit than we do, and now they weren't smart any more. But they

had worked as hard as anyone, even if they were new to the business.

We wanted drinks very badly, but more than that, even, we wanted boracic for our eyes. Sarah turned up trumps there again: every house keeps boracic ready, and she had mixed a lot. We bathed our eyes and felt better: better still when Sarah produced tea. None of us could eat, but we drank gallons. After that, we washed.

Clem looked dead to the world, and no wonder, after all he had done; he'd fought as if he had the strength of a man. He slipped away to his room presently. I went after him: he was standing at the window, staring across the paddock.

I said, "Don't you worry, old man: the first shower of rain will make it green, and the grass will really be all the better for the burning. The sheds and fencing won't take long to renew—you'll simply *have* to let us help."

"I would, too," he said, and for Clem to give in like that just showed how discouraged he was, because he's nearly as proud as his father. "But I don't know if Father will. And apart from the damage the whole thing will throw him back and make him miserable. He isn't fit for it. Gosh, I wish I wasn't so young, Peter. I feel sort of beaten."

I said, "That's only because it's come on top of a lot of other worries. But things are looking up—old Sarah's so bucked with herself that I believe she'll be quite cheerful after this. Another thing, Clem; the visitors will have to move on. They must see they can't stay, with the place in a mess like this. Then we'll all settle down and get busy at the damage."

"I hope to goodness they will," he answered. "Sometimes I wonder why they ever came. Mervyn's a sort of cousin, of course, but I don't believe he's really interested in us. I like him all right, only with Father as he is, and everything else, it's a nuisance having strangers about."

"Well, if they're not blind they'll realize that now," said I. "And if you ask me, those two are a long way from being blind, though Mr. Mount went near it about Miss Tarrant until she got him jumping."

I was glad to see old Clem managed to grin at that recollection. He began to pull off his shirt.

"Oh, I expect things will work out," he said. "Anyhow, I'd better make myself a bit decent before Father comes home: if he sees me in these burnt things he will think I've been in the wars. The mischief is, you know, Peter, Father worries as much about me as I do about him. He told me yesterday I was having a rotten holiday, and he's got a silly idea that I look seedy. Wanted me to take cod-liver oil—did you ever hear such bilge! But it shows how he is bothered in his mind."

"Well, you do look pretty skinny," I said. "But you'll be all right when things settle down, and we've lots of the hols left. I hope to goodness Mr.

Garfield comes along before they're over. He said in his letter he was looking forward to seeing you again. I hope his new 'plane is big enough for you and me to go up together with him."

That set Clem off on aeroplanes, about which he is simply mad, and he nearly managed to forget the fire. We went back to the others presently, and I couldn't help noticing that Mr. Mount and Mr. Smedley were specially nice to Clem. I expect they felt sorry for him.

Dad had left the men to cut away the burning fencing so that the fire couldn't spread along it, and to patrol all the place until it was certain there was nothing left to smoulder. Jack came in after a while to report that all was clear. They had found a broken bottle, probably left by a swagman, in our paddock where the fire started; it must have acted like a burning-glass and set the grass alight. Dad was glad to know what had caused it, though he uttered a few hearty remarks about swagmen in general. Jack said that Charlie had gone in search of Mr. Hardy's horse and cows, and brought them back. Clem jumped up.

"That's awfully good of Charlie," he said. "I must go and milk."

"You ain't got that to worry about to-night," Jack told him. "We done it. Charlie fixed up a bail in the barn, an' the ol' cows took to it quite kindly. After a bit of persuasion, that is. The ol' bawley cow didn't like me much at first and she planted a hoof in me bucket, but she got real affectionate after that. Charlie an' me reckon we'll end up as dairy farmers when the Boss here sacks us."

Well, if you know anything about stockmen, patient reader, you will know what that meant, old Jack drawling it out as grave as a judge, with just a twinkle in his eyes. Because as a rule a stockman scorns and despises a dairy cow, and most of them would ask for their cheque and clear out if you suggested they might milk one. In fact, very few of them would lower themselves by even admitting they knew how to milk. It just showed how much they thought of Clem, and how sorry they were for him and Mr. Hardy: and it bucked Clem far more than anything I'd tried to say to him. He jumped up.

"My word, that's nice of you, Jack!"

"Better go and see what kind of a bail they've made, Clem," Dad said, chuckling. "If I know those two they've probably built something like a branding-race."

"Aw, now, Boss, that ain't fair," said Jack solemnly. "Who built the crawlin'-pen when there was first a baby on Weeroona to use it, I'd like to know?" He looked sideways at me in a way that set us all laughing.

"You and Charlie," admitted Dad. "And you made it strong enough to hold a bucking bullock!"

“Too right we did. We sized him up first time we laid eyes on him. Charlie, he says to me, ‘Jack,’ he says, ‘that young one ain’t goin’ to be no pet lamb; we gotta use big timber.’ So we done it. But we darned near had to build a new one for Miss Binkie!”

We gave in, because old Jack always manages to get the last word, no matter what. Clem and I went out with him to see the bail. They had fixed up everything for easy working for him, and Charlie and another fellow were running up a little yard with saplings at the end of the barn, so that he would have a place to put the cows when he brought them in from the back paddock.

“We’ve turned them out there,” Jack told him. “An’ don’t you go out huntin’ them in the early mornin’, Master Clem. Me an’ Charlie’ll be bringin’ in our horses in any case, an’ it won’t take us two shakes to slip over an’ run your cows up. You better have a good sleep-in to-morrow; I reckon you look as if you could do with it, don’t he, Charlie?”

“Too right he does,” agreed Charlie. “Fact is, Master Clem, you ain’t wanted out here in the mornin’. Jack’s got that devoted to milkin’ he’s dead keen to be at it again. Says it’s a fascinatin’ job. You gotta humour a bloke when he’s took like that.”

“And what about you?” asked Clem, laughing at him. “You haven’t gone mad, too, have you?”

“Me?” asked Charlie, trying to look demure, which is a hard job for anyone with a face like old saddle-leather. “Well, between you an’ me, I gotta date with Sarah. I have fell for her. She’s goin’ to have the kettle boilin’ at seven o’clock to-morrow mornin’——”

“What?” yelled Clem.

“Seven o’clock, I said,” went on Charlie severely. “You never can tell what’ll come over a woman when her heart’s touched.”

“Or her brain,” grinned Jack.

“That’s an unnecessary remark, Jack. He’s jealous, that’s what he is, Master Clem. Me an’ Sarah are goin’ to have a nice cuppa tea while he’s milkin’. So the main point is that if you was to show up anywhere at all it would be where you ain’t wanted. You sleep-in. Now where on earth did I drop that darned three-inch nail?”

That was Charlie’s way of showing that the conversation was over, and we left them hammering old horse-shoes on to the posts for sockets to slip the rails in: they wouldn’t let us help, and when Clem tried to thank him they just laughed at him and shut him up.

It was a real help to Clem. I mean, to his mind. Because when one’s best friends stand by anyone who’s had a stroke of bad luck it’s only ordinary: but when men like the stockmen go out of their way to do a really good turn it means an awful lot. Clem looked quite different as we went back to the house.

The car was coming, and he ran out to meet it.

You could see the relief on Mr. Hardy's face when he saw him running across the lawn, looking all right. Probably he had expected to find him pretty well knocked up with fire-fighting instead of being in fresh clothes and quite cheerful. To see him like that took some of the sting away—though there must have been sting enough when he looked at his burnt property.

Dad and Mother came in and had a talk to him, and Clem and I went to the kitchen to see Sarah, which is a thing we usually avoid if possible. But Sarah wasn't like herself at all. She had pinned up her hair and put on a clean dress, and she was baking as if her life depended on it. There was a big tray of jam turnovers just out of the oven; she told us to help ourselves, and though we were too paralysed to move for a moment, we did. They were good. Whether it was because she had been the heroine of the fire, or whether Charlie and Jack had something to say to it, we never knew; but Sarah had certainly got a change of heart. We talked to her for quite a long while, and you might almost have called her skittish.

"Now you go along out of my kitchen, or I'll never get this pie ready," she told us at last. "An' look here, Master Clem—don't you go fussin' with beds and brooms in the morning. You'll be fence-mendin' or some such, an' you can't be in two places at once. Have another turnover as you go, won't you?"

And we did.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE NEXT DAY

WE went home, and Dad told us that Mr. Hardy had been more reasonable than he had hoped to find him. He knew perfectly well that he and Clem couldn't build sheds and put up fencing, and that it had to be done. Dad, of course, had a trump card in the fact that the fire had started on Weeroona land, and he played it for all it was worth: Mr. Hardy had to realize that Dad had a bit of pride as well as himself. So finally they had arranged that we should all make a working-bee of the job. We knew very well that none of the Weeroona crowd were going to let the Hardys do the heavy part of it.

"He would have been more difficult to deal with but for Clem," Mother said. "He's worried about him, and I don't wonder: Clem has too much for young shoulders. I should love to have them both here and spoil them thoroughly. But that is out of the question as long as those two young men are there. Dear me, I wish they would go."

"Well, this business ought to move them," Dad remarked. "They won't have much playing-round and picnicking now: and somehow I can't see either of them keen on doing rough work on blackened ground. Still, they couldn't in decency sit still and see other people working. I expect they'll find this a convenient moment to remember that fishing-trip they talked about at first."

Next morning I went up to the Crowsnest to have a look round. Presently I heard Clem's secret whistle. Binkie and he and I have our private way of whistling, because it is very often convenient to know who wants you, and generally it means that the person who whistles wants you by yourself and at once. I had the telescope rigged up, so I couldn't come down; I whistled back, and in a minute there was a scrambling below me and Clem's head popped up through the trap-door. He was looking rather excited.

"Father said I had better come over and talk to you," he said. "I say, Peter, Mervyn and Mr. Mount have decided to go off on that cruise of theirs."

"Just as well, isn't it?" I said.

"There's no doubt of that, with things as they are at our place. But you'll never guess what they're suggesting now—they actually want me to come too!"

"But can you?" I asked, greatly surprised.

"Why, of course I said straight out I couldn't, with all this work ahead. But Father says he wants me to go. He's got this silly bee in his bonnet that I'm not

absolutely fit, and he thinks it would be a good change for me. You know what Father is when he gets an idea; he's quite keen about my going. Says he'll get a boy from Thompson's place to milk and do my jobs, and that even if I stayed I wouldn't be much use over fencing and building. That's true enough, but I don't like shirking." He looked at me in a worried way.

"Well, do you want to go?" I asked. "Honestly, if you do, I don't see why you shouldn't." Though I was a bit taken aback at the idea of being without old Clem, because we always knock about together in the hols.

"I . . . don't know," he said, hesitating. "In some ways I'd love it, but . . ."

I began to see that it might be a very good thing for him. He did look washed-out that morning, after all the rush and hard work of the fire the day before. Then, too, Clem never gets away anywhere: he had not had one holiday since they came to live near us. All the year round, his life is simply school and jobs, and then jobs and school. I don't think they even talk much in that house. I mean, there is not much time for talk when a fellow is always busy at one thing and another, and has a big pile of homework to do every night.

So you can understand that when a chance of a trip like this came unexpectedly it was enough to make him feel excited. Any holiday to a boy who never has one must seem pretty marvellous; and even if it was with people he didn't know very well there would be fishing and camping and exploring new places. I wished it might have been with us, but Dad never leaves the station in summer for fear of bush fires.

I said I thought he ought to go, if only to keep Mr. Hardy's mind easy—it would certainly be a great relief to his father to see him come back looking brown and jolly; and Clem admitted that was true, but he hesitated and beat about the bush until I realized there was something else on his mind. So I asked him straight what it was.

"Well, it's just this," he said. "Seeing how Father feels about it I'd go like a shot if I had a mate. But not by myself. Mervyn and Mr. Mount are so much older, and I don't much like Mr. Mount, anyhow. I'd only be a sort of odd-man-out—you know I would, Peter. It would be jolly lonely. I'll go if you'll come too."

I stared at him in astonishment.

"Me?" I said. "Why, apart from everything else, I'm not asked, Clem."

"Yes, you are," he said. "We argued about the trip all through breakfast, and then Father had a go at me afterwards because I wouldn't give in. So I told him at last that I'd agree if they would ask you to come, but I wouldn't go by myself. And he went back and told Mervyn so."

"Oh, look here, Clem," I said, "I can't take an invitation of that sort. I'll bet Mr. Smedley didn't want to give it."

"Father said he was rather taken aback at first," Clem admitted. "He said

something about not having enough sleeping accommodation. But he went off and consulted Mr. Mount, and then they came back together and said it would be all right if we didn't mind roughing it somewhat. He was really quite nice about it, Peter—they both were. Said they quite understood it would be a bit lonely for me without someone of my own age, and that they might have thought of that before.”

Well, I hung back and didn't like it. Of course I could see that we might have lots of fun, but you know how you feel about being invited in that left-handed way. I wished to goodness they *had* thought of asking me before. Now I was in a hole, because whether I went or whether I didn't I was bound to feel awkward.

Clem went on trying to persuade me to give in, and I put up all the arguments I could think of to make him go without me. It was no use: he is as obstinate as his father when he makes up his mind to anything.

“Don't you see, you old idiot,” he said at last, “that I'd rather be at home when you're here? The summer hols are the best time I have in the whole year—you don't know how much I look forward to them. I don't see why I should choose that very time to go off with people I don't care two hoots for.”

“Oh, you'd like it all right once you really started,” I said. “They'd be very decent to you, Clem. And you know you love fishing.”

“I can fish here,” he said. “It just boils down to this—I'll enjoy myself fooling about here with you, even if it's only helping with the building, and I won't enjoy myself if I go away on my own. And after all, they're my hols—why shouldn't I do what I want to do in them?”

So I said we'd better go and see what Mother thought about it, because Clem thinks an awful lot of her, and she can generally get him to take her advice. We found her making butter, so I took a turn at the churn while Clem put the matter up to her.

“Of course I don't know if you and Mr. Forsyth would let Peter go, to start with,” he said. “Father said he thought you would. But it's only if you don't mind.”

Mother looked as if she wasn't too keen, I thought, but she didn't say so. She thought for a minute without giving any opinion. Mother never rushes things.

“You say your Father is really anxious for you to have the trip?” she asked.

“He's dead keen on it. Thinks it's going to turn me into a sort of Sandow, I believe,” Clem told her. “Of course, I don't really need it at all, only he won't see that. Truly, Mrs. Forsyth, I'd chuck the idea altogether if it wasn't that he does get so worried. It's because he's so seedy himself, I suppose.” Clem wrinkled up his forehead and looked miserable. “I say, I'll go home now. Come over later on and let me know what you decide to do, Peter.” And off he

went.

I would have stopped him, because I didn't like to see old Clem going away like that, but Mother put a hand on my arm.

"Keep on churning, Peter," she said. "I want to speak to Father."

It was about ten minutes before she came back. The butter had come, and I was trying to get the buttermilk away from it, and making rather a mess of things.

"Never mind—I'll do that," she said, mopping me down with a cloth. "Peter, Father and I think you should go. We know it isn't the most comfortable way of getting an invitation, but we want you to put that aside. The trip will do Clem good, but our chief concern is for Mr. Hardy: you remember I said last night I should like to have the chance of looking after him."

"Well, I don't see how you're going to be able to do that, just because Clem's away," I objected.

"Yes, we shall," she said. "We'll make him come here: old Sarah has been asking for a holiday, and I really think the poor old woman needs it—that is probably why she has been so cross. She can go on leave, and we'll adopt Mr. Hardy. Don't tell Clem, of course, but we are rather anxious about his father. If he comes here I can diet him in the proper way, and perhaps we may be able to induce him to go to a doctor. So will you do your share? Make things easy for Clem, and take at least one worry off Mr. Hardy's mind. He is not happy about the boy—and worry is the last thing he should have just now."

I said if she put it that way there wasn't any choice for me, but how about the work on the Hardy's place? and Mother laughed and said the men were on the job already and could manage very well without me. That was the only time she laughed. Later on she told me that sending me off on that trip was one of the hardest things she had ever had to do. But that was a long time after. I'd never have guessed it at the moment.

So I saddled Roona and rode over to Mr. Hardy's. Clem was mooning about in the orchard. He looked awfully pleased when I told him I was coming, only rather bothered for fear it was against my will. I bucked him up and made him see that it was all right, and then we found Mr. Hardy and told him. He did seem relieved. In fact, he thanked me so warmly that I felt a perfect fool.

"Clem doesn't get much fun," he said. "This trip is a wonderful chance for him, Peter. And you will enjoy it too, won't you? I want to feel that."

I said, "You bet I will; it's going to be a tremendous lark." I meant it too, for once I'd made up my mind to go—or Mother had made it up for me—I'd begun to see that we ought to have no end of a time. And it really was jolly to see Mr. Hardy looking quite peaceful, as if a load was off his mind. He began telling us about fishing trips he had had in Ireland, and we were all yarning and

laughing when Mr. Smedley and Mr. Mount came along.

They made me feel quite at ease about going. Nobody could have been nicer than they were.

“We’ve been down studying the boat,” Mr. Mount said. “There’s really plenty of room, even if wet weather comes: none of us will mind packing pretty tightly. In fine weather you two may prefer to sleep on deck. You won’t insist on having a spring-mattress, will you, Peter? If you do, I’m sorry for you, because we don’t stock them. I slept on one of the seats in the cabin on my way here, and I don’t believe they are much softer than the deck planking.”

Clem and I didn’t want to sleep in the cabin, and said so. At Weeroona there are a couple of Li-lo mattresses that we use on the beach, and I knew we could bag them for the trip. Mr. Mount laughed when I told him about them.

“Those affairs you blow up with a bicycle pump?” he said. “Great idea, especially when they deflate under you in the middle of the night. We’ll enjoy hearing your remarks when that happens. Anyhow, they’ll lend great tone to the boat, for she’s built more for use than for ornament. Her only decorations are fish-scales left to me by her late owner: you boys can pick them out of her whenever you feel dull.”

“I expect they will be too busy adding to them,” Mr. Hardy said. “How do you manage for water, Mount?”

“Oh, there are two or three beakers,” he said. “We shall never be very far out at sea; I’m a prudent man in strange waters. It will be no trouble to go ashore and fill up whenever we need. How would you two like to come down now and spend a really useful morning with Mervyn and me overhauling the ship? The engine is my department; you can have all the rest of her, and I warn you she’s dirty.”

We thought that was a great scheme, and I let Roona go and borrowed a pair of dungaree trousers from Clem, at Mr. Smedley’s suggestion. I was glad I did, for that boat certainly needed a spring-cleaning. We worked on her for most of the day, stopping now and then to peel off our clothes and have a bathe: it was blazing hot, with not a breath of wind to ruffle the water. But it was good fun, and Mr. Smedley and Mr. Mount made everything very jolly. I began to feel as excited as Clem was about the trip, because when you’ve worked on a boat you seem to belong to her.

Old Sarah had given us lunch to take down, and in the afternoon all the others appeared with tea. Mother told me she had arranged everything with Mr. Hardy, and he had agreed to stay at Weeroona. That piece of news was just the finishing touch to Clem’s happiness. He’d never been really comfortable about leaving his father alone, and when he heard that Mother was going to look after him he hadn’t a care left in the world.

The family had remembered to bring our bathing togs, which was a detail

that had not troubled us all day. Binkie and Miss Tarrant and Clem and I swam out to a flat rock after tea so that we could talk. Poor old Binks was rather blue because we were going away. Not that she said anything, of course, but we knew how she would be feeling, so we all played the fool to cheer her up, which is never very difficult with Binks.

“They may be feeling on top of the world now, Binkie,” said Miss Tarrant, “but just think of their poor green faces when they’re rolling in those long oily swells farther out.”

“Oh, yeah?” drawled Clem. He was not allowed to say that at home, so he always kept it for Miss Tarrant.

“That obscure remark does not hide his inward terrors, Binks,” she said. “But we shall get a full report from Mr. Mount later. *He* can’t be afraid of being sea-sick, or he wouldn’t be planning another trip in that old barge of his. She looks to me as if she could roll horribly. Don’t you think so, Peter? Or don’t you want to think of it?”

I said that what I thought was that she knew precious little about boats: and Binkie giggled and said, “*He treats the suggestion with a scorn worthy of his strong sense and dauntless courage*, doesn’t he, Tarry?”—which led to her disappearing suddenly over the edge of the rock with a loud splash. Unfortunately, while I was helping her to go Miss Tarrant basely attacked me in the rear, so I went too. I told her from the water just my opinion of her tactics, and I think I mentioned her personal appearance as well.

“What a tongue!” she said. She was leaning over the edge, pushing my head down every time I tried to climb back on the rock. “*He possesses talents both for disquisition and declamation—keep down, you little horror!—which assiduous culture might have improved into the highest excellence—Peter, let go!—I’m slipping——!*”

“Yes, you jolly well are,” I said, because I had managed to grab her arm, and the rock fortunately sloped a bit at that part. So she came down head first, and there was a third loud splash, leaving Clem alone on the rock. But while I was fully occupied with Miss Tarrant in the water Binkie scrambled back. She waited until I was allowing Miss Tarrant to board our island again, and then said, “Bad luck, Tarry—*at this point the valour and genius of an obscure youth suddenly turned the tide of fortune*, didn’t it?” And that led to more loud splashes.

It has often seemed to me a pity that Macaulay could never know all he has been responsible for in our family. He’s missed a lot.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE "LOVELY LOU"

MR. MOUNT'S boat was called the *Lovely Lou*. We never knew whether this was her original name; when we discussed it on board we came to the conclusion that it must have been given to her by her last owner, and that he was slightly mad. I suppose it was after a girl, or perhaps his wife, but it was not much of a compliment to any girl.

The *Lovely Lou* was a big old tub, built for safety more than for speed. We thought that in her first youth she might have been designed for some rich man with a large number of children, one who wanted to be able to take the pack out with a reasonable certainty that none of them would fall overboard. In those days she must have had a high rail and plenty of good fittings—she was built of lovely timber.

