THE HAPPY TRAVELLER

Mary Grant Bruce

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STORIES BY

MARY GRANT BRUCE

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

THE HAPPY TRAVELLER

BY

MARY GRANT BRUCE

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TO
MY SONS,
J. E. B., P. DE B. B.

JANUARY, 1929.

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THE HAPPY TRAVELLER

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

"NOW'S my chance!" muttered Teddy Winter.

Far below him, somewhere in the depths of the building, a heavy door had suddenly slammed. He raised himself on his elbow, listening. No sound in the long room but the steady breathing of sleepers—save in the bed next his own, where Danny Wellcome, who always snored, had already embarked upon his nightly programme of nasal music. They were all sound asleep; all the twenty good and bad boys—chiefly bad, Mr. Pullinger said—who peopled Dormitory B. Only Teddy Winter, the twenty-first, universally admitted to be bad, was very thoroughly awake, and full of purpose.

The slamming of the door downstairs was what he had been waiting for. It always came, twenty minutes or so after Mr. Pullinger had made his final round of the dormitories, counting the heads, dark and fair, on the hard little pillows, casting his eagle eye over the neatly-folded piles of clothes at the foot of each bed, and generally satisfying himself that the Boys' Side of the Orphanage might be considered safe for the night. Matron had passed round earlier, asking all the questions Matrons were so unpleasantly fond of asking, looking at an occasional tongue, producing an occasional dose of evil-tasting medicine. You never knew why you were singled out for Matron's medicine, but there was no arguing about it—you gulped down the thick, bitter stuff, forbore to wipe your mouth on your sleeve while she was looking, and hated her a little more heartily than usual. At least, Teddy did. But then, as has been hinted, no one made the mistake of thinking him a good little boy.

He had escaped the dose to-night, but Joe MacEwen had been less fortunate, much to the satisfaction of the dormitory, where Joe—known as "one of Pully's pets"—was not popular. Matron had been in a hurry, and Teddy knew why. There was a party downstairs to-night: not a very exciting party, just one of the carefree gatherings of grown-ups that generally occurred when the great man of all, the Sup'ntend'nt, went out for the evening. Dr.

Mackintosh was the Superintendent, and even Mr. Pullinger had been known to quail before his eye—much as the boys were apt to quail before that of Mr. Pullinger. The boys knew well the sense of relaxing that came upon all the Orphanage attendants when the Superintendent went out. It had come early that evening, for he had taken his wife into the city for dinner and a theatre; they had heard the car grinding down the avenue while they were still at tea. Every one had hurried after that; there had been jokes between the attendants, low-voiced allusions to the party, a scamping of the time for the boys' baths. "Bad luck it's bath-night!" Mr. Pullinger had been heard to observe. Still, with management, it had been ten minutes earlier than usual when they were inspected for the last time. Then, lying with every muscle tense, Teddy had heard the moving to and fro, the shutting of cupboards, the turning of keys in locks, the voices dying away: all the finishing-up sounds he knew so thoroughly. And finally, the banging of the door that shut off the attendants' quarters and the kitchens. It banged to-night with a kind of defiance, as though it shouted, "Sup'ntend'nt's out!"

They were safe now, all the big people who ruled each hour of the day with their hard, commanding voices. Down in the big room by the kitchens they were probably becoming quite human, even merry. It was only in the boys' waking hours that they became parts of the great machine that was the Orphanage, doing their job in their stony, efficient manner. Boys, to them, if they were orphan boys, were not really human—not flesh-and-blood boys, made for laughter and loving, but just parts of the machine. It had to be so, if Fate had dealt you the nasty trick of making you an orphan. Only for little Teddy Winter, who had not learned in three years to become a really respectable orphan, the breaking-point had come. To-night was his party as well. For he was about to run away.

I am not going to pretend that this was a proper thing to do. In the three years of his orphanhood Teddy Winter should certainly have learned to be grateful and humble; grateful to the Powers-That-Be that had fed and clothed him and provided him with a bed—complete with hard pillow—without any expense to himself; and humble because he was a bad little boy. But there you have it. Doubtless because he was bad Teddy had been quite unable to forget the first ten years of his life. They had been years containing a good many hard times, and, at the last, rather more of bewildering grief than any little boy should have; but they had also been years of much laughter and of love that had no limit. When you have such memories as these you do not take kindly to being a part of a large, cold machine. You keep remembering things when you should be trying to be grateful and humble. You remember the enormous jokes you shared with Father: at night, on the small hard pillow, comes the obstinate

dream that Mother is there, tucking in the blankets, fixing the sheet at your neck so that you cuddle down into it with a little sigh of comfort, just awake enough to feel her cheek on yours. One should really have no memories at all if one is to make a satisfactory orphan. So Teddy Winter was giving up the job.

He waited for a few moments after the slamming of the far-off door, and then crept noiselessly out of bed. Through the high, barred windows came a very faint light: the moon had not risen, but there was promise of her coming, and the stars shone brightly. Not that Teddy needed light; he had so long studied every inch of the ground he had to traverse that the blackest night would not have hindered him. He crept to the foot of the bed and dressed quickly, pausing now and then lest some sound, floating up from below, might turn to the menace of a footstep on the stairs. But none came. He was fully dressed, save for his boots, when a drowsy murmur from Danny Wellcome's bed suddenly turned his heart cold.

"Whatcher doin', Teddy?"

"Gettin' a hanky, fat-head—stop makin' a row!" said Teddy, in a swift whisper. He plunged back into bed, dressed as he was, and lay motionless; and presently Danny's snores proclaimed that slumber had again claimed him for its own.

Very slowly Teddy crept out once more. He lingered a moment to arrange his bedclothes in a hump over the pillow, so that if any grown-ups looked into the dormitory they might imagine that he slept beneath. Then, picking up his boots, he tiptoed to the door and out into the passage.

Everything was dim and still. Most of the lights had been turned out; only a faint glimmer showed on each landing. But the main stairs were not for Teddy; not, at least, if Mr. Pullinger had done his duty and unlocked the door leading to the fire-escape, supposed to be unfastened each night after the boys were in bed. If the anticipation of the party had so infected Mr. Pullinger that he had omitted the unlocking, then Teddy knew he must face the stairs and the long corridors, with their infinitely greater chances of discovery. "He jolly well ought to be reported to Sup'ntend'nt if he has!" he muttered, gliding like a shadow along the wall.

He tried the door. It creaked hideously, but it yielded; and in a moment he was out on the slender iron staircase, and the door was shut between him and the warm silence of the building. For a moment the chill night air, the sense of utter solitude, held him motionless. Far below him, a zigzag thread of steel, the fire-escape led downwards. On one side the long line of the enormous house seemed like a crouching beast, ready to spring and swallow him up; but on the other were the friendly shadows of the trees, among which lay his path to

freedom. The scent of flowers came to his nostrils—the bed of stocks he had helped to weed that very afternoon, when Joe MacEwen had pulled up three plants and had hurriedly replanted them with a wild hope that nobody would ever know. Teddy grinned at the recollection as he began to feel his way down the ladder.

It took a long time, and twice his boots, swinging in his hand, caught the iron railing with a noise that seemed appalling. But no one heard him, and presently he had reached the ground. He gave a smothered sigh of relief, sitting down on the lowest step to put on his boots.

A slow step crunched the gravel on the wide path that skirted the building, and in a flash Teddy had slipped through the staircase and was crouching beneath it. The open framework was little enough shelter, but it was better than nothing; he huddled against the wall, holding his breath, his heart thudding in his breast. Slowly the steps came, and with them the scent of tobacco; it was old Branson, the head gardener, strolling home to his cottage down by the orchard. He passed a yard from the staircase, glanced up at it, and went on, slowly—slowly, seeing nothing of the dark blot below the iron rungs. The heavy steps died away.

Teddy stood up, trembling so violently that movement was for a moment impossible. Then, deciding that it was safer to delay putting on his boots, he crept along the wall until he came to a place where the shadows lay thickest across the path; and there risked the crossing, each step on the gravel making, in his ears, noise enough to disturb a hundred Pullingers. But the party was in full swing, and the rest of the Orphanage slept; Teddy was still safe as he gained the shelter of the trees and dived among some bushes. Boots must go on now, for there was work ahead.

He knew he could not risk the gate. It might be unlocked, since the Superintendent had yet to come in; but the lodge-keeper would not be in bed, and besides, an electric light over the gateway gave a radiance that was the last thing Teddy wanted. But he had long planned his road. It lay by way of the great oak tree that grew just inside the wall and flung gnarled branches far beyond it. The drop on the outer side was longer than he liked—he had studied it whenever they were taken out for a walk—but there was nothing for it. He uttered a little prayer as he came to the tree in the darkness and scrambled into its branches: “Oh, God, please don’t go an’ let me hurt my ankle when I drop!”

Not the easiest matter, climbing a tree in the faint starlight. He had not imagined how puzzling it would be. But he managed it, with a few rents in his jacket, and found himself perched on the branch he wanted—and he had passed the wall, the hideous twelve-feet wall that shut in all the dreary Orphanage world from the world of space and freedom and happy boys. He

could have shouted aloud when he climbed beyond it and made his slow way down the drooping bough. But it was too soon to shout. He crept on until the bending of the branch beneath him warned him not to trust it further. Then he gripped it with both hands, said his little prayer again, and dropped.

It was a long drop, and an unlucky one, for one foot came down heavily on a bent dry stick, which promptly flew up and dealt him a cruel blow from hip to ankle. He went down in a heap on the hard ground and lay for a moment, wondering if any bones were broken. Finding himself whole, though sorely battered, he struggled to his feet—and immediately forgot bruises and pain. For he was free! The great wall towered above him, the wall of which he hated every stone; but he was on the right side of it now, and the whole world lay before him.

So long he had planned the great adventure that he knew exactly what he meant to do. For two years the resolve to escape had never left him, though his native shrewdness had warned him that it was useless to try too soon—that he must wait until he was big enough to make sure of getting the job on a farm that he knew waited somewhere for a handy boy. Even Mr. Pullinger said he was handy—when he liked. Until he was thirteen he had waited: it had seemed like a message from Fate that on the very day after his birthday wonderful luck had come his way in the shape of the visiting lady. He did not know who she was—a tall, pale lady, on her way to see Mrs. Mackintosh when she met him wheeling a load of pea-stakes. She had stopped and chatted with him for a few moments, just as she might have talked to a real boy—not to an orphan. And then, as she bade him good-bye, she had hesitated, glanced round cautiously, and had slipped into his hand a shining new half-crown! He trembled yet with the wonder of it.

It was absolutely against rules, of course, and highly dangerous as well for Teddy; for orphans were not supposed to possess anything at all beyond the meeker virtues. Sooner or later it was bound to be discovered, and then there would be trouble, and the marvellous gift would be taken from him—to be kept for him, probably, but what good would that be to him now? He must escape while he was still a capitalist, with a whole two-and-sixpence between him and the needs of the world. Just a few days to make up his mind, while the precious coin lay hidden in a convenient hole in his mattress, companioned by what crusts of bread he could smuggle away from tea: and then had come the happy chance of the Superintendent’s absence and the party below stairs. All the stars in their courses had fought for him; and here he was, at ten o’clock at night, free, independent, rich, and the open road calling to him! “If only the chaps could see me now!” he thought, with a half-contemptuous memory of the sleeping cherubs in Dormitory B.

Not that he had any illusions about the difficulty of running away. To escape from the Orphanage had been easy enough, but permanent escape was quite another matter. Other boys had tried it, but they had always been brought back; Mr. Pullinger often told them about it, laughing in the way they all knew and hated—every boy dreaded "Pully's laugh" more than any other attendant's anger. According to Mr. Pullinger, no runaway had the slightest chance. There were so many policemen about wherever one went; so many officious people, quick to note a boy in unusual clothes. The clothes made it so hopeless. Teddy felt a new spasm of hatred for the little round jacket and the trousers he wore, a queer shade of muddy blue; no boys he ever saw outside wore anything like them in colour and cut. They would mark him out half a mile away. Therefore it was only possible to move about at night until a chance came of finding other garments. "Finding" meant stealing, of course. He did not like the idea, but there seemed no other way.

Meanwhile, the first thing to do was to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the storm that would certainly break over the Orphanage in the morning—if, indeed, luck delayed it so long. To the right lay the city, miles away, its myriad lights sending a pale glow into the sky—no place for a runaway orphan. To the left, fewer lights, but still far too many for safety. But ahead were dim roads, and dark expanses of paddocks, beyond which lay the country of his dreams, where overworked farmers waited anxiously for a handy boy. Teddy set his teeth, felt the half-crown in his pocket for the thousand-and-first time, and jogged off into the darkness.

CHAPTER II

THE ADVENTURE OF JOHN PRICE

HE was still jogging steadily two hours later. Now and then he had rested for a few moments, sitting by the roadside to ease the aching of legs unused to steady running; but always fear drove him on and made him forget weariness. And yet he knew that he had not come very far: not into safe country. There were still houses everywhere, linking up scattered outer suburbs, through the outskirts of which he crept like a thief, slinking in every shadow. The paddocks were small and bare, with no hiding-places. Teddy had begun to wonder how far he could run—if morning light would find him still in this horrible network of houses, in which he struggled like a fly in a spider's web.

He was on a main road, though where it led he did not know. It threaded the little towns on its length like beads on an unending string. Teddy edged away from it when the towns came, but he always found his way back to it again, feeling that it would lead him in the right direction. But it was so mercilessly long.

He had sat down again to rest when the sound of horses' hoofs and the rattle of heavy wheels sent him scurrying into the shelter of the hedge. A van came round the corner; a huge van, drawn by two horses, its great bulk towering against the dimly-lit sky. It creaked and jangled past him, the horses trotting slowly. Teddy noticed that the near-side one was lame. Apparently the driver noticed it at the same moment, for the van was pulled up suddenly, drawing in towards the hedge where Teddy lay. The driver got out, unhooked a hurricane lantern that swung from the splash-board and, muttering to himself, went forward to look at the limping horse's hoofs.

There was the sound of a cantering horse approaching, and in a moment the rider pulled up beside the van.

"Anything wrong?" he asked. He was a tall fellow, little more than a boy, riding a fidgety black.

"Oh, she's only picked up a stone," the driver answered, putting down the mare's hoof. He dug his hand into his pocket. "I got a pick in me knife—that'll fetch it out."

"Can I help you?"

"No need, thanks—I can do it. Take a bit of time in this light, but it only

wants patience." He laughed. "I was just about asleep, I reckon—sorter felt the ol' mare goin' dot-an'-carry-one in a dream."

"You're travelling late, aren't you!" the rider asked.

"Yes, worse luck. We're movin' down into the country, an' I got the loan of the van for twenty-four hours. Got to use pretty well every minute of the twenty-four, but I'll do it all right. Times is that hard a man's glad to save cartin' furniture to the country by rail; them railways charge as much as the stuff's worth. Travellin' at night, I'll get it into the house before the missus and kid come down."

"That's right," agreed the rider. "All the same, I'm glad it isn't me to be on the road all night."

"Oh, I'll be gettin' a nap now an' then," said the driver. "These ol' horses is that wise they don't need much lookin' after."

He bade the other a cheery "Good night," stooping over the mare's hoof as the younger man rode away towards the city. The stone was an obstinate one, as he had foreseen; in the uncertain light of the hurricane lantern it was some minutes before he succeeded in getting it out. He climbed back to his seat, shook the reins with a good-humoured "Gidap there!" and the van rattled down the road once more. The driver settled himself comfortably in his seat and prepared to go to sleep again.

He did not know that he carried a passenger. While he was engrossed with his task Teddy had slipped behind the van like a shadow; and now he was curled up among the furniture at the back, finding what chinks of space he might between the legs of a wash-stand and those of a kitchen safe. It was not comfortable, but Teddy did not ask for comfort. All he cared for was that he was progressing towards his dream-country, and not on his own tired feet. And presently, rooting round quietly in the darkness, he encountered a roll of carpet with his head, and it was more welcome than had ever been the Orphanage pillow. He snuggled against it and fell fast asleep.

The night passed in a succession of uneasy dreams, generally of Mr. Pullinger. That genial soul pursued him throughout his sleep, and no matter where he hid, sooner or later the heavy step sounded, the heavy hand fell on his shoulder, and there was his enemy, grim and triumphant, with the Orphanage in the background, waiting like an enormous trap. These dreams, coupled with the shifting nature of the roll of carpet and the meat-safe legs, which moved with every jolt of the van, prevented his sleep from being restful, and when he came to complete wakefulness in the early dawn he felt as though his whole body were one large bruise. He rubbed his eyes and looked round him in bewilderment, expecting to see the clean and varnished expanse of

Dormitory B. Then recollection returned, and he gave a happy sigh.

Other people might not have thought his surroundings exhilarating. He was crouched in an incredibly small space amid the furniture, which towered round him and crowded upon him as though resenting the fact that he was there. It was poor enough furniture—deal cupboards and tables, wooden chairs, fragments of dismembered iron bedsteads, and piles of packing-cases, reaching to the very roof of the van. A catastrophe had evidently taken place in a case near him, from which came a clinking of badly-packed bottles and jars, while a stream of what looked like jam had found its way through a crack in a board and was struggling across the van floor. Teddy moved hastily to avoid it—Matron was short in the temper if you got jam on your clothes. Then he remembered that there was now no Matron for him, and in the exultation of the thought he almost moved back towards the oozing stickiness. But not quite: Teddy had natural ideas on being clean. Instead, he wriggled upon his hands and knees and peeped out over the tail-board of the van.

They were going slowly between hawthorn hedges that lined each side of a very wide road. The track for vehicles ran in the middle, and on either hand were stretches of short grass, with occasional trees. Beyond the hedges were paddocks, dotted with cattle and horses; a few houses were in sight, but there was no sign of any town. Then Teddy's investigations ceased suddenly, for the van stopped and he heard the driver's feet on the road. Was he coming round to the back? Teddy scuttled away like a panic-stricken rat, crawling into the deepest recesses he could find among the furniture.

But the driver did not appear. Instead Teddy heard him speaking to the horses.

"Guess you've earned a bit of a spell, ol' mokes," he said. "How about nose-bags, eh? An' I could do with a drop of tea meself. I guess you thought I was never goin' to get to this creek. Get back, Blossom, if you want me to get this trace undone."

Teddy crouched, motionless, listening to the rough, good-tempered voice and to the clatter of the harness as, bit by bit, the horses were released. Then he heard them led away slowly, and he guessed that they were being taken to the creek for a drink. Should he slip away now while the driver's back was turned? But he did not know how near the man might be, and there was risk in it; if he were caught, how easy it would be to take him back to the Orphanage when the van made its return journey that afternoon. Most men would think it was the right thing to do. In the end Teddy decided to remain where he was, and to trust to luck for a better chance of getting away without being seen. After all, the farther he let the van take him, the better; every mile was something that put him farther from the righteous annoyance of Mr. Pullinger.

But it was weary work, waiting during the hour's halt. The horses were led back near the van and provided with nose-bags, and soon he heard the merry crackling of burning sticks and smelt the sweet wood-smoke that he had not known for three long years. That was good: but it was less pleasant to picture the driver brewing tea and stretching himself lazily on the grass to eat his breakfast. Not until then had Teddy realized how desperately thirsty he was. His long run through the first hours of his flight had been enough to make him want a drink badly before he gained the shelter of the van; there the dust from the floor and the packing-cases, together with his uneasy sleep, had given him a mouth like a lime-kiln. He tried to nibble some of his crusts of bread as he crouched in his hiding-place, but they were hard and dry, and he could not swallow more than a couple of mouthfuls. There was nothing to do but to endure as best he might. He remembered having heard that thirst-smitten castaways found relief in sucking some hard object, and as his precious half-crown was the only clean thing about him, he sucked that. It did not help his mouth much, but he fancied it comforted him a little.

It seemed ages before he heard the welcome sound of jingling harness once more. Not until the van was in motion did he dare to crawl out of his nook to the comparative air and space of his first hiding-place. He prodded the roll of carpet into a position that would give him greater comfort, and, leaning against it, watched the trees and hedges as they went by. But for his devouring thirst he would have been happy, weary and aching as he was. And at last neither thirst nor weariness troubled him, for the little body sagged down on the carpet, and Teddy was asleep.

* * * * * * *

"Well, I'm blessed!"

He woke with a great start and a stifled cry of terror—again in his dream he had been fleeing from Mr. Pullinger. But it was not Mr. Pullinger who stood looking at him with a face of comical dismay.

The van was standing still, and there was no sign of the road. So much he realized; but nothing else was clear except the face of the driver looking at him over the tail-board of the van. Teddy blinked back at him stupidly, struggling to collect his thoughts.

"An' where d'you think *you* come from?" demanded the driver. "You don't tell me I brought you all the way from Town?"

Teddy shook his head.

"No, sir. I got in on the road."

"Well, you got a pretty good cheek of your own, haven't you?" The driver

looked at him, and a slow grin overspread his face. “S’welp me if you aren’t about the dirtiest youngster I ever saw! Was you white once, or was you always like that?”

“Am I dirty?” Teddy looked at his hands, and grinned in spite of himself. “They *are* black, aren’t they?”

“They aren’t a circumstance to your face,” stated the driver. “Here, tumble out of that till I get a look at you.”

Teddy crawled out into the sunshine, stiffly, and stood before his captor, a huddled, miserable figure. The driver looked him over carefully.

“Well, you’re a pretty object,” was the conclusion of his inspection. “An’ if you was my kid what’s at home I sh’d say you could do with a drink.”

“I could so!” said Teddy fervently.

“Well, there’s tea yet in the billy,” the driver said. “About cold now, but I don’t s’pose that’ll worry you.” He poured some into a tin pannikin and handed it to the boy, watching silently as he drained it. Then he held out his hand for it, refilled it, gave it back, and watched him again. After a third time, all in silence, he did not offer to refill the cup, but exhibited the fact that the billy was empty.

“That was the best drink ever I had,” said Teddy solemnly. “Thanks, sir. An’ I’ve got half a crown, if that’ll pay you for the ride.”

“Bloomin’ rich man you are, aren’t you?” demanded the driver, with interest. “I’ll see presently what the meter says on me taxi.” He chuckled deeply over this thought. “And wot about a bite of breakfast? You’ve had the lodging, so you might as well have the board.”

“I guess I’ve had the board all right,” said Teddy, rubbing an aching leg. “Feels like it, anyhow.”

The driver’s chuckle became almost dangerous, bordering on choking.

“Haw, haw! Good for a joke yet, ain’t you, son? I’ll bet you weren’t on any bed of roses on the old van floor. I ain’t as skinny as you, but I wouldn’t care for it meself. Well, I’ll find something for you to get your teeth into, and then we can see what’s to be done with you. I guess it ain’t a hangin’ matter.” He turned to the van and took out a battered basket from which protruded greasy papers.

Teddy hesitated. He was hungry, but he had been bred to cleanly ways.

“Wonder if I could get a wash first, sir? I’m too jolly dirty to eat.”

“Sure you can,” said the driver cheerfully. “This is me property, an’ even if it ain’t no Buckin’am Pallus we ain’t short of water.” He waved his hand, and Teddy realized that the van had come to a resting-place at the back of a small

wooden house standing in a bracken-grown paddock. “There’s a tank over there, an’ if you look on the stand behind it you’ll find a bit of soap I lef’ when I was doin’ odd jobs last week. An’ here’s a bucket. You get along, son, an’ remember your face is about two shades worse than your hands.”

He filled his pipe as he watched the boy hurrying across to the tank. The water splashed into the bucket as Teddy hunted for the soap; then off came his coat, and in a moment the dark head, now grey with dust, disappeared altogether. It came up dripping; then followed a vigorous soaping and the head vanished once more. The driver’s grin widened. He was still smiling when Teddy trotted back in a few moments, dripping and cheerful.

“Blest if I ever saw such a boy to wash!” said the driver. “Now my young Jimmie at home, he’s that scared of soap you’d think it was a tiger. Sorry I ain’t got a towel, but you’ll soon dry. Feel better?”

“Miles!” said Teddy briefly.

“There’s no denyin’ that you look better now you’ve come out of the cloud,” said the driver. “Breakfast next, I guess.” He handed him a couple of enormous sandwiches. “Now, you get busy on that, an’ tell me what you mean by sneakin’ rides in private kerridges.”

Teddy took a huge bite—partly because he was hungry and partly to gain time. Since it was clearly impossible for him to speak, the driver contemplated him patiently.

“I wanted to get to the country,” the boy said. “I’m looking for a job.”

“You’re just about the size to be wantin’ one,” said his companion. “A bit of station-managin’ ’ud be about your line, eh?”

“No, a job on a farm,” Teddy said seriously. “Lots of boys younger’n me work on farms.”

“Sure, they do. An’ where’s the farm?”

“I don’t know. I’ll find one, though, when I’m in the country.”

“Well, you might. An’ what do your dad and mother say about it?”

“They’re dead,” said Teddy steadily. But there was something in his voice that wiped the smile from the driver’s face.

“By Jove!” he uttered. “Poor kid! An’ where you been livin’?”

“Oh—at a place,” Teddy answered vaguely. He felt his colour rising and forced himself to meet the driver’s look. “I haven’t done anything wrong—not really wrong,” he faltered. “Please don’t ask me any more.”

“Well, you don’t look exactly a hardened criminal,” said the driver, after a pause. “An’ I s’pose if a feller does sneak a ride it don’t give one any reason to

boss him. 'Tain't my business where you come from, 's far's I can see. An' you got two-an'-six to start on?"

"Yes, sir. But I owe you that."

"Can't be done," said the driver. "I ain't got no licence to carry passengers, an' the p'lice 'ud be down on me quick an' lively if I took money from 'em. Awful knowin', the p'lice. Another sandwidge?"

"No, thanks, sir. I'm not hungry any more."

"Well, now, look 'ere," said his friend. "I got to get all this stuff into the house, an' mighty little time to do it in. Say——"

"Can't I help? I'm awful strong, truly, sir," Teddy interrupted.

"I was comin' to that when you butted in," said the driver severely. "Say you give me a hand. You can save me no end, even if you ain't a giant, 'cause none of this stuff's heavy. An' there'll be something to eat in the middle of the day, an' a bob or two when we're done to help you on the road. That a bargain, son?"

"I'd like to help you, but I don't want pay," Teddy said, flushing.

"Lor, don't talk like that!" uttered the driver, in mock alarm. "You seem clean set on landin' me in trouble. Wot 'ud the Trade Union say to me if I employed a man without payin' him? They'd have me blood, sure's you're born. Well, if the argument's over, s'pose we begin luggin' things about?"

There followed for Teddy the first day of absolute happiness that he had known for more than three years. From some of the labels on the cases he gathered that the driver's name was John Price; and before an hour was over Teddy would cheerfully have fought anyone who had hinted that John Price was not the finest man in the world. A companionable man with a never-failing twinkle; a man who treated you exactly as if you were another man, never bossing, only suggesting, and accepting help with not a hint of patronage. And Teddy worked like a beaver, intent on showing himself worthy of such a man. Together they unpacked the van and carried everything into the little wooden house, which was already clean and shining, for Mrs. Price also had been down to do odd jobs. They arranged the furniture in the rooms; they placed the kitchen china neatly on the shelves; they made the beds; they even filled the jugs with water and put soap in the soap-dishes. John Price found a hammer and nails, and they hung the few poor little pictures on the walls, and put the clock on the mantelshelf with a china dog on each side of it. In short, they made a home. And you must have been in an Orphanage for three years to know just what that meant to Teddy Winter.

They boiled the billy outside when dinner-time came, and ate their meal sitting on the little verandah, where they talked of all that John Price meant to

do. The farm was small and poor, and there would be hard scratching for a few years; but already he had ten cows, and Jimmie could milk, and success was only a matter of time. Mrs. Price, it appeared, was a wonderful manager: the sort of woman who could make a dinner fit for a king out of an old mutton-bone and three onions. A great gardener, too: Teddy listened respectfully to the list of vegetables they meant to grow. They had been stuck in the city for a long time while they had saved money to start the farm; but now that was all over, and before they knew where they were they'd be buying a motor. Jimmie was wonderful knowledgeable about cars. As they talked, Teddy felt each moment that he loved John Price and his wife, but he could not bear the thought of Jimmie—Jimmie, who was to be heir and sharer of all this magnificence; Jimmie, who had a father and mother.

All the work was finished at last, even to cutting firewood and laying a fire in the kitchen stove, ready for Mrs. Price to apply the match. John Price looked round his home, his honest face very content. The van was loaded with the empty cases, the rubbish of unpacking swept up and burned. Nothing was left that could fail to delight the gaze of Mrs. Price.

"Well, we've made a job of it," said Price. "Thanks to you, Ted. I'd never've got the half of it done if I hadn't had a mate."

"Oh, yes, you would, Mr. Price. I didn't do much."

"Well, you ran like a redshank the whole bloomin' day, that's all," said his friend. "All I know is, you'll get a job all right if you work like you done to-day. I'd have got the things into the house some fashion, o' course, but I cert'nly wouldn't have been able to leave them fixed up all dossy like they are. The missus'll think it's Christmas! Here's your two bob, son, an' I'd make it double if I could. An' now what's to become of you?"

"Oh, I'll go on an' find a job," Teddy said sturdily.

"I don't like it," John Price said, looking doubtfully at him. "You're too little to be strollin' round the country on your own. Wish I could give you a job meself, but if the estate supports three for a year or two it's about all it'll do. Honest, now, Ted—ain't you got anyone belongin' to you? Anyone as 'ud look after you?"

Teddy shook his head. "Honest, I haven't, Mr. Price. And I'll get a job all right. Don't you worry."

He rose, fearing more questions, and put on his coat hurriedly, while John Price watched him with a moody eye.

"That's rather a queer sort of kit of yours, ain't it?" he questioned. "Where've I seen boys wearin' duds like that? Somewhere, I know." He knitted his brows over the problem, and Teddy turned scarlet. "By—Jove!"

said John Price slowly, light dawning on his brain. “So that’s it, is it? You’ve cut an’ run. From the Orflingage. Well, poor kid!”

Teddy flung himself at him.

“You won’t take me back, Mr. Price! You won’t tell them! Say you won’t—I’d rather be dead than go back.”

“Me take you back? Not much,” said John Price decidedly. “I’ve wondered sometimes what it ’ud be like to think of Jimmie in a place like that. Dessay they’re kind enough, but it always seems to me a bit like jail. An’ you got away! How d’j’ manage it, son?”

Teddy told him.

“Well, it ain’t for me to interfere with your chance—but I’m afraid they’ll get you, all the same,” John Price said. “Lor, I wish I could take charge of you. It’s tough, bein’ poor. The duds are the trouble—I’d give you some of Jimmie’s, only you couldn’t get into them.”

“Don’t you bother, Mr. Price,” Teddy begged. “There’s heaps of farms; I’ll get a job all right.”

“Well, I expect you will—if they don’t get you first. But if things don’t go right, son, you make back here, an’ I’ll fix you up somehow—we’re comin’ down in three days.”

He put out a great hand and shook Teddy’s solemnly. Then he climbed into the van and the boy ran to open the gate for him. He watched him as he shut it carefully.

“I don’t like leavin’ you, an’ that’s a fact,” he said. “But I got to be gettin’ back—an’ it’s time you were findin’ a place to stay the night. You write a postcard sometime, and let’s know how you get on: an’ remember I’ll never see you stuck. So long, mate.”

“So long,” said Teddy. He forced a smile as the van lumbered into the road. It hurt to see it go—the friendly van that had sheltered him in the night. It hurt to turn his back on the little wooden house that they had made into a home. But his hand yet tingled with the ache of John Price’s farewell grip, and he had called him “mate.” And yesterday he had been merely an orphan. Teddy went down the road with his head well up.

CHAPTER III

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SMALL GIRL

IT was the question of clothes that was the great problem. Food did not worry Teddy—so far. He was well fed, and John Price had insisted on stuffing his pockets with all that remained of Mrs. Price's sandwiches; enough, with economy, to keep him going for a whole day. Money he had, four whole shillings and sixpence. That, translated into terms of buns, meant fifty-four, which seemed an unlimited subsistence: translated into bread it meant even more, but it was pleasanter to think in buns. Work, he was certain, waited for any handy boy. But how was he to buy buns, how ask for work, in the horrible clothes that cried aloud to all the world that here was a boy escaped from an Orphanage?

Already the police would be looking out for him in every town. By to-morrow the papers would be telling all the country that he had run away, perhaps even offering a reward for his return, as was done with escaped prisoners. He did not know for certain, but he thought it likely. Thanks to the van, he had left no trail for Mr. Pullinger to follow, but he knew that Mr. Pullinger would be only the more annoyed on that account, and would leave no stone unturned to find him.

What could he do? He racked his brain unavailingly. He was desperate enough to steal clothes anywhere: the trouble was that there seemed nowhere that he might steal. The farms he passed were all occupied; smoke curled from their chimneys, people moved about, dogs barked. A boy of thirteen, however desperate, cannot turn bushranger and hold up a populous farm, except in story-books. And he was no story-book hero, but merely little Teddy Winter, alone on a dreary country road, dressed in blue clothes that would tell the most casual passer-by that he was a hunted fugitive.

It occurred to him that his coat was the most conspicuous part of his outfit, and he hurriedly took it off, carrying it over his arm. In his grey shirt he felt safer, since people might not notice that his trousers were a peculiar shade of blue. He was bareheaded, because caps were not allowed in the Orphanage dormitories—even had they been, he would have left his behind, since its shape was different from that of the caps worn by ordinary boys. He thought of abandoning his coat, hiding it under a log, but he did not dare: the nights were cold, though it was October, and he knew that he must sleep somewhere in the open that night. So he went on doggedly, chewing on his problem, and finding

no solution.

Towards evening he saw that he was approaching a township. That was not to be dared, so he cut across a paddock, meaning to skirt it, and presently, dipping into a gully, found himself near a lonely house. It looked quiet and home-like. Perhaps there were people there who might be as kind as John Price, if indeed the world held such another man. It was worth trying, at all events. He approached the house by the yard gate and tapped on the back door, his heart thumping.

A woman came to the door and looked at him suspiciously. She was a tall, thin woman with a hard face.

"Well?" she asked.

"I was wondering did you want a boy to work, ma'am?" Teddy stammered.

"A boy to work? I'd like to see myself bothered with one," she said harshly.

"I can work hard," he faltered.

"If you can, you're the only boy ever I saw that could," she returned. "No, I gave up having boys about long ago; there's not one who isn't ten times more trouble than he's worth. There's nothing for you here, so you'd better clear out. Mind you shut the gate properly."

Teddy forced himself to ask another question.

"I—I s'pose you haven't an old coat you could give me, ma'am?" It was not easy to say. Begging was a far more difficult thing than he had imagined.

"A coat? No, I've nothing for you," she snapped. "I wouldn't give to beggars at the door if I had. Get along—I've no time to be bothered with you."

The door slammed in his face, and Teddy turned away with blazing cheeks. The horrible woman! Even if she had nothing she might have answered him kindly. He shut the gate with care, and relieved his feelings by putting out his tongue at the house. Then he hurried away across the paddock, sore and angry.

He crossed many fences, taking a line across country that would leave the township on his left. There were plenty of houses near him, but he did not feel brave enough to approach any of them; they were all busy farm-houses, with much movement of people and cows, for he was in a dairying district and it was the hour of the evening milking. Soon the township lay behind him and the houses grew more scattered. Ahead, he saw a thick line of trees. As he drew near it he noticed that it marked the course of a creek, a wide brown stream, flowing lazily. It was far too wide to cross, and there was no sign of a bridge. So he struck into a narrow cattle-path that ran beside it, fringed with a knee-high growth of wild mint that gave out a sharp fragrance when he

brushed against it.

It was almost dusk when he came to a place where a huge tree, fallen across the creek, formed a natural foot-bridge; evidently a much-used one, for it had a hand-rail of fencing-wire supported on light stakes. Teddy crossed it and looked up and down. On one hand the level paddock stretched away, so far that he could see no fence; but on the other was a house. It stood near the creek, surrounded by a deep belt of orchard trees. Nearer, between him and the house, was a jumbled mass of sheds and stables: he guessed that the largest was a milking-shed, for a long line of cows was slowly stringing away from it through the deep grass. There were haystacks, too, and a big open barn that seemed nearly full of straw. Teddy was very tired; already it was dusk, and he felt that he could not go much farther.

"I could get into one of those stacks when they're all gone away from the sheds," he muttered. "I'll try, anyhow."

He walked slowly towards the sheds, keeping close to the trees by the creek, and when he drew near, hid himself in a clump of bushes where he could watch unseen. There were men busy about the buildings, but, as he had guessed, their work was nearly done; very soon he heard their voices growing fainter as they went away towards the lights of the house. When all was silent he crept out of his hiding-place and hurried across to the haystacks. They were tightly covered with tarpaulins, offering no chance of a bed, and so he turned his attention to the barn. That was better: the hay was loosely piled and there was plenty of space between it and the roof. Moreover, sacks lay about; good, clean, empty wheat-sacks that would be just as good as blankets. He possessed himself of three, clambered with difficulty into the highest part of the hay, and there made himself a nest in which he crouched to eat his supper.

It was quite dark long before he had finished, but the darkness did not trouble him. For the moment he was safe and warm and happy, and content to let the problems of the morrow look after themselves. He cuddled down into the sweet-scented hay with a great sigh of delight. Yesterday he had been an orphan; to-night he was a tramp. But how glorious to be a tramp! Even as he thought it he fell asleep.

He did not wake until long after daylight. Outside were the voices of men, and at first he gave a terrified start. Then he laughed at himself. No one could possibly see him here: he might lie safely concealed in the hay for weeks, for all that anyone would know. He had still some food, and there was no hurry. So he dragged his sacks very cautiously to where, lying on his face, he could see outside.

Evidently it was a big place. The house was two-storied, with a wide

verandah and balcony, and he could catch glimpses of well-kept flower-beds. There were stables a little distance away where a couple of men were busy with horses. Presently one of them ran a motor out of its garage and began washing it. Nearer to the barn the milking was in full swing. It was pleasant to watch the cows in the yard, sleek, well-fed Ayrshires, chewing the cud contentedly as they waited for their turn in the bails. A boy came from the shed from time to time to drive in a cow. Teddy looked at him enviously. Such a happy boy, free to work with men. If only he could find a job like that!

In the yard near the house a small dog began to bark in an excited fashion. Looking towards the sound, Teddy saw a little girl running; and presently she came back, with a fox-terrier racing beside her in delirious joy, jumping up at her and saying "Good morning!" as plainly as possible. They had a great game together before she brought him his breakfast in a shallow brown dish. Then a lady appeared on the back verandah and called "Berta!" and the owner of the dog went reluctantly into the house. She was a small, square girl with two short plaits of yellow hair that bobbed on either side of a rosy face. Teddy had no special interest in girls, but it occurred to him that she looked what he termed "a good sort."

The men came from the yard presently, and there was much coming and going about the barn. Teddy lay very still, but once a straw tickled his nose and nearly made him sneeze. He saved the sneeze by gripping the nose firmly; but the movement made the hay rustle, and he heard one of the men say, "I'll bet there are mice in that hay—we'll have to get the dogs in some time." That was rather terrifying. Teddy scarcely dared to breathe until a bell rang somewhere and they all trooped to breakfast.

The men went away to work when breakfast was over, and soon the small girl came out, a school-bag slung over her shoulders, mounted a Shetland pony, and rode off, waving good-bye to a lady and gentleman, evidently her parents. Parents were very interesting people to Teddy; he watched them wistfully. Then they also went away in the motor. Teddy began to think that it was time for him to go, too.

But the boy was in the way—the boy who had been working in the cow-yard. He seemed to have endless odd jobs to do about the barn and the yard, and there was never a moment when it was safe for Teddy to climb down from the hay and make his escape. Women-servants, too, kept appearing on the back verandah from time to time—perhaps to make sure that the boy was doing his work properly.

"Darn them!" said Teddy heartily, when two or three hours had gone by. "Well, I s'pose they'll go and have their dinners some time or other. Then I'll be able to make a dart for it."

He ate some more of his provisions. Mrs. Price's sandwiches were getting very dry now, and eating was thirsty work. He hated the boy savagely when he saw him go to a tap and drink, splashing the water about in a tantalizing way. How hot it was in the warm, fragrant hay, with the sun beating on the barn roof just overhead! So hot that after another slow hour Teddy grew sleepy. He tried to keep awake by pinching himself, but the heat and his enforced stillness were too much for him. Even as he pinched he drifted away into dreamland.

