THE TWINS OF EMU PLAINS

MARY GRANT BRUCE

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A LITTLE BUSH MAID
TIMOTHY IN BUSHLAND
MATES AT BILLABONG
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON
GLEN EYRE
NORAH OF BILLABONG
GRAY'S HOLLOW
JIM AND WALLY
'POSSUM
DICK
DICK LESTER OF KURRAJONG
BACK TO BILLABONG
THE STONE AXE OF BURKAMUKK
BILLABONG'S DAUGHTER
THE HOUSE OF THE EAGLES

" 'It's all right,' Jean assured him. 'No one knows you are here.' "
(Page 233.)
The Twins of Emu Plains] [*Frontispiece*

THE TWINS OF EMU PLAINS

BY

MARY GRANT BRUCE

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CHAPTER I

THE PLEASANT MADNESS OF THE TWINS

THE final struggle in the tennis match between Merriwa and Kooringal schools was raging, and the very air about the court at Merriwa was vibrant with excitement. The western side, which gave the best view, without the sun in one's eyes, was, by traditional use, given over to the supporters of the visiting team; and there the Kooringals massed in a solid phalanx, under their green and mauve flag, and screamed as one individual at the doughty strokes of their champions. Opposite them were the long lines of the Merriwiggians, with dark-blue favours that matched their silken banner, and with voices no less jubilant when a well-placed School stroke got past the said champions' defence. At either end of the court the seats of the mighty bore the impressive forms of "teachers, parents, and guardians"; some watching the play as eagerly as any Fourth Form youngster, while others were so lost to a sense of their opportunities as to while away the time in discussing the latest Russian pianist or the result of the State Elections. Afternoon tea had already occurred; even now, in the pavilion, could be heard the clatter of crockery as the maids packed up—a faint and far-away sound, that contrasted oddly with the simmering excitement round the tennis-court.

The game had been very level, but, on the whole, Kooringal felt its star in the ascendant. So far, indeed, the match was a tie, but there was good cause for the visitors' comfortable feeling of security, for the Merriwa pair for the finals were not seriously considered as champions. Their place in the team was due only to the fact that Merriwa was short of tennis players. Now they had to meet the Kooringal cracks, a year older, and winners on many a hard-foughten field. It was small wonder if the Merriwiggians settled themselves to watch the finals with hearts inclined to sink.

They felt rather worse at the end of the first sett, and through their ranks ran a feeling of "I-told-you-so!" Jean and Josephine Weston, their players, had shown from the first that they were oppressed by the magnitude of their task. They played carefully, without any dash, afraid to take any liberties with the tall pair across the net, who seemed so huge and so confident. By luck, rather than by play, they had managed to win four games to six: that it was luck no one knew more clearly than Jean and Jo. They exchanged depressed looks when "Game and sett!" was called at the end. It had been a "love" game, thanks to the appalling series of balls Eva Severne had served: unplayable,

malevolent streaks of grey light, which had merely touched the ground in the extreme corners of their courts before disappearing into the landscape. Jean and Jo had "swiped" at them unavailingly; useful exercise, but in no way affecting the balls.

"We're not going to be even amusement to them!" Jean remarked, as they crossed over to change ends. "Isn't it perfectly awful, Jo! And I never tried so hard in my life!"

"Neither did I," Jo answered. "And, of course, the more I try, the worse I play. Look here, Jean, it isn't a bit of use trying—to play a careful game, I mean. This isn't a time to be careful. I'm going to be desperate!"

"Oh, are you?" Jean met her twin's eyes with an answering flash. "Well, I suppose the only thing is to be desperate too. We'll just slog."

"Right! And there's another thing—Mona Burton isn't playing nearly as well as that terrible Severne girl. She's muffed a good few balls."

"That's why the sett was 6-4!" said Jean drily. "Well, we'll give her all we can. Your serve, Jo—slog them in!"

Jo slogged accordingly, and had the satisfaction of seeing her first ball hit the top of the net. In ordinary moments this would have induced a careful second service, and Eva Severne moved up closer to the net in anticipation. Instead, Jo set her teeth and sent the second ball with even more fervour than the first. It went true, and Eva was never even near it.

The twins grinned at each other as they crossed.

"Go on being desperate!" Jean said. "It pays!"

Which may or may not have been why within two minutes the Merriwiggians were tumultuously applauding a "love" game as emphatic as that which only a few moments earlier had been delightedly acclaimed by the ranks of Kooringal!

The sett ran to a swift and exciting conclusion. The twins' play was occasionally erratic, but never for a moment dull: they had decided upon ways of desperation, and they fled wildly from one place to another, hitting at everything, possible or impossible; occasionally achieving what seemed to be impossible, by reason of amazing agility. They were a lithe and active pair, built on economical lines that suggested that wire and whipcord were largely used in their composition. Certainly, both whipcord and wire were in evidence in their strokes. There was no special science in their method, but it was good, hard-hitting play; and as they always played together, they knew exactly what to expect of each other, and never overlapped.

The Kooringal pair were taken aback. The first sett had made them feel

confident of an easy victory. Mona Burton knew that she was not playing well, but then Eva seemed to be on her usual superb pinnacle of self-confidence, and would be sure to pull them through. She had not worried, even when she had "muffed" a few strokes. But in the second sett the small pair of Merriwiggians seemed to be transformed into a couple of inspired imps, who bounded and twisted and ran—*how* they ran, thought Mona, who was inclined to plumpness, and preferred a game conducted mainly from the back line! Nothing came amiss to them, and they served balls that seemed to Mona to be compounded of quicksilver and electricity. Even the redoubtable Eva was nonplussed; the opening games had not prepared her for anything like this. Her own play showed distinct signs of being "rattled": she missed strokes that would ordinarily have been easy to her, and her service lost a good deal of its "bite." Silence—dismayed silence—fell upon the ranks of Kooringal, while among the Merriwiggians rapture and amazement mounted until the sett came to a triumphant conclusion at 6-3!

"Can you make it last?" Helen Forester, the Merriwa captain, managed to whisper to Jean, as the twins changed ends with their opponents.

Jean gave a rapturous gurgle.

"*I* don't know," she answered. "We're both quite mad, of course. It would be an awful lark, if only it weren't so terrible!" She caught her twin's eye and they grinned at each other. In Jo's glance there was something of a look familiar to Jean: she had seen it often when they were mustering young cattle with their father, and an excited bullock had needed determination and hard riding to bring him round to the main mob. The twins loved such jobs, and Jo used to gallop after a fugitive with her jaw set in a firm line, but her eyes alight with laughter. So she looked now: the immaculate, white-clad girls in the other court might have been a pair of unruly steers, bent on breaking away, and the racquet she swung loosely, a stock-whip ready for use, as she waited for Eva's service. The familiar look gave Jean fresh courage. Terrible the game might be, but it was certainly also a lark!

Possibly, had they been girls bred to games, with years of school-life behind them, and the importance of tennis tournaments ground into their beings by tradition and experience, the twins might have been unable to tackle that last sett with the cheery courage that somehow communicated itself to the tense onlookers. They would have been crushed by the importance of their task; and in that case they would most certainly have gone under. But Jean and Jo Weston had had only a year of a Melbourne school, and behind that lay a lifetime of the lonely country, where games were mere incidents, and where recreation meant, for the most part, sharing their father's work on the station. Even after a year of school, tennis—even tournament tennis—was only a game

to the twins. They had taken to it with quick natural aptitude, and being unusually tough and wiry, with eye and hand trained by the use of stock-whip and rifle, they had soon found themselves in the front rank, with the consequent responsibility of match play. That, if they could but adopt the view-point of their school-mates, was rather terrible. Jean and Jo obediently echoed them, and said it was terrible. But at the back of their minds was the conviction that it was only a game after all.

They had played the first sett with a due sense of responsibility. In the second, they had cast responsibility to the winds, and had been merely desperate. It had paid, and there was no question as to which method was the more enjoyable. Therefore, there seemed to the twins no reason why they should not continue to be cheerfully insane. They did better when they were insane, and it was so very much more pleasant!

Eva Severne made a desperate effort to recapture the Kooringal lead in that last sett. There were times when she played so brilliantly that no mere insanity on the part of the twins could enable them to meet her balls. But Mona Burton was manifestly weighed down by the madness of the flitting pair opposite, who never by any chance were where you might expect them to be, and who seemed capable of acrobatic feats worthy of a circus. They never looked worried; in fact, they laughed a great deal, until the spectators caught the infection, and rocked with laughter themselves. It was a delirious game, full of amazing incidents, in which the inferior players scored simply by desperate hitting and by taking chances that no one would, in sober moments, have dreamed of taking. Nine times out of ten, the system—if system it could be called—would have failed. But this happened to be the tenth time. Luck held, and impossibilities happened. Finally, a smashing half-volley from Eva, on its way to annihilate Jo, was intercepted by Jean, who executed a leap into mid-air only comparable to the jump of a performing flea! The ball seemed to wobble in the air for a moment, and then dropped weakly on the far side of the net. Eva and Mona, rushing madly to reach it, collided violently; the spent ball dropped: and, amid a gale of laughter from all round the court, and a crescendo of delirium from the ranks of Merriwa, the sett ended in victory for the twins at 6-3!

Jean and Jo, laughing and half-apologetic, shook hands with their opponents.

“Of course, it’s the most amazing luck!” Jean said. “You’re simply miles beyond us, really: we haven’t a scrap of science.”

“I don’t believe you have,” said Eva, regarding them with an amazed air. “But I hope we’ll meet some one scientific next time, that’s all! You’re so hopelessly unexpected!”

“The win was unexpected, at any rate,” Jo laughed. “We looked on ourselves as utterly beaten at the end of the first sett, so we just went Berserk. It was great fun!”

“Fun—to you!” Mona Burton was still panting. “I feel as if I should never get my breath again. Never—never—never did I play at such a rate! Do you ever get tired, you two wild things?”

“Oh, not often,” Jo answered. “And it was far too exciting to think of getting tired.” Then suddenly they were swamped in a wild surge of schoolfellows, their hands pumped, their backs patted. Delighted juniors bore their blazers, holding them proudly while they donned them, and uttering incoherent murmurs of joy. Amidst the general delirium two majestic figures detached themselves from the throng at the far end of the court. The crowd melted like magic at their approach, and presently Jean and Jo, blushing like poppies, found themselves receiving the dignified congratulations of the two principals.

“A most interesting game—and a truly energetic one!” said Miss Atchison, of Kooringal, in the measured tones that made her least remark seem like an anthem. “Miss Dampier tells me you are twins—and not sixteen yet. You should play well when you are a year older.”

“Oh, but it was only luck,” the twins assured her. “You wouldn’t really call our play tennis!”

“Well, it was too good for us!” said Eva Severne, laughing. Then Miss Atchison and Miss Dampier drifted away into the throng of parents and visitors, who were beginning to think of trams and motors, and the girls closed once more round the twins. Every one discussed points of the play, and most people seemed to concur in the view that the twins were mad. But it was, as Helen Forester said, a pleasant madness.

The Kooringal boarders formed up presently, and marched away, still bearing their banner proudly.

“Just you wait until next year!” said Eva Severne, shaking a threatening fist merrily at the twins.

“Yes, next year!” echoed Mona. “I shall have left then, but I hope we shall have somebody less fat to meet you.” She sighed. “Certainly, no one who plays against you should be fat!”

“We may be fat ourselves!” said the twins—a remark greeted with derisive cheers. “At any rate we’ll work up ever so much science.”

“Sure you’ll be here next year?” asked a Kooringal girl.

“Oh, certain. Two more years of school, at least—perhaps three. So there’s lots of tennis ahead,” Jo uttered, happily. “Next year we must take it up in

earnest and learn all the technical part. Then I suppose we'll find out why your balls go straight through one's racquet, Eva!"

"I wish they had done so a bit more to-day!" said Eva ruefully. "Well, it's time we took our battered remnant to the tram. Good-bye—and it was a very jolly game, even if you did beat us!"

The Merriwiggians escorted them to the gate, and they marched down the road, in excellent formation for "battered remnants." Then the school closed round the Weston twins, and, lifting them shoulder-high, carried them up the path to the house, asserting loudly and more or less tunefully, that they were jolly good fellows. The sudden appearance at a window of Miss Dampier disorganized the procession, and those responsible for the twins dropped them. Miss Dampier disappeared as quickly as she had come. She was that pearl among women, a headmistress who realized that teachers should occasionally have no official existence.

Jean and Jo picked themselves up, remarking that the consequences of winning a match seemed to be more strenuous than the game itself! They turned scared eyes on an attempt to revive the procession, and, ducking under admiring arms, fled to their dormitory. No one was there, and they sat down and looked at each other. In each look there was a sudden access of respect.

"Well, I didn't think you had it in you!" remarked Jean.

"I didn't either," responded Jo.

CHAPTER II

MIDNIGHT

"WAKE up, Nita!"

Nita Anderson grunted and buried her dark head yet deeper in the pillow.

"The bell hasn't gone yet," she murmured. "Do go away and stop playing the goat!"

"Well, if I do, you'll get no supper," said the caller, not ceasing to be energetic. "Why, no self-respecting person goes to sleep at all before a supper, and here you are, snoring like a hog!"

"I *don't* snore!" said Nita indignantly. She cast a wrathful glance at her accuser.

"Thought that would fetch you!" said that damsel gaily. "But you can't be certain, and now you'll never know! Hurry up, or all the éclairs will be gone before you get there." She capered off, and Nita, with a huge yawn, jumped out of bed and sought for her kimono.

There were about a dozen girls in the room to which she found her way presently. As a rule, midnight suppers were conducted in muffled tones, the only illumination a candle-end, and enjoyment was heightened by the knowledge that at any moment the dread form of a too-inquisitive governess, or even of Miss Dampier herself, might appear. It lent zest to the flavour of even a shop-made sausage-roll when you knew that you might not, as Ellen Webster put it dramatically, "be spared to finish it." But to-night was different, by time-honoured custom. It was just at the end of term, for one thing: for another, it was match night, and every one knew that on match night Miss Dampier and the staff made a practice of sleeping with such soundness that no untoward noises, such as the popping of ginger-beer or lemonade bottles, or the clatter of strange crockery hastily assembled as goblets, could shake their dreams. Supper arrived almost openly on such nights, in proud hampers from home, or tempting-looking parcels from the big shops in Melbourne: not smuggled in in greasy paper bags, the contents of which were apt to become flattened and crumby long before they were eaten. And, in addition to sleeping soundly, no governess thought of alluding, next morning, to heavy eyes or lessons half-prepared. Miss Dampier always inculcated tact in her staff, especially in the last days of term.

There were four beds in the dormitory that Nita entered. One, smoothed over and spread with newspapers, served as supper-table, while on a chest of drawers were ranged the drinks: coffee, that had once been iced, and was now faintly lukewarm—the night was a hot one in December—raspberry vinegar, and a collection of "soft drinks" in bottles. Each girl was supposed to bring her own tooth-glass; but there had been a more surreptitious supper two nights before, at which several of these useful articles had been broken, so that to-night there were deficiencies which had to be filled by such substitutes as the cups of thermos flasks. As may be imagined, a thermos cup is sadly insufficient as a vessel for fizzy drinks; and bitter was the lot of those who depended on them.

On her knees upon the floor, Helen Forester was laboriously dissecting a large cold fowl. Her only weapon was a penknife, backed by brute force.

"This is a horrible job!" she observed to the company at large, raising a flushed countenance. "I should like to wipe my heated brow, only my hands are too greasy. Nita, you're great on physiology—do come and tell me where this animal's joints are."

"Get his side-fixings off," counselled Nita, coming to her assistance. "You hold one leg and wing firmly, and I'll hold the others, and we'll pull. Something's sure to come apart!"

Something did. Nita surveyed the dismembered bird with satisfaction.

"There!" she said. "That's much simpler. Now you just go ahead and dig in here and there till you weaken the general resistance of the creature, and I'll get the leg-joints apart."

"It sounds simple, but when you come to reality you need an axe!" said Helen. "I suppose if one scrapes the bones until there's nothing left on them one needn't bother about getting inside?"

"Indeed, there's the stuffing—or should be," said Nita, wrestling gallantly with the leg-joint. At which Helen groaned, and fell to work anew with her inadequate weapon.

"Father would shudder at the carving, but there's nothing wrong with the result," she remarked placidly, sometime later. "After all, every one seems to have got some, and I believe that it really needs a genius to feed twelve people off one fowl!"

"Few could do it," agreed Nita. "No one is sufficiently grateful to us, of course, but——"

There was a chorus of dissent.

"We *loved* watching you!" said Grace Farquhar, in her soft drawl.

“I haven’t a doubt of it,” Helen laughed. “Well, it’s something to have been able to provide a circus before supper. Will anyone give me a méringue? Thanks, Jo. Have one yourself.”

“I’ve had all that’s prudent, thanks,” Jo Weston answered. “Méringues soon go to your head after you’ve been in strict training for tennis. Did you get an éclair, Nita?”

“I did—thanks to you,” Nita laughed. “Nothing but the vision of missing them would have dragged me from my pillow. I know your mother’s éclairs, you see. When are you going to learn to make them, Jo?”

“Mother might teach me in these hols., she said,” responded Jo. “But she’s not very keen on teaching us while we’re at school. She says we’re to learn all the cookery and domestic science stuff we can from Miss Smith, and she’ll see what it amounts to after we leave. Then she’ll round off the corners.” She laughed. “Personally, I think she’ll find us *all* corners. Mother hasn’t got any degrees and letters after her name, like the worshipful Smithy, but when it comes to running a house practically, I think she’d leave her cold!”

“Oh, but who would expect Smithy to be practical?” demanded Grace. “She looks so exquisite, and she wears such fetching uniforms, and she’s terribly impressive; but you always have the feeling at the back of your mind that she’d expire if the gas-stove wouldn’t act!”

“Yes—I’d love to see her reduced to the cooking outfit my grandmother had in the bush,” said Helen. “Colonial oven—did any one of you ever see one?”

There was a chorus of “No.”

“Just a big oven, built in between bricks; you put a fire underneath and another on top. Then you had a couple of bars across the fire, and balanced your saucepans on that. No pretty aluminium saucepans in those days; just big heavy iron pots.”

“Gracious!” said the chorus.

“You ought to have heard my grandmother’s remarks on restaurant food,” remarked Helen. “She used to expect to hear of Father’s death any minute after she found that he had to get his lunch in Town every day. Say, girls, I’m glad we don’t have to live up to our grandmothers. Mine used to make all the family clothes—by hand, if you please, and you should just have seen the tucks!—and do all the cooking, when they didn’t have maids, and run the house, and doctor her own family and half the district for fifty miles round, and take an odd turn at harvesting, or bush-fire fighting, or cattle-mustering, or ——”

“Oh, they *couldn’t*, Helen! It simply wouldn’t happen!”

“But it did! They fought blacks too sometimes on their own, when the grandfathers were away; and they doctored injured cattle, and taught their kiddies, and lots of ’em spun their own wool and knitted it. And they kept up their accomplishments—painting, and music: Grannie played the harp like fun, even when she was old. And they hadn’t any labour-saving devices at all. What if any of us found ourselves up against a job like that!”

“I’d be sorry for the person who expected *me* to keep up accomplishments while I made the family clothes by hand!” said Nita firmly. “That would be sufficient accomplishment for *me*, thank you. Anyhow, I agree we’re not what our grandmothers were. What are you going to do when you leave, Grace?”

“Oh, I’m going to the Gallery,” Grace said. “If I can’t paint I can’t do anything. Later on, if I show signs of its being worth while, they’ll let me go to England to study. What about you?”

“Tennis, principally, I think,” said Nita, laughing. “I haven’t thought of anything else. Golf too, I suppose. *And* dances. I’m going to have a good time for a while, anyhow. Don’t ask me to be serious, because it simply can’t occur!”

“Hear, hear!” said several pyjama’d figures, with relieved accents. There were others to whom the breaking of the school chain meant only “a good time.” No one wanted to be serious.

“Well, I’m going to learn to run the house,” Helen said. “Mother says so, and what she says generally happens. But we’re going to Ceylon for a year first if we can depot Rex.”

“Who’s Rex?”

“My little brother. He hasn’t been strong, and the doctor doesn’t want him to go to Ceylon. But he is a bit young for school—only nine. Aunt Ada was to have taken charge of him, but now she is going to England herself. However, I suppose we’ll find a home for him somewhere.”

“Ceylon for a year—how gorgeous!” said Jean Weston.

“Yes; I’m going to learn to plant tea,” laughed Helen. “If we have luck we may go on to India: Father has cousins in Bombay. But there will be a wonder-year, at any rate. What are you going to do, Jean? Of course I know you’re not leaving yet.”

“Thank goodness, no!” Jean answered. “We wanted to go to school from the time we were ten, and we didn’t go until we were over fourteen, so it would be too awful to have only a year. We’re to be left to accumulate learning until we’re eighteen, I believe!”

“You won’t be fit to know!” said Gladys Armstrong solemnly.

“That depends on how much we accumulate. Thank goodness Father isn’t a bit keen on exams for us. We’re to learn French thoroughly, so’s we can talk it if we ever get to France, and we’re to have a good sound education without any frills, and all the domestic science Smithy can pack into us. That’s Father’s idea: Mother stuck out for a few extras. And they both want us to play all the games we can, barring football!”

“They sound extremely satisfactory parents,” said Grace, laughing.

“You ask Helen—*she* knows them!” returned Jo defiantly.

“Why, they’re darlings: everybody knows *that*!” said Helen. “Mr. Weston gave us—the twinses and Nita and me—a most gorgeous time when he came to Town to sell his wool. Didn’t he, Nita?”

“Rather!” responded that damsel. “I wish he had wool to sell once a month!”

“I’m afraid he won’t have much next year,” Jean said. “The drought is pretty bad up our way; Mother’s letters seem a bit worrified.”

“I wish Miss Dampier could hear your new English,” said Ellen Webster.

“Well, if you say ‘horrified’ why shouldn’t you say ‘worrified,’ I’d like to know?” Jo demanded. The twins always answered for each other.

“You might say ‘horrid’ to match ‘worried’ instead,” remarked Nita. “Why not? Some day, when I’m not busy, I think I’ll make a new dictionary. I know heaps of lovely words that no dictionary-maker ever dreams of putting in.” She yawned. “But seriously, Jean, I hope your father isn’t having a bad time. My uncle is up in your part of the country, and he seems to be pretty hard hit by the drought.”

“Oh, Father is sure to be feeling it,” Jean said. “But I ’spect it will be like other bad times: they come and go, you know, and everybody jogs along just the same. Father always says one good year makes up for several bad ones. But of course it makes you pretty blue to be living in the middle of the drought, and seeing the sheep and cattle grow poorer and poorer every day. I know what *that’s* like. So Mother’s letters can’t be very cheery.”

“Jean and I were looking forward to new saddles and riding-kit these hols.,” Jo remarked. “Now I suppose they won’t be able to manage them for us. But it never lasts long. Father will preach economy, and look glum when the bills come in, and of course we’ll economize, somehow—but he’d be awfully wild if he found Mother doing without anything she really wanted! And then the rain will come, and everything will be all right again.”

“You’re a cheery old optimist,” Gladys said, laughing.

“Well, isn’t life cheery? Things always come right again, if you give them

time—Mother says so, at any rate. We always have good times, don't we, Jo?" And Jo grinned at her twin, and said "Rather!"

"My father says," observed Grace, "that you often get just what you're looking out for—if you make sure you're going to have a bad time, it comes, and if you make up your mind that everything will be delightful, then that comes too." She sighed. "I've tried to work out that theory when I was going to the dentist—planned in my own mind that I was going to have something between a pantomime and a picnic. It was, too, I think, for the dentist. But not for me!" She sighed again.

Every one laughed, with a painful absence of sympathy.

"All the same, I believe in your father's idea, though I think you tried it pretty high," remarked Helen. "I do think if you believe in your luck it's more likely to come than if you make up your mind that nothing will go right. It's the same with people: if you're quite sure they are decent, well they generally turn out decent."

"That's what Father says!" cried Jo. "He always believes every one's all right."

"Then, when you get let down by some one who isn't all right," said Grace —"well, you come with a bump!"

"That's true, I suppose. But Father says he hasn't had many bumps, and on the whole he'd rather have had them than give up believing in people. Anyhow, I believe in every one—except Miss Smith!"

"Well, go on believing—but keep your eyes about you next year, as well," said Helen, laughing. "You two will be seniors next year, and if you're not awfully careful you'll be prefects before it's over. A lot of seniors are leaving, and Miss Dampier will be so hard up for prefects that she may have to promote even graceless children like you!"

"Good—gracious!" said the twins, in tones of horror.

"It's true. You can't expect for ever to blush unseen in the murky obscurity of the Middle School—'specially when you win tennis matches. Miss Dampier has her eagle eye on you."

"But—but——" gasped Jean, "we shan't be sixteen until next year! And you're eighteen, Helen."

"Well, I was a prefect when I was sixteen," said the Captain, drawing her dainty embroidered kimono round her. "So were Nita and Ellen. And you two are higher in the school for your age than I was."

"Yes, but you've often told us that, being twins, we've only sense enough for one real person divided between us!" said Jo, amidst laughter.

“That’s one of the ways in which one hatches sense in the young,” said Helen. “I’ve told you lots of other things, for your souls’ good. Captains have to.” She smiled at them very kindly; they looked such scared children, so ridiculously alike, in their pyjamas, with their hair tumbling about their flushed faces. “Oh, you’ll be terrors to the wicked juniors when you’re prefects, because they’ll never know which of you they’re talking to! Fancy being quite certain you’d dodged one of the Powers That Be, and then seeing her double stalk out before you!”

“I see a vision!” remarked Ellen Webster solemnly. “Two years hence, you and Nita and I will re-visit the old school and tread the familiar paths, once desecrated by the pelting feet of graceless twinses. And lo! we will see droves of demure juniors, damsels without guile——”

“There ain’t none such!” said Nita.

“—and older damsels of staid, not to say cowed, aspect; and at the head, two goddess-like figures—

‘So like they were, men never
Saw twins so like before’—

bearing badges of office, and walking statelily Even the Fifth, that band without reverence, will tremble at their gaze. Slowly, majestically——”

The orator’s voice died away in a pained gurgle. One twin seized her suddenly from the rear, and tilted her backwards, while the other pressed to her face a large, wet sponge. It was almost dry when the ensuing struggle was over, and most of the water it had contained was distributed evenly over Ellen and the twins.

“Ugh!” said Ellen, abandoning all oratory. “You little fiends!” She wriggled in her wet pyjamas.

“It’s a nice warm night for a bath!” said Nita, weak from laughing.

“Yes, but this only feels clammy. You two, prefects! You’ll never be anything but disgraces!”

She glared at the twins, capering safely in the distance, soaked and cheerful. Certainly, there was nothing about them that suggested prefectorial dignity. They danced in a manner only possible in those who have no responsibility.

“I believe you’re right,” laughed Helen. “Anyhow, it’s a good thing it’s match night, or you’d certainly have had Miss Dampier in here. And you three are far too wet to sit up any longer: come and clear up the wreck. Who’s going to dispose of the chicken-bones?”

CHAPTER III

THE LAST DAYS OF TERM

"YOU didn't truly mean it, Helen—last night? About being prefects?"

The twins had sought Helen Forester in her study, finding her in the throes of packing up. In itself this was a distressing sight, and induced seriousness. Every one had been proud of the Captain's pretty room, with its dainty furniture. The big, comfortable couch looked bare, stripped of its Indian rug and the dark-blue cushions embroidered with the School badge. Gone were the photographs—hockey and tennis teams, girls, past and present, Cingalese pictures, and views of Helen's own people, and of her home in the Western District. Gone, too, were the trophies of her five years at school: silver cups, won in many a hard-fought fight with other schools and other Merriwa champions. Their places looked bare and dismal. In the middle of the room a packing-case yawned widely to receive everything.

Helen, mounted on a table, was detaching a racquet from the wall. She balanced herself on one foot, and the table creaked ominously.

"Sit on the other edge, will you?" she asked with some anxiety. The twins sprang to her aid, and she brought down the racquet in safety. Then she sat on the table and looked at them.

"Mean it? Why, yes, of course I meant it. You can see for yourself, kiddies. There were twelve of us at supper last night, and you were the youngest. Seven of us are leaving. That's a big loss out of the seniors, isn't it?"

"But there are other seniors," said Jean, hopefully. "Ethel Tarrant wasn't there, nor Janie Frith, nor Doris Harvey."

"Yes, but look at them. Ethel thinks of nothing in the world but music. She lives with her head in a cloud composed of Chopin and Debussy and Bach. Janie Frith is far too delicate to be counted on, and will never be a prefect. And Doris is queer and prickly, and won't take part in anything. Not one of them plays games. No, as far as I can see, you two will have to make up your minds to it—not at once, but in six months' time. You'll do it, too, all right, because you love the School."

"Oh—if loving the School were all——" The twins hesitated.

"Why, it's ninety per cent. You two care awfully for the School, and you'll never let it down. The honour of the School means a heap to you, and it will mean more. You know how high we stand, and what is expected of us.

Merriwa isn't a new thing: lots of our mothers were here before us, and we've got traditions as well as present honour."

"But that makes it all the worse!" Jean said. "Of course, Mother was here, and she told us about the School from the time we could walk. She's terribly proud of it. She regards us as about six, and she'll be horrified if she thinks there is a chance of slumping to people like us for prefects!"

"Well, you have got to see that it isn't a slump." The Captain swung the dusty racquet slowly to and fro, looking at them thoughtfully. "You'll be sixteen; I was only that when I got my prefect's badge——"

"Oh, but you——!" broke in the twins.

"Oh, of course, I know I was a marvel!" The tall girl laughed at their eager faces. "Just between you and me, I wasn't a marvel in the least. I was fairly harum-scarum, and the idea of responsibility appalled me. I thought the girls would just yell with laughter at the idea of my being a prefect."

"They certainly will at us!" said Jo, ruefully.

"Well, they didn't—much. And they stop laughing after a while, as you'll find. You don't want to get fussed or worried—only go straight ahead. If you get it into everybody's mind that certain things are done, just as certain things aren't done, simply because it's the School—well, you won't have much trouble. You two have a tremendous start, because your mother was here before you, and because you grew up with the School in your bones. Just remember that."

"Why, I thought it was the other way round!" Jean said.

"Oh, you owls, how can it be? Who's likely to do best for the School—you, brought up on its traditions, or young Pearlie Alexander, who's not quite happy that her people didn't send her to Kooringal, 'cause she thinks it's a shade smarter than Merriwa? And smartness, to her type, simply means richer fathers and bigger motors. If she went to Kooringal and thought Eversleigh College had a few more Rolls-Royces pulling up before it, she'd want to go there. What does the school itself matter to the Pearlie type? They make me tired!" She laughed. "I can say what I like about her because she's leaving!"

The twins laughed in sympathy.

"Well, it's comforting to think you don't believe we'd make a hopeless mess of it," Jo said. "We'll try to believe it too, but it's difficult. And the most difficult of all will be to make the School believe it!"

Helen slipped off the table and inserted the racquet into a crevice in the packing-case.

"Oh, the School won't worry you much," she said. "Don't start off with

thinking about all your problems at once; take each day's work as it comes, and leave to-morrow's to look after itself. Remember, you're not going to be prefects all at once, either, so you've time to hatch out a good manner!"

"If ever I see Jo with a prefectorial manner I'll cease to believe that she's my twin!" uttered Jean.

"What about yourself?" demanded Jo.

"If I could roll the ridiculous pair of you out into one large prefect I believe I'd have an excellent one!" said Helen, laughing. "Stop worrying over six months hence, and help me pack my books; there's an empty box in the corner by the fire-place. Oh, and remember, too, Ellen Webster will be Captain, and a jolly good captain she'll be. Keep your eye on her, and pick up points."

"Right-oh!" said the twins, falling upon the empty box and transporting it to the book-case. "What goes in first, Helen?"

"The fat ones—line the box with paper, though."

"Rather. If we'd known about this prefect idea we'd have spent all this term watching you. I'd have followed you about with a note-book."

"Then thank goodness you didn't know! At least I've had my last term in peace," laughed Helen. "And when poor old Ellen finds you trailing her with lifted pencil, don't tell her it was I who put you on to watch her, or my memory will be blackened for ever. By the way, twinses, you'll find it quite helpful to talk to Miss Dampier if you're in difficulties."

The twins looked more round-eyed than ever.

"Does one really talk to her—ever?" queried Jean. "I merely quake in my shoes when I meet her."

"Oh, one doesn't take her actual problems, unless it's absolutely necessary. But a talk about things in general helps one on a lot. She's awfully human when you get to know her, really, and you've no idea how much she understands. Of course I began by thinking she was just one's natural enemy, but I grew out of it. You will, too. She remembers your mother, too—she was a junior mistress in her time—and so she expects things of you."

"It seems to be a big responsibility to be born with the School in one's family, so to speak," said Jo.

"Well it is, in a way. But responsibility's a jolly good thing for every one," the Captain remarked. "Now, that's enough sermonizing, and I'm sick of packing. Thanks ever so for doing the books. I've got leave to take five girls down to St. Kilda to bathe—will you two come?"

The twins gave an ecstatic yelp of acquiescence.

"Then go and collect Gladys and Nita: I've collected Ellen already. Hurry

them up—we'll all meet here in ten minutes."

Bathing was always a joy, but it generally took place in large parties, under the supervision of two house-mistresses, so anxious for the safety of the non-swimmers that discipline was very strict. Even Nita, who was like a fish in the water, was wont to say that it made her nervous to feel that Miss Morrison was ranging to and fro on the gallery like a panther, holding her breath when a girl dived, and emitting a bursting sigh of relief when her head at length popped into sight. But at the end of the term, when rules and regulations were relaxing, parties of senior girls known to swim well were sometimes allowed to go down without a mistress in charge, if at least two prefects were among their number. Invitations to these swims were much prized, and the twins felt that even if the cares and responsibilities of age were descending upon them, so also were some of its delights, as they fled about the business of "collecting" Gladys and Nita.

Ten minutes later the cheerful band hurried down the wide garden path, followed by the envious glances of girls who lay here and there under the pepper-trees enduring the hot afternoon as best they might. Someone begged Jo lazily to bring her back a strawberry ice, a dismal pleasantry which evoked groans from its hearers. Outside, the pavement felt sticky underfoot with the heat. Little eddies of winds swirled here and there, scattering dead leaves and scraps of dusty paper. On the shady side of the street a few tired children toiled home from school, swinging straps of books; but there were not many people to be seen. Even the tram which the girls boarded presently was nearly empty, and the conductor seemed almost too tired to collect their fares. He perched on his tiny seat at the back of the car, glanced with a covetous eye at their rubber bathing-bags, and remarked audibly to himself that it was better to be born lucky than rich!

The esplanade at St. Kilda lay grilling under the heat, the yellow sand of the beach contrasting sharply with the wilted green of the strip of garden and lawn that lies between the roadway and the shore. Beyond gleamed a grey expanse of sea, its surface not marked by the tiniest wave until it broke in lazy ripples on the beach, where hundreds of children were bathing and paddling. The sands were churned into hills and hollows by innumerable feet: greasy lunch-papers littered them, with crumpled bags that had once held cakes and fruit. Rows of deck-chairs bore the forms of slumbering grown-ups; here and there a mother roused herself to shout to Tommy and Winnie that they were going too far into the water and had better come out, now, and behave. Babies crawled everywhere, fighting, falling over, and eating sand and strange treasure-trove of the littered beach. As the girls watched, one crawled straight into the sea, laughing gleefully at the warm touch of the shallow water. A half-

naked little brother pursued it, shouting threats and dragged it up the sand, fulfilling his promise of a smack. The baby howled distressfully, and the mother stirred to say, “Now, Willie, whatcher doin’? Couldn’t yer let ’er alone for ’arf a minute?” She gave the annoyed baby a cake, and the baby ceased howling, and fell upon it wolfishly, its joy in it not at all disturbed by the fact that between bites it generally fell into the sand. Willie also seized a cake, and departed, with the puzzled air of one who, having done his duty, receives no commendation. The mother slumbered again.

“Don’t you hate city beaches?” Jo asked; and Jean nodded.

“Think of Anderson’s Inlet beside this,” said Nita, “up at the Eagle’s Rest, with the tide coming in and filling all those jolly rock-pools. Clean, hard sand that you can gallop a horse along; and such bathing. It’s like soda-water to bathe in at night, all sparkle and foam, and you just tingle all over after it!”

“I know,” Gladys said. “I was nearly washed out by a wave on those rocks one day: it came unexpectedly when I’d just been taking photographs, a sort of lone wave that rushed in ever so much farther than any of its mates. I had to hang on like grim death, and it washed the rock clear of everything but me. Camera, book, lunch-basket—they all went off to the Antarctic: and I had five miles to walk home, soaked to the skin. It *was* jolly!”

“It sounds jolly,” said Helen, laughing. “It’s almost hard to believe there are waves like that when you’re looking at that tame sea in front of us—it looks as if it were made of grey oil.”

“Grey oil or not, it’s all we’ve got to-day, and I won’t have it abused,” Ellen Webster said. “Come on, girls; we’re wasting precious time.” She led the way along the pier that led out to the baths.

There were scores of bobbing heads in the water within. At the shallow end the sea seemed full of small girls, splashing about within their depths; and every inch of the rope that stretched across from side to side, where the water was three feet deep, was occupied by clinging hands, whose owners swung themselves up and down in the waves with shrieks of delight. The shallower the water, the more incessant were the screams of the bathers. Farther out they became quieter, though wild yells rose from one place where a band of mermaids played a kind of water-polo with a huge ball. In the deep water at the extreme end, peace reigned: only a few strong swimmers were to be seen there, moving quietly along, or floating lazily. A big, black-backed gull perched on a water-worn post, crusted with barnacles, and gazed at the scene, probably reflecting that nothing so queer was likely to meet his vision again between there and the South Pole.

A railed gallery ran round the baths, overlooking the water. Dressing-boxes

opened from it, trails of wet foot-marks leading from them to the flights of steps that gave access to the sea. The gallery was crowded with onlookers, among whom forms in bathing-suits, wet and dry, edged swiftly, with due regard for bare feet among the many shod. Occasionally a soaked bather, hurrying to dress, cannoned into an immaculate damsel in a crisp frock, greatly to the destruction of her crispness. The crowd of spectators was thickest near a spring-board jutting out over the deep water, where a girl capered gaily, making the board leap up and down until it fairly bucked her off. She turned a double somersault in mid-air before she struck the water.

"That's Alice Pearce," said Nita. "I heard she'd broken six spring-boards this season. It must be an expensive amusement."

"Wouldn't you just *love* to be able to dive like that, Jo?" Jean murmured; and her twin breathed, "Rather!"

They had some difficulty in finding vacant dressing-boxes; every one seemed occupied, and sometimes by the wet and dry together. Finally they were lucky in finding three, in which a party of Kooringal girls were dressing after their bathe; and having inherited these damp and darksome abodes, were quickly ready for the water. Making for the nearest steps, they dived in, swam out to a raised platform in the middle of the deep part of the baths, and sat on it for a moment to rest.

"Glorious, isn't it!" ejaculated Helen. "Look at those girls!"—as two swimmers flashed by, using a powerful trudgeon stroke. "They're practising for the swimming carnival. Now, I wonder did she mean to do that?" she added, as Jo tumbled off the platform in a casual manner, and disappeared.

"Don't know," Jean answered, laughing. "I'll go and see!" She tumbled in, in the same fashion, and fell squarely upon her twin, who was just rising to the surface. They vanished together, to reappear, presently, having apparently had a heated altercation under water.