But as Mr. Smedley said, those days were not these days. She looked as if she had had many owners and that most of them had not treated her well. The last had been the fisherman who had hired her out to Mr. Mount for two months. He had scrapped her fine teak rail and sold it to a builder, replacing it with a low one of cheap stuff, so that he could work his nets easily. Her good fittings had gone too, including most of the seating accommodation; what brasswork was left was green, and she was in shocking need of a new coat of paint.

She had two half-decks, and the cabin was built aft, with a space between it and the stern rail. A very narrow settee ran round it; down the middle was a slip of a table, filling up nearly all the space. Under the settee were cupboards with sliding doors where we kept cooking-pots and food and all that kind of thing: a very convenient arrangement, if only there had been room enough to get at the cupboards. It wasn't so hard for Clem or me, but if the men wanted to find anything in a cupboard they had to crawl under the table and lie almost flat. Mr. Mount sometimes tried lying on the settee and operating from above, but it never looked as if he were really comfortable, and generally he ended by overbalancing and crashing, which was funnier for us than for him.

Not that we bothered much about the cabin. The men slept there, and it was a useful place to stow things: but as a rule we lived and ate on deck, keeping the Primus stoves and frying-pan and kettle under the fore-deck. There was plenty of space there and it was easier to get at. Now and then we raked out saucepans and cooked something a bit extra, but generally the frying-pan was

all we wanted.

The engine was the best thing aboard the *Lovely Lou*. The fisherman hadn't cared much about the rest of his boat, but he had kept the engine in first-class order; and Mr. Mount was just as particular. He wasn't keen on anyone but himself touching it, though he let me run the boat sometimes when he'd made sure I knew how. I think that at first he was rather afraid that two boys as passengers would be a nuisance, but he got over this when he saw that we had some sense. You do not play fool tricks in a boat if you have been trained by my father.

Altogether, though she wasn't much to look at, the *Lovely Lou* was a first-rate boat for a cruise like ours. Mr. Mount had tried to hire a smaller one, but we were glad he hadn't been able to get what he wanted, or we should have been in each others' pockets all the time. As it was, there was plenty of room for four people. Clem and I used to fish from the fore-deck, the two men astern behind the cabin, and often it seemed to us that we were the only people on board. We couldn't see them, and they always talked in low voices; while we made as much noise as we liked, often with my gramophone going as well. Generally we had better luck than they did, too. Mr. Mount said it was because the fish had a musical ear.

Not that we did much fishing for the first few days. We ran up the coast, dodging in and out of bays and inlets and landing at lots of the tiny coastal townships. Sometimes for water or fresh bread, but quite often just to prowl round. "Your funny little Australian tin-roofed villages are interesting," Mr. Mount said. "Don't you think so, Mervyn?"—and Mr. Smedley would agree with him. Of course that seemed rather mad to Clem and me, because most of those little townships have a single street, with one hotel and one general store, and they all look very much alike. Often we would have preferred to stay on board, or to loaf on the beach. But the Englishmen seemed to like to have us with them, so we used to roam round in a body, talking to the local people whenever there was a chance. Mr. Mount said he meant to write a book on his travels later on, and he wanted to pick up local colour and Australian expressions. Clem and I gave him as many of the latter as we could think up, but he said the township men had more variety. We planned to introduce him to a few bullock-drivers when we got home, because they have a greater command of language than anyone we know.

Apart from the townships, we just loved the life. Most of the time we wore nothing but shorts or bathing togs, and we were in and out of the sea all day. We ate enormous meals. Mother had provided lots of bacon and eggs and tinned stuff; we kept most of it in reserve, in case of bad weather, and lived chiefly on fish. The nights were cool enough, out on the water, to make us want a blanket or even two; and our Li-lo mattresses were a great success. The

Englishmen said we had all the best of it over sleeping arrangements. I should think they must have hated the stuffy little cabin, but they said it was all right. Probably they liked being by themselves: often I could hear their voices going hard, long after Clem was asleep.

It was gorgeous lying out on the deck at night. Not much moonlight, but millions of stars, with the Southern Cross fairly blazing; and the *Lovely Lou* rocking gently on the swells, just enough to give you the feeling that you were in a hammock. And waking up at dawn was gorgeous too: the sun coming out of the sea, and the gulls flying round us. Macaulay would have used marvellous language about it, I expect, but I am not in his class. Anyhow, I liked it, and so did Clem. And we liked rolling out of our blankets and diving in for a swim before the Englishmen were up. They said we were insane—we never could get them into the water until the sun had warmed it.

Clem began to look just as fit as his father had hoped he would, and his appetite grew bigger every day. We sent our families post cards whenever we called at a township. Mr. Mount and Mr. Smedley saw that we did. Sometimes we thought it wasn't worth while, but they always made a point of it. They would say, "It's not much trouble for you; and your people will be wondering if you're really having a good time." So we made that very clear in our cards.

There was no need to exaggerate about it, either, for we were enjoying every day. All the same, I could easily see that it would have been a poor show for Clem if he hadn't had a mate of his own age. The others were always as friendly as they could be; they treated us almost as if we were men, never bossing us, or talking down to us in the maddening way some grown-ups have, which is almost worse than bossing. Each of them was good at spinning yarns; whether their stories were true or made up we couldn't always tell, but they were exciting. And they did their fair share of the cooking and general work; Mr. Mount liked to have the *Lovely Lou* kept as much like a new pin as her age and shabbiness would allow, but they didn't give us the grubbiest jobs as some men would have done with boys. Altogether, she had everything to make her a happy ship.

And yet she wasn't quite happy. Living at such close quarters one can tell pretty quickly if something is even a little bit wrong; and that something was Mr. Smedley. Clem spoke about it when we had been on board about a week. It was a hot afternoon, and the fish weren't biting. The others had given it up and had gone to sleep in the cabin. Clem and I were up in the bow: our lines were in the water, but there hadn't been a movement from the sinkers for so long that we had forgotten all about them.

"Peter," he said, keeping his voice low, "do you think there's anything wrong with Mervyn?"

I said he didn't eat as much as the rest of us, but he looked all right.

“Oh, I don’t mean that he’s sick or anything like that,” Clem said. “But I’ve an idea that he isn’t happy. I used to think it at home, sometimes, but I was too busy there to bother my head about it. I’m pretty sure of it here. Haven’t you noticed how quiet he is often? Of course he’s apparently as jolly as anyone as a general rule; but there are times when he leaves all the talking to Mr. Mount, and if you watch his face then he looks awfully miserable. But if he catches anyone looking at him he shakes it off quickly and talks hard.”

“Well, I’ve seen that,” I said. “But I suppose he’s got a right to feel blue if he likes. We don’t know what bothers he may have.”

“It may be money,” suggested Clem. “I believe he told Father he was pretty short of it.”

“Or a girl,” I said. “If you believe half you see in books people get simply potty about girls. Can’t make it out, myself, but there seems to be something in it. Mr. Mount seemed to be heading that way about Miss Tarrant, only she choked him off—with the help of old Truca.”

We chuckled over that, but Clem was grave again in a moment.

“Whatever it is, I bet Mr. Mount knows about it,” he said. “Lots of times when we’re out of hearing they’re talking awfully seriously, and Mervyn always looks down in the mouth then.”

“I’ve noticed that,” I agreed. “And if one of us comes along they shut up like knives and start talking of something we’re interested in. Still, they’re bound to have their own affairs to yarn about. All grown-ups have. I’m blessed if I want to know their business: it doesn’t matter to us.”

“Neither do I. Only I can’t help wondering about Mervyn. After all, he’s a cousin of sorts, and that makes it a bit different. I don’t suppose Father or I could do anything to help him, but I expect Father would if he got the chance.”

I didn’t see what we could do, anyhow. The only idea that I could think of in the way of helping was to do the washing-up when it was Mr. Smedley’s turn, because we knew he hated that job; and somehow that didn’t seem worth mentioning, and I only put it in here to show you that I haven’t much in the way of brains.

But our talk started me watching more closely, and I saw that Clem hadn’t made any mistake. There was something queer about Mr. Smedley. Queer times of silence; and even when he was outwardly jolly, as he usually was when we were about, his eyes never laughed. I’ve told you he had curious eyes. If he was really amused or interested they were just grey, but at other times they were dark and sort of mysterious. They were nearly always dark on board the *Lovely Lou*.

I thought Mr. Mount must have been worried about him too. After the first week they kept more to themselves, and talked in low voices—and it seemed to me that Mr. Mount was doing most of the talking. Mr. Smedley would

listen, smoking all the time—that man must have smoked dozens and dozens of cigarettes every day. His fingers were deep yellow from the second joint right up to the top of his nails. He would light one from the stub of another and smoke in a jerky way that finished a cigarette in no time. Sometimes he would listen with the fag burning between his fingers until it scorched him, and then chuck it into the sea and swear while he took out a fresh one from his case. I got the idea that Mr. Mount was trying to make him see reason about whatever was bothering him, and that he wasn't succeeding to any extent. Clem and I wished he could succeed, because it wasn't very comfortable to feel that Mr. Smedley had something on his mind that was keeping him from enjoying the trip.

Not that it really weighed on our spirits. After all, we were not expected to know anything about it, or even to be noticing; and we were jolly careful not to let them think we watched them. It had nothing to do with us. And as I said to Clem, even troubles that seem pretty big have a way of blowing over if you give them time enough, and most likely Mr. Smedley's would.

I felt rather old and wise when I said that, but unfortunately Clem didn't seem impressed with my wisdom. He just grinned and said, "You're a funny old owl, Peter—when did you ever bump up against a big trouble?" And when I came to think of it, of course I hadn't, except the time I ricked my ankle the day before our school sports, when all the fellows reckoned I was pretty certain to win the mile and the high jump. I certainly hadn't forgotten how it felt to sit among the parents on Sports Day and see young Patterson, whom I'd beaten a dozen times, walk off with those two events. Gosh, it was tough.

But when I opened my mouth to speak of this calamity I saw Clem's face, and so I shut it again. Anyhow, I had had two parents to sit with that day, and that was more than Clem could ever have now. He hardly ever talked about his mother, but I knew how he felt. And he was always anxious about his father, and they had all sorts of money worries. And I'd felt desperate about a ricked ankle! It was almost funny when you really thought about it: I was glad I had shut up in time.

Still, you mustn't think Clem and I spent much time in bothering over whatever might be wrong with Mr. Smedley. We were having far too good a time for that. When you have only to chuck in a line, most days, to haul up whacking big schnapper and flathead and whiting, with an occasional gummy shark by way of variety, you don't brood on things that don't concern you. Nearly always there was fun of some kind going, and the very fact of being always at sea, living just like men, was enough to keep us feeling on top of the world. And even if the two Englishmen did seem rather taken up with each other, they were just as jolly as ever with us: and Clem and I were never likely to get tired of being on our own together.

We were having supper one night when Mr. Mount said:

“Boys, I think we’ve hugged the shore long enough. I believe I’ve seen all the townships I care about. Local colour’s exhausted: I want to look for something else.”

We said, “Good business!” both at once, and Clem asked where he thought of going next.

“Well, we can’t stay away too long,” he said, “though I feel as if I could stand this sort of life for ever, so far as I’m concerned. Suppose we stand out to sea for awhile and then head south again. You remember those little islands we could just see, far out, as we came up here? Don’t you think it would be rather jolly to explore them? I’ve always had a liking for islands, though I don’t quite know why.”

“Oh, do let’s,” said Clem. “You never know what may happen on an island.”

“No,” said Mr. Mount slowly. “You never know. That’s what makes them exciting, I suppose. Peter, you’re the local authority—any information about these particular fragments of Australia?”

I said: “No; I’ve never been so far up the coast as this. But from what I’ve heard, no islands about here are anything much.”

“He means,” Mr. Smedley put in, “that they afford no good grazing land for Hereford cattle. Therefore they have no business to be on the map, have they, Peter?”

He grinned at me, and I knew he was only pulling my leg. I said, “If it comes to that, I don’t suppose you’d find them on any map—any more than you could find our own Castle Island. I think they’re only humps of rock, with a little grass growing here and there, and perhaps a few bushes. But Castle Island is jolly good fun to climb, and why shouldn’t these islands be the same?”

“No earthly reason,” said Mr. Mount. “Let’s go and climb the lot. Clem, I’ll go you halves in that last schnapper, as I see with joy that the other members of the crew have passed on to bread and jam.”

“Can do,” said Clem. “You carve it, and then you’ll feel obliged to give me the best half.”

“I don’t like your unpleasant calculating ways,” returned Mr. Mount, getting to work with a knife. “My only regret is that I didn’t keep the schnapper’s great ugly head on when I fried it; I should then have had much pleasure in giving you the head half. But to return to the pleasanter subject of islands—do you think there’s any chance of finding water on them, Peter? Because, if so, we could stay out in the blue longer.”

I shook my head doubtfully.

“It’s only a chance. I haven’t the ghost of a notion as to whether there

might be springs. Or perhaps water caught in rock-holes—but that's very unlikely in the middle of summer."

"Well, we'll go ashore to-morrow and fill up with all the water and petrol we can carry," Mr. Smedley said. "Then we shall have to do frantic calculations to show us how much we must keep to make sure of getting back to civilization."

"Sez you!" said Mr. Mount. "You don't catch me napping on that point. The rest of us may be able to tighten our belts, but my *Lovely Lou* has had no training that way." He looked sadly at the schnapper bones on his plate. "Though as for tightening my own belt—shall I ever be able to do that again, I wonder!"

"Well, you've had some practice in the past," said Mr. Smedley.

"Yes. Too much," Mr. Mount answered slowly. "It's a poor game, Mervyn. I've made up my mind to avoid it in the future."

He looked straight at Mr. Smedley, and I had a sudden feeling that there was something I didn't understand under his joking manner. I don't know if Mr. Smedley understood it: he didn't say anything. He got up rather quickly, taking out his cigarette-case.

"Want a light?" asked Mr. Mount, getting up too.

He snapped on his lighter and held it to the cigarette, looking straight into Mr. Smedley's eyes while the tobacco began to glow. Mr. Smedley said, "Thanks." He turned away and walked to the stern.

## CHAPTER XIII

### HOW WE BATHED UNEXPECTEDLY

NEXT morning we turned south for the first time. We kept close to land until we came to a little bay with a village near the shore, and put in there for the things we needed. There were a good few people on the beach, kids paddling, and others bathing. They stared at us a lot as we tied up to the jetty and walked along the street. We must have looked fairly disreputable; it hadn't occurred to us to change the shirts and shorts we wore on board, and they were a long way from being fresh. There was so much salt in our hair that nothing would make it lie down: we had given up bothering about brushing it. I heard one girl say to another, "My, ain't they brown!" as we passed her, and of course Clem and I looked steadily ahead.

Mr. Mount didn't. He grinned at her, and seemed to take an interest in everyone he saw. At the store he became quite friendly with some men who were lounging there, and I heard him and Mr. Smedley telling them about our cruise. When we had finished shopping he called out, "Post office now, boys—your people will be looking out for another post card." He put his arm across Clem's shoulders as they went out. Clem wriggled away: he hates being touched. I didn't myself see why Mr. Mount need be so hearty among perfect strangers; but then Miss Tarrant often says I am an unfriendly little beast.

However, we didn't worry about anything on earth as we carried our loads down to the jetty. We got water from a pump there, filling up everything that would hold it. There was quite a crowd to see us go as the *Lovely Lou* headed out to sea.

We ran out a good way before we swung again to the south. The land was only a dim blue line by that time, and sometimes we lost sight of it altogether. It was a dead calm day, the water like glass except for the long ripple of our wake. Mr. Mount sent the boat along fast for a long time. Then he throttled her down and asked me if I'd like to steer.

"We'll go easy now, I think," he said. "The poor old girl must be wondering if I think she's a speedboat. The course is due south, Mr. Mate, and you can wake me if she seems about to sink, or if you sight a sea-serpent. Not for anything less."

He went to the fore-deck and lay flat, his hat tilted over his eyes. Mr. Smedley was sitting on the rail, looking at nothing in particular, smoking hard all the time. Clem came and squatted near me. Nobody seemed to want to talk.

It was the first day we had gone ahead steadily all the time; the only time that we had been quite alone on the sea. There was not a boat of any kind in sight: not even the far-off line of smoke that tells of a coastal steamer. The only sounds were the put-put-put of the engine and the swish of the bow wave. Clem looked utterly peaceful; and as for me, I was so happy that I wouldn't have cared if we had gone on that way all day.

I think it was nearly two hours before anyone moved. Once I looked round at Mr. Smedley. He was still smoking, looking at Mr. Mount in a queer fixed sort of way as if he wondered what he was dreaming about: or perhaps he was only wondering how a man could lie so long on hard planking. Clem had curled up and gone to sleep too. So I settled back to steering and feeling contented. I was quite sorry when at last Mr. Mount stretched himself, gave a great yawn, rolled over, and sat up.

"Heavens, I am stiff!" he said, rubbing his legs. He looked at his watch. "Great Scott! does anyone know the time? Here, you at the wheel, why didn't you call me ages ago?"

"No sea-serpents nor sinkings to report, sir," I told him, in what I hoped was a professional manner for a First Mate. "Orders was not to disturb you for anything else."

"There's a sinking all right, only it's within me," he said. "Am I the only person on board this packet who wants lunch?"

"Me," said Clem, wriggling out of his burrow. "And Peter's weak with hunger, only he's been like the boy that stood on the burning deck, shouting 'My father, must I stay?'"

"Or the noble child that kept his finger on the break in the Dutch dyke and pushed the sea back," Mr. Mount suggested. "What a lot of heroic boys there are in poetry, aren't there? I've always been hoping to meet one, but so far I've had no luck. I don't believe they happen in real life. Peter, would you like to stop steering and do a spot of cooking for a rest?"

"I would not," I said firmly. "But I could steer with one hand if you put a sausage-roll in the other."

"That's an idea!" said Mr. Mount. "Why cook, when it's too late for lunch anyhow? What about you, Mervyn? Hungry?"

"No," said Mr. Smedley. It was the first time he had said anything since we left the shore, and he didn't seem inclined to talk now. Mr. Mount looked at him rather sharply, and then smiled.

"Full of chat, isn't he, boys? Well, since nobody seems to feel like cooking, let's eat whatever comes handy. That noble word sausage-roll has stirred me to my depths, Peter. Where did we put them?"

We had bought a big bag of them at the store, and we ate the lot, topping up with what remained of Mother's plum-cake, and drinking orange-squash. It

was a first-rate lunch, but Mr. Smedley didn't eat much. In fact, he ate only half a sausage-roll, chucking the other half overboard—greatly to my regret, because I could have eaten a dozen. Then he went off to the cabin and lay down on one of the settees.

“Is he seedy, do you think?” Clem asked Mr. Mount.

“I don't think so. Mervyn's always liable to attacks of silence; when you've known him as long as I have you won't worry about them. But I'll go and have a word with him.” He lit his pipe and strolled aft.

We could hear their low voices in the cabin for a good while. Mr. Smedley had got over being silent, but his tone wasn't cheerful, though we couldn't hear what he said. Clem and I didn't bother. I had not been told to leave the wheel, so we ran on quietly, yarning to each other. Then Clem felt restless, so he got out the gramophone; and after he had played half a dozen records the two men came back.

“Music has done the trick,” said Mr. Mount. “Can't keep Mervyn away from it. I say, boys, I think we have made our record run—what's the good of piling it on? Shut off the engine, Peter, and we'll see if the fish will bite as far out as this. Heave over the anchor, will you, Mervyn?”

It took nearly all the anchor-line before we found bottom; we began to think we should have to move nearer the coast, but at last the hook held. The fish wouldn't bite, though: none of our sinkers were heavy enough to reach the bottom, even when we tied two together. So we gave it up finally, and had a swim.

I had never bathed in water as deep as that. It may have been just imagination, but I thought it was a lovely feeling—as if the great mass of the sea down below held me up, supporting me like a whacking big cushion. Clem wasn't very keen on going in at first; imagination again, I suppose, because there's nothing wrong with his swimming, even if he isn't as strong in the water as people who have been used to it all their lives. But once he was in he liked it nearly as much as I did: and the others were just as keen. But we didn't stay long, and we kept together, just in case an old shark came cruising our way. We rarely hear of sharks on our part of the coast, but we thought there might be a chance out in deep water.

“Sorry to be fussy,” said Mr. Mount, when he said we'd better go aboard. “But we're responsible for the children, aren't we, Mervyn?”

Clem and I said it was the other way about—he and I were responsible for the new chums. That led to a general rough-and-tumble in the water, and any shark that might have happened along would probably have been badly frightened.

The bathe seemed to have washed off the last remnants of Mr. Smedley's moodiness. We were all as hungry as hunters after it, and the sausage-rolls

were as though they had never been: so we got out the Primuses and brewed tea and cooked immense quantities of eggs and bacon. Each man cooked his own, so that there was never any awkwardness about asking for more; you just went and cooked it when your plate was empty. I think all picnic meals ought to be run this way, so as to avoid the painful sight of everybody looking hungrily at the last sandwich and wondering who was going to be brave and bad-mannered enough to grab it.

After supper we camped on the after-deck and watched the sun going down like a ball of fire into the sea. There was a red glow all over the western sky long after it had gone down; then it faded into darkness and the stars came out. You could see them reflected in the sea like a million pin-points of drowned light, and all the water was full of phosphorescence. The moon was just old enough to light things up, but the stars were so bright that you scarcely realized the moonlight. I began to wish that the Englishmen would go to bed, so that Clem and I could turn in on our mattresses and enjoy it properly: I knew it was going to be the best sky we had had yet.

But they weren't sleepy, and after all it was interesting to hear them talking; and the sky wouldn't run away. Mr. Smedley was telling us about some of the natives he had seen at different ports: fellows who would dive right under a big liner and come up smiling on the other side, and who never missed coins thrown into the sea for them, no matter how rough the water was. He had seen natives at Colombo bringing their outrigger canoes in in a storm, sailing them right up on the beach with a crash that ought to have smashed them to bits, only somehow it didn't.

