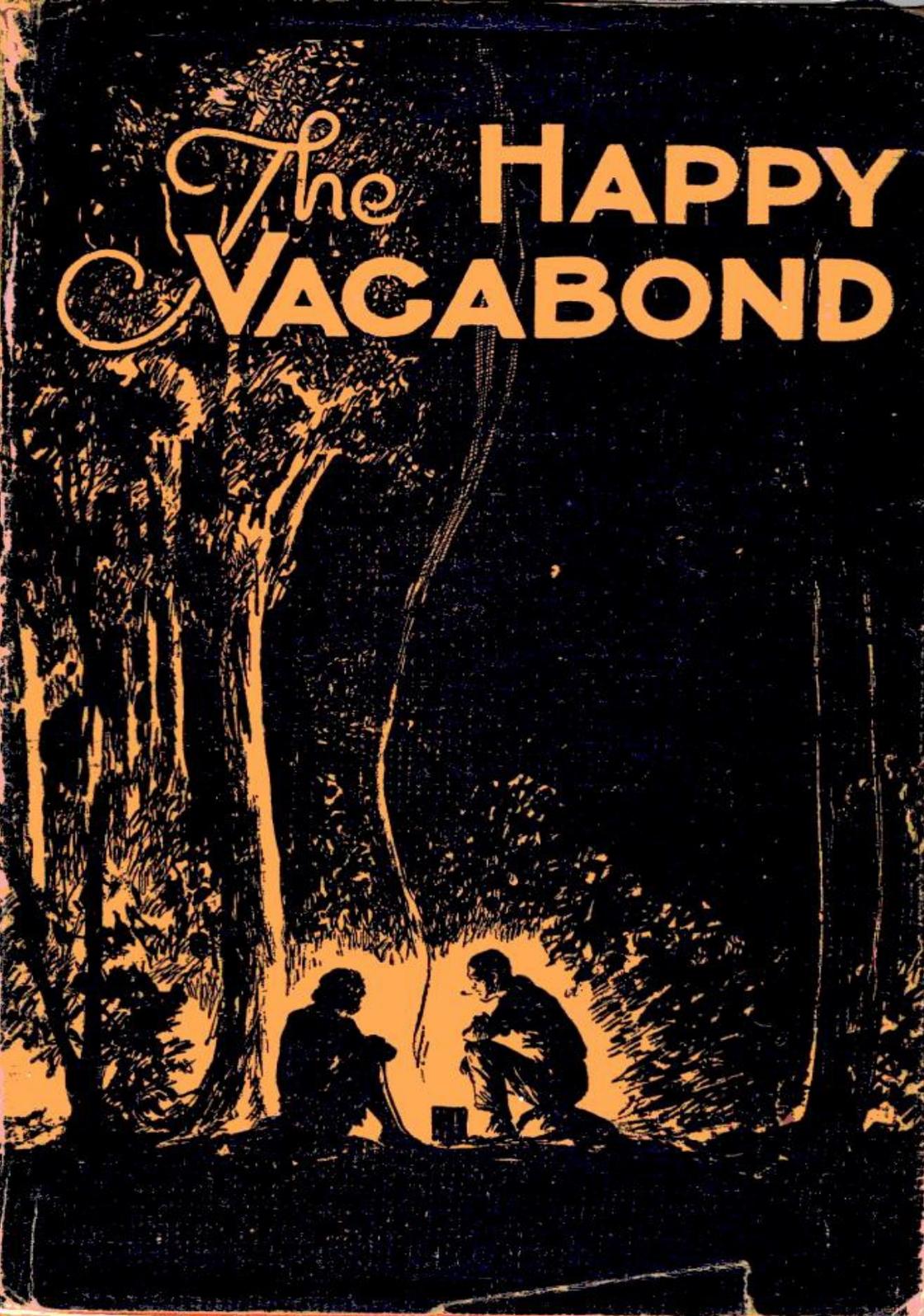


The HAPPY VACABOND



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THE
HAPPY VAGABOND

BY
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AND
HILARY LOFTING

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M.F.

H.L.

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BROWN BREAD AND BUTTER

It was evident that, even for the highly exclusive community known as the Delamore Golf Club, something unusually important was in process. The parking paddock behind the professional's shop was full; a number of impatient-looking saddle-horses glared from the railing of the new paddock; a couple of ornamental buggies glittered in the shade of the big gum-tree; even the Delamore motor-bus was languishing in the midday glare. The clubhouse was as full as the parking paddock; sports sweaters and jumpers of all hues of the rainbow, and plus fours of all imaginably surprising checks, diagonals, and herringbones were dotted all about the rooms and the wide veranda; and the tinkling noise of chattering light voices mingled with that other potent tinkle of glasses and cups-and-saucers.

The event that had brought all these careless, ornamental people together was obviously over. The golf-course was empty, save for three old gentlemen putting on the eighteenth green and a groundsman in the distance. The steward was trying hard to work out some way of lunching twenty tables in a room built to accommodate twelve; at the back of his harassed mind he looked forward to the end of the day with fervent gratitude that the final of the Raven Cup was not played off every day of the week. What with special morning-tea parties, special lunches—why, there'd be enough cold meat and poultry to feed every member for a week of Sundays.

In the big semicircular corner of the veranda a very special morning-tea party was being held, with the beautiful Miss Torrance as hostess. On the flower-decked table, in the place of honour, the Raven Cup twinkled out of a cloud of asparagus fern; Miss Torrance's half-dozen guests were obviously very sensible of the honour of taking their morning-tea round the sacred cup. All save one—a young man leaning against the veranda rail a little apart from the group round the table, a distinctly bored expression in his elfin eyes. This expression was surprising; not only was the young man this year's winner of the famous Raven Cup, but he was also the fiancé of Miss Elaine Torrance, the much more famous Melbourne beauty.

Her blue eyes rested coldly for a moment on this young man's face. "You look bored, Michael," she said. "Does fame pall so soon? Think of your name and prowess in all this evening's newspapers and all to-morrow morning's. And come over here and have a cake for being such a clever little golfer."

Michael's eyes smiled, a shadowy little crinkle starting into life at the corner of each; but there was a worriment, a half-puzzled listlessness behind the smile. Somehow this smile seemed to come vaguely into his voice.

"Of course I'm not bored, Elaine," he said, standing up and walking over to the table. A very personable young man, with a nice taste in the blending semitones of tweeds and flannels, the tie and the socks and the handkerchief—almost too nice a taste, perhaps, for the Australian scene. The English precision of his speech condoned and explained this fastidiousness, however, as that slight greying of his trim hair at the temples gave an added distinction to his thin, half wistful, half confident face. The war, whose echoes were not yet stilled in the world, may have put that challenging reticence into his face; it was not six months since his discharge. The smile deepened as he looked at the plate of luscious creamy cakes beside his cup.

"Haven't you got anything simple?" he asked. "Some plain bread and butter, or something like that?"

She glanced up at him, the beginning of a frown between her fascinating eyes. "Of course I haven't any bread and butter, Michael. Don't be absurd."

A tall man at the other side of the table clicked his heels together and bowed abruptly; his effusive eyes seemed to flash defiance at Michael. "How shall there be anything but sweetness on the table, monsieur," he said, "with all the sweetness in the world at the head of it?"

The frown became a conscious smile, and the tired look flickered into Michael's face again. "Perhaps you're right, de Frontenac. You try one of the cakes, then."

The heels clicked again, and the sudden bow followed. "With all my heart," de Frontenac protested, taking the largest, most bilious-looking cake, while Miss Torrance's conscious smile seemed to gurgle.

Michael glanced at the two faces and put down his tea-cup. "Do you mind walking home, Elaine?" he asked. "We can just manage it by lunch-time."

"Yes, if you insist. But it's hot, and there's the car, and——"

"De Frontenac can use the car, and tell Willard about all the sweetness in the world. I'd like a word with you, if you have the time."

She rose, a definite chill in her manner now. "Certainly. As the hero of the day I'm sure you've earned that. I hope you'll like it."

Really unconscious of the awed, admiring glances of the scattered groups of members, he waited for her by the entrance, feeling the rich sunshine soaking into him. Over by the fourteenth tee he could see that belt of white gum-trees stretching to the edge of the fairway—how many times had he thought how splendid they looked compared with the artificial excellence of the Delamore fairway and greens! Since his first sight of this sumptuous southern land he had loved it, had meant, if ever his wanderings ceased, to let them cease here in this outpost of sunshine. There was a truth, a reality, here, besides the gorgeous beauty——

She came down the steps, and he joined her, falling into step with her as they walked round the drive to the gates. The admiring glances followed them until they turned out of the gateway and vanished.

"There's something on your mind, Michael," she said in the road, "something which doesn't improve your manners. Is it de Frontenac?"

A sudden vision of the over-dressed Frenchman trying to be an Australian sportsman made him laugh. "Good lord, no," he told her.

Recording the laugh in her memory, she turned her fascinating eyes towards him, the cold smile stirring in their depths. "Is it me, then?"

"Partly you—and partly something else."

"We'll begin with me. Anything wrong with me?"

He looked at the rich embodiment of Australian beauty beside him, the hair like spun gold, the Viking blue eyes, the upright, heroic body. She seemed the very type of the land that had so haunted him about the world, the pallid, outer world.

"No, nothing wrong with you, of course. I was wondering if you could——"

"Yes?" she prompted in the pause. "If I could——"

"Listen, Elaine. I won the cup to-day because I wanted it for you, to balance a letter I got this morning—a letter from home." The crinkle hovered beside his eyes as he turned and looked at her. "I don't suppose it's going to make any serious difference, but—well, it is, as you said, on my mind."

Some unusual seriousness in his flippant manner made her fine face grave. "Tell me," she said. "Have things gone wrong at home, Michael?"

"Yes. Uncle David, my trustee, has been buying dud stock in the war-time jamboree they are having over there. It's better to tell you at once: my income from the business has vanished."

She caught her breath and glanced at him from the corners of her eyes.

“The whole of your income?”

“Yes. There’s something like a thousand pounds of the capital left, which he has paid into my Melbourne bank by this mail. There was eight hundred or so there already. . . .”

She waited, but he said nothing more.

“Do you mean that this £1800 is all the money you have in the world?”

“Yes, Elaine.”

He, too, waited, his ears keen for the tones of her voice and his face very grave. She stopped in the road and faced him.

“You are a beggar, then, compared with yourself last month?”

“Not entirely,” he said, ignoring the hard edge that he had expected in her voice. “Old David offers me a sort of managership of his own business—to go in and earn it, drawing a manager’s salary all the time until I can be the manager.”

“A good salary?”

“Two thousand a year.” He ignored the hard edge again, and the sudden brightness with which she turned her eyes up to his.

“That would be all right, Michael. We could have a little flat in London, and do some entertaining. Perhaps the salary would improve. . . .” A fugitive vision of the white gum-trees marching into the Delamore fairway crossed his mind. “You are somebody, you know, with your war record, and——”

“You don’t know Uncle David, Elaine.” A certain heaviness had crept into his tones. “His letter only just apologizes for cutting the ground permanently from under my feet, and the rest of it is full of sanctimonious protest that he can’t see his dear dead sister’s boy in want or cast adrift. So he and his fellow-directors have fixed up this charity stunt for me.”

“Well? I think it was very kind of them.”

He looked at her, but made no comment on her remark. “We should get that sort of thing from him whenever we saw him, and I should get it every day and all day in the office. Besides——”

“Besides what?”

“I thought of taking this money that’s left and borrowing some more from old David and putting it into Willard’s place here—he wants a young man as partner, he said, having no sons or relations. In that way we could stay in Australia——”

“Buy a share in a small station and bury myself in Australia? I wouldn’t think of it.” There was no want of definition in her attitude now. “Why, it’s to get out of Australia that I want—that’s why I——Can’t you see, Michael, that I should be buried permanently in this twopenny-halfpenny place of Willard’s? I couldn’t——”

“Not if it were my dearest wish, saving your presence, to stay in Australia?” His voice had regained its habitual note of flippant irony, but no smile crinkled the corners of his grave eyes. “Don’t you see, my dear girl, that——”

“I see one thing very clearly, Michael. That you have made up your mind to stay here, and that that means that you are demanding your freedom. Very well. You shall have it.” She slipped off her glove and handed him her engagement ring. “Perhaps some other lady——” she said, and walked up the steps of the Willards’ veranda and through the doorway without looking back.

For a moment he stood, looking at the place where her beauty had been. So it had been all self, then. He turned at last and walked back into the Willard garden, a grey shadow on his

vivid face. Far-off memories crept back to him, of wanderings before the war, the easy, pleasant softness of that old life. Was it his own fault—had everything come so easily to him that now, at this first heavy blow, everything must fall away, to teach him? He remembered his first vision of Australia—abruptly the memory of his bitter loss seized and shook him. She had been Australia, radiant and triumphant in her beauty.

He found himself at the garage door as the big gong for lunch boomed through the house behind him. Lunch . . . all those faces round the table . . . he stared bleakly at the man cleaning down the car that had taken them to Delamore, to his empty triumph in the Raven Cup. His motor-bike . . . a long hard run, all out, under the sunshine. . . .

“Will you see that a message is taken to Mr Willard,” he said to the man, “a message to say that I can’t face lunch—that I have a headache?”

“Very good, sir,” the man replied, thinking it was queer how a man’s face could change in a few hours.

The air was good. Its hard Australian definition braced and steadied him, as the need for keenness and concentration in driving at this terrific pace swept everything else out of his mind. Happily the road was good; mile after mile shot past him in a sort of steady rhythm which had an even sanity, an effortless quietude, that soothed and inspired. His eyes watched the road and the bends, and the engine throbbed and boomed beneath him; the clumps of trees, the outposts of the bush, showed first as shrubs, swelled suddenly, and suddenly vanished behind him. That was all—all there was in the world.

One other thing there was: a deep, hard rut in a stretch of the road running to a sharp bend in a hollow. Providence drove his front wheel into this rut, and there locked it, he going all out on a high-powered motor-bicycle. The impact of the sudden cessation of demoniacal speed swept him over the handle bars and threw him, a huddled heap, beside the deserted road. Here a swooning darkness shot with fire enveloped him on the instant, and the huddled heap was still.

Dusk had fallen when the heap stirred and rose difficultly to its feet, disclosing itself a blood-stained, haggard man, swaying gently at first, but gradually steadying enough to take stock of his whereabouts.

There was the bicycle still stuck fast in the rut in the deserted road; and here was himself, battered and shaken, cut about the head and face, but still alive. What to do? He had no least notion of his distance from a township, or even of his position on the map at all. . . . In this twilight, this gathering darkness, it would be hard, probably impossible, to find out——

Was that a light through the trees, that faint glimmer below the bend?

He found walking as difficult as standing, but somehow he made his way towards the flickering, beckoning gleam. It seemed to be some distance into the bush; he had stumbled to the edge of the bend and over a faint track before he came to the clearing where the light revealed itself as a fire, a comfortable-looking fire crackling merrily against the background of the dusk.

Michael paused and stood swaying vaguely on the rim of the firelit circle. How quiet and somehow real this looked. . . . A caravan, like the gipsies’ horse-drawn houses of childhood memory; an old horse grazing in the shadows; a man bending over a violin, crooning to it while he played “Annie Laurie” as if there were nothing in the world but sweet Annie Laurie; and a girl, a little girl of perhaps twelve, who leaned towards the fire watching a billy. The firelight caressed her hair and her watching eyes, making the clearing and the rosy circle seem like home

—that was it: it was home. The father at his violin and the daughter making his tea, the day's work or wandering done.

The old tune crept caressingly into Michael's mind, soothing and lulling the bitterness. Presently, leaning against a gum-tree, he opened his mouth and caught up the phrase trembling on the violin. The shadows seemed to gather in to hear the radiant sound as the beautiful tenor voice flowed out into the night. The man glanced up and paused, his surprise showing vaguely in his pallid eyes; the girl caught her breath and stared into the singer's face, watching him breathlessly until the heavenly sound had ceased. The last faint echoes faded into the silence, and the man put down his violin and stood up, the troubled pallor in his eyes changing to concern as he saw Michael's head and face.

"You're hurt—you've had an accident," he said. "Rosa, bring me some water and a towel, quickly." She took her eyes from Michael's face and slipped up the steps of the caravan as he reached the fire and subsided suddenly on the rug. "You have a wonderful voice," he heard the man say, but thinly, as if he were speaking from a distance. Suddenly the fire and the murmuring dusk vanished. . . .

But only for a moment. As the tin dish and towel appeared beside him he came to again. "I'm sorry," he said. "You looked so happy here. I shouldn't have disturbed you——"

"Put your head down," the girl said. "I believe you've been fighting."

"No, not fighting. My bike found a rut like a steel trap and threw me——"

"Stop talking," she told him. "How do you think I can do your chin if it's wagging all the time. Daddy, will you bring me the plaster and the ointment, please?"

"There, now," she went on when the two strips of plaster were in place. "Now you can smoke or sit and think while I get your supper and go on with ours."

Michael looked at the caravan and the old horse, at some pots and pans hanging from the back of the caravan, at the clothes of the man and this child. This was a working camp—he had no right to hospitality here. "I say, won't you let me pay for—for things? I don't know where I am, or I wouldn't have bothered you. But I can——"

He felt the sudden stillness in the atmosphere, and looked from cold face to face. A light danced first in the child's eyes, and she laughed and turned to the fire.

"But you've sung for your supper," she said, "and now you shall have it."

She took the billy off, and began a little murmuring song as she busied herself with cups and plates—a foolish, jangling song—

Here's Tommy Tucker,
Sings for his supper—
What shall we give him?
Brown bread and butter. . . .

Michael lit a cigarette and sat watching her hovering in and out of the firelight.

How can we marry him
Without a wife?
Here's Tommy Tucker. . . .

The meal over, he and the man brought his bicycle into the camp, and dried the plates and cups she had washed.

"Bring our guest a rug, Rosa, dear, please. He'll want to sleep soon, after the shock of his spill."

"Tommy Tucker's rug? Certainly, Daddy."

Michael looked into the fire and smiled his radiant smile, the shadowy crinkle coming and going beside his eyes. He was taken in, unquestioned, unauthenticated. The smile deepened; the bitterness was sleeping now. He felt that he had taken the pain and loss, and left it all in the hands of the rich Australian night beyond the rosy circle. She could deal with it, in her large, magnificent way; for him this fire and these kind hands were the escape, the escape to home, he allowed himself to add.

Daybreak had become dawn before he got the fire properly lit. He looked up from it to the man's pale eyes watching him. "You are early, Mister——"

The crinkles flickered suddenly beside the elfin smile.

"Tucker, Thomas Tucker, I think Rosa said was my name."

"Mr Tucker," the man added, laughing gently; "you are early. The tinkers are not too bad at early rising, but you beat us, Mr Tucker."

"Tinkers?"

"Yes." He sat down, throwing twigs on the fire, and looking thoughtfully at them. "We are tinkers, you know, going from house to house—in the tradition of tinkers. Gerrard is our name."

Tommy Tucker was lost in thought for a moment. The Raven Cup crossed his mind, and Elaine, and Willard; that balance at the bank flickered in and out. He looked at the man beside him, at the bustling fire, the quiet old horse, and the caravan. All this in the Australian dawn, on the brink of summer. . . .

"I don't know anything about tinkering," he said; "but I'm a fairly good vet, and"—he paused to think for a moment—"I can tune pianos—I suppose there would be a good many pianos in the country districts. Could you put up with me for a few days, Mr Gerrard?"

"Of course we could, Mr Tucker." Rosa brought the billy and set it on the fire.

"Good morning, Tommy Tucker," she chanted. "How are your aches and pains?"

"Mr Tucker is joining us for a few days, my dear. He is a vet and a piano-tuner."

"Good-oh! But that doesn't mean that he'll be let off singing for his supper every evening, does it?"

Tommy Tucker laughed. "Why, no. I'll sing for my breakfast, if you like."

"Let's make him sing for every meal, Daddy. Then the whole camp will be working; he might not get a piano to tune or a sick animal to make well every day. Is it a go, Tommy Tucker?"

"It's a go." He smiled down at her brown, keen face. "My aches and pains are gone, but it's hard to sing with a stiff face. Do you insist?"

"I insist," she said preemptorily. "I know more about those cuts than you do. Sing."

Presently "Bois Epais" came stealing crooning on the silence, the soft phrases filling the morning. Michael's head voice soared up and drooped in the final silence, making an ineffable sweetness of sound like a bloom on the quietude. Rosa watched him hungrily; his voice stripped all the gallant dominating bonhomie from her, leaving the child a still, listening figure without any consciousness save that of the sounds he made. When he had done she sighed.

"Oh, Tommy Tucker, brown bread and butter will never pay for that, I'm afraid."

A momentary gravity banished his smile.

"Plain bread and butter is the best payment for anything, I think."

Three more dawns and dusks had gone when in a new rosy circle of firelight Mr Gerrard put down his violin and looked at Tommy Tucker.

"You like the life, don't you, Mr Tucker?"

"Yes. I hadn't dreamed that there was such a life."

“Nor I, when Rosa and I began it.” He took the cigarette that Tommy offered him. “My bad health was the cause of our beginning it—that and my eyes. Rosa’s mother had been dead for some years, and I got careless about my health, with no one to look after me. I found that I couldn’t see as well, that the figures in the ledger were often blurred. So I went to the doctor, and he was very grave about me and my chances of being able to see at all soon.”

He paused and flicked the cigarette ash into the fire. Tommy waited in silence.

“Since then we have spent all my savings on doctors and oculists and hospitals, and my eyes are steadily growing worse. . . . Part of the general treatment is to keep out in the open air and live as much like a primitive man as I can, and so we started this. I knew enough about tinkering to make it possible, and here we are.”

“Is there no hope for your eyes?”

“Only an impossible one. You see, Mr Tucker, we are really caught here now. So much has gone in the effort of getting this life of the open air that now there is nothing else. Rosa”—he glanced over at the figure of the child sitting gravely knitting at the other side of the fire—“has had no education since she was practically a baby. This is no life for her at her age; she should be at a good boarding-school instead of roughing it about the country roads with me, living the life of a tinker. In five or six years she’ll be grown up. . . .”

His voice faded away, and he sat staring into the fire. Tommy sat in silence for a long moment before he stirred, flicking his cigarette butt into the darkness beyond the caravan.

“What is that impossible hope for your eyes?” he asked. “You seem to be telling me that you are going blind. . . .”

“I *am* going blind. . . . and the hope is quite impossible.”

“What is it?”

“A treatment called the Paravane Cure. It means an operation and months of observation by the specialist, and its cost will be at least two hundred and fifty pounds.” He sighed, and his pale eyes seemed to shine at the thought of an impossible boon, a lifelong blessing within sight and yet far beyond his reach. “Which is, of course, as absurd as to hope for a decent education and environment for Rosa. . . .”

“This is urgent, this Paravane treatment?”

“Oh, yes, it’s urgent,” he said wearily; “but that doesn’t make it possible. In a year or less I shall be stone blind, Dr Savage says. Blind,” he repeated, all the weariness in the world in his voice, “blind. . . .”

The Australian night stirred gently under a wandering breeze. So rich and full of sumptuous life, Michael thought; and here, at its heart, in a small firelit circle in the trees, a man going blind. Never to see the night or the day again. . . . Tommy uncrossed his legs and smiled.

“I have some money,” he said, “and I like this life. In a fortnight you could teach me all the rough tinkering I should be likely to need. Will you sell me the caravan and horse, and the goodwill, for seven hundred and fifty pounds—half for the Paravane treatment and half for Rosa’s schooling?”

Mr Gerrard’s vague eyes opened wide in indignant amazement.

“Certainly not,” he said sharply. “The whole turnout is not worth twenty pounds. Isn’t it getting near bedtime, Rosa, my dear?”

“Not yet,” Tommy put in before she could reply. “And don’t be angry. Will you let me lend you the money?”

“Certainly not,” Mr Gerrard repeated as sharply as before. “There is no chance of your being ever repaid. Did you water Bonny to-night, Rosa?”

“I did,” Thomas Tucker told him. “If you knew what you have done for me you would know also that repayment cannot possibly come into the matter. If you accepted, I should still be in your debt. Won’t you accept?”

The veiled eyes stared coldly at him in the flickering light. “How can you think I would accept, Mr Tucker? A man can be honest, if he cannot see.”

