THE WONDER-CHILD

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WONDER-CHILD ***

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Cover art

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'HERMIE.' (See page 134.)

THE WONDER-CHILD

An Australian Story

BY
ETHEL TURNER
(MRS. H. R. CURLEWIS)

Author of 'Seven Little Australians,' 'The Camp at Wandinong,' 'The Story of a Baby,' 'Three Little Maids,' etc.

'The common problem, yours, mine, every one's,
Is, not to fancy what were fair in life,
Provided it could be,—but finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means,'—ROBERT BROWNING.

With Illustrations by Gordon Browne

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CONTENTS

CHAP.

I. TWO WORLDS

II. THE WONDER-CHILD

III. THE SECOND LADY-HELP

IV. THE PAINTING OF THE SHIP

V. DUNKS' SELECTION

VI. THIRTY THOUSAND A YEAR

VII. COME HOME! COME HOME

VIII. AN ATHEIST

IX. MORTIMER STEVENSON

X. 'I LOVE YOU'

XI. A SQUATTER PATRIOT

XII. R.M.S. UTOPIA

XIII. THE BUSH CONTINGENT

XIV. HOME TO THE HARBOUR

XV. HEART TO HEART

XVI. THE ROSERY

XVII. CROSSING THE VELDT

XVIII. A SKIRMISH BY THE WAY

XIX. THE MOOD OF A MAID

XX. MISS BROWNE

XXI. THE MORNING CABLES

XXII. CONCLUSION

THE WONDER-CHILD

CHAPTER I

Two Worlds

'Ah me! while thee the seas and sounding shores
Hold far away.'

They were walking from the school to the paddock where the children's horses, thirty or forty nondescript animals, grazed all day long.

'Sh' think,' said Peter Small, son of the butcher who fed Wilgandra,—'Sh' think you could have afforded one sprat at least for teacher's present!'

'Afforded!' quoth Bartie Cameron. 'I could have afforded a thousand pounds!'

'Then why d'ye 'ave 'oles in your stockings, and bursted boots?' asked Peter.

"Cause it's much nicer than having darns and patches,' returned Bartie, looking disparagingly upon his companion's neater garments.

'My old man's got a mortgage on your sheep,' said Peter, baffled on the patches.

'We like mortgages,' said Bartie airily; 'they make the sheep grow.'

'We've got a new red carpet comin' for our livin'-room,' shouted Peter.

Bartie looked him over contemptuously.

'I've got a sister in London, and she makes fifty pounds a night by her playing.'

'You're a lie!' said Peter, who was new to the school, and did not know the Camerons.

'Take this, then!' said Bartie, and put his strong young fist in the face of his friend.

A big girl, saddling her horse, came and pulled them apart, after they had

had a round or two.

'Haven't I got a sister who makes fifty pounds a concert?' demanded Bartie breathlessly.

'Ain't he a lie?' demanded the son of the slaughterer.

The big girl arbitrated instantly. Certainly Bartie had a sister who made hundreds and hundreds—more shame to her. Peter had better go home and read the papers, if he did not believe it.

Peter said he did read the papers; he had never seen anything in them about no sisters.

'What papers?' said the girl.

'*P'lice Budget and War Cry*, of course,' answered the boy.

'That's the sort of paper *your* sister would be in,' Bartie said; 'mine is always in the cables.' He turned off from both girl and boy, and made his way to where a half-clipped horse nibbled at the exhausted pasturage.

A small girl of eight had, with incredible exertion, put the huge saddle on its back; Bartie had nothing to do but fasten the girths in place and put on the bridle. He flung himself up, and moved the animal close to a stump; Floss, the small girl, climbed to a place behind him, and a nine-year-old boy, playing marbles near, rose up at the sight of the moving horse, pocketed his marbles, swung his bag of books round his neck, and clambered up to the third place on the steed's broad neck.

All the paddock was a-move. There was a general race down to the sliprails, a gentle thunder of horses' hoofs and boys' shouts, broken by the shriller cries and 'Good-byes' of the girls.

Then up and down, left and right, away along the branching roads rode the country school children, tea and home before them, behind, one more day of the quarter's tedium dropped away for ever.

The Cameron horse jogged along; as a rule she had only Roly and Floss to carry, Bartie having a rough pony to journey on; but to-day the pony had wandered too far to be caught before school-time, so Tramby had an extra burden, and walked sedately.

Floss had a tiny red palm to show.

'Why, that's three times this week you've had the cane! You must be going it, Floss,' said Roly.

'It was sewing,' sighed Floss; 'how would you like to sew? I know you'd go and hide behind the shed.'

The front horseman turned his head. 'It's time you did learn, Floss,' he said; 'look at my stockings, I'm sick of having holes in them. Look at my trousers.'

'I heard Miss Browne telling you to leave them for her to mend,' said Floss.

'No, thanks,' said Bart; 'I know her mending too jolly well. She'd patch it

with stuff that 'ud show a mile off.'

'Yes, look at my elbows,' Roly said; and though the positions forbade this, a mental picture of the clumsy mending with stuff worlds too new rose up before the eyes of his brother and sister.

Floss was dressed with curious inequality; she wore heavy country shoes and stockings, like the rest of the children at that public school, and her bonnet was of calico and most primitive manufacture, but her frock was exquisite—a little Paris-made garment of fine cashmere, beautifully embroidered.

'I wish some more of Challis's frocks would come,' she sighed; 'this one's so hot. I wish mamma would make her always wear thin things.'

'Why, she'd be shivering,' said Roly.

'Think how cold it is in Paris and those places!'

'Think how hot it is here!' sighed Floss and mopped at her streaming little face with her disengaged hand.

'I got the mail,' Bartie said, and pulled two letters out of his pocket—a thick one from his almost-forgotten mother, and a pale blue with a fanciful C upon the flap from his twin sister; they both bore the postmark of Windsor.

'Suppose they're stopping with the Queen again,' he added laconically.

'Wonder what they have for tea at her house?' sighed Flossie, and her system revolted against the corned beef and ill-made bread that were in prospect for her own meal.

Tramby turned of her own accord at a sudden gap in the gum-trees, and stood alongside while Roly stretched and contorted himself to lift out the sliprail—nothing ever induced him to dismount for this task. Then she stepped daintily over the lower rail, and again waited while the passenger in the rear stretched down and made things safe again.

Their father's selection stretched before them, eighty acres of miserable land, lying grey and dreary under the canopy of a five o'clock coppery sky, summer and drought time.

[image]

HOME FROM SCHOOL.

Patches of fertility showed some one laboured at the place. There was a stretch of lucerne, green as any in the district. But this was not saying very much, for Wilgandra's vegetation as a rule copied the neutral tint of the gum-trees, rather than the vivid emerald so pleasant to the eye in country wilds.

There was a small patch under potatoes, there were half a dozen orange-

trees, yellow with fruit. At the very door of the house a cow grazed calmly, and everywhere browsed the sheep, brown, ragged, dirty things, fifty or sixty of them, far more than the acreage should have carried, but still in good condition—it seemed as if the mortgage was fattening. The house was a poor weatherboard place, the paint blistered off, the windows rickety, the roof of cruel galvanised iron.

Inside there were chiefly pictures, great canvases on which Thetis was rising from a roughly tossing sea, her infant Achilles laughing in her arms; on which the lofty mountain Pindus towered, the Muses seated about in negligent attitudes; on which delicious twists and turns of the River Thames flowed; on which wet, cool beaches glistened, and shallow waves lapped idly.

There was also a piano with a mountain of music. Also a few chairs and a table.

Bartie dragged off the saddle and harness, flung them on the verandah, and turned Tramby loose among the sheep. Then he went into the house.

There rose up listlessly from the doorstep and a book an exquisitely pretty girl of seventeen, a girl with sea-blue eyes and a skin that Wilgandra could in no wise account for, so soft and fresh and pure it was. You saw the same face again and again in the canvasses about the room, sweetest as Isis, with the tender, anxious look of motherhood in her eyes, and Horus in her arms. This was Hermie.

'Have you got the mail?' she asked.

Bartie nodded.

'Go and fetch father,' he said; 'he's down with the roses, I saw his hat moving.'

He flung himself on the ground, listless with the heat; Floss dragged off her hot frock and her shoes, and revelled in the pleasure of her little petticoat and bare feet. Roly looked plaintively at the table, on which was no cloth as yet.

'Miss Browne,' he called, the very tears in his voice, 'Miss Browne, isn't tea ready?'

A faded spinster, lady-help to the family for six years, came hurrying into the room.

'Poor Roly!' she said. 'Yes, it is too bad of me, dear; I was mending your best jacket, and didn't notice the time. But I'll soon have it ready now.' She ran hastily about the room looking for the cloth, and at last remembered she had put it under the piano-lid, to be out of the dust. She put on the vases of exquisite roses that Hermie had arranged, and a wild collection of odd china and crockery cups and enamelled ware.

Then she noticed the rent of extraordinary dimensions in Bartie's coat, the same jagged place that had made even Peter Small exclaim.

'Dear, dear,' she said, 'this will never do. This really must not go a moment

longer. Where is my thimble? Where can I have put my thimble? Give me that coat, Bartie, this minute, if you please.

Bartie took it off, but sat with jealous eye upon it all the time it was in her hands. He would have it mended his way.

'Now, look here,' he said, 'please don't go putting any fresh stuff in it. Just sew it over and over, so the places come together. I'll take to mending my own clothes. It's just the way you go letting new pieces in that spoils your mending, Miss Browne.'

'But, Bartie dear,' the gentle lady said, 'see, my love, when a place is torn right away like this, we have to put fresh stuff underneath. I'll just get a tiny bit from my work-basket.'

'You just won't,' said Bartie stubbornly. 'You give it to me, and I'll mend it myself'—and he actually took the needle and cotton and cobbled it over till there certainly was no hole left.

'Now, my love,' he said, and held it up triumphantly.

'But it will break away again to-morrow,' said Miss Browne, in deep distress. 'If you would just let me put a little patch, Bartie.'

But Bartie clung to his coat.

Roly had strayed out to look at his kangaroo-rats, but now came back.

The tears came to his voice again at the sight of Miss Browne, sitting with her thimble on, looking helplessly at Bartie.

'Oh dear,' he said, 'isn't there never going to be any tea?'

'You poor little fellow!' she said. 'Just one minute more, Roly dear. You can be sitting down.'

Hermie had gone flying across the ground to a place in the eighty acres where the ground dipped into a little valley. It was all fenced round with wire, to keep off the fowls and sheep. Within there grew roses in such beauty and profusion as to astonish one. She saw a very old cabbage-tree hat bending over a bush, and darted towards it.

'Dad,' she said, 'dad darling, come along in; the mail has come.'

There rose up a man, grey as his own selection, a man not more than five-and-forty. Eyes blue as Hermie's own looked from under his grey eyebrows, a grey beard covered his mouth.

'The mail, did you say, little woman?' he said, and stopped to prune just one more shoot here, and snip off just one more drooping blossom.

'And tea, too, darling; at least I suppose it will be ready some day. Come along, you are very tired, daddie. Why did you start ploughing a day like this?'

The man sighed.

'It had to be done, girlie; but see, I gave myself a reward. I have been down here an hour. Now let us go and read our letters.'

As they reached the living-room they found Miss Browne dusting the piano and tidying the music; the setting of the table was advanced one stage further, that is, the knives and forks were now on.

Roly came up again from another visit to his rats.

'Miss Browne,' he said, 'oh dear, oh dear!'—and stalked off to the kitchen, to demand of Lizzie, the young State girl who scrubbed and washed for them, where was the corned beef for tea, and wasn't there any butter?

But the father was tearing open the letters. Hermie and Bartie hung over his shoulder, reading just as eagerly as he. Floss crouched between his knees to catch the crumbs. Roly, munching while he waited at a hunch of ill-coloured bread, kept an eye and an ear for any spoken news, and Miss Browne moved continually about the room, straightening chairs, altering the position of the table vases, rearranging the knives and forks.

Mr. Cameron looked up, and drew forward a chair next to his own.

'Do sit down, Miss Browne,' he said; 'I am sure you are very tired. Sit down, and let us enjoy this all together.'

So Miss Browne, too, joined the circle, Roly watching her with a brooding eye.

'WINDSOR CASTLE.

'OH, MY DEAR ONES, MY DEAR ONES' ran the white letter,—'Is the earth shaking beneath me, have my hands ague, that my pen trembles like this? We are coming home, home, home. No false reports this time, no heart-sickening disappointment; the papers are actually signed for a long season, and we leave by the Utopia in six weeks. The news came an hour ago. I saw an equerry coming in with the letters, saw the letter that meant so much carried up to my room by a house steward, and had to pass along the corridor and leave it. Challis was going down to play to the Queen in her private sitting-room. But after it all was over how we went to our rooms again! There was only a chambermaid in sight, and for the last twenty yards of corridor we ran. Home, home, home, to your arms, my husband, my dear one, my patient old sweetheart! Home to my little girls, my boys, my little boys! Darlings, my eyes are streaming. Oh, to hold you all again, to feel you, to touch my Hermie's hair—is it all sunlight yet?—to be crushed with Bartie's hug, to hold again the poor little babies I left, my Roly, my little Floss. Ah, dear ones, dear ones, now it is all over, now we are coming, coming to you, I can let you know. Oh, these weary, weary years, these great cities where we have no home, no corner of a home. I have broken my heart for you all every night since I came away. Six years, my dear ones, six years of nights to break

my heart. Be sorry for mother, and love her, darlings. Have you forgotten her, Hermie? Bart, Bart, have you kept a little love warm for her? Ah, dear God, my babies will not know me, little Floss will turn away her head. My sweetheart, my sweetheart, if the time has been as long for you, and pleasures as tasteless, and all things as void, then my heart sickens afresh, for I know what your life has been.

'What has kept me up all this weary time I cannot even think. Whatever it was, it has snapped now, and I am limp, useless, broken up into little bits, like nothing so much as a little child stretching out its arms and crying to its mother. Can you not see my arms stretching, stretching to you? Does not my cry come to your little town? It is Challis who is the woman now; she sees my work is done. She had begun to show me the bracelet the Queen gave her, and to tell me what every one had said, but I had torn open Warner's letter, and found the home orders had come. She is packing various little things now, and has rung, and given orders with the dearest little air of self-possession. "Sit down and write, and tell daddie," she said; "I will see to everything now."

'The carriage is to come for us in an hour. We have been here three days, and every one has been as kind and as enthusiastic as they are always. We go to Sandringham on Friday; the Princess asked for Challis to play for her guests that night; the Dowager Empress is to be there, and others.

'Then at Manchester an immense farewell concert on Monday; Mr. Warner says two thousand seats are already booked to hear the "Wonder-Child"; another at Plymouth on Friday; a rush up to Edinburgh, just for her to appear at the Philharmonic. They are only giving her forty pounds for the night, but Mr. Warner is unwilling for her to lose the Scotch connection.

'Then peace, perfect peace, and home. I sit and try to fancy the changes the six years have made in the home. I am glad you have had two new bedrooms built; that will allow you to have a study again, sweetheart, and Hermie a drawing-room—sixteen is sure to be hankering for one. The furniture is looking a little shabby, I know; but of course that can be easily remedied, and I have always had my boxes stuffed with art vases and bits of brass and bronze, ready for when the good time came. You have probably laid down new carpets long ere this in all the rooms, but I shall bring some rugs and Eastern squares, for I doubt if your back-block towns have supplied what would satisfy my now cultured taste.

'I suppose people wonder at you still being stuck to the Civil Service at a wretched two hundred and fifty pounds a year. Isn't the prevailing idea that we are rolling in money? There is surprisingly little for all the enthusiasm there has been—I think Mr. Warner said he had banked three thousand pounds for her—all the rest goes in expenses, which are enormous. We are obliged to be at the best hotels, and to be dressed up-to-date; that runs away with big sums. And

the advertising that Mr. Warner says is so necessary swallows gigantic amounts. This has been the first year with much profit. Sometimes when I dress my little girlie in her Paris frocks I think of Hermie, making last season's do again, perhaps. Did the last box of Challis's frocks do for Flossie? The lady-help, I am sure, will have been able to cut them down.

'Do not let us think of the future, sweetheart, I cannot bear it yet. I cannot leave you any more, you must not be left; Challis has had her meed of her mother now, and it is the turn for the others. Yet Mr. Warner says it must be kept up, this life of hers, this Wandering Jew life. It is the price great artists pay. But the child is brave.

'"You shall not have it any more, mamma," she said when I read this out; "you shall go home to daddie for always now."

'But when I looked at her face it was pale, and there was that wan look in it that comes sometimes. To think of the little tender thing bearing all this alone!

'But we must not think of the future, sweetheart; we must not think of it for an instant. You will come to Sydney to meet us? Perhaps only you. And we will come straight home to Wilgandra with you. If she ruins her chances for ever, she shall have one month's quiet home before the Sydney season begins. Mr. Warner will try to prevent this, but I shall be very firm. Then you must get leave, and children and all, we will go to Sydney together, and you shall hear the darling play. To think you have none of you ever seen great audiences carried away by her little fingers!

'Ask the lady-help not to do up my bedroom for me. I want to see the faded pink and white hangings, and the sofa with the green roses on it, and the knitted counterpane that grandma made—just as they were when I left them.

'Oh, my little home, not beautiful, not even very comfortable, stuck away in that hot little town hundreds of miles from Sydney—my heart is breaking for you!'

Nobody spoke when the letter was finished—nobody, indeed, had spoken all the way through. Tired little Floss, finding no news forthcoming, had fallen asleep.

Roly had sat down to the table, and was sawing an end off the corned beef. Miss Browne, since nothing was read aloud, had gently risen up and was dusting the piano, to be less in the way. But from time to time she glanced at the letter, alarm in her eyes. Could it be the little golden girl was ill?

The father put down the letter, and his hand shook.

'Coming home,' he said, and rose up, looking dazed; 'we—we must stop her at once, of course. Children, how can we stop her?'

Bart's chest was heaving. For a second he had heard the crying come to

the little town, and seen the stretching of the arms.

But out of the window lay the grey selection that she had never seen; closer at hand were the rents in his clothes, the broken places on his boots. He pulled himself together.

'I'll go down to the post and cable to her not to come,' he said; 'you be writing it down, dad.'

And Hermie's girl-heart was breaking. The letter had shaken the very centre of her being, and wakened in her a passion of love and longing for this tender woman. Oh, to be held by her, kissed, caressed—to feel that hand on the hair she could not help but know was pretty!

But looking up she saw her father's anguished gaze around him—Bart's manly mastery of himself. She brushed her tears aside.

'I'll get the pen and ink,' she said; 'it—it's late—the cable ought to go tonight.'

Miss Browne sat down, quivering with the suspense.

'Which,' she whispered, 'which of them is dead, your mother or little Challis?'

Bartie it was who laughed—a hoarse apology for a laugh.

'Dead!' he said; 'they're coming home, Miss Browne!'

It was Miss Browne's turn to look anguished. She rose up and moved uncertainly about the room, she began to tidy the music in feverish haste, she dusted the piano yet again.

Then she turned to Mr. Cameron with one hand fluttering out.

'I—I—must ask you to let me have a s—shilling,' she quavered; 'the—the boys really must have their hair cut before she sees them.'

CHAPTER II

The Wonder-Child

'Yet now my heart leaps, O beloved! God's child with His dew
On thy gracious gold hair, and those lilies still living and blue,
Just broken to twine round thy harp-strings.'

Up to the last eight years Mr. Cameron's friends and relatives had always had their hands full with finding positions for him that would enable him to support

his wife and family.

Once or twice he was in receipt of five hundred a year, but much more frequently he would be in a bank or an insurance company, starting with a modest salary of a hundred and twenty.

Every one liked him cordially—they could not help it. But every one was unfeignedly glad when one of the relatives made a great effort, and, by dint of interviewing Members of Parliament and getting a little influence to bear here and a little there, worked him into the Civil Service, the appointment being that of Crown Land Agent at Wilgandra, the salary two hundred and forty pounds, less ten pounds for the Superannuation Fund.

Wilgandra was so far away—three hundred and seventy-three miles back, back, away in the heart of the country—the very farthest town to which the Government sent its Land Agents. Surely the bad penny could never turn up again to vex their peace!

Even Mrs. Cameron's anxious soul was set at rest.

The climate was intolerable in the summer, there was little or no society, the only house they could have was not over comfortable. But the work seemed smooth and easy, and after so many ups and downs the quiet security of the small hot township seemed delicious to her.

It was not that Mr. Cameron drank or gambled, or possessed indeed any highly coloured sin. He was simply one of the impracticables, the dreamers, that the century has no room for.

He had written verses that the weekly papers had accepted; indeed, a few daintily delicate things had found their way into the best English magazines.

He had painted pictures—a score of them, perhaps; the art societies had accepted three of them, refused nine, and never been even offered the remainder; no one had ever bought one of them.

He had composed some melodies that a musical light passing through Sydney professed to be captivated with, had promised to have published in London, and had forgotten entirely.

When they were unpacking their much-ravelled chattels the first night in Wilgandra, James Cameron came to his great paint-box that the late family vicissitudes had prevented him touching for so long.

'Ah,' he said, and a light of great pleasure came into his grey eyes as he lifted it from the packing-case and rubbed the dust off it with his good cuff—'mine old familiar friend. Why, Molly darling, I shan't know myself with a brush in my hand again. With all the spare time there will be here, I ought to do some good work at last.'

Then his wife laid down the stack of little torn pinafores and patched jackets and frocks she was lifting from another box, and crossed the room and

knelt down by her husband's side, just where he was kneeling beside the rough packing-case that had held his treasure.

'Dear one,' she said, 'dear one, Jim, Jim,'—one hand went round his neck, her head, with its warm brown hair that the grey was threading years too soon, pressed against his shoulder, her face, old, young, sad, smiling, looked into his, her brave brown eyes held tears.

'Why, little woman,' he said, 'what is it—what is troubling you? Smiling time has come again, Molly, the worries are all left behind with Sydney.'

'Jim,' she said, and her hand tightened on the paint-box he held, 'Jim, do you know we have five children, five of them, five?'

'Well, girlie,' he said, and got up and sat down on the edge of the box and drew her beside him, 'haven't we an income of two hundred and thirty pounds for them, a princely sum, when we are in a place where there is nothing to tempt us to buy? And we hardly left any debts behind us this time.'

'But, dearest, dearest,' she urged, 'if you get hold of this, we shall not have it a year; you will get up in cloudland and forget to furnish your returns or some such thing, and then you will be dismissed again.'

'Ah, Molly,' he said, his face falling, 'always the gloomy side. Couldn't you have given me a night of happiness?'

A stinging tear fell from the woman's eyes.

'I couldn't, I couldn't,' she said; 'the danger made my heart grow sick again. See, for I must be brutal, the time has come for it. *I* love your ways, your dreams; no canvas you have touched, no song, no verses but I have loved. But what have they done for us, what *have* they done?'

The man's eyes, startled, followed her tragic finger that swept a circle. Outside he saw the sun-baked, weary little town that must see their days and years, inside the cramped room full of boxes that were disgorging a pitiful array of shabby clothes and broken furniture; just at hand his wife, the woman he had taken to him, fresh and beautiful, to crown his tenderest dream and turned into this thin, careworn, anxious-eyed creature.

His face whitened. 'It is worse than drink!' he said.

She acquiesced sadly.

'Nothing else would make me take it from you,' she said, her wet eyes falling again to the paint-box; 'and if it were you and I only against the world, you should have it all your days. But five children to get ready for the world! Jim, my heart fails me!'

He was trembling too. It was the first time he had felt a sense of genuine responsibility for his tribe since the time Hermie was put into his arms, a babe three hours old. Then he had rushed away to insure his life for five hundred pounds. He forgot, of course, to keep up the policy after the second month. Now

his heart felt the weight of the whole five, Hermie, Bartie and Challis, Roly and little Floss.

He gave his wife a passionate kiss.

'You are right,' he said, 'take it; I give it all up for ever, and begin from now to be a man.'

Time went past, and the criss-cross lines on the mother's brow were fading, and the anxious outlook of the eyes seemed gone. She called up a home around her where before had only been a house; the children were taught; she even, by dint of hard economy, made it possible to send to Sydney for the piano they had left as security for a debt.

The friends in Sydney, two years gone by, began indeed to congratulate themselves that Wilgandra had swallowed up for all time that troublesome yet well-liked fellow Cameron, and his terrible family.

Then the name began to crop up in the country news of the daily papers. Another wonder-child for Australia had been discovered, it seemed—a certain Challis Cameron, a mite of eight years who was creating much excitement in the township of Wilgandra.

Presently from the larger towns near the paragraphs also were sent. A concert had been given in aid of the Church Fund, and a pleasing programme had been submitted. Among the contributors was a tiny child, Challis Cameron, whose wonderful playing fairly astonished the big audience.

Before Mr. and Mrs. Cameron had quite waked up to the situation, an enthusiastic committee had been formed, a subscription list started and filled, and a sum of sixty pounds thrust into their astonished hands, for the child to be taken to Sydney for lessons.

Nowhere on the earth's surface is there a a land where the people are so eager to recognise musical talent, so generous to help it, as in Australia.

Mr. and Mrs. Cameron looked at each other when they were left alone, a little dismay mingled with their natural pride. And from each other they looked to the paddock beside their house where all the children were playing. This especial child was unconcernedly filling up her doll's tea-cups with a particularly delightful kind of red mud, and then turning out the little shapes and calling Bartie to come and look at her 'jellies.'

Talent they had always known she had, but hardly thought it was anything much above that of any child very fond of music. As a baby she had cried at discords; at three years old she used to stand at the end of the piano and make quite pretty little tunes with one hand in the treble, while Bartie thumped sticky discords in the bass. At four she used to stand beside Hermie, whom her mother was teaching regularly, and in five minutes understood what it took her sister an hour to learn imperfectly. At four, too, her head hidden in the sofa-cushion,

she could call out the names of not only single notes but chords also, as Hermie struck them. So her mother undertook her tuition too, and in two years these paragraphs were appearing in the papers.

But to go away with her and stay in Sydney while masters there heard her and taught her! What was to become of the other four, and the husband who needed his wife so much?

'I am afraid we must send her to a boarding-school there,' she faltered. 'How can I leave the home?'

But later the child came and stood at her knee; a tall, thin, little child she was, with fair fine hair that fell curlless down her back, and in her eyes that touch of grey that makes hazel eyes wonderful.

The face was delicately cut, the skin clear and pale; only when the pink ran into it was she pretty.

'I made another song, mamma,' she whispered.

The dying light of the long still day was in the room, very far away in some one's fig-trees the locusts hummed, a sprinkle of sweet rain had fallen, the first for months, and the delicate scent of it came through the window.

'What is it, darling?' whispered the mother.

The child's eyes grew larger, she swayed her tiny body to and fro.

'Oh, the roses, the roses and the shivery grass! Oh, the sea! Oh, the little waves running on the sand! Oh, the wind, blowing the little roses till they die! Oh, the pink roses crying, crying! Oh, the sea! Oh, the waves of the crying sea!'

The mother's arm went round the little body, down into the depths of those eyes she looked, those eyes with their serious brown and grey lights mingling, and for one clear moment there looked back at her the strange little child-soul that dwelt there.

Out at the door there was a clamour, Roly demanding bread-and-jam. From the paddock came a sudden gust of quarrelling, the next-door children, with Hermie, shrill-voiced, arbitrating. Probably down in the street Bartie was fighting any or all of the boys who passed.

'Dear heart!' ran the woman's thoughts. 'My days are too crowded to tend this little soul. Better that she too asked bread-and-jam of me.'

'Play it for me, mother,' said the child, and plucked at her hand. 'I can't; I have tried and tried, and the sea won't cry, only the roses.'

'Nonsense, nonsense!' said the troubled mother; 'run and play till bedtime. Play chasings with Roly and Floss, or be Bartie's horse. Have you forgotten the reins I made him?'

The child seemed to shrink into her shell instantly.

'I will get the reins,' she said nervously, obediently.

Into the midnight they talked, the father and mother; and all they could say

was, this was no child to hand over to a boarding school or strangers.

Wilgandra and the towns around grew clamorous. They grudged every moment that the child was not being taught, and having contributed solid coin of the realm for her education, they were vexed at the shilly-shallying in using it.

So to Sydney the mother went, half fearfully, Challis and a modest trunk beside her in a second-class carriage.

'We shall be back in a month at most,' she called out for the twentieth time reassuringly to her family seeing the train off.

But Sydney seemed in league with Wilgandra. Without a doubt, it said, the most wonderful child performer ever heard. It wiped its eyes at her concerts, when the manager had to get thick music-books to make her seat high enough; it stood up and raved with excitement, when she stepped off the stool at the end of her performances and rushed off the stage, to bury her excited little face on her mother's breast.

Without a doubt, it said, with its peculiar distrust for the things of its own, here was no child to be confined to Sydney teachers; it insisted she must have the best to be had in the world, and thrust its hands recklessly into its pockets.

Mrs. Cameron at the end of six months went back to Wilgandra, the anxious outlook in her eyes again, and five hundred pounds in her pocket, the result of concerts and subscriptions given for the purpose of sending the child to Germany.

And now what to do?

The small house at Wilgandra seemed going along very steadily; Mr. Cameron had not once failed to furnish the reports due from him to the Government. The lady-help selected by the mother had the house and the children and the father in a state of immaculate order. She was a magnificently capable, managing woman; every one, Mr. Cameron especially, stood much in awe of her, and unquestioningly obeyed her smallest mandate; even Roly, unbidden, performed magnificent ablutions before he presented himself for a meal, and Hermie was often to be seen surreptitiously trying to mend her own pinafores in the paddock.

Mrs. Cameron could not but confess her place was not crying out for her to the extent she had imagined; indeed, the wonderful lady-help, Miss Macintosh, seemed to have brought the home into a far better state of order and discipline than even she, the mother, had been able to do. Little Floss was a healthy and most independent babe of two; Roly, three years old, was a sturdy mannikin who stared at her stolidly when, her heart full of tears, she stooped over him and asked, did he want her to go away again?

'Mamma mustn't go away in a big ship, must she, sweetheart? You can't do without her again, can you?' she said.

But Roly was a sea-serpent swimming on the dining-room floor, and the interruption irritated him.

'Yes,' he assented, with swift cheerfulness, 'mamma go in big ship. Good-bye, good-bye!'—and he waved an impatient hand to get rid of her.

Hermie and Bartie had just started to a good private school near at hand, and the teaching—all honour to the mistress!—was of so skilful and delightful a nature that the two could hardly summon patience to wait for breakfast ere they set out for the happy place. So Challis's claims tugged hard.

'But you—what of you, my husband?' she said. 'You cannot spare me; it is absurd for you to even think of it!'

But he was excited and greatly moved at the thought of his child's genius. Deep down, in his heart was the knowledge that had he himself been given a chance he could have made a name for himself in this world. But there was always uncongenial work for him, always something else to be done, 'never the time and the place and the loved one all together.'

'Let us give her her chance,' he said. 'It is early morning with her. Don't let ours be the hands to block her, so that when evening comes she can only stand wistful.'

So they sailed away, the mother and the wonder-child; behind them the plain little home, before, the Palaces of Music.

CHAPTER III

The Second Lady-Help

'The droop, the low cares of the mouth,
The trouble uncouth
'Twixt the brows, all that air one is fain
To put out of its pain.'

And for actually six months that home survived! After that the crumbling was to be expected, for some discerning man came along, and married the marvellous lady-help out of hand.

Mr. Cameron spent five pounds in the purchase of a pair of *entrée* dishes for a wedding-present, and was unhappy that he could so very inadequately reward her great services. But there was a curious air of buoyancy and relaxation

observable in him the first day the house was free of her.

At tea he got *The Master of Ballantrae* out, and read boldly all through the meal, a thing he had not ventured to do for eighteen months. And out in the frozen shrubbery at midnight, with the Master and Mr. Henry thrusting at each other, he spilled the tea that Hermie passed him. When he saw the wide brown stain he had made on the table's whiteness—although the ridiculous fancy pursued him that it was the Master's life-blood smirching the snow—he looked up startled, full of apologies. But there was only Hermie's childish face in front of him; and though she said, 'Oh, papa!' as became a president of the tea-tray, she looked away the next second to laugh at Roly, who had spread his bread with jam on both sides, and did not know how best to hold it. And Cameron felt so much a man and master of his fate once more, that he stretched right across the table to help himself to butter, instead of politely requesting the passing of it. For three months the household ran a merry course. Hermie, a bright little woman of eleven, begged her father to let her 'keep house' and give the orders to Lizzie, the very young general servant.

The father bent his thoughts five minutes to the problem; Miss Macintosh had been away now a fortnight, and everything seemed going along really delightfully. What need to break the sweet harmony of the days by getting in some person whose principles counted reading at table and spilling tea among the cardinal vices?