"Colombo is a great place for curios, if you know where to look for them," he said. "That's not in the ordinary shops where the tourists go in herds whenever a ship berths. I was rather lucky, because I've a friend living there, and he showed me the ropes. You're keen on knives, aren't you, Peter? Did I show you a hunting-knife I picked up there?"

I pricked up my ears, because I do love good knives, and I've quite a collection already. I said, "No, but I wish you would when we get back."

And Clem said, "You'll be green with envy if you get your hands on that one, Peter; it's a beauty."

"You can see it now if you've enough energy," Mr. Smedley said. "I thought there might be some use for it on this trip, and it wasn't much to pack. You'll find it in the middle left-hand cupboard under the settee."

I hopped it like a shot. It was pretty dark in the cabin: I crawled under the table and began rooting in the cupboard. For a few minutes I couldn't feel anything that resembled a knife. Then Mr. Smedley came in behind me.

"I was afraid you might be having rather a hunt," he said. "Here's a torch. I'll get on the settee and hold it for you. I think the knife is under my shore-

going coat—you know, the one I keep in the cupboard and never take out when we go ashore.” He lay along the settee. “Half a moment—the catch of this blessed torch is a bit stiff.”

He fumbled at it while I crouched under the table, feeling among the things in the cupboard. The light flashed on suddenly: he bent over, shooting the ray into the darkness. I caught a glimpse of a leather sheath and a handle studded with turquoises. My hand was just on it when I heard a sort of cry. It sounded like my name.

I said, “What’s that?” and sat up so suddenly that I bashed my head against the table and saw stars.

“I didn’t say anything,” Mr. Smedley answered. “No—didn’t someone yell? Listen!”

And then it came again, and I knew it was Clem’s voice. I squirmed round under the table and crawled out as quickly as I could. Something bumped on the floor. Mr. Smedley said, “Confound the torch!” and scrambled out, and of course we collided in the darkness and got mixed up with each other’s legs. I wriggled clear and bolted round to the after-deck, shouting, “Anything wrong?”

There was nobody there: nobody in sight anywhere. I looked round in bewilderment, wondering if Clem and Mr. Mount were playing some sort of a trick on us. There wasn’t a corner where they could hide unless they had crawled under the fore-deck, which nobody would do in the dark among the Primus stoves and things. I was opening my mouth for another yell when again a cry came, and I whirled round. They were in the sea, a dozen yards from the boat.

For a moment I couldn’t realize that there was anything wrong. It was so ordinary for any of us to drop in for a bathe, either day or night, in the weather we were having: and there were often enough yells when someone was unexpectedly ducked. And then Clem called again, more faintly—“Peter—quick!” so I shot over the rail.

They went under before I got to them. I dived—the water was clear enough in the moonlight to let me see old Clem’s fair head just below me, and he seemed to be hanging on to Mr. Mount. I got hold of him and kicked up to the surface harder than I’d ever done anything in my life, yelling for Mr. Smedley as soon as my head was out: I knew I couldn’t hold them both, and of course I didn’t care what became of Mr. Mount if only I could get Clem clear. He swam with one hand, but the other still clutched the Englishman. Then Mr. Smedley dived in and took the strain off him; Clem let go, and we made for the boat. I hung on to his collar, for he was swimming in a feeble sort of way, gasping hard. Somehow we got on board.

I dragged Clem’s clothes off and started rubbing him down with a towel,

and Mr. Smedley did the same for Mr. Mount. When they were both in blankets we gave them a little drop of brandy from the medicine-chest. It immediately made Clem very sick, which was just as well, for he seemed to have managed to swallow a lot of sea-water. We were thoroughly puzzled, as you can imagine, but it wasn't time for explanations yet. However, Mr. Mount was much better after the brandy. He sat up and asked Mr. Smedley for a cigarette.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "It was all my fault: I don't know what came over me." He stopped, shivering under his blanket.

"You never fell in, did you?" I asked. "I thought you'd just gone for a bathe."

"Fall in is just what I did," he said, looking very ashamed. "We were sitting on the rail, and suddenly I had an extraordinary feeling: I've never had anything like it in my life. Head swimming, and bright flashes in front of my eyes. I put out my hand to Clem to steady myself, and then I found myself falling backwards. The next thing I knew I was in the sea. Did you come after me, Clem, or did I pull you in?"

"A bit of both, I think," Clem answered. His voice was rather shaky. "You gave a queer sort of groan, and went back like a log—and I went too."

"How are you now, Harold?" Mr. Smedley asked anxiously. "Do you still feel ill?"

"My head's aching furiously, but my eyes are clear," he said. "This cigarette tastes perfectly foul." He chucked it overboard. "I can't imagine what got hold of me—I've never in my life had a feeling of such utter weakness."

Of course I knew jolly well what it was and I told him.

"You've had a touch of the sun, that's a sure thing."

"What do you mean?—sunstroke?" he said unbelievably.

"Well, not a violent one, but first cousin to it. I'm certain that's it."

"I say," he said, looking worried—"it doesn't mean that I'll be crocked up, does it? How long do these things last?"

"I shouldn't think it would last long with anyone as strong as you. You'll probably have a headache for a day or two. I really don't know much about it: you may be all right after a good sleep. But I do know that you ought to be careful about the sun now, because one touch makes you more liable to have another."

"Good lord!" he said disgustedly. "If I've got to look after myself like a baby the whole trip will be messed up. You'd better put me ashore and go on without me."

We told him not to be an idiot: the chances were he'd be all right quite soon, and in any case it would be time enough in the morning to decide what had to be done. I was privately a little uneasy, because I had a vague sort of

memory that brandy was the wrong thing to give a sun-struck person. However, as the brandy was inside him there seemed no point in mentioning this idea.

“I don’t know what to say to you, Clem,” said Mr. Mount, miserably. “It was a miracle that I didn’t drown you. My memories of the time in the water are only a vague sort of blur, but I seemed to be clinging to something, and I suppose that something was you.”

“Well, I was all there was—and I’m jolly glad I was there,” answered Clem, grinning. “The mischief was that I couldn’t master you in the water; you didn’t know what you were doing, of course, and you just grabbed wildly. I thought we were both gone for good when you got hold of my foot. We went down miles that time, and I swallowed half the sea before I kicked myself free. Then I reckoned that the only thing to do was to yell for help. Gosh, I was glad when I saw old Peter come charging along.”

“Well, between you, you certainly saved my life,” Mr. Mount said. “I’d be food for the fishes now but for you. Thanks a lot. I feel the most utter fool to have caused such a fuss, to say nothing of risking your neck.”

“Why, it wasn’t your fault,” Clem told him. “It might have happened to any of us. I bet I know how you got the sun, too—it must have been lying in it all that time to-day. I expect we’d have thought of it if you had been lying on your face, but I didn’t know there was danger if the rays were not on the back of your neck. Did you, Peter?”

I said I didn’t—feeling rather ashamed of myself for not having remembered that a new chum wouldn’t know anything about sun risks. But when you have been soaked in the sun all your life you don’t think about it. However, neither of the Englishmen would agree for a moment that we ought to feel any responsibility: they seemed more concerned about us than themselves.

“Well, I’ll turn in,” Mr. Mount said presently. “I hope to goodness I’ll wake up with a normal head. It will be too sickening if the cruise is spoilt because I hadn’t enough sense to come in out of the sun.”

“What’s the good of worrying about it?” answered Clem. “If you’re seedy we can just run home quietly and look after you there. We’ve had a jolly good cruise already; it won’t hurt us to miss a bit of it.”

“Very nice of you to put it that way,” Mr. Mount said—“but somehow it doesn’t console me. I always did hate being the fool of the family. And no man need hope to feel a greater fool than I do to-night. I’ll bet Mervyn agrees with me—don’t you, Mervyn?”

“I won’t argue the point with you,” said Mr. Smedley. “You might go off your head again and fall overboard—and I warn you that if you do I shan’t dive after you. We’ll all stand clear and let you sink. You’d better get to bed

and sleep it off.”

Mr. Mount stood up, putting his hand to his head with a groan. He staggered a little. Mr. Smedley slipped his arm round him, and they went slowly into the cabin. I don't think he went to sleep soon: I heard their voices a good while later. Sleep wouldn't come my way either. The remembrance of those few minutes in the sea was enough to keep a fellow awake.

## CHAPTER XIV

### ISLANDS AND GULLS

**I**N the morning Mr. Mount said he felt much better. We were afraid he was just cracking hardy, and we watched him pretty carefully, knowing you can't fool with sunstroke, even if it is only a touch. But he really looked quite fit considering. He said his hand was shaky; and Mr. Smedley wouldn't let him shave, and chaffed him about his villainous appearance. That was true enough, too, because of being so dark that he often needed to shave twice a day if he wanted to look his best in the evening. With a blue-black flush all over the lower half of his face and his black hair standing on end, he'd have made a really good villain in a play.

Naturally, whether he shaved or not didn't worry Clem and me. We were only too glad to think that the trip might not have to be abandoned after all, and we didn't care if he grew a beard to his waist so long as we didn't have to miss exploring those islands. We advised him not to eat much all day and to keep well out of the sun; and of course he was not allowed to bathe. He was pretty meek about everything, though he said he found it hard to bear the sight of us wolfing enormous breakfasts while he ate a boiled egg in a lady-like manner. But we were stern with him; and I didn't think he minded much.

Most of the day he lay down in the cabin, and Mr. Smedley kept him company. Clem and I thought that Mr. Smedley looked worse that morning than Mr. Mount. He wasn't moody, but he was cheerful with an effort, and that was nearly as bad. There were dark hollows under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept much. We weren't sorry to see him fast asleep in the cabin in the afternoon: he looked as if he needed it.

That was a good day for Clem and me. We were a bit tired ourselves, especially Clem, and it was rather jolly to feel that we had the *Lovely Lou* almost to ourselves. We took turns at steering, running quietly towards the south; what breeze there was blew against us, so that it was cool and pleasant while we were moving: hot enough when we anchored for lunch. We had a bathe then. I was afraid Clem might be nervous about going in after his experiences the night before, but I need not have bothered: he dived in as confidently as ever.

He told me all he knew about the adventure while we were going ahead in the afternoon.

"It was all so quick," he said. "You know Mr. Mount and I were sitting

near each other on the rail. I was saying something about that knife of Mervyn's after you and he went into the cabin to look for it: I noticed he didn't answer some question I asked him, and I glanced round at him. He was swaying forward; then he suddenly went back, clutching at my arm. I hadn't any say in the matter at all: I was in the sea before I could even realize that I was going."

"You know, you had great luck," I told him. "If you two hadn't been sitting so far to one side you'd have crashed into the dinghy for a certainty."

"We nearly hit it as it was," Clem said. "My head missed it by inches. My word, Peter, we should both have been goners in that case, because he seemed as if he didn't know the first thing about keeping afloat. It's rather horrible, isn't it, to see how a touch of the sun destroys a man's ordinary senses. He simply began to drown, and I was the straw he clutched at. I felt like a straw, too, I can tell you, because he wasn't weak at all: compared to me he was as strong as a bull."

I didn't say anything. I was thinking what I might have had to tell Mr. Hardy when I went home. That thought had kept me awake the night before.

"He hit me two or three times in his struggles," Clem went on. "Of course he didn't know what he was doing, poor beggar. He kept gasping, 'Hold me! I'm sinking!' It was pretty beastly: I just *had* to yell for you. I don't know how many times we went under. The worst was when he got hold of my foot." He shuddered. "Peter, I don't know how I got free. You wouldn't say it was possible with a man as strong as that."

All I could say was, "I wish I'd got there quicker, old man."

"You got there in time, anyhow. Mighty like an angel you looked, too, though I'd never have thought you one ordinarily." He laughed a little, but he was sober again in a moment. "Peter, I've puzzled and puzzled over getting my foot free. It didn't seem possible; any more than it would have seemed possible for young Timmy Dickson to be kept safe in that old stump when he was lost in the scrub. But that happened. And I got free last night."

I said, "Well, Mother reckons Timmy was looked after, somehow. Perhaps you were looked after in the same way."

"I reckon that too," said Clem under his breath.

We didn't say anything more for a while, because there are some things you can't talk about easily, even with a best friend, and I find it's much harder to write them. Only, when things that seem like miracles keep on happening under your nose, it does set you thinking: and since I've been in bed all this time I've thought more than I ever did in my whole life. But I am not going to write about that, patient reader.

"I feel awfully sorry for Mr. Mount," Clem said. "It must be pretty rotten for him to know he went practically off his head, especially when he's the

captain of this show. We'll have to be extra decent to him, or he may go broody like Mervyn does."

I said I didn't believe Mr. Mount was the broody kind of man, but of course we'd do all we could. Anyway, having to look after him would probably keep Mr. Smedley from getting into his queer moods: and Clem said he hoped to goodness it would. And then the day was so gorgeous, with the *Lovely Lou* cutting through the water smoothly and the engine purring like a happy cat, that we forgot all about the Englishmen and only talked of cheerful things.

The others appeared about tea-time. Mr. Mount said he felt nearly all right and that he was sure his sunstroke was not going to give any more trouble. Also that he was hungry. We thought that was a good sign, but we weren't taking any chances, so we firmly insisted on giving him only half-rations that day. He said we were fussy old women, and he might as well be in hospital. We remained unmoved.

However, his luck was in, for when we anchored for the night we found the water much shallower. That pointed to our being over a bank, so we tried fishing, and got seven or eight very fair whiting. We allowed Mr. Mount to have one for supper; I never saw bones more cleanly picked.

Next morning there was no more chance of holding him in. He declared that he was perfectly well and that no one was going to bully him any more: and showed his independence by eating enough breakfast for two. So he resumed command of the *Lovely Lou*; and the first thing he did was to examine the engine anxiously to see, he said, if I'd dropped any spanners into the works. There weren't any, so he said he would give me my First Mate's ticket when we finished the voyage, but no certificates would be coming to us as doctors, because we were nothing but nigger-drivers in that capacity. "I've had to take up two holes in my belt after all, and it's entirely your doing," he said indignantly. We told him he would probably have to take up half a dozen more if he didn't wear a hat all day and keep out of the sun when it was hottest. He wore the hat, but I don't think he ever bothered about the sun.

We caught more whiting for breakfast, and if there is anything better than a whiting cooked directly it is out of the sea I haven't met it yet. Then we started off, all of us rather excited because we reckoned we ought to sight the islands some time during the day.

Sure enough, we caught the first glimpse of them in the afternoon, lying on the horizon like wisps of blue cloud. We got near them about sundown. Mr. Mount anchored then, saying that where so many lumps of rock were sticking out of the sea there might very well be other lumps just below the surface, and he had no intention of risking the *Lovely Lou* by scraping over one.

They were a curious group of islands. You might have imagined, looking

at them, that a playful giant had amused himself by picking up a fistful of rocks and hurling them into the air, letting them fall in every direction. They were all shapes and sizes; most of them small and quite bare, but a few larger ones, partly covered by scrub. And one looked as if it really deserved to have a name on the map.

It was far and away the biggest of the group. On one side tall cliffs went up sheer from the water; they looked as though not even a gull could have found a place to perch on the smooth face. For all we knew the cliffs might run all round, but at the end farthest from us they seemed to shelve downwards, becoming broken.

“Judging by Castle Island,” Clem remarked, “that one might be pretty flat on top. There’s certainly land to grow trees there—can’t you see the top of a big tree showing over the cliff right ahead? I shouldn’t wonder if it had just the same kind of formation as Castle Island.”

“It looks a pretty solid block of rock from here,” Mr. Smedley said. “And I’d like to be able to say that I saw a tree, but I am a truthful man; I don’t. Give me its bearings, Clem.”

Clem did his best to point it out, but it was no use: neither of the Englishmen could see it.

“Hopeless in this light,” said Mr. Smedley. “No matter; it will certainly be there in the morning, whether it’s a rock or a tree. In any case, there should be good scrambling there, if the birds don’t eat us. Did you ever see so many gulls, Harold? The smaller islands are white with them.”

“Pity we haven’t a gun, isn’t it?” answered Mr. Mount. “By Jove, we could scatter them!”

Clem and I were so taken aback we could only stare at him. Mr. Smedley looked uncomfortable and said nothing. Mr. Mount glanced at us.

“Hullo, you look shocked!” he said. “Isn’t it the thing to shoot gulls in Australia?”

“I don’t believe it’s the thing anywhere,” Clem said. “You don’t do it in England, do you?”

“I never heard that you couldn’t. Who says so?”

“Why, I believe that in England they’re more particular about protecting sea-birds than anywhere in the world,” said Clem hotly. “My father has told me lots about bird-sanctuaries there.”

“I fancy most fellows out with a gun take pot-shots at anything they choose,” Mr. Mount said. “I wouldn’t blame them. What’s the use of gulls, anyway?”

“Well, they’re worth a lot as scavengers. And what would be the good of killing them? You can’t eat them.”

“I don’t suppose you can,” said Mr. Mount. “But there’s always

satisfaction in hitting something you've aimed at. I would certainly try for some of those chaps on the rocks if I had a gun."

"Then I'm dashed glad you haven't!" Clem told him angrily. It isn't often that Clem loses his temper. But he was very near it then.

Mr. Mount looked at him. There was something in the look that reminded me of his face when Truca pitched him off that day in the paddock. I believe he would have liked to kick Clem as he had kicked Truca. Clem was very red. His eyes never wavered; they met Mr. Mount's scornfully.

It was the man whose eyes shifted. I had expected almost anything to happen just then, and I fancy Mr. Smedley had too. To our astonishment Mr. Mount laughed, quite in a friendly way.

"No need to get so hot about it, old chap," he said. "Didn't you guess I was only pulling your leg? I thought you must have guessed, you played up so well."

"No," said Clem, "I thought you meant it."

"I must be a better actor than I imagined," Mr. Mount grinned. "Me shoot a gull! I'd almost as soon shoot you. But it wasn't fair to string you on that way—I'm sorry. Forget it."

Mr. Smedley yawned.

"When you two have finished your private theatricals you had better get down to the hard fact that supper's waiting for someone to cook it," he said. "Your turn with the frying-pan, Harold; try your fairy-tales on the whiting."

"No whiting would swallow my yarns," said Mr. Mount. "And I haven't cooked for days: I've forgotten how. It isn't fair to expect a man to cook when he's had a sunstroke. I think it's coming on again."

"I hope you'll get our supper cooked before you collapse," Mr. Smedley remarked unfeelingly. "But I fancy you would be wise to eat nothing while you feel that way. That will be three extra whiting for us, boys."

"Will it! I like your chance!" said Mr. Mount. "Oh, well, lead me to it."

We didn't speak for a moment after they had gone. Then Clem said in a low voice:

"Peter, he did mean it, didn't he?"

"Well, I certainly thought so. But he's such a queer chap—you never know if he means half he says."

"I'll swear he meant it. Did you see his eyes?—they weren't the eyes of a man who's playing the fool. He tried to laugh it off, but his eyes had given him away. I don't like his beastly jokes—and I wouldn't trust him alone with a sea-gull or anything else!"

"Oh, steady on, old man," I said. But I knew how he felt, because a few minutes before I wouldn't have trusted Mr. Mount alone with Clem, not to mention a sea-gull.

“Well, it’s no use being angry,” Clem said, after a minute. “Can’t afford to have quarrels when you’re at sea in a small boat. It wouldn’t be fair to Mervyn and you, anyhow. But I’ll never believe he was pulling my leg; and I bet I know what you think about it.”

“We’ll talk about that when we’re back at Weeroona,” I said. “Don’t keep thinking about it, Clem—the silly ass isn’t worth it. No good letting it spoil our fun. After all, what does he matter? He’s only a stranger, and after another week or two you’re never likely to see him again.”

“No, it’s not worth it,” he agreed. “I expect that to-morrow I’ll be wondering why I got so wild with him.” He smiled at me in his ordinary way. “But there’s no doubt that I like sea-gulls a whole heap better than I like Mr. Mount!”



“Clem called again, ‘Peter—quick!’ so I shot over the rail.”

*Told by Peter)*

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## CHAPTER XV

### ASHORE

WE discovered in the morning that most of the islands couldn't be explored at all. Even if a landing had been possible on them, which it wasn't, there wouldn't have been anything to see except the remains of birds' nests.

They were just humps and spears of rock rising sheer from the sea: dangerous enough, Mr. Mount thought, to ships, only that they were well away from the ordinary track of shipping. We cruised among them very slowly and carefully, with Clem and me lying flat on the fore-deck with our heads over the rail, watching for rocks below the surface. It was a still, calm day; we could see deep down, able to give plenty of warning when it was necessary. All the same, Mr. Mount was jumpy about the safety of his *Lovely Lou*, and when we had had a look at all the islands he said we must now keep away from the smaller ones. We decided that only three were worth landing on, and that those three would give us all the exploring we wanted.

In the end, however, it was the largest of all that we adopted. The others were good fun enough to scramble about, but too steep and bare for anything else. But the big island was a much better proposition.

It really was very like Castle Island, rock most of the way round, and flat on top. At one end the rock face fell away gradually and there was a little bay with a good sandy beach. From the beach you went up a long slope, rising fairly steeply just before you reached the plateau on top: all sandy going at first, but grass and low bushes higher up: and the plateau itself had very fair grass growing on it. Otherwise it was bare: we reckoned it must be too wind-swept in winter for bushes to take a hold. But there was scrub round its edges, where the rocks gave shelter; sparse in some places, but pretty thick in others, with a few tall trees. We spotted the one Clem had seen on the first night: a good-sized gum-tree, with its top oddly twisted by the wind.

But there was no wind while we were there, though we could imagine how the winter gales must howl across the island. We had glorious days, with just enough breeze to make things pleasant. Clem and I fell in love with the place, and we were delighted when the others proposed staying there for awhile. That was after we found a deep hollow in the rocks, almost like a natural well, holding quite good water. Evidently it caught all the rainwater seeping from the plateau, and as the rocks shaded it there was not much evaporation.

"This is a find," Mr. Mount said. "What's wrong with camping on the island for a few days, you fellows? There ought to be good fishing from the rocks, and we might as well save over petrol."