Michael was conscious of a little softening in the rigidity of Mr Gerrard’s attitude. There was a faint, half-ashamed smile in his eyes as he went on.

“I suppose I am being ungracious, Mr Tucker. But you must see my position, as you must see also how the suggestion, the least suggestion, of charity seems to a man who is going blind.”

He sighed heavily and turned from Tommy to look round the camp once more, as if he were hungry to see all that he could before it was too late. When he turned back the smile was stronger.

“Let us find something more cheerful to think about; we’ve had enough of miseries. Rosa, bring me my good violin. I think the occasion calls for a merry tune—thank you, my dear.”

He took the violin tenderly from its case, and sat looking at it for a moment before putting it to his chin. The deep colour of the wood gleamed richly in the firelight.

“One of my dreams, one of the straws I clutched at, was this violin. It used to belong to a rich old man, an eccentric, who died suddenly; there was a sale of his property at Baloo, a little town we were passing through. And I bought this—needless to say, very cheaply. I have imagined that if I could get it to Sydney I might find that it was valuable, really valuable, as some violins are——”

Tommy held out his hand. “May I see it?” he said. “I know a little about——”

Rosa came over and stood looking down at him as he took the violin. A sudden flame in the fire shot up, showing the three intent faces and the rippling gleams on the violin. For a space Tommy turned it over, examining it in detail, his eyes growing more intent with every moment. His examination over, he sat with the violin across his knees staring into the fire. Suddenly he looked up, a new strong light in his elfin eyes.

“You were right,” he said, his voice ringing with hope and confidence, “you were right. This is a Strad, true and unmistakable. It would be cheap at a thousand pounds—probably three thousand is nearer its value.”

He stood up, towering over Mr Gerrard and Rosa, his eyes alight and all his personality at concert pitch. “Now,” he said, a triumphant laugh rippling through the word, “this is the hand of Providence. Sell me your Strad for seven hundred and fifty pounds—and I make money out of you——”

The sudden flame died down and the rosy twilight came back. Mr Gerrard sat so still that, but for the atmosphere of tension, Rosa and Tommy could imagine that he wasn’t there. She looked up into the elfin, crinkling eyes.

“Is it true?” she whispered. “Is it true?”

His great laugh pealed out in radiant triumph. “As true as the night,” he said, throwing his arms wide; “as true as the beautiful night watching us and guiding our hands to the Strad he bought for a song. Give thanks,” he commanded, “give thanks!”

His voice fell a tone as his hands dropped gently to her arm. “He will see now, child, and you can learn all the graces that you wish.” His elfin eyes peered down into hers that were filling with tears, watching, watching.

“And the joke is that I make money out of it—we all make money.” A thought struck him, or

seemed to strike him. “Throw in the camp and Bonny, Mr Gerrard,” he said, turning from Rosa to her father, an irresistible power of persuasion in his manner; “then I can keep for a while the good life you’ve shown me. Teach me this tinkering, and then go down to Sydney for your eyes, your eyes back again, and the night and day to see—all the glory to see, the glory that was slipping into darkness——”

But Mr Gerrard keeled suddenly over, snapping the atmosphere of tension. Mr Gerrard had fainted, his pale eyes that were soon to be strong and vivid again closed in radiant hope.

Summer was higher in the land when a man with vague, uncertain eyes, a brown girl, and a vivid-looking stranger stood on the platform of the Quincy station, waiting for the Sydney train and the long run south. The girl looked up into the vivid man’s laughing eyes.

“Will you sometimes sing for your supper, Tommy Tucker?” she said, a little catch in her voice, “and sometimes have brown bread and butter for it?”

“Of course I will. Bread and butter will be my staple food, Rosa. And I am a tinker and a minstrel and a vet, so——”

“Yes, I know. But it’s the singing for your supper that I mean.” Her eyes left his to look along the track, the track to Sydney, for a moment, before they came back, peering intently into his again. “Of course, there will only be bandicoots and the night to hear you. But you love the night, don’t you, Tommy? You can sing to it for love of it.”

“Yes. It was my sanctuary that day my bike threw me”—he paused, remembering his stumbling towards the light flickering in the trees, his finding the rosy circle; the Australian night had done that—plucked him out of bitterness and shame, and given him work to do—“yes, I can easily sing to the Australian night, and the bandicoots if they care to hear me, Rosa.”

“Oh, they will care to hear you, Tommy.”

The train came round the bend and stopped at the platform. Presently it gathered speed again, and Thomas Tucker, tinker and vet, stood alone on the deserted station. His face was grave and sorrowful for a moment, but presently the elfin smile flashed into his eyes.

At dusk he found a clearing and drove Bonny carefully into the bush. Soon the fire was lit, flickering on the caravan in the shadows and on the man bending over the locker. A violin case filled one end, and Tommy drew it out and looked at it, the smile hovering at his lips.

“I might get a fiver for it, if I sold it carefully,” he told himself, half aloud.

He put the billy on the fire, found the brown bread and butter, and paused, sitting back on his heels. The bandicoots and the night. His head went back and his lips opened; all the noises of the night fell still, in waiting, as the splendid voice crept softly out into it, gathering its sumptuous volume as the phrases multiplied:

A wandering minstrel I,
A thing of shreds and patches. . . .

THOMAS TUCKER, VOCALIST

The lady in the deep chair turned rather languorously towards the boy on the stool beside her.

“But, Jacky, dear, eighteen is a beautiful age,” she murmured. “I wish I had any hope of seeing it again.”

The boy’s bright face flushed in adoring response.

“All ages are the same to you, Elise,” he said. “But eighteen is a silly sort of half-way age for a man. He is neither one thing nor the——”

“You don’t know anything about it till you’ve lost it,” Major Ovenden put in gently. “When I was eighteen I was at Sandhurst, champing at the bit to get to India. And many a time in India I wished I was back in Sandhurst, champing at the bit.”

The boy laughed, the flush still on his face.

“I can’t imagine anyone in India wanting to be back anywhere, sir; it would be like being in Tahiti and longing for a sight of Redfern again.”

“Well, that can be imagined, John, you know.” Major Ovenden’s precise English tone seemed to put a quiet distinction into the most ordinary sentence. “I dare say it has happened more than once.”

“Not at eighteen, though, Major,” the languorous lady murmured. “We who are drifting as gracefully as we can towards the dread thirties know that.”

The Major’s eyes were a little hard as they rested on the lady’s fascinating profile. In the dappled shade of the big turpentine one could almost imagine that her thirties were yet to come.

“In my own near vicinity of twice thirty, Mrs Warwick, I am perhaps past the age of judging. Another cup of tea?” he said.

“Thank you.” She handed him her cup, but young John Clifford sprang to his feet and carried it safely the four feet to the tea-table. The girl pouring the tea smiled up into his eager face.

“In Australia,” she said, “I think eighteen seems to be equal to about twenty-eight in England. It must be the climate.”

“Thanks for the suggestion, Miss Ovenden; but it doesn’t make me feel more than eighteen.”

The flapper lying on the grass shook the hair out of her eyes.

“I say, you people talk an awful lot,” she told them. “Chuck us a cake, John.”

John dutifully chucked the cake, which the flapper caught neatly in one lifted skilful hand. She took a large bite from it, staring steadily over the bite at her brother’s rapt gaze at Mrs Warwick’s profile. “As a twin, John,” she continued, “you disappoint me. A month ago our age was quite good enough for you; now you have a steady nark because you’re not a hundred. I call it morbid.” She stood up suddenly in one supple movement, and picked up her racquet. “I’ll play you a single,” she said, “and give you fifteen.”

John flushed again, but darkly.

“Don’t be an ass, Joan. It’s too hot to play. Besides, you couldn’t give me fifteen in a hundred years. Even supposing that anyone in his senses would be keen on female tennis, as I said, it’s too hot.”

“You’re a bad-tempered pig, John, and female tennis, as you call it, is far too good for you. Why don’t you give up everything decent and healthy, and settle down to making sheep’s-eyes at Mrs Warwick and nothing else? Why don’t you——”

Major Ovenden's voice interrupted mildly, with the obvious intention of pouring oil on waters about to be troubled.

"Why don't *you* wear gloves when you are sparring, Miss Joan? You are altogether too—dare I say too Australian—in your methods. In our older civilization we—we put a little covering on what we have to say, like the sugar on the outside of the pill. In Australia——"

"Oh, everybody knows you hate Australia, Major. And certainly if John is a sample you're probably right. Still——"

She paused, and into the little silence the sound of a running motor hummed and purred in the distance. From the lawn Joan could see the white ribbon of the road climbing the hill; her eyes were watching the approaching car and the single occupant. The car seemed to be cut off at the back, to be a miniature lorry, or to have its carriage converted into a tarpaulin-covered hold-all.

"I wonder who on earth is coming to see you," Joan murmured. "Nobody ever comes to Harrow, and I don't suppose Greyfields is bombarded——" Suddenly she dropped her racquet and clapped her hands. "I believe it's Tommy!" she cried. "Wake up, John. I swear it's Tommy Tucker, after all these ages. Hi, Tommy! Tommy! Come on, John——"

She sped down the drive and opened the gate as the low-hung, queer-looking car reached it. From the driving seat a figure sprang quickly to the ground and took off its cap, disclosing a shock of unruly greyish hair and a lean, brown face which from the lawn seemed to be all smiles and animation. Joan took his arm and hung on it, apparently insisting upon his joining the group under the turpentine. He laughed at her, betraying even at that distance a romantic, magnetic quality in his personality; and presently he seemed to give in, and walked lightly beside her towards the tea-table in the shade.

Joan's face, too, was all delighted animation when they reached the group.

"It is Tommy," she said, beaming at the group. "Isn't that lovely?"

Major Ovenden looked at her companion with a cold "How de do, sir?" for greeting. He would have called him a well-set-up chap, thoroughbred in a sort of a way, and with an extraordinary face, half hard-bitten and half shy. You couldn't tell whether the chap was good-looking or not; all you knew was that you wanted to look at him and listen to him speaking. He was obviously very fit—moved lightly and precisely; and his manner was good. His answering "How d'ye do, sir?" was exactly right—just the proper blend of deference and independence; so was his general inclusion of Mrs Warwick and Miss Ovenden in a slight but definite bow. Young Clifford he greeted with a "Hello, John," and a swiftly held out brown hand. He brought an electric air of keenness, almost of vividness, into the somewhat somnolent company: and Joan was evidently very fond of him.

"Tommy, dear," she said, "I'm trying hard to find some way to introduce you—you haven't got one of those beautiful cards, have you?"

"Yes, I have, Joan (I ought to call you Miss Clifford now; last time I saw you you had a pigtail and were quite different); I always carry my cards. Every self-respecting tradesman does."

Joan made a face at him as she took the card. "It's only three years, Tommy, darling," she said; "and if you think I'm going to call you Mr Tucker, or to answer when you call me Miss Clifford, you can think again." She handed the card to her host.

For the first bewildered moment the Major feared that his lurking suspicion that all Australians were mad had proved itself true. The card read:—

THOMAS TUCKER

VOCALIST

MEALS SUNG FOR DAILY

And the back of it:—

PIANOS TUNED

POTS AND PANS MENDED

SICK ANIMALS MADE WELL

BOOKSELLER

The Major turned the card over again, and decided to take it all as a joke. “Ha, ha!” he said politely.

“But it’s all true,” Joan told him indignantly. “He has the most lovely things in that sawn-off car of his, and he’s a vet and a tinker and tunes pianos. And his voice is heavenly. Sing for us, Tommy; sing for your dinner now, like a good boy. I’m sure Major Ovenden will ask you when you’ve sung for it. Sing ‘Old Madrid.’”

From beneath long and very black lashes Mrs Warwick watched the man. His eyes seemed to recede for a moment, as if he were separating himself from his hearers as human entities; then, without a trace of self-consciousness, he threw back his head and sang.

Before Joan’s eyes and John’s, and the eyes of Mabel Ovenden, a barred window in Spain shone fitfully in a warm darkness. Under it a man poured his heart out in radiant music, a man with a strange, fascinating head, adventurous and yet wistful, strong and yet appealing. The cadences of the old song held all their rich romantic meaning—this lover, too, would die for Spain, Joan and Mabel and John knew, and glory in the dying.

Mrs Warwick and Major Ovenden were perhaps not so easily accessible. To them a queer figure had appeared suddenly in the midst of a customary drinking of afternoon-tea—a man with a golden voice, obviously a gentleman and yet a pedlar, a tinker, and a vet. Ovenden decided that he should certainly have the dinner he had sung for; life at Greyfields was not unmonotonous at times, even with the house full of guests, as at present. Besides, the chap was puzzling and somehow interesting, very interesting. To Mrs Warwick Thomas Tucker was a new kind of man, a kind not at all easy to understand or read, a kind offering a definite contrast to young Jacky Clifford. Nearing forty, she thought, but wearing well and full of life.

Joan sighed as the last phrase drifted gently to silence.

“Thank you, Tommy. That was bonzer. Can he have his dinner, Major?”

“Of course, my dear child. Any friend of yours can have his dinner, as you put it.”

“Good-oh! Now, Tommy, what have you got in the bus?”

The rich tenor rose up again:—

I’ve snuff and tobaccy, and excellent jacky,
I’ve scissors and watches and knives;
I’ve ribbons and laces to set off the faces
Of pretty young sweethearts and wives.

“What’s ‘jacky?’” Joan said in the pause.

“Nobody knows,” he told her solemnly; “but I’m sure I’ve got some.”

“I suppose you’re just camping this trip, Tommy?”

“Yes. But I like camping, you know.”

Joan turned to the company.

“Tommy usually stays with us,” she said, “while he’s doing the district. But mother’s away

—oh, Tommy, have you got ‘The Green Sleeve?’ I’m sick of putting it on the library list——”

“Yes, I’ve got ‘The Green Sleeve,’ and about forty other new novels. Come and have a look.”

“Does this—er—Mr Tucker usually stay with his customers when he’s on his—his rounds, John?”

“Most of them try to get him to stay, sir,” John said; “but he generally refuses, except to personal friends like us. Why?”

“Oh, I was just inquiring,” the Major said thoughtfully.

“John!” Joan’s shout came from the gate. “Come and help me in with these books, will you?”

Ovenden watched the turmoil of young people round the pedlar and his pile of novels, a turmoil which even Mrs Warwick joined in a dainty, half-supercilious manner. From the pedlar’s recommendation of the contents of various books it was clear that he was enough of a critic to enable him to describe his wares. The Major smiled: he would put a little test. If it came off, he would; if not, he wouldn’t.

“Do you happen to have a copy of ‘The Egoist,’ Mr Tucker?” he asked in a pause in the pleasant turmoil.

“Not for sale, sir. But I can lend you my own copy, with pleasure. Will you have any of the others as well—‘Evan Harrington,’ or ‘Diana,’ or ‘Richard Feverel?’”

Major Ovenden smiled again.

“Meredith is obviously an old friend of yours, too. Thank you, but I have them all except ‘The Egoist.’ And won’t you give my daughter and myself the pleasure of having you as our guest while you are in our part of the country?”

The pedlar looked at Joan.

“Oh, do, Tommy,” she said fervently. “They’re quite harmless and awfully nice—do say you will.”

“I was looking at you for your permission, Miss Clifford,” he said sternly. “You introduced me, you know. Thank you very much, sir. I’ll be glad to stay.”

Later, in the small smoking-room off the hall, Joan turned a worried, unhappy face to the pedlar.

“It’s all gone to pot, Tommy,” she said miserably; “I’m so glad you turned up to let me tell you all about it. Mother’s away in Melbourne with Aunt Celia, who’s ill—she had to go suddenly, and so the whole lot of us, including that Warwick woman, were dumped on the Ovendens. Not that mother’s much good to talk to, even if she was here. Isn’t it ghastly?”

“I can’t help feeling,” Thomas Tucker told her presently, “that you’ve left something out. What is ghastly, and how has it all gone to pot?”

“Why, John and this Warwick woman, of course.”

“The vamp?”

“Yes. John’s head over heels in love with her, and he’s eighteen and she’s fifty at least. She’s a widow who came from England with letters to mother and various other people, and she was staying with us when the telegram came from Aunt Celia. Mother’s only going to be away a week or ten days, and so Mabel Ovenden asked us all over here—the Ovendens knew Mrs Warwick slightly in England. And John will marry the beastly woman, and then where will he be? She’s only after his money.”

“Has he got any money?”

“He’ll have £40,000 on his twenty-first birthday, and mother’s such a fool over him that she’ll forgive him anything and keep them supplied with money until he inherits.”

“It *is* rather a pickle, isn’t it? Do these Ovenden people know anything about her—I mean, are they satisfied that she’s O.K.?”

“Oh, yes. I don’t think they like her—nobody could, except that goat of a twin of mine—but they’re all English you know, and they stick together against these Australian natives, doncher-know.”

“They weren’t here three years ago, were they?”

“No. They bought Greyfields at the same time as Bill Dampney——”

“Who?” Thomas Tucker sat up and looked at her.

“Bill Dampney—why?”

“There was a man of that name in my company in France—never mind; go on, Joan.”

“He’s got a sheep-and-wheat place out towards Alton—and that’s another ghastly mess, Tommy.”

“Why?”

“Bill’s dotty over Mabel Ovenden, and she’s dotty over him!” She looked mournfully at him.

“You know, Joan, that doesn’t sound like a ghastly mess to me.”

Joan sighed. “You’re very stupid to-day, Tommy. Don’t you see, old Major Ovenden is rotten with fever or something Indian, and Australia is the only climate he can keep well in. But he hates it—can’t understand the country or the people at all, and loathes us all the time he is being so polite. And Mabel is all he’s got to look after him; so, Bill being a beastly Australian, Mabel breaks her heart and gently turns him down. Don’t tell me you can’t see that.”

“I can see it now.”

“I should hope so. Mabel’s idea is that her father will drop down dead at the idea of her marrying an Australian, and perhaps he would. Anyway, she won’t risk it. So she and Bill are eating their hearts out, and John’s going to marry this Warwick woman, and that old lunatic in there despises us all . . . and nobody cares a row of pins except me.” A suspicious brightness appeared in the usually merry eyes. “So you can imagine how glad I was to see your silly old bus lumbering down the hill.”

“Yes, I can see that, too, now, Joan.” A sudden smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. He remembered the schoolgirl of three years ago and the little girl of the years before that—the devoted friend who never asked him awkward questions, but accepted him as he was, sawn-off bus, peddling, singing, and all. “Carry on, old horse,” he adjured her in the vernacular of three years ago. “There may be a way. Anyhow, carry on.”

“Do you think there could be a way, Tommy?” she asked tremulously, the brightness coming back.

A gong boomed through the house before he could answer.

“The dressing bell!” she said, starting up. “Boot it. And sing the ‘Kashmiri’ and ‘Still Wie Die Nacht’ after dinner. Shake it up—anyone two seconds late is court-martialled and instantly beheaded.”

Thomas Tucker, vocalist, was not one second late for dinner. He appeared at the door as the second gong sounded, his dinner-coat and shirt-front making a fine black-and-white note against the claret-coloured hangings of the hall. Major Ovenden glanced at him with what looked like faintly surprised approval; Mrs Warwick quite obviously approved him; and Joan beamed at him.

The slight touch of ceremonial which the host managed to give the meal did not prevent it from being a very pleasant meal. Mrs Warwick, highly dramatic in black and silver, did her languid best to draw the intriguing pedlar out; but Thomas Tucker was elusive. Yes, he knew London, but it was a good many years ago now—he remembered his first sight of the city and sneaking down to the housekeeper's room on his return to tell them all about it. But it was all shadowy now. Yes, he spent a couple of leaves in Paris—oh, yes, very pleasant place. No; he was alone in the world; no people anywhere, he told her, his disarming smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. Finally Mrs Warwick gave it up and went on with her dinner, with only an occasional puzzled, almond-eyed glance in the pedlar's direction.

But as a singer after dinner he was entirely satisfying. Even the Major's tired eyes became serene and thoughtful as the golden music filled the room. For the space of the song he was back in a Germany to whom 1914 was unthinkable, a Germany of long ago, full of romance and simple charm. It took him back into his youth, into the company of the dreams that were his, many years ago, when the stillness of the night meant something. The Indian "Kashmiri" came nearer these empty days of to-day, yet it, too, had a glow, a fine, keen spirit of renunciation and unrequited longing; the Major was glad of it, and of the beautiful voice which made it so real and throbbing. When silence fell he remained in his memories of the crowded yesterdays, his oblivion a better tribute than the perfunctory applause of Mrs Warwick or the delight of Joan.

John got up and wandered restlessly round the room, throwing open the French windows to the veranda silvered in the moonlight. On the black background of night it was beautiful. Young John stood on the threshold, lost in thought; presently he turned, his eyes on Mrs Warwick. She smiled, and, black and silver like the night, followed him out into the stillness, her pale hands like lilies against her frock. Joan's face twisted into a savage sneer as Mabel Ovenden's patient eyes watched them going—the whole world had gone mad because it was a fine night and Tommy had sung a couple of songs. Mabel's fine face was a study in sorrow and loss; she was obviously thinking of the moonlight and the companionship that might be hers. . . . Joan watched her for a moment, and the youthful sneer vanished. Poor old Mabel! Joan slipped lightly across the room.

"Come out, Mabel," she said, "and see the moon—it's public property, you know."

Major Ovenden watched the two bright figures pass out of the room. All life was before them, and most of it before this queer young man who peddled books and reels of cotton, tinkered the housewives' pots and pans, in this incomprehensible Australia. Thomas Tucker's accent was half English, a sort of echo; the Major knew that he was an Englishman as well as he knew that Thomas Tucker was not his name, nor tinkering and piano-tuning his professions. No matter; his reasons for the masquerade were his own, and, judging by his wide, smiling grey eyes, perfectly honest ones. For the rest, he was a pleasant, well-mannered guest, a much more interesting guest than commonly fell to the lot of the casual host. Ovenden was content to take him on his face value and let it go at that. If you came down to the final touchstone, the man was a gentleman, and that was enough.

The pedlar's sensitive personality was conscious of the general drift of his host's thoughts, and a slight smile remained at the back of his eyes all the time he was doing his best to entertain the elder man. They parted for the night good friends, each with a slight reservation as to the other, but also a full appreciation of his quality. A heaviness, almost a heaviness of defeat, was the background of Ovenden's manner, and Tommy forbore from Australian propaganda.

Something more than casual dislike and misunderstanding was obscuring Ovenden's obviously good critical faculty, and until that something was cleared away he would continue to keep his own counsel as to the country of his adoption. . . .

Mrs Warwick's keen eyes detected no reservation at all in the intriguing personality of the pedlar laughing with Joan in the sunshine of the following morning. A shower in the night had put a clean green frock on the turpentine and the lawn, and Mrs Warwick had slept well; to be thirty-six on a morning like this seemed just as good as Joan's pink-and-white eighteen—if not better. John's motor-bike fussing in at the gate with the mail was a pleasant incident, especially to the accompaniment of covert admiring glances from this engaging man who insisted on the ridiculous name of Thomas Tucker and his equally ridiculous gesture of peddling and veterinary surgery. Altogether, Mrs Warwick liked the bright fresh morning very much, and took her share of the mail from young John with the sweetest of languid smiles. The departure of the twins with mail for Major Ovenden and Mabel was another pleasant incident, which left her alone with Tommy.

He, on the other hand, was clearly thinking more of his pile of accumulated mail and a couple of telegrams than of her; and she judged that, his admiration being registered and established, it would be politic to follow the twins to read her own comparatively uninteresting letters. The man's head would be full of business for the next quarter of an hour, and it would be unwise and impolite to sit with folded hands waiting for his attention.

Tommy, alone, made notes at the foot of three letters and put them aside; the others he tore up. Most of the mail accumulated at his stopping-places had generally answered itself automatically by the passage of time when he received it. One of the telegrams joined the little heap of torn-up paper. The other Thomas Tucker spread out on the little tea-table.

Thomas Tucker, Post Office, Hardwick.—Golden Horn soaring sky-high. Our fortunes are made.

BRINTON.

He read the telegram twice. In the second reading a gradual smile curved his mobile lips, a half-cunning, half-whimsical light gleamed in his elfin eyes. Glancing up and seeing Mrs Warwick coming over the grass with self-conscious grace, Thomas Tucker banished the smile, though the gleam stayed to twinkle fitfully. He left the telegram lying open on the table, and made it clear that business was over by putting the annotated letters in his pocket and rising to give her his chair.