Hours later he woke with a start. He peered out cautiously. No one was in sight; all the place seemed wrapped in the stillness of the hot afternoon. Very slowly and nervously Teddy crept down, dragging his sacks with him, lest anyone should discover them in the hay and become suspicious. He put them where he had found them, slipped out of the barn on the side farthest from the house, and ran down through the orchard. The thought crossed his mind that it might be more prudent to walk—but he could not walk. Even if it made him look like an escaping criminal, he had to run.

"Hi!"

A shrill voice cut across the stillness. Teddy stopped and spun round. No one was in sight. But the voice came again:

"Hi! What are you doing?"

That was a question Teddy had no thought of answering. Instead, he gaped silently towards the voice, which seemed, astonishingly, to come from mid-air.

Then he saw that it was the Small Girl. She was high up in a pine-tree, one of a group that stood like sentinels some distance from the house. Her pony was standing below, saddled, the bridle-reins trailing on the grass, and the Small Girl stood on a branch and yelled at him menacingly. Teddy had no fear of girls, but he dreaded what the shrill voice might bring upon him. He took to his heels again, and ran as if Mr. Pullinger himself were behind him.

The Small Girl was a person of determination. She swung herself down from the tree with amazing swiftness and was on the pony's back in a twinkling. Teddy heard the galloping hoofs behind him as he raced towards the creek. If he could gain the log-bridge in time she could not follow, he thought rapidly; and before she could summon help he could be far enough away to lose himself in the scrub that grew thickly on the other side of the creek.

But the Small Girl knew the log-bridge even better than he did. She came, galloping; she passed him without a word and pulled up the pony with a scatter of hoofs just at the end of the log, barring his path to safety. Then she faced him defiantly, raising her whip.

"Now, you just stop!" she said.

"You get out of my way!" panted Teddy.

"No, I won't, then. What were you doing in our barn?"

"I wasn't doing any harm," the boy said angrily.

"You were trespassing," said the Small Girl sternly. "How do I know what you haven't been stealing?"

"I never stole a thing. There wasn't anything but old hay to steal."

"Then you've stolen from somebody else, and you were hiding."

"If you weren't only a girl I'd hit you for sayin' that," flamed Teddy.

She flamed in answer:

"I'm not afraid of you, if I *am* a girl. My brother'd thrash you for being cheeky. Anyhow, you've got to come back an' see what my father says about you."

"I'd like to see you try to make me!"

"P'f!" she said. "I've only to yell, and the men will come."

"Well, yell, then!" said Teddy desperately.

He sprang forward as he spoke, and tried to dodge past her. But she was too quick for him. At the touch of her heel the pony started forward, blocking him. Teddy struck at the chestnut neck furiously, only to stagger backwards as her whip cut him full across the face.

For a moment he was blind with pain and rage. Then he forgot altogether that she was a girl. He dashed at her and, in spite of the blows that rained upon him, wrenched the whip from her—and in a moment they were fighting wildly, while the pony danced in a circle. Had Teddy been cooler, it was his chance to have gained the bridge; but he was beyond anything but the lust of battle. He caught her wrist as a blow fell; the pony backed, there was a struggle, and then a thud; and he was standing over her as she lay on the ground, the pony half a dozen yards away. And the Small Girl was very queer and white and still.

He might have run away easily enough then, but he could not. He went down on one knee beside her, trembling with a fear that was not for himself. Had he killed her? She was quite motionless, and her brown face had turned an unpleasant greyish-white. Her arms were outflung in a helpless way. He had not realized how small she was—on the pony she had been a raging demon in his eyes, but now she was just a little, hurt child. And he had done it—a boy! He gave a dry sob of misery.

"I say, are you hurt much?" he said, hoping she would answer. But no answer came. A dreadful silence had come upon the afternoon like a cloud.

The Small Girl's felt hat had fallen off. Teddy took it and ran down to the edge of the creek, and brought it back full of water, that slopped and leaked as

he stumbled up the bank. Her handkerchief was sticking out of her pocket; he took it and bathed her head clumsily, not knowing what else to do. And presently, to his intense relief, she stirred. Her eyes opened and she looked at him in a bewildered manner, and murmured something that sounded like "Dick."

"Just you keep still," he said, his voice trembling. "You'll be better in a minute." He went on bathing her head.

The colour was coming back into her face, the bewildered look leaving her eyes. She wriggled uneasily.

"I say, look out—you're making me all wet!" she said. "What's up? Where's Barney?"

Teddy did not know who Barney was, but he answered hurriedly:

"He's all right. Feel better?"

" 'M," she said. "Do stop making me wet. Oh, you're the boy!" She looked at him with a sort of weak anger.

"Yes, but I'm sorry," he said. "Do you think you're broken anywhere? Can you move?"

She wriggled and sat up—and immediately lay down again.

"I'm all right," she said. "Head feels a bit rummy, that's all." She prodded it gingerly, and made a face. "I'm all horrid and wet. What happened?"

"I—I pulled you off," he answered, his voice shaking so that he could say no more. A big lump came in his throat. He got up and turned his back, and she heard a dry sob, and then another.

The Small Girl commanded her shaken forces and sat up again.

"I say, don't," she said gently.

"I—thought I'd killed you," Teddy gulped.

"Well, you didn't, so don't worry. And I hit you first," she added apologetically. "But I had to look after the place, with Dad away."

"You were all right," he said. "But I was a cad to hit you. I clean forgot you were a girl."

He turned, and she saw his face, and caught her breath. There was a scarlet weal right across it, with other marks of battle.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh, I *did* hurt you!" She flushed scarlet. "I'm sorry—true, I am."

"Oh, that's nothing," he muttered. They looked at each other, a dawning friendliness in their eyes.

"You hadn't really been doing anything wrong in the barn, I s'pose?" said

the keeper of her father's property.

"No, true, I hadn't. I only slept there last night."

"In the hay! But weren't you cold?"

"No. I had some sacks. But I couldn't get away all day, 'cause there was always some one about."

"And hadn't you anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes. But I hadn't anything to drink. And I'm ever so thirsty. I'll get a drink now."

He went to the creek again. When he returned, the Small Girl was sitting on the end of the log-bridge.

"Where do you live?" she demanded.

"Don't live anywhere."

"But your father and mother?"

"Haven't got any."

"But—but persons must live somewhere," she said, puzzled. Then her eyes grew round. "You—you haven't been in jail?"

Teddy laughed.

"No—true as death, I haven't."

"And where are you going?"

"To find a job."

"You're too small," she said decidedly.

"No, I'm not—I can work."

"H'm," said she, with doubt in her voice. Then another bright idea came to her. "I b'lieve you've run away," she stated.

She was startled at the wave of colour that dyed his face. It did not occur to him to lie.

"Well, you needn't tell anyone, if I have."

"I won't tell." She looked at him with respect. "I think you're brave. Have you run far?"

"Ever so far," he said.

"I've always wanted to meet some one who'd run away," said the Small Girl, much impressed. "Dick and I often planned we'd run away, but somehow we never did. It would have worried Dad and Mother. But as you haven't any, of course it's all right. I say, you might tell me all about it. I'd never tell a soul. Dick always says I can keep a secret. He's my brother, bigger'n me."

“Sure you won’t?” Teddy asked doubtfully.

“True’s life—cross my heart and wish I may die!” she assured him. “Oh, go on—do tell me, boy!”

So he told her, sitting on the grass by the log, and the Small Girl thrilled delightfully over his escape in the night and gurgled with joy over his day with John Price. She flushed hotly when she heard of the woman who had hunted him from her door.

“That must have been Mrs. Smithers. She’s a horrid woman—I know her. She came an’ told Dad when Dick an’ I chased rabbits on her nasty old farm. I hope she won’t tell the police you went there.”

“It’s the police I’m afraid of,” Teddy said dolefully. “Them—and Mr. Pullinger. He’s awfully clever.”

“He must be an old beast!” said the Small Girl, frowning. “Would he beat you if he caught you?”

“I s’pose so. But it wouldn’t be the beating I’d mind—only being caught. I *can’t* go back again!” The boy’s voice was almost a cry. It wrung the heart of the other child who sat on the log with her wet hair dank about her round face.

“Ah, don’t—he won’t get you,” she said comfortingly.

“It’s my beastly clothes.” Teddy’s voice was despairing. “I can’t get any others—and the first policeman I see will spot me for an Orphanage boy. I wouldn’t care a button for anyone if I could get some other clothes.”

The Small Girl sprang to her feet, cutting an exultant caper.

“I’ll get you some!”

“You!” He stared at her.

“Yes—easy! Dick’s. Dick’s gone to boarding-school, you know, and all his old things are in the cupboard in his room, so’s he can wear them in the holidays. I can slip up an’ get a suit—he’s a bit bigger’n you, but it will do well enough.”

“But—but . . .” He flushed. “Look at the way I hit you—I might have killed you.”

“Well. I hit you first,” said she. “And I think you were pretty decent—you might have run away as easy as easy, and you stayed and bathed my head. You might even have stolen Barney, and you didn’t. So I think we’re quits, and it’s all square. And it’s going to be a scrumptious adventure to tell Dick about when he comes home. He’d like you to have his clothes, I know.”

“But your mother? Won’t there be an awful row when she finds out?”

The Small Girl shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, there has to be a row now and then! But I'll tell Mother—in a week or so, when you're quite safe. Don't you worry. You stay there, and I'll slip up to the house on Barney—Dad and Mother won't be home yet. P'raps you'd better hide in the scrub across the creek. I'll come back an' whistle."

She crammed her wet hat on her yellow head and was in the saddle before she had finished speaking. In another moment she was racing towards the house.

Teddy crossed the log-bridge—just now he had fought for it like a madman, and now his foe had turned to a fellow-conspirator, and Hope was dancing before him like a will-o'-the-wisp. His head was whirling as he crouched in the scrub, waiting for her return. It seemed an age before he heard the pony's hoofs again, and the Small Girl's quick feet on the log. Then came a low whistle, and he ran to meet her.

"I'm awful sorry I was so long!" she panted. "I had the work of the world to dodge Bridget. But I've got them. Here you are!"

She was on her knees, unwrapping a bundle wrapped in a piece of sacking.

"It's a pretty decent suit. I brought a blue shirt, too, 'cause some one might spot your grey one. And a tie. And a hat. And some tucker. That's what made it hard to dodge Bridget, 'cause she's always suspicious if I go to the pantry." She chuckled. "Good thing it was baking-day; she'd made stacks of things."

She tumbled them out of a brown-paper bag: a mingled mass of sausage-rolls and cakes and turnover tarts. From the pockets of her jumper came two tins of sardines.

"You can buy some bread to eat with those," she said wisely.

Teddy could only gape.

"I say!" he said. "I say! Oh, but you are a brick! I'll hate myself as long as I live for having hit you."

The Small Girl frowned.

"Don't you be an ass," she commanded. "Now, you cut into the scrub and change, and I'll find some big stones, and we'll tie them up in your Orphunt things an' put 'em right in the creek. An' that'll be the end of *them*. An' then we'll see if your old Pullinger-man will ever find you!"

She was waiting with an exultant face when he came back.

"I say, you look jolly decent in Dick's suit!" she stated. "It's hardly a bit too big. And the hat's all right too. Everything feel all right?"

But he did not need to answer her: his glowing face was enough. With the shedding of the hated Orphanage clothes he seemed to have shed the last remnants of fear. Now he was a boy, as other boys, and free. He looked at the

Small Girl as though she were an angel from heaven.

The Small Girl at the moment was far more like an imp. With ecstasy she helped him to tie the blue clothes in a weighted bundle and to sink it in a deep, snaggy bend of the creek where no fisherman would ever cast a line. She capered anew as the bubbles rose over the place of burial.

"It's a 'normous adventure!" she said. "Dick will be wild as a meat-axe 'cause he wasn't in it. Now you've got to tell me your name, and how old you are."

"I'm Teddy Winter—and I'm thirteen."

"And I'm Berta Branston—and I'm twelve. Right-oh. And will you write some day an' tell me how you got on?"

"My word, I will," he said. "And—and—I haven't said 'Thank you' a bit, 'cause the words just stick. But if you knew! Oh, if you knew how it feels to be—like this."

"Jolly decent," said the Small Girl. "Don't you worry about saying 'Thank you.' It's been no end of fun."

They shook hands solemnly.

"It might be as well," said the Small Girl thoughtfully, "if you cut across the paddock an' took the back road. 'Cause if you went by the front road you might meet Dad an' Mother, an' they might spot Dick's suit. Mother's awful quick at spotting things she shouldn't!"

"Right," agreed Teddy. His hand, thrust into the pocket of Dick's trousers, encountered something, and his face grew puzzled. From the other pocket he drew out his four-and-sixpence, looking at it doubtfully.

"I thought so," he said. "That's mine, all right. But this isn't. Your brother must have left it here." The first hand came out, and he showed her a half-crown lying in its palm.

The Small Girl reddened.

"Oh—that's yours," she mumbled.

"No, it isn't. Here's mine."

"Oh, well, it's all right," she said gruffly. "I put it there. You'll want it before you find a job. It was my own, so you needn't worry."

Teddy shook his head.

"No. The clothes an' the tucker are diff'rent, 'cause I'm awful stuck. But I can't take your money."

"Why on earth can't you?"

"I d'know. But I can't. Thanks awfully, all the same—just as much as if I

did take it." With a quick movement he slipped the coin into the pocket of her jumper, seeing that arguments burned upon her lips. He stood back, smiling at her.

The Small Girl was visibly annoyed.

"Well, I think that's all rot," she stated. "I didn't mean you to find it out before you got away. Wish you hadn't. But, I say—if you don't get a job, you come back here, an' Dad'll find you one." She told him the address, and he repeated it after her.

"I'll remember that," he said, " 'cause some day I'll send back money for the clothes. But I wouldn't dare come back myself—Mr. Pullinger might track me. I've just got to lose myself now."

"There'll be a row if ever you send back money," said she. "But you can write when you've got a good job an' made heaps of money. They couldn't take you back and make you an Orphunt again, then." She came a step nearer, her manner dark with mystery and conspiracy. "And if I was you, I'd take another name!"

"Think so?" he asked doubtfully.

" 'M," she nodded. "Dick an' I always planned to if we'd run away. 'Cause the police track you by your name. You call yourself Horace Plantagenet, or something like that!"

"Sounds a bit frilly," said Teddy. "I think I'd better pick out something shorter. But it's a good idea. I'll think up a name as I go along. An' I guess I'd better be gettin' along now."

"And you don't know where you're going?" she asked, her face troubled.

"Not an idea," said Teddy cheerfully. "But what's it matter? There's everywhere to go to."

"Well, there is. But you mightn't like all of it."

"Oh, well, if I don't I'll go somewhere else." His eyes were dancing. The Small Girl laughed in answer to their confident mirth.

"Well, so-long," she said. "Good luck."

They shook hands again. She stood with her arm across the pony's neck and watched the thin figure in the ill-fitting clothes until the trees swallowed him.

Twenty minutes later, as Teddy plodded along the back road, came the sound of galloping hoofs, and in a moment the Small Girl had pulled up beside him.

"Came to give you this," she panted. She held out a stout pocket-knife.

“Aw, you shouldn’t have,” said the boy. “I don’t want it.” But he did want it, terribly; only a boy without a knife could guess how much. He dropped his eyes lest she should see the longing in them.

“ ’Tisn’t safe to be without a weapon,” said the Small Girl decidedly. “By rights you ought to have a six-shooter when you take the trail: Dick always said so. But Dad might be annoyed if I took his. But it’s my own knife, so that’s diff’rent. You just take it; you never know your luck!”

Teddy hesitated. Then the knife pitched into the dust at his feet and the Small Girl wheeled Barney and went off again at a gallop.

CHAPTER IV

THE ADVENTURE OF THE OLD WOMAN

TEDDY swung along the highway with no doubt whatever in his mind that the world was a good world. Last week he had thought very differently. Then the world had been a place bounded by the twelve-foot wall of the Orphanage, above and around which hovered the immensity of the wrath of Mr. Pullinger: a machine-world, where you lived by a clockwork time-table; where three hundred solemn little boys were tiny cogs in the machine, turned by a great wheel of routine. Nothing interested you greatly, for the future was a dull, blank wall, and the past it was better to forget—if you could. The days went by drearily, the nights were full of dreams that made waking hard. But now a miracle had swept away the Orphanage, and the world had changed to freedom and the open road.

He was free! No one to give him orders in hard, quick tones; no dull circle of little duties that seemed to lead nowhere, that brought with them no interest. Free!—with the clothes of a real boy, with money in his pocket, with a boy's knife clasped in his hand for the joy of feeling it. He did not know what lay ahead, but he was sure that it was good. Luck, that had so long hidden her face from him, had turned with a smile at last.

It was such a jolly world. So full of pleasant people ready to help you and hide your secret. Only two days—and in them, first John Price, and then the Small Girl, had crossed his path and had given him help and comfort and companionship. He felt that this new world was full of such people, ready to lend him a hand. There was no room for fear and loneliness—never again could he know the bitter loneliness of the crowded herd-life of the Orphanage. Even Mr. Pullinger, that figure of dread, would find it hard to track him now. He whistled as he went.

Still, it might be as well to change his name—that was a brilliant notion of the Small Girl's, even if he didn't think much of her choice of a new title. He pondered the matter. There were dangers in changing a name, because it was so easy to forget your new one in a moment of carelessness. Perhaps it would be safer to stick to his own real Christian name, Edward: it was sufficiently unlike Teddy to be safe, and the Orphanage knew him only as Teddy. For a surname—that was a harder matter, and for awhile only the ridiculous "Plantagenet" would come into his mind. "That's a fool thing to call a chap who's being hunted," he thought—and the thought gave him what he wanted.

Hunt. Edward Hunt. That was good enough, and he was not likely to forget it —not as long as the memory of Mr. Pullinger remained grimly threatening. So Teddy Winter sank into the background of the cast-off life, and Edward Hunt strode towards the new one, whistling.

The little towns no longer made him afraid; he passed through two, looking about him with a boy's keen eyes, dwelling a few moments on the joys of the shop-windows. Nobody seemed to notice him, and he hugged himself in the certainty that this was because he looked like any other boy of thirteen. He had no idea where he was, nor would he have dared to ask. But he did not want to know. It was enough to know that he was getting deeper and deeper into the country.

Evening came, finding him on a lonely stretch of road far from any township. The light had almost failed when he found shelter in the lee of a last-year's haystack, standing in the corner of a paddock near the road a good way from a farm-house. There was a creek near, where he drank deeply before washing his face and hands. His feet were tired and hot: he took off boots and stockings and dangled his feet in a clear pool while he ate his supper, saving some of his provisions for the morrow's breakfast. Then he curled into the loose hay like a tired puppy and fell asleep.

Morning saw him early on the road. The day was hot for October, and although at first he made good progress, he was often glad to sit on a log and rest as the sun grew higher. Luckily, he was getting into more timbered country where tall trees often shaded the road; but even with this help he was very tired by midday. His food was finished, save for the two tins of sardines, and he was not yet hungry enough to feel any desire for sardines all alone.

"I'll buy a loaf of bread in the next township," he thought. "An' I'll get a cup of tea, too. A cup of tea 'ud go good."

The very thought made him thirstier. He looked eagerly ahead for signs of a town as he rounded a bend in the road. But there was only a signpost where another track led off into the bush. "Wincham, 4," said the road that he trod; "Hartington 2; Ferndale, 11," said the bush track.

Teddy hesitated. A township two miles off was more tempting than one twice as far away, and the narrow track, winding away into the bush, looked pleasanter than the main road, which had grown straight and treeless. Moreover, it might be more prudent to leave the main road: if he turned aside into by-ways it would be far more difficult to track him. And what did it matter where he went, so long as he escaped Mr. Pullinger? He took the track towards Hartington with a renewed sense of freedom and exploration.

He was plodding along steadily a mile farther on when a car passed him,

driven by a lady, alone. It stopped within fifty yards, and she called to him:

"Are you going Ferndale way, little boy? I can give you a lift if you are."

It was on the tip of Teddy's tongue to say that he was going to Hartington. He checked the impulse just in time. This was astonishing luck—the car would take him ever so much farther on his way, perhaps to a part of the country where farmers longed to offer a job to a handy boy. He pulled off his hat as he answered:

"Yes, ma'am, I'm going to Ferndale."

"What, the whole way? That's a long walk," she said. "A good thing I came along. Jump in; I can take you to where my road turns off, half a mile this side of Ferndale."

It was delicious to sit in the car, his hot face cooled by the swift wind of their progress; delicious to rest tired feet and aching legs while the car ate up the miles that would have been so long on foot. He had dreaded being questioned, but the lady was easy to satisfy.

"Do you live in Ferndale?" she asked.

"No, ma'am." He paused, and then added, "I'm going to friends there." He hoped desperately that it was true; even more he hoped that she would not ask their name. But the lady was only concerned in getting the utmost out of the car: she defied speed-limits in Hartington, and took the rest of the road at a racing pace that was sheer ecstasy to the entranced small boy, shooting round curves and skirting bad patches of track with a joyful recklessness. He heaved a great sigh when she brought the car to a standstill, long before he dreamed that Ferndale could be near.

"There you are!" she said briskly. "You have only half a mile to go now."

"That was gorgeous," said Teddy, getting out. "You *do* make her go, ma'am! Thanks very much."

She looked at him and smiled, thinking him a merry urchin.

"Like going fast, do you? Well, it's a vile road, but it's better in a car than on foot. Shut the door—a good hard bang. Yes, that's right. Good-bye!" The car accelerated swiftly, took the corner on two wheels, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Teddy stood looking after it, wishing she had not gone so quickly.

"Wish I'd asked her if they wanted a boy at her place," he said to himself. "She was jolly decent. Oh, well, it's no good thinking about it now; I'd better be getting along."

Ferndale proved to be a tiny township nestling in a bend of a creek. The school stood just outside the line of tin-roofed buildings that constituted the

main street; as he went by Teddy could hear the drone of drowsy voices repeating the “nine-times” table, and it gave him a fresh sense of liberty.

He found a baker’s shop with a tiny refreshment-room, and the baker’s wife, a tired-looking woman with a heavy baby on her arm, provided him with tea and buns, to which she added as a bonus a pink-iced cake, explaining that its selling value had been impaired by the fact that the baby had stuck a finger into it. Teddy did not mind. He ate the last tiny crumbs, drained the teapot, devoured a large spoonful of sugar when the woman was not looking, and went his way, carrying a loaf of bread imperfectly wrapped in newspaper. His capital was reduced by fivepence, but he still felt rich enough to be without care for the future. The sense of safety was deepening every moment. In this quiet bush country, with its sleepy little townships, who was ever likely to track him? The baker’s wife had shown no curiosity about him. As for policemen, Teddy did not believe that the little towns held any. They looked far too dreamy to need anyone to enforce law and order.

The road led away into the bush. On one side were low hills, thickly covered with tall trees and dense bracken fern; on the other the creek ran lazily in the midst of a valley, among thriving farms. They looked tempting, but Teddy disregarded them. He had made up his mind that what he wanted was a lonely farm—not one with near neighbours, who might get gossiping about a new boy and wonder where he came from. Somewhere in the bush he knew it waited, that farm of his dreams—where they would be so pressed with work that they would be only too glad to take a useful boy, asking him no inconvenient questions. And he would live there for years, saving his wages until he had enough to buy a few cows and rent a few acres and be a real farmer himself. It was all mapped out in his brain. All he had to do was to find the right farm.

He walked on and on, hour after hour, along the lonely road. Soon there were trees on both sides, so that he was in a great green tunnel, where the sunlight filtered through arching boughs and the track he trod was patterned with light and shade. The trees were full of little twittering birds, very busy with their own affairs. Sometimes a big kookaburra settled on a branch and burst into a peal of jolly laughter that seemed to Teddy part of the universal welcome and kindliness of the bush—though this idea was somewhat dispelled when a nesting magpie swooped suddenly from far above him with a sharp cry and a noise of rushing wings, resenting his presence. It made him jump backwards; but he had known magpies in the long-ago time, and nobody could really blame them for being over-anxious about their babies. Mothers were often like that. So he waved his hat at the big worried bird and went on, and the magpie returned to her nest, confident that she had saved her family.

The farms became farther apart, small houses separated by many wire-fenced paddocks. The hills fell away, and another creek, winding at their feet, crossed the road and ran gurgling down to join the stream in the valley. Teddy paused on the bridge to watch the rippling water. It had come from a grove of tree-ferns that grew green and high, sheltered by the hills; beyond them it wound away, trees hiding its course. The dancing ripples made him feel how hot and dusty he was. They called to him, and he answered the call.

He crept through the wire fence and threaded his way between the trunks of the tree-ferns that grew, tall, brown and slender, on both sides of the creek. Beyond was scrub of hazel and musk and dogwood, growing thickly to the very edge of the banks, interrupted here and there where cattle had trampled down a path to the water. Teddy sent a hasty glance round. No one was in sight; no house, not even a cow; he might have been the owner of the world. In a moment his clothes were under a bush and he was in the creek.

The cool water took the thin little body gently, as though it were glad to wash away the grime of the long road, to ease the feet that ached from its stones. Teddy wallowed in it joyfully, ducking his head under the surface, coming up gasping for breath and shaking the drops from his eyes—to draw a deep breath and disappear again. Presently he pulled a handful of moss from the bank and scrubbed himself heartily with it, producing a curious striped effect of brown and green. The moss came to pieces, floating down-stream, and the striped body ducked under water and came up gleaming. Then the spirit of the creek, who was clearly a merry fellow, fairly gripped Teddy. He rolled into a shallow and, finding mud, daubed himself from head to foot until he was all coated, his eyes and teeth gleaming in a chocolate-coloured face. He capered and danced in the shallow, sending showers of glistening drops high in the air, scooping up handfuls of mud and flinging them back into the water. “Wish old Pully could see me now!” he shouted gleefully.

Some one else saw him. Some one who crept through the dogwood thicket stealthily, who crouched in the shelter to watch. The sharp snap of a trodden stick warned Teddy. He spun round in the water and saw, peering through the bushes, an old face, brown and withered like a last-year’s apple, in which black eyes glittered. He started back. A stone caught his foot and he sat down with a mighty splash.

“Who’s there?” he shouted.

The bushes parted and an old woman appeared. Very old she looked, and yet hard and strong, like a tough vine. She was dressed in a queer mixture of clothes: a man’s coat, ragged and much too large, a skirt made of sacking; her feet were thrust into a man’s rough boots, and her grey hair hung in wisps beneath a man’s felt hat. There was something in her face that made Teddy

suddenly afraid. But when she spoke her voice was kind.

"You funny little boy!" she said. "Whatever are you doing?"

"Sittin' in a creek," said Teddy. It seemed the only thing to say.

"But—but where do you come from?"

"Oh—I'm just travelling," he said. "Came for a bathe."

"And where are you going?"

"Oh—just anywhere."

"But where's your home?"

"Haven't got a home. That doesn't matter," said Teddy airily.

"But you must sleep somewhere!"

"Oh, there's gen'lly a haystack," he said impatiently. His teeth were beginning to chatter; he wished she would go away.

"And what do you eat?"

"Anything I can get."

"Deary me!" she said. "Why, you're a tramp! Only I never saw such a little one."

"Well, I'm a jolly cold one," said Teddy, with wrath. "I say, if you don't mind movin' on, I'd like to get out."

"All right," she said vaguely. "I'll go. Fancy you being a tramp!" The dogwood suddenly closed behind her and he heard her tramping through the bushes.

Teddy scrubbed off his coating of mud, a matter of some difficulty, since it had caked on his face and shoulders. He dried himself by rolling on the warm dry grass and scrubbing himself with handfuls of leaves; and so, glowing and somewhat scratched, he got into his clothes, picked up his loaf of bread, and turned back towards the road.

At the entrance to the grove of tree-ferns he stopped short. The old woman was there. She sat on a log, picking at the soft furry bark of a fern beside her that shot its slender column twenty feet into the air before its green circle of fronds unfolded. She looked up at the sound of Teddy's footsteps and smiled.

"There you are!" she said in a pleased way. "You look much nicer now you're washed."

Teddy grunted uncivilly. He did not find his new acquaintance amusing.

"You mustn't mind me," she said. "Nobody minds old Kate. Once I had little boys of my own, but they grew big and then they went away. Every one goes away—but me. I have to stay behind and watch out for them, in case

they'd ever come back. But they don't."

"That's hard luck," said Teddy, feeling that something was required of him.

"Yes, isn't it?" she said. "It's lonely, waiting. Oh, well, never mind; there's lots worse off than old Kate. And I've got the cottage and the Old Age Pension, and now and then I get a bit of a chat with some one that comes along." She looked at him with something like pleading in her eyes, and Teddy felt that she was not such a bad old woman after all. She might be queer, but she was friendly, too. And he was lonely enough himself to be glad of any friendliness. So he grinned at her sheepishly and muttered something incoherent. She was quick to note the change in his face.

"I'd like a chat with you, you know," she said eagerly. "You're like my little boy Joe was—once. He had curly hair, too. And he was always such a one for laughing. Till he grew up, that is."

"And where's he now?" Teddy asked.

"The police took him, my dear," she said confidentially. "Nasty interfering creatures: I never did like a policeman. So starey and inquisitive. They said he stole sheep, and they took him away. And he never came back—poor Joe! Once the police get you it's all up with you, you know. Do you like policemen?"

"No, my word, I don't!" said Teddy hastily. "I never want to see one."

"I knew you were a sensible chap," she said. "Oh, you and me 'ud be pals. We'd have lots to talk about. And I do get that lonely for a bit of a talk. Do you always sleep in haystacks?"

"Haven't had anywhere else to sleep lately," said Teddy, laughing. "I'm looking for a job, and I haven't found it yet. But I'm sure to get one before long."

"You *are* a man, aren't you?" she said admiringly. "Of course you'll get one. But it's late to go hunting jobs to-night, and goodness knows where you'll find a haystack. Say, you come up to my little place to-night? It's not much of a place, but there's a spare bed there—I always keep it ready for Joe. But if he did come he'd never mind finding a little chap like you in it."

Teddy hesitated. She was a queer old woman, and he was not sure if he liked her. Still, there was no doubt that she meant to be kind; and the thought of a bed was not unpleasing, after three nights spent in unusual sleeping-places. He might do worse. But he had a queer feeling that made him hesitate still.

"Ah, do come," she begged. "I'd be miserable to think of a boy out in the

night, looking for a haystack, and me with a comfortable bed for him and a good supper. And breakfast to-morrow morning, and then you could go on as soon as you liked. Not as I wouldn't be glad to keep you longer; only you'd have to do whatever you liked. But come to-night."

"It's giving you a lot of trouble," Teddy mumbled.

"Then you'll come!" she said delightedly. "That's right—and don't you go talking of trouble. Trouble's a pleasure, as they say. Now we'll get along, and we might as well pick up sticks as we go, for I'm a bit short of firewood. What's that you're carrying?"

"Bread," said Teddy. "You can have it."

She drew herself up with a comical look of offence.

"Do you think I'd take food from a visitor?" she asked. "What an idea! No, my dear, old Kate's not come to that yet. You come along, and don't talk rubbish."

She led the way through the scrub, following a faint sheep-track. Presently they came out upon a clearer space, and through the scattered gum-trees Teddy saw a little cottage standing on a rise a quarter of a mile away. As they drew near Kate pointed to it proudly.

"That's my little place," she said.

It was a very tiny house, consisting of two rooms with a lean-to at the back. The grey, weathered walls had never seen paint, save for a daub of bright blue round the door-frame and the broken windows. There had been a garden once, but the fence had rotted away, and all that remained was a wild mass of rose-bushes that had spread almost to a jungle. The roof was half covered with them, and though the place was desolate enough its poverty was hidden under the glory of the roses. Red and pink and golden, they bloomed in a wild confusion, drenching the evening air with a wave of fragrance.

"You've got plenty of flowers, Missus," said Teddy.

"Yes—I can't get on without my roses. Grew 'em all from cuttings, and look at 'em now! There's roses on 'em all the year round. Oh, and I've a veg'table garden at the back." She led the way round the cottage and showed him rows of vegetables growing within a rough fence of interlaced boughs.

"Sometimes the cow breaks it down on me," she said sadly. "It's Mr. Smith's cow, but he lets me have the milking of it. I couldn't do without the milk, but the cow's done me no end of damage from time to time. Ah, well, we've got to have our ups and downs. When Joe comes back he'll build me a new fence, first thing he does."

Within, the cottage was surprisingly neat. A great hearth almost filled one

end of the main room; there were iron bars across it, and a black kettle simmered over a smouldering log. A makeshift dresser held a queer assortment of china; there was a well-scrubbed table, scarred with the cutting of many boyish initials, a couple of chairs with seats made of strips of cowhide, and a bed in one corner, covered with a striped rug. Everything was very poor and very clean.

"This is Joe's room," said Kate, opening a door.

It was a tiny room, with a narrow stretcher-bed and a dressing-table made from a box. There were things belonging to a man in it: a stock-whip hung on the wall, a couple of felt hats near it; a man's clothes dangled from nails behind the door. The bed was neatly made, even to sheets and pillow-case. Everything was ready for occupation, and yet the room held a sense of silent desolation, of emptiness that seemed to have lain upon it for years. It chilled Teddy with a sudden fear. He glanced up at Kate sharply. But there was only a childlike pleasure in the lined face.

"There!" she said. "You just put your loaf of bread on the table so's it'll be all ready when you start off in the morning. Joe 'ud be real pleased to think you used his room. Poor little room! I often think it feels kind of lonely, like as if it was wanting Joe. But he'll come in all of a sudden some day. He was a good son when he hadn't got the drink in him. It'll be like old times to see a boy here again."

She went back into the living-room, and Teddy followed her closely. Somehow, he did not like the lonely little room. Kate bustled about, preparing to get supper ready, refusing his offer of help. He watched her in awkward silence.

"I say," he said presently. "Couldn't I cut some wood while you're working? I can chop all right."

"Sure you won't go away?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, honest, I won't. Got an axe?"

"Oh, I've got an axe—a good axe," she said. "Old Kate knows how to keep things sharp. I'll lend it to you if you'll be careful with it."

She brought it from the lean-to: an old axe with a handle worn to glass-like smoothness, but its edge clean and sharp. Teddy took it joyfully and went out into the paddock, his queer nervousness vanishing before the prospect of wholesome work. There was plenty of wood: a fallen tree lay within fifty yards of the house. He chopped steadily until he had a respectable pile of small logs, which he carried to the scanty remains of a wood-pile near the back door. Then, returning, he set to work again with the axe. It was better there than in the house; although his shoulders and arms ached he was sorry when at length

Kate came to summon him.

"My, you're a great worker!" she said. "I'll be set up for ever so long. I can do most things, but chopping comes hard on me. Why, it's like having Joe at home again, to see all those logs ready! Now you come in and have your supper."

The living-room looked more inviting now; the fire was blazing merrily, there was a cloth on the table, and the lamp was lit. A pleasant smell of cooking came from a big pot beside the kettle, making Teddy realize that he was ravenously hungry. Never, he thought, had there been such a meal as Kate gave him: stew from the big pot, hot scones, cooked in a camp-oven, gooseberry jam out of a tin, and cup after cup of tea. He ate as a boy may be expected to eat who has tasted no warm food for days; and Kate watched him delightedly, scarcely touching the food herself, but heaping his plate again and again. When at last he succeeded in convincing her that not another morsel was possible to him, she reluctantly ceased to ply him with food. Against her will he insisted on helping her to wash up. "Joe never did it," she said. It seemed to trouble her that he should do anything that Joe would not have done.

They sat by the fire when the work was over and talked; or rather, Teddy tried to keep awake while Kate talked in a rapid monologue that seemed likely to go on all night. She told him a hundred stories of Joe and his brothers. Joe had been the youngest, and the others had gone away long before he came to manhood: they were faded memories, but Joe was almost a living presence, although it was more than ten years since he had gone.

"He used always to say he'd go," she said. "But I don't believe he really would've if it hadn't been for those nasty police. As if a few sheep were anything to take away a boy for—away from his mother, and she all alone!"

"But why doesn't he come back?" Teddy demanded.

"I don't know, my dear, I don't know. Once the police get hold of you you're never the same. Mr. Smith says he's ashamed to come back, but Joe'd know he'd never need to feel ashamed with his mother. Oh, he'll come some day. And he'll find me waiting, and his bed turned down and his whip kept oiled and everything the way he liked it." Her voice died to a whisper: she sat staring into the fire, her lips moving silently.

Teddy's head went forward with a jerk. Kate started, and then looked pityingly at the drowsy boy.

"Ah, you're clean dead with sleep," she said. "Get along to bed, then, do. I've put a clean shirt of Joe's for you to sleep in."

She came in softly when he was in bed.

"I thought you wouldn't mind if I tucked you up," she said. "I always used

to tuck Joe up—when he'd let me." Teddy was too sleepy to answer. But he knew vaguely that gentle hands were about his bed—such touches as he had not felt for three grey years.

It was many hours later when he awoke suddenly. Through the chink of the partly-open door he could see that there was still a light in the living-room, and old Kate's voice came to him clearly. He wondered had Joe come back—perhaps with the drink in him, and wanting his room. That was a startling thought. Teddy decided that he had better make sure.

He slipped out of bed and crept to the door, peeping through the chink. Kate was alone, and the kitchen was as he had left it, save that the fire was dead. But the old woman was different, and at the sight of her changed face Teddy's heart began to thump heavily.

Gone was the kind-faced old Kate who had tended him gently. In her place was a woman with a fierce, set face and hard, glittering eyes. They were not sane eyes. Teddy had never seen the pitiful sight of madness, but he did not need to be told that he saw it now.

She was sitting facing the lamp, and in her hand was a long knife that glittered as she moved restlessly. A string of words fell from her lips without ceasing—words that came clearly to the trembling boy at the door.

"It's the only thing to do. It's a *kind* thing. Nobody ought to let a boy grow up. When they're little they're good, and they love you . . . and they grow up and turn wicked. If I keep him he'll get like Joe . . . cruel, and hit me, and steal . . . and the police'll get him. If he dies he'll go straight to heaven, and it'll be nice to think of him there . . . not in the other place . . . like Joe."

Teddy backed from the door, casting a hopeless look at the window. There was no chance of escape there; it was far too small even for his slender body. He was trapped like a rat—and she would come presently and kill him. In blind terror he flung off the big shirt that hampered his movements and dragged on his clothes; they gave him a nameless feeling of protection, and at least he could move freely. He thought of hiding under the bed, and rejected the useless idea: there he would be even more hopelessly trapped. He crept back to the door.

Kate was on her feet now, coming slowly towards him, gripping the great knife.

"He'll never feel it. He's so dead asleep—I've looked ever so many times. He won't know anything—and he'll be safe for ever and ever. I'll bury him in the garden, all nice and tidy. He's such a dear little boy. It isn't fair to let him grow big and wicked. Old Mad Kate knows—she knows."

She was coming nearer. He could not bear it. He put out a trembling hand,

and it fell on the loaf of bread. It was better than nothing. Gripping it, Teddy flung open the door and dashed out into the room.

Kate screamed and sprang at him. The boy dodged and flung the loaf wildly at her. It caught her elbow, and the knife clattered to the floor.

As she sprang to pick it up he darted to the outer door. For a dreadful moment the latch stuck—he wrestled with it frantically, giving himself up for lost. Then it yielded—just in time. She was almost upon him as he wrenched it open: but he was through, and the door banged in her face. Teddy heard her scream again, but he did not look back. He raced away in the moonlight, past the dew-drenched fragrance of the roses and across the open paddock—stumbling over his trailing boot-laces, sobbing, shivering—but safe.

When the dawn broke he was miles away, still stumbling and running. And in the little lonely cottage old Kate crouched by the blackened ashes of her fire and rocked herself to and fro, crying helpless tears for the little boy who would not die.

CHAPTER V

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SWAGMAN

"HULLO!" said the Swagman. "Going far?" He was sitting on a log under a wattle-tree heavy with golden bloom. The tiny yellow balls covered the ground near him; some had fallen on his battered felt hat. The Swagman was a middle-aged man of comfortable appearance, short and plump, with twinkling grey eyes and a brown beard. He did not look as if the life of the road had used him hardly.

"Hullo!" Teddy answered. "Till I find a job."

"Oh, you're looking for a job, are you?" said the Swagman. "Bank manager, I s'pose?"

Teddy considered this an ill-timed pleasantry, and he scowled without answering. The Swagman grinned.