All of us agreed that it was a good scheme. There was no reason why we shouldn't stay there as long as our bag of flour held out. We tried the fishing, and there was no difficulty about that: you had only to chuck in a line from any ledge to get rock-cod, with plenty of schnapper and bream and flathead a little farther out. Clem and I used to take the dinghy early every morning and pull out a few hundred yards; generally we'd catch all we needed for breakfast before we'd been gone half an hour.

The bay was very sheltered. At first it had rock walls on each side, and after they shelved down it got shelter from a smaller island that lay across the mouth. We were able to moor the *Lovely Lou* to a rock-ledge that ran out like a pier close to the beach: a convenient arrangement, because Mr. Mount and Mr. Smedley still preferred to sleep on board; and of course we kept all our stores on her. Clem and I used to take our mattresses up to hollows in the little hummocks, where the sand was so soft and warm and dry that we scarcely needed mattresses at all. We made up our minds that we would simply drag all our people here some day, because it would have been just perfect if Binks and everybody had been there too.

Even if bad weather had come we should have been all right. There were lots of caves in the rocks, some of them big ones, with winding passages going off from them. We explored them fairly thoroughly. It was only on the south coast that we could reach them on foot, by climbing over a huddle of broken rocks and then going along a little beach. The sea ran in under the island for quite a long way in some places. Even in the calm weather we had we could hear a dull, heavy booming underneath when the tide was coming in. It was lovely to lie on the ground and listen to the waves pounding below us. In a storm it must be tremendous. Mr. Mount reckoned that the sea must be steadily undermining the island.

"I'll bet you there are caves and channels everywhere under her," he said. "In a few thousand years she'll probably fall to bits in a big storm. For all we know that has begun already; all this group of islands may have been one big one originally. It looks like that to me. This is the toughest part, but Old Man Sea is going on with his job, eating away into every crack, widening cracks into channels and channels into caves. Old Man Sea never lets go of a job: what he begins he finishes. A good example for humans, isn't it, Mervyn?"

He winked at Mr. Smedley: I supposed he was having a little hit at him, because he often chaffed him about being a slacker. Anyhow, Mr. Smedley didn't answer.

Clem said, "Oh, well, I don't suppose the finish will come while we're

here. The old island feels pretty firm yet.”

“It would be awkward for you and Peter if it came at night,” said Mr. Mount, getting warmed up with his cheerful idea. “We should be safe enough in the boat: but how annoyed you two would be if the ground suddenly opened beneath you! The only thing to do would be to hold on like grim death to your beautiful mattresses and try to float to the mainland. You should never go to bed without a bicycle pump strapped to you, because they would be certain to deflate during the voyage.”

I said I didn’t see myself sleeping with a bicycle pump, and that it would be great luck if the Li-los survived the first crash, anyhow, to say nothing of ourselves. And Clem added, “You and Mervyn mightn’t be any safer in the boat, so you needn’t be too sure. If the island collapsed you would probably find several tons of rock suddenly hurled into the *Lovely Lou*.”

“Then I should never have to pay for her, and that is a consoling thought,” Mr. Mount remarked.

“And quite a lot of problems would be solved,” Mr. Smedley said.

It was all silly talk: the way people get to talk when they are at close quarters for a long time, with nothing much to do except just enjoy each day. You pick up any odd idea then, and toss it about, and it does not matter if it is awful rot it keeps you entertained. We used to have lots of fool conversations of that kind, and often they were good enough fun, especially as Mr. Mount had so many unusual notions. It was only necessary to start him with an “If ——” and he would go on developing one ridiculous possibility after another: always gravely, though they made Clem and me laugh. Mr. Mount was a man who never laughed much himself.

All the same it struck me now and then that there was something queer about our talks. I don’t know how to explain it exactly. Rather as if there was an undercurrent of some feeling between the two men that we couldn’t understand. One of them would make some remark that seemed to have nothing in it, and the other would take it up with a twist that gave you a sudden sensation that there was something very much deeper in it than mere ragging.

It was like that when Mr. Smedley spoke about solving problems. He said it half under his breath, not looking at anybody, but very gloomily; and Mr. Mount glanced sharply at him, and then grinned at Clem and me, giving his shoulders a little shrug, as he often did when Mr. Smedley got broody.

“Oh, cheer up, Mervyn,” he said. “We’ll solve the problems in some way not quite so thorough as that. But thorough enough. Let’s shelve problems, anyhow, and go fishing.”

I never thought I could get tired of fishing, but I got near it on the island. It was too easy for one thing: we never saw another boat all the time we were there, and I suppose the fish had not learned that there was any danger in a

baited hook. We had no trouble in getting all we wanted, and more: beautiful fish, too. But you can only eat a certain amount. A good big amount, with the appetites we had; still, there was a limit.

Fishing at home was different, of course. No matter how much we caught there it was never too much: there were lots of people at Weeroona to eat it, and neighbours were always glad of any surplus. At home, when we come in with a boatload, someone gets the car and runs round dropping fish at one house after another; just as people do with a surplus of fruit of any kind, or if somebody shoots an unusual number of wild duck or quail.

But on the island naturally there was no means of disposing of the fish we didn't need. Clem and I used to take a hook out very carefully and throw back whatever it was we had caught—it surprised us, too, to find how often we caught one of the hungry beggars for the second time. You'd think that a schnapper that had escaped with his life after an unpleasant experience of that kind would be jolly careful not to risk bolting unknown substances again, wouldn't you? They were not, however: again and again we would hook one that had already been on board.

There was one old fellow we christened Horace, because we actually caught him three times in one morning. He was only foul-hooked the first time, and not at all damaged—he freed himself just as I hauled him in over the edge of the dinghy. I cut a little nick out of his tail so that I would know him again, and tossed him back, and within ten minutes Mr. Smedley had him: well and truly hooked this time. We greeted him as an old friend, slipped out the hook, and let him go. Half an hour later he was again on my line. Clem vowed he winked at us as he landed in the bottom of the dinghy for the third time.

"I never met such a sociable schnapper," Mr. Smedley said. "I know his name is Horace—he looks like it. Either he really wants to commit suicide, or he comes back to prove that fish don't feel pain when they're caught." He let him go: the old schnapper just whisked his tail and went off gaily. We made a bet about getting him again: there was no sense in betting with money on the island, so we arranged that the next person who hooked him was to get off washing dishes all that day. After that there was naturally great eagerness all round about catching Horace; but we never saw him again. I suppose he thought three times was as much as was healthy. Mr. Mount said that no doubt he had a story to tell in the Schnappers' Club that would last him for the rest of his life.

But as a general rule Mr. Mount was all against putting fish back. He said it was silly, and just made fishing into a sort of pretence; and he used to knock on the head every single fish he caught. Indeed, at first he didn't knock them on the head, but just let them flap about in the bottom of the boat until they gasped to death. "Why bother?" he said. "I don't believe they feel anything."

Clem and I got pretty hot about it: we couldn't stand seeing the poor wretches dying slowly. There was very nearly a quarrel over it; but quite suddenly Mr. Mount gave in and said, "Oh, have it your own way—only I think killing them is a messy game." Of course it isn't, if one does it quickly and neatly, and he showed that he could do that well enough. But for a moment he looked just as he had done over that business of shooting sea-gulls: and I was glad Clem and I were together to back each other up.

We got to realize that Mr. Mount's temper wasn't nearly so smooth as it appeared on the surface. Not that he gave us the rough side of it—Clem and me, I mean. Sometimes we knew he was near it, but always he would change at the last moment, and it was with a sort of wrench—as if he'd made up his mind to keep in with us. We thought it was rather curious considering that we were only boys: and we knew well enough that he didn't spare Mr. Smedley that way when they were by themselves. Quite often we heard them going at it hammer and tongs. But when you've been to school you know that people can't invariably be polite and holding each other's hands. It isn't natural not to have a row sometimes.

"I'm glad they keep their rows private, anyhow," Clem said one morning when we were out in the dinghy. "It wouldn't be much fun if they quarrelled in front of us. Grown-up people are so serious when they get angry."

"It's because they can't settle it with their fists, I suppose," I said. "Those things are far simpler when you can go off to some quiet spot and see who's the best man."

"Yes, and very often you quite like a fellow after you've had a really good fight with him," said he. "There was a chap at school I couldn't stand: we were always treading on each other's toes. It worked up until one day I told him I'd hit him if he went near my pony; and he did, so I had to."

"Hard, I hope," I said. "Where did you land him?"

"On the nose," said Clem. "I'll admit it was a lucky one, though—he got a beauty back on me. So then we had a real show-down; a mighty fine battle, with quite a lot of gore. Made a horrid mess of each other."

"Who won?" I asked.

"Drawn game. I don't know how long it would have gone on, but I think we were both pretty sick of it, only of course neither of us could give in. Then some silly kid left the gate of the school paddock open and both our ponies got out. We had to stop fighting in a hurry and go after them. A nice job we had catching them too: they were making for their own paddocks, and we'd never have headed them off if there hadn't been two of us. So by the time we'd got them back we were quite matey. We've been good friends ever since."

We agreed that methods like these were the sensible and proper ones for settling disputes, and that arguments conducted with words led one nowhere;

and we only hoped we should be able to stick to that belief and practice when we grew up. So then we pulled ashore and found Mr. Smedley making fried scones for breakfast. It was his great accomplishment in the cooking line; I never saw anyone who could make better ones, and it was funny to see how pleased he used to look when they began to puff up and turn brown as they swam in the boiling fat. He said it was the artistic effect that appealed to him: and he liked our Australian name for them, “pufftaloonas.”

“Pufftaloonas!” he said. “I could make an anthem out of that beautiful word!”

But I am afraid the rest of us never cared much about anthems or artistic effects if only he made enough of them. We only knew they went jolly well with fried fish.

## CHAPTER XVI

### WE HAVE WORDS

FOR the first few days on the island we all kept together, exploring it and making fishing excursions, either in the dinghy or in the *Lovely Lou*. Then, when we had settled down to living there, things began to shape themselves as they had done when we were cruising; the two grown-ups going one way, and Clem and me another.

It suited Clem and me all right. For one thing, we didn't care for Mr. Mount's way of fishing, as I have said. It didn't amuse us at all to see fish hauled in and killed until he got tired of the game. A schnapper just out of the sea is a marvellous thing to look at, all pink and silver, flashing in the sun; but for his queer bull-nosed head he would be the loveliest fish that swims. But when he has been an hour or two in the bottom of the boat, dead and stiff, with his eyes glazed and his colours fading, he is not so pretty. And of course it is worse when there are a lot of his mates with him.

We never could understand Mr. Mount's liking to see the whole of his catch mustered like that. He would count them carefully at the end of the day, throwing them back one by one into the water, almost gloating over them. We could see no sense in it. He could just as well have kept a tally as he hauled them in, chucking them away at once, if he was so keen on counting the slain. But he said he liked the mass effect.

Well, we didn't, though it was not our place to talk about it. He was in the position of captain; we couldn't argue about what he chose to do in his own boat. But we began to divide forces; Clem and I doing the early morning fishing for breakfast, and the others going out by themselves later in the day. That seemed to suit them very well, though we didn't think Mr. Smedley did much fishing. Often we could see them from the cliffs, Mr. Mount hard at work in the stern or amidships, Mr. Smedley half lying in the bow, smoking. "Mervyn doesn't care for wholesale slaughter any more than we do, I believe," Clem said.

We had great times, exploring on our own account, until we knew the island as thoroughly as we knew Castle Island. At least, we thought we did, though later on we came to the conclusion that we hadn't mastered all the curious passages connecting the caves. We used to take the dinghy and paddle into them as far as we could, and then land and scramble round the passages with a hurricane-lantern; we had torches, but we were afraid of the batteries

conking out; and the lantern gave a better light, anyhow.

Sometimes we came to unexpected holes in the floor. Clem slid into one when he was going carelessly one day: he was a little ahead of me, and suddenly I heard a yell and a splash as he turned a corner, and there wasn't any Clem visible. Luckily I was carrying the lantern; but I had a pretty bad moment waiting for him to reappear, because he might easily have come up under the rock, and goodness knows if he would have managed to get back to the hole; for it's easy to lose your sense of direction when you suddenly go under water like that.

I held the lantern above the water, and gosh, I was glad when his head popped up in the middle of the hole. Then, of course, we were able to see the funny side of it, and we howled with laughter as he climbed out like a drowned rat. You can be certain we were careful to watch our step after that day. We told the others about it. Mr. Smedley seemed rather startled, and said, "For goodness' sake be careful in those places, Clem; I'm responsible for you, you know." But Mr. Mount laughed at him, and told him that no power on earth could make boys into old women. "Where Clem is concerned you can't keep a good boy down," he said. "I seem to have tried hard enough when I had that sunstroke and took him swimming with me, but I couldn't manage it."

Mr. Smedley didn't laugh, though we did. He never liked talking about that night of the sunstroke. We reckoned it must have given him the scare of his life, and he didn't like to be reminded of it.

Some days Clem and I felt lazy; no wonder, living that life—three big meals a day, and roasting in the sun when we weren't bathing. We wouldn't bother about the dinghy on those days, but take books and go up to the plateau. There was shade there if we wanted it, and it was jolly to lie on the short grass and read or yarn. If we went to the edge of the cliffs we could lie flat, watching the gulls on the ledges below or the gannets diving farther out.

It was the best place I ever saw for gannets. We never got tired of watching them. Sometimes there was so many in the air at once that you would not know which to watch; trying not to miss the moment when some enormous fellow, hovering high up, would turn downwards. It always comes so suddenly—you see the deep brown of the long wing-feathers, looking black against the snow-white body, as he folds his wings tightly round him, flashing down in a splendid straight dive that sends a column of spray high in the air. Then you gaze until you see him come up with his fish. I don't believe he ever misses one.

Apart from watching birds we liked just looking at the sea. There were scattered rocks all along the foot of the cliffs: it was fascinating to see the waves come curling in among them, the water eddying and sucking down, and coming in in great swirls to fling all its strength against the cliffs. You could

get almost giddy if you stared down for a long time.

“Anyone falling from here would have a poor show,” Clem remarked one day.

“By Jove, yes!” I said. “One comfort, he wouldn’t know much about it. He could hardly fall without hitting a rock—and the strongest swimmer couldn’t live in that wild water for more than a minute.”

“It does look grim, doesn’t it, when you think of falling,” Clem said. “Better keep off the idea, or I shan’t enjoy it so much.” He was only ragging, for the cliffs attracted him as much as ever after that talk. Sometimes we would fall asleep lying on the hot grass of the plateau; easy enough, for it was very silent there. The only thing to break the quiet was an occasional aeroplane or two, flying down the coast. We got used to them, just as we were used to the low booming of the sea against the cliffs. That was a kind of undertone to the island, never changing either day or night. Even now I often wake up thinking I hear it.

We went to sleep like that one afternoon, and when I woke up Clem wasn’t there. I knew where he had gone; it would only be to the edge of the cliffs, for he would not have left the top of the island without waking me. So I decided to go and find him.

There was a narrow belt of light scrub at the edge of the grass, dividing it from the rocks. I was going through it quietly, looking ahead to see where Clem was, when I heard the snap of a breaking stick a little to my right. At first I thought it was Clem, and I glanced round, expecting to find him among the trees.

But it wasn’t Clem: it was Mr. Mount. I was surprised to see him, because they had gone out in the boat, and they didn’t as a rule come back so early. I was just going to give him a coo-ee when it struck me that he was moving in a curious manner—almost as if he was stalking someone.

“Probably he’s playing some joke on Mr. Smedley,” I thought; and I got behind a bush, not wishing to spoil it. There was no sign of Mr. Smedley anywhere, but of course my range of vision was limited, and the scrub was thicker where Mr. Mount was. I kept still, watching him.

He was clear of the scrub in a minute, and out on the rock-strewn ground leading towards the edge. Then he went very quietly, dodging from rock to rock. It puzzled me a good bit, having only Mr. Smedley in my mind. Then I caught sight of Clem at our usual place, gazing out to sea, and I suddenly realized that it was Clem that Mr. Mount was trying to surprise.

Well, I didn’t care how many jokes he chose to play on Mr. Smedley, but Clem was different. For one thing, I knew what I reckoned Mr. Mount probably didn’t, that he was far too near the edge for any foolery of that kind to be safe. And apart from that, Clem has a rooted objection to some things; he

hates being touched by anyone he doesn't know very well, and he hates being taken by surprise. Probably it's a kind of nervousness, and comes from having been a delicate little kid once; but there it is, and we understand it and take care not to annoy him—not that he's likely to mind anything Binkie and I do.

But I wasn't going to see Mr. Mount annoy him, so I took a hand in the game. I walked out of the scrub, beginning to whistle the first tune I could think of, and trotted gently across the rocky ground.

Clem didn't hear me, being so near the crashing of the sea against the cliffs, but Mr. Mount did. He swung round quickly in a startled way, looking as black as thunder. He didn't move at all; just stood still, staring at me as if I was a ghost.

Of course I took no notice of that; knowing his queer temper it was quite likely that he would be a bit wild at having his practical joke spoilt. I just strolled up and said. "Hullo—were you looking for us?"

"Oh, not exactly," he said, speaking pretty shortly. "Just strolling round—and I saw Clem up there and thought I'd take a rise out of him. You turned up just at the wrong minute, Peter, old scout. I was going to give him the surprise of his life."

"Pretty dangerous place for surprises of that sort," I said. I was fairly curt myself, because I thought that a grown man ought to have more sense than to play practical jokes on a cliff edge. He shot a rather unpleasant glance at me.

"Oh, I knew what I was doing," he said. "Don't get into the way of thinking you can tell the world everything, Peter, my lad: you're rather young for that, and it's apt to make people laugh at you. Well, I'll carry on with my stroll, since it's clear that I'm not wanted." And he turned on his heel and walked back into the scrub, not giving me time to answer him.

I didn't want to answer, anyway, for I might only have been rude; he'd never spoken to me in that way before, and you can bet I didn't like it. I felt hot all over for a minute. It seemed to me that if he was going to begin to use the same tone to us that he often used to Mr. Smedley, the sooner we went home the better. An island is precious little good if people quarrel on it.

Clem had heard our voices: he turned round, rather surprised to see Mr. Mount walking away. I went over and joined him.

"Anything the matter?" he asked. "You look as if you wanted to fight somebody. Has friend Harold been saying anything he shouldn't? I only saw his back, but it looked very cross."

"He's a silly ass," I growled, and I told him what had happened. Clem looked rather puzzled.

"But it was such a little thing," he said. "A man's a fool to get angry just because he's failed to bring off a silly joke. I'm jolly glad you stopped him, anyway, Peter, because I might have leaped like a startled fawn if he'd come

on me suddenly, and this isn't exactly a place for leaping." He glanced down at the sheer drop beneath him. "But I don't see why he wanted to turn nasty. I expect you glared at him in that blood-and-thunder way you have, and it was the last straw for poor Harold after having his merry plan dished."

I said, "Poor Harold be blowed—he had a dig at me about being young, but he acted like a silly kid himself. And I don't care if I did glare at him, and I'd do it again." And then, having relieved my mind, I began to laugh. Clem cocked an eye at me and waited for me to explain.

"Well, I've just begun to remember how funny he looked," I said. "He was doing such a lovely stalk—bending low, and taking cover behind the humps of rock as if you were a deer and he was trying to get near enough for a shot. It really must have been rather crushing when I turned up whistling and spoilt it all."

"I'll bet it must," Clem agreed. "And he's the last man to enjoy being made to look silly. Wonder if he's taking it out of Mervyn now? I hope not; Mervyn must get a bit tired of being jawed at, I should say."

I wondered that too, and wished that Mr. Smedley would let him see that he was tired: but we didn't waste any more time in talking about it, knowing we could say we thought it was time to go home if things really were strained. We went for a walk right round the island, and finally scrambled down the rocks at one side of the bay.

The two men were bathing, so we stripped and went in to join them, thinking it a good moment to meet Mr. Mount after his bit of bad temper, because it's very hard to keep up any ill-feeling in the water. There was no awkwardness at all. Mr. Mount seemed in very good form, and that little brush up on the cliffs might never have taken place. We had a great swim, ending up with a water-fight that left us all limp with laughing, so that for quite a time nobody had energy enough to cook supper.

That evening was one of the cheerfulest that we had on the island. Talking over it afterwards, Clem and I agreed that Mr. Mount must have been a scrap ashamed of having been cross, for he just laid himself out to be nice to us. We all lay on the sand and swapped yarns and sang songs, and played the gramophone, and all sorts of silly jokes were flying round. Mr. Mount surprised us by producing a tin of toffee from his locker, saying that we two ought to have something as we didn't smoke. He said he had kept it as an iron ration, in case of shipwreck. But we strongly suspected that it was a peace-offering.

Anyhow, it was good toffee; and when we were going to sleep later on we agreed that there really were good points about Mr. Mount.

"One is," said Clem, "that he never keeps a thing up. I believed we were going to find him anything but pleasant, after what you told me, but he was

extra jolly instead. I wish I knew how to swallow my wrath like that when I've been riled, instead of just bottling it up inside me."

"It does make things simpler, doesn't it?" I said. "We'll have a go at the swallowing process next time anything happens, shall we?" So we began to practise on toffee, and went to sleep doing it.

## CHAPTER XVII

### WHEN I LISTENED

“YOU boys coming out this afternoon?” asked Mr. Smedley next day. “Harold wants to have another go at the fish. He’ll never be happy until he has caught Horace for the fourth time.”

We had all been for a run in the *Lovely Lou* in the morning, getting back just in time for dinner. Clem and I had suspicions that we had eaten too much, and we felt properly lazy. We said so.

“That means you’re going up to the plateau to read thrillers, I suppose,” remarked Mr. Mount. “Sheer loafing, I call it. You’d be far better employed beating me to it with Horace.”

We said that anyone who could get Horace to swallow a fourth bait was welcome to him; and we offered them thrillers in case they were dull. Mr. Smedley took one, but Mr. Mount wouldn’t.