The almond-shaped eyes glanced at the telegram once or twice during the short conversation that followed. Mr Tucker, a most romantic light in his smiling eyes, was heartbroken that he had to go down to the post-office at once in his bus—it was urgent. Mrs Warwick emphasized her disappointment; she was even a little petulant—she had looked forward to a *tête-à-tête* with him. He smiled, told her that business was business, and went to the garage and his bus, leaving the telegram still lying on the table.

In a few moments he was back—he had lost a wire that he must answer, he said—ah, there it was; stupid of him to leave it. . . . Mrs Warwick's petulance had vanished. All the arts and graces of a polished and almost beautiful woman of the world were turned in their dazzling brilliance on Thomas Tucker, vocalist. He, poor bewildered man, was obviously bowled over; a great romance had clearly descended upon him. At last he dragged himself away to his car and this pestilent business of answering wires at the post-office; one could see how he hated to go in his inspired face; one could feel it in the lingering, electric touch of his hand.

But he didn't reach the bus. In the big living-room a lean, wiry-looking figure stood suddenly upright at his entrance and sprang to attention, heels clicking and eyes front. The pedlar looked at the man for a moment, a puzzled frown on his forehead. Then his quick smile drove the puzzlement away.

"Stop that nonsense, Dampney," he said, holding out his hand. "That's ten years ago. How are you?"

Mr Dampney was very well. Slightly reticent, perhaps, in the Australian manner, but obviously very glad to see the man under whose orders he had faced death. His eyes followed Mabel Ovenden about the room, and he seemed to be really conscious only of her presence. Thomas Tucker couldn't help thinking what a fine, handsome pair they made in the contrast of her English fairness and his brown Australian muscle-and-bone. Mr Dampney had come to lunch—a little early, it was true, but that didn't seem to trouble him. The pedlar—whom Dampney addressed as "Major," to Ovenden's quickly suppressed surprise—admired the nerve which had construed an invitation to lunch from the enemy as a permission to arrive at 11.30; Bill deserved the girl, if he could stick Ovenden's frigidity and the nervous strain of drinking morning-tea in this atmosphere for the sake of looking at her in a crowd. He decided to relieve the strain by getting Bill out of the room as soon as he could.

He did that, and presently the shade of the turpentine was lying on two men, one small teatable, and two long glasses which tinkled pleasantly when they were lifted.

Tommy looked at the expressionless face of Bill Dampney and decided to chance it.

"What's Ovenden's nark on you and Australia, Dampney?" he said suddenly.

Half unconsciously Dampney answered his field-officer's voice.

"I think it's a general nark all round, sir," he said, "and we happen to—to concentrate it. It's reasonable enough; he's had a rough spin."

"A rough spin?"

"Well," Dampney began, and paused. He seemed to be in two minds as to his going on or remaining silent. "It was a rough spin," he said at last thoughtfully. "You know what these English families are, especially of the Ovenden type. He had four sons and one daughter; the youngest son was a rotter—went under and vanished years ago, after being kicked out of his regiment and his club, and breaking his mother's heart. Naturally, of course, being a rotter he was the prize exhibit; everybody fell down and worshipped when he looked at them. The other three were killed in France. And the shock killed their mother. Exit the ancient English name of Ovenden."

He paused again, and emptied his glass.

"If you add to that a constitution shot to pieces by a lifetime in Indian military stations you'll agree, Major, that the spin is a rough one. Mabel is the sum total of the balance."

"Yes." The pedlar lit a cigarette. He knew the type; nothing could be more bitter to Ovenden than this solitude in his old age. A man with four sons was surely safe to keep his name alive. "But where does Australia—where do you——"

Dampney's short laugh interrupted.

"I'm the thief who wants the last English Ovenden," he said, a sudden flush rising under his tan, "and to keep her out of England, too. As for Australia—can you imagine a man who has spent his life in the rank snobbery of Indian stations, in the mollycoddling mediaeval rubbish of such survivals, taking the free strength and power of my country to his bosom?" William Dampney, late A.I.F., obviously felt strongly on this point; there was more than a hint of anger and contempt in his voice. "But every mortal thing has been torn away from the poor old cove,"

he went on, his voice softening; “and even I haven’t the hide to press Mabel to fly in his face. You see, Major, she really is the very last of all his possessions——”

“But why should he lose her? Your place is only over the hill, isn’t it?”

Dampney shrugged his shoulders. “I’m Australian,” he said. “The very idea of Mabel’s looking twice at me would kill him, she seems to think.” The shadow cleared from his face as he looked up at the pedlar. “I don’t know why I should unload all this on you, sir——”

“That’s all right. You obeyed orders, sergeant,” Tommy said casually. “Ovenden’s face is vaguely familiar to me, somehow——”

“I thought so, too, when I first met him; but I fancy it’s only that he’s the sunburnt, lean type we’re used to in Australia. Lots of men are like him here, especially in the country.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Tommy’s voice didn’t sound quite convinced as he stood up. “However, carry on, Bill. We’ll have a yarn after lunch; there ought to be some way. . . . I must skin down to the post-office and get through this mail before lunch.”

All the way to the Hardwick post-office that shadowy, elusive memory of Ovenden’s face, or a face like Ovenden’s, crept into and out of Tommy’s mind. Half a dozen times he thought he had run it to earth, but it eluded him again at the last second. Only when he reached the counter of the post-office did anything like a clue present itself.

Mr Tucker got through a deal of business at the small post-office. He wrote half a dozen letters, three of them quite long, and despatched four fairly lengthy telegrams. He was so long in the post-office that he had to get the last ounce out of the bus to reach Greyfields in time for lunch and dodge that summary court-martialing and beheading. Nevertheless, the crinkle came and went at the corners of his smiling eyes while he speeded over the dumpy road, as if only part of his attention was being given to the wheel.

For the inside of a week he devoted himself to the business of peddling, leaving on his rounds soon after breakfast and not returning till nightfall and dinner. He always managed to be home with a quarter of an hour to spare for the change to evening-clothes, and he devoted a good deal of his attention to Mrs Warwick. He picked up a couple of parcels and a fairly heavy mail at the post-office one evening, and the following morning any interested observer might have been surprised to see Thomas Tucker, vocalist, doing his best to spoil a perfectly good, new cigarette-case of fine silver. In the early morning light he rubbed the case on the ground, carefully knocked three dents in it, and tried to dig a hole in the path to the stables with one corner of it. When he had finished it looked like an old, work-worn case instead of a gleaming new one.

In a way, perhaps, some vague reason was supplied for this extraordinary behaviour by Mrs Warwick in the evening. As was her habit, she handed him her 12-inch tortoiseshell and gold cigarette-holder, his part of the gesture being to light a cigarette, fit it into the holder, and hand it back to her, a ceremonial always eyed malevolently by young John Clifford, who cursed himself nightly for not having thought of it before Tommy turned up. To-night, by some mischance, Tommy’s leather cigarette-case was empty.

“So sorry, senora,” he told Mrs Warwick. “I don’t know how I came to be such an ——” A thought struck him. “Do you happen to like Russian cigarettes?” he asked her. “I’ve got half a dozen upstairs—all that are left out of a thousand Duke Boris—I mean, a friend of mine gave me years ago. They’re still in good condition. Do try one.”

She smiled, and Tommy got up, and was back again in three minutes, a battered silver cigarette-case in his hand. He lit a cigarette and put it into the holder.

“Delicious,” she said, holding out her hand for the case. “May I see?”

Half reluctantly he handed her the case. She turned it over, examined the almost obliterated crest in the corner, smiled dreamily, and gave it back to him. Obviously very glad and relieved to get hold of it again, he slipped it into his pocket.

Young John, at this point, manifested his displeasure by kicking over a footstool and walking out of the room.

“You’re a very interesting person,” she murmured. “You peddle books and—and ribbons and laces; you sing like a Covent Garden star; you give me a Russian cigarette from a Grand Duke’s gift to you; you mend pots and pans; and you’ve been trying to rub out the crest on your cigarette-case, which you only happened to show at all because you made the mistake of running out of ordinary cigarettes. . . .”

She looked up to see a shadow on the piquant, elfin face beneath the shock of greying hair. His eyes were veiled, hiding some secret. He spread out his hands in a little gesture, and let them fall again.

“Life casts a man for many parts, senora, and when he has played one out he must forget it and come bravely to the next with an open mind.”

“And you have forgotten that old past in which Grand Dukes and crested silver figured?” she asked, keen eyes belying her languorous voice.

“Every one must forget the past if he hopes to do his best with the future. You misjudge me, senora; you attach too much importance to little passing things, little mistakes that——”

At this point young John entered the room again, having evidently thought better of his malevolence, to be received but coldly by his adored Elise.

It was to be observed that John’s star seemed to decline now. It is crude, perhaps, to say that Mrs Warwick set her cap at Thomas Tucker, vocalist; but she had unquestionably cast a very favourable eye in his direction. He on his part was clearly hard hit; he spent every available half-hour in her company, and exhibited all the signs of being finally trapped in these luxurious coils.

Naturally, John’s temper, not inherently a sweet temper by reason of his mother’s spoiling went from bad to worse. He in his turn exhibited all the signs of extreme youth cheated and thoroughly narked, a circumstance which did not show him in the most favourable light. He felt that he was losing ground; but the adored Elise managed to convey the impression that her favour was not totally withdrawn—he was still her Jacky, as it were, if for the moment he was obscured by the fascinating personality of Thomas Tucker. Which was small comfort to the enraged young John.

Joan remained serenely aloof from the elucidation of these cross-purposes. One would have judged that she was indifferent. A few minutes’ *tête-à-tête* with Tommy now and again seemed to suffice, deep as her affection for him was. She was there if she was needed; but she had withdrawn into a (for her) most unusual background. She even sat in window-seats on the other side of the house when Tommy was singing to Mrs Warwick.

On the present occasion he was not singing to anyone; he was prowling round the veranda. He stuck his head in at the open window and grinned at Joan, who shut up her book and grinned back.

“Walk round the side veranda with me, old horse,” he said, “past the little table in the corner. And just say ‘Yes’ soulfully to everything I say, will you?”

Joan slipped lightly over the window-sill, and began to walk staidly beside him. He was not

very animated until they came within sight of the little corner where the table was screened by a creeper-covered wing of the railing. You could pass the corner a dozen times without knowing who, or if anyone, was sitting at the table. But a bronze house-shoe with a very high heel and eighteen inches of yellow silk stocking were visible at the foot of the screening wing.

"I don't know how it is, old girl, but I seem to be absolutely floored this time."

"Yes," said Joan, as they reached the shoe.

"If I only knew her mind about John," he said fervently, "I'd ask her to-night."

"Yes—oh, yes," said Joan as they passed the shoe and turned the corner to the front veranda.

John, in some miraculous way, found himself alone with Mrs Warwick very soon after dinner. Furthermore, he found himself in the full tide of an impassioned proposal for her hand in marriage. Not to put too fine a point upon it, Mrs Warwick laughed.

"You're a dear boy, Jacky," she said, looking away from the black rage in his face, "and I shall always cherish you in my heart. But consider the difference in our ages—why, I'm not *many* years short of twice your age, Jacky, dear."

John was silent in the pause.

"Besides," she went on smoothly, "I'm sure you are the wrong type for me. I need a husband older than myself, a man of experience and travel, a man——"

John's curt laugh broke his silence.

"Then it all meant nothing," he said savagely. "You were just playing with the kid who thought he was a man." Young John stood up, his face bleak with hurt pride. Somehow he looked more of a man in his defeat than in the days of his romantic adoration. He stared down into Mrs Warwick's face, his lip slightly curled. "I hope your elder man of experience will be a success," he said; "but I doubt if the poor devil will be happy. You are too cunning and too obvious. Good night."

He marched away, and it is to be feared that he slammed the door behind him. A sudden flush had risen under her make-up at the words "cunning" and "obvious." The puppy. . . . Nevertheless, the puppy was cured; some way had been found for that one of Joan's difficulties.

Without undue emphasis, almost without putting it into words, Mrs Warwick conveyed to Thomas Tucker, vocalist, that young John had proposed and been, naturally, laughed at. The moonlight made a halo round her head; Mabel was playing old melodies to her father, who was half asleep in his chair; from the silvered veranda the pedlar could see and feel the serenity of the room. The undercurrent of sadness in Mabel's tunes was not a false note; the room and the ageing man in the arm-chair were sad—sad in their acceptance of the blows Fate dealt, in their inability to refuse to take Fate's as the last word. It was not in blind acceptance——

"Well, Mr Thomas Tucker, have you nothing to say?"

The melodious voice broke into his thoughts.

"What should a poor pedlar have to say to you, senora?"

The rhythmic swinging of her fan stopped.

"Have you nothing—important—to say to me?" she whispered.

He spread out his hands.

"I am a poor man. My income is small—hardly more than enough for myself. I have, perhaps, eighty pounds in the bank—the savings of two years. What could I possibly have to

say to you?"

The fan snapped shut.

"You realize what I have been saying to *you*?" she asked, her voice sharp with impending anger.

"Yes. I am honoured," he answered humbly. "But my first job is to protect you—against yourself. You see, I *am* poor——"

"Do you think it's decent"—the anger was no longer merely impending—"to drag this masquerade into an interview like this? You know that your name is not Tucker, that you are not a pedlar from necessity, and that you are not poor—why lie to *me*?"

"I will bring you my pass-book," he said, still humbly, "and——"

She turned in her chair and faced him.

"What about Golden Horn?" she said crisply.

"Golden Horn?" His face and voice were blank.

"Yes; is it a mine, or oil, or what?" she asked triumphantly.

"Neither," he said. "It's a bean—a cross between butter beans and French. I only happen to know that because a friend of mine wanted to try a crop and hadn't the room on the place to put one in, and was too broke to rent any more land. It was a good thing, he thought—new, and all that sort of thing; fancy prices in Sydney, and so on. So I rented half an acre for him, and he put them in on condition that I went shares. He wired me the other day that they were coming on well."

A heavy silence followed this last casual sentence. There was black anger in the voice that broke it.

"And Grand Duke Boris?"

"Old Duke Boris." He laughed, "He's a dear old chap. He's a Russian, and is always talking about some Moscow duke whose butler he was, or says he was. That's why we call him 'Duke Boris.' He's a waiter in Darlinghurst."

"And your crested cigarette-case?"

"Oh, I bought that in Sydney," he said innocently. "You see, I'd lost mine, and this was cheap, and——"

But Mrs Warwick was standing up. The anger had gone from her face, and a smile, not a languid smile, was there instead. She held out her hand.

"You're a clever man, Mr Tucker—that reminds me: *are* you Mr Tucker, and *was* there a housekeeper's room?"

"*Touche*," he said in mock disappointment. "I am not Mr Tucker, and there *is* a housekeeper's room in father's house. But neither accident comes into this incident. You were saying how clever I was."

"Yes—at working hard for your friends. I wonder if you'd drive me to Hardwick station to-morrow morning? I promised some people in Sydney that I'd go and stay with them early this month, and they're hammering away at me by every mail. I meant to wire them to-day that I should arrive to-morrow. Do you mind driving me down to the early train?"

There was nothing languid in Mrs Warwick's handshake as the train came in the following morning, nor did her smile suggest the traditional vamp. She seemed a healthy-minded, highly ornamental lady taking farewell of a man she was sorry to part from—indeed, there was keen regret in her almond eyes as she sat back in the compartment. But there was no cunning in the eyes, nor any languor.

Thomas Tucker stopped at the post-office on his way home and collected some letters and a square, flat parcel. These he took up to his room where he remained for half an hour. Coming down, he found Ovenden alone in the little smoke-room. He entered, closed the door carefully behind him, and put his parcel on the table. The Major looked up from his newspaper, a faint surprise evident in his raised eyebrows.

"Hallo, Mr Tucker," he said. "Come in. I imagine we have the house to ourselves this morning; my daughter has taken her mare out for some exercise, and the twins have motored to the junction to meet their mother's train. Have a peg?"

"No, thanks." The pedlar was taking the paper off his parcel, and spoke without looking up. "You had four sons, hadn't you, sir?"

Major Ovenden blanched and stiffened in his chair.

"Yes."

"And three were killed in France?"

"Really, Mr Tucker, I fail to see," Ovenden's iciest voice began, but the pedlar looked up.

"I have a good purpose in what I am trying to do, sir, and you must forgive me if I reopen old wounds. It's for the sake of the ultimate purpose."

A heavy line of pain showed in Ovenden's forehead, but his voice was calm as he replied, "Carry on, Major."

"This fourth son vanished years before the war—vanished completely, leaving no trace?"

"Yes."

"Then will you look at this photograph, please?"

Ovenden rose and walked, very upright, to the table. He took the photograph with a steady hand. It was a slightly faded group of Australian soldiers, a dozen men posed carelessly at some picnic meal.

"Do you recognize anyone there, sir?" Tommy asked gently.

"That's Dampney by the tree," he heard the Major say, "I don't know that any of the others are——"

The voice stopped suddenly, and Tommy looked up to see Ovenden's rigid face staring at the picture.

"My God!" he whispered. "That's Robin—my boy, my boy. . . ."

The pedlar allowed a little pause of silence to intervene before he began to speak in his ordinary tones.

"All these men, except Dampney, are dead—most of them were killed in action. This one"—he pointed to one of the men, and was conscious of the Major's sudden start—"died a decent, comfortable death in hospital, thanks to Dampney."

Ovenden turned his back on Tommy and walked over to the window. Tommy went on, as if he were telling a casual war story.

"He was an interesting sort of chap, an Englishman who enlisted in Sydney under the name of Jones. The Diggers called him 'The Toff,' but they liked him—no one could see him in action and not like him. No one knew anything about him, and he never talked about himself—that wasn't extraordinary, of course, in the kind of crowd we had there; but there really was a remarkably interesting quality about Jones."

He glanced up at Ovenden's rigid back, all the sympathy in the world in his eyes.

"How did he die?" came in a muffled, toneless voice from the window.

"There was a chance, a hundred-to-one chance, that he would die an awful death. We were in retreat, Front Line, and most of us were back in the trench—Fritz had landed one of his

surprises. I could see that one man had been caught on the wire, a badly wounded man. No hope of doing anything, of course; it was certain death to attempt it. Even keyed-up for that terrible front-line work I couldn't help thinking what a horrible fate it was—pinned down by a bit of barbed wire at the mercy of God knew what lingering destruction and agony. But Dampney suddenly slipped over the top and skinned out to the man. I saw him pause just before he reached him, and I knew he'd stopped one; but he got the man, disentangled him, and brought him back."

Tommy was conscious that Ovenden had turned round and was looking at him, but he did not look up.

"If the man's chance was a hundred to one, Dampney's was a thousand to one; but he did it—the pluckiest thing I saw in all the four years. The man was Jones. Dampney was badly wounded—a Blighty and jolly nearly one leg gone—but Jones was smashed to pieces. He died a couple of hours after they reached the hospital."

"Did—Jones—say anything . . . in hospital?"

Tommy was busy lighting a cigarette, and had his back to the Major by now.

"I only remembered Jones the day after I met you, sir; perhaps seeing Bill Dampney again brought him to my mind, too. A man named Hazell happened to be in the next bed when Jones died—I knew that, because he told me when I spun him the yarn of Dampney's heroic stunt years ago at the Soldiers' Club. And this morning I got a letter from Hazell." Tommy took the letter out of his pocket and opened it. "' . . . Spoke only just before he died. He started muttering in a quick, bossy sort of voice, as if he were a youngster again—all about horses, it seemed to be, and Bonny's swollen shoulder'——"

"Bonny was a cream pony he had when he was a schoolboy," the dry, lifeless voice said. "Go on, please, Major."

"There's hardly any more, sir. 'And then suddenly he called out, "Good-bye, dad—we're off!" and died.' That's all, sir."

Major Ovenden broke the silence. "It's impossible for me to find words to thank you," he said. "I would rather know what you have told me to-day than—than anything in the world. You have told me the story of the death of a gentleman—death for a great cause; and that redeems—everything. I will not try to thank you."

The pedlar shrugged, retaining his carefully casual manner.

"It was the death of an Australian soldier," he said; "and its decency and dignity—even the hearing of the last words—were made possible by the heroism of another Australian soldier."

"Yes. Yes. My debt to Dampney and to—to Australia is immeasurable. But to you——"

Tommy walked across the room to the open window, smiling his crinkling smile.

"Leave me out, Major," he said, pointing to two figures on horseback coming up the drive. Mabel was listening intently to some fervent laying-down of the law from Bill Dampney. "Don't they make a fine handsome couple?"

Major Ovenden looked at them for a moment before he turned and held out his hand to Thomas Tucker, vocalist.

"By George they do, Tucker," he said, his voice full of life and warmth.

TOO MUCH MONEY

Thomas Tucker, always very sensitive to environment, was revelling in the richness of the morning. After a month of rain and wind and bitter cold, the iron fist of winter had been suddenly opened, and spring had rushed in and captured the situation. In her accustomed Australian manner, she was working hard and fast; the grass and the wild-flowers beside the road looked as if they knew nothing of the iron fist that had lately held them so closely; the little hills and valleys near and far were lush slopes, enamelled and studded with flowery jewels; and a faint breeze put life into the air of the very early morning, as well as into the heart of Tommy Tucker at the wheel of his motor that was half small lorry and half small touring car. The tarpaulin cover protecting the stock announced: "T. Tucker, General Storeman;" and beneath it in smaller letters, "Tinker, Veterinary Surgeon, Piano-tuner, and Vocalist," to a world of heart-breaking beauty, a world of breezy adventure quite consistent with Tommy's tenor voice, his good manners, and his half shy, half cynical face whose flickering smile came and went, crinkling the corners of the kindly eyes. Tommy and the morning were one; he and his elfin stunt of singing and peddling were like one of the blades of grass drinking the new sunshine, or one of the upturned flowers.

He turned the sawn-off bus out of the road and into the Weatherbys' track, settling down to the remembered difficult job of holding the car in one piece over that battered, rutted, pot-hole apology for a track. But she slipped smoothly on to a noble stretch of gravel-and-sand as flat as a billiard-table. He looked for the old ruined fence with the supine posts and the rails every now and again; but a new fence was taut and trim beside the track. The Weatherbys must have made some money. He reached the gate that used to hang rotting on one hinge at its job of shutting off the paddocks, but a new gate gleamed white and magnificent in the morning sun, a gate that swung gently back on well-oiled hinges, and gently forward again on perfectly-balanced springs. These Weatherbys must have come into a fortune.

It was all part of the bosker morning, of course; anybody might come into a fortune on a day like this. Tommy watched the gate softly latch itself. Nothing could be better than a fortune for the Weatherbys; it had been a rough-and-tumble for them long enough. The smile crinkled his eyes as he got back into the bus. Good old Len—with a new gate and a new road and his pockets full of money, he wouldn't know himself. The idea so attracted Mr Tucker that his tenor voice stole gently up into the breeze, though no one was by to hear and ask him to a meal for the song.

"I have a song to sing, Oh!" he announced radiantly to the morning as he reached the edge of the filmy, cherry-blossom veil.

"Sing me your song, Oh!" came in a ringing soprano from the orchard.

Tommy paused and shut off his engine. Anything might happen, of course, on a day like this; but—He waited, but no soprano made her appearance. The shadowy smile flitted across Tommy's eyes, and he opened the mobile lips again.

It is sung to the moon
By a love-lorn loon,
Who fled from the mocking throng, Oh!
It's a song of a merryman, moping mum,
Whose soul was sad, and whose glance was glum,
Who sipped no sup, and who craved no crumb,
As he sighed for the love of a ladye.
Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me, lackadaydee!
He sipped no sup, and he craved no crumb,
As he sighed for the love of a ladye.

He paused, waiting. And once more the bright, strong soprano called unseen from the trees:

I have a song to sing, Oh!

Tommy answered, *fortissimo*:

Sing me your song, Oh!

And she, triumphantly, from behind her screen of snowy fragrance:—

It is sung with the ring
Of the song maids sing
Who love with a love life-long, Oh!
It's the song of a mermaid, peerly proud,
Who loved a lord, and who laughed aloud
At the moan of the merryman, moping mum,
Whose soul was sad, and whose glance was glum.
Who sipped no sup, and who craved no crumb,
As he sighed for the love of a ladye!
Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me, lackadaydee!
He sipped no sup, and he craved no crumb,
As he sighed for the love of a ladye.