And Lizzie, the State girl, was at his elbow with a shining face. She was fifteen, she said—fifteen was real old! Now why should the master go getting in any more of them lady-helps, who did nothing but scold from morning to night? She, Lizzie, would undertake all there was to do in this place 'on her head.'

Cameron smiled at the eager girls, and, while hardly daring to consent, put off for a further day the engagement of a successor to Miss Macintosh. And the three months ran gaily along, and still Hermie sat importantly at the head of the table, and still her father read, and still Roly spread his bread upon both sides.

There was always a good table—far better than either the mother or lady-help had kept.

For the family grocer had an alluring way of suggesting delicacies, when he came for his orders that certainly no mistress of eleven or handmaid of fifteen could withstand.

'Almonds?' he would say. 'Very fine almonds this week, Miss Cameron—three pounds did you say—yes? And what about jam? I have it as low as fivepence a tin, but there is no knowing what cheap fruit these makers use.'

'Oh,' Hermie would say, 'I must have very good jam, of course, or it might make my little sister ill! How much is good jam?'

'There's strawberry conserve, a shilling a tin,' the man would say—'pure

fruit and pure sugar, boiled in silver saucepans.'

'Silver saucepans! That couldn't hurt Flossie! We will have six tins of that, please,' the small house-woman would answer. Then there were biscuits; Miss Macintosh, frugal soul, only gave Wilgandra, when it came calling, coffee-biscuits at sevenpence a pound with its afternoon tea. Hermie regaled it upon macaroons at half a crown. Then Lizzie would have her say. What was the use of cooking meat and vegetables on washing-day, ironing-day, and Saturdays, she would say, when you could get them tinned from a grocer? So tins of tongue, and whitebait, and pressed meats, French peas, asparagus, and such, were added weekly to the order, the grocer sending to Sydney for the unusual things. 'We are saving a lady-help's wages,' Hermie would say, 'and it saves the butcher's bills, so it is not extravagant a bit.'

It was not until the third month that the day of reckoning came. Then the grocer, grown a trifle anxious over his unusual bill, which no one was settling, ventured to accost Mr. Cameron one day on his verandah and present it.

'No haste, of course,' he said politely, 'only as your good lady and Miss Macintosh always paid monthly, I thought you might not like it going on much longer.'

When he had bowed himself out, Mr. Cameron rubbed his suddenly troubled brow a moment. Money, bills! The thought had actually never crossed his mind all these three months! His wife first and then Miss Macintosh had always managed the finances of the family. Indeed, one of Mrs. Cameron's injunctions to the lady-help had been, 'When Mr. Cameron's cheque for his quarter's salary comes, please be sure to remind him to pay it into the bank.' And Miss Macintosh had never failed to do so, nor to apply for the twelve pounds monthly for payment of the household bills.

He went into the dining-room and began to rummage helplessly about his writing-table. To save his life he could not recollect what had become of his last cheque, for there was a conviction on his mind that he had never paid it into his account.

Hermie was at the table, Mrs. Beeton's cookery-book spread open before her; over her shoulders peeped the heads of Bartie and Roly, absorbed in the contemplation of the coloured plate picturing glorified blancmanges and jellies. For was not to-morrow Roly's fifth birthday, for which great preparation must be made by the young mother of the house?

'Children,' said the father at last entreatingly, 'come and help me; I have lost a very important envelope.'

For over an hour did that family search from one end of the house to the other. It was Lizzie's happy thought that discovered it.

'A long blue envelope, with no stamp on it and just printing instead—why,

there was one like that in the kitchen drawer with the dinners on it,' she said.

She rushed for it, and met her anxious master with it held triumphantly out.

The back of the envelope bore dinners for the week in Hermie's round careful hand.

Mon.—Roast fowl, mashed potatoes, collyflower, pink jellie and gem cakes.

Tues.—Tong, blommange and strawberry jam, rainbow cake.

Wed.—Sardenes, current buns, yelow jelly and merangs.

Mr. Cameron thrust a trembling hand into the depths of it, and, to his exquisite relief, was able to draw out the cheque for his quarterly sixty pounds.

In danger of the kitchen fire, in danger of the dust-box, in danger of Roly's passion for paper-tearing, in danger of all the wind-storms that had sprung up and torn raging through the place, in danger of all these for three months, and still safe!

The relief took the man back into the dining-room, responsibility for his family to the front for the third time in his life.

He ran through the bills with a sinking heart. Instead of twelve pounds a month that Miss Macintosh's carefulness had made suffice, little Hermie had brought up the totals to twenty-eight—eighty-four pounds for the quarter, to be deducted from the sixty pounds that must also pay rent and clothes and many other things.

The child cried bitterly when he showed her what she had done. It had been delicious pleasure to her, this time of ordering and helping with the dinners. Delicious pleasure to see her father appreciating the changed meals as much as the boys—Cameron had quite a boyish appetite for good things, and Hermie's brilliant menus had been delightful to him after a long course of Miss Macintosh's boiled rhubarb puddings, treacle roly-polies, and milk sagos.

'A first-rate little manager,' he always called her, when he passed up his plate for more of the jelly, or more whitebait, or asparagus, and he recked even less than Bartie that the things were intrinsically more expensive than rhubarb or rice.

'Oh, daddie, oh, daddie dear, I am so sorry!' she said, awake at last to the sad truth that luxury must be paid for, cash down, and was a dear commodity. And her eyes streamed, and her little chest heaved to such an extent that he had to put the bills aside and comfort her affliction, and explain to her that he was

scolding himself, not her.

'But I am eleven,' she kept repeating sadly, 'eleven, papa. I ought to have known.'

There rang at the door a few minutes later the master of the boys' school to which Bartie had just been sent. Hermie, her mother's conscientiousness strong in her, had always gone off to her school each day, though, in truth, so absorbed was she by her housekeeping delights that she was a very ill scholar nowadays.

But Bartie, plain unalloyed boy, had wearied suddenly of tuition, and found a pleasant fishing-ground in a secluded creek. There was no one to tell him to go to school, it was against nature that he should betake himself to servitude every day of his own accord, so, towards the end of the quarter, it fell out that he fished two days of the week and studied three, even at times reversing that order of things. In restitution he took canings, his hands were horny, the touch of the master not over heavy.

But now the matter was before his father, and the master was returning home, the consciousness of duty done lifting his head.

The father's blue eye flashed with strange fire as he looked at the boy.

'Is my son a thief,' he said, 'that he should treat me so? Or is it he despises me because I leave him unwatched and free?'

With that he strode out of the room, out of the house; Bart, his conscience quick once more and in agony, watched him walking, house-coat on and no hat, down the main street of the township and up, up, never resting, to the top of the great hill the other side they call the Jib.

No further word of the matter was ever said till the next Christmas, when the boy marched in with the year's prize for punctuality under his arm. Then Cameron shook hands with him.

'I like a man of honour,' he said. But the two events together, the grocer's bill and the master's call, decided the father he must enter into submission and have another lady-help, for the children's sake.

How to obtain one? He made inquiries about Wilgandra, but the class of people from whom he sought to take one were of the mind that prevails in many of the country towns and bush settlements. They would rather starve than serve—at all events where they were known. Now and again a self-respecting intelligent girl broke away from her life and went off with her trunk to find service in Sydney.

But, for the most part, the daughters of a house up to the number of seven, or even ten, stayed under the cramped roof-tree of their fathers, and led an unoccupied, sheepish existence, till marriage or death bore them off to other homes.

So in despair Cameron wrote off to a Sydney registry office, and asked the manageress to send him a lady. Just before he closed the letter the happy freedom

of the last three months led him to add a postscript, 'I should like the lady you select to be of not too managing a disposition—gentle and pleasant.'

The registry office keeper rubbed her hands; here surely at last was a chance to dispose of Miss Browne—Miss Browne, who was ever on the books, who was sent off to a situation one week, and came back with red eyes and a hopeless expression the next, dismissed incontinently as incapable.

The registry office keeper turned up the town Wilgandra in her railway time-table.

Three hundred and seventy-three miles away! Surely at such a distance, especially as the employer was paying the expensive fare, Miss Browne might be regarded as settled for a space of three months!

Mr. Cameron had no complaint to make of his new lady-help on the score of being of a managing disposition. She was gentleness itself—that kind of deprecating gentleness that makes the world feel uncomfortable. She tried pitifully hard to be pleasant—pleasant and cheerful. She worked from earliest morning to late at night, and accomplished about as much as Hermie could in two hours. It took her nerveless fingers nearly a quarter of an hour to sew on a waistcoat button, and in little more than a quarter of an hour the button would have tumbled off again.

Lizzie seldom trusted her to cook anything; when she did so the poor lady invariably emerged from the kitchen with her hands burnt in several places, sparks in her eyes, the front width of her dress scorched, her hair singed, and her poor frail body so utterly exhausted, the family would insist upon her instant retirement to bed.

Nobody knew what the woman's life had been, where had gone the vigour, the energy, the graces that should still have been hers, for her years were barely thirty-five.

A crushing sorrow, disappointment on the heel of disappointment, loneliness, or perhaps only a grey life full of petty cares passed in a scorching, withering climate—one or all of these things had dried the sap out of her, and left of what might have been a gracious creature, radiating pleasure and comfort, only the rags and bones of womanhood.

The Camerons suffered her patiently for three long months; then the father gathered his courage up in both hands, closed his ears to the pity that clamoured at his heart, and told her gently enough that she must go.

She threw up her fluttering hands and sank on the sofa—in her eyes the piteous look of amaze and grief that your fireside dog would wear if you took a sudden knife to him. So kind had the family been, so patient, the poor creature had told herself exultingly that they were satisfied, even pleased with her, and had hugged the novel, delicious thought to sleep with her for the last two months.

She asked shakingly what she had done.

'Nothing, nothing at all,' Cameron reassured her eagerly; 'it is merely, merely I can see you are not strong enough for such a hard place as mine.'

'A hard place!' she cried, and looked at him dazed. 'Why, there are only five of you, and Lizzie to do all the rough work! I've been where there were ten, and done the washing and everything. I've been where there were nine, and had to chop the wood and draw the water myself. I've been mother's help and had to carry twin babies miles in the sun. I've been where the children pinched and scratched me. I've been at places where I rose at half-past four, and found my way to bed at eleven. And in none have I ever given notice myself. A hard place! Dear heart!'

'My dear Miss Browne,' Cameron said, and such was the fluent nature of the man that his eyes were filled, and he had no idea that he lied, 'it was solely for the sake of your health I spoke. You look so delicate. If you think the duties are not too heavy, why, I shall be most heartily obliged to you if you will stay with us indefinitely.'

Then he went away to seek his children, to tell them her story, and beg their tenderest patience.

CHAPTER IV

The Painting of The Ship

'Never a bird within my sad heart sings,
But heaven a flaming stone of thunder flings.'

Yet his coward pen never plucked courage to itself to write across seas of this family incubus.

The earlier letters had spoken variously of 'Miss Macintosh,' or 'the lady-help'; now there was never a name given, the references being merely to 'the lady-help.' Even the children scrupulously followed this up.

When the Marvellous One had gone off with her *entrée* dishes to her new home, the father had said, 'Children, we will not tell mother just yet that Miss Macintosh has left, it would only worry her. We will wait till we can write and say we have another one as good.'

So the tale of Hermie's housekeeping and the mislaid cheque never crossed

the sea, and the mother in her far German boarding-house continued to comfort herself with the thought of Miss Macintosh's perfections.

When Miss Browne's shortcomings made themselves glaringly patent, the pens again shallied in telling the story.

'It is so close to Challis's concert, we mustn't worry them with our little troubles, children,' the father said.

So Bartie and Hermie continued to write guarded letters; and if the boy's hand at times ran on to tell how Miss Browne had put ugly patches on his clothes, or the girl's heart began to pour itself out on the thin paper and speak of the discomfort of the new reign, recollection would come flooding, the letters would be cast aside and new ones written, short, studied, and never saying more in reference to the vexed question than 'the lady-help had taken Floss out for a walk.'

'I hope Miss Macintosh sees you have your little pleasures,' the mother would write. 'You do not tell me about birthday parties or picnics. Don't forget mother loves to hear of it all.'

And Hermie would write back sadly:

'The lady-help is very busy just now, but when she has more time she is going to let us have a party.'

'I tremble each mail,' the mother wrote once, 'lest your letter should bring me news that Miss Macintosh is engaged and about to be married. It is strange such a woman has not been snapped up long before this.'

And Cameron answered:

'I do not think you need worry, my darling, about the lady-help marrying. She has given me to understand she has had a disappointment, and will never marry.'

But the very guarding of the letters, the reading of them over, to be sure nothing had been let slip, made them seem poor and lifeless to the anxiously devouring eyes the other side of the world.

She wrote at last:

'Sweetheart, from what you don't say, more than from what you do, I learn of your loneliness. You are so dull, my poor boy, and the days rise up and sink to rest all grey like one another. Yet a little more patience, and surely there will be plenty of money to make life all sunshine for you. But just for a little brightness, darling, reach down that box of paints we put away on the cupboard top, get out your brushes, and let them help the hours to fly. While the Conservatorium has been closed for vacation Challis and I have been four days in Rome. And she found me crying one morning in a picture gallery, in front of some great picture, a Raphael, or an Andrea del Sarto—some one, at all events, who painted with hands of fire. And yet it was not the subject of the picture that moved me, unless

it was that the magic canvas wrought me to the mood that is yours so often. All I thought of was the cold harsh woman, the Martha with blind eyes, who, that first day in Wilgandra, took away by force and at the same time the paint-box and the glow from your life. My boy, my sweetheart, let me give it back. Ah, would that I could stand on the chair and reach it down from the cupboard and put it into your hands myself! But do it now, my darling, this moment. I know you will be careful and not risk your position by forgetfulness. And when you are loneliest, when you miss me most, let the brushes take my place.'

Cameron had been reading his letter at the tea-table.

'Children,' he said, and rose up, his face working, his eyes shining strangely, 'children, mother wants me to paint pictures again. I—she says I am to get the box down.'

The table had no comprehension of the greatness of the matter, but rose up at once, at seeing the father so moved. Roly brought his mug of sweetened milk along with him, Floss continued to bite at her crust of bread-and-jam, Miss Browne fluttered about, Hermie and Bart pressed at their father's elbow.

'Bring a chair, Bartie,' Cameron said, 'here at the cupboard in the hall.'

'Mine cubbub,' interjected Floss; 'me's hat in dere. Go 'way, daddie.'

'I'll climb up,' said eager Bart. 'What is it up there, dad?'

'Give me the chair—let me reach it down myself,' Cameron said, and stepped up and stretched his long arm to the top.

A dusty mustard-box! The children's eyes brightened with swift thoughts of treasure, then dulled when the lid was flung back and displayed nothing but a chaos of dirty oil-tubes and brushes.

But when they saw their father's glistening eyes, saw him fingering the same tubes with a tender, lingering touch, looking at the brushes' points, they did not tell him they were disappointed in the treasure. Instead, Bart led off with a cheer.

'Hurrah for daddie the artist!' he shouted.

'Hurrah!' cried Hermie.

"Rah!' shrilled Roly.

Floss claimed a kiss.

'Me dive daddie dat,' she said in her kindest way, 'out mine cubbub.'

And thus was the painting of the ship begun.

'Can you see what I mean, Bart?' Cameron said two months later, when the picture was almost finished, so desperately had he worked at it.

'You mean it for a ship, don't you?' Bart said. 'If I'd been you, though, dad, I'd have painted a steamship with two funnels. People don't think much of sailing-boats now.'

'Can you see what I mean, Hermie?' Cameron said, and wistfulness had

crept into his eyes.

Hermie's blue-flower eyes were regarding the great canvas dubiously.

'Couldn't you have made the water blue, papa?' she said; 'the sea is blue, you know. P'raps, though, you hadn't enough blue paint. But I like it to be a sailing-boat; steamships aren't so clean.'

The man's heart clamoured for his wife, who had never been at a loss to find what he meant. For a moment it seemed intolerable to him that she was not there at his elbow, to share the exaltation of the moment with him.

'Run away, run away,' he said irritably to Hermie and Bart; 'you shake my elbow, you worry me; run away.'

Miss Browne made a hysterical noise in her throat.

'It is so sad,' she said; 'what is it you have done to it? It is only a ship and a man, and yet—do you know I can hardly keep the sobs back when I look at it.'

To her amaze her employer turned eagerly round, shook her hand again and again in warmest gratitude, and fell to painting once more with feverish haste.

The canvas showed a livid stretch of coast and ocean, and a spectre ship with a spectre captain at the helm.

The ship had an indescribably sad effect. You saw her straining through the strong, repellent waves, you heard her cordage creaking, you saw her battling stem struggling to push a way. She was a living thing, breaking her heart over the black hopelessness of her task. The captain's face burnt flame-white out from the canvas; his desperate eyes stared straight ahead; his long hand held the helm in a frightful grip. You knew he was aware he would never round his cape; you knew he would fight to do so through all eternity.

The Camerons celebrated the day of the finishing of the picture as a high holiday. The children had ten shillings tossed to them to spend as they liked. They bought a marvellous motley of edible things, and dragged their father and Miss Browne up the Jib to partake of them. It were sheer madness to suppose a whole half-crown's worth of Brazil nuts; to say nothing of chocolates, tarts and other extreme dainties, could be discussed within the cramped walls of a house in a street. The whole width of the heavens was needed, and a thousand gum-trees, and the smell of earth and grass.

Cameron walked about on the heights as if on air. He had not painted that canvas that stood, still wet, down below in the straggling town. He had entertained a spirit, something stronger, fiercer, more triumphantly capable than himself. He could have flung up his arms and run shouting up and down, shouting thanks to the winds, the trees, the sailing skies, that the spirit had taken its dwelling in him. Magnificent fancies came bursting upon him; now and again he held his head, so rich were the conceptions, so strong felt his hand to bring them

into instant being.

An urgent craving for his wife took hold of him—he strode away from the children's shouts, away from Miss Browne, who sat wretched because she had forgotten the tin-opener, and the tea, and the sugar.

He found himself down near the creek, with the gums waving eighty feet above his head, gums with snow patches of blossoms on them, stern gums, smiling gums, red, silver, blue. And he called, 'Molly,' and the trees encouraged him.

And again, 'Molly,' 'Molly,' and there burst up to his lips from his heart all the words he had had to stifle away since the sailing of her ship. All that he would have poured out to her these last two years, all that had lain quiet and kept his being stagnant since that last agonised clinging of her arms.

'I thought I could bear it,' the man said to the trees, 'but I can't—it is too much! Are you listening to me, Molly? I must have you again to talk to. She has had you long enough—Challis has had her share of you; now I must have you again. These children take us from each other, Molly. We are very fond of them, but we should have more time to love each other without them, to love like we did twelve years ago. I want you, to tell you about the picture, Molly, Molly. Can you hear, darling, can you hear?'

And sometimes she seemed near to him, seemed a part of the air, the trees, the earth, and he raved to her and talked joyously.

And sometimes he lost her, the delicate spirit webs broken by the world's machinery, and he dropped his head on his arms and wept.

But when the thread snapped finally, and nothing could bring her to him again, he groped his way upwards, for now the loneliness, after the speaking, was a thing he dared not bear. The children welcomed him eagerly. They had wanted him so badly, they said, for dinner, and here he came only just in time for tea. Would he please open that tin of jam—there was no opener, but perhaps he could do it with a bit of broken bottle? And there were no matches; would he please use his and light the fire? The tea was forgotten, but hot milk and water would be nice, perhaps, but there was only a little milk remaining, and the sugar had been left behind. He fell to laughing, and was thereby restored to more normal mind. He lighted the fire, and water and milk circulated round the little party, and refreshed it. He attended to the wounded—Bart had gashed his hand attempting the opening of that tin of jam, Hermie had a tick in her arm, Roly had stirred up a nest of bull-dog ants, and had met with his due reward, Floss had eaten too many chocolates, and Miss Browne had been stuck in the mud, attempting to get water from a pot-hole; her large shabby shoes looked pathetically ridiculous.

So by the time he had helped all his lame dogs over their stiles, and got them ready for marching home, his mood was quite a happy one again. He went down the mountain-side, Floss in his arms, Bart and Hermie on either side, Miss

Browne and Roly close at hand.

And with a flushed face and happy eyes and a fluent tongue he told them all manner of wonderful things; in very truth he could keep them to himself no longer. How the world was going to be very pleased indeed with his picture, and hang it in so famous a place that Challis would not be the only one making the name of Cameron celebrated. And how a whole mint of gold was going to be given to him for it—Hermie and Miss Browne would be able to order all they liked and more from the family grocer. And how he was going to send for mamma to come at once to stay with them again, so that they could all live happily to the end of their days.

Through the little town they wound with eyes shining at the thought.

Hermie's order-loving soul was soothed at the vision of domestic peace once more. Bart resolved to keep his best knickerbockers for the mother-fingers to mend.

'Can she make puddings?' said Roly, who despised the culinary skill of Miss Browne. And 'Mam-mam,' murmured little sleepy Floss, not because her mind held recollection of using the name, but because a baby next-door spoke it incessantly, and it seemed pleasant. Only Miss Browne looked wistful-eyed; a mother such as this seemed would never deem her capable enough; Christmas would see her back in Sydney, weariedly waiting occupation in the registry office.

They turned the key of the door—Lizzie had had holiday also. And on the threshold, pushed beneath the door by the post-boy, lay another long blue envelope with no stamp upon it, and only printed letters instead.

Cameron picked it up, quite without suspicion—his cheque for the quarter, he supposed.

But the reading told him he was dismissed the service for his carelessness and the culpable neglect of his duties during the past four months.

CHAPTER V

Dunks' Selection

'Well, it is earth with me; Silence resumes her reign,
I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.'

'I shouldn't think it can be very much farther, dad,' said Bart.

'I believe we have passed it,' Hermie sighed; 'I am sure we have come much more than nine miles,' and she mopped her hot cheeks that the sun, burn as he would, had never freckled.

Cameron, the reins slack in his hand, looked doubtfully from side to side.

'It ought to be somewhere here,' he said; 'isn't that a fence at the top of the hill? Yes, I'm sure it is.' He touched the horse lightly with the switch that Floss held, and on they went again. They were in a borrowed broken-springed buggy, the five of them and Miss Browne, come out to see the home their father was buying—none of them, not even the father, had seen it yet.

For a couple of months after his dismissal Cameron had lingered on in the house in Wilgandra, too bewildered and helpless to know what to do.

It was not the first time a similar crisis had happened, but before his wife had always taken matters in hand, looked up situations for him in the papers, interviewed influential people, brushed his clothes and sent him out with little to do but present himself to his employer.

But now he was completely at sea.

He wrote a few letters to Sydney friends, vaguely asking if they knew of 'a billet.' But seven years' silence makes strangers of ones best friends; some were scattered, and dead letters were the only reply; others wrote to say Sydney had never been in such a state of hopeless depression, and strongly advised him not to come to add to the frightful army of the unemployed.

'Why not go on the land?' said one or two of them. 'A man like you with a growing family should do well there, and you would at least be your own master and free from "a month's notice."'

Cameron first asked the children what they thought of 'going on the land.'

When they heard this meant moving to a new place, and having sheep and growing all their own things, and each one helping, they were enchanted.

Cameron was too shy and reserved to have made many friends in the township, but he put on a clean cool coat and filled his pipe and wandered forth, with the vague idea of asking some one's advice on the matter. But there was a race-meeting in a neighbouring township, and the streets were almost deserted, the tradespeople and the land-and-estate agent being the only men at their posts. The latter, however, struck Cameron as the very man to ask. And Cameron struck the agent as the very man for whom he had been waiting. There was a selection, he said, a few miles away—eighty acres of fine land that its drunken owner, Dunks, had hardly stirred since he had taken it up. There was a five-roomed cottage on it, there were fifty head of sheep, poultry, a couple of horses, a cart, and all tools. Dunks, anxious to get to Sydney, was willing to let all go for two hundred and fifty pounds.

But Cameron went home hopeless, he could as easily raise two thousand

pounds as two hundred and fifty.

Hermie met him with a registered letter from which a cheque for a hundred fluttered. Challis's professors, it seemed, had allowed her to give a few concerts in the midst of her course of lessons, and five hundred pounds had been the result.

'The child insists that I shall send a hundred,' ran the letter, 'for you all to buy presents with, and though I don't know what you can buy—but sheep—in Wilgandra, I send it. More I do not enclose, my dear one, for well do I know how shockingly you would lose and give it away. But all have some fun with this hundred, and now every penny that comes I shall jealously bank for the future and for the child's own use, as is but fair and right.'

Cameron and Bartie and Hermie went eagerly off to the agent's again. Cameron held up his cheque, and asked if it would do if they paid that amount down and the rest on terms. And the agent, after a little demur, was agreeable—had he not that morning been visited by Dunks, who said he would take as low as a hundred and fifty to be rid of the place?

Cameron almost handed the cheque over there and then, but then some of the prudence learned from his wife came to him, and he pocketed it instead, and said they would go and look at the place.

Thereupon, the following Saturday, the agent lent his buggy, gave directions for finding, and this was the journeying.

'Yes,' Cameron said, 'this must be it, but there doesn't seem to be a gate. I suppose we had better go through these sliprails. Get down and lift them out, Bart.'

The early summer, in her eagerness and passion for growth and beauty, had been tender even to Dunks' selection. The appearance of the place appalled none of the buggy-load.

Wattle in bloom made a glory of the uncleared spaces, the young gums were very green, the older ones wore masses of soft white upon their soberness.

Farther away there browsed brown sheep, but this was the season for lambs, and a dozen little soft snowballs of things had come close to the cottage and gambolled with the children. There was a bleating calf with a child's pink sash tied round its neck, fluff balls of chickens ran under the feet, downy ducklings were picking everywhere.

And all this young life was so beautiful a sight that the children were wild with rapture, and Cameron's dreamy beauty-loving soul told him here was the home for him.

The cottage shocked him somewhat, it was so very tumbledown, the roof was so low, the windows so broken.

He began to consider whether he had not better take up a selection for himself near at hand and run up his own cottage, these walls were hardly worth

the pulling down.

But Mrs. Dunks began to talk to him, and her apron was at her eyes nearly all the time. He learned that Dunks was the best of men, and only weak. If once they could get from this neighbourhood and his bad companions to Forbes, where her own people were, he would surely reform. He learned that Mrs. Dunks had nine children, all under fourteen; that she was in a consumption, and only the air of Forbes could cure her. It seemed to him that he could not turn round to this fragile, heavily burdened creature, look into her fever-bright, anxious eyes, and tell her he would not give her this chance to end her days among her own people.

So he looked at all the young life again, and the sheer sun, bursting out of the wattles, and was glad to be persuaded that a little paint and a bit of timber would make the house quite new again.

'Do you think,' he said, and turned round to the woman, 'that you could give me possession of the place in a month?'

And the woman burst into thankful tears, and told him they would be gone to-morrow.

'I've packed up for going eighteen times this year,' she said through her tears. 'I've got my hand well in.'

Dunks was away in the township, the youngest baby was lying in her arms looking up at her with pure eyes, and the pale wraith death, whom she ever felt beside her, had kept her conscience tender.

'Did—did you say the agent told you two hundred and fifty?' she faltered.

Cameron thought of his children and braced himself up.

'He did,' he said firmly, 'and I cannot possibly give you a penny-piece more. I consider it is a very fair price.'

'But—but——' the woman began again.

'It is no use, I can go no further,' Cameron said, 'so please do not waste your breath'—and he unhobbled his horse and prepared for the journey home, his face set away from her, lest he should be softened.

How could he dream she wanted to tell him that a hundred and fifty was all they had asked, and more than the place was worth, so ill in repair was everything? Then the thought of this man's famous child came to her—Challis, with fingers of gold. What were a hundred pounds to the father of such a child?

She looked away from the eyes of her babe, she forgot that she and death were met, and replied:

'Very well, we will take two hundred and fifty, Mr. Cameron.'

Going homewards in the jolting buggy the talk was of the happiest.

'Miss Browne and I will look after the fowls, daddie,' Hermie said.

'An' me,' said Floss.

'You and I must get the crops in,' Bart and his father told each other.

But how this would be done, and what the crops should be, they had but the remotest notion; still, it was a phrase heard often in Wilgandra, and sounded well.

'Will it take you long to learn to shear the sheep?' asked Miss Browne timidly.

Cameron looked a trifle disturbed. Sheep seemed very right and proper things to own when one was 'going on the land,' but it had not yet occurred to him to think to what use he was going to put them.

Bart's observation of his neighbours had been a little keener than this, however.

'We sha'n't get any wool to mention from that handful,' he said. 'I suppose they are for killing. Mrs. Dunks says they use a sheep a week. Her husband kills one every Saturday.'

'Who—who—oh, surely you will not have to kill them, Mr. Cameron!' said Miss Browne, shuddering with horror. 'Surely you will not be expected to kill them for yourself.'

The thought of it turned Cameron sick; it seemed to him he had never quite got over chopping off a fowl's head once for his wife, though it was nine years ago.

Roly gloated over the thought.

'I'll shoot them with my bow and arrow,' he said.

Cameron wiped his brow.

'I suppose one could use a gun to them, eh, Bart?' he said.

But Bart looked doubtful.

Nearing home Cameron gave the reins to Bartie, and leaped out and walked the last mile or two, wrestling with the problem how he might turn himself from a dreamer of dreams into a practicable, hard-working man of business. It had to be done, some way, somehow, or what to do with these children, and how to face his wife?

Then suddenly he found his thoughts had wandered to the sunset fire that blazed before him in the sky; he was putting it in a picture, massing up the purple banks, touching the edges with a streak of scarlet.

When he convicted himself of the wandering he groaned aloud.

'There is only one way,' he said, and walked into his house with lifted head.

The children were stretching their limbs after their cramping drive, Roly and Bart panting on the floor, a cup of water beside them so warm and flat and tasteless that even thirst would not bring them to it. Bart was talking of Nansen, picturing stupendous icebergs, revelling in the exquisite frigidity of the water in which Nansen had washed luxuriously every day. The exercise actually cooled

the little party down one degree. Then in to them came their father.

'I want a bonfire made in the yard,' he said; 'a very big one, I have something to burn.'

The boys were upright in a moment and on their way; even Floss tossed down the newspaper with which she was fanning herself (the *Wilgandra Times*, with which was incorporated the *Moondi Mercury*), and rushed to partake of the fun, and Hermie and Miss Browne found themselves impelled to go and see what was happening.

Such a blaze! Bart raked up a lot of garden rubbish and added tree branches. Roly, feeling quite authorised since the bonfire had been commanded by his father and was no illicit one of his own, made journeys to and from the wood-heap and piled on the better part of a quarter of a ton of wood just paid for.

Then down came the father, his blue eyes a little wild, his mouth not quite under his own control. He had his mustard-box under his arm.

'Oh, daddie!' Hermie cried and sprang at him. 'Oh no, no, no!'

But he pushed her aside.

'Don't speak to me—none of you speak one word,' he said, and he stooped and dropped the box where the flames leapt.

'No, no, no!' Hermie screamed, and rushed at it, and put a hand right through the flame and touched the box, then drew back, helpless, crying.

'Get away!' Bart said, and pushed her back from danger and took the work himself, a rake for aid.

He dragged the charred box out, Miss Browne fluttered round him and caught at the lid and burnt her hands, and fell over the rake and singed her hair and eyebrows. Roly and Floss, carried off their feet by the excitement, rushed to help, and the box lay safely on the grass again, two minutes from the time it had been in the flames.

'Let it alone, no one dare to touch it!' commanded the father, and the voice was one the children had never heard before.

He picked the box up, hot and blackened as it was, and flung it on the fire again; the lid fell off, there came a rain of tubes and paint-brushes, a splutter or two from the turpentine, the smell of burnt paint, then the fire burnt steadily again, and there was silence that only Hermie's bitter crying broke.

The father had gone back to the house; he came down to them once again and this time The Ship was in his arms.

Surely an ill-starred ship! There had been no money to send it to Sydney for the artists there to appraise; Cameron, absolutely frightened when he found how the debts were growing, exhibited it in Wilgandra and a neighbouring town or two, and marked it ten pounds.

But who in the back-blocks was going to give that sum for a picture without

a frame? The coloured supplements, with elaborate plush surrounds, satisfied the artistic yearnings of most of the community, and The Ship came back to sad anchorage in the Cameron dining-room.

But to burn it!

Hermie gave a fresh despairing cry. Floss, Bart, and Roly stood absolutely still, the instinct of obedience strong at such a crisis.

Cameron's arm was again raised, but Miss Browne flung herself right upon him and clung to the canvas, her weak hands suddenly filled with strength and tenacity.