"Bless you, I was only joking," he said. "No need to take offence, as the old horse said when he wouldn't jump. Got any tucker?"

Teddy shook his head.

"Well, you look as if you could do with a bite—and as luck happens, I've got plenty. Take a chair—there's lots of room on the log. Mind out for jumper ants, though; I shifted a couple just now."

Teddy inspected the log carefully and sat down. He had been walking all day and he was very tired. But over and beyond all weariness he was lonely. The shuddering horror of his waking in the night was still heavy on him; he longed for some one friendly, if only to break the never-ending silence of the road. There had been no break throughout the long day; no little wayside town; no farm near enough to visit. He had plodded on, dazed and miserable, still living over again and again the scene in old Kate's cottage. It had been bad in the daylight hours. The thought of the night ahead was infinitely worse.

The Swagman looked at him with curiosity.

"Had about enough trampin' for one day, haven't you, son?" he asked.

" 'Bout enough," Teddy answered.

"An' where are you thinkin' of campin' to-night?"

"I d'know. Anywhere."

"Why, we've got exactly the same plans!" said the Swagman cheerfully. "I've been lookin' out for a hotel this long while, but they don't seem to grow

freely in these parts. Do you happen to know how far it is to the next town?"

"No."

"No more don't I. So we're in the same box. But haven't you got any friends hereabouts?"

"No. I'm a stranger in these parts."

"Come far?"

"Oh, I've been on the tramp a good while," Teddy answered, trying to speak lightly.

"And where's your own home?"

"Haven't got one."

The Swagman eyed him keenly. There was a pause.

"Well, every man to his own business," the Swagman said at last. " 'Tisn't anything to do with me if you do happen to strike me as a bit young for the job. But if you're goin' to camp anywhere, an' I'm goin' to camp anywhere, it seems to me we might as well camp together! Two's company, an' one on his own's a bit lonely."

"But—but I haven't got anything to camp with," Teddy said. "I gen'lly look about for a haystack."

"So do I, if I can't get anything better. But haystacks along this track seem as scarce as hotels. And if I did meet a hotel, son, it wouldn't be much good to me, seein' I'm just about out of cash. Still, it's goin' to be a warm night, an' by the look of the country there ought to be a creek in that gully down yonder. Say we go prospectin' down there for a place to camp?"

It seemed a good idea to Teddy, chiefly because there was nothing better. The empty grey road had lost its charm to-day: no longer was he a gay adventurer, rejoicing in his freedom, but simply a lonely, frightened boy. And the Swagman looked kind; Teddy rather liked his off-hand way of speaking and his matter-of-fact acceptance of himself as a companion. Most men would have given him a curt "Good day" and let him go.

"All right," he agreed. "Thanks very much." He hesitated. "I could pay you for some tucker."

The Swagman cast a sharp glance at him.

"Oh, you're a man of money, are you?" he said. "Lucky chap!"

"Well—I've got four'n a penny," said Teddy. "That'll buy a good bit of tucker, won't it?"

"You bet it will. But just you keep it well down in your pocket, son, an' don't go talkin' to strangers about it. Time enough to show it when you've got

to—an' I'm not sellin' tucker to kids." He rose and picked up his swag and blackened billy-can. "Come along; we'll go an' explore the gully an' fix up a good camp before dark."

The gully was sheltered by great trees growing thickly on its steep banks. A creek wound slowly in its depths, with deep pools and shallow, gravelly stretches where the water rippled cheerfully. They made their way down the rocky sides, and the Swagman, looking about him with satisfaction, picked out a dry, grassy hollow half shut in by a grey crag.

"Couldn't be better," he said. "We'll be all snug here. Good water, good ferns for beddin', plenty of firewood. What's your name, son?"

"Edward," said Teddy. "Edward Hunt."

"Well, I'll call you Ned. That's short an' easy to remember. Now, you hustle round, Ned, an' get sticks—plenty of 'em, an' not too small. An' I'll cut ferns for a bed."

He opened a heavy clasp-knife and set to work, cutting great armfuls of crisp green bracken. There was a huge mound of it piled close to the rock by the time Teddy had finished his task.

"First-rate!" said the Swagman, looking approvingly at the pile of wood. "Bit of a worker, aren't you? Now, how about it? Ready for tea?"

"Would I have time for a swim first?" Teddy inquired.

The Swagman stared at him.

"Rum idea, but you've all the time there is," he said. "Get down-stream, though; not near the camp. I never swim in my tea-water."

Teddy grinned, and trotted off. After a pause the Swagman followed him. He sat on a rock, smoking, while the boy splashed and wallowed in a wide pool. There was no space to swim more than three strokes, even for Teddy; but the water was warm and delicious and seemed to wash something of the trouble from his mind, even as it washed the heat and dust of the road from his body.

"An' how d'you get dry?" asked the Swagman, as at length the boy came out reluctantly, dripping and refreshed.

"Oh—grass and ferns and things," said Teddy vaguely, beginning to scrub himself down. "I don't bother much."

"Well, you look a hundred per cent better, I will say," said the other, gazing at him wonderingly. "Couldn't face it myself, but there's no doubt it seems to suit you. First mate I ever had that went in for that sort of game."

"You try it," advised Teddy, scrubbing hard. The Swagman shuddered.

"Not me!" he said. "Water's a good thing to make tea with, but I don't worry myself with it much any other way. Well, hurry up an' get dressed; I'll go ahead and start the fire."

It was blazing briskly when Teddy rejoined him. The Swagman had unrolled his swag and spread his blanket over a rock in the sunlight. There were interesting things scattered round him: a loaf of bread, a big piece of bacon, a lump of cheese. Teddy eyed them wolfishly. His host was sitting cross-legged near the fire, busily twisting a length of wire into a kind of mat.

"That's me little grid," he explained. "I never can stick carryin' a fryin'-pan about, and this does just as well. Wastes the fat, of course, but that can't be helped." He finished the job by twisting the end of the wire round a green stick, and, laying it aside, began to slice bacon. The billy hanging over the fire was already beginning to sing. The camp had suddenly become home-like and pleasant to Teddy. He sat on the grass in happy ease of mind and body while the Swagman, refusing help, made tea and set the billy aside while he fried the bacon. The fire sizzled and hissed with the dripping fat; a heavenly bacon-smell began to mingle with the fragrance of wood-smoke and burning gum-leaves; and presently Teddy was furnished with a gigantic sandwich of bacon and bread, a tin cup of tea steamed beside him, and the Swagman, who insisted on drinking his own tea from the lid of the billy, was similarly provided, and they ate in a happy silence, too contented to talk. There was bread and cheese to follow the bacon. Teddy finished the last crumb of his allowance with lingering enjoyment, and licked his fingers.

"Well, between the bath an' the feed you're changin' every minute," observed the Swagman. "Look less as if the world was hollow, if you understand me."

" 'Twas me was hollow," said Teddy, with a twinkle.

"You looked it, son. Now it's me for a smoke. You can take the things down to the creek an' wash 'em up."

Teddy assented eagerly. He left the cup and billy to drain when he had washed them, and then wandered along the creek to explore, looking for birds' nests and pitching sticks at fish jumping in the pools. The creek wound its way through the gully for half a mile; then the steep banks slowly lessened and soon it ran on level ground, and on rounding a bend Teddy came within view of a farm-house not far off: a comfortable-looking place, with trees about it and the usual evening sight of cows stringing slowly away from the milking-shed. A woman was feeding a flock of fowls and ducks that clustered round her as she flung out handfuls of grain there were calves in a little paddock, and children playing near the house. He could hear their high, shrill voices. He

watched the place for a time, enviously; it was so home-like, so happy. Then, aware that the evening was becoming chilly, he turned and made his way slowly back to camp.

The Swagman greeted him cheerfully.

"I was beginnin' to think you'd lost yourself," he said. "Good boy, you've fetched a billy of fresh water. Well—been all round the country?"

"Oh, just a bit up the creek," Teddy answered. "There's a house there."

"Is that so? What sort?"

"A pretty big house. Farm, I s'pose—there's cows and horses and fowls, and all that sort of thing."

"I wouldn't wonder if I strolled over an' saw them presently," said the Swagman. "Might be a job there, or a chance of tucker. You'd have to stay an' look after the camp."

"All right," said Teddy. "Anything I can do?"

"There ain't anything to be done," the Swagman said. "That's the best of campin'—there's so little housework about it. No, if I was you, Ned, I'd turn in pretty soon. You're gettin' sleepy, aren't you?"

Teddy nodded. He wondered where he was to sleep.

"Plenty of room for us both on the ferns, an' my blanket's wide enough for two," said the Swagman, guessing his thought. "Just you get your boots off an' lay down next to the wall. Ferns are a sight more comfortable with a blanket under you as well as on top, but travellers can't have everything. I've cut out a couple of big sods for pillows, an' they make matters better."

Teddy had no idea of grumbling. The springy bed of ferns made a queer bed; they billowed about him and scratched him in a dozen different places, but he wriggled himself into a comfortable position, drew the blanket over him, and settled down with a great sigh of weariness. It was very peaceful to lie in the warm dusk, watching the fitful light of the fire and the quiet figure of the Swagman, smoking beside it. He made up his mind that he would lie awake to guard the camp until his friend had come back from visiting the farm; and even as he made the resolution he fell asleep.

He awoke much later. The fire was still burning, and the Swagman was sitting with his back to him, evidently busy at something Teddy could not see. His broad figure was curiously huge, outlined against the dull glow. Teddy wondered drowsily what he was doing. But sleep drifted over him again and held him through the night, save that now and then he was half conscious for a moment that the Swagman was lying beside him, snoring even more lustily than Danny Wellcome had snored in Dormitory B in the Orphanage—how

long ago it seemed! Then he fell asleep again, and did not wake until the sun was up.

He lay still for a moment, trying to remember where he was. The fire was alight, and beside it sat the Swagman, holding his makeshift gridiron by its long handle of green wood. From it rose a smell of cooking even more entrancing than that of the night before. Teddy jumped up, rubbing his eyes.

"That you?" asked the Swagman, without looking round. "I was just goin' to wake you. Breakfast's ready, an' a slap-up one it is, if I do say so meself. Chicken, young Ned! What do you say to that?"

"Wherever did you get it?" asked Teddy, goggle-eyed.

"Over yonder." He waved a careless hand in the direction of the farm. "Very kind people there. No jobs going, but very free with their tucker. Reg'lar pressed this bird on me, they did. So I've split him in half an' grilled him, Ned, an' we'll eat half of him now an' keep the rest for to-night. Look slippy an' cut some bread—he's just ready."

There was an unusual air of haste in the Swagman's manner that morning. He hurried Teddy through breakfast, which the boy regretted, since such a meal was clearly one to linger over. It was time they were on the road, he said—he believed in an early start, before the day grew hot. Yet, hurried as he was, he checked Teddy sharply when he tossed a well-picked leg-bone away from him.

"You go an' pick that up," he said. "Doesn't do to leave bones about—nor feathers neither. Some sheep-dog might get hold of 'em, an' next thing he'd be helpin' himself in his boss's fowl-yard."

Meekly, but with wondering, Teddy retrieved the bone. He wondered still more when, returning from washing up after breakfast, he found the Swagman neatly burying bones and feathers in a hole he had made with his clasp-knife.

"Always leave your camp neat," said he. "Then you don't get into trouble with people." He scattered the embers of the fire and carefully quenched them with the water Teddy had brought from the creek. A stray feather caught his eye; he muttered impatiently, picked it up and put it in his pocket. Then he rolled the swag, and they set out on the day's tramp.

The Swagman was silent for a time as they walked, and Teddy was thinking. Orphanage boys are not lacking in knowledge of the seamy side of life, and shrewdness comes to them early. Teddy had no doubt at all that he had just eaten a stolen breakfast.

It worried him—curiously, when you consider that a few days before he had been quite ready to steal clothes. But clothes were a desperate necessity: they seemed altogether different. The need for them had lain between him and

freedom. Food was another matter. He had never yet been hungry enough to want to steal. It seemed to him, puzzling the matter out in his small brain, that only sharp hunger should drive anyone to theft. Neither he nor the Swagman had been hungry, but they had just eaten a stolen breakfast. Teddy decided that it was not "the square thing." And in the old days before the Orphanage, Teddy had been brought up to think a good deal of the square thing.

Then there was the question of the police. That also was worrying. His one desire was to avoid the police. If they got on the track of the Swagman it certainly meant trouble for Teddy: not jail, perhaps—he did not think that jail followed on having eaten part of a fowl you hadn't stolen—but, without doubt, the Orphanage, which was almost as bad. All things considered, Teddy began to think that it might be as well if he and the Swagman parted company.

But how to manage this? As if he divined something of the boy's thoughts, the Swagman suddenly began to talk, and made himself so entertaining that Teddy almost forgot his perplexities. He had all sorts of stories of the roads he had tramped and the cities he had seen. Most of his life had been spent in tramping, since he admitted frankly that there was a queer kink in his nature that prevented him from ever settling down. Sometimes he took a job on a station, he said, and saved a little money; but always the road called to him, and sooner or later he rolled his swag and set off again. "Humping Matilda," he called it. "An' you take it from me, Ned," he added, "that there's worse pals than old Matilda. She's the only pal that never lets you down."

There was no trick of the road that he did not know. He told his stories carefully at first, so that Teddy was merely amused, and then fascinated by the hundred and one devices he had for gaining a living easily. Work he held to be a waste of time in the long run, for anyone who had nothing: you could work and work until you grew old and past working, and what did you get out of it? Nothing, said the Swagman. You were always nobody's dog. The only sensible thing was to take all you could get, giving as little as possible in return. There was plenty of fun in life if you looked at it that way, whereas if you worked you were simply somebody's cart-horse, with the difference that when you were old nobody turned you into a nice comfortable paddock to take things easy until you died. He wrapped up his beliefs in stories that sometimes set Teddy laughing, sometimes thrilled him with a sense of adventure. The Swagman became in his eyes rather a splendid figure, with his back to the wall, disdaining the world. One might do worse than become like him, since nothing seemed to trouble him, and he was fat and comfortable and jolly.

When they camped that night, after a day of lazy walking, Teddy ate his portion of the remaining half of the stolen fowl without any feeling of remorse. After all, he decided, he did not know for certain that it was stolen—at any

rate, the responsibility was the Swagman's. It was hardly his job to question the proceedings of a grown man, especially one so full of kindness. He went to sleep peacefully, a little disliking the smell of the Swagman's blanket, a little worried by his snores—but accepting both as minor discomforts to be endured stoically in a life of adventure. Who, after all, was Teddy Winter, that he should turn up his nose at minor smells and major snores?

Soon after starting next day they came within sight of a little township in the bush: a main street and a few scattered houses nestling in a ring of hills.

"We'll buy some bread there, Ned, if we're driven to it," said the Swagman. "But we'll try gettin' it without spendin' money first. I'm afraid we may have to do some work for it, but that can't always be helped. This looks a fair chance."

He pointed to a house in a paddock. It was the farthest place from the township; a funny little house of two stories with trees all round it.

"Rum-looking place," commented the Swagman. "Looks as if some one had taken two boxes an' put one atop of t'other an' called it a house. Well, we'll try it, Ned. An', by the way, it'll be better if I adopt you for a few days, don't you think? People 'ud just naturally think I'd be travellin' with my son. You call me Daddy if you have to call me anything, an' I'll be James Hunt for the time bein', if I have to give any name. Never give a name if you don't have to, Ned; an' if you do, give a wrong one." He chuckled deeply, leading the way up the paddock. Teddy echoed the chuckle, following him. It seemed rather a lark.

There was only one person to be seen at the queer house; an elderly woman, thin and angular, with grey hair twisted into a tight knob at the back of her head. She looked rather grimly at the Swagman as he made a civil request for work. But her face softened when she looked at Teddy.

"I never give money," she said curtly. "Not to swagmen. But I want some wood chopped, and chips and sticks picked up. If you and the boy like to put in a couple of hours' work I'll give you your dinners and some food to take away with you."

"That's the very thing to suit Ned an' me, ma'am," said the Swagman pleasantly.

"Very well," she said. She took them round to the back-yard, where a great pile of uncut wood filled one corner. From a shed she produced an axe and a hatchet, showed Teddy an empty case to be filled with chips, and stood watching them begin work. Then she went into the house, and the Swagman, who had been chopping vigorously, slackened his efforts.

"No need to bust yourself, Ned," he observed. "This old dame 'ud be a

proper slave-driver if we'd let her. Look as busy as you can, an' go as slow as you can—that's another good rule."

It was not an easy one for Teddy to follow, but he obeyed reluctantly. The woman kept a wary eye upon them, coming in and out of the house, and sometimes she could be seen watching them from her kitchen window—which gave deep annoyance to the Swagman, since it was necessary to maintain a degree of industry foreign to him. He heaved a sigh of relief when at last she came to call them to dinner. It was a good dinner of boiled mutton and suet-pudding: they ate it at a little table in the kitchen while the woman busied herself at the stove. The Swagman glanced about him as he ate, noting the big, comfortable kitchen and the glimpses of solid furniture through a half-open door that led into an inner room. There was no sign of any other person in the house. He tried to chat affably with their hostess, but she had no wish to talk; she returned only short answers. Dinner over, she gave them a loaf of bread and a large piece of cooked meat, and ushered them out.

"The boy's a better worker than you," was her parting remark to the Swagman. "He's too young to be on the road. Shut the gate after you." She stood at the door to watch them go.

"Now that's what I call an unpleasant female, Ned," remarked the Swagman. "No nice, comfortin' ways about her. Well-off, too, I'll be bound; there wasn't anything poor in the place. She's a right to be keepin' servants an' spendin' money like a lady."

"Well, she gave us good tucker," said Teddy.

"Wouldn't have hurt her to have added a couple of bob to it. But that's the way of the world, as I told you: people with money'll take all they can get."

"She must be lonely," Teddy observed. "Why, she hadn't even a dog!"

"No; I noticed she hadn't a dog," said the Swagman. "Not as I'm anyway keen on dogs about a house; they're a darned nuisance very often. But it shows you, don't it?" Teddy had no very clear idea of what it showed, so he merely grunted in a non-committal manner.

Somewhat to his surprise the Swagman did not go through the township's main street. Instead, he struck into a back lane where there were only two or three cottages and hurried Teddy until they were clear of all the buildings and out on the high road again. Then he slackened speed, and they went at a snail's pace for a mile, after which the Swagman suddenly stopped and declared himself tired.

"We've been trampin' quite long enough, leave alone all that wood-cuttin' we did," he remarked. "We'll call it a day, Ned. Yonder's as good a camping-place as we're likely to get." He turned across a paddock until they reached a

water-hole a few hundred yards from the road. A grove of scrubby trees gave good shelter: he tossed his swag down in their midst.

"You can get firewood ready an' cut ferns, Ned," he remarked. "I've just remembered I'm nearly out of baccy; I'll mooch back an' pick up some in that town. Won't be long." He went off more quickly than he had come.

It was some hours before he returned, and Teddy had found waiting slow work. It had been fun to get the camp ready; but once that was done there had been nothing to while away the time. A running stream has unlimited possibilities of entertainment, but a water-hole, even a tree-fringed one, soon palls. Teddy was thoroughly bored when at length he saw his companion returning.

The Swagman brought with him an atmosphere of cheerfulness, as well as of beer. He had made some acquaintances in the township, he said; they had had a great yarn, so that now he knew all about the district. He related a good deal of the gossip to Teddy as they ate their evening meal by the fire.

"The old lady we were workin' for this morning's named Miss Payne," he said. "Plenty of money, they tell me, an' as mean as a Jew with it. Lives all alone, and never spends a penny she can help. I got no time for that sort of woman, Ned. She's just a blight on a place. What's the good of keeping money in an old stocking, the way they tell me she does? Money has a right to be put in circulation, so as it'll benefit the poor."

He stretched himself comfortably under a tree and again became the pleasant companion of the day before, telling stories and cracking jokes until Teddy had forgotten all about his dull afternoon and could only think how lucky he was that so jolly a man had chosen to befriend him. The Swagman made plans for the future, too, and they were certainly more fascinating than his own idea of work as a farm-boy.

"I've taken a fancy to you, Ned," he said. "We get on real well together, 'cause you've got more sense than most kids of your age. What say we travel together for a bit? It's easy enough to pick up all we need, an' you'll see a lot of the world if you stick with me. Time enough to start hard work when your muscles are a bit tougher: I know how they work youngsters on farms. You'd never be able to call your soul your own. We'll make down towards the coast if you like; it's nice to be near the sea in the hot weather, an' you'd get all the bathin' you're so keen on, an' there'd be plenty of odd jobs among the fishin'-boats."

"Oo-oo!" said Teddy ecstatically. "I'd love that."

"You bet you would, Ned. Well, that's a bargain, an' we'll start off to-morrow. Now you'd better turn in; it's dark, an' we want to make an early get-

away in the morning."

Teddy went to sleep amid happy visions of blue waves and golden beaches, with boats laden with great masses of shining fish: the Swagman's figure moved in the pleasant prospect like that of a benevolent Father Christmas. There was no doubt, he reflected drowsily, that the world really was full of kind people. Old Mad Kate had just been an unlucky exception, and her evil memory was already growing faint in the reality of his wonderful new friend. So he closed his eyes happily and slept; to wake with a start at the touch of the Swagman's hand on his shoulder. It was still dark: the moon rode high, but moving cloud-masses veiled her, and the Swagman's face was a dim blur.

"Not time to get up, is it?" he murmured sleepily.

"Not time to start—but I got a little job on, an' I want you to help me, Ned," said the Swagman in a low voice. "Keep quiet an' don't ask questions, 'cause I got to rely on you."

Sleepy as he was, that pleased the boy. He sat up and found his boots and hat, and in a few moments they had left the camp and were striking across the misty paddocks. They skirted the sleeping township, keeping well away from it, and so came round in a half-circle that led them to the place where they had worked the day before. Near the funny little two-story house the Swagman stopped.

"Now we got to go like mice, Ned," he whispered. "It's this way—I left something of mine in that old dame's kitchen yesterday, an' when I went back for it she wouldn't give it to me. So I'll just have to get it, see? an' that's where I want you to help. The kitchen window's shuttered, but there's a little side-window that's just big enough for you to slip through—I've been here already this evening to see. So I'll get that open an' help you through, an' then you just open the kitchen door, or the big window, an' I can get my—my property."

"But—but is it safe?" Teddy stammered.

"Safe as houses, if you keep quiet. She sleeps upstairs, an' we'll take off our boots. Mind you move slowly an' open the door slowly, once you're in. An' once I'm in, you can just cut back to camp quietly; don't wait for me." He patted the boy's shoulder. "Mighty good thing for me I had you for a pal, Ned. I couldn't manage it by meself."

That was pleasant to hear, and made him feel a man. They crept up to the house at the back, and then edged round the wall until they came to the side-window. The Swagman opened it very gently with his knife while Teddy took off his boots. Everything was so still, so quiet, that the tiny sound of the window going up, inch by inch, seemed loud enough to wake any sleeper. But

it was up at last, and there had been no stir in the house. They listened a moment, the Swagman's hand on Teddy's shoulder.

"All quiet," he said, with a chuckle in his low whisper. "Up you go, Ned."

It was something in that suppressed chuckle that brought home to Teddy the sense of evil. An uneasy foreboding had been creeping over him as he stood waiting for the little window to open—now, suddenly, he knew. The Swagman was no longer a wonderful, jolly companion, but a thief—a thief who would crawl into the house of a lonely woman in the night. And he would make him, Teddy, a thief also. Not if he knew it! He drew back, trembling. Never had he felt so little and young.

"Wh-what is it you've left there?" he asked, trying to gain time.

"Never you mind. I'll see to that, old chap. Up you go." The whisper was sharp.

"No," said Teddy.

"Don't be an ass, Ned." The Swagman's hand pressed more heavily on his shoulder. "It's quite easy—you needn't be afraid, old chap."

"*No.*" He could say no other word—only tremble, looking at the Swagman's face as it lost its cheery good-fellowship and became hard and angry. But the man continued to check his fury.

"Aw, now, Ned," he whispered. "An' me relyin' on you! You've been such a good little pal; I thought I could trust you. I wouldn't have asked an ordinary boy."

"I—I'm not goin' to be a thief for anyone," Teddy stammered. "You let me go!"

"What d'you mean—talkin' about thieves?" demanded the Swagman.

"Well, it's thievin' to break into houses. I'm not goin' to do it—not if you lammed the head off me," whispered Teddy. He broke away from the restraining hand and picked up his boots.

Above them a window went up with a rattle.

"Who's there?" asked a sharp voice.

With a movement of incredible swiftness the Swagman flattened himself against the wall. Teddy followed his example and began to edge silently towards the back of the house.

"Keep still!" whispered the man.

There were keen ears upstairs, and they heard the whisper.

"Who's down there? I've a gun here, and it's loaded!"

At this extremely unpleasant news the Swagman shuddered. He glanced

upward anxiously, hoping that the boast was an empty one, and so met his fate. Old Miss Payne may have had a gun, but if so, it was her second line of defence. Her first was a large bucket of water. She caught sight of the movement and promptly reversed the bucket.

It was unfortunate for a man who rarely used water save to make tea that he was directly beneath the window. The deluge took him squarely in the face, and with a loud "Ow!" he went down, flattened under the impact. The empty bucket followed, catching him amidships, and eliciting a hollow groan as his breath went from him. He lay squirming and helpless while a triumphant shout of joy came from Miss Payne.

"Got you!" she observed happily. "I see you, you ugly brute!" She disappeared for a second, and then her head and shoulders again came into view, and with them a long ominous muzzle, pointing downwards. "Now, you git!" she said tersely.

The Swagman got. Bruised, drenched, terrified, he scrambled to his feet and fled across the paddock. Teddy had dodged round the corner of the house when the bucket fell, and was already out of sight, running like a hare among the trees, choking with laughter as he ran. Nobody had ever looked so funny as the Swagman.

He did not pause until he was well on the other side of the township, and not far from the camp. Then he pulled up, panting. What should he do? To go back to the camp was not to be thought of—better to face a hungry lion than the Swagman in what was probably his present temper.

"I'd better get away as hard as I can," he muttered. "I 'spect he'd about kill me if he got me." He giggled helplessly. "Crumbs, didn't he look a treat!" he said. "I'm glad it was him got it!" Then he made his way to the road and jogged on through the moonlight until weariness overcame him and he turned into a clump of scrub, snuggled shiveringly behind a log, and went to sleep.

He woke with a great start. It was early dawn, and he was stiff and cold. But worse than bodily discomfort was what he saw—the Swagman's face glaring down at him. The man kicked him into complete wakefulness.

"I thought I'd get you, my beauty." The great hand held him like a vice, shaking him roughly, and Teddy could only shiver and stare at him. He was still soaked, and his face was terrible.

"If I was to kill you, it wouldn't be more'n you've earned," said the Swagman, punctuating his speech with kicks. "But I was always soft-hearted. Hand over that money you've got."

Teddy obeyed.

"Four'n a penny," said the Swagman. "Not much, considerin' what you've

cost me. An' now I'll leave you to reflect on what comes of lettin' down a pal."

He took a short length of cord from his pocket and tied the boy's hands together, securing the free end to a sapling.

"You'll get that undone sooner or later," he said. "Or if you don't, some one'll find you—p'raps. But if you ever let on that you know anything about me, young Ned, I'll come back an' kill you, as sure as fate!" He picked up his swag, gave Teddy a parting kick, and slouched away.

CHAPTER VI

THE ADVENTURE OF THE STRANGE YOUNG MAN

IT was more than an hour before Teddy succeeded in freeing himself. To untie the cord from the sapling was not difficult; to release his wrists was quite another matter, and they were raw and bleeding in more than one place by the time he had at length managed to gnaw through his fetters.

He set off down the road in a mood of blind anger. His body ached from the Swagman's kicks, he was hungry and penniless; but the ache of his mind was worst of all. For two days he had known companionship: the Swagman had treated him as a mate, had been kind and friendly; and then he had suddenly turned into a thief, and brutal, so that all his small world had crashed in pieces.

"I was a jolly fool to think people were decent," Teddy muttered. "I'll never make that mistake again!"

But it is not a lucky thing to hate the world, because hate is a poison that works into the hater. It was not long before Teddy was thoroughly convinced that he had lost his luck. He tramped to every farm-house he could see from the road to ask for work, but day after weary day went by and he was no nearer his ambition. Sometimes he earned sixpence by wood-cutting or helping with sheep; sometimes a farmer let him sleep in a barn and gave him breakfast next morning. But nobody seemed to want a boy for regular employment. Perhaps they wanted a bigger boy—not a thin, anxious-faced youngster still within school age.

He lost count of time after awhile. It seemed an age that he had been wandering, and the loneliness ate into his soul. The reality smote him sharply after all his happy dreams of freedom. Yet, because a stout heart dwelt in his starved little body, he did not give way to despair. His father had always told him that a man must face things squarely and never lose courage, no matter how bad they seemed; he clung to the brave words and tried to believe that before very long—indeed, at any moment—his lost luck would come back, and all the bad times would be like a terrible dream that fades away in the daylight. But it grew harder and harder to keep his faith.

He did not know where he wandered in those bewildering days; there were few signposts in that sparsely-settled district, and names of unfamiliar townships meant nothing to him. When he came to one of the little bush towns he hurried through it, only pausing to buy food if he had any money—always

afraid that a policeman might see that he was a tramp and make inquiries that would end in the Orphanage. For, no matter how hopeless seemed the outlook, Teddy never dreamed of giving himself up as a runaway orphan. Quite often it occurred to him that he might die. But he would die free.

Nobody, however poor, refused him food, and after a few days he had almost lost his shame at begging—when he knew that he had grown too weak to work the only thing was to beg for food. But the scrappy meals that fall to a tramp's lot are not much good to a boy of thirteen, living in the open air: he was always hungry. Between his scanty earnings and the odd meals he kept going longer than you might think—perhaps the spirit helped. But he grew steadily thinner, and his cheekbones stuck out and there were hollows under his eyes. His face began to wear that look of desperate anxiety that one sees in so many faces in the slums of a great city. He kept himself clean, for there were many creeks, and a daily bathe was his only pleasure. But he began to slouch, for he was always tired, and it seemed too great an effort to keep his shoulders straight.

The time dragged by, and a new trouble presented itself—he thought little of it at first, but very soon he knew that it was no light matter. His boots were wearing out. A hole appeared in one sole, and quickly grew larger, and small stones began to work into it, so that his foot grew sore. He begged for boots then at different places, but without success. The farms were small and poor and there were no boots to spare. One kindly woman offered him a pair, but they proved too small. Her heart smote her as he stood up after trying them on, his young face set despairingly, and she ran into her cottage and found a few coppers for him. Teddy took them gratefully; she had already given him a meal. She watched him with troubled eyes as he limped away. But she was very poor, with a houseful of little children; she could do no more for a strange boy, even though it was many days before she forgot him.

Two days later Teddy knew that he had come to the end of his endurance. He had had nothing to eat for sixteen hours; even though the woman's pence were still in his pocket he had reached no place where he could buy bread, nor had he passed any house since an old man, living in a tiny hut, had given him some bread and jam the day before. Now the road stretched before him, straight and grey and empty, holding no sign of life. One boot was past wearing; he carried it in his hand, but he could not put it on his blistered and bleeding foot. Every step was agony.

He had spent a restless night, tossing and turning on his bed of bracken in a hollow. The cold of the early dawn had spurred him to start before the sunrise, coupled with his gnawing hunger; he had struggled on, staggering with weariness, hoping that each turn in the track would show him a house where he

might find kindness. But now he was done. The hot sun, blazing down pitilessly, turned him dizzy: he reeled to the side of the track, struggling to reach a patch of shade under a tree. Then he fell, and lay still, a limp heap crumpled on the dusty grass.

Quiet settled down upon the lonely road—in no place more quiet than where the grey blur rested under the tree, with ants and beetles running over it unnoticed. Then, far away, sounded a dull, intermittent engine-beat, and presently there came in sight a battered Ford car with a shirt-sleeved young man at the wheel. It was clear that the engine was doing strange things; it coughed and wheezed asthmatically as though groaning in protest at being asked to go. Finally it decided not to go at all, and came to a standstill not far from where Teddy lay.

The young man got out, remarking reproachfully, “Buttercup, you’d turn a fellow’s hair grey!” and his head disappeared under the bonnet. He emerged presently, heated of countenance, rummaged in his box of tools, and returned once more to the engine, whistling as he worked. After a series of experiments his head reappeared; he wiped his hands on a piece of cotton-waste, sprang into the car, and worked levers anxiously. The engine started—doubtfully at first, and then with a gathering feeling of security, and the young man’s face cleared.

“Got you, my beauty!” he remarked. “Let’s hope you’ll run as far as the next town.” He left the engine running while he again dismounted to shut down the bonnet. Turning, he caught sight of the motionless bundle under the tree.

“By Jove!” he said. “Why, it’s a kid!”

Two strides took him across the road. He hesitated, his cheerful face clouding. The bundle was horribly still. Teddy had pitched forward, his face hidden on his arms; the bare foot, dusty and blood-stained, told its own story.

“I believe he’s dead!” muttered the new-comer. He went down on one knee and turned the limp body over. “No, he’s not”—with a sigh of relief. “Poor atom, he looks mighty near it!” He felt for the pulse, finding a weak flicker. “Where on earth can he have come from! He looks deadly ill. Thank goodness, there’s the brandy!” He studied Teddy’s face closely. “I believe he’s starved!”

He ran to the car, returning with a small flask. It was not easy to open the boy’s tightly-shut lips, but he succeeded in forcing a few drops of brandy into his mouth. He unbuttoned his collar and chafed his hands; and presently Teddy grimaced and made a painful effort to swallow, though his eyes remained shut. The young man promptly administered more brandy. This time it went down, and Teddy choked, coughed, and slowly opened his eyes.

“Don’t worry,” said the young man gently. “You’re all right. Just lie still.”

Teddy had no intention of doing anything else: already he was drifting away again. The stranger disappeared, and in a moment was back with a basket, from which appeared a bottle of milk, a tin cup and a teaspoon. He mixed brandy and milk swiftly, took the boy’s head on his arm, and began to feed him with the spoon, a few drops at a time at first—gradually increasing the amount as swallowing became easier. Teddy could not see him clearly, for it was too much of an effort to raise his tired eyes. But gradually, as the spirit took effect, he became vaguely aware of a voice that said comforting things. “Poor chap—never mind, you’ll be right as pie presently—there, just open your mouth a bit more—swallow it down, it’ll do you good.” It hurt to swallow, but the taste was delicious; a little trickle leaked from the side of his mouth and he tried weakly to reach it with his tongue. The stranger gave a relieved laugh.

“Plenty more, old man—never mind. I’ll give you as much as is good for you.” The slow feeding went on, gradually becoming easier, and the trees above him ceased to whirl in a confusing dance and became steady trees, their leaves just moving in the faint breeze. When the cup was half empty the young man stopped.

“That’s enough for just now.” He laid him back gently, made another dash to the car, and returned with a coat, which he folded into a pillow for the boy’s head. Presently, lying with closed eyes, Teddy was conscious that his face and hands were being bathed with cold water. Something soft and cool and wet rested again and again on his hot eyelids: it was heavenly to feel it. When the bathing was over his eyes opened naturally and he tried to smile. But it was a sorry attempt at a smile—his lips twisted over it, and slow tears, that he could not restrain, began to trickle on his cheeks. He was desperately ashamed of them, but they would not stop.

“Don’t you worry,” said the pitying voice. “Bigger men than you cry after a starve.” The wet coolness brushed his face again. “Here, just a spoonful more”—and his head was raised, and once more he swallowed milk hungrily. That was better; but still he could not speak, though he tried to mutter thanks. The stranger laid him back.

“Now, you keep quiet, old man, and I’m going to fix your foot. You’ve got a nice foot, and no mistake—no wonder you caved in.” He heard water splashing into a tin basin, and the foot of which he was only vaguely conscious as a burning mass was gently lifted and bathed for a long time. It hurt, but at the same time it soothed him—so much so, indeed, that he seemed to sink to sleep under the cool touch of the water, and was not conscious of the anointing and bandaging that followed.

When he opened his eyes again he was alone. For a moment he believed that it was only a dream that help had come to him—that now that lovely dream had ended in bitter waking to silence and loneliness; and in the horror that swept over him he gave a strangled, terrified cry. Then peace wrapped him again, for the cry was answered by a shout, and swift feet came running to him.

"Hallo, old chap! Did you get scared?"

"I—I thought you'd gone," he muttered. Again the hot tears he could not help stung his eyes.

"Not much!" said the young man cheerfully. "I was just looking for a place to make a good camp. There's quite a good one near here. We'll move there presently. But you must have some more milk first—hot this time. Feel like hot milk?"

He did not wait for an answer—perhaps he saw it in Teddy's face. He heated milk quickly over a spirit-lamp, stirred into it a spoonful of meat-extract, and fed his patient carefully, resisting him with a laugh when he tried to gulp it ravenously.

"No—you've got to go slow. That's the rule when a fellow's done a perish. I'll give you as much as ever you want—in time. There, you're coming along like a house on fire! Lucky I had this meat stuff; I'd never have packed it myself, but my aunt insisted on giving me a box of what she called 'medical comforts.' I thought she was dotty, but she must have had a hunch that I'd find some one down and out. Steady now—don't swallow the spoon, my lad. There, that's the very last drop. Now, just lie quiet. Feel better?"

" 'M," said Teddy. A flicker of colour was coming back into his face. "It was lovely!"

"That's right. Now, don't try to talk, only I'd like to know one or two things." He sat down near him. "Anything wrong with you except forgetting your meals? I mean, were you ill, or hurt?"

Teddy shook his head.

"No—I'll be all right now. Only my foot. My boot wore out."

"It sure did," agreed the Good Samaritan, looking at the battered relic of a boot that lay near him. "I wouldn't say that would ever be a good boot again. Well, that doesn't matter. Now, where are your people? Will they be worrying about you?"

"No. Haven't got any people."

The stranger knitted his brows.

"Sure, old chap? You haven't been running away from home, or any little

game like that?"

"True's life." Teddy met his eyes squarely. "Cross my heart." He tried to do so, and found that his hand refused to do anything but waggle feebly. The young man laughed and patted the futile hand.

"Keep still—I believe you all right. I'm not going to worry you with questions, only I had to find out if I ought to get a doctor or send messages anywhere. If I haven't, the rest's no business of mine. You're my business, though, all the more if you haven't got anyone belonging to you. So just understand that I'm boss for the present, and all you've got to do is to keep quiet and obey orders."

He tried to make his words sound fierce, but the fierceness was altogether belied by the twinkle in his eyes. Teddy had no thought of rebellion, even had rebellion been possible. The slow misery of the last week had effectually choked his desire for lonely adventuring; now, whatever the future held, it was sheer bliss to think that some one else was in command. He lay watching the stranger as he filled a pipe thoughtfully.

He was a tall, thin fellow, not much more than a boy, clad in breeches and a bush shirt, the sleeves of which, rolled above his elbows, showed arms as brown as his face. Blue eyes, in which a twinkle always seemed to lurk, a firm mouth, with a moustache so small that it seemed hardly worth the trouble of growing it, and a square chin; and he carried his head with a lift like that of a stag that meets the breeze on an upland moor. His voice was slow and quiet, with a lazy drawl that his quick movements belied. Teddy could not have told you if he were good-looking; but he knew without any doubt that it was a face to be trusted. And having made up his mind to this, he gave a great sigh and fell asleep immediately.

"About the best thing he could do," mused the stranger, looking at him compassionately. "Poor kid—I'd like to know who's responsible for letting him out on his own! Wonder if I ought to take him to a hospital? But I don't know if there's one within a hundred miles! Nice-looking youngster, too, and he looks one straight in the face. Well, I'll keep him quiet for a day or two, and find out a bit more when he's strong enough to talk."

The pipe was drawing well: he got up and moved away in the direction of the car. Then he came back and tossed his battered hat on the grass near Teddy.

"If he wakes up and sees my hat he'll know I haven't gone far," he said to himself. "Wasn't too nice to see the look of terror he had when he thought he was alone. No kid ought to look as scared as that. Wonder if he's had some sort of a shock?" He pondered the matter as he started the car and drove it into

the bush beside the road, looking sharply to see whether Teddy stirred. But there was no movement, and he went on slowly until the trees swallowed him.