Following the best dramatic traditions, the singer appeared with the last line of her song. There was little of the spring morning about her, save her youth, as she came through the blossom, lighting a cigarette. Tommy slipped out of the driving-seat and took off his cap; he pushed the shock of greying hair back and smiled at her. This would be some guest of the Weatherbys, some guest that he had not yet met; an unusual guest for them, with her artificially scarlet mouth and darkened eyes, her glittering shingle, and very brief skirt. There was even a trace of an ultra-modern sneer on her hard young mouth. But good-looking—oh, decidedly, very good-looking.

“You sing well,” she said without greeting.

Tommy made his best bow.

“My singing is silence compared with yours,” he said. “I was coming up to see the Weatherbys.”

“You can't do that,” she told him, her bright, capable eyes taking in all the details of the sawn-off bus and the inscription on its tarpaulin. “There are no Weatherbys here now, except Len, who stayed on to manage the place. They sold out to father last year.”

“Oh! Hence the new road, the real fencing, and the beautiful gate—I hardly knew the place.”

“Oh, yes, we've got plenty of money.” He glanced at her, surprised at the scorn in her

voice. "It's about all we *have* got—and we didn't earn even that."

Tommy waited. This decorative person smoking a Turkish cigarette at the end of a nine-inch holder was unusual. Her air of forced raffishness didn't fit her singing, and neither fitted her general attitude of sullen boredom.

"Did you know these Weatherbys well?" she asked, glancing a shade too obviously at the inscription on the bus.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Len is one of my best pals, in so far as a man in my business, here to-day and gone to-morrow, can have any pals. I always counted the week I used to stay with the Weatherbys as one of the best in the year."

"Did you stay with them?" she asked, the side-long glance going to the tarpaulin again.

"Oh, yes. And very jolly times we had."

"Stuck-up lot, I thought them. And Len's the worst. The place was always full to the neck when they had it—people running in and out all day long. And now nobody comes near it. I know we're common," she said, the sneer on the scarlet lips deepening, "and not a patch on the wonderful, hard-up Weatherbys. But that doesn't mean that we've got the plague, does it?"

Something in her voice, in her sullen eyes, in the sunlight on her somehow pathetically perfect hair touched the sensitive heart of Thomas Tucker, vocalist and tinker. This girl had found out early that almost nothing is what it seems; and from the ridiculously costly shoes out to the too pink and shiny finger-nails and up to the too-glittering head she was bitterly resentful of that discovery. On a morning like this it was a particularly repellent discovery. And she was really a very fine-looking girl, beneath all her embellishments. Tommy's musical voice was persuasive as honey as he answered her slight outburst.

"I should say you were distinctly uncommon. You sing uncommonly well, for one thing; and you look uncommonly fine, for another. And you're uncommonly honest, for a third."

She eyed him mistrustfully.

"You're a good hand at talking, aren't you? I suppose it's the business gives you practice. What have you got in that *Lizzy*? At least I can buy anything I take a fancy to."

But Tommy's business had at least given him practice in meeting rebuffs so crude as this. He smiled and pushed back the shock of hair.

"I've plenty of things in the *Lizzy*, but I shan't show you any of them until you've taken me to the house, given me some breakfast, and let me have a yarn with Len."

For the first time the girl smiled, a radiant, luminous smile.

"Right-oh," she said. "Be stuck-up—you and Len ought to get on well together. At least you'll be some sort of a visitor. Come on."

The homestead garden was trim and orderly, the lawns and hedges clipped, the borders all obviously tenderly cared for; Tommy remembered the wilderness of last year, and his heart seemed to contract—the poor Weatherbys, who had so loved the home of four generations. . . .

Inside the house the change was more marked. A butler opened the door, and Tommy entered a hall full of plush and Landseer, a hall dominated by a gorgeous gramophone. Everything was obviously the best that money could buy—or perhaps the best that too much money could buy. Again Tommy remembered the old rooms, and again his heart seemed to contract.

Miss Gibson, Miss Lilian Gibson, preceded him to the circular corner of the veranda. Here he was introduced with heavy formality to Mr and Mrs Gibson, who were seated solemnly among the crowding tables, chairs, and what-nots. Tommy allowed a small smile to crinkle his

lowered eyes as he bowed. There was a slight constraint in these elders' reception of Tommy; nobody seemed quite to know what he was there for, at eight o'clock of a fine spring morning; and Lil, with a fine air of indifference, did not deign to enlighten the company beyond her original thrown-out information that he was a tinker and a friend of the Weatherbys. He could almost feel Mr Gibson trying to balance a friend of the aristocratic Weatherbys and a tinker in the same person. Finally he told Mrs Gibson that he had expected to find the Weatherbys still here, that his peddling business took him so far beyond the reach of communication that he had not heard of their departure, and that, in point of fact, could he have some breakfast?

The dignity of Mr Gibson was clearly ruffled at this extraordinary request, this invasion of his wealthy seclusion; Tommy could see it in his small, fat person, in his red, over-fed face. But for Mrs Gibson the request relieved the situation at once; here was something that she *could* tackle, something hospitable and friendly.

"If you'll push that bell-button behind you, mister, Annette'll come, an' I can tell 'er."

Annette duly came, and was told. She was, furthermore, instructed to tell Mr Weatherby that breakfast was on the veranda, it being a fine day after the rains and a shame to sit indoors. And in due course Len Weatherby came, his self-contained, slightly supercilious air vanishing as he saw Thomas Tucker.

"Tommy!" he cried, striding across the veranda with outstretched hand. "I never was so glad to see a mate in my life!"

This authentication of the pedlar's claim that he was a friend of the Weatherbys considerably eased the situation in Mr Gibson's hitherto suspicious mind, and the sumptuous breakfast proceeded without mishap. Barring one or two vicious jabs at Len Weatherby's silence and slightly obvious boredom, Lil's sole contribution to the conversation were two words of praise of the devilled kidneys. Tommy was surprised at the change in Len; not to put too fine a point on it, Len was not behaving at all well. There was an undercurrent of antagonism between Miss Gibson and him which was, in its manifestations, much more "common" than the Gibsons were. They seemed to hate each other with a violence quite beyond the ordinary interchange of social usage. The thing puzzled and disappointed Tommy; this ill-mannered pup couldn't be Len.

In the manager's office after breakfast he found a different but not less baffling Len. The young man, explaining that the place had broken their backs at last and had had to be sold, nest of the "proud, impoverished" Weatherbys as it had always been, had no trace of the pup in his manner. It had been so heavily mortgaged that the sale had not realized more than enough to make things safe for old Mr and Mrs Weatherby; the "children" were no better off, beyond that they were free of the incubus of the dear old place. Louise had got married; Dick and Spencer were farming in New Zealand; and Madeline was looking after the old people in their four-roomed cottage at Epping. He, as Tommy could see, was managing this gilt-edged baby station for old Gibson, who was an awful pill, but not so bad as his ghastly daughter. He had what Len called a "feudal complex"—had filled the homestead with butlers, housemaids, parlour-maids, personal maids for Mum and Lil; had fixed up all the tumbledown cottages and put overseers, gardeners, under-gardeners, grooms, and what not into them——

"He likes to stand on his veranda with his stomach well out, feeling that he's monarch of all he surveys, a mighty squatter and all that. But he's scared blue at the sight of a horse."

"Where did he get his money?"

"Plain luck. His brother in England made a huge fortune in some sort of war-profiteering; he dropped down dead suddenly one day—probably from over-eating—and was found to have

made no will. So this—squatter (who kept a little general store in Stanmore) got the lot.”

Tommy lit a cigarette.

“Why do you stay on, Len?” he asked.

“Well, it’s about the only thing I can do, Tommy. It’s a good job, comfortable, excellent food, and all that. Dull, of course—nobody comes near the place since we left, and there’s that awful girl with her unbreakable nark—but I like Mum, and I don’t take any notice of the squatter. Besides”—Len’s clear-cut face became suddenly grave—“I’m here on the spot where a Weatherby has been for nearly a hundred years. And I’d rather be here in discomfort and seeing the place smeared all over with the squatter’s rubbish than making a fortune elsewhere.”

Tommy smiled at this first glimpse of the old Len.

“Even with Lil to bite at you every time you show your superiority?”

The glimpse of the old Len vanished and the supercilious pup said coldly: “Impossible ass of a girl, isn’t she? Hallo—here’s the rain again; you’d better shove your bus into the garage. Dickson, the sub-assistant-deputy chauffeur, will do it for you.”

But Tommy, pausing outside the door of the manager’s office, was not nearly so disheartened by the sound of the rain drumming on the veranda roof as a self-respecting pedlar with a lot of long-distance driving to do should be.

In the plush-and-Landseer hall he found the squatter lighting a long cigar with an apparently undetachable band.

“Miss Gibson,” he told Tommy, with the formality to the Gibson wealth, “’d like to see yer stock as soon as yer ready. I dessay you’ll find her a pretty good customer.”

Thomas Tucker intimated that he would be happy to show Miss Gibson his stock whenever she cared to see it. He was always at the service of his customers, he told Mr Gibson with his disarming smile. Their relative positions having been thus established, the squatter took his enormous cigar out of his mouth and went on:

“She tells me that you were in the ’abit of staying with these Weatherbys when you worked this district, and that you ’ad a pretty good time with them. Well, I tell you what: you stay with us for a few days, say while the rain lasts, and we’ll see what *we* can do for you in the way of a good time. The Weatherbys were pretty broke, an’ couldn’t do much. Well, we’re *not* broke. See?”

Tommy accepted this obviously lavish condescension with proper humility, and went to see Dickson about the housing of the bus and to get his stock for its examination by Miss Gibson. He found her as her father had implied, a very good customer, if a little indiscriminate in the purchase of new novels in bulk and Turkish cigarettes by the thousand. She mightn’t like them, he pointed out; but she wrote him a cheque and said that she didn’t care whether she liked them or not.

Tommy did not anticipate anything like the old uproarious parties in the Weatherby regime, with Len and Spencer cooking their special dishes and a houseful of neighbours and friends waiting to be fed and howling for song after song from Tommy. Nor was he disappointed. This new homestead was a very solemn business, dominated by the army of servants, and no good to the family, with the exception of the squatter who couldn’t get enough of this new feeling of being an important somebody instead of a servile nobody in Stanmore. Lil was bored, and so was Len; Mum, too, was bored, because the hands that had been so busy and happy in Stanmore were now idly folded in her lap, a lot of superior, irritating servants doing the work she longed to get at herself. She said as much to Thomas Tucker, whom she found a very sympathetic personality, quite apart from the lovely singing, through which Dad slept and

which nobody seemed to appreciate except young Mr Weatherby and herself.

Tommy shut the piano, and Len got up instantly and went out, muttering the word "accounts." Lil watched him go, the heavy sneer curling her lips, and after a moment slouched out on to the veranda, muttering no word of excuse or farewell at all. A defiant snore came from the squatter; and Tommy came over and sat beside Mum, who beamed at him, but with a worried look behind her patient, self-denying eyes.

"I s'pose you miss all your friends from this room," she said, sighing. "God be with old times, as my mother used to say. I'm sure there's not many of us with the common sense to know when we're well off."

Thomas Tucker waited. There was evidently something on Mum's mind.

"Of course, this is a great lift-up for us, this money and all. Dad likes it; he's always wanted a big place of his own, like the estate in England he worked on as a boy. And I've always liked the country. But it's Lil that worries me, Mr Tucker; she can't seem to take to it at all. I'm sure sometimes I wish we was all back grafting hard in Stanmore."

"The neighbours will come round in time, Mrs Gibson, and put more life into the place for you."

Mum bridled slightly.

"My troubles about a lot of stuck-up neighbours. And Lil's too, if you come to that. No. It's more than that."

She glanced over at the squatter, an unlovely sight in a bulging shirt-front; a solemn, ruminative snore rose gently from his purple face. Mum hitched her chair a little closer to the pedlar's.

"Our Lil," she said portentously, "has gone and fallen in love with young Mr Weatherby!"

She sat back and looked at Tommy.

"You may well look surprised, but that's what that foolish girl 'as done, Mr Tucker. And of course he won't look at 'er—why should 'e? Let alone the way she treats 'im. Always snappin' 'im up in the way she does—I'm sure it's enough to put any man off. Yes, you may well look surprised," she went on to Tommy, who hadn't looked surprised, "but you can trust a mother. That's what she's gone and done."

She sighed and looked hopelessly at Tommy.

"But what's to be done, Mr Tucker? She'll go and break her heart or go on the stage, as she's always threatening since she acted in them operas down in Stanmore. And we all know what the end of that'll be. . . ."

A tear coursed slowly down her cheek, and Thomas Tucker thought it was time for him to speak. He called up his most winning smile and most melodious tones.

"If we conspired—will you join with me in a little deception, Mrs Gibson, a little pretence that will do nobody any harm?"

She put her handkerchief on her lap and eyed him uncertainly.

"I'd stand on me head on the steps of the Town Hall if I thought it'd do Lil any good," she said firmly. "Why? Do you think you can——"

For two minutes the seductive and melodious voice of Thomas Tucker, vocalist, murmured gently in the over-furnished room, punctuated by slight exclamations and short sentences from Mum. At the end of the two minutes she asked one question.

"Do you think a week'd be long enough?"

"Quite long enough, I think, Mrs Gibson. Besides, they might get restive—you don't want to lose them altogether."

Simultaneously with Mum's hopeful smile a last despairing snort came from the squatter, and he woke up.

"But I don't want to go on a picnic."—"But, Lil!"—Lil rounded on Mum. "You must think you're back in the Sunday-school in Stanmore," she said. "What's the good of a picnic? It'll only be an excuse for Dad's manager to be clever and superior." Her sidelong glance elicited no response from Len. "Besides, it's going to rain like fury before lunch again. I think it's a fool of an idea; and I believe Mr Weatherby must have started it." But Len was still busy with his poached egg, and apparently unconscious of the other occupants of the breakfast-table. "I won't go. And that's flat."

"But, Lil, dear"—there seemed to be tears in Mrs Gibson's voice—"you know I never get out now, and I 'aven't been any too well lately. I think you might——"

Lil's hard eyes softened at once.

"Right-oh, Mum. When do we start?"

The squatter cleared his throat.

"Steady on," he said; "I don't know that I care to go picnicking. It looks like rain again, and ——"

But Mum had her own way of squashing any nonsense from Dad. One glance was enough.

"The big car and the hamper'll be ready at ten o'clock, Dad," she said coldly, "and Mr Tucker's good enough to drive 'er for us. You can leave your work for the day, can't you, Mr Weatherby?"

"Easily, Mrs Gibson. I'd leave any work for a week for the chance of improving my manners in Miss Gibson's company."

Lil glared, but no retort vitriolic enough entered her mind before his gentle closing of the door behind him.

The picnic was a great success. The rain held off all day; Lil and Len bickered all day; and the squatter slept for most of the day. The return home at the fall of dusk was not so successful. There was a curious, even a disquieting, air of deadness about the house; there seemed not to be a soul in it.

Upon examination this monstrous suspicion proved to be true. Of all that army of retainers, from the magnificent butler to the most inexperienced peeler of potatoes, not one was left to serve or feed the family!

The squatter showed alarming signs of apoplexy when the hideous ingratitude and disrespect of this wholesale desertion burst upon him. Len was merely bored at this incident of the day's work. Lil laughed scornfully; it served them right, she said, for being so common—they couldn't expect decent servants to stay with them; Mr Weatherby would be the next to go, she expected. Mum and Thomas Tucker were the only two who kept their heads. There was a singular air of waiting in Mum's manner as she looked at Lil.

"Well, what about it, Lil?" she asked. "We've got to get some tea, I s'pose. Slip into the kitchen and see what you can do for us."

Tommy smiled handsomely at the company.

"Yes," he said, "it'll be rather a lark. Come on, Miss Gibson. I'll be your wood-and-water Joey."

But Lil lit another cigarette.

"Not me," she told them, settling back on the Chesterfield. "I don't want any tea—or dinner, you ought to have said, Mum—I've had too much lunch already." She picked up a book and

opened it.

Simultaneously with the opening of the book the squatter exploded.

“Look, young woman,” he gobbled, “*you* may not want any tea, but there’s others to be thought of——”

“Don’t be silly, Dad,” she said languidly, and without looking up. “Anybody’d think I’d caught you putting sand in your sugar.”

Mum looked helplessly at Tommy and took off her hat.

“Well, it’ll be like old times again,” she said, a new note of authority and decision in her voice. “Mum goes to work while the rest sit magging at their ease. I’ll have yer tea for yer in half an hour, if Mr Tucker’ll give me a hand.”

Lil looked up, and pointedly, at Mr Weatherby; but Mr Weatherby looked, as pointedly, through her, and went out of the room in the direction of his office. Mrs Gibson paused at the other door and looked back at Lil, but she was buried in her book.

“Don’t you worry, Dad,” Mum said. “I’ll ’ave yer tea on the table in ’alf a jiffy.” She smiled at the discomfited squatter and vanished.

By lunch-time of the following day Miss Gibson’s boredom with the situation had given place to a smouldering rage. She had had to make her own bed and do all sorts of odd jobs about the great house; in addition to that, Len was hiding in his office pretending to be busy, but in reality shirking. Mr Tucker was hard at work, and so was Mum—Mum was enjoying herself, really; but, with Len in hiding and everybody else hard at it, Lil began to feel narked and out of it. She tried taking it out of the hide of the registry-office by telephone, but the registry-office was curiously reserved and non-committal. No, they were afraid they couldn’t do anything under a week—oh, yes; they could promise Miss Gibson a full complement of servants by the end of the week. But nothing before that. No, not even a charwoman. Miss Gibson must understand that—But Miss Gibson’s rage boiled over, and she slammed the receiver back on to the bracket without waiting for the long explanation.

Mum held the ship together. Lil turned up her nose and refused to eat the plain, wholesome fruits of Mum’s arduous cooking; but the fruits were there at every meal-time. The house might need some dusting and such-like fal-lals; but everybody got his tucker on time, thanks to her and Mr Tucker. But she was not enjoying herself, as Lil imagined. Late in the afternoon she sank into one of the kitchen chairs and turned a woeful face to Tommy.

Tommy put down his tea-towel and smiled at her.

“It’s not working out, Mr Tucker,” she said. “I thought—we thought—she’d put on her apron and turn to. A man loves to see a girl busy about the house getting his tucker and that, doesn’t he? But look at her! Lolling about the place worse than ever, while we——”

“It’s my fault, Mrs Gibson. I ought to have got rid of you first.”

Mum looked puzzled.

“Yes, I s’pose so,” she said finally. “You may be right, Mr Tucker. But, as far as I can see, you and I work our fingers to the bone till the end of the week, when all that lazy lot comes back again. And Dad’ll go on something awful when he hears I gave ’em a week’s holiday without saying anything.” A spasm of pain crossed her face. “This running about touches up me sciatica,” she said apologetically. “There’s young Mr Weatherby shut up in his room and never a sight of his face for ’er. An’ she—you see, she *won’t* work, Mr Tucker. An’ I’m sure a better girl never stepped; you mustn’t judge her by the bits o’ paint on her face. She never was one for housework, though (but a real good girl, for all that)—and I did think she’d turn to an’

work for him, with the house in this pickle——”

Tommy smiled his shadowy, confident smile.

“I don’t want her to work for him, Mrs Gibson,” he said. “On the contrary. We’ll carry on now. You leave it to me. Er—that sciatica—I think you ought to stay in bed with it for a couple of days.”

Mum sat bolt upright.

“Me—stay in bed!” she said indignantly. “With all this lot to cook for! You’re dreaming, Mr Tucker; me sciatica’s not near so bad that I can’t——”

“I think it’ll keep you in bed for a couple of days,” he insisted gently. “You ought to take care of yourself, you know. Besides, I can’t work my scheme if you’re not bedridden.”

A gleam of hope showed in the tired eyes.

“You won’t tell me?”

“Not yet. But all you have to do is to be too ill to get up till I send you word that you may.”

The house of Gibson was plunged further into despair on the morrow by the announcement that Mrs Gibson was prostrate with sciatica, and couldn’t leave her bed. The household had assembled for breakfast, but was like to be disappointed of its hopes. Lil settled the difficulty so far as she was concerned by going back to bed. “You can bang on my door when there’s some breakfast for me,” she said as she went out.

The squatter snorted and went up to see Mum again. Somebody’d have to go through it for this.

Thomas Tucker looked at Mr Leonard Weatherby.

“What about it, mate?” he asked. “You’re the star amateur cook of the Southern Hemisphere. You like Mum—you told me so. And she’s lying up there helpless, without a soul to fry her an egg.”

“What about you?”

Tommy looked reproachfully at him.

“I mean an invalid egg,” he said. “I’m only a good *plain* cook. Besides, I’m a pedlar, with my living to earn, and I’m going to drive seventeen miles in the mud to sell Mrs Horton some buttons, and perhaps some safety-pins, too. I have a hunch that she needs them. But”—he shook a menacing forefinger at Mr Weatherby—“I shall be back to dinner. And I shall be very hungry, and at the same time very critical.”

The old Len looked out of hiding for the second fleeting moment. “Right-oh,” he said, getting to his feet. “Somebody’s got to do it, I suppose.”

Miss Gibson greeted the hungry pedlar on his return, a Miss Gibson with some interest in life, even with a glow in her eyes.

“Len’s a marvel,” she said. “You ought to have been here to lunch. There was a cauliflower *au gratin*. . . .” Words failed her, her enthusiasm excusing even her pronunciation.

“Good! He was always a bonzer cook.”

“It’s nice of him to wait on us and cook the dishes we like—I like—isn’t it?”

The gathering dusk prevented Lil from seeing the crinkles at the corners of Tommy’s eyes.

“Yes—very. How’s Mrs Gibson?”

“Oh, she’s all right. I believe she’s shamming, so as to get Len to cook for her.”

The hungry pedlar could be as critical as he liked as to the dinner Len gave him; no man in his senses could do other than bow down before the little joint of veal resting gently on the

apples and marjoram in which it had been baked.

The morrow's breakfast was baked bream, filleted, buttered, and tomatoed, with just a shadow of fried onions. Bream *à la* Weatherby, it was called; but Lil said it was heavenly, and the squatter had three helpings. The braised breast of lamb at lunch was so tenderly savoury that Len had hard work to get his own share; and dinner's fried chicken *à la* Maryland was a mere handful of bleached bones in twenty minutes from its appearance. All the original combinations of flavours tried and approved in the Weatherby parties of yore came to the Gibson table, to be hailed as the fine art of cooking.

This was good. But the permanent reappearance of the old Len was better. Once more the house assumed the atmosphere of one of the old parties, with guests and hosts running in and out of the kitchen; and once more Len was the dominating spirit, a smiling, handsome, kindly man at the service of his friends. Lil's gibes ceased, and Len's vanished as if they had never been. Indeed, these seemed to have a special quiet smile, shutting out the rest of the unimportant world.

Tommy, living in hope and imagination, believed that the gods were going to be good; passing the kitchen door just before lunch, he paused, and made certain of the favour of the gods. Three flowery potatoes were lying unheeded on the floor, and above them a bright shingled head and a dark head seemed unreasonably to have become one head. A voice was murmuring:

"You're an awful creature at times, Len, darling, but I can't do without you."

A deeper voice answered:

"As an awful creature I'm nothing to you, dearest. But—well, I could cook for you for ever."

Thomas Tucker tiptoed away to write a little note to Mrs Gibson.

"But how did you do it—what made you think of it?" Mum asked, beaming at the figures of young Mr Weatherby and her daughter disappearing towards the cherry-orchard. Tommy spread out his brown, narrow hands.

"Cooking is Len's heel of Achilles, his art, his weak spot. And if a man's in a gilt-edged job, with practically nothing to do, he broods on his wrongs and becomes an all-round nark, which prevents him from seeing or acting like himself. Often others can see his affairs more clearly than he can himself."

"Yes, that's true," Mrs Gibson conceded.