“They bring unpleasant memories of the last time I slew a policeman in Piccadilly,” he said, laughing. “I’ll tell you that yarn some day, boys. Thrillers can’t teach me anything.” He laughed again in his queer way. “Come along, Mervyn. We’ll hunt up this sleepy pair on the plateau when we come back, if there’s no sign of them on the beach. I expect we’ll find them hanging from a tree head downwards—like two-toed sloths, isn’t it? I’ll bring my camera.”

We saw them start off in the dinghy. The plateau seemed a long way to climb in the heat; we decided that we wouldn’t go so far to begin with. There was rather a jolly nook in the sandy slope that led up to it, only about five minutes’ walk from the beach, and we made for that.

It was a saucer-shaped hollow, partly shaded by one of the big rocks that cropped out of the island here and there. Anyone lying in it was completely hidden, unless someone came to the very rim of the saucer. The sand was hot and soft; we were wearing only shorts, and it felt gorgeous against our bare backs. Clem went to sleep almost at once.

I didn’t feel sleepy, and I was just at the most exciting part of my book. So I read on, and had just finished it when Clem woke up.

“Hullo!” he said, seeing me at the last page. “I must have been asleep a good while. Good yarn, isn’t it? Did you guess the murderer?”

“Not me,” I said. “I can never spot the villain in a detective yarn: they’re too smart for me. But it’s rather fun trying to follow the clues. Fun to write one, too, I should think.”

“Yes, that must be interesting.” Clem became wide awake all at once. “How would you begin? I suppose you’d plan who’d murder who, and then work backwards, fitting in clues wherever there was a space.”

“And you’d see lots of ways to make your villain seem particularly innocent, and to make the unfortunate reader believe that the old maiden aunt or the saintly Vicar had sloshed the poor victim. Poison would give you lots of chances—there are so many ways of working it into the corpse; at least, I mean, before he was a corpse. I vote we think up a good murder some day and have a shot at writing it.”

“Too much fag to think about it on an island,” Clem said. “We might try it in the winter hols. I’d rather read somebody else’s efforts now. What are you going to do, Peter?—you didn’t bring a second book, did you?”

“No, like an idiot: I might have remembered that I had read most of this one. Never mind, I’ll slip down to the boat for another. Want me to fetch up anything else?”

“No, thanks: I’ve only just begun my book. Unless you feel like carting up the gramophone: it would be rather soothing, don’t you think?”

“Right-oh,” I said. The gramophone was very light, and we had a handy bag for the records: we used to carry it all over the place. “Any special records?”

“Too lazy to think: I’ll leave it to you, partner.” He rolled over and picked up his book, and I made for the *Lovely Lou*.

Everything was very quiet at the bay: so quiet that a sea-gull was hopping about on the fore-deck. I got another book out of the locker in the cabin and went to get the gramophone from the fore-deck glory-hole where all sorts of things were stowed.

Someone must have been shifting things about there, because it wasn’t in its usual corner, and the box of records was pushed far back. I crawled in: there was barely room to sit upright once I was inside. It didn’t seem worth while to pull everything into the open, so I sat there cross-legged and took out the first records that came handy, stowing them into the carrying-bag.

I had just finished and was buckling the straps when I heard voices. Mr. Mount and Mr. Smedley came on board—much to my surprise, because it was far earlier than their usual time for giving up fishing. I heard their baskets planked on the seat, and then they sat down on the edge of the fore-deck. Through the opening I had an excellent view of four bare legs ending in canvas shoes.

I was just going to speak when a mad notion came to me. I’m not much on practical jokes, because Dad discourages them; but it seemed to me that I had an idea for a super one. I opened the gramophone very softly and slipped on a record, reckoning that the way those four legs would move when music floated

up from below would be worth the ducking I was pretty certain to get immediately afterwards.

But I never went as far as winding the handle, for the first words they said put any idea of music out of my mind.

“Where do you suppose the little brutes are?”

It was Mr. Mount’s voice, and only once before had I heard it sound that way. That was the afternoon he had kicked old Truca.

“Oh, up on the plateau,” Mr. Smedley said. “They always go there. Lord, I wish they would fall over the edge and save us trouble!”

“No such luck, more’s the pity,” said Mr. Mount. “They’re too dashed careful. It makes me sick when I think how near I was to getting the job done yesterday—if only that revolting young cub Peter hadn’t come along just as I felt certain. He has a genius for turning up when he’s not wanted.” And he added words about me that I had better not write in my book, in case Binkie sees it. There will be a lot left out because of that.

“You will never manage it unless we can get them apart,” Mr. Smedley said. There was no savage ring in his voice: only a sort of hopelessness. “And they stick together like leeches.”

“Well, they will have to go together if I can’t pull it off any other way. It might be safer, too: young Peter might prove very troublesome if Clem . . . disappeared.”

“You *can’t* do that, Harold. One is bad enough—not two——”

“I’ve got to think of my own skin,” snapped Mr. Mount. “And that boy is a fiend. When I think of that night when I had my sunstroke——! My convenient sunstroke!” He gave a short laugh. “One minute more, and your dear little cousin would have ceased to trouble you. And then that young pest must come diving in just in time——Lord, what fools we were to bring him!”

“We couldn’t help ourselves—you know that. Clem absolutely refused to come without him.”

“You might almost have thought that Clem suspected something,” Mr. Mount said. “Rot, of course, but it was odd that he made such a point of it. And queer, too, how he got away from me that night in the water. I thought I had him for keeps when I got my grip on his ankle; I don’t know how he managed to free himself. The devil takes care of his own, I suppose.”

He got up restlessly and walked about the deck for a minute. I knew he must be lighting his pipe; there came the sound of a match being struck, and the smell of the tobacco first alight. He flipped away the match, and it fell on the deck, still burning: he had to spring forward to pick it up. I had a glimpse of his face as he stooped, dark and scowling. I can tell you, I held my breath, thinking he might have caught sight of me.

But he came back to his seat in front of the opening, and once more I had

four bare legs to look at, instead of two. I felt a little safer that way. My legs were growing stiff and cramped, but I didn't dare to move even half an inch.

"The maddening thing is that it would be easy enough to separate them if it was Peter we wanted," he said. "He'd go off on some expedition with me readily enough if you staged any sort of illness and someone had to be left to take care of you. Clem would be delighted to stay and hold Cousin Mervyn's hand. But he wouldn't leave you for a trip with me. Wouldn't be natural, with his cousin ill. And Clem doesn't like me well enough to care for my company alone. Very polite young guest, of course, but his nose has great difficulty in refraining from turning up at me sometimes."

"Well, that's your own fault, Harold. I told you you had a queer streak of cruelty; it's a pity you let the boys see it."

"If you only knew," said Mr. Mount between his teeth, "how utterly sick I am of playing the good-tempered uncle! There are times when I hardly know how to keep myself from knocking their innocent little heads together. Or wringing their necks, which would be permanent, and therefore more desirable. I can't stand it much longer, Mervyn."

"I would chuck the whole thing," said Mr. Smedley suddenly, "if I——"

"If you dared. But you know you don't dare, Mervyn. I've too much up my sleeve about you. Why, you fool, the thing's not worth making a fuss about. With Clem out of the way, you and I are on Easy Street for life. Otherwise—well, we're in a hole we'll never get out of. But I swear I'll make it worse for you than it will be for me."

There was a long silence. Then Mr. Smedley said dully, "What is your next plan?"

"Get them apart. We've got to manage it somehow. Give me five minutes alone with Clem in the right setting, and I'll guarantee to do the job. Good Lord, it ought to be easy enough on this island! We could suggest a walk right round it to-night in the moonlight, on the edge of the cliffs. I'll do my best to fall behind with Clem if you get ahead with Peter. And for the love of Mike, do something to prevent that loathsome little beast from interfering again!"

"Will you, just!" I said inside myself.

"I'll try—but you know what he is," Mr. Smedley said. "It's an even chance whether it comes off."

"Well, if it doesn't, we must fall back on the boats. I was thinking that if we go out to-morrow I might contrive to leave you and Peter in the launch, taking Clem to help me to pull the dinghy. Five minutes out of sight of the launch is all I need. Gad!" he said—"think of it! A fortune dangling before our eyes and we may miss it for want of five quiet minutes! It's enough to send a man off his head. If I'd only dreamed that having one boy too many would make all this difference!"

“And it would not,” said Mr. Smedley, “if the sunstroke plan had succeeded. It would have made us safer. There would have been Peter, able to tell how we had tried to save Clem; and people in all those coastal townships remembering us.”

“Yes—remembering what a nice, happy foursome we were. So attached to each other, and sending joyful post cards home. Oh, it was well enough planned. And it would have come off, too, if you had only held young Peter another half-minute in the cabin that night.”

“Hold him!” said Mr. Smedley furiously. “You might as well have tried to hold a charging elephant.”

There was a long silence. In the middle of it I had a frantic desire to sneeze. I remembered just in time the dodge of pressing under my nose with my finger, and I pressed it so desperately that I had a good old bruise there next day. But it held the sneeze back.

“Well, something has to be done soon,” Mr. Mount said at last. “We have only a few more days’ flour: once we move from here there will be no excuse for coming back. And it ought to be an ideal place for getting rid of a boy: we shall get no better chance that I can see, unless we have an unexpected stroke of luck. Luck has been all on Clem’s side so far, but it may turn.”

He paused for a moment. Then he broke out angrily:

“And the dickens of it is that if it did turn, and the chance came your way, you wouldn’t take it! You’re willing enough to let me do the dirty work, but you won’t soil your own fingers.”

“No,” said Mr. Smedley. His voice was so low I could scarcely hear it. “I will not. It was your idea, not mine: I’ve agreed up to a point, because you’ve got me in a cleft stick, but I won’t do the thing. You would be a fool to depend on me, even if I were willing, because my nerve would only give at the last moment—I *couldn’t* do it, I tell you. I’d rather chuck myself over the cliff—and it may come to that yet.”

Mr. Mount spoke less sharply next time.

“Oh, don’t talk rot, Mervyn. You’re softer than I am, that’s all. Don’t worry: I’ll manage it somehow. But for pity’s sake be ready to back me up and get Peter off my hands.” He got up. “Well—shall we go and look for them?”

I crouched there, nearly breathless. If they went up the island they might easily see Clem on their way to the plateau: they knew the little hollow where we had camped. Or he might even meet them: he might be coming to see why I’d stayed away so long. And the *Lovely Lou* could be seen from anywhere on the slope: I wouldn’t have the slightest chance of getting away from her without being spotted. My heart began to pound so loudly that I thought they would hear it. Then a great wave of relief came over me as Mr. Smedley said unwillingly:

“It’s early yet, Harold. I’d like to get my ideas clearer before we meet them again: and ten to one they are still sun-bathing—asleep, probably.”

“Well, we can’t sit on this deck for ever,” said Mr. Mount. “Suppose we take the dinghy again, and paddle round among the islands. I can always think better on the water. We won’t fish, as you’re sick of it.”

“Sick to death; I never want to see a dead fish again. Well, I suppose the dinghy is as good as anything. We can come back when it begins to get cooler.”

The four legs moved, disappeared. Their rubber-soled shoes made no sound on the deck: I couldn’t tell where they were. I strained my ears until I heard the creaking of the rowlocks and the plop of oars in water. It grew fainter and died away. I didn’t dare to stir until I reckoned they must be clear of the bay.

And then I couldn’t move, I was so stiff. I rubbed my legs until I was able to crawl out, keeping well down on the deck at first. Then, very gradually, I put my head up until I could see over the rail.

The bay was quite empty. Listening hard in the deep silence I could just catch now and then far-off voices or the sound of an oar. It was safe to get away. I made one spring to the rock-ledge and pelted up the slope as hard as I could go.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### WE FACE FACTS

I HAVE written down all that talk on the *Lovely Lou* just as I heard it. There isn't a word of it I could ever forget; it seems burned into my memory, and often and often at night, when my leg is aching and I can't sleep, I go over it again. Mother says it isn't good for me; and she thinks that writing it all down may help to get it out of my thoughts. Well, I hope it will.

I haven't tried to tell you how I felt, crouching there in the stuffy little fore-deck, where it was so hot that sometimes my head began to swim. I don't think there's any way of telling you.

At first I thought they were having some queer joke together. You simply can't believe or realize that people who seem like ordinary friends are planning a murder; it's like having an idiotic dream. You read about murders in thrillers, or in the daily papers—goodness knows there are plenty—but you can't by any possibility picture such a thing happening to people you know. Of course, you can imagine a murder by somebody in a towering passion. But something deliberate and cold-blooded—well, it's incredible. I *couldn't* take it in as hard fact at first.

Then, as they went on, I knew it was grim, sober earnest: and it was Mr. Smedley's voice, hopeless, and yet agreeing, that convinced me more thoroughly than all Mr. Mount's beastly talk. It was hard fact, and we were up against it. But I could only listen in a sort of daze, too bewildered to understand.

I wasn't sorry to find Clem fast asleep when I got up to the hollow. He was lying with his head on his arm, and all I could think of as I stared at him was what a kid he looked. It's because he's fair-haired, I suppose, and so much slighter than I am, but he always seems younger than me. Whereas he really is months older, and he has lots more sense.

I lay down with my head in my arms and tried to think it out. Naturally, I hadn't the foggiest idea of what all their talk meant, except the one horrible fact. Why on earth should they want to get rid of a boy? What did they mean by his standing between them and a fortune? Clem and Mr. Hardy had barely enough to live on, and even if he lost Clem, Mr. Hardy wasn't likely to give them any money. And yet, they were in such deadly earnest. I gave up that part of it; after all, it wouldn't help if I did understand it. What brains I possessed were needed for something much more urgent.

Then a sudden thought came to me. The *Lovely Lou*! Why shouldn't we race down and get on board and escape before they came back? I nearly yelled aloud with joy at the idea, and I jumped up. Then my heart went into my shoes again. The dinghy was back in the bay, just pulling up to the launch. There was no possibility of our leaving the hollow without their seeing us go.

But it was an idea, and I lay flat again. If they had not seen me from the dinghy they might go straight up to the plateau without thinking of the hollow. Then, once they were out of sight we could tear down and get away with the launch. I wriggled until my head was behind a little clump of bracken through which I could watch without being seen.

Our luck was out. They must have spotted me when I jumped up, for after mooring the boat they came straight towards our hollow, walking fast. Clem spoke, and I started like a rabbit.

"What on earth are you up to, Peter?" he said. "You look jolly queer."

He had rolled over with his face near mine, looking at me in a puzzled way. There was no time to tell him anything: I said the first thing I could think of. "Oh, nothing—I'll tell you later on. Look here, Clem, stick close to me tonight, will you? Don't go more than a yard away from me until I have a chance of talking to you."

"What's the game? Have you been getting into a row with the others?"

They were almost up to us: I had barely a moment. I said, "Something like that—but promise, will you? Promise faithfully, Clem."

"Right-oh. I'll stick to you," he said. Then we sat up, and Mr. Smedley and Mr. Mount hailed us.

"You two loafers!" said Mr. Mount. "I believe they've snored all the afternoon, Mervyn. Peter looks as if he'd had a sunstroke—he's all red and white in patches."

"Sure you're all right, Peter?" Mr. Smedley asked; and all three looked at me as if I was some curious exhibit.

I mumbled something about sleeping with my face in the hot sand, and said of course I was O.K. Honestly, I could hardly get a word out. My head felt as if instead of brains it held only some badly set jelly. The more I tried to think clearly the more my thoughts whirled round in masses; and there was only one definite thing in the lot—that, whatever happened, I must keep near Clem.

We went down to bathe, and that cleared my head a bit. Only it made it seem even more than ever like a fantastic dream, to remember that the two men who were ragging with us in the water were the two who had talked in the boat, with me listening-in. I'd never be any good as an actor; I found it next door to impossible to play up so that they wouldn't suspect anything. As it was, I saw them looking at me pretty closely more than once. So I thought it better to admit that I had a bit of a headache; and that made it less of a shock to

them when I had no appetite for supper, a thing which had never happened before on the trip.

Mr. Mount proposed a walk after supper, saying that it ought to be rather jolly up on the plateau in the moonlight, and Clem agreed.

“I don’t know about you, though, Peter,” remarked Mr. Smedley. “Scrambling round at night over rough ground is hardly the treatment for a headache. Suppose you and I stay down here and let these energetic people go on their own.”

I felt Clem glance at me, but I remembered to keep my eyes away from him.

“Oh, I’d rather go, thanks all the same,” I said. “My headache’s nothing much: a blow on the cliffs will do it good. Pity to waste such a ripping evening.” And I got up, trying to look very spry, so that there should be no more argument.

If only I hadn’t been in such an awful state of mind, that walk would have been almost funny. As it was, Clem had most of the joke to himself. It was really interesting to see the efforts Mr. Mount made to keep behind with Clem, and the efforts Mr. Smedley made to get ahead with me. It helped me, too, because I had to concentrate on it as if it was a game we were playing; and whatever might happen to-morrow, I knew we could beat them to-night. Clem had only to be rather unsociable and stroll away from Mr. Mount whenever he hung back—not on any walk had he discovered so many things he wanted to point out to Clem. I had to use every dodge I could think up to delay Mr. Smedley, who seemed to be in a particular hurry; I believe I got nearly poetical about the beauty of the moonlight effects among the trees.

And all the time, without letting Clem know, I had to keep him away from the edge of the cliff. He must have thought me stark staring mad. Ordinarily we went as close to the edge as we chose; we knew the ground well by this time, and it was far and away the best place to walk if we wanted to look at the moonlight on the sea. I just had to pretend to be keen on other things that night. Only for his promise to keep close Clem would have been really snappy with me: he came near to that more than once. Then I got a chance to whisper, “For goodness’ sake play up, and follow my lead,” and of course after that he was tame but mystified.

Mr. Mount and Mr. Smedley were pretty quiet when we left the plateau and went down the slope. I would have given a good deal to know their thoughts. But I expect Mr. Mount’s were chiefly full of a strong wish to wring my neck.

They said good night very curtly, disappearing into the cabin. We took our mattresses and rugs and got away as quickly as we could. We never had any special place to camp on the sand, and you may be sure that I went a good

distance away that night. Clem's patience came to an end as I walked on.

"Look here, Peter, what's got hold of you to-night?" he asked. "You've been acting the silly ass all the evening. I'm blessed if I'm going to hump this load any farther."

"Just a bit," I said. "I'll explain in a minute." That explaining was one of the hardest jobs I ever had to do. I didn't even know how to begin. It is an impossible sort of thing to tell a fellow that two people want to kill him. I suppose I bungled it pretty badly at the start, for Clem simply didn't believe me.

The way he showed it was embarrassing. He said, "Peter, old chap, I know you think you mean what you're saying, but you've just had a touch of the sun. I've thought you had ever since I woke up and found you looking so queer. People do get those mad sort of dreams when the sun has hit them. You go to sleep and forget it." And he added very kindly, "You'll be O.K. in the morning—it's nothing to worry about. Mr. Mount was a lot worse when he had his sunstroke, and he was quite well in a couple of days."

I said, "Mr. Mount's sunstroke!" and then I started laughing and couldn't stop myself: and in the middle of laughing I found to my horror that I was crying, and I couldn't stop that either. Clem was awfully scared. He got off his mattress and put his arm round me, begging me to stop; and then he said he'd race down to the launch and bring Mr. Smedley. That helped me more than anything to get hold of myself. I grabbed his arm and managed to get out, "No—don't go—I'll be all right in a sec."; and then I choked back my idiotic sounds, and felt absolutely ashamed of myself.

I stood up and did some deep breathing until I felt better. Then I said:

"Clem, you've *got* to listen to me. I've had no more sunstroke than you have. I never went to sleep this afternoon at all; while you were asleep I was hiding in the fore-deck. And I swear to you that I heard every word I'm going to tell you."

"I don't believe you ought to talk," he said anxiously. "You couldn't have had the . . . the sort of attack you've just had, if you were all right."

"You needn't remind me of that," I said, feeling very sore. "I don't know why I did it, only I suppose it was because this evening has been so awful, between bottling things up and pretending there was nothing the matter. And now you've gone off on a wrong tack altogether, and I tell you, we haven't any time to lose. And it is most terribly serious. For the love of Mike, do stop talking and let me tell you all I've got to."

"But I know you're seedy," he said unhappily.

"I'm no more seedy than you are. But I've had the biggest scare of my life, and I'm terribly anxious. You keep quiet until you hear all about it."

So I told him everything, sitting on the sand and keeping my eye on the

beach, for fear someone might sneak out of the launch and get near us: and after the first bit, he believed me. I felt steadied by the way he took it. Most Australians would have got furiously angry, like I had; but Clem is English, and he just stiffened and remained very cool.

I hoped that when I got to where they'd spoken about money he might know something that would make the whole thing seem like sense. And of course he did have some glimmering of what it might mean.

"It's just possible, I suppose," he said slowly. "Father would know at once. My grandmother in England has money, only we're the last people she'd leave it to. I'd have imagined Mervyn would be more likely to get it—if I ever thought about it at all. You see, I know so little about Mother's family. But I should think, Peter, that we might say that there *is* money somewhere and that Mervyn would get it if I were out of the way. That's the only state of affairs that makes your story hang together."

So I went on: and when I'd finished Clem sat thinking.

"I thought for a time that they had fixed up an elaborate joke, just to pull your leg," he said at last. "But it's true, right enough. It makes a lot of things clearer. That night in the water . . . there were bits I didn't tell you, because I was really sorry for the man. I understand them now. The crafty brute!—he really did do his level best to drown me then."

"Well, thank goodness you believe it," I said.

"Oh, there's no getting away from it. I remember other times when I've suddenly found him near me in dangerous places—or rather, places that might easily have been dangerous . . . for me. I put it down to the jokes he's been so keen on since we came on this trip. And there was one day at home when by sheer luck I found the girth of my saddle damaged. It puzzled me awfully. You know my single-buckle girth—the leather was rubbed away inside the loop that holds the buckle. Just luck that I happened to give it a good oiling that morning, and noticed a shred of frayed leather sticking out of the loop. Or—*was* it luck?"

"The sort of luck that saved you in the water, perhaps. But, Clem, that was a fool idea. You might have taken a pretty bad toss if it had given way when you were galloping, but the chances are you would not have been killed. And they seem to prefer you dead."