"With all the sea to jump into, she had to choose the exact spot I was using!" grumbled Jo, laughing.

"That's because you're twinses, and have everything alike," said Nita. "Come on—let's go out to the deep end. I'll race you!" She went off, with swift overarm strokes. Nita was the champion swimmer of the private schools, and Merriwa was justly proud of her. Therefore they reviled her as they panted after her, finally reaching the deep end to find her placidly floating on her back.

"Old leviathan!" grumbled Helen affectionately, turning on her back near her.

"I splash horribly, but I get there—some time or other," panted Gladys.

“Nita, how do you manage to swim as fast as a porpoise, which you resemble, and never make a bubble of splash?”

“All done by kindness!” said Nita, lazily.

“Let’s lean on you, Nita, darling!” The twins arrived on either side of her, and leant, heavily and suddenly. Nita went under for an instant, and reappearing, with a roll which in truth was like that of a porpoise, ducked them both, in a thorough and scientific manner. Every one seemed to become involved in the process, and the sea was churned by the throes of the Merriwiggians. Ellen Webster was the first to emerge from the turmoil. She swam to the nearest steps, and sat upon the lowest, drawing her knees up to her chin.

“You look like a witch brooding over the deep!” Gladys told her. Ellen was small, with rather sharp features and twinkling eyes, and the insult held a certain amount of truth.

“If I were to say what *you* all look like it would need a vocabulary unbefitting a vice-captain!” retorted Ellen. “Remember, young ladies, you are not allowed out without a keeper so that you may indulge in unseemly horse-play! Your conduct is sadly lacking in either deportment or——”

“She’s drowning in her own eloquence!” remarked Nita. “Come, and we’ll save her, girls!” They made a rush at the orator, who tried to escape up the steps, but being caught by what Jo termed “the hind leg,” was ignominiously hauled back into the water, where she became the victim of all known methods of rescuing the apparently drowned. Then, not because the sea had lost any of its charm, but because time was slipping away, they swam back to the dressing-boxes, making as quick a toilet as their soaked hair would permit.

“Rubber caps are a delusion and a snare if you once happen to go under water,” remarked Helen disgustedly as they walked along the pier to the shore. “Ugh! another drop has slid down my back!”

“Can’t be helped.” Gladys shook her own lank and dripping locks. “Anyhow, we’re all alike—except the twinses. They have an altogether unfair advantage!”

The twins grinned. They had worn their hair close-cropped until they came to school, following an attack of fever in which, like good twins, they had indulged together, and their hair had been compulsorily shorn. It was growing again now, but the growth was slow, and their dark locks clustered about their necks in curls that refused to reach their shoulders. It made them look younger than they were, and had the effect of enhancing a resemblance to each other that the School declared little short of criminal. Even Miss Dampier often had distressing doubts as to whether she were dealing at the moment with Jean or

Jo. The twins were quick to recognize any signs of doubt as to their identity, and had never been known to relieve such doubts unless compelled by authority.

"Never mind," said Ellen Webster. "We'll soon be hot enough to welcome anything dripping down our backs. Who says ices?"

Every one said ices, with one voice. They sauntered to the café perched half-way down the big pier, and voiced their demands, following the ices with tea and many cakes, regardless of consequences. Then Helen, with the recklessness of one about to leave, ordered raspberries and cream all round; and at length, sustained and refreshed, the Merriwiggians turned their steps homeward. The crowd on the pier was beginning to thin: people were going home to tea, and only the fishing enthusiasts, who sit on the edge of the pier and angle perpetually for fish that never bite, showed no signs of moving. On the beach mothers were collecting children, wet, sandy, and tired. The trams were crowded, and the girls obtained places with difficulty, "strap-hanging" until they changed from the beach tram into the one that took them close to the School.

"It's been lovely," Jo said, as the iron gate of Merriwa closed behind them. "And I don't want tea one bit!"

Nobody did. There was, indeed, a general shudder at the bare idea of a meal.

"We've got to face it, anyhow," said Helen. "And you'd better all take notice that we've only about five minutes to change!"

The urgency of this discovery mastered any more personal feelings. They scattered to their rooms, in a wild endeavour to achieve the well-groomed appearance that Miss Dampier was unfeeling enough to demand, in all circumstances. A junior, still in the flush of hero-worship that surrounds tennis championships, hailed the twins as they reached their door.

"Letter for you in the rack. Shall I get it for you?"

"Oh, do, there's a good kid!" Jo gasped, struggling with buttons as she ran. "Give it to us at tea—we haven't time to sneeze!"

The letter lay between them throughout tea, while they gallantly tried to obey Ellen Webster's whispered injunction at the door—"Assume an appetite, though you have it not!" Luckily, the night was hot enough to cause a general disinclination for food, and no one in authority paid any special attention to the lack of interest in the meal manifested by the bathing party. Jean and Jo cast longing glances at their letter, wishing that the time of release would come, and set them free to read it.

It was a rather thick letter, addressed in their father's firm writing in the

style in which he always addressed them—“Miss J. Weston.” Mother might give them the individual Jean or Josephine, or lump them together as “The Misses Weston,” but Father held that these distinctions, with twins, were merely waste of time, since anything he had to say was sure to be said to both. A letter from him was rather a rarity, and the twins puzzled a little over it as tea dragged slowly on.

“Queer that Father should write, when we’ll be home in three days,” Jo said. “I wonder what he’s writing about.”

“Thank goodness, there’s Miss Dampier standing up for grace, so we can cut off and read it,” Jean answered, getting to her feet. The School rose, and after grace was said, filed out of the long room. As the twins passed Miss Dampier, she beckoned to them.

“You have had your father’s letter?” she asked. They fancied her face was rather grave.

“We got it just before tea,” Jean answered. “We haven’t had time to read it yet.”

“I heard from him, also,” the Head remarked. “Come and see me in the study when you have read yours.”

Something in her tone sent swift alarm into the twins’ faces.

“Oh, they’re quite well—don’t worry,” Miss Dampier said hastily. “Run along to your room and read your letter quietly.”

CHAPTER IV

A LETTER FROM HOME

THE twins did not lose a moment. They edged through the crowd of girls, dodged one or two laughing queries about their bathe, and, gaining the staircase, fled up to their eyrie on the second floor. It was a little room, with a big window, and a deep window-seat from which could be seen the Bay and the big liners going up and down on their way backwards and forwards across the world. The twins loved their window-seat, and generally read their home-letters in it. But when they had read this one they faced each other with eyes wide with dismay.

Father had gone straight to his point. That was like Father: he never wasted time.

"MY DEAR LITTLE GIRLS,—

"I had meant to keep the news I have to give you until you came home. But it occurs to me that it is better to let you know at once.

"This has been a very bad year for me, as you know—not that you have known everything, for Mother and I haven't believed in worrying you unnecessarily. You're only kiddies, and we hoped the bad times would pass. But they haven't passed. The drought has hit me very hard: I bought stock dear last year, and had to sell them for next to nothing this year, because I hadn't feed for them. The stock I have still are as poor as crows, and I am only keeping them alive by buying feed.

"I might have managed, however, but for an extra bit of bad luck. Before things got very bad I lent an old friend a big sum of money, expecting it to be paid back last month; and the long and the short of it is, that he's as hard hit as I am, and hasn't got it to pay back. Goodness knows if he'll ever be able to pay.

"So I've got to retrench, and I only wish I could do it all myself, instead of involving Mother and you children. But that's just what I can't do. We shall have to spend just as little money as possible, and it will mean sending away the servants, living very simply, and—I must take you two from school. I hate to say it, but there's no help for it. School costs me close on £300 a year, and I can't spare it. Besides, we'll need your help. I know you'll save Mother in the house as much as you can, and I think you should be able to teach Billy for a year or so. That will save a governess. Possibly you'll even give me a hand on

the place now and then, for I must do with as little outside labour as I can. I expect I can reckon on you two when I need a couple of extra hands, mustering."

Jo gulped at this point. "Isn't he a darling?" she said irrelevantly.

"Well, that's all, and I'm afraid it's an awful bombshell for you, little chaps. It might have been better to wait to tell you, but we have always faced things, and I thought you might prefer to tell your mates yourselves, instead of having to write explanations and good-byes. I'm writing to tell Miss Dampier. I shall always be sorry that Mother's old School had only a year's chance at you: the School that turned out Mother has a big thing to its credit, and I was awfully glad to send you there. It is a bitter disappointment to us both to have to take you away. I wish I'd been able to manage better for you, kiddies.

"Your loving

"FATHER."

"Oh, poor old chap!" said Jean. "Poor old chap!"

"Oh, isn't it just rotten luck for him!" said Jo. "My word, Jean, we'll have to buck up and help him!"

Which remarks Miss Dampier would certainly have condemned on principle as unladylike. But it is doubtful if Father would have found any fault.

"Mother simply isn't fit to do much work, of course," said Jean. "I wonder what we can do, Jo. Do you suppose we can run things for her?"

"We'll have a jolly hard try," responded her twin. "After all, we ought to be able to do a good bit. But—Jean—*Sarah*? Can you imagine Mother without Sarah!"

Sarah had been part and parcel of the Weston household as long as the twins could remember. There had never been a time when she had not ruled unquestioned in the kitchen: tall, lean to the point of scragginess, dour and short of speech, but with a heart of gold that belonged entirely to her mistress. Housemaids came and went, after the manner of housemaids, but Sarah was as the fixed stars. When sickness came she was a tower of strength: nothing came amiss to her, and she would sit up all night as tirelessly as she would work all day. Mrs. Weston was not strong, and Sarah watched over her as a warlike hen watches a delicate chick. It was unthinkable that Mother should be without her.

"But—but he said, 'the servants.' And there's only Sarah and Amy."

"Then he *must* mean Sarah. Well, I guess it will take a team of bullocks to drag her away!"

“Father wouldn’t keep her unless he could pay her,” Jean said. “My goodness, how poor he must have got!”

“And I ate three ices this afternoon,” said Jo, contritely. “I wish I hadn’t been such a greedy pig!”

“I did, too,” said Jean. “Why didn’t we get the letter a post earlier, and we needn’t have spent all that money going to bathe!”

“Well, it’s gone now,” Jo said, mournfully. “Anyhow, I suppose it’s only a drop in the bucket,” she sighed. “And I know he was hoping to be able to get a motor for Mother next year. Now I suppose it’s doubtful if we’ll even be able to keep the ponies.”

“The *ponies*?” Jean exclaimed. “You don’t mean to say you think they’ll have to go? Why, Jo—I just couldn’t imagine you without Pilot!”

Jo blinked something away rapidly.

“I can’t quite imagine myself,” she said dolefully. “Or you without Punch: it’s just as awful. But Father will simply *have* to keep Cruiser, Jean, ’cause he couldn’t work the place without him. That’s one comfort, at any rate.”

“Unless his awful sense of duty makes him sell Cruiser and ride some old crock,” Jean said. “It would be just like him to do that. But we’ll make mother put her foot down about it—he won’t do it if he realizes how we’d all hate to see him riding any horse except Cruiser.”

Jo nodded agreement.

“I wonder Mother didn’t write,” she said. “But I suppose she’s pretty busy: and she’s just waiting to talk it all out when we get home. How do you think we’ll get on at teaching Billy?”

Jean laughed.

“Oh, there will be a good deal of wool flying, now and then,” she said. “Billy hasn’t been exactly all jam for the governesses—he won’t be keen on obeying a mere pair of sisters. Perhaps it would have been as well if we’d had a bit of experience as prefects first.” She hesitated, looking out across the Bay at the sunset sky, against which the tall masts of a wheat-ship showed black and slender. “And only this afternoon we were scared blue at the very idea of becoming prefects!”

“Well, it needn’t scare us now,” Jo said, drily. “Oh, Jean, it’s going to be hateful to leave!”

“Yes, isn’t it?” Jean said. “And it’s hateful to have to tell every one—so we’d better get it over as soon as we can. Let’s go and see Miss Dampier, and then tell the girls.”

“All right,” Jo answered. “And if young Pearlie Alexander patronizes us

I'll—I'll—well, I'll cease to be a perfect lady immediately!"

"You'll have to begin by being one, first," responded her twin. "And so far, there hasn't been any sign of it!" At which they managed to laugh, and so took not uncheerful countenances to the study where Miss Dampier sat reading the evening paper.

The Head was not at all cheery. She was to be bereft of so many of her seniors that next year's discipline presented something of a problem to her; in addition, she was genuinely fond of the twins and of their mother, and sympathized very heartily in their difficulties. She spoke so kindly that Jo and Jean found her suddenly more human than they had ever imagined that she could be, and talked freely to her of their disappointment and their hopes and fears for the future. It came upon both with a shock of horror, later on, that they had used slang expressions several times, and that the Head had never seemed to notice it!

She dismissed them at length, and they went slowly down the passage that led to the senior girls' studies. No preparation was done on the last nights of term; already the holiday spirit had infected every one. From the big schoolroom came the notes of a piano and a shouted chorus that showed that the junior school was making merry. Several of the studies they passed were in darkness, their doors ajar, their owners released from the tedium of nightly toil. Helen Forester's door was also ajar, but light streamed from it, and the sound of many voices. The twins looked in.

"Hullo, you two!" Nita Anderson greeted them. "We thought you had succumbed to the mingled effects of bathing and ice-cream. And then an awestruck junior reported that you had gone to Miss Dampier's room. Anything wrong?"

"Pretty awfully wrong—for us," Jo said. "We've got to leave school!"

"Oh—*twinses*!" Helen Forester's voice was a cry of distress. She crossed the room quickly, putting an arm round each. "Not—not your mother?"

"Oh, no. Mother's all right," Jean answered "It's just horrid old money." Her face was flushed, but she kept her head up, looking bravely at the concerned faces round her. "Father's been awfully hard hit by the drought—he kept things from us as long as ever he could, hoping they'd pull round, and they haven't. The stock haven't anything to eat, and he's buying feed."

She stopped, on the verge of further revelations. Suddenly she realized that her father would not like her to speak of the friend to whom he had lent money, and who had failed to return it.

"Got to cut down expenses." Jo took up the story. "School-bills are simply awful, of course, 'specially for people as fond of ices as we are! House-

expenses, too—we're going to be cooks and bottlewashers, and teach Billy in the intervals. Billy doesn't respect us at all, so I don't know how *that's* going to answer. But we shan't have a dull moment."

She stopped abruptly: so far she had rattled on, but she knew that her voice would not carry her much farther. She was desperately afraid of pity. But no one pitied them.

"Well, you are bricks!" Helen said, cheerily. "Such a chance: we always talk, or think, about doing things for our people, but it generally ends in their doing everything for us, in the same old way. Now you two are really going to do things. You'll have no end of fun."

Her eyes sought Ellen Webster's, saying silently, "Back me up!" Ellen responded promptly.

"Woe is me!" she said, dismally. "Here are you off to Ceylon, Helen, and all the others to frivol or be artistic, and who is going to support me? I'd depended on the twinses. They were going to be kept under my eagle eye and gradually hatched into the perfect prefect! Now they'll be fully-fledged housekeepers, and they'll look down on me as a little schoolgirl. It isn't fair!"

This point of view had very naturally failed to present itself to Jean and Jo. It had not occurred to them that any one could possibly feel aggrieved at their going. Being only human, they found it cheering.

"But we don't want to go a bit——" they began.

"Oh, you think you don't. But wait until you've been home a few months, running things, and see how you'd feel at the idea of coming back—back to being put in your place by Smithy, and asked at short notice for the subjunctive of a hideous irregular French verb, or made to walk in a crocodile every day! Catch either of you giving up your independence, once you've got it!"

"But we shan't be independent—you seem to forget there's Mother."

"No—but I know you two!" said Ellen darkly. "I've been vice-captain for a year, and I pity your hapless parents!"

"Yes, poor things!" Nita agreed. "Of course, they won't be hapless for ever—the drought will break, and stock will go up with a rush, and they'll become horribly rich——"

"This isn't a story," said Jo, regarding her sternly. "It's real life."

"Well, that's what I'm talking about," said Nita, much injured. "This is the way it happens in the best circles. I wish you wouldn't interrupt me just as I get thrilling. Where was I?—oh, yes, horribly rich, and then they'll send the twinses to France and Switzerland, to finish off, and they'll be touring the world when they ought to be thinking of Junior Public Exams. Their characters

will be ruined, of course, but they'll have a gorgeous time!"

"Yes," said Grace. "Then they'll come home and find me painting for a crust, in a torn overall, and they'll charitably give me three-and-elevenpence for my landscapes——"

"And sell them at a jumble sale!" put in Nita cruelly.

"Oh, I suppose so. That's how great charitable reputations are worked up. And they'll look at me through lorgnettes, and say to themselves, 'Dear me, and to think we were at school with that old thing! Hasn't she grown into a perfect haybag?' Because, being purse-proud and ignorant, they won't know an artistic figure when they see it. And they'll ask me what has become of that queer, gawky Nita Anderson, and I shall reply, 'Oh, quite dropped out of decent society—she's taken to golf!' "

The soft drawl ceased abruptly, as the outraged Nita picked up the artistic one in her muscular arms and deposited her on the sofa, where she sat upon her, to keep her quiet, she explained. When the tumult caused by this interlude had subsided—it had managed to include most of those present—the twins were so weak with laughter that their troubles seemed faint and far-off things. The cheery chaff went on—they were somehow the centre of it, and they knew that every one else was trying to "buck them up." It was only decent to respond; "blues" were for private consumption only, and must not be allowed to darken end-of-term gatherings. So the twins became as cheerful as anyone, and put away resolutely the spectres of drought and unpaid bills and household worries. Later on, these would have their place; to-night was to-night, and every one must be merry.

Bed-time came, and, one by one, the girls drifted away until there were only Helen and Ellen Webster left. The twins were perched, cross-legged, on each end of the Chesterfield couch, and Ellen looked at them, her queer, elfin face, with its sharp features, settling into its accustomed gravity.

"Well, I've ragged all the evening, but I'm going to be serious for two minutes," she said: "just long enough to say I'm horribly sorry you're going."

"Thanks," the twins said, nodding at her. "But we'd never have made decent prefects, Ellen—truly."

"I've my own opinion about that. But apart from being prefects, I'm going to miss you. You don't seem to consider I've a thought apart from prefecting!"

"Well, we're going to miss you. Oh, my goodness, how we're going to miss every one!" Jo breathed. "Even the irregular verbs and the crocodile. We've had an awful lot of fun this year!"

"I don't look forward to nearly so much as I've had," sighed Ellen. "You two cheerful lunatics will be gone, for one thing: so will Helen, whom I

mustn't call a lunatic, because she's Captain, but who is very cheerful. And nearly all the old set will be gone, and I'll be left like a pelican on the housetop. But it's worst of all for you, because you'll have worries as well. I just wanted you to know I was sorry."

"You've all been jolly good," Jean said. "I don't suppose we realize the worries yet. Of course we've never been rich, but we've had all we wanted. That's one way of being rich, I expect. But it's going to be horrid to think Father and Mother have worries we can't help."

"But you *are* going to help. Look at all you'll be saving them."

"Yes, but that doesn't seem like making money. If only we could keep Sarah for Mother—'cause Sarah understands all about her, and she's as good as a nurse if she's ill. I wouldn't care how hard we worked, if only we could keep Sarah. But it's no use wishing. No one is much good when they aren't even sixteen yet," finished Jo, with an utter lack of grammar and a woe-begone expression.

"No—as far as making money goes, you can't expect to be marvels," Ellen agreed. "But do remember that you're helping when you save, because that will help you yourselves—ever so much."

"You're going to help in dozens of ways, and most of all by bucking them up," said Helen firmly. "No worries can be half so bad with you cheery twinses about. You've just got to go home and be Knights of the Cheerful Countenance, and that's something a long way better than money. And don't forget that bad times don't last for ever—especially if you make up your mind not to regard them as bad. Now, just uncurl yourselves from those sofa-ends and go off to bed, or Miss Dampier will ask if I've already ceased to be Captain!"

"The twins loved their window-seat, and generally read their home-letters in it."
The Twins of Emu Plains] [*Page 43*

CHAPTER V

HELEN HAS AN IDEA

"TWINSES, are you awake?"

"Yes," said Jean and Jo, together.

They had awakened early, and had lain for an hour discussing their father's news, and trying to face all that it meant for them. Last night had been a kind of whirl, in which it was difficult to realize anything; but in the quiet of the summer morning it was easier to look steadily at the future. They had re-read Mr. Weston's letter, with a fresh rush of pity for the pain that lay between its lines. Dimly they realized what it had cost him to write it. It made them ache to make things easier for him.

Helen's voice broke across a wild vision on the part of Jo, in which she had just discovered a gold-mine in one of the back paddocks, and had so put an end for ever to financial shortage. Jean was as thrilled as she over this dazzling prospect, and they both started violently at the interruption.

Helen came in, very tall and impressive in her kimono, with two long plaits of fair hair.

"I thought you'd be awake," she said, sitting down on the edge of a bed. "I've had a gorgeous idea, and I simply couldn't wait any longer to tell you about it."

"What is it?" burst from the twins.

"Well, you know, you mustn't be offended. But you've got too much sense to be that. You made me think of it by saying you wished you could make some money to help your father."

"Try us!" said Jo briefly.

"Well, it's my young brother, Rex. You know I told you the other day that he was rather a problem to us—we don't know what to do with him when we go to Colombo. Mother has been at her wits' end for a place to depot him. He had a bad illness eight months ago, and we don't want to send him to boarding-school until he's twelve. Not that he isn't strong enough; but he just wants a bit of extra care—or Mother thinks he does, which comes to the same thing. She would like him to run wild for a year or two, with just enough teaching to keep him from being too much of a dunce."

"Yes?" said the twins.

"Well—we're not short of money, you know, but it's one of the places where money doesn't help one much. Mother said in her last letter that she and Father wouldn't care what they paid if only they could get the sort of home they want for him. But they just couldn't come across anything, and they've been ever so worried, for Father simply *must* start for Colombo this month."

"Jolly rough on your mother," said Jo sympathetically. "I wish we could help, Helen: I know Mother would take Rex like a shot, only I suppose I'd better not tell her now, with things as mixed as they are. If we were even going to keep Sarah——"

"But that's just it!" Helen cried excitedly. "I want you to take him. Only you'll have to make Mr. and Mrs. Weston put their pride in their pocket and let us pay for him."

The twins' faces expressed blank amazement.

"Pay? For a friend? Well, you *are* queer, Helen!"

"Oh, don't be horrid and difficult!" Helen begged. "Don't you see that's the only thing that makes it possible even for me to speak of it? We must pay for him somewhere: if we can't find the sort of place we want we'll probably have to send him to some boarding-house in the hills with a governess that we don't know anything about—a horrible arrangement, and as far as payment goes it would cost ever so much more. But to send him to you people would be just ideal for us: Mother would know that Mrs. Weston would mother the little chap, and Mr. Weston would keep him straightened up, and you two could teach him—you're going to teach Billy, and you might just as well have another pupil. Mother would go off to Colombo feeling as if she hadn't a care in the world if Rex were at your place!"

"Well, we'd love to have him," said Jean. "But—to be *paid*——"

"You were saying only last night how you wanted to earn money," Helen interrupted. "Well, does it matter from whom you earn it? If you were trained nurses, do you mean to say you would only go to strangers? I think it's just splendid if we can manage to help each other, and make things simpler all round."

She glared triumphantly upon the twins, who sat in puzzled silence. She was Captain, and her words sounded very like sense: but all their instincts of hospitality and friendship were at war with her proposal.

"Think!" said the artful one. "You needn't even ask your father and mother—they'd never turn us down, once you'd made the arrangement. Such a chance for you to help them—to say nothing of us! Why, it would mean that you could keep old Sarah—and think what a difference that would make! Even if you aren't sixteen you can manage it."

The twins drew a long breath. It was a dazzling prospect. Hard times with Sarah seemed only a circumstance to hard times without that rock of defence.

"I wonder—I wonder if Father would be awfully wild!" Jo pondered.

"Not he—once it was done. Your father has too much sense: how do you think *he* feels about parting Mrs. Weston from Sarah?"

"Why, I guess it's a nightmare to him," said Jo.

"Well, you've got it in your power to spare him that, at any rate."

Jean caught at her twin's hand.

"Oh, Jo, let's do it!" she begged. "It's only silly pride if we don't, as Helen says. And we'll do our level best to give him a good time and look after him. It will be lovely for Billy, too—he's always wanted a mate."

"It would be altogether lovely," said Jo,—"if only horrid old money didn't come into it. But I agree with you—we'd be stupid not to take such a chance."

"Oh, thank goodness!" said Helen. "Mother will feel simply years younger. Now look here, twinses: I'm to meet her in town this afternoon, so you had better write her a letter, and then she and I can fix everything up."

"All right," said Jo. "Dig out a dictionary, will you, Jean?—we mustn't spoil our chances by putting in bad spelling!"

"If you spelt every other word wrong it wouldn't worry Mother just now," Helen said, laughing. "It's mothering and a jolly home she wants for Rex, not higher flights of knowledge!"

"There are no higher flights about my spelling!" said Jo, with decision. "You ask Miss Allpress!"

Whereupon the twins politely hinted that solitude would be helpful to them, and applied themselves to composition; the result being a document over which Mrs. Forester smiled in a Melbourne tea-room that afternoon.

"DEAR MRS. FORESTER,—

"Helen says you want a home for Rex, and she thinks you would let him come to us. We think it is perfectly awful to take money for having him, which we would love to do without any money at all, but Helen says it must not be. So, as Father is having hard times with the drought and other things, and we must leave school and teach Billy, what would you think about trusting Rex to us? Mother and Father would act as parents to him, we are sure, and we would try to make him happy." ("I *like* the division of duties!" murmured Mrs. Forester.) "We do not know if we are any good at teaching, but we are up to Junior Public work, and we are going to teach Billy, so he and Rex could have lessons together. We would do our best, and each of us could teach the

subjects she was best at; as, for instance, I cannot do French at all, while Jean is a whale at it, and she hates mathematics, which I love. We can both teach him riding, swimming, and gym. work, and see that he baths himself thoroughly, and cleans his teeth. Mother and Father do not know anything about our proposal, and we know they will hate taking money, so we thought we would fix it up without them, if you approve, which Helen says she thinks you will. We would give him the best time we could, if you let us have him, and take tremendous care of him, and Billy would love a mate. Wishing you a happy Christmas, we are,

"Yours sincerely,
JEAN and JO WESTON."

(Jo had said she didn't think Christmas wishes were correct in a letter that was strictly business. But Jean had contended that civility always paid, and that kind wishes were only civil. She had carried her point, after heated discussion.)

"They sound a most cheerful pair," Mrs. Forester said, folding up the letter and putting it carefully away in her hand-bag. "I haven't seen them for years."

"Oh, they're priceless!" said her daughter. "Thank goodness they didn't leave during my time—but I'm sorry for Ellen. They're so cheery, and absolutely straight; the sort of people who are a good influence in the school, without having the least idea of it. You'll let Rex go, won't you, Mother?"

"I must consult your father first. But so far as I am concerned, I think it is a splendid opportunity. To get him with people we know—and especially people like the Westons—well, it's just a wonderful chance. Even if he learned nothing at all, I should go away happily if I could leave him with the Westons. I'll see Father to-night, and talk it over with him. Now I wonder how much those stiff-necked people will let us pay for him?"

"They will try to make it about sixpence a week, unless you're firm," said Helen.

"Yes. And boarding-school, with holiday expenses as well, would cost about £150, and it wouldn't be a quarter as satisfactory. Well, I must try to clinch a bargain with the girls before they see their parents, and bind them down to take a decent sum. Poor John Weston! I'm very sorry he's so hard-hit. It's hard on the girls, too. You say they told all the school?"

"Oh, yes—with their proud little noses well in the air. Every one was awfully nice to them though, and no one pitied them except young Pearlie Alexander, who reeks of money. And Jean looked at her and said, 'Oh, but it's so horribly boring to stay at school after you're sixteen!'—with such an air that Pearlie actually believed her, and felt quite crushed. All the small fry have been weeping on their necks—the juniors all love them. Lots of girls might

have their heads turned, but the twinses are sublimely unconscious of being regarded with affection by the school. Jo merely remarked to me that it was queer how decent everybody was to people in a hole!"

"Are they very good-natured and easy-going, Helen? Or will they be firm with Rex?"

"They have heaps of sense," Helen said slowly. "Of course they haven't been tried out at school yet, but I should think, from their way with the juniors, that they wouldn't stand any nonsense."

"Rex needs firmness," Mrs. Forester said, a little anxiously. "He has got rather out of hand lately—Father has had to be away so much, and I have been busy preparing the house for being shut up. He has had no lessons since Miss Green left."

"Well, there will be Mr. Weston. I don't suppose he is likely to let Master Rex think he can do as he likes."

"Not if he has time to be bothered with him. However, Rex is less likely to get his own way in a household like the Westons' than with a governess in a boarding-house; and we were beginning to face that possibility. If the twins are sensible with him, he will be all right—I mean, if they don't pet him. Not that Rex is altogether pettable!"

"You needn't worry about that," Helen said decidedly. "They have a little brother of their own—I fancy the ways of small boys are quite well known to them."

"Yes, that's a great help," her mother said. "Well, I shan't worry—except as to the possibility of Mr. and Mrs. Weston putting a veto on the proposal altogether."

So Helen carried back a hopeful message to the anxiously awaiting twins; and next evening they rushed into her study with excited faces, waving a letter.

"It's all settled, Helen! What a nice mother you've got!"

"I've suspected it for some years," remarked Helen, laughing. "What has she done now?"

"Listen! It sounds too splendid to be true.

" 'My dear Jean and Jo,—

" 'Your letter has relieved my mind of a very pressing problem. Of course, I understand that you wrote without referring to your parents, but I hope that when they realize how much Mr. Forester and I would value the arrangement they will not refuse their consent. We shall be delighted to leave Rex with you; I trust you won't find him a great nuisance—he has had rather too much of his

own way lately, and needs a firm hand.

" 'When I hear from your mother I will write more fully about him. Just now, I would like to arrange the business side with you girls—we wish to pay at the rate of £150 a year for the privilege of leaving Rex with you all. And I am making so certain that Mr. and Mrs. Weston won't refuse that I have ceased making inquiries for a governess or any other way of arranging for him.

" 'Will you tell your mother that while we are deeply sorry that hard times should come to our old friends, we find it hard not to feel a selfish gladness that they make possible an arrangement which ensures such a home for our small boy?

" 'Yours very sincerely,
" '*Elaine Forester*.'

"So there!" said Jo. "Isn't it scrumptious!"

"But—a hundred and fifty pounds!" ejaculated Jean. "It isn't worth it—three pounds a week for a bit of a shrimp like that!"

"That's rubbish!" said Helen inelegantly. "We might easily have had to pay much more, so, you see, you're saving us goodness knows how much. And the peace of mind you'll be giving us is worth thousands!"

"That may be, but we don't charge for peace of mind," said Jo, laughing. "It's given in, like the coupon with the pound of tea. And it really is a ridiculous sum to pay for a little chap."

"Father's fixed it," said Helen stubbornly. "You'd better talk to him—if you really feel you must. I wouldn't advise it, because he would simply wipe the floor with you; when Father fixes a thing it usually remains so. And when you have finished arguing with Father there will be Mother to tackle. And you can argue and argue, and at the end the sum will still be £150!"

"I don't think you're a bit nice!" said the twins in chorus.

"I'm ever so much nicer than Father will be if you try to upset his figures."

"But what about *our* father? He'll certainly want to upset them."

"He can't if you've accepted the arrangement. It isn't fair to Father: he has written down the Rex page of his ledger as closed, and now he's off in full cry after income-tax arrangements or tea-plantation figures, and you want to take him from them and drag him back to considering Rex again. And he's *so* busy; there'll be nothing left of him by the time we sail. Please—please don't worry him any more, twinses!"

She looked so appealing that the twins gave way.

"Well, I only hope Father won't be very angry," said Jo.

“Tell him if he tries to alter our very sensible and business-like arrangement that Father will make the £150 into £200!” said Helen, laughing. “That should reduce him to order. And when he’s had Rex for a while he’ll think that even £200 wasn’t much!”

At the moment no one had much time to worry over private affairs, however urgent; for it was the last evening of the term, and half Melbourne was coming to the speech-night. The big schoolroom was gay with flags and flowers, with pot-plants massed upon the little stage at one end; and every one was getting into white frocks, while here and there were the anxious faces of the harassed individuals responsible for items on the programme. The twins had long looked forward to having their father and mother down for the great occasion, but a worried little note from Mrs. Weston had said plainly that at the moment the expense of coming could not be faced. It took away half the joy of the evening that the two dear faces were not to be among the long rows of parents who were coming to beam upon excited daughters. Still, there was no help for it, as the twins realized: and Helen had wisely kept them so busy that they had no time to think. Now, although the evening could not be all that they had hoped, it was still their first speech-night; and to-morrow there would be home, with Mrs. Forester’s wonderful letter to show. The twins found it quite beyond their power to feel gloomy.

Tea was a more or less sketchy meal, at which a junior teacher presided, and Miss Dampier made only a fleeting appearance. No one really wanted to eat; there were still odds and ends of packing to be done, farewells to be said, final touches to be put to preparations for the evening. Moreover, from time immemorial there had been Miss Dampier’s supper for the boarders after the guests had gone, and it was a supper which made tea beforehand seem a mere excrescence. So girls drifted in and out as they liked, and the artistes of the evening brought books or music to the table, studying the fingering of the Moonlight Sonata, or Portia’s remarks on Mercy, while they absently consumed weak tea.

Day-girls concerned with the programme began to arrive soon, and there was much dressing and undressing in studies and bedrooms, with anguished appeals for forgotten burnt-cork and other aids to a good stage-appearance: for there was a little play to be given, and in the eyes of the cast Beethoven and Shakespeare were unimportant details beside it. The twins made a brief but glorious appearance in the play, as Corsican bandits—slim figures in tunics and gym. knickers, with enormous slouch-hats concealing their darkened features and corked moustaches, Neapolitan scarves knotted about their necks, and with crimson silk sashes, in which were stuck a very arsenal of lethal weapons, ranging from ancient duelling-pistols to Gurkha kukris and Canary

Island daggers—the species of outfit, in brief, without which no self-respecting Corsican may be found. They fought, were slain, died with artistic gurgles, and were dragged out by the heels; and the junior school, with sighs of rapture, mourned openly that Merriwa was to know them no more.

They appeared in different guise later on, in soft white frocks, their curls clustering about faces scrubbed to a fine rosy polish—the burnt-cork had taken some getting off. On this occasion it was their fate to ascend the daïs modestly and receive prizes at the hands of the Distinguished Person presiding—Jean an award for the French at which, as has been previously stated, she was "a whale," while Jo, to her own amazement, found herself the owner of Miss Smith's prize for cookery. Her bewilderment at this was so profound that she almost forgot to bow, and was only recalled to a sense of her position by a dig in the back from the Domestic Economy prize-winner, who was behind her.

"Who'd have thought it!" she ejaculated inelegantly, regaining her seat. "Will you ever forget Smithy's remarks on the sausage-rolls that I mixed up with sugar?"

"Oh, but that's ever so long ago," Gladys said. "I know—it's that Angels' Food affair you compounded last cooking-day. You said yourself it was poetic!"

"Yes, but I also said it was a fluke!" rejoined the artist. "And I thought no one knew that better than Smithy!"

She was still regarding with astonishment the huge leather-bound copy of "Mrs. Beeton" that Miss Smith had presented as a tribute to the Angels' Food, when her name was again called, this time with Jean's. Jo dumped "Mrs. Beeton" on her neighbour's knee, and the twins went up together to receive little silver cups that were to remind them of the tennis victory of that week. This time the junior school let itself loose. It had been—unfortunately—not permitted to them to applaud the spectacular decease of the Corsican bandits, since it had occurred at a moment when applause would have wrecked the progress of the drama; and French and cookery, while all very well in their way, made no special appeal to the hordes of juniors. But the tennis cups were a different matter—had they not palpitated *en masse* throughout that last wild set when the twins had snatched victory from the jaws of Kooringal? Wherefore they made the long room ring with the noise of their enthusiasm, clapping until their hard young hands rang again. The twins stood, flushing, a little taken aback by the warmth of their reception. Then they dived for cover among the applauding ranks.

"Such dear things!" murmured the Distinguished Person, looking after them with a twinkle in her distinguished eye. "And they were such *lovely*

bandits! Tell me, Miss Dampier, do you ever manage to tell them apart?"

"Sometimes," the Head admitted. "Not always, by any means—for their first three months at school I never knew whether I was speaking to Jean or Jo. Even now, if possible, I begin by saying the name of the one I want, in a determined tone; the wrong twin won't respond, to me, though I believe they take an awful joy in doing so among their mates, out of school. But there are many occasions when I am reduced to saying 'dear'; and I am always in doubt as to whether the twin I am addressing isn't well aware that my affection is only an insufficient cloak for ignorance!"

The Distinguished Person bestowed a geography prize upon a quaking junior.

"I wonder does their mother ever confuse them?' she pondered.

"Oh, quite often, she has told me. The only person who never fails to know them apart is a small brother who bluntly says that he fails to see any likeness between them!"

"Dear me!" said the Distinguished One faintly. "How uncanny!" She gave away the next prize with a bewildered air that the recipient imagined was inspired by the spectacle of so much learning.

Visitors, distinguished and otherwise, vanished at the end of the prize-giving. Day-girls bade farewell to the boarders, exulting in the thought that to them the morrow would bring release from early rising and racing for trains and trams. Jean and Jo were the centre of a cheerful crowd—sorrow at parting lost in the overwhelming joy of the Christmas holidays. Their arms ached with shaking hands when the last farewells had been said, and they found themselves trooping with the other boarders to Miss Dampier's supper.

It was at these farewell suppers that Miss Dampier showed that she fully understood the impossibility of making a decent tea on speech-night, and the consequent need of later nourishment. The nourishment she provided was of a kind that made the most irresponsible junior wonder if up till now she had not misjudged her head mistress. Moreover, she presided with a pleasant tact, bidding every one help herself, and restricting her conversation to teachers and seniors until it was evident that even the hungriest could eat no more. Then she moved about among her guests, with an understanding word for each; and those who were not coming back found themselves singled out for a special little chat and a few words that lay warm at their hearts long after they had gone away.

"Somehow, I don't feel as if it were really good-bye to you, twinses," she said; and Jean and Jo found nothing strange in the unfamiliar sound of the familiar school nickname on the Head's lips. "It's more as though you were

going home on a visit—a long one, perhaps, but it may happen that you will come back."

"Oh—we'd love to, Miss Dampier. Do you think there's really any chance?"

"One never knows. Luck turns quickly in Australia."

"O—o—oh!" said the twins, and looked longingly at each other. School had never seemed so desirable as on this last night. It was a gay and delightful place, with not even the spectre of an irregular verb or an early-morning bell: full of pleasant people and understanding teachers. They caught at the hope of returning to it.

"Oh, we'd love to come back!"

"Well, there would always be a big welcome for you. Tell your mother I had counted upon having you to help me next term." She smiled at them, knowing she had summed up in those few words the answers to a dozen questions that the mother would have asked. "And I know you'll help her through." She drifted away through the throng, her grey head, with its exquisitely dressed hair, towering above every one.

The twins were going by a very early train; all their good-byes had to be said that night. Helen Forester came up with them to their little bedroom.

"Got all your packing done?"

"Oh, yes. The trunks have gone down."

"It seems queer to think it's the last night," Helen said. "And to-day I was Captain, and to-morrow I'll be—oh, very small potatoes! What fun it's all been! Oh, you ought to be coming back, twinses!"