"I know Len Weatherby well, and he's not anything like the man I found here. I had to find a reason for the change—something big enough. And I think I found it in two causes: that he was a servant in the house where he had been virtually master, and that he was in love with his master's daughter. He rubbed in his hatred of Miss Gibson so much that I should have had to be a blind fool not to have seen through it. He's one of the best chaps in the world; but losing his home, falling in love, and becoming a servant all at once were too much for him. So the thing to do was to drive Len back to his art, his weak spot, to make him himself again. Miss Gibson—er—likes her food——"

"She always did," Mum conceded again.

"And would be appreciative of this art. Particularly when the too-much-money atmosphere had temporarily vanished with the servants. After that was established, the lady being much more important in these matters than the mere man who persists in thinking himself such a fine fellow—well, you could almost leave it to work itself out automatically, couldn't you?"

These important matters all comfortably settled, and the army of servants back from their arbitrarily-ordered holiday, Thomas Tucker took his leave in a cloud of blessings from Mrs Gibson. Spring had finally banished the rain in favour of the ultimate beauty of weather; no day had any right to be so exquisite as the day of Tommy's departure. He proclaimed loudly that he had a song to sing, Oh! as the sawn-off bus slipped sweetly over the perfect road past the cherry-blossom.

"Sing me your song, Oh!" came the rich, strong answer, as Lil came out of the trees, her hands full of blossom.

"You're a very clever sort of person, aren't you, Thomas Tucker?" she said, her firm glance resting on his mobile, elfin face.

Tommy bowed in depreciation.

"I hope you're a very happy person, Lilian Gibson," he said.

"Oh, well." Her eyes swept the bus and its inscription, and came back to the smiling face. "Take these, from me," she said suddenly, pushing the white fragrance into his hands. "It'll be all right, I suppose—I'll be Mrs Leonard Weatherby, and the neighbours'll deign to notice me because I'm his. And it'll be the same old thing again till I'm old, like Mum and Dad." The bright, adventurous eyes sought his face again. "But . . . sometimes I think I wasn't cut out for that sort of life. I ought to be a pedlar's wife, here to-day and gone to-morrow, a gipsy with no roof-tree and not wanting one. Not caring—except for the pedlar and his smile. That should be the life for me, I think——"

But abject terror shone in Tommy's face as he stared at her for a moment. Secretly he touched the starter, and very softly the sawn-off bus slipped away from Lil. On the breeze a line of song came faintly, tenderly, back to her:

It's the song of a merryman, moping mum,
Whose soul was sad, and. . . .

THE SHY COLLEEN

New South Wales, pictorially, had always appealed to Thomas Tucker, vocalist, vet, and tinker. So this stretch of yellow road, bush-bordered and sleepy in the afternoon, was very easy for him to look at. The sawn-off bus was running with its accustomed easy complacency, taking this good stretch of road gratefully as a sort of reserve pleasure to compensate for the inevitable bad stretches to come, the roads of New South Wales being far short of the excellence of its pictorial quality.

It was a drowsy business, this humming gently along in the rich magnificence of this beloved picture. Tommy's crinkling, elfin eyes watched the picture more than they watched the road, not because he was a careless driver, but because it was for this intimacy with the picture that he was humming along here at all. He was due to sell safety-pins and tape, and perhaps to tune a tired piano or so, in Harrowdene before the dusk fell; but that was business, and a necessary corollary of his wandering. The real thing was the wandering itself—these roads and the bush coming gently down to them, the strange fervour and pungency of the colouring, the sweet strength that seemed to bloom like a burgeoning undertone all through the day and night.

He smiled at the faint menace of a mixing of metaphors in the thought; he must remember that he was a tinker and a travelling storekeeper, and watch the road, so that the stock be not unduly shaken. He settled down over the wheel, taking the bend with the proper caution of the serious motorist.

The big stationary car ahead seemed to be in a difficulty. Tommy slowed up; perhaps he could help; but two long legs were protruding from underneath the car, out into the yellow dust. All was well; the man was at work, and Harrowdene was still some miles ahead, with the afternoon passing—he speeded up and passed the car.

“Mr Tucker—Tommy!”

He put on the brakes and got out of the driving-seat of the bus. Some one who knew him, evidently.

From the window of the big closed car an old lady was looking, her strong face full of animation and pleasure.

“Come here to me, Tommy Tucker. How dare you pass me in the road without a word?”

His persuasive smile danced in his eyes. “If I'd known it was you, Mrs Woodruff, I should have stopped at once, naturally. How are you?”

“Bored,” she said wearily; “this is our fifth breakdown in twenty miles. Is Max still playing with the wheels underground?”

“The gentleman under the car?”

“Yes. He's my nephew, so try to be polite to him. But a polecat would make a better chauffeur. Max, come out!”

A young man emerged from the darkness beneath the car, a young man with a dark, angry face pleasantly decorated with grease.

“I can't do anything with the beastly thing, Aunt. I believe it's gone permanently bung—oh!” The added exclamation followed his realization of the stranger's presence.

“That's Max Viati, my nephew, Mr Thomas Tucker.” Tommy held out his hand, and the youth wiped his on his trouser-leg and shook it. “A delightful nephew, but hopelessly incompetent.”

Max's dreamy eyes looked pathetically at her, but not with the proper expression of concern

at the breakdown. "I really can't do anything with it," he said impersonally, as if he were washing his hands of the affair. "I can't think in wheels and valves."

"Shall I have a look at it, Mrs Woodruff?"

"Please, Tommy. Max is a mere sculptor, but you are a really useful man." She smiled into Tommy's face, her vivid old eyes running over the shock of grey hair and the brown, elfin face beneath it, with that strange, fascinating crinkle beside the kindly eyes. "As well as an ornamental one," she added.

He located the trouble in a moment, rectified it, and, to the accompaniment of Max's murmured admiration, came upright again.

"There you are, Max," his aunt told him. "I knew it was some perfectly simple thing that a mere child like Tommy Tucker could discover and put right. Now you come home with us, Tommy, and sing to me."

"Er—thank you, Mrs Woodruff, but——"

"But what?" she asked sharply.

"I was going to Harrowdene to-day, and over to you to-morrow. I have one of my hunches that the Harrowdene district is full of leaking pots and pans, tinny pianos, and sick cows, and therefore needs me very badly."

"Nonsense. I need you very badly, too, after three weeks of Max's chauffeuring, and I'm much more important than a sick cow. You get on that bus of yours and follow on to Sedgemoor; I'll give you a good dinner and a comfortable bed, and between them you can sing to me. Drive on, Max, before he has time to refuse again."

Max might be no mechanic, but he was certainly a reckless driver; the car had vanished round the far bend before Tommy's wheel was in his hand. Old Mrs Angus Woodruff was probably enjoying the terrifying run, he thought; she was a connoisseur in the highlights of life.

The afternoon was almost gone when he reached the Sedgemoor gates and ran the bus round to the garage. The man washing the Woodruff car there was new to Tommy; he looked so dubiously at the inscription on the tarpaulin of the bus that Tommy smiled at him and read the inscription aloud, finally presenting him with a card. The man stared gloomily at the front:

THOMAS TUCKER

VOCALIST

MEALS SUNG FOR DAILY

He turned it over:—

PIANOS TUNED

POTS AND PANS MENDED

SICK ANIMALS MADE WELL

BOOKSELLER

"You haven't got a sick cow, have you?" Tommy asked him pleasantly. "Nor a leaking kettle?"

"No," the man answered.

Tommy sighed. "I knew I should have gone on to Harrowdene. Not a hope of business here—nothing but dinner and a too-luxurious bed. Don't wash down my car—the paint is not too safe in places."

The man stared after him, his expression of morose bewilderment intensifying as he saw Tommy greet his hostess at the veranda steps.

“Have you got any new books or anything pretty to sell me, Tommy, dear? Or will you just talk to me before dinner, and sing to me after it?”

Tommy looked up at the fine white head, at the bright, strong eyes that had seen seventy summers and winters, and at the whimsical smile in the eyes.

“Wouldn’t you like me just to listen to you before dinner, Mrs Woodruff?” he asked, his crinkling smile answering hers.

“Don’t be so rude,” she said. “And, anyhow, I’m going to listen to you after dinner, am I not? So it’s a fair go. Come and sit down.”

Dutifully he sat down beside her and turned to her attentively.

“Don’t be so absurd, Tommy. You make me feel as if you expected a speech. How do you like my Max?”

“He seems a very nice Max, from the little I saw of him. Not a brilliant motor mechanic, perhaps; but there are other careers in the world.”

She laughed. “Last year he ruined my garden, and this year he’ll probably wreck my big car.”

“Your garden?”

“Yes. Max is by way of being one of these new-fangled, independent youngsters— independent with reservations. He feels that he cannot take a few meals from his widowed aunt without returning something for them, if it’s only a ruined garden or a smashed-up car.”

Tommy looked blankly at her. “Dear Mrs Woodruff,” he said finally, “can I get you something—a little *sal volatile* or——”

“Really, Tommy, you are the most impertinent vet in New South Wales. Max’s mother was poor Angus’s younger sister—about twenty years younger; and he never forgave her for marrying Angelo Viati—‘that Dago,’ as he always called him. Angus’s will tied up all his money in trust for me, with a special clause expressly forbidding me to use any of it for the comfort or advancement of the Viati family. Angus was Scotch, and tenacious of his likes and dislikes, Tommy.”

“Obviously. But why does that make a ruining gardener and chauffeur of Max?”

“Well, I, too, am tenacious, if not Scotch. And, my own sons and daughter being scattered broadcast over Australia, I like Max to come and stay with me sometimes. But he, hating Angus (not without reason), insists upon working for his keep. So I sacked a gardener last year and gave Max his job—which was ultimately a very expensive gesture by the time the garden was fit to look at again. And this year I’m doing without a chauffeur while Max is here—literally without; and heaven knows what *that* will cost me in the end.”

“He’s not—er—a handy young man?”

Mrs Woodruff turned coldly to Thomas Tucker. “He’s a genius,” she said with an air of finality.

“A sculptor, I think you said.”

“Yes. He’s going to Rome to study under Capelli for three years. At my expense.”

“But I thought you said——”

“I know I did. But we have our ways, our small tenacities of purpose,” she told him airily. “Some money—a good deal of money—was left to me some years ago; my brother died, and my share of father’s estate came to me. I didn’t turn it in to the Woodruff estate—oh, no—I bought—what do you think I bought, Tommy, dear?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“Emeralds. Good emeralds, exceptional emeralds, always increase in value, and are always

high in value. Max *is* a genius; I have proof of it. And my emeralds shall buy him his chance to prove it to the world. Besides, I love him," she added, as if it were an afterthought.

Tommy sat laughing gently at her, his vivid eyes veiled and soft. A heavy booming began a crescendo roar in the house.

"The dressing-gong," she said. "You have half an hour, Tommy. Come and see if there's an afterglow."

There was an afterglow filling the other veranda with its soft light, and touching gently a small figure sitting demurely and very upright in the corner. Mrs Woodruff paused before the figure.

"Well, Eileen, how are you getting along?"

There was a hint of patronage and more than a hint of affection in her voice. The girl looked up from her needlework, shaking out her clustering beautiful black curls.

"Very well indeed, thank you, Mrs Woodruff. I'm as happy as the day itself." Her voice was a liquid melody, a shy melody that seemed to call up a vision of green hills and small white Irish houses hiding under their thatch. She had the softest, most fairylike brogue that Tommy had ever heard; sitting there with her needlework in her lap, she was the very embodiment of the shy Irish deference, the diffident courtesy that he could remember from long ago. "It's yourself that's looking the picture of health, ma'am, too," she went on, sweet grey eyes "put in with a smudgy finger" flashing up between the curtaining curls.

"I'm always well, my dear," Mrs Woodruff said, patting a thin shoulder and smiling down into the grey eyes. "And I think you're losing your pallor." The smile became a chuckle. "But where's your familiar—your Teddy bear?"

She blushed and the eyes fell. "It'll be in my room, ma'am. I'm not—not needin' it so much now, with your goodness to me."

"That's good. But don't work any more in this light, or you'll be needing an oculist. Put away your work and go for a walk round the garden, or something."

Eileen rose obediently and seemed to vanish, with such silent grace did she leave the veranda and slip down the steps.

"Another of your pets, Mrs Woodruff?"

"Certainly not—I have no pets. Do you like her?"

"Er—yes, if you can do that in one minute. She's very ornamental."

"Yes, isn't she? Far too young and pretty—that's what I told her when she came up in such distress from the hotel in the township."

"The hotel?"

"Yes. She was a housemaid there—a green child straight from Dublin, as pretty as a picture, in a hotel like the Unicorn. She came up to me one night with her heart breaking and told me how"—she paused and looked gravely at the gathering shadows—"never mind—let us say she was far too young and pretty, Tommy, for her job. So she—well, she helps the housemaids here and does a little needlework, and—and that sort of thing. I hardly see her from day's end to day's end. What are you laughing at, Tommy, dear?"

He instantly assumed a becoming gravity. "You, dear Mrs Woodruff," he said, but with respect. "Is your shy colleen alone in Australia, then?"

"At the moment, yes. Two brothers and their families are coming soon from Dublin; but Eileen came first, alone, to see if she could save some money out of the wages we pay our servants here—which to her seemed enormous—so that when her brothers came she wouldn't

be a penniless burden on them. A fine child," she added, turning to the shadows again.

"And the familiar, the Teddy bear?"

Mrs Woodruff turned back, her eyes tender. "Oh, that is rather pathetic, Tommy. She doesn't understand Australia and Australian ways yet, and sometimes I believe my maids here are not, shall I say, too sensitive in their treatment of her. So she gets homesick, and hugs and cuddles her Teddy bear, the one relic of her childhood, for comfort, carrying it about with her all day sometimes. I always mention its absence, because I'm so glad to see that the need of it _____"

The reverberating gong boomed again through the house. "Twenty minutes only, Tommy. On the run, please—I want dinner over, and 'O Sole Mio' in my ears."

Tommy was a minute and a half late, but he was ahead of Mrs Woodruff. Only the tall figure of Max Vati was waiting in the living-room hall. "Aunt's late—have a cigarette?" he said, adding impersonally, "she always is late."

Taking the cigarette, Tommy let his eyes rise to the young man's face. So many swans of Mrs Woodruff's had been geese in the end. There was a half-baffling personality behind the big dreamy eyes and the olive complexion of Max's Italian inheritance; the face was too handsome, in an undistinguished way, and yet it had also the British reticence to give it distinction. Tommy's eyes came back to the lighting of his cigarette; perhaps the baffling quality was only that of the genius Mrs Woodruff was so sure of—pray providence the man *was* a genius, for his aunt's sake. He certainly looked the part.

"I don't suppose anybody questions her right to be late." Tommy smiled as he put the comment—a small test-comment for this swan.

"Eh? Good Lord, no!" Max was half-indignant; his manner was anything but impersonal now. "She can be as late as she likes, as long as she turns up in the end."

It looked and behaved like a real swan.

"Ah, there you are, Aunt." A light of admiration sprang into the big dreamy eyes, and seemed to kindle all Max's spirit, so that for the moment he was an unquestionable genius. "Why, you're a rolling ball of style, Auntie. What's all the parade for? Thomas Tucker?"

Tommy turned to the figure at the foot of the stairs, standing under the cluster of lights. It was old Mrs Angus Woodruff, her accustomed vivid self, but transformed by sleepy rivers of green light, by darting points of green fire, by slumbrous masses of green beauty shining on the whiteness of her neck and arms and hands. She looked at the men and laughed, quite conscious of the sensation she had caused by the contrast of her white hair and black frock lit by all that green, living beauty.

"So you like me?" she said. "That's good. I'm a rolling ball of style, in your elegant phrase, Max, partly for dear Tommy, and partly for myself. I expect—I hope—to-night is my last chance of wearing my emeralds."

"Your last chance? Why?" Max held her chair for her.

"Mr Middlemass is coming to-morrow—on his way from Harrowdene to Sydney by car—and he has found an intolerably rich client with a complex for collecting emeralds. Mr Middlemass thinks this beastly client may be the opportunity I have been waiting for to sell my emeralds—Max's emeralds—and, as the kind of lawyer that dear Angus would entrust his business to, he prefers to carry the emeralds to Sydney in person."

She turned to Tommy, a sea-green flame seeming to swing across the room from each ear as she did so. "Good stones, aren't they, Tommy?"

“They’re wonderful,” Tommy said, staring at the leaping fire rippling on her neck. “I didn’t imagine that such——”

“I say, Aunt,” Max’s voice broke in, a fervent note in it, making Tommy feel that Max and his aunt were alone, “you’re too desperately good to me, you know. And those bonzer stones—it’s a shame——”

She turned angrily from Tommy to him.

“Nonsense, boy,” she said sharply. “Think of Capelli and Rome and fame, and then of an old woman in the backblocks of New South Wales, hugging the thought to her bones that she did it all. What’s a couple of emeralds to that?”

Tommy sang “O Sole Mio,” and was a great success, Mrs Woodruff sitting rapt while he did so, her eyes full of memories. At the song’s end she sighed, and was silent a moment.

“Now the Rimsky-Korsakov, Tommy, please,” she said gently at last, “the Field Song—the unpublished one. Max will let you play your own accompaniment, I’m sure.”

Max left the piano and dropped into a chair beside his aunt in the shadows of the room. He watched this Thomas Tucker, tinker and vet, a new expression in his eyes; “O Sole Mio” sung by this smiling man, this pedlar, was surely the spirit of all the beauty in sound.

The beating, half-Eastern accompaniment to the Field Song throbbed gently through the room, the two opening phrases recurring to make an over-beat. Presently Tommy’s head went back, and the wild sorrow poured in magic from his throat; he *was* the poet working in the cornfield, his spirit shaken with pain and longing. Max caught his breath and leaned forward so that he might lose nothing of this enchantment; “O Sole Mio” was sugary and affected compared with this bitter, beautiful cry.

The poet’s work in the cornfield done, Tommy was back in his hut, the candle lit and the pen in his hand. A crooning inspiration possessed him; Mrs Woodruff and Max saw the pen travelling along the paper, saw the black words on the white. Tommy’s perfect voice a sort of menacing lullaby in their ears, they saw the pen falter and the poet’s head droop forward, heard his gasp, saw him die of hunger over his manuscript. . . . The beating Tartar rhythm pulsated softly once, and silence fell.

Mrs Woodruff looked up. “Thank you, Tommy. You’re a great blessing to me. You needn’t sing any more to-night; you must be treated as a sort of Caruso, with only two jewels to fling to the groundlings per evening. Don’t you think so, Max?”

But Max had no words. He was a poet, or a sculptor, condemned to work in the corn, and too poor to buy clay. He grunted, staring unseeingly at Tommy’s elfin head. Tommy laughed and stood up, sub-consciously aware of the clustering curls and the shy bent head of the colleen moving silently away from the open French window. He wondered vaguely what she thought of the Field Song.

“I’ll sing to you all night if you’ll let me smoke one cigarette now, Mrs Woodruff.”

“No; you can sit and talk to me instead, while the Korsakov sinks in. Don’t you know enough to stop on your high note, Tommy?”

So Tommy sat and listened while the career of Max was sketched out for him, small, eager white hands heavy with emeralds emphasizing all the highlights of that splendid career.

Australian sunshine was filling the living-room hall as Tommy came down the stairs, the conscious virtue of the early riser expressed in his light step and smiling eyes. But Mrs Woodruff was there before him, pouring coffee at the window-seat and looking dubiously at a piece of toast on her plate.

“Somehow I loathe breakfast more every day in every way—Oh, good morning, Tommy.”

“Good morning,” he said coldly. “You’ve spoilt my scene.”

“I’m so sorry. What is your scene?”

“By all the rules of the game, I am the first up—it’s not half-past seven yet.”

“I know. I apologize. Shall I go back to bed, and come down in a kimono at nine?”

“No,” he said, bruising the skin of an orange and smelling it; “honour is satisfied by your apology. But don’t let it occur again. How are you?”

She sighed. “Insomnia, Tommy—that’s why I spoilt your scene; I was so sick of staring at the ceiling. Sometimes, when I’m depressed, I think I must be getting old, you know, Tommy—good morning, Max. You don’t happen to be the first up, do you?”

“No, Aunt,” he said, looking from her to Tommy; “I’m obviously the third. Why?”

“There!” She turned triumphantly to Tommy. “Isn’t he the little gentleman? You have the entire stage, Thomas Tucker, with both spotlights on you.”

“Thank you.” Thomas Tucker bowed gravely. “It is my due.”

Max peered into their faces anxiously. “I say,” he said patiently, “are you sure you’ve been to bed? You don’t suggest a good night’s rest to me.”

Mrs Woodruff drank her coffee and stood up. “I’m going into the library,” she announced. “You can fight it out between you who has my orange and my egg.” She smiled at them and disappeared through the library doorway.

Max turned back to the table. “Good morning,” he said to Tommy. “Would you like her egg or her orange?” His face became grave. “I suppose she couldn’t sleep again.”

“Yes; she said something about insomnia.”

“She ought to sleep well, with the days she puts in. But——”

“Max! Tommy!”

They turned at her horrified voice. She was standing at the open door of the library, her face as white as her hair and her trembling hands clasped together.

“Heavens, Aunt! What’s wrong?”

Her lips trembled, her haggard eyes staring from Max to Tommy. Tommy stood up.

“What is it, Mrs Woodruff? Can I do anything? You know I’m at your service.”

“Nobody can do anything,” she said, her voice stricken and toneless. “The emeralds are gone!”

“Good Lord!” Max whispered.

“I put them in my desk last night,” she went on in the same suddenly-old voice, “to be ready for Mr Middlemass to-day. And they’re gone!”

“But, Aunt”—Max sprang up—“you must be wrong. You must have meant to put them in your desk, and taken them up to your safe in the usual way.”

She stumbled across the room and sank suddenly in her chair.

“*I know* I put them in my desk,” she whimpered, “and they’ve vanished. And I’m an old woman. Do something, Tommy. Ring up the police, or something. I’ll faint or go to pieces if ——” She sighed heavily and was silent, leaning her head on the back of the chair, her face drawn and lined, and with all the vividness banished from it.

Tommy looked down at her. “You’re all right, aren’t you?” he said sharply.

She opened her eyes. “I’ll be perfectly right if you’ll get on the trail of my emeralds, of Max’s fame,” she said. “Count me out for now; I’m all right here. But for the love of Providence go to work.”

Tommy turned to Max. “Step up to her room and search all the likely places. She may be

wrong about the desk. I'll round up the servants, and run the search down here. Shake it up."

Max vanished, and Tommy went out to the kitchen. In two hours Sedgemoor had been searched from end to end and top to bottom; every servant had been cross-examined; even the garage and the man's room had not been omitted.

To no avail. Barring a broken twig or so on a shrub beneath the library window and some faint, indefinite disturbance of the mould of the bed round the shrub, no slightest clue was found of the emeralds going. Tommy rang up the Harrowdene police and went back to Mrs Woodruff. He was telling her as gently as he could of the failure of his efforts when the noise of pattering feet sounded on the polished floor of the room, and Eileen stood before them, Eileen on the verge of collapse. She was hugging her Teddy bear frantically to her bosom, and gasping sobs of terror were shaking her.

"Will the men not still be on the premises, Mrs Woodruff, dear?" she whispered.

"What men, Eileen?" Mrs Woodruff's eyes looked firmly at her to quell the rising hysteria.

"The burglars—oh, wirrah, wirrah, we'll all be murdered in our beds. Was it for this I left me home for strange lands?" She fell on her knees, a picture of wild distress, the cloud of curls quivering on her head and the grey eyes wide open in panic.

Mrs Woodruff laughed and drew her to her feet. "Now, Eileen, my dear," she said, her strong voice confident and soothing, "you can trust me to see that no harm comes to you. The men who took my emeralds are miles away by now—they'd be fools to be anywhere near us, wouldn't they, with the police on their way from Harrowdene now?"

But the colleen could not be comforted. Clutching the Teddy bear she burst into a storm of weeping, wild, hysterical weeping that nothing could stop. This was the end of all things; it was she who had brought it on the house—bad luck always followed her, had always followed her since her mother died. There was a curse upon her, and she had brought it into the house of her benefactor at last.

Mrs Woodruff gathered her into her arms, and by slow degrees forced the storm to subside. In the end the sobs became fewer and fewer, and finally ceased. Eileen stood up, a vision of lovely sorrow, but calm now.