[image]

'NOT THIS, NOT THIS,' SHE CRIED, 'ANYTHING BUT THIS.'

'Not this, not this!' she cried. 'Anything but this! Give it to me—I will keep it from your sight—I will hide it away—it shall never meet your eyes. My ship, my ship, you shall not burn it.'

She held it in her arms, actually torn from his grasp.

Cameron glanced around—the leaping flames, the startled children, Hermie's hysterical sobbing, Miss Browne's wild attitude of daring and defiance—he told himself he had taken a theatrical vengeance on himself.

'Oh, do as you like,' he said irritably, and turned back to the house. 'Bart, put a bucket of water on that fire.'

One month from the night of the sacrifice the Camerons were in possession of the selection, and Mrs. Dunks was lying in peace among those of her own people who rested from the sun's heat in the Forbes graveyard.

CHAPTER VI

Thirty Thousand a Year

'Ah, for a man to arise in me,
That the man I am may cease to be.'

'I should think we might get the bag of corn now, eh, Bart?' Cameron wiped his brow, and stopped to survey the patch of ground that looked so smooth.

Bart looked at it critically.

'I think we'd better give it another turn, dad,' he said, and hitched the string-mended harness a little more securely to the jaded horse. 'It's such a lunatic plough, it misses twice for every time it hits.'

Cameron looked at the wide space of ground to be gone over yet again.

'I'm very anxious to get the corn in,' he said. 'You see, we're a month late as it is, and it will be a big saving in feed when we have it to cut.'

'Yes; but it is no good unless the ground is ready,' Bart said. 'We have no manure or anything like the *Journal* says. We'd better give it an extra turn.'

'You're quite right, quite right, my boy,' Cameron said, and led his horse on again, up and down, up and down the furrows.

'I don't like such a lot of stumps being left in,' Bart said, the seventh time in an hour that the plough had gnashed on one. 'In the *Journal* there's a picture of a stump eradicator—a grand little machine. We'll have to save up and get it, dad.'

'Ay, ay,' said the father; 'still, I don't think the stumps will interfere very much. The corn can easily come up between them.'

'It would be easier ploughing,' sighed Bart, following the horse about in a waved line.

'You're tired out, lad; knock off for a spell,' Cameron said. 'I keep forgetting how young you are. We have been working here since eight—five hours.'

But Bart would work till he dropped rather than leave off a minute before his father. He took a long drink at the oatmeal water Miss Browne had made, and went on stooping, picking out the stones, digging spots the unfaithful plough had left untouched, following the horse while his father dug.

Cameron was thin as a rail. Ever since they had come here he had worked like a man possessed, for the spectacle that came to haunt his nights was of his children in actual need of bread. He had left debts behind him in the township—a hundred pounds' worth of them; there was a hundred and fifty yet to pay on the selection; and the patching-up of the house, rough as it had been, had taken money. There was seed to buy, there were tools to mend or replace, interest to pay on the money he had borrowed on the place—a thousand other things.

And not one word of all the changes did the letters carry across the secret seas.

'There is no need to worry mamma unnecessarily,' Cameron said to the children. 'When we have made a great success of the place and paid everything off, then we will tell her.'

Across the acres came the insistent sound of the dinner-bell.

'I don't think I'll stop,' Cameron said, 'I'm not hungry. Off you go, Bart, and don't come back for an hour.'

But Bart was learning the art of managing his father.

'The poor old nag wants a rest,' he said. 'We must take her up and give her a drink and some oats. And I'd come in to dinner, dad, if I were you. Hermie will be disappointed if you don't.'

So they went up to the little patchwork house together.

It was not to a very tempting repast the bell had summoned them. Hermie, no longer able to order macaroons and whitebait and tinned oysters to make delicacies with, had, childlike, lost interest in the culinary department of the house. And Miss Browne was no artist; to her a leg of mutton represented nothing but a leg of mutton, and fricassees and such tempting departures seemed but tales in the cookery book never to be put to practical use.

To-day there were chops—fried. Years back, when Lizzie came fresh from the State to Mrs. Cameron's tutelage, she had been instantly instructed in the fine art of grilling. But now that there was no one to insist upon these delicate distinctions, and the frying-pan was so much easier labour, Cameron was slowly forgetting the taste of grilled meat.

There were potatoes too; the family took it for granted that these were necessarily nasty things, either watery or burnt.

Bread and jam—no longer silver-pan conserve, but cheap raspberry, in which the chief element was tomato—finishing the pleasing repast.

Miss Browne sat at the head of the table, exhausted and dishevelled, for she had swept the room, had sewn on four buttons, and dressed Floss, and set the table.

Cameron, before removing to the selection, had dismissed her again, gently enough; he knew it would be impossible to continue to pay her ten shillings a week for being a nuisance to them.

And again she had wept and wrung her hands and entreated to remain. The tears streaming down her cheeks, she told him the time she had been in his family was the happiest in her life. She would not dream of taking money now, she said; but she implored him to let her work for her home. So here she was, still at the head of the table, faithfully apportioning the dish of chops and keeping the smallest and worst-cooked one quietly for herself, and pouring out tea, which all the family drank with each and every meal, so slowly and confusedly that her own was always cold before she touched it.

'Not a chop?' she said to Cameron. 'Oh, but you really must. Think of the severe physical labour you are continually doing. Just a small one! You touched no meat yesterday, nor the day before.' She looked on the verge of tears.

'Don't trouble, I don't care for any,' Cameron said. 'I'll have some—some,'—his eyes wandered round the table in search of something nicer than the potatoes—'some bread and butter.'

But Lizzie's prentice hand at bread! And store butter three weeks old! He reached himself *Pendennis*, and, helped by the pleasant gossiping of the mayor, managed to swallow a few mouthfuls.

All through the meal Miss Browne lamented over his appetite, but he heeded her voice just as much as he did the flies that buzzed round his tea-cup—both were integral parts of life, and to be endured.

'May I put you a chop aside, and warm it up for your tea?' she persisted anxiously.

He put his finger on the place in the book and looked up for one second.

'I am going to try vegetarianism,' he said. 'I have come to the conclusion that meat does not agree with me.'

And it did not. Every second Saturday now with his own hands he was obliged to kill a sheep for the sake of his family; he found a man would charge ten shillings each time to come the distance. The physical nausea for the task was such that from the time he first took the knife into his shuddering hand to the day they buried him, no morsel of animal food passed his lips.

The children were still—a month after they had come—full of magnificent enthusiasms. Hermie and Miss Browne were going to restore the fallen fortunes of the family by raising poultry. Hermie worked intoxicating sums on paper, and even Miss Browne, distrustful of the child's arithmetic, on checking the figures could find so little wrong that she began to be a-tremble with delight at the prospect herself. Bart himself, the only one of the family touched with caution, found they had left sufficient margin for losses, and assented that a fortune might assuredly be made.

For who could dispute the fact that the grocer charged from one to two shillings a dozen for his eggs, according to season? Let them reckon on the basis of one shilling. And Small, the butcher, charged three and sixpence to four and sixpence a pair for table fowls. Let them be very safe, and say two and sixpence.

They were starting with the twelve fowls the Dunks had left on the estate. Now if one hen in one year brought up three clutches of chickens, how many would that make? Hermie, with shining eyes, cried thirty-nine; but Bart, who had seen mortality among chickens, refused to put down more than twenty.

'Very well,' said Hermie, 'count twenty, if you like, only I know it will be thirty-nine, I shall be so careful of them. Twelve hens with twenty chickens each—that will be—that will be—what are twelve twenties, Miss Browne?'

'Two hundred and forty,' replied the lady, amazed herself that it could be so much, 'two hundred and forty! Why, I have never seen so many together in my life.'

Bart wrote down the figures two hundred and forty.

'Fowls grow up in six months,' Hermie said. 'Lizzie says so, and her mother

used to keep fowls. The *Journal* says—I read it this morning—that fowls generally lay two hundred eggs a year.'

'Say one hundred and fifty,' Bart said.

'Very well,' said Hermie. 'Please, Miss Browne, what are two hundred and forty times one hundred and fifty?'

'My dear,' gasped Miss Browne, 'I—I really need a pencil for that.'

Bart offered his stump, and Miss Browne was five minutes working the sum, so sure was she she must have made an astounding mistake somewhere.

'It—it certainly comes to thirty-six thousand,' she said at last.

'Would you please multiply it by a shilling a dozen, and say what it comes to,' was Hermie's further request.

Miss Browne again took a surprising time to do the simple sum.

'A hundred and fifty pounds,' she said.

'That is for the first year,' Hermie said; 'but now would you please work it out on this big piece of paper, and see what we should get the second year. Two hundred and forty fowls——'

'And the twelve you began with, too,' said Roly.

Hermie was quite willing to be cautious.

'We won't count them, we'll allow for them dying, too,' she said. 'Two hundred and forty fowls with, say, twenty chickens each in the year. What's that?'

Miss Browne's pencil worked.

'Four thousand eight hundred,' she said.

'And they lay one hundred and fifty eggs a year.'

Miss Browne looked quite shaken at the result her arithmetic produced—seven hundred and twenty thousand eggs! Three thousand pounds!

The excitement made her work out the results of the third year, and she was weeping when the sun came out—sixty thousand pounds. She was weeping for her grey spoiled life. Exquisite dresses, travel, health, even marriage, and little children of her own, would have been all possible, had she worked these sums years and years ago, and set to work with twelve fowls.

Bart still had misgivings.

'More might die than that,' he said.

Hermie was quite pale with excitement.

'We have counted that half that come out die,' she said, 'and Lizzie says her mother always reared ten out of every thirteen. We have only counted six. But count three, if you like; still, that is thirty thousand pounds. And we have not counted selling any.'

Even Bart saw the moderation that only counted three chickens to each hatching, and his doubts died away.

Visions of all this wealth intoxicated the children; they tore their father from his book; Hermie told him, with eyes ashine with tears and little heaving breast, that he was never to do any more of that dreadful ploughing, that in three years they would be making thirty thousand a year, at least, by no harder work than just feeding the fowls and packing up eggs.

He smiled at them very gently; he could not bear to damp their ardour. In very truth he could not exactly find out why these figures should not be as they seemed.

'Of course you would have a huge feed-bill and want a big run of land,' he said.

Bart gave a comprehensive sweep of his young arm towards the scrubby bush-land that lay around them.

'As much as we like for a shilling an acre a year,' he said.

'But the feed-bill?'

'Five thousand a year would buy enough at all events, and still we'd have twenty-five thousand left,' Hermie said jubilantly. 'You will give up the ploughing, won't you, daddie?'

Cameron temporised, and said he would just do a little while the chickens grew.

That night a violent wind came up with drenching rain. Cameron lay listening to it, wondering what skies were over the head of his beloved whom the seas held from him.

Then he heard doors opening and shutting, whispered words, and finally a series of very angry cackles. He threw on some clothes, and went to find out the meaning. In the living-room an oil lamp was flaring in the draught, a Plymouth rock was roosting on the piano top, a white Leghorn was regarding the sofa suspiciously. On the floor sat Hermie, rubbing a wrathful fowl dry with a Turkish bath-towel, and presently in staggered Bartie and Miss Browne, the former with five fowls by the legs, the latter nervously holding one at arm's length.

Cameron fell into a convulsion of silent laughter, so earnest were the children, so absorbed. And Miss Browne, poor Miss Browne, how ludicrous she looked with her scanty hair flying ragged round her shoulders, her figure clad in an ancient mackintosh, her mouth frightened, her eyes heroic with the endeavour not to let go the fowl, which twisted itself madly to peck at her trembling hand!

'I don't know what you are laughing for, papa,' Hermie said, a trifle offended. 'The fowl-house leaks dreadfully.'

'But it has rained half a dozen nights since we came; you never brought the things in here before, my child,' he urged.

Hermie received Miss Browne's contribution on her knee, and fell to drying

its dejected feathers.

'We didn't know before that each of them was worth two thousand five hundred pounds,' she said. 'Please, papa, will you hold Bartie's fowls, so that he can light the fire. We are going to give them something hot to drink.'

CHAPTER VII

Come Home! Come Home

.

'Oh, that 'twere possible,
After long grief and pain,
To find the arms of my true love
Around me once again!'

Five years dragged on. Sometimes word came that the travellers were at last coming home, and Cameron's heart grew warm, only to grow cold again, as he realised he dare not let them come to this. Then, while the agony of dread still was crushing him, the next mail would bring the bitter relief that the time was not yet—the agent or the music masters or some one else had found another year was necessary, or the great career would be spoiled. Not one word all this time of the selection, else had the 'career' been in instant danger of the ruin predicted, the mother would have journeyed at the greatest possible number of knots an hour back to them. Her dreamer of dreams depending on a selection, her children depending on her dreamer, become his own master!

Yet surely the man had had his lesson, and toiled now marvellously, piteously.

Five years, and not one idle day.

Five years of bewildered struggling with unknown enemies—drought, hurricanes of wind, bush fires, devastating rains, a soil that the farmer born and bred could hardly have made pay. Never a complaining word. Hermie, growing to womanhood, broke her heart over his life at times.

There was even a day when she fell down on her knees at a chair, and covered paper wildly with a pen that commanded her mother to come home.

Cameron working obstinately on one frightful day, the thermometer one

hundred and seventeen degrees, had a 'touch of the sun,' and even after the doctor had left him quieted, his head in cool cloths, his temperature falling, he still moaned for his wife, cried to her like a child, stretched out his arms, raved, besought her to hold his hand. It was then that Hermie broke her promise, down on her knees, just hidden by the bed-curtain, writing wildly with the pen she had brought for the doctor to write his prescription.

'By the next boat,' she wrote; 'if you wait for the one after, it will be wicked of you. How can you stay like this? Challis, Challis—all our lives spoiled for her to have a chance! We have no chance; father's life is worse than any dog's. Challis—I think I hate Challis! Going along quietly and happily, are we? Miss Macintosh taking your place? We are starving, worse than starving; the food we have to eat is worse than none at all. He needs delicate things, ice and invalid dishes, properly cooked. I have just been to the safe to look what I could get, and the mutton has gone bad—it goes bad nearly every day in summer here; there is no milk, for the cows have no feed, there is some nasty mouldy bread and bad butter, and golden syrup with flies in it, and sugar alive with ants. You! You and Challis are eating the best things that can be bought with money. I hate Challis! The doctor says we are to keep his head cool with water, and to stand vessels full of water about the room to cool the air. The well is nearly dry, the sun has turned the tank water bad, or else a wombat or a bird has fallen in, and it is poisonous. Bartie has gone a mile with the cart to beg some from the Dalys.

'Miss Macintosh taking care of us all so nicely! We have no one in the world but Miss Browne. Oh yes, we have told you lies and lies, but you ought not to have believed them. You should have come to see for yourself that he was happy and well. Oh, if you could hear him crying, just to hold your hand, he says, and to hear you talk! Ah, mother, mother, mother, how cruel you are!'

But the spirit of the man, just learning to be indomitable, kept him back from long illness. In four days he was up again, easily turned sick and faint, but able to lie on the sofa, and even take an interest in the delicacies that Hermie set before him. She had ridden Tramby into Wilgandra herself, gone to the grocer, and implored him for nice things—calf's foot jellies, and whitebait, and Canadian tinned fruit.

'My sister, Challis Cameron, the pianist will be back soon. I have written for them to come, so you will be sure to be paid.'

And the grocer, a kindly spot in his heart still for the youngest housekeeper he had ever taken orders from, made up a big basket of tinned goods, and said he would wait for Challis to pay him.

'Hermie,' Cameron said from the sofa on the fifth day, 'my head is still confused, but I seem to remember when I was very bad that you kept telling me mamma was coming. There has been no letter, has there?'

Hermie grew a little pale.

'No, there has been no letter, papa,' she said.

'Hermie,' he cried, after spending a minute trying to find the reason for her curiously averted head, 'you did not write for mamma, Hermie?'

She turned to him then, her blue young eyes on fire.

'I did,' she said; 'it is time, more than time she came. If she does not come soon, you—we—we shall all be dead!'

'Child, child!' he said.

He had risen from his sofa and gone to the window, to look once more with aching eyes at his wretched lands. If this had been the green isle in the sea he had dreamed of making it, he would have sent long ago himself. But these desolate acres!

'Child,' he groaned, 'I couldn't let her come to this. I am only half a man—half a man. God left the manliness out of me when He made me, and gave me womanish ways instead. And I have never fought them down, as it must have been meant I should do. But I will begin again, I will work harder—things must take a turn, and then I can meet her, and she will not despise me. Child, God has no more awful punishment than when He lets those we love despise us. Send another letter, tell her not to come yet—not just yet. Let me have one more chance.'

Hermie was sobbing at his side, pulling at his arm, trying to urge him back to the sofa. She knew he was not talking to her, knew he was hardly aware she was there, but her sensitive spirit, leaping at his troubles with him, was bowed down with the knowledge and weight of them. How she loved this man—this grey-haired, blue-eyed man at her side! Hardly the love of daughter for father; her feelings for him had in them something of the passionate, protecting tenderness of a mother for a crippled child.

'Lie down,' she said, 'there—let me move these pillows; that is better. She must come—she should have come long ago. And I told her to be sure to come by the next boat. Now lie still; I am going to get your lunch.'

The exertion and emotion had tried him exceedingly. He lay still, still, his face to the wall; and now his mood brought a tear from under his eyelid. It was too late! She would have started! Ah, well, praise God for that! God who took these things out of our hands. She was coming—he might give up for a little time, and lie with his head on her breast; she who had always forgiven him would forgive him still and clasp him to her, and call him, 'Dear One.' Then all he would ask would be the happiness of dying before the world began again.

The happy tears rolled down his cheeks. Hermie, tip-toeing back with her tray, saw them, and was filled with dismay. What had she done by this interference?

'Darling,' she said, dropping beside him, 'don't mind, don't mind. The letter

is not posted yet—Bartie was going to take it in this afternoon. It is not mail day till to-morrow. We will not send it.'

Not posted! Not posted! She was not coming—she might not know of his extremity, his need for her! The chill wind passed over him and dried his tears, dried his heart.

'Here is the letter,' the poor child cried; 'don't look like that, darling. I would not vex you for the world. Shall I tear it up?'

He looked at it piteously. Oh, that Bartie had it, riding with it through the bush, summoning her, summoning her!

'Shall I burn it?' said the poor little girl.

'Yes,' he said, 'burn it.' His voice was lifeless, his eyes stared dully at the wall.

CHAPTER VIII

An Atheist

'Thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.'

Hermie put her letter and all hopes of rescue together into the kitchen fire.

Life was an endless drab again.

She went listlessly out, and stood on the doorstep to look at it.

Her father did not want her, he had pushed his lunch aside, and bidden her, irritably—he who was so gentle—to leave him to himself.

Bart, poor grave little Bart, a man at fourteen, was working about the place. Neither he nor the young ones had gone to school while the father had been ill. He and Roly had been all the morning beating monotonously at a bush fire just across the road. There was no excitement about it, there seemed little danger; the fire burned quietly, steadily—it had been burning for two days—but this morning it had crept to the fences; the boys had been obliged to cut boughs and beat at it.

Roly sat on the fence most of the time, and sleepily kept back the cunning yellow tongues from the patch Bart had entrusted to him. Bart walked up and down, mechanically threshing out the little licking flames that longed to curl round the fence.

Sometimes he left Roly on guard, and went to do necessary work, feed the

two calves, shed a burning tear over the dying sheep, give Tramby a few drops of water.

Hermie went down to him wearily, a sun-bonnet on her head.

'There's no danger about the fire?' She looked at it a little apathetically.

'Oh no; if there were three of us, we could put it all out. Roly's not much use, of course.'

'Bart, what are we going to do?'

'For water? Oh, Daly's going to let me have a big cask to-night. You've got half a bucketful still, haven't you? I didn't want to take Tramby out till it was cooler. Reminds me, I must mend the cart—that old shaft's smashed again.'

'And when that cask's gone?'

'Oh, I'll go and get some from old Perry. His well's not half dry, and there's only himself. But don't you go and be wasteful, Herm—no washing clothes and that sort of waste.'

'I want a bath—I want to turn on a tap, and not have to use just a dipper or two. All Challis has to do is turn on a tap.' Hermie spoke with a strange bitterness.

Bart smiled good-humouredly. 'Yes, she's a lucky little beggar,' he said. 'My word, if I could have the bath-water she wastes, I'd make this poor old place look up a bit.'

He looked round on the desolate acres, looked at them with yearning affection. He was a quiet-natured boy; he did not call himself unhappy; he would have felt he had nothing left to ask for, had he but a plentiful water supply for the stock and crops, and better tools to work with, and a little more strength in that young arm of his. Like his mother, he had the knack of doing the thing at hand with all his power, and already he was a far more proficient farmer than his father would ever be.

'What are you going to do now?' the girl asked, as he hurried away. 'I'll come with you if you like.' Such a hot, patient young face his was, it smote her that she seldom heeded him. He looked pleased at her faint show of interest.

He showed her the corn, coming up bravely, the wheat patch, not drooping quite as much as it might have done. He pointed to the trees in the little orchard. 'In another month or two those apricots and peaches will be about ripe,' he said; 'make a nice change, won't they?' His eyes dwelt lovingly on the green small fruit. 'When the drought breaks——'

'Pshaw!' said the girl.

'Oh,' the lad said cheerfully, 'it will, one of these days; then we'll go along grand.'

He had caught the spirit of patience, of acceptance of ills, from the settlers about.

'But the sheep, nothing will give them life again!' The girl's eyes burned.

The boy had no fortitude against this; he gave a sudden wet glance towards the far end of the selection.

'Let's go and see how they're getting on,' he said in a low tone.

The girl rebelled.

'No—why?' she said. 'It only makes us miserable, and we can't help.'

'All right, you go back,' Bart said. 'I'll have to go. I might have to light another fire.'

Hermie followed him.

The sheep crept away from the house to die, once they found no water was to be had there. They chose to lie down and cease to be at the spot where once had been a dam. Patches of ashes showed where Bart had piled wood over the poor carcases and burnt them up, in his wise young knowledge that the air must be kept pure.

None were dead to-day, though fifty seemed dying. Half a dozen brown ragged little lambs filled the air with piteous outcry.

Hermie's heart swelled.

'Can't you do anything?' she said.

'No,' he said, 'they'll have to go. I've had to give them up, dear. If I can get water for the house for the next week, I'll be glad. Daly is running very short himself.'

There were footsteps in the bush just near, a panting of breath, a curious dragging sound.

'Floss,' said Hermie, and remembered for the first time she had not seen her little sister for hours. 'Where can she have been?'

The child was dragging a bucket. Her face was almost purple with the heat; she had kept her eyes half closed, to shut out the almost unendurable glare, and did not know she was so close to home till she stumbled almost into Bart's arms.

When she saw Hermie there too, she clung to the handle jealously.

'It's not for the house,' she said, 'so don't you think it. Let it alone, Bart! Bart, if you take it, I'll scratch.'

Such a fierce little face it was!

'I'm only going to carry it for you, Chucks,' Bart said. 'You shall do what you like with it.'

'True'n honour?'

'True and honour.'

The little girl relinquished her hold, but kept a guarding eye on the precious fluid.

'Where did you get it, old girl?' Bart said.

'Don't tell father?'

'Why ever not?' said Hermie.

Floss turned on her vehemently.

'I took it,' she said. 'Don't care, I'm glad. They've got a whole cask, the greedies, and lots of money, so they can get as much as they like. They get casks from the Bore, and they're sent down in the train, and they've got a cart to fetch it. They drink it all themselves—pigs! They don't care about the sheep.'

'Not the Scotts, Floss—you've not been stealing the poor Scotts' water?' cried Hermie, aghast. The Scotts lived in a miserable hut on the adjoining selection, and were the nearest neighbours.

Flossie's eyes blazed indignantly.

'Them!' she said. 'They've got less than us! I got it from those mean measuring men.'

Hermie looked puzzled.

'She must mean that camp of surveyors down the road,' Bart said. 'It's a mile away at least. Why, you poor old Flossie, have you been right down to that camp for this little drop of water?' He put his disengaged arm over her bony little shoulders.

Floss caught her breath, and looked unhappily into the half-full bucket.

'The first one was fuller,' she said, 'but the s-sheep nearly knocked me down to g-get it, and they s-s-spilled it on the g-ground.' Her voice shook with sorrow for the waste.

'Twice,' muttered Bart, 'she's been twice, Hermie.'

They were back among the sheep now, and Bart hardly knew what to do with such a drop among so many.

'This one,' said Floss; 'look at its poor eyes—and that one lying down, and the little lambs, Bartie.'

Bart put the bucket to the noses of the ones she touched, but had to drag it away before the poor things had half what they wanted.

A piteous bleat went up from the others.

'I—I think I'll just get one more,' Floss said, and almost staggered to the bucket. 'It's quite easy to steal it now; the camp's left all by itself. Oh, I must get one more—look at that one's eyes.'

But Bart picked her up in his arms, and started back to the house with her.

'You'll just come and lie down quietly,' he said. 'I never saw anything like your face. You'll be ill like father. Poor little Floss! poor little old Floss!'

'There—there would have been half a bucket more,' said Floss, 'only I nearly fell once, and it s-s-spilled.' She was sobbing on his shoulder, sobbing heartbrokenly, hard little Floss who never cried.

Hermie took the child from her brother at the door.

'I'll undress her and sponge her,' she said; 'that will cool her a little, but I

quite expect she will be ill like father. Well, it is all Challis's fault.'

In an hour Floss lay asleep, the fierce heat of her cheeks a little faded, and Hermie's hands were idle again.

Miss Browne was helping Lizzie to fold the poor rags of clothes from the wash; the father still begged to be left alone; outside Bart and Roly still threshed monotonously at the fire.

Hermie went into the tiny bedroom that had been run up for her because the house was too small—the bedroom that the mother had been so pleased to hear was built. She found herself looking in the glass at herself, looking sadly, listlessly.

She saw a girl, thin, undeveloped, with a delicately cut face, and shadows lying like ink-smears beneath her eyes. Her womanhood was coming, and she had no strength to meet it; at her age she should have had rounded limbs and pleasing curves. She seemed to recognise this, as she gazed unhappily at her angles. Her hair pleased her, for the sun was making a glory of it; there was a nameless beauty about her face that she recognised vaguely.

'I shall never marry,' she sobbed. 'No one ever comes here but that heavy, stupid Morty. I shall be like Miss Browne in a few more years. I'm getting untidy now—no one can be tidy in clothes like these; I never care how I do my hair—what is the use, when there is no one to see it? I've not been to a party or a proper picnic, like the girls in the book, in all my life. I shouldn't know what to do, if I did go to one. No; I shall grow just like Miss Browne, and it is all Challis's fault.'

A portrait of the sweet-faced girl-player hung on the wall. Hermie tore it down from its place and broke it into fragments.

'I'm just tired to death of seeing you smile!' she muttered.

Miss Browne came in—Miss Browne, with perspiration on her face and a strand or two of her colourless hair loose. She carried an armful of Hermie's clothes from the wash. 'They are a very bad colour,' she said, 'but we cannot blame Lizzie, when there was next to no water. My dear, what is the matter?'

Hermie did not even wipe the tears from her face; she was sitting still, her hands on her knees, and letting the salt drops trickle drearily down her cheeks.

Miss Browne took a step towards her, then paused timidly. There had never been much intimacy or confidence between them. Hermie, with her innate love of daintiness and beauty and the hardness of youth, despised while she pitied the poor woman.

'Is it—anything I can help—your father—Floss—you are anxious—worried?'

'Oh no,' said Hermie, 'I wasn't thinking of any one but myself.' She leaned her head back, and had a sense of pleasure in her rolling tears. 'I suppose I'm not much more miserable than usual; but then I expect you are miserable—every one is, I think.'

'But not in the middle of the day, love,' the lady-help said.

'Why not?'

'Oh'—vaguely—'there isn't time, as a rule. One is so busy. It is a different thing when you go to bed.'

'What do you do then,' said Hermie, 'when you are miserable in bed?'

Miss Browne thought a second. 'I think I say my prayers,' she said.

'And if that does not cure you?'

'I say them again.'

'And if you are still miserable?'

'I—I think I go to sleep then; one is generally tired.' She spoke apologetically.

Hermie leaned her head still farther back. 'Saying prayers would not help me much,' she said. 'I am an atheist.'

'What?' screamed Miss Browne.

'An atheist,' said Hermie. 'It is very comfortable to be one. You have only to think about eating and sleeping. Oh dear!'

She arose languidly and administered water to Miss Browne, who was gasping alarmingly. 'This room is hot,' she said. 'Go and lie down in your own. You shouldn't have made me talk, if you didn't want to hear things. Mind that bit of loose wood at the door.'

Miss Browne, thus dismissed, went away like a chidden child, but her eyes were full of terror, and her very knees trembled. She groped her way to the sitting-room and poured out the frightful story into Mr. Cameron's ears.

He made his own way presently to the hot, cramped bedroom. Hermie had let her hair down, and was sitting on the edge of the bed surveying her poor little prettinesses tragically in the looking-glass.

Her father sat down on the bed beside her, and disclaimed fatigue and headache and everything else she urged upon him.

'What is this Miss Browne tells me, little one?' he said, and almost indulgently, so young, slight, and absurd she looked, to be questioning eternity.

Hermie twisted her wavy hair up into a hard plain knot.

'I only said I was an atheist,' she said, and her young lips quivered and her eyes grew wild.

He put his arm round her.

'How long have you been feeling like this, childie?'

She burst into a passion of frightened tears.

'Since yesterday morning,' she said.

'Tell me about it,' he whispered.

She swallowed a few sobs. 'I'm tired of saying prayers, nothing gets better—nothing comes. It—it's easy enough to believe in God, if you live in Sydney and

have water laid on—and cool days and money and a mother. But out here—oh, He can't expect us to believe in Him!'

'I think a few of us do,' he said.

'Us!' she repeated. 'You don't believe anything, do you, father? I've never heard you say a word. I have thought for long enough you were an atheist too.'

He took his arm away and moved to the little window; it was almost ten minutes before he turned round and came back to her.

'Child,' he said, 'sometimes I think my mistakes are too many for me. I have nothing to say to you. I dare not even say, Forgive me. Poor little child, to have come to such rocks! I should have helped you long ago. Only, you see, I had got in the habit of leaving these things to mother.'

'Mother did not often go to church,' said Hermie discontentedly. 'I don't remember her talking religion much.'

'She breathed it instead,' he said; 'she is the best woman in the world, never forget that, Hermie. When we were first married I was full of the young university man's talk—brain at war with established doctrines. She never came over weakly to me, as some women might have done, she never kept spotlessly aloof, indeed, she conceded me freely many of my points. But she managed to make it plain to me that all these questions mattered very little—Christ, and prayer, and love, and doing our best—those were her rocks, and waves of dogma washing for ever on them could not move them.'

'Did she ever read any of those books of yours—those on the top shelf?' whispered Hermie.

'Ah,' said Cameron, 'you have been reading those, have you? Oh yes, she was never afraid to read anything that was written, but she distinguished between faith and creed. She said she did not try to explain or understand God, only to believe in Him. She is quite right. It is the hard names, the popular orthodoxies, the iron creeds, that take the soul and heart and warmth out of religion. When you were little, she did nothing more than show you God as your Father, and Christ as your Saviour, to be tenderly loved and obeyed, and gone to for refuge and comfort.'

'No,' said Hermie.

'No; it was her way. She wanted the love of God to be a living thing to you all—a glad, warm, spontaneous thing, like the love you bore us, only deeper. She would have no lines and rules and analyses of it while you were small. It was not a thing she actually spoke about very often, but white hours, find room for themselves at times—on plain Mondays and Saturdays as often as on quiet Sundays, and she had a way of making the influence of them run, clear, fresh, pleasant streams through the mud-flats of life. Can you realise in any degree what it is to me to find her daughter with such thoughts, Hermie?' His voice was

very low. Hermie pulled the pin from the plain tight knob, and let all her hair hide her flushed face again.

'If—if only I had known you thought like this!' she muttered.

'Yes,' he said; 'it is a thing I shall never be able to put away from my mind again, that I did not let you know. A man gets in the way of keeping quiet things like these to himself, but I should not have forgotten I had children. I knew Miss Browne was a good woman, whatever her faults, and I felt that I might leave you to her. Don't think I am excusing myself.'

'It was not your fault, darling, darling,' Hermie said, and clung to him; 'but think how miserable we are—all of us, even poor little Floss! How can He forget us like this?'

Cameron's blue eyes looked out at the blue sky.

'Not to understand, only to believe. He does not lead us always through green pastures. The severe and daily discipline makes us shrink, no doubt. But we have to go on.'

'Oh, darling, I do love you, I do love you!' wept the girl.

'Tie up your hair, childie, and we will go down and sit among the roses, if any are still alive. I am quite strong enough to walk.'