"Perhaps we shall, some day. Miss Dampier seemed to think so," Jean said. "After all, we're not so awfully old!"

Helen looked at the eager faces framed in the short curls.

"No, you're not so awfully old," she said. "Especially to have responsibilities. Don't grow up too soon, kiddies."

"Gracious!" ejaculated Jo. "And you've given us the biggest responsibility of all, you blessed old darling! Aren't you nervous about trusting us with Rex?"

Helen laughed.

"Why, I think to-night proves that you're, together, an association capable of dealing with any small boy," she said. "One of you has a prize for learning, and the other for cooking, and joint cups for hard-hitting! What more could anyone want? Rex ought to come back to us re-modelled in mind and body."

“Oh—Helen!” protested the twins.

Helen put an arm about each.

“Don’t spoil him—that’s the only thing I’m afraid of,” she said. “Good-bye, twinses dear: I’m so glad I was at school with you, ’cause you’re a nice old pair!” She dropped a kiss on each face, and was gone.

CHAPTER VI

EMU PLAINS

"FOR the first time," said John Weston, "I'm not keen on going in to meet my daughters."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself," said his wife briskly.

"Well, I am. And that's why."

"I never heard such nonsense," Mrs. Weston said. "If every one in Australia who had had bad luck on top of a drought were to go about feeling ashamed, a nice place Australia would be! No one could have foreseen all the losses you have had. You certainly have no right to blame yourself."

"Oh, I know all that," said her husband, laughing rather grimly. "You needn't ruffle up all your feathers, you fierce old mother-hen! But the youngsters may not realize it all; and anyway, it hurts a bit to meet them as a failure, and not as the person who has generally been regarded as a providing agency that always could be relied on. I feel as if I had let them down badly; and it isn't a pleasant feeling, Mary. I get it every time Sarah glares at me."

"But she isn't glaring because we have lost money—only because we won't let her stay without wages."

"Oh, well, of course that's rank insanity," said her husband. "I wish I hadn't any pride, for your sake; it makes me squirm whenever I think of your being without Sarah. But—one can't do that."

"I do wish you wouldn't worry your dear old head about it," said Mrs. Weston comfortably. "If I can't manage, with two able-bodied daughters to help me, I should be the one to be ashamed. And we *are* going to manage, and very happily too. I quite look forward to running the house with the girls. They are such cheery souls—they'll always make the best of things."

"Well, they get that from their mother," said the big man, looking down at her with many things expressed in his grey eyes. "To hear you talk, one would think that all this trouble I've landed you in for was just a picnic."

"If you want to make me really cross," said his wife, looking at the moment as if nothing on earth could ruffle her, "you will continue to stand there and talk nonsense. I don't worry when Billy tears his trousers, because I know that little boys *will* tear their trousers, whether one worries or not; and I'm not going to worry when bad luck comes along, because one can't expect good luck always. But I shall worry if you go about looking miserable: and it

will be much harder for the girls. So you mustn't."

"Bless you!" said John Weston, his face suddenly grown younger. "Well, I suppose I'd better start." He stooped to kiss her. "Where's Billy?"

Billy answered for himself, characteristically. The gravel on the path by the window rattled under racing feet, and he came in through the window, crossing the sill with a swift, lithe movement.

"Didn't touch the curtains, Mother—truly! I've been down at the creek, and I was afraid Father would be gone."

"I nearly am," said his father. "Are you ready, or will you have to clean up?"

"I'm pretty clean," said Billy, looking down at himself. He was a slender, lightly built little fellow, with an elf-like face—with small features, and very bright brown eyes. Like his sisters', his hair curled, but his was inclined to be red. Billy despised boys with curly hair, and would have had his shorn almost to the skin, had his mother permitted. "Do I need to put on another coat, Mother?"

"Certainly you need, my son. You'll find a clean holland coat on your bed."

"Hurry up, old man," said his father. The injunction was lost on Billy. He dashed from the room, pounded down the hall, and returned in an astonishingly short space of time, spruce and merry. His father was already in the buggy. Billy dropped a hurried kiss on top of his mother's head, and raced out to join him.

They drove in a high express-waggon, which had ample room behind for luggage: the two-wheeled "jinker," or Mrs. Weston's light hooded buggy, were no use when girls with trunks and suit-cases had to be brought home. A heavy pair of iron-grey horses bowled them along at a good round pace. They were horses accustomed to any sort of work: singly or together they went in the buggy, the plough, the cart; they might draw a disc-harrow to-day, and take a turn at rounding up cattle to-morrow. They were splendidly matched, and though just now they were in poor condition, they held themselves as proudly as thoroughbreds, as they trotted along. John Weston had bred them himself, and he loved the gentle, honest animals. His face was gloomy now as he watched them. All the district knew the big greys, and lately he had had a good offer for them. It was the kind of offer he would have laughed at a year ago. But now—money had become a big thing: Prince and Captain might have to go.

"May I drive, Father?"

Billy's voice brought him out of a reverie.

"All right, Son." He gave the reins into the eager brown hands, and made him hold them correctly, watching him as they spun along. Billy took them successfully over a rather narrow culvert, kept a wary eye upon a noisy motor-van, which did not trouble the greys at all, and presently dodged between a timber-waggon and a farm-cart in a way that brought a gruff word of praise to his father's lips. This brought upon Billy the pride that goes before destruction, and in an effort to show how near he could drive to a hawker's van he very nearly removed its wheel—bringing upon them the wrath of the hawker, with shouted inquiries as to whether they desired to retain the whole of the road. Somewhat chastened in spirit, Billy drove with great care, and gave other traffic a wide berth: so that they arrived in the township without further misadventure.

It was sale-day, and the little town was busy. Farmers' buggies and motors thronged the streets; the shops were crowded with the cheery, brown-faced country women, who knew precisely what they wanted to buy, and were not to be deceived by the most tempting "bargain-lines" displayed at "alarming sacrifices" by the drapers. Little boys, in little tweed suits, and little girls, with well-frizzed hair, accompanied their mothers; while babies were as the sands of the sea in number. The fences surrounding the sale-yards were black with men; more sellers than buyers, for there were few men in the district with grass left for their stock. There were many hearty greetings for John Weston as he drove up the street.

"Getting the girls back, John?"

"Yes. And you're in to meet Tom, I suppose?"

"Yes—he comes by this train. Now the house will wake up again!"

The speaker was a short, stout man with a round, good-humoured face, who sat in a motor outside the station. He was Evan Holmes, of Holmdale, the largest station in the district. Like all the other landowners, he had felt the drought; but, unlike them, he had a well-grassed property in Gippsland, where there was no drought, and he had sent his stock there until better conditions should come to the northern areas. Therefore his good-humour was unfailing, and no lines of worry had creased his brow. John Weston and he had been to school together, and, so far as was possible, he had stood by his old friend, sending some of his best cattle to Gippsland with his own. He looked up now and spoke concerning these.

"Heard from McIntyre this morning, John. He says your stock are doing splendidly."

"Well, that's something to be thankful for, at any rate," said Weston.

"Wonderful season, down there. They grumble, of course, and say it's dry

—but compared to here——!" The speaker swept a hand round the dry landscape. "Green feed—strawberry clover, and all the rest of it: running creeks. I sometimes wonder we don't all move down there."

"This part is good enough for me," said his friend. "We don't get a drought every year."

"That's true. And you can't beat it when we don't. A man likes his own country, especially when he was born and brought up in it, as you and I were. Oh, well, bad times pass: everything comes right, if you give it long enough. How do the girls like coming home?"

"They write as if it were a huge joke: but of course I knew they wouldn't grumble, whatever they might feel. The only thing that seemed to worry them was that their mother and I wouldn't go down for the breaking-up."

"Yes, that would worry the twins," said Mr. Holmes. "Tom was a bit disgusted that I couldn't get down for his, too: but my wife went. She'll be home on Christmas Eve, but Tom wouldn't stay: he always makes for home as quickly as he can. There's the train now"—as a far-off whistle was heard. "Let my man hold your horses—he's brought the cart in for some boxes. Here, Joe!" He whistled to a man who was lounging near the entrance-gate. John Weston got down from his high seat, and they went in together to the platform, where Billy was already dancing with impatience.

There was no difficulty in finding Jean and Jo. They had secured an open doorway, and, in complete defiance of railway regulations, were projecting their persons as far as possible into space, that they might the more quickly reach home. They uttered a composite shout at the sight of their father and Billy, and further defied the regulations by swinging themselves down from the train before it had come to a standstill. A wail from the station-master floated by them unheeded. They darted up the platform together and flung themselves upon their father.

"Do you behave like that in Melbourne?" he demanded, laughing, an arm round each.

"Gracious, no! we're models of deportment," Jo answered. "But then you're not in Melbourne, and you've a terribly demoralizing effect, Father. Oh, there's the baby! and he's grown *yards*!" She hugged Billy.

"Baby yourself!" quoth Billy, indignantly. He hopped about them on one foot. "Give us something to carry—here, I'll take that!" He grasped a suit-case.

"You can't carry that, Billy darling—it's too heavy," Jean objected. "Take the umbrellas."

"Umbrellas!" snorted her brother. "Boys don't cart umbrellas round." Gripping the suit-case, he staggered off, unheeding feminine remonstrances.

“How are you, Tom?” Mr. Weston detached himself from his daughters to greet a stout youth who had followed them from the train. “Glad to see you back, though you’ve come to a dry country.”

“It’s the best place I know, anyhow,” said Tom Holmes, shaking hands all round, and bestowing a shy grin upon the twins. “And we’ll get rain some time or other, and then every one’ll have a few thumping seasons and forget the drought. I wish Dad would let me cut school and stay at home to help him: I’ll never do a bit of good at school, and I do love messing about at home.”

“Lazy young dog!” said his father cheerfully. “Another year’s lessons won’t hurt you.”

Tom groaned dramatically.

“Latin!” he said, with a resigned shrug. “And maths! I try to stick arithmetic, so’s I’ll be able to work out interest on mortgages”—he grinned at his father—“but I’m blessed if I can see the use of Euclid or Horace or Virgil on a cattle-station. I seem to spend half my time over Virgil, but I never learn a word that’ll be handy in a tight corner with bullocks!”

“Ah, that’s specialized knowledge, and comes later on,” said his father, laughing. “Come along, now, and gather up your luggage: we’ve got to have dinner at the hotel. Any use asking you and the girls to join us, John?”

“No, thanks; my wife will be looking out for us. I never can get the girls home quickly enough.” They said good-bye, and presently the twins were installed on the seat of the express-waggon, their father between them, while Billy perched on top of the heap of luggage at the back. Jo had the reins: it was an understood thing that she always drove when they came home. She wheeled the greys out of the crowded yard, dodging among motors, carts, and buggies, and in a few moments they were spinning along the dusty road towards home.

“Whew-w!” said Jean. “*Isn’t* everything dry!”

The familiar landscape was dreary in its barrenness. Nothing green was visible, save the line of trees that marked the nearly dry bed of the creek. The paddocks were brown stretches, almost bare: little swirls of dust rose here and there as the hot breeze blew over them. They passed crops—sad little crops of oats that had come into ear while only about a foot high, and were now not worth the labour of cutting.

Scarcely any stock could be seen. A few dusty brown sheep picked up a scant living in the paddocks near the creek, and here and there were hungry-looking cows, only kept alive by hand-feeding, and apparently getting short rations of that. Everywhere dust lay thick: on the fences, on the dried-up grass by the roadside, on the dull green leaves of the hawthorn hedges past which they drove. It was clear that many weeks had gone by since a shower of rain

had fallen to wash the all-covering dust away.

"Yes—you never saw the country looking like this before," said John Weston sadly.

"No, indeed. It comes home to you with a sort of a bang," Jo agreed. "Poor old Dad!" She put her hand on his for a brief moment.

"Wait until you see the stock," he said sadly. "That's what hurts: to ride out among them day after day, watching them getting poorer and poorer, and to feel you can't do anything to help them. I'm almost ashamed to go out now—they seem to look at me as if they expected me to help. Of course, most of them have gone—the cattle, I mean. Some I sold, the rest have gone down to Gippsland. Holmes says they're doing well enough there."

"What about the garden, Dad?" Jean asked.

"Oh, we've still a garden, thank goodness—you see, the windmill pumps the water up from the spring, and it's one of those obliging servants that works all the twenty-four hours and never asks for pay. So we can still keep the vegetables and your mother's garden going. But we'll have to do it ourselves: I've been compelled to let the Chinaman go. Sorry, too: he had the place in splendid order."

"We'll work," said Jo cheerfully. "I'm very handy with a hoe." She grinned across her father at Jean. " 'Member our old gardens, Jean?"

"Rather!" said Jean. "We had awful bursts of industry, and made them lovely, and planted all sorts of seeds, and then some evil influence came along ——"

"Generally Dad, with a job among the cattle," remarked Jo.

"Why, you monkey——!" protested Mr. Weston.

"Just so," Jean went on. "And so we would forget them, and the weeds would grow faster than the seeds, and presently there'd be nothing left of our poor gardens, 'cause Hop Sing would come along and dig them all up. Then we'd make another start!"

"Well, you'd better not grow vegetables on those principles," said Mr. Weston, laughing, "or it will be a bad look-out for our dinners. Not that I'm going to let you do much work of that kind. I suppose I'll be glad enough of some help with weeding now and then—my back isn't as young as it was—but you'll have plenty to do without that." He sighed heavily. "That's the worst of it all—so much is going to fall on your mother and you two; and I can't help it. If only I could keep old Sarah—and it's going to take a team of bullocks to shift her! She wants to stay without pay, bless her—says she's got enough saved up for her old age. But of course we can't allow that."

"Of course you couldn't," agreed the twins demurely. They exchanged, behind their father's back, ecstatic glances, which greatly puzzled Billy. "But you mustn't worry, Dad: we're awfully strong, and we won't let Mother do too much. It's all going to be great fun!"

"I hope you'll continue to think so," said their father dryly. "You're dear kiddies, anyhow, and we'll all try to make things easy for each other. Mother's the one who has to be spared in every way: I know you'll always remember that. Doing without Sarah is going to be harder for her than any of us can guess —not that she ever says so. But I know."

"Yes, of course," agreed Jean, with a queer little giggle that brought an inquiring look from her father. It was not quite like Jean to giggle at such a moment. Probably, he reflected, she was over-excited at getting home.

"I'm going to milk with Dad!" announced Billy, proudly, from his perch in the rear. "I've been practising, and I've milked old Strawberry three times!"

"Good old Billikens!" said Jo, turning to give him a sisterly pat. "Is it hard?"

"Men don't find those things hard," said Billy loftily. "You girls will have to be up to give us early tea before we start!"

"It shall be done," said Jo meekly. "Any other orders?"

"I'll let you know if there's anything else," replied Billy, preserving an unruffled masculine dignity. "Dad's going to start teaching me all about the stock soon. He says I can be useful to him in no end of ways."

"Yes—but lessons have got to come first, old son," remarked his father.

"Oh, lessons! *They* won't take long," remarked Billy airily. Plainly it could be seen that he regarded the prospect of education under his sisters as a huge joke.

"You little know," said Jean darkly. "We mean to turn you out a beautiful specimen of Higher Education before we've done with you. Manners and Deportment will be taught—sternly taught, young Billy!—and also Respect for Teachers——"

"Oh, *will* you?" responded Billy. He tipped his prospective instructor's hat over her eyes, and scrambled off across the luggage to avoid reprisals. They were just turning in towards the big gate that opened into the homestead paddock. Billy swung himself to the ground before the buggy had stopped, and, racing ahead of the greys, flung open the gate with a flourish. Looking at him, his hat pushed back on his curly head, his brown face glowing, and his eyes alight with laughter and mischief, it was difficult to imagine him as either a station-hand in the making or a docile pupil—especially in Deportment.

“You’ll have your hands full with him, I’m afraid,” remarked Mr. Weston.

“Oh, Billy will be all right,” said Jo confidently. Something in the certainty of her voice gave comfort to the harassed man at her side.

“I believe everything will seem more all right, now that you two have come home,” he said. “It’s high time you did—we’re almost forgetting how to laugh.”

“Well, no one could forget how to laugh with Jean about——” said Jo.

“Or with Jo,” put in Jean.

“Because she’s such a perfect ass!” finished the twins, in complete unison.

CHAPTER VII

THE TWINS' SURPRISE-PACKET

MOTHER was at the gate to meet them—a slender, pretty woman, looking not so much older than her tall daughters. She disappeared under their onslaught, emerging from a bear's hug presently, dishevelled, but cheery.

"Well, you dear things," she said. "It's good to get you home. And you've had *such* a hot journey—you'll want baths, but you must have some tea first. And here's Sarah."

Sarah had come out to the gate, contrary to her usual habit. Generally she prepared to be sought in her kitchen, a spotless place where she reigned supreme amid the glory of a shining stove, gleaming brass taps, and tables and dressers scrubbed to a whiteness that was almost past belief. But to-day she chose to come out; and there was something in the hard old face that made the twins suddenly rush at her and hug her almost as thoroughly as they had hugged their mother. Sarah had not any words for them. She held them tightly and looked over their heads at their mother and father with a half-defiant question in her eyes. Mrs. Weston could not meet her piteous look. She put her hand gently on her shoulder, going past her on her way to the house.

"Come on, children," she called. "Tea is ready. Sarah made it as soon as we heard the buggy coming over the bridge. And I'm sure you are both ready for it."

The twins rushed to the bathroom, to remove the more recent layers of journey grime, and in a few moments they were all in the big comfortable dining-room, where afternoon tea was on a scale calculated to soothe hungry travellers. So far there was no sign that they had come to a poverty-stricken home. The room was just as well-kept as ever, with big bowls of flowers here and there: the glass and silver were shining, the table-linen was as exquisite as they had always known it. Mother was just as dainty as ever, in the soft blue dress that was the colour of her eyes. Everything was simply home: home, as they had pictured it a thousand times, away at school.

But when they looked more closely, the change was there—in the faces of their mother and father. Mr. Weston's eyes were deeply sunken, with dark shadows under them, and threads of grey were thickly sown in his crisp dark hair; and there were lines in their mother's face that were new, and an unfamiliar hint of repression about her mouth. Both tried to talk as though

nothing was the matter: there were a hundred questions to be asked and answered, and the revelation that the twins had actually brought home prizes elicited satisfactory expressions of awe and respect on the part of their family. But through all the cheery chatter there was an under-current of something wrong—something kept down. It was like a shadow lurking in a corner of the room.

Sarah came in presently to take away the tea-things. She looked approvingly at an empty plate which had held scones, and with less good-will at others not entirely cleared of cakes. The twins glanced at their mother inquiringly as the door closed behind her. It was not usual for Sarah to appear in the dining-room. Mrs. Weston understood the glance.

"Amy has gone, you know, girls," she said placidly, taking up her knitting. "She didn't want to go until after Christmas; but Mrs. Holmes needed a housemaid, and it was too good a place for her to lose: I persuaded her to go."

"Of course," said the twins hurriedly. There fell an awkward silence.

"Mother and I have made up our minds that it's best to let you know just how we stand," said Mr. Weston, speaking as a man speaks who faces a disagreeable task. "It's only fair, seeing that you youngsters are so much affected by our bad luck. We're not going to be permanently ruined, so you needn't worry too much: unless the drought stretches out indefinitely I'll pull round all right, once the rain comes. You know, droughts with us generally mean extra good seasons afterwards: the ground has had a rest, and grass and crops come on splendidly."

Jean and Jo nodded acquiescence. They understood the ways of droughts.

"Well—I'll be right enough if I don't have to sacrifice more of my stock. The few I have left on the place ought to be able to scratch up a living: those I've sent to Gippsland will be our salvation, if only I can hang on to them. If I am forced to sell, things will be very bad, for of course stock are fetching the very lowest prices. I could have gone on without making any special change in our way of living but for the money I told you about—the sum I lent. I lent it to a good friend—he'd done me more than one good turn years ago—and I don't regret it. Mother says she doesn't, either."

"Then nobody does," said Jo, and Jean nodded vehemently.

"I knew you'd say so," said Father, and smiled at them. "Still—that's our trouble. It leaves me horribly short of ready money. The place is bringing in nothing whatever: the small income I have, apart from it, isn't nearly enough to pay household expenses, school bills, a governess for Billy, a big wages-list, and a dozen other things. So there was nothing for it but to cut down expenses in every way, and bring you home to help."

“We’re jolly glad you did,” said the twins.

“Oh, we knew we could depend on you. Still, we’re awfully sorry. If you could, we’d like you to go on with some decent reading, and with your music—you’re such kids, to be leaving off studies altogether, and we hate it for you; but we quite realize that you won’t have much time. Sarah is to go after Christmas, and there will be loads for you to do, with Billy’s teaching thrown in, and we don’t want life to be all work for you.”

“We won’t make it all work,” said Mother gently. “We’ll try to have lots of fun mixed in.”

“Why, we couldn’t help it,” said Jean laughing.

“I know you’ll look after your mother,” said Mr. Weston. “I feel pretty desperate at letting Sarah go, for she’s a standby in everything, and she takes such care of Mother if she’s sick.”

“I decline to be sick—ever!” said Mother firmly. At which her husband ran his fingers through his hair, and looked at her with an air of desperation that would have been almost comical if it had not been so miserable.

“I’m afraid of that very thing,” he said. “You’ll hang on and hang on, long after you should give in, if you do get seedy. Sarah would know at a glance, and put you firmly to bed; but the girls and I won’t be as quick to see. If I were sure that you would be sensible, and take care of yourself, I wouldn’t be half so worried. But yourself is the one person about whom you haven’t any sense!”

“Now, don’t meet trouble half-way,” said Mrs. Weston. “We’re going to manage very comfortably, girls. I can get a good woman from the township for a day each week, for washing and rough cleaning, and the rest will be quite easy to us. And if I do feel sick, I promise to stay in bed and call loudly for nourishment. So——”

“Jean,” said Jo, “if I don’t tell I shall burst.”

“Me too,” said Jean.

“Then why don’t you tell?”

“I was waiting for you. You’re five minutes older.”

“I wish you always remembered it!” said Jo severely. “Well, we’ll tell together. You see——”

“There’s nothing wrong, is there, girls?” queried Mrs. Weston anxiously. “You’re not ill, Jo?”

“Do I look it?” asked Jo. “No, but we’ve been fixing up a bit of business on our own. We do hope you won’t mind.”

“You simply mustn’t mind,” said Jean. “It was so dreadful to think we couldn’t earn any money to help you——”

“And when you’re fifteen and a half there doesn’t seem *any* way to earn money. And we were tearing our hair about it at school——”

“And Helen—er—one of the senior girls happened to hear——”

“The tearing of the hair?” asked Mr. Weston solemnly.

“Yes, it made an awful row. Like tearing calico. And she started thinking, and so she came up in her kimono early next morning——”

“And offered us her little brother!” Jean finished triumphantly. She glared at her father and mother as if defying them to make any protest.

“It seems more like a way out of the other girl’s difficulties than yours,” remarked Mr. Weston, much puzzled. “Did you mention to her that you had a little brother of your own? Or perhaps you offered Billy in exchange?”

Billy, who had been sitting in a corner of the big sofa in unwonted silence, snorted indignantly.

“No, we didn’t. But we took hers.”

“My dear girls, what *do* you mean?” asked Mrs. Weston.

“Why, I thought we’d made it quite clear,” said Jean, rather aggrieved. “You see, they want to get rid of her little brother——”

“That sounds as if he were pretty beastly, but he’s not,” said Jo. “Only they’re all going away to Colombo, and——”

“And he can’t go, ’cause of the climate, and——”

“My beloved daughters,” remarked Mr. Weston, “if you would only speak one at a time, and say what you really *do* mean, we’d know more about it. You first, Jo—you’re the eldest.”

“Well, but we told you, didn’t we? They’re going to Colombo, and they can’t take him, ’cause he’s only nine, and not very strong. And they were wondering what on earth to do with him—they didn’t want to send him to school. They were at their wits’ end. And then they thought of us. And we’ve made an arrangement—that is, if you approve, only you simply *can’t* disapprove, or it’ll put them in the most frightful fix—that we’re to take him, and look after him and teach him with Billy, for——You tell them, Jean.”

“For £150 a year!” said Jean solemnly.

They ceased, and looked for the effect of their bomb. It was all they could have desired.

“Whew-w-w!” whistled their father.

“My dear little girls!” Mrs. Weston put down her work and stared at them.

“You aren’t joking?”

“As if we’d joke about anything so amazing as £150 a year!” uttered Jo.

“But who is it?”

“We don’t want to tell you until you’ve consented,” said Jo. They had decided in the train to keep the identity of the new pupil a secret, believing that Mr. and Mrs. West on would find it easier to accept a stranger than a friend’s son. “It’s all right, of course; they’re nice people. Say we may have him, Dad. You simply can’t refuse.”

“But can you teach him?”

“They don’t want him to have many lessons. They only want him to learn a little, and play about and get strong—and to be made to mind his manners. *You*’ve got to do that part of the job, Dad.”

Billy got down from the sofa and came forward, his eyes dancing.

“Do you mean to say,” he demanded, “that you’re going to bring a boy here—a real boy, that I can play with and go about with? I never thought sisters were so much good before! Oh, Mother, say you’ll have him!”

“Yes, and if you do, Sarah needn’t go, need she?” exploded Jo. “That’s the loveliest part of it—we can keep Sarah to look after Mother.”

“By—Jove!” said John Weston, very slowly. His eyes met his wife’s with a passion of relief in them.

“But it’s too much to pay for a child,” she objected.

“They won’t pay less,” Jean said. “If they had to send him away with a governess it would cost them more. And they’re *longing* for him to come here. They’re counting on your not saying No.”

“I’m not going to say it,” said John Weston. “If you think you can stand another small boy about, dear—it will mean we can keep Sarah.”

Mrs. Weston had taken up her knitting, but there were tears falling on it, and she dropped three stitches. Suddenly the twins’ arms were round her.

“Oh, don’t cry, darling! We’re going to look after you, but we know we can’t do it as well as Sarah.”

“Was ever anyone so looked after?” Mrs. Weston smiled through her tears. “I don’t know why I’m crying, only you’re such darlings. Yes, we’ll have your boy, and we’ll keep Sarah——”

“And bless you both,” said John Weston, putting his arms round all his feminine belongings. “Billy, go and tell Sarah we want her. By the way, Jo, who is he?”

“Rex Forester—only you’re not to mind that.”

“George Forester’s boy!—whew-w! I wish it wasn’t a friend’s son.”

“But it’s that that makes them so happy about it. Mrs. Forester wrote us a lovely letter, and she’s writing to Mother. They’re just frightfully relieved.” The feelings of the twins overcame them, and they jazzed frantically together round the room—a demonstration that brought them into violent collision with Sarah, who entered silently, with Billy, flushed and excited, at her heels.

“Sarah, will you stay with us?” Mrs. Weston asked.

Sarah blinked rapidly thrice.

“Will I stay?”

“Miss Jean and Miss Jo are to have a pupil,” Mrs. Weston said. “A little boy, to teach with Master Billy. It gives us a little more money, so—will you stay with us, old friend?”

Sarah uttered a loud sniff.

“I wouldn’t have gone,” she declared stoutly. “Not if it was ever so. What’s wages, between you and me? and who’d know how to treat your brownkities, when they come?” She put her apron to her eyes. “And why them poor lambs should have to teach some ’orrid little boy, just to keep me on the place, *I* dunno, seein’ I’d never have gone!”

“I can’t afford Amy too, you know, Sarah,” said Mrs. Weston.

“I’m not conshis of havin’ ever said I needed a second pair of ’ands to ’elp me run a place like this,” said Sarah stiffly. “The work ain’t nothing. Many a time ’ave I said to myself, with Amy talkin’ about her boys and the new way of doin’ her ’air, that I’d rather be on me own.” Suddenly her hard old face worked, and her voice trembled. “I couldn’t never have gone!” she cried loudly, and turned swiftly from the room. They heard her sobbing as she went.

“Go after her, girls,” Mrs. Weston said, crying softly herself. “Tell her all about it. She has been breaking her heart for a month.”

Left alone, John Weston looked long at his wife.

“I seem to remember Sarah once remarking that you’d never know where you were with them twins!” he said.

CHAPTER VIII

GETTING ON TERMS

REX FORESTER arrived three days after Christmas. The twins drove in to meet him, well charged with pity. A little boy of nine, whose family has just sailed in a body for Colombo, may be expected to be an object for anyone's compassion, and Jean and Jo fully expected a tear-stained and disconsolate individual.

Instead, there stepped from the train a perfectly self-possessed young gentleman. Nothing was awry about him, and no tear seemed likely to find a lodging on his cheek. His light suit was unspotted by a journey that reduced most small boys to monuments of grime; his sailor hat sat jauntily upon his well-brushed head. He wore spectacles, which gave him a curious air of dignity. Very fair was he, with large blue eyes and a skin of milk and roses. Nature seemed to have destined him to sing in a choir; and as there was no such opening for him at Emu Plains, the twins may be excused for wondering what on earth they were going to do with him. They also wondered what Billy would think of him.

They had shopping to do in the township, so Jo drove into the little main street and held the horses while Jean transacted the commissions. Rex declined to get down, saying he would rather stay in the buggy—a mode of conveyance which interested him a good deal, since he had had no experiences save of motors. He had expected a motor, and had been frankly amazed at the high, light buggy into which he was expected to climb.

"I didn't know anyone used these things," he said. "Not—well, not our sort of people, you know."

"Oh, you'll find quite a lot here and there," Jo told him. "Some even prefer them. No nasty smell of petrol, like motors have."

"Oh, not decent cars," Rex answered, in a pained way. "I suppose some smell of petrol, though I really don't know. But not good cars."

"And is yours a good car?"

"Ours? Oh, we've got three. Yes, they're all good. I can drive a bit. Is it hard to drive horses?"

"Not when you're used to it," said Jo. "Or to ride them, either. Can you ride, by the way?"

"No, I never tried riding. We've been in town since I was a little kiddie.

Helen said she supposed I'd learn at Emu Plains."

"Oh, of course you'll have to—we all learned to ride about the time we learned to walk," Jo told him. "It's half the fun of the bush."

"Is there much fun in the bush?" asked the small boy doubtfully.

"Depends on what you call fun," Jo answered briskly. "Of course, if you're mad keen on picture-shows and theatres and going down to St. Kilda, you may find it a bit slow. We have riding and driving, and we go for picnics, and there's ripping bathing in the river, and there always seems something to do about the place. Billy—that's my young brother—is awfully glad you're coming. He has never had a mate of his own size."

"How old is he?" asked Rex, forbearing to make any comment on the list of country attractions.

"Eight, but he's as big as you, I think. He's hoping very much that he is, anyway. He rides pretty well, and he can swim fairly. Dad thinks it would be a good plan to teach you both to box."

"I'd like that," Rex said eagerly. "My father was going to have me taught, but I got sick after I'd only had one lesson. I don't have to wear my specs. to box, and that's a pull. Specs. are an awful nuisance."

"Jolly hard on you to have to wear them," said Jo sympathetically. "But perhaps you won't have to always."

"I hope to goodness I shan't," said the small boy. "A fellow does look such an ass in them. And other chaps rag you about them." He set his teeth and looked ferocious. "That's one of the reasons why I want to learn to box!"

"So that you can take it out of them—good idea!" agreed Jo. "Here's Jean, all bundles. Got everything, Jean?"

"I sincerely hope so," said her twin, who looked hot. "The shop's crowded, and the smell of half-dead Christmas decorations is awful." She glanced down her list. "Yes, that's all, except the mail. Drive up, and I'll meet you at the post-office."

"Can't we go somewhere and have an ice, or a drink?" suggested Rex, as they drove up the little street. "I'm awfully hot. Is there any place?"

Jo hesitated. In the old days when money had not seemed to matter, she and Jean had never failed to sample the ice-creams and other delights of hot weather supplied by the little fruit-shop. But the twins had talked this matter over, and had agreed that such luxuries must now be cut out of their programme. It was somewhat disconcerting to find that their pupil looked on them as one of the ordinary aids to existence. She temporized.

"Well—it won't be long before we get home," she said. "Can't you wait?"

“Oh do let’s come—it won’t take two minutes,” Rex begged. “Look, there’s quite a jolly place over there and it’s got an ‘Ice-Cream’ sign hanging out.”

Jo yielded, with a sigh. They had agreed not to take any more pocket-money from their father, and Christmas had made a very considerable hole in their slender funds. Still, there seemed no way out. She beckoned to Jean as her twin came out of the post-office.

“Jean—take Rex across to Fielding’s, and have an ice with him.”

Jean’s heated countenance expressed reproach, mingled with surprise. She had not time to reply, however, before Rex broke in.

“Oh, but you’ve got to come too,” he said.

“No! thanks—don’t want any,” Jo returned.

“Oh! that’s rubbish—you’ve got to come. Can’t you get anyone to hold the horses?”

“Well, I won’t, if you don’t, Jo,” said Jean firmly. To depart from a rule so recently formed was bad enough, but it was ten times worse to be expected to do it without one’s faithless twin. Mingled with her feelings was a guilty consciousness that she wanted that ice very badly indeed. “Jimmy Fielding will hold the horses. Come on.”

“Oh, all right,” Jo said, capitulating. “After all,” she added to herself, “it’s only threepence a head.”

But it turned out to be rather more than that. After the ices, Rex ordered raspberry vinegar before the twins could interfere; and then it occurred to him that peaches would enliven the journey home, and he secured a bag full of rosy-cheeked freestones. He picked them up and stood aside, cheerfully unconcerned, while Jo paid the bill. Rex had plenty of money in his pockets, but it did not occur to him that others might not be as well off. Older people always paid for him when they shopped together—why not the twins?

The superhuman politeness of their pupil continued during the drive home, scarcely modified even by the consumption of peaches that freely dripped with juice. He asked a great many questions, but did not appear at all interested in any answers. One gathered the impression that he considered it bad manners to sit in silence, and that questions were the easiest way out. The twins, however, were somewhat paralyzed by the rapid-fire nature of his conversation, and found their own supply of small-talk quite unequal to his. It was something of a relief to them when they reached the homestead, and saw their young charge taken over by Billy.

“Wonder what Billy’s thinking?” Jo laughed, as she perched on the end of

the table where their mother was sewing.

"What do *you* think?" was Mrs. Weston's rejoinder.

"He's quite amazing," Jo answered. "Isn't he, Jean? Frightfully grown-up, and I should think he's had rather too much of his own way all his life."

"His manners are lovely," Jean said. "You should have seen him eating peaches, Mother—they were the really-drippy sort that ordinary people like Jo and me can only eat with comfort in a bath, or in the middle of a fifty-acre paddock; but he managed it without turning a hair, and I don't think there's one spot on his coat!"

"Remarkably prehensile action with his tongue," grinned Jo. "I'm going to practise it—in private. The weird part was that it hardly interfered with his remarks at all!"

"It would take years of practice before *I* could eat a peach and talk at the same time—except to you," said Jean. "It's one of those occasions when the strain of society is a bit too much. But Rex isn't like any small boy I ever met."

"I'm rather leaning back against the fact that he's Helen's brother," Jo remarked. "Anyone belonging to Helen *must* be all right. And of course he's had lots of drawbacks."

"He does not seem quite a natural small boy," said Mrs. Weston. "But Billy will make him natural, if it's humanly possible. So don't worry, girls."

Meanwhile, Billy and Rex, having looked each other over after the fashion of young puppies who meet for the first time, had strolled together into the orchard. They kept some distance apart, and exchanged sidelong glances, looking very much as if they wished to growl. Conversation flagged. Billy paused presently under a laden apricot tree.

"Have one?" he asked, jerking his head upwards.

"Yes, thanks," Rex answered. They browsed awhile in silence.

"Not many good ones left near the ground," remarked Billy. "Come on up the tree."

Rex hesitated.

"Don't think I care about climbing trees."

"Not like climbing trees!" uttered Billy. "Whyever not?"

"Oh—I'm not keen on it."

"But—*fruit* trees!" Billy's eyes were round. "How on earth are you going to get fruit if you never climb?"

"Well—I can buy it."

"You can't buy it more'n once a week, if you're livin' with us," affirmed

Billy. “An’ fruit in shops isn’t half as good as fruit picked off trees. Besides, every one climbs.”

“Well, I don’t, so that’s flat.”

Billy surveyed him with amazement. Courtesy to guests had been preached to him, but this was a serious matter. There surged over his mind the utter impossibility of living with a boy who refused to climb.

“I believe you’re afraid!” he burst out.

Rex went scarlet.

“ ’Fraid, yourself. Don’t you dare say I’m afraid.”

“Well, if you aren’t afraid, come on after me.”

Billy swung his lithe young body into the lower branches of the tree, and went up, hand over hand, until he reached a favourite nook near the top. He hooked his leg over a branch and looked down, tauntingly.

“There!—why, it’s as easy as easy. Even old Sarah can climb an apricot tree—any muff can! And you’re afraid!”

“I’m not afraid,” retorted Rex furiously.

He gave an awkward little run at the tree and succeeded, with a scramble, in gaining the lower branches. It was very plain that he was unused to climbing. He clung rather desperately to the trunk and turned an angry face upward to Billy, who unfeelingly roared with laughter.

“That’s right—hang on like fury, or you’ll tumble out again! Come on up here and have an apricot—all the ripe ones are high up.”

Rex set his teeth and tried to copy his tormentor’s easy upward swing. It looked the simplest thing, but, somehow, it was harder than it looked. He missed his grasp at a branch, slipped, and fell with a resounding bump. The ground was hard beneath the tree, and, though he fell only a few feet, Rex felt considerably shaken and damaged. He jumped up—rather to the relief of Billy, who promptly laughed anew.

“Well, you *are* a muff! Fancy falling out of a tree like that. Did you ever try to climb before?”

“No, I never!” rejoined Rex, red with rage. “It’s all very well for you to laugh, when you’ve been climbing trees all your life. Anyhow, I wouldn’t have silly ginger curls like yours for something. Does your mother put them in curl-papers every night?”

The bitterness of this insult sent the blood to Billy’s face.

“No, she doesn’t—an’ I’ll fight you if you say that again!”

Every vestige of his society manner had departed from Rex. He danced

about on the grass, chanting derisively.

"Yah, Curly! Who's got ginger curls? Silly old Curly—won't the boys laugh at him when he goes to school!"

"Not as much as they'll laugh at you if you try to climb!" retorted Billy, at the top of his voice. But Rex apparently did not hear. He danced and yelled with unabated vigour.

"Curly, Curly Weston! Curly, Curly Weston! Who goes to bed in curl-papers every night?"

"I'll teach you!" said Billy fiercely. He came down the tree like an avalanche, dropping from bough to bough until he landed on the grass. His fists were clenched at his sides. It would have been difficult to say which face was the redder.

"Will you fight?"

"I don't fight girls with silly curls," said Rex—and realizing that he had made an unexpected burst of poetry, was correspondingly uplifted, and chanted wildly, "I—don't—fight—girls— With—sil-ly—curls" again and again, ducking to avoid a sudden blow from Billy. Then another, better aimed, caught him on the shoulder, and from that instant neither manners nor melody remained to Master Rex Forester. He became primitive boy. Hammer and tongs they fought each other under the tree—slipping on squashed apricots, stumbling and recovering, exchanging thudding blows with their hard young fists.

From the shelter of an apple-tree by the gate Mr. Weston, who had come to make his guest's acquaintance, watched them, a twinkle in his eye.

"I suppose I ought to interfere," he murmured, smiling under his moustache. "But—I don't know. There certainly doesn't seem much of the city polish left about that youngster: and a little blood-letting is a pretty good way to friendship. I think I'll let them be. Anyhow, Billy's getting the worst of it, so my feelings as a host won't be too badly hurt." He drew back into the shelter of the tree, watching.