Within the scrub he came presently to a fence, old and tottering, so that it was easy to pull down a panel and admit the car into the paddock beyond. It seemed to be a sort of No-Man's-Land, for there were no tracks or sign of stock and the trees grew fairly thickly. He threaded a careful way among them until he came to a little creek, half-hidden in a tangle of blackberry brambles and tea-tree. Leaving the car under a tree, he shouldered an axe and went in search of suitable saplings for tent-poles. The sound of chopping soon broke the bush silence; he returned presently with his poles, left them near the car, and hurried back on foot to the road.

Teddy was awake, his face placid.

"Didn't think I'd cleared out this time?"

"No—your hat was there," said Teddy.

"Good boy—that's why I left it. Now we'll get a move on."

Just for a moment the boy's eyes became uneasy.

"You—you're not taking me—to—to the police—or anywhere?"

"Me? Not much. We're going to camp close to here, in that paddock." He stopped and slid an arm under him. "Hang on round my neck; I'll try not to hurt your foot."

"Aw, I'm too heavy!" protested Teddy. "I could hop on one foot—true!"

"You're just about as heavy as a walking-stick," returned the other, laughing. "And a piece of wet string could do about as much hopping as you're up to." He picked him up with an easy swing and carried him off, walking between the grooves the car had left in the dusty grass: and presently Teddy was lying in a pleasant hollow under a tree, very much softer than his nobbly bed by the roadside. Here the grass was thick and green, and little hooded orchids pushed their helmets out of it, standing erect like tiny emerald knights. A creek was rippling behind a screen of tea-tree. There were big gum-trees and bushy lightwoods everywhere, many of them covered with trails of clematis and purple sarsaparilla; from above came an incessant twittering of unseen birds, though you had to watch closely to catch a glimpse of them. Teddy's head rested on a cushion taken from the car: something that he could not see propped his bandaged foot. And the young man was smiling at him in a way that Teddy would have called "matey."

"Comfortable?" he asked. "That's right. Now we'll start a happy home going."

That "we" was nice, even though Teddy was not helping. And there were

worse things than lying in the shade watching his new friend. The young man was certainly a mighty worker. A roll of canvas strapped to the running-board of the car revealed itself as a tent, after a few moments' wrestling with its intricacies, and in a surprisingly short time it was standing among the trees where a grove of bushes made a wind-break. Another piece of canvas was cunningly stretched from the hood of the Ford and supported on uprights driven into the ground—and lo, there was an open-air room! In its shade the young man fixed a bed—it was the result of juggling with little crossed sticks and two long, soft bran-sacks, and it puzzled Teddy greatly, though the result looked most inviting. Then the car disgorged a number of things: rugs and bush blankets, a battered cushion, which was immediately given him for an extra pillow, heavy-looking food-tins, tools, a nest of billy-cans, fitting one inside another, a frying-pan, a long object in a brown canvas case which was another mystery to Teddy, and a jumble of parcels and bundles beyond any description. The young man stood in the midst of them, wiped his heated brow, and laughed.

"I never expected to use a quarter of all this junk," he explained. "Don't suppose I would, either, if I hadn't come across you. I've just been diving in and hauling things out as I needed them, and everything's got into the most appalling mess; so this seems as good a time as any to clean out the car." He tossed the bedding upon the stretcher, returned a few things to the car, and put the remainder in some sort of rough order. Then he glanced at his watch.

"By Jove, it's getting near dinner-time! I must light the fire!"

He seized the axe and went in quest of firewood, while Teddy wriggled with disgust of himself for being unable to help in the work. Since his benefactor was out of sight, he decided to try to move—if he could only hop about and pick up sticks it would be better than nothing. He sat up and, finding that this was a possibility, struggled to his feet, balancing on the toe of the bandaged member. Then his head began to whirl swiftly, the trees spun round in a delirious dance, the grass sprang up to meet him, and he found himself in a heap, giddy and bewildered.

"Now then, what are you trying to do?" came a warning cry.

The young man appeared, out of nowhere, it seemed. He picked him up and put him back on his pillow. Gradually the world became stationary again, and Teddy bunked up at him feebly.

"I—I just thought I'd get some firewood," he murmured.

"Oh, did you?" The young man's voice was both gentle and stern. "Well, you'd better scrap any ideas of that kind, my lad. You lie still; I'll have a fire going in a minute."

But the fire waited while he heated milk on his little spirit-lamp and administered more nourishment to his patient—this time finding that he was able to drink from the cup without the aid of a spoon, a stride towards recovery that cheered them both. Then the young man rigged his fire in a sheltered place, boiled his billy, and ate a mighty meal of cold meat and bread and butter, ending with a huge apple. He apologized for not offering any of these delicacies to Teddy.

"Can't give you anything solid to-day, old man. I'll take the tucker out of your sight if it annoys you to see me eat it."

"No, don't," Teddy said. "I like watching you—but I don't want any."

Over his pipe, the meal finished, the young man consulted a map.

"I must leave you for a bit," he stated. "Don't worry"—he saw the swift fear that flashed into the boy's face—"I'll be back in an hour or so. I've got to find a town and get food, and have a heart-to-heart talk with some garage-chap about the car: she had an awful pain in her digestion this morning. And I must get bran-bags for a stretcher for you."

"Aw, don't bother; I can sleep on the ground," protested Teddy. "Ferns make a good bed."

"Bran-bags make a better. I'm going to put you on the stretcher over there before I go, and you'll see. I'll be as quick as I can, but I may be held up awhile with the car. But you're not to worry. What's your name, by the way?"

"Teddy Winter." It did not occur to him to give the other name—not to this man.

"Well, you're not to worry, Teddy. If I have to hunt up another car, I'll come back. I'll leave some milk near you. 'Fraid it'll be a bit dull for you. I've some books, but I don't know if you'd care for them. Feel up to reading?"

Teddy shook his head. "I like reading," he said; "but my head's queer and swimmy."

"Well, you try to sleep. That's much better for you." Suddenly he began to laugh. "If I haven't been a fool!" he ejaculated. "Forgot I had to go, and I've fixed the shelter from the hood! Well, that's soon altered."

He whipped the canvas from the car, drove it out, and rigged poles in its place to keep the canvas taut over the stretcher-bed, where he installed Teddy on the folded rugs. It was as comfortable as he had prophesied, and the boy smiled restfully.

"That *is* jolly!" he said. "You—you're awful good to me, sir."

"Good be blowed!" said the young man pleasantly. "Now you snuggle down and have a sleep and I'll be off." He edged the car in and out of the trees,

and presently the sound of her engine died away in the distance.

A great silence seemed to fall with his going. Yet in some strange way there was no loneliness in Teddy's heart, though he lay solitary and helpless in the midst of the quiet forest. His friend had gone: but he had left behind him a sense of strength and purpose and companionship that seemed to fill the empty space with his presence. And he would come back. That was very sure. Teddy smiled to think of that home-coming as he tucked his cheek into his pillow and fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

HOW ONE BECAME A MASCOT

THE sun's rays were beginning to slant before a warning hoot told of the return of the car, and if Teddy had found the time long he was certainly not going to admit it to a young man who came back full of concern for his neglected patient. What was the good of thinking about a grey time when everything had suddenly turned again to gold? So he welcomed his host with a cheerful "Hallo!" and a wide smile, watched the Ford backed into place with deep interest, and declared that he was miles better.

"You look it, too," said the other, evidently relieved. "Had a sleep? That's good, and you've drunk all the milk. Splendid!"

"I'd have drunk more if I'd had it," said Teddy. "Gee, I'm hungry!"

"Well, I've caught some new-laid eggs, and you're going to have one. Not cooked—I'm afraid to give you anything solid to-day. Ever had an egg whacked up with milk and sugar?"

Teddy nodded. "Years ago," he said; and the young man wondered at the shadow on his face.

"Well, that's what you're going to have now, before anything else gets done about this camp," stated he. He broke an egg into a large pannikin, beat it up with almost as much vigour as he applied to wood-chopping, added sugar and milk, and brought the delectable, foaming mixture to his guest with the pride of a young mother exhibiting her first baby. Never had anything tasted so good. Teddy sat up to drink it without assistance. He made it last a long time, sipping it blissfully while the young man unpacked his purchases and told of his doings abroad.

"Found quite a decent little town with a sensible garage. They seemed to think that old age was the car's chief trouble, but, anyhow, they've done something to remedy her indigestion. I only hope it won't come on again in the night, poor dear! Got my sacks for your bed, Teddy—by Jove, I must cut props for that—and all sorts of tucker. Stuff to make soup for you, and some jelly in a jar that's going to turn you into a Hercules in two days." Teddy had not the faintest idea what a Hercules was, but he accepted the prospect in perfect faith. Whatever it was, if it meant eating jelly he was prepared to face it. "Bandages for your foot and a pair of gym. shoes—extra big, to allow for the bandages. We'll see about boots later on. Two shirts: I hope I guessed your size. You'll

have to use one for a night-shirt. Socks. Papers for me and some comics and a B.O.P. for you." "*Ow!*" from Teddy. "Eggs: I made love to a nice old lady at a farm for those and a big billy of fresh milk. Oranges—hang it, the bag's burst!"—as a dozen golden globes suddenly cascaded at his feet and rolled over the grass. "There, I think that's all."

"I say, sir . . ." Teddy's lip quivered. "It's too much . . . I can't pay you back . . ."

The other stared.

"Pay me back? Don't talk through your hat, kid. And don't call me 'sir.' My name's Bill Courtney, and Bill is enough for you to remember—except that I'm very glad I happened on you this morning, and I'm going to get you fit and well again. So that's that. Finished your drink?" He took the pannikin. "Now you lie down while I make soup. Soup is where I shine."

It was a very short time before meat and vegetables were chopped up and simmering over the re-lighted fire. A stretcher was rigged for Teddy in the tent, and made ready for the night, Bill remarking that it was lucky that he had brought twice as many blankets as he ever used. He heated water and doctored the sore foot afresh, delighted to find it looking better already.

"You'll heal up in no time," he said as he adjusted the bandage. "Well, I don't think there's anything more to be done, and I'm hot and grubby. I'm off to the creek for a swim, if I can find a hole big enough to swim in."

"Wish I could go," Teddy said seriously.

"Like swimming?"

"Better'n nearly anything in the world," answered Teddy. "I had a bathe every day till I got too tired."

"Good man," Bill said. "Oh, we'll have you bathing in a few days—but you'd better keep quiet this evening." He rummaged in the car for a towel and went off, singing.

For the next twenty-four hours Teddy did little but sleep, waking to take the nourishment that was always ready, and then letting sleep repair his worn-out little body again. But the third day found him bright-eyed and stronger, with an appetite that scorned such kickshaws as milk and beaten-up eggs. Bill fed him cautiously, afraid of the effect of solid food after starvation, but relieved to see that his patient's strength seemed to return with each hour. He established him on the open-air stretcher with his papers, but though he took them eagerly the boy did not read much; it gave him more pleasure to lie and watch the work of the camp. "I'll be jolly glad when I can give you a hand," he remarked when everything was shipshape, and Bill came to smoke a peaceful pipe under a tree near him.

“Oh, you’ll do that soon enough.” Bill regarded him closely. He was still very pale under his tan, and his eyes were too big for his face, but his look of starved terror had gone; it was a thoroughly boy-like Teddy who answered his smile. A decent youngster, Bill reflected: looked as if he came of decent people. Surely he belonged somewhere—and if so . . . Bill frowned. It was not pleasant to think that perhaps an anxious mother was worrying herself into fiddle-strings about that jolly, curly-haired kid.

“I say, Teddy,” he remarked. “Where are you heading for?—when you’re better, I mean.”

“Nowhere in p’ticular,” Teddy answered. “I’ve got to get some sort of a job.”

“But—but you’re too young to be out on your own. Where do you come from?”

“Oh—Town.” Teddy flushed.

“Is your home in Town?”

“Haven’t got any home.”

They looked at each other in silence. Then the wave of colour deepened in the boy’s face.

“I s’pose I’d better tell you,” he said. “I’m . . . an Orphan.” He brought out the word with a queer reluctance, and then it came in a voice of shamed bitterness, as if he had said “I’m a viper!” “I broke out of the Orphanage an’ ran away. You won’t tell the police, will you, Bill?”

“Me? Not much. But why should you mind my knowing?”

“Well—who wants to have anything to do with an Orphan? We’re just—charity kids.” He spoke steadily, but it was plain that each word hurt him.

Bill uttered an impatient exclamation.

“I never heard such bally rot!” he said. “Who put that fool idea into your head?”

“I’ve been one for three years,” said Teddy simply. “That’s how I know.”

Young Bill Courtney felt a flame of honest indignation. He looked pityingly at the small runaway ward of the State.

“Well, you’ll find fools everywhere, Teddy,” he said. “I’m several kinds of a fool myself, but I don’t make the mistake of thinking that because a fellow’s had the bad luck to lose his parents he isn’t still a decent chap. It all depends on the fellow himself. Have you done anything to be ashamed of? I don’t believe you have.”

“Unless it’s running away,” Teddy said. “And I don’t care—I’d run away

fifty times. I couldn't stick it. 'Cause I was quite big when they got me, you see. I was ten. An' I kept remembering all the time—Mother an' Dad, an' home. An' I just couldn't stick it. It was like being in jail."

"Ah, poor kid!" said Bill softly. He had a quick vision of Orphanage gates shutting grimly on a newly-made Orphan: bewildered, even though ten and "quite big." Such places had to be, he knew, and doubtless many youngsters were happy in them. He had never thought about it. But one could imagine that this bright-eyed piece of quicksilver, with his memories, had found it hard.

"How did it all happen, Teddy?"

"I d'know why things happen like it did," said the boy heavily. "We had a farm—Dad an' Mother came out from England when I was three, an' there was no one belonging to us in Australia at all. It wasn't our own farm: Dad rented it, but he always 'spected to buy it. We were awful happy there. I had a pony, an' there was a river where we used to swim—Dad was a champion swimmer—an'—an' everything was all right."

His voice dragged. He stared in front of him, seeing something long vanished.

"Don't talk about it if you'd rather not, old man," Bill said.

"I like to," Teddy said. "You see, I haven't had a chance of talking for three years, an' sometimes you feel as if you'd just bust inside. Dad had bad luck for two years before he died—bad seasons an' no crops worth talking about. It 'ud have come all right in time, of course. Only, he died."

"How was that, Teddy?"

"I d'know what they called it. He was ill a good while, an' at last he had to go to hospital. An' he died there. Mother an' I sat with him all the last day an' held his hands. But there wasn't anything we could do. He just died." He paused a moment, looking straight in front of him. "Then there was a sale, an' after Mother had paid all the bills there wasn't much money left. But she paid 'em all. An' she an' I went off to Town an' lived in a little room, an' she tried to get work. They made me go to school, the beastly Gov'ment did, or I could have got a job. I d'know why Gov'ments won't let a person work when he should be working, not learning silly things like King John an' 'rithmetic. But they wouldn't. The police said so. I do just hate policemen!"

"They've got to do their job, Ted."

"They interfere," said Teddy scornfully. "So we lived on next to nothing, 'cause Mother couldn't get much work. An' then the 'flu came, an' she—she died, too."

Bill Courtney let his pipe go out. He sat in silence. What was there he

could say?

"So then they took me to the Orphanage an' dressed me like the other Orphans," went on the level young voice. "I didn't care much at first, 'cause all the outside of me seemed to be asleep. But afterwards . . . Well, I just made up my mind I'd run away when I got the chance; an' I got it after three years, an' I ran."

"Good man!" said Bill imprudently. "How long ago?"

"Oh, I s'pose it's between two an' three weeks now. I got a bit mixed about time the last week, when I was starving an' my boots wore out on me. But it must be that." He sat up and looked anxiously at his friend. "The police'll be lookin' for me still, you know, Bill. They never stop lookin' for an Orphan. I don't want you to get into any trouble for keeping me. Could they put you into jail, d'you think?"

"Not with my permission," said Bill. "Don't you worry, old chap; I'll risk the police."

"They're awful sharp," said Teddy apprehensively. "That's why I never dared to beg in a town—only in the country, where there weren't any bobbies about. I planned I'd call myself Edward Hunt—me being hunted, you see—an' I felt safe enough just walking through a town after I got these clothes. But begging's different—you have the police sharp on your tracks then."

"But how did you get the clothes?"

"Oh, I got them off the Small Girl," said Teddy.

"*What?*" said the stunned listener. "You—you took them off a girl?"

Teddy grinned.

"Oh, not 'zactly. I'll tell you all my adventures if you like, Bill—if you won't get sick of hearing me talk."

"Rather not!" said Bill. "I'd like to hear. Hold on until I get you some soup, and then you can fire away. It's my belief you've been bushranging half across Australia!"

Teddy lay back with a comforting feeling that this man understood everything. He was decent. He had not said much, but his look had been more than words. Men, Teddy felt, were like that with each other: they understood, and they didn't talk much. Something of the aching home-sickness of three years seemed to have rolled from him.

He took his soup obediently and then told the story of his wanderings, while Bill lay on the grass, smoking. Sometimes he made a quick comment, or asked a question, but for the most part he was silent. But the end of Teddy's experiences with the Swagman moved him to longer speech.

“The brute!” he said. “The cur! By Jove, kid, I’d like to come across him! You never did meet him again, I suppose?”

Teddy shook his head.

“No; I ’spect he went a lot quicker’n I did. An’, you see, I wandered up one road an’ down another, an’ I never knew where I was. He might have kept to the main road altogether, or he might have got work somewhere.”

“I doubt if he’d have kept to the main road,” Bill said thoughtfully. “He’d have been too scared lest the old lady had put the police on the look-out for him. Well, if ever we meet him, Ted, let me know in time for me to have a word with him. But I’ll grieve to the end of my life that I was not there to see when he met that bucket!”

Teddy giggled happily. “It was a lovely moment!” he said. “Just thinking of it often kept me going—at least, till my boots wore out!”

The story ended after awhile, and Bill smoked and thought in silence, while Teddy lay feeling that he was no longer shouldering all the responsibility of life alone. In his mind was a sure feeling that Bill would help him. He would not leave him on the road alone, nor would he give him back to the Orphanage. “He’ll find me a job, I know,” Teddy thought. “He’s a gentleman, even if he is in old clothes, driving an old Ford. Just a word from him would get me a job.”

He became aware that Bill was looking at him kindly. For Bill had been thinking, and he had come to a decision.

“I’ll tell you my yarn now, Teddy,” he said. “It’s rather a rotten yarn beside yours, though—I’m not half the man you are. My father has a station, and when I left school he wanted me to go home and learn how to run it with him. But my chums were going on to the ’Varsity—the University—know what that is, Teddy?”

Teddy nodded. “Sort of big school for gentlemen,” he stated.

“And wasters,” said Bill. “That fits me better, I think. So I wanted to go there too, and my father gave in, though he didn’t like it much. He’d looked forward to having me at home. But he let me go and I had a great time. I did as little work as I could, and spent a lot too much money, and generally made rather a fool of myself. My father went to England for a trip six months ago, and I could have gone, only I thought I was having more fun where I was. He told me before he went that if I didn’t pass the exams. at the end of this year he wouldn’t keep me there any longer. ‘You’ll have had three years by that time, and I’m not going to stand it indefinitely,’ he said. And, being a fool, that put my back up.”

Teddy’s eyes were shining. This was what you read about in books: the

stern parent and the splendid, wilful son! But Bill somehow didn't look as if he thought himself splendid.

"Well—it put my back up," Bill went on, "and when he had gone I fooled harder than ever. I didn't do anything really bad, I suppose, but I drank more than was good for me occasionally, and got into trouble with the police more than once over my car, and I didn't work at all. The authorities at the 'Varsity warned me a good many times, but I managed to dodge real trouble with them until six weeks ago. Then some of us got annoyed with one of the tutors, and one night we made a torchlight procession round his house and burned him in effigy——"

"Oo! What's that, Bill?"

"Made a sort of Guy Fawkes statue of him in old clothes and burned it in a bonfire. Under his windows."

"Gosh!" uttered Teddy. "Wish I'd been there!"

"Well, we thought it was fun at the time, but after all, it's a fool sort of fun for grown men. I'm twenty-two, and it's time I stopped acting like a kid. Anyhow, the authorities thought so, and they kicked me out."

"Sweeps!" said the indignant listener.

"No; I'd outstayed my welcome. So there was I, owing a lot of money, and my father in England. I'm the only son and my mother is dead: I've an uncle and aunt, but I wasn't going to ask them for money. Of course, I could have gone home and worked on the station, but I wasn't keen on that: the manager my father had left is a fellow I don't like, and I couldn't see myself working under him. And before I'd made up my mind to do anything a lot of us had a farewell supper one night, and the question of earning a living cropped up. There was a lot of fool talk, and at last some one bet me I couldn't earn my own living for three months without assistance. Fair bet, too, considering I'd never worked or made sixpence in my life."

"And did you bet?" demanded the thrilled Teddy.

"Oh, yes: I was always ass enough to take any bet. But I made some conditions, and one was that I'd do it in a car. The other was that I'd have a working capital of five pounds; but it must be shown up intact at the end of the three months. But they barred my using the car to earn money."

"Not taking passengers?"

"No—or goods. I can take as many as I like, of course, but I can't make money that way."

"Then the car only makes the bet harder," Teddy said shrewdly. " 'Cause you've got to feed her as well as yourself."

“Yes, of course. But it adds to the fun.”

“ ’M,” nodded Teddy. “It would do that.”

“Well, I sold my own car—oh, and she was a beauty, kid!” said Bill, with a sigh. “A racing model. It hurt to let her go. I paid up my debts like a little man with the money, and with what was over I bought this magnificent lady. She was nearly given away, because even a second-hand car-dealer hadn’t the face to ask much for her, but she was all I could afford. How she keeps going at all I don’t know, because she’s got consumption—yes, tremendous consumption! —and laminitis and roup and blind staggers, and every known disease; but somehow she’s a splendid old bird in spite of ’em all, and now and then she can put up a surprising gallop. There are moments when I’m on the point of taking the axe to her and smashing her up, and yet I’ve got a soft spot in my heart for her. Her name’s Buttercup.”

Teddy gurgled happily.

“Well, I’ve done a heap of thinking in old Buttercup,” Bill said. “I’ve been on the road a month now, and I’ve had some queer times, and I’ve had to work. That’s no difficulty; my muscles are pretty good, and odd jobs aren’t hard to find—when you’re my size, old man,” he added hastily. “It makes all the difference. Even if you’ve got the heart of a lion, you’ve got to have muscles to back it up. Lord knows I’m no lion-heart, but I can swing an axe and do odd jobs. You’d beat me any other way.”

“Me!” said Teddy dolefully. “But I got beat right out.”

“Only your body,” said Bill.

He smoked in silence for a few moments.

“Well—I told you I’d been thinking. And I came to the conclusion that I’d been a pretty average rotter. I’ve done what you’ve never done, Ted—I’ve let my father down. When you realize you’ve done a thing like that it stings pretty badly: I’ve taken my medicine all right, driving round and thinking, in between working with men who get their fun out of life by decent work. So I’ve made up my mind about the future. My father will be back from England just about the time this trip of mine is over; then I’m going back home to ask him to let me start in with him on the station and work. He needn’t pay me more than enough for clothes and baccy, but I’ll work.”

“That’ll be ripping,” Teddy said. “Won’t he be glad!”

“I don’t know how mad he’s going to be before he’s glad,” said Bill ruefully. “He doesn’t know quite how big a fool I’ve been yet. And he isn’t the soft sort.”

“But he’ll have you,” said Teddy comfortably. “That’ll be all he’ll care

about."

"Will it?" Something in the boy's confident tone struck home to the young fellow. This kid, to whom it was somehow so easy to talk, knew what he had never known—mateship between father and son. It brought that ring of certainty to his voice, although it was so long since he had lost all his world.

"Well——" Bill said, and hesitated. "I hope it's going to be all right. Anyhow, young Teddy, I'm going to adopt you for a mascot."

"What's that?" asked Teddy, staring.

"A mascot?—oh, some little thing you pick up to bring you luck. You fit that description well enough, don't you?"

"Well, you picked me up, all right. But I'm blest if I think I've brought you any luck," said Teddy worriedly. "You've lost a lot of time, an' spent a terrible lot of money, an' you aren't rid of me yet!"

"Well, you see, I'm not going to be rid of you."

"How d'you mean?" Something was beginning to thump in Teddy's breast. A hope too tremendous to be believed danced before him, will-o'-the-wisp fashion. His words had been only a whisper, but Bill caught them.

"Why, I think we'll stick together. I'm not going to let you trail round the country hunting work, and I'm certainly not going to hand you over to the police. There's plenty of room for you in Buttercup's front seat. Like to come?"

"*Like to!*" Teddy could only gasp, his eyes like saucers. "But—but——"

"But what?" laughed Bill. "Out with it!"

"But your bet an' all. You can't have me hanging on an' losing you chances. If I could earn tucker I wouldn't mind, but I don't seem able to do it." His lip quivered.

"Oh, shush!" said Bill cheerfully. "My bet's my own business, and I've every intention of winning it, even with a mascot in tow. And if I don't, it's not going to worry me. We'll stick together, and trail round in old Buttercup, and you'll get quite fit and strong and get some flesh on that scraggy little body of yours. I'll pick up odd jobs, and when you're well I'll give you plenty to do—you can be camp cook if you like. But not until you're really fit. And then you'll come back home with me, and we'll see if my father can't find work for two station-hands instead of one. You can ride, you know, and that's the main thing——"

He broke off. "Why, little chap!" he said gently, and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. For Teddy had suddenly turned his face on his arm and sobs were shaking him from head to foot.

“I’m a first-class fool,” Bill abused himself angrily. “I might have known you were too weak to stand all this talking. Now I’ve let you get thoroughly knocked-up.” He patted the heaving shoulder for a moment, and then, deciding that stimulant was needed, he mixed a little brandy and milk and came back to Teddy.

The sobs had ceased, and presently the boy looked at him, shamefaced.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean to be such a baby.”

“You drink this and don’t talk,” ordered Bill; and Teddy gulped the drink obediently. He lay back, his breath still coming and going unevenly. “Talking was just a bit too much for you,” the big fellow said kindly. “I ought to have had sense enough to remember how weak you were. But you seemed so much better.”

But Teddy was master of himself again.

“So I am better,” he said sturdily. “I’ll be as right as rain in a day or two. Only—only . . . well, it was like heaven being there, an’ it knocked me all endways.” He put out a timid hand and touched the other’s sleeve. “You truly meant it, Bill? Sure you truly meant it? To go home with you an’ get a job on your place?”

Bill took the thin hand in his great paw and gripped it man-fashion.

“You bet I meant it, old chap,” he said. “There may be some difficulty about my landing my own job, but I’ll make dead certain you get yours!”

CHAPTER VIII

CAMP MATES

"I THINK," said Bill Courtney reflectively, "that I'll go and hunt up some work."

It was some days later, days which to little Teddy Winter had been a time of blissful happiness. Too weak to move about, he had been content to lie obediently on his stretcher, reading sometimes, dreaming often of the new world which had opened to him, or talking to Bill—which was best of all.

Their friendship had grown rapidly: curiously so, considering the difference between their ages. On Teddy's side it was easy to understand. This big fellow had come to him like a miracle; had tended and nursed him, had smoothed his hard path, and in addition now gave him a careless, cheery comradeship that made every day a delight. It was small wonder that Teddy's whole heart had gone out to him. And Bill Courtney, who had himself been lonely and dissatisfied, found an odd pleasure in the small companion who could be silent if necessary, but was always ready to talk; to whom every detail of the camp was of the keenest interest. He liked to draw him out; liked to see him becoming normal and merry, losing the look of starved terror. Bill did not care to remember that look.

He had exerted himself to banish it finally. Together they had "yarned" and joked under the trees in the long days of sunshine; Bill counted himself a success the first time some ridiculous story had drawn a shout of boyish laughter from his patient. Then a new joy had dawned for Teddy, for the long package in the car had turned out to be a banjo, and in the evenings Bill would sit in the firelight, plucking at the strings, and sing song after song to an entranced listener. He had a good voice and a memory that seemed inexhaustible; and Teddy never tired of hearing, and would beg for "just one more" when the singer declared that he had arrived at a point when he could only croak. But Bill enjoyed it too. It had never seemed worth while to unpack the banjo when he had been alone. Now, with an audience who listened with a beaming face, it was very different. Bill came to the conclusion that a mascot was an excellent thing about a camp.

To-day they were sitting on the bank of the creek, where Bill had carried Teddy on his back, despite the boy's protests that he was able to walk. There, for two hours, they had endeavoured to catch trout, or, failing trout, blackfish. But the day was hot and thundery and the pools like glass: the fish had not

taken the slightest interest in their attentions. Bill had given it up as a bad job, but Teddy still dangled his worm in the water, refusing to despair, but scarcely optimistic.

"Work? Now?" he asked.

"Not this afternoon. It's going to rain like fury to-night, or my name's not William. I'm going up to camp presently, to shorten sail and make all snug for a hurricane. But to-morrow I'll go job-hunting. You see, Teddy, there are no points in leaving here just yet. You're getting more of a pocket Sandow every minute, but you're not fit to sit in Buttercup all day."

"I guess I am, if you want to start," declared Teddy stoutly. But Bill shook his head.

"You don't know Buttercup. Her full name is Buttercup Boneshaker Ford. I don't know what springs she had in her first wild youth, but they're like pancakes now. And these roads are chiefly pot-holes, where they're not the deepest ruts you ever saw. It takes a stout fellow really to enjoy a ride in Buttercup. However, there's no need to break camp, for we're as well off here as we should be anywhere else. It's a jolly good spot."

"It's a ripping camp," Teddy agreed happily. He had watched it developing from day to day; by now it would have been difficult to convince the small boy that the world held anything better than Bill and Bill's camp and Bill's views on situations, or anything else that was Bill's.

"Yes, it's getting quite a home in the wilderness," agreed his friend. "I'd like to stay here until you're really fit. But there's no reason why I shouldn't go out and earn our tucker."

"I've cost you an awful lot," Teddy said mournfully.

"That's all tosh, and I thought we'd agreed not to talk about it. You can pay me back some day, when you're earning good wages, just to satisfy your pride, but of course I shall begin to pay you as soon as you're able to be camp rouseabout——"

"Aw, Bill, you won't!" Teddy burst out, horrified.

Mr. Courtney grinned.

"Well, don't talk rubbish. We're partners, and partners don't start splitting halfpennies. The exchequer is down to two pounds seventeen and tenpence, and though there's a lot of spending in that, I'd like to see it mounting up to the original fiver again. In fact, I've a private ambition to make it a tenner, and then we could go easy with a clear conscience."

"Wish I could help," said Teddy enviously.

"So you will, some time or other. Meanwhile, you won't mind being left

alone in camp?"

"Rather not!" said Teddy. "I can hobble round an' do odd jobs, an' I can fish. It 'ud be jolly if I had a whole lot of fish for tea when you got back."

"Yes, it would, but I'll bring chops—in case," said Bill. "And now I think you'd better wind up that line; I don't much like the look of the sky."

"It's getting black."

"Yes, and I'd feel rather a fool if the tent was still under that tree in a thunderstorm."

"Why, you aren't going to move the tent, are you. Bill?" Teddy asked, wide-eyed.

"I certainly am. Trees may get struck, and a limb on top of a tent doesn't add to its beauty. I oughtn't to have pitched it there at all, but I was in rather a hurry that day. However, it won't take long to move it." He picked up his "partner" and strode towards the camp.

It was anything but pleasant to be unable to help, Teddy considered. But it was certainly interesting to watch Bill work when he wanted to finish a job quickly. Down came the tent, and almost as swiftly up it went again, this time in the curve of a deep belt of low-growing tea-tree which sheltered it on three sides. Bill flung all the bedding inside it, in case of a sudden downpour, and took down the open-air shelter, which he re-erected over the tent as a fly. Then the car was backed carefully until the door was a yard in front of the tent opening, its side-curtains were rigged, and the stores were packed in front, leaving the back empty, while a spare tarpaulin from the tent-fly to the roof of the car covered in the vacant space between them and ensured dry ground in front of the tent.

"I say, that's jolly!" cried Teddy, at this addition.

"I hate getting wet going from the drawing-room to the bedroom!" was Bill's dry comment. He took his spade and dug a trench round both tent and car, with a drain to carry off overflow water. It was hot work, for the ground was hard and dry; Bill grunted with relief when it was done. But he did not pause; his long form disappeared within the tent, where Teddy guessed that he was making his stretcher ready for the night. Presently he came out, stowed his own bedding in the car, and declared that he was prepared for forty thunderstorms.

"But you can't sleep in the car," Teddy protested.

"You try me," said Bill.

"But you can't, Bill. You're too long."

"Oh, I coil round. Bless you, kid, I've slept there lots of times; I never

bothered to put up the tent for myself. I'm a lazy brute," said Bill, laughing. He cast a glance at the lowering clouds, hearing a low mutter of thunder.

"It's coming, but it won't be here for a bit. I think we'll have an early tea, Teddy. It isn't a whole heap of fun to get it ready in heavy rain. I'll bring you the spirit-lamp, and you can heat up soup while I boil the billy."

"Good-oh!" said Teddy thankfully; "I've got a job at last!"

"The spirit-lamp was my aunt's bright idea," remarked Bill, busying himself with the tucker-box. "It's the last thing I'd ever have dreamed of bringing when camping out, but I'd never come again without one. Saves a mighty lot of trouble when you're in a hurry, or if you can't get any dry wood. Aunts really do have sense sometimes, and this particular aunt had done a bit of camping herself. She sent me a whole box of things—brandy and meat-extract and a pillow, and a lot of other oddments that I rather turned up my nose to see, thinking that they were just auntish: but I've been jolly glad of most of 'em. Lots of wet nights I've camped in the car and made my tea over the spirit-lamp and never bothered about a fire. Buttercup is a queer old bird, but at least she's water-tight."

They had reason to be glad of Buttercup's stanchness presently, for the rain came before their meal was quite over, and they had to make a hurried retreat to the car, carrying their food with them. They sat on the running-board, sheltered by the tarpaulin, watching the first great drops that hissed and left black patches where they fell on the fire. Low growls of thunder were incessant, but far away. The clouds had covered all the western sky with a thick black pall, now and then broken by a flicker of lightning: overhead was a grey haze. There was a deep stillness, as though all the thirsty earth waited expectantly for the coming of the storm. Up and up the clouds piled swiftly. Then, suddenly, the storm broke, and everything was blotted out in sheets of blinding rain. The fire spluttered and died under the first onslaught; it drove in beneath the tarpaulin and the boys fled into the car, where they sat for half an hour watching the jagged lightning-flashes and listening to the rolling peals of thunder that crashed and rattled round the sky.

"Jolly good thing you made that trench," remarked Teddy. "Look, it's all filling up." He pointed to the stream of brown water encircling their little oasis.

"Jolly bad thing I didn't make it deeper," was Bill's comment. "I'll have to improve on it." He flung on his mackintosh and sallied into the rain, working vigorously with his spade at the drain and clearing out the sticks and leaves that threatened to choke it. Teddy envied him greatly as he splashed and paddled in the driving rain, his bare head sleek as a wet seal's, his coat a limp, shining rag that flapped about his knees. He came back to the car when the

drain was safe, but shook his head in response to the suggestion that he should get in.

"Too wet," he said. "And it's rather jolly out here. By Jove, look at that!"

There was a blinding flash, a roar, and with a sharp rending crash a great dead tree a few hundred yards away split from top to bottom and burst into flame. It blazed fiercely for a few moments before the fury of the rain mastered the fire; then a gaunt and splintered section of the trunk crashed down among the trees and the blackened remainder smouldered sullenly. Teddy gasped.

"Didn't I tell you trees were dangerous in a storm?" Bill remarked. "We're nearer some of 'em now than I like. However"—placidly—"she's not likely to strike more than one in this corner."

As if satisfied with having shown this mark of its power, the storm gradually rolled away, though the rain fell heavily for a long while. Towards evening it cleared, the sun came out suddenly, and in a few moments every wet leaf was shining as though polished, and the open ground steamed under the hot rays. There was a delicious sense of freshness and coolness; birds broke into a chorus of twittering, darting from tree to tree. They could hear the little creek, swollen to a torrent, rushing and leaping in its deep bed.

"Everything's as dry as a bone in the tent," Bill reported, untieing the flaps and peeping into the murky interior. "Good thing we made snug, though, wasn't it, Teddy? And Buttercup never leaked a drop, bless her old heart! Get on my shoulders and we'll paddle round and see the nice clean world!" He draped his mackintosh on a stump and carried Teddy into the open.

"I could walk," said the boy unhappily. "I do hate you carrying me all the time, Bill."

"I believe you'll be able to walk to-morrow," Bill agreed. "That foot's healing in double-quick time. But we'll give it another night, Ted. It's better without the pressure of even a gym. shoe yet."

Morning brought a clear sky and a mild sun. Bill reported that, having arranged his legs in sections, he had slept like a top in the car; and soon after breakfast, leaving the camp in order and food in readiness, he drove off. It was dull without his cheerful presence, but there was a certain enjoyment to Teddy in being left in charge. His foot, well protected still with bandages, had accepted the loose shoe with comfort; Bill had cut him a stout stick, and he found himself quite able to hobble about. He used his new freedom delightedly, since Bill was not there to keep him quiet; on the principle of the mouse which plays during the cat's absence he went in quest of firewood, and laboriously collected a great heap of sticks, dragging them one by one out of the scrub. But it was hard work for one who limped heavily on a stick and had

but one hand to use. Teddy was somewhat disconcerted to find himself suddenly very tired.

"Won't do," he said, sitting down on a log. "Bill'll be mad. It's beastly to be weak."

The thought of Bill's certain madness made him somewhat alarmed, and induced prudence. He got back to camp slowly, heated some soup, and felt rather better after he had swallowed it, though still shaky. The stretcher in the cool shadow of the tent was tempting: he lay down, and in a few moments was fast asleep.

It was two hours before he stirred, finding himself mightily refreshed and his whole body demanding food. The demand satisfied, his wandering eye caught sight of the fishing-rods leaning against a tree. Hurried investigation revealed a good supply of worms wriggling in moss in the depths of the bait-tin, and in a moment Teddy was making the best pace possible towards the creek.

It was a new creek this afternoon: the sluggish stream of yesterday had become wide and merry, full of discoloured flood-water hurrying away to the sea. Leaves and sticks and masses of rusty wattle-bloom raced in the shallows; ferns that had yesterday been high and dry now stood deep in the water, their fronds tugged by the current. Teddy adjusted a worm on the hook with loving care and swung it into a deep hole by a log. Within three minutes there was a sharp tug, echoed by a yell and a convulsive movement from the fisherman, who subsided on his back from the force of his effort. The hook, shorn of its worm, rested in a branch overhead. There was no fish.

Somewhat sobered by this disaster, Teddy with difficulty retrieved his hook and committed a fresh worm to another hole, wisely deciding that the first fish would be so annoyed that further fishing in his lair would be useless. Soon there was another tug, and this time, warned by experience, Teddy struck lightly. The line tightened; there was a moment's struggle, while Teddy prayed mutely that Bill's line was a strong one. Then a great heave was followed by a thud on the bank behind him—and a frenzied small boy was gloating in speechless ecstasy over a splendid two-pound trout.

Only a boy whose memories of many good fishing days had been stifled—but not killed—by three Orphanage years could know how Teddy Winter felt just then. He crouched over the beautiful fish, rejoicing in each scarlet spot on the golden side, testing its weight, glowing with the pride of his capture. The hook had come out of its mouth: he killed it with a swift, merciful blow, as his father had taught him, and fell to studying it again, turning it over and over until he knew every marking by heart. "I never caught such a beauty!" he

murmured. And with that, he was suddenly back at another creek, a little bare-legged urchin with his first fish, and with him the face that had been even prouder than his own. “Dad!” he whispered. A dry sob shook him. He dropped the trout and went down on the grass, his face hidden in his arms.

It was only a moment: he sat up, setting his jaw. “No good being a baby,” he muttered. He wrapped the fish in cool fern-leaves and grass and put it in a shady place. Then he re-baited his hook and turned back to the creek.

Bill came home in the evening, tired and cheerful. Teddy had heard the car and was at the slip-panel to meet him; Bill greeted him with a look of pleasure that warmed his heart.

“Hallo, mate! Mind your foot, I’ll fix up that rail. Jump in. Had a good day?”

“Yes, ripping. Did you get a job, Bill?”