"Yes," he said. "Perhaps they realized that—it may have been why there were no more attempts on land. The sea is thorough—and so much safer for them. It leaves no trace."

It gave me a queer feeling that we were in a dream together, calmly discussing the chances of Clem being killed. Not like anything in everyday life. But as we talked it out we began to understand so many little details that had puzzled us all through the trip, and we could see how carefully they had

worked out their plan.

“Everything calculated to make them safe,” said Clem. “All those careful visits to the little townships, making us go ashore with them to show how happy we were. Golly, Peter, do you remember how he put his arm round me in the store when we were doing our last shopping? And planning this all the time! It makes you feel you’d never trust anyone again in all your life.”

“Well, you never trusted him, really, did you?” I asked.

“Why, no, I suppose I didn’t. There was always a . . . something,” he admitted. “But it’s Mervyn who has me beaten—my own family!”

“Mr. Mount’s got some deadly hold on him,” I said. “He’s the unhappiest person on this island, if you ask me. The other man’s a blackguard, but he’s just a worm. Clem, doesn’t it feel as if we were people in a book? as if it couldn’t be just us. And to think that only this afternoon we were rotting about writing a murder yarn!”

“We may do that yet—if they don’t kill me.”

“I’ll be shot if they do that!” I snapped.

“No, but I do hope Mr. Mount will be hanged,” he said quite cheerfully. “And look here, Peter, we’re wasting a lot of time talking about them, when what we really should be doing is planning how to circumvent them. What are we going to do about it?”

“I’ve been thinking of that ever since I found out,” I said. “The first thing, of course, is that we must never leave each other for a single minute. We’ve got to be the nearest thing possible to Siamese twins. And how about telling them in the morning that we want to start for home? You can say you’re beginning to worry about being away any longer from your father. I don’t see how they can in decency refuse to go.”

“And if they won’t?”

“Then we watch like cats for a chance of getting away by ourselves in the launch. Easy enough, if they go out fishing in the dinghy. That’s what I’d like best of all, because we’d have a peaceful run home, without having to watch out all the time for some dirty trick on their part.”

“Golly, that would be fun!” said Clem. “They’d be pretty sick of each other before they pulled that dinghy as far as the mainland. And they’d have no food until they did, unless they made a fire on the island and cooked fish in the ashes. Let’s do our level best to grab the launch, Peter.”

“I wonder,” I said, “how they would act if we faced them together in the morning and I told them I’d been in the fore-deck this afternoon. I would rather like to see their faces.”

Clem shook his head.

“I know jolly well how they’d act. They would simply say you had had a sunstroke and were raving—just as I thought at first. And I wouldn’t put it past

them to lock you in the cabin if you went on raving; and then they'd have a free hand to deal with me. We're a bit too young for that plan to do any good, old chap."

"I suppose so," I admitted. "Well, the only thing is, then, to do as we've arranged. And do remember, Clem, we can't afford to be careless for one instant."

"I'll remember that all right," he said.

So we went to sleep.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THINGS HAPPEN

**I**N spite of having talked for half the night we woke up early. We were glad we did, because we didn't want the two in the cabin to see how far away we had slept: and we carried our things back to the rocks and were out fishing for breakfast before they appeared. They seemed just as usual, and we all had a swim before breakfast.

At breakfast we broke the news to them that we wanted to go home. That is, Clem did. He said very convincingly that he was getting bothered about Mr. Hardy, because he had never been away from him so long before, and he knew he wasn't well.

"Not that we want to spoil your trip, you know," he said. "Peter and I thought you might run us ashore: we could get a train to Kurungi."

"And how would you get home from Kurungi?" Mr. Smedley asked.

"Oh, we'd telephone to Weeroona. They would run up for us in the car in no time," I said.

They were silent for a moment. We could see they were taken aback.

"I think it's a pity to split up the party," Mr. Mount said then. "We'll certainly take you all the way home once we start. But do you really think you need hurry, Clem? Mr. Hardy is in splendid hands at Weeroona, you know. I can't imagine anyone better than Mrs. Forsyth to look after him."

That made me suddenly angry. I wanted to tell him to keep my mother out of his conversation. But of course I went on eating flathead and kept my eyes down.

Clem said, "I think I'd rather go, if you don't mind."

There was another long pause: we saw them exchange glances.

"You don't mean you want to start back to-day, surely?" asked Mr. Smedley.

Mr. Mount didn't give Clem time to reply.

"Oh, that's out of the question," he said decidedly. "I'll have to overhaul the launch: I know there are one or two odd jobs to be done in her before we make a long run. She's been neglected lately. I'll see to her to-day. Then we can make an early getaway in the morning and be back at Weeroona before night."

We were not too pleased, as you can imagine, but we couldn't say anything. After all, it was his launch, and we had no right to expect him to start

at a moment's notice. So we had to agree that that was all right. We asked if we could help with the *Lovely Lou*, and he said no, the engine was a one-man job.

"Well, I'll stand by to take over part of it if you find there is much to be done, Harold," Mr. Smedley said: and Mr. Mount answered that he might give him the dirtiest part of the cleaning to do.

They went off to begin work as soon as breakfast was over. I think they did as much talk as work. I had seen a good deal of that engine, and I knew there was hardly a thing to be done to it.

"It's evidently the only idea they could think of to gain time," I said to Clem, as we washed up.

"And now they're plotting their next move. We'll have to keep our eyes skinned."

We hung about the shore, not knowing quite what to do. There was an uncomfortable, restless feeling, as if something was going to happen. Time went by. There were plenty of fish for dinner, and I began to clean them down by the rocks. Clem was not far off, looking at the *Lovely Lou*. The engine sounded, beginning to tick over, and Mr. Mount raised his voice.

"She's all right, I think. Come for a run round the islands for five minutes, Clem, just to test her. You can steer."

Clem hesitated for a second. I had already dropped my knife and the fish I was cleaning. The words "five minutes" on Mr. Mount's lips had a nasty sound after yesterday.

"Coming, Peter?" Clem called.

"Oh, rather," I sang out; and you can be certain I didn't waste time. I hopped on board at his heels. Mr. Mount was looking daggers at me; and I let him look.

Clem took the wheel and I sat down near him, facing him. Nobody was coming up behind him to take him unawares if I knew anything about it.

"What about your job, Peter? We'll want those fish soon," Mr. Mount said sharply. "You'd better stay behind and finish them. Start cooking if we're not back soon: we shan't be long."

I had a sort of insane feeling that he might as well have gone on to add, "We're only going to kill Clem." I sat still, feeling like a mule; and everything felt tense. What would have happened I don't know—but Clem suddenly took charge of the situation.

"By Jove, is it as late as that?" he exclaimed. "Sorry, Peter—I never dreamed I'd be leaving you all the cooking. I'll go out another time, Mr. Mount, thanks."

Mr. Mount made a quick movement, but Clem was a shade quicker. He put one foot on the rail and sprang ashore. I was there almost as soon. We ran off

towards the cooking-place. I turned just before we jumped down from the rock-ledge and sang out, "I hope she goes all right."

The turn gave me a view of the two on the launch. They were standing together, a curious mixture of expressions on Mr. Smedley's face. I mean, he looked angry, but there was relief too. There was only plain fury on Mr. Mount's.

That moment on the *Lovely Lou* had been pretty bad—but all the same, we nearly choked with suppressed laughter as we saw them going down the bay.

"They don't want to go at all, but they don't know what to do about it," gurgled Clem. "So off they go for a nice spin. I hope they'll enjoy it."

"Gosh, you managed to think quickly!" I told him. "I was absolutely stumped when he ordered me ashore. I could only sit tight, and wonder if he'd chuck me overboard."

"Judging by his face, he was just about ready to do it," said Clem. "Well, that's one up to us, at any rate. But doesn't it show how we'll have to keep our wits on the jump? That last move of theirs came so suddenly; there was no time to think what we'd do. I can see now that I oughtn't to have gone on board at all, but at the moment I was taken by surprise."

I said, "Well, look here—it's easy to see that the sea and the cliffs are the danger points. We've got to go on the launch to-morrow, and we'll just have to keep together every second we're on board. But we can keep on shore this afternoon, no matter how much they ask us to go. I don't care if we have to be rude about it."

"Nor me," said Clem solemnly.

"Then we needn't go anywhere near the cliffs this afternoon. Can't we slip away by ourselves? If we could dodge off without letting them see us go we could plant ourselves in one of the caves: they don't know them half as well as we do, and anyhow, they're sure to look for us on the plateau. Then we could stroll back just at supper-time and say we'd bathed already—you're not to trust yourself in the water with them again, Clem."

"No—I was thinking that," he said. "Even in the bay they might manage to stage a distressing accident, and say I'd got cramp or something. And another thing, Peter: I'm not going to sleep to-night."

"Right-oh," I agreed. "We'll keep watch and watch. I hope to goodness we can manage to stay awake."

"I believe one can do a lot that way if one keeps sticking a knife gently into one's leg," he said with a grin. "You know, Peter, I suppose I ought to be feeling afraid, but somehow, I'm not. Probably it's because I simply can't realize they're after me. I know it's true, but I don't seem able to take it in as a personal matter. So far, I'm rather enjoying it, though I suppose that's an idiotic thing to say."

“Well, I hope you can keep on saying it,” I answered. “Personally, I’ll be jolly glad when the game’s over and I’ve got you safely back to Weeroona.”

We were cooking the fish all the time. There was no sign of the launch when everything was ready for dinner. They must have been too bad-tempered to come back as soon as they had first planned: or perhaps they were thinking up something extra special in the way of tactics. We got bored with waiting, especially as we were frightfully hungry.

“Peter!” Clem said all of a sudden. “Why shouldn’t we carry on with our own dinner? I don’t see why we need wait any longer. Fried fish doesn’t improve with keeping. Let’s get ours over and clear out as soon as we’ve finished.”

“Good idea!” I said. “Even if they come back before then it will be simpler to slip away while they’re eating. Pity we didn’t think of it before.”

“We were silly chumps, if you ask me,” Clem said. “Never mind—we’ll make tracks now. Grab a bit of newspaper and we’ll wrap up some food and leg it to the caves as hard as we can go. What luck that Mervyn’s been pitching things out of the launch in getting her tidy!—our torches are in the box over there. I’ll get them.”

A lot of the dunnage that cluttered up the *Lovely Lou* had been stowed on the ledge. He ran over and put everything we might want in his pockets while I bundled up some food. We wrote “Gone exploring” on an old paper-bag and left it on a biscuit-tin, weighted down with a shell. Then we tore up the slope, turned left, and cut across just below the plateau. Just before we lost sight of the bay we looked back.

“Not a sign of them,” said Clem. “Good business!”

A little farther on was the sea-wall, only a jumble of broken rocks at this place. We knew our way among them; they were rough scrambling unless you had studied out the easiest places. Dodging in and out, we made good time until we were nearly in sight of the sea.

“Better be careful here, or they might see us,” I warned. I put my head cautiously over a boulder. “Duck down, Clem! there they are—just coming home.”

We kept low, watching them. The *Lovely Lou* was chugging along, not far away: Mr. Mount steering, Mr. Smedley sitting on the after-rail. She went out of sight round the point. They would be turning into the bay now. We had got away only just in time.

Were we pleased with ourselves! We fairly chuckled as we climbed down to the foot of the rocks. There was a narrow slip of beach there, but we took care not to walk on the sand and leave footprints. We hurried on, rather tempted to stop and eat, especially as grease was soaking through the newspaper and the fish were threatening to break out. But we reckoned it was

safer to get into shelter, so we went ahead.

The rock face began to tower over us, and soon we came to the first cave. It was a good one, but it had no back door; we wanted one that had passages running off from it, as lots of them had. So we went on until we were satisfied that we had found one that gave us plenty of opportunity for escaping if the worst should happen.

It was a jolly cave with a fairly wide opening into which the sea ran at high tide. The tide was in now, so it had a big pool in the middle, with flat rocks on each side. We went back for some distance, choosing a rock that gave us a good view of the doorway; and I was thankful to sit down, because the fish parcel was becoming very hard to control, and I was very greasy. Clem was better off, as all the food he had to carry was a great number of oatmeal biscuits which he had put inside his shirt. Most of them had broken, and he complained bitterly of the crumbs against his skin; but then, explorers always have to put up with hardships.

We spent quite a long time peeling bits of newspaper off the fish, keeping every scrap carefully collected; we didn't want to leave a trail like a paper-chase. They were good fish, though lukewarm, and they went very well with oatmeal biscuits. A slab of chocolate that I had carried in the pocket of my shorts was lukewarm too, but we agreed when everything had disappeared that we had seldom had a better meal.

We were in awfully good spirits. Every move had gone just as we wanted it; we felt perfectly safe for the afternoon, and a kind of recklessness had got hold of us about whatever might follow. Pretty cock-a-hoop we were, too, remembering how we had scored over the hated foes; we pictured their disgust when they came in and found the birds flown, and it was a thoroughly satisfying picture. We were willing to bet anything that they hadn't enjoyed their dinner as much as we had.

"You know," said Clem, "I fancy they must be suspecting by this time that we are fighting shy of them."

"You don't say!" I scoffed. "Whatever would put that idea into their heads!"

"Don't you be so clever," he said severely. "No, I mean that they may guess we have an idea they're up to no good. They can't possibly tell how we came to know anything, but our line of conduct since yesterday afternoon must have set them thinking: and of course they have guilty consciences."

I said I didn't think they had any consciences at all, and that I didn't care two hoots whether they guessed or not.

"Well, I reckon it makes them more dangerous if they do," he said. "So long as we were quite unsuspecting, they could bide their time; but if they think we have got wise to their playful ways it may make them desperate."

Peter, they'll try very hard to finish me off before we get back to Weeroona."

"They daren't do anything unless they catch you alone. And we're not going to give them a single chance of that."

"Not if we know it," he said. "But we'll have to watch our step as if we were walking a tight-rope. I think we ought to be very civil and friendly when we go back to the bay. Of course, if they try to separate us we must take our own line, but otherwise we'd better do a bit of acting to try to make their minds easy."

I agreed it might be as well, though personally I felt more like heaving rocks at them.

"I'm awfully curious to know what it's all about," Clem said. "The mischief is, I can't consult Father: he must never know anything about this business. I believe it would send his temperature sky-high. What about telling Mr. Forsyth?"

"You bet I'm going to tell him," I said. "We ought to, you know, Clem. Two murdering brutes like those can't be allowed to hang about the district. You wouldn't be safe for one thing. Dad will know how to get rid of them for good and all. They ought to be in gaol, but of course we've no evidence."

"No, and unfortunately I believe you can't put a criminal in gaol before he's committed a crime," added Clem. "Peter, I've an unholy longing to damage them in some way. In a way that hurts, I mean. If only we were strong enough to land them some really good punches it would ease my mind. Especially Mr. Mount. Where friend Harold is concerned I am afraid I am not a nice boy."

He said it so solemnly, looking like a wise old owl, that I burst out laughing. Clem isn't generally as warlike as that.

"No such luck, I'm afraid, though," he went on. "Unless we got him by himself, you and I. Two to one wouldn't be unfair then, would it?"

"I'd chance it," I said. "The swine have not the slightest objection to being two to one against you, have they?"

"No," he agreed. "I say, Peter, what an easy job they would have had if I hadn't refused to go on the cruise without you. Long before now I'd have been food for the fishes." He grinned cheerfully. "Wonder if they would have brought home the body as evidence?"

"Oh, for goodness sake don't talk that sort of bilge!" I snapped, feeling chills down my spine. "You've a simply foul imagination. There isn't going to be any body now, at all events. Let's forget the blighters and have an explore."

We collected every fish-bone and bit of paper and buried them under a stone, and we swept the biscuit-crumbs off the rock like a pair of housemaids. No one coming into the cave was going to find traces of us. Then we set off among the passages, using only one torch. We came to the place where Clem

had fallen into the rock-hole, and wished we could get across it, because the passage led away beyond it in a very tempting manner. We could have done it if we had chosen to swim, for it was only a few yards wide; but it was chilly down under the island, and neither of us cared for the idea of a ducking.

So we turned back and went wandering here and there, taking our bearings carefully to be sure of finding our way out again. We knew most of the windings already, but every now and then we would come on a place we hadn't noticed before: more passages, or a rock chamber big enough to be a good bedroom for us, if we had wanted one.

"By Jove, this is a marvellous place for exploring!" I said. "I'll never be satisfied until we get all the family here to camp. Wouldn't Binkie just love it? And Miss Tarrant would, too. She's daft about islands."

"It's pretty maddening, isn't it? To think how good the island would be if we only had a decent crowd with us," said Clem. "What waste, to have struck it with the pair we've got! Never mind, we'll make up for it some other hols. How superior we'll feel, being able to show them all our favourite spots, won't we? We ought to charge half-a-crown a day for our services as guides."

We thought that was a great scheme, only I reckoned we ought to get half-a-crown a head from everybody, considering how valuable we'd be, though I couldn't see Binkie paying it: and we planned what a lark it would be to pretend to lose them underground.

"We could hide, and leave them to find their way out, just to see how much they could do," I said. "Lucky they're none of them the sort that get scared. Miss Tarrant would be hard to lose; she's got a great bump of locality. And she would stay here all night rather than give in and ask to be shown the way out."

Clem said: "It's a bit of a maze: we should have to be careful not to lose sight of them really. I wouldn't mind betting that even you and I might discover that it would be fairly hard to find each other if we played hide-and-seek this minute."

"That's an idea!" I said. "Let's try it now. Bet you I find you in five minutes after giving you two minutes' start."

"Right you are," he said. He pulled out his torch, and I shut my eyes and counted. We knew pretty well the number to count per minute.

I found him all right, and after that he found me, though it took him nearly the five minutes, because I'd tucked myself into a nook in the rock that he passed twice without spotting me. He said, "You nearly won that time—now I'll give you something harder."

He did, too. I went this way and that when the two minutes were up, flashing my torch everywhere, and I couldn't find him. We had arranged after the first time to shout at the end of five minutes, because it really wasn't very safe to get too far apart in that jumble of passages. I had only half a minute

more, when I heard him call.

I knew something was wrong, because it was my turn to shout, not his. My heart seemed to jump into my throat. I whizzed round and went like a hare in the direction the cry had come from.

There was a despairy feeling in my mind as I ran. Whatever was wrong, I might get there too late, not knowing which turning to take—and there were so many. Then I caught another sound that came from not far ahead—a choking sound: and I ran like mad, holding my torch low. It showed me Clem and Mr. Mount struggling in the passage: and Mr. Mount's hands were round Clem's throat.

His back was towards me. I put my head down and charged into him, butting him low down. He nearly crashed forward on top of Clem: I had a split second to land him a beauty on the side of the head with the hand that held the torch. Clem struggled free as the grip on his throat slackened: he was gasping, but he managed to put his weight into a straight left to the enemy's jaw. Then we ran.

We raced down the passage, hearing Mr. Mount's hard breathing as he came after us. The blows had rattled him a bit: we had a fair start, but we knew he could out-run us.

"Better separate," Clem panted.

I knew that was sense, because it was dangerous running for two abreast. I said: "O.K.—slip into the side-passage just round the next turn—I'll let him follow me."

"No," he got out. "You take the side-passage. I've a plan."

I didn't like it; after the mauling he had had he couldn't be fit for much running. But I had no time to argue. We were round the bend already: he shot ahead of me as we got near the next opening and passed it. I shut off my torch and ducked in: and a moment later Mr. Mount passed within a yard of me, racing after Clem.

That was more than I could stand, and I went in pursuit. The light of Clem's torch glimmered far ahead in the darkness: Mr. Mount had one too, and as I ran I could see its beam getting closer and closer to Clem's. I thought, "What on earth did he mean by saying he had a plan?" Because no sort of plan would come into my thick head, and I knew the race couldn't last long, at the rate Mr. Mount was going.

Then Clem suddenly swerved into another side alley and I yelled out in horror, for I remembered it. It was the very corner he had taken too quickly once before, where the deep hole was. I groaned "He'll be in it again!" and put on a frantic spurt. Mr. Mount's light went round the bend: I heard a cry of fear and a tremendous splash.

I got there in time to see a curious sight. Clem was crouching on the

ground, looking with great interest into the hole. The only light was in the water, where Mr. Mount, still clutching his torch, was just coming to the surface: and neither Macaulay nor I nor anybody else could ever hope to tell you what his horrified face looked like.

I wish we could have enjoyed it longer, because it was one of the most perfect moments anyone could wish for. And I wished I dared put out my foot and press his head firmly under the surface as he got near us; but the rock sloped too much for that, more's the pity. There was nothing for us to do but to go while the going was good. We left him clawing for a hold on the slippery wet rock, and spluttering curses every time he slid back.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF

“PETER,” Clem said as we trotted down the passage—“there’s only one thing to do now. It’s open war, you see: he’d have killed me in a minute more if you hadn’t arrived. Our one chance is to get to the launch before they do.”

“But what if Mr. Smedley’s there?”

“We ought to be able to settle him between us. We’ve *got* to. But ten to one he’s somewhere else, hunting for us. It will take some time for the other brute to find his way out of the caves; he’ll be pretty well dazed, and he doesn’t know the passages well. We’ve got to put on the pace as soon as we get outside.”

The going was rough and broken; it was awful to have to go slowly, picking our way. But a sprained ankle wouldn’t have been helpful at the moment, so we choked back our impatience and made ourselves be careful. There was no sign of a light following us.

“Clem, you’re a wizard!” I said. “How on earth did you get him into the water?”

Clem chuckled deeply.

“He went there himself,” he said, “It was so simple: all I had to do was to make him play leap-frog. I went down on all fours and tucked my head in the second I was round the corner. Oh, Peter, he played beautifully! He charged round and met me with his knees, and then he just shot in head-first. Gosh, I did wish you were there!”

“I saw enough to keep me laughing for the rest of my life,” I told him. “I say, old chap, did he hurt you much? I mean, your throat? How did the swine manage to catch you?”