Billy was certainly getting the worst of it. He was slightly smaller than Rex, and had very little idea of fighting; while the solitary boxing-lesson of which Rex had spoken had not failed to leave some impression on that hero. There was a trace of science in his hitting: a faint trace, it is true, but it was more than enough for Billy. Billy's muscles were hard, and his blows were of the sledge-hammer type—the drawback being that they so seldom got home. He was almost on the point of admitting that he had had enough when a swing from Rex's left arm landed on the point of his nose. Blood followed, in quantities sufficiently terrifying to an eight-year-old. It was not altogether

surprising if a few tears came too.

Billy was desperately ashamed of crying. He leaned against a tree, endeavouring to staunch the bleeding—thankful that, for once in a way, he had a handkerchief, and trusting that his suppressed sobs would be unnoticed by his conqueror. He knew he was beaten: it would be only a moment, he supposed, before the insulting chant about his curls would begin again.

It did not come, however. Gradually the bleeding slackened, and he became sufficiently master of himself to face the world again. He turned from his friendly tree, his face doggedly ashamed, ready to meet whatever insults his victor might devise.

There were none, it seemed, that he was to be called upon to meet. Rex lay full-length in the grass, his face buried in his arms. His shoulders were shaking: there was obvious evidence that Billy was not the only one to cry. And suddenly it came to little Billy Weston that this conqueror, with his smooth hair and his grown-up manner, was only a lonely little boy whose mother was very far away.

He paused a moment, awkwardly. Then he went over and knelt beside him, putting a nervous hand on his shoulder.

"I say. Rex, I'm awful sorry. I was a pig."

"Well, so was I," came in muffled tones.

"No, but you're a visitor. Anyhow, you licked me. M-made me blub, too."

The last was an heroic effort, and it brought Rex round to a sitting position.

"Did I?" he uttered. His own face was tear-stained, and a fine bruise was rapidly developing near his eye. "Well, I blubbed, too. I—I guess it's a bit queer, being away from every one you know."

"Well, we're no better than each other," said Billy quaintly. "Let's be pals."

They shook hands solemnly. Mr. Weston slipped away, chuckling as he went.

"I wouldn't take any notice of anything peculiar in the boys' appearance," he told his wife and the twins. "They've been making friends, and it's a process involving bruises. But it's all right." He told the story.

Billy guided Rex by devious paths to the bathroom presently, there to remove as much evidence of warfare as could be treated with soap and water. They appeared at tea with extremely red and shiny faces, coloured here and there with bruises, and, in Billy's case, with a nose resembling a beetroot in shape and colour. No one took any apparent notice of these defects. The twins plied their pupil with food—for which he had little appetite—and Mrs. Weston

asked him kindly if he had enjoyed his afternoon.

“I’ve had a very nice time, thank you, Mrs. Weston,” responded Rex politely. “We’ve been in the orchard.”

“Ah, it’s nice there,” said John Weston gravely. His eyes met his son’s for a moment, and Billy flushed at something he saw in them.

“Do I look rum?” he demanded of Rex when, released from society, they wandered out into the garden.

“Pretty, rum,” Rex said, regarding him critically. “Do I?”

“Yes, rather. I wonder would anyone guess we’d been fighting?”

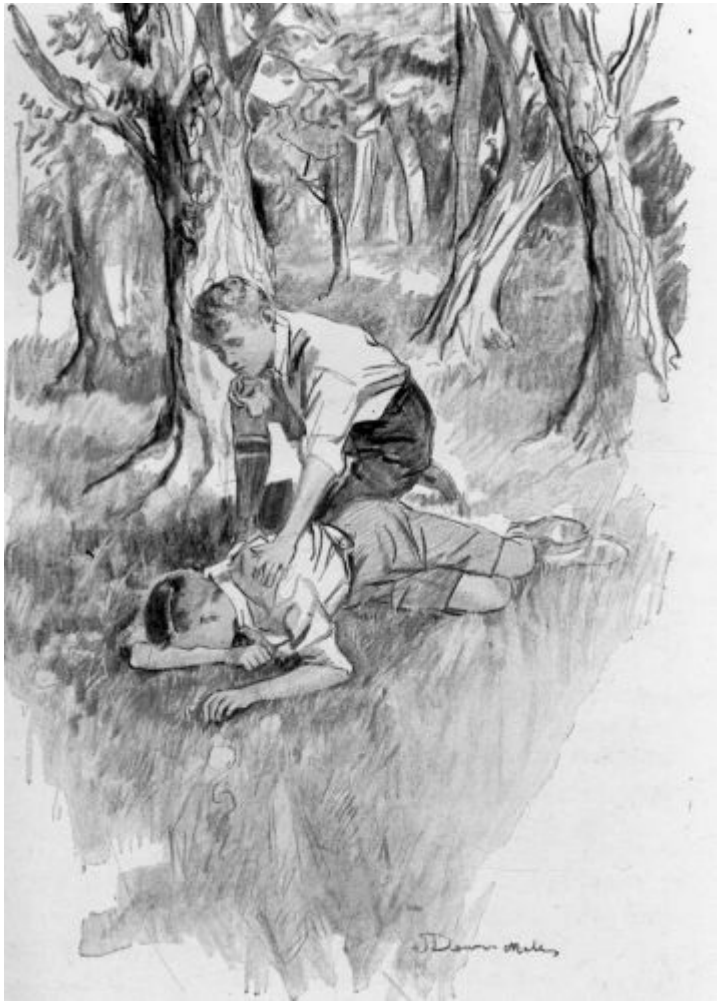
“I shouldn’t wonder if they did. Would they be wild?”

“Well, they told me to behave nicely to you—especially at first.”

“They told me that, too, at home.”

They grinned at each other, comprehendingly.

“Oh, well,” said Billy. “Girls an’ grown-ups can’t possibly understand everything about boys!”



" 'I say, Rex, I'm awful sorry. I was a pig.' 'Well, so was I,' came in muffled tones."
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CHAPTER IX

THE PROGRAMME

"ARE you young people aware," asked Mr. Weston severely, "that it is now up to you to map out the whole duty of pupil-teachers?"

"Parents of high-grade pupil-teachers," remarked Jo with equal severity, "don't use such expressions as 'up to you.' They employ only the *best* English."

"It has been sufficiently exhausting to act as the parent of low-grade twins without beginning to live up to them as high-grade pupil-teachers," said her father, laughing. "However, I'll try, being of a meek spirit. Will you, my children, address yourselves to the problem of framing a suitable scheme of educational training for——"

"Oh, Daddy, do say something like 'that blessed kid,' to finish with, and then I'll know it's you!" cried Jean.

"I meant to," said Mr. Weston with a sigh of relief. "I couldn't have kept it up a second longer. Well, what are you going to do about it, anyhow?"

"We've been trying to work out a scheme for a week," Jo said. "There's such a lot to be thought of. Mrs. Forester said specially that she didn't want him to have too many lessons—three hours a day would be quite enough for him. Is that enough for Billy?"

"Well, Billy could stand more. But three hours will do for the present," said Mrs. Weston, who was knitting in her armchair by the window, profiting by the last gleam of daylight. The long summer day was over, and a cool breeze had begun to blow across the scorched, bare plains. Rex and Billy, wearied by battle, were already in bed, in their corner of the verandah, sleeping peacefully. The twins had tucked them up, and were now ready for a family conclave.

"Well—lessons, three hours. We've got to fit that in with our own work," said Jean. "You see, we're going to do most of the housework. We mean to get up at five in the summer, and get most of it done before breakfast. That leaves Sarah pretty free. Of course, we don't want Mother to do anything at all."

"A nice sort of person I should soon become!" said Mrs. Weston, laughing. "Disgracefully fat and hopelessly lazy! It seems hard that you should deliberately conspire to ruin an excellent character like mine!"

"Oh, we know well enough you'll always be busy, darling," Jo said,

laughing. “You can have the mending of all Billy’s trousers, for one thing: and that’s about enough to keep you busy. But we don’t want you to have any definite housework. We’ve talked it all out with Sarah, and arranged everything. She insists on turning out one room every day—so we’re going to get it all ready for turning out, and do the rest of the housework. It’ll be quite easy, because nothing will ever get dirty or untidy.”

“My poor lambs!” murmured Mrs. Weston, gazing at this picture of youthful optimism.

“Well, you know, Mother, not really bad.” Both the twins laughed. “We do really mean to try to keep things tidy. We’re going round a bit at night, putting everything away before we go to bed—things that don’t seem to matter a bit at night do look so horribly untidy in the morning. And we’re going to plan the work so as to get method. Smithy—Miss Smith, I mean—used always to preach about that. Do you think it takes long to grow method?”

“A lifetime isn’t enough for some people,” Mrs. Weston said. “But if you really try I think yours will soon develop. There are already signs of healthy sprouting!” She smiled at them—the smile a little tremulous. They were so young, and so tremendously in earnest.

“That’s comforting,” Jean said. “Now there’s another important thing. Do you think it’s our duty to teach the boys together? Us together, I mean—not the boys, of course.”

“A class of two isn’t exactly huge,” said their father. “It would be rather over-engined with two teachers, I think.”

“That’s what we thought,” Jean cried eagerly. “It would be silly—we’d be falling over each other. So we mapped out a programme, each of us taking an hour and a half at a time, and we’ll each give the lessons we’re best at ourselves. English isn’t mine, you’ll notice! Then the one who isn’t teaching can be free for other jobs.”

“Here’s the programme,” Jo said. She displayed it triumphantly—a lengthy document, with spaces beautifully ruled in red ink, mapping out a week’s work. Mr. and Mrs. Weston studied it together.

“ ‘Drill—15 minutes’?” queried Mr. Weston presently.

“Oh, that’s physical jerks—you know, calisthenics,” Jo explained. “We’ll begin with that every morning. They were very keen about it at school. Miss Dampier says it gets all the brain-machinery going well.”

“Good idea,” said their father, relapsing into silence.

“Isn’t there a good deal of time for ‘Reading’?” asked Mrs. Weston. “They’re very small for such long lessons.”

"Oh—that's not only the boys," Jean said. "We're going to read to them—jolly books, like those 'High Roads' series, that teach you all about history and geography and literature without letting you guess that you're being taught. We had a lot of them ourselves, and Mrs. Forester has sent dozens in Rex's trunk. They'll get absolutely full of knowledge without an effort on their own parts!"

"Why wasn't I taught like that!" groaned Mr. Weston. "My 'High Roads' were paved with flint—these lucky young dogs will have theirs strewn with rose-leaves. Well, it seems a pretty comprehensive schedule, twinses. I hope you'll be able to live up to it."

"We mean to have a jolly good try," Jo said. "I expect we'll slump sometimes, but we're really going to do our best. Now, where do you come in, Dad?"

"Is it me?" queried Mr. Weston blankly. "What have I to do with your fell schemes?"

"Rex isn't a fell scheme, and you have lots to do with him," said his relentless daughter. "You see, it was specially mentioned that he needs manly influence. Well, we can't supply that!"

"I'm not so sure," remarked the hapless man, gazing at the determined young faces. "Still, I'm willing to do all I can. What would you suggest?"

"Well—boxing for one thing: and of course he has to be taught to ride. We can all take a turn at that, but we think he ought to begin with you, Dad, 'cause he'll have more confidence with a man than he would with us."

"Can do," said Mr. Weston. "I'll give him half an hour on old Merrilegs after breakfast every morning—if I possibly can. Boxing after tea; then they can wash off the results and sleep off the soreness! Anything else?"

"Well—no other accomplishments. But he can go about with you and Billy, can't he, Dad?—when you have time, of course. We don't want them always with us, or getting into mischief alone."

"Billy is very anxious to learn to manage the place," said Mr. Weston, with a twinkle in his eye. "I think he has visions of relieving me of any work after a year or two—like you two with your mother. I've promised to teach him all I can, but of course there's very little to show him just now, with the whole place a desert, and most of the stock away. When Rex can ride I can take them both out with me. Meanwhile, I'll do what I can to instruct him in country ways; and it's not a bad thing to teach them to use their eyes. Quite remarkable, how many people can look at things without seeing them. To come down to actual deeds, Billy is earnestly learning to use an axe, and to milk. Rex can share those lessons."

“For goodness’ sake, don’t let him chop his feet off!” begged Mrs. Weston.

“Not if I can avoid it,” said her husband. “The axe Billy is using isn’t sharp enough to cut anything in particular, so I don’t think you need worry. But will young Rex want to learn such unfashionable things as chopping and milking?”

“Oh, I think he’ll want to join in anything that Billy does,” Jean said. “And if you tell him to do them as a matter of course, he’ll hardly refuse, even if it’s a shock to him. Then there’s swimming.”

“Am I the swimming teacher too?” demanded Mr. Weston. “For I warn you, I shan’t have time.”

“Oh, no—we can teach him. We thought of going to bathe every afternoon, and he’ll soon learn. I think that’s all,” said Jean, wrinkling her brows. “Or can you think of anything else we ought to teach him?”

“I think you’ve a fairly complete scheme—for a boy who has to go slow. Rex will certainly say that he has enough to do.”

“It doesn’t appear that there is any job for me in the scheme,” remarked Mrs. Weston. “In fact, I think you’re steadily planning to make me into a fine lady. I don’t think I quite like it.”

She found herself suddenly hugged by both twins.

“Bless you, you’ve got jobs all the time!” said Jo. “He’s only nine, and he can’t possibly do without mothering. It’s the biggest job of all. And we’ll all come to you with our difficulties, as we always do, and you’ll get us all out.”

“So long as you all do that I shan’t feel too much on the shelf,” said her mother. “And I’m appointing myself one job that you needn’t put down on the schedule—the last half-hour at night for the boys. That is mine, and nobody must take it, please. Also it seems to me that the schedule and the oddments and the hundred-and-one things that aren’t written down won’t leave my twinses much time, so I want it to be clearly understood that in case of necessity I can take over the lessons occasionally. I’m not going to have your poor old noses perpetually at the grindstone.”

“We’re not going to feel it a grind,” declared Jean. “And, Mother, there won’t be much mending for Rex, for Mrs. Forester has sent up just the sensiblest things for him: scout blouses and whipcord breeches, and all sorts of hard-wearing things that look as if they couldn’t possibly tear!”

“You don’t know small boys as well as I do!” returned Mrs. Weston, laughing.

“Well—you’ll see. And there are ever so many things, and all perfectly new. But nothing very swagger: our poor old Billy won’t feel that he’s too much in the shade.”

“I was afraid when we met him that Billy would be hopelessly out of it,” said Jo. “He was such a dreadfully superior young man. And he still shows signs of being superior—but not as much. And they went off to bed arm in arm—which was far more than I had dared to hope for, the very first night.”

“There’s nothing like a good, honest fight,” said her father, laughing. “If you had seen those urchins in the orchard, going at each other, hammer and tongs, you’d have known that there was no question of superiority about either of them. After all, Rex’s polish is only skin-deep; there’s normal small boy under it. And one small boy is very like another.”

“I’m rather troubled about one thing,” Jean said. “It doesn’t seem to me that Rex can possibly keep his polish up here. Billy will certainly rub it off, even if Jo and I don’t. It just couldn’t exist in a place like Emu Plains.”

“It could not,” her father nodded agreement.

“Well—when the Foresters come back from Colombo and find only unpolished Rex—it sounds rather like unpolished rice—do you think they’ll be horrified? For all we know Mrs. Forester has spent nine laborious years in putting that polish on.”

“That’s an awful idea!” said Jo anxiously.

“Only, Helen isn’t a bit polished,” Jean said. “She’s almost rugged at times, especially when you duck her in the baths. Of course her manners are lovely when she wants them to be; but then every Captain of the School has to have lovely manners for use if required—not as a habit. Rex’s polish isn’t like that. He fairly wallows in it.”

“He won’t wallow long,” said Mr. Weston. “Not if I know Billy.”

“Well—will Mrs. Forester mind?”

“She will not,” said Mrs. Weston, coming into the discussion with a note of decision in her clear voice. “If Mrs. Forester finds that much-too-pretty little boy grown into a brown, noisy, healthy ruffian like Billy, with horny hands and tough muscles, she won’t worry one little bit as to where his polish has gone. The mother who sent her son up here with scout suits and whipcord breeches doesn’t want him kept in cotton-wool. We can’t be always sure of making no mistakes, twinses dear: but I think if we have to decide between living up to the polish or the breeches, it will certainly be best to let the polish go. Elaine Forester won’t miss it after her boy has been for a year on Emu Plains!”

Later, on her way back from bidding good-night to the twins, in their end of the verandah, Mrs. Weston paused near the boys’ beds. Billy always slept under her window: to-night the second little bed was drawn near his, and the sleek, fair head showed close to the ruddy curls in the moonlight. Billy lay, as

always, with one arm flung above his head. He did not stir when his mother stooped to kiss him, tucking the sheet more closely round him. But when she bent above the other bed, Rex tossed round uneasily, and spoke in his sleep.

“Mother!” he muttered. The word was almost a cry.

“Go to sleep, little sonnie,” Mrs. Weston said gently. She put her lips to the smooth cheek, and Rex settled down with a little satisfied sigh.

A vision came across Mrs. Weston of that other mother, whose ship was bearing her relentlessly away from her son.

“I’ll take care of him for you,” she murmured. And when she leaned from her window later on for the look she always gave Billy before blowing out her light, her caressing eyes lingered as long on the fair head as on the ruddy mass of despised curls.

CHAPTER X

MIXED INSTRUCTIONS

WITH the first days of January the twins' programme may be said to have got fairly into its stride. It worked smoothly enough. An alarum-clock, placed on an empty kerosene-tin between their beds, shrieked a wild summons at five every morning—on the first occasion each twin had dived to seize and silence it, with the result that their heads had banged together with sufficient violence to banish sleep very effectually. After that, they put the kerosene-tin near the foot of the beds, a plan that had the additional advantage of making them leap from their pillows without any chance of yielding to the temptation, familiar to us all, of "just one minute more." Then came a quick cold shower and a hurried dressing, after which one twin attacked the drawing-room and the other the dining-room; it was a point of honour to have both rooms done before early morning tea, always ready in the kitchen soon after six. They had had visions of taking in their mother's morning cup; but they soon realized that this was a privilege too dear to Sarah's heart to be deputed to anyone. Therefore the twins contented themselves with taking their own tea very cheerfully in the kitchen with Sarah, who imagined that she concealed, under a grumpy manner, the fact that she delighted in their presence.

Billy and Rex used to appear in the kitchen also, demanding nourishment. Rex had willingly agreed to the plan of learning to milk and to use an axe. He never attempted to hint that he cared either for cows or for chopping; but it had very soon become evident that he was keenly anxious to be as strong as other boys of his age, and he welcomed any chance of developing his muscles. They would hurriedly swallow cups of weak tea, and, their hands full of scones, trot off to the paddock near the house, where the three milkers, which were all that the drought had left of Mr. Weston's herd, awaited them. It was never hard to yard the milkers, for there was scarcely anything left for them to eat in the paddock. Down by the river there was still some dry, stick-like grass, on which they browsed for forms' sake during the day; but green feed welcomed them at milking-times—lucerne, from the little patch that was irrigated through the efforts of a windmill which brought from the spring enough water for household purposes, and a little extra. The cows needed no bell to summon them when the hours for lucerne drew near.

The girls' room had two long windows, opening upon the verandah where their beds were placed. It was a cheery place, with little to indicate that it was

used as anything but a sitting-room: the stained floor boasted a couple of good rugs, easily moved when necessary, and there was an old sofa, disreputable, but astonishingly comfortable when once you had learned to accommodate your person to the places where its springs were broken. Two or three inviting chairs were scattered about; there was a business-like writing-table with the drawers on the east sacred to Jo, and the western ones Jean's property. A rather good Japanese screen hid the dressing-table—not that the twins had much use for a dressing-table, since their bobbed curls demanded little more than hard brushing, and their frocks were of the type that is easiest to slip on hastily. Tennis-racquets and hockey-sticks were displayed upon the wall, and there were many school photographs, as well as those of the home-folk. A long, low cupboard ran along one wall. To its kindly recesses was due the fact that the twins' room was nearly always tidy. "It's a mercy we've got it!" Jean would say, tossing old shoes, or battered hats, or half-soiled aprons into its capacious interior. "And Mother's such a brick—she never dreams of looking inside it!"

"Mother's an awfully understanding person," Jo would answer. "She says if it weren't for Sarah she wouldn't have any reputation for tidiness herself!"

For Mother never failed to understand. Perhaps it was because her own gay youth was not so very far behind her; perhaps because of her great love for these cheery, curly-haired twins, with their merry faces. She knew—somehow—when the famous programme did not seem to run smoothly: when the housework developed unexpected difficulties, or the teaching faculty seemed suddenly deficient. Then she would make an appearance, as if accidentally, and things would smooth out. Her sovereign prescription on these occasions was open air. Generally, she would take over the small boys, and the twins would find themselves suddenly despatched on an errand to the township, or, best of all, sent out in the paddocks with their father. For though Emu Plains might be scorched and bare, and the stock weak and starved, so that riding out on the run had lost something of its joy, it still remained the chief of all pleasures.

But it was not often that the programme failed to work. After early tea the twins made a triumphal progress from one room to another, sweeping and dusting. They generally sang, too, loudly and cheerily, what their voices lacked being made up in enthusiasm. They swept verandahs, and made beds, and trimmed lamps, and gathered what flowers the drought had spared, which were not many. The work, like the songs, was made into a duet, so far as was possible, for the twins hated to work apart. When they dusted a room together they did it in a kind of drill, each taking one half—the work calculated so that they finished at the same moment. They swept the wide verandah, that ran round three sides of the house, in a concerted movement, beginning at opposite

ends and making a race of it until they met in the middle, at the steps leading down from the front door. This lent great excitement to the job, and Mr. Weston had even been known to appear near the finish, to cheer on the panting combatants.

Most of the housework was done before breakfast, and then odd jobs took up the time until nine o'clock, when Rex and Billy were supposed to be in readiness on the verandah, with scrubbed hands and faces, and persons displaying as little dust as possible, considering that the persons were those of small boys. Rex had, by this time, undergone his riding-lessons, and his appearance was fairly certain, since Mr. Weston used to dismiss him at five minutes to nine, telling him to hurry up and get ready for school. But Billy was a will-o'-the-wisp creature, and rules and regulations meant little to him. He was never openly defiant: he was merely oblivious of time and space, when engaged in any of the thousand-and-one "ploys" in which his soul delighted; and against that bland armour of forgetfulness the twins' wrath fell blunted. "I never really *meant* not to be there," he used to say, with wide, innocent eyes, after an indignant twin, wailing his name disconsolately, had run him to earth in the orchard, or the stables, or on the river-bank. "It isn't truly nine yet, is it?" When assured in pungent tones that it was long after nine, he would exclaim, "My word, I must hurry up, then!"—and would take to his heels; so that when his teacher, heated in more ways than one, arrived on the verandah, it was to find him awaiting her, washed and brushed, and with a disarming twinkle in his eye. The pursuing twin invariably twinkled in response.

"He's awful, of course," they would say. "But we were young, once, ourselves!"

Rex, so far, committed no breaches of discipline. When alone with Billy there were signs that his polish was, after all, merely skin-deep, and was even wearing off in places; but with the other members of the family he maintained a calm correctness of demeanour that the twins found almost painful. He drilled painstakingly, in a solid fashion; the twins sighed over his heavy movements, even while they rebuked Billy, who loved to prance through his "physical jerks" like the light-footed elf he was. To lessons Rex brought a dull hatred that somewhat astonished the twins, since it was evident from the first that he was by no means deficient in brains. Only when he dealt with figures was he at all happy, and as Jean put it, resentfully, "he just wallows in sums." Jean herself having a constitutional dislike to adding even two and two, mathematics were always left to her twin, so that her share of the lessons was rather wearying.

"There must be a reason for it," she puzzled, one day. "I wonder if he had very frowsy governesses."

“We’ll ask him,” Jo declared.

They did, and the boy’s heavy eyes kindled as he was gradually induced to describe his former lessons. His governess had been one of the old school, severe and correct; she exacted absolute stillness and obedience, and led the weary feet of her small pupil along the dullest paths of old-fashioned learning. He used to learn by heart long passages of heavy history and geography books and repeat them to her with very little idea of their meaning. In the same way he would learn poetry, and repeat it, parrot-fashion. All lessons were beastly, he said, but poetry was not quite so beastly as others, because it had rhymes, and was not quite so hard to learn. But it never meant anything. You could tell a story better without worrying about rhymes, if that was all you wanted.

“But poetry’s gorgeous!” expostulated Billy, open-eyed.

“Aw, what’s gorgeous?” Rex demanded. “I never saw any sense in it.”

“But it is. Look at fighting yarns like ‘Horatius,’ and things like that!”

“Oh, I know that ‘Horatius’ thing. It’s one of the worst,” declared Rex, loftily—“there’s such miles of it.”

“Say a bit, Rex,” said Jean.

It was lesson-time, and they were all in the schoolroom. Rex began at once, obediently.

“But the Consul’s brow was sad.
And the Consul’s speech was low,
And darkly looked he at the wall,
And darkly at the foe.

“ ‘Their van will be upon us
Before the bridge goes down;
And if they once may win the bridge
What hope to save the town?’ ”

He said it in a queer, lifeless, sing-song voice, with not the smallest shade of expression. The end of each line was a recognized stopping-place, where he halted heavily. It was evident that the brave old lines conveyed nothing to him. Jo shuddered.

“Hold on!” she said. “Why did you begin there, Rex?”

“That’s where it began in my book.”

“And don’t you know anything of the part that goes before?”

“No. Is there any?”

“But there’s lots, and it’s the jolliest lines!” cried Billy excitedly. “All

about the Etruscan Army marching, and coming down on Rome, and all that. Didn't you never have it?"

"No," said Rex. "Thank goodness, I didn't. I reckon I had quite enough."

"Well—!" said the twins explosively. They looked at each other in bewilderment. "Horatius" had been part of their lives since they were very small people.

"Jo," said Jean, "let's have the 'Horatius' play."

"And no lessons?"

Jean nodded.

"It isn't wasting time, if we can make him see it." She turned to the bewildered small boy. "Rex, you like stories?"

"Rather!"

"Well, that's a simply ripping story, if you get it the right way. Will you try and forget that you know a bit of it, and that you don't like it? and we'll make a game of it for school this morning."

"But you *can't* make that stuff into a game!"

"Can't we!" laughed Jean. "Billy, you've got all your soldiers, haven't you?"

"Rather!" gasped Billy. "D'you really mean to get them? And no lessons?"

"Really and truly!" laughed Jean. "And bring any blocks you've got. Clear the table, and we'll go back to Ancient Rome!"

She darted to the store-room, returning presently with half-a-dozen packets of matches.

"Must be careful of these, because they've got to go back," she said, stripping off the paper wrappings. "I know Billy hasn't enough blocks left, now. Come along, Rex, and we'll build Rome."

They built it at one end of the table, a wobbly oblong, enclosed by strong matchbox walls. There were turrets and towers here and there, made of cotton-reels. Without, ran the Tiber, a noble river of yellow ribbon, wide, and doubtless deep. A bridge spanned it—a high-walled bridge, long and narrow. From the bridge you came out upon a wide plain, the rest of the table: it was easy to see it was a plain, because it was flat, and there were trees on it, and cattle, contributed by an ancient Noah's Ark. It was all workmanlike and comprehensible, and something like interest kindled in Rex's eye.

"Atlas, please, Billy," Jean said. "You know, the Ancient History Atlas."

She showed them the scene of the story.

"Now you've got to get that in your head, Rex, and remember it's all real."

Rapidly she sketched the story of the downfall of the Tarquins.

"They'd been kings of Rome, but they were absolute wasters, and at last the Romans were just fed up with them, and they kicked them out. Served them jolly well right, too; the Romans were terribly proud, and the Tarquins weren't fit to have in a decent city. And they cleared out to a place called Clusium—here it is—and asked Lars Porsena, the Etruscan king, for help."

"Was he a swine, too?" asked Rex.

"No, I don't think so. But he was fierce and warlike, and all those old States were jealous of Rome, because she was so powerful. They were all anxious for a chance to take her down."

"Who's 'her'?" queried Rex.

"Oh, they spoke of Rome as 'she.' Well, you can just imagine this mouldy Tarquin crowd coming to Lars Porsena and telling him all sorts of yarns about the way the Romans had treated them, and saying what a great man he was, and that they were jolly well sure he'd never see them in a hole. I don't suppose Lars Porsena believed half they said, but he was quite willing to have a war. All those chiefs were. They reckoned fighting was the only game fit for a man."

"So it is," quoth Billy, in martial tones.

"And Lars Porsena was awfully keen on his army. He was the biggest man of that part of the country, and he could command all the fighting men from ever so many cities. And he sent his messengers everywhere to muster them all at Clusium. And they came, as hard as they could pelt—armies and armies of them, until he had ten thousand cavalry and eighty thousand infantry. Just you picture that, young Rex—all in glittering armour, and with splendid flags, and simply gorgeous horses."

"Whew-w!" whistled Rex. "But this isn't really 'Horatius,' is it?"

"Yes, of course it is. It's the only 'Horatius.' Just you forget that you ever learned it as a lesson—it's a fighting yarn, and old Macaulay told it in a top-hole way. You've got to listen to it all presently; Jo must read it, 'cause she reads better than I do, and it's just all music."

"It's not music when I say it," Rex said, with a grin.

"No, 'cause you say it as if you were a lump of dough, and you come down with a 'wop' at the end of each line. You don't make any sense of it. You listen to Jo—and when she comes to the name of any place, I'll show it to you on the atlas. Well, Lars Porsena mustered all his crowd—ninety thousand—and then he consulted his tame prophets, and asked them what he'd better do. There were thirty of them, and they were very tame—they always said what

they were wanted to say. They knew the king wanted horribly to go to fight Rome, so they told him it was all right, and he must go ahead and bring all the spoils of Rome back with him. So off they went, and as soon as they got to the Roman country they began to burn villages and kill the people. Now you read, Jo."

Jo read well, and her clear young voice made the most of the singing words. The other three heads bent over the atlas, following up the story of the great muster and then of the fierce swoop on Rome. Rex was politely interested, at first. Then the story caught him, and his eyes kindled; he sat up, staring at Jo.

"And nearer fast and nearer
Doth the red whirlwind come:
And louder still, and still more loud.
From underneath that rolling cloud,
Is heard the trumpets' war-note proud.
The trampling and the hum.
And plainly and more plainly
Now through the gloom appears.
Far to left and far to right.
In broken gleams of dark-blue light,
The long array of helmets bright.
The long array of spears!"

"My word!" gasped Rex. "Wouldn't you have given something to see it!"

"We'll make it," said Jean, delightedly. "Have a rest, Jo, and we'll get the soldiers."

Billy had played with soldiers since he was a very small boy, and it had been a hobby of his family's to keep him supplied with fresh regiments. Out they came from their boxes: horse, foot, and artillery; ambulance-waggons, ammunition carts, and all the paraphernalia of battle.

"We can't make it correctly, of course," Jo said. "They didn't have our weapons, and we don't have their armour. But we can make a gorgeous and glittersome march; and you can just imagine that it's all ancient Etruscan, just as you've got to imagine that that yellow ribbon is the Tiber, all muddy and foaming with flood-water, and that the match-boxes are really the great stone walls of Rome."

Beyond doubt, it was a noble march. They headed across the plain towards Rome: Cavalry in the lead. Horse Guards and Life Guards, Lancers and Dragoons. They were brave with bright paint and glittering cuirasses, and with waving scarlet pennons. Then came guns, with teams of six horses, their

officers galloping alongside; and there were machine-guns and other artillery, cunningly drawn by means of attaching a cavalryman to each with a scrap of flower-wire. It was hugely realistic. Then the “four-score thousand” came marching in solid formation: Highlanders and Fusiliers, men in khaki and men in scarlet coats, with banners here and there. There were officers standing in the empty ambulance-waggons, directing the march. Aeroplanes taxied on either side, loaded with men; the carts were full of bundles that were certainly ammunition and food. One mounted officer carried a splendid silken Union Jack, and near it a tiny model of a motor bore a seated soldier—once the driver of an ambulance-waggon. On one side of the car rode a Lifeguardsman; on the other, a rather undersized Cavalryman, one from a boxful which Billy, in his secret heart, despised, since neither in general splendour nor in correctness of detail did they come up to most of his army.

“Who are those fellows?” Rex asked; and Billy answered him, from the poem.

“ ‘Fast by the royal standard,
O’erlooking all the war,
Lars Porsena of Clusium
Sat in his ivory car——’

an’ that’s Mamilius an’ False Sextus on his right an’ left. Doesn’t False Sextus look a mean little toad? I wish Lars Porsena looked prouder—but that driver is the only one I’ve got that’s made to sit down.”

“We’ll gild his helmet,” said Jo. “That will make him look awfully proud.” She produced gold paint from a cupboard, and endowed the Etruscan leader with a helmet of pure gold, to the immense delight of the small boys.

“They laid waste all the country as they came,” Jean said. “You can see the cattle clearing out.” She withdrew the Noah’s Ark cows to the friendly shelter of the trees. “But it will avail them nothing—see, there are a couple of cavalrymen galloping out on the wing to head them off. They’ll be steak before night!” she added, gloomily. “Now we’ll fix Rome—you can just imagine how anxious the people are there.”

She manned the walls of Rome with soldiers—a detachment of Seaforth Highlanders, made in a lying-down position, firing rifles towards the advancing Etruscans. Within the city walls were massed the casualties of five years—all the damaged and legless warriors resulting from natural accidents since Billy had first taken to military operations. Billy never had the heart to throw away what he termed a “wounded”; and when they were packed together, supporting each other’s tottering forms, they made an imposing enough crowd in the streets of Rome. Jo read on as they placed the men in

position; and the little boy who had known in “Horatius” only the dullest of dull lessons felt something of the tense anxiety of the doomed city at the steady march of the Etruscan hordes.

“Get Horatius and his mates—quick, Jean!” cried Billy.

Jean brought three tall Guardsmen from a box and placed them on the bridge. They were officers, each with his sword at the “carry”: stiffly standing at attention they stared before them, looking loftily at the advancing hosts.

“Aren’t they dauntless!” breathed Billy. “Come on, Jean—here’s the Fathers and the Commons!”

These were kneeling riflemen—Jean placed them at the foot of the slope leading up to the main bridge, where they might easily be supposed to be working for their lives. Jo read:

“And Fathers mixed with Commons
Seized hatchet, bar, and crow,
And smote upon the planks above
And loosed the props below.”

“Now the chiefs spurring, Jean!”

Jean took out the last three soldiers. They were Scots Greys, survivors of a well-loved set. Two of the chargers had wooden legs, deftly placed in position by Mr. Weston; but, though mended, they were still gallant and debonair, and they pranced out in front of the advancing army gaily, even as Aunus, Seius and Picus had pranced in the brave days of old.

“Now you’ve got them all, Rex,” Jean said. “Is it still dull?”

“Dull!” uttered Rex. “Why, you’d never think they were only toys—just wee little bits of lead and paint! They look so awful real. My word, I wouldn’t ’ve like to ’ve been in Rome!”

Jo read slowly:

“Meanwhile the Tuscan army,
Right glorious to behold,
Came, flashing back the noonday light,
Rank behind rank, like surges bright
Of a broad sea of gold.
Four hundred trumpets sounded
A peal of warlike glee,
As that great host, with measured tread,
And spears advanced, and ensigns spread,
Rolled slowly towards the bridge’s head,
Where stood the dauntless three.”

She stopped. Rex looked up at her with shining eyes.

"Oh, go on!" he begged—"go on! That's never the stuff I used to say!"

Jo read on, putting all her heart into her task. It had somehow become the most important thing in the world, for the moment, that this little lad, who seemed to have missed so much, should get the same joy from the poem that they had had. She wanted intensely that he should see it as clearly as did Billy, who knelt on his chair beside the table, staring at the soldiers. Billy knew every word of the story, but it was always new to him.

And there was soon no doubt that Rex was ensnared. There came to Jo the feeling dear above all others to the preacher and the actor—the knowledge that the audience is caught and held. She felt him thrill to the words: she knew, when she reached some verse more than usually musical, that every line went home to him. He ceased to look at the glittering array on the table; it had served its purpose in fixing the scene for ever in his brain, but she felt his great eyes upon her all the time. It was as though she were reading to Rex, and to Rex alone, knowing that in reading she was giving him a precious possession that could never be taken away from him.

They followed the fighting for the bridge, Billy's eyes ecstatic over the downfall of Astur; they heard the destroyed bridge crash into the flooded Tiber and sweep away with the torrent, leaving Horatius alone to face the taunts of his enemies. Jo heard Rex draw his breath sharply as the Roman turned his back upon the invitation to surrender, looking across the swollen river to the dear glimpse of his home. Her voice grew low.

"Oh, Tiber! Father Tiber!
To whom the Romans pray,
A Roman's life, a Roman's arms,
Take thou in charge this day!"

She felt her lips unsteady. Even to her it was more real than ever before. She had a sudden vision of the wife who waited in that white porch for her fighting man, holding his baby to her heart. There was tense silence in the room. Then she steadied herself, and the story drew to its triumphant close.

Billy straightened himself with a jerk that shook the table and sent the Etruscan army into a heap. But the matchbox walls of Rome, although they quivered, stood firm and steadfast.

"Well!" said Rex, with a great sigh. "If that's poetry, I want it every day!" He raised pleading eyes to Jo. "If you aren't tired, would it bother you awfully to read it all over again?"

CHAPTER XI

THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE

AFTER that, lessons went more easily, because both teachers and pupil understood each other better. Rex had a good deal of the quick intuition and clear brain that had made his sister a successful Captain of Merriwa. He realized that it was only a different method of teaching that had transformed "Horatius" from a dull lesson into something startlingly alive. The words had been the same all the time, only he had not had the wit to read them until his eyes were opened. Possibly, he reasoned, other branches of learning might have possibilities; they might not all be mere devices for embittering one's young life.

His books, too, were different. To tell the truth, Mrs. Forester had been rather horrified when she had realized the weary path her young son had trod—a discovery not made until Helen, fresh from school, had helped her to arrange Rex's outfit for Emu Plains. Helen had gasped in amazement over Rex's books.

"But these aren't all he has, surely, Mother? Wherever did you get them?"

"I didn't get them," Mrs. Forester had answered. "Miss Green had them. She brought them with her. I believe I bought them from her: she told me most of them were difficult to obtain now."

"I should think they would be. Poor little kid—just fancy having to wade through these! Why, they're fit for boys of fifteen, if they're fit for anything at all—only they're not! Every one ought to be scrapped. Look at the tiny print, and the weary, long paragraphs. And to drag a little nine-year-old through them!"

"I do feel rather ashamed," Mrs. Forester had admitted, after an examination of Miss Green's ancient literature. "They are really dreadful, aren't they? She came with high recommendations, and I thought it wouldn't matter if she were a bit old-fashioned—I was so much away from home that it seemed better not to have a very young governess to leave in charge of Rex."

"And didn't he tell you he hated his lessons?"

"Well, he did. But then so had you and Wilfred and Arthur before him," Mrs. Forester had said, twinkling. Helen had laughed.

"I suppose poor old Rex has paid the penalty of our grumbles—although I know the other boys and I never had books like that. Well, you'll let me send

up all the things he ought to have, won't you, Mother?"—and Mrs. Forester had thankfully consented.