“I did,” said Bill, worming the car carefully through the trees. “Quite a good job, only it’s got a dashed lot of work about it. I found a farmer tearing his hair because the Shire Council had ordered him to cut the ragwort on his place—fine lot of good it is to cut it, with ragwort blossoming gaily on all the Shire Council’s roads and seeding the whole district! But they’d sent him a fierce letter, and he was up to his eyes in work already and couldn’t get a man anywhere. He welcomed me as if I were a long-lost aunt!”

“Good-oh!” said Teddy. “Did you cut it all?”

“Bless you, there’s a week’s work at least. But I’ve taken it on a contract, and it’ll pay quite well. He gave me a large hoe and his blessing, and I’ve been swinging that hoe all day—jolly heavy it got the last hour or two. And he fed me nobly.” Bill broke off as they came in sight of the camp. “Oh, good man—you’ve got the fire going *and* the billy on. I say—who got all that firewood?”

“Me,” said Teddy, in a meek voice.

“Well, you’d no business to. Didn’t I tell you to keep quiet? How’s the foot?”

“Oh, ever so much better, truly, Bill. It doesn’t hurt much at all now.”

“H’m,” said Bill unbelievingly. “I’ll have a look at it presently. Did you get tired?”

“Oh, just a bit. But I had a good sleep, and I ate lots.”

“Well, you look pretty fit,” Bill said. “But you shouldn’t have worked, for all that.” He backed the car into its place and got out, stretching his long limbs. “I believe I’m stiff—that’s what it is to be soft. I’ll have a swim before tea. I got chops and bread in a township, and my worthy farmer gave me a can of milk, and when his wife heard I had a young brother who was seedy she gave

me a jar of cream for you. Think of it, Teddy—we'll have bread and jam and cream after the chops!"

Teddy had a queer flush of pleasure that had nothing to do with the cream.

"Did you say I was your brother?"

"Oh, it seemed the best thing to say," Bill returned carelessly. His hand rested on the boy's shoulder for a moment. "You know, it's rather decent to come back and find a mate waiting and the fire going and everything home-y. Good job I found you, Ted." His mouth suddenly opened and remained open for a moment. "What on earth—five—six fish! You never caught them, Teddy!"

"Did," said Teddy, hugging himself.

"By—Jove!" ejaculated Bill. The fish hung from a bough on a string, stiff, but still gleaming. "What beauties! and all by your little self." He patted Teddy on the back so enthusiastically that it was almost painful, though very pleasant.

"Five trout an' one blackfish," said the fisherman delightedly. "I lost two, 'cause I struck in too much of a hurry. But you won't need the chops, Bill—to-night, anyhow."

"I should say I won't," said Bill, examining the catch. "Why, you've cleaned them, too—they're all ready to cook. Well, you are a whale of a mate, young Teddy!"

"Oh, Dad an' I always cleaned our fish for Mother," Teddy said. "He taught me. Dad was very strict about ladies."

"I'd like to have known your Dad," said Bill quietly, his hand on the thin shoulder. "You've got to tell me lots about him some time, Ted. Well, I'll hurry over my swim and then we're going to have the feed of our lives. Didn't I tell you you were going to be a mascot!"

CHAPTER IX

HOW TWO TRAVELLERS MET

THE next day went by slowly. Bill went early to work, and when he was out of sight Teddy busied himself with what small tasks he could find—there was not much, since Bill held definite views about leaving a camp in proper order. He fished, again with success, and with no little pride cooked for his dinner a trout which he considered superior to any other trout that had ever sizzled in a frying-pan. Then, having washed up, he read, and dreamed, and read again; and still the sun was annoyingly high, which meant that he need not yet begin to listen for Bill's return.

"I think I'll go for a bit of a walk," Teddy said to himself. "It won't hurt my old foot, if I go very slow."

He took his stick and limped up the bank of the creek. It was easy going, and the creek was always fascinating, since you never knew what you would see round each bend. Teddy had been early trained to move lightly in the bush, where luck comes only to the soft-footed; and luck presently repaid him by letting him see a platypus, which many a bushman goes years without seeing. A ripple spreading in a pool warned him first, and he crouched silently behind a bush. Then he caught sight of the duck-bill above the water, and the queer, shy thing crept out upon a mud-bank and lay there, the sun glinting on its beautiful seal-like fur. It stayed until a kookaburra perched overhead and broke into a shout of laughter, whereat the platypus immediately slid off into deep water, as if it believed that it was the subject of the joke. Teddy watched for awhile, but it did not reappear, so he moved on.

He saw a kingfisher next: it came skimming over a long reach of water, a darting glint of deep blue, and perched on the trunk of a tree that had fallen into the creek. Presently came another blue flash, and its mate joined it. They rested on the bough together for a few moments, near enough for Teddy to see every exquisite shade of colour in the trim bodies; and then were off, flying swift and low in the shadow of the bank. Teddy sighed with happiness. There was no doubt that luck was with him to-day.

He did not go far, for his foot was still tender—the exertions of the day before had not helped it. But there was no need to go far, for birds came all about him when he sat still; and once a red wallaby hopped out of a thicket and fed quite near him. Even when it saw him it did not seem afraid, but hopped quietly away until the scrub hid it. And there were the rarely-seen black

cockatoos, and their white cousins with sulphur top-knots; flocks of red and green parrots, pink and grey galahs, and harshly-chattering wattle-birds. Two whip-birds called to each other incessantly, but he could never catch a glimpse of them, although the sharp crack that ended the "swish-h" sounded only a few yards away. It was so interesting to watch the bird-life that the time went by unheeded, until he suddenly became aware that the sun's rays were slanting.

"My word, I'll be late for Bill!" he exclaimed. He picked up his stick and limped homeward.

A little earlier, a man walking along the road beyond the camp had paused, noticing the car-tracks that led into the scrub. There was no made road to show that the way led to a house: he wondered a moment, asking himself why a motor should choose such rough ground.

"It's queer," he muttered. "Maybe some settler that hasn't made his road in to his place yet. I believe I'll see if there's a house in here. Might be a chance of a feed. Lord knows, I could do with a feed."

He turned aside, following the tracks until he came to the slip-panel in the fence. There he stopped and, leaning on the rail, peered into the trees. There was no sign of any house, but the wheel-marks ran on, winding in and out among the trunks in so definite a way that a man might reasonably hope that they led where some one lived—especially a man as hungry as the Swagman.

The road had not used the Swagman well since his abrupt parting with Teddy. The plumpness of his thick-set figure had fallen away considerably; he looked pinched and wolfish, and was no longer cheerful of countenance. He was also considerably dirtier. One might fancy that the compulsory bath he had endured at the hands of the old lady in the cottage had so disgusted him with water that he had decided to abandon its use for ever. His beard was matted and unpleasant, his greasy clothes showed many signs of wear and tear. He was not a taking figure as he leaned on the slip-panel, trying to make up his mind if it were worth while to turn aside from the road on what might prove to be a wild-goose chase.

"Well, I'll have a look, at any rate," he said to himself. "I won't go far."

Hiding his swag and billy in the bracken, he wriggled between the rails and followed the tracks. A grunt of satisfaction escaped him when he came within sight of the tent. Immediately he cast a wary glance round, slipping among some bushes to watch. When you approached a house in daylight you walked openly, since it was almost certain that some one would be there; with a camp it was different. A camp might well be deserted in the daytime; and about a camp whose owner was away at work, or—if he were one of the queer people who camped for fun—shooting or fishing, there might be most fortunate

chances of picking up unconsidered trifles. Therefore the Swagman watched narrowly, remaining motionless.

It seemed deserted. There was no sign of the car, which in itself was a hopeful detail, and made him almost certain that the camper belonged to the sporting variety. No other vestige of life was to be seen. The fire was out, though a well-blackened billy hung above it; the peace of the drowsy afternoon seemed to lie silently upon the lonely little place. Then the Swagman's eyes twinkled rapidly, for a pair of magpies flew down near the fire-place and began to hop about in a way that proved conclusively that no human being was near. He gave a low whistle of relief, and went forward as quickly and fearlessly as the magpies themselves.

No one was there. He glanced into the tent to make sure, turning hastily away to make the best possible use of so glorious an opportunity. A man's coat hung from the ridge-pole; an excellent coat, infinitely better than his own. He took it down and ran to where the tucker boxes and tins were ranged under the shade of a bush. An experienced man, the Swagman: he made his selection hurriedly, choosing what might be most easily carried. Bacon, bread, a parcel of chops; he placed them on the coat, eyeing them hungrily. A smothered yelp of joy as the brandy-flask was fished out and added to the pile. Jam and tinned milk he rejected as too heavy, but sardines were another prize to be annexed. The pile grew rapidly, until it was as much as he dared burden himself with. He began swiftly to make the loot into a bundle.

"You put those things down!" shrilled a furious young voice.

For a moment the Swagman might have been turned to stone. Then, as he lurched to his feet and whirled to meet the new-comer, his mouth opened and he stared in blank amazement.

"Lor, it's the kid!" he gasped.

At sight of the hated and dreaded face Teddy stopped. But only for a moment. Teddy Winter might have run from the Swagman once: not now, when he was guardian of Bill's camp. He set his teeth and came on unflinchingly.

"You drop those!" he said.

The Swagman burst into a hoarse chuckle, in which amusement blended with relief.

"Lor, ain't he a cock-sparrow!" he said. "And where did you spring from, young Ned?"

"Never you mind," said Teddy wrathfully. "You clear out—my mate'll be here in a minute, an——"

"Oh, *will* he?" asked the Swagman, with interest. "Where's he now, Ned?"

"He's quite close," said Teddy, with a wild hope that his words were true.

"In 'is car?"

"Yes."

"Well, there ain't no car in hearin'," said the Swagman. "So that cheers me up a bit. An' who've you been pickin' up with since I kissed you good-bye?"

Rage at the memory of that parting fairly choked Teddy. The Swagman chuckled.

"Did it take you long to untie yourself that morning?" he asked unpleasantly. "I reckon you didn't find them knots any too easy, Ned. What, you won't talk to an old pal? Too bad! Well, even for the pleasure of talkin' to you an meetin' your fine new motorin' pal, I'm afraid I can't wait. So good-bye, Ned, my lad, an' here's to our next merry meetin'!" He picked up the bundle.

"You drop it!" said Teddy between his teeth. He made a rush, which the Swagman stopped with a rigid arm.

"Best take care," the man said jeeringly. "I taught you one lesson, my beauty; I'm quite ready to teach you another. Keep your distance, or I'll tie you up again, an' gag you this time."

"You shan't take it!"

"Oh, clear out!" said the Swagman contemptuously. Nothing would have pleased him better at the moment than to give the lesson he threatened; but time was of more importance to him than the settling of a private grudge. He turned to go.

Teddy was too blind with rage to be afraid. Forgetting his hurt foot, he dashed forward, flinging his stick. It caught the Swagman on the head, and as he turned with a snarl of rage the boy grasped at the bundle.

"*Would* you?" The Swagman kicked, deliberately and viciously, and under his boot Teddy staggered back with a stifled cry and fell. The Swagman picked up the fallen stick. "I reckon I've time enough for that lesson," he said savagely.

* * * * * * *

Bill Courtney, whistling as he drove home in the cool of the evening, had allowed himself to become careless, since the road was so lonely that it was rarely that he encountered even a wood-cutter's cart. Hence came trouble; for in swinging round a corner at the slow speed that seemed at the moment to humour Buttercup, he ran through a puddle left by the downpour of the storm.

It was a wide and placid puddle of an innocent demeanour that gave no hint of the depth of the unseen pot-hole below its surface. The front wheel got through with difficulty; the back one sank, stuck, revolved frantically, and Buttercup's headlong career ceased abruptly.

"Well, I'm darned!" said the justly-incensed driver. He got out and surveyed the puddle, now seething; he got in again and tried to reverse, turning it into viscous mud, but with no other result. After five minutes, during which Mr. Courtney exhausted all his ingenuity, he was forced to admit that Buttercup was stuck. A less obstinate person might have admitted it before.

"Nothing for it but to chop some wood and pave your way out, my delight!" he said resignedly. "What a sickening nuisance!—and, of course, the axe is at the camp. Lucky I'm so near home."

He left Buttercup sitting in her involuntary bath-tub and struck across country, taking a diagonal line. "The kid'll be taken aback when I walk in on him from the wrong side," he thought. "Ten to one he's looking out for me at the slip-panel now." It was queer, he pondered, how he had come to look forward to the welcome that never failed, even if he were but ten minutes away from the camp. It was still a half-shy welcome; but the lift of the head, the quick smile, the look of dog-like devotion in Teddy's eyes made a greeting that he would now have missed badly. Camp was no longer a mere camp, but a home. There was something he had never known in all his careless life in the realization that to one person he was Providence incarnate: it gave him a new responsibility, a new steadiness. He did not put it into words, even in his thoughts, but it was there. "And he's such a plucky little beggar," he mused: "a jolly kid he'd be, too, if he hadn't almost forgotten how to smile. He hasn't had a square deal. I'll make it my business to see that he gets one from this out."

He crossed the creek by a log and swung up towards the camp. Suddenly he halted in his stride, hearing voices.

"Some one's there," he said. "I wonder——" A vague misgiving came over him, and he went on quickly. Then he heard Teddy's voice, shrill with anger—"You shan't take it!" Bill uttered an exclamation and broke into a run.

He came in sight of the clearing just in time to see Teddy fling himself at the stranger and fall beneath a kick that turned Bill sick with fear. He cried out, but they were too engrossed to hear him. Already the heavy stick was raised over the motionless little body on the grass.

Then things happened swiftly for the Swagman. A long form, tense with fury, seemed, to his appalled senses, to hurtle through the air; a large fist, with the weight of the arrival behind it, crashed upon his nose, and apparently

simultaneously the ground appeared to rise and smite the back of his head with hideous impact. For a moment all the universe swam in stars about him, but he was given no leisure to study this phenomenon of Nature. A rain of blows from the stick, wielded by a muscular arm, descended upon him, sparing no part of his person. Under its influence vigour was imparted to a sufferer who would fain have rested: he scrambled to his feet, weeping and cursing, and ran with a speed almost incredible in one so plump. The avenger with the stick pursued him for a minute, using his weapon like a flail, with every stroke telling. Then, mercifully for the Swagman, the stick broke.

Bill flung the fragments at the fleeing visitor, and experienced gratification in seeing that both found their mark.

"I'll have the police on your track in ten minutes!" he shouted. The Swagman heard the words, and they helped to lend him wings. The scrub swallowed him, and the sound of his wailing died away.

Bill did not wait to see him go. He had raced back to Teddy, who, white-faced, but still eager of eye, had risen on one elbow.

"Did the brute hurt you much, little chap?" Bill's arm was round his shoulder, and there was a deep note in his voice that caught at Teddy's heart.

"Only my leg," he said. "It's all right. Oh, Bill, you hit him lovely!"

"The swine!" said Bill, between his teeth. "The low swine! I could have stood seeing him hit you, but a kick's different. It gave me the creeps. Where did he get you, Ted, old chap?"

Teddy indicated his thigh, and Bill made a swift examination. It was grazed and already discoloured, but apparently no very serious damage was done, and Bill grunted with relief.

"How he didn't break your leg, I don't know," he said. "I thought it was your body—the brute!"

"I dodged a bit," Teddy said. "But I hadn't time to get out of the way altogether. That was my old Swagman, Bill."

Bill sat back on his heels and stared at him.

"Not the fellow who knocked you about before?"

"Yes. The very same. I'd been for a walk, an' when I came back I found him stealing. Look—he's got ever so much tucker wrapped up in your coat."

Bill drew a long breath.

"He wouldn't have got off when he did if I'd known he was the same man," he said. "I always wanted to get my hands on him."

"Well, you did." Teddy sighed with happiness. "It was the loveliest thing I

ever saw. Only, it was over so quickly!"

"I suppose," said Bill, "that if I'd had time to think I couldn't have hit him, seeing that he's older than I am, and fatter. So what a mercy I hadn't time! Well, now I'm going to bathe that bruise and stick some iodine on it, and then we'll have a cup of tea; then we must go and rescue Buttercup, who's sitting in a deep puddle."

"Me, too?" asked Teddy.

"You bet, you too. I'm not going to chance leaving you alone in camp again." He picked Teddy up and carried him to the grassy hollow by the fire-place, putting him down carefully.

There were things he wanted to say, but he judged that it was not the moment to say them: the small boy's colour had not returned and his eyes were unnaturally bright.

He extricated Buttercup from her wallow an hour later, while Teddy sat on the bank close by and thrilled at the proceedings. It took time and energy and patience: Bill was mud to the shoulders before he succeeded at length in getting the pot-hole filled with slabs of timber and Buttercup, with much groaning and heaving, dragged herself to dry land.

"The lark now leaves her watery nest," remarked Mr. Courtney, quitting the wheel and surveying "the lark" with some disgust. "Come along, Teddy, lad; we'll get home."

Teddy's eyes had grown heavy by the time the evening meal was over. Bill put him to bed like a baby and tucked him up.

"Go to sleep, old chap. I'll put my stretcher near the door of the tent in case you want anything."

"Thanks, Bill," said the small voice. "It's jolly to have you there."

"I haven't thanked you for guarding the camp," said Bill.

"Aw—don't," Teddy protested, flushing.

"But if I wanted a better guard, or a pluckier, I'm hanged if I know where I'd look for him," finished Bill. He gripped Teddy's hand. " 'Night, mate."

CHAPTER X

BASSETT'S FARM

A PEACEFUL week followed, during which, to his intense joy, Teddy found himself part of Bill's contract for ragwort cutting. Bill firmly refused to leave him alone at the camp. That the Swagman would come back was unlikely, judging by the manner of his going; still, it was a possibility that a thirst for revenge might make him return, in the hope of finding Teddy alone. Even putting the Swagman out of the question, there might be other gentlemen of the road to whom the lonely camp would offer tempting pickings. Bill held the opinion privately that Teddy's adventurous experiences had already been wider than he could have wished. "I won't feel comfortable if he isn't under my own eye," he decided.

Each morning, therefore, saw them starting early, all portable possessions stowed in the back of the car, while the partners, at ease in the front seat, felt, Teddy was convinced, as lords might feel. A few miles over bush tracks brought them to the scene of Bill's labours, and Teddy was left under a tree with the car, when they had bumped and rattled across a paddock, to while away the time as best he could until midday brought his partner back to him, hungry and hot and clamouring for food.

The Swagman's kick had left Teddy with no desire to be active for the first day or two. He bore the scars of battle in the shape of an enormous bruise, deep-seated and exhibiting all the colours of the rainbow, and the whole leg was stiff and sore. He found some philosophic consolation in the fact that it was the leg belonging to the sore foot, since he had still one sound limb; but even this cheering reflection did not prevent his being glad to obey orders and keep still.

He was not, however, allowed to be dull. Bill's employer, a kind-faced man whose brow was perpetually creased by the cares of a large farm and insufficient labour, came out of his way to speak to Teddy on the first day on his return from a distant paddock where he was ploughing. He rode one wise old plough-horse and led another, and he let them nibble the grass while he talked of the weather and the troublesome habits of the ragwort plant (at which Bill was hoeing mightily in the distance), and inquired if Teddy was pickin' up his strength a bit. Teddy did not mention the Swagman, but Bill was more communicative when Mr. Bassett paused by him a little later on, with the result that Mrs. Bassett ran out to stop them when they drove through the gate

next morning. She was fat and motherly, and full of honest indignation over the story she had heard from her husband.

"The brute of a man!" she said—"and such a little boy! Well, there's no knowin' what wasters are knockin' around the country. I'd like to see that laig, Mr. Courtney; I'm a bit of a bush-doctor, y'know, an' with all respect to you, you mightn't know as much as I do about it. You leave him with me an' I'll have a look at it, an' he can have his dinner here. He looks as if he could do with a bit of feedin'-up."

Teddy, somewhat indignant, protested that Bill fed him like a fighting-cock; but Bill, who had his private anxieties about the leg, was not sorry to accept the offer. So Teddy found himself installed on an old sofa in the farm kitchen while Mrs. Bassett explored his injuries with work-roughened hands that were surprisingly gentle. She deigned to approve of Bill's methods, and declared that there was no reason to worry about the leg; though having—like all bush women—a wonderful lotion of her own brewing, she insisted on rubbing some in, and gave Teddy a bottle for future use. She doctored the fast-healing foot also, and made a thorough job of her patient by preparing a hot bath for him, after which she cut his hair, clothed him in outgrown Bassett garments, and washed his own clothes.

"Now I'll iron those for you to-morrow, and then you'll have a thorough change right through," she observed briskly. "An' just you bring any shirts or things of your brother's to me, an' I can give 'em a rub in the tub just as easy as not. He's a pleasant-spoken young feller, and the Boss says he's a real good worker. Doesn't stick to his own job, neither: he gave the Boss a real good hand the other night, gettin' a bogged cow out of the creek."

"Well—of course he would," said Teddy, opening his eyes.

" 'Deed, an' it isn't every man'll do what he isn't paid for. First time we ever had a man come to work in his own motor, though I'm told even the washer-women use 'em in America. We thought it was a joke at first when he came an' asked the Boss for work; but as the Boss says to me, 'Well, ragwort'll soon take the joke out of him if he's doin' it for a lark, an' there ain't much harm done if he chucks it.' "

"Him chuck it?—not much!" said Teddy scornfully.

"Well, he don't show any signs of it, I will say," remarked Mrs. Bassett, a note of thankfulness in her voice. "An' we were fair stuck over that ragwort, an' the Boss late with the ploughin' as it was. Ragwort an' ferns 'ud turn a man grey. Now, you just take this cup of broth, dearie; it's the real stick-to-your-ribs sort, an' I've mixed some cream into it. Good soup's what you want to fatten you up a bit; I know what camp cookin's like."

“This is great soup,” said Teddy; and it was. “But Bill makes me soup, too, Mrs. Bassett. He’s a slap-up cook.”

“You don’t say!” Mrs. Bassett stared. “Well, that’s something new—I suppose it’s all in keepin’ with the car! Lor, if that isn’t Myrtle awake!—an’ me hopin’ she’d sleep an hour yet. It’s no time since I put her down.”

She whisked out of the kitchen and returned presently with a very wide-awake two-year-old, who inspected Teddy critically, thumb in mouth, and then decided that he was sent by Heaven as a playmate. She sidled near the sofa in gradual stages, and, encouraged by Teddy, produced for his inspection a battered rag doll. Teddy responded by displaying his knife; and when Mrs. Bassett came in from the washtub she found her daughter curled up on the couch beside the patient, who was showing her pictures.

“Lor, now, look at that baby!” ejaculated the mother. “Don’t you let her hurt your laig, Teddy. Myrtle, you’d better get down out of that.”

“S’ant,” said Myrtle placidly. She snuggled nearer to Teddy and caressed his nose with a finger she had been sucking.

“She’s all right, truly,” Teddy said. “I like her here. Isn’t she a friendly little thing!”

“Well, she don’t take to every one,” said the mother, regarding the pair with an expression which showed clearly that Teddy won her own approval. “We’d a man workin’ here last month, livin’ in the house with us, an’ Myrtle wouldn’t go near him with a forty-foot pole. You send her off if she bothers you.”

But Teddy was not bothered. The friendly baby, with her funny little ways, was part of the feeling of home that filled the big cheerful kitchen, and her friendliness seemed to make him a part of it too. He loved it all; the wide low window with red geraniums on the sill, the gleaming blackness of the stove where wood-flames glowed scarlet and pots and kettles simmered, the row of polished tins on the mantelshelf, the utensils hanging on the wall, the blue china on the dresser—it was all home. He liked to watch Mrs. Bassett as she bustled about her work. It was cake-making day, which meant delightful preparations; when Teddy begged for a job she gave him raisins to seed (which meant that Myrtle had to be firmly banished from the couch); and later on he shelled peas and peeled potatoes with a deftness that surprised her—she did not know that he had served an apprenticeship in the Orphanage kitchen, where no cook’s-boy dared loaf on his job. By this time the oven was sending forth smells of bewildering fragrance; soon the table was covered with brown cakes, all nubbly with fat burnt raisins, and Teddy and Myrtle were nibbling the first cooked—hot and spicy and delicious. A huge pie stood waiting its turn

while tarts and pasties cooked: the kitchen began to look like a baker's shop and Mrs. Bassett to look hotter and redder each minute. But she was unfailingly cheerful, and she whisked about in a manner almost alarming to behold in one so fat; so that when one o'clock brought Mr. Bassett, dinner was all ready on the table and the kitchen neat and smiling.

"Hallo, old girl!" said Mr. Bassett. "Something smells good. I hope you've got plenty, 'cause I've brought this young feller." Bill's tall form loomed in the doorway behind him, and Teddy gave a delighted yelp.

"That's quite right, Father," said his wife approvingly. "Come right in, Mr. Courtney, an' sit down. My word, I've had a great offsider here this morning; he can work like a Torrojan, even if he's on'y got one laig."

"And how's the leg?" Bill asked.

"Oh, he'll be all right in a day or two, though he'll carry that mark for a good while, mind you. Been through the wars, hasn't he, poor kid? I'd like to let that swaggie know what I think of him. But Teddy tells me you handled him proper."

"I did my little best," said Mr. Courtney modestly, glancing at knuckles that still bore the scars of warfare. "I don't believe his nose will ever be quite the same nose again." He moved hastily to set chairs for Mrs. Bassett, a proceeding that caused her much surprise. "And how's this small person?" he continued, swinging Myrtle into her high seat.

"Oh, she's wropt up in Teddy. He do play nice with her, an' it's been a real comfort not havin' her under my feet all the morning. There's some bakin' mornings when I'm fair desperate. It's no joke when you turn round from the stove with a big oven-shelf full of hot scones an' fall over a baby!" Teddy let out a gurgle of joy at the picture, and Mrs. Bassett shook her fist at him. "Look at him, laughing at me! Shows he's better, don't it, Mr. Courtney?" At which Mr. Bassett observed surprisingly: "You can't keep a good man down!" and began to cut enormous helpings of roast mutton.

The other children came home from school at four o'clock—two little girls and a boy of twelve who was very much bigger than Teddy. They were shy and silent at first, but soon made friends; and the kitchen was full of merriment when Bill arrived at the end of his day's work and demanded his partner.

"I'd keep him to-night an' willin', Mr. Courtney," offered Mrs. Bassett. "He's very happy with the children: they've taken a rare fancy to him. What do you say, Teddy?"

But Teddy's look at Bill was eloquent. He faltered, "It's very good of you . . . but . . ." Mrs. Bassett laughed her jolly laugh and patted his head.

"But you'd rather go back to the camp, all the same. All right, son—don't

you worry. Come and see me any time; you're always welcome, an' Myrtle reckons she half owns you now." She pressed a bulging parcel on Bill. "Just a little bit of my bakin', Mr. Courtney." She waved them a good-bye from the back verandah, Myrtle in her arms, while the other children dashed to open the gate.

"You didn't want to stay?" Bill asked, as they bumped down the track.

Teddy countered with a question.

"You didn't want me to, Bill?"

"Rather not—unless you were keen yourself. I thought you might like to be with the youngsters. As far as I'm concerned—well, the camp 'ud be pretty lonesome without you now, kid."

"I'd be pretty lonesome without the camp," Teddy said, his voice awkward and gruff, because it was a little difficult not to show how his heart leaped at Bill's words. A man, he knew, would hate a boy to be "sloppy." But that Bill should really want him——! He hugged the thought in silence all the way home.

The job at the farm lasted more than a week, and long before it was finished Teddy firmly declined to be an invalid any longer. He begged a small hoe from Mr. Bassett and worked with Bill at the ragwort, hewing out the big plants with their crown of golden blossoms and finding an unholy joy in imagining that the toughest ones were either the Swagman or Mr. Pullinger—a thought which lent viciousness to his strokes. Mrs. Bassett provided him with boots that her Jim had outgrown, and fussed over him as much as possible. She became ingenious in devising excuses for getting the partners to dinner in the kitchen, although Bill was unwilling to add to her work. He repaid her by strings of trout, caught in the camp creek at night—and fish was a delicacy at the farm, where no one had time to go fishing.

But he found a surer way to her heart when he discovered that she had a sister living fifteen miles away, a distance that might almost have been fifteen hundred when the only means of bridging it was the Bassetts' old buggy and overworked farm horse. So Teddy and the farmer kept house all one Sunday, and Bill packed Mrs. Bassett and the four children into Buttercup and drove them to the sister's—carrying their dinner with them, since the unexpected arrival of six hungry mouths to feed might almost have outweighed the rapture of the meeting. It was a delirious day for the young Bassetts, not one of whom had ever been in a motor. What it meant to Mrs. Bassett, Bill could only guess at. But it made him thoughtful that evening.

"I never knew how lonely the women of the bush could be," he said to Teddy. "By Jove, they're plucky! I reckon most men ought to take off their

hats to them. Do you know, those two hadn't seen each other for four years. And you wouldn't wonder, if you saw the road we had to go. Old Buttercup nearly died of fright, but she wallowed through somehow."

It was on the last working day that Teddy was wandering with his hoe in the home paddock, looking for small plants of ragwort that might have escaped the general destruction, while Bill, farther afield, was cutting out the last section. The house was not far off; glancing towards it he could see Myrtle's pink frock as she played in the yard. She always watched for him; Teddy had fallen into a habit of looking eagerly for the baby greeting, "H'lo, Ted-dy!" whenever he came near the house. Indeed, only stern discipline kept her from joining him in the paddocks; but the weather was hot, snakes were becoming plentiful, and Mrs. Bassett preferred to have her youngest under her own eye.

This morning, however, the wary eye must have been over-occupied in the kitchen, and Myrtle, a lady of fixed purpose, had recognized the fact. She climbed on the gate to watch Teddy; and then one fat leg found its way over the middle bar, and then its fellow, and their owner fell with a bump on the farther side. She picked herself up, uncertain whether to cry. Then she decided that crying, which would bring Mother very quickly, was not nearly so desirable as the freedom of a paddock which held Teddy. She chuckled deeply and trotted over the grass towards him.

Mrs. Bassett, wiping her hands from the flour of pastry-making, glanced out into the yard and saw no daughter.

"Myrtle!" she called.

There was silence, and she went out on the verandah. There was the pink frock, already a good way from the gate; and Teddy had seen, and was coming towards the runaway, pausing now and then to use his hoe.

"Teddy'll take care of her—the monkey!" said Mrs. Bassett. But she strolled to the gate to make sure that they met. Teddy would bring her back. Still—one had to keep one's eye on a baby.

Teddy had laughed to see the purposeful little figure running towards him. The fat legs pounded steadily up and down; the pink sun-bonnet had fallen back from the yellow curls and was hanging by its strings, unheeded by its owner. "She'll get spanked if Mrs. Bassett comes out," he said—and quickened his pace, so that he might take her back before her absence was discovered.

And then he saw her stop suddenly, and heard a little, frightened cry.

At that, Teddy raced forward. It might be nothing—a thistle-thorn in the bare foot. But you never knew. The lurking horror of the bush was always there; that silent gliding peril that gives no warning, that has no pity even for

little, laughing, runaway babies. And Mrs. Bassett had seen and was running too, looking wildly for a stick as she ran, her mouth set, her comely face haggard.

Teddy was the nearer. He saw the evil thing as he came: a long black body, half-hidden in the grass; a wicked head, raised and poised to strike, not a yard from the fat bare leg. And the hoe he gripped was a fool weapon for a snake—all the bushmen said so, for you had only one stroke with it. With a stick, you could strike and strike again, rapidly; but the hoe-blade buried itself in the ground if you missed, and you had no time for a second blow—not with a snake. He prayed desperately that he might not miss, altering his grip as he ran and judging his distance. Only one hit—and such a narrow blade! He steadied himself for a second, and struck; and the evil head, with its flickering tongue, left the body and fell a yard away as he dropped his hoe and caught up the sobbing baby. He raced on and almost flung her at Mrs. Bassett.

"I don't b'lieve he got her," he panted. "Look—look quick!"

Together, sick with anxiety, they searched for any sign of the deadly twofold puncture. Myrtle found herself twisted and turned and reversed in a dozen ways within a few seconds, and screamed furiously at such indignity, declaring that the bad 'nake never did nuffin' to her. Mrs. Bassett breathed freely at last.

"She's all right, I do believe," she panted. "Oh, *Myrtle*, hold your noise—I can't stand it! Oh, Teddy, if you hadn't been there!" She fell to laughing and crying together, much to Teddy's alarm. He pounded her vigorously on the back, with a vague feeling that something must be done. It was so unlike the fat and jolly Mrs. Bassett to behave so oddly.

She pulled herself together in a moment.

"Oh, I'm sorry—I came all over queer," she apologized. There were tears still running down her face. "There, now, Mother's baby, don't cry—we've got you safe. Leave the beastly old ragwort, Teddy, an' come home with us: if I met another snake I wouldn't have enough strength to get out of its way!" And Teddy picked up his hoe, with a glance of triumph at the headless body of the enemy, and escorted them home solemnly, a knight in charge of trembling ladies.

This incident gave a sharper edge to the sadness of parting in the evening, when all the Bassetts gathered round Buttercup to bid the partners good-bye. It was surprisingly hard to say farewell to the farm-house and the kindly folk who had made it like a home to them.

"It won't seem natural not to have you an' Buttercup comin' in an' out," said Mrs. Bassett dolefully. She gave Bill a shrewd glance. "I don't fancy

you'll often be comin' round lookin' for jobs, Mr. Courtney." At which Bill grinned rather sheepishly, and Mr. Bassett said in a deep voice, "Worse luck for me an' the ragwort!" "But whenever you do come, job or no job, there's a welcome for both of you. Ain't there, Father?"

"My oath!" said Mr. Bassett.

"An' as for Teddy—well, me an' Myrtle wouldn't like to think we wouldn't see him again." She put her arm round the boy, and for a moment Teddy was greatly afraid that she would kiss him. But Mrs. Bassett knew boys: the kiss she may have wished to give was not offered. "Come back some day, son," she said.

"I will—if ever I can, Mrs. Bassett," he promised.

"I'll see that he does, some day," Bill said.

They shook hands all round. There was a chorus of "Good-byes" as Buttercup wheezed into energy and slid away.

CHAPTER XI

WAYFARING

"AND where to now, Teddy?"

"Anywhere you like, Bill."

They had cleaned up the camp in the early morning, working in a leisurely way because the day was hot and they had the comfortable lazy feeling that succeeds a good job of work done, with nothing very pressing to do ahead. Then they had driven away aimlessly, Buttercup taking, apparently of her own accord, the first road that promised something like a decent surface. A little township with a corrugated-iron garage had given Bill the opportunity of replenishing the car with oil and petrol, and they had jogged off into the blue until a shady creek-bend by the road had suggested itself as a good place for a midday meal. Now, well fed and placid, they lay on the grass, Bill smoking while Teddy nibbled grass-blades and stared through a pattern of leaves at the hot blue sky.

"Well, I'm no' carin' where we go," Bill said. "There's no hurry to start work again; the exchequer's quite flourishing, and we've earned a bit of a rest. There's all Australia to choose from. If you've any fancy for the Northern Territory or Cape Leeuwin, you've only to say so, partner!"

Teddy giggled.

"And what about Buttercup?"

"H'm," said Buttercup's owner, thoughtfully. "I forgot the old bird. She's going kindly this morning, but perhaps we'd better not try her too high. We'll keep to one State, Teddy. But within those limits, you can choose."

Teddy rolled over and looked at him.

"I've been thinking," he said slowly. "When I was tramping with the Swagman he used to talk about going to the sea. It sounded jolly good, the way he talked. I s'pose it really would be as good as he made out, Bill?"

Bill glanced curiously at him.

"But you've seen the sea, haven't you, Teddy?"

"Oh, of course I've *seen* it," Teddy said. "We used to get taken down to it now and then—from the Orphanage. Not many times. And of course it was rather fun. But . . . but . . . Oh, well, you know, when you go down in a big herd, with the Attendants bossing you all the time an' people looking at your

queer clothes, it isn't such a whole lot of fun, Bill."

Bill nodded agreement.

"Then you don't know the sea the way I know it, Ted. Not living near it in a quiet camp where there aren't any people and it doesn't matter whether you wear a bathing-suit all day or wear nothing at all. Not going barefoot and always having sand between your toes and in your ears. Not forgetting all about time, and having your meals when you're hungry, and sleeping when you feel like it, and knowing that when you want to go in for a swim it doesn't in the least matter whether it's ten o'clock at night or eleven in the morning. Not like that, Ted?"

Teddy had gone a little pink, his eyes shining. He gave a great sigh.

"No. Never like that, Bill. Is it . . . ? Could we . . . ?"

"It is, and we could," said Bill. "Whaffo' not? It's not so far, and we've got time and money. And—yes, I'd rather like to introduce you to the sea, young Ted. Just you bring me the map out of Buttercup's side-pocket."

Teddy bounded to obey. Together they pored over the map.

"Here's where we are," remarked Bill, indicating a spot on the map with the stalk of a gum-leaf. "And here's the sea. Bream Point wouldn't be a bad place; I camped there once for a week with some fellows, and we had a great time. There's a little fishing township with a steamer three days a week and a long stretch of jolly coast-line. Sandy hummocks, Ted, and a rocky shore, and good coast scrub growing in clear sand."

"Wow!" said Teddy blissfully.

"Good water, too, which isn't always easy to come by. We camped in a creek-bend near the shore, a corner where you had to cross the creek by a log to get down to the sea, about a mile from the township. We wouldn't have much chance of finding that place unoccupied a little later on, but it's too early in the season for anyone to be there yet, I should think. We'll try for it, anyhow—and if we don't get that spot, well, we'll try somewhere else."

"Oh, Bill, you are a oner!" said Teddy solemnly. "How long will it take to get there? Can we start straight off?"

Bill measured distances on the map with his thumb-joint.

"Two days, making allowances for Buttercup's little fits of temper. We might do it in less if she behaves herself and if we find a decent road. But the roads were nothing to make a song and dance about last time I was in that district. However, there's no hurry."

"Oh!—don't you want to get there—quick—Bill?"

Bill looked at him.

“Well, yes, come to think of it, I believe I do,” he said, laughing. “Hurry up and get a billy of water, in case we don’t strike any to-night, and I’ll wake up Buttercup. If we see——” He stopped, finding himself without an audience. Teddy had seized the billy and was already slipping and scrambling down the bank of the creek.

They made more than two days of it, however, for Buttercup developed turns of temper that were most disconcerting to people in a hurry. She declined to start after every halt without prolonged coaxing and humouring, so that Bill spent long intervals with his head under her bonnet while Teddy danced with impatience on the roadway, far too excited to await developments sitting still. On the road she wheezed and grumbled, emitting strange rumblings and knocks which increased to a painful degree if Bill tried to wheedle any speed out of her. Finally, on the second day, she came to a determined halt half-way up a long rise, and mutely announced that further progress of any kind was distasteful to her. Then she slept.

“Well, she’s got me beaten,” Bill announced, after an annoyed hour during which most of Buttercup’s internal organs were strewn on the roadside. “I can’t see what’s up with the old cow.”

“You called her your delight last time,” grinned Teddy, who had become resigned to delay.

“Well, she isn’t now. She’s just an old cow,” stated Buttercup’s owner. “Chuck us the map, Ted.” He looked at his hands. “No, you open it—hold it steady. Fourteen miles to Bream Point; two to Possum Creek—which doesn’t sound as if it were a place likely to have a garage. Well, the only thing I can do is to walk to Possum Creek and see if there’s one—or a man who knows more about a Ford than I do.” He sought for cotton-waste and rubbed his hands disgustedly. “She’ll have to be towed in, I expect.”

“I can’t come, I suppose?”

“No, you’ll have to mind the things. No one can steal Buttercup—unfortunately—but somebody might come along and help himself to tucker. I won’t be any longer than I can help. So long.”

He went off with great strides, and Teddy wandered about the road, finding little to interest him in its dusty surroundings. There were trees bordering it on both sides, but a bush-fire had swept through them the previous summer and they were only blackened trunks, slender and twisted, on which bunches of startlingly green leaves were beginning to grow. Burned bracken covered the stony soil, with the croziers of new fronds uncurling among the old plants. There were no birds and no animals: not even a rabbit. Buttercup could not have chosen a drearier place in which to lie down and die.

He was sitting listlessly on the running-board when a blur of dust on the road that they had travelled resolved itself into two riders. They were cantering, but they slackened speed at the foot of the rise. Teddy watched them as they came: a big man on a slashing brown mare and a little girl on a black pony. They were well turned out, the girl in coat and breeches as smart as the man's, and they were talking and laughing; but it was the pony that held his eyes. Such a pony! He was full of fire and life, and he came proudly, as though the road were scarcely good enough for him to tread, tossing his beautiful head so that flakes of white foam flew from his bit. The little girl sat him proudly too, her hand light on his rein. You could see quite plainly that they loved each other, Teddy thought. He watched them with eager eyes as they passed him, casting but a glance at the dusty Ford and the small boy sitting with his feet in the road.