He opened the door, and they went out together, and neither looked at the sky. But here had gathered a brave cloud host, and there another contingent came, determined, black-browed, strenuously fighting the long-victorious sun, desperately clinging together. And over the fainting earth flashed its lights, and through the heavens tore the sudden thunder of its guns.

And the battle was to it.

Down came the sweet torrents of the rain, and the cracked, piteous earth lay breathlessly glad and still beneath it. You heard the calves call to their mothers, the surprised whinny of the horses seeking shelter. You saw the sheep struggling to their feet and lapping the wet grass with swollen tongues.

You heard the birds making all sorts of new little cries and noises, as they flew wildly for shelter—birds many of them that had been born and grown to make nests for themselves, and never known the strange phenomenon of rain.

You heard the hisses and splutters of the bush fires, as the evil spirit went out of them.

You saw a lad come up from them, his beating bough still in his hand, the lines of his young grave face all broken up, and the glad tears bursting out, to meet the deluge of rain that beat in his face.

You saw a small girl rushing out half dressed and heedless of the torrent, for the exquisite pleasure of seeing the sheep drink.

You saw a woman with thin, blown hair and a drab complexion saying her prayers in her bedroom.

Down where the roses were just recalled to life, Hermie was clinging to her father, both wet through with the sweet blinding rain.

'Oh, you didn't believe me, did you?' she cried. 'As if I could—as if I could! It was just that the dust had got into my heart and choked me. Oh, darling, I never really meant that dreadful thing! Dearest, you don't think I meant it, do you?' Her tears were gushing out in streams.

'I never believed it for one moment,' he said, and kissed her, and led her back to the house.

CHAPTER IX

Mortimer Stevenson

He was a man, take him for all and all.'

Morty came up to the selection the next Sunday—Mortimer Stevenson.

'Glad to see you, Morty,' Cameron said. 'What's the news of the war? It is a week since we have seen the paper.

Mortimer fastened his horses' reins to the verandah-post, then drew half a dozen papers out of his saddle-bag—a daily or two, a couple of weeklies, one or two English special war numbers.

'I'd rather you read for yourself,' he said, handing them to the older man; 'it's not pretty enough to talk about much. Those Boers take a lot of beating. Of course, it will be all right as soon as Lord Roberts takes charge.'

The crisp papers were in Cameron's hands; a few yards away an old canvas chair stretched itself out invitingly.

'Hermie, my dear—Miss Browne—here is Mr. Stevenson,' he called down the passage of the little house.

'Don't mind me, I'll just sit down here and have a smoke while you read,' Stevenson said; 'don't disturb any one, perhaps they are busy.'

He sat down on the verandah step, and began to fill his pipe, and Cameron, relieved, opened his papers, and was in the Transvaal for the rest of the afternoon.

To look at, Stevenson was a typical young bushman. He had added inches to his stature so rapidly, and breadth to his shoulders, that he was ill at ease anywhere but in the saddle. His complexion was burnt to a deep copper. Grey, good eyes looked squarely at you.

Used to cities, you would not like his dress. A serviceable tweed suit, country-cut, one of the brilliant ties, which, so the storekeepers persuade the bush, are worn in Sydney, a soft brown hat with its dangling, string-coloured fly-veil.

His father was a vigorous old man of seventy; his type occurs again and again on the out back stations.

He had gathered great wealth during all those laborious years, and he spent it, if not frugally, at least with full respect for its difficult garnering. He had been a member of the Upper House, and his wife, during her lifetime, had much enjoyed the dignity of seeing his letters addressed, 'The Hon. Matthew Stevenson, M.L.C.'

He had had but a rudimentary education, yet his plain common-sense and clear intellect had made the loss only a slight one to him. To his sons—six of them he had—he offered education, or at all events its equivalent—the money for it—liberally, and three of them had taken advantage of it, and gone finally into various professions in Sydney.

The others—the duller three—had assimilated just as much of the tonic waters as does the ordinary youth of eighteen; then they shook the dust of Sydney off their feet, and returned thankfully to the station where their hearts had always been. Mortimer was youngest of this latter three, and the only one now unmarried.

Bart came down the passage, and his eyes brightened at the sight of the figure smoking on the verandah step.

'Hallo!' he said, 'just the fellow I wanted. Look here, Daly gave me a whole lot of new seed—Sheep Burnett I think he called it. Will it hurt to sow it on that place where the sorghum was?'

'Oh, any place will do, old chap; but you needn't waste your best ground; it's great stuff, you know—it would grow in the Sahara. Just sow it along with your grass or clover seeds.'

'It comes up quickly, doesn't it?' Bart said anxiously. 'Do you think it would make all down there look smooth and green and nice in a month?'

Mortimer laughed. 'Are you taking to landscape gardening, Bart?' he said. 'I never knew before you had an eye for effect.'

Bart sat down on the step. 'It's no joking matter, Morty,' he said. 'My mother and Challis will be home in a month; we've got to make the place look up a bit before they come. The governor's been making bonfires of all the rubbish since breakfast—it does look tidier, doesn't it?'

Mortimer looked round. 'It's not the same place,' he said heartily, and added for encouragement, 'And after all, perhaps they won't come, old fellow; you know you've had a lot of false alarms.'

'Oh, but this time it's certain,' Bart said, and not without unhappiness;

'they've actually started by this.'

Floss came clattering out in her rough boots. She sat down on the other side of the family friend.

'I knewed it was you when I heard Pup bark,' she said; 'you came last Sunday, too, and the Sunday before that.'

'Did I, Flossie?' he said. 'That sounds as if it were a Sunday too many.'

'Oh no, no one minds you,' she answered; 'if it were your father, now, or the Revering Mr. Smith, it might be a nuisance; we'd have to put a clean tablecloth on for them.'

'And that sounds as if I am going to be asked to stay to tea, Floss?' Mortimer said.

'Of course you are,' was Flossie's reply. 'Miss Browne says it's the least we can do, considering all the papers and things you give us. Only she says she doesn't know how she's going to make the butter spin out. We don't get it from the store again till Thursday.'

'There, hold your tongue, Floss,' said Bart, 'you'll make Morty afraid to take any.'

'Oh no, he needn't be,' Floss said. 'Me and Roly's going to say we don't like it under our jam.'

Roly came stealthily from behind some trees.

'Where is she?' he whispered.

'It's all right,' Floss said; 'she's got to change her dress, and her hair was pretty awful, so she'll have to do it again.'

Thus reassured, Roly ventured to the step, and took up a position at Mortimer's shoulder. He was attired in an orange and blue-striped football jersey, and the most respectable pair of knickerbockers he possessed. Mortimer had given him the jersey on his last birthday, and it was the boy's dearest possession.

'Why,' said Mortimer, 'what have you been after? Is Miss Browne laying wait for you for stealing her jam?'

'Oh no,' said Roly. 'It's only this,' and he pointed to his jersey; 'she doesn't think it's religious to wear football things on Sunday.'

'Well,' said Floss, in the virtuous tone a clean pinafore made justifiable, 'I don't think it is, either. Look at me. I learnt a collect this morning.'

'A what?' said Roly.

'A collect,' said Floss. 'Collect for the thirteenth Sunday after Trinity. Hermie wasn't sure if this was the right Sunday, only it was a nice short one to begin with.'

'Does Miss Hermie teach you your collects?' asked Mortimer, his head turned away a little.

'She wants to,' said Floss, 'but I don't know if she'll always be able to find

me. She was looking for Roly, too, this morning, only he was playing Boers somewhere, so he got off.'

'Wasn't playing Boers,' said Roly. 'I was putting a new name on our gate.'

'What a story you are!' cried Floss. 'I saw you creeping along with father's guns.'

'Wasn't!' said Roly. 'Hadn't I got this jersey on?'

'That's nothing; you sleep in it—truly he does, Morty. As soon as Hermie or Miss Browne go out of the room, he puts on the jersey over his pyjamas. Why he hates school is 'cause he can't go in it.'

'What name were you writing on the gate, old fellow?' asked Mortimer, to save the situation.

'Transvaal Vale,' said Roly; 'come on down and see—it looks great. I rubbed Hermie's silly name off.'

But Mortimer did not move. Dunks' Selection the place had always been, and always would be called; but Hermie in piteous rebellion had written years ago in violet ink on the sliprails, The Rosery. Mortimer would not go and look at the poor little name defaced.

Miss Browne came out, Miss Browne with her face shiny with recent washing, her hair almost tidy, the better of her two colourless gowns on her back.

'Very glad indeed to see you—very sorry to keep you waiting so long—hope you, your father is quite well—Bart, my dear, a chair—what are you thinking of, to let Mr. Stevenson sit on the step?—very sad about the war—Flossie, don't tease Mr. Stevenson, my dear—quite a cool day—providential thing the drought has broken—hope you will stay to tea.'

These and sundry other remarks she delivered breathlessly, and at the end put her hand to her side and gasped gently.

'I shall be most pleased to stay, Miss Browne, if it will be putting you to no inconvenience,' Mortimer said.

'Most pleased—most happy—an honour—who is so kind, so thoughtful—those English magazines—and she had never thanked him yet, and those delicious chocolates—too good of him; most glad if he would stay—uncomfortable house—unavoidable—bush, no comfort—he would understand——'

'He knows he's not to take more than two helpings of butter,' said Bart, with a twinkle in his eye.

'Bart, my dear—oh, my love—your mother—what would she say?—Mr. Stevenson—what can he think?—my dear—oh, my love,' and the poor lady withdrew in hot haste, to hide the embarrassment Bart had plunged her into, and to laboriously prepare tea.

'I see your father's come down generously,' said Mr. Cameron, glancing up a moment from his papers. 'Matthew Stevenson—that is your father, of course—

five thousand pounds, and more if wanted, to the fund for the Bushmen's Contingent.'

'Yes, that's the governor,' Mortimer said. 'He's red-hot on the war. I believe if he were five years younger, wild horses wouldn't keep him back from volunteering himself. You must come up to Coolooli and have a chat with him over it, Mr. Cameron.'

But Cameron was deep again in the war correspondent's letter.

Bart went off to feed the calves—Roly had vanished at the sound of Miss Browne's footstep.

'Did you know our mother and Challis was coming home, Morty?' said Floss.

'Bart just told me—yes, that will be very nice for you, Flossie. All will be well, now, won't it?' said Mortimer.

'Oh, you're like the rest, are you?' Floss said. 'Every one going to live happy ever after, eh? No, thank you, not me; I'm always going to hate them. They don't get over me. No, thank you. I know them—bring me a doll, won't they? and "There you are, Flossie darling, sweetest, come and kiss us." Not me. See my finger wet, see it dry, cut my throat sure's ever I die, if I have anything to do with them. Stuck-ups, that's what they are!'

Mortimer gazed on the child, a little uncomfortable horror mixed with his amusement; his bringing-up had been orthodox, and reverence for parents was entwined with all his life.

'Why, girlie,' he said, 'this is shocking! Your own mother!'

'Challis's mother,' corrected Floss. 'Didn't she go off and leave me? Lot she cared! I was only two, Lizzie says, and I might have picked up anything, and eaten it and died. Even Mrs. Bickle minds her baby, although she does get drunk at times. S'pose I'd had measles? or Roly? We'd have died, or at least got dropsy, Lizzie says, having no mother to nurse us. No, thank you—no getting round me with a doll. As for that Challis, I'll give her a time of it—just you see.'

'But—but—but,' cried Mortimer, greatly at a loss, 'your mother is as fond of you as anything, of course. I expect it is very hard for her to go so long without seeing you. She doesn't do it on purpose, old woman. You see, Challis was so clever they had to give her a chance.'

'How do they know I'm not clever?' demanded Floss. 'I believe I am. You should have seen the man I drew on my slate this morning. Or how do they know I couldn't play before the Queen? I'm up to "What are the Wild Waves Saying?" and it's got two flats.'

Mortimer had no answer for this; he could only gaze at her.

There was another step in the doorway, and Hermie came out, a very slender-looking Hermie in the let-down white frock that had made a woman of

her in a day. Floss leaned back and giggled as her sister shook hands with the visitor.

'He! he! he! She's put her long dress on,' she said. 'Morty, look! it's as long as Miss Browne's. You'd think she never had short ones, wouldn't you? She's 'tending she's growed up.'

'Flossie,' said Mortimer, 'wouldn't you like to look at my watch? you haven't seen the works for a long time.'

'Me holding it then,' stipulated Flossie.

'All right,' said Mortimer, and gave up his valuable timekeeper into the bony little outstretched hand.

'You spoil that child shockingly,' Hermie said.

Floss looked up from the entrancing little wheels.

'He spoils you worser,' she said. 'Look at the books and flowers and chocolates he brings over and gives you, no matter how bad-tempered you may be.'

Hermie looked vaguely disturbed.

'Spoil me—do you spoil me? Surely I'm too big,' she said.

The man's heart leapt to his eyes.

'Wish I'd the chance,' he muttered.

'What did you say?' said Hermie.

'Nothing,' said Mortimer, and began to smoke furiously again.

'Morty,' said Floss, 'Morty, how many times does the littlest wheel turn while the big wheel turns once?'

'Thirteen,' Mortimer said recklessly.—'I hear your mother is coming home, Miss Cameron?'

'Yes,' sighed Hermie.

'This is surely very good news?'

Hermie gave a troubled glance around.

'Y-yes,' she said.

'Why, what a story you are, Morty!' said Floss. 'It doesn't turn thirteen times.'

'I mean thirty,' said Morty. 'Miss Cameron, I have three men loafing around at the sheds, and can't find work for them to do. It would be doing me a real kindness if you'd let them put in their time straightening up this place.'

'Thank you,' Hermie said, 'but we should not like to employ men we were not paying.'

'Not when they're eating their heads off in idleness?' implored Morty.

'No, thank you,' Hermie said stiffly.

'I beg your pardon,' Mortimer said dejectedly.

'I should think you do,' cried Floss; 'it doesn't turn anything like thirty times. I wouldn't have a watch I didn't understand. Here, take it.'

He pocketed it humbly.

'I'd like to see the ground Bart spoke of sowing Burnett on,' he said, plunging away from his mistake. 'Will you walk down with me, Miss Cameron? It is quite cool and pleasant now.'

Hermie rose to her feet, then remembered her shabby little shoes that she had all this time been successfully hiding beneath her long dress.

'Oh,' she said, 'it's too far. Floss will go with you, won't you, Floss? I will go in and help Miss Browne with tea.'

CHAPTER X

'I Love You'

'The bird of life is singing on the bough
His two eternal notes of "I and Thou."'

It was after tea, and the long shadows of the dusk had fallen so gently, so tenderly, that even Dunks' selection had a beauty of its own.

Mortimer sat on the verandah and talked war to Mr. Cameron till his very soul loathed the Transvaal. Then he was captured by Bart, and forced into the dining-room to explain something in the *Town and Country Journal*, and give his opinion on the merits of Johnson's Grass.

And when he went outside again, Roly and Floss hung upon his arms and begged and begged him to 'come with us a bit.'

At eight o'clock he broke away from them, and stumbled through the dark passage to the kitchen regions to seek Miss Browne.

But here only an oil-lamp flickered in the breeze; even Lizzie was away from her post, having gone before tea to walk to Wilgandra, in the urgent need of a little pleasant human intercourse, ere she began another grey week.

There was a door open near by, and glancing in Morty saw Miss Browne, seated at her cleared dressing-table so busily writing and so surrounded by little papers and letters he came to a vague conclusion that she was 'literary.'

'Miss Browne,' he called imploringly.

She laid down her pen and hastened to the door to him.

He seized both her hands, he pressed them, he wrung them as he stood, labouring with his excitement.

'Miss Browne,' he said, 'will you help me? You must help—oh, do not refuse—she has gone down the garden alone—I think she is leaning on the gate. I must go to her. I must go to her. Will you keep them back—all the others—could you get them in a room and turn the key—how can I tell her if they follow me like this?'

'Tell her—who—what—why?' said the astonished Miss Browne.

'I love her,' said the man; 'I love her with all my soul—I must tell her; you will help me?'

His face looked quite white; there was a moisture on his forehead, his eager voice shook.

Miss Browne was crying; she had taken one of his big hands and was stroking it.

'Oh, my dear, my dear!' she said. 'How beautiful, how very beautiful! Oh, my love, how sweet—oh, how sweet, my love!'

'You will help?' he said. 'You will keep those little beggars away?'

'Leave it to me,' she said; 'you go to her, down in the garden, and the dusk is here, and the moon beginning to rise! How sweet, how beautiful! And she has on a white dress! Don't trouble about anything, my love—just go out to her.' The happy tears were gushing from her eyes.

'What a good sort you are!' he said, and wrung her hand, and patted her shoulder, then went plunging out into the sweet darkness to tell his love.

He found her where the wattles grew thickest, leaning on the fence, her flower-face turned to the young rising moon.

'How did you know I was here?' she said.

'I knew,' he answered, and a long silence fell. 'What are you thinking of?' he whispered.

'I don't—know,' she said, and a strange little sob shook in her throat.

His arm sprang round her.

'Oh,' he said, 'I love you—I do love you! Dearest, dearest, I love you! Do love me, darling—I love you, I love you so!'

Hermie was trembling like the little leaves around them—too surprised, too stricken with the newness of the situation even to slip out of his arms. The pleased young moon smiled down at them, the leaves whispered the news all along the bush, an exquisite perfume of flowers and trees and freshening grass rose up to them. How sweet something was—the clasp about her waist, the kisses that had rained upon her cheeks, the eager, beautiful words that still were beating in her ears!

'Oh, I don't understand, I don't understand,' said the excited girl, and burst into strange tears, and tried to move from his arms, and put a startled hand to her cheeks, to feel what difference those kisses had made.

'Did I frighten you—did I frighten you, my darling, my little girl?' he said. 'See there, don't tremble, I will take my arm away. It is too big and rough, isn't it? There, there, I won't even kiss you; let me hold your hand, there. You have only to understand that I love you, that I have always loved you—ever since you were a tiny thing of twelve, and I used to ride this way just for the pleasure of watching you. You were like no other child here, so slender and sweet and white and pink, and all that shining hair hanging round you. I think I wanted you always. I wanted to pick you up and put you on the saddle in front of me and ride away with you—away and away right out of the world. You will let me, darling? You will try to love me a little? You will be my own little wife?'

Wife! One of the Daly girls had just been married to a boundary rider near. Hermie had seen the lonely place where they were to live together with no one else to break the monotony.

Wife! All those dull, uninteresting women who came to call in Wilgandra were wives, all those dull, horrid men in Wilgandra were their husbands.

Be married; she, Hermie Cameron, like the girls in Miss Browne's books! Perhaps it might not be so very bad—they all seemed to look forward to it.

But to Mortimer Stevenson! Oh no, none of them ever married any one like that, the men there were all officers, penniless young artists and authors, or at least earls. Most of them had proud black eyes and cynical smiles, and spoke darkly of their youth. Or else they were debonair young men with laughing blue eyes and Saxon curly hair.

Mortimer! She had actually forgotten it was only Mortimer speaking all this time, Mortimer Stevenson, who wore red and blue painful ties, and grew red if she spoke to him, and knocked chairs over in his clumsiness, and had never been anywhere farther than Sydney, and thought Wilgandra and his father's station the nicest places in the world.

A cloud came over the happy moon, the leaves hung sad and still; from somewhere far away came the piteous wail of the curlew.

Hermie freed her hand and found her voice.

'This is really ridiculous,' she said petulantly. 'I suppose you are in fun.'

'In fun!' he echoed dully.

'Yes, you can't really be serious. Think what a fearfully long time we have known each other! I'd as soon think of being married to Bart, or Bill Daly.'

He winced at Daly—big, coarse, uneducated bushman.

'If I waited a long time, couldn't you grow to love me?' he said. 'I could stop doing anything you don't like; I—I would go through the University like James and Walter did, if you liked.'

The exceeding pain in his voice touched the girl's awakening heart.

'Forgive me, Morty,' she said, 'it must seem very horrid of me. I didn't

understand myself at first——'

'Perhaps—perhaps——' he began hopefully.

'No, I am sure, quite, quite sure I could never love you,' she said decidedly. 'I shall never marry, I have quite made up my mind. There is no one I could ever care for enough.'

'Have you anything particularly against me?' persisted Mortimer. 'I'd alter anything; you don't know how I would try.' His voice choked.

She could not instance his ties, his clumsy length of limb, his habit of furious blushing.

'You make it very hard for me,' she said. 'I—I wish you would go home; I want to go to bed.'

'Forgive me,' he said humbly. 'Forgive me; you have been very good and patient with me. I will go at once.'

Hermie looked for him to move. He took a step away from her—a step back—a step away. The sad moon came out and showed her his blurred miserable eyes, his working mouth.

'Oh, I am sorry—sorry!' she cried.

'May I kiss you—just once?' he whispered.

She stood still, her head drooped down, till he lifted it, very gently, very tenderly, and bent his head and put his quivering lips on hers.

Her hand went gently round his neck a minute.

'Poor Morty, dear Morty!' she said. Her breath came warm on his cheek one second, and a feather kiss, a sweet little sorry kiss that made his heart like bursting, was laid there.

The next second she had slipped away into the darkness, and he was stumbling to find his horse and carry his misery as far as he might.

Hermie went a circuitous route round the back of the cottage, so anxious was she to reach her bedroom without having her hot cheeks challenged by the sharp eyes of Floss or Roly. And there on the back verandah, where they never went, the two little figures were sitting, one at either end with their backs against a post.

'It's time you were in bed,' were the natural words that sprang to her lips, when she found she might not elude them.

Two laughs bubbled up. 'We're not going to bed for hours,' they said; 'we're having a 'speriment.'

'A what?' said Hermie.

'See this,' said Floss, standing up, 'we're both tied to the posts with the clothes-line. Such larks! Brownie said she wanted to try a 'speriment on us, and see if we could sit still for two hours. If we do, she's going to give me her little gold brooch, and Roly the green heart out of her work-box.'

'We can swop them at school for usefuller things,' interpolated Roly.

'The best is,' giggled Floss, 'we like sitting still, we'd been running about all day. And she forgot to tell us not to speak to each other, and she didn't put us too far to play knuckle-bones. I've wonned Roly three times.'

But Hermie had gone in, an impatient doubt as to Miss Browne's sanity crossing her mind.

She found Bart climbing out of the dining-room window.

'Did you go doing that?' he demanded.

'What?' said Hermie.

'Lock the door while I was reading.'

'Of course I didn't,' Hermie said impatiently.

'It's that young beggar Roly,' Bart said; 'I'll have to take it out of him for this. He'd even jammed the window, and I'd no end or work to get it open. I want to go and help father.'

'Where is he?' Hermie said.

'He's washing the paint-brushes in the cowshed,' said Bart. 'Isn't it lucky? Morty says there are about three dozen tins of red paint at his place, no earthly good to any one, and he's going to send them down in the morning, and dad and I are going to give all the place a coat of paint before mother comes.'

Hermie went to her bedroom, shut the door, and sat down by the window, glad of the sheltering darkness.

But two or three feet away, at the next window, sat Miss Browne, also in the dark, Miss Browne, now crying happily into her wet handkerchief, now looking at the moon and whispering, 'Love, love, how beautiful, how beautiful!'

The sound of footsteps, however, in the adjoining room brought her swiftly outside Hermie's window.

'Hermie!' she cried in a breathless tone at the sight of the girl sitting there in her white dress. 'That cannot be you?'

'Yes, it is,' said Hermie; 'why shouldn't it be?'

'Oh, my love, my love! It is hardly half an hour. I thought two hours, at the least. My dear, my love, no one disturbed you? Oh, my love, don't tell me Roly and Floss got loose?'

'I don't know what you mean,' Hermie said shortly, 'but I can't help thinking it is rather ridiculous to keep those children sitting there. They ought to be in bed. I am going to bed.'

'To bed—my love—my dear!' gasped Miss Browne. 'Where is he?'

'Where is who?' asked Hermie impatiently.

'M-M-Mr. M-Mortimer Stevenson,' said Miss Browne in a whisper.

Hermie had her secret to hide.

'What should I know about Mr. Stevenson?' she said coldly. 'I presume he

has gone home.'

Gone home! All could not have gone well and happily in half an hour! Miss Browne grew quite pale.

Such a sweet half-hour it had been for her! For twenty minutes of it she had thought of nothing but the white light of love that was going to flood Hermie's life. But during the last ten minutes there had come to her a thought of the material advantages that would accrue to the girl—Stevenson would have four or five thousand a year at his father's death. It had been very sweet to sit and think of dear little flower-faced Hermie lifted for ever above the sordid cares of wretched housekeeping.

'My love—my dear,' she faltered, 'I—I am old enough to be your mother. Could you trust me—won't you——'

But Hermie, with the blind young eyes of a girl, saw nothing outside her window but tiresome Miss Browne, crying a little into her handkerchief (she often cried), stammering out sentences that seemed to have no beginning or end (her sentences seldom had), twisting her fingers about (she never kept them still).

This, when the girl's excited heart wanted to be away from all voices, all eyes, and go over the strange sensations, with the moon alone for witness.

'Miss Browne,' she said, making a strong effort not to speak unkindly, 'I have a headache to-night, and want to be alone. Would you be so kind as to keep what you have to say till morning, and tell me then?'

Nothing could have been swifter than the way Miss Browne melted away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XI

A Squatter Patriot

It was eleven o'clock before Mortimer reached home, not that Coolooli lay two hours and a half distant from the selection, but that he was trying to ride and ride till the raw edges of his wound had closed together somewhat.

Finally he remembered his father would be waiting up for him—one of the old man's fixed customs was to be the last one up in his house—and he turned his mare's head in the direction of the sleeping station. He rode up through the moonlit paddocks and the belts of bush, and wondered a little, as he looked at his home, that the sadness of the place had never struck him before.

The house rose on the crest of a hill, convict-built, most of it, in the very early days of the colony, and with a wing or two added here and there. Large, thoroughly comfortable, yet it stood there with a certain air of sternness, as if it knew what unhappy hands had laid its strong foundations, what human misery built up its plain thick walls.

No creepers clung to it and wooed it with their grace; no fluttering muslins, fashioned by women's hands, blew about its plain windows. In the wide garden that encircled it trees grew, and handsome shrubs, but the flowers seemed to know themselves for strangers there, and came not. Mortimer's eyes went to the twin hill, half a mile away.

How often had he raised a house on that! Not a grim, plain one, like this his home, but a large sunny cottage, with wide verandahs and large bright windows, and a garden where all the sweet flowers in the world ran mad.

Near enough the big house for the old man, left to himself, not to feel lonely; far enough away for Hermie to be unquestioned queen, and free as the winds that blew.

Oh, the happy hours he had wandered on that farther hill, raising that happy home to receive his love! There had even been a moonlight night or two when he had furnished it—furnished it with deep chairs and wide sofas and delicious hammocks, all for the little light-haired girl who worked so hard on that wretched selection to nestle into and rest. He had begun to work harder and give deeper thought than was his wont to the management of the station; there would be plenty of money for an income, he knew, but he wanted even more than plenty; he wanted the little hands that had always been so afraid to spend sixpence, to revel in the joy of flinging sovereigns broadcast. He had been waiting—waiting to tell her, it seemed for years—waiting till she was just a little older and a little older.

But the long frock to-day had told him she was a woman, and he had rushed to know his fate; and now all was over.

He put his saddle in the harness-room, and turned the horse out into the moonlit paddock. He went in through the side door, down the wide hall where the lamps still burned for him, and into the dining-room.

His father was sitting at the big table drinking very temperately at whiskey and water, and reading a paper.

'I'm sorry to have kept you up, dad,' Mortimer said.

'That's all right,' said his father, 'it's not often you do it.'

'No,' said Mortimer.

The old man pushed the spirit-casket across the table.

'You look as if you've got a chill,' he said; 'take a nip.'

The son poured himself a finger's depth, and drank it off, his father watch-

ing him from under his shaggy eyebrows.

'Did Luke or Jack come up this afternoon?' asked Mortimer.

'Jack and his wife,' said the old man. 'Luke went to Sydney yesterday, Jack says, to watch the sales himself.'

'Take Bertha with him?'

'I rather think the young woman took him. Don't believe she's the wife for any squatter; Macquarie Street's the only run she'll ever settle on, with the theatres and dancing halls within cooey.'

'Oh, well,' sighed Mortimer, 'Luke can afford it, and he seems happy enough. Anything fresh about the war? You seem to have all the papers there.'

The old man's eyes gleamed, his hand trembled as he reached for an evening paper, and opened it.

'See here,' he said, 'Buller's made a fatal mistake, a fatal mistake. He's advancing on Ladysmith by this route, wheeling here and doubling there, and having a brush or two on the way. Now, what he ought to have done is plainly to have gone along by night marches up here, and taken up a strong position here. See, I've marked the way he ought to have gone with those red dots. You don't look as if you agree.'

'Oh,' said Mortimer, 'I don't know anything about it. But I should say those Johnnies at the head of things know what they're about better than we can out here.'

'Not a bit, not a bit,' said the old man excitedly; 'it's always the looker-on who sees the most. He's just rushing on to his doom, and those brave chaps shut up in that death-trap'll never get as much relief from this attempt as they would if I sent old Rover out. You mark my words and see. This range of hills is the key of the position, and until those thick-headed generals can be brought to see it, there'll be defeat after defeat. Did I tell you Blake and Lewis and Walsh and Simons came to me, and asked to volunteer?'

'Whew!' said Mortimer. 'I don't see how we'll get along without Blake. Did you give your consent?'

'Consent!' cried the old man. 'If the place went to ruin, d'ye think I'd keep the fellow back? I gave him a cheque, and I promised to look after his wife and brats if he fell; that's what I did.'

'But it's unlucky Walsh wants to go too,' said Mortimer; 'he'd have been the very fellow to take Blake's place. We could have better spared Doherty.'

'That mean-spirited dog! A lot of volunteering there is in him. He'll take good care to keep his cowardly carcase out of bullet range.'

Mortimer looked thoughtful, and poured a little more whiskey into his tumbler.

'I suppose we must get fresh men on in their places straight away,' he said;

'we don't want the place to suffer.'

'Hang the place!' shouted the old man; 'let it go to ruin if it likes. Every man that has the pluck to come and tell me he'll go and shoot at them scoundrels out there, hang me, it's a cheque I'll give 'im, and be a father to his brats if he's got any, and keep his place open till he comes back. And a horse to each—the best I've got on the place—hang me, two horses.'

'It's very generous of you, father,' Mortimer said, a little unsteadily. 'I see, too, by yesterday's paper, you are giving five thousand pounds to the fund. I—hardly knew you felt as strongly about it as this.'

The old man sprang up, and began to thunder about the room.

'Feel strongly about it—strongly! If I was only ten years younger, I'd do more than feel strongly! Me very bed's like stones the nights the cables show no victories; the food in me mouth turns to dust. Feel strongly!'

Mortimer left the table, and stood at the window looking out at the moonlight that made snow of the twin hill. He did not know he drummed on the window pane until his excited father roared to him to stop. Then he turned and went across the room to where his father was sitting again at the table, gazing with furious eyes at the cables that told of Buller's line of march.

'Father,' he said, and put his hand on the old man's shoulder, 'will you give me a couple of horses? I don't know that I want the cheque.'

Old Stevenson trembled. 'You're fooling me,' he said.

'I wouldn't fool when you're so much in earnest,' Mortimer said. 'I'm afraid I'm a slow-witted chap. It never occurred to me before to-night to volunteer. Now it seems the one thing I'd care to do in all the world.'

The old man breathed hard.

'I'm not as young as I was, Morty,' he said quaveringly; 'I—can't take disappointments easy. You're not just saying this lightly? You'll abide by it?'

'The only thing that could stand in my way,' said Mortimer, 'would be your objection. That is removed, since it never existed; so it only remains to find out the date of the sailing of the Bush contingent. Thanks to your subscription, there'll be no difficulty in getting me in, for I know my riding and shooting will pass muster.'

'Morty,' the old man was clinging to the young one's arm, 'Morty, I'd given up the hope of ever seeing this day. Six sons I had—six, and not a puny, poor one among them. That's what held me up when the war got into me veins first, and I had to face it that seventy was too old to fight. It took some facing, lad. After that I just waited and waited. And none of you spoke. I kep' reading the Sydney news, to find that my sons there was going. None of their names was in. Dick, I could ha' forgave him—p'r'aps—as he's six childers and a wife; but James, a doctor, no end of chances to get in. And Walter, the best shot and best horseman ever come

from out back. Never a word that Walter had blood in his veins. I thought it might be funds stoppin' 'em—they might be feared to leave their businesses, thinking they'd suffer. No need of that, I thinks, and sends them a cheque a-piece—a solid thousand each. Does that fetch 'em? Not it. They writes back, very useful, come in nicely. Jack here, married to a wife, wouldn't mind going—see some life; but wife cries and clings, and he gives in. Luke! No son of mine. Oh, I'll not cut him out my will, or do anything dirty by him, but don't never let him give me his hand no more. Cries down his own people, upholds the dirty scoundrelly Boers, and hopes they'll win their fight; dead against the Britain that his own father comed from. My only lad left at home——'

'Well, that laggard at least is off to shoot his best,' said Mortimer lightly.