So Rex found his new lessons taken from books that were easy to read and pleasant to look at and to handle—books that made history a succession of fascinating stories, and Geography something more than a weary catalogue of place-names and products; and there was something new called Literature, so like story-telling that it seemed impossible that it should be really a lesson. He found new peep-holes into learning that were extraordinarily interesting. Punctuation, under Miss Green, had meant a collection of horrible things called "stops," traps to catch the unwary, for which there was neither rhyme nor reason. With the twins, they became kind little bridges over which you stepped into understanding just how a sentence should go: some places required big bridges, like a full-stop, or lesser bridges, like a semi-colon, and others only tiny foot-bridges, which were commas: but always when you crossed them, the sense of what you read was waiting meekly for you, instead of being a will-o'-the-wisp thing that dodged away from you and hid itself in the mazes of a paragraph. Once you had mastered them it was impossible to read poetry badly, and the lines sang to you as they were meant to sing. Maps, with Miss Green, had been the dreariest species of jigsaw puzzles; now they became pictures that helped you to make stories wonderfully alive. When you had a twin reading you the story of how Hawke chased the French fleet into Quiberon Bay, the full thrill of the story came home if you followed his course on the map, tracing his rush through the quicksands and shallows and roaring breakers, his only pilot-light the flash of the enemy guns. "It would seem just any old bay, if you didn't see it," Rex said. "But when the map makes you understand what an awful passage it was—and he did it at night, and in a howling gale!—well, it just makes you squiggle down the back!"

And that is an amount of success which does not fall to all teachers—perhaps not to many.

Lessons ended at twelve, and there was an interval to recruit exhausted nature before the dinner-gong sounded at half-past twelve. At half-past two came bathing-parade, an institution for which the boys were never late. They mustered in the verandah, with light coats flung on over infinitesimal swimming-suits; and being joined by the twins, went, helter-skelter, down the hill to the river. The stream was lower than the twins ever remembered to have seen it, and in most places very little current ran; but the bathing-pool was still good. It was formed by a wide bend in the river; on the far side the bank rose high and steep, but the bank near the house shelved gently down to the water's edge, in a little beach of fine sand. Mr. Weston had the pool always kept clear of snags, and it was fenced in, so that the cattle could not drink there. Trees

overhung part of it: there were always shade and coolness there, even in the hottest days. A hut, built in bush-fashion of interlaced tea-tree poles, and overgrown with clematis and sarsaparilla, formed a dressing-room, if needed.

The Weston children had learned to swim almost as babies. They could scarcely remember a time when they had not rolled in and out of the water as they chose. But Rex could not swim, and, to handicap him further, he had an instinctive dread of the water. When a tiny boy he had fallen into a creek, and had been nearly drowned; and now, even to enter running water meant a rather painful effort for him. The twins had been warned of this, and they took him very gently.

"You're not going to learn to swim at all just yet," they told him, on his first day, as the small boy stood on the sand, looking as if he would have shivered but for the heat of the day.

"But I want to learn to swim," Rex protested. "I've got to. I can't go to school with other fellows if I can't swim."

"No, of course you can't," Jean said. "Don't you worry, old chap; we'll make a regular Annette Kellermann of you before we've done with you. But we won't be in a hurry. You've got to learn this old pool first. Rule I is that you don't go beyond that rope."

She pointed to a cord stretched across the water.

"Now, just you remember that the water is never more than three feet deep on this side of that cord; and the bottom is all good, firm sand, with no holes or snags. That's quite deep enough for you to practise strokes in when you feel like it. Plenty of time. We'll sail Billy's yacht first."

Billy's yacht was a noble craft built by Mr. Weston, and home-rigged. In a favourable wind she sailed well, but had a disconcerting habit of suddenly turning turtle with no apparent reason. Her builder stated that it must be due to some mysterious flaw in her original plan, but, as no one knew what the original plan was, this theory was scarcely helpful. Jo's explanation was that she had really meant to be a submarine, and had occasional uncontrollable impulses towards this ambition. Whatever the reason might be, this curious habit of the yacht's lent considerable excitement to sailing her.

The boys played with the boat in the shallow water during the first bathing days, Billy heroically stifling his longing for deep water so that Rex might not feel himself an outsider; and gradually the boy lost his first nervous terror of the cool touch of the river. Then, as the twins saw that he was gaining confidence, they proposed a new game. They brought to the river one afternoon a huge rubber ball, at the sight of which Billy yelled with joy.

"Water-polo!" he shouted. "Wherever did you get it!"

He gave the ball a mighty kick, and it rose high in the air, to fall in the deepest part of the pool. Billy was after it like a flash. He darted across the pool with swift strokes, and then, turning on his back, kicked the ball before him as he swam out again. Rex watched him enviously.

"Wish I could do that," he muttered.

"So you will, soon," Jo said. "Come along, and we'll have water-tennis; you and Billy can keep the ball on the shallow side, and Jean and I will go out in the deep part. It's no end of fun."

It was indeed a glorious game for a blazing January day. At first Rex kept prudently near the bank; but as the excitement of keeping the ball going backwards and forwards grew upon him, he forgot himself more and more, and a few splashing tumbles gave him increased confidence, since he found that he always emerged safely. Soon he was as keen as Billy, laughing, shouting, and racing hither and thither after the elusive ball. Backwards and forwards across the rope it flew, a wet and slippery thing that never took the direction it might reasonably be expected to take; and after it plunged and splashed and scrambled and flopped the small boys, yelling with glee. The twins bobbed about in the deep water, like cheery young seals, returning the boys' erratic services, and keeping a keen eye on the movements of their pupil.

"Working like a charm," Jo said, nodding sagely.

"Yes, isn't it?" responded her fellow-plotter. "Look at him!—he went right under then, and never minded a bit. He'll be like a dabchick soon."

And indeed, after three days of water-tennis, Rex revolted against the limitations of the non-swimmer. The ball had bobbed away from him at an unexpected angle into deep water; he flopped after it, missed his footing, and went under. Scarcely had his head disappeared when a twin was by his side, her hand on his arm. Rex came up, shaking the water from his eyes, and bursting into a flood of incoherent speech.

"Why, you're not frightened, Rex?" demanded Jo, the twin in question. "You weren't really in deep water, you know."

"Frightened? No, of course I'm not frightened," said Rex crossly. "I'm wild, that's all! It's just too silly, not being able to swim—I'd have had that ball as easy as wink if I could have swum two strokes. Do teach me, Jo!"

"My, rather!" said Jo delightedly. "Here you go—I'll hold you." She swung him off his feet, her hands under his chest. "Now kick away: hands too. I won't let you down."

Rex kicked manfully, thrashing the water until the splashing almost hid his teacher and himself. Gradually Jo induced him to calm his movements, and they progressed up and down beside the rope.

“Don’t try to go too quickly—you aren’t trying to increase your number of strokes per minute, you’re learning to swim. Bring your hands well back—remember you’re using them and the soles of your feet to push you through the water—that’s right, now you’re doing better. Slowly does it—now, don’t you begin to feel you’re shoving yourself along?”

“I’m not really, am I?” Rex panted.

“Yes, of course you are; do you think I’d walk about in the water carrying a great lump like you?” demanded his instructor, pithily. “Not much; and soon you’ll be doing all the work for yourself, and I’ll only be keeping one finger under your chin; and then I’ll forget you, when I want to scratch my nose, and take it away; and you’ll never notice, ’cause you’ll be swimming along merrily by yourself. All that keeps most people from swimming is the idea that it’s dreadful to go under the water; now you’ve found out that it’s really quite pleasant and homely under there, and you won’t mind a bit. And I’ll write to your mother and tell her you’ve developed into a young human porpoise, and she’ll be ever so proud! And now I think we’ll have a rest,” Jo finished, panting herself. “Stick your feet down: you’re only within your depth.”

“Like it. Rex?” demanded Billy, swimming happily on the other side of the rope.

“Rather. Only I don’t know that I’ll ever go by myself.”

“You’ll swim by yourself just as soon as you believe that you can,” stated Jo. “You know all the movements now—that comes of practising them on land. It’s only a question of believing you can swim—and there you’ll be!”

“I’m an awful hen in the water, you know, Jo.”

“Now, that’s the very thing you’re *not* to believe,” Jo said, positively. “The fellow who thinks he’s a hen in anything will act like a hen—and I simply decline to teach hens! But we aren’t going to hurry you, old chap: we’ll have a few days of practising like this before we let you go alone, and then it will only be inside the rope, and facing towards the bank, so that you’ll know you’ve only to put your feet down and bob your head up, if you go under. So don’t worry.”

“You’re an awful brick, Jo!” said the small boy gratefully.

“I’m not—I’m a high-class instructor!” said Jo, laughing. “Come on, and we’ll have some more tennis.”

They practised tennis and swimming alternately during that day and the next, Jo and Jean taking turns in supporting their kicking pupil. On the way up to the house, and at intervals throughout the day, he was to be seen vigorously employing the breast-stroke; he was even discovered face downwards across a

log in the paddock, practising with his feet as well as his arms, and gasping heavily.

"There's nothing in it, you know," he said in his old-fashioned manner to Billy. "Any ass could do the movements. Then why can't I swim?"

"But p'rhaps you can," said Billy, grinning. "Jo says you can do anything if you only believe you can. You'd better practise believing, instead of breast-stroke!"

"I believe I'd better," said Rex solemnly.

Billy awoke next morning earlier than usual. He fancied he had heard a step: and yet there was no sound in the house. He leaned on his elbow, and looking across towards Rex's bed, saw that it was empty.

This was unusual, for Rex loved his bed, and, as a rule, it was hard to withdraw him from it. Billy was mildly surprised. There was another sound, inside their room, and he went to the window and peeped in. Rex, in his little coat and sandals, a towel over his arm, was just going out into the passage.

"Great Scott!" said Billy. "He's off to bathe by himself!"

A moment's reflection showed him that this was a proceeding that should not be allowed. He hesitated a moment over the point of calling Jean and Jo: then he decided that he could deal with it himself. He slipped on his bathing-knickers and coat, and trotted down the hill after Rex, just as the twin's alarum-clock brought them painfully from their beds.

Ambition had been striving within Rex for four-and-twenty hours. He wanted to swim alone: he felt within himself that he *could* swim, if only he might try without anyone there to witness his preliminary struggles. Overnight he had made up his mind to go down alone to the river, if only he could awake early enough. He had gone to sleep urgently repeating, "I'm going to wake up at four"; he had given himself four hard knocks on the head, a plan which—so he had heard—never failed to rouse you at the time indicated by the number of knocks. And whether the fact was due to one of these charms, or to his own determination, he had certainly waked up in the early dawn.

Bathing did not seem half so tempting then as in the heat of the day, although it had been a hot night, and he had lain with only a sheet as covering. Still, his mind was made up, and it was an obstinate enough little mind; so, after a few moments' hesitation, he got up noiselessly, and slipped away.

He ran down the hill as hard as he could, trying to get hot enough to be anxious for the cool touch of the water. But he was not very thoroughly warmed when he reached the river; and it looked lonely and dark under its overhanging trees. He flung off his sandals and coat without giving himself time to think, and ran in.

Whew-w! it was cold. At the first touch of the still water his courage almost melted. This would not do, he knew. Stooping, he splashed water over his head and face, as the twins had taught him, and then flung himself full-length in the shallows, knowing that once he was wet all over, one terror would have passed. That was better. He stood up and waded sturdily out towards the rope—just as Billy gained the bank and dived into the dressing-hut for purposes of observation.

Rex turned when he reached the rope and faced the bank from which he had come, telling himself, over and over, that if he did go under he was only within his depth. It was a comforting thought, but it needed constant repetition, or it seemed to slip away from him—so dark and unpleasant seemed the water. It was not at all like the warm, cheery pool in which they frolicked daily after dinner. There was no small effort of heroism, at length, in his sudden, clumsy dive forward.

He went under, lost his head for a moment, and came up, gasping and spluttering, all his courage gone, for a moment. Then he realized that he had not tried to swim at all—that from the first his feet had been seeking for the bottom. "Silly ass I am!" he remarked—and dived forward again, kicking vigorously.

Hurrah! he was swimming. One, two, three—yes, that was certainly three strokes, and he was almost in the shallows. Another, and his knees touched the bottom. He turned on his back, digging his hands into the oozy sand, and kicked in an ecstasy of triumph. The rope was really quite a decent distance away, and he had swum from it—he, Rex Forester, who had always been scared of water! It was almost beyond belief.

"Won't Jo yell!" he said aloud. "I—I think I'll swim out to the rope again."

He rose and waded a few steps, and cast himself forward again. It was quite easy this time: he made a huge splashing, but certainly the rope was getting nearer. Then almost within reach of it, he missed his stroke and tried to clutch the rope, losing his head for a moment. The impetus of his kick carried him forward, under the rope. There was nothing but deep water before him, and he did not know how to turn. Terror seized him, and he went under.

He rose, choking, clawing at the air. Then a leg, lean and brown and scarred, came beside him, and, as he clutched it, a cool voice spoke cheerily.

"My word, that was bonza!" said Billy. "Told you you'd swim. Hang on to my leg and turn now, and I'll give you a start and race you in."

Rex grasped him, panting. Billy, on his back, was holding the taut rope with both hands and stiffening his young body in the water, kicking gently towards him. He drew him quietly back until the rope was within his reach. A

faint sigh of relief escaped the rescuer as Rex caught the cord and pulled himself in until his feet were on the bottom once more.

"You're a nice sort of chap, scooting off to go swimming all alone," said Billy, bobbing up and down cheerily beside him. "Anyhow, now you know that you can swim all right, and we'll have no end of larks."

"I can't," Rex shivered, his teeth chattering. "I'd have drowned if you hadn't come."

"Not you!" Billy's voice was reassuring. "You only thought you couldn't swim for a moment. Come along and we'll swim in."

"I don't think I will," Rex quivered. "I'll just wade in."

"Ah, don't," Billy begged. "You can't say that, after the way you were swimming about before I came in. Have a go, now—I'll be just behind you."

Thus adjured, Rex gripped his waning courage in both hands and plunged in again. This time it was quite easy: in a moment he was near the bank and Billy was crowing gently beside him, triumphant.

"That's top-hole. Cold?"

"Rather!" chattered Rex.

"I'll tell you what, then—come and have a race on the bank to get warm, and we'll have another practice afterwards."

They splashed out and tore round the dry slopes like a couple of young puppies. The sun was well up now: already it was warm with the promise of a blazing day. In a few minutes they were glowing with heat. Down the bank again and into the water, tumbling over each other in the shallows; then they swam out to the rope, and back again, and round and round in a circle, Rex's confidence developing at every stroke. He tingled with the joy that comes with the first knowledge that deep water has lost its mystery and terror and has become merely a playfellow.

"I believe I could swim right across, now!" he said, looking longingly at the deep side.

"Yes, but you better hadn't—it must be nearly cow-time," said Billy prudently. "Come along home, or the girls will be hunting for us."

They trotted home gently, hugging the prospect of surprising the twins. A knowledge of the early-morning habits of those energetic damsels enabled them to slip into their room unperceived, and when they appeared presently in the kitchen, ready for milking, their hats concealing their damp heads, no one suspected them of anything more than being rather later than usual. Faint surprise was excited by their appetites, which seemed remarkable for the early morning, even for small boys.

“Them’s the two to eat,” remarked Sarah, looking after them as they ran off to milk, their hands full of food. “Here was me thinkin’ I’d enough scones to do breakfast—but they’ve made ’em look silly. Well, you’d sooner see ’em eatin’ than not eatin’.”

“Yes, and Rex is looking ever so much better already,” said Jo, with satisfaction.

“H’m,” sniffed Sarah, who adored Billy and viewed with distrust and suspicion any small boy so completely unlike him. “I dunno that you’ll ever make a man of him. He’s built wrong. Think he’ll ever swim?”

“Oh, yes—after a bit,” Jo said. “One can’t expect too much all at once.”

They had agreed between themselves that it would be extremely unwise to try to hurry Rex’s development in the water; and as they followed the boys down to the river that afternoon they reminded each other of his disadvantages, deciding that for a week or two they would not think of allowing him to try to swim alone.

“I’d rather wait a month than risk him losing his nerve,” Jo remarked, as they neared the river-bank. “It’s one thing to paddle round with someone holding you, and quite another to find yourself with nothing but cold water as a support. And he’s such a scared little kid. We’d never forgive ourselves if ——”

She broke off, gaping. They had come within sight of the pool; and there, beside the rope, the “scared little kid” was swimming solemnly, his earnest face, with very tightly-shut lips, held stiffly away from the water, his eyes anxiously watching for them, to make sure they missed no detail of his prowess. At the sight of their amazed faces he uttered a kind of triumphant snort, and promptly sank—emerging a second later, grinning broadly. Beside him, Billy swung upon the rope, chanting a gleeful song.

“Well—I—never!” gasped the twins, in unison.

“We couldn’t wait for you,” called Billy patronizingly. “You’re so jolly slow at teaching a chap to swim!”

CHAPTER XII

RESPONSIBILITIES

MOTHER had gone to Melbourne, much against her will, to see the dentist—that useful person who secures for many Bush mothers their only chance of a holiday to the city. But on this occasion Mrs. Weston was not in the least grateful for the trip. In better times, when a visit to Town meant pretty clothes, theatres and smart restaurants, the necessity for a few painful hours in the dentist's chair never seemed a high price to pay. But now, with so little money to spare that her beloved twins had to work at home, the journey was merely a nuisance, and she resented having to spend so much upon herself—after the fashion of mothers. Melbourne was hot, dusty, and empty of all the people she knew: they were all at the seaside or in the cool shelter of the hills. Mrs. Weston harried the dentist until he consented to hurry through her treatment, and thankfully sent a telegram to Emu Plains to announce her speedy return.

Tom Holmes brought the telegram out, driving his father's car. A long trail of dust marked his dash up the track through the grassless paddock. The twins, just returned from bathing, met him on the verandah.

"Lucky people—you look disgustingly cool," said the stout youth, pushing his broad Panama back from his hot forehead. "How do you manage it?"

"Swimming," said Jean, shaking her damp curls. "There's still water in the bathing-pool, though very little in the other part of the river."

"Well, it'll soon be the only place in this district that isn't solid dust, if we don't get rain before long," declared Tom. "Our billabong and creek are bone-dry, and the river's only a trickle. Father says he'll have to send every hoof off the place—not that he's got many left."

"The whole country looks awful," Jo said. "It doesn't seem possible that there was ever thick green grass on those bare paddocks—or that there ever would be any again. How are your horses, Tom?"

"Poor as crows, except two or three that we keep in the stable. Of course, there are hardly any here now; they've all gone away for change of air," said Tom, laughing rather bitterly. "Well, I'm generally keen enough on being at home, but I'm beginning to feel I can stand a change of scene myself; it gives a fellow the blues to see nothing but dust and half-starved stock. For once in my life I'd rather drive the car than ride; one gets about the country more quickly.

That reminds me. I thought I'd bring out your mail. There's a wire for you."

"Father's out, so we'd better open it—I expect it's from Mother," Jo said. "Yes; and she'll be home to-morrow, Jean—hooray! It seems an age since she went away, and it's only four days. Thanks, ever so, Tom. Do you feel like tea? Or a lemon squash?"

"If I'm to be strictly truthful," said Tom, "I feel like both. A squash would make me less like a sandy desert, and then I'd enjoy some tea. At present, tea would be wasted on me: it would merely hiss when it struck me, and immediately vanish in steam!"

"Poor boy!" laughed Jo. "Come along, and we'll brew the squash before tea comes in. Thank goodness Father planted lemon-trees near the spring; they haven't the least idea there's a drought on. Would you like a wash first, Tom?"

"I was afraid I looked like that," said Tom unhappily. "Yes, please. Bathroom on the verandah?"

"Yes. And you really didn't look like it, only I thought it might make you feel a bit happier. Is it necessary to say, 'Don't waste the water,' or would you be insulted?"

"I should think I would," declared Tom; "we've got a drought of our own, haven't we?" He strode off, returning presently to find a brimming tumbler awaiting him in the cool dimness of the shaded dining-room.

"That's gorgeous!" he declared, putting down the empty glass. "I had a drink from the tap in the bathroom first, because, of course, no drink is really long enough in weather like this, and——"

"You shouldn't have drunk that water," stated Jean anxiously. "It isn't drinking-water. Now we ought to sterilize you."

"Any water's drinking-water in weather like this," said Tom, unmoved. "Besides, it will get thoroughly boiled when I go out into the heat again, so why worry? Water is always purified if you submit it to a high enough temperature—and goodness knows the thermometer is doing its best to break records to-day. How's your pupil-teaching going, Jean?"

"Oh, well enough," Jean answered. "We're beginning to feel we're making some progress. At first we were very scared of our job, but we are plucking up courage now. Rex is getting much more like an ordinary boy, and that's a comfort. We were afraid he'd never be ordinary, but it's surprising to see how soon polish like his disappears among plain and honest folk!"

"Is that what you are?" Tom demanded, round-eyed.

"Yes—very plain and honest. Don't you dare to say we're not, Tom Holmes!"

“All right,” said Tom, meekly; “I won’t; only just you remember it wasn’t me that said you were plain. And what about the riding-lessons? Is the kid shaping well at that?”

“Oh, rather. Father says he took to it from the start like a duck to water. He goes cantering round the home-paddock now on old Merrilegs, with Billy on one of our ponies. Sits well too, and he has good hands. He tried to jump a log the other day, and came to grief, but he didn’t mind.”

“He wasn’t hurt?”

“Oh, no. You see, Merrilegs has ideas of his own about jumping, now: he thinks he’s too old, and it takes Billy all he knows to get him over a log. So, when Rex rode him at this one—it was only a wee little log—he just propped. And Rex shot over the log all right, except that the pony didn’t go with him. Rex was awfully disgusted, but he wasn’t hurt.”

“And, of course, Billy yelled with laughter?”

“Well, that’s what Billy *would* do,” said Jo. “All the same, I think it’s very likely that Master Rex will go off by himself some fine morning and get Merrilegs over that log—just as he did with swimming.” She told the story of the boys’ early-morning bathe, and Tom nodded approvingly.

“Shows he’s got something in him. Well, I went to school with the other Forester boys, and they certainly weren’t the kind of chaps to be beaten by anything.”

“And, of course, his sister Helen is the same. Why, she was Captain of Merriwa!” said Jo, as though that assertion implied every possible virtue. “Only, Rex hasn’t had a fair chance, between illnesses and being handed over to a prim old governess who did her best to make an Early Victorian young lady of him. He was like nothing earthly when he came, but there’s a good deal of commonplace small boy cropping out now, thank goodness!”

“And how about you two?” demanded Tom, with a grin. “How’s work suiting you?”

“Oh, work’s all right,” said Jo shortly.

Not even Jean knew how her twin longed in secret for the school-life they had lost. School had always been a glad prospect ahead of them, for Mrs. Weston had loved her years at Merriwa and she had brought up the twins in happy anticipation of just as good a time when their own turn should come. And it had been all, and more, that they had hoped. Lessons, thanks to their mother’s good grounding, had been not too difficult: out of school hours the time had been all too brief for the packed interests, the jolly friendships, the long, intimate talks. Their first year had gone in a happy whirl: they had looked forward to others as good. And now it was all over.

Not that Jo was discontented with home-life. It was not in her nature to be discontented with anything for more than five minutes at a time. She loved her home, and there was plenty of interest in each day's work and play, besides the solid satisfaction of knowing that she and her twin were doing something really worth while—something that helped to lift the burden from her father's shoulders. But they were not yet sixteen: and sometimes there came over her a wave of longing for the care-free days when there had been no worries, no responsibilities. "We were just kids, last year," she thought, sometimes. "It's a bit sudden to be grown-up."

Then she would wonder if Jean thought the same. But, whatever Jean thought, she made no sign.

Something of this longing for the life of last year came over Jo at Tom's careless question. She looked at him half-resentfully: he was so unconscious of any real worries, although he grumbled cheerfully at the heat and the drought. They really touched him very little: he would go back to school, bored at going, feeling certain that before he returned the drought would be broken and the country smiling again. He was a year and a half older than they, and yet he was only a child, playing: and they were workers——

She gave herself a mental shake.

"Well, you are a pig, Jo Weston!" she addressed herself silently. "Jealous and bad-tempered, and altogether piggish! Be ashamed of yourself!"—and forthwith smiled cheerfully at the unconscious Tom.

"Work's really rather a lark when you get going," she stated unconcernedly. "We get a lot of fun out of it."

"Well, you both look as if you were always on the grin," said Tom. "Goodness knows, there's not much laughing going on at our place. Father's always growling at the drought, and Mother says she's tired of looking at bare paddocks and she means to have a flat in Town. And Father says he'd rather be shot than live in a flat. So there it is, and I'm beginning to think it won't be so bad to go back to school, though the bare idea of swotting over Latin gives me the creeps. Hullo, Sarah! how are you?"

"I've been better, and I've been worse," said Sarah, non-committally, putting down a loaded tea-tray. "And how's yourself, Master Tom?"

"Oh, first-rate," Tom said. "Is it hot enough for you, Sarah?"

"That's one of them questions as ought to be put down by an Ack of Parlyment," said Sarah testily. "I druv into the township with Miss Jean yesterday, an' it was just as 'ot as 'ot: an' every one arsked the same thing, no matter what shop I went into. A body knows she ain't lookin' 'er best with 'er face the colour of a tomato an' perspiration droppin' off 'er forehead, an' it

sort of rubs it in to be arsked all the time, ‘Is it ’ot enough for you?’ Anyone lookin’ at me with ’alf an eye could see it was a good deal more’n ’ot enough for me. But they kep’ on arskin’, all the same.”

“Sorry,” said Tom, laughing. “Stupid of me, Sarah—but when it’s as hot as this all one’s brain turns to dough.”

“Oh, ’ot!” said Sarah, with scorn. “It makes me tired to hear every one growlin’ about the ’eat, and sayin’ there was never such a drought.”

“But you said yourself it was hot yesterday,” protested the bewildered Tom.

“Well, I did; an’ it *was* ’ot. But I don’t go growlin’ all the time. Summers ain’t nothing to what they was: I tell you, in my young days ’eat was ’eat, an’ drought was drought, an’ no mistake. Just you think what summers was twenty years ago—oh, well, of course you can’t”—as her hearers shouted with laughter—“but any’ow, you can take my word for it we knew what temp’rashur was! Soarin’ well above the ’undred for a fortnight on end. An’ droughts lasted years. Nowadays, every one thinks they’re killed if they get a few days’ ’eat, an’ a bit of a drought like this makes ’em think the world’s comin’ to an end.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Sarah. But it’s bad enough.”

“Aw, bad!” sniffed Sarah. “Them old droughts was bad, if you like, when the ground was as bare as Collins Street, an’ all the sheep got boiled down for tallow. An’ there wasn’t the grumblin’ then that there is now.”

“Gammon!” said Tom unexpectedly. “Don’t tell me people didn’t growl, Sarah. Why, anyone on the land will growl even in a good season, let alone a bad one. Did you ever know a man on the land who was satisfied with the weather?”

“Well, no, I don’t suppose I did,” admitted Sarah, gazing with some amazement at her opponent. “Farmers an’ sich especially: you can’t please ’em with weather, not if you made it to order. But what I do say is, that it’s no good grumblin’ an’ grousin’, even if there is a bit of a drought. Keep smilin’, an’ it’ll rain some day.” With which philosophy Sarah collected her temporarily scattered forces and withdrew.

“She didn’t say that, at all, of course,” remarked Tom. “At least, I don’t think she did, but Sarah’s so eloquent, when she gets going, that I’m really not sure. I’d love to take her last bit of advice home to Father and give it to him when he was being really excited about the drought. ‘Keep smilin’, an’ it’ll rain some day!’ But I’d wish to be well out of his reach when I delivered it.”

“You’d think Sarah was such a Tartar, just to listen to her, wouldn’t you?” laughed Jean, pouring out tea. “And she’s really so mild she’d eat out of your

hand. She's been teaching us the proper way to turn out rooms, and polish floors, and to keep the silver, in the hope of making us what she calls 'house-proud.' She says no woman is any good unless she's house-proud."

"Whatever's that?" asked the bewildered masculine hearer.

"Oh, being mad keen on one's house, and having everything 'just-so.' It's really rather fun, too, only poor old Sarah's so quaint over it; she shows us how to do a thing with heaps of 'elbow-grease,' and then she sighs over our doing it at all, and begs us to go and rub cold cream on our hands or they'll never be as nice as Mother's! Which they certainly never will," added Jean, placing a brown paw on the table near her twin's. "And then she goes and hurriedly cooks something we like for tea. But if we thank her she only looks down her nose and mutters something, and, if you didn't know her well, you'd think she was offended at being thanked at all. But she's a darling when you do happen to know her."

There was a pounding of horses' feet in the paddock, and Jo ran to the window. .

"Father and the boys are coming!" she cried. "They've been out to one of the back paddocks. Look at Rex, Tom—doesn't he ride decently, for a new-chum?"

There was a cloud of dust, out of which the forms of the riders were looming indistinctly. Old grey Merrilegs came along at a smooth, easy canter, his rider bumping a little, but clearly happy. Mr. Weston rode a little to the right, on a big, good-looking bay, and Billy scampered in front on Punch, Jean's pony. He rode as if he were part of the little black he was on: his hands down, his head up, all his merry face flushed with excitement.

"Rex'll never ride like Billy," said Tom, watching him.

"Oh, but Billy has been on a horse ever since he was six months old and Father used to take him out in front of him," Jo said. "Billy can't help riding. But Rex is not bad, now, is he?"

"No, indeed, he's not. And with goggles, too—I always think glasses must be terribly hampering to a kid," remarked Tom. "Oh, he'll do, if only you people can keep him for a bit. It would be no end of a pity if he wasn't able to follow up his big brothers at Grammar: they've been such good all-round men."

"He's going to be just as good as they are," declared Jo hotly. "When he gets stronger he'll probably be able to leave off the glasses altogether—the oculist said so. And his muscles are developing already."

"Yes, and he can box, too," chimed in Jean. "Father gives them lessons every night, and he says Rex will have a punch like the kick of a mule!"

“And you’re just like a pair of old hens with a turkey-chick,” grinned Tom. “You know what delicate little squeakers they are at first—have to be fed every hour, and all that sort of thing. And then, suddenly, they get big and strong and turn into proud gobblers! Take care, or that’s what young Rex will be doing—and proud gobblers have no sort of a time when they go to school.”

The twins laughed, but they accepted the big fellow’s warning meekly enough.

“We’re going to be awfully careful, really. He’s such a nice kid—when he isn’t polished—that it would be easy to spoil him; and then, it does feel as if he really were our own turkey-chick. And we keep remembering how small he is, and that his mother’s thousands of miles away. But we’re trying hard to keep our feelings to ourselves, when he’s about: and Father has promised to come down on us heavily if he sees any signs of molly-coddling. So perhaps there’s hope.” The twins, who had rendered these remarks in a composite fashion peculiarly their own, paused, and looked anxiously at Tom, who suddenly loomed before them as a possible Grammar School senior what time Rex might be joining as a palpitating junior.

Tom nodded, aware of his masculine superiority.

“Oh, if Mr. Weston’s keeping an eye on him he won’t go far wrong,” he said—and then Sarah stalked in, tall and grim, with a loaded tray.

“I made the biggest pot of tea,” she explained, “seein’ as ’ow they’ll all be dusty and thirsty. They’ll be in in a minute; they’re washin’ themselves up now.”

“Thanks, Sarah dear,” said Jean. “Oh, and, Sarah—Mother’s coming home to-morrow.”

Sarah’s dour face suddenly softened.

“That’s good news!” she said. “Some’ow the place is just an ’owlin’ desert when she’s away. Did she say if the dentist ’ad ’urt her much?”

“She didn’t say—there’s only a telegram,” Jean answered.

“I wish she ’ad,” said Sarah anxiously. She left the room, evidently dissatisfied with the deficiencies of telegrams. They heard her joyfully informing Mr. Weston, in the hall, of the news.

“Mother coming home!—that’s great!” he said, coming in. “You’re the mail-man, I suppose, Tom—many thanks. We didn’t expect her so soon. Yes, I’ll be glad of tea, twinses: it’s awfully hot and dusty in the paddocks, and my two boundary-riders must be as thirsty as I am. Here they come”—as the boys clattered up the hall. “Any news, Tom?”

“Nothing that I know of—barring drought,” Tom answered.

“That’s not news now, worse luck!” Mr. Weston said. “It’s what you might call ancient history turned into an established fact. Well, I heard some news, and it isn’t good news, either: a man who was mending a fence next ours told me there are big fires at Gulgong Flat, fifteen miles away. Several poor souls have been burned out, and a lot of damage done. Of course, with such a season, it’s a wonder that we have not had fires in the district before this: had there been more grass to carry them they would certainly have come, for the whole country is as dry as a stick.”

“Father was saying a good many fires have started, but they have been quickly got under,” Tom remarked.

“Yes—that’s one advantage of a drought. Fires won’t run over bare ground, and most of the paddocks are bare enough. Even the roadsides have been eaten right out by travelling stock. But there is plenty of lightly timbered country about Gulgong Flat, and of course fire will travel very fast in that. We can only hope they will get it under before it comes our way.”

“Well, Emu Plains is safe enough, Mr. Weston,” said Tom.

“The house is, of course. There’s scarcely any chance of danger here, for there’s no grass to carry a fire up to us, and no timber to speak of. But I don’t want my back paddocks burned out—that’s about all the grass I’ve got left; and I can’t afford to lose fencing. We may have to move the cattle in a hurry, if the fire spreads; the boys and I rode round them to-day, and drove them out of the timber, to accustom them to the move, in case it has to be made.”

“It was grand fun,” said Rex. “And, Jean—I jumped a log, and I didn’t fall off!”

“Didn’t I tell you you would?” said Jean, smiling at him. “How are the cattle, Father?”

“Well, they’re holding their own, and that’s about all one can say,” her father answered. “The water is good, of course: that helps a lot. Goodness knows, there can’t be much nourishment in the sort of grass that’s left, but, somehow, they are managing to pick up a living. I suppose, some day, if rain doesn’t come, they’ll decide that it really isn’t worth while, and they’ll lie down and die. But there’s always hope that rain will come.”

“Then we’ll all go and sit and watch the grass grow and the cattle get fat,” said Jo. “Won’t it be fun, Rex?”

“Will they really get fat while you look at them?” asked the small boy, round-eyed behind his spectacles.

“Rather,” said Tom. “Of course, there are a few shy ones, which don’t like getting fat in front of people, and they make for the scrub!”

“I don’t think that’s true!” said Rex solemnly. At which everybody laughed, and Jean offered him a cake, which he ate in puzzled silence, pondering on the queer ways of country folk. They were very jolly, Rex thought, and he had quite made up his mind that when he was grown-up he would own a station and manage it himself. But there was no doubt that they were sometimes difficult to understand, and occasionally they talked a language all their own, full of words that were quite unfamiliar to him. He had mental notes of several queer expressions he would ask the twins to explain: Why bullocks were “poor as crows,” and why a crow was poor, anyhow; and what it was that cattle held when they were said “to hold their own,” and how did they hold anything? Rex had ridden that afternoon round more cattle than he had ever been near before, but none of them were attempting to hold things, their own or anyone else’s. He longed to catch a twin by herself, that he might ask her. Other people might—and did—laugh at him; but never the twins.

Tom said good-bye presently, and they all went out to the gate with him, after the friendly Bush fashion, and watched him disappear in a cloud of dust. The twins hurried back to take out the tea-tray.

In the kitchen they came suddenly upon Sarah, who straightened up guiltily at their approach. But the twins had seen, for a moment, a bowed head, her face hidden in her hands; and as she turned from them to stir a saucepan which obviously contained only hot water they saw that she was pale, with heavy rings under her eyes. Jean looked a minute, and then put down her tray.

“What’s the matter, Sarah?”

“There ain’t nothing the matter,” Sarah said. “What would there be?”

“I don’t know,” said Jean. “But there’s something, all the same. Tell us, Sarah dear—let’s help.”

“Well, I’ve just a little ’eadache,” admitted the gaunt handmaiden.

“It must be a pretty big headache, to make you look like that,” Jo said. “You might as well tell us, Sarah, old thing.”

“It’s me rubbishy old neuralgy,” Sarah said, capitulating. “I do get it ’ot an’ strong, an’ that’s a fack. Comes all over me ’ead. I been tryin’ to beat it all day, but it’s near got me down. It’s like a red-’ot knife goin’ in an’ out of me left eye.”

“Why, you poor old dear!” cried the twins. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Oh, I ’ates makin’ a fuss,” said the sufferer. “I did ’ave thoughts of goin’ to tell you, when I seen you come back from bathin’: an’ then Mr. Tom came, an’ on top of ’im the news of the Missus comin’ ’ome. An’ I can’t go an’ get sick just as she comes. So I determined not to be. But the pain seems a bit ahead of the determination: I expect it got a start.”

“Well, you’re just going to lie down now,” Jean said firmly. “Real lie-down—dress and shoes off: and you’re not to come out again to-night, or to-morrow, or until you’re better. I’ll come in ten minutes with a cup of tea and some aspirin.”

“But the tea!” groaned Sarah. “I got a potato pie made, but, of course, it ain’t time to put it in. Lemme stay till I’ve washed up after tea——”

The twins each took an arm, and propelled her, gently but firmly, towards the door.

“I guess we’ll manage the pie,” Jo said, with the firmness possible to a cookery prize-winner. “Now, we’re coming in ten minutes, Sarah, and just you be lying down, or there’ll be awful trouble.”

They found her, pale, but protesting, when they visited her room, and having administered tea and aspirin, bathed her throbbing brows with eau-de-Cologne.

“That’s lovely,” she admitted. “My word, it’s great to be lyin’ down—but I do ’ate leavin’ everything to you. It don’t seem fair, when you’ve all the work you ’ave.”

“Now, will you just be a sensible old thing and not talk rubbish!” Jean said, giving a final dab with her little sponge. “What do you think Mother would say to us if she came home and found you doing the work and looking like a demented ghost?”

“Demented I was beginnin’ to feel, an’ no mistake,” said poor Sarah wearily. “You really won’t do any more than you ’ave to, will you, me dears?”

“We won’t start cleaning the kitchen, if that’s what you mean,” said Jo, laughing. “Go to sleep, if you can, and forget about everything until you wake up better.” They tiptoed out, closing the door gently, and softly danced down the passage to the kitchen.

" 'Oh, we're quite all right,' Jo replied. 'It's really great fun, Father, and we're enjoying it. And we *do* want to have things nice for Mother.' "

CHAPTER XIII

A JERSEY BULL

"HOW'S Sarah?" demanded Mr. Weston, coming into the kitchen next morning with a bucket of milk in either hand.

"Well, she's better," Jean answered, turning from a pan of fried potatoes. "She says the neuralgia has quite gone. But you can see that she has had an awful night—the poor old soul is so white, with big black rings under her eyes. We couldn't dream of letting her get up."

"And she's really too tired to fight us about it," said Jo, who was compounding a stew. "She says she feels as if she could sleep all day, and of course it's the best thing for her. So we've given her some tea and toast, and darkened her room, and we're not going near her until dinner-time."

"That's right—sleep is probably all the treatment she needs," Mr. Weston said. "But it's a bit hard on you, twinses. Do you think you can manage?"

"Well, rather!" said his daughters cheerfully. "We're going to have no end of a day. Mother's not going to dream, when she comes in, that there isn't a staff of liveried servants!"

"So I should think," said Father dryly. "What time did you two get up?"

"Oh—five-ish," said Jean, with studied carelessness.

"Rather more 'ish' than five, I fancy. Truth now, twinses."

"Well, it's going to be hot, so we thought we might as well start early. And it truly was after half-past four."