"I'll be going back to the maids now, Mrs Woodruff," she said, stroking the Teddy bear's head and speaking in a small, ashamed voice; "I'm a great distress to you, with me moiderin'. I hope you'll forgive me." She looked from Mrs Woodruff's face to Tommy's, the liquid melody of her brogue making a thin sorrowful music in the room. "It's meself that's ashamed, and I wonder you put up with me at all." She half curtseyed, and flitted from the room, that first impression of a magic vanishing coming back to Tommy's mind as his eyes followed the pretty white-and-black figure with the brown note of the comforting Teddy bear held close to the childish bosom.

"Poor child." Mrs Woodruff's voice was tenderness itself. "She seems to feel that the loss of the emeralds——"

A voice from the doorway interrupted her.

"The inspector is here, ma'am," the maid said. "Shall I show him in, or will Mr Tucker see him?"

"Show him in here, please."

Inspector Haig went over all the ground already covered by Tommy and Max, preserving the inviolate police expression of knowledge withheld. He spent some hours at this task, did a good deal of telephoning, and finally installed a constable to take charge of the case, since his

duty called him away. But neither he nor his constable threw any light on the loss of the emeralds; they no more than proved, once more that the jewels, the necklace, rings, and earrings were not in any hiding-place in Sedgemoor. Finally the constable, too, departed to communicate with headquarters with a view to getting some help from the detective force. The thing was a mystery to him, he confessed to Tommy; he couldn't imagine where the stones were, or who was responsible for their vanishing. Tommy smiled and thanked him, unable to suppress the thought that he was thanking him for nothing.

"Well, there goes Max's chance of Rome and fame," Mrs Woodruff said. "It's a hard life, Tommy, dear. That's not an original remark; Mr Middlemass said it this morning when I had to send him to Sydney without the emeralds."

For a moment she stared out of the window. "Will you stay for a couple of days, Tommy?" she went on. "You can do your work from here as well as from elsewhere, and you give me confidence. Stay until this beastly detective has come up from Sydney to tell us that the thing is a mystery to him, too, will you?"

"Of course I will. And I shan't be doing any work much at present. I have an idea that might _____"

He ceased and looked thoughtfully at her.

She sat up. "An idea, Tommy?"

"Only a hunch," he said hurriedly. "Don't take the bloom off it by asking me about it. There are incantations and enchantments and all sorts of secret ceremonies—you see, it's a hunch, and that means that it can only work in silence."

Her eyes held him for another moment. "Don't forget that I'm an old woman, Tommy, will you?" she said at last.

Tommy's crinkling smile flashed radiantly at her.

"No, I won't forget," he told her.

The days dragged by. The detective came, retaining his cloak of silent wisdom while he potted about and was discovered at odd moments in odd unexpected places. But he found no emeralds, nor any trace of emeralds. The day came when Tommy's business demanded that he return to work; this slack, luxurious life was making him soft, he said. He came into the living-room hall with his hands full of parcels, and his smile very much in evidence.

"These are gifts," he said; "small parting gifts from a grateful guest. That is yours, Mrs Woodruff, it's silk—the pride of my stock. Don't look at it till I've gone. And that is yours, Max—Turkish cigarettes of the very best brand." He looked at the other parcels. "Could the maids have these things, Mrs Woodruff? I don't like to invade the kitchen; they might think I wanted to cross-question them again, and they must be sick of that by now."

"Of course, Tommy. Ring that bell—no, there's Eileen on the veranda. Eileen!"

She appeared at the window.

"Take these to Palmer, will you, my dear, and say that they are gifts from Mr Tucker, with his compliments—is that right, Tommy?"

"Quite right, thank you, Mrs Woodruff." He looked at Eileen, at her Teddy bear. "Your bear ought to have a ribbon, Eileen, as a remembrance from me. Bring him out to my bus in the garage when you've taken the parcels, and we'll find him a good one in the stock."

"Very well, Mr Tucker. And thank you." She curtseyed and slipped away with the parcels.

"What a heavenly colour, Tommy!" Mrs Woodruff was holding some silk to her neck and looking in the mirror. "You *are* a dear. Thank you so much."

“I told you not to look at it,” he said severely; “but I knew you would. I’m so glad you like it. Now I must go and decorate that bear.”

In the garage the little black-and-white figure with the cloud of curls was standing demurely by the bonnet of the bus. Tommy’s smile faded as he saw it, and his eyes grew hard and purposeful. He walked over to the tarpaulin-covered stock, putting his hand on it, but looking at the little figure.

“Which will you choose?” he said suddenly. “Will you get on to the bus and come away with me, or shall I hand you over to the police?”

She gasped, and a grey pallor rose in the pretty face.

“Is it insulting me you are, or making game of me, Mr Tucker?”

For answer he took the Teddy bear from her arms, tore off the fur covering, and let a glittering pile of emeralds ripple from the case into his hand.

“Now, will you come with me, or shall the police see to it?”

Her arms fell to her sides, and a hard, reckless light showed for an instant in her eyes.

“I’ll come with you,” she whispered.

“Then wait—I’ll be back in five minutes. Wait,” he repeated. “I have the bus, and there are two cars. If you tried to get away you’d be caught in ten minutes.”

“I’ll wait,” she said.

Tommy took the bear and the emeralds, and disappeared into the house. In five minutes he was back empty-handed, motioned her to take her seat in the driving-seat, and climbed up beside her without looking at her. Presently the bus slipped gently through the gates of Sedgemoor, and took the main road running north.

The afternoon shadows were slanting through the bush when Tommy ran the bus into a clearing, glancing at the river behind the clearing and at the remains of some former camper’s fire. He brought the bus to a standstill and climbed down, addressing his first words since leaving Sedgemoor to the shy colleen.

“Gather some sticks,” he said, “and we’ll make a fire—a good big fire—and you can tell me all about it.”

She looked at him, her face pale and drawn, and the panic filling her grey eyes again.

“Hurry up,” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

The sticks were brought and the fire started.

“Bring more,” Tommy said, stripping the tarpaulin off the stock, “a lot more.”

Presently the fire was leaping high in the clearing. Tommy came and looked at it, some clothes in his hand. “Yes, I think it’ll do now,” he said. “Now take these clothes, go behind the bus, and put them on. We’ll burn those you’re wearing. And we’ll begin with this.” He plucked the clustering curls suddenly from her head and threw the wig on the fire, smiling calmly into the boy’s terrified face. “Now change,” he said, sitting down beside the fire.

A slim Irish boy came and stood beside him, a dark Irish boy with all the fugitive beauty of the colleen, but looking better now in grey flannel trousers and shirt. His close-cropped head had a wistfulness and yet a half-defiance hard to place, hard to make consistent with his youth. There was a slackness, too, about him, a line-of-least-resistance softness which made him pathetic. He threw a bundle of clothes on the fire and sat down at some distance from Tommy, watching the towering flames in silence.

“Now tell me about it,” Tommy said gently, when the flames had died down.

The boy told him about it—about the childhood and boyhood in Dublin, and the criminal

father in and out of gaol. About the forcing of himself into the easy criminal ways, about the discovery of his magic gift of impersonation and the many devious uses of the gift, about the unexpected chance to come to Australia under the wing of some social welfare society.

Tommy stared into the heart of the fire while the boy's rich brogue went melodiously on, telling him of his effort to run straight when he first arrived, and of his failure to do so when he heard that there was to be a family of rich squatters at the Harrowdene hotel a month ago, the lady squatter's diamonds being famous for their size and value. About his going there as a housemaid, and about the failure of the squatters to come there at all; of his chance hearing of Mrs Woodruff's emeralds, and his going to her with his tale of distress.

"And the rest of it you know yourself, Mr Tucker," the boy added, throwing a twig on the fire with a little gesture of hopelessness.

For a long moment Tommy sat in silence. Some nameless quality in the boy called out to him, beseeching his help. It was only backbone that the lad wanted, the backbone that was every man's right, and which he had missed through a bad environment at the beginning. Max was safe for Rome and his chance of fame; Mrs Woodruff was happy again, if another of her swans *had* turned out a goose; and here was he, Tommy Tucker, and this boy, this fine boy, he thought, looking at the shapely head and the grave eyes. Too soft, too soft.

"Ever done any fishing—go in for any sport at all?"

The boy turned to him, his face full of amazement. "I have not," he said. "Why?"

"Because it's time you did. Come over here."

The boy followed him, wondering, to the bus, and took the fishing-line and hooks from his hand.

"I got a bag of forty-two, and five of them three-pounders, at that bend, one afternoon," Tommy told him, pointing to a sharp curve in the river. "Now you go and see what you can do while I get the billy boiling and tea on the way."

He looked into the boy's face and smiled, the little crinkles coming and going at the corners of his eyes.

"We'll try what three months of the Australian bush and me can do, my boy," he said.

In an autumn dusk Tommy sat over the fire. A billy of coffee was shedding its perfume up into his nostrils, co-ordinating with an empty feeling below his belt.

"If that young blighter doesn't turn up in a minute," he muttered, "I'll eat my tea alone, and he can starve."

A thin whistling started some distance off between the trees, growing louder, until a brown, hard-looking youth stepped out into the clearing, put down his gun, and brought three wild duck proudly over to Tommy.

"Aren't they beauties?" he said, his clear eyes dancing with triumph.

Tommy looked up into the healthy, weather-bitten face, all hard and confident, and with the serenity of confidence.

"Creditable," he said; "late, but very creditable. Don't be too fussy about the cleaning. I'll have to begin on bread. You're starving me."

The youth looked into Tommy's elfin eyes.

"I say," he said, a half-smile showing about his lips, "I believe you're going to reform me, Mr Tucker."

Tommy looked up gravely at the youth, swung slowly back and forth, and chanted:

Of that there is no possible doubt,
No possible, probable shadow of doubt,
No possible doubt whatever.

YOUNG FELLER ME LAD

Thomas Tucker, driving his sawn-off bus towards the setting sun, was conscious of something lacking. The evidence of this lack was not an actual pain, but only a slight discomfort—so slight, indeed, that it was some time before Tommy could relate it to its cause. He realized finally that he was hungry, remembered that he had had no time for lunch, and decided that he would not wait for dark for tea. To that end he looked for a clear opening in the bush, and, finding one soon, turned the sawn-off bus into it. A couple of hundred yards of careful driving took him to a clearing and the remains of some swaggie's fire.

This hour of the day was always the best to Tommy. None of his work was actual house-to-house peddling, it is true; his customers were all either friends or the friends of friends, and they were so many that he need never have camped. His tenor voice and queer elusive charm would have made him sure of a dinner and a bed every night of the year had he so wished. But he did not always so wish. Not much of a roof-tree was his, and nothing at all of a household; but such as these were he enjoyed them when the mood was upon him, as to-night.

He was alone; and all that he knew of home, in these later Australian years, was around him: the bus, and the little lean-to tent, and himself. To those he added the peace of Australian evening, that blessed feeling of rest and settling-down which yet held all the latent Australian power in the primeval spaces whither Tommy's business took him. The solitude brooding over the vast world seemed to keep a place at its heart for Thomas Tucker, a little vacuum of silence for him and his apologies for a home. Here he could dispose himself in quietude for the night, could take his ease, and forget. From now until dawn he was himself only, without need to sing, or smile, or remember. There was nothing now for him to do but to make his tea, smoke three peaceful cigarettes, and sleep.

The sun had set, and the swift dusk was passing. When the lean-to tent, the little house, was up, the fire had calmed down to a steady glow, and the billy was boiling. He tipped the coffee in, and watched the brown bubbles for a minute and a half before he took the billy off the wire. As he turned back to the bus for tucker supplies a little song escaped his lips in his crooning, dreaming head voice:

Now for the banquet we press,
Now for the eggs, the ham;
Now for the mustard and cress,
Now for the strawberry jam!

In the still silence that followed, a shadowy sound made itself heard in the encircling bush, a little rustle and the soft snap of a twig. Tommy looked up, peering into the gathering darkness beyond the glow of the fire. Watching the motionless leaves, his eyes suddenly crinkled in their flashing smile, and he turned back to the big tucker-box in patent ignorance of any shadowy sound. In that obvious ignorance he continued his song:

Now for the tea of our host,
Now for the rollicking bun;
Now for the muffin and toast,
Now for the gay Sally Lunn!

That, too, had faded into the silence before any cause of the snapping twig presented itself. Tommy waited, idly sorting the tucker. Presently a figure detached itself from the blackness of

the bush and came slowly out into the clearing. On the edge of the circle of firelight it paused, looking warily at Tommy. It was a little boy, a ragged, unkempt little boy with tired yet watchful eyes. His face was very grave as he stood on the ring of light, fingering his torn shirt.

“Have you really got all them bosker things to eat, mister?” he asked.

Tommy was dramatically conscious of the intruder’s presence.

“Hallo, young feller me lad; where did you spring from?”

“From the bush,” the boy said, the watchful light deepening in his eyes. “What’s Sally Lunn?”

“A Sally Lunn is a bun—twelve thousand miles away, I am sorry to say.” Tommy’s manner changed suddenly to that of a tradesman anxious to please a good customer. “I regret that I can’t do you eggs or muffins or mustard and cress,” he said, “and my stock of rollicking buns has run out. But I can manage the strawberry jam, the ham, and the toast. Excellent bread and butter. Cheese. Condensed milk, if you don’t mind the manufactured article.”

The boy’s eyes gleamed.

“I like it better,” he said, coming nearer to the fire; “I can’t stick real milk.”

Tommy looked at the dragged, grimy little figure wearing all the signs of having slept in the bush. A haunting forlornness hovered about the boy, but dominated by a precocious courage; but at the moment all evidence was obscured by dirt.

“How about a wash before tea, feller me lad?” he said gently. “There’s a towel and a bit of soap in the tent, and at the bottom of that rise you’ll find an old waterhole.”

“Ta. I c’d do with a wash.” His slight swagger as he walked across the clearing to the tent very nearly hid the fatigue in his bare brown legs.

When he came back the evidence was clearer. He was a surprisingly handsome boy, slim and graceful, and yet giving the impression of hardiness. The deep shadows under his eyes might be caused by fatigue, or they might be part of that elusive forlornness. He put back the soap and towel and came over to the fire, holding small sturdy hands to its warmth with the reticent, accustomed air of an old campaigner, and carefully not looking at the display of good things to eat. Tommy suppressed a smile and pointed to the other side of the fire.

“Sit down,” he said, as to a contemporary. “I hope your appetite’s good.”

“Not too bad,” the boy replied, carefully casual.

“Good! I thought you might like something a bit stronger than milk, if you’d been on the road, so I brewed you coffee.” Tommy handed him the mug of one-per-cent coffee. “Try that; and have some ham. You must be peckish.”

The boy demonstrated beyond question that his appetite was not too bad. Tommy admired in silence until he thought it was time to intervene.

“Going far?” he asked, still as to a contemporary.

“Down t’ Sydney,” was the offhand answer.

“You’ve got a job there?”

“Yairs.”

This boy might perhaps be nine years old, but was more likely eight; and Sydney was three hundred-odd miles away. Tommy looked reflectively at the grave, attractive young face, so deliberately reticent and casual in its affectation of independence. Something had aged the boy, put him on his guard, given him an armour long before armour was necessary. He looked up into Tommy’s eyes, and for the first time smiled, a dim smile like a ghost from a lost childhood.

“No, I’ve got no job, mister. I just run away. Couldn’t stick it.”

“Couldn’t stick what? Home?”

“Yes, if yer c’n call it home.”

Thomas Tucker, pedlar, tapped a cigarette thoughtfully on his thumbnail. The dusk of night had descended, and here at its heart was the camp-fire of home, if you could call it home. Over the flame of the match he looked at the boy’s fine head, remembering the dim smile.

“What’s wrong with it?” he asked gently.

“The old woman,” was the prompt answer.

“Your mother?”

“Naow,” in infinite contempt; “Mrs Boyd. Me mother’s dead, and so’s me father.”

“And you live with Mrs Boyd?”

“Yes. Ever since I was a kid.”

Tommy suppressed another smile, not wholly of mirth.

“Yes?”

“When me mother died—there was only her and me—Mrs Boyd took me in, to gimmie a home, she says. An’ it’s only natural I got to work for it, she says. An’ I do—I got seven cows to milk mornin’ and night, besides odd jobs of work about the place. I’m goin’ all day—sometimes I c’n hardly find me chaff-bags in the wood-shed when it’s bedtime——”

“Your chaff-bags? What for?”

His level, patient gaze turned in surprise to Tommy.

“Well, Mrs Boyd’s got kids of her own, she says, and stretchers cost money, let alone giving me me tucker and a home. I don’t mind the graftin’—everyone’s got to graft, I know, without her tellin’ me—but she’s always goin’ off pop an’ rousin’ on me when I’ve done nothin’. You know, mister”—he looked argumentatively at Tommy—“I don’t get *time* to do anything but work. An’ it isn’t any good her knockin’ me about an’ yellin’ at me, ’cos I haven’t done it an’ she knows I haven’t.”

He paused and stared into the fire’s red heart, his eyes looking haggard and bleak for a moment, and that indescribable forlornness descending upon him. So long was his pause to peer into the fire that Tommy prompted him at last.

“Yes, young feller me lad?” he said softly.

“Me name’s Jack—Jack Turner,” the boy replied, as a courteous intimation that his name was not feller me lad. “Well, I got full of it an’ cleared out yesterday mornin’, for good. I know I’ve done it before, when she got over the odds, and hid about the place. But she always found me, or I got hungry, or somethin’. That was before I got me growth, though”—he turned gravely to Tommy—“an’ the night before last she went for me with the soft broom once too often.” The mobile mouth set in a thin line, most strange in the child’s face. “And at sun-up I walked out. Wherever I ended up, even if it was the gallows, it couldn’t be worse than Mrs Boyd’s. I slept yesterday an’ to-day, an’ walked all last night, so as to dodge any neighbours. I’d just woke up when your car come in.”

He ceased, and sat watching Tommy, as if he resented the weak-mindedness of telling a dangerous secret to a grown-up, but was glad also that the secret was off his chest.

“Where is Mrs Boyd’s place?”

The boy sat bolt upright, a wild terror lighting his eyes. He clutched his battered, shapeless hat, and held it before him.

“You’re not taking me back, mister?” he whispered, catching his breath.

Tommy’s heart shook as he leaned over the dying fire and patted the clenched brown hands.

“No, no, young feller me lad. We’re cobbers in this. I only thought it was curious that I hadn’t heard of the lady—I know this district pretty well.”

The boy leaned back on his tree-trunk with a great sigh of relief.

“She’s not in this district,” he said. “I ran most of last night.” His face was grateful for Tommy’s friendliness, but a little puzzled at his attitude in a grown-up. “You said we were cobbers in this, mister?”

Tommy smiled into the puzzled face. “Well, aren’t we? We’re banded together to see that you don’t have to go back to Mrs Boyd’s, aren’t we? And we’ve broken bread together beside our own camp-fire, haven’t we? If any two people are cobbers, we are. Didn’t any of the neighbours have anything to say to Mrs Boyd—the parson, or the schoolmaster, or anybody?”

“Yes, some of ’em used to come up sometimes when I was a kid. But she talked ’em over an’ said the neighbours ’d been spreadin’ yarns and I was real bad at heart—young Leon (that’s one of her kids) told me that.” He sighed once more and turned again to the smouldering fire. “My word, they were hard. . . .”

“What about school—did you go to school?”

“A bit, sometimes. But mostly I worked—Mrs Boyd couldn’t spare me, she said, what with the wood and the fowls and the stock to be fed and the cows milked. School made it a cruel long day,” he added as an afterthought.

“I see. Have you got any relations, young feller me lad? I mean, that you know of?”

“No; there was only mother an’ me. Father died in Brisbane—I never knew him—an’ mother was a stranger in Quincy. She was a pommy, she used to say.”

His face softened at some memory, but in his reticent habit he said nothing more.

“I see,” Tommy repeated, and was silent for a long moment while he lit and half smoked the second of the three cigarettes. Presently he kicked the embers of the fire together and threw on some sticks and a last log. The flames leapt up to illumine the walls of massed bush and show him once more the handsome head of this boy, this young feller me lad who had walked out of the dark into the ring of firelight that was home. This was sanctuary, and beyond the massed shadows the night brooded over its Boyds and its multitudes of cows to be milked.

“I don’t see why I’m sitting here thinking about it,” he said at last, throwing the cigarette butt into the fire. “We wander for a time in our separate intentions, feller me lad; but presently we converge, and meet. In the back of the bus you’ll find two rugs; put one on the ground on this side of the fire, roll up in the second, and sleep on the first. I sleep in the tent, and I shall be obliged if you’ll call me early. We must be up and away at the break of light. Who knows what Boyds are on our tracks?”

A gleam of fear started into the boy’s eyes at the dreaded name, but he saw that queer crinkling at the corners of the man’s smiling eyes and he chuckled.

“Right-oh, mister,” he said. “I’ll call you early. I ought to know how to wake up when I want to be now.”

At the break of light, then, the sawn-off bus took the road under the command of two officers: Thomas Tucker and young feller me lad; and for six months, until Jack’s ninth birthday was well past, it travelled and peddled under that command. When Tommy spent the night, or some days and nights, at the home of a customer and friend, Jack, who became “young feller me lad” throughout a large part of the area of New South Wales, was an equally honoured guest. Tommy taught him to speak, to read, and to write correctly. He taught him mathematics

as far as he could, and geography, and the leading principles of music. And, not omitting the matters of standing up when a lady entered the room and holding doors open, Tommy did all that he could do in the groundwork of Jack's fitness for the journey of life.

By degrees the forlornness had faded away; only very rarely did it make its appearance now. The steady watchfulness had vanished, and that bleak gravity of the boy's eyes. But the reticence remained; that much of his armour young feller me lad kept. When circumstance demanded imperatively that he speak, he spoke; otherwise, he was silent; and never did he speak of the past in its, as it were, Boyd application. His only acknowledgment that there was such a past was expressed in an undying hatred of cows, and even that was politely supposed to be an unaccountable idiosyncrasy.

Tommy pushed back the gates of a new world for young feller me lad, a world of toys you could take under your rug with you while Tommy smoked his last cigarette and the fire went dimmer and dimmer; a world of fairy-tales and all the good things you could think yourself into believing. Jack went his self-contained, reticent way in this rich world, his eyes looking at Tommy's face for guidance in the unfamiliar paths. In this world he learned that you washed three or four times a day and had a bath whenever you got a chance, that you answered promptly and without slurring your words, and that everybody was at heart kind and meant you well. The rules are not hard to follow when you get used to them, and with Tommy to guide you; and you undoubtedly got your money's worth.

Tommy felt that he was getting his money's worth, too. In place of the draggled waif of circumstance who had peered watchfully at him from the edge of the firelit circle, there was now this handsome lad equipped to make some sort of fist of life—he had at least a working confidence in life, anyhow, as a jumping-off place. Furthermore, that shifting home, that household of a cleared space in the trees, firelit and silent, had become more real now. Voices had driven out the silence, and young feller me lad the everlasting solitude. Tommy knew that a rare thing, a great possession, was his now. Yet . . . feller me lad was the point—was the possession so great for him, as from now?

Lighting his third cigarette, he looked across the embers at the little pile of rugs with the bright head at one end. That confident quietude was his work; not being a fool, he knew that. But for him this waif of humanity would be now sleeping in fear and strain, alert for the peep of daybreak and the long day's work. Because of Thomas Tucker he was now happy; his birthright was his again. Yet——

Tommy looked over at the lean-to tent, the bus in the shadows, the dull glow of the fire, and again at the little pile of rugs quietly rising and falling. He remembered to-day, and yesterday, and the days before it. Young feller me lad had more rights than mere affection and security from pain. For a life-worn pedlar and vet this sanctuary of shadows was well enough, as was the shifting, never-ending journey of the day; but not for a little boy on the threshold of life. He needed a real home, and the education that Tommy could not give him. He had taken young feller me lad as far as he could.

But what to do?

The third cigarette was ash in the embers, and an unlawful fourth had joined it before any light presented itself. Tommy remembered that within thirty miles of these ashes there was a station of fair size and of great prosperity. Jock Anderson had had the habit for forty years now of boasting that never a pennyworth of mortgage had rested on Muirfield, that not a square foot of it had even come within cooe of the clutching fingers of a bank or a public company. Mrs Jock, who had travelled by sailing-ship from Dundee to join Jock when Muirfield was an

infinitesimal part of its present self, had decreed long ago that any moneys put into the place should be earned and not borrowed. Hence the heroic prosperity of the station and its immunity from the common fate of stations.