“Well, he just appeared,” said Clem. “We were rather fools you know, Peter, to take it for granted they wouldn’t look beyond the first caves. I don’t think Mervyn can have tried it, anyhow. But I was hiding from you behind a boulder, and suddenly his light appeared. Thought for a moment it was you—until he gave a sort of growl. Pleasure at seeing me, I suppose, but we didn’t chat about it. He simply pocketed his torch and rushed me.”

“How’s your neck?”

“Oh, a bit sore. The choking feeling was the worst. I did all I could. I hadn’t room to hit, but I got in some good work with my feet. Only you can do

so little good with gym shoes,” he added sadly.

We were over the bad patch, and from that time we saved our breath for running, keeping a sharp look-out in case Mr. Smedley might be lurking anywhere. There was no sign of him, however. We came out very cautiously into the open. It was a relief to be clear of the caves and to see the sunlight again, and the sea rippling on the little beach.

We had no reason to hide our footprints now; we took to the hard sand and ran steadily until we reached the easiest part of the rock-wall. Over it we went, scrambling across the jumbled boulders as fast as we could; and at last we could see the bay, and the *Lovely Lou* lying beside the rock ledge. She looked deserted, but of course we knew that Mr. Smedley might be on board. If so, our best chance was to take him by surprise.

We raced down the long slope. Clem said to me: “If he’s there, we’ll tackle him together—and we may have to knock him on the head to keep him quiet. Are you game?” I said I was, and we tore on.

There were handy chunks of firewood near the cooking-place on the beach. We each grabbed one. Then we ran softly along the ledge. Nobody was visible. We dropped on deck and made for the cabin.

It was empty. The *Lovely Lou* was really as deserted as she had seemed.

I can tell you we had to smother howls of joy. It was beyond anything we had dared to hope—and I didn’t know what a load of fear and anxiety had been in my heart until that moment when it lifted, and all we had to do was to head the *Lovely Lou* for home. I shouted, “Cast her off, Clem!” as I rushed to the engine and got the cover off.

And then I just sat back on my heels and stared at it. We might have known the enemy would take no chances. The engine was partially dismantled; and where the vital parts were probably only Mr. Mount knew. We didn’t even bother to look for them; we knew when we were beaten.

And when I told Clem he never turned a hair. He just said, “Bad show, old chap; what’s the next move?”

We thought hard for a minute. If the dinghy had been there we’d have taken her, although we knew we wouldn’t have had a dog’s chance of getting away—it would have been the simplest possible thing for them to run us down in the launch. And anyhow, she wasn’t there; they had hidden her away in some little inlet. We were hopelessly trapped on the island, and we had to make the best of it.

“Let’s get back to the caves,” I said. “We’re safer there than anywhere else. We’ll hide there until it’s dark and then climb up to the plateau. We can make a beacon fire there—there’s any amount of timber. People on the mainland might see a big blaze—or any boats passing. There’s just a chance that someone might come to see what it meant.”

I knew, and Clem knew, that it was so faint a hope as to be hardly worth mentioning. We had seen no boats all the time we'd been on the island; and even if a fire were seen from the mainland people would only think that some silly fools of campers had lit the scrub for fun.

But it was the only thing we could think of. We were right up against the certainty that two desperate men were out to get rid of us; I had a sort of queer satisfaction in knowing that I was concerned just as much as Clem now. We'd both have to be disposed of, if they wanted to save their own skins. And they held all the cards; the boats, food, water—all were under their control. We were like trapped animals, running round in circles. I'd never in my life felt so bewildered and helpless—and so horribly young.

Well, we had a long drink, which we both needed pretty badly by this time, and we pocketed some biscuits and a box of matches, and went up the slope. We trudged along heavily, not speaking: for the moment all the spirit seemed to have gone out of us, driven out in that moment on the launch when our hopes had crashed so completely. Near the turn to the rocks Clem looked at me and said: "By Jove, old man, I'm sorry I brought you into this!"

Of course I told him not to be an utter fool, and said: "I bet you anything you like we'll get out of it yet." But the words didn't ring true, because the more I thought about it the less chance I saw of anything that could help us. And I began to wonder how I'd feel when the actual attack came, and whether it would be any worse than this beastly feeling of helplessness. I rather believed it would be better. At least it would be a fight; and that couldn't be so bad as the trapped feeling.

Well, it wasn't long before I was able to decide the point. Because just as we got near the broken rocks we saw Mr. Mount and Mr. Smedley coming across them to meet us.

That cut us off altogether from taking refuge in the caves. They were walking some distance apart: we couldn't possibly have hoped to dodge them both if we had tried to get across. You can't dodge, anyhow, on a jumble of rocks like that, and they were quicker and stronger than we were. So we had nowhere to go except back to the bay or else up on the plateau; and we chose the plateau. Up there there was at least room for the animals to run round in circles.

The two men had not seen us as soon as we saw them, so we had a start; and they had the rocks to climb over. We were well up the steepest part of the slope before they spotted us. We heard Mr. Mount shout to Mr. Smedley; turning, we saw them begin to put on the pace. That sight sent us up at the rate of knots.

Somehow, we both felt better. I suppose we were fairly desperate by this time; and when you come to that point it is a relief to have something definite

to do. You think, oh, well, it will soon be over now, and anyhow it's exciting, and we'll put up as good a show as we can to finish up with. I don't know that either of us put it into words like that, not clearly, at all events. But I do know that when we looked back from the top and saw Mr. Smedley take a colossal toss through catching his foot in a hole, we both burst out laughing.

We legged it like mad across the plateau. The short grass and the sound going were grand to run on after the rough pull up the slope; we sprinted in great style, hoping to be able to take cover in the scrub before they showed up over the rim. We managed it, too. Peering out from a thick bush we saw their heads come into view: Mr. Mount first, Mr. Smedley close behind. They stopped short: cast their eyes round in every direction, apparently holding a council of war: pointed here and there. Then it seemed that they had made up their minds about what to do; Mr. Mount went off towards the cliffs, Mr. Smedley further to the north.

Neither of them was heading our way, so we kept still, getting our breath back. We hadn't any definite plan of campaign, for there was so little we could do. The only way of getting off the plateau was by the slope up which we had come; and any hope we might have had of dodging back in their rear and escaping to the caves was checked by seeing that Mr. Smedley didn't go far; he was evidently doing a kind of sentry-go, for presently he turned, walking so that he could command a view of the slope and see us if we bolted out of cover.

And neither of us wanted to go back to the caves now. We agreed on that. It would only have made the business longer, not altered the finish, we said. Suppose we did reach them, there were only two possibilities: they would hunt us down, or else hunger and thirst would drive us out. We had got to that pitch of recklessness when we thought it was better to get things over quickly.

Still, that didn't mean that we felt like walking out into the open and surrendering. I have often wondered since what would have happened if we'd done that—just strolled across to Mr. Smedley and asked him what sort of a funny game they were playing. It would have been very embarrassing for Mr. Smedley, I think—and even Mr. Mount would have found it quite difficult to explain what he proposed to do. I believe it would have shaken his nerve. Though no doubt he would have got it back later on, and Clem and I would have got all that was coming to us.

All we could plan to do was, as the thrillers say, to sell our lives as dearly as possible, which meant that we hoped to get in a few good whangs at them before the end. And we definitely wanted to keep away from the high cliffs where we used to watch the gannets. At other points the wall of rock was more irregular, and below was clean open sea; not that grim place where the wall fell sheer to the half-sunken rocks round which the tide eddied and swirled and

crashed all the time. If we had to go over the edge, and we were jolly well sure we had, we preferred to make our last dive into a kinder sea.

We crouched among the bushes, watching like cats. Now and then we had a glimpse of Mr. Mount: he was steadily making his way round the plateau, searching every bit of the scrub. Mr. Smedley walked backwards and forwards, smoking hard, with his shoulders hunched and his head down; but his eyes were always watchful.

“Peter,” Clem whispered, “you know that place where there’s no scrub—where the ground is mostly rock?”

I nodded.

“It would be a good place for a fight,” he said. “We could get our backs against a rock there and let them come up to us in the open. I hate the idea of being hunted down in the scrub.”

“Same here,” I said. “We might be able to give them a spot of bother there. I’d love to feel I’d done something to spoil Mr. Mount’s beauty.” And I looked lovingly at my stick of firewood, because it was a very handy shape and size.

“There are some useful hiding-holes among the boulders there, too,” he said. “We might puzzle them a bit if only we could get to them. Let’s work over to the sea-wall quietly; we might be able to slip past Mr. Mount when he’s in the scrub if we had any luck, and get to one of those crannies. It can’t really help us, of course, but . . . oh well, it’s something to do. I’ll have the willies if I stay here any longer.”

So I said, “Carry on,” and we crept towards the sea. We had nearly reached the edge when we heard Mr. Mount moving through the scrub; we stiffened, hardly daring to breathe, and he passed us not a dozen yards away. It was a few minutes before we thought we might move; then we sneaked back across the patch he had just searched, putting each foot down noiselessly.

We almost reckoned we were safe—though safe doesn’t seem the right word to use—when we heard him nearer. Something had made him turn and catch a glimpse of us. He gave a triumphant yell and began to run towards us, and we bolted out into the open.

The clear ground was not far away. We raced across the plateau towards it, hearing him pounding behind us, shouting to Mr. Smedley. The sea came into view beyond the rocks.

We got there first. There was a big round boulder with a flat top; we sprang up on it and stood with our sticks ready. Mr. Mount dashed in and caught at Clem’s leg; the movement was so quick that Clem had no time to use his stick. I got in one blow; it glanced a bit, grazing his cheek and landing heavily on his shoulder. But it didn’t stop him. Clem came down heavily on the rock and lay half-stunned.

“I’ll settle you, my young friend!” said Mr. Mount between his teeth. The

blood was running down his face, and his eyes were terrible. He snatched up Clem's stick and whizzed it at me. It caught me on the side of the head and knocked me off my balance. I crashed down and went over the side of the boulder on to the rocky ground below. Something went snap in my leg. I tried to move—and knew I wasn't going to do any more moving for a long while.

And then I had to lie still and watch him turn to Clem. He caught hold of him and began to drag his limp body towards the edge of the cliff. I yelled at him, and my head turned queer, and for a moment I couldn't see anything.

My eyes cleared, and I saw Mr. Smedley. He went past me like a flash, as if he was running to help Mr. Mount. But it wasn't that. Mr. Mount was only a yard from the edge when Mr. Smedley charged into him. Clem fell to the ground between them. There was a moment's fierce struggle, and they went over the edge of the cliff together.

Then I didn't know anything at all for a bit. I woke up to find Clem leaning over me and calling to me, but I couldn't get really awake. There was a queer droning in my head like a million bees, and it bothered me awfully: and Clem was sobbing, with his tears dropping on my face, so I supposed I was dying. It didn't seem to matter at all. The pain wasn't much, and I thought I was right outside it—as if the me on the ground wasn't really me. And the droning had stopped, and that was a comfort. I went to sleep again.

Next time I woke up I was sure I was dead, because the things that were happening weren't possible. Clem was still there, but so were other people. He was sitting on the ground leaning back against Mr. Garfield, who had his arm round him, and Mr. Garfield's face was kind and sorry, just as it had been over Dickson's cows. And what was even more astonishing, Miss Tarrant was kneeling beside me, putting something under my head: and this time she was the one who was crying. Well, do you wonder I made dead certain I was dead?

## CHAPTER XXI

TOLD BY BINKIE

**T**HIS is Binkie Forsyth speaking.

Peter says I have got to write this bit of his book because it is the part he only knows about from hearsay. To be asked to make even a small part of a book has shaken me badly, and I know I will never do it properly. For one thing spelling is always an effort to me. Peter can spell naturally, and he hooted at me when I lent him my good dictionary.

But we think he must have used the dictionary, for Mother found it in his bed more than once. On those occasions she said nothing, but gently laid it on his bedside table. Once Peter said proudly, "Oh, there is that rotten old thing, you had better take it away and give it back to Binks," and Mother replied, "Yes, I will, dear." But she seemed to forget it, and next morning it was again among the peculiar collection of things that get down inside Peter's bed.

So I have never had my dictionary back, and therefore Miss Tarrant says I cannot be considered accountable for the spelling in this chapter, and she refuses to help me at all, because she says it is Peter's private book and he has not given me authorrity to show it to another living sole.

Miss Tarrant has said I needn't do any other lessons to-day, so I have the whole day for the job, and I will need every bit of it. Peter will not do any writing, for it is the day when the doctor comes to overhawl his leg, and after those visits he is seldom enclined to write. And he has been quite desent about it, once I gave in and said I would do it. He said I was to take my time and he wouldn't bother me, and that if he felt like any exertion this afternoon he could do his stamps. Lots of people have sent him simply oceans of stamps since he broke his leg. We have stuck most of them into his album, but he says he wants to go over the odd ones and arrange all his duplequits for swopps.

So now I must begin where we were left at home when Peter and Clem went off in the *Lovely Lou* for their cruse, leaving me feeling utterly berrefit. Only one does not stay berrefit long when there are the horses and the dogs and Miss Tarrant, and lots of things to do with Dad out in the paddocks, so it wasn't so bad after all. And we liked getting their post cards, which were often very funny, when we were able to make them out which wasn't always. But Mother was worrying a bit all the time, though she never said so, only we knew. I asked her once, why, and she said, "Oh nothing, only I shall be glad when they are home."

Well, then, after getting all the post cards there was a long and heavy silence from the boys. The last postcard had said they were not going to write for a bit because of going to explore islands, so we hardly expected to hear, although we missed the cards. And Mother began to be very silent when she thought nobody noticed her. And so it went on until the exciting day when Mr. Garfield came.

He came as suddenly as he had arrived at the Dicksons' place, only this time he refrained from killing any cows. It was near evening, and we were all on the verandah when we heard the plane, and I said straight out I bet that's Mr. Garfield, and it was. He made a beautiful three-point landing in the home paddock and taxied up nearly to the garden fence, where we all gathered to meet him, and he apologized to Mother and Dad for dropping in without warning and of course they said that that was O.K. by them.

So when we had looked at his plane, which was new and big and very posh, we went back to the house and had tea. Mr. Hardy was there, and we all talked about the boys and the marvellous trip they were having, and Mr. Garfield nodded and said yes, it was a great experience for them, and how sorry he was to miss them on his first visit to Weeroona. Then he smiled and said, "That is, if you will permit me to make a second, Mrs. Forsyth," and Mother looked at him and said indeed I hope you will make many more. So I knew she liked him.

After tea Mr. Hardy went to lie down as he generally does, and we sat and talked. But Mr. Garfield seemed a bit restless, and presently he suggested to Dad that he would like to see the stables. It was getting rather near dusk, and not a very good time to see stables, but Dad said, why, certainly. And I naturally went too. But while Dad was shutting the yard gate Mr. Garfield bent down to me and said quickly "cut along, Binks dear, I want to speak to your father by himself," so I saw promptly at once that I was in the way and I cut.

They were away a good while. I don't know if Mother was jumpy in her mind. She asked me why I had come back, and I said they wanted to be by themselves. Mother didn't say anything, but she sat with her knitting in her hands, but not knitting. And after a bit she got up and went to the stables.

They came in looking very grave. Miss Tarrant and I were there, and they sat down and we all said nothing for a minute. Then Mr. Garfield said, Miss Tarrant, I know you and Binkie have been thrown a good deal into Mr. Mount's company, and Mr. Forsyth says I may ask you if you have noticed anything particular about him?

Miss Tarrant looked very straight at him and said "Since you ask, I will say that I do not trust Mr. Mount at all. I have nothing definite to go on, but he has talked a great deal to me, and the more he talked the more I disliked him. I could not say anything under the circumstances, but I was very sorry that the

boys went on this trip with him.”

“Ah,” he said, “and you, Binkie?”

I said, “None of us like him much, because he isn’t our sort, and we have seen that he can be cruel, and he shows too much white in his eye.”

Dad said, you kids seem to have sized him up better than I did. And then he told us why Mr. Garfield had come. And that was the quickest minute he could after he had got Peter’s and my letters with the snapshots of our picnic. He had only got those letters the night before, because he had been away in Queensland trying out the new plane. They were waiting for him when he got back late at night to Sydney.

He did not go into close details for us, but this is what he told us. When he had had a glimpse of Mr. Mount in Kurungi he had had a feeling that he knew him, but he was half-hidden behind a newspaper, and he couldn’t remember for certain. But in the snapshots Mr. Mount appeared in several positions, and he remembered him at once.

Because Mr. Mount was a man who had been with another man in a hotel in London where Mr. Garfield was staying, and the two had got talking several times with him, and they had tried to take him down for a lot of money by a thing called the confidence trick. That is a thing I find it very hard to understand, but it seems that the trick men talk a lot about wanting to give away money to a poor man; only they say they need a friend to take the money to him, because he would be too proud to accept it from them.

There are other ways of playing this trick, but that is one way. And they get very friendly with the man they have met, like these two met Mr. Garfield, and after meeting and talking and having drinks for several days they say that they feel the man they have met is the very one they have been looking for to take the money to the poor man. Only they suggest sort of jokingly that there must be a test of mutual confidence, so they pull out a big wad of notes and say, here is £5,000, and you must take it and go for a stroll about London, and when you bring it back we will know we can trust you with any sum of money. And then you must trust us in the same way with £5,000 and we will bring it back. And after that we will hand you very much more to take to the poor man.

But of course the trick is that the first wad has only notes on the outside, only it is tied up cunningly to hide the fact that inside there are only false notes or waste paper. So if they lost it it wouldn’t hurt them much. And when the man they have met trusts them with his money they hop it to another town, such as Paris, and that is the last he ever sees of it, or of them.

When Mr. Garfield told us about this I was simply petrified with astonishment, and I said I do not see how any man who is not stark raving mad could ever be taken in by such a tom-fool trick, because it seems to me just about as silly as a wet hen. But he told me that it is nothing but a miracle how

many men get taken in by it, and lose their money; and the police in London seem to be practically overworked trying to hunt down confidence-tricksters who have succeeded in their peculiar game, and trying to console the men who have lost all their cash. He looked sideways at Dad with his funny little smile and said, even hard-headed Australian squatters are among the victims. And Dad grinned and said, I'd better not go to London, then.

Not that he told me all this at the time: it was later, after Mr. Hardy had gone to bed, which he did very early because of being not well. On the verandah Mr. Garfield was telling us everything in a hurry, so he nearly said Mr. Mount and the other fellow tried to cheat him. But he knew all about the system, so he just led them on and on, and at the right moment he put the police on to them.

The police were very grateful, because it seems they were two well-known criminals, and Mr. Mount had been in gaol in America for robbery with violence. So they got into prison again and Mr. Garfield gave evidence against them at the trial. That was five years ago, and Mr. Mount had shaved off his moustache since, so it was no wonder that Mr. Garfield hadn't recognized him in the Kurungi hotel. But in some of the snapshots Mr. Mount was laughing, and then he knew him at once, because he remembered how gaily he had laughed when he was trying his level best to do him out of £5,000.

So anyone can imagine how Mr. Garfield felt when he heard that this desparate man was staying as a friend at Mr. Hardy's, and mixing with us all at Weeroona, for he felt that wherever he was he wouldn't be up to any good. He said Peter and Clem and I were his friends, and he thought he ought to get here as fast as he could and warn Dad: and so he flew down next day. But his anxiety when he started was simply nothing to what he felt when he landed and learned that Peter and Clem had gone away on a lonely cruse in Mr. Mount's launch.

Well, he and Dad decided what they would do. Dad would take the *Albatross*—that's our launch—next day and go in search of them; and when he found them he would bring the boys home, and let Mr. Mount and Mr. Smedley think anything they liked. And Mr. Garfield would go in his plane, scouting ahead, so that if he saw them he could fly back and signal their whereabouts to Dad.

I said, "Oh, do take me, Mr. Garfield!"

He looked at Mother. She had been very white ever since they came in from the stables, but she went a bit whiter then. She said, "I must not be silly . . . but . . . oh, Binks dear, not until we get Peter back safely." And that was so unlike Mother that it shook me. So I said in a hurry that of course I wouldn't, but might I go in the launch with Dad?

"Why not go in the launch yourself, Mrs. Forsyth?" asked Mr. Garfield.

“Then perhaps Miss Tarrant would like to come in the plane. I should prefer to have an observer with me.”

So it was settled that way, and we just left word for Mr. Hardy that we were going for an excursion. Dad had Mother and me up before dawn, and we set off in the *Albatross* just as the sun rose. The plane was to follow after breakfast, but as it turned out, they were much later than that in starting because Mr. Garfield had to do some adjustments to the engine, which hadn't been overhauled since his Queensland trip.

We had a great run up the coast. It was a very still day, and Dad sent the launch along for all he was worth, and she is much faster than the old *Lovely Lou*. Mother had taken a huge picnic basket, because she had to allow for the appetites Peter and Clem would have when we were bringing them home. Dad wouldn't stop the engine while we had lunch, so we had to feed him with things. It was some time after that when we saw the plane coming behind us. By that time we were rather relieved to see them, because we'd begun to wonder if anything was wrong. They waived to us and flew on.

Dad and Mr. Garfield had fixed up a way of signalling if the plane found the cruising party. Miss Tarrant had taken some water-tight tins, and all she had to do was to write a message and put it in a tin, and they would drop it as close to us as they could. Miss Tarrant thought of something else to make the tin easier to see in the water, in case there were any waves. She took some scarlet rubber balloons to tie on before she dropped one. Dad says Miss Tarrant always has artistic noshuns.

I never thought of being anxious as we travelled up the coast that day: and I don't think Dad did, either. But Mother was sort of strung up all the time: not talking about it, she's not like that—but she never relaxed for a moment. All day she was watching ahead as if her eyes were just aching for the first sight of Peter. Dad let me steer for awhile after lunch and he went and sat with Mother. I heard him say, Take it easy, dear—the boy's all right. She smiled at him, but she didn't answer.

The plane went farther out than we did. There are lots of scattered islands for miles along the coast, and they had to observe each one. We could see them circling round above islands that were hardly visible to us. Finally they went out of sight. It seemed lonely when we couldn't hear the sound of the plane any more, and Dad tried to get a bit more pace out of his engine.