'Morty,' said the old man, and pressed his hand, 'you'll ha' to forgive me. I've had hard thoughts of you, Morty.' His faded eyes were suffused.

'Don't let's think of that, dad,' said Mortimer. 'What horses do you think I'd better take?'

'In the morning, in the morning,' said Stevenson. 'I only want to sit still to-night, and thank God I've got one son that's a man.'

Mortimer looked at the creased, illumined face, the wet eyes, the old, working mouth. His heart swelled towards him.

'Dad, old fellow,' he said, 'I'm hard hit. I love a girl, and she won't have me.'

His father gripped his hand.

'Poor chap, poor chap!' he said. 'I know, I've been through it. I loved a girl before I married your mother, and I met her daughter the other day, and it was the same as if it had been yesterday.' He looked at his big son with new eyes. 'The girl's got hanged bad taste,' he said.

'You'd have liked her, dad,' Morty said. 'Not like the girls round here, big, strapping women; very slender and sweet-looking, her skin's as pink and soft as that baby of Jack's.'

'Happen I know her?' said his father.

'Her name is Hermie Cameron,' Mortimer said.

'That thriftless beggar's daughter!' was on the old man's lips, but the look on his son's face checked him.

'Yes—a pretty child,' was what he said instead, and thanked Heaven that her taste had been so bad.

'See here, dad,' Mortimer said awkwardly, 'of course it's not in the least likely I shall get hit—-but of course war's war, and there's a chance that one may get knocked over.'

'I don't need telling that,' said the old man quickly.

Mortimer pressed his shoulder. 'It's this, dad,' he said. 'I want to ask you a favour The Camerons—they're so hard up, it—it makes me fairly miserable.'

'A cheque, lad,' said the father eagerly, 'of course, of course. Would a thousand pounds do? You shall have it to-night—this minute.'

He was moving to get his cheque-book, but Morty detained him.

'No, no, dad,' he said, 'you don't know poor Cameron; he's the most unfortunate fellow in the world, but he's the last man who would take a present of money.'

'I could offer it as a loan,' suggested the old man.

'No, he wouldn't have even that, I'm positive,' Mortimer said. 'I've tried a time or two myself, but he's choked me off jolly quickly.'

'Then what can I do, boy?' the father said helplessly. 'Believe me, I'm willing enough.'

'I know, I know, dad. All I want to ask you is to keep an eye on them, and if you can do them a turn, do it. The mother's coming from England in a month or so, and I'd give my head to be able to make the place look up a bit. Cameron and his boy are fairly killing themselves to do their best, but you can guess what their best is when there's only labour and not a sixpence to spend.'

'You leave it to me, leave it to me,' said Stevenson.

'And one other thing,' said Morty. 'Of course I won't, dad, but if I should come a cropper, will you let some of my share go to the little girl I wanted?'

'She shall have every penny of it,' cried the old man; 'hang me, it's the least I can do.'

They gripped hands.

'Good-night, boy!'

'Good-night, dad!'

CHAPTER XII

R.M.S. Utopia

'There,' said Challis, 'that is exactly the middle of the sheet, mother. Just as many again, and we're all kissing each other and going mad.'

She held a piece of note-paper in her hand, and had just carefully marked out with a red pencil one more of the thirty-three days of their voyaging.

'That leaves just sixteen,' said Mrs. Cameron.

'And a half,' said Challis, 'and Mr. Brooks told me the captain says we may be two whole days late, so we'll count seventeen, darling, and not disappoint

ourselves.'

'There is the captain now, talking to Mrs. Macgregor and Lady Millbourne,' said Mrs. Cameron. 'Run and ask him, dear, if it is true. I can't bear the thought.'

'Oh, mother,' said the little girl, and hung back, looking with nervous eyes at the group.

'Girlie, you must get over this silly shyness,' said Mrs. Cameron. 'I think you get worse every day, instead of better. Run along at once.'

The girl rose and walked slowly down the long deck. Some children rushed to her.

'Come and play, come and play,' they said. 'It's rounders, and we want another on our side.'

'Don't ask her,' said a boy, 'she's a stuck-up—never plays with any one.' The voice reached Challis, and coloured her cheeks.

'You will be on our side, won't you?' a little girl said. 'We don't know what to do for another.'

'I—I don't know how to play. I'm very sorry—if I could I would,' Challis said.

'Oh, but you can't help knowing,' urged the small girl. 'All you've to do is hit the ball and run. Mamma's deck-chair there is one rounder, and the barometer thing's another, and that life-buoy's the third, and here's home. Of course you mustn't hit the ball overboard.'

'Oh, please,' said Challis, 'won't you get some one else? I should spoil the game. Oh, I couldn't play—please,' and she broke away from the hand, and heard 'stuck-up' again from the boy as she moved away.

Used to the fire of a thousand eyes, the girl shrank nervously from disporting herself before half a dozen idle watchers. She liked the quiet corners on the deck where no one could see her; she had a habit of lying on some cushions by her mother's side, and pretending to be asleep, just to escape being talked to.

A group of ladies drew her amongst themselves before she could pass.

'The sweet little thing!' said one.

'Have you been dreaming a Wave Nocturne up in your corner?' said another.

'Don't tease the child,' said a third. 'Darling, we're getting up a concert for to-morrow evening, and we're going to give the money to the Patriotic Fund when we get to Sydney. You will play some of your lovely pieces for us, won't you? You know we couldn't have a concert without the aid of the famous Miss Cameron.'

'I am afraid mother will not allow me to again,' Challis said. 'She said yesterday was to be the last time.'

'The last time! Oh, why—why?' chorused the ladies.

'She said something about wanting me to rest now,' said poor Challis, flushing.

'Oh, but just two or three little pieces,' persisted the promoter of the concert, 'for the wives of the brave boys going to the war! Oh, I know you won't refuse us, will you? That pretty little thing you played for the funds of the Sailors' Home on Monday—what was that?'

'The Funeral March from Chopin's Second Sonata,' said Challis shyly. 'I will ask mother. I am sure, as it is for the soldiers, she will allow me,' and she edged out of the group.

A lady lying on a lounge beckoned to her.

'How are you, my dear, to-day?' she said.

'Quite well, thank you,' was Challis's answer.

'You are looking pale, I think. Your mother should give you quinine. Don't you ever take anything before you play to your big audiences?'

'No,' said Challis.

'Your mother should see you have a quinine powder before you begin, and just before going home a dessert-spoonful of malt extract. It would fortify the system immensely.'

'Would it?' said Challis, a little wearily.

'Is that little Miss Cameron?' said another lady, coming up. 'Now I think Mrs. Goodenough might really introduce us. Ah, now we know each other, and I am very proud—very proud indeed to shake hands with Australia's celebrated player. I heard you in the Albert Hall two nights before we left London, my dear. You play magnificently—magnificently.'

Challis stood with gravely downcast eyes, and never said a word.

'I wonder could you spare me a photograph, my dear,' continued the lady, 'one of those in a white frock that are all over London? And I should like you to write your name across it. Will you?'

'We have not any left—we gave the last away,' said Challis, and with a little good-bye bending her head—something like the grave quiet bend she gave her audiences—she moved along on her errand.

'So that's your player,' the flouted lady said. 'Well, I don't think much of her. Not a word to say for herself. I suppose she is greatly overrated; it is mostly advertisements, you know—wonderful nowadays what can be done by advertisements.'

Challis reached the captain at last. Lady Melbourne had a pleasant word for her, and asked nothing but how she was enjoying *Treasure Island*, which was in her hand. Mrs. Macgregor merely inquired after her mother's headache.

'Captain,' Challis said, 'are we really going to be two days late? Mother is very anxious.'

'Why, we are all hoping it will be more than that,' said Lady Millbourne. 'A perfect voyage like this should last for ever. I want to persuade the captain to break the shaft of his propeller, like the Perthshire did, and let us drift for forty days.'

'Then mother and I would steal the captain's gig and row home by ourselves,' Challis said with a little shy roguery that dimpled her mouth, and made you think she was pretty after all.

'I never loved a dear gazelle,' said the captain, 'but I had to land it days before I should have had to, if it had only been a tiresome elephant. My dear little fairy-fingers, I have to give you up two days before the time. This will be the quickest run I've made this year.'

The glad colour leapt all over the girl's face. 'Oh-h-h!' she cried, and broke away from them, and went bounding back along the deck to her mother, just as any of the children might have gone.

The delightful news necessitated giving all the rest of the morning up to happy chat. They drew their chairs close up together, sheltered from overmuch observation by the angle of the deck-house. Mrs. Cameron had no more headache, *Treasure Island* fell flat and forgotten on the deck.'

[image]

'NOW LET'S JUST GO OVER IT ALL AGAIN,' SAID CHALLIS.

'Now let's just go over it all again,' said Challis. 'Father'll come first. I don't want to kiss any one till I have kissed him. Well, what's he like? No, don't you say, I'll say. He'll have a moustache—no, I think he'll have a beard—yes, a beard. Not a long one, just a short one, and rather curly. And his eyes have a nice laughing look in them, just the nice look like M'sieu de Briot's, who said there was nothing in the world worth worrying about. You said, didn't you? that daddy hated worrying over things. I can't help thinking he'll have a brown velveteen jacket when he comes to meet us, like Mr. Menel's, at Fontainebleau, and paint all over it. But of course he won't. Let's see, he'll have a grey suit and a shiny hat, like Mr. Warner. No, he mustn't have that—that's not like daddie at all. No, I'll tell you; it's very hot at Wilgandra, so he'll have a nice white linen suit and a white helmet, and he might—he might be holding up a big white umbrella lined with green—you know, mamma, like that nice man who came on board at Malta.'

Mrs. Cameron was leaning back, her eyes shining, a fond smile on her lips as she listened to the girl's prattle.

'Then there'll be Hermie, and I know she's lovely. Don't you think she

will be? You said you always thought she would grow up very beautiful. Oh, isn't it dreadful that we've never had a photo of them? Such lots of mine sent to them, and never any of theirs! It's like drawing their faces with your eyes shut. I think Hermie will have her hair in a thick plait. I suppose she goes to picnics and dances and everything, and always knows what to say to people. Mother, I don't think I shall ever get to know what to say. I'm fourteen, and nothing will come into my head to answer people. A lady said to me this morning, "You play magnificently." Now what can you answer to that? I really felt I'd like to say, "Yes, don't I?" just to see how she would look. Only I was afraid it would be rude. If I'd said, "Oh no, I don't, you're mistaken," she would have thought I was mock modest, wouldn't she? But Hermie, yes, she'll always know what to say. I can sleep in her room, can't I? You said there wouldn't be any other. It will be like Ellen and Edie Fowler we met on the trip to Dover; they always had their arms round each other, and used to tell each other everything and everything. Hermie and I will; we'll whisper and whisper all night, just like they did.'

The steward came up with eleven-o'clock tea and the glass of milk that Challis always drank. Mrs. Cameron left her cup to grow cold, Challis set her tumbler in an insecure place, and a lurch of the ship sent it flying.

'Never mind, I couldn't have drunk it,' she said, then as the man came back, 'I am so sorry to give you that trouble, steward. If you like to bring a cloth, I'll wipe it up myself.'

'Well, about Bart,' said the mother, 'what will Bart be like?'

'Oh, Bart,' said Challis, 'I just feel as if we'll rush straight together, and never come undone again. That's the sort of feeling you have when you're twins. I feel I'd like to give him everything and sew his buttons on and let him bully me. You notice the Griffithses here. They're twins, and she does everything he tells her, and he gets everything for her. It's lovely. I hope Bart hasn't forgotten we're twins.'

'And Roly?'

'Roly? I'm not sure of Roly. I can hardly see him at all. I think, p'r'aps, he's like that little boy at our table who wears Eton suits and tries to walk like the boatswain. All I can remember about Roly is one day we were eating watermelon in the paddock, and Roly ate his slice away and away, till there was just a green circle round his head.'

'And Flossie—my little baby Floss?'

'Darling little Flossie, I almost love her best of all. She's got very goldy hair and a teeny little face, and she's as little as Lady Millbourne's little girl. And she likes being carried about, and she can't dress herself, and I shall dress her, and fasten all the dear little buttons, and tie her sashes. And I shall put her to bed myself, nobody else must, and I'll tell her stories and stories. And every day

there'll be something new for her out of my box. There are fifteen things for her, mother, not counting what she's to go halves with Roly in. Isn't it a darling little tea-set? I never saw such sweet little cups. And won't she like the little dolls from the Crystal Palace? I'd really like to play with them myself. And the big doll we got in the Rue de Crenelle. I must get on with its frock to-morrow, mother, or it never will be done.'

On, on went the ship through the secret waters. New stars came out on the great night skies, new breezes played in the rigging. On, on, and the long days dropped away, somewhere, somewhere, beyond the edge of the sea. On, on, and the happy eyes saw at last the dear frown of the Australian coast-line.

CHAPTER XIII

The Bush Contingent

'Armed year—year of the struggle!
No dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses for you, terrible year.
Year that suddenly sang by the mouths of the round-lipped cannon—
I repeat you, hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year.'

Cameron was in Sydney again—the first time for seven long years. He had come down almost a month before the date upon which the Utopia was advertised as due, with the desperate hope of getting something to do that might yield him enough money to buy a new suit.

Up on the selection he wore soft shirts and old tweed trousers almost all the time.

When it came to a question of finding him starched shirts and a decent suit and hat in which to face his wife, Hermie and Miss Browne were nonplussed.

Finally they discovered one suit that had not been taken, piecemeal, to work in; but the moths had also discovered it. Sponge and press and darn as Hermie might, it still looked disreputable; the shirts were ragged, there was no hat that was not hopelessly spoiled with the sun and dust and rain.

It forced itself upon Cameron that there was but one thing to do—he must borrow a few pounds from some one.

And there was but one man he knew who would lend it to him—Mortimer Stevenson. Hermie had never told her secret. He groomed Tramby up a little, and

put on a linen coat and hat, and set out in the direction of Coolooli. He hoped he might not meet the father; he was quite conscious of the fact that the business-like, successful old man looked upon him as a shiftless beggar. They knew each other slightly; Stevenson had ridden in two or three times when passing the selection, and stayed for an hour or two talking stock and crops and the war. Once or twice Cameron had been for dinner to Coolooli while shearing was on, and there were chances to learn successful methods. But he shrank with all his soul from encountering the old man this morning.

Two or three aboriginal women were coming back from a journey to the house, cloths full of stores and broken food slung over their shoulder. Stevenson forty years ago had had to break up a big camp of them on the land he had just taken up, and drive them farther west. Ever since he had not felt justified in refusing food to any of their colour.

Cameron stopped the women, to ask if they had seen Mortimer riding away that morning.

'I say, Mary,' he said, 'you been see that one Mr. Mortimer?'

'Ba' al mine see 'im that one young pfeller Stevenson walk about,' said the most ancient of the women. 'Old pfeller Stevenson 'im up there. You gib it tik-a-pen, you gib it plenty pfeller 'bacca.'

Cameron threw her a bit of precious tobacco, which she proceeded at once to cut up and cram into her unsavoury-looking pipe. Then he rode on; Mortimer might by chance have gone out somewhere on the run before the women had reached the station. Half a mile nearer to the house a sundowner had been put on to mending a fence. At present he was smoking and looking at it occasionally.

'Going up to volunteer, mate?' he said, as Cameron rode through a gate.

Cameron disclaimed the honour.

'Take a tip and do it,' the fellow said. 'The old chap is off his nut just now, and is jolly well flinging his money round—him as was too close to give a fellow tucker without turning him on to axe-sharpening first. You'll get your fare to Sydney and a moke and pocket of tin handed over to you afore you've finished of telling him you want to join.'

Cameron inquired good-humouredly why under such exceptional circumstances he himself did not volunteer.

He grinned. 'Guv'nor's knowed me on and off for twenty year,' he said, and fell to looking at the work before him again. 'Seems to think I've had too much bush experience. Had a try on, of course, but Mister Mortimer he put the stopper on me. I'm cursing my luck for not waiting till he'd gone.'

'Gone!' said Cameron; 'why, where's he going?'

'He went last Monday—you must be a just-come not to know,' the man said; 'he's goin' off to glory along o' the Swaggies Army.'

Cameron turned his horse's head and rode slowly back to the selection.

He took a picture or two, and tried to sell them in Wilgandra, but they were still frameless, and he only raised a pound by the sale of both.

It was his neighbour Daly who helped him most; he saved him his fifty shilling railway ticket by sending him to Sydney in charge of a dozen trucks of sheep.

Landed there after the almost intolerable journey, he tried desperately for work—even beat up an old friend or two, who looked askance at his shabby appearance. One offered him a pound which he could ill spare, having fallen on hard times himself, the other wrote him half a dozen useless recommendations to various business men.

Cameron hung around the quay in a sort of fascination; no pilot boat went out but he did not tremble, no great ship came round Bradley's Head but he felt it bore his wife on board. The transports sent from the Cape for the Bush Contingent—The Atlantian and the Maplemore—were already anchored out in the stream, the great numbers painted on their sides adding an unusual note to the shipping on the smiling harbour. Launches and heavily weighed boats bearing timber for the horse-boxes were continually putting off from the quay to cross the intermediate stretch of water to where they lay.

The bustle and movement woke Cameron to life again, and the knowledge that he must do something, if it were only to take a header into the plentiful water; not here at the quay where a thousand eyes would see, but from one of the quiet bays or headlands the harbour has so many of.

Then he pulled himself together again, recognised it was want of food that had begot such cowardice in him, and spent his last shilling on a good meal. After that he tramped out to Randwick to the camp, and asked for Private Mortimer Stevenson.

The sentry jerked his head in a certain direction, and Cameron made his way to where some ten thousand perhaps of Sydney's citizens, women and children, had crowded, as they crowded almost every afternoon, for the novelty of seeing the bushmen drill.

It was an odd, unmilitary spectacle. Uniforms were not yet served out, and there seemed no regularity as to height. Here a sunburnt fellow from 'out back' drilled in a tattered flannel shirt and a pair of ancient moleskins that had seen several hard shearing seasons. Next to him was some wealthy squatter's son in a well-cut light grey suit, then a rough fellow with a beard half a foot long, moleskins again, and an old red handkerchief tied round his throat, then a lad, a fine well-grown fellow in the white flannels he played tennis in on his far-off station. None of the pomp, the *éclat* of militarism was there—not even the discipline; the men gossiped cheerfully with each other even while they stood in

their ranks, they laughed at the girls in the crowd—even threw kisses to them. They were a fine, independent-looking lot, and you knew at a glance at them that they would think no more of carrying their lives in their hands than most people think of carrying umbrellas. But you marvelled how they were to assume in so few weeks' time the well-groomed, spick-and-span, automatic appearance you had hitherto associated with the word soldiers.

Cameron watched the different squads for a little time, and felt proud of Mortimer when he found girls and men were pointing him out and saying. 'That one, look! the fourth from the end; he's a splendid-looking fellow, isn't he?' 'See that fourth chap, that's the sort of man we want to represent us.'

But the drilling and the hoarse cries of the hardworked sergeants seemed endless, and Cameron wandered on and watched the riding and shooting tests which separated the genuine bushmen from the counterfeits, who swarmed here, as easily as the winnow separates the grain from the chaff. At last the squads broke up, and the men mixed with the crowd or went off, mopping their steaming faces, to their tents or the canteen.

Mortimer broke loose from the men around him, and went instantly to Cameron, whom he had quickly seen while drilling. He carried him off direct to his tent.

'I'm awfully sorry to have kept you waiting so long,' he said. 'Here, try this deck-chair, it's more comfortable than that bench. And what will you have to drink? Oh, I know, you like lemon squash.' He turned to a rough-looking fellow at the door. 'Go down to the canteen, Brady, like a good fellow, and get a jug of lemon squash. Here's the money.' He turned back to Cameron. 'I'd have given anything to get away when I saw you, but you can guess what it is out there.'

'Yes, yes,' said Cameron, 'it doesn't matter; it was all interesting. I have been looking about.'

Mortimer gave him a sharp look.

'Is all well up there?' he said. 'It isn't often you come down.'

'Nothing's wrong,' said Cameron, 'I came down to meet my wife, that's all.'

'Of course, of course,' said Mortimer; 'stupid of me. I was reading about it only this morning in the paper—about the big welcome the citizens intend to give your little girl. There is to be a launch—the Government launch, isn't it?—and the mayor and no end of people are going up the harbour to meet her.'

'Are they?' said Cameron.

'You've been consulted about it, surely?' said Mortimer warmly. 'They're not doing all this without referring to you?'

Cameron straightened himself a little.

'I've had no fixed address since I came down,' he said. 'They've overlooked me, I suppose, because they don't know I exist; I hardly do, you know.'

'Are any of the others down with you?' asked Mortimer—'Bart or Roly or any of them?'

'Oh no,' said Cameron. 'Some one has to mind the landed property against my return.'

'And are they all well?' pursued Mortimer. 'Roly—wasn't Roly looking a little thin before I left?'

'Oh no,' Cameron said, 'he's right enough. The girls feel the life more than he and Bart. My eldest girl seemed very off colour when I left?'

'Not typhoid?' burst out Mortimer. 'I saw in the paper it had broken out in Wilgandra——'

'Oh no, we're too far for that. Nothing but the heat. Was that Timon I saw among the horses?'

'Yes, I brought him and the governor's favourite roan down—he made me have him.'

'Mortimer—I'm compelled to ask—I cannot do without—my wife—Challis—suit—make them ashamed——' Cameron's voice choked.

'Confound that Brady!' said Mortimer, springing up and upsetting his chair; 'takes as long to get a lemon squash as if I'd sent him to town for it. If it had been a bottle of whiskey, now, no delay then; might come in for a spare glass himself. You r'mber Brady, rouseabout up at Coolooli, gives a home-touch to see him about. He volunteered the same time as I. I say, I'm off duty now for the rest of the day—may as well come back to town and have a bit of spree. Brooks, I say Brooks, go and see if there's a spare cab, there's a good fellow.' Another coin went into another rough fellow's hand.

Cameron found himself driving back to town by Stevenson's side before he had collected his thoughts—or even had his lemon squash.

Half the way Mortimer rattled on about the day's work in camp, the transports, provisions for the comfort of the horses, the prospect of the contingent's success.

'By the way,' he said all at once, 'I want you to do me a favour. The governor's been too free with his cash for me—not safe to have too much about, you know—tempt some poor devil. D'ye mind taking some of it and looking after it for me—just for a year or two till I get back? Use it, you know; you might use it now instead of drawing any out of your own account, then when I come home you can pay me back. Awfully obliged it you will; had a couple of pounds stolen out of my tent yesterday, and have been going about with fifty pounds on me since. I'll get you to look after thirty of it; the governor's cabled no end of money to a bank in Durban for me, for fear I'll run short.'

Half a dozen crisp notes were thrust into Cameron's hands, and Mortimer, hot and red in the face, was rattling on again about the horse-boxes for the voy-

age, and how they should have been made this way, and not that way, and about the wisdom of telling the men to bring their own saddles, and about that egregious ass the public, who seemed to think the Bushmen were so thin-skinned that they could not bear a word of command, unless it was put in the form of a polite request.

'Isn't it tommy-rot?' said Mortimer. 'We're not a pack of sensitive girls. We enjoy the discipline, and recognise we have to be licked into some sort of order, unless we want to remain a mob.'

Cameron was very quiet, but he gripped Mortimer's hand on parting, and cleared his throat to try to say something.

But the young volunteer found he must be off in violent haste.

'By George,' he said, 'haven't another minute; promised the colonel I'd go out and kick up a row about the horse-boxes,' and his big loose figure plunged back to the waiting cab. 'You'll come and see me off, all right, so long'; and the cab woke to life and moved smartly off, to lose itself in the stream of vehicles going towards the quay.

Cameron, a lump in his throat, turned towards the General Post Office, to see if there were further news from the little contingent at home. The last letters from Bart had been disquieting; Small, the butcher, it seemed, had transferred the mortgage he held on the selection to old Mr. Stevenson. 'And Daly says,' Bart had written, 'it's about the worst thing that could have happened, Stevenson's so close-handed. Small often used to give you time, but he says Stevenson never will.' A second letter followed. Stevenson had foreclosed, but was willing for a year or two, until a tenant he had in view was ready to occupy, that Cameron should remain on the place. In the meantime, however, he, Stevenson, must be at liberty to make any alteration or improvement he saw fit to the property.

The present letter was excited in tone. 'After all, dad,' the boy wrote, 'I believe it's the best thing that could have happened. The place is looking up no end, there are quite ten men at work on it, so the chances are the mater and Challis won't quite die of the shock of seeing it. And what do you think? You know that calf we gave Hermie two years ago? Well, I never knew there was good blood in it, did you? It's the last thing you'd think to look at it. But that Stevenson knows a thing or two. He comes down here and pokes about pretty often, and he saw it, and what did you think? Offered me ten pounds down for it! I couldn't believe my ears. Don't you remember I tried to sell it when you were ill, and Small offered two for it? But I wasn't going to let on I was so green as not to know it was a good sort, and I said straight that we could not let it go under fifteen. He looked at me in that queer, sharp way of his, and he poked at the calf a bit, and then said, "Say twelve ten." But I'd got my mettle up by that. I knew if a close-handed, hard chap like that offered twelve ten, it must be worth

quite twenty-five. I just turned round and went on digging up the potatoes for dinner and said, "Fifteen pounds," for all the world like Small does at the sales. He went round to Dimple and began poking at her again, and examining her like anything, and then he said, "Fourteen pounds, sonny." I'd got enough potatoes out for Miss Browne by then, so I put them in the basket and just said, "Good morning, sir," and pretended to be going.

'Then he began laughing fit to kill himself, and in between the laughs he said, "Fifteen," and I said, just like Small, "She's yours, and you've got a bargain." And he laughed again, and said, "I have." I hope you're not vexed, dad, at me doing this on my own. I've been feeling very anxious ever since, for she must have been a really valuable little thing—he's not the man to be deceived; they say he's the best judge of stock in the country. I told Daly about it, and he wanted to know if Stevenson was drunk at the time. He doesn't drink at all, does he? But I thought you'd agree that the fifteen would be more use to us now than twenty-five later, and that's why I closed with him. I'm sending five down in this, thinking it will come in usefully for you. And Hermie and Miss Browne have gone off to Wilgandra to get new dresses and cups and sheets and whips of other things with the rest. You should have seen their list. The mater and Challis'll think we're no end of swells after all.'

CHAPTER XIV

Home to the Harbour

'City of ships!
City of the world! (for all races are here,
All the lands of the earth make contributions here;)
Proud and passionate city—mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!
Spring up, O city—not for peace alone, but be indeed yourself, war-like!
War, red war is my song through your streets, O city!'

Down through the excited waters of the harbour came the great ship Utopia, the fussy little tug running on ahead.

Away near the Heads the stretching blue had danced almost as unfurrowed by the lines of boats as outside, where the ocean's ways lay wild.

But as the ship came down, down closer to the city, a stately untroubled belle on the arm of her hot, nervous, fidgety little partner, many of the passengers felt with astonishment they had never seen so many watercraft in all their lives before. Rowing boats—scores and scores of them! They looked like flies on an agitated surface of translucent honey. Sailing boats! Surely not one stitch of canvas owned by the city was out of use. Poised, waiting, up and down, everywhere, you felt there was going to be a storm and these were the white gulls come in flocks to flutter and dip and rise till it began. The ferry-boats! They went their hurried journeys to and from—across to North Shore, to Mosman's, and Neutral Bay, to Manly, and you could fancy they were looking over their shoulders all the way and longing to come back. The ocean-going boats, leaning at the Woolloomooloo wharves or anchored out in the stream, they were black with eager people, and waved from every point long strings of brilliant flags—the flags of half the world. America was there, shaking out her Stars and Stripes from a mail steamer, a San Francisco timber-boat passing along to a berth in Darling Harbour, and a transport come to take stores for the army in the Philippines.

From one of the men-of-war in Farm Cove floated Japan's white flag with its red chrysanthemum; France had her war-ship, with its red, white, and blue ensign, also in the cove. All the others, half a dozen of them, floated the white ensign of England.

Up at the quay lay the mammoth Friedrich der Grosse, Germany's black, red, and white ensign flying in the wind amid her gay strings of bunting, and round the corner, in Darling Harbour, among the boats that had come down heavily laden from the rivers, the boats from all the other colonies and Fiji and Noumea. Russia and Norway both were represented.

And the city—had the City of Blue Waves gone mad?

As the Utopia made her slow progress up the harbour, those on board were able to catch a breath of the excitement from the land.

The wharves at Woolloomooloo seemed a black mass of humanity; the windows of the warehouses were lined with faces, men and small boys had taken up vantage-points on scaffolding, cranes, the very roofs of the wharf buildings. On the green park-like slopes of the Domain thousands were patiently waiting, white and gay coloured parasols and dresses enlivening the sombre garments of the men.

Challis stood at the side of the boat with trembling knees and rounded eyes. Mrs. Cameron was beside her, very pale, struggling hard for composure, putting her hand to her throat secretly now and again, to smooth the lumps that seemed to be rising there. A warm reception she had had no doubt her child would have; indeed, the Melbourne papers she had seen had said big preparations were to be made for her reception, for was not this the city of her birth, the eager, open-

handed city that had made it possible for the world to judge of her genius? But the mother's wildest thoughts had never dreamed of anything like this; royalty itself had never on any of its journeyings been welcomed in more magnificent fashion.

She paled and paled—she slid down her hand, and caught and held tightly in it one of the small thin hands of her gifted child.

Yet, great as the honour undoubtedly seemed, had the power to change things been hers, she would have swept the wharves clear of all that strange-faced crowd, and have had, standing there alone, looking up at her, the husband her heart was throbbing for, the children she yearned for, and yet would hardly know.

The lady who had begged the photograph pressed her way up.

'What does it all mean? Did ever you see such excitement? Is it really as Mrs. Graham says—the welcome for Miss Cameron? I never saw anything to equal it in my life. My dear, my dear, you are the most fortunate girl in the world. I am proud to have shaken hands with you, honoured to have sat at the same table. See, here is my travelling ink-pot and a pen, write me your autograph, darling.'

Mrs. Goodenough bustled up and caught at the mother's arm.

'Such excitement is enough to kill her; give her two of these quinine tablets, and keep these in your pocket, to give if you notice a sign of flagging. It will be a most exhausting day for her. And you are pale—here, I have my flask of tonic—you must, you must indeed take some. You will never bear up through all the congratulations, if you do not. Well, well, I must say I have never seen anything like this in my life.'

Challis stood as white as if carved in marble; sometimes her little soft underlip quivered, sometimes she gave an almost piteous glance round, as if seeking an impossible escape. She had had warm welcomes and even cheers and a little bunting in many towns, but what was this she had fallen upon?

The gangways were hardly down before there hurried on board from the wharf a gentleman in a tall hat, and two others with the ungroomed, long-haired appearance of the musician the world over. One of them bore a moderate-sized bouquet of white flowers, and another a small harp of roses that looked a little dashed with the sun and dust.

'Miss Cameron, Miss Cameron!' was the call echoed all along the deck. The captain himself came up and took the little girl and her mother down to the men. They were warmly shaken hands with, their healths and the voyage asked after, and the flowers presented. Then one of the musicians began to read an address couched in the most flattering terms, but half-way through the tall-hatted gentleman tapped his arm and whispered and looked at his watch. And

the musician nodded and turned over the leaves of the address, and shook his head doubtfully and looked hastily also at his watch.

'My dear Miss Cameron,' he said, and rolled the big paper up, 'I shall really have to keep this for a more opportune time. We had thought the Utopia would not have been here until four this afternoon, when all our arrangements would have gone well. But now the mayor and the Euterpe Society, and all the musical bodies in the town are of course engaged in seeing the Bush Contingent off. We expect the procession any minute—indeed, it must be nearly in Pitt Street by this.'

Mrs. Cameron said a few graceful words, in which she begged them not to waste time now; she was assured by all their kind speeches of the welcome her daughter had in this her native city, and she expressed her sense of the good fortune that had awaited them, inasmuch as the Utopia had arrived in time to see an event of such national importance as the departure of the Bush Contingent. No one could have guessed at the dear fatuous notion she had been nursing in that sensible head of hers until a moment back.

As for Challis—Challis put her head over her fast-fading harp and laughed, laughed uncontrollably a minute or two. Then she stretched out her hand and touched one of the musician's sleeves. 'Couldn't we get off and see the procession?' she said.