They were some lengths ahead of the car, and he was still staring, when the little girl spoke to her companion. They glanced round. Then they turned and came back to him.

"Had a breakdown?" the big man asked.

Teddy stood up.

"Yes, sir. My—my brother's gone to Possum Creek to see if he can get some one to help him. She's stuck."

"H'm—I don't fancy he'll have much luck at the Creek," said the big man. "There's a garage of sorts, but the blacksmith runs it, and he's a busy man—too busy to come out here, I should think. Do you know what's the matter with the car?"

"Bill says she's got indigestion and senile decay and blind staggers, sir," stated Teddy gravely. The girl giggled, and the big man stared, and then laughed.

"Well, she looks weary," he observed, surveying the drooping Buttercup. "I'm afraid I don't know anything about a Ford. Where are you making for, my boy?" He looked with some interest at this dusty urchin who stood to attention when he spoke and called him "sir"—unaware that these details were part of Orphanage training.

"Bream Point, sir. But we won't get there to-night, worse luck. Bill says Buttercup'll have to be towed in."

"Who? Oh—I see." He laughed.

"She doesn't look much like a buttercup," said the little girl; and, indeed, nothing could have been less flower-like than Bill's chariot, which had been built in the early stages of Mr. Henry Ford's industry, at a time when he had been able to rule that a buyer of his cars might choose any colour he pleased so

long as it was black. Even the original black of Buttercup's painting had long given place to a general rustiness. She looked like the battle-scarred survivor of a hundred campaigns.

"Well, you'd be s'prised to see how she can go—when she's in a good temper," Teddy defended her. Bill might abuse Buttercup, but not chance strangers, even if they were mounted on horses that made one dizzy with admiration and longing. "But Bill doesn't know her insides very well, either. He says it 'ud take years to know her, an' he's only had her two months."

"It looks as though she might die before he got a chance to be fully acquainted, I'm afraid," said the man. "But about getting her to the Creek: I've a man coming along with an empty cart and a pair of horses, and he can give you a tow if you like. I don't think your brother will find anyone who can tow him. Can you steer her?"

"Rather, sir." Teddy was beaming. "It's very good of you. Bill'll be ever so grateful."

"That's all right. We'll canter back and tell Flint to pick you up. Well, what's the matter?"

Teddy had begun to speak, and was hesitating awkwardly.

"Please, sir—I've got no money. Bill's got it, an' of course he'll be glad to pay, if you could come across him."

"He—why, he wants to pay us, Dad!" said the little girl, in stupefied tones. The man frowned for a moment, but his voice was kind.

"You needn't worry about that, my lad; I should think—er—Buttercup will cost your brother quite enough without a towing bill. Well, come along, Jess, and we'll tell Flint." They smiled at Teddy as they turned and trotted down the rise.

Before Teddy had ceased gaping at his good fortune they were back again. They pulled up for a moment.

"Flint's just at the turn of the road. He'll land you at the garage. What is your brother like, by the way? I'll tell him you're coming if we run across him."

Teddy commanded his wits to give a somewhat hazy description of Bill, and they rode away. Within ten minutes Flint arrived, a pleasant young fellow whose sympathy for the stranded wayfarer was mingled with a hearty distrust of cars. He had a strong rope, and he chatted to Teddy while he adjusted it.

"Never see the car I'd swop for a good horse. Horses don't turn dorg on you in a tight place. Good thing for you the Boss met you, wasn't it? You go an' stand at their heads, sonny, while I tie on. Not afraid of horses, are you?"

Teddy said indignantly that he was not, and Flint chuckled.

"Well, I'm told boys don't give a darn for horses now if they can get boxes of tricks like these. Dashed pity, if you ask me. Well, the Boss has a car, but he an' Miss Jess never go in her if they can use horses. Notice that pony of hers?"

"My word, yes! I never saw such a beauty!"

Flint glanced at him approvingly. Teddy was caressing the nose of the near horse, which was inclined to be restless.

"Oh, he'll take some beatin', that pony. Miss Jess has won prizes with him all round the districk." He tested his knots. "There, that's all set. Now I'll hold 'em, an' you jump in an' steer her. Mind you jam on your brake if she runs on to the cart goin' downhill." He climbed into the cart when Teddy had settled himself at the wheel, and they moved off slowly.

Bill met the inglorious procession near the township, and, much to Teddy's satisfaction, left him in control of the car until they were safely at the garage. Flint bade them good-bye and wished them luck, jogging on to the one store boasted by Possum Creek. The blacksmith came out to overhaul the patient Buttercup.

"Mr. Cunningham asked me to do the best I could for you," he observed. It was evident that any remarks of Mr. Cunningham's carried weight. "Lucky I'm not rushed this afternoon. Well, she's a great ol' warrior of a car, ain't she? Built about the year One, by the looks of her. I got one much the same meself."

"That's luck for me," said Bill.

"Yep—there's not much about the little games of a Lizzie I don't know," said the blacksmith. He held his inspection, became highly technical in his explanations, and finally delivered his verdict.

"She wants a coupla hours' work done to her, but I can get her goin' all right. But that'll be too late for you to get on to Bream Point. Campin', are you?"

"Yes," said Bill. "We'll have to get the tent up somewhere."

"You can put it up in my orchard," said the friendly blacksmith. "Plenty of room there, an' you can get water from the house. Be careful of your fire, that's the only thing."

"Jolly good of you," said Bill, with some relief.

"Don't mention it," answered the blacksmith affably. "This place ain't what you'd call lively; it's rather a treat to see a stranger. Look here, what say you give me a hand with your car? I can put you up to a good few wrinkles about her while we're workin', an' it'll get the job done quicker. Then I'll help you fix up your camp."

This seemed to Bill an excellent arrangement; he accepted it gratefully, as well as the dungaree overalls with which the blacksmith insisted on arraying him. They ran Buttercup into the garage and spent an oily hour or two over her ailments, while Teddy hovered near, trying to acquire knowledge that might be useful another day—having small faith in the permanence of any cure that she might undergo. On this occasion, however, she responded to treatment nobly, and the engine was running smoothly when the blacksmith declared himself satisfied and ceased work. Mrs. Blacksmith, too, had looked in from time to time, with a baby in her arms, much interested in the strangers; she provided them with soap and hot water when they had finished, and came to offer suggestions about pitching camp, which Bill and her husband received meekly. She drew the blacksmith aside for a moment's private conference when the tent was up.

"I d'know what's the good of you two startin' a fire an' cookin', as late as 'tis," she stated, returning to Bill. "Tea's ready inside, an' there's enough rabbit-stew for half a dozen. You an' the little chap come along an' have tea with Mick an' me, Mister."

Bill protested, and the blacksmith grinned.

"Not a bit of good arguin' with the Missus," he observed. "I found that out years ago, an' it's been a peaceful house ever since! Best come along quiet, ol' man, an' avoid trouble." At which Bill yielded gracefully, and they ate a mighty meal in the kitchen, while the baby sat in an upturned box on the floor and gnawed a bone. Then their host and Bill smoked under a tree while Teddy and Mrs. Blacksmith washed up. Like all bush women, she was hungry for talk.

"Bit o' luck you fell in with Mr. Cunningham," she said, whisking the soap in her great dish to snowy froth. "Mick thinks the world an' all of him; he was dead keen on doin' the best he could for you when Mr. Cunningham asked him to."

"Did he? Jolly good of him," said Teddy.

"Yep; he an' Miss Jess came along an' said you were decent young chaps an' for Mick to fix you up if he could. But every one in the districk 'ud do anything for Mr. Cunningham. Mick used to work for him before we was married."

"Where does he live?" Teddy asked.

"Oh, a few miles out. Got a big place, an' his wife's a lovely woman. She's down at their seaside place at Bream Point now, an' he an' Miss Jess were on their way there: they got no other children. Here's a towel, sonny, an' there's another somewhere."

She cast an inquiring glance about the kitchen.

"Where did I put that towel, now? Oh, Cyril's got it—grab it from him, like a good boy. Careful with that glass, I'm down to three. You'll see the Cunninghams' house at Bream Point: it's a long, low place, right on the headland beyond the township. They've got a motor-launch an' a sailin'-boat an' goodness knows what-all. Pity they ain't got any sons, but Miss Jess is as good as a boy. Mrs. Cunningham wants her to go to school in Town, but her Dad won't be parted from her, so they keep a governess. She's real nice, Miss Jess is. She always brings her pony for Mick to shoe, an' while he's bein' done she comes in here an' yarns to me an' plays with the baby, as friendly as can be. She thinks there's no baby in the world like Cyril. That's a nice name for a boy, don't you think?"

" 'M," said Teddy. "I like Mick better, though."

"Y'don't, reelly, now? Well, that's what Miss Jess says—she was dead keen for me to call him Mick, after his Dad. But I think it's a common old name. What's up? Anything wrong with that fork?"

"It's dirty yet," said Teddy, inspecting a wet fork closely. "Guess you missed it a bit."

"Lor, ain't you p'ticular for a boy! What's the towel *for*, that's what I say! Hand it here—I'll give it another wash. Your brother's a nice-lookin' young chap, ain't he? What's he do?"

"Oh—odd jobs," Teddy said vaguely, turning to put a handful of spoons and forks on the table. "He's been cutting ragwort lately."

"I thought only shearers went round in their own cars. Shows he must a' saved his money, don't it? Even if it's only a Lizzie, a car's a car. But why aren't you at school? You ain't fourteen, are you?"

"No, I'm thirteen. But I've been ill."

"I thought you looked a bit scraggy," said the blacksmith's wife sympathetically. "Well, it's a good way to pick up again, goin' round with your brother an' campin'. Nothin' like open air—we sleep on the verandah every night, winter and summer. I always say that's why Cyril's so fit. You'll be too, before you get back home."

Teddy changed the conversation with an effort—it was getting to a dangerously personal note. Instinct warned him that Cyril was a safe attraction, so he cudgelled his brains for a moment and remarked that he had a nice nose. To which Mrs. Blacksmith assented rapturously, adding that it was the dead spit of her Dad's. She then embarked on a detailed analysis of Cyril's features, and had not exhausted their beauties when the washing-up was done and Teddy was able to escape to Bill.

The sound of hammer and anvil woke them in the early morning—the blacksmith, who knew no Trades Union hours, was already shoeing a teamster's horse. Mrs. Blacksmith was laboriously chopping wood, a sight which horrified Bill. She protested when he arrived at a run and took the axe from her.

"Bless you, I can chop all right. Not as Mick likes it, I'll admit—but he's that busy that it gets ahead of him. Sunday's his only day, an' I've known him light up his fire on a Sunday for a drover's horse. Now, don't you worry—I've got enough to start with."

"Teddy, you come and carry in this wood!" sang out Bill. Teddy came hastily, half-dressed, and trotted in with an armful of sticks, the ends of which looked as though the wood-cutter had chewed them, while Bill set to work with the axe and chopped vigorously for an hour. They filled the great wood-box on the back verandah and left a pile of cut logs on the wood-heap, and were still working when the blacksmith appeared.

"Well, you're a white man!" he said. "I see meself takin' the missus an' the kid out in the car on Sunday, thanks to you two. Drop it now—the missus says you're to come in to breakfast. Got your own? Well, you can jolly well keep your own till to-morrow, that's all." Mrs. Blacksmith seconded his remarks with penetrating screams from the kitchen that the chops 'ud be burnt black, and Bill yielded, though with embarrassment. He was further embarrassed during breakfast by the firmly-stated opinion of Mrs. Blacksmith that his wife would be a lucky lady.

Buttercup seemed refreshed by her night's sleep in the garage. They packed her up and said good-bye, promising to call on their way back, and Mrs. Blacksmith reduced Teddy to his lowest terms by kissing him heartily. She stood at the door, waving Cyril in farewell as they drove away.

"Good sorts," said Bill. "But the bush is full of good sorts, isn't it, Ted?"

"I thought every one there was good, once," said Teddy. "Then I met Old Kate an' the Swagman, an' I wasn't so sure."

Bill pondered.

"I'd keep on being sure, if I were you, old chap," he observed presently. "The Swagman was bad, certainly, but you don't come across many like him—at least, I don't believe you do. And Old Kate—well, you were lucky to get away from her, but she wasn't responsible. I feel a bit sorry for her."

" 'M, I do too," Teddy agreed. "She'd had such bad times, it was no wonder she'd gone off her head, living all alone. An' she was jolly kind at first. I think she thought it 'ud be a kind thing to kill me."

“My father says,” Bill remarked, “that one of the best things in getting through life is to understand the other fellow’s point of view. Well, all I can say is, young Teddy, that if you’ve got to the stage of being able to understand Old Kate’s point of view with a knife, you’re a philosopher!”

“I bet I’m not! What’s it mean, anyhow?”

“A philosopher? Oh, a chap who understands all sorts of unlikely things. Never mind, Ted, don’t bother your head with long words. Look here. Buttercup’s going like a dream, and it’s good road all the way to Bream Point. How about learning to drive?”

Teddy’s eyes grew round and his face pink.

“Oo-oh, Bill! You don’t mean it, do you?”

“Yes, I do. It’s just as well to know how, and we shan’t meet any policemen on this road, I should think. You can dodge along in second for a few minutes until you get used to the feel of her. Then you can let her go—but nothing over seventy, remember!”

“No, true, I won’t,” said Teddy earnestly. “I say, you are a brick!”

They changed seats, and if Buttercup were mildly surprised at the way she wobbled for the next few minutes, she was too chastened in spirit to object. Gradually Teddy mastered his excitement enough to hold her on a straight line, and soon he was driving steadily while Bill kept careful watch and dropped words of encouragement and advice. They neared a wood-cutter’s dray, and Bill glanced at him.

“Think you can pass all right?”

“I—I think so.” The pink in his cheeks deepened to scarlet; Bill moved a cautious hand in readiness to grasp the wheel if necessary. With the set face of one who heads a cavalry charge Teddy drew near the dray. They passed.

“Was I awful near, Bill? I thought I was.”

“Not more than a yard to spare,” said Bill, laughing. “You’re all right, old chap. Keep going, and you needn’t worry about anything.”

Having survived his first encounter with traffic, Teddy gained confidence with every mile, and Bill left the wheel to him until they reached the outlying houses of Bream Point.

“That’s quite good for a beginning,” he observed, as he took control once more. “Now I can teach you all the rest of the matter; we’ll find an open space some day and I’ll set you exercises. Meanwhile, the first thing to do is to buy tucker and see if some criminal has jumped my old camping-place.”

Bream Point was a little township straggling along the edge of a curving bay shut in by the rocky headland that gave it its name and sheltered it from

the worst of the winter storms. There was a stoutly-built pier where a grimy little tramp steamer was discharging cargo: near it a number of fishing-boats rocked idly on the lazy sea. Pleasant houses rubbed shoulders with fishermen's cottages and tiny shops; at the corner where the main road turned in to the village stood a more pretentious store, where could be bought anything, from peppermint rock to gramophones. Its wide verandah formed a general meeting-place; men were always lounging there with horses tied to the hitching-rings on the posts.

"That's the place," said Bill, halting Buttercup at a seemly distance from the heels of a restless grey mare. "Come along, Ted—it's a long time since you went shopping."

"More'n three years," said Teddy, getting out; and Bill looked at him quickly.

"Poor kid!" he muttered under his breath. The thought of that long-ago shopping made his face grave—and his first purchase was a box of chocolates, which he thrust into the boy's hand. "Help yourself, old chap."

"Me!" uttered Teddy, his eyes and mouth opening together. He fingered the gay box bewilderedly, far too shy to eat in the shop. "Aw, Bill——!" Words failed him.

They bought food and collars, and bathing-suits, and towels, and newspapers and other thrilling things, and Bill chatted to the storekeeper while the parcels were tied up. There were not many people about, he learned; too early in the season—the place was dead quiet. Fishin' was good, and all the boats were busy. No campers anywhere, so far as the storekeeper knew. Boats to be hired? Yes, ol' Ben Davis had a couple of dinghies he let out to visitors. If they wanted meat they had better let the butcher know, 'cause he wasn't killin' more'n twice a week this month. Any work goin'? Well, there was often an odd job when the steamer was in, or if the boats came home with a good catch an' not much time to unload it. And then the storekeeper suddenly asked a question:

"I suppose, now, you wouldn't be able to play the pianner?"

"Well, yes, after a fashion," Bill admitted. "That is—I can strum. Not what you would call real music."

"Any music's real music to me," said the storekeeper. "Look here, I'm in a hole. I own the hall here, y'know, an' I run a picture-show in it twice a week—one of them travellin' affairs. There's a local girl plays the pianner for me, an' what must she go an' do yesterday but fall off of a pony an' break her wrist! An' I'm clean stuck for a pian-neest. Can't find a soul that'll undertake to keep goin' for more than half an hour. Look here, are you game to take it on?"

“Me!” gasped the stunned Mr. Courtney. “Why, I never played in public in my life!”

“But you said you could play!”

“Well, you asked me. But it’s only strumming.”

“But could you keep going?”

“I—I——” stammered Bill. For the first time Teddy saw his hero scared. “I know a lot of tosh, of course, but——”

“Well, you look strong,” said the storekeeper, sizing up his customer’s muscles as though he saw in him a prospective candidate for a weight-putting event. “That’s all that matters. Look here, there ain’t no highbrows in Bream Point. All they want is a cheerful noise most of the time, an’ a bit of sob-stuff when the heroine’s dyin’—you know—something like ‘Old Kentucky Home’ played like a hymn-toon. But gen’lly it’s just a glad noise. Now, couldn’t y’ do it?” he pleaded. “It ’ud help me out of a real hole, an’ I’d pay you well. You *said* you were lookin’ for a job.”

“But I’d only make a fool of myself, and the pictures too——”

“Them pictures,” stated the storekeeper confidentially, “don’t expect concert music. They’re not exactly what you’d see at the Capitol. But they’re too darned poor to stand alone. I might get a house *one* night without music, but there wouldn’t be a soul next time. Miss Duckworth, her that’s broke her wrist, is a pretty poor player, but she keeps up a sort of rattly tum-tum-tum, an’ it makes the crowd keep time, an’ they forget how bad the screen is.”

“Oh, Bill, you’ve got your banjo!” said Teddy in a stage-whisper.

“Eh?—what’s that you said?” said the storekeeper.

“Teddy, you little beast!” Bill groaned.

“Did you say a banjo?” The storekeeper was leaning across the counter, his eye lighting. “Why, that ’ud be a real draw! Nobody here knows anything about ’em. Look here, you could keep swopping between the pianner an’ the banjo, so’s you’d last out!”

“Oh, it’s all rot!” Bill protested. “Why, I’d be playing the wrong thing all the time—giving them jigs when the mournful parts were coming.”

“Not you. We’d fix that up—give you some sort of a signal when you ought to switch your gears. Well, I’d call it a soft job for any young feller that wanted to earn money. An’ I’d pay well, as I said, an’ let you have your stores at wholesale prices into the bargain!”

“There’s the bet, Bill,” whispered Teddy. The storekeeper could not hear the words. But he guessed that he had an ally in the small boy, and he remained silent to let the remark sink in.

"So there is," said Bill slowly. Suddenly he laughed. "Right-oh, I'll do it. Mind you, it's your own fault if it's a frost. I can't be certain of keeping going, and I'll have to play the same things over and over again."

"Bless you, that's just what Miss Duckworth does. We know every toon she plays by heart, an' just when she's goin' to start the round again. I've heard people say her music is fair awful, but somehow it doesn't keep the crowd away." He drew a deep breath of relief. "Look here, you don't know the weight that's off me mind. I'll get a notice ready right away an' stick up copies outside the hall an' in the shop-window. What did you say your name was?"

The newly-appointed cinema pianist shied violently.

"I say—you're not going to put my name up!"

"Why not?"

"Well, because I won't have it, that's all," stated Mr. Courtney flatly. "The deal's off."

The storekeeper wilted like a flower.

"Aw, now!" he begged. "Y' wouldn't let me down after you'd promised! Look here, I don't care a dump about your name, but I must stick up something. Say I give you a fancy name, like they have in circuses? Signor Vermicelli, or something like that."

Teddy gave a shout of laughter.

"Oh, do, Bill!"

"Shut up!" said Bill, grinning. "No, you can call me Williams, if you like. That's as good a name as any other, and it happens to belong to me, all but the 's.' But I say, there's another difficulty. I've no clothes but these."

"In Bream Point," said the storekeeper earnestly, "it wouldn't matter if you wore that bathin'-suit you've just bought. (An', by the way, I charged you three-and-six for it, but it'll only be one-and-eleven, wholesale, now.) You'll be hidden, most of you: Miss Duckworth's very genteel, an' she always insists on playin' behind a screen. But it wouldn't sinnify if you were in full view."

"All right," said Bill resignedly. "I'll do my best, well we'd better move on, Teddy, and pitch camp. I'm beginning to feel the need of lunch to restore me. By the way, do I get a free pass for my brother?"

"You do," said his employer, looking at Teddy with something like affection. "As many as he wants, him havin' taken my part. Then you'll turn up sharp at half-past seven to-night?"

"To-night?" asked Mr. Courtney faintly.

"Yes, of course. That's what was makin' me jumpy. You won't let me

down?”

“No,” said the victim. “Not if I don’t die of heart-failure meanwhile.” He gathered up his parcels and departed miserably to the waiting Buttercup.

CHAPTER XII

HOW SIGNOR WILLIAMS HELD DOWN HIS JOB

NOT even the satisfaction of finding that his old camp was untenanted and clean could dispel the gloom that hung over Bill Courtney. He moved in silence about the business of pitching the tent and settling down. Meditation sat as a cloud upon his brow. Occasionally his lips moved, as though he were murmuring some incantation, but he spoke no word aloud. His dark mood infected Teddy, who trotted about his usual jobs, not daring to open a conversation, and rapidly becoming nervous and unhappy. This was very different to the usual merry affair of camping, with Bill making jokes and singing as he worked and chaffing him when he did anything stupid. When Bill was jokey, Teddy reflected, it didn't seem to matter what went wrong; they just laughed at it and it came right again. But with this new Bill, glum-faced and preoccupied, he felt as if he were doing stupid things all the time, and they didn't vanish away in laughter; they mounted up until he began to wonder how long Bill would stand having such a dodderer for a mate.

Lunch was a terribly solemn meal. They ate cold food, bought at the store, because Bill remarked curtly that he wasn't going to be bothered cooking; and though Teddy did not care what he ate, the remark was so unlike Bill that it added an additional weight to his spirits. Bill had taken out his note-book and pencil, and from time to time he wrote hurriedly. There were wattle-birds chattering and calling round them, busy and gay, and beyond the scrub that walled in the camp Teddy could hear the low murmur of the sea. But it no longer seemed to call to him, and he watched the birds gloomily. How could a fellow take interest in anything when Bill seemed a thousand miles away?

He went off without speaking when lunch was over to wash up at the creek. When he came back Bill was still writing in snatches, chewing his pencil and muttering between each burst of inspiration. Teddy sat on a log and watched him unhappily. And presently Bill put the pencil back into his pocket, read over the result of his labours, and sighed.

"Well, that ought to carry me on for a good bit," he observed, with something like relief. He looked up and seemed to behold for the first time the melancholy small boy on the log.

"Hallo, you look mighty glum!" he said. "What's up, Teddy?"

"Nothing," said Teddy, digging his boot into the sandy soil.

“Well, you look as if all the world was blue.”

“Well, so do you,” muttered Teddy.

Light dawned on Mr. Courtney.

“Have I been rather a sweep?” he asked, a trifle penitently. “Sorry, Ted. Fact is, I’m scared stiff over the business to-night.”

“You—you’re not wild with me, Bill?”

“Rather not!” Bill responded quickly. “Why on earth should I be wild with you? No, I’m only oppressed with the belief that I’m going to make a fool of myself. So I suppose I’ve been like a bear with a sore head. Sorry, mate.”

“I was afraid you were wild,” said Teddy, his spirits reviving. “It’s all my fault, ’cause I said that about the banjo.”

Bill looked at him.

“Had any chocolates?”

“No.”

“Well, bring ’em here.”

Teddy leaped to obey.

“Chocolates were made to be eaten,” remarked Bill, selecting a large one. “So eat fair. Well, I’ve been racking my empty head for all the tunes I ever heard and writing down their names.” He produced his note-book, and Teddy, sitting close to him, looked with respect at the long list.

“My word, can you play all those, Bill? Then what on earth are you worrying about?”

“I can make some sort of a shot at them,” said Bill. “That is, if I don’t get stage-fright and forget everything as soon as I see the piano. But that’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Not you!” said his henchman sturdily. “An’ if you do forget some, well, you can play the others over and over again. The man said so. Just think of all the tunes you play on the banjo every night. You’ve only got to forget you’re in a hall—pretend it’s the camp an’ only me there, an’ you’ll go on like a house afire.”

“Wish I could think so,” groaned Bill. “But you’re rather comforting.” He ate another chocolate.

“Look, you’ve forgotten some things you play,” said Teddy eagerly, scanning the list. “You haven’t put down ‘Tipperary’ or ‘Ole Man River,’ or ‘Mother Machree.’ But can you play on the piano all the songs you do on the banjo, Bill?”—anxiously.

“Oh, yes, after a fashion. Turn ’em into waltzes or fox-trots or dirges—if I

don't lose my head," Bill answered, his pencil flying. "Go on, Teddy, you're a jewel. Anything else?"

"There's 'Roses of Pickleby,' an——"

"What? Oh, yes, Picardy. What else did you say?"

"An' 'Forty Years On' an' 'Drake's Drum.' I can't think of any others now, but I 'spect I will if I keep at it. Why didn't you ask me before, an' I'd have been thinking all the time?"

"How was I to know you stored up all my songs in your small head?" returned Bill, patting the head in question. "Anyhow, that's a good lot and I begin to feel better. We will leave the question of melody, Teddy, and go and bathe. Race you into togs!"

The creek which ended in the bay near the township came out of the hills five miles away, running roughly parallel with the shore until it reached the sea. It twisted and wriggled as it ran, and it was in one of these loops, bounded on three sides by the water, that they had made their camp. A dense belt of scrub, interspersed with tall trees, hid the creek, growing to the very foot of the hummocks and even spreading up their lower sides. Some camper of long ago had felled a tree across the stream, making a narrow bridge which gave a short cut to the shore; it was worn smooth with the passing of the many light feet that raced across it each summer. The boys crossed it now in their bathing-suits, followed a path beyond, ploughed their way up the hummocks, and came in sight of the sea.

They halted to look. To the left Bream Point rose high and steep, shutting in the view and crowned by pine-trees through which could be seen the long outline of the Cunninghams' house. Far to the right ran the open shore, level and golden. There were masses of rocks here and there, tumbled on the sand and jutting out into the waves; the tide was coming in, striking them with a hollow sound and falling back, leaving them streaming with foam, with sunlit pools eddying between them. Half a mile away the rocks seemed to take possession of the beach, leaving no sand visible, and a black, ridged reef, covered with slippery seaweed, ran like a causeway far into the water. At the mouth of the shallow bay an island, narrow and long, lay bathed in sunshine; they could see a couple of boats in its lee, with people fishing.

"That's a great place for perch," said Bill, pointing to the boats. "And farther up we used to get a lot of whiting. Can you row, Teddy?"

Teddy shook his head.

"Never been in a boat in my life."

"Well, you won't be able to say that soon," Bill replied. "I'll see about hiring a boat to-morrow; they ought not to charge much if we took it for a

fortnight. Think you could stand a fortnight here?"

"My word!" said Teddy ecstatically.

"We might do worse," Bill said. "Living here will be pretty cheap, because we can catch fish, and if I can only hold down my job at the Cinema we'll do well. Let us never forget that we'll get our stores wholesale! By Jove, I've *got* to hold down that job, even if my fingers give out and I have to start whistling—it might not matter in Bream Point! Then there's the chance of other odd work cropping up. A fortnight here will do you no end of good. I'd like to see you get a bit of colour instead of being the old pasty-face you are."

"Oh, I'm right as rain now—true I am, Bill."

"Well, you're a lot better, of course. But there's room for improvement yet, and bathing and sea-air will make you into a new little dog. A fortnight will nearly end my three months, too, and then we'll have to push off for Town."

"Bill—will I be safe in Town?"

"Safe? What do you mean?"

"Well, I often wonder. Any of the Orphanage people might catch sight of me. I don't think the Sup'ntend'nt would know me, but I'm dead scared of Mr. Pullinger. He always bragged that he never forgot a face he'd once seen, and he never did, either, among the boys. Nor our names, neither. The other men used to mix us up, an' Matron always forgot who was who—easy enough with every one dressed the same. But old Pully never did. If he met me, Bill——?"

"I think you can put that idea right out of your head," Bill answered decidedly. "Your Pullinger-man doesn't get many days off, I should think; it would be one chance in a million if he came across you in Town. And if he did, you'd be with me; and I'll get you a decent rig-out, and he'd never dream of looking twice at you. And if the worst came to the worst I'd look my fiercest and ask him what he meant by looking at my young brother. Your Pully may be a very brave fellow among a lot of little boys, but I don't fancy he would tackle a man."

"You're a great comfort, Bill," said Teddy, with a sigh of relief. "I s'pect I'm a goat to worry, but——"

"But it's time we bathed instead of talking rubbish," interjected Bill. "Come along, and forget worms like Pully. You'll never see him again, take my word for it!" He gave Teddy a friendly shove that sent him flying down the steep sand-bank, and they raced for the sea.

It was glorious to swim and float and skylark in the warm, dancing water; to come out and lie on the hot sand, rolling in it until they were sand all over and then to dive from a rock and begin all over again. Glorious to come in at

last, glowing and hungry; to stroll lazily back to camp and cook a meal, hardly able to wait until the spluttering sausages turned brown; and then, glorious to lie under a tree and talk of all the good days ahead. But not so glorious to realize that the time was passing, and that very soon the eager inhabitants of Bream Point would be thronging to the hall to sate their gaze with Mary Pickford and Tom Mix, what time their inner senses were soothed with melody. Not, at least, if it had to be melody of Bill's providing. Both partners were silent and thoughtful when at length it was time to back Buttercup up the narrow lane that led to the road and to head her for Bream Point.

The storekeeper was looking out for them near the hall, his face anxious.

"I was beginnin' to wonder if you'd given me the slip," he said. "No offence meant, but you never do know with fellers travellin' round. Park your car here, she'll be all safe. I've got the operator waitin' to talk to you: he'll give you an idea of what the pictures are goin' to be." He hurried them through a waiting crowd of loungers, who looked at them curiously. On the door of the hall was a large roughly-printed notice, stating that the music that night would be provided by Signor Williams. It brought Bill up all standing.

"What on earth——!" he began fiercely.

"Oh, that's a mere detail," said the storekeeper airily. "Makes a bit of interest, y'see: they're all askin' me who the Signor is, an' I tell 'em you're a dark horse from Italy. Come along." He grasped Bill's arm and drew him past the notice before he could find words to express his feelings.

It was a small wooden hall with a corrugated-iron roof, furnished with plain benches; the front rows had backs, those behind were merely school forms. A piano stood near the stage at such an angle that the player could see the speckled sheet stretched near the footlights. The screen which surrounded the piano might have hidden the absent Miss Duckworth if that lady were of minute proportions, but it was evident that Bill's long form would find it only a scanty shelter. But there was no time to think about it, for the operator was nimbly descending from his ladder and coming to meet them. He was a pale little man with a worried manner. Bill wondered what he had to worry over, since he was not expected to make music. To turn a handle, now—that was an effortless job!

The operator undeceived him.

"This the Signor?" he said. "Evening, Signor. Hear you're new to the job. Well, I've made out a list of the pictures—we don't run to programmes. Haven't had time to write much—the engine's turned dog on me an' the light's giving no end of trouble. But your game is to keep going. You'll have to watch the screen and try to make the music appropriate."

"Lor!" said Bill, from his heart.

"Oh, you won't find it hard. Mr. Clinch here tells me you play the banjo as well—I don't quite know how that'll work in with pictures, but at any rate it'll be a novelty. But for any sake, keep going, especially if the light gives trouble—and goodness only knows what it's going to do. I must get back and tinker it up a bit. You start at five minutes to eight, to play 'em in, like." He hurried back to the door and skipped up his ladder like a squirrel.

"I'd give ten bob if it was over," said Signor Williams heavily. He sat down on the nearest bench and cast a bitter glance about the empty hall. Already small boys were clustering round the doorway, peeping in at the strangers, and Mr. Clinch was hurrying to keep them out.

"Don't you worry," Teddy said. "You'll be as right as pie. You told me you could play all sorts of dance-music—that you'd played at a dance."

"Yes, but that was in a private house where I knew everybody. This is different—they expect something. Signor Williams!" He gave a hollow laugh.

"Oh, they won't be lookin' at you, y'know, Bill. They'll be much too int'rested in the pictures. You remember that, an' keep thinking that it's only you an' me an' the camp," Teddy went on, trying to reassure the distraught performer, and beginning to feel seriously alarmed himself. Suppose Bill's fingers refused to play altogether! He certainly looked queer enough for anything. It was a harrowing prospect.

"Now, don't you get fussed, Bill, old chap. Got your lists ready?" Bill had laboriously printed two lists of tunes in large letters, one headed SAD, the other GLAD. He relied on them to provide him with suitable inspiration at critical moments.

Bill dived into his pocket. A moment's pause, and his face grew tragic.

"Teddy! I've left them at the camp!"

"Great snakes!" gasped Teddy weakly.

"Well, that puts the lid on things, doesn't it. I'm down and out now, Ted—my brain's like a lump of suet," said Signor Williams desperately. He glanced at his watch. "Ten minutes to eight—not a possible chance of getting there and back in time. What a jolly evening!"

Already people were beginning to come into the hall.

"Look here!" Teddy whispered. "I know most of 'em, Bill—I read 'em out for you to make the lists. You let me come inside that screen with you an' I'll keep thinking as hard as I can an' whisper names to you. I know the 'sads' and the 'glads' all right. Do let me!"

Bill caught at the idea. He glanced at the incoming people and shuddered

suddenly as his eye fell on little Jess Cunningham and her father, walking up the aisle. He retreated to the piano promptly and dived behind the screen as a soldier might fall back upon a trench.

"Well, come along, Ted." He stopped. "Look here, you aren't going to stand all the evening."

" 'Course I can," said Teddy scornfully. "Think I'm a baby?"

"Shush!" said Bill. "You stay here a second—there are generally chairs knocking round in the back rooms of a hall." He plunged through a door near the stage, returning in a moment with a wooden chair. Teddy was dancing with impatience.

"Mr. Clinch is signalling you to begin, Bill!"

"I'll *swear* it's not five minutes to eight," said the miserable performer. He sat down and fingered the keys helplessly for a moment, his brain utterly refusing to work. Then out of its recesses drifted a tune he had not played since he was a boy at school taking music-lessons. Why one of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words" should have come to him in that tense moment must remain an unsolved mystery; but it came. The dreamy notes of "Consolation" fell slowly on the probably astonished interior of the Bream Point hall.

Teddy sat down, drawing a long breath of relief. At least Bill was playing, though it was a sad little old tune, he thought. But Signor Williams was holding down his job and supplying music.

His satisfaction was cut short. Mr. Clinch, leaving a substitute at the door, had appeared, thrusting an anxious head over the screen.

"Say, couldn't you liven her up a bit?" he begged, his voice wheedling. "That's a nice tune, of course, but a bit on the sad side. All the boys are askin' me if it s a funeral. You want to give 'em something to bring 'em in lively."

"Consolation" ceased, and Bill sat still, his face quite vacant, staring at the harassed visage topping the screen. This, he reflected calmly, was the end. This was where one dived out by the back door, leaving Bream Point to its fate. This——

"*Bill!* Give 'em 'Tipperary'!"

Light swam back to his brain. His fingers were still on the keys; they dashed mechanically into the old tune. It rang out bravely. Mr. Clinch's face disappeared, and the men of Bream Point came swarming into the hall, keeping time to the music, as many of them, khaki-clad, had kept time to it on the shell-pitted roads of Flanders. Some of them whistled it; the hall was in a moment full of gaiety and life and movement, and the drum of heavy feet on the bare boards. Bill played it over and over, gaining confidence each moment,

until the hall was full. He heard the door shut, and the lights suddenly went out, leaving blackness for a moment. Then a ray flashed upon the sheet on the stage, and he drifted into a waltz as pictures of scenery began to flit across it. Mr. Clinch, standing in the darkness at the back of the hall, mopped his brow.

"He's all right," he muttered. "Lor, that was a near thing! Pretty a case of stage-fright as ever I seen!"

Bill Courtney realized presently that he was enjoying himself. His nervousness had gone—the darkness helped, for one thing; then the piano was a surprisingly good one, almost new, responsive to every touch. He swung from one tune to another; if a new one did not come readily he flashed an inquiring glance at Teddy, and a quick, whispered suggestion never failed. He found a fascination in watching the pictures and fitting his music to them—the "sads" and the "glads" began to come obediently as he needed them, so that soon he was independent of the little henchman at his elbow. Under cover of a loud passage he managed to convey a rapid message:

"I'm all right, kid. Don't worry."

He heard the fervent whisper, "Good man!" as he went on playing, and smiled in the darkness. What a little brick he was, the small, eager "partner" who showed his devotion at every turn! He could feel him there, although beyond his touch; knew that he was putting all his heart into helping. But for him there wouldn't have been a note. Now everything was going like clockwork. He glanced at the screen.

The heroine was dying, as Mr. Clinch had foreseen, and Bill slid softly into "sob-stuff." She died at considerable length, on the moonlit prairie, amid the drear waste of sage-bush and cactus, with (one could be reasonably sure) the howling of coyotes in the distance. Her faithful mustang stood by, mute, his bridle trailing. The slow notes of the piano dripped plaintively as the moon sank behind a cloud and darkness fell. It was gone, and letters flashed out:

CAME THE DAWN.

But—it did not come. The music brightened at its promise, but no fulfilment followed. Minutes passed by with the delusive lettering still staring at the audience, while in his lofty box a sweating operator wrestled with a sulky apparatus. A drawling voice from the hall shattered the air.

"Darned long time gettin' up, that dawn!" it said.

The hall rocked with laughter. In its midst the light failed altogether, leaving the hall in blackness, save for the faint glimmer of the piano-lamp. Bill whistled under his breath.

“Keep going, Bill!” he heard Teddy.

He nodded, playing on. The audience was a patient one: it sat quietly enough for some time. Then feet began to shuffle and some boys fell to skylarking at the back, knocking a form over. Others began to stamp in unison. The atmosphere became electric; it communicated itself to Bill, and the effort of steady playing became harder and harder. He made a few false notes, which rattled him more completely. The music faltered.

“Can’t you keep going, Bill?”

“No, I’m about done,” he said, and struck a wrong chord that set his teeth on edge. He was no longer good enough to hold them, he knew.

Then he stopped, for Mr. Clinch was making a speech from the back.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Just a few minutes, please. We’re tryin’ our lick-hardest to get the light goin’. Give us a chance!”

Some one said, “Poor—old—Clinch!” drawlingly, and the rear seats took it up and chanted it derisively. The uproar grew. People were stumbling about the hall in the darkness, boys whistling and cat-calling. Suddenly a new voice rang out—Bill knew it for Mr. Cunningham’s.

“Gentlemen! Give the management fair play, and remember there are ladies here. Perhaps if the musician will go on——”

There was silence as the crisp voice ceased. Bill racked his brains for a moment in vain. Then he remembered his banjo, and snatched it from the piano-top. No use only to play, he knew; a banjo’s tinkle would never keep that disorganized rabble quiet for more than a moment.

“Pull the screen aside, Teddy,” he said audibly. The first “plunk-a-plunk” of the strings came slowly, and then strengthened to an old plantation tune. Bill’s clear baritone rang into the silence:

“Fairest of darky daughters
Was Dinah Doe.
Eyes like the laughing waters
Of the Ohio—
The waters of the O-hi-o!”

He sang the song through, and paused. There was a storm of clapping, and Bream Point stumbled back to the benches in the darkness. A voice shouted, “Give us some more of that!” and he gave them song after song. It was easy to imagine that he was back in the twilit camp, singing to Teddy—save for the cheers and clapping that ended every song. He wondered why he had ever been such a fool as to be nervous. They didn’t expect a fellow to be an artist, but they liked a tune—well, he could give them tunes. And he was enjoying

himself immensely, as any singer must who feels that he is holding his audience. He didn't care how long the light failed.