"H'm!—not much after," said Mr. Weston, laughing. "However, I don't mind, if you'll take a rest after lunch. See here, girls; I've got business in Barrabri, and I want to be at the sales, besides meeting Mother's train: I intended driving in after breakfast. Suppose I take the boys with me? a holiday won't do them any harm, and you'll have no dinner to get—except for yourselves. That, I know, means that you'll dine on scraps off a corner of the kitchen table, but I believe women like that sort of thing!"

"Father, you are just the most scrumptious person!" ejaculated Jean.

"We won't say we'd love to get rid of you all, but yes—well, it would be rather gorgeous to have the day to ourselves," Jo agreed. "We want to make cakes, and have everything as nice as nice. Bless you! Did you say you would like to hurry away after breakfast?"

“I didn’t say so, but of course I will,” said Mr. Weston, laughing. “Never say I’m not a well-trained parent!”

“I’ll never say you’re not an understanding one,” Jean said. “Breakfast will be ready whenever you and the boys are. Won’t the urchins be delighted at a day in Barrabri!”

“We want a lot of stores, Father,” said Jo. “Luckily Sarah has them down on the kitchen slate, or we wouldn’t know what was needed. I’ll make a list presently.”

“Do—and put down what sort of sweets you like. I don’t believe you’ve had any for a month.”

“No sweets until rain comes,” said Jean determinedly.

“Who says so?”

“We do.”

“Well, I haven’t said it yet,” remarked Mr. Weston, with a twinkle. “However, we won’t discuss the point; it’s too hot. I’ll be ready in ten minutes, if that will do, girls.”

Breakfast over, and the boys arrayed in garments suitable for a day in Barrabri—“and what’s more important, for meeting Mother, so just you keep clean, young Billy!” warned his sisters—the remaining housework was swiftly accomplished, and the twins retired to the kitchen. There was a savoury odour of hot scones when Mr. Weston put his head in half an hour later.

“I’m off, girls,” he said. “Sure you have put everything on the list?”

“Why, I hope so,” said Jean, taking floury hands from a yellow mixing-bowl, and endeavouring fruitlessly to rub her eye with her elbow. “Aren’t the flies awful! The list is so long that you won’t want any additions to it, Father. Whatever you do, bring the seventy-pound bag of sugar; there are only a few pounds in the house, and we have to make jam to-morrow.”

“I won’t forget,” Father nodded. “Poor little cooks, you do look hot! Josephine, my daughter, are you trying to bake yourself?”

“It happens without any trying, in this weather,” Jo answered. She was kneeling in front of the open oven, which gave back her voice with a hollow sound. “I wish they’d taught us at school *why* a cake suddenly rises in the middle and explodes! It looks weird, and I’m sure it won’t be wholesome.” Shutting the oven-door carefully, she scrambled to her feet. “It is so simple to cook things in class, with gas-stoves and Miss Smith—this oven seems to have the Equator in the middle and the North Pole at one side!”

“Don’t you worry,” said Father consolingly. “It smells tremendously good, and the scones are splendid.” He looked at his daughters, a little wrinkle in his

brow. “Don’t work too hard, twinses. Mother will be vexed if she finds you knocked up.”

“Oh, we’re quite all right,” Jo replied. “It’s really great fun, Father, and we’re enjoying it. And we *do* want to have things nice for Mother. It would be so horrid for her to come home from Melbourne to find everything at sixes and sevens just because Sarah was sick.”

“She won’t do that,” said Father—“you have the house like a new pin. Well, I must go: there’s plenty to do in Barrabri before Mother’s train gets in.” He closed the door with a cheery farewell; and immediately re-opened it.

“By Jove, I nearly forgot something! That Jersey bull I sold to Joe Harrison is in the stock-yard, and he’ll send for him during the day. Don’t go into the yard, for he’s a nasty-tempered beast. You can tell Harrison’s man where he is; and give the man a cup of tea when he comes, and something to eat, for he’ll have had a twelve-mile ride.”

“All right,” said the twins, together.

“Thanks,” said Father. He smiled at them in the way that made it feel most uplifting to be able to do anything for him. “Now, don’t forget to eat some lunch yourselves. We’ll be back before four o’clock.”

“We’ll have the kettle boiling; Mother will want her tea badly,” Jean said. They went out upon the kitchen verandah to watch him get into the buggy, where Billy and Rex were awaiting him, swishing with the whip at the clustering flies. “Take great care of yourself!” they called. It was always their good-bye to him.

Outside, the blazing February sun beat down on the dust-coloured paddocks, above which a heat-haze shimmered. The road ran right and left beyond the homestead fences, here and there a little cloud of dust showing where a horseman rode slowly. A deeper cloud marked the passage of a flock of starving sheep, on their way to be trucked to Gippsland—many of them doomed to die from sheer weakness on the road before ever they should see the train. In the fruit trees outside the kitchen window locusts shrilled ceaselessly, and grey miners—greediest of birds—hopped and pecked, uttering long, screaming cries. The twins took advantage of the break in their work to refresh themselves with a cool drink from the canvas water-bag hanging under the shade of a great walnut-tree, Jo obligingly holding the cup for Jean, whose hands were too encumbered by flour to do so for herself. Then they dived anew into the hot kitchen.

It was an hour later that Jo was carrying a freshly baked cake across to the larder—a cool room, looking south, under the walnut-tree. She regarded her cake with a motherly eye as she went. It had baked a trifle peculiarly as to

shape; still, it bore indications of being an excellent cake. The odour it exhaled was tempting enough to the hungry cook, and sent her thoughts in the hopeful direction of lunch. She put her burden carefully on a shelf, and came back across the verandah.

A low sound met her ear; a long, growling bellow, which had come at intervals during the morning. The Jersey bull was resenting his imprisonment in the stock-yard, and venting his ill-temper by making unpleasant remarks and pawing up the ground in one corner. Jo stopped to glance in the direction of the yard.

As she did so, the bull found a weak spot in the fence. He put his great head under, and lifted; and the top rail shot into the air. It left a gap that was far too much temptation for a wrathful Jersey. Jo uttered a startled exclamation as the big brown beast suddenly rose in the air, jumping lazily over the broken fence. He stood irresolutely for a moment, and then trotted up the road, keeping close beside the fence, and bellowing morosely as he went.

Jo's voice brought her twin hurriedly out to her side.

"Good gracious!" Jean exclaimed. "The wicked old horror! Whatever can we do?"

"We can't let him go," Jo said. "Mr. Harrison's man must have him, or Father wouldn't get the money for him. And anyhow, he isn't safe, Jean; he simply mustn't be left on the road. Why, he might meet some children. You never know who may be on that track."

"I don't believe we could yard him again," Jean said doubtfully. "Father said yesterday that it took him all his time to handle him: his temper's abominable. Mother has wanted Father to sell him for ever so long, 'cause he isn't to be trusted."

"If only a man would come along!" Jo uttered.

They ran to the fence and looked up and down the road. No one was in sight: the lane the bull had taken was a quiet one, and it was empty save for his fast-retreating form. He trotted briskly, hugging the fence and uttering his long, growling bellow. The twins looked at each other blankly.

"He's worth such a lot of money, too!" Jean said. "Father's going to get ever so much for him. It's perfectly awful, Jo!"

Jo was thinking.

"There are men at Moncrieff's, of course," she said. "But he'd be out of sight long before we could get them, and once he gets to the cross-roads we wouldn't be able to tell which way he went. Besides, he might jump into any paddock; you know, Father said that no fence would stop him except the stock-

yard. And if he did any damage he might get shot. A policeman shot a stray bull in Barrabri last month." She wrinkled her forehead. "Jean, I don't see how we're to hold up our heads if anything happens to him—he was left in our charge!"

"Well, he's left it now," said Jean dolefully. "And Father would know we couldn't stop him. He wouldn't be angry."

"Why, of course he wouldn't: he'd never say a word about it to us. And that would make it all the worse, because we'd know how bad he felt about it," Jo answered. "Jean, it's no use talking, while the old beast gets further and further away every minute. I'm going after him!"

"After Father?"

"No, stupid, after the Jersey! I believe I can stop him, on Pilot. At least, I'm going to try!"

"You aren't going to do any such thing, Jo Weston!" said Jean desperately. "You'll get killed, and Father would be furious!"

"I won't get killed at all," said Jo, laughing. "And I'd never have any peace of mind if I didn't go, and the old beast killed some poor little youngster by the roadside. And neither would you, and you know it!"

"Then we'll both go," said Jean decidedly.

"We can't—some one must stay with Sarah and the house. And I'm the eldest!"

"Five minutes!" said her twin, resentfully. "That's not fair, Jo!"

"No, it isn't, I know," admitted Jo, hugging her penitently. "I didn't mean it, Jeanie darling. But you know Pilot is just a bit handier with cattle than Punch is, and I'm used to him—I know I'd better go. Oh, we mustn't waste time arguing about it. You run and get Pilot, and I'll fly into my riding things." And Jean, silenced, but inwardly protesting, ran.

The ponies were in the little paddock near the house. They were accustomed to being caught in the open; even if Pilot felt puzzled at being bridled by the wrong twin he made no objection. By the time Jo, in coat and breeches, came running from the house, he was ready; a handsome, eager little black pony, dancing with impatience and with disgust at the swarming flies. Jo swung herself into the saddle.

"Do be careful, old girl!" Jean called.

"Of course I will," Jo answered briskly. "Put the sliprails of the yard down, in case I bring him back, will you, Jeanie?"

She waved her hand gaily, and in another moment was galloping up the road.

Far ahead, the Jersey bull was only a little dot upon the wayside. He was travelling fast, and probably his temper was, as yet, none the better for the exercise. Jo shuddered to think of what might happen if he encountered any of the Bush children, who are, as a rule, fearless of any animals. Little children would very certainly not think of getting out of his way.

She dug her heel into Pilot, giving him his head: and the black pony, glad to be out again, after long days in the paddock, answered promptly. His long stride soon lessened the distance separating them from the blur of dust ahead. From the house, Jean watched them anxiously, until a bend in the road hid them from sight. Then she turned with a little sigh, and hurried back to the neglected kitchen, resolving to have all the work done before Jo's return. But it was certainly hard to be the one to stay at home.

It was near a little clump of trees that Jo first came up with the Jersey. The shade had tempted him to pause; he stood under a wattle, his angry head low, until the sound of galloping hoofs startled him. Quite well he knew that hoofs would come; but he had not the smallest intention of waiting for them. As Pilot and his rider came into view he went off again, this time at a heavy gallop.

"Bother the old thing!" said Jo, pulling up. "We'll let him run a bit, Pilot: he'll stop much sooner then."

She waited until the bull dropped once more into a jog-trot. Then she cantered on, keeping this time on the opposite side of the road, in the somewhat vain hope of inducing the fugitive to think she was merely out for a ride, with no intention whatever of interfering with his excursions. But the bull knew the pony, and he was not easy to deceive; he quickened his pace whenever the hoofs came nearer, and so the miles steadily increased between them and the Emu Plains homestead, now far out of sight. Jo set her teeth at last.

"Well, this may go on all day," she said. "We've simply got to head him, Pilot. Come on, boy!"

Pilot was very willing. He was galloping before the bull realized it. There was a minute of uncertainty, and then the pony forged steadily ahead, still keeping on the far side of the road—not turning until they were a hundred yards in the lead. Then Jo swung round suddenly, pulling up across the bull's path. The Jersey came on steadily. She swung her light stock-whip free, with a sharp crack, and, shouting, rode to meet him.

The bull was in much too evil a frame of mind to care for a girl on a small black pony. He bellowed defiance, keeping close to the fence, and scattering the dust as he came. The stock-whip spoke again, the lash falling across his face; but it was not the heavy thong to which he was accustomed, and, while it

made him angrier, it did not turn him in the least. He put his head down and charged, making a savage thrust with his cruel little horns at the pony, missing Jo's leg by a hair's breadth. Pilot danced aside; and then they were once more in the rear, and the broad, brown back, with the switching, angry tail, seemed to fill the road in front of them.

"Well, you are an old pig!" said Jo, in heartfelt accents, to the bull. "Come on. Pilot!" They galloped in pursuit again.

An hour later, they were still pursuing. Four times they had managed to head the bull, and each time he had beaten them, becoming, with each victory, more and more unmanageable. Only a man on a good horse could have turned him now, for all his wicked fury was aroused, and from being merely bad-tempered he was actively vicious. Twice, Pilot's quickness alone had saved Jo from disaster. Now, she was very tired, and her arm felt almost useless, so cruelly did it ache from trying to use the stock-whip. Tears were not usual with the twins; but Jo was not far off them.

"We'll never get him back, Pilot!" she said miserably.

They rounded a bend in the road, and ahead a little cottage came into view. At sight of it Jo caught her breath. Out in the road before it, two little blue figures were playing happily in the dusty grass.

No one else was in sight: before her loomed only the bull, bearing steadily down on the children. Jo forgot her weariness; forgot everything but those little, helpless figures. Next moment Pilot was going at racing pace—up the road, past the galloping bull, on and on, his rider shouting as she bent forward on his neck. "Run! Get inside the fence!"

They were very little children; too young to understand or to be afraid. They looked up at the flying pony with wide, interested eyes, never thinking of moving; unheeding Jo's wild cries to run within the shelter of the garden fence so near to them. The sound of the racing hoofs and the wild cries brought a man to the cottage door—and in a moment he also was shouting, running wildly; knowing himself too far off to be of any use.

The bull was very close as Jo flung herself from Pilot's back, leaving him, with a little dry sob, to shift for himself. She caught a child in each hand and raced for the garden gate, as the bull, bellowing, put down his head and charged.

It was so near a thing that the father, running madly down the path, held his breath in despair; so near that Jo felt the bull's hot breath as she flung herself at the gate. Had it been latched, all had been over with them; but the children had left it unfastened—it gave as they touched it, and in a second they were through. Jo freed one hand to bang it behind them. She heard the latch click—

heard the thud of the bull's shoulder as he came heavily upon the stout gate-post. Then her foot caught, and all three went down in a heap.

The man who came, racing, picked her up even before he looked at the badly frightened children. His breath came and went in gasps—even as Jo's did.

"Well!" he said, and stopped at that.

"I'm sorry," Jo said apologetically. "Father would be awfully annoyed if he knew that horrid old Jersey had given anyone a fright!"

"It's thanks to you I've got my two kids," said the man, gasping. "There, that'll do, Jimmy—you're not hurt, lad. I—I never saw anything like it. Sure you're all right, Miss Weston?"

"I'm all right, I think," Jo said. Suddenly she felt queer, and sat down on the grass. "I'll just sit here a moment. How did you know my name?"

"Bless you, I know the pony," he said, looking at Pilot, standing quietly by the road. The bull was already a hundred yards away, trotting steadily. "I'll go and catch him." He went out and secured Pilot, putting his bridle over a post, in the shade of a grevillea tree.

"You're sure he's all right?" Jo questioned anxiously.

"Right as rain." The man's ruddy face was still queerly white. "If I'm not mistaken that's the bull I was going to take to Harrison's this very day. Was you bringing him yourself?"

"I?" said Jo. "Good gracious, no! I didn't even know that Mr. Harrison lived in this direction. The bull was left in our charge, and he got out. I was trying to get him back."

"You!—you mite of a thing!" said the man, staring. "Well, he's brought himself not far from Harrison's, and saved me a nice, hot ride—but it's you that've had the worst of it. Just you come in, and my missus'll make you a cup of tea while I take after the old brute. I'll have him in his new paddock inside of half an hour. Sure you're all right?" he queried, anxiously.

"I'm all right, thanks," Jo said, getting up stiffly.

"You'll be better when you've had a cup of tea. I'll give the pony a feed while you're resting, and you can ride back comfortable when he's had it. Come along, now." He swung a child aloft on each shoulder. "My missus'll have something to say to you when she hears about this!—the very pluckiest ——"

His voice stopped uncertainly, and Jo, suddenly aware that she was very tired, followed him up the garden path.

The wife proved to be not excitable—which was, perhaps, as well for Jo.

Her motherly eyes took in the girl's strained face at a glance—she had quietly established her on an old sofa in the kitchen before her husband had finished the story. Even then, she said little. She caught the babies to her for a moment: then, putting them aside, brought water and bathed Jo's face and hands, and presently had a cup of tea beside her—the universal medicine of the Bush. As she put it down she stooped suddenly, and kissed the girl's hand.

"There ain't no sayin' 'thank you' for what you've done for us," she said.

When her husband came back, within an hour, he brought with him a man who greeted Jo as an old friend. She had drunk five cups of tea, and was feeling rested, and both babies were sitting on top of her. Jo adored babies.

"Why, Dr. Lawrence!" she said.

The Barrabri doctor patted her on the head.

"Tim Conlan's been telling me all about you, young lady," said he. "Nice hot day you've chosen to chase a bad-tempered bull twelve miles! How are you, Mrs. Conlan? and the youngsters? You all look very fit. Look here, twin—which are you? I never know!"

"Jo," said that lady meekly.

"I've only your word for it," said the doctor, laughing. "Anyhow, Conlan and I have agreed that you're not going to ride back in this heat. He was going to drive you; but he ran across me, and I'm going past your place in the car. You come home with me, and Conlan will bring your pony over in a day or two. Will that do?"

"Oh, that's giving Mr. Conlan an awful lot of trouble," Jo protested. Whereat Tim Conlan uttered a kind of smothered snort, and Dr. Lawrence laughed.

"I think Mr. Conlan will be annoyed if you talk to him about trouble," he said. "Well, that's settled. Feel well enough to start now?"

"Oh, yes," said Jo, giving in. "I would like to get back before Mother and Father get home—Mother's coming back from Town to-day. And poor old Jean will be awfully anxious. She wanted to come after the bull too, but there was no one to look after Sarah—she's sick."

"I thought it was curious to see one of you without the other," said the doctor. "Be thankful you haven't got twins, Mrs. Conlan, that you can't tell apart!"

"I'm thankful I've got any children at all this day!" said Mrs. Conlan, with a smothered sob.

The doctor's swift little car made short work of the miles to Emu Plains, where they found a distraught Jean, on the point of setting out on Punch, in

search of her twin.

"I simply couldn't stand it!" she said. "How did I know if that old beast of a bull hadn't killed you? I had awful visions of you lying on the road, hurt, in all the heat—I just couldn't face Father and Mother when I didn't know where you were. And Sarah's well enough to be up, so I was coming."

"Poor old Jean!" said Jo. "I guess you had all the worst of it."

The doctor stayed to tea, partly that he might give Mrs. Weston a word of warning.

"She's had rather a shock," he said, when Jo was out of the room. "Of course, she thinks she's all right, being fifteen, and Jo into the bargain, but I'd advise you to take care of her for a few days, and make her lie down a bit, and go to bed early. No need whatever to fuss, but just keep your eye on her. She's had a heavy strain, finishing with a sudden call on every ounce of physical and mental strength she possessed. Conlan said it was almost a miracle that they escaped—only extraordinary quickness did it."

So Jo found herself gently taken care of, for a few days, which embarrassed her greatly. She rather wondered that she felt listless and heavy-eyed; and her sleep was broken by bad dreams, in which she was perpetually snatching babies from the jaws of unpleasant prehistoric animals, rather like Chinese dragons. Always after one of these dreams it seemed that Mother was beside her, soothing her with a gentle voice. Mother had taken to sleeping on the verandah near them, declaring it was too hot in the house. Jo found herself very glad of her nearness. And after a few days the dreams went away, and she was a mere twin again, much to her relief.

Tim Conlan had brought Pilot back, and had found speech difficult when he talked to Jo's parents.

"I never saw the man who'd 've done it," he said. "Not in me life. The brute wasn't twenty yards away, and he was fair wicked: them little kids of mine wouldn't 've had the ghost of a show. All he wanted was something to kill, and he'd 've done them in but for that little slip of a girl." He was silent a moment, his rugged face working. Like Jo, he had had bad dreams since.

"Well, I don't suppose I'll ever be able to pay her back," he said. "There's no payment for that sort of thing. But if I can do her, or any of her people, a good turn, any time in me life—well, me missus an' me would walk barefoot fifty mile to do it, an' glad of the chance."

"There's no question of payment, as you say," Mr. Weston answered. "We're thankful it was our girl who saved them. Remember, the bull was mine—I'd never have forgiven myself if he'd hurt them. I've been wishing to goodness I'd shot the brute instead of selling him."

“Oh, well, that’s simple waste,” said Tim Conlan, amazed. “You gotter remember he’s a real good Jersey!”

CHAPTER XIV

GENTLEMEN ADVENTURERS

"MOTHER, could Rex and I go for a picnic?" Billy's eager face showed at the dining-room window. Behind him Rex peeped in, more sober, but evidently just as anxious.

"A picnic?" Mrs. Weston said, bewildered. "What, all by yourselves?"

"Well, there's no one to go with us," Billy said. "The Lawrences are coming out to play tennis, and *we* can't play when big people are there. You know it's always a case of picking the balls up, for Rex and me, and a bit of extra cake is all we get out of it! And we'd love a ride. Couldn't we take some lunch and go out? It would be no end of fun."

"But is Rex safe? You know, he has never gone far without Father."

"Oh, abso-lutely!" said Billy, with evident pride in the long word. "He really rides quite decently now, don't you, Rexona?"

"I'll give you a hiding if you call me that," stated his guest.

"Sorry—it was a slip," Billy said, grinning. "Forgot you didn't like soap. But he can ride all right, Mother; Father says so. And we'd be awfully careful, and keep our weather-eye out for snakes, and all that sort of thing. Anyhow, the ground's so bare you can see a snake half a mile off. Oh, do let's go!"

"What do you say, girls?" Mrs. Weston asked.

"I don't think they could damage themselves, do you, Jean?" Jo asked.

"No, I don't think so," her twin answered. "They're really quite safe, if they promise to be sensible. I'd rather you didn't jump, Rex, when you're by yourselves."

"All right, I won't," Rex promised eagerly.

"Then may we go, Mother?"

"Well, you must ask Father. I couldn't let you go without his consent."

"But may we say you say we may?"

"Is that a poem?" asked Rex solemnly, "or just a 'hidden-word' competition?"

"Oh, be quiet, donkey!" said Billy, joining in the general laugh. "You know what I mean, Mother—may we?"

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Weston. "If you'll really promise to be careful." Then,

as the racing feet of the petitioners carried them out of earshot, “You really think it’s safe, girls?”

“I don’t see how they can get into any trouble,” Jean said: “Rex can ride quite decently, and Merrilegs is so steady. And they can swim—not that there’s enough water in the river to drown them, even if they couldn’t.”

“And I do like to see Rex getting independent,” added Jo. “He’s twice the boy he was, in that respect. They’ll feel just like men, going off together on their own account, bless them!”

“Father says we may!” shrilled a high, ecstatic voice from afar off: and in a moment Rex was back at the window, flushed and eager.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Weston! And Billy’s gone to run the ponies up, and he says, please, twins, will you fix up some grub for us—lots of grub, please? I’m off to help him.” He was gone, like an arrow.

“Come along, Jo,” said Jean, laughing. “Good old thick sandwiches, with the crust left on, I suppose. It’s a mercy we made extra cake!”

They stood together at the yard gate, twenty minutes later, to watch the pair ride away, each boy with a respectable parcel of lunch tied to his saddle. Their Scout blouses bulged in a peculiar way that suggested apples. They dug their heels into their ponies’ sides, and departed at full gallop, uttering demoniacal yells after the approved fashion of Red Indians.

“Nice kids!” said Jo inelegantly. “Hurry up, Jean; I’ve got a frock to iron, and there’s heaps to do. The Lawrences said they’d be out early.”

It was Saturday, and the spell of heat still lay upon the land. Everywhere was the thick blue haze that told of far-off bush-fires; although the Gulgong Flat fires had been checked, there had been other outbreaks, and there were miles of burnt country where charred logs and trees were smouldering; ready, should a wind spring up, to send burning fragments far enough to start a fresh blaze. Day after day the water shrank in the creeks and rivers, and the little remnant of dried grass grew less and less; day after day the worry-lines deepened on the faces of the men who saw their sheep and cattle grow weaker and weaker. The household at Emu Plains was cheery enough, to all outward seeming, for Mr. and Mrs. Weston had determined that the shadow should not lie heavily on the boys and girls there, if they could keep it from them awhile yet. But at night, when the children were in bed, they talked long together; and often it was hard next morning to follow the Scout prescription,—“Keep smiling!”—which they had adopted as the rule of the house.

There was no shadow resting on the small boys’ solitary picnic. Beyond doubt, it was a great adventure to ride out alone into the wide paddocks where a hundred interesting things might happen. They were Red Indians first; braves

armed with deadly weapons and intent on scalps: they rode stealthily in the timber, keeping a keen look-out for palefaces and wolves; ejaculating “Hist!” when a leaf rustled, and stalking the sound in single file, prepared for anything, from a grizzly bear to a hostile Choctaw. Then a fox slipped away into the open, and on the instant they were pig-stickers, bursting out of the Indian jungle. They raced after him across a bare plain, Merrilegs hopelessly outdistanced by the swifter Punch, until an unexpected turn on the part of the quarry gave Rex a chance of cutting across and getting in the lead, where he remained until the fox dived under a fence to safety. This was triumph, and he exulted openly.

“Yah! Beat you!”

“He beat both of us,” said Billy, laughing.

“Yes, but I was nearest to him when he got away. Good old Merrilegs!” boasted Rex, patting his ancient steed.

They ate their lunch in a shady hollow near the river. It was a noble lunch, with a solid foundation of sandwiches and cake, and such added details as mince-pies, dried figs and prunes, and a package of toffee!

“There’s no mistake, the girls do know how to pack a lunch!” said the sated Billy, lying back on the ground. A large lump of toffee impeded, but by no means prevented, speech.

“They’re great!” agreed Rex, similarly employed. “D’you know, I used to hate girls!”

“Don’t you now?”

“Not like I used to, since I knew Jean and Jo. They’ve made me think better of girls!” said the philosopher of nine. “The sort I used to see at home were awful! They were all pretty old—about seventeen or eighteen—and they used to put powder on their noses. And some of ’em wanted to kiss me. Now that’s a thing Jean and Jo have never done!”

“I s’pecs they don’t think you’d be up to much to kiss,” said Billy, grinning. “I don’t, either!”

“Nobody wants you to, smarty!” returned Master Forester. “I was awfully afraid they would, though. But they’re so jolly and so sensible. They really don’t seem to me like girls at all!”

“Well, they’ve really got as much sense as if they were boys,” Billy agreed. “I thought I’d be able to do as I jolly well liked when I heard they were going to teach me. But——” he paused, with a grin.

“But you don’t, do you?”

“Not much!” said Billy. “And all the same, they never get exactly wild. I

don't know how it is. They've got a queer way of just expecting you to be decent, and so it just happens."

"Yes, and they're never bossy," Rex remarked. "Old Miss Green, now—she just *was* bossy. She used to finish up everything with, 'Now, Rex, obey me instantly!' " He imitated Miss Green's high falsetto squeak.

"And so you never did, I suppose?"

"Well, not if I could help it!"

"And didn't you get into rows?"

"Oh—not much." Rex shrugged his thin little shoulders. "She hardly ever told Mother, and if she did, I didn't get much done to me, 'cause I was nearly always sick." He paused, and his face grew red. "You know, I didn't mind taking advantage of that then. It didn't seem to matter, with old Miss Green. But if I did it now, with the twins, I'd feel awfully low-down."

"I should think you would," agreed Billy. "But then, you aren't sick now, ever, so it wouldn't be any good."

"No. But I guess I wouldn't do it, anyhow," said Rex, reddening more deeply.

This was as far as soul-analysis would reasonably take small boys, and they fell silent, pitching dry grass-roots sleepily at the little brown lizards that ran over some big stones near them. Presently they grew tired of inaction, and went roaming along the river-bank. Rex had long ago fought down his fear of climbing; they "shinned up" wattle-trees in search of gum, and practised gymnastics on the low, swinging branches of other trees. Then a rabbit darted out of a hole near by, and they chased it wildly, dodging hither and thither among the stones: the chase coming to an end when the rabbit found another hole, and whisked down it with a final twist of his white tail. They wandered aimlessly back towards the ponies and Rex almost trod on a big black snake, which lay sunning itself in a dusty patch. He jumped back, with a little cry. It was the first snake he had seen, and he had all the town boy's dread of the evil thing.

"Watch-him-while-I-get-a-stick!" said Billy, all in one word.

He darted aside, and in a moment came racing back with a stick. The snake was just slipping away through the grass; Billy brought down the stick with a quick blow that broke its back.

"Run, Billy! Oh, do run!" Rex cried, shrinking back from the creature that thrashed wildly round on the ground. He caught at Billy's sleeve. "You'll only be killed. Do run!"

"Run!" ejaculated Billy, in huge scorn. "Whatever for? He can't move,

bless you. He's done—his back's broken."

"You never broke it, did you?"

"Rather! He'd be a mile away by now if I hadn't."

"But you couldn't break it with a little hit like that!"

"Oh, well, I s'pose you know all about it!" Billy uttered. "Think I never killed a snake before? How many've you killed yourself, I'd like to know? That chap's never going to bite any one again, anyhow!"

"But he's not dead! He's moving!"

Indeed, "moving" was a mild term to apply to the struggles of the black snake.

" 'Course he's moving, you little silly!" said Billy, in superb scorn. "But he isn't getting anywhere, is he? Only his head 'n' his tail's moving: 'n' that's only what's called nerfs. Nerfs are things that keep wriggling long after a snake's dead."

"But he isn't safe!"

"Well, he isn't if you go near the business end of him," Billy answered, keenly pleased with his mastery of the situation. Rex could beat him at boxing, but when it came to dealing with a snake, he, too, was evidently a prey to "nerfs." "Only no one but an idjit goes near a snake's head, even if he's dead. Father puts his heel on the heads of the snakes he kills, but he made me promise not to. That chap's back's broken, an' he couldn't never move from where he is till he died. 'Course, it would be cruel not to finish killing him: I'd have finished ever so long ago if you hadn't kept grabbing at me!"

His stick sang in the air again, and came down just behind the snake's head.

"That's done for a lot of his ole nerfs!" said Billy, darkly. He continued the slaying of the reptile, with the thoroughness dear to every boy.

" 'Tisn't hard. You have a hit and see if it is. You only got to keep your hair on an' hit straight."

"Can I really?" Rex asked. Gingerly he took the stick and whacked the unpleasant remnant of the snake.

"It isn't hard, is it? Do you think I killed a bit of him?" he asked, his face glowing.

"Oh, I s'pecs you did," admitted Billy, who felt he could afford to be generous. "Now you can say you aren't quite a new-chum any more. Next snake we meet you'll have to tackle on your own!"

"Shall I, really? I believe I'd be scared."

"Not you. It's dead easy. Why, I killed my first when I was six, and you're nine!" They moved on, Rex feeling that the sum of his out-back experiences had been considerably developed.

The ponies awaited them under a shady light-wood tree, drooping sleepy heads in the hot afternoon stillness. They saddled them and rode on, looking for new worlds to conquer.

"Where'll we go?" Rex said.

"I d'no. There's so much smoke about that every place looks the same," Billy answered. He suddenly broke out in youthful impatience of the long drought. "My word, I'll be glad when we get rain! It just is sickenin', seeing the place all burnt up to a cinder with heat and dryness! By rights there ought to be green grass everywhere, all thick 'n' long, 'n' simply scrumptious to gallop over. I've seen it on these flats many a time so high I could tie it over Merrilegs' neck!"

"Go on! Is that a yarn?"

"No, it isn't. It's plain truth. An' everywhere you could see cattle and sheep, thick as anything, an' all rolling fat. 'Cept the stores, of course."

"What's stores?"

"Cattle that aren't fat," said Billy, in blank amazement at such ignorance. "They're stores when you buy 'em first, an' then you put 'em on good paddocks an' watch 'em fatten. Then you sell 'em for heaps of money."

"Is that how your father gets his living?"

"Yes, of course it is."

"Then how does he get a living now?"

"He doesn't," said Billy simply.

"Well, but . . . but . . . he's going *on* living, isn't he, silly?"

"Oh, well, you don't expect him to turn up his toes an' die as soon as a drought comes," Billy said, laughing. "Of course, every one has money in Banks and things. That's what Banks are for. You stick money in 'em when times are good, and then there's something to live on when they're bad."

"And do the Banks just shell it out when you want it?"

"You bet they do. Why, they wouldn't dare to keep it—the police would get them. It isn't really their money—it's the money people have put in. They'd just better try to stick to it, an' I bet they'd see!"

"Well, I don't see what the Banks get out of it," Rex said doubtfully. "Who pays 'em?"

"Blessed if I know," Billy answered, without any sympathy for the

difficulties of financial institutions. “I s’pecs they’ve got their own ways of making a living. The one in Barrabri must be jolly fond of Father, ’cause I heard Mr. Holmes say to him, ‘Don’t you worry, old man: the Bank will stick to you.’ But I know Father reckons he hasn’t got enough money in it, an’ that’s why we’re so jolly poor now.”

“Are you poor?” queried Rex, round-eyed.

“Oh, horrid poor,” Billy answered lightly. “But it doesn’t seem to matter much: we have lots of fun, I say, Rex, s’pose we ride round the back paddock where we went with Father that day, an’ have a look at the bullocks. I s’pect he’d be glad to know how they are; I heard him say he must go out there next week, so we might save him the trouble.”

“Right-oh!” Rex agreed.

They shook the ponies into a canter, and, after following the winding of the river for a time, struck across the paddock to a gate. Passing through this, they found themselves in the back paddock of the Emu Plains run. It was a wide stretch of plain, sloping gently back to the river that formed Mr. Weston’s southern boundary, and at present it represented almost all the grazing land on which he could still run cattle. There was coarse grass on it, rough and poor: still, it meant something of a living for cattle, dry as it was, for the water in the river was good, and good water helps stock to live on very poor fare.

There were very few cattle in sight on the plain, and the boys trotted across to the timber near the river, where they knew they would find the bullocks sheltering from the fierce sun. It was not very easy to distinguish anything, so thick was the smoke-haze. Dense as it had been all day, in this corner of the run it was worse than anywhere else.

“My word, you’d think the fires were close!” Billy uttered. “Let’s go over to the corner by Moncrieff’s, Rex, and see if we can see any sign of ’em.”

“What if we did?” queried Rex.

“Well, it’d mean we’d have to fly round,” said Billy, speaking as one might speak of an earthquake, without any real belief that such a thing might happen. “Fight it, if we could: but I don’t s’pose we could do anything to stop it. We’d have to get the cattle out, and get word to Father. It would be rather a lark, if it didn’t do much damage. They’ve never let me go out if there was a fire, an’ I’ve always wanted to.” He broke off, peering through the haze: then he spoke excitedly. “Rex, I’m not sure, but I could nearly swear I saw flames! Did you see anything? Over there in Moncrieff’s.” He pointed to the southeast.

“I don’t see anything but smoke,” said Rex, straining his eyes.

“Neither do I, now, but I’ll swear I saw a flash of flames—high up. Let’s gallop over and see!”

They raced over the dry grass, keeping just outside the timber. The boundary fence loomed up presently out of the haze, and then Billy uttered a cry.

"My word, it is burning, Rex! Look—can't you see men working at it?"

There were red flashes of fire coming out of the smoke-drift in the next paddock, and, as they looked, a burning tree sent a tongue of flame skyward. Here and there they could make out the forms of men, beating out the fire in the grass. It was difficult to see how much fire there was: but presently a blazing stick fell from the top of a tree, and, caught by a sudden eddy of wind high up, sailed towards them for a moment and then dropped, a blaze springing up the moment it touched the grass. A man on a smart pony came tearing across to it, and beat it out. Then he caught sight of the two little figures at the fence and galloped to them.

"It's Mr. Moncrieff!" Billy exclaimed.

"Is that you, Billy?" The man peered at them with smoke-reddened eyes. "Is your father about?"

"No; he's at home, Mr. Moncrieff," Billy said. "Is the fire very bad?"

"Bad enough. We're holding it at present, and, luckily, what wind there is is helping us. But we may not be able to keep it back—if the wind changed to the east your place will go like smoke. I'd have moved your cattle, only we can't spare a hand." He looked at them doubtfully. "Are you boys by yourselves? I suppose you couldn't get the cattle out?"

"We'll jolly well try," cried Billy. "Oh, Mr. Moncrieff, keep it back if you can—it's all the grass Father's got left!"

"I know that well enough," the neighbour said. "Every one of us would keep it off your father's place if work will do it. But it's most likely it will beat us. Shift the stock if you can, Billy, and get word to your father as soon as you do it: we want all the help we can get. My word, there's another blaze starting ——!" He wheeled his pony and went off at full gallop.

"Come on, Rex!" Billy said, pulling his pony round.

"What have we got to do?" Rex kicked Merrilegs into a gallop, racing beside him.

"Get the cattle out of the paddock, through that gate we came through. You know how we mustered 'em with Father that day we came out? Well, we've got to do the same, and as hard as we can lick, 'cause the fire may be here any minute. If it does, I don't know what we ought to do," said poor Billy, feeling suddenly that he was only a very small boy. "Cut for the gate ourselves, I suppose: we mustn't get trapped in the timber. Ride all you know, Rex, an'

yell like the mischief! I'll go in near the river, an' you keep towards this edge of the timber. Drive 'em in front of you, an' try to edge 'em out on the plain if you can, like we did with Father."

The cattle were standing about among the trees, uneasy with the smoke and with the all-pervading smell of fire. To them suddenly appeared two small demons on ponies, who rushed at them, shouting and waving threatening arms. Hither and thither through the trees the demons rushed, and the noise of their yelling was as the noise of ten. It was no use to try to evade them: no use to slink into the shelter of a clump of bushes, or to pretend to gallop clumsily off for a few yards in the hope of persuading them that you were an obedient bullock. Both were bad demons: but the smaller one was infinitely the more horrible of the two, for he was like a will-o'-the-wisp among the trees, and he rode a black pony that was a demon in itself, and just as alive as its rider to the ways of bullocks. The other invader was slower, but he had a high, shrill voice that was very terrible, and his eyes seemed to be of glass, and reflected the light in a most alarming manner. The bullocks decided that their only salvation lay in flight. The infection of their terror spread quickly among them, and the timber was soon full of the sound of frightened bellowing and pounding hoofs, with the high shrill cries of the boys sounding over all.

"Keep looking behind you," Billy panted, meeting Rex for a moment. "Don't let any of 'em break back if you can help it." He shot off again, yelling at a bullock that had dropped from a gallop into a jog-trot: and the bullock shook his head in terror and galloped anew.

As for Rex, Merrilegs had taken possession of him. Every horse on Emu Plains was thoroughly trained to stock work, and Merrilegs was the oldest of them all. What he lacked in speed he made up in cunning: he had an uncanny fore-knowledge of what a beast would do, and his twistings and turnings and sudden rushes were more like the work of a dog than a horse. A hundred times Rex was nearly off, saving himself only by desperate clutching at the pommel: a hundred times he barely saved his leg from the trunk of a tree, or ducked just in time to avoid an overhanging limb. At first he was sick with fear: and then the wild excitement of the moment took hold of him, and he forgot himself altogether, and let Merrilegs take him where he would. The pony did the work: the boy clung to the pommel and drummed with his heels on the lean grey sides, and yelled!

In their inexperience and comparative helplessness the little fellows accomplished what men, with quieter methods, might have failed to do. They actually started a stampede among the cattle; and the quick sense of overmastering fear leaped from beast to beast until every bullock in the paddock was on the run. They burst out of the timber in a whirlwind,

converging to a point on the plain where they could see their galloping leaders. Behind them Rex and Billy raced, with scarlet faces and very little voices left.