The musician looked at her eagerly, admiringly. 'Just what I was going to suggest,' he cried. 'Come on, come on—we've got a carriage out here for you, and if we've any luck we'll just get up into Macquarie Street in time.'

He and his friends swept the two voyagers off their feet, and carried them with the pushing throng to the gangway. None of the passengers had any time to look at them; all were a little off balance at the time, rushing about with faces broken up into tears and laughter, kissing and throwing arms round those they had been long parted from, wildly imploring stewards for gladstones and handbags from their cabins.

In the crush Challis whispered to her mother, 'Oh, aren't I glad it's not for me!' in a tone of fervent thankfulness.

When they were down on the wharf, the rapturous meetings on all sides sent their eyes hungrily searching the crowd again for their own home welcomers. But there seemed no one, no one, look as they would, and they went slowly down the company's wharf with the welcomers the city had sent to the hired open carriage outside.

Challis and her mother sat facing the horses, the tall-hatted gentleman and one musician sat opposite to them, the other went on the box. It had been the committee's intention to bid the coachman wear white favours, in honour of the visitor's youth. But the item had been forgotten, and the man wore instead three of the Contingent medals boys were selling in the streets. The carriage made a

snail's progress along the quay crowded with the emptyings of the ferry-boats, and slowly, slowly climbed up to Bridge Street, which was on the line of march. The multitude looked at the vehicle.

'Who's the kid?' shouted a youth.

And a bright young Australian yelled:

'The colonel's kid—going to meet her pa and say good-bye.' On which the human sea lifted up its lungs and hurrahed wildly, till something new came along to attract its interest.

So Challis had her cheers.

But in Macquarie Street all traffic was suspended, and a hoarse, red-faced man in some sort of a uniform charged at the open carriage, and ordered it to go back, as if it were no more important than a broken-springed buggy with one horse.

'Have to take yer up Castlereagh Street, ladies,' said the driver regretfully. 'If yer'd been 'arf an hour sooner, we'd have just got up to the 'ospital, and yer'd 'ave seen it all fine.'

'Oh,' said Challis eagerly to the musicians, 'see! see that lovely heap of wood—look—over there—those women are getting off—there would be lots of room for us. Oh, do let's get out!'

In three minutes the little party was sitting, clinging, or standing on a pile of timber outside a half-built house, and the carriage had backed, backed away to take a clear course up deserted Castlereagh Street.

The sudden roll of a drum sent its electric vibration through the tense multitude. The cry of, 'Here they come!' raised falsely a dozen times during the last two hours, now had the positive ring in it that carried entire conviction.

'Oh, look, mother! See here come the horses! Doesn't it remind you of the Jubilee crowd in London?' said Challis.

But Mrs. Cameron pushed roughly at her shoulder. 'Come here,' she said hoarsely; 'change places with me. Don't fall—there, hold fast. Let me get lower down.'

A man was fighting his way through the throng—a grey-bearded man in a well-cut light grey suit and a white helmet; and such was his determination that five minutes after Mrs. Cameron had seen him he had worked his way through twenty yards of solid crowd and was standing just below her.

Mrs. Cameron turned to the musician who had been at much pains to secure a little room for himself on the timber.

'Mr. Jardine,' she said, 'will you please get down and give up your place to my husband? I—I have not seen him for six years.'

Jardine climbed down cheerfully—but also of necessity. Cameron pulled himself into the vacant place.

They were side by side at last, and neither could speak; they just looked at each other with white faces—looked, looked.

Finally their hands went together.

A choked little voice came from above after a minute or two.

'Me too, daddie—speak to me too.' And it was then he remembered his child as well as his wife was come back to him.

He reached up and squeezed the eager hand, he put his other hand round her little shoe and squeezed that too. Challis leaned down and kissed the top of his helmet.

'I said you'd have a helmet on,' she said, with a hysterical little laugh.

His hand went back to his wife's.

'Is there no way of getting out of this rabble?' she said.

'You might be crushed to death. There's nothing for it now, but to sit still till it is over.'

'Why—why weren't you on the wharf?'

'I was—of course I was—I saw you both plainly just as they put the gangway down. But there was an accident: a little child near me was knocked down by a luggage truck, badly hurt, at the moment: there seemed no one else to give the mother a hand. By the time I'd got him up and into a cab and found a fellow willing to go with her to a doctor's, you had gone. They told me the carriage had come up Bridge Street. I have been fighting my way and looking for you ever since.'

'The children?' said the mother.

'All well, quite well; I couldn't bring them.'

'No. Oh, to get out of this hateful crowd!'

'Here they come,' Challis said; 'no, they are only policemen.'

The fine horses and men of the mounted police rode by, then a small body of Lancers; after these marched some two hundred sailors of the Royal Navy, and perhaps half that number of Royal Marines.

Then the Bushies.

And now the crowd took the reins off itself, and gave head to its madness. It hurrahed itself hoarse; it waved its arms, and its handkerchief, and its hat, and its head; it flung flowers, and flags, and coloured paper; it hung recklessly from roofs, and walls, doors, chimneys, fences, lamp-posts, balconies, verandah-posts, and it yelled, 'There's Jack,' 'Good-bye, Joe,' 'Come back, Wilson,' 'Shoot 'em down, Tom,' 'Hurrah, Cooper!' 'Luck to you, Fogarty,' 'There's Storey,' 'Hurrah, Watt!' It handed up drinks to the thirsty horsemen, it pressed handkerchiefs, cigars, and sweets indiscriminately upon them.

In return the sunburnt Bushies waved their helmets and little toy flags; one held up a small fox-terrier, another an opossum by the tail; they rode along with

one arm free for handshaking all along the route, threw kisses to the excited women, even at times leaned down and kissed some tip-toe eager girl in a white dress and a wonderful hat.

They looked as military as one could wish now; Cameron was amazed to think this was the same material he had seen drilling. A finer body of men had never passed down the streets of any city. They sat their magnificent horses magnificently; you knew there was nothing they could not do with the splendid beasts. The khaki uniform and khaki helmet, and the sunburnt ruddy faces made a healthful, workmanlike study in brown.

'That's the dog Bushie,' said Cameron to Challis. 'Every one in the colony is interested in him; the men say he will be very useful.'

The crowd yelled, 'Bushie, Bushie—hurrah! good old doggie,' as the intelligent sheep-dog came into sight.

'Here's Stevenson—see, the man on the left, Molly,' Cameron said; 'our best friend. Good-bye, Mortimer, good luck! Good-bye, old fellow, good-bye.'

Mortimer waved his helmet gaily.

'What a fine fellow!' said Mrs. Cameron, and what a good face! Who is the old man?'

'Why, it's old Stevenson. Yes, just like him to do that,' Cameron answered. The old squatter had ridden alongside the Bushmen the whole of the line of march. His face was working with excitement; every time a cheer went up from the crowd he cheered too, standing up from time to time in his saddle and waving his soft felt hat. He kept beside his son as much as he could; he was almost bursting with the pride of his position.

Challis's eyes were full of tears.

'Oh,' she said, 'what a very dreadful thing if that nice man should be killed!' She was quite captivated by the sunny smile Mortimer had given their group.

'There's not a better fellow in the world,' Cameron said warmly.

The khaki died away in the distance, the prancing horses were gone, the sound of the band grew fainter and fainter.

Yet a little time, and the transports would be plunging through the Heads with them, carrying them forward as fast as might be to dye the veldt red with their own blood or that of the Boers.

CHAPTER XV

Heart to Heart

'We will not speak of years to-night;
For what have years to bring,
But larger floods of love and light,
And sweeter songs to sing?'

They were in a quiet room at the hotel at last. They had lost sight of the tall-hatted gentleman and one musician entirely; the other had said thoughtfully that he would not intrude.

'This is not the way we meant to welcome your daughter, Mrs. Cameron,' he said, laughing, as he clung by one hand to the timber, 'but, as you see, we're all mad together to-day. By to-morrow we shall have calmed down a little, and there will be a deputation and everything in order. You'll be at the Australia, of course?'

'Yes, I have rooms waiting for them,' Cameron said quietly.

So the pleasant, long-haired fellow drifted away, and Cameron, at the first chance, steered his little family out of the thinning crowd, and found a cab to take them to the peace of the hotel.

They took their hats off. Waiters seemed to think eating was a necessity, and brought in a meal, and stood, two of them, to help serve.

Mrs. Cameron turned her head.

'We would rather wait on ourselves,' she said. 'We have everything that we shall need, thank you, so you may go.'

Cameron drew a relieved breath, though he would as soon have thought of dismissing the men himself as of calmly ordering one of those magnificent colonels out of his way during the afternoon.

'Now we can be cosy,' Challis said, and sat down on her father's knee, instead of using the chair the waiter had placed for her. 'Are we like what you thought?' she asked. 'Someway I can't think now how I could have fancied you would be any different. Oh, I'm sure you're just like what I thought, only——' She paused then, and a little sensitive flush ran up into her cheeks. She had almost said, 'Only your beard is grey.'

But her eyes had gone to its greyness.

'Yes,' he said a little sadly, 'I didn't wait for you, Molly, did I? We always said we would grow old together, but I have left you far behind.'

He hardly knew his wife. Time seemed to have turned back for her. There was not a wrinkle on her skin, the sharp winters had given a bloom like girlhood's to her cheeks, and the varied life and rest from domestic worries had brought the spring back into her blood.

The wife who had gone away had been shrinking, careworn; she had worn

shabby bonnets of her own trimming, dresses she had turned and turned about again. This one had the quiet, assured manner of a woman accustomed to travel. She wore a tailor-made fawn coat and skirt, whose very severity accentuated their style. There was the hall-mark of Paris on her bonnet of violets.

Cameron sent a fleeting thought of gratitude to Mortimer, who had made it possible for his own clothes not to blush beside such garments. They were a quiet little party, and Challis did most of the talking. Cameron looked at his wife when she was occupied with the tea-cups; her searching eyes fastened on him when he turned to speak to his little daughter.

Once, when he passed a plate to Challis, she noticed his hands against the snow of the tablecloth—hands she did not know at all, so rough and weather-marked and deeply brown they were. But she asked no question; instinctively she felt there was something to be told to her, and she hung back from the knowledge, knowing the telling would be pain to him.

'Oh dear,' said Challis, 'if only you had brought Bart down, too, daddie, and he was sitting just here on this chair next to me!'

'I thought it was Hermie you wanted most,' the mother said.

'Ah, Hermie! I want Hermie to sleep with. No, not to sleep with, for we sha'n't shut our eyes at all, but just to lie in the dark and talk and talk.'

'Roly wanted to come,' Cameron said. 'He's war mad, of course. He's painted the name Transvaal Vale on the sliprails.'

'On the what?' said Mrs. Cameron.

Cameron went darkly red.

'The—gate,' he said.

'What else does he do? I want to know about Roly,' Challis said eagerly.

'He wears a football jersey most of the time,' said the father, 'and is to be met at any hour of the day hung all over with the table-knives and the tin-opener and the cork-screw and the sharpening-steel. Also, he carries round his neck a string of what I think he calls double bungers. These are his cartridges. And he came possessed of an old tent in some way—the railway navvies gave it to him, I believe—and he has pitched it just outside the back door, and sleeps in it all night.'

'Oh dear, oh dear! The night air; he will catch a dreadful chill!' cried the mother, used now to English nights.

'Not he! He's a hardy little chap,' said Cameron.

'More, more,' said Challis. 'He's great fun, I think. Tell some more about him, daddie.'

'A neighbour, young Stevenson—you remember the Stevensons of Coolooli, Molly?—gave him half a crown the other day, and of course he went off to Wilgandra and laid in a stock of crackers. He made a rather ingenious fortification that he called Spion Kop, and invited us all out to see it. You don't

know Darkie, the cattle dog, of course—we've only had him four years; Darkie naturally came too. He's rather a curiosity in his way, old Darkie; seems to have a natural love for fire, and goes off his head with excitement whenever a cracker is let off or the boys make a bonfire. Well, he made enough noise barking and yelping over Roly's display to satisfy even that young man. Presently Roly Put a whole packet of his double bungers on the top of his fort, and—what he did not tell me till afterwards—a quantity of blasting powder he had purloined from the navvies. Then he put a lighted match near a long piece of string, and cut down to us as hard as he could. Just at the critical moment, when we were getting our ears ready for the big explosion, Darkie gave a frantic bark of delight, bounded to the fort and seized the whole packet in his mouth. There wasn't time even to shout at him; there came a tremendous explosion, and the air seemed full of stones and earth and Darkie. The old fellow must have been blown six feet up in the air. I think we all shut our eyes, not liking the thought of seeing the poor old dog descend in a thousand pieces. But when we opened them he was down on the ground barking and yelping with more furious delight than ever, and except for a badly singed coat and a burnt tongue, not a bit the worse for his elevation.'

Mrs. Cameron was looking disturbed.

'He seems to do very dangerous things,' she said.

Cameron laughed.

'That's what Miss Browne says,' he answered; 'but he always turns up safe and sound.'

'Miss Browne?' repeated Mrs. Cameron.

Cameron's eyes dropped to his plate, and he drank deeply at his tea, to put off the moment of his answer.

'Who is Miss Browne?' his wife asked again.

Cameron moved his eyes to a button on her coat.

'I was obliged to change lady-helps,' he said.

Mrs. Cameron's face expressed absolute alarm.

'Miss Macintosh—is not Miss Macintosh still with you? You did not tell me. Why did she go? How long has she been gone?'

Cameron looked white. 'Some—little time,' he said; 'she—went to be married.'

'And is this other—is Miss Browne as good? Oh, it would almost be impossible. Have you had to change much?'

Cameron reassured her on that point. Miss Browne had been with them ever since Miss Macintosh left.

'But how long is that? You don't tell me,' she cried.

Cameron looked at a lower button.

'Some—time,' he repeated faintly.

'Jim,' she cried, and almost sharply, 'have you been keeping things from me? How long has Miss Macintosh been gone?'

He lifted his eyes and looked at her. The day of reckoning had come.

'She left six months after you went,' he answered.

The news held Mrs. Cameron speechless for three minutes.

'This other person—Miss Browne—is she as good?' she asked at length.

Cameron breathed hard, and cut a slice of bread.

'She does her best,' he said, 'but she is not—very capable.'

'Jim,' said Mrs. Cameron, 'is there anything else? Have you lost your position?'

He bent his head a little. He merely nodded, and she might have thought it a careless nod, only her eyes suddenly saw the trembling of his work-marked hands.

'Challis,' she said, 'go away—leave us alone.'

The child put down her spoon and fork, and vanished.

Cameron stood up, looking fixedly at the carpet, waiting with bowed head for her questions.

[image]

'HAVE YOU HIDDEN ANYTHING ELSE?' SAID MRS. CAMERON.

'Have you hidden anything else?' she said, 'Are any of the children dead?'

'None of them are dead,' he said.

'Are any of them deformed or hurt in any way?'

'None of them are hurt—they are in good health,' he said.

'Have you ceased to love me?'—her voice was losing the note of fear that made it hard and unnatural.

He looked at her, and his eyes swam.

Her arms were round him, she was kissing him, kissing his wet eyes, his trembling lips, stroking his cheeks, crying over him.

'You are afraid to tell me—me, your own little wife—something that does not matter at all. What can anything matter? We are all alive, and we love each other as we have done always. Darling, darling, don't look like that! Put down your head here, here on my breast—my husband, my darling! This is Molly, who went all through the ups and downs with you; you never used to be afraid to tell her anything.'

He tried to speak, but sobs shook him instead.

'Hush!' she said. 'There, don't talk, don't try to tell me. I know, darling.

You lost the position, and you couldn't get another, and you're all as poor as poor can be. Pooh! what does that matter? You have none of you starved, since you are all alive, and the end has come. Poor hands, poor hands,'—her kisses and tears covered them,—'have they been breaking stones that the children might have bread?'

'Molly,' he said, anguished, 'your worst thought cannot picture what I have brought them to.'

She trembled a little—Hermie, little Floss, the boys!

But she laughed.

'They are alive—they are together, and not in the Benevolent Asylum. My darling, I don't mind in the very least.'

'Molly,' he cried, 'you cannot dream how bad it is! It is Dunks' selection; we have been there four years!'

She trembled again, for she had seen Dunks' selection, and the memory of it was yet in her mind.

But again she laughed.

'It will have made them all hardy,' she said; 'I can see it has done so, or Roly wouldn't be sleeping out of doors.'

'My wife,' he said, 'my wife, my wife!'

They clung together.

'The past is gone,' she whispered. 'I will never leave you again.'

'My wife, my wife!'

'Together now till death; nothing else shall part us, nothing else.'

'My wife!'

Her tears rained down, mingled with his, and fell away into the greyness of his beard.

They clung together, and the room and the world faded. They clung together, and there was no one in all space but themselves and God—God who had given them into each other's arm once more.

Challis came to the door—she had knocked twice, to tell them that the luggage had come from the ship—then she turned the handle, for she thought they had gone out.

But those faces! Those faces of the father and mother, wet, uplifted, almost divine!

Very softly she closed the door again, and stole away.

CHAPTER XVI

The Rosery

They cling in the moonlight, they kiss each other.
"Child, my child!" and "Mother, mother!"'

Bart was on Wilgandra Station to meet them—Bart, healthy-looking and sinewy, if thin; he wore white flannel trousers, a white linen coat, and a new straw hat with a new fly-veil attached. Mrs. Cameron had looked when her husband cried, 'There's Bart,' with eyes that expected to see an out-at-elbow lad, possibly barefoot, probably ill-developed. But there was nothing she would have changed.

'Of course they all wanted to come to meet you,' the boy said, when the first glad greetings were over, and the great panting, shrieking train had become just a quiet black thread climbing the side of the next rise. 'But I didn't want to crowd the buggy.'

'The buggy!' his father said. 'I was just going into the hotel to get one. I'm glad you thought to order it.'

'It's Mr. Stevenson's,' Bart said. 'He sent it down this morning for me to meet you in,' and he led them with much satisfaction to the handsome roomy sociable he had in waiting. Their own solitary equipage, the shabby cart drawn by Tramby and driven by young Daly, was in readiness for the many boxes.

Once, in carrying the luggage to the cart, Bart and his father found themselves alone on the station for a moment. Bart gave a laughing glance from his father's to his own apparel.

'Isn't it a lark?' he said. 'I feel quite shy of myself, don't you?'

'Do the girls look nice?' Cameron said anxiously.

'Spiffin,' said Bart, 'and Miss Browne's got a new dress, and even curled her hair. I say, have you told mother about Miss Browne?'

'Yes, she is quite prepared.'

'And she knows about the selection?'

'She knows about the selection.'

'We've—we've been tidying up a bit, dad. I think you'll find it's a bit—er—tidier.' There was a flush on the boy's cheek, a look of suppressed excitement in

his eyes. 'Let's get on now; the horse doesn't like to stand, and everything's in.'

They drove up the road that wound out of civilised Wilgandra away to parts where the bush took on its wild character again, and rolled either side of them in unbroken severity and loneliness for miles.

But it was early winter now, and the thankful land lay smiling and happy-eyed beneath a cooler sky. Even the newest clearings flaunted rich carpets of grass, green as grass only springs where a bush fire has purged the ground for it. The air was fragrant with the bush scents that rise after rain. A cool, quiet breeze swayed the boughs of the ocean-waste of trees, here and there it lifted the long string of warm-coloured bark—autumn's royal rags—that hung from the silvered trunks.

Cameron was driving, and mechanically turned the horse's head at the place where he had always turned for the sliprails of his selection.

And there were no sliprails!

He turned an astonished glance at Bart, but the boy's eyes only danced.

'I'll get down and open the gate,' he said demurely, and jumped down while his father stared at the neat white gate with The Rosery painted on in black letters. Could this be Dunks' selection that stretched before the head of the horse that bore them slowly along? This the grey, dreary place that had cast its colour over the souls of those who looked at it. A drive ran up from the gate to the house, not a smooth, red gravelled drive by any means, but it was cleared and stumped now all its length and width, and went with pleasant windings between the trees.

A low white two-rail fence divided the bush and sheep ground from the land about the house; the small orchard showed freshly ploughed up and trenched between the trees; a vegetable garden was laid out, and the peas and beans were above the ground already. The flower-beds near the house were dug and weeded, as if they had been beds in the Botanical Gardens; and dahlias, little sunflowers, and cosmea of all shades made a gay mass of colour. The pixies' hands had even attacked the cottage; Cameron himself had given it a coat of red paint that had much altered its forlorn aspect; these new hands had carried the coat of paint even over the dreary galvanised iron roof, had 'picked out' the chimneys, and windows, and verandah-posts with white, added a seven-foot verandah all round, and knocked a French window into the walls here and there.

'Why,' cried Challis, 'it's the sweetest, darlingest little place I ever saw! Oh, I never want to go away from it again!'

Mrs. Cameron was looking with eyes full of pleased surprise.

'Why, Jim,' she said, 'why, dearest, it is really very nice, very nice indeed, so peaceful-looking. You did not prepare me for anything like this.'

Cameron swallowed a lump in his throat.

'I didn't prepare myself,' he began; but his wife's hand was fluttering to the fastening of the sociable door, and her ears were no longer for him, for Hermie and Roly were running out to meet her.

Such a rushing into arms, such kissings, such a choking of laughter and tears! Mrs. Cameron held Hermie to her and from her, and to her again, and marvelled to find her almost a woman.

'My pretty girl, my pretty girl!' she said, the fond tears starting, and Hermie blushed herself into even lovelier colour than before.

Challis kissed her sister and clung to her a moment, then stood away shy and pink, almost crying. Hermie's hair was done 'on top,' her dress was long, so long; she was very pretty and sweet-looking; but oh, there would never be any whispering and whispering in bed—she was far too grown up for that.

Roly came up to the sister and submitted the edge of his left ear to her kiss. He looked at her critically.

'Did the Queen cry when you came away?' he said.

'I didn't notice,' said Challis. 'She was in the garden when I went to say good-bye, and she waved her handkerchief when I got back to the house—perhaps she had been crying into it.'

'Floss, Floss! I want my baby,' the mother's voice was saying.

Hermie looked about her distressed.

'Will you take no notice just yet, darling?' she said. 'She is very—shy, but she won't be able to stay away long; she's hiding somewhere.'

'Well, look here,' Roly said, 'I suppose she'll be wanting to come out here and see you——'

'Who?' said Challis, who also was looking longingly for the little girl she was going to put to bed at night.

'That Queen-woman, of course,' said Roly. 'Look here, you can tell her straight before she comes I'm not going to take my tent down for her. You can let her have Miss Browne's bedroom, and you can't see it from that window. Miss Browne's got a cheek. Wanted me to take it down just for you and mother, cos she says it's untidy.'

'Why, we're dying to see the tent, aren't we, mother?' Challis said.

Mrs. Cameron's arm went round her boy's shoulder, and her lips down to his round, closely cropped head. He dodged skilfully.

'Come and see the tent,' he said. Then a gush of gentler feeling came up in his little boy-heart, and he moved up to her again and rubbed his head on her arm. 'If you like,' he said, 'I'll let you sleep out in it to-night, but not her,' and he pointed a finger at Challis; 'she'd get messing about and trying to tidy up.'

He dragged them round to the back of the cottage, where the tent stood, a most dilapidated spread of ragged canvas.

'Look here,' the owner said, nearly bursting with pride, 'up there, that's the fly, keeps it cool. I can sit in it on the hottest day.'

'No one else could,' laughed Bart.

Roly took no heed of the depreciation.

'See that? That's my water-bag; hang it in a draught, and it's as cool as you like.'

'No,' said Bart again, 'only as *you* like.'

'See this? Keep my meat in it, flies can't get in, hang it up out of the way. Here's my gridiron—here's my frying-pan.'

'Why,' cried Hermie, 'Miss Browne's been looking for the frying-pan all the morning!'

'Let her cook her things in the oven,' said Roly. 'See this? It's my bunk, made it myself—just legs of trees, and you stretch canvas on it. No sheets for me, only this blue blanket——'

The blanket moved convulsively, a little brown bare foot was sticking out of one end of it, a strand of straight light hair showed at the other.

'Flossie!' the mother cried, and made a rush at the bunk.

The small girl sat up.

'Go away!' she said. 'Go away! I won't be kissed. I'm not your girl. Keep your old dolls for yourself.'

'Flossie,' cried the mother, 'Flossie!' and tried to gather her up as if she had been two instead of seven, and tried to kiss her; but Floss covered her face tightly with her bony little hands.

'Floss,' said Cameron, 'don't be ridiculous. Kiss your mother, and why are you not dressed?'

Hermie was looking ready to cry. Had she not herself put the child a clean white frock on, and tried to curl her hair and seen her into shoes and stockings? And here was the naughty little thing barefoot, and in a ragged print frock!

'Kiss your mother,' Cameron said sternly, the surprised pain on his wife's face angering him against the child.

Floss turned a sullen little face to her mother, but her lips did not move.

'Now kiss Challis,' the father said; for the mother, stooping over the child, had hidden it from him that he had only been half obeyed. Challis came forward to put a loving arm round the ragged shoulder. But Floss struggled to the ground, dived under the bunk, dragged at one of the tent-pegs, and was out and flying off to the bush like a wild rabbit before any one could stop her.

'Go and fetch her back, Bart,' Cameron said, extreme annoyance in his tone.

'It was to be expected,' Mrs. Cameron said, but she looked a little white. 'We mustn't force her; you must let me lay siege to the fortress my own way.'

They went into the cottage, and Miss Browne showed herself—Miss

Browne, with her usual strands of hair in little tight curls round her forehead, and a ready-made blouse and skirt of white pique vainly endeavouring to accommodate itself to her figure.

'Oh dear!' she said, 'most ashamed, most grieved, Floss, peculiar disposition, soon come round, hope a pleasant journey, hot, dusty, must be hungry, Roly, ashamed, grieved, most untidy tent, unwilling to take it down, like to wash and take hats off, bedroom, show the way, dinner, hoped they would like it, not what they were accustomed to, holes in curtains, had not had time to mend them, must excuse table, afraid not a good manager, ignorant many things.'

'Everything is very nice,' Mrs. Cameron said. 'I am quite sure you have always done your best. Mr. Cameron has told me how hard you have worked, and you must let me thank you for it. There, there, I am afraid you have overtired yourself preparing for us. Don't trouble any more, we are going to shake down into place at once, Challis and I, and forget we have ever been away.'

'Oh, my love,' said Miss Browne, 'my dear, oh, my love!' and went away into the kitchen, and wept happily all the time she helped Lizzie to dish up the dinner.

'Be quick,' said Roly, as the travellers went to a bedroom to take off their hats, 'there's fowls for dinner. It's Bluey, and Speckle, and Whitey. Whitey'll be the fattest, he was mine.'

'Oh dear,' said Hermie, as she shut the bedroom door, 'I wish he hadn't said that. Now father won't eat any. He never eats meat at all, but he likes poultry unless any one says anything like that. He says he likes to think of dinner just as dinner, and hates to remember the things have once been walking about. Now it won't be roast fowl at all to him, but just Whitey.'

'I don't think he heard,' said Challis; 'he was looking at the roses on the dinner-table, and saying, "I hope they didn't break my Souvenir de Terese Levet when they plucked these."'

Hermie laughed.

'Dear old dad!' she said. 'Mother, I don't know how he could have done so long without you if it had not been for his roses.'

'I must go down and see them,' the mother said, and tossed her bonnet off hastily. 'See, he is already going out to them. Is there time before dinner, darling? Plainly he can't wait any longer.'

She went through the long window on to the verandah, and caught him up.

Challis was taking off her hat, brushing her hair, removing the signs of travel with a dainty deftness born of so frequent journeys. Hermie's eyes followed her everywhere. They saw a girl not tall for her fourteen years, slender, not over strong-looking. Soft light hair fell away down her back, curlless, waveless. The greyish, hazel eyes were full of quiet shining, the face was thin, yet soft

and childish, the mouth sensitive, a little sad.

'Oh,' she said, 'the smell of the soap, Hermie! I can see the other bedroom so well—the Wilgandra one, and your bed was near the fireplace, and mine had white tassels on, and there was a pink vase on the washstand for our tooth-brushes.'

Hermie looked in slight bewilderment at the pieces of common household soap that her sister held; she did not realise that the girl had seen and smelt nothing but scented since she went away, and that this plain yellow piece was pungent with the old days.

'Where am I going to sleep, Hermie?' said the little girl, and her heart throbbed with the hope that Hermie would cry, 'With me, of course.'

'Bart is going to sleep out in the tent with Roly,' Hermie said, hanging up the well-cut little travelling-coat with a sigh for its style. 'You'll have his room.'

'Where do you sleep?' Challis ventured.

'Dad and Bart built me a little room across there,' said Hermie.

'And Floss?'

'Her cot is in Miss Browne's room.'

Challis was glad bed-time was still some hours off; she had never yet slept in a room all to herself, but did not like to tell Hermie so.

Roly banged at the door. 'There you go,' he said, 'grabbing everything, Hermie. She wants to come out and finish looking at the tent.'

'Finish looking at your grandmother!' laughed Hermie, then blushed vexedly. That was such a favourite phrase of Bart's she unconsciously fell into it herself; but what would Challis think of such slang, Challis, who was used to the conversation of cultured, travelled people? Challis, who looked such a little lady in her well-cut English-looking clothes, and spoke with the clipped, clear pronunciation her mother had insisted upon all these years?

Challis, of course, would think her a boor, an uneducated, unrefined Australian back-blocks girl. Well, whose fault was it if she was?' She turned to her sister coldly. 'If you have finished we may as well go.'

Challis followed her meekly.

'Flossie,' said the mother, going into a bedroom when it was eight o'clock at night, and the rebel had come in and put herself to bed, 'I've just been unpacking my box and found this for Hermie. Do you think it is pretty?'

She held up the daintiest of hats.

Flossie looked at it, then squeezed her eyes up tight.

'Don't want to see it,' she said.

'We are unpacking the boxes,' the mother said; 'I thought you might like to put your dressing-gown on and come and watch.'

'Don't want to watch,' said Floss; 'haven't got any dressing-gown.'

Mrs. Cameron was standing in the bedroom doorway. She held out a box of fascinating doll's tea-things.

'Those are rather pretty, aren't they?' she said. 'We almost decided on a blue set, but then these little pink flowers seemed so fresh-looking we took it.'

Flossie sent a devouring gaze to the beautiful boxful through the bars of her cot. Then she squeezed her eyes up tightly again.

'Wouldn't look at them,' she said.

The mother went away, and the darkness deepened in the room, and Floss lay gazing with hard eyes at a patch of light thrown from the living-room lamp upon the ceiling.

Her heart swelled more and more; she pictured miserable scenes in which, while the rest of the family flaunted about in silk, she, Floss, was attired in rags and had crusts only to eat.

'Only,' she muttered to herself, 'I won't eat them, and then I'll die, and p'r'aps she'll be sorry.'

There was a movement in the room.

'I think I'll lie down quietly on your bed for an hour, Miss Browne,' the mother's voice was saying; 'it will do my head good. Yes, thank you, I have the bottle of lavender water here; I never travel without getting a bad head.'

Miss Browne shook up the pillows and left her; this idea of making capital out of the headache was her own. 'Flossie never can bear any one to suffer,' she said. 'I always remember when I first came here, and she was only about three, some one cut a snake in half along the road. And what must the child do but rush from us and pick up one half—by the mercy of God, the tail half! You remember, Hermie? Bart, my love, you can't have forgotten that shocking day? She came running back to us crying dreadfully, and with that horrible thing in her hands. "Mend it, mend it!" she sobbed "oh, poor sing, poor sing, mend it twick!"'

So Mrs. Cameron went to lie on the bed far from Floss, and to sigh occasionally, once or twice to moan, as indeed she could, for her headache was severe.

At the sighs there were restless movements in the cot; at the first moan the little figure climbed over the rail.

'I don't mind bathing your head,' she said, her voice a little unsteady. 'Is it hurting you much?'

'Yes,' sighed the mother, 'it is very bad.'

Floss dipped her handkerchief in the water-jug, and kept laying it softly on the aching forehead. For ten minutes Mrs. Cameron allowed herself to be thus ministered to, and presently the child sat down on the bed, almost within the arm that yearned to circle her. 'Would you like me to fan it?' she whispered. 'Fanning is good.'

'I would rather you laid your little hand on it,' said the mother.

The little hand lay there instantly.

'I think a kiss on it would do it more good than anything else,' whispered the mother, 'just a little one, sweetheart, sweetheart.'

'I couldn't,' quavered Floss. 'I promised faithfly and somenley.'

'Promised who?'

'Me.'

'What do you mean?'

'When you say, "See my finger wet, see it dry, cut my throat suresever I die," you've got to keep to it.'