He drifted into "The Long Trail" presently, and paused at the end of the first verse.

"Chorus, please!"

They came in with a roar.

"*There's a long, long trail a-winding*," sang Bream Point with all its heart, drowning the tinkle of the banjo: men, women and children all singing together, forgetting all about pictures and the dawn which declined to come. Let it stay dark! Nobody cared with a "sing-song" going on. Bill fell back on his memories of old ditties that every one would know, and they had song after song, "Old Folks At Home," "Poor Old Joe," "Dixie"—the choruses made the roof ring, and brought to their doors the mothers of Bream Point who had stayed at home to mind the babies. Some of them joined in, too, from their doorsteps. Then, as the last notes of "Kentucky Home" died away, there was a flash of light from the operator's eyrie and a triumphant shout—"Got her! Now, please, ladies and gentlemen!"—and Bill dropped the banjo into Teddy's hands and crashed out a waltz as the screen came back to life, undauntedly asserting still:

CAME THE DAWN.

There was a roar of laughter. Bream Point hugged the joke, and rocked itself to and fro and pounded on the floor and clapped: much to the indignation of the operator, whose temper was already at boiling-point. He switched the film on furiously and the hall settled itself to finish the evening without further diversion. But they waited after "God Save the King" had been played and shouted "Three cheers for Signor Williams!"—in which Bill very nearly joined, through failing to realize whom they meant. Teddy was cheering at the top of his lungs, his face beaming. Mr. Cunningham looked at them, standing together by the piano, the small boy, excited and proud, and the tall lad who looked shamefaced, though his eyes held a twinkle.

"I wonder who those two are," he said. "They interest me, Jess."

"Don't know, but I like them," said Jess, whose voice was hoarse with singing choruses and her hands sore with clapping. "Do bring me next time, Dad. I never enjoyed pictures so much!"

Mr. Clinch was enthusiastic.

"Well, you got us out of a real bad mess!" he said, insisting on shaking Bill firmly by the hand. "The whole evening 'ud ha' been smashed up if it hadn't

been for your songs. My word, you took a load off of my mind when I heard you begin to sing!”

Bill muttered incoherent nothings.

“I tell you, it was a dashed serious thing,” said the storekeeper. “There was fully a dozen fellows demandin’ their money back jus’ when you piped up—but I never heard no more money-back chat from that minute. But if I’d paid one I’d have had to pay the whole crowd. Well, I ain’t the mean sort; there’s double your pay in that, Mr. Williams, seein’ as how you did double work.” He thrust an envelope upon the embarrassed Bill and waved away thanks. “Lor, don’t I wish I could have you permanent, ’stead of Miss Duckworth!”

“ ’Fraid not,” said Bill. “I couldn’t jump a lady’s claim.”

“Ah, I don’t see you takin’ on a Bream Point job,” said the storekeeper. “Why, you could get a job in a music-’all, you could!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE ODD-JOB MAN

THE steamer was loading at Bream Point pier, in a hurry to get away with the afternoon tide. For this reason, and because he was short-handed at any time, her captain had enlisted odd labour. The labourer he had secured was one whom he had found useful on two previous visits; a tall young man who did not look as though he had been born to be a dock-hand, yet—perhaps because of that reason—worked with an energy that had almost endeared him to the captain. The fact that he had gathered that his name was Williams induced the captain to call him Bill: a name to which the young man answered readily. He was accompanied always by a small boy, curly-haired and eager of face, as dark as his brother was fair. They were, in fact, curiously unlike, for brothers. But as they had in common a liking for work the captain did not allow any other dissimilarity to trouble him.

The small boy was not hired to assist. One did not hire small boys as wharf-labourers. But if an urchin doggedly insisted on lending a hand wherever possible, hauling at bales and packages far too heavy for him until warned by a shout from his brother to relinquish them, and then consoling himself by hauling at others slightly smaller—well, what, the captain asked himself, could a man do about it? The captain had boys of his own at home, and his heart warmed towards the eager-eyed youngster. He solved the problem by including him in his expense-list as a "sundry assistant," which meant that when paying his brother he handed a two-shilling piece to the junior labourer—a liberality which was received with a wide smile and a quick "Thank you, sir." But the captain had an idea that had there been no money forthcoming he would have worked just as energetically next time—if Bill were working.

On this afternoon the steamer got away in good time for the tide, announcing her departure by three shrieks from her siren that sent echoes ringing round the bay. Bill and Teddy, their work over, had helped to cast off ropes from the bollards on the pier, and now lingered, watching as she headed for the bar. The other wharf-men had strolled away towards the hotel: they had the pier to themselves save for gulls that squabbled over scraps of bread thrown out by the cook.

"Tired, Ted?"

"Not a bit," Teddy answered. He did not look tired. Ten days at Bream

Point had made him, as Bill had prophesied, “a new little dog.” He had grown brown and had filled out until there were no longer hollows in his cheeks; his clothes, Bill noted with satisfaction, had ceased to suggest that they hung loosely on a collection of sticks. He was full of energy from morning until night, and he seemed to regard life as a perpetual joke.

“Well, we’re doing very fairly,” Bill remarked. “Work’s good and pay’s good, and the exchequer flourishes. I see myself winning that bet with something to spare, Ted.”

“But we’ll keep on working, Bill, won’t we—just in case of accidents?”

“Oh, rather! We won’t run any risks, though I think we’re quite safe.” He looked up at a footstep on the pier and saw Mr. Cunningham. “Good evening, sir.”

“Good evening,” John Cunningham answered. It was not the first time they had met in Bream Point, where, indeed, it was not possible to avoid meeting any inhabitant, unless you remained within doors. Mr. Cunningham had seen Bill engaged in various jobs: working at the steamer, off-loading fish from the deep-sea fishing boats, digging in the garden of the hotel. He regarded him with curiosity mingled with distrust—the latter arising from the fact that he played the piano in the Cinema, which, John Cunningham held, was not a job for a man. It was also evident that he was not precisely what he seemed, which deepened the distrust. He put him down as a ne’er-do-well—the sort that drifted about the country living on his wits when he should be doing something better.

Still, that was none of his business, and at the moment he wanted a man. He spoke pleasantly.

“Are you free to take a job, Williams?” He had no intention of using the “Signor” by which Bill was known in the village.

“Anything, sir. That is, if it leaves me free in the evening. I have to play at the Cinema twice a week.”

“Ah, yes.” Mr. Cunningham frowned slightly. “Well, this won’t interfere with the Cinema. I want to go up to the whiting-grounds for a couple of hours—can you pull me up?”

Bill nodded agreement.

“Is your boat here, sir?”

“Yes; she’s down by the steps. Then, if you’re ready, we’ll start at once.”

He led the way to the side steps of the jetty, where his boat was rocking gently. Bill looked at her with approval: a beautiful boat, built on lines very different from those of the old dinghy in which he and Teddy disported

themselves whenever they were free from work. Pulling her would be a pleasure; the only drawback was that Mr. Cunningham had evidently no idea of taking Teddy.

The small figure, perched on a bollard, looked after them rather wistfully as the strip of water widened between the boat and the pier. Then he trotted away—having, in fact, remembered a forgotten intention. He spent a laborious ten minutes in the post office, where he wrote two post cards, wording them in the same way, since that entailed less mental effort. One was addressed to the Small Girl and the other to John Price; they stated that he was well and had a splendid job, and that some day he would come to see them. The result of his labours filled him with pride.

"Some day," he reflected, "I'll write old Pully a postcard. A real rude one!"

Unconscious of this desperate resolve, Bill was pulling with slow, strong strokes towards the whiting-grounds.

"Your brother does not look over-strong," Mr. Cunningham remarked.

"He has been ill, sir. But he's picking up splendidly. This place has done him good."

"Are you finding much work?"

"Oh, there are a fair number of odd jobs, if one looks for them. I pick up all I can. But living costs a good bit—I'm feeding up Teddy as much as possible, and the little beggar gets miserable if I don't eat exactly what he does," said Bill, with a laugh. "However, we manage very well, and we're getting a good deal of fun out of it."

"H'm," said Mr. Cunningham. He approved of the care for Teddy, but he considered that a strong young man should be looking for a steady job rather than thinking of fun. Still, it was not his affair, though he made a mental note that he might find occasional work for the young man, who certainly could pull a good oar. And as the afternoon went on he admitted to himself that he was a pleasant companion; silent unless addressed, but ready to talk interestingly at any time. An educated fellow, too; he wondered increasingly why he should be wandering about as an odd-job man.

"He doesn't drink, I'll swear," he thought, looking at Bill's clean eyes and clear, ruddy skin. "Terrible pity he isn't doing something better. Well-bred hands, too, though they show work. I wonder where he comes from?"

But he asked no questions; it was nothing to do with him. They cruised about the whiting-grounds, dropping anchor here and there while they fished. It was a lucky day: there was a pile of long, silvery fish in the boat when at length they came back towards the pier.

“But you don’t want to land here, do you, sir?” Bill asked. “Wouldn’t you rather go to your own jetty?” He knew the landing-place under the Cunningham’s house on the headland.

“Oh, it would be hardly fair to take you so far,” his employer answered. “I picked you up at the pier.”

“But that doesn’t matter at all. I can easily take you across.”

“It puts another half-mile on to your road to your camp.”

“Oh, that’s nothing.” Bill wasted no further time on argument, but swung the boat’s head eastward.

“But your brother? Won’t he be looking out for you?”

“Teddy? Not he—he’ll be at the camp, getting the fire going. He’s a very reliable offsider,” said Bill, smiling.

“Well, I’m not sorry to be saved the pull,” admitted Mr. Cunningham. “I’ve a rheumatic back, and it doesn’t take kindly to some forms of exercise.” He felt himself thawing to his boatman, realizing that he had enjoyed the afternoon unusually. When they got out at the jetty he found himself curiously embarrassed as he took out his money. It was like offering payment to a man of his own standing.

But Bill pocketed the money cheerfully, with no shade of embarrassment.

“Thank you, sir. It has been a pleasure to pull her—she’s a real beauty. Do you take up the oars and rowlocks?”

“Yes; I never leave anything in the boat.” He held out his hand for them.

“I’ll carry them up,” Bill said. He shouldered the oars, picked up the basket of fish, and went lightly up the rough stairway cut in the rocky hill-side. At the gate leading to the house he paused. Mrs. Cunningham and Jess were on the verandah, and Jess uttered a shout of greeting to her father, racing across the lawn. She took a flower-bed in a flying leap and arrived at the gate, panting.

“Any luck. Dad? Oh, what ripping fish!” She looked shyly at Bill. “Good evening.”

“You must take some fish,” Mr. Cunningham was saying. In the boat he had strung four fine whiting together; he picked them out and gave them to Bill. “And thanks very much for helping me home.” He had a queer impulse to shake hands with his boatman, but Bill did not seem to see the movement: he thanked him with a brief “Good evening,” lifted his hat and strode off along the cliff path, swinging his fish. John Cunningham called after him:

“Can you come out again to-morrow?”

“Yes, sir. Shall I come here for you?”

“Well, I suppose it would be better. At three o’clock, then?” He turned into the garden, Jess carrying the fish triumphantly.

“So you found your boatman,” his wife said. “Was he satisfactory, John?”

“Oh, an excellent boatman—and a fine young fellow, too. Comes of decent people, I should say. But I wish I knew why he was hanging round a place like this picking up work. Cinema-playing!” said John Cunningham with a snort.

“But he’s a lovely player,” said Jess enthusiastically. “I’m never going to miss the pictures while he’s here. I wish they were every night!”

“Well, you certainly wouldn’t go if they were, young woman,” returned her father. “Two nights a week is more than enough, in my opinion!”

“We love ’em, Miss Ramsay and I,” said Jess calmly; and her father pulled her hair and remarked that she was a spoilt monkey.

“We met the little boy on the beach this afternoon. Dad; and Mother says he’s got better manners than I have!”

“That,” said her father, “would not be difficult. Eh, Jess?”

“He really seems a nice little fellow, John,” Mrs. Cunningham remarked. She was a slight woman, with greying hair framing a gentle face. “He helped me over a rocky place as if I were made of egg-shell china. And he has a pleasant way of speaking, half-shy and half-merry. He told me proudly that he had earned two shillings at the steamer.”

“They’re both keen enough to earn money, I’ll say that for them,” said her husband.

“I told him he didn’t look strong enough to be earning, and that his brother should not let him work; and he became quite heated: he said Bill couldn’t stop him!” said Mrs. Cunningham, laughing. “Quite a fiery urchin: I’m sure he’d cheerfully fight anyone who said a word against the brother. The big fellow seems very good to him.”

“He told me the youngster had been ill,” her husband said. “We might give them some eggs and cream, Eleanor; he said he was trying to feed him up. And he certainly seems a decent young fellow. If only he didn’t call himself Signor Williams! Signor! I’m hanged if I know what young men are coming to!”

Unconscious of these remarks, “Signor Williams” was striding homewards, whistling as he went, happily certain of finding fire and food and welcome. He was not mistaken: the glow of the fire shone through the trees as he neared the camp, and Teddy came racing to meet him, cheeks and eyes glowing.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re back, Bill! Had a good time? Oh, you’ve got fish —and I bought sausages!”

“Good man; we’ll eat the lot,” said Bill. “Yes. I’ve had a good time, and

my employer nearly shook hands with me, but luckily remembered before it was too late. Nice old chap, but doesn't quite approve of me; you can see it in his wild eye."

"Him!" said Teddy scornfully. "He ought to be jolly glad to shake hands with you."

"Queer, how some people don't appreciate their opportunities!" laughed Bill. "Well, never mind, partner; come and help me fix these fish, and tell me all you've been doing."

The days flew by even more quickly after this, and the exchequer mounted rapidly, for work came increasingly from Mr. Cunningham. His own odd-job man was away: he was always glad to get Bill to row him to fish in the afternoons or for other work; and there was one never-to-be-forgotten occasion when, finding that Bill understood the motor of the launch, he engaged him for a whole day for a family picnic along the coast, and invited him carelessly to bring Teddy as "crew." It was difficult, on a picnic, to maintain altogether the attitude of master and man, especially as Mrs. Cunningham and Jess showed a simple friendliness that made the whole day go easily: though Bill had warned Teddy to keep discreetly aloof, they found themselves drawn into the circle of fun again and again. Mrs. Cunningham called Bill "Mr. Williams," adding, "Or should I say 'Signor'?"—and Bill shuddered, and ejaculated "Oh—*please*, don't!" in tones of such unfeigned horror that she laughed. He loved her for her motherly air towards Teddy: she had brought an overcoat in case he should be cold, and in a dozen ways she showed care of him. Jess was unfeignedly glad of a playmate, and after lunch she and Teddy ran about the rocks together and collected shells and starfish, and completely forgot that Teddy was "crew." But he was careful to call her "Miss Jess," since Bill was also: a matter which Mrs. Cunningham noted silently.

Little gifts came to the camp regularly from the big house: eggs, cream, butter, vegetables—now and then a chicken, ready cooked. Jess would dash up on the black pony, bearing a string-bag that bulged with good things. She would linger as long as she dared, looking with longing at their camp arrangements, clearly regarding theirs as the only life worth living. Her father rode with her once or twice; his keen gaze noted the workmanlike camp, neat and orderly. "If the fellow didn't play in that wretched little Cinema I'd say he was a really good sort," he admitted to himself. "But——" The "but" still stuck in his mind.

The fortnight the boys had planned stretched itself to three weeks. It was too good to leave, Bill said; the long days of work and play, the hours of happy fishing and exploring, the plunges into the blue water that called them whenever there was a free half-hour, the happy evenings in the camp, singing

to the plunk-a-plunk of the banjo and making a thousand plans for the future. Teddy had not dreamed that such happiness, such friendship, could be: he clung to every day and rejoiced in almost lunatic fashion when Bill declined to leave at the end of a fortnight. Bill said it was because Mr. Clinch had wept upon his neck and offered to throw in a side of bacon if he would play in the Cinema for another week: and without doubt the bacon was a weighty argument. But in truth, Bill Courtney was finding life a good thing: life that held work, and sound sleep, and clear-eyed waking to a world that smiled and a small boy to whom he was as a god.

CHAPTER XIV

ONE CROWDED DAY

"OUR last day, Ted."

" 'M," said Teddy sorrowfully.

"Don't look so glum, old chap—lots of good days ahead."

"Oh, rather," said Teddy, smiling at him. "But this has been lovely, Bill; I never thought any place could be so good. So it's horrid to leave it, even for another nice place."

"Well, I'm as sorry as you are," Bill answered. "Tell you what, Ted—we'll come back some day and camp here again, if old Buttercup's hanging together still. Or perhaps there'll be a new Buttercup, if we have luck. But we'll come back."

"Oo-oh, Bill! I'd love to!"

"It's a bargain," said Bill. "Meanwhile, there's one day more, and it's rather a pity so much of it has got to go in work. But I didn't like to refuse to take Mr. Cunningham out this afternoon: it isn't the money, because that's all right, but they've been jolly good to us. The rolls of fat upon your plump body are largely due to Mrs. Cunningham's feeding."

"Aw, Bill!" murmured Teddy.

"Well, you aren't nearly such a scrag as you were. In fact, you're a credit to your tucker and Bream Point generally. And I'm not so wasted myself as I expected to be when I began playing for old Clinch. By Jove, I'll never forget the horror of that first night! I dream of it yet and wake up in a sweat of terror."

"Poof, I knew you'd be all right," said Teddy scornfully.

"Well, it's thanks to you I was. Another moment and Bream Point wouldn't have been able to see my heels for dust: and then you murmured 'Tipperary' in my ear, and all was well. I'll always owe you something for that, young Ted. However, it's no good thinking of old unhappy far-off things; we'd better make the most of our last morning. Come and bathe."

They bathed and breakfasted largely, and spent a happy morning in the boat, with Teddy at the oars: he had taken easily to rowing, under Bill's instructions, and delighted in being capable of managing the unwieldly dinghy. Bill might—and did—look with disdain upon her, but in Teddy's eyes no finer

craft had ever floated on blue water. The fish seemed to recognize that it was their last day; they bit with a liveliness most gratifying to the fishermen. Then, because it was useless to catch too many, and because they were still in bathing-suits, and because the invitation of the water was too strong to be resisted, they bathed again, diving from the stern of the dinghy and creating an uproar sufficient to scare away all the fish for a mile round. They drifted back with the tide to the pier when hunger warned them that it was near lunch-time. Teddy bade a lingering good-bye to the boat, and they strolled home along the shore.

"What are you going to do with yourself this afternoon?" Bill asked. Lunch was over, and he was preparing to leave for his appointment with Mr. Cunningham.

"Oh, I don't know," Teddy answered. "I'll clear up camp as much as I can —we shan't want much left out for the morning, shall we? Then I'll just knock about an' bathe. You won't be late home, Bill?"

"Rather not: it's my last night at the Cinema. Have everything ready, Ted, in case Mr. Cunningham does happen to delay me. You might give Buttercup a drink of water. No, by the way, an idea! I'll take her up to the Cunninghams'. Then I'll be sure of getting home in good time."

He ministered to Buttercup's needs and drove off, waving his hand to Teddy, who waved a frying-pan in response, together with the stick with which he was scraping it. Buttercup carried him quickly to the headland; he left her by the homestead gate and ran down the cliff stairway to the jetty, pausing to collect oars and rowlocks from the shed where they were kept. Presently Mr. Cunningham arrived, greeted him in a friendly fashion, and they set off.

The luck that had attended the morning fishing seemed to have vanished; the whiting were sluggish and would not bite for a long while, and they moved from place to place in vain. It was very hot at first, the sea a burnished blue mirror under a blazing sun. Then a cloud drifted across the brightness, a little breeze blew up from the west, and the fish became slightly more interested in their baits. They anchored near a rocky island and fished, occasional catches encouraging them through long periods of slackness.

Mr. Cunningham had been silent for a time, smoking and thinking. Presently he tapped out his pipe on the edge of the boat and looked hard at Bill.

"So you're off to-morrow, Williams?"

"Yes, sir. We have had a very good time, but we must move on."

"Have you got other employment?"

Bill hesitated. "I think I know of a job, sir."

Mr. Cunningham considered this.

"Williams," he said at length—"don't you think this knocking about with odd jobs is rather a pity? You're quite a good worker, and as far as I can see you're very steady: but to me it's very regrettable to see a young man being a rolling-stone. You'll never get anywhere in life if you don't face it. And it's a thoroughly bad example for your brother."

Under this onslaught Bill sat perfectly still, his eyes opening widely. He did not reply for a moment.

"I'm sorry you think so, sir," he answered finally. "I'll admit I have been rather at a loose end, but I want to settle down."

"I'm very glad to hear it," Mr. Cunningham said warmly. "Well now, Williams, I don't know anything about you, but of course anyone can see you have been educated to something very different from the life you are living; however, if you choose to work for wages it's no affair of mine."

Wishing neither to agree nor to disagree with this observation, Bill held his peace.

"But what I want to say is," went on the other, "that if you really want a steady job I can give it to you. I need another man at this place, especially in the summer; there are plenty of rooms in the stable buildings, and you could have your brother with you. He should be going to school, as you know. I pay good wages and I treat my men well. And we like the little boy; my wife and daughter have taken quite a fancy to him. He could be found a job when he leaves school; I could have you both on the other place. But I never take a man without some sort of a reference. Can you give me one?"

"I'm afraid I can't, sir," said Bill. He had flushed deeply, and he spoke under his voice.

There was silence for a moment, and Mr. Cunningham sighed.

"Well, that speaks for itself, I suppose," he said. "I'm sorry, Williams: very sorry for what you imply." He paused. Then he spoke impulsively: "Look here—I'll give you a chance. I don't know what you have done, but I believe you're honest. If I take you without a reference, will you——"

Bill interrupted him.

"Oh, I can't let you go on, sir," he said, meeting his eyes squarely. "You're too kind, and I'm sailing under false colours—not that I meant to."

"What do you mean?"

"Well—I don't need a job, sir. I want one, and I'm going to get one. But it will have to be on my father's place. He's got a station on the Murray. You might know the name—for all I know, you might know Dad. It's Burrabri

Downs."

"But—but that's Haviland Courtney's place," said Mr. Cunningham, in tones of bewilderment. "I don't know him, but of course one knows the name."

"Yes. He's my father."

"But why are you knocking about like this—under a false name? *Signor* Williams!" said Mr. Cunningham in hearty disgust.

"Oh—that," Bill gave a short laugh. "That was a mere accident. Old Clinch demanded a name to put up on the Cinema, and of course I wasn't going to let him put Courtney, so I gave him Williams because my name is William and I couldn't think of anything else. And when I came down to the hall in the evening I found that the old blighter had christened me 'Signor,' and it was too late to alter it. And after that I just let the thing slide: it seemed the easiest way, and, after all, I wasn't keen on having Dad's name handed about when I was anybody's odd-job man. Not that I was ashamed"—his head went up—"but—oh, well, I think you understand, sir."

"Yes. I see. Well, do you mind telling me why you have made yourself an odd-job man? Not unless you wish to, of course."

"I'd rather like to, sir. I've been a bit of a fool, but I don't want you to think I've been anything worse." He told his story, in as few words as possible, leaving out any mention of Teddy.

"And it wasn't only the fool-bet that kept me going, sir. I wanted to win it, of course, but I could have done that easily enough. But I got interested in work, and it made me feel less of a waster. And I thought . . ." He hesitated, and again his cheek reddened. "Well, I thought that if Dad knew I'd put in three months of fairly steady work he'd be less disappointed with me generally. It's going to hit him hard that I got sent down—not that he was ever keen on the 'Varsity. But if I can tell him I've chucked loafing for good he may not feel so bad about it."

"I think you can be fairly sure of that," Mr. Cunningham said kindly. He gave a short laugh. "Certainly I can give you a reference as a worker!"

"I jolly well won't forget that you would have given me a job without one, sir!" said Bill warmly. "And—yes, I'd like that reference, if you don't mind. I may need a character to show Dad!"

"What I can't understand is why you took your brother with you," said Mr. Cunningham. "Surely it would have been better to leave him at school?"

"It might have been," Bill said awkwardly. Kind as John Cunningham had shown himself, he had no idea of giving away Teddy's secret. The Orphanage was dead, he hoped, for ever; no one except his father need know how he had

found him. He hated the necessity for any more deception. But he comforted himself with the thought that this was Teddy's business—not anyone else's.

"Still, it may have been the best thing for him, after his illness," mused Mr. Cunningham—and left it at that, to Bill's relief. "I think your father is a widower, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir. My mother died ten years ago."

"And have you sisters?"

"No, sir." He nearly added imprudently, "I'm the only one," but managed to bite off the words in time.

"Ah, well, I fancy you will find that your father will be willing enough to let bygones be bygones, considering everything. A man wants a son with him: he will be so glad to have you working at home with him, sharing everything, that he won't be too hard. I only wish I had a boy to come after me. Yes—a man wants a son," he said, with a half-sigh.

"You have a great little daughter, sir," Bill said warmly.

"Oh yes—and sometimes I think she is half a boy. And after all, a father without a son is not so badly off as sons without fathers. I've been thinking pretty sharply of that this morning."

"Yes?" Bill looked at him inquiringly.

"Oh, it was just that I was talking to a collector—a fellow from an Orphanage. Hallo, got a bite?" Bill had started.

"I'll see." Bill had forgotten that he had a line, but he pulled it up. "No, nothing. An Orphanage, did you say?"

"Yes. Now, I didn't like that fellow—a repellent sort of type, I thought him. I wondered that they employed him as a collector, but he happened to mention that he wasn't regularly on that job: a head attendant, he said he was, but doing a bit of collecting on his holiday. They get a commission on all they make, I suppose. Anyhow, he had his authority all correct."

"Yes?" Bill's heart seemed to be doing odd things, but he kept his voice calm. He told himself not to be a fool—it couldn't be Teddy's man. If only Mr. Cunningham wouldn't be so long about telling! "What did he—was he——?" His voice was confused, but Mr. Cunningham did not seem to notice.

"Well, as I said, I didn't like the man; liked him less when he said he was an attendant, and I thought of the youngsters under him. But he made me think. It wasn't so much what he said, for as a matter of fact I didn't listen to a good deal of it; it was the photographs he showed me. The boys. Not that they looked ill-fed or ill-clothed—they didn't. Those places are well run, and there's no unkindness, I suppose—and anyone has to be strict with boys. But

those groups of boys, big and little——! It wasn't their bodies that looked hungry, it was their souls."

"I don't suppose their souls get much worried over," Bill said. "Did you ____"

"It's only to be expected," said Mr. Cunningham. "It doesn't stand to reason that all that horde of youngsters, taken from goodness knows where, could get any affection. No one would imagine otherwise, and I'm not discrediting the Orphanage. I believe it to be an excellent place. But that greasy-looking fellow maundered away about its beauties, and all the time I was looking at the faces of those youngsters, wondering how youngsters get on without affection. I suppose it's because I've wanted a son badly myself that I wondered how sons get on without fathers."

"He didn't tell you his name, I suppose, sir?"

"No—oh, no, why should he? I didn't care who the fellow was. He talked in an oily way about the boys, and wondered why they should ever run away. I didn't wonder. They must ache for an adventure now and then, I should think. One little chap did get away some time ago, by the way, and they haven't found him yet; but this chap said they didn't lose hope of finding him. I didn't like his voice as he said it. Bad job for the boy if he caught him, I should think. Is anything the matter, Bill? You look queer."

"No, sir, of course not. I was only listening to you. I'd rather like to have known that man's name."

"Why, if you really want to see him he's staying at the Maynes' boarding-house," said Mr. Cunningham, looking mildly surprised. "Or, by the way, I have his receipt for my cheque in my pocket: I suppose he didn't only put on an official stamp. Let's see." He fumbled in his pocket while Bill watched eagerly. "Ah, here it is. Yes, what's the fellow's name? . . . Pallinger or Pullinger, I can't tell which. Do you want to give him a subscription?"

"I—think not," Bill said. "I say, sir, do you mind if we go in now?"

"Oh, it's early yet," said Mr. Cunningham, serenely unconscious of the storm raging in his boatman's mind. "But are you in any hurry?"

"I've—got to get in." The words came so sharply that Mr. Cunningham started out of his reflective mood and looked keenly at him. Bill did not notice the steady look. His mind was seething with a question. Where was Teddy? Where was he now?

"There's certainly something wrong," said John Cunningham, now thoroughly alert. "Is it that collector-fellow? Why are you concerned about him?"

“He’s after Teddy!” said Bill between his teeth. Already he had wound up his line—now he snatched at the anchor-rope. “I must hurry, sir!”

“He’s—after your brother? What do you mean?”

“Oh, Teddy’s not my brother! I didn’t mean to tell you, because he’s so desperately ashamed of being branded as an Orphanage boy. He’s the little chap that man was speaking of—the boy who ran away.” The anchor came dripping over the side, and he faced Mr. Cunningham, his mouth grim. “I found him nearly dying by the roadside—and I’ll be shot if they get him back!”

“Good heavens!” said John Cunningham weakly. “Pull as hard as you can! But they can’t guess he’s here—they couldn’t know——”

“It’s just a bit of bad luck,” said Bill, rowing furiously. “Queerly, Teddy’s always had the fear this man would find him. Pully, they call him: he’s the only thoroughly-hated man in the Orphanage. They say he never forgets a face; and he’s certainly the only thing in the world my little chap’s afraid of.”

“You found him!” said John Cunningham slowly. “Poor little boy! And you’ve kept him ever since?”

“Yes, and, by Jove, I’m going to keep him! Even if I had to take him back to the Orphanage myself, I’d sooner do it than hand him over to that man. The swine!—and I was just congratulating myself that the little chap had finished with fear. Mr. Cunningham, you don’t know what a great little kid he is! It—it’s just unthinkable to let him go back.”

“I believe you would be able to get him out again,” John Cunningham said.

“Not for a year—until he’s fourteen. And he’s so happy. It’s wonderful to see how happy he is. The very idea of being caught—caught like a rabbit!—is enough to break his spirit. Lord, I wish I hadn’t left him alone!” He groaned, and pulled more savagely.

“Row to the pier—it’s shorter for you.”

“No, I’ve left my car at your place.” The boat was flying through the water, the jetty coming nearer.

“You’re unduly worried, I think,” said Mr. Cunningham. “Remember, it’s not at all likely that Pullinger will have come across Teddy. And you go to-morrow.”

“I suppose I’m a fool,” said Bill. “But I’ve a queer feeling that something is wrong. I shan’t be easy until I see him. You see, he’s been my mascot, sir. Everything has gone right since I picked him up—poor little unconscious wisp of a thing under a tree by the road. We’ve had no end of a time together.”

He stopped abruptly, pulling in silence until they reached the jetty. Mr.

Cunningham picked up the boat-hook and steadied the boat against the steps.

"Jump out," he said. "No, don't wait; I'll see to her. And good luck." He watched Bill taking the cliff stairway in great bounds. Presently he followed slowly, and a little later his wife found him writing at his desk.

"You are early home," she said. "Did you have letters to write, John?"

"No," he said, smiling at her. "Something more important. I am writing a reference for a labourer—a young man of character."

CHAPTER XV

THE SURPRISING ADVENTURE OF MR. PULLINGER

LEFT alone, Teddy had cleared up the camp as much as possible, packing away whatever was not needed before the final move, and making some preparations for the evening meal. He laid the fire, filled the billy with water and hung it up—lest some prowling dog should come nosing about the camp and made a trip to a farm for some milk. This done, there seemed no other pressing duty.

"Might as well go down to the beach," he said.

He took off his jacket, which he had donned over his bathing-suit as a delicate attention to the lady of the farm. Bathing-togs Teddy held to be the world's finest garment. You put them on with no effort, and it did not matter whether you were in the water or out of it for the rest of the day: the sun dried you almost as quickly as the water wet you. So, equipped for anything, he wandered through the narrow belt of scrub, crossed the creek by the log, followed the overgrown path to the hummocks—a path considerably more open now after three weeks' daily use—and so gained the shore.

No one was in sight: the whole beach seemed his own. The sea was smooth as glass: he strolled down to where the waves lapped the sand and amused himself by skipping flat stones across the water. Bill could make a stone jump seven or eight times, but Teddy was proud if he could manage more than three. He tired of the amusement after awhile and, turning from the township and the camp, walked along the beach towards the great reef of jagged rocks to the right.

He had nearly reached them when he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs. Turning, he saw Jess Cunningham on her black pony Selim. She was riding fast; in a moment she was beside him, greeting him with a friendly "Hallo!"

"I was looking for you," she said. "Mother thought you might be out of butter, so I brought you some. Catch!" She tossed a package into his hands. "I'd have left it at the camp, only the car wasn't there and I didn't know where to put it."

"It's all right," he said. "Thanks ever so, Miss Jess. Jolly good of your mother." He rubbed Selim's nose, and the black pony stood as though he liked the caressing touch.

"He knows you quite well now," said Jess.

"He's a beauty," Teddy said. "Some day I hope I'll have a pony like that."

"Not many like Selim," returned Selim's owner, with a touch of pride.

"No, I guess there aren't."

"Was the pony you had once as good?"

"Ginger? Oh no, not nearly. But I thought an awful lot of him. You see, I was small then."

Jess became thoughtful. It occurred to her that she had been perilously near "swank"—and swank was one of the seven deadly sins.

"I'm sorry you're going away."

"So'm I," said Teddy. "Awful sorry."

"Will you ever come back?"

"Bill says so—some day. If Buttercup holds together."

"Then you'll have to come pretty soon," Jess said with decision. "Buttercup is failing fast."

"Oh, she's a jolly good old car yet."

"Um." She forbore to argue the matter; it seemed unnecessary to state her father's belief that at any moment Buttercup would subside on the road, a dismembered scatter of ironmongery. "Well, be sure you come to see us when you come back."

He promised, still stroking the pony. A sudden idea came to Jess.

"I say, Teddy! Like a ride on him?"

He raised a face of bewildered joy.

"You—you don't truly mean it, Miss Jess?"

"Yes, I do. You can have a ride if you like."

She slipped out of the saddle, smiling at him. He looked as though he were still unable to believe his ears.

"It won't be awfully comfortable to ride in bathing-togs," she warned him.

"Much I care!" His eyes began to dance. "Where'll I go, Miss Jess?"

"Oh—up to the pier and back. The sand's hard as hard—it's just ripping. Hang on to him if you let him gallop—he pulls, you know."

He was in the saddle, and Selim was moving as though he were on springs. Teddy had ridden Jim Bassett's pony several times at the farm, and that had been joy unspeakable: but no pony that he had ever ridden had been like this. He was all fire and breeding, yet with perfect manners: a show-ring pony, clean-bred and educated to show his paces. He shook his beautiful head as if impatient to go; Teddy leaned forward, and in a moment they were flying over

the hard ribbed sand that echoed under the drumming hoofs. The seagulls scattered before them, skimming out to sea with shrill cries; the rough outline of the hummocks was a continuous line of gleaming sand. Every bound was the very music of motion, smooth, easy, regular. The pier seemed to rush to meet them all too quickly: the pony slackened to a dancing walk, knowing his galloping track better than Teddy knew it. The boy turned him, riding slowly at first, lest the delight should end too soon; then, unable to resist the enchantment, he gave the pony his head and they swept back at a wild gallop to where Jess, perched on a rock, was waiting with laughter in her eyes.

"Can't he go!" she said, as Teddy slipped from the saddle, panting, more with excitement than breathlessness.

"Go!" he said. "He's perfect!"

"Takes some beating," she answered. "And he just loves galloping on the sand."

"You can feel he does. I say, it was good of you, Miss Jess. I'll never forget I had that."

"Well, you sit jolly decently," said Selim's owner—who had watched this point with some anxiety. "And you've got hands. You'd ride well, Teddy."

"Would I?" He flushed with pleasure. "I say, look at his shoes! They're like silver."

"That's the sand. It always polishes them like that." She picked up the near foot; the pony gave it readily, standing like a rock while she ran her finger round the gleaming horseshoe. "Well I must be going. So—good-bye, Teddy." She put out her hand, and he shook it awkwardly, not expecting such a mark of favour.

"But you'll be at the pictures to-night? It's Bill's last night, you know."

"Yes, Miss Ramsay's going to take me. Dad won't go; he says he can't stand pictures. But you and your brother never look at us there. Why don't you?"

"Bill says not to. Wouldn't do, he says."

"Why ever not?"

"Don't quite know. But Bill says so."

"I think that's rum," said Miss Cunningham inelegantly. "Doesn't matter, anyhow." She swung into the saddle. "Well, good-bye!" Selim appeared to pivot on one foot, and they whirled off.

"Whew-w!" said Teddy, drawing a long breath. "Wasn't it gorgeous! I bet Bill'll be glad when I tell him I rode Selim. Selim!" He rescued the package of butter from the shade of a rock and set off towards the reef.

In the angle of two rock-walls sat a man at peace with all the world. Mr. Pullinger considered that he had begun his annual holiday very well. It had been a brilliant idea to arrange to do a little collecting for the Orphanage while on leave; on his very first morning he had landed several good-sized donations, the commission on which would help considerably towards paying his bill at the boarding-house. So satisfactory a morning justified a lazy afternoon, and Mr. Pullinger was not the man to deny himself what he felt was due to him. Therefore he had strolled along the beach in the sunshine, tempted by the hard sand of low tide to go farther than he had meant; so that when he reached the rocks he was pleasantly tired. He found a comfortable corner, shady yet warm, and, propping his back in the angle, had gone to sleep.

Not a pretty person, Mr. Pullinger, as he slumbered in the shade. The tumbled mass of rocks, red and grey, stretched about him; between them the clean gold of the sand went sparkling down to the blue ripples of the sea; and among all that peace and beauty the only unlovely note was the man who lolled with half-open mouth against the crag. Just as in sleep the face of a clean-hearted man may look like that of a dreaming boy, so sleep brought out all that was mean and cruel in Mr. Pullinger. He was a burly man, with reddish hair and smooth, pale skin; capable in his waking hours of showing a suave manner, together with a glib eloquence that had won its way that morning to the cheque-books of Bream Point. But as he slept, his teeth showing under his clipped moustache, the face, despite its plumpness, bore a curious resemblance to the face of a rat. It struck stark terror into the boy who, straying light-footed among the rocks, came suddenly upon him.

A moment Teddy stood in sick dismay, incapable of movement. Then, slowly, tremblingly, he backed away, seeking to put the tall rocks between him and his enemy’s face. He was almost out of sight when Mr. Pullinger awoke, roused by a sense that he was no longer alone. He scrambled to his feet and looked about him.

Across the rocks his eye fell on a small figure in a scanty bathing-suit and a grey felt hat: a boy whose terrified face woke a memory that puzzled him for a moment. They stared at each other, and light dawned on Mr. Pullinger.

“Why, it’s young Winter!” he cried. “Young runaway Winter! Did you think I wouldn’t find you, my lad? You might have known better!” He laughed loudly; and at that laugh fear gripped Teddy anew. He knew it so well; they all did on the Boys’ Side of the Orphanage—Pully’s laugh. It seemed to wipe out all the good weeks of his happy travelling and put him back behind the twelve-feet walls again.

He backed farther away, and the man shot an order at him.

"None of that! Come here, and look sharp about it."

"I won't!" Bill's face suddenly came before Teddy's mind—Bill's voice, that told him he had done with fear. But Bill was out on the bay—and he did not know Mr. Pullinger. Still, Bill would expect him not to give in without a struggle. If he could only gain the scrub there might be a faint chance. "I won't!" he repeated. He turned from the rat-face and ran out upon the rocks.

Mr. Pullinger followed, finding himself at a disadvantage, since on the rocks boots were easily out-classed by sand-shoes. Not that he was in any doubt as to the outcome: there was no possibility that the boy could escape him. He licked his lips to think of the credit that would be his when he restored his prey to the Orphanage, where such unpleasant comments had been made on his carelessness in letting him escape. Still, as they dodged each other on the rocks, getting farther and farther from the shore, he began to lose his temper, shouting threats of what awaited Teddy when he caught him. It was no fun, on a hot day, to be stumbling over jagged rocks in pursuit of an elf who went like a cat where he could only flounder.