Mother suddenly said, They're coming back! We listened very hard, but it was a minute or so before we could hear her. Sure enough, she was coming—only a speck in the sky at first, but rapidly growing bigger. She was flying very fast and losing height. When she got near us she circled twice, getting lower each time. We could see Miss Tarrant leaning over the side of the cockpit. Then a little bright object with a scarlet dot above it began to float

down through the air. It hit the water about a hundred yards from us. Miss Tarrant told Peter later on that she could have made a much better shot only she was afraid of braining me. Peter wasn't up to many jokes just then, but he grinned and said "Couldn't be done."

The plane rose again and roared away; and Dad sent the *Albatross* racing towards the tin that was floating with the red balloon a foot above it in the air, straining so hard we thought it would lift the tin out of the water. I leaned out and grabbed it as we slowed down. The lid was very tight. Dad said "Give it to me—quick!" He had it off in a moment, and he read the message out loud.

"Spotted launch in bay east of large island. Think certainly *Lovely Lou*. Can make out one man, looks like S., ashore, on flat top of island. No sign yet of others. Going back to observe further. Will remain near island."

"There you are, Helen," Dad said, with a laugh. "What did I tell you? We'll have them in half an hour."

Mother just said, Please hurry, Tom.

So we raced on, and I got very excited as the big island hove in sight. We could easily tell her by her flat top. But the plane puzzled us. She was circling over it, banking as if she meant to come down. Dad said sharply, Garfield's never going to land, surely—is the man mad! Mother stood up, peering forward. She was twisting her hands together so that the knuckles were quite white.

Then the plane went down on the island. We couldn't see whether she landed safely, because the trees and rocks hid her. It was awful to have to sit still in the launch, not knowing what had happened. We got near the island and coasted along it, looking for the bay: Dad had to run in very carefully when he found it, because of the small island across its mouth. Then he fairly whizzed towards the beach.

He moored the *Albatross* to the *Lovely Lou*. Mother was ashore almost before we had stopped, springing down into the other launch and up on the rock, and I jumped after her. We went as hard as we could up the long slope to the top of the island.

I don't know how Mother stood it. It was rather a pull, but she ran as if she was no older than Peter; and presently Dad came plunging past me and caught her. We came to the top. The plane was sitting in the middle of the plateau, quite safe: but nobody was in sight.

For a moment we didn't know where to go. Everything was quiet and silent up there, as if there wasn't a living person on the island except ourselves. Dad gave a long coo-ee.

Then we saw Mr. Garfield hurrying towards us from some rocks, and we raced across the plateau to meet him. He was looking terribly grave. Mother caught her breath in a little gasp as she saw his face. We could hardly keep up

with her as she ran to him.

“Peter?” she said.

“He’s hurt, Mrs. Forsyth.” She said one word, and he answered it sharply. “No—not dead; a long way from it. They’re behind those rocks—I’m going for water.” He rushed away, and we followed Mother.

Peter was lying on his back with Miss Tarrant’s coat under his head. He opened his eyes as Mother went down on her knees beside him.

“Knew you’d come, Mother,” he whispered, and suddenly he looked absolutely happy. Then his eyes shut.

. . . . .

They made me take Clem away while they set Peter’s leg and fixed up his head. Miss Tarrant and Mother know a lot about injuries, and it turned out that Mr. Garfield did too: but of course they could only do it in a rough-and-ready fashion, with Dad’s shirt torn up for bandages. Luckily for poor old Peter, he was unconscious during the whole business.

Clem was only badly bruised, but his state of mind was terrible. He couldn’t stop himself from shaking all over; he kept saying “I know they’ve killed Peter, and it’s all my fault—he’d never have been here but for me.” So at last I couldn’t stand it, and I said, Get hold of yourself you, silly old owl, because Mr. Garfield told us he was a long way off being dead, and I know he is. And then he shivered and said, The others are dead too, Binkie—I saw them go over the cliff. And he put his head in his hands, shuddering.

I was astonished. I said, what others?—do you mean Mr. Smedley and Mr. Mount? And he said, yes, they tried to kill Peter and me, and now they’re both dead.

Then I got very angry. It made me hot all over to think of anyone having the cheek to try to kill Peter. I said, “Well, I don’t see what you’re making such a fuss for, because if they tried to be murderers they jolly well deserved to be killed, if you ask me. And they’d have been hung anyway.” And I gave him a little shake, not remembering his bruises, for which I was sorry afterwards, but not then.

It had a funny effect on Clem. He suddenly began to laugh, even though he was still shaking, and he said, “Oh, Binks, you are a masterpiece—I say, do help me to get some water, because I think I’m going to be sick.” So presently he was, and I held his head, and soon he felt better. I left him while I tore down to the *Albatross* for drinks, and when I came back loaded he was nearly all right.

The others were glad of some drinks too, though they would hardly take time for them. They were busy arguing about what was to be done with Peter,

who was still unconshus. Mr. Garfield said, “Let me take him in the plane to Kurungi, Mrs. Forsyth—I’ll have him there in half an hour. He must be X-rayed, and the quicker the better. You can come too—I’ll guarantee to land you safely.”

Mother and Dad had only thought of taking him home in the launch, but they saw that Mr. Garfield’s plan was far better. So they carried Peter carefully to the plane and stowed him away in it. It is a mercy the new plane is so big.

I knew it wasn’t hurting old Peter, because he didn’t know anything about it, but somehow I couldn’t bear seeing him carried. So I thought I would go and look over the cliff edge, because I had never had the chance before of looking at a place where two murderers had plunged to their deaths. And it was wonderful luck for Mr. Smedley that I had that noshun.

Because he wasn’t killed at all. There was no sign of Mr. Mount, and there never was any sign of him again, so he must have fallen slap into the depths and been carried out to sea. But Mr. Smedley had fallen on a wide ledge about ten feet from the top, and there he lay under my astonished eyes. And if I hadn’t had that idea of glancing over, we’d all have been off the island in ten minutes, and nobody would ever have known about Mr. Smedley, unless future generashuns had found his skelliton.

I simply pelted back to tell Dad. The plane was just ready to start; they looked unbelievably at me, but they came to see. Dad whistled when he saw him.

“This wants good ropes and special gear—and some extra men,” he said. “Garfield, can you go to the coastguard station in Kurungi when you’ve landed Peter at the hospital? They’ll know what to do.”

“Right,” said Mr. Garfield. “But not until I’ve seen that everything is being done for Peter. That animal can wait.” Some people have said to me that Mr. Garfield was unfeeling, but I simply loved him when he said that.

So the plane started, and we all stood with palpitaiting hearts until she rose into the air, because the plateau is really not so large a space as a big plane likes, only Mr. Garfield is a wizzard pilot. She soared away over the sea, mounting as she went, and then turned and headed for Kurungi. And Dad said, “Take the youngsters to the launch, Miss Tarrant—I’ll stay on guard here.” He sat down on the cliff where he could see Mr. Smedley, but what he could have done if Mr. Smedley had become conshus and rolled off the ledge I don’t know. Probably nothing, Peter says.

On the *Albatross* Miss Tarrant doctored Clem’s cuts and bruises, and made him lie down with a rug over him, and soon he fell asleep. She wouldn’t let me ask him any questions. And she wouldn’t let me go with the coastguard men when their launch came shooting up the bay and they set off with their gear to rescue Mr. Smedley. Miss Tarrant can be very stern sometimes.

They came back after a bit, carrying Mr. Smedley on a stretcher. Dad was with them. We didn't go back to Weeroona that night: instead we made for the nearest place on the mainland as hard as the *Albatross* could travel, and Dad got a car and we raced to the hospital in Kurungi. They told us that Peter was sleeping naturally, and that he would be all right in time. Mother was sitting with him: they let her sleep at the hospital. So we went for that night to the hotel, and Miss Tarrant and I had to borrow pyjamas from the housemaids.

That ends the bit I was told to write, and I only hope Peter will be satisfied with it. Anyhow, I have got off a lot of lessons through having to write it, because it has taken me two days instead of one. But I would not care to be an auther. For one thing, I can never be sure of remembering the little jiggly things authers put in as a sort of trimming round people's conversashuns, like commas with their tails in the air. Miss Tarrant says they put them in to make sure the reader understands that somebody is speaking, but I reckon that if the reader can't understand that without silly jiggles, then the auther is a dud.

And I cannot help having an uneasy feeling that some of my parragraffes contain words that I might have spelled in some way or other diffrunt if Peter had not got my dictionery. But then, he has.

## CHAPTER XXII

PETER AGAIN

**I**T was Miss Tarrant who brought me my orange-juice at eleven o'clock this morning, and I asked her if she knew where Binkie was. In fact, I asked her where on earth Binkie was. To put in "on earth" shows that you are a little annoyed, though I have never known why it should. I mean I never bothered to think about words until I began to write a book and found out what queer tricks words have. And anyhow I did feel rather annoyed, because I wanted to see what Binks had written, so that I could decide whether I'd scrap it, which I was afraid was very likely.

Miss Tarrant had been baking cakes, and she'd brought some with the orange-juice. She put them on my table and took one herself. Then she sat down at a respectful distance. She and Mother are the only people who never bump into my bed; and you need to have a broken leg to know what that means.

"Binkie," she said, "is lost in the ink-pot. She is creating literature with the ruthless determination she brings to all matters. Except lessons, that is."

I said, "Golly, she isn't still writing that chapter, is she? Why, she was at it all yesterday."

"She is indeed," said Miss Tarrant. "That is why you behold me looking beautiful in an overall, and why you have hot cakes." She took a large bite out of hers. "School is off the map until Binkie comes out of the ink-pot. I could wish, Peter, that you had given her more than one chapter to write."

"I should think one will be more than enough for Binks," I said. "You don't know what an awful grind writing is. I'm only scared that I'll have to write hers all over again."

"Heavens, no!" she exclaimed. "Why, you would break her heart. If you could only see her, Peter!—sheets of paper scattered all over the schoolroom, and Binkie pegging away with an agonized expression, paying no attention whatever to anyone who comes in. She's ink to the ears. I gather that she generally plunges her pen far too deeply, and wipes off the surplus on her hair."

"I suppose you couldn't sneak what she wrote yesterday and bring it along to me, could you?" I asked, feeling anxious. "I want to get on with my last chapter, and I can't do that without seeing hers."

"I wouldn't dare," she said. "It would be like robbing a lioness of her

whelps. Or is it cubs?—I never know. But Binks would certainly behave like the lioness. Peter, I shall never ask you to show me your book, no matter how I eat my heart out in silence—but I'd give my ears to see Binkie's chapter."

"Well, I couldn't show you hers," I said. "But you might strike a bargain with Binks. I expect she'd rather have a whole holiday than your ears."

"I wonder," she said. "Your mother thinks Binkie will probably have a nervous breakdown as soon as the chapter is finished. The strain is terrific for such a delicate and refined child——"

"What!" I yelled.

"Oh, shush!" she said. "Your only little sister, and she labouring on your behalf like a late lamplighter. You must be very gentle with her when she comes up to the surface. But goodness only knows when that will be. If I were you I should just get on with your own part."

"But I need hers, I tell you. I can't get on without it."

"You should be master of your fate," she said. "If you find afterwards that your chapter doesn't fit in to hers can't you saw bits off or cram bits in? No need to let a little thing like that get you down. Carry on, my lad, and may the best man win!"

"Well, I could, I suppose," I said. "Anyhow, I told her where to stop——"

"Your mother will be overjoyed to hear that. It's the very thing she's afraid Binkie doesn't know." She got up. "Anything I can get for you before I go?"

"Only my writing-board," I said resignedly.

So I will just be vague about the next bit, in case Binkie's feelings have carried her away beyond her limit. Regular authors may find it easy to fit odd chapters together like a jig-saw, but I am an irregular one, and my only chance is to go on smoothly. But I need not trouble the patient reader with details about my first few days at the hospital. Anyhow, I don't remember much about them, except that they were chiefly aches.

I came home in great splendour in an ambulance when I was a bit better. Mr. Garfield had it brought down from Sydney, and he sat beside the driver while Mother travelled inside with me and a nurse. No ambulance had ever been seen before in our district. It created tremendous excitement, because everybody thought it was a circus. Mr. Garfield said he did his best to look like a tiger; and that the driver was already a bear, because of our remarkable roads.

We were very glad when the nurse was able to go away. I know she was a good nurse, but she was awfully stiff and starchy, and she bossed me and everyone else. She used to turn the family out of my room when they made me laugh, saying they would send my temperature up again. Nurses have to be careful, I suppose, but she could never understand that a family like ours

simply has to laugh, in spite of broken legs.

But she went away after awhile, and the doctor stopped coming every day, so we were able to settle down to an ordinary sort of life, with Mother and Miss Tarrant looking after me and everyone else taking a hand. They were all jolly good to me. Clem and Binks waited on me like slaves, though they didn't go so far as to refrain from telling me where I got off if I tried to boss them. I'd have thought I must have some injury I hadn't been told about if they had.

Dad was a great comfort. Nobody could move me in just the way he did without hurting me too much. And he always sits and smokes in my room in the evening, and tells me every little thing that goes on in the paddocks. And old Bran lives with me day and night.

The men have been bricks, too. Nearly every evening they come for a yarn; they have never talked about my leg, only about interesting things; and even on bad days Jack and Charlie could make me laugh, because they have only to talk in their ordinary way to do that.

As for Mr. Garfield, you would have thought that man was a particularly good sort of uncle. He has flown down to Weeroona dozens of times, always with his plane loaded with presents; and when he doesn't come he sends exciting parcels by post. And he told a whole lot of his friends in Sydney that I was a friend of his—of course the accident had been in the papers, so everybody knew about it. He said to them that I collected stamps, and what were they going to do about it? The result of that has been that our mail-bag has been crammed with letters and post cards from people I don't know, and my stamp-collection has become worth looking at. Two people sent me ripping stamp-albums, too. And as none of these people put in their names or addresses, of course I don't have to write thank-you letters. If I'd had to do that this book would never have got written. I do think people like that are decent.

Dad told me everything that had happened when I was well enough to listen—which wasn't until I had been home for some time and the nurse had gone away. By that time Mr. Hardy was in Sydney. He'd gone to a specialist, who had made him have an operation, and Dad says he will be a new man when he comes back.

Because Mr. Hardy doesn't have to worry about money now. And the reason is the very thing that brought Mr. Smedley and Mr. Mount to Australia.

It seems that Mr. Smedley had always kept a little in touch with Clem's old grandmother and aunt in England, though they didn't like him, and never had him in their house if they could help it. He knew that Mr. Hardy lived here, and also that he had a son; but they were vague about the son, not knowing whether he was alive or dead—they only knew he had been a delicate little baby.

Well, Mr. Smedley was always in a hole about money, and he did a lot of

shady things to get it. He got in with some crooks, and one of them was Mr. Mount. Dad never would tell me what it was that Mr. Smedley did that gave Mr. Mount a hold on him. But it must have been something fairly bad, for he was terrified that Mr. Mount would tell what he knew.

And just about then he saw in the papers that Clem's aunt had been killed in a motor-smash. He went to their place for the funeral, and found that the shock had made the old grandmother have a paralytic stroke. She would never be able to speak or move again, her doctors told him. They said she couldn't possibly live more than a few months.

Well, Mr. Smedley immediately saw what all that might mean to him. He knew that the old grandmother had made a will leaving everything she possessed to her daughter. Now the daughter had been killed, and her mother would never be able to make a new will. And that meant that when she died all the money would go to her grand-son Clem in Australia—the delicate little baby who might have died for all Mr. Smedley knew. But if he was dead everything would be Mr. Smedley's. I'll bet he hoped he was dead.

He told Mr. Mount, and they decided to go to Australia to find out. They were nearly at the end of their tether in England, anyhow: Mr. Mount was well known to the police, and Mr. Smedley knew he might be, too, at any time. At first they only thought of finding out whether Clem was alive; if there wasn't any Clem their future was safe, so far as money was concerned. And if he was alive, and grown-up, they might manage to get friendly enough with them to get hold of some of his money when it came.

But on the ship Mr. Mount began to think about getting Clem out of the way altogether. Tempting enough, if you were a crook, I suppose—an unknown youngster who was standing between them and pots of money. Dad says there are people who don't care what they do where money is concerned, and evidently Mr. Mount was one of them.

Mr. Smedley was not altogether like that. He was weak and shiftless, but he never could have been a murderer by himself. It took a long time for Mr. Mount to persuade him. And when he came to the Hardys', and they were nice to him, asking him to stay—and when he saw that Clem was only a boy—he would have backed out of it altogether if he could.

He told Dad all about it as he lay in bed at the hospital. The fall over the cliff had damaged him pretty badly inside; the doctors knew he would never be really fit again. His only regret was that he hadn't gone out altogether. Dad said that not once did he excuse himself. He had argued and pleaded with Mr. Mount, but it was no use; Mr. Mount was quite determined to do the job on his own, knowing he could get money out of Mr. Smedley later. And so Mr. Smedley got desperate and joined in. Only at the very end he found he just couldn't see Clem killed; and so he decided suddenly that the best thing was

for him and Mr. Mount to go over the cliff together.

Dad and Mr. Garfield managed to hush up the whole story. It wasn't hard, because there was nobody who could tell anything. If Mr. Mount's body had been found, it would have been more difficult, because of having an inquest; but it never was found. Mr. Smedley and I were practically unconscious for days after, and Clem broke down altogether and had to be kept in bed at Weeroona. He wasn't fit to be questioned. The only person he had spoken to was Binkie, and for some queer reason Binks held her tongue. I believe she thought Clem was off his head when he told her, and she didn't want people to know it.

Of course there were Miss Tarrant and Mr. Garfield. They came overhead just as the fight began, but at first they honestly thought we four were having a friendly rough-and-tumble. People up in a 'plane can't pick up details. It wasn't until they saw me laid out by the rock, and Mr. Mount began to drag Clem towards the cliff, that they realized something awful was happening. Mr. Garfield quickly made up his mind to land, and gave all his attention to the 'plane, so he never saw what followed. Miss Tarrant did. But, like Binkie, she held her tongue, once she was off the island.

And so the newspaper headlines just said it was a sad accident to a happy camping-party. We let it go at that.

And before I was out of the hospital a cable came from lawyers in England to Mr. Hardy to say that the old grandmother was dead, and asking where was Clem, because apparently they wanted to send him stacks of money. I don't know how the business was fixed up. But Dad succeeded in making Mr. Hardy have sense and borrow from him to go on with, so that he could have himself looked after. Dad pointed out that stacks of money would probably fail to console Clem for having a dead father. It almost came to that, too; the specialist said he'd certainly have died before long but for the operation.

I asked Mother one day why she had been so scared when we were away on the cruise, because she is very rarely scared about anything. She just went on knitting for a bit without answering me.

"I don't know, Peter," she said at last. "But I never trusted Mr. Mount. There was something in his eyes that made me feel cold when I looked at him."

"Well, you couldn't have thought he would try to do us in," I said.

"No, of course not. I had no thoughts that I could put into words. And I didn't distrust Mr. Smedley: somehow I was always sorry for him. Even now I don't feel bitter against him, thank goodness: I'm glad Mr. Hardy is going to have him looked after. But . . ."

She broke off, and sat looking out of the window.

"How do warnings come?" she said suddenly. "I can't tell. It seemed my

plain duty to let you go on that trip. But I hated and dreaded it, and all the time you were away I was never at peace for a moment. Perhaps . . . oh, perhaps it was just that you are the only boy I have, Peterkin.”

She hasn't called me that since I was a tiny little chap. So we hugged each other, and we never talked of it any more.

Well, that is all the story, patient reader, and even if you don't exist, it has made the time pass to tell it to you. But I shall not require you any more, for yesterday the doctor took my leg out of plaster, and he says it is a perfectly good leg, or will be soon, and before long I shall be flying round on crutches. He gave me a long jaw about being careful on them, but I will not go into that, for, as Macaulay truthfully says, *unless I greatly err, this subject is to most readers not only insipid, but positively distasteful*. It was both to me, anyhow.

Clem and Miss Tarrant were sitting with me a little while ago, all of us making whoopee over the doctor's verdict, when Binkie came in with her chapter. She wore a dazed expression, and Miss Tarrant had not exaggerated—she was ink to the ears. The chapter was a fat roll, tied up with a bit of shoelace. She chucked it on to my table.

“There you are,” she said. “And of all the awful jobs I've ever had in my whole life, that's the worst. I'd rather . . . well, I'd rather drive sheep on a hot day, and I never thought there was a tougher job than that.”

“My poor lamb!” said Miss Tarrant. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, I would.” She sank into a chair. “How authors manage to live I simply don't know.”

“Some of them find it hard, I believe,” said Miss Tarrant. “Some have been known even to commit suicide.”

“I don't wonder,” said Binks. “I've been feeling like that myself. Peter, how do you manage when you get a sentence started and the beastly thing won't end?”

“Oh, he lets them peter out,” said Clem solemnly.

“Clever, aren't you?” said Binkie with much bitterness. “I'd like to see you trying to write all that awful stuff.”

“If it's that,” I told her, “it's jolly well not going into my book. And I've finished my part, and my leg's out of plaster, and I'm never going to write another line. So there won't be any book—and much I care!”

“Peter, you're never going to let us down like that?” Miss Tarrant said anxiously. “Even if you won't let us see it, think of what a family record it would be! Consider your helpless grandchildren, reading it in the future and thrilling over what Grandad and his trusty friend went through in the days of long ago!”

“The little blighters needn’t depend on me for their thrills,” I said. “Anyhow, they won’t be there; Clem and I are never going to get married. We’ve decided to be woman-haters, thanks to some people who infest Weeroona, haven’t we, Clem?”

“Too right we have,” said Clem. We gave each of them a stony stare.

Miss Tarrant had got up to go and get tea. She paused near my bed.

“Look at them, Binks!” she said. “*Bold even to temerity, sincere even to indiscretion, hearty in friendship, open in enmity—*”

Binkie’s wad of writing was handy. I landed her with it just as she got to the door.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Told by Peter* by Mary Grant Bruce]