'And you promised yourself like that that you wouldn't kiss me—me—mamma, who has been away for years and years breaking her heart for her little baby.'

'Oh,' gasped Floss, the fortress nearly down, 'but we might have got dropsy, truly, dropsy and deafness, me and Roly; May Daly's mother says so; you gen'ally get them after measles.'

'But you didn't, you didn't, Tiny. I prayed and prayed over the seas to God to take care of you all for me, and I knew He would. See how well and strong you all are! But ah, I never thought Tiny would break my heart like this.'

Her voice quivered—fell away; Floss, putting up an uncertain hand through the darkness, found the cheek above her quite wet.

'Mother!' she cried, and was face downward in a minute sobbing relievedly on her mother's breast.

When they had lain together happy and quiet for a little time, the mother stirred to go, for Miss Browne must come to bed.

Floss gave her a final hug. 'I do love you,' she said.

'My baby,' murmured the mother. Floss shook back her straight hair and climbed off the bed and got into her own.

'But I'm not going to let that Challis off,' she said. 'I'll just have to take it out of her.'

CHAPTER XVII

Crossing the Veldt

'Why criest them for thy hurt? Thy pain is incurable.'

'Truly this is my grief, and I must bear it.'

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'Thus saith the Lord, Such as are for death, to death
and such as are for the sword, to the sword.'
Jeremiah.

His good horse under him, a thunder-clouded sky above, a strange country astretch on every side, Mortimer was off, despatches in his pocket from his own colonel to the colonel of an Imperial regiment stationed some hundred and thirty miles away.

The day hung heavy from the sky, the land lay sad hearted and patient-eyed beneath it.

Yet now for the first time in all the weeks he had been on African soil Mortimer felt at home with his surroundings, even happy in them. The tumultuous days that lay behind him—he felt that some other, not he, had been living them. The frantic excitement of the send-off, the days at sea, the storm or two, the troubles with the horses, the uneventful landing on the unfamiliar shores, the hurried packing off up country by train, the feverish days and nights in camp at the bewildered little village that saw the armies of the greatest nation on earth swarming about its quiet fields, his first patrol and the fierce whizz and rattle of marvellously harmless bullets from a deserted-looking kopje, his first battle, with its horrid nightmare of flashing lights and thundering guns, its pools of blood, its contorted human faces, its agonised horses writhing in the dust—these were all nothing to him now, but the coloured bits of glass one shakes about in a kaleidoscope.

The smell of tents and of spent gunpowder was no longer in his nostrils; the brown earth alone sent up its homely odour, and he drew the breath of it in with thankfulness. Such a quiet country; silent little farms asleep in the afternoon's sunshine, their crops long since ready, but gathered only by the birds. The cottages, some of them empty of all signs of habitation, some of them with their doors carefully locked on all a woman's treasure of furniture and homely things.

Here and there the sheep had not been driven off, but cropped placidly at the plentiful pasturage. Mortimer's heart went out to the brown soft things.

On and on he rode, finding his way with a bushman's instinct for the right path.

The sky grew grey and more grey.

Up from the west rolled a great woollen cloud that drooped lower and lower till it burst with a sudden fury over the land, as if shrapnel shells charged with hail had exploded in mid-air. Mortimer put up his collar, and ducked his head to the heavy ice-drops that struck him on every side. He looked in vain for shelter;

the veldt rolled smooth and gently undulating in all directions, and no tree was anywhere. To the left a kopje loomed in the darkness ahead, to the right he had seen when on the last rise the white gleaming palings and lights of a farm. He pulled his watch out, and just made out in the rapidly falling darkness that it was eight o'clock. His colonel had advised him to camp for the night somewhere, lest he should lose his way in the darkness, and start off again at earliest dawn. He rapidly resolved to make the farm his halting-place, should, as was most likely, it prove to be unoccupied. The rumour that two lines of defence would join across this part of the country had swiftly cleared the sparsely occupied place. The thought of camping among the rocks of the kopje he did not entertain, having by this the same firmly rooted distrust of that kind of geological formation that the British soldier will carry henceforth in all ages. He forced his plunging horse along; the terrified beast was trembling in every limb with fright at the blinding lightning.

The sound of voices on the road made him push forward harder than ever, his hand going swiftly to the pocket that held his revolver; then he found it was women's voices he heard, a woman's cry of anguish came after him. He wheeled his horse round, and went back slowly, almost feeling his way in the darkness.

A flash of lightning showed him a cart with a fallen horse, an old man, and three girls.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

The old man began to explain rapidly in Dutch, but a girl who was stooping over the horse rose up and came to him.

'Our horse has been struck,' she said in perfectly good English; 'one wheel was struck too, and blazed for a minute, but the rain has put it out.'

'Are none of you hurt?' said Mortimer.

'None; it is wonderful!' said the girl.

'Then run along all of you as hard as you can,' said Mortimer. 'There's a farm and shelter I think quite close. I'll take the old man up on my horse.'

'We can't leave the cart,' said the girl.

'Oh, confound the cart!' said Mortimer, struggling with his plunging horse. 'You can get it after the storm is over.'

'We have some one in it,' said the unemotionable voice of the girl. 'He is dead.'

Again the anguished cry of one of the other girls rose through the rain.

Mortimer rode round the cart twice before he could think what to do.

'Whose farm is it? Is any one living on it?' he said.

'It is ours,' said the girl; 'we were almost home.'

'Who is at the farm—how many?' Mortimer said, having no inclination to run the risk of being made a prisoner before his despatches were safe.

'My mother, we girls, our grandfather here, and some children.'

'I think I had better put up my horse in the shafts,' said Mortimer, 'though I much doubt if he'll go.'

'It is no use, the wheel is broken,' said the girl. 'We were just going to carry him home, only they will not do anything but cry. Anna, Emma, for shame! What use are tears? Come, we are strong; let us carry him out of this rain.' The girls still moaned and wept, however, and she spoke sharply again to them, this time in Dutch, the language in which their lamentations had been.

'See here,' said Mortimer, 'I will take him up on my saddle.' He dismounted and went to the cart and felt about nervously. The English-speaking girl lifted up a rug, and there on pillows on the cart lay a dead young Boer.

'Are you sure he's dead?' Mortimer said. The hands, though wet with rain, were hardly stiff, the body had some faint warmth.

The girl was helping him to lift.

'He is quite dead,' she said. 'He was wounded and going down by train to a Hospital. But as he passed this place, his home, he made them put him out on the station, and send for us to take him home. We brought the cart and pillows, but he had died in the waiting-shed before we got there. We are taking him home to bury.' The other girls shrilled loudly again. 'Anna, Emma,' she said, with more sharp words in Dutch. Then, excusingly, to Stevenson, and with pity in her voice, 'He was to have married one of them, the other is his sister.'

Mortimer got the dead man up before him, held him with one arm and rode slowly, the girls and the old man hurrying by his side. The farm lay about a quarter of a mile away. The English-speaking girl opened the gate.

'There is a ditch all the way up; don't stumble in it,' she said. 'I must go on and warn his mother.' She ran forward in the darkness. A turn in the path, and the lamplight from the farmhouse sent out its rays into the night. Some children, small boys chiefly, clustered at the door; in front of them stood the girl and another woman, fifty or sixty years old.

Mortimer with their aid lifted his burden down, and laid it on a bed in an inner room. He gave a fearful glance at the elder woman, the man's mother. She was a big woman, not fat, like the Boer women generally are, but of angular outline, and with sharp high cheek-bones, and brown piercing eyes.

She was of English parentage, married in early girlhood to a Boer farmer, and become mother of one daughter and six sons. Her husband had fallen with the handful at Jameson's Raid; two sons had with their life-blood helped on the British reverse at Modder River, one lay buried on the field at Elandslaagte, one at Magersfontein, one had been flung in the river at Jacobsdal, here was the sixth come home to her.

She turned from the bed a moment to her niece, the English-speaking girl,

who had been a teacher in Johannesburg, but had come to her aunt for refuge at the beginning of the war, and remained as mainstay of the farm.

'Take those shrieking girls out of my hearing, Linda!' she said. 'Let no one come in to me.' She closed the door of the bedroom in their faces.

Linda turned away.

'I must get some hot drinks,' she said. 'Grandfather and the girls will take cold. Where are you going?'

'Oh, I'll get along now,' said Mortimer.

'Nonsense!' said the girl; 'you must dry yourself and eat and drink.' She moved towards the kitchen.

'Oh,' said Mortimer, 'I'd better go. Just think, I might have been one of the lot who knocked that poor chap over.'

'We cannot stay to think of that,' the girl answered. 'You helped us; you must stay till the storm is over.'

'But,' urged Mortimer again, 'how will *she* feel?' and he glanced at the closed bedroom door.

'Oh, she understands,' said Linda; 'her feeling is not against individuals. Your soldiers have eaten and rested here three or four times, for we are almost the only people left. We stay because we have nowhere to go, and we none of us care what happens.'

Mortimer went to the door.

'I must see to my poor horse,' he said presently.

The girl summoned the stolid-faced little boys—sons they were of the sons who were slain. She gave them a lantern, and bade them show the strange guest the stables. Then she ran to the kitchen herself.

Mortimer was twenty minutes drying down his horse, feeding it, making it comfortable, for the fate of his despatches rested on its welfare. Then he went back to the kitchen.

The mother was there. She had left her dead after a few minutes, to busy herself with the task of getting all the wet figures into dry garments. She was mixing drinks, hot, strong drinks that made the girls blink and choke even while it restored them. She had the grandfather wrapped in rugs, sitting closest of all to the fire.

When Mortimer stood in the doorway, dripping helmet, dripping khaki suit, she moved towards him.

'Drink this,' she said, and gave him a deep mug of hot liquid.

He swallowed it gratefully, for the cold seemed in his very bones.

'Here are some clothes,' she said, and picked up a rough farming-suit that she had laid in readiness on a chair—'here is a room.' She stepped across the passage. 'Change at once, and hand me your wet things to dry.'

Mortimer obeyed her, and, after doing so, sat down on the bed to await the call to eat of the food the girl Linda was preparing.

And then outraged nature took her revenge. He had not slept for fifty-six hours; he had been in the saddle eighteen hours of yesterday, and twelve of today. It was three hours before he knew anything more, and then it was only his cramped position on the bed that woke him; except for that he would have slept the clock round.

He sat up numbed, his heart beating suffocatingly. Where were his despatches? What clothes were these he wore? He fell to his feet, a groan of horror bursting from him. What was this he had done—raw, careless, culpable soldier that he was? He had never taken the envelopes from the clothes he had handed the woman—the woman whose sons' and husband's deaths lay at his country's door, still unavenged! Two strides took him down the hall to the kitchen, his face was like ashes. All the little house lay still as the tall, thin young farmer who, in the front room, was taking his rest for ever from the ploughing of fields, the sowing and reaping of crops, the blind and strenuous guarding of his land and liberty at the command of those in the high places.

The fire still burnt brightly in the grate. Linda sat before it so plunged in mournful thought she did not hear the young bushman's footfall.

Across one side of the fire a clothes-horse stood holding the draggled skirts of the girls, the grandfather's moleskin clothes, the familiar khaki of the uniform he had disgraced.

His hand clutched the coat convulsively; beads of sheer terror stood on his forehead. Then he sat down suddenly, the passion of relief bringing the tears of relief to his eyes.

The papers were there untouched; the long envelopes with the red army seal upon them stuck up out of his breast-pocket in full view! That woman, the mother whose sons were dead, that clear-headed young girl, they must both have known the importance of the papers, yet neither had laid a finger upon them, since he was their guest, their helper!

Linda smiled at him in a pale way.

'You have come to say you are hungry,' she said. 'I went to your room twice, but you slept so soundly I thought the food might wait.' She put a dish before him, meat and vegetables mixed up together. 'This is hot, at least, and nourishing,' she said.

He thanked her, his voice still thick from agitation, then ate while she went back to her morbid gazing at the glowing fire.

'Do you know it is twelve o'clock?' he said presently. 'Won't you go to bed? I am afraid you have sat up to keep this fire alight for the food.'

She pushed back the thick hair from her forehead. No one could call her

pretty, but the clear eyes and the patience and strength of the young mouth struck one.

'I think I was trying to see the end of the war,' she said, sighing; 'but it takes better sight than mine.'

'You?' he said pityingly. 'Have you lost any one very near—nearer than these cousins?'

She blenched a moment.

'One of them,' she said. 'I had been married to one of them—a week. We will not speak of that.'

He begged her pardon, his throat thick again.

She fought her lip quiet.

'Oh,' she said, 'it is the same everywhere; our lovers, our husbands, our sons—all gone from us! Some will come back, of course, but crushed and mutilated. A little time, and your army will only have a handful of women to contend against.'

'We, too,' he said, 'we have lost our brothers, our fathers, our sons. Everywhere we have women mourning.'

'Yes,' she said, 'I suppose so.' She sat silent a little time. 'But then it was you who came,' she urged again. 'We used to be quiet and happy in our own way, even if we were unprogressive and unintelligent. It seems, to a woman, we might have been left alone.'

'Ah, but,' he said, 'there were bigger issues than that at stake. You have read—I can see that you have read—you must know why we are fighting.'

'Somewhere at the top,' she said, with a wan smile, 'there may be a few—a very few—on both sides who know. But our men don't know. They have been told they will lose their liberty and homes if they don't fight; that is all any of my cousins knew, and they went off to death, not cheerfully, but because there was nothing else to be done. Your men, of course they come because they are sent, and they fight their best because they are brave and obey orders. We have been insolent—isn't that what you say of us?—and we must be crushed. But some of you must know the rights of it all. Think how much wiser you are than we. You read while we plough. Those of you who know should stay behind.'

'No,' he smiled; 'that is not our way either. We are no different from you. We pay a few great men to do the thinking for us, and if they say it's got to be fighting, then, whatever it seems to us individually, collectively we just shoot.'

The fire burnt lower and lower; it was the only light in the room, for the oil-lamp, exhausted, had died out. Outside the rain still fell in straight soaking sheets over the thatched roof of the little house. A wind moaned restlessly over the empty country; you fancied it was lost and full of woe, because it had no trees to wander through. Once or twice a horse whinnied, once or twice there came

through the night the inexpressibly mournful sound of the bleat of a sheep. You felt the rain was like no other rain at all; it seemed as if the land, swollen-eyed, was weeping in the quiet of midnight for its unutterable woes.

The girl's head drooped back against the wall. Sleep had claimed her; but, by the anguish of the mouth and the pitiful stirring of the breast, you knew it was but to show her the body of her young husband, cast with a score of others in a trench, all wet with red.

Stevenson sat, a cold sweat upon his brow; he felt he was the only soul awake on all the frightful continent.

Then through the silence of the house came a woman's voice reading the Bible—the mother seated a foot away from her quiet son. The thin wood offered no resistance to the sound of her voice.

'"Gather up thy wares out of the land, O thou that abidest in the siege. For thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will sling out the inhabitants of the land at this time, and will distress them, that they may feel it. Woe is me for my hurt! My wound is grievous: but I said, Truly this is my grief, and I must bear it."'

The sound of the voice pierced into Linda's wretched slumbers. She opened dilated eyes, and stared wildly at Mortimer. And the voice went on again:

'"My tent is spoiled, and all my cords are broken: my children are gone forth of me, and they are not: there is none to stretch forth my tent any more, and to set up my curtains. For the shepherds are become brutish, and have not inquired of the Lord: therefore they have not prospered, and all their flocks are scattered. The voice of a rumour, behold it cometh, and a great commotion out of the north country, to make the cities of Judah a desolation, a dwelling-place of jackals."'

'Oh,' said the girl with a sobbing breath, 'it is only aunt, of course; she often reads aloud like that. But, oh, I have had such dreams—such frightful dreams!'

The voice went on.

'"O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps. O Lord, correct me"'—the tone of the voice fell a little—'"but with judgment; not in Thine anger, lest Thou bring me—to nothing."'

'I dreamt—I dreamt,' said the girl, pressing both hands on her throbbing heart—'ah, I could never tell you what I dreamt!'

'Hush,' said Mortimer, 'don't try, don't try! Won't you go to your room, and try to sleep in comfort?'

She looked at him with distended eyes.

'I daren't,' she said. 'O God, I never shall dare to sleep again!'

The voice rose; the horrible exultant thrill in it made the flesh creep.

'"Pour out Thy fury upon the heathen that know Thee not, and upon the families that call not on Thy name: for they have devoured Jacob, yea, they have

devoured him and consumed him, and have laid waste his habitation."'

The girl staggered to her feet.

'I will go and sit with her,' she said; 'she should not be alone.'

CHAPTER XVIII

A Skirmish by the Way

At earliest dawn Mortimer was up and away again.

Linda had risen up and prepared breakfast for him; quiet, capable, busied with frying-pan, fire, the setting of a place at table; he looked at her as she moved about the kitchen, and wondered had not the sight of her face of agony last night been a dream? She even rallied him a little.

'You must eat well,' she said, as she put fried eggs and bacon before him—the pleasantest meal he had eaten since he had left Sydney; 'you don't want to be out another night with those despatches of yours loose.'

'I want shooting,' he said, his forehead burning.

'Oh no,' she said, 'you are young yet to it all; you will have plenty of time to learn carefulness before the war is over.'

'I hope so,' he said.

'I am afraid so,' she assented.

Something struck him. That soldier-farmer in the quiet front room—who was to bury him? who dig his grave?

'If I had thought,' he said, 'I would have done it myself the—the grave, you know—instead of having breakfast. You girls cannot do it. Is the old man strong enough? I would do it now, but my time is not my own.' He looked at his watch.

'I have sent the three little boys to Du Toit's farm,' she said, 'five miles away, to ask them to send two of their Kaffir boys down. All of ours have gone off.'

He shook hands with her when he was going, thanked her for all she had done.

'It is nothing,' she said; 'we have to thank you, yet we don't, you notice. It is war-time. Good-bye.'

The grey air freshened as the sun climbed foot by foot up over the great kop to the east. The night's storm had left the veldt fragrant as our own bush after rain. The deserted farms looked at him, a mist of sleep and forgetfulness in their

eyes. Those every-day fences, those gates made for farmers to pass through, farmers' daughters to lean on watching for their lovers, farmers' children to swing on—was it possible half a dozen regiments had gone crashing through and over them, hastening to headquarters only a week before?

Mortimer looked at the healthy land with a bushman's appreciative eyes. He wondered now many sheep the farms held. A Boer prisoner at the camp had told him the country carried a sheep to six acres, an ostrich to twelve, and a horse to twenty. He speculated loosely on the chances there would be for an army of drought-ruined Australian settlers to come here after the war with modern implements and knowledge, and astonish these pastoralists, who were a century at least behind Europe in the way of agriculture.

'Even Cameron's ahead of them,' Mortimer thought, his mind reverting sadly to the poor little selection at Wilgandra that bounded Hermie's life.

A heavy waggon went past drawn by a span of mules, and driven by a Kaffir, who cracked a whip of such length that the ordinary stockwhip was nowhere beside it.

A bent old man, with a cart of vegetables and a horse too decrepit for the war, crept by. Smoke in a place or two went up from the chimneys of the scattered farmhouses. The continent was awake.

Riding yesterday, Mortimer had never known when he might run into a Boer picket, but the farther he went now the danger lessened—in another dozen miles he ought to be somewhere about the beginning of the line the British had made to defend a railway. And after that his ride would lie through country dotted over by the British army.

He pushed on; his horse was fresh and ready again after the night's rest and a couple of good feeds; his own spirits, chiefly owing to his excellent breakfast, began to rise again and push his carelessness from the chief place in his mind; he grew aflame for a chance to prove his courage, and respect himself once more. Before he left the camp it had been held that a big engagement was certain in a very few days; his mind leapt forward to it now with a keenly sharpened appetite, and he beheld himself making famous his country's name by impossible feats of strength.

Crack! To the left of him a firearm went off; the bullet passed clear over his head, and rattled on some loose stones as it fell.

He glanced round less in fear than astonishment. At the spot the veldt was singularly clear, and the nearest kopje was far beyond rifle-range. Whir! A second shot struck his helmet, a third grazed his shoulder! His horse plunged and reared; he spun it round and faced a clump of karoo bushes twenty yards to his left, the only place from which the shots could have come, and even these seemed absurd, for no shrub was more than two or three feet high. He raised his revolver;

his finger was at the trigger. Then he saw three small faces over the edge of one of the bushes—three that he knew; they were the stolid, secret-looking little boys who had lighted him to the stable last night.

[image]

HIS HORSE PLUNGED AND REARED.

'The little sweeps!' he muttered, but moved his finger from the trigger, even though he kept the revolver cocked at them.

'Do you want me to blow the brains of all three of you out?' he called. 'Lay down those guns this minute, or I will.' He was close up to them, and a sharp glance among the sparse bushes showed him that beyond these small youths he had no other attackers. At the sight of British might in the concrete form of a mounted soldier standing right over them, two of the lads instantly laid down their ponderous old style weapons. The third essayed another shot, but his rifle kicked and the bullet went wild.

'You young beggar!' said Stevenson; 'put it down this instant.'

The lad obeyed sullenly; he was the eldest of the three, and yet not more than twelve; a thickset boy with a heavy, brooding face and fine eyes.

'And what's the meaning of this little performance?' said Mortimer.

Two of the boys had very little knowledge of English, but the eldest had been quick to pick it up from his grandmother and Linda, who had just become his aunt.

'You killed our fathers,' he said doggedly. 'They've taken all the good guns with them, or we wouldn't have missed like this.'

Mortimer had no doubt of it; as it was, the shots had landed so near to the mark that it was plain what was the Boer boys' pastime at present. There was something about the three small lads that reminded Mortimer irresistibly of Roly—Roly, hung all over with the kitchen cutlery, or prowling about the bush with a broken-barrelled gun, Roly lying face downward behind a great ant-bed and picking off his foes at a lightning rate. He found it hard not to smile.

'Hand me up those guns,' he said to the eldest boy.

The boy gave him a stubborn glance, and it needed the discharge of a cartridge over his head to bring him to obedience. Then he handed the poor old musket up sullenly to the conqueror.

'See here,' Mortimer said, 'you'll make fine soldiers by-and-by. Don't go and get yourselves into trouble while you're young, and so ruin your chances. If it had happened to be some one less in a hurry than I am, he'd have marched you

over and seen you among the prisoners, just to keep you out of mischief.'

'He'd have to catch us first,' said the boy, with a defiant smile.

'There is such a thing as putting a bullet into the legs,' said Mortimer gravely. 'But now cut along and fetch those Kaffirs for your aunt.'

The boys turned round and struck off dejectedly in a new direction; they had come three miles off the road their aunt had sent them by to execute this plot, secretly formed by the eldest boy, for killing off one at least of the enemy.

When Mortimer looked round again, they were mere specks on the veldt.

'Poor little beggars!' he said, smiling as he thought over the adventure again. He flung two of the rifles into the river; the third he carried with him as far as the British camp, and gave it to some one of the ambulance there, promising a five-pound note if it were kept safely till the end of the war.

'Roly'll go off his head at such a trophy,' he thought.

He handed in his despatches not many hours later, with no further adventures.

CHAPTER XIX

The Mood of a Maid

'Do you know what it is to seek oceans, and to find puddles, to long for whirlwinds, and have to do the best you can with the bellows? That's my case.'

Bartie had gone up to Coolooli for the afternoon. Old Mr. Stevenson had taken a great fancy to the boy, and prophesied that he had the making of a fine squatter in him.

Stevenson had ridden in to the selection on his way from Wilgandra. It was not often he passed the neat new gate in these days without turning in. He always felt a pleasant glow of conscious virtue, as his eyes marked all the improvements that had so suddenly sprung up.

'Me boy's pleasing me,' he would mutter. 'It wasn't much to ask.'

He told the surprised Cameron that it was his fad to leave none of his property unimproved, and that he was merely making the trial on this particular selection, to see what might be done with a small holding. Cameron was rather relieved than otherwise that he no longer owned the place; the money he had borrowed on it at different times was almost equal to the sum he had paid for it

at first. With such a landlord it was a much less responsible thing to be merely a tenant, especially as Stevenson, since he had foreclosed, would accept no rent, professing that he was getting the place ready for some one who could not take possession for a year or two, and that it was a convenience to him for Cameron to stay on the place and keep it in order. The long-established character of the man as hard and close kept any suspicion from Cameron that he was being helped out of kindness.

The old man had come in this afternoon to carry Bartie up to Coolooli with him, to show him the new invention he was about to try for the destruction of rabbits. Bart rushed off to get his horse ready while Stevenson stayed talking of the war and his son to Mrs. Cameron. It was quite a surprise to her when she learned much later that the old man had five other sons. This one at the front was the only one he ever spoke about.

He liked talking to this practical, sensible mother of the family. He felt amazed that such a shiftless fellow as Cameron should own such a treasure, and he felt, as he looked at her, that the salvation of the family would have been assured after her arrival, even if he himself had not lent a hand. With Hermie his manner was unconsciously somewhat aggressive, and she shrank from the rugged-faced old man who looked at her so sharply from under his bushy eyebrows. He saw her one day as he passed her in the verandah, reading a book fresh from London. Mrs. Cameron saw to it that the poor girl had time now for such rest and recreation.

'Can you make soap and candles?' he said, stopping suddenly in front of her.

It was not likely such arts had been learned on Dunks' selection.

'No,' said Hermie. 'At least, we did try once with the fat to make soap, but it went wrong.'

'How would you instruct your men to corn beef or make mutton hams?'

Hermie looked at him distressed.

'I have never done any,' she said.

'Humph!' he growled, and went to untie his horse, muttering, 'A pretty wife, a pretty wife!' to himself.

This particular afternoon Bart went off in high spirits, Challis watching him wistfully from the verandah.

Hermie was—oh, who knew where Hermie was? Wandering up and down among the roses perhaps, her eyes soft with tears—Challis had found her like that two or three times—or reading poetry in some quiet corner in the paddocks, or writing it in the secret solitude of her bedroom, or on Tramby's back riding, riding with dreamy eyes down the road to the sunset. Wherever she was, she did not want Challis.

Mrs. Cameron was with her husband. Up and down the path they walked, his arm round her waist, her hand in his, talking, talking a little of the future, not at all of the quivering past, mostly of the tender all-sufficing present. Challis, who had had such sweet monopoly of her mother for so long, missed it exceedingly now, while readily acquiescing that the turn for the others had come. She looked from the verandah with yearning eyes. It seemed months instead of weeks since she had poured all her hopes and imaginings and longings and queer little fancies into that ever-ready ear.

Roly? Roly was killing his Boers down in the paddock, or wheeling heavy loads of earth to make kopjes in the bush. He would tell her to 'clear out of the way of lyddite shells,' if she sought him out.

Floss? Floss, who hated a needle, was sitting on the grass making, with incredible labour, a pincushion for the mother she had begun to love with an almost fierce affection. Challis would have liked to go and help her, but the child, if she pricked her fingers till they were empty of blood, would have no stitch set in it that was not her own. Furthermore, all the dreams on the Utopia were dispersed. Challis had never buttoned one of the little girl's garments, never tied a sash, never brushed out a curl. The small woman had dressed herself independently ever since she was three, and indignantly scorned all help; she hated sashes—her straight light hair she raked herself. And though she accepted in an offhand fashion the toys Challis had chosen with such love and interest, she kept up an inexplicably warlike attitude towards her, and deprecated her on every possible occasion. Her hands—'Pooh! Well, I would be ashamed to have hands that colour! S'pose you never take your gloves off?' 'Frightened to walk in the bush 'cause of snakes! Well, some girls are ninnies!' 'Never been-on a horse—'fraid to get on Tramby! Why, she—Floss—had galloped all over on Tramby without a saddle when she was only four!'

Challis, sensitively aware of her own want of courage to explore and grow familiar with these bush things, got into the habit of shrinking away when Floss came on the scene.

There seemed no niche left for her in this home she had looked forward to; that was what it was. The place, rightly hers, had filled up entirely during her long absence.

No one understood her, or tried to. They took it for granted that her genius and her life abroad had lifted her to a higher plane than the one on which they themselves lived. It might be very cultivated and beautiful up there, but they were not familiar with it, and therefore did not take any interest in it.

The girl tried hard to get on to their plane, and be interested in their things; but they knew she was trying hard, and it merely irritated them. Let her stay where she belonged.

It was so lonely, too—so very lonely. Used to the pleasant uproar and friendliness and excitement of cities, this little clearing in the great silent bush oppressed her intolerably after a week or two.

She had been a little ill before leaving Sydney. The doctors had said her nervous system was completely run down—a shocking thing in a child! They advised complete rest for several months, and expressed their opinion that the quiet bush life at Wilgandra and roughing it with children, who would take her out of herself, would be the best possible thing for her, and the triumphal career could be resumed later on.

So there were to be no concerts yet, no happy strivings to interpret Chopin's varying moods to a breathless audience, to reach up with Mendelssohn to his pleasant sunlit heights, to go down with Wagner to strange depths that stirred her soul. She was to practise very little, to appear in public not at all. The papers expressed their regret at her illness, and said a kind thing or two. After that her name had no mention in them.

One paragraph she had read had touched her to the quick. Some interviewer who had been to see her in Sydney wrote in his paper, 'Thank Heaven, she is not pretty! Her chances are hereby much greater.'

Poor little Fifteen! Her pillow was wet that night. She felt she had much rather he had said, 'She has no genius, but she is very pretty.' She longed for Hermie's shining wavy hair, for the sweet blue of her eyes, the pink that pulsed about her cheeks. Who cared if you could interpret the waves and storms of Lizst's rhapsodies, and let the keen little rifts of melody in between the thunder until the almost intolerable sweetness made the heart ache? Who cared that Leschetizky himself had taught you and had tears in his eyes once, when you had played to him the wind in the trees just as he himself heard it? What did all these things matter? Every one went home from your concerts and forgot all about you. Oh, surely it were better to be so exquisitely pretty that all who saw you loved you on the spot!

She looked at herself again and again in the glass that night. Until that wounding paragraph, she had never given one thought to her looks; the sensitive small face, the grey eyes drenched with this new tragedy, the fair straight hair falling over her shoulders—not pretty, not pretty, and all the world knew it now!

She drifted in from the verandah to the living-room, where the piano stood open as Hermie had left it, when, imagining Challis out of hearing an hour or two ago, she had sat down to it for a few minutes. But the cheap tinkling stuff that comprised poor Hermie's *repertoire*—the jingling waltzes, the pretty-pretty compositions of Gustave Lange and Brindley Richards, 'Edelweiss' and 'Longing,' 'Warblings at Eve,' and such—they set her ear horribly on edge, though she would rather have died than have said so. It were less torture to hear Flossie thumping

conscientiously away at 'The Blue Bells of Scotland' and 'We're a' Noddin'.'

The very piano was a heartache; it was seven years since it had been tuned, and despite the careful dusting of Miss Browne, the silverfish led a gay existence in its interior, and ate all the softness and depth from the notes.

But this afternoon the girl, with that vague misery tugging at her heart, was driven to it; nothing else could ease her. She put her foot down on the soft pedal, to keep the discordant jangle away, and avoiding as much as she could the B that was flat, and the D that was dumb, and the F sharp that Roly had torn off bodily, she worked off the gloom that oppressed her with Beethoven and Bach.

Roly came in. He was arming himself for a new attack on Ladysmith; he had the kitchen poker and the stove-brush, the tin-opener, a knife from a broken plough, a genuine boomerang, the corkscrew, the gravy-strainer, and the carving-knife, disposed about his person, and he came into the living-room, his eye roving about in search of fresh implements of warfare. Nothing seemed to appeal to him, however, and he was going out again discontentedly when he noticed his new sister had dropped her hands from the keyboard, and was resting her forehead there instead.

He approached her with some awe.

'Can you play with your head too?' he asked; then he noticed there were tears running down her cheeks. 'Don't cry,' he said; 'I'll run out and ask mother to let you off. Did she say you'd got to practise an hour? Oh, I'll soon get her to let you off!'

Challis smiled faintly through her tears.

'It's all right,' she said; 'don't disturb mother. No one told me to practise.'

'Well, you *are* a muggins!' said the uncouth bushikin. 'Catch *me* setting myself a copy or a sum! Why don't you go out and play?'

Challis let a new tear fall.

'I don't know how to play at anything,' she said. 'I never had any one to play with.'

Roly's breast swelled with magnanimity.

'Look here,' he said, 'you can be Cronje if you like. Here, you can have these two for your weapons.' He handed her the stove-brush and the corkscrew. 'Come on down here, I'll soon show you how to do it.'

Challis shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'I'm fifteen; it's too late to learn now. I'll just have to go on playing and playing at concerts. And who cares when you're playing your very best, and have practised one composition six hours a day? Who cares?' She looked at him miserably.