"Can you keep 'em going?" Billy gasped. "I'll get round 'em and open the gate."

He shot off to one side, crouching low on his pony's neck; and for a moment Rex felt blank terror. What should he do, if the cattle turned and came charging back to the shelter of the timber? What power had he to stop them? Luckily, the problem was not given to him to solve. Billy kept well away from the cattle, swinging round them in a wide half-circle; and Merrilegs dropped to a canter, keeping them moving in the right direction, while Rex continued to utter mechanical yells in a kind of cracked yelp. Billy swung the gate open to its fullest extent, and then came racing back as he had gone, well out from the bullocks, until he could swing in behind them and push them on.

To the bullocks the open gate and the sun-dried plain beyond offered respite from the demons in the rear. They jostled each other through the opening, and lumbered away at full gallop, spreading out as they went.

"We've done it, Rex!" Billy gasped: "an' I never thought we would. *They* can't be burnt anyhow." His face was scarlet, and his hat was gone, but his eyes were dancing. He held the gate for Rex to pass through. "I say, do you think you can hurry home an' take word to Father? I'm going back to help."

"Not to the fire?"

"Rather. Some one ought to be there to help keep it off Emu Plains. You can get home all right, can't you, Rex? Merrilegs will take you."

"I can get home all right," Rex said. "But you—will you be safe, Billy?"

" 'Course I will."

"But you said they didn't let you go to fires."

"I'm letting myself go to this one," Billy returned. "Think I'm going home now—to sit down an' have tea? My word, no—I'm goin' back with the men!"

"Couldn't I come too?"

"We can't both go—some one must take word to Father. Oh, do go, Rex!" Billy begged.

"You haven't even got your hat!" said poor Rex, in a final protest.

"I know where I dropped it—I'll get it. Cut along, old chap!" He latched the gate as he spoke, and, swinging round, went off at a hard gallop, Punch's little hoofs drumming over the baked ground. Rex looked after him enviously, feeling suddenly lonely. Then it came to him that after all he had a job of importance: was he not a despatch-rider? If you cannot be in the firing-line, it is at least something to bear despatches. The small boy cheered, and sent

Merrilegs galloping for home.

It was a queer version of the usually spic-and-span Master Forester who came, a little later, on the tennis-party at home. Afternoon tea was in progress, and Jo was just handing her father a cup when the little boy came up the path. He was still scarlet-faced, and his fair hair drooped in a lank lock over his forehead: there was an angry red mark from brow to chin where a branch of a sapling had struck him, swinging back after the rush of a bullock. One sleeve of his blouse hung in tatters, and there was a big triangular tear in his trousers, while his stockings, in rags, hung round his ankles. His knees were scarred and cut. But he was undeniably happy.

Mrs. Weston was the first to catch sight of him.

"Good gracious!" she ejaculated. "Whatever is the matter, Rex?"

Every one was looking at him. He stammered a little as he tried to speak.

"There's a fire," he said. "Near your back paddock, Mr. Weston. I 'specs it's in it by now!"

"Good heavens!" uttered John Weston, putting down his cup hurriedly. "The cattle!"

"Oh, we've got the cattle out," Rex said, doing his best to speak unconcernedly. "Billy and me. We had a great time. They're all right—I think we got them all."

"Where is Billy?" put in Billy's mother sharply.

"He's fighting the fire. There's a lot of men there. Billy went back to help them. He told me to come and tell you. They're going to do their level best to keep it out of your paddock."

"John!" Mrs. Weston's voice was a cry.

"He'll be all right, dear," Mr. Weston said. "The men will take care of him. I'll go out at once. Jump on Merrilegs, Jean, and run up Cruiser for me while I change: I won't be five minutes." He went off across the grass with long strides, turning just for a moment to Rex. "Good boy, Rex: you're a real man!" he said.

"Sit down, Rex dear," Mrs. Weston said.

The despatch-rider sat down. Other bearers of despatches, he knew, from the stories he had read, finished with great excitement: generally their horses dropped dead in the last furlong, or they themselves swooned on delivering their message. But Merrilegs was already tearing off, with Jean on his back: and he himself had no desire to swoon: no desire for anything, indeed, except for tea. He eyed Mr. Weston's untasted cup wolfishly, and licked his dry lips. There was no sort of polish left to him.

“My word, I’d like that cup of tea!” he said.

CHAPTER XV

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

"JUST as close a shave as anything could be," John Weston said. "It came into our paddock and burned about a chain of fencing: and then the wind changed. It had been chopping about a bit, they said: not much of it: but suddenly it blew steadily from the west. And so we've still got our grass, Mary girl!"

"Thank goodness!" she said. "And thanks to every one who worked for us!"

"Yes, indeed," said her husband. "Half the district seemed to be there when I got out; it's queer how the news of a fire will travel quickly in some directions. Some one passing in a motor saw it in Moncrieff's, and sent the word along. That big fellow Conlan—Jo's friend—was there, working like a tiger. Was Billy very done?"

"Yes, absolutely. The man who brought him home said he had almost to hold him on his pony: he was just dead with sleep and fatigue. He drank two cups of hot milk and was asleep before he had fairly swallowed the second. I undressed him and put him to bed without even washing his dear old dirty face; and he's asleep yet."

"Poor little chap!" The man's voice was very tender. "They said he worked splendidly, galloping from place to place to beat out fires from flying embers: they wouldn't let him beat near the main fire, much to his disgust. Mary, how on earth those kiddies managed to get the cattle out beats me! Moncrieff said it seemed no time after they went after them that Billy was back, saying all the bullocks were out."

"As far as I can gather from Rex they just got them on the run and kept them running," Mrs. Weston said. "Rex mentioned that they both yelled like fury: and certainly he has no voice left to-day. You must be very tired, John."

"I'm not: I'm too thankful," he said.

It was noon, and he had just ridden in, after having spent the night at the fire: for although the most acute danger was over, trees were still blazing in Moncrieff's paddock, and a change of wind might have carried sparks into the dry grass on Emu Plains. It would be necessary to watch until the last tree was burned out.

"I thought the twins might go out and keep guard this afternoon, while I

have a sleep," he went on. "They would like to be in it: and there's no hard work required, only watchfulness. I'll go out again to-night. Conlan's chopping down two of the worst trees."

"What—is he still working?" Mrs. Weston asked.

"Can't hunt him away. He says he has nothing particular to do—he has a farm of his own, you know, and does odd work occasionally for Harrison. I believe the poor chap thinks he's working off a bit of his debt to Jo. As things stand, Mary, it's a very lucky fire for us. It means that we have a big break of burned country between us and further danger. It has done Moncrieff good, too—cleared up a very dirty paddock, all over fallen trees and rubbish—a harbour for rabbits. He had no stock there, so he's lost nothing except a little fencing. Moncrieff is jubilant."

"Perhaps the luck is turning," his wife said, smiling.

John Weston sighed.

"It's taken a long time to turn," he said; "and there's no sign yet. Half the district will be ruined if rain doesn't come while there's still warmth enough to bring on the grass. It's over a year since we had a good rain. Do you know, I almost thought it was coming this morning: it was very cloudy, and there was a sort of feel of rain in the air. But it blew over, as it's done hundreds of times."

"I know," said Mrs. Weston. "I was up at daylight, looking out for you: and I was almost hopeful. But my toe wasn't aching!"

Her husband laughed.

"Your old toe!"

"But it always ached for rain, John!"

"Then it's had such a long spell it must have forgotten to ache," said he. "For which you should be thankful."

"I'm not," she replied. "It's better to have my toe aching because of rain coming than the whole of me—mind and body—aching because rain doesn't come. You'll see me dancing with joy if my toe ever aches again."

Mrs. Weston's private barometer was a standing joke to her family. As a girl, her toe had been broken in an accident: and ever since, when rain was coming, it ached, more or less. Now, however, it had not manifested itself for over a year, and its queer warnings had been almost forgotten.

"May I see the dance soon!" said her husband, almost solemnly. "By the way, that fellow Conlan was giving me a chance of buying sheep last night."

"And feed with them?" Mrs. Weston queried, drily.

"Feed? Well, yes, as it happens. It would be rather a chance, if one had

ready money—and pluck. A cousin of his named Murphy, a queer old chap, has just been left a property in Ireland, and he's anxious to clear out at once and go back to take possession of it. He rents a place ten miles away, on Reedy Creek, where he runs sheep. His lease has only a couple of months to run, and he's willing to forfeit that, or to give it in to any one who'll buy his sheep. Dirt cheap, too, they are. But, of course, no one's buying stock now, especially for ready money, which is what old Murphy wants. In two months' time this country will be like the Sahara, unless we get rain."

"What a chance—if rain should come!" said his wife.

"Rather. But it would be simply a gamble: of course the sheep are as poor as crows, Conlan says. They can scratch up a sort of a living, but they couldn't travel. That's the sort of gamble a man can face if he has a good fat balance in the Bank: not unless. Conlan was very sorry. He brought me the offer first."

"What did you tell him?"

"Told him I guessed he had as much ready money as I had, just now. He grinned at that, and said, 'Well, indeed, I bought a pair of Injinrubber ducks for the Missus last week, but it took some scratching up to raise the cash!' I told him to go to Holmes about Murphy's sheep. But I don't suppose even Evan Holmes has any spare cash now."

He rose, yawning.

"Well, I must see to some things," he said. "I'll lie down after dinner, and have a sleep. I don't suppose Sarah has enough wood to go on with for the kitchen stove."

"Oh, yes, she has," his wife answered, with a smile. "The twins got it. They chopped mightily. Jean remarked that she hoped you wouldn't notice any logs, or you would certainly think a dog had gnawed them off! And they milked."

"Did they, indeed?" her husband said. "Good old twinses! I quite forgot that the little chaps were still asleep."

"Oh, Rex isn't. But he was late: the twins wouldn't call him. He was very disgusted to find that they had done the outside work, and at once went and chopped another barrow-load of wood! I think he would have liked to milk again, but Jean pointed out that the cows wouldn't have been of the same opinion!"

A quaint figure came round the corner of the verandah: Billy, in his pyjamas, with his ruddy curls ruffled all over his head, and with his face startlingly dirty. He came towards his father, rubbing blackened fists into his sleepy eyes.

"Is the fire out?" he asked.

"All that matters is out," John Weston said.

"Did we get burned out, Father?"

"No, we didn't. And I'm proud of you, old son." John Weston sat down, drawing the boy into his arms; and Billy snuggled down on his knee, cuddling his sleepy head into his father's neck. Over the rumpled curls the father and mother smiled at each other.

Round the corner came the twins, with Rex between them.

"Father! Is everything all right?"

"Quite all right," Mr. Weston said. He held out his hand to Rex.

"I've got to thank you, old chap. You and Billy did men's work yesterday."

Rex flushed to the roots of his fair hair.

"Indeed, it wasn't me, Mr. Weston. It was all Billy!"

"Bosh!" said Billy briefly, without raising his head.

"No, it wasn't all Billy—though I'll admit Billy did his share. Billy couldn't have moved those cattle single-handed. I'm blessed if I know how you got them out as it is."

"I didn't think we had any chance myself," said Billy, sitting up suddenly, "with no dogs, and no stock-whips, nor nothing. So we just went mad 'n' yelled. And then the jolly old bullocks went mad, too, an' put their tails in the air an' galloped. So we got 'em out quite easy. It was no end of fun, if we hadn't been anxious about the grass."

"You're good kids," said Mr. Weston, laughing. "I must say I'd like to have seen that muster. Billy, my son, have you any idea how dirty your face is?"

"No, really, is it?" Billy asked, greatly surprised. He caught sight of his blackened hands. "Why—look!" He held them out for his family's benefit. The family shouted with laughter.

"Your face matches them, sonnie," said his mother. "Go and look at yourself; and then be off to the bathroom as fast as you can. Dinner will be ready as soon as you are."

At dinner it transpired that Mrs. Weston would like to see the scene of the fire, and that the boys were much aggrieved at the idea of not going out: so it was decided to give the ponies a rest, and Jo drove the whole party out in the big express-waggon, leaving Mr. Weston to sleep in the silent house, in charge of Sarah. They offered to take Sarah too, but the gaunt handmaiden received the invitation with a snort.

“What ’ud I do, picnickin’ on a burnt log? An’ no one to look after the master if he wanted anything. No, thanks. You’d better boil the billy out there; if there’s men workin’ they’d be glad of a drink of tea. I’ll fix it—you go on an’ get ready.” And when the iron-greys were harnessed, she came out with a huge billy and a package of food almost as huge. She held the gate open as they drove through—tall, erect, and bony, in her stiffly-starched print dress, her hair screwed back from her knobby forehead.

“Good-bye, Sarah, old girl!” sang out Billy. “Wish you were coming!”

“I know when I’m well orf!” responded Sarah, loftily. But her eyes were very tender.

There was no buggy track across the paddock: the express-waggon bumped and rattled over the bare, uneven ground, and the water splashed from under the lid of the billy with such persistence that it seemed as if there would be very little left to boil by the time they reached their journey’s end. The cattle were all back in their feeding-ground—the gate into the next paddock tied back, in case a fire should spring up. They looked sleepily at the rattling buggy, failing to recognize, in the small boys sitting in the back, with dangling legs, the two demons who, only yesterday, had chased them through the timber with horrid yells.

Moncrieff’s paddock stretched away to the east, blackened and bare. Smoke rose lazily from the charred timber on the ground, but only one burning tree still stood erect. There was a steady sound of chopping near its base, where could be seen a man, whose axe rose and fell with machine-like regularity. As Jo pulled up the horses, a warning crack came from the tree, and he stepped quickly backwards, looking up. Slowly the tree swayed to one side, seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then toppled lazily over, coming to earth with a crash. It broke into three pieces, showers of sparks and burning fragments rising from it. The greys leaped beneath Jo’s restraining hand; and then, deciding that they had made a mistake, settled to calmness again.

“That’s Mr. Conlan,” Jo said. “Isn’t he a brick, working here like this—and on Sunday, too! And there’s Mr. Moncrieff. We must send them home—if they’ll go. Come on, Jean, and we’ll get the horses out.”

They unharnessed the greys and tied them in a patch of shade, while Billy and Rex hunted for sticks to boil the billy. Moncrieff came riding towards them as they returned to the buggy.

“Good-day, Mrs. Weston. Nice and hot, as usual, isn’t it?”

“It was hotter for you, yesterday, Mr. Moncrieff, I believe,” Mrs. Weston answered, laughing. “You have had a great burn.”

“Yes, thoroughly satisfactory, since it didn’t finish by getting the Emu

Plains grass," said Moncrieff, a burly man with a keen, rugged face. "I certainly was afraid that it was going to. It has done me hundreds of pounds worth of good, in clearing up my paddock."

"We've come to relieve you, Mr. Moncrieff," Jean said. "Father sent us out. We're to stay until he comes, so you mustn't wait, after you've had a cup of tea."

"I won't wait for that, then, if you don't mind, Miss Jean," Moncrieff said. "I'll not be sorry to get a sleep, for I've been on the go for two nights now. My wife will have tea for me when I get home." He yawned openly, looking at them with tired blue eyes, inflamed from the smoke. "Great kid you've got there," he said, nodding towards Billy, busily gathering sticks a little way off. "I never saw anything quicker than he was last night. Well, I'll be going." He lifted his hat—they saw a long red burn across his hand as he did so—and, wheeling his pony, rode away.

"Run and tell Mr. Conlan to come for some tea, Billy," Jean called presently. "The billy's boiling."

Tim Conlan was busy with the tree he had felled, piling the lighter pieces about the heavier, that all might burn quickly. He came in a few moments greeting them all cheerfully, with a special smile for Jo.

"You're to bathe your eyes before you have tea, Mr. Conlan," Mrs. Weston said. She produced a bottle of boracic lotion and an eye-bath, and showed him how to use it.

"Smarts like fury, but it makes 'em better, don't it?" said the big man, with tears streaming down his cheeks, making curious patterns in the smoky dust that covered his face. "If you don't mind, I'll slip over to the river for a wash: I'll feel more comfortable-like."

"Have one cup of tea first, Mr. Conlan," suggested Jo, handing him a brimming cup. "Then you can really have tea when you come back!"

The big man grinned, and obeyed her.

"That's too big a temptation for a thirsty man to resist, Miss Weston. My word, it's good!" He drained it at a draught, and then went off with great strides to the river: returning presently much freshened.

"That's more respectable—though I don't think my old woman would think I looked respectable, if she could see me. Fire-fighting isn't clean and tidy work," he said, laughing. Suddenly his eye fell on Jean, who was proffering him a plate of scones: and then wavered to Jo, who was handing him tea. "Holy Ann!" he ejaculated. "I say, excuse me, but which of you is which?"

The twins, who were dressed alike in blue print frocks, chuckled.

"This is my sister!" they said, together, each indicating the other. The girls at school used to say that only twins could have made remarks with the absolute unanimity of Jean and Jo. It happened without any previous preparation, as though the two bodies were informed by one mind. Rex and Billy shouted with laughter.

"Well, I've met one of you—and good reason I have to know it," said the bewildered man. "But I'm hanged if I can say which it is. Do *you* know them apart, Mrs. Weston?"

"Well, nearly always," said that lady. "I have my moments of uncertainty, but they seldom last long."

"You've a right to brand them!" murmured Mr. Conlan, gazing distressfully.

"When they were smaller, I used to put different coloured ribbons on them," Mrs. Weston said, laughing. "But I regret to say that they used to change the ribbons!"

"They look as if they might do that," remarked Tim. "Take pity on me, and tell me which is the one I know!"

"Make a guess, Mr. Conlan!" sang out Billy delightedly. "I don't believe you're game!"

Thus adjured, Tim Conlan favoured each twin with a searching glance, and then, indicating Jo with an accusing forefinger, said, "You're her!"

"Good guess!" said Billy approvingly.

"Well, 'tis no credit to me," remarked Tim, at length accepting nourishment at the hands of the laughing twins. " 'Tis only that I noticed she'd a scar on her hand, the day she was at my place: and, by good luck, I remembered to look for it!"

He ate a vast meal, punctuated by many cups of tea. Though he had been up all night, and working hard for twenty-four hours, he disclaimed any idea of being tired. He kept a wary eye on the smouldering fires, until the twins sent Billy and Rex to patrol them: then he allowed his long limbs to relax, lit his pipe, and "yarned" in the manner dear to the bushman. All the time he covertly watched Jean and Jo. They strolled across to the fires presently, and he watched them go, with a little smile.

"They're wonderful alike," he said. "But I've got 'em placed now. Their hair don't grow quite the same way, an' my Miss Jo has a tiny mole near her eye." He ran over half a dozen other differences: some that Mrs. Weston herself could not remember noticing. "I'll not mix them up again," he finished.

And he never did.

"I wish the Boss could have seen his way to buyin' old man Murphy's sheep," he said, as he was preparing for his long ride home. "They're dirt cheap, and no mistake: if only rain comes they'll be easy money for the man who buys them."

"Yes—but if rain does not come, Mr. Conlan?"

"Oh, rain's sure to come some day," said Tim, with the easy optimism of his Irish blood. "And there's two months' feed, of a sort, where they are. It'd be worth the risk, if a man only had the money. Murphy's pretty near ready to give them away, for cash!"

"But cash is what no one has."

"More's the pity, for it's a real bargain. I'd like Mr. Weston to have been the one to make a pile out of 'em. But of course no one's buyin' sheep now, nor cattle either, barrin' the chaps down Gippsland way. He'd truck 'em there, only they'd never stand the trip." He put his bridle over his horse's head. "Well, I'll say good-bye, Mrs. Weston."

She put her hand into his.

"I can't thank you enough for helping us."

"I've done nothing," he said. "Nothing that any neighbour wouldn't be glad to do. An' where Miss Jo's concerned—well, you can guess it's a relief to me to try an' work off a bit of my debt."

"There is no debt, Mr. Conlan. Jo would be the first to tell you so."

"Isn't there?" he said. "Well, I see it pretty plain every time I look at them little kids of mine." He swung his long form to the saddle, and she watched him ride carefully over the burnt ground to say good-bye to the others; she noticed that, though he shouted cheerily to the boys from his horse, he dismounted when he spoke to the twins. Then he jumped the broken fence and cantered off, leaving them to patrol the dying fires.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TWINS TAKE A HOLIDAY

"REX, it's a perfectly dreadful copy!"

Rex shuffled his feet uneasily.

"Well, I can't make it any better."

"That's just nonsense," Jean said. "It's almost the last page in your copy-book, and it's quite the worst copy you've done. You just haven't tried."

"Did try," said Rex sullenly.

"I don't see how you expect me to believe that."

"Don't care if you don't believe it!" said Rex, under his breath: not so low, however, but Jean caught the words. She looked at him steadily, and the small boy had the grace to redden.

"That's impertinence," she said. "You mustn't think that you can speak to me like that, or that you can show me that sort of copy. Write the next one, please." She pushed the hair from her forehead with a tired gesture. "Now, Billy—let me see yours."

Billy was laboriously finishing, the end of a very pink tongue appearing at the corner of his mouth as he made his way along the last line. He completed the final word, and, seizing his blotting-paper, banged it down on his copy, smudging it hopelessly. The bang brought an angry growl from Rex.

"Can't you keep from jolting? How d'you expect a fellow to write a copy?"

"Oh—Billy!" Jean said.

What could be seen of Billy's copy showed that it was rather worse than Rex's. It was scrawled carelessly throughout, with an easy disregard of the finer flights of penmanship provided by the copy-book maker.

"Well, I couldn't help smudging it, could I?"

"Yes, of course you could if you'd tried," Jean said. "But it wasn't decently written before you smudged it. You haven't even looked at the copy after the first line."

"Yes, I did. What else would I look at?"

"Why, you've looked at your own disgraceful writing. You've spelt 'glitters' with one 't' in the second line, and copied it throughout, with every

other mistake. I believe you boys have just been larking while I was out of the room. I won't trust you again."

This was bitter, and the sulkiness deepened on each rebellious face.

"Write another," Jean said. "I won't pass work like that. And this time I must watch you."

Under this infliction both boys wrote with deliberate slovenliness, and the second copies were rather worse than the first. Billy had recorded that "All is not gold that gliters" in the first; now he stated "Honistey is the best pollicy," and stuck to the assertion throughout five lines; while Rex scrawled his quickly, and, having made a huge blot in the middle of the page, devoted himself to turning it into a fat-bodied spider by the addition of sundry hairy legs. Jean flushed as she took the books.

"I suppose you're both seeing how far you can go," she said. "I don't know what has come to you both; as a rule you don't seem to want to behave like little pigs. Well, you'll write another copy after school. Get the geography books, Billy."

It was a sultry morning in March, and from the first the day had begun badly. The twins' alarum-clock had failed to do its duty, and instead of jumping up at five they had slumbered peacefully until Sarah, outwardly amazed, but inwardly rather pleased, had brought tea to their bedsides at half-past six. Sarah considered that they got up far too early, and worked far too much; she chuckled to herself because they had had an extra allowance of sleep with, in the end, tea in bed—as she would willingly have brought it to them every morning. But the twins were horrified at the failure of their programme. For once their cheerfulness failed them, and they may be said to have got out of bed on the wrong side.

Possibly the weather had something to do with it. February had closed in a blaze of still heat, and March showed no signs of bringing better weather. Not in the memory of man had such steady heat been known in the district; the men talked of it when they met in Barrabri, and shook their heads over the near approach of ruin to many. It was "sticky" weather; humid sultriness, not like their usual dry heat; people longed for a breeze, even a hot wind, rather than these endless days when even the lightest of clothing seemed to cling to the prickly skin, and perspiration made it almost impossible to handle a pen or to use a needle.

"I never remember such a season," Evan Holmes said. "We're used to decent, clean hot weather here, that nobody minds; but this is like living in a perpetual vapour-bath. Everybody's temper is getting on edge!"

The nights were not much better. Often, at sundown, clouds rolled up, and

growls of thunder were heard, bringing hopes of rain: then it would all disperse, and the still, clammy heat would do its best to make sleep an impossibility. The twins, generally asleep five minutes after they were in bed, found themselves, to their disgust, tossing and turning in unaccustomed wakefulness. It was small wonder if they overslept themselves when the alarum-clock failed to act.

Everything seemed to go wrong that morning—partly because they tried to carry out the programme in full, not realizing that a lost hour and a half takes too much catching. Older people would have shrugged and let some things go, for once; the twins, being young and stiff-necked, refused to do so, would not take time to eat a reasonable breakfast, and, by the time lessons began, were thoroughly on edge.

The boys, too, had had an unfortunate morning. They had been late, and had rushed the cows up to the milking-shed—bringing a sharp word of reproof from Mr. Weston. Then old Strawberry, infuriated by the clustering flies, had kicked just as Rex had almost finished milking her, and had knocked over half a bucket of milk, most of which bespattered Rex. Billy had unfeelingly howled with laughter, and even Mr. Weston had smiled, though he was annoyed at the loss of the milk—milk was getting scarce as the lucerne crop shrank and the remnant of feed in the paddock dwindled. Rex himself had been astonished at the wave of hot anger that swept over him, and at the dull resentment that followed it. He did not generally feel like that, even if things did go awry. Certainly the clerk of the weather was responsible for much that morning.

Billy's troubles had come to him after breakfast, when he was sent to clean his father's brown boots, and absent-mindedly began operations with the tin containing blacking. Mr. Weston had found him gazing at the ruin in a dreamy fashion, which lent the final spark to his father's just wrath. He lost his temper—in itself an occurrence so rare as to be amazing, and Billy departed hurriedly from the scene, tingling both in mind and body.

It was clearly an unlucky day, and the boys were in no mood for lessons, especially when they found that Jean was busy cleaning the lamps and was only too glad to leave them to write copies alone. The pens were unruly, and stuck to their moist hands; it was ever so much pleasanter to make paper darts and throw them, than laboriously to inscribe obvious truths like "All is not gold that glitters." As if people didn't know that! And then Jean had been "snarly," and it was horribly easy, this morning, to be snarly in response.

The geography lesson fared little better. It was rather a dull lesson—or possibly Jean, being oppressed by unusual dignity, did not feel equal to making it bright. The boys were frankly bored, and Rex remarked, in an audible undertone, that it was just like Miss Green's sort of lesson! Somehow,

the remark stung Jean more than open rudeness. She found tears very near her eyes.

Mother came in quietly, looking at the flushed, resentful faces, but apparently noticing nothing. She brought with her, as always, a sense of restfulness. No one would have guessed that she had been sitting on the verandah, listening to the stumbling feet on the path of knowledge—waiting for the exact moment to interfere. It was near Jo's time for taking over the schoolroom; and Jo, she knew, was polishing linoleum, having resisted any suggestion to leave it until another day: rubbing hard, with one eye on the clock, and with a red spot on otherwise white cheeks.

"Father wants a telegram sent, Jean," she said. "And he wants the afternoon mail brought out. I think you and Jo had better ride into Barrabri, and have lunch at the Bank or at the Lawrences'; they have been asking you a long while. Then you can get the mail, and ride out when it is cooler. I'll take over the boys."

"Sure you want to. Mother? Jo could go by herself." But Jean had flushed with anticipation. The prospect of a holiday was very tempting.

"Oh, I'd rather you went together. And the boys and I will quite enjoy ourselves." She looked at them with a little smile. "You won't give me a bad time, will you, boys?"

Both urchins flushed.

"We've been rather brutes this morning," Rex said frankly. "Haven't we, Billy?"

"Perfect swine!" agreed Billy. "I'm blessed if I know why. I say, Jean, I'm sorry!"

"So'm I, Jean," from Rex. "An' I'll do that extra copy my very best."

"Oh, bother the extra copy!" Jean said. "I expect I was cross, too. Every one's cross but you, Mother, and you're a miracle! Have you told Jo?"

"No—get her yourself. Be off, both of you!" And Jean was gone like a flash.

Mrs. Weston looked hard at the two boys.

"I want you two to remember," she said, "that Jean and Jo aren't very old; not so tremendously older than you two. But they are responsible for your lessons, and it isn't quite playing the game for you to make lesson-time hard for them. Please don't." She smiled at the downcast little faces. "Now come along: this room is really too hot. We'll go out on the south verandah, and you two can cut up French beans for dinner, and I'll read you a history story. Run and get the beans from Sarah."

Billy hesitated.

"Mother, could we get the ponies ready first for the girls?"

Mrs. Weston patted his head.

"Yes—good idea. But hurry up."

So when Jean and Jo came out presently, dressed for riding, they found Mrs. Weston in a rocking-chair on the verandah. A table near her bore a tray of glasses and a tall jug full of cool lemonade; and close at hand, under a pepper-tree, Pilot and Punch awaited them, groomed and saddled, and each in charge of a small boy.

"Oh, you little bricks!" Jean said. "That *is* a let-off—I was looking forward to a blazing walk down the paddock after the ponies. Bless you!" They drank their lemonade thankfully, and set off, while Mrs. Weston and the boys established themselves on the verandah, and the preparation of beans went on contentedly to the accompaniment of "Westward Ho!"

To be on a horse was always a tonic for either Jean or Jo. Even in the blaze of noonday they enjoyed the ride to Barrabri. It was a journey they always liked to make on horseback, since it was then possible to go across country for most of the way, cutting through the corner of the Emu Plains run, and then crossing a wide tract of rough country known as the Barrabri Common. There were gullies in the Common, up and down which it was necessary to scramble, following narrow cattle-tracks; and there were logs to jump, and, in ordinary seasons, watercourses, so that a gallop there presented something between a steeple-chase and an obstacle-race, and was tremendous fun. Now, alas! the watercourses were dry and the galloping ground, instead of being well-grassed, was bare, dusty earth; but still the Common was shady, and more interesting than the long, straight roads, where passing motors made conditions anything but pleasant for other folk.

They reached the township in good time, finding it wrapped in mid-day calm; and, having sent their telegram, made their way to the doctor's house, where Eva and Maisie Lawrence greeted them with delight, mingled with amazement at their heroism in taking a long ride on such a hot day.

"But it's always hot now," Jo said; "so if we didn't go out in heat we should never go out at all. And anyhow, I believe you've been playing tennis!" She glanced at the girl's rubber-soled shoes.

"Well, we have, though we know it's mad," Maisie said, laughing. "Tom Holmes was over, and he never thinks it's too hot to play, so he fairly dragged us out. He wouldn't stay to lunch, though. He heard about this escaped prisoner, and he thought he'd do a bit of detective work."

"But who is the escaped prisoner?"

"Oh, haven't you heard? He was being moved from one gaol to another, and he gave the slip to the policeman who was in charge of him. I forget what he was; a burglar or something—nothing so thrilling as a murderer! He got away two stations up the line, and he's supposed to have been seen making across country this way. A whole lot of policemen are after him."

"Why, how exciting!" exclaimed Jo. "Poor wretch—I wonder if he's got a wife and children?"

Eva Lawrence laughed.

"You are a funny old soul, Jo," she said; "you always think of queer, sentimental things. All the more shame for him to be a criminal if he *has* got a wife and children. But I believe he's quite a young man."

"Who's that? the runaway?" Dr. Lawrence asked, coming in. "Why, how are you, twins? did you actually ride in, on such a day! Well, I have to go out, to earn my living, but otherwise I would sit in a bath all day and drink iced things! Yes, the prisoner's quite a young man. He was a bank clerk, and managed to get away with about £5,000, and he's got a pretty long sentence to serve. He'll get more when they catch him."

"Perhaps they won't get him," Jean said.

"Oh, there's very little chance of that. Nowadays an escaped criminal can be so easily tracked in the country; it's all so opened-up, and the telegraph and telephone are everywhere. If ever people find out that you're a criminal, Jean, and you want to escape, hide in a big city; don't try a district like this, where every strange face is noticed."

"I'll remember," Jean said, twinkling. "But couldn't he get into the ranges, Doctor? It's lonely and rough enough in the country back of our place."

"But how would a man live? There's mighty little game there, even if he dared carry a gun; and scarcely any houses. And criminals have such appetites, you know!"

Jean laughed.

"Yes, I suppose that would be the difficulty, unless he had friends," she said.

"Oh, given friends, a man could hide in the ranges well enough, unless they brought the black-trackers up," the doctor said. "Very few people know much about that part of the district; the only men who ever go there are odd station-hands, looking for lost cattle. Anyhow, this man comes from the other side of Melbourne, so he's not likely to try the ranges. I'd give him, at the outside, two days' run; then they'll find him under a culvert or a haystack, or he'll have sense enough to come in and give himself up."

"Wouldn't you just hate to do that!" Jo ejaculated. "It would make you feel so small!"

"Well, I don't know. There's a certain amount of dignity in it; more, anyway, than in being dragged by the heels from under a haystack. No one can look dignified with straws in his hair! Poor wretch, I expect he's feeling sorry for himself now. Liberty must look pretty good to you when you see a sudden chance of escaping from a constable; but I'll guarantee he doesn't know what to do with his liberty now he's got it. Rather like Dead Sea apples—rosy enough on the outside, but dust and ashes when you bite them. However, there's lunch, and I'm glad I'm not an escaped gaol-bird, especially if it's been in the ice-chest—come along, girls!"

Lunch *had* been in the ice-chest; the twins, enjoying crisp salad and firm, quivering jelly, openly envied the township opportunities of combating the hot weather.

"You just don't know how lucky you are!" Jo said. "We have all sorts of bush dodges, of course; Coolgardie drip-safes and holes in the ground, and all that sort of thing; but, especially since this horrible sticky weather began, nothing seems to make much difference. The butter's always oil, and everything else is warm and flabby. I'd love to take a pat of this butter home to Mother! Her appetite has gone to simply nothing."

"You can have the butter!" said Mrs. Lawrence, laughing. "But why not send your mother in to us for a week? We should love to have her, and we'd take great care of her."

"She wouldn't leave home, I'm afraid," Jo said. "Father wants her to go down to the Harlands', at the Lakes' Entrance, but she won't go. I expect it's because she doesn't like to leave Father, when he's so worried over the drought."

"She'd be wiser to go," said the doctor, gravely. "No one knows how long this drought is going to hold out. And your mother has had a long spell of it now."

They lounged in the darkened drawing-room after lunch: Maisie and Eva played snatches from the new musical comedy, and there were English illustrated papers to look at, full of pictures of snow and ice, which seemed like a fairy-tale in the throbbing heat. Afternoon tea came in early, to suit the twins; and when it was over they said good-bye, and walked down to the post-office to get the mail before going to the stables for the ponies. As they came out of the post-office, the Barrabri policeman detached himself from a knot of men and came to meet them. He wore a look of unusual importance.

"Good afternoon, Miss Weston." He looked straight between them, a

method of greeting with which the twins were familiar among those who were puzzled by their uncanny resemblance. “You came in this morning, didn’t you? Did you happen to see any unusual character about?”

“No,” said the twins. “We didn’t notice anyone.”

“Not a man, for instance?”

“No one we didn’t know,” Jean answered. “Is it the escaped prisoner, Mr. Ransome?”

The constable nodded.

“Oh, he won’t be escaped long, Miss Weston. There’s some very smart men lookin’ for him. Of course there’ll be a search out your way, but I was just wondering if you’d seen anyone suspicious. Well, not as he looks suspicious; I believe he’s rather a nice-lookin’ young feller. P’raps, if he’d looked more like a criminal the chap in charge of him would ’a’ been more suspicious himself, instead of bein’ caught nappin’. I bet he’s pretty sorry now. Well, it’s a lesson to us!”

“I suppose so,” said Jo, feeling rather sorry for future “prisoners and captives.” “Have you any idea which way he went?”

“Well, he’s given us the slip altogether at present,” admitted the policeman. “Oh, we’ll get him, right enough. Well, you keep your eyes open, Miss Weston —a delicate-lookin’ feller in a grey suit. Did you come by the road this morning?”

“No—through the paddocks, and across the Common.”

“You’d ’a’ been more likely to see him there—he won’t be troublin’ the highroads much,” said the constable. “Oh, well, good afternoon, Miss Weston.” He smiled between them and strode off, his chest well out, and his step martial; and the twins, themselves feeling a little important, went in search of their ponies, and rode out of the township.

At first they were on the alert to scan every unfamiliar face—not that unfamiliar faces were plentiful in Barrabri, where the twins knew everybody. They were like a person who, having encountered a snake, sees one in every bush. Twice they turned down cross-roads in pursuit of a suspicious figure: the first turning out to be a grizzled rabbiter, and the second, Tom Holmes, who, covered with dust, was returning from a long afternoon spent fruitlessly as a sleuth-hound. Tom’s return to school had been delayed, owing to an untimely attack of chicken-pox; an undignified disease, which had caused him bitter shame. His period of quarantine had almost expired, and he was off on Monday, he explained; it would have been some set-off to a fool complaint like chicken-pox if he could have captured a criminal off his own bat!

“But I had my usual luck,” he said wrathfully. “Never saw a sign of him all the afternoon, and finished up by letting my horse get a box-thorn in his fetlock! He’s dead lame, and I’ve had to leave him at the stables. Tried to get a horse in the township, and couldn’t, so I’ve got to walk home!”

“Teach you to let poor prisoners alone!” said Jean unsympathetically. “Why do you want to hunt the poor fellow down?”

Tom stared.

“Why ever not?” he demanded.

“Well, he’s got plenty of people after him.”

“He ought to have kept his hands off other people’s money.”

“Oh, well, that’s not our business,” Jean said.

“But, good gracious!” ejaculated Tom, “you said you came down this road because you thought I was him! What did you mean to do if I had been?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jean said, laughing. “Look at him, I suppose. Criminals don’t come our way every day, you know!”

“We certainly wouldn’t have laid violent hands on him, remarking, ‘Come and be killed!’ anyhow!” said Jo.

“Well, I should say you wouldn’t—kids like you! But you’d have gone in for Ransome, I suppose?”

“Oh, that’s the last thing we’d have thought of doing!” Jean assured him.

“Well, girls are beyond me!” said Tom heavily. He said good-bye, evidently considering them unworthy of his further attention; and set off on his dusty tramp home.

Their excursions and discussions had made the twins late, and they abandoned further ideas of chasing suspicious characters for purposes of inspection, and cantered briskly across the Common. The thunderous clouds, so usual now towards evening, were rolling up over the western sky, and the heat was breathless; when, in pity for the ponies, they reined in to a walk, they almost gasped in the still, heavy air. They were thankful when at length the roofs of the Emu Plains homestead showed through the trees.

The paddock through which they were riding was next to the homestead block. A creek ran through one corner, its banks thickly fringed with scrub; and in a little nook near the dividing fence there was an old hut, built long ago by men on a timber-felling contract. It was half in ruins now, held together by the sarsaparilla and clematis that festooned it; the children used it sometimes as a place to picnic. Something moving near it caught Jean’s eye, and she brought Punch to a standstill.

“Do you see anything there, Jo? Down by the old hut?”

Jo looked.

“No,” she said. “There couldn’t be anything. Oh, you are an old duffer, Jeanie; you’ve got that escaped man on the brain!”

“Well, I did see something,” Jean persisted. “And there are no sheep or cattle in this paddock at all, so it couldn’t have been a beast. Let’s ride down and see, Jo.”

“I think it’s mad,” said Jo. “You really couldn’t have seen anything.”

“Well, it won’t take us more than three minutes to go and see,” Jean said. “Come on, old girl.”

She turned Punch from the gate and cantered towards the creek, followed by her twin—who, however she might protest, never thought of not joining in. They drew up near the hut.

There was no sign of anything there, and everything was very quiet. Jean was just about to turn her pony when something caught her eye—a freshly broken stalk of bracken.

“That didn’t break itself, Jo,” she said, pointing to it. “Hold Punch a moment: I’m going to have a peep in.”