The one fly in this ointment—and possibly a strong contributing cause of the ointment's satisfactoriness—was the non-appearance of any little Andersons. In the fighting days of the development of the place this did not seem perhaps of very great importance; but now that the fighting days were over the absence of any young life at Muirfield made itself felt in a good many ways, as Mrs Anderson had more than once confided to Tommy on his annual visit. For years she had been making up her mind to go down to Sydney and see about the adoption of some child, but she didn't like going down to Sydney, and it was a confusing, elaborate business, and Jock might not like the child, and—well, somehow it didn't get done. Mr and Mrs Jock Anderson remained at Muirfield, a lonely, rich couple fast approaching old age, their strong personalities rubbing each other the wrong way with increasing frequency, and their real interest in life disappearing in proportionate ratio.

Remembering these circumstances, Tommy sat deep in thought. The situation was not nearly so obvious as it seemed; you had to take into account those two very strong personalities who, unaided and unguided, had reached their present position from a beginning of no position at all. . . . The embers received a few abstracted sticks, and burnt them up; and the moon dipped below the ring of trees. But Tommy presently stood up and stretched, a flickering smile on his lips and wrinkling the corners of his eyes. This faded suddenly as he looked at the little pile of rugs; soon it came back, and he shrugged his shoulders and entered the lean-to tent.

Mr and Mrs Anderson were delighted to see Thomas Tucker in the middle of the following morning, and they became as effusive as their natures and upbringing permitted at the idea of his and young feller me lad's staying with them for a week. In their different ways they both liked Thomas, his rendering of Scotch ballads, and his habit of disappearing in the early morning on his round, and not showing up again until dinner-time to sing to them. In that way he was a guest, a very entertaining guest, whose presence embodied the maximum of enjoyment with the minimum of trouble; and the fact that most of their neighbours would have been more than glad to shelter him did not diminish their national relishing of his choice of Muirfield.

He announced at lunch that he had a call to make that afternoon, and if Mrs Anderson didn't mind he'd leave Jack at Muirfield and make the call alone. Mrs Anderson beamed.

"Certainly, Mr Tucker. The laddie'll be vera sociable and comfortable with me, won't ye, Jack?"

"Yes," young feller me lad said non-committally.

Tommy laughed.

"It isn't everybody I'd leave him with, Mrs Anderson. But he gets enough of the road, day in, day out."

"I'll show ye round the place," Mr Anderson said, with the air of conferring an enormous favour.

"Thank you," young feller me lad conceded.

After dinner Mr Anderson pushed the decanter of port across to Tommy and cleared his throat.

"Yon's a fine lad o' yours, Thomas," he said with elaborate but not too elaborate casualness.

"Yes. I'm proud of Jack. He's a great comfort to me on the road, you can imagine."

Mr Anderson smoked his cigar in silence for a moment.

"I doubt his schooling'll be a bit deficient," he said presently, "as yet."

"Oh, well, I do what I can, you know. He can read and write and speak fairly decently now. And I like teaching him."

Mr Anderson flicked his cigar-ash into the tray and stood up, putting the stopper into the decanter.

"Mebbe," he said. "But a lad who can hold his tongue like that one should get all the opportunities, Thomas. He didna speak ten words to me to-day, and six o' them were to curse a cow he didna like the look of. A fine lad, a vera fine lad."

Thomas Tucker followed Mr Anderson into the drawing-room, his face composed in suitable and respectful gravity. His inspired singing of "Bonny Dundee" brought tears into Mrs Anderson's eyes.

"It's a breath o' home an' the sight of Tay Bridge ye bring me," she said, unashamedly wiping her eyes. "And that wee laddie o' yours with his hand in mine had started me soft before dinner. You'll get me all nervous, between you."

"Mr Anderson seems to think he doesn't get enough schooling, and that I ought to part with him for his own good. But I couldn't think of doing that, Mrs Anderson. I found him, you know, and he's mine; it would be like parting with my own son. Besides, I couldn't afford to put him at the kind of school I'd want for him. But I couldn't let him go, in any case."

"No, Mr Tucker. And you couldna be expected to." Mrs Anderson continued her knitting with absorbed attention. "I've known lads get on vera well wi' little or no education. It's not so important as folks imagine. A good home, now, is a different matter. . . . Ye'll be on your rounds again to-morrow, Mr Tucker?"

"Yes. I shall be away all day to-morrow. I hope young feller me lad won't be a nuisance to you."

"He won't. I was thinking of taking him to Lollard with me, an' gettin' a few things. The big car is never out o' the garage now. And ye'll no be offended if I get him a suit, will ye, Mr Tucker? Oh, he's well enough dressed," she hastened to add; "but it'll be a treat for me to get him a wee suit. Ye won't mind?"

Mr Tucker smiled wholly in friendship.

"I should like you to, Mrs Anderson. It's a thing you understand much better than I do. He'll pay for dressing, won't he?"

Mrs Anderson looked over at the handsome head bent over the book.

"He will indeed," she said softly. "Will ye come on a motor drive with me to-morrow, Jack, and we'll have a fine lunch at the Lollard Arms?"

Young feller me lad looked up, and smiled his distant smile.

"Yes, thank you," he said, and returned to his book.

Returning from his round as the dinner-gong was booming in the hall, Tommy was conscious of a slim, upright figure standing by the dining-room door. The figure had an air of strangeness; its hitherto bare brown knees were covered by beautifully-creased blue trousers, for one thing; and its khaki, open-collared shirt by a coat and waistcoat, for another. But it was calm and self-contained.

“Hallo, young feller me lad,” Tommy said. “You’re a great swell. Have a good time?”

“Yes. I say, they’ve given me a room—a play-room, she calls it. And she bought me a stockyard, all full of sheep and horses and—cows, of course. You can’t have a stockyard without cows. It’s a bonzer thing—cost pounds and pounds. I’ll show it to you after tea. And I’ve got a dozen shirts, and new shoes and ties, and another suit, and . . .” Words apparently failed the self-contained figure by the dining-room door.

“My word, you have been going it. How do you like Mrs Anderson?”

“All right. She’s very kind. But you come up and see my stockyard after tea. It’s a bosker.”

The household inspected the stockyard after dinner with respectful admiration. It was a really wonderful toy, complete with sheds and fencing and gates, lifelike miniatures of stock, and even riders to yard and muster the stock. It occupied quite half the floor of the attic play-room; the other half would be occupied, Mr Anderson intimated, by a Hornby train to-morrow or the next day; he had telephoned that it was to be put on the train in Sydney without fail to-day.

“You’ll have as much stock in the bus as I shall, if this goes on, young feller me lad,” Tommy said. “I hope you said thank you. We’ll have to stop every hour or so to set ’em up on the road and have a look at ’em.”

Mr Anderson looked dour and cleared his throat, but didn’t speak. Mrs Anderson, on the other hand, became immediately and most unusually voluble.

“Did ye show Mr Tucker your ties and socks, Jacky? I’m sure I had a better time than he did, Mr Tucker, buying the bit things. And for once that cook at the Lollard set up a good lunch; she might have almost known it was a special occasion. But come down—your coffee’ll be cold. D’ye like him in his new suit?”

Later Thomas Tucker, vocalist, did his best to protect himself against the two strong personalities.

“No, I can’t do it,” he told them. “I wouldn’t dream of parting with him. He’s mine. And I’m a lonely man. You can’t expect me to do it.”

“Ye see, Thomas,” Mr Anderson began again in his quiet, steady voice, “it’s no yerself and what’s yours that I have in my mind. It’s the laddie and what should rightly be his. You can’t give him that, and I—and we”—with a saving glance at Mrs Anderson—“can. He’ll have his own tutor, the best in the Commonwealth; he’ll be legally adopted as our son and the heir to Muirfield, and I’ll teach him how to run the place.”

He paused, with the implacable air of a man who was only just beginning his argument.

“Yes, that’s all very fine,” Tommy put in; “but you’re taking away my boy, my young feller me lad. I can’t—”

“Wouldn’t it be better, now,” the other strong personality interrupted, “if ye thought of him, Mr Tucker, as a charge on yer conscience, instead of just as your boy? I can’t believe that ye really mean to stand in the way of a great opportunity for him. It’s not like you.”

But Tommy shook his head.

“Your arguments are very sound, and I know my point of view is sentimental. But the strongest arguments in creation wouldn’t move me. It can’t be done.”

Mr Anderson’s quiet, implacable burr started again, and the clock had struck midnight before Tommy finally gave in, with the air of a man worsted by superior reasoning. Sorrowfully he made an appointment for the following Friday morning at the Lollard lawyer’s office, and went dejectedly up to bed, leaving those two personalities in conscious command of the field. But to his reflection in the looking-glass he allowed himself one flickering smile; this, in its swift

vanishing, however, seemed to leave his face more grave than usual.

This gravity did not reappear until he was well away from Muirfield. Jack had said good-bye in his accustomed reticent manner the Andersons had speeded the parting guest with much unaccustomed effusiveness, the victory being theirs; and Tommy, alone on the driving-seat of the sawn-off bus, was driving rather drearily along the never-ending road. He was alone now, permanently alone.

Remembering the week's work and the fruits of it, he gradually drove the settled seriousness out of his face. It was his job, and there it was. He should rejoice that he had managed to put it through. There remained only those papers to sign at the lawyer's, and young feller me lad was on the tide leading on to fortune. But his eyes did not release their grave stare at the road, this never-ending road. Young feller me——

A figure slipped out of the bush as he took the bend, a khaki-shirted, brown-kneed figure with no air of strangeness. Tommy's grave stare vanished, and a stare almost of elation took its place as he put on the brakes. His usual calm unruffled, young feller me lad climbed into his accustomed seat beside the driver.

"It's no use your talking to me," he said evenly.

"But what about the Andersons?" Tommy gasped. "You're leaving a fortune behind you—the finest chance a man ever——"

"I couldn't stick it," Jack told him briefly.

"Couldn't stick what? The place? It's a place in a million. Look, young feller me lad——"

"Couldn't stick leaving you. I said it was no use talking."

For a long moment Tommy stared at this boy. By degrees the horrified surprise left his face, and a shadowy smile began to crinkle the corners of his eyes. The never-ending road became suddenly the fine white road of adventure again.

"Well, that seems to settle it, doesn't it, young feller me lad?"

"Yes." Young feller me lad dismissed monosyllabically the matter of his future career, and took something out of his pocket. "I say," he continued, "I brought this. They wouldn't mind me having one of the sheep, would they?"

Tommy looked at the sheep, sole survivor and souvenir of the wondrous stockyard, and looked away from it, down the fine white road.

"No, I don't think they would, my boy," he said. "You keep it—I'll be responsible. We'll carry on now, eh?"

Summer waned, and gave place to autumn and her winds and dewy twilights. Less and less did Tommy accept those insistent invitations to "stay the night and sing to us," and more and more did the firelit circle make the night's resting-place for the bus and the two sojourners. Gradually these homeless ones were achieving a home—not a merely romantic place by the wayside where they could pitch a camp and eat and sleep, but a spiritual home in the voice and near presence of the other sojourner. Sometimes supper was a practically silent meal; sometimes Tommy sang those ineffable songs which made up half his spiritual being, with young feller me lad and the night to listen; and sometimes laborious books of geography and grammar were read by the light of the fire. But the spirit of home was always present, the home that travels light and exists in the heart.

One invitation could not be refused. Not that it was insistent; the Rileys were never insistent. But Mrs Riley came out on the veranda, smiled in her large, motherly way, and wiped her hands on her apron.

“Ah, there you are, Thomas Tucker,” she said. “I thought you were about due, so I fixed yer room up Thursday. I’ll shove a stretcher in for the kid—what’s yer name, son? Come in. There’s a good fire in the kitchen—warm some o’ this westerly out o’ yer.”

At this point a hurricane of children descended upon the bus, eight children of all ages and sizes. Mrs Riley looked at them sleepily, and, undisturbed by the rapturous clamour, went back to the kitchen and the preparing of tea. A lean brown man sitting at the table looked up as she entered.

“What’s all the row, Mum?” he asked.

“Tommy’s here,” she said, turning to the laden stove. “He’s got a bosker-lookin’ kid with him.”

“Good-oh,” the man said, returning to his paper. “We’ll have a sing-song to-night. Who’s the kid?”

“I dunno, Dad. Set the table, will yer; and don’t forget two extra.”

The table seemed as clamorous as the greeting of Thomas Tucker. Tommy saw with a faint amusement that they were thirteen at table: the selector and Mrs Riley, their eight children, the schoolmaster, who boarded with them, and young feller me lad and himself. He saw, too, that Jack’s face was not quite so self-contained as was its wont; a sudden crack of laughter came from him at Mrs Riley’s admonishment of a fair-haired boy named Pat, the admonishing being effected with a cooking-spoon on the top of the boy’s head. Young feller me lad was shedding his reticence; he talked without waiting to be spoken to, and at the top of his voice, in the habit of the young Rileys. When the mountainous tea had vanished, he also vanished, with the young Rileys; nor did he reappear until, the washing-up dispatched, Tommy’s voice rose in the Bach-Gounod “Ave Maria.” Young feller me lad stood by the door until that invocation ceased, his eyes staring at Tommy’s face; at the fall of silence he disappeared again upon his own occasions, and was no more seen till bedtime.

Tommy had several customers who were known as neighbours of the Rileys, despite the many miles of driving needed to call on them. Hence he saw little of young feller me lad during the first few days of their stay. He supposed he was busy about the place; in the small commonwealth of labour and effort everyone was busy, down to the smallest child watering the dogs or collecting the eggs; with this reflection Tommy answered his vague feeling that Jack might have spared him a little more of his time.

Sitting down to his fourth breakfast in the Rileys’ kitchen, Thomas Tucker, pedlar, was startled into surprised attention. Michael Riley, out of a full mouth, made the astonishing announcement:

“Cripes, Mum,” he said, “young Jack c’n milk, all right. He done five while Pat done three _____”

“One moment, Mick,” the schoolmaster put in. “‘Can’ and ‘did,’ please, while you are speaking the English language.”

“All right, Mr Davis. But wouldn’t it get yer goat, with Pat near three years older than what Jack is?”

Mr Davis looked as if something had got his goat, but did not reply. Tommy looked in amazement at young feller me lad blushing and grinning under this public recognition of his prowess.

“But you hate cows.”

“Yes.” Jack bit magnificently from his bread and butter. “But they were shorthanded, with

Maurice down with the toothache. Besides, those cows are easy." He swallowed the bite. "You ought to try *some* o' the cows I've had," he added darkly.

Tommy receded from the noisy recording of feats done and seen. This confident, definite young feller me lad . . . like a changeling . . . Thomas Tucker finished his breakfast in silence, and departed on a twenty-two-mile drive, his last distant call before their departure from the Rileys'.

Going into his room on his return he was conscious of a figure sitting on the stretcher in the corner. The half-light of dusk did not prevent him from seeing that the figure's face looked uncertain and worried.

"Hallo, young feller me lad. What's up?"

"Nothing." The figure's voice was ruminative; there was obviously something on the figure's mind. "I say"—Jack gulped and came to the point—"do you think you could get on without me for a bit? I've not been any too well the last few days, and I was thinking . . ."

The spurt petered out as Tommy turned up the lamp. Jack's face was brown and his eyes bright and keen; he looked the picture of health.

"What is it that's really on your mind?"

"Well, Morry and Pat were at me this morning . . ." This was a difficult thing to put properly. Young feller me lad blushed and looked down at his restless hands. "They want me to stay on a bit. There's more work about the place than they can get done, and the little kids are not much good. You see, Dad's got this big job of clearing, and he can't work single-handed. That takes Peter off the place, and leaves it too short. And there's a cruel lot to get through, with the days getting shorter and shorter. We'll have winter on us before we know . . ." He paused, realizing that his line of argument had deflected. "I only mean for a bit, you know." He looked up from the restless hands, and Tommy could see the struggle in the bright, keen eyes. "You could get along all right, couldn't you—say till the back of the winter was broken for 'em?"

"Now, then." Mrs Riley, large and calm, stood in the doorway. "Tea's just dishing up. Are you——"

Something in the two faces made her come in and shut the door.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking from face to face. "You're not crook, are you, Jack?"

"No; I'm all right, thank you, Mrs Riley."

She turned to Tommy.

"What's wrong? Doesn't he want to go with you to-morrow—would he like to stay on a bit?"

Tommy took the struggle out of young feller me lad's hands.

"I think he wants more than that, Mrs Riley. He wants to stay with you for good."

"Oh!" She smiled sleepily. "Well, that's all right, if you're agreeable, Thomas Tucker. He's a bonzer good boy at the work, and the kids and Dad and me, we all like 'im—he's one of ourselves already, you might say. That's all right."

"But, Mrs Riley—you've got a houseful of children now. You surely don't want another one to feed and look after."

"Eh?" A faint surprise showed in the placid face. "Oh, I see—oh, well, one kid more or less don't make any difference. He's welcome; and he'll earn his keep twice over." She looked again at Tommy's grave face. "That is, if you're agreeable. There's nothing flash, as you know; but there's plenty to eat and there's the school, and Mr Davis living with us. He'll be comfortable and well looked after."

Tommy's smile flickered across his lips, but did not show in his eyes.

"Oh, I'm quite agreeable, Mrs Riley. I couldn't have found a better home for him in Australia. And my old bus is no home for a boy. Thank you very much." He turned to Jack. "Well, there you are, young feller me lad; you're settled at last. One of Australia's workers, eh?"

Jack's answering smile was perfunctory. He slipped out of the room on the run, and his excited voice rang back from the kitchen. In the roar of approval that followed his voice Mrs Riley smiled serenely at Tommy. "That's all right," she said.

Clouds had been banking up all day; but at the fall of dusk a heavy westerly had cleared the sky. Tommy decided to pitch his camp early and get out of the wind. A good fire was soon going, its light showing the lean-to tent, the big tucker-box on the ground, and the dark elfin face bending over it. A loaf of bread, a canister of coffee, some cheese—the thin hand paused, and came slowly out of the box. In the hand was a little wooden sheep.

The dark face bent over the sheep for a moment, a set gravity in its lines. But by degrees the gravity went; the flickering smile moved the lips, crept upward to the corners of the eyes, and came to rest in the eyes themselves, while the thin hand slipped the sheep into a pocket.

THE WANDERER

The chill of the autumn had crept into the late afternoon, although some sunshine lingered between the long shadows on the road, making it hard for the driver of the car to dodge the potholes and ruts. Yet he was merry enough, as his cheerful whistle testified. Eight miles more of this bad road and a mile of bush cart-track would lead him to a large open fire, a group of welcoming people, and an excellent dinner. He pushed up the collar of his overcoat and settled down over his wheel as the sun slipped below the horizon. The run would soon be over.

One pedestrian trudged before him as the car rounded a bend, a limping, weary-looking man, who did not look up as the driver stopped. A young man in ill-fitting, shabby clothes, he slouched along with an air of morose secrecy, his hat down over his eyes, his coat collar up, and his hands in his trouser pockets.

“Care for a lift, mate?” the driver called.

“No,” said the young man from the corner of his mouth, limping past the standing car.

The driver peered through the failing light after this surly rejecter of a courtesy obviously sorely needed. His whistle began again, and he restarted the engine, his watchful eyes on the figure in front. He passed it slowly—here was youth, footsore and in some trouble, miles from a township, with bitter-cold darkness on the way, and a great bank of clouds piling up . . . But the figure did not glance up, and presently was trudging far behind the car.

The driver whistled thoughtfully for half a mile, finally falling silent. For another half-mile he drove with most of his mind on the limping gait of the figure behind him. Presently he slowed down the car, and stopped, his lips curling in a shadowy smile. He took the bonnet off the engine and tinkered vaguely to the accompaniment of the little humming whistle, until the dragging, weary figure limped into sight again in the gathering dusk. The whistling ceased as the young man came near to the stationary car. As he shambled past the gathering dusk was filled with a radiant singing. A romantic tenor voice rang out to the listening shadows:

Dear wandering one!
Though thou hast surely strayed,
Take heart of grace,
Thy steps retrace,
Poor wandering one.

The spirit of pity and comfort hovered over the driver’s exquisite voice. The oncoming night seemed somewhat glad of the vesper song of grace and courage; even the footsore, sullen youth paused half gratefully and stared at the elfin face whence this beauty came. His shoulders hunched a little higher in the sudden icy chill that swept down from the darkening heavens, and he turned to follow the weary road again.

“Poor wandering one . . .” followed him softly in a magic head voice. He stopped again, turned, and came back.

“I’ll have that lift now, mate, if you don’t mind.”

The surliness and gruffness had not left the youth’s manner, but the driver of the car ignored it.

“Right-oh. Hop in,” he said. “It looks like rain, and it’s horribly cold already. Here, wrap this rug round you—you’re shivering.”

The young man took the rug in silence, and by degrees the chattering of his teeth subsided. He shrank back in the seat as the driver switched on the headlights, but the driver stared straight ahead into the night.

“Going far?”

“Yes.”

“How far?”

The young man stirred restlessly in the enveloping rug. The driver watched the road and repeated his question. With morose reluctance the young man answered.

“Bongaderie.”

“My word! Forty miles. Footslogging and camping?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s your swag and billy?”

“Lost them.”

For a quarter of a mile there was silence in the driving-seat of the car. The young man crouched as far back as possible in his corner, and the man at the wheel was apparently devoted entirely to his wheel. Presently he began to speak, an undercurrent of honeyed comfort in his persuasive voice, but no recognition of the youth’s presence beside him in his manner.

“The night tucks everything in with the dark, doesn’t it?—makes a gesture, and the day is forgotten. And sometimes it takes some forgetting . . . No matter, the friendly dark comes to blot it out.”

The young man said nothing.

“That makes the dispensation of night both a providence and a spell, a refuge and an inspiration. In France, of course, it was a holy terror. But that business in France upended all the rules—one of the best things to come back to when it was over was the true serenity of the night. That’s the best of the country, too—it understands the blessing of the night, while the cities live and die without ever coming within cooee of it. Do you happen to know Paris at all?”

The other stirred slightly, and muttered, “A little.”

“Ah! Well, then, you can see what I mean. Still, the laws of life are not the same for everyone; mostly each one learns them for himself. Not that the Little Fellows don’t interfere. Elves are always busy, like white ants, at the base of the best structures. Imagination plays the devil, too—worse than white ants. There was a man in Damascus——”

He paused, and glanced sideways at his passenger without moving his head. The youth seemed quieter, less at war with the night and her elves, as it were, but still very far from rest. The driver’s eyes shifted to the road again, and did not leave it as his melodious voice went on in the same impersonal manner.

“This man in Damascus was a painter. He had a fountain in the tiny courtyard of his house, one of those whispering fountains; and he couldn’t leave it. The years went heavily by, and an art critic in Rome suddenly began to understand the man’s pictures. The painter became famous and prosperous. But nothing could drag him away from his whispering fountain in the slum in Damascus. He said it had talked to him when he was hungry and lonely, and he wasn’t going to desert it because some ass in Rome thought he knew everything. I expect that fountain was an elf, a Little Fellow, who was more to the painter than all the common goods of fame and prosperity. But you couldn’t make that sort of thing a law of life, could you?”

The youth made no reply.

“There’s that monkey in the model dairy at Pre Catelan in the Bois de Boulogne—you probably know him. The monkey with the silver chain around his neck and the weary eyes. The ladies who come to the café try to make him drunk with liqueured chocolates, but he is seasoned and tough—they never do make him drunk, and they never will. Meantime he gets all

the chocolates, his tired eyes watching fashionable Paris doing its little stunt of visiting the Watteau dairy at the Catelan after too much lunch. He is unquestionably an elf, don't you think?"

He went on again without pausing for any reply.

"I saw twelve nuns in a procession in Barcelona, twelve nuns with the same thought. Those single-thoughted people are always comparatively free of elves. There were a lot of other people in the procession—clever, romantic, fascinating, dramatic people, all giving part of their rich minds to the business in hand. But these nuns thought only of Saint Teresa, whose feast day it was. You could tell that—their twelve minds were one open book. And not one Little Fellow in all witchcraft would spend an ounce of effort on them. He knew he hadn't a hope against Teresa, and that was a fair thing, too, because it was her day."