'Look here, Chall,' he said, a most brotherly, kindly tone in his voice, 'it's only because you play such fat-headed things, that's why they don't care. I can't

listen to them myself. Often when I've been digging my garden outside the window, and you've started to play, I've just had to go away. If you'd learn some nice-sounding pieces now, instead of things like Flossie's scales, only worse! There's Peter Small's sister, down in W'gandra, you ought to hear *her* play; she can play "Soldiers of the Queen," and "Sons of the Empire," and "Absent-Minded Beggar," and "Girl He Left Behind Him," and all those things, and she jumps her hands about, and runs up and down, and crosses them just as much as you do. If you like, I'll ask Peter to get her to lend you them; I'm friends with Peter just now.'

Challis smiled and dried her tears.

'I mightn't be able to play them, Roly,' she said; 'so I don't think I'll trouble you to ask.'

'Oh,' said Roly encouragingly, 'you'd soon pick them up. You could watch her a few times, and notice how she does them. But I'll have to be going now, Challis, if you don't want me. I'll be down in the bush at the back, if you want to come and have a try to play. Don't let on to Brownie that I've collared this.' He pointed to the gravy-strainer that adorned his breast. I'll bring it back all right.'

Left alone once more, Challis wandered about the little house. Miss Browne's door was half open, to let in the evening breeze. Miss Browne herself, her day's work finished, was sitting at the table writing a multitude of letters with a happy flush on her cheeks.

Challis looked on wistfully.

'Would you mind if I came in and sat with you?' she said.

Miss Browne dropped her pen and jumped up to welcome her.

'My dear, my love, why, you know you may; most pleased, most delighted, whenever you like—honoured, most delighted.'

Challis stepped into the little room.

CHAPTER XX

Miss Browne

'I shall have no man's love
For ever, and no face of children born
Or tender lips upon me.
Far off from flowers or any love of man
Shall my life be for ever.'

What was it that broke the barriers down? The wet eyelashes of the little music-maker? The droop of her soft mouth? Or came there across that poor room one of those divine waves of sympathy and understanding that wash at times from a richly endowed soul to a lonely stunted one?

Miss Browne found herself telling anything and everything that had happened in her life, and even the things that might have happened. Not that the whole of them made a sum of any account, if you condensed them; but, told ramblingly and with pauses for tears, they fell pathetically on the young listening ears.

Thirty-eight grey years! Life in this country town and that country town, in this crowded suburb or on that out-back station or selection—a hireling always. The first twenty-five had dragged by under English skies that even in summer had no sun for a motherless, fatherless girl, pupil-teacher from the age of fourteen. She bore twelve years of it patiently enough, and indeed would have borne another score, but two friends, stronger, more restless souls than she, though chained to the same life, told her they were going to break through it all, strike out of the stagnant waters of suburban England into the fresh, glittering sea the other side of the world.

They were saving their salaries to pay their passage to Australia. Governesses were royally paid out there, they had heard, and more than that—they whispered this a little ashamed—husbands grew on every bush.

Miss Browne scraped and saved for a year, cheerfully shivering without a winter jacket, happily heedless of the rain that came through the holes of her umbrella. If it had been a question of economising in her diet, she would have brought herself down to a crust a day, in her eagerness to make a plunge into a different life, but fortunately governesses are 'all found.' The three women cheerfully cramped their bodies third-class for the voyage, letting their souls soar boundlessly in the pleasant evenings on deck.

They came to their new land, saw it, and after a few years were conquered. Almost the same conditions of life, the same sickening struggle of a multitude of educated women for one poor place, the same grey outlook. One found a husband; he took her to some heaven-forgotten corner of North Queensland, where she had for neighbours Japanese and Chinese and Javanese, and he drank, as the men all do in those forgotten corners, where alligators are to be found on the river-banks, and coloured labour crowds out the white man's efforts. She bore him six children in eight years, and then died thankfully. The second woman went into a hospital and became a nurse; for the last five years she had been in Western Australia, kept busy with the typhoid in Perth. Once in a while she wrote to Miss Browne; once or twice she had eagerly said she was 'all but engaged,' but later letters never confirmed the hope, and now a dull commonplace had settled

down over the correspondence.

Miss Browne drifted from place to place, place to place; there was nothing she was capable of doing really well, and no land has a hospitable welcome for such.

'It is a funny thing,' she said to Challis, 'but, however hard I try, I never seem able to do things like other people can.' Her eyes stared in front of her. 'If it had been your mother now in my place, she could have managed; she is made of the stuff that never goes under. But you would have thought any one like I am would have been sheltered and—cared for—as so many women are cared for.'

Challis stroked her restlessly moving hand.

'Sometimes,' she continued—her voice dropped, her eyes stared straight out before her—'sometimes I can't help feeling as if Providence has pushed me out to the front, and quite forgotten to give me anything to fight with.'

Then she pulled herself together reprovingly.

'Of course, that attitude is very wrong of me,' she said. 'It is only very seldom I think that, my love.'

Challis squeezed her hand sympathetically.

'It will all come right some day,' she said, with the large vague hopefulness of the very young.

'That's what I have always told myself,' said Miss Browne; 'but you must see, my love, if—if it does not come right very soon, it will be too late. I am thirty-eight—there, there is no need to mention it to Hermie or the rest of the family, my love.'

'But thirty-eight is not old,' said Challis, so eager to comfort, she left truth to take care of itself. 'Think what lots of people are fifty, and they don't think themselves a bit old.'

'But who will marry you after you are thirty-eight?' said poor Miss Browne, unable to keep any ache back to-night.

'Oh,' said Challis, 'lots of people don't get married, and they are as happy as anything.'

Miss Browne's lip quivered.

'If I had been asked,' she said, 'then I should not mind so much. But I am—thirty-eight, and no one has—ever asked me.'

Challis put her arm round the poor woman's neck; she stroked her cheek, patted her shoulder.

'Of course,' Miss Browne said at last, sitting up with tremulous, red-eyed dignity, 'there is no need to tell Hermie that, my love.'

'But you must have lots of friends,' said Challis, looking at the number of envelopes lying on the dressing-table. The colour ran up into Miss Browne's face. She half put her hand over the letters, then drew it back.

'If I told you about these, you would think me so foolish, my dear,' she faltered.

'Oh no, I wouldn't!' said Challis. 'Now I know you so well, I seem to understand everything.'

Miss Browne got some little papers out of a drawer, English penny weeklies devoted to 'ladies' interests.' She turned to the Answers to Correspondents pages, 'Advice on Courtship and Marriage.'

'Those marked with a little cross are the answers to me,' whispered Miss Browne. And Challis read these three marked paragraphs:

'*Fair Australienne* writes: "I am the only daughter of a very wealthy squatter, and have two lovers. One is a squatter on an adjoining station, the other an English baronet travelling in Australia. If I marry the baronet, I must leave my father, who loves me dearly; but I care for him more than I do for the squatter. What would you advise me to do?"

And the 'Aunt Lucy' who conducted the page had replied:

'Marry where your heart dictates. Could you not induce your father to live in England with you?'

'*Sweet Rock Lily.*—"I am eighteen, and, my friends tell me, very, very beautiful. I am governess in a wealthy family, and the son is deeply in love with me. If he marries me, he will be disinherited. What should I do? I love him very much. And will you tell me a remedy for thin hair?"

'The editor's answer is: "Try to overcome the prejudice of the family, *Rock Lily*, and all will go well. Bay rum and bitter apples is an excellent tonic."

'*Little Wattle Blossom.*—"I am seventeen, and only just out of the schoolroom. I am passionately in love with a young handsome man, who loves me in return; but my parents are trying to force me into a marriage with an old foreign nobleman. They have even fixed the wedding day, and I am kept a prisoner. What would you advise me to do?"

'The editor's answer is: "You cannot be forced into a marriage in these days. Refuse firmly. In four years you will be of age. In answer to your second question, your friend had better try massage for the crow's feet and thin neck."'

Challis read in extreme puzzlement.

'I hardly understand,' she said. 'How do you mean—these are to you?'

'It is only my foolishness, my love,' said Miss Browne, gathering them up again; 'but I get a great deal of pleasure out of it. The days the mail comes and I get the papers, I am so excited I don't know what to do. You get into the way of feeling it really is yourself.'

But this phase of Miss Browne was beyond Challis's comprehension, and she only looked doubtfully at the papers, so Miss Browne was swift to change the subject.

'These letters,' she said, 'are to the Melbourne and Adelaide art societies. I should like to tell you about this, my love. Your father, about four years ago, painted a picture, and something happened that made him try to burn it. Well, we managed to prevent that, and I got hold of it and hid it away. He has forgotten all about it now, imagines I sold it, but I haven't, and it occurred to me lately to write to several artists and describe the picture to them, and see if they would buy it. I did not mention your father's name; just said it was by a friend of mine—you will forgive me for the liberty, my love?'

'But didn't you send the picture?' said Challis. 'They could hardly tell from a description.'

'I had no money,' said Miss Browne, sighing 'I made inquiries at Wilgandra, but it would cost so much to have it packed and sent to Sydney. And there is the risk of losing it. I was *very* careful over the description; it took me five long evenings to write—I left no detail out.'

'And what happened?' said Challis.

Miss Browne flushed.

'Courtesy seems dying out,' she said. 'Not one of them answered. It might have been any lady writing—they could not know it was only I.'

Challis asked more questions about the picture. She asked to be shown it, and waited patiently while Miss Browne disinterred it from under the bed, and took off the old counterpane with which it was wrapped.

'I have never seen any great picture-galleries,' said Miss Browne, 'but I know there is something about this that must be good. It could not work up the feelings in me that it does, if it were just an ordinary picture. Look at the man's eyes, my love—isn't the hopelessness frightful?—and yet look at him well. You just know he'll keep on trying and trying till he gets there.'

Challis gazed at it for a long time.

'Yes,' she said slowly; 'that is how it makes me feel. I feel I want to beg him to stop trying, and lie down and go to sleep. But it wouldn't be any use. You feel the storm will last for ever, and the captain will go on trying for ever to get to wherever he has made up his mind to get to.'

'Your father intends it to represent the Flying Dutchman,' said Miss Browne.

'Oh yes!' Challis said. 'Of course. I ought to have known. But it is just like this picture—just as sad. And I play it too. Wagner, you know,—Der fliegende Hollander,—it makes you want to cry.'

'My love,' cried Miss Browne, 'you say you know an artist in Paris. Why, surely that would be the very thing! I believe they are all jealous of him in Sydney. Write to your friend. He would take notice of a letter from you. Write to him, and send the picture too. You can afford to, and it is not likely to go astray, since you know the exact address. Suppose we start to do it now?'

Challis sprang up with shining eyes. It seemed the loveliest plan in the world.

'It shall be our secret, you dear, dear thing!' she cried. 'We won't tell a single soul in the world—not even mother. Let's write it down that we promise.' She pushed pen and ink to Miss Browne. 'Write on this paper,' she said, '"I promise Challis Cameron faithfully I won't tell any one in the world."'

Miss Browne wrote the compact down, smiling.

Challis seized the pen.

'I promise Miss Brown faithfully I won't tell,' she wrote.

'Oh, my dear, my love!' said Miss Browne distressed. 'My love, how careless of you! I spell my name with an "e." I never thought you would forget, my love. No, don't add it on there; it looks as if it were an afterthought. Please write it again. We have always spelt our name with an "e," my love.'

CHAPTER XXI

The Morning Cables

'With rending of cheek and of hair,
Lament ye, mourn for him, weep.'

Bart came clattering at a great pace up the path with the mail. It was the midday

dinner-time; and such pleasant appetising foods were the order of the day now, boylike he did not care to be a moment late.

He took the saddle off, laid it down on the verandah, drove the horse down to the first paddock, and hastened in to the dining-room.

His father was just unfolding the daily paper he had brought, and opening it to find the war cables.

'Read them out, Jim,' said Mrs. Cameron, looking up from her task of apportioning the peas and cauliflower and potatoes.

Cameron read out the headings:

'"DESPERATE FIGHTING AT KRUG'S SPRUIT."

"GALLANT ATTEMPTS TO RESCUE GUNS."

"OFFICERS SERVING THE ARTILLERY."

"FIFTEEN THOUSAND BOERS IN ACTION."

"BRITISH UNDER A GALLING CROSS-FIRE."

"BRITISH CASUALTIES."

"CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY BY A NEW SOUTH WALES PRIVATE."

"LOSSES OF AUSTRALIAN TROOPS."'

The last two headings sent Cameron's eyes hurrying down the long column to seek details.

'Oh,' he said, 'poor lad, poor lad! Oh, I'm sorry for this—sorry for this!'

'Not old Morty,' said Bart—'not poor old Morty, dad?' Yet even as he spoke he knew it must be, for who else of all the contingent had they a personal interest in? He pushed his chair back and went to his father's shoulder. His eyes read the meagre paragraph, and burnt with swift tears for his friend.

'CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY BY A NEW SOUTH WALES TROOPER'

was the heading of the cable. Below it said:

'During the engagement, Trooper Stevenson, of the N.S.W. Bush Contin-

gent, made a most gallant rescue. He galloped to the assistance of General Strong, whose horse had fallen, and bore him under a scathing fire to a place of safety. General Strong escaped unhurt, and obtained another horse, but while galloping after his troop through the dusk, Stevenson was hit by a bullet, and killed instantaneously.'

'Just the sort of thing old Morty would do,' Bart said, his throat thick.

'I am thinking of the poor old man,' said Mrs. Cameron. 'It will kill him. Jim, you had better go up; you might be able to do something. None of the other sons are at home.'

'I'll go, certainly,' Cameron said; 'but it won't kill him. His pride in the lad's courage will keep him up.'

'I say,' said Bart, 'he won't have got the paper yet. That fellow Barnes was waiting for the mail while I was, and he had been drinking frightfully. It'll be hours before he gets back. I saw him turn in to the Golden Fleece as I came along.'

A strange stifled cry came from the end of the table. It was no use; Miss Browne had fought desperately to keep her self-control, but nature was too strong for her, and she was struggling with a piteous fit of hysterics.

Mrs. Cameron went round to her, got her to the sofa, opened the neck of her dress, administered cold water, spoke firmly and decidedly to her. There was nothing in the poor woman's cries for a long time, and she only pushed at Mrs. Cameron, as if trying to force her away. Finally a word came from her choking throat:

'Hermie!' she cried, and pointed to the open door. 'Go—to—Hermie.'

Where was Hermie? Mrs. Cameron looked round in surprise. It seemed only two minutes since she had been cutting the bread, and laughing at Roly because he had arranged his plate as a battle-field, with the peas for the army, the cauliflower as a kopje, the mashed potatoes in dots for the tents, while a slice of beef made the enemy's laager, and a gravy river flowed between the troops. Why had she left the table like this?

'Go—to—Hermie!' gasped the shivering, sobbing woman on the sofa. 'I—am—all right—quick, quick!'

Where had the girl gone? No one but Miss Browne had even noticed her chair was empty.

Mr. Cameron armed himself with another tumbler of cold water, and came across to the sofa.

'I will look after Miss Browne,' he said. 'You go to Hermie; perhaps she was a little faint.'

'Down—the—path,' gasped Miss Browne, 'near the wattles, most likely.'

Mrs. Cameron made her way down the path, looking from left to right, a

puzzled expression on her face. The girl was nowhere to be seen. She looked among the roses, in the various shady corners, beneath the trees. Finally she came to the thick-growing wattles near the fence, and a gleam of blue cambric showed through the leaves. The mother went in among the bushes, and found the girl face downward on the ground, sobbing in so bitter and heartbroken a way that she was quite alarmed for a moment. Then a wondering comprehension came; her girl was almost a woman. Was it possible she had cared for this friend of the family in a different way from Bart and Floss and Roly?

'My poor little girl!' she said, and sat down on the ground beside her, and lifted the bright head that had been Morty's perpetual delight on to her knee.

But Hermie pulled herself away, and rose wildly to her feet, and ran this way among the bushes with her broken heart, and then that way.

'Oh,' she sobbed, 'go away, go away—I want to be alone! Oh, it is my fault!—I want to be alone—oh, mother, mother!'—and she came back to her mother's side, and fell down beside her again, clinging to her piteously. The mother said nothing at all—just stroked her hair and let her weep as she would, and soon a little calmness came back to the girl.

'Oh,' she said, 'if you knew how I loved him, mother!'

'Did you, my darling?' said the tender mother, and never showed the ache that was at her heart because her child had kept so great a thing as this from her confidence.

'Ever since he went I have been loving him,' Hermie said, 'and yet when he told me, I sent him away, and he was so miserable. I am sure that is why he went to the war.'

'And you thought you did not care for him, then?' said Mrs. Cameron. 'Well, darling, that was not your fault.'

'Oh, it was—it was!' said Hermie. 'You don't understand, of course. You never could. But I shall be miserable now all my life!'

'You found you had made a mistake, and you cared for him after all?' said Mrs. Cameron.

'I didn't know quite how much till to-day!' sobbed Hermie. 'I have kept thinking of him and thinking of him ever since he went; out now—oh, now it is too late! I know I shall love him till I die.'

The mother's heart ached, as all mothers' must do when their children have to stand alone in a grief, and there can no longer be any kissing of the place to make it well.

'It seems as if I have been blind,' went on the girl, sometimes wiping the tears away and hiding her swollen eyes, sometimes letting them trickle unchecked down her cheeks. 'I can't tell you how silly and small I have been—thinking men ought to be just like men in books, and never looking at what they

really are. Oh, he was so good, such a brave fellow; ever since he has gone, people are always telling different brave or kind things he has been doing ever since he was a boy. And, just because he wore clothes and ties I didn't like, and sometimes knocked things over, I——'

Her voice choked, and she fell to sobbing again heart-brokenly.

Mrs. Cameron was silent again for a space; but when as the time went on the girl seemed to abandon herself more and more to her grief, she rose to her feet and drew the sobbing figure up also.

'There is a hard task before you, dear one,' she said, 'but I know you will do it.'

Hermie gazed at her helplessly.

'His poor old father does not know yet, for Bart tells me his man Barnes is still drinking in Wilgandra. I want you to go up to Coolooli and break it to him.'

'Me?' gasped Hermie. 'Me?'

'Yes, you, my dear. You cared for his son; it will establish a bond between you, and make it a little easier for him.'

'Oh, I couldn't!' cried the girl, shrinking back, actual alarm on her face. 'Oh, it is cruel of you to even ask me, mother! Why should I do such a thing? Surely it is hard enough already for me!'

'Because you are a woman, my dear, and must always think of yourself last,' the mother said quietly. 'How soon can you be ready to start?'

One glance the girl gave at her mother's face that was so quietly expectant that she would do the right thing. Her head lifted a little, and her mouth tried to compose itself.

'I have only my skirt to put on,' she said; 'I can do it while Bart saddles Tramby for me.'

Up to the cottage she walked again, and put on the neat blue riding-skirt her mother had lately made her. She bathed her red eyes; she drank two tumblers of cold water, to take the choking from her throat.

'Father will go with you,' the mother said, coming to the door; 'but when you get to Coolooli you can ride on ahead.'

Through the pleasant winter sunshine they rode, up hill, down dale, across bush stretches where Mortimer's horse had worn a path for them. Coolooli faced them at last, secret stern-looking, with its curtainless windows, its garden barren of sweet flowers. It was the first time the girl had been so near her lover's home.

She was among the trees now that lined the drive leading up to the house; her father had dropped behind, and was to follow on in half an hour.

Her heart seemed fluttering in her throat; a deadly sickness possessed her.

The old man was standing at a table on the verandah; he had a great map of the Transvaal spread open before him, and, with small flags stuck in it here

and there, was following his son's footsteps.

He turned at the sound of the horse's hoofs. When he saw the rider he went down instantly on to the path, to help her to dismount.

'Well, little missie,' he said, 'it's not often you ride this way.' He looked at her colourless cheeks keenly. 'What is the matter—can't you jump down?'

She absolutely could not, and he had almost to lift her off her saddle. He tied the horse's reins loosely round the verandah-post, and looked at her again from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. He told himself he knew what was the matter. The family was in difficulties again, and had sent this particular member of it as an emissary to borrow money. Well, this freak of his son's was going to cost him dear. Still, the little thing was trembling dreadfully, and evidently did not like her task. He put his hand on her shoulder reassuringly.

'Out with it, lassie,' he said; 'how much do you want?'

Hermie clung to his arm—her very lips were white.

'Mortimer has been very brave,' she said; 'he has done something magnificent.' Her voice fell.

'My lad!' he cried, in a changed tone. 'Where? show me—I haven't seen the paper yet.'

She clung to it.

'You will be very proud of him,' she said 'All Australia is talking of him to-day.'

He pulled vigorously at the paper; his creased old face had a strangely illumined look; his hands were trembling with eagerness.

'I knowed it,' he said; 'he always had grit. I've kep' expectin' this. Well, I'll lie quiet in me grave now, whenever the Lord up there likes.'

'Yes,' the girl continued, and gave him the paper. 'All the world is proud of him to-day, so that must help you. He gave his life to save the general's.'

The old man drew a curious breath, and sat down on his chair; he opened the paper and read the paragraph. Then he read it again, and again, and again, until his eyes had carried the news to his brain twenty times at least.

'It was a fine thing to do,' he said at last.

'Yes,' said Hermie.

'No other Australian's been mentioned like that.'

'No,' said poor Hermie.

'It was a fine thing to do,' he repeated. He got little further than that all the time the girl stayed; even when Cameron came up, all a-quiver with deep sympathy, he still only said, 'It was a fine thing to do.' After an hour or so, he looked at them expectantly.

'I suppose you'll have to be getting back?' he said; and Cameron and Hermie rose at once.

He saw them down the steps, and even helped Hermie on her horse again. Cameron rode on.

'Good-bye, missie,' he said. Then he shot an almost aggressive look at her. 'You ought to be fine and set up that a fellow like that loved you.'

'I am,' said Hermie bravely. 'I shall be proud of it just as long as I live, Mr. Stevenson.'

He softened a little, then looked suddenly old and very tired.

'I want to be alone now,' he said. 'But I don't mind if you come up again to-morrow.'

With that he went back to the house, the paper still in his hand. But the next day, when she went, she found him pacing the place like a wounded tiger. The servants told her he had been very quiet all the morning and the previous evening, and had told them all several times about the fine thing his son had done. But Barnes had brought in the day's papers an hour ago, and he had been raging like this ever since. The girl found him with bloodshot eyes and clenched hands, walking the big verandahs.

'Go away!' he shouted when he saw her. She turned and went into the house at once, to wait the passing of the mood. She stood at the window of one of the handsome rooms, and looked with dreary eyes out to the twin hill that lay bathed in the clear sunshine half a mile away, and never knew how often Mortimer had sat at that same window, smoking his after-dinner pipe, and building his sunny cottage for her on the bright hill-top.

Presently the old man came in to her.

'Take the paper from me,' he said quaveringly, and held it out to her. 'If I read it any more, I'll lose me reason!'

The girl looked startled.

'I didn't know there was anything new to-day,' she said. 'Bart told me he had lost our paper on the way.' Her eyes, large with fear and grief, tore through the cables they had kept back from her at the selection.

'Private Stevenson,' said a paragraph, 'did not die instantaneously. He was shot through the jaw and through one lung, and dragged himself to a rock, leaving a long trail of blood behind. He must have lingered in frightful agony all night, for when his body was picked up by the ambulance, it was found that he had written the word "Cold" on the ground with his finger.'

'Dear God, how can they do this?' Mrs. Cameron had cried, when she saw the paragraph. 'Have they no sense of pity or decency, that they print these frightful details? This is more terrible a thousandfold for those who loved him than the plain news that he was dead.'

The poor little girl, who had gone up so resolved to be calm and brave, screamed out uncontrollably at the cruel news, then buried her head in her hands

to keep the moans back.

The old man brought her a glass of water from the sideboard.

'Let's tear it up,' he said, and rent the horrid news in pieces. 'Let's only remember the boy did the right thing, and died like a man.'

He found himself comforting the girl who had come to comfort him. She found herself telling him with streaming eyes how she had loved his boy and thought of him, even though at the time he asked her she had said, 'No.'

'If only he could have known!' she sobbed. 'Perhaps, perhaps he was thinking of me part of that night when he—was cold.'

The next day there was another cable about the affair.

'The trooper who saved General Strong's life at Krug's Spruit was Private Mark Stevenson, of the Queensland Contingent, not Mortimer Stevenson of the New South Wales, as reported yesterday.'

Hermie tore along the road to Coolooli to rejoice with the old man, since before she had gone to grieve with him.

He was sitting on the verandah looking very shaken and bewildered, and reading the third cable as often as he had read the first.

'I—hardly understand,' he said feebly.

Hermie had seized his two hands, and was shaking them joyously.

'He is alive—alive!' she cried.

He looked at her piteously.

'Didn't he do that fine thing at all?' he said.

'No,' she cried. 'Some other man did it, thank God! He is alive, alive—Mortimer—he is not dead!

He drew his hands out of her eager ones a little pettishly.

'They should be more careful with these cables,' he said.

'Oh,' she cried happily, 'we will forgive them anything! He is alive—alive!'

'But he never did that fine thing,' he repeated sadly.

CHAPTER XXII

Conclusion

'Let one more attest
I have lived, seen God's hand through a lifetime, and
all was for best.'

Life, so long a hopeless tangle, smoothed itself out at last for the little family. Challis was well again, and had gone off to give a series of concerts in the respective capitals of each colony; gone off in high spirits, touched with sweet responsibility, inasmuch as she was the bread-winner for the family. Mr. Cameron went with her this time, and her mother stayed thankfully at home on the selection. And Australia, despite the fact that she neither recited 'The Absent-Minded Beggar,' nor yet had 'Sons of the Empire' in her *repertoire*, gave her so warm a welcome everywhere that in three months she was back again at The Rosery with a fresh thousand pounds put to her credit in the bank.

This pleasant sum was to pay passages across the sea for all the family.

For, warm-hearted as the big overgrown young island had proved, its eager, easily roused enthusiasm would soon be turned upon some other object, and there would be no permanent opening for the girl-musician. She must go to the little, pulsing, crowded island the other side of the world for that.

Mrs. Cameron had the plan of campaign all in readiness in her head. They were to find an ideal house in a pleasant countrified suburb just out of London, and Challis, accompanied by her father, was to fulfil her English engagements from there.

When she went abroad, they would all, when possible, go with her, and make headquarters in some inexpensive French or German village. The benefit of a varied life like this would be incalculable to the young ones, after the stagnant years at Wilgandra.

Bart was to go to an English public school the moment they touched land after the voyage. He had but three or four years left now in which to crowd all his school education, and he was eager to begin. In general education and the making of moral fibre, Wilgandra had done a better work than Eton or Rugby could ever hope to do.

'But I shall come back and be a squatter,' he always insisted. 'No other life for me.'

'If he sticks to that,' old Stevenson said to his father, 'send him back to me. I'll give him a start, and be thankful to do it. He's got the stuff in him to make the kind of man this country wants.'

Then he fell to chuckling over the memory of the calf that Bart had sold him, and so started the intimacy between them.

Hermie was to travel as much as possible, take lessons in various subjects from good masters, and go on with her general education under the able guidance of her mother. And there were picnics and dances and all manner of brightness for her in her mother's campaign, to counteract the grey monotony of her earlier girlhood.

And, when the war was over, one in khaki would step in and take the young

life into his keeping, and make all the sunshine for it that a boundless love makes possible.

On his far battle-fields Mortimer knew now the little girl's heart was his own. His father had written to him one of his characteristic letters.

'I'm glad to hear, my boy, you're still alive, but it was a fine thing that other fellow Stevenson did for his general. I take pride that my name's the same. But perhaps you'll get a chance yet to do the same thing. I've been looking round, and I think the hill over the way will make the best place for your house, and I daresay two or three thousand a year would keep you going for a time, as she's not flighty and used to fine things, like Luke's wife. It's a pity she can't make soap and such things, but maybe she can learn; she may favour her mother, who seems a sensible body, more than that fool of a father of hers. I'll give the little baggage credit, at all events, for being fond of you. A nice job of it I had with her, when we thought it was you killed instead of that fine fellow Mark Stevenson. She was nearly crazy, because she said you'd never know how she loved you.'

[image]

ONE OF HIS FATHER'S CHARACTERISTIC LETTERS.

So Mortimer fought the rest of his battles with a light heart, and many a night, when the veldt slumbered restlessly beneath its covering of white, harmless-looking tents, he lay happily awake, thinking of the green twin hill at home and the bright cottage that was going to crown it.

'But I shall insist that he travels about with you for a year or two before you settle down,' said the mother; 'it will do you both good. And he must bring you for a visit home to us at least every three years.'

The girl went on her way, shyly, sweetly, learning all she might to fit her for the high office of woman and wife.

Miss Browne?

At first Mrs. Cameron had almost obeyed the natural impulse to dismiss her kindly, give her a handsome present of money, and help her to find a comfortable situation. But the vision perpetually haunted her of the poor woman with a strand of dull hair blown loose, and her blouse and skirt not quite meeting, and her face moist with perspiration, toiling in one hot country town after another, getting sparks in her eyes, cooking other peoples' food, dragging fat babies out for a walk, battling helplessly with naughty small boys and girls, and distractedly saying to them, 'My love, my dear.'

This while she and her own family, their eyes turned eagerly to a glowing

future, sailed thankfully away from all the misery and monotony of the past.

She could not do it. The woman seemed to stand right in their path, a moral responsibility for all their lives.

So while Mr. Cameron was away with Challis on the Australian tour, she filled in all her spare time undertaking a mission to Miss Browne. Her first battle was to make the woman respect herself, trust herself. She ordered some clothes for her, well-cut coats and skirts, warm-coloured home dresses with soft lace to hide the bony neck and wrists. She gave deep thought to a style of doing her hair, and having found it, kept her to it, insisting that she should give plenty of time to curling those helpless strands and brushing them and getting them into good condition. She encouraged her to form her own opinions on things, and teased her gently out of her little eccentricities of speech. She applied herself energetically to making her capable and efficient in the branches of housekeeping which all these years she had so hopelessly muddled. The mission was sheer hard, exhausting work—there were times when it seemed almost desperate; but women have battled far harder and with far less hope of success with the Island blacks or the far Chinese, and here was her work come to her hand.

'Why,' cried the changed woman, at the end of a day that had seen the accomplishment of a most respectable pie-crust, an almost invisible patch on a coat, and a hard piece of music mastered, 'I shall be able to ask for ten shillings a week, I am sure, when I go to the registry office again; I never used to get more than five or six until I came to Mr. Cameron, and I am sure I was not worth the ten he used to pay me then.'

'My dear,' said Mrs. Cameron, 'you have finished with registry offices. I want you to come to England with us, and help me with Floss and Roly.'

This decision she and her husband had only just arrived at; to leave her behind, even improved as she was, would mean she would soon sink back without stimulus into her dreary ways. So Challis gave yet one more concert in a country town, to pay for the extra passage money and frocks, and the future they left to look after itself. She had a relative or two in England who might give her a home; if not, well, unless life went very crookedly again, they would always keep a corner for her themselves wherever they lived.

But before they had been in London six months the pleased Fates relieved them of their anxiety.

Next door to them in the pleasant home they had made was a widower, just getting over—and without overmuch difficulty—the loss of a wife who had insisted upon managing his very soul as well as his house, and his two children and his very respectable cheque-book.

His small ones were running wild—he noted the contrast between them and Floss and Roly, whom Miss Browne seemed now to manage so admirably. The

intimacy increased; the change from his past, overruled existence to the companionship of this gentle lady-help, who deferred humbly to his opinions, and asked his advice, and was curiously grateful for the smallest attention, was such a restful novelty to him that he offered her his hand and heart and lonely little children forthwith.

And now that Fortune, so long harsh and uncompromising, had taken to flinging gifts at the family with unstinted hand, it did not leave Cameron himself out of its scheme of sudden generosity.

The picture of the ship had found its way safely from under Miss Browne's bed at Wilgandra across the sea to the artist who painted in leafy Fontainebleau pictures the world was pleased to stand and look at long.

And the man's artist-soul rose in recognition of the passion and strength that had gone forth into the brush that had worked so feverishly in that far-away bush township.

An important Paris exhibition was just coming on. He rushed up to the city with the canvas, and his influence got it in at the right time, and saw it well hung. The second day the exhibition was opened it sold for two hundred guineas, and the path Cameron had ached to walk on all his life was at last open to his feet.

The day had not dropped her burdens from the backs of these people for ever; it had merely strengthened weak shoulders with soldierly discipline, and readjusted the weight.

Bright days, sad days, separations, meetings, temptations, love, death, all would come along, as they always have done, as they always will.

For this is Life we fare upon, and not just a little journey to ask smooth ground for all the way.

THE END.

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* * * * * * * *

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