“You’re not to get off,” Jo said quickly.

“Well, I’ll peep in, anyhow.” She rode up to the doorway of the hut. The pony shied violently.

“Jo!—there’s a man there. He’s lying down.”

“Then you come away,” said Jo decidedly.

“He looks queer: I think he’s sick.”

“Drunk, more likely. Don’t be a donkey, Jean—you know Father would be wild with us if——” She stopped uncertainly, looking at her twin. A low moan had come from the hut. There was something very pitiful in the sound.

“I say,” Jean called clearly: “are you ill?”

There was no answer, but presently the low sound came again. The twins rode to the doorway, controlling their frightened ponies, and looked in.

The man lay quite near the doorway. There were tracks in the dust that seemed to show that he had crawled there, and had then collapsed. His face was partly turned towards them—a delicate face, begrimed with dust, but showing traces of refinement. It was very white under the dust, and his lips were bloodless.

“And he’s got a grey suit!” said Jo.

The lad—he seemed little more than a boy—opened his eyes slowly and

looked out. At first his gaze saw only the ponies' legs: then the eyes slowly travelled upwards until they rested on the two faces—and saw nothing but pity in them. He tried to speak, but only one word came clearly—"Water!"

"Oh, he's thirsty, Jo!" Jean cried.

She was off her pony in a moment. There were old tins about the hut, relics of the contractors; not ideal vessels for a sick man's use, but there was no choice. Jean fled down to the creek, where a little runnel of water yet trickled over mossy stones; she rinsed and filled the tin, and hurried back with it—to find Jo bending over the man in the grey suit.

"His head's hurt, Jean, and I think his leg is too. I'll help him—you hold the tin."

Even with Jo's help it was not easy to give him the drink he longed for; the tin was awkward, and they splashed a good deal of it over his face and neck. But they managed to get it to his craving lips at last, and he drank deeply. They laid him down again, and his eyes closed.

"He's had an awful bump on the head, Jean—look!" Jo said. "And see—he's been trying to get one boot off." She touched his leg gingerly, and the lad winced.

"I believe we ought to get that boot off," Jean said—and then started, for an unmistakable sound of acquiescence had come from their patient.

"We'll do it," Jean said, answering the sound. "I hope we shan't hurt you much."

That they hurt him was evident, for the ankle was cruelly swollen, and to draw the boot off was quite impossible. Neither twin had a knife, but it occurred to them that the patient might be better equipped, and they searched his pockets, with the result that an excellent knife came to light. With this they gradually cut the boot to pieces, and slit the sock. The ankle was puffed and swollen, and beginning to turn black.

"Now, I wonder if that's broken!" Jo pondered. "They taught us in first-aid to waggle it, didn't they?"

She "waggled" it, very badly afraid of damaging it further, and prodded it here and there, while its owner lay motionless, with set lips.

"I don't believe it's broken, Jean. There's no sign of grating or anything. I fancy it's just a very bad sprain." She bathed it, using the torn sock as a sponge, and finally as a cold-water bandage, while Jean bathed his head with her handkerchief. It seemed to give him relief; something of the pain died out of his face.

"Whatever are we going to do with him?" Jo queried, when they had

finished.

"We'll have to tell Father," Jean answered. "And if we do, Father will have to tell the police."

There came from the half-conscious lad a sharp, protesting sound.

"It's awful," Jo said. "I simply couldn't bear to let the police have him! He—he looks so young, and not really wicked. But Father is different; he'd be sterner. Besides, he'd get into bad trouble himself if he didn't give him up."

"But we can't leave him here. He's too ill."

The patient made a great effort to speak.

"I'm all right. Don't tell——" His voice became indistinct, but they caught the muttered word, "police." The twins looked at each other.

"We might leave him until the morning," Jean said—and there was an answering sound of gratitude from the patient. "After all, I don't suppose he could be moved to-night, and it's so hot he might as well be here as—as in gaol," she finished, dropping her voice.

"I'm—not going—to gaol," said the patient indistinctly.

"You don't understand," said Jean, speaking as one would to a baby. "They're looking for you everywhere: I'm afraid we can't hide you. But we won't say anything to-night, if you'd like to stay here."

The patient grunted.

"And we'll bring you food early in the morning," added Jo, who had been rapidly turning over ways and means in her mind. "Do you think there's anything wrong with you besides your head and ankle?"

The grunt said "No."

"Well, we'll just leave you to-night, and if there's any way we can help you in the morning, we'll do it."

They collected a few armfuls of bracken and put them against the wall of the hut for a bed, helping the lad to move there; Jean bathed his head again, and made a wet bandage for it of his other sock, and they put two full tins of water near him. Then they remembered that they were bringing home a surprise for Rex and Billy in the shape of two slabs of chocolate, and, with some regret, gave him these. He lay with closed eyes, but they felt that he was dimly conscious of all they did. Once he muttered something that sounded like "Thanks."

They left him at last, and cantered rapidly homewards, conscious that they were very late. No one seemed to mind, however; the breathless heat was sufficient excuse for anything. Even Sarah sat on the kitchen verandah, fanning

herself with the milk-skimmer. The twins handed over the mail-bag and ran off to change for tea—not sorry for a chance to discuss their amazing find.

"You know, I don't see what we really can do," Jo said. "He couldn't be hidden down there for more than a few days, even if we could get food to him."

"I suppose not." Jean looked perplexed. "Anyhow, let's do our best, Jo. He looks so young and miserable. Perhaps, if he escaped, he might never steal again."

"Why, I'd help him to escape, quick enough—if I could see how," Jo said, with calm disregard of the law. "But that's the trouble. And we mustn't land Father in a hole—if we can help it, that is."

"No," agreed her twin. "Not if we can help it."

It was distressingly clear that if the choice came between inconveniencing their father or the patient, Mr. Weston might have to go to the wall.

"Perhaps we could keep him fed for a few days, and then let him take his chance of escaping," Jo pondered. "But we just couldn't hand him over to the police, Jeanie."

"And what if the police come out here and question us?"

This was a horrible possibility which had not occurred to Jo. She thought a moment.

"We'll make for the bathing-pool!" said she.

"They can't question us if we're swimming round in bathing-suits!"

Mr. Weston had carried the mail-bag out to the verandah, where his wife lay back in a long chair. For once, her busy fingers were idle, and she was very pale.

"Two for you, Mary," he said, sorting the letters. "The usual assortment of bills and agents' circulars for me, I suppose." He tore open an envelope, and fell silent, while Mrs. Weston became immersed in her own letters. Presently she heard him give a stifled exclamation. She looked up inquiringly. He was staring at the page in his hand, amazement on his face.

"What is it, John?" she asked.

"The most unexpected thing!" he answered, his voice shaking. "Ahearne has paid up!"

"Not the borrowed money!"

"Every penny. Poor old chap, he's glad to be able to do it. He's had a legacy; some old aunt in Sydney has died, leaving him enough to clear away his difficulties." Mr. Weston held out a pink slip of paper. "There's his cheque

—we haven't seen so much money for ages, Mary-girl!"

Mrs. Weston took the cheque and turned it over slowly, looking at the figures on it. It seemed an incredible thing.

"I'm glad for his sake, too," she said. "He was unhappier about the money than we were, John."

"I know he was. But I'll never regret having lent it to him, even if it did land us in a hole. He's a good friend."

He stood up, straightening his shoulders as if a weight had fallen from them.

"Well, that clears away some difficulties," he said. "I'll put it in the Bank to-morrow. It won't put us on our feet, of course, but it will help our credit; and we'll want all the credit with the Bank that we can get, even if the drought does break."

"I suppose we shall," his wife said, slowly. Then she was silent; and all through the evening she said little, looking before her with brooding eyes. Her husband watched her anxiously. When the children had gone to bed, he spoke.

"Is anything wrong, Mary?"

"No," she said—"there's nothing wrong. But I want you to do something for me, John. I don't want it put into the Bank—that money of Mr. Ahearne's."

"Not put into the Bank!" he said. "But why, Mary? What else do you want to do with it?"

"I want you to buy Murphy's sheep," she said.

"Murphy's sheep!" He looked at her with amazed eyes. "But, Mary—it's an utter gamble!"

"There's a month's grass with them yet. I met Tim Conlan on Saturday, and he told me they were not sold, and that Murphy would take even less for them. And, John—nothing but a gamble will put us on our feet now, even if the drought does break."

"I know," he said heavily: "I know. And of course, if it breaks, sheep will go up like sky-rockets—every one will be wanting to buy. But—look at it!" He swept his hand vaguely towards the hot darkness, seeing, as plainly as in daylight, the bare, scorched land. "How do we know it will break this year!"

Mrs. Weston looked at him, and a little whimsical smile came at the corners of her mouth.

"My toe is aching," she said. "It has ached for three days!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE TURNING OF THE LONG LANE

IT was barely dawn next morning when the twins' alarum-clock roused them. They sprang up, dressed with swift movements, and tiptoed to the larder. No one else was astir.

"Whatever we do, we mustn't wake Sarah!"

"No—and we mustn't take what will be noticed too much," Jean said. "Here's a tin of sheep's tongue, and another of sardines." She rummaged among the spare foodstuffs that are to be found in every station store-room. "A pot of peach jam, Jean—I hope he likes peach; and a tin of tomatoes. There's a jar of anchovy paste here."

"No—make him too thirsty," objected Jo. "He can't crawl up and down the bank for water, with that ankle. Look, I'll pack butter into this little pot—it's got a screw-top, and he can put it in a tin of water if it gets too soft. We must take a spare billy and a cup—oh, and grab a tin-opener! And a knife."

"Right!" whispered her twin. "Plenty of bread, thank goodness: Sarah baked yesterday. No wonder she was cooked at night, poor old dear! I believe we can spare him some cake." They progressed to the meat-safe under the walnut-tree, and abstracted some cold beef. A bottle of milk finished their depredations, and they set off, laden, across the paddock. The house still slumbered peacefully.

So, apparently, did their patient when they appeared at the door of the hut; but he woke with a terrified start.

"It's all right," Jean assured him. "No one knows you are here. How are you?"

"Better," he whispered. Speech seemed difficult to him; he lay quietly while they bathed his injuries. They gave him milk, which he drank thirstily, but he refused food.

"We'll bring you more milk as soon as we can," Jean said. "It was no use bringing more now, because it would only go sour—it's going to be another blazing day. Sour milk would be bad for you, so finish that soon." She spoke in the tone of an understanding mother to a fractious child, and he looked at her gratefully for a moment. Then his heavy lids drooped over his eyes again.

"It's hard to believe he's a criminal; he looks such a boy," Jean said, as they hurried home. "Oh, I do hope the police won't come this way. I feel as if

I'd do anything to keep him out of their clutches!"

"So do I," Jo said. "After all, the police have so many criminals that they could easily spare one! And if he gets a chance now he may live a good life for ever after. But I do wonder, Jean, if he oughtn't to have a doctor."

"But that means the police!" Jean cried. "Dr. Lawrence never could visit him without letting the police know." She thought a moment. "I'll tell you what, Jo: we'll see how he is this evening, and if he's not better we'll get Sarah to see him. She's as good as a doctor, and we could swear her to secrecy." The phrase struck her with a pleasant flavour of conspiracy and mystery: she repeated it to herself, ending with a little chuckle.

"It really is fun, Jo! To think of the police scouring the country for that poor fellow, and you and I have him planted in that hut! Don't you wish we could tell them at school!"

"Rather!" Jo agreed. "Wouldn't there be excitement! By the way, I wonder if we're likely to get into a jolly row!"

"Well, there's a pretty good chance, I suppose," Jean said. "But it's worth it. Goodness me, Jo, there's Father!"

Mr. Weston, in riding-breeches and shirt, was in full view, going to the house-paddock, a bridle over his arm. The twins ducked guiltily behind a bush, waiting until a high fence hid him; then they rose and bolted to the garden, and climbed over its pittosporum hedge with the kindly aid of an overhanging pepper-tree. They gained the house without being seen—it was only a little after five o'clock; and were soon hard at work. Presently Sarah appeared.

"Tea's ready," she informed them. "Yes, it's early, but the Master's wanting breakfast; he's off to Reedy Creek, after some sheep. I thought you would 'ave your tea in the dining-room with 'im an' see that he eats somethin'; there was mighty little eaten in this 'ouse yesterday!"

"Too hot to eat, Sarah," said Jo.

"Too 'ot *not* to eat," responded Sarah. "People's gotter keep up their strength in weather like this. Just you go an' bully the Master, now: he told me to give 'im just some bre'n'butter, but I've done 'im some bacon the way 'e likes it. You two go an' be firm with 'im."

They found their father rather ruefully contemplating the bacon-dish, and induced him to eat by representing Sarah's wounded feelings should he send it out untouched.

"I suppose I'd better; but it's too early to eat," he said. "And later it will be too hot, so Sarah's cookery doesn't get a fair chance. However, I've a twenty-mile ride, so it really would be wiser to have something."

“Are you going to buy sheep, Father?” Jo asked, pouring out tea.

“I believe I am. It’s a gamble, of course—but they’re very cheap, and I need not move them for a month. Your mother will tell you about it. It’s going to be a worse day than yesterday, I believe: I’m going to get back as soon as I can, and get the trip over. Take care of your mother, girls: she was awfully done yesterday.”

“We’ll take her a nice little breakfast-tray before she gets up,” Jean said. “Perhaps she may eat something if we do. I’ll make her an omelette à la Smithy.”

“Do,” he said, smiling at her. “And have one for me when I come back. I’ll need it after spending as much money as I’ve got to spend this morning!” He pushed his chair back. “Well, Cruiser’s had his feed by now, I expect: I’ll be off.”

Jean’s brow had a little furrow as she gathered up the breakfast dishes.

“Poor darling!” she said. “Jo, did you notice how grey he’s getting?”

“Do you wonder?” Jo said. “Oh, I do wish we could get a few more small boys to teach!”

It was a day of blistering heat. Lessons were voted impossible, and teachers and pupils spent the morning in the river, accompanied, for once, by Mrs. Weston, whom the twins conveyed carefully on Merrilegs. The bathe refreshed her, and afterwards she sat in the shade and laughed to watch their porpoise-like gambols at water-polo. But she was restless and uneasy, and before they were ready to come out she mounted the grey pony and rode back to the house, declaring that her stock-riding days were not so far behind her that she should need assistance now.

As she neared the garden, she saw her husband coming. He was riding up the track slowly, his head bent down. She turned and rode to meet him, laughing at his astonished face.

“You!” he said. “Whatever are you out for, on such a day?”

“Oh, I’ve been with the children,” she answered. “I couldn’t rest, John: I had to know. Did you get the sheep?”

“Yes, I got them,” he said. “But, Mary, what is it? Aren’t you well? Why are you troubling about it?”

“I’m all right,” she said. “But I wanted you desperately to buy those sheep, and I couldn’t rest until I knew. I don’t know why—perhaps because my silly toe still aches! Tell me about them, dear. Was Murphy glad to sell?”

“Oh, Murphy’s gone!” her husband answered.

“Couldn’t wait any longer: he cleared out two days ago, and I believe he

sails for the old country to-day. He left the sheep in the agents' hands to sell, if possible: if they were not sold when the lease of his place expired they were to put them in the yards and let them go for what they'd fetch. The agents didn't expect to get rid of them: neither did Murphy himself. But he said, 'Is it a mob of sheep will be keeping me from Ireland? Begob, it is not!'—and went."

"And they're really ours?"

"Really and truly—signed, sealed, and delivered. I saw them first—they're not bad sheep, considering—and then fixed up the deal with the agents, in Reedy Creek. They've got my cheque, and I've got their receipt. Now, are you satisfied, you worrying woman!" He smiled down upon her from Cruiser's back.

"Yes, I'm satisfied," she said. "Perhaps I'll be sorry afterwards, but I've faith in my old toe!"

"I hope we shan't all be sorry afterwards," he said gravely. "But it's a big thing, Mary-girl." He helped her to the ground. "Go on to the house while I let the horses go: it's far too hot for you to be out."

The long day dragged to evening—an evening that brought little relief from the overpowering heat. There was something almost malignant in the heavy air. Even Billy and Rex were subdued by it: they lay on the floor in their room, in the minimum of clothing, and would not face the short journey to the river, declaring that one couldn't actually *live* in the water, and that one felt worse on coming out. The twins tried to read, and found it impossible to keep their attention on a book: slept, lying on the floor, and awoke in a bath of perspiration, acutely sorry they had slept. Mrs. Weston would not come into the house. She lay on a lounge on the verandah, pretending to read; but whenever her husband looked at her, her eyes were fixed upon the western sky, where the sun, a ball of lurid fire, was sinking into the bank of dull cloud that waited for it every evening.

Sarah—who had ironed all the afternoon with steady persistency—made no attempt to induce people to eat what she termed a "proper" meal. She marched through the house towards evening with a tray of sandwiches and a huge jug of cold coffee—the said coffee having been immersed, in bottles, in the underground tank. Jean and Jo nibbled their sandwiches, and then, taking a bottle of milk with them, slipped away to the hut by the creek.

It was evident that their patient was ill. He lay in the stifling little hut, his breath coming in gasps, his face deadly white. But he was more alive now: he looked at them with more recognition, and muttered thanks as they bathed his head and foot; and he drank the milk greedily. They conferred together in low tones.

"I'm sure he needs a doctor," Jean said.

"We'll get Sarah," said Jo.

"Don't get anyone," begged the patient, unexpectedly. "I'm all right—want sleep—brute of a headache—sorry!" He closed his eyes and seemed to sleep. They watched him for a little while, and then, as he made no movement, they set off home.

"He'll simply have to be moved," said Jean. "It's enough to kill him, to be in that awful little hut. We couldn't risk another day of it for him."

"Yes," Jo agreed. She heaved a sigh. "Better to let the police have him than for him to die—and he looks awful to-night. But who wouldn't look awful, to have spent to-day in that hut!"

"Oh, we'll beg and beg Father!" said Jean. "Perhaps he'll take the risk and not tell the police. No one would think of looking for the prisoner in the homestead; as far as that went, he'd be safer than in the hut."

"But if we have to get the doctor?"

"I forgot the doctor," Jean admitted gloomily. "He's a magistrate himself: he'd simply *have* to tell. Well, we've done our best, Jo: we can't do any more. And look here: we'd better tell Father at once, for he'll have to be brought up to the house before dark, and Sarah couldn't do it—Father would have to help."

"Yes, that's true," Jo said. "There's Father, coming across from the lucerne patch. Let's go and tell him."

Mr. Weston heard their story in utter astonishment.

"Well, if you aren't the most amazing twins!" he ejaculated. "And I was assuring a very hot policeman at Reedy Creek, only this morning, that no strangers had been out our way! I'll go down at once. No, I'm not angry: I don't see what else you could have done. Tell Sarah to get a room ready, but don't say anything to your mother: she isn't well enough to be worried. Do you think we can move him on a pony?"

"I don't know," Jean said. "But if you can't, how can you?"

"That's just what I don't know: we can't get a buggy down to that corner." He thought for a moment. "Look, Jean: send Sarah out here to me, and you go on getting the room ready. I'll need Sarah's help to lift him. Jo, get Merrilegs and bring him down to the hut. You'd better go first: I don't want to startle the poor wretch."

So it was that Mrs. Weston, moving restlessly about the garden, caught sight of a queer little procession: Jo, slowly leading the grey pony, on whose bare back was a white-faced young man with his head tied up in a sock, and

one foot curiously wrapped in its fellow. On one side her husband supported him, and on the other, Sarah: he wobbled rather painfully between them.

"It's all right, Mother darling," said Jean's voice behind her. "It's only our prisoner!" She explained briefly. "And oh, Mother!—do you think we'll have to give him up to the police?"

"I don't see how we can get out of it," her mother said. "But the main thing is, to get him better. Poor fellow! what a dreadful day he must have had!" She hurried to the verandah to meet him, all her weariness forgotten.

It was half an hour later when she came out to the anxious twins on the verandah.

"He's asleep," she said. "We have fixed him up comfortably, and I hope he'll sleep all night; Father means to camp near his room. Poor fellow—he's only a boy! But we must tell the police, twinses dear; Father says there's no help for it. We'll get the doctor in the morning and let the police know."

The twins sighed heavily.

"I suppose it's got to be," Jean said. "It's hard: but I don't think he can have a wife and children, as I was afraid he had—he's too young."

"He certainly is," said Mrs. Weston, smiling.

"And, perhaps, after he's served his sentence he'll be a reformed character, and Father will give him a job."

"And he'll marry Sarah!" finished Billy, who, with Rex, had been hugely interested in the prisoner.

"And meanwhile, we'll look out for our valuables!" said Mr. Weston, who had come out, unperceived—darkness had fallen suddenly. "Sorry, twinses, when he's your pet criminal—but really, it's as well to be careful. However, he's helpless enough to-night, poor wretch!"

"I'm thankful he's out of that horrid little hut," Jo said. "We were awfully keen on taking care of him; but the job got a bit too big for us. Of course, in books, he'd get better and escape in the night, leaving a note of thanks on the pin-cushion!"

"And taking the spoons with him!" finished her father, callously. "No, he won't do any escaping: his head and his ankle will see to that." He drew a long breath. "My word, isn't it hot! Are you all right, Mary? I can hardly see you, it's so dark—but you're very quiet."

Mrs. Weston did not answer him for a moment. She stood up and moved a few steps into the darkness.

"John—I smell rain!" she said.

Something in her voice made him suddenly anxious. He came quickly and put his arm round her.

"Sure you're all right, dear?"

She did not seem to notice the question. Her face was raised to the western sky.

"Listen!" she said. "It's coming—it's coming, John! I've been feeling it for three days. I know it's coming—now!"

A scorching breath of wind swept across their faces. Then, as they stood in tense silence, a great flash of lightning cut across the blackness of the night: and suddenly big drops fell around them. They heard them splash heavily on the iron roof of the verandah: they felt them through their thin clothes on their heated bodies. The boys gave a great shout, springing forward, and suddenly Sarah came running through the house.

"Did ye hear it?" she was saying. "Are ye there, ma'am?—did ye hear it?"

Then it was on them in a sudden torrent—blinding, rushing rain. They heard it drumming on the baked earth, beating furiously on the echoing roof. In a moment they were soaked to the skin, but no one noticed it: they stood together on the lawn, with faces upraised to the wonder of it, afraid to speak. It seemed to hiss round them, beating through the hot air. Then, as the thirsty ground grew damp, the smell of it came up to them: the unforgettable smell of rain after long drought. Another vivid flash of lightning showed them standing together, with Sarah peering anxiously from the verandah.

"Come in!" she cried. "Make her come in, sir! Are ye all gone mad?"

"I think so," John Weston said. His arm was round his wife: he picked her up suddenly and carried her to the verandah. "There you are, Sarah—take care of her," he said. "She's soaking wet—soaking wet, thank God! Go in, kiddies!" He turned and strode out into the storm.

"Come in yourself, sir!" Sarah cried. "Aren't ye wet enough?"

"I don't think I'll be wet enough if it goes on for a week!" he said. He felt Billy beside him, catching at his hand. "Go in, Sonnie—it's enough for one of us to be mad!"

"I'm goin' to stay with you!" Billy uttered. "I'll get wet with you. I'm wet already!"

His father put his arm round the thin little shoulders in the soaked shirt.

"Ah, well, then, we'll go in together, old Son," he said gently. "Go and change now, all of you."

He stood awhile on the verandah, looking out into the storm. The lightning flashed, and thunder followed it in long rattling peals: but the drumming of the

rain never ceased, and every drop was music to him. Presently he turned and went through the hall to his wife's room.

She lay on a couch near the window, listening to the roar on the roof. Her face was very pale, but she smiled up at him.

"Well!" she said. "And you bought Murphy's sheep to-day!"

He bent down and kissed her foot.

"Thanks to your old toe!" he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONCLUSION

JOHN WESTON slept but little that night. It was as though he were afraid to close his eyes for fear the rain might stop. Too well he knew that the breaking of the drought could be no affair of a thunderstorm! many inches of rain must fall before they could hope to recover from the long months of heat and dryness. He woke every half-hour, dreading to find the rain had stopped; but always there was the steady drumming on the roof—no music had ever been so sweet to him. He would go to the window and look out into the blackness: sometimes he went out to the verandah, and walked up and down, all his being rejoicing in the rain, just as the thirsty earth was rejoicing. There was splashing now, mingled with the steady pelting on the roof: splashing from leaking spouting, untried for a year; splashing of deluged trees, discharging their burden of water on the ground; splashing of a miniature torrent, running past the house on the gravel path. And towards morning the ceaseless downpour began to conquer the heat, and cold fresh air seemed to rush to greet him when he came out of the still, stifling house. He flung on a coat, and then tiptoed round the verandah to put blankets on the children. Jean woke as he covered her.

"Is it still raining, Father?" she asked sleepily. She could just see his face in the growing dawn.

"Still raining, thank God!" he said. "Go to sleep, little daughter." He watched her for a moment as she turned over, snuggling her face into the pillow. When he tiptoed away he took the alarum-clock with him. There should be no programme that morning.

Daylight showed leaden skies and a drenched landscape. Not for a moment did the rain cease; it fell as though determined to make up long arrears. The fowls, many of which had never seen rain, cowered under any available shelter, draggled and miserable: the ducks paddled about happily, swam in the big pools that had formed in the hollows by the gates, and quacked their complete approval of the weather. Every garden path, its surface baked to the hardness of cement, was a torrent. The underground tank gave back a thunderous echo as the water from the roof rushed into it. Already the garden looked freshened and more green, washed clean from the coating of dust that had covered everything; the dahlias and chrysanthemums lifted revived heads, sparkling under their veil of moisture, and spoke mutely of blossoms to come.

The boys had dashed out early, clad in shirt and trousers, and now were rather like the ducks, splashing in every pool for the mere joy of splashing. They raced to the bathing-pool, shouting with glee to see the river already rising and flowing with something like a current once more: they flung themselves in, just as they were, since it was impossible to be more thoroughly soaked: then, coming up, caught Punch and Merrilegs, and went galloping madly round the paddock—until Merrilegs, finding a baby watercourse that had long been only a dry hollow, jumped it, and finished up with a long slither on the wet ground, whereat Rex, unprepared for such acrobatics, shot over his head, landing in a pool, while Billy yelled with laughter. They capered back to the house, turning somersaults on the flooded lawn; then, discovering that it was breakfast-time, and that they were very muddy, brought out the long-disused garden hose and sluiced each other thoroughly.

"Wish we could, too," said the twins enviously.

The prisoner awoke, evidently better, but still unable to say more than one or two disconnected words. It puzzled them that he seemed happiest when anyone except the twins was with him: the sight of Jean and Jo invariably brought a look of worry to his face, so that after a time they reluctantly decided to keep away from him. This was sad, seeing that he was their very own prisoner. He fell into a sound sleep after breakfast; and when the doctor arrived —summoned by a passing neighbour, who had called in on his way to Barrabri to mention that the rain was glorious—he was still sleeping soundly.

"Concussion, of course," Dr. Lawrence said. "He's had a fall. Sleep's the best thing for him; I don't want to rouse the poor beggar. Keep him very quiet: your old Sarah can nurse him." He grinned. "Fancy the twins getting him, with all the police in the district after him! Did you send word to Ransome, by the way?"

"No, I didn't," Mr. Weston said. "I didn't want the police out here worrying him before you had been out. He can't run away, that's certain. I suppose you must tell them."

"Oh, yes, I'd better. I'll wait until to-morrow, though; I fancy they'll have to put a constable on here, to watch him, and there's no need to give you that bother to-day. I'll come out in the morning. Great rain, isn't it, old man? I said that before, didn't I?"

"Three times, I think," said John Weston, laughing. "You could say it three times a minute, and it wouldn't be too much for me. Listen to it!" as a sudden downpour, heavier than usual, suddenly pelted on the roof. "Was there ever such a sound!"

"I'm resenting having the hood on the car," the doctor said. "Naturally, it

wouldn't be common-sense to arrive at my patients' bedsides as soaked as Billy and young Rex, whom I met in a puddle on the track—but I understand how they feel. I want the rain on my skin. We all do."

"I've been wet through twice this morning," said his friend, laughing. "It's a gorgeous feeling. Of course, I'm not counting on the rain yet; we haven't had anything like what we need. But it really does look like keeping on."

"There's every sign of it. Well, I'll have a word with Mrs. Weston and the girls, and be off: I'd two cases of sunstroke yesterday. Worst day I ever knew." He spoke to Mrs. Weston, and immediately prescribed a tonic for her, saying he would bring it with him next day: and chaffed the twins on their ability as detectives. "I'll have to bring a constable out to stay with your friend to-morrow," he said.

Jean made a little face.

"I'd hide him from you, if I could," she defied him. "We were going to help him to escape, only he was too sick. We're awfully sorry for him—he's so young!"

"You're a nice young law-breaking person!" said the doctor, with mock severity. "Don't forget I'm a magistrate—I believe there's a special penalty for harbouring criminals. And he was old enough to annex quite a nice little sum of other people's money!"

"Well—he may have had his reasons!" said Jo—a mild sentiment which evoked mirth among her hearers.

"A good many people have—that's why magistrates exist," said the doctor. "Well, I'm afraid you'll have to lose your friend as soon as he's well enough to be moved." He said good-bye, splashing out to his car through the pouring rain.

It was still pouring when he returned next day, this time with two policemen: a senior man from an adjoining town, and a tall, downcast young constable, the unlucky wight who had been careless enough to lose his prisoner.

"He's conscious, I think, but still very stupid," Mr. Weston told them. "He doesn't attempt to speak, but he has taken a little nourishment. You can't move him yet, surely, Sergeant."

"That's for the doctor to say," said the sergeant. "But I'll have to leave a man in charge of him: we can't run the risk of losing him again. Constable Wilkins will relieve you of some of the care of him."

"Lemme have a look at him!" said Constable Wilkins sourly. "I'll bet he don't give me the slip again!"

"I'll see him first," said the doctor.

He came out presently.

"You can go in, to identify him," he said. "But don't worry him with talk yet; he's not fit for it. Don't take your helmets in, either—no need to make him feel he's in the hands of the police. I'm not keen on his having a shock. . . . And the sight of that chap's sulky face is enough to give anyone assorted shocks!" he added to himself, as he followed the policemen in. In the background Jean and Jo hovered with downcast looks.

If Constable Wilkins's face had been sour when he entered the room, it was frankly furious as he turned and strode out. Only the doctor's lifted finger had prevented the angry words that sprang to his lips.

"Whose little joke is this?" he queried wrathfully. "That's not my man!"

"Not your man?" queried the Sergeant.

"Not a criminal?" yelped Jean.

"I'm jolly well hanged if I know what he is," quoth the angry policeman. "But he's no more Dawson than I am! Why, he ain't even like him! Not remotely. And we've wasted half a day on a wild-goose chase!"

What more Constable Wilkins might have said was lost in a curious demonstration. The twins, who had been staring, with shining eyes, suddenly seized each other and executed a wild two-step down the hall. The door stood open; they danced through, and disappeared; the sound of their prancing feet died away upon the verandah. The doctor shook with silent laughter.

"But who said he was Dawson?" demanded the Sergeant.

"Why, I'm afraid we'd rather taken it for granted," Mr. Weston admitted. "Perhaps I adopted my daughters' view too readily; they seemed to have no doubt. Of course, he has been practically unconscious since they found him. He was a stranger—a delicate-looking man in a grey suit—and he seemed to be a fugitive." He smiled a little. "Possibly I might have asked more questions if the rain hadn't come just as we brought him home. But the rain seemed so much more important!"

"It did," said the doctor. "After all, the circumstantial evidence was good enough to go on: you'd have censured them for not reporting their find, Sergeant."

"I would," admitted that officer. "Matter of fact, we've been calling them the 'uman sleuth-hounds since we heard! Oh, well, he's not our man, so we needn't worry you further, Mr. Weston." They said good-bye, Constable Wilkins's face still a study in mingled emotions.

On the verandah, the twins faced each other.

“But there’s no doubt he didn’t want the police on his track, Jo,” Jean said. “Do you think we ought to tell them?”

“I won’t!” said Jean obstinately. “He’s our discovery, and he’s sick, even if he *is* a criminal—and I don’t believe he is! We’ll tell Father, when the poor fellow is better. Fancy imagining any one ever would get better, with a horror like that Wilkins creature looking at one. He’d be clinking the handcuffs at you all the time!”

The mystery, however, was cleared up two days later, when a hue-and-cry was suddenly raised for one of two young Englishmen who were farming together five miles up the river. He had gone out with his gun, intending to reach a neighbour’s place and remain all night, so that his mate felt no anxiety when he did not return. It was not until the third day that he discovered that nothing had been seen of the absentee, and at once raised the alarm. Therefore a very harassed young man arrived on a very tired horse at Emu Plains, and begged to be allowed to see the Westons’ guest.

“He’s sure to be Harry,” he said. “The police in Barrabri described him to me.”

The guest was by that time regaining full consciousness, and greeted his friend with a faint grin, although he showed no disposition to talk to him. It was several days before he was able to give a coherent account of himself. He had put his gun down on a log while he pursued a wounded rabbit into some thick scrub, and then had been unable to find it again. In the search he had lost his way completely, and had wandered all day in the heat, until, in the evening, he had found himself near the ruined hut at Emu Plains. He had climbed a tree to get his bearings: and, just as he caught sight of the homestead roofs, a limb had given way with him, and he had fallen, damaging his head and ankle. He had managed to crawl to the hut when the twins found him.

“You were godsends, of course,” he said. “But you worried me dreadfully.”

“We didn’t mean to,” Jean said, rather pained. “We only did what we could for you.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that!” Harry Jeffries said, rather appalled at his own apparent ingratitude. “Why, if ever a fellow had two ministering angels looking after him it was I! But it was the fact that you were two that worried me—especially when I came up here, and began to feel better.”

“But why?”

“Because I thought I was off my head permanently. I could see your mother and father, and Sarah, all right: they were normal and natural. But whenever I looked at you I thought I was seeing double!”

“Good gracious!” said the twins in chorus.

“And each said to the other, ‘That’s your fault!’ as Kipling has it,” put in Mr. Weston, laughing.

“But there’s another thing,” Jean said. “Why were you so worried in the hut when we spoke of the police?”

The patient reddened.

“Well, you mustn’t give me away,” he said. “The fact is, I’d been making a collection of platypus skins—the little beggars are very thick in the creek near our place. And it was only the day before that I found out they were strictly protected, and that I was liable to imprisonment, or beheading, or something, for having the skins in my possession. So, when you talked police, of course I thought it was my poor old platypi!”

* * * * *

But this was after the rain had stopped—it had poured for four days and nights without cessation—and already there was a green tinge all over Emu Plains. The river was running almost a banker: the creeks had overflowed for miles, and the flood-waters were beginning to recede, leaving the paddocks covered with a muddy silt, as good as a dressing of fertilizer. All over the country, thankful men spoke of the wonderful rain, and predicted wonderful grass to follow; the land had rested for a year, and now there would be such a season as would wipe out the memory of the evil time. Already there was talk of bringing back the stock from Gippsland: owners were beginning to plan to stock up their places again, and sheep and cattle had risen sharply in price.

“I’m going to make a hatful of money over those sheep of Murphy’s,” John Weston told his wife. “By the time I’m ready to sell them sheep will be four or five times what they are to-day! and they’re worth twice what I gave for them now.” He looked down at her very tenderly. “You can begin to choose the colour of your motor—I reckon that old toe of yours has earned a car! It shall be carried in luxury for the rest of its time.”

“Then it might not do its duty so well,” she said, laughing.

“It has done its job,” he answered. “I don’t want it ever to ache again!”

They looked out across the paddocks, faintly green. About them was the smell of growing things: although the land was still bare, it was different—there was no longer the feeling of barren desolation. The garden was already bursting into new life, and new life was stirring in every one.

“I don’t want a motor particularly, John,” she said. “But I want to give a good time to my twinses!”

“They’ll have their good time,” he said masterfully. “Your motor will be

part of it. And we're all going away for a holiday, as soon as I get things settled—a real holiday—Sydney, Tasmania, or wherever you like, where we'll forget about droughts. We'll let the twins choose, shall we? They've been great little daughters to us when we needed them."

"Great little daughters!" Mrs. Weston echoed softly.

"Then we'll get a tutor for the boys, and the twins can go back to Merriwa next term. We'll tell Miss Dampier not to make them prefects yet awhile. I want them to be kiddies again—to forget they ever had responsibilities."

He was silent for a moment, pulling hard at his pipe.

"It isn't so much what they did for us," he said; "though goodness knows they did enough. It was how they did it: how they brought youth and freshness and laughter back to us—how they 'kept smiling.' Will you ever forget how they sang as they swept the verandahs?—the little bricks! And never a whine or a murmur from them, though I'll bet they often ached for the old good times!"

"I know they ached," the mother said. "Please God we'll keep that sort of ache from them in future—at least while they are children."

* * * * *

At the moment the twins were not manifesting any ache, unless it were the ache that comes from overmuch laughter. They had dismissed Rex and Billy after morning school, and had watched those graceless urchins tear down the paddock on their ponies. Then they had turned to tidy up the schoolroom table, and in doing so a sheet of paper had fluttered from an exercise book. It was covered with Rex's small, neat writing.

"It's not a letter," Jo said, picking it up. "I don't suppose it's private. Oh, my goodness, Jean, he's dropped into poetry!"

They bent delighted heads over Master Forester's outpourings. The path of spelling was always strewn with rocks to Rex, but his sentiments were definite.

"Why, it's an ode to you, Jean," said Jo, chuckling. "Prepare to blush!"

“Girls are fat and girls are lean,
Just allright is danety Jean.

“She has prety curly hair,
And she has a lovely stare!

“Once I swetted with Miss Green,
She was a cat, but now I’ve Jean.

“Other chaps may plump for Jo,
Phurmly I would anser ‘No.’

“I have known ful many a girl,
Danety Jean she is the purl!”

“And I’m the plain, I suppose!” commented Jo ecstatically. But Jean frowned.

“The little villain!” she said. “I must say he’s managed to conceal his sentiments pretty well. I don’t believe he likes me a bit better than you.”

“Shows his sense if he does,” said Jo, laughing. “What on earth does it matter?”

“I don’t suppose it does,” said her twin. “And it’s a gorgeous poem! Did you know I had ‘a lovely stare’?”

“I suppose that’s your look of fixed horror when he shows up a bad copy. Next time you can remember that he’s wallowing in enjoyment of it!” Jo laughed.

“I’ll wallow him!” said Jean. “How dare he make any difference between us—aren’t we twins? He wants spanking!” She flipped the paper contemptuously away.

“Now, that’s foolish!” Jo said. “Remember, you’re never likely to have an ode written to you again!” She picked up the sheet of paper. “Why, my stars, Jeanie! there’s another ode on the back!”

They read together:

“Pharest of all girls I’ve seen
Is the joly Josypheen.

“She is very tall and slim.
Like a porpus she can swim.

“Just to see her makes you glad.
Chasing savige bulls like mad.

“She is nerely always kind.
To play the gote she does not mind.

“Fokes may say the best is Jean—
Me for joly Josypheen!”

“He’s all things to all men, isn’t he!” gasped Jo, when she could speak.

“Did you ever see anything so priceless!” Jean uttered, wiping her eyes. “Twin odes to twinses! Look, he’s grouped us in a grand finale at the bottom—in his best writing, and flourishes all round it, too!”

“I have known ful many a girl,
Danety Jean she is the purl!

“Fokes may say the best is Jean—
Me for joly Josypheen!”

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 *The Twins of Emu Plains* by Mary Grant Bruce]