They were well out on the reef when Teddy suddenly ducked, turned, and ran for the hummocks. He reached the firm sand well ahead of Mr. Pullinger, crossed it, hare-footed, and went lightly up the hummocks that held back his heavy pursuer still more. Then through the scrub, catching his thin bathing-suit on a hundred twigs and thorns, afraid to stop or try to hide, since there was no hiding the footprints that left an easy trail upon the sand. He knew he was losing the ground he had gained, and his heart sank when at length he came out upon the broad track that ran through the bushes, past their camp and on to the township. If he could but reach the side-track to the camp and dodge into it without being seen, there might be a chance, for there were many footprints there to mask his newer ones.

He had a good lead, and he made the most of it. But his strength was a poor thing yet, and his pursuer was athletic, for all his weight: he came on steadily. And the track ran straight; there were no windings to hide what Teddy hoped to do. The boy cast a despairing glance backward as he came to the camp turn-off, seeing Mr. Pullinger a good way back, but well in view. There was no chance that he would pass the turn-off; and Teddy, his breath coming in sobbing gasps, knew that his own running was almost done.

He turned into the camp-track, without hope, but knowing nothing better to do, and in a moment had reached the place where the log spanned the creek. Just before he came to it he caught his foot and fell. All through his flight he had carried mechanically, not knowing that he held it, the package of butter that Jess Cunningham had brought him, now soft and oily with the heat of his hand. It flew from his grasp and flattened against the end of the log, the butter

oozing through the sodden paper wrapping. He picked it up and sprang upon the log.

There are keen wits among the street Arabs of an Orphanage, and three years in their company had not failed to sharpen Teddy Winter's. Or perhaps his good angel whispered to him in that moment of hopelessness, sending a wild idea into his brain. He ran half-way across the log; then, turning, he went down on his knees and rubbed the oozing butter into the smooth timber. It burst through the remnants of the paper, lending itself, it seemed, gladly to his aid. He finished the rubbing quickly with his palm, working desperately, in an agony of fear as the heavy pounding of footsteps drew nearer. Then, hurling what remained of the butter far up the creek, he regained his feet, fled across the log and dived into the scrub. He crouched under a bush, panting.

Bill Courtney, driving Buttercup furiously along the outer road, reached the camp half a minute later. He sprang out of the car. The camp was quiet and desolate in the afternoon stillness: the fire was ready laid, the billy swinging from a branch. Bill looked about him irresolutely. Where was Teddy? Then he heard a sound in the scrub, and he burst through the screen of bushes and came out by the log-bridge. And thus it was given to him to behold a remarkable sight.

He saw, across the creek, a burly man, his face purple with heat and anger, who came running swiftly along the narrow track; who did not see Bill, because he looked only for a child. He sprang upon the log and took two steps. Then there was a long slither, his feet went from under him, and he fell, landing violently on his back. A moment he clawed the air helplessly. Then he slid to the edge of the log, turned over, and hurtled downwards. With a loud yell and a resounding splash Mr. Pullinger disappeared within the creek.

The amazed Mr. Courtney stood rooted to the spot. Presently the eddying waters parted and the burly one reappeared, so beplastered with mud that it is doubtful if his own mother would have known him. He waded to the bank from which he had come and clambered painfully out, pausing to wash away the mud which filled his eyes. There he stood gasping and choking while Bill watched him, valiantly endeavouring to subdue the emotions that seethed within him. In a moment Mr. Pullinger looked across and saw the silent figure.

"Have you seen a boy there?" he shouted, his utterance thickened with fury and mud.

"Not a sign of one," Bill answered truthfully. "Have you lost one?"

"The little brute was running away from me. He must have crossed that log."

"If he did, he's probably running still," said Mr. Courtney, with a complete

lack of sympathy. “This is a private camp and I’m the only person here. But you are welcome to come over and look, if you like.”

“I wouldn’t trust myself on that log again for a hundred pounds!” averred Mr. Pullinger, spluttering. “The darned thing’s as slippery as glass. I’ve just fallen in!”

“I fancied you had,” said Bill mildly.

“And I’ve just about broken my back!” bewailed Mr. Pullinger. “And my clothes were new!”

“Dear, dear!” said Bill. “Were they really?”

“I’d better get back to the town, I suppose,” said the miserable Mr. Pullinger. “If I can walk it, with my back. My word, when I catch that boy ——!”

“He’ll have quite a poor time, I expect,” said Bill. “Wouldn’t you like to get your hat? It will be wet.” He pointed to Mr. Pullinger’s hat, floating placidly in the pool.

The owner of the hat shot a malevolent glance at him, disdaining answer. With many groans he succeeded in fishing his headgear from the creek. He gazed distressfully upon its ruin and decided not to wear it. Then he spat, “Think you’re funny, don’t you?” at Bill, and tramped out of sight.

Bill waited until the last sound of his going had died away before he returned to the camp; and as he went he choked and spluttered even more alarmingly than had Mr. Pullinger. There was no one in sight. He cast a rapid glance about him.

“Teddy, are you anywhere?” he asked softly.

The bushes parted and a small boy crawled out. His attire hung in rags about him, revealing large sections of deeply-scored skin; and as he sat on his heels and looked at Bill his grin was purely impish.

“Bill, did you see him go in?” he demanded. “Oh, Bill, you didn’t miss it?”

“I didn’t,” said Bill, and gave himself up to his emotions. They laughed until laughing was no longer possible and weakness had made them collapse on the grass.

“Oh, I have such a pain!” gasped Teddy. “I’ve laughed till I’m all hollow inside! Oh, did you ever see anyone look so funny!” He broke into agonized giggles of joy. They were still helpless when there came a quick sound of hoofs and John Cunningham rode into the camp.

“Is he all right?” he asked sharply. “Whatever is the matter with you both?”

Bill pulled himself together.

“We are a little overcome, sir,” he explained, getting up. “We have just seen a hurried gentleman somersault from our log into the creek, and now he’s gone, looking sadder than any orphan I ever met. He isn’t looking for Teddy any more at the moment; all he wants is a bath and new clothes!”

John Cunningham gave a crack of laughter that made his mare bound.

“But how?” he asked. “How did it happen?”

“I buttered the log,” said Teddy simply. The impish grin returned. “And it was your butter, too, sir!”

Mr. Cunningham stared at him, his mouth twitching.

“Young man, you will go far!” he stated solemnly. “Gad, I’d have given something to see it!”

* * * * * * *

It was ten o’clock next morning when Bill and Teddy bade farewell to the sorrowful Mr. Clinch and turned Buttercup once more into the road leading from Bream Point. They had had a glorious farewell performance at the Cinema, the audience refusing to go home after the last film until Bill had played every tune he knew on the banjo; the sound of the rousing choruses had drifted to the boarding-house where a bruised and battered man tossed on his uneasy pillow, regretting that he had ever been beguiled into a pleasant holiday by the sea. Mr. Pullinger was well enough in body to sit on the verandah of his boarding-house in the morning, though his spirits were low. As he talked sourly to Jim Mayne, his host, a decrepit Ford car, piled with bundles, drove rapidly past. Mr. Pullinger interrupted himself in the middle of a sentence.

“Who’s that?” he asked sharply.

“That?” returned Jim Mayne. “Why, that’s Signor Williams an’ his kid brother. D’you know ’em?”

“I’ve seen them,” said Mr. Pullinger bitterly. “And I never want to see either of ’em again!”

CHAPTER XVI

HOW THE ROAD BEGAN AGAIN

TEDDY leaned over a garden gate, looking down a wide suburban street. It was growing dusk; not many people were about, save a few evening strollers who sauntered on the wide footpaths under the dusty elm trees. Across the way some boys were playing tennis; he could hear the hard smack of racquet on ball and the gay shouts of the players, though he could not see them. Motors slipped by, hurrying in to the city. They were beautiful cars with long, gleaming bodies, and they went past with a smooth and silent rush: not in the least like Buttercup, who had clattered up the street with Bill and himself a few hours before. People turned to look at Buttercup, that veteran of many outback roads. Some people laughed as they looked. But Teddy liked her better than any shining Vauxhall that whirred by him in the twilight.

He tried to think he was cheerful. Behind him was a wide garden of shaven lawns and gay flower-beds, almost as fine as the garden of the Orphanage, which was perhaps why it was so difficult to feel free in it. Standing well back from the street, surrounded by broad verandahs on three sides, was a big white bungalow. There were blossoming shrubs scenting the air all about it; the lattice of the verandahs was screened with a mass of mandevillia and jasmine that sent out waves of perfume. From the inner rooms came the first gleam of shaded lamps as the dusk deepened. The tennis-players on the other side of the street ceased their game, their voices dying away as they left the court. Then a loud-speaker from their house broke the quiet, and Teddy pricked his ears. Some one on the wireless was singing “Old Man River”; and it seemed that he was no longer in the suburban garden, but back in the little wooden hall at Bream Point, with Bill, in coat and breeches, his banjo on his knee, singing.

“Wish we were back there!” Teddy muttered.

The house was very fine: so fine as to be almost bewildering. He had recently eaten a very good dinner there, sitting at a table where lace mats lay on a polished surface that reflected the glitter of silver and crystal in the deep pools of its gleaming surface. There was no table-cloth, which Teddy thought queer: there had been none in old Mad Kate’s cottage, but he thought rich people were different. But perhaps he did not know—there was so much that was puzzling in the succession of courses, and the many knives and spoons and forks about his plate had bothered him badly. Glancing under his eyelashes, he saw that he had not used them in the same order that the others

did—a troubling thought. But how was a fellow to know?

He had felt like a jackdaw in a company of hummingbirds, sitting at that glittering table. There had been a lady and gentleman, Bill's aunt and uncle, and a younger lady the others called "Theo," which Teddy had always considered a boy's name. She was a little like a boy, with her tall slenderness and her Eton-cropped hair: she smoked many cigarettes, and called her father and Bill "old bean" or "old fruit," while her mother she addressed as Jane. The ladies were dressed in lovely, shimmering clothes, with bare necks and arms and sparkling jewels: "Theo" wore long green ear-rings that dangled far below her ears. Teddy thought her wonderfully brave to endure such torment. Bill's uncle had black clothes certainly, but they were enlivened by a wide expanse of shirt-front that looked as if it were made of white china and had little gold buttons in it; so that he, also, was decorative. Even Bill did not look like the Bill he knew; he had put on a suit of smooth dark blue, with a stiff collar and a beautiful tie. "Theo" had said a queer thing to him when he came into the drawing-room before dinner.

"Hallo, you sundowner!—why haven't you dressed?" She had lifted her eyebrows and tilted a pert nose.

Bill had laughed carelessly.

"Can't. I'm going in to Town to meet some fellows. Going to collect a bet."

It was part of the general curiousness of things, for anyone could see that Bill had dressed. Teddy puzzled over it a good deal until the worse problem of the spoons and forks had banished it.

He had not understood a good deal of the rapid talk at the dinner-table. Bill had told the others some of the experiences of his trip, and they had been only mildly interested. "Theo" had said bluntly that she couldn't see what fun he had found in turning himself into a common labourer and doing grubby work for cocky-farmers. "Rather lets you down, that sort of thing, don't you think?" Her tone had been so scornful that Teddy quailed under it. But Bill had not seemed to care at all; he had laughed, chaffing her about being "an appalling little snob." Mr. and Mrs. Robert Courtney had not said much. But there was an air of disapproval about them that was very plain to the small boy who sat at Bill's elbow, shy and embarrassed, in the shabby suit that had been Jim Bassett's cast-off.

Bill had offered to drive "Theo" in to Town after dinner, hearing that she was going to join a theatre-party. She had looked at him sideways and lit a cigarette before answering:

"What, in your funny old caravan? I don't think I see myself, thanks, old

thing. But I'll take you in myself in the Chrysler if you like."

Teddy had boiled inwardly, but Bill had been only amused.

"None of your plutocratic Chryslers for me to-night, thanks. The fellows want to see Buttercup." And "Theo" had shrugged her shoulders until they almost touched her jade ear-rings and declared that she wouldn't for worlds deprive them of the circus.

Teddy had gone to the garage with Bill to fetch Buttercup. He fancied that she looked, in company with the two other cars that stood there, as queer and lonely as he had felt at the dinner-table.

"Well, you'll be all right until I come home, partner. Go to bed in good time, and to-morrow we'll go shopping and get you town clothes."

"But are you sure you can afford it, Bill?"

Bill had laughed joyously.

"Afford it? Why, I'll be rolling in money. I collect no end to-night—enough to get all I want for you, at any rate. We mustn't forget riding-breeches: you'll want 'em up at Burrabri." He had waved his hand as Buttercup creaked into her stride. Then a smart chauffeur had taken the Chrysler to the hall door for "Theo," and she had come out in a wonderful cloak of green and silver that rippled and flashed as she moved. After that Teddy had had the garden to himself.

There was a new and disquieting thought to add to his gloom, for Bill's father would soon arrive—and Teddy would have preferred to take Bill's family in gradual doses. Bill had not expected him quite so soon, and even his light-heartedness had received a shock when his aunt had told him that afternoon that his father was on the incoming mail-steamer. Teddy had not heard all she said, but he had gathered that Mr. Haviland Courtney had cut short his trip because of his son's misdeeds. Therefore, he might be expected to arrive in anything but a friendly mood.

Bill had said, "By Jove! Then he'll be here next week!"—thoughtfully. Presently he had added, "Well, it will be jolly good to see him again." And his aunt had said acidly, "I'm afraid you may not altogether enjoy the meeting."

All this gave Teddy food for reflection as he hung over the gate, listening to the wireless from the opposite house, and for a time he was depressed. Then he shook off the feeling with determination. Everything would be all right, he told himself; it was not to be believed that any father could be hard on so splendid a person as Bill, even if he *had* done a few silly things. He would "tell him off," as fathers always did, and then he would forgive him, and they would all go off to Burrabri Downs together as Bill had promised. Teddy went back in mind to the long yarns he and Bill had had on the journey from Bream

Point, jolting over the dusty roads in Buttercup or sitting by the dying camp-fire in the long evenings. He felt he knew Burrabri quite well: its long rambling house with the tree-shaded billabong close beside it, with bathing-shed and spring-board; its wide paddocks, where long-horned Queensland bullocks fattened; its river-flats, irrigated from the Murray, where grew splendid orange-groves and fields of lucerne. There were horses without number there; among them would certainly be a pony for him. Bill had said so. And there would be a settled job for him, and a home. Working with Bill. It seemed to little Teddy Winter that no boy could ask more from life.

On the verandah Mr. and Mrs. Robert Courtney sat in the dusk and unburdened their hearts to each other.

"It's really most annoying," said the lady in worried tones. "As if the stupid boy hadn't done enough to worry his father—getting into trouble at the University, and then wandering off round the country in this disreputable fashion—how do we know *what* he has been doing? And now, of all things in the world, he must bring home this dreadful little boy from goodness knows where, expecting us all to receive him like another nephew and talking about adopting him. Adopting him! Is he mad?"

"Well, he doesn't seem a very dreadful little boy," her husband observed pacifically. "Quiet and nicely-mannered, and all that sort of thing. Still, I agree with you that it's rather over the odds. Haviland's a peppery individual, and he's coming home in a distinctly bad temper. I rather fancy the boy will be the last straw." He glanced about him. "Where is he now, by the way? He didn't go with Bill?"

"Oh, no—he's hanging over the gate, listening to that appalling wireless. I do think Parliament ought to put down loud-speakers," remarked Mrs. Courtney, in parenthesis. "They make sitting out of doors intolerable. However, it is keeping the boy out of mischief, though he is probably kicking most of the paint off the gate. Did Bill tell you how he got hold of this child?"

"No. Bill's like Haviland; he never tells more than he feels inclined."

"I tried to find out," Mrs. Courtney said, "but he was very uncommunicative; just said that he was a good little fellow who wanted a job, and he'd promised him one on Burrabri. Haviland may have something to say to that."

"He probably will. The boy is still of school age, to begin with: I shouldn't think he'll care to be bothered with him."

"And then there will be another fight with Bill. And I did so hope things would go smoothly!" sighed Mrs. Courtney. "But Bill would provoke anyone. I'm very fond of him, but really, I nearly rebelled when he marched in this

afternoon calmly expecting to have this shabby urchin treated as one of the family. It's so utterly unreasonable. Theo is furious; she almost refused to come down to dinner."

"Oh, it's no use being furious with Bill," Mr. Courtney said. "He's not much more than a boy himself—and he has always been a fellow of queer whims. Very like Haviland. But there's real stuff in Bill, I've always believed. Do you think, Jeannie, that's he's really been working all these months?"

Jean Courtney shrugged her shoulders.

"I believe he has—just for mere impishness, because of the silly bet he made with half a dozen boys from his College. His hands certainly show that he has been working; they're scarred and rough, and his nails are simply dreadful!"

"Then all I can say is, I hope he'll keep it up," said her husband. "His father has quite made up his mind that it is perfectly useless to hope that he will ever work."

For a few moments they sat in silence. The loud-speaker across the way was braying out a military march, making conversation difficult: they waited in patience until it should be over. In the clash of the final blare of brass they did not hear light, slow footsteps on the grass, passing below the flower-screened lattice.

Mrs. Courtney leaned forward and spoke energetically.

"Robert—if only we could induce Bill to give up this dreadful little boy before Haviland lands! Do let us try. We could make some arrangement—find him a home somewhere. I simply cannot bear to have Bill's chances spoilt with his father for the sake of a stray child from goodness knows where!"

The footsteps on the grass had halted suddenly. Then they moved back the way they had come.

"Well, we can try," Mr. Courtney said doubtfully. "But Bill is an obstinate young beggar when he embarks on a whim."

"Oh, we'll try to make him see reason. After all, he can't have any affection for the boy—he must have picked him up out of pity, and I suppose he was useful about their camp. We must find out if he has any people, and get him sent back if we can. Bill said his parents were dead, but there must be some one belonging to him. Or we can find him work somewhere or other."

"Well, you talk it over with Bill in the morning," said her husband. "I think you'd deal with it better than I could. But don't tell Bill he's a dreadful little boy, or he may be annoyed: he's a queer fellow. And after all, the boy is a civil-spoken youngster. I rather liked him at dinner; he was so obviously

scared, but he kept his head and didn't look awkward. Still, I quite agree that he would be better out of the way before Haviland comes. And then I should be extremely pleased to get Bill out of the way too—I wish he'd go to Burrabri and let his father find him there with his brow wet with the sweat of honest toil!"

"I wonder if he would!" said his wife eagerly. They discussed this inviting possibility and plotted to arrange it.

In a little room at the end of the house Teddy sat on his bed and thought deeply. There was no question in his mind of what he must do. He had not meant to listen; he had had no idea that anyone was on the verandah as he came by until Mrs. Courtney's voice had fallen sharply on his ear. After the first stunned moment he had got out of earshot. But in that moment he had learned enough.

A dreadful little boy! That had been Mr. Pullinger's opinion of him, and until he had known Bill he had believed that it was true. Bill had a way of making you think yourself a fairly decent fellow, but evidently no one else would agree with Bill. The taint of the Orphanage was too strong; he could never shake it off. But at least he could free Bill.

"Well, I must just clear out," he muttered. "That's the only thing to do. I'm not going to spoil his chances with his father: it 'ud be too low-down, after he's been so jolly decent to me. I can start off on my own again."

The thought of long empty roads surged over him; roads that he must trudge wearily, alone. But harder to bear was the thought of all their happy planning. Burrabri—a home—a pony—work with Bill. Bill always there, helping him along, calling him "mate" and "partner"; sometimes just a merry boy, and sometime—oh, best of all!—treating him as if he were a man, and talking of all a man could do if he set his back to it. In his dreams of the good times ahead there had been a vague vision of Bill's father, rather stern and awe-inspiring, but still kind. But always there was Bill. A sob caught his throat.

"I d'know how I'm going to do without him," he whispered. "Nobody'll ever be like him in the world."

Then he stiffened. Bill said a man had to face things and not whimper. He might be a dreadful little boy, but at least he would carry that banner—play the game so that Bill would not be ashamed of him.

"After all, I'm not as silly as I was at first!" he mused. "I didn't know anything then; now I know where I am, an' about railways and roads. Good thing Bill made me study his maps. An' my clothes an' boots aren't too bad."

He made his plans, sitting on the bed. John Price would help him: he had

told him to come back if he needed help. His two shillings—Bill had refused to take them—would buy a ticket that would put him well on the way to John Price's farm, and there was no fear of being tracked by the Orphanage now. If there were not room for him at the Prices' they would help him to get a job. He refused to doubt it.

A voice came at the door, and he started violently. It was Mrs. Courtney speaking.

"Are you going to bed? Do you want anything?" she asked, in her cold, clear voice.

"No, thank you." He answered her good night and heard her steps die away, going back to the drawing-room. Now he was safe, until Bill came home. But he must be gone before that happened. He knew that, stiffen himself as he might, he dared not see Bill again.

There was writing-paper in his room. He scribbled a note rapidly.

"DEAR BILL,—

"Please don't be cross becos I am going away. It would not do for me to stop, becos I expect your Father would think a strange boy would be a bit of a newsance. You don't want to anoy him. I am sory if you are cross with me, and I will not ever forget how deasent you were and took care of me. When I am groan up I will try and find you again, if I have any luck.

"TEDDY."

He put the sheet in an envelope and addressed it, leaving it on his table. It looked horrible, lying there—the end of everything, like a tombstone over the grave of some one you had loved. He turned his eyes resolutely from it, hurrying to make his preparations.

They did not take long. He rolled his few clothes in a bundle and tied it up with string. This was a very easy getting-away: no attendants to dodge, no great walls to scale—just to drop through the open window and go out by the side gate. And one must not think or let one's mind whimper. So, carrying his banner, the Happy Traveller went out into the darkness.

CHAPTER XVII

A LITTLE LOST DOG

BILL COURTNEY came home late in a mood of considerable cheerfulness. Everything was quiet; he went to his room softly, glancing at Teddy's door, farther along the passage. Should he go in and see if the boy were awake? It was queer to be without the small companion whose "Good night" had been the last sound in his ears for so many nights. Bill was not sure that he liked the feeling.

"Oh, I might only wake him," he decided. "I won't go in. How beastly to sleep under a roof again! I wonder how Teddy likes it?"

He slept late in the morning and arrived in the breakfast-room after a hurried dressing. They were all at the table—all but Teddy.

"Good morning, everybody," he said gaily. "Sorry I'm late. Where's my offsider?"

"He is late, too," said his aunt, rather grimly.

"The little beggar!—he must have overslept, like me. I'd better go and hurry him up." His aunt's voice stopped him at the door.

"Oh, he is up," she said. "But he must have gone out. I sent a maid just now to see."

Bill wrinkled his brow.

"Stupid of him," he said. "I suppose he must have gone for a walk—he's accustomed to very early hours. I'm sorry, Aunt Jeannie. He must just go without his breakfast, that's all."

"Oh, he can have something when he comes in," Mr. Courtney said. "Don't worry about him, Bill. Bacon or kidneys?"

"Bacon and kidneys, please," said his nephew, laughing. "I want to enjoy the full luxury of a breakfast I haven't cooked myself!"

He ate and chatted with one eye on the door, expecting to see Teddy at any moment; and afterwards strolled round the garden and looked into the garage, though scarcely in the hope of finding him. Evidently he had gone for a walk, and had missed his way—no difficult thing with a boy unused to streets for so long. Mr. Courtney came out and drove away, remarking that he would keep an eye out for the truant and send him home if he saw him. Bill was becoming vaguely uneasy. He tried the streets, walking round several blocks, but without

success. Finally he returned to the house, to meet Theo on the verandah.

"Your offsider seems to have eloped," she said, smiling. "At least, he's done what all elopers do—left a note on his pin-cushion."

"What!" He stared at her.

"Quite true." She raised her voice. "Jane, are you there? Here's Bill—have you got that letter?"

Mrs. Courtney came out with it in her hand.

"I don't know what it means," she said, looking puzzled. "The maid found it in his room."

Bill read the letter in silence, twice. He folded it up and put it in his pocket.

"Were you talking to Teddy last night?" he asked. His face was grim.

"I? No—he didn't come near us. He spent the evening at the gate, listening to the Stewarts' abominable wireless. Why? Has he——"

"You didn't speak to him at all?"

"I went to his room to see if he wanted anything, and he called out 'Good night' through the door. I did not even see him. But what is it, Bill?"

Bill drew a long breath.

"He has cleared out," he said.

"Cleared out! But why?"

"I'd like to know. Somehow or other the poor little chap has got it into his head that he's a nuisance. And he's gone. I wonder if he took his clothes."

He went off to Teddy's room quickly, returning to find his aunt and cousin in the smoking-room.

"He has taken everything—not that everything amounts to much," he said. "But I can't understand it; he was all right last night. A bit shy and quiet, of course, but that was natural. Look at that, Aunt Jeannie."

He gave her the letter, watching her keenly. A flush rose in her cheek as she read it.

"Did no one talk to him?" Bill asked. "He has never had any fear of annoying my father: he must have got the idea last night. Aunt Jeannie—were you saying anything that he could hear?"

The flush deepened on Mrs. Courtney's face.

"Well, Bill, your uncle and I were certainly talking about him on the verandah," she said. "We were agreeing what a great pity it was that you had brought a strange boy home—that it would certainly be an annoyance to your father. It is, of course, possible that the boy listened. He could easily have done

so, behind the creepers."

"Teddy's no listener!" flashed Bill. "It isn't in him to do a mean thing." He pondered. "Of course, he may have picked up a word in passing—and he's as sharp as a needle. He wouldn't want more than a hint." His face was deeply troubled. "Poor little chap! How on earth am I going to get on his track?"

"I think he has acted very sensibly," said Mrs. Courtney with decision. "Let him go back to his own people, Bill. There never was any sense in your bringing him back with you—your father would have been more annoyed than ever."

"Are you suggesting that I should let him go and do nothing about it?" Bill asked, staring at her.

"Oh, I wouldn't suggest your not finding out that he is safe—if you can. Has he any money?"

"He has two shillings. That won't keep him long."

"Well—no. But he will go to his people, I suppose?"

"He has no people. His father and mother were English, but they're both dead. He has no one belonging to him."

"Then he should go to an Orphanage," stated Mrs. Courtney firmly.

Bill gave a sudden laugh—a mirthless sound that startled his aunt.

"I don't suppose you mean to be rude, Bill——" she began.

"I'm trying not to be," he said. "But your last idea made me laugh. I tell you, Aunt Jeannie, rather than let that little chap go to an Orphanage I'd clear out with him myself if Dad won't put up with him. But I don't believe Dad would be as hard as you are about him."

"What am I supposed not to be hard about?" came a deep, slow voice; and Bill whirled round, his eyes lighting.

"Why—Dad!" he said. His hand shot out, and the man who had entered took it and held it for a moment. They stood looking at each other, father and son: alike in feature and build and in the fearless carriage of the head. Haviland Courtney's eyes studied Bill's face keenly, and something of the sternness in them relaxed. The boy might have played the fool, but there was nothing worse.

Mrs. Courtney and her daughter were greeting the new-comer eagerly.

"But we didn't expect you until next week!"

"I came overland from Perth," he said, smiling at them. "A bit anxious to get back. Robert well?—and all of you? That is good." His glance went back to his son. "I seemed to drop in for a discussion," he said. "May I know what I

am not to be hard about? Is it you, Bill?"

Bill's eyes met his frankly.

"You can be as hard as you like with me, Dad," he said. "I've made a fool of myself—but I wrote and told you all about that. And I've tried to wipe it out. This discussion isn't about me; it's about a better fellow than I am——"

Mrs. Courtney broke in.

"Oh, it's quite ridiculous, Haviland," she said warmly. "Bill came back last night from wandering round the country in his old Ford car——?"

"His—*what* did you say?"

"The first Ford ever built, Uncle," put in Theo. "It has to be seen to be believed!"

"Ah?" he said gravely. "I beg your pardon, Jeannie."

"He has been working like a common labourer—perfectly insane! There was no reason why he could not have worked at Burrabri—or Robert would have had him in the office. But he would listen to nobody, of course. And yesterday he came back with a boy—a little, common strange boy—and calmly announced that he was going to adopt him and take him up to Burrabri when you came home. A boy who had probably never been in a decent house before—his clothes were appalling. And we had to take him in; we could hardly refuse. But you can imagine how we felt about it. I had to put him in the little spare room—and you know how particular I am about my blankets!"

"It does not sound quite considerate, perhaps," said Mr. Courtney, as she paused. He looked at his son. But Bill said nothing.

"I knew what your feelings would be," Mrs. Courtney said. "After all you have had to vex you—cutting your trip short and all!—it did seem hard to Robert and me that you should have this additional annoyance. We talked it over last night—Bill had gone out, leaving the boy prowling about the garden—and we decided that I should talk very seriously to Bill this morning, telling him how impossible the thing was. We would have been willing to find some employment for the boy, though, since he seems to have nobody belonging to him, the obvious thing is to let him go to an Orphanage. At all events, I hoped to make Bill realize that he should be out of the way before you arrived."

"And now I have tactlessly arrived too early."

"Oh, well—there has been a new development. The boy appears to have had more glimmerings of sense than Bill. He has taken his departure."

"Where has he gone?"

"We have no idea. But Bill is actually proposing to go after him!"

“How old is this—er—undesirable?” Mr. Courtney asked.

“He is thirteen,” said Bill, speaking for the first time.

“Of course, we must find out where he is,” declared Mrs. Courtney. “We can’t leave him straying about, since Bill has been so silly as to make himself responsible for him. But if we communicate with the police it will be quite simple: they have all the machinery for dealing with such matters. And then I do hope, since you have come, that you will be able to make Bill realize that he is much too young to take control of any boy, and that he has no right to expect you to have him at Burrabri. I’m very sorry you have to be bothered with such a thing, Haviland—I am, indeed.”

Mr. Courtney looked from the speaker’s flushed, well-kept face to Bill’s grave one. It sounded reasonable and just, the way Jeannie put it: and Bill had done so many foolish things. This was just one of the many; nothing to make a fuss about, if handled firmly. He wished Bill would speak: his face puzzled him, for there was a difference in it, subtle yet definite. And then he suddenly knew what it was. His son had grown up.

“Dad,” said Bill slowly. “If you found a dog on the road—a little stray dog that nobody wanted, all down and out; and if you took him and nursed him till he got well, and found in doing it that he was a clean-bred little dog right through——”

“Clean-bred!” echoed Theo, with a scornful little laugh.

“Clean-bred in everything that matters; white right through. Faithful and plucky and the best little pal you’d ever come across, even if he did make the mistake of thinking you were a sort of god—would you kick him out when you were done with him, Dad?”

For a moment Mr. Courtney did not answer. In that instant the boy on the road was nothing to him, and only his son mattered: the son whose grave troubled eyes never left his, man appealing to man.

Bill misread his silence.

“I thought you’d understand,” he said. “I’ve been a waster, and I suppose I’ve given you enough trouble. I hate to give you any more. But this has become a very big thing to me. I’d only despise myself if I let the little chap down. And I’m hanged if I will! Clean-bred! Why, he’s chucked every hope he had in the world because he was afraid he’d be a nuisance to you! Well, I’m going after him.” He turned on his heel.

Mr. Courtney moved almost as quickly.

“Steady, old chap!” he said gently. “I’m coming after the lost dog too.”

CHAPTER XVIII

JOURNEY'S END

"HAVE you any idea at all where he might go?"

They were in Buttercup, and that faithful lady seemed to be realizing that unusual exertion was demanded of her, for she was displaying a turn of speed quite foreign to her nature.

"He's bound to go back to the country," Bill said. "He hates the city, and it isn't safe for him—I'll tell you about that presently. And I don't think he would go to a district of which he knew nothing. There's a man named Price on the main Southern Road, a fellow with a little farm, who befriended Teddy once before. My main hope is that he'll try to get to him."

"Would he try to walk all the way?" Mr. Courtney asked.

"I don't think so. He had a couple of shillings, and he would probably use that to get as far as he could by train. He has often said how different it would have been if he had dared to use a train to get through the suburbs when he ran away before."

"Before?" echoed his mystified father. "Does he make a habit of running away?"

Bill laughed.

"Oh, I had better tell you the story from beginning to end," he said. "There's quite a lot to tell you."

"I should rather like to hear your own as well," remarked his father. "Your aunt was a little heated—but I suppose there was something beneath her statement that you had become a common labourer?" He pondered. "Unpleasant word, 'common'; I wish your aunt were not so fond of it."

"Oh, I'm afraid I've become hopelessly common in Aunt Jeannie's eyes," said Bill, grinning unrepentantly. "Uncle Robert isn't quite so sure, but his women-folk have definitely made up their minds. They don't like labourers."

"Ah, well, I've laboured a good deal myself, and I hope to go on doing so for many a year yet," said his father.

"Will you count me and Teddy in on that?" asked Bill swiftly.

"Are you coming?" said his father, a light in his eyes. "That's good news, son."

Bill drew a long breath.

"You haven't said a word to me about the 'Varsity business."

"What's the use? It's past and done with; I'm far more concerned with the future. If I had found you still at a loose end—but I haven't. I'll admit I was nursing my wrath until I saw you this morning. But somehow I knew from the first moment that you had found yourself; and that's all that matters to me."

"You're jolly good," said Bill, very low.

"But there's one thing that is exciting my curiosity," said his father. "Why are you cherishing this hoary antique of a car? Where is the Vauxhall?"

"Sold," said Bill: and if his heart sighed his voice showed nothing of it. "I sold her to square up what I owed and bought my Buttercup with what was over. And I will thank you not to speak disrespectfully of Buttercup. She's a sensitive person, and we always treat her like a lady, Teddy and I."

"I apologize to Buttercup," said his father. "Carry on with your story."

It took a long time in the telling, and they laughed a good deal over it, becoming each moment better acquainted. In Haviland Courtney's heart was rising a warm flood of contentment; it seemed hard to realize that only a few hours ago he had been a stern parent, hastening home from across the world to mete out justice, and to endeavour to map out some sort of a future for an unsatisfactory son. Now the things which had seemed formidable were suddenly become little, and there was no task left for him to shoulder. Deep within him lay the thought of the days ahead at the home he loved—of Bill beside him, working with him, loving it too. And there would be a sure place for the little lost dog. If Bill wanted to bring home a very tribe of lost dogs they would all be welcome—now.

"You seem to have made up your mind to keep him with you almost from the first?" he asked.

"Pretty well," Bill nodded. "There was something about him—I can't quite explain it, but you'll understand when you see him. And he was so helpless. I'd never realized what it must be to have nobody between you and the world. One takes things for granted—I'd always done so. Made me think a bit, Dad."

"Yes?"

"When you strike utter loyalty it sets you thinking," Bill said slowly. "Loyalty breeds loyalty, I suppose—anyhow, once you realize what it can be in a small boy, you—well, you just can't be less decent. Not that he ever said much: Teddy isn't a fellow of many words. Even when anything happens to make him entirely happy, when his face seems chiefly big round eyes, he can only bring out, 'Aw, *Bill*!' It says a heap. I liked to hear it."

"And he worked with you?"

“Any mortal thing, once he was strong enough. Cutting ragwort and ferns, cleaning pigsties and cowsheds, gardening—it was all a lark to Teddy. We whitewashed a cowshed for Mr. Cunningham, and got ourselves into a most beastly mess, and he adored it.”

Mr. Courtney chuckled.

“You don’t know anything about the boy’s people?” he asked.

“Not a thing. Teddy doesn’t know himself, except that they were English. But I’m quite certain they were of good stock. You can see it in every line of the little chap. Of course, three years in the Orphanage would take the polish off any youngster of that age; but though his speech is careless and slangy—well, so is mine!—his voice is never, to use Aunt Jeannie’s word, ‘common.’ And he hasn’t an instinct or a thought that falls short of a gentleman’s. His mother must have been particularly fine. It’s rather a heartrending thing to hear him talk about their struggle before she died.”

“Poor souls!” Mr. Courtney said. “I suppose Teddy does not know if she left any papers? Surely there would be some.”

“He says there was a box the Orphanage took. Of course, he’s vague about it—he was only just ten years old, half-starved, and blind with grief. But it stands to reason there would be papers of some sort. Still, we can’t inquire for them.”

“Not just at present,” said his father. “But later on—in a year or so—I see no reason why we should not approach the Orphanage.”

“They couldn’t take him back?” Bill asked suspiciously.

“Oh, no. They would not want to. They would be quite satisfied to know that the boy was in a good home: it would relieve their responsibility in the matter. And he should have the papers, if they exist; I would not like to feel that we lost any chance of finding out who he is.”

“No, I suppose not—though I hadn’t thought of its mattering,” said Bill. “Well, we’ll take him back for them when there’s no longer any possibility of the amiable Mr. Pullinger getting his hands on him.” He chuckled deeply. “To the end of my life I’ll be glad I arrived in time to see Mr. Pullinger take the fatal plunge!”

“It must have been a sight for the gods,” agreed his father. “What a lot I seem to have missed! I should rather like to have seen you as Signor Williams.”

“Yes, that was fun,” said Bill. “Oh, and I’ve a precious document to show you. Look at it carefully, for I expect it’s the only one I’ll ever have!” He fished in his pocket and drew out John Cunningham’s “reference.”

Mr. Courtney read it through more than once. But he did not give it back to Bill. Instead, he put it carefully in his own pocket-book.

"I'll keep that, if you don't mind," he said. "And some day we'll wander in a car over the tracks you took and we'll go and see John Cunningham. I think I should like to know him." He turned to his son. "Bill, what decent people you met!"

Bill nodded.

"Yes. All decent—with the shining exceptions of the Swagman and Mr. Pullinger. Teddy and I used to talk about it. All hard-working and simple and kindly, and ready to go out of their way to help. I used to think about it to myself, and I came to the conclusion that it was the land."

"The land?"

"Yes. Somehow, when you work with the land you seem to get something out of it beside mere living. That may be hard enough, but living isn't quite everything—just the money. But there's growth all round you, and you're part of it—seed-time and harvest, and trees, and the wisdom of animals. There's achievement and bigness, and it gets into people's souls. Do you know what I mean, Dad, or am I talking rot?"

"No," said his father, "it isn't rot at all. And that is why, when the land once holds you, it never loses its grip. It's the bigness under everything that takes possession of a man, even though he may never put it into words."

* * * * * * *

They had left the outer suburbs far behind them. At a wayside inn they stopped for lunch; a hurried meal, for Bill was becoming increasingly restless. He bought some bread and meat from the landlord and stowed the package carefully in the car.

"He'll be hungry when we find him," he said to his father. "I've been trying to calculate how far he can have got—I don't think there's any chance of his reaching Price's place before nightfall."

"And if he is not there?"

Bill's face was gloomy.

"Of course, I've thought of that. It's only a chance, and I didn't see any other clue to follow. If he isn't—well, there's nothing for it but to call in the police, I suppose. And that means the Orphanage. Dad, I can't let him go back! He trusts me so completely. You'll help me fight the Orphanage for him, won't you?"

"Oh yes, I'll put up a very good fight," said Mr. Courtney serenely. "I

don’t think you need worry, Bill. Orphanages are only human, after all—they won’t keep a boy some one wants very much.”

“I wouldn’t like to think they had him, even for a night,” Bill said. He drove along, looking eagerly ahead at every turn, scanning the paddocks to right and left. In so wide a country, how easy to miss one small boy!

They came upon him quite suddenly in the end. He was sitting by a creek that crossed the road, spanned by a little bridge: but for Bill’s close watch they had almost passed him by. He heard the grinding of Buttercup’s gears as Bill jarred her to an abrupt stop, and he rose to his feet and looked with steady eyes at the two tall men who jumped out and came towards him; a tired small boy, but unafraid.

“You oughtn’t to’ve come,” he said.

“Oughtn’t I?” Bill answered. “Why not, when I’d lost my partner?” He put his hand on the thin shoulder and shook him gently, his face alight with relief. “It wasn’t playing fair to run away from me, Teddy.”

Teddy flushed.

“ ’Twasn’t from you. But I had to, Bill. I didn’t know how dangerous it was for you to have me. You’d better let me go. I’d only spoil your chances with your father. They said so.”

“Did they?” Bill laughed. “Well, this is my father. Is he going to spoil things, Dad?”

“They’re too big to spoil,” Haviland Courtney said. He shook the boy’s hand gravely. “As far as I can see, Teddy, this son of mine won’t settle down on Burrabri unless he has you. And goodness knows I need extra hands on Burrabri!”

Teddy looked at him, and no words would come. It was the look of the lost dog who finds home.

“So that’s all about it,” Bill said. “Why, you old ass, Teddy, did you think I’d let you go? Did you think when I’d found a real good mate I’d lose him?”

“Aw, *Bill*!” said Teddy.

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