He allowed himself one more sidelong glance at the youth huddled beside him.

"Prague is full of a shadowy witchcraft, mournful and yet friendly. It would be a devil of a place in which to try to learn any rule of life. All darkness and sorrow, and hurrying priests and patriotism. There was an angel in a beer-garden there, years ago, who sang me nearly the whole of Mimi's score——"

The youth seemed at rest now. The driver's honeyed voice went evenly on, his eyes steadfastly watching the road.

"Many adventures have befallen me, but never before have I given a lift to a footsore woman in men's clothes."

The figure beside him sat bolt upright. "Oh!" came from it; and again, "Oh!"

A moment of rigid consternation heralded a flood of hysterical tears. The driver did not turn his head. Some thoughts ran swiftly through his mind as the car passed the cart-track leading to the dinner and the open fire. A pang of passing regret was his farewell to those engaging comforts. This wanderer was more important.

"Cry as much as is good for you," he said gently, "but not more than is good for you. We can carry on now all right, I think."

The bank of clouds had vanished, and the grudging autumn stars came out one by one. The road improved, and the car hummed easily along under the skilful hands of the driver, until it reached a clearing and the faint signs of a rutted track. The hysterical storm had faded to a low sobbing. He turned the car in.

"Hold tight," he said. "There used to be a woodchoppers' camp in here . . ." The car heaved itself over a slight rise, and ran gently down into a little valley. He ran it under an overhanging branch, and shut off the engine. "Here we are. Stay where you are till I get a fire going—that's the first thing."

He groped for his torch under the tarpaulin cover of the body of the car, and went gathering sticks. In five minutes a fire was flickering on the massed shadows of the valley, and the low sobbing had ceased. He threw two heavy rugs beside the fire, and looked up at her, a little smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

"Now you can come down," he said, "and get warm. I'll put the billy on, and by the time it boils I'll have your house up."

Stiff and aching with fatigue and cold, she climbed down from the car. Huddled in her rug she watched the flames, the hat still half hiding her face. Occasionally she threw a stick on the fire, but beyond that she was inert and oblivious of anything save the rest and the blessed warmth. He glanced at her once or twice, and finally stopped his rummaging in the car and came over to the fire.

"You're hungry," he said. "I think we'll leave your house until after we've had something to eat."

A light came into her tragic, shadowed eyes, and she turned her attention from the fire to him. He took the cap off a canister and handed it to her.

"Smell that," he said. "It's bad Australian to make coffee in a billy, I know. To be really patriotic we should be floating our powerful minds in strong tea. But coffee is heartening, don't you think? The smell of it puts life into you, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said faintly.

He tipped a generous measure of coffee into a boiling billy, let it boil its heart out for half a minute, and took it off.

"In another half-minute it will be clear. Meantime," he handed her a frying-pan, "will you start the bacon while I get some bread and butter?"

Presently she was eating bacon and bread ravenously, unmindful of any tragedy, unmindful of this valley perfumed with coffee and frying bacon, or of the man with the heavenly voice, the friendly, smiling man who had taken her for granted, given her weariness a lift and food, and shelter. She put her empty tin plate aside, and suddenly took off her hat, shaking out a cloud of bobbed brown hair. If the driver of the car had looked at her he would have seen a fine, handsome head, slightly lazy eyes, and a broad, capable forehead. But he did not seem to be looking at her, or, indeed, to notice her at all. He was busy with a wonderful contrivance, all shining, jointed bars, and white cord and canvas. She watched him, wishing he would offer her a cigarette, and struggling against an intolerable desire to fall asleep sitting upright.

In time, all the joints were snapped into their proper lengths, all the canvas taut, and all the cords knotted. The contrivance revealed itself as a sort of lean-to tent, the car being the main building to which it leaned. He trimmed and lit a small shining hurricane-lamp, and stood it beside the open flap of the little tent.

"There!" he said, standing back and taking out his cigarette-case. "All complete. Bosker little gadget, isn't she? Have a cigarette?" He handed her the case. "Inside the little house you'll find a narrow stretcher, a leather pillow, and two fat woolly rugs. You will sleep like a queen and know nothing until the day is up. Ah, me," he stared admiringly at the lean-to tent, "the fine fat money she cost me . . . nearly all the profits of one long trip. But she's worth it. She packs into a suit-case at the bottom of the stock, and in ten minutes she's up between me and whatever the night may hold. A brigand in George Street showed her to me, spoke softly for three moments, and I fell, pouring money into his lap. But isn't she beautiful?"

Without waiting for her comment he continued.

"The poor man's darling . . . No matter, she's mine now, and some day I'll catch up the money when business takes a sudden heavenward twist—some great trip when I have to restock twice by telegram. By the way, I didn't tell you—I'm a pedlar." He picked up the little hurricane-lamp to light the inscription on the tarpaulin of the bus. "This is me—Thomas Tucker. The 'General Storeman' is, of course, pure swank. But the rest of it—tinker, vocalist, vet, and piano-tuner—comprises all my titles and accomplishments." He bowed, but the brown head nodding over the fire could only lift faintly in acknowledgment. He came over and stood above her, the firelight on his flickering smile and unruly shock of iron-grey hair. "Go into your little house," he said softly, "and sleep—sleep . . ."

She staggered to her feet and across the clearing. At the flap of the lean-to tent she turned, her glazed eyes half closed.

"Thanks," she muttered, and vanished.

He bowed again. But his airy “Not at all” was wasted on the dying fire and the shadows, and there was only the night to admire the grace of his bow.

The night and the shadows saw him standing for a long moment staring into the dying heart of the fire. His eyes were grave, and no crinkling smile made them start into life and animation. Presently he shrugged and turned away from the fire, coming back with two logs. He threw these on to it, and fell thoughtful again as the sparks rose in a shower. The night was fine—cold and bright, and with a sickle moon. All poor wandering ones should be at rest beneath its blessing. He took off his overcoat and rolled it into the semblance of a pillow, lay down on one of the rugs, and, pulling the other over him, turned his back to the fire.

The sound of a new fire awakened him on the morrow. Not a good fire. It flared and spluttered for a moment, was silent, and flared and spluttered again. When he opened his eyes and looked at it it was black and sad in the twilight of daybreak. The face of the youth with bobbed brown hair bending over it was sad, too, and puzzled.

“Good morning,” he said to the youth. “It’s the dew—I’ll find you a dead sapling. All your leaves and twigs are soaking wet.”

He came back with the sapling, stripped the leaves off it, and soon the fire was crackling cheerily.

“It’s the wrong time of year for leaves off the ground,” he told her. “You have to find them standing up and shake the dew from them. Then the sticks are drying while the fire is starting. I’ll fill the billy, and coffee will be served in a quarter of an hour, madam.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m afraid I’m not much good at it. I thought I’d surprise you with a fire and a boiling billy when you woke. I found the spring, but the fire was a dud.”

“The morning fire in autumn is the last thing the camper learns. You look better.”

“I am better, thank you. Here is the billy. It’s full.”

He took the brimming billy. “Too full, I fear. We’ll pour a little libation—so. Did you sleep well?”

“Like a pig. I think your little house is heavenly. I felt an awful pig when I woke up and realized where I was, and that I’d done you out of—I say, it was awfully good of you to——”

He interrupted her smoothly.

“Madam is waiting for her coffee,” he reminded her. “Tell me what a wonderful chap I am after breakfast, won’t you?”

Soon the valley was filled with last night’s perfume of coffee and bacon. The wanderer was not so primitive, but her breakfast was a good one. She dried the tin plates and cups after Tommy’s expert washing-up, and when that was done sat back on her heels and looked at him.

“You don’t like ‘Thank you’ being said to you, do you?” she said, noticing again that curious trick his eyes had of wrinkling at the corners when he smiled. “You shut me up just now.”

“I didn’t mean to shut you up. But it’s a sunny day, and you’re not so beat as you were, and—well, it seemed a pity to waste time in mere thanks.”

She took the cigarette he offered, and looked at him thoughtfully over the flame of the match.

“You say you’re a tinker and a pedlar.”

He waved a brown, thin hand towards the tarpaulin cover of the sawn-off bus.

“There it is in print,” he reminded her.

The puzzlement was still in her eyes as she looked away from him and round the little valley,

as if she were not yet quite sure that it was real. But there was the little house glittering in the morning sun, there at her feet was the fire, and beside it the elfin-faced man. All around them the world was warming itself after the chill of the night; everything was natural and simple, and sweet. Her eyes came back to the smiling man.

"It's not much of a story," she said, "except to me."

The smile left his eyes, and his face became all grave attention.

"I had an ungodly row with my husband. And I've left him." She threw her cigarette-end into the fire. "He doesn't treat me decently," she added.

The sullen look returned to her face, and behind it a lazy anger.

"I'm telling you because you've earned it, if you care to hear it. If you like I'll start walking on to Bongaderie now, and not bother you any more."

Tommy lifted a brown hand and let it fall again.

"No," he said. "Tell me. It'll be good for us both."

"All right. As I said, you've earned it. I wouldn't mind if Phil was poor or only moderately well off. But he's rich—sometimes very rich. And it's not fair to browbeat me and give me orders, is it?"

"I don't know, with the evidence to hand."

"You mean, begin at the beginning. Well, I'm Pauline Meredith, and my husband's Phillip Meredith, of Plainfield, which is a fairly big station about midway between Sydney and Melbourne. It was over Melbourne that the row happened on Thursday." Her eyes suddenly gleamed. "I never heard such cheek in my life . . . But that's not beginning at the beginning, is it?"

"It might be. What was the kind of row over Melbourne, since you're telling me about it?"

"Well, I was going there to-day—I'd made all my arrangements to go there to-day, and Phil suddenly became a firm business man, the master of his house and all that rot, and said that I shouldn't go—jolly well *forbade* me to go." Her voice was full of indignation.

Tommy put in a gentle word.

"I suppose Plainfield gets a little dull at times for you."

"A little dull . . . Plainfield is the ghastliest hole in Australia. Of course, it's very comfortable and that sort of thing—trust Phil to see to the comfort part, for his own sake. But dull . . ."

"And I suppose you're tied there a good deal—you don't get away much, I mean."

She looked rather blankly at him.

"Oh, yes—I get about a lot, one way and another. What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, your husband's refusing to let you take a trip after a long spell of the country might seem a bit hard, perhaps——"

"Oh, no—I was in Melbourne last month. I went over there just after I came back from Sydney."

He raked the ashes of the dying fire gently, but he didn't speak.

"Well, I've no ties," her voice was raised a little, "no children. I'm young, and my husband's a rich man. Why shouldn't I have a good time, and have a proper allowance paid into my bank regularly, so that I could be independent? I'm sure Phil would love to have to go crawling to somebody else every time he wanted a pound-note, wouldn't he?"

"I don't know him, so I can't say. Do you have to crawl for your pound notes?"

"For every one," she said. "And I'm sick of it. It's all rot, this cadging from husbands. Every woman ought to be independent."

"Yes, she ought."

“But Phil won’t let me be independent. He refuses to give me an allowance properly, and he says he won’t give me any money to go to Melbourne with. So I’ve left him, as a protest, and I’m going to earn my living.”

“Is he a young man? You see, you promised to begin at the beginning——”

“Yes, he was only thirty-four on his last birthday, and he doesn’t look that. We’ve been married three years, and we’ve been very happy,” her lips quivered, “only——”

“Only he won’t make you independent?”

“Yes. But you mustn’t think I married him for his money. I’d have married him if he hadn’t a penny. Certainly he did happen to come in the nick of time; just after father went bankrupt. But that didn’t make any real difference to Phil and me. Mother had been dead for years, and I had no brothers or sisters. Father’s place was as big as Plainfield—bigger—so Phil didn’t give me anything that I wasn’t already used to. Of course, if it hadn’t been for him I should have had to bread-and-cheese in a flat or rooms with father, after the bankruptcy. But Phil stepped in and I simply moved from one comfortable house to another. I didn’t bring any more money into it, that’s all.”

“Still, you earn your independence by running Plainfield—seeing to everything, and directing the smooth running of the big establishment, you know. That’s hard work, and ought to be paid for——”

Her stare of amazement made him pause.

“But I don’t do any of that,” she said. “I couldn’t. Mrs Blayney does it. I don’t know anything about that sort of thing.”

Thomas Tucker lit a cigarette with unnecessary care.

“What is it that you do?” he asked gently.

“Well, I’m there, you know—Phil married me—and I—well, I sing fairly well. And when there are people in the house I look after them. And that sort of thing.”

“How do you mean to earn your living, now that you’ve left your husband?”

“Oh, I’ll get along,” she said airily. “I only had a tiny scrap of money in my purse when I told Phil what I thought of him, so I could only come part of the way by train to see Mrs Stokes at Bongaderie. She’ll lend me my fare to Sydney, and I shall be all right. I knew I’d have to walk fifty or sixty miles after I left the train, and I knew I couldn’t do it as Mrs Phillip Meredith or as a woman at all. So I took this old suit of Phil’s——”

“But what are you going to do when you get to Sydney?”

“Oh, I’ll be all right, once I get there. Mrs Stokes used to be one of the housemaids at Plainfield, and she married one of the men, and they took a farm at Bongaderie. She imagines she’s under an obligation to me, so she’ll look after me.”

Thomas Tucker sighed.

“Can you typewrite or do shorthand, or teach?”

“Of course I can’t—I’ve told you I can’t do anything. Phil, of course, will think I’ve gone to the Gadsbys in Melbourne, and will be sending wild telegrams all over the place. That’s why I’m going to Sydney—it will give him something to think about when he can’t find me. To be independent is everyone’s due, and if he won’t——”

“Don’t you think,” he interrupted, “that at the back of your mind you’re really only expecting him to find you and bring you back on your own terms of a good big allowance and no questions asked?”

She opened her mouth and closed it again without speaking, while a slow flush rose in her face. She glanced at him, but he was looking at the ashes of the fire. Suddenly she smiled, the

becoming flush still in her cheek-bones.

“Well, that would settle it friendlily all round, wouldn’t it?”

“At a price,” he said, a new note in his mellow voice.

She glanced at him again, but the ashes still apparently engaged all his attention.

“At what price?” she asked.

“The price of your independence, of any hope of your independence.”

“But,” she burst out indignantly, “that’s what I’m fighting for—it’s for that I——”

His interest in the ashes vanished, and his eyes smiled at her.

“Let me talk now,” he said. “It’s my turn. In most households the woman is already independent. By the way, the meaning of the word is to earn one’s living. In most households the woman does that very thoroughly. In the outback she more than does it, as also in the large family, small-income houses in the suburbs. It’s easy for those wives to demand an allowance as their right; they’ve earned it. But for you, the childless rich, it’s the hardest thing in the world to achieve independence.”

“But,” she burst out again, but fell silent, hearing the echo of his words and watching his face. “Go on,” she said finally.

“You give your household and husband nothing—no labour of your hands, no labour of your mind. Why should the household give you an allowance—why, by your leave, should it even keep you? You love your husband—I can see that. But you don’t expect to be paid for that, do you?”

The mantling flush burned up her face again.

“No,” she said in a low, outraged voice.

“Well, then, what is he to pay you for?”

No answer filled the pause, and he went on.

“As I said, independence is the hardest thing in the world for you. The world has conspired for centuries to keep you dependent—you were even taught nothing but those accomplishments which should prevent your independence. If a married woman comes into a house to do a day’s washing, she has to explain that her husband knows nothing about it, for fear his dignity as her keeper shall be offended. If she’s not married, and has no one to keep her, she can be as independent as she likes, and break her heart in the effort. But not if she’s married. Then all her earning must be secret, so that it shall never be known that, even for half a day’s washing, she has dared to be independent.”

She was watching him now, all her attention concentrated on what he was saying.

“For the unmarried woman the world has sloughed some of its heavier stupidities in this present century, but for you it still decrees that your heaviest shame must be to be independent. And that,” he flashed a sudden smile into her intent face, “is cutting its nose off to spite its face. The world thereby ordains that you must do nothing to help the world, that in its progress you must lie fallow and dependent. Coming down to details, it decrees that you personally shall get fed up and walk away from your husband in high indignation because he won’t put his charity to you on a proper business footing. Is that putting the case too roughly?”

“No,” she said in a small, half-stunned voice. “I never dreamed . . .”

“When you and I are dead a long time it may be that the world will realize what it is doing in withholding the common birthright of independence from its best material, the material chosen for its coming generations. The elves and witchcraft of that century will find time often idle on their hands, I fear.”

He laughed suddenly at her bewildered, helpless expression.

"I'm becoming too solemn," he said. "We have the case of Mrs Pauline Meredith's independence to consider, not my hobby-horses, if the case does happen to fit a hobby-horse. This Mrs Pauline Meredith——"

He paused and looked at her.

"Yes?" she prompted, the bewilderment still clouding her eyes.

"Is not at the moment convinced of the truth of what I say, as applied to her own case. But for the purpose of argument we will assume that she is." His manner changed. "Do you still want to go down to Sydney to earn your living? Or do you want to go back to Plainfield and tell your husband that you'll never do it again?"

The anger gleamed again.

"Go back and crawl to Phil again?" Her voice was sharp and indignant. "Never," she said. "I don't care what happens, I won't go back and cadge tram-fares again."

"Good, that states the case of the lady with excellent definition. She is not quite convinced, but her nark is solid. To effect the removal of that nark (since I am talking like a book) will she be guided by me?"

She made a little pile of ashes, unmade it, and remade it, watching its construction and demolishing with great care. This putting of everything into this pedlar's hands . . . risky, of course, but . . . where else to put it now? She looked up, to see his steady eyes looking at her.

"All right," she said. "But I think I am convinced. I never dreamed——"

"No, one carries on so often without stopping to have a look at things. You can't do anything—you can't teach or typewrite, or do shorthand. And it wouldn't be any good for our purpose if you could."

She glanced at him, puzzled.

"The only interest that you really have is your husband. Then why not work for him?"

"How on earth can I——"

"Wait. His only interest besides you is Plainfield. Learn to run the household personally and properly—there are schools and courses for that work in Sydney—and then come back and demand your proper salary, paid monthly into your account. That will make you independent, keep him for you, and create his respect for you as a very essential part of that only interest of his besides yourself. Is it a go?"

Her lazy eyes gleamed into sudden vigour and life. She sat up, shaking out the cloud of hair. That would mean Phil and no cadging, no getting fed up, no dreary diplomacy, no wondering whether the cheque would come off this time . . . but, above all, she knew now, Phil—Phil. But presently her face fell, and the life died out of her eyes as she returned once more to the pile of ashes and to the prodding stick.

"I can't," she said. "You see, it would take some time, and——"

"I know. I've fed you, and lent you my little house, and given you the benefit of my powerful mind, haven't I?"

She looked at him in amazement.

"Yes," she said uncertainly.

"Well, in return for that will you let me lend you your fare and expenses to Sydney, and be sure to call at the G.P.O. for letters or telegrams to-morrow?"

"Oh!" The uncertainty had gone from her voice. "Thank you," she said, gravely and simply. "You're very good. Yes, I'll be glad to let you do that."

"Good-oh." He stood up. "Now we'll pack up and I'll drive you to Alton station; you'll be

in Sydney by lunch-time. And on the way to Alton you can tell me where Plainfield is. I'm going to sell Mr Phillip Meredith some tape and some safety-pins—in person.”

She looked up at him, startled.

“Don't worry,” he went on. “Your address will be care of the G.P.O., Sydney, and I'll guarantee that only telegrams or letters will bother you from Plainfield until your independence is assured. But I really can't wrench a man's wife away from him without a word. Besides, he'll be jealous of his right to finance you during your course.”

At Alton station the graceful, vigorous-looking youth held out his hand to Thomas Tucker.

“It's absurd to say ‘Thank you’ again,” she said. “But—oh, well, give my love to Phil. If you have a mind and heart like yours, it's its own reward. Sickening for you, but there it is. Good-bye.”

Mr Meredith was at the telephone when the card was brought to him. Indeed, he had hardly been away from the telephone all the morning. He looked at the card, wondering if he had really gone mad with the strain.

THOMAS TUCKER

VOCALIST

MEALS SUNG FOR DAILY

He turned the card over.

PIANOS TUNED

POTS AND PANS MENDED

BOOKSELLER

SICK ANIMALS MADE WELL

He looked at Roberts.

“The person won't go, sir,” Roberts said sadly. “He says he has a message from a wanderer _____”

Mr Meredith looked up sharply.

“Show him in please, Roberts, at once,” he said.

Presently Thomas Tucker was smiling in the doorway. Mr Meredith looked at him, and stood up.

“Come in,” he said, “and sit down. You have a message for me.” Mr Meredith walked over and closed the door.

For ten minutes Tommy skated melodiously over the thin ice, while Mr Meredith watched him in silence, listening with every drop of blood in his veins. At the end he sighed with relief.

“She's safe, anyway,” he said, “thanks to you, Mr Tucker. I'm—I'm more grateful than I can say. She'll probably go to the Barrauds.” He looked longingly at the telephone-book on the table, but turned firmly to Tommy again. “But about this scheme of yours——”

“Pardon,” Tommy interrupted, “I don't think she'll go to the Barrauds—in fact I know she won't. And the scheme (which isn't mine, but hers)——”

He slid out again on to the thin ice, Mr Meredith giving him all his attention. The dubious expression gradually cleared from Mr Meredith's reticent face, and in the end he touched the bell-button on the table.

“It's obviously not a thing that we can discuss in any detail, Mr Tucker, but we'll see how it works out. I'll attend to my part—I'll telegraph money to the post-office at once. And I hope you'll let us put you up for a week or so when—when she's back. The tandalus and a siphon, please, Roberts,” he added to the man at the door.

Spring was well on her way before Thomas Tucker, vocalist and pedlar, called at Plainfield again, and was taken in as the most honoured guest the house had ever sheltered. He found it a remarkable house in its quality of smooth and efficient administration. It was a perfect machine, from the smallest detail in the kitchen to the order of the guests at the table. This perfection of action was achieved by the skill of Mrs Meredith's housekeeping, he understood. Yet the house was not a tie upon her freedom. She had the fine art of running a big establishment at her finger-tips, and was able to spend as much time as she cared to in Sydney or Melbourne without any qualms as to what was happening in her absence. But she didn't care to spend much time away, she said. Her home had become part of her spirit, so that, although she was quite independent of its domination, and had it running like clockwork, absent or present, yet she—well, she preferred to be at home.

In Tommy's last sight of her she was standing on the veranda beside her husband and watching the sawn-off bus on its way to the gate. Looking back, he saw her smile and lift her hand, and listening, he heard her contralto following him out on his trip:

Poor wandering one!
If such poor love as mine
Can help thee find
True peace of mind,
Why, take it, it is thine . . .

The rich salute on the breeze was for him, he knew, but he could see that she was looking at her husband as she sang.

GOOD MORROW, TO-MORROW!

“What d’you make of this, Bill?” The proprietor of the Elite Garage in Bowral was clearly puzzled, as was also Bill, his off-sider, who presently joined him at the entrance to the garage, staring at the queer turnout that had awakened the surprise.

“It *is* a rum go, isn’t it?” murmured Bill. “Sort of an Hemporium on wheels . . .”

The cause of all this was a truncated motor with the driving-seat of a lorry, but low down on the wheels on the foreshortened body of a small touring car. This body was encased in a tarpaulin cover, which was inscribed—

THOMAS TUCKER
GENERAL STOREMAN

and in the left-hand lower corner, in smaller letters—

TINKER
PIANO TUNER
VET

The air of aristocratic Bowral seemed to frown its disapproval on this intruder, this sawn-off bus with its squalid inscription. The young men at the Elite Garage were not alone in their surprised contempt; the whole street was resentfully aware of the bus’s presence. It did look out of place, perhaps, in this haunt of fashion; some workaday country road would have suited it better, some road where Australia was about her business instead of loafing ornamentally on the job.

Happily, the driver of the bus was unconscious of the comment, spoken and unspoken, for which he was responsible. He drove serenely through the entrance of the Elite Garage, to the consternation of the proprietor and Bill, and presently walked serenely out, suit-case in hand. His personality was obviously persuasive, inasmuch as both Bill and his boss had gone contentedly about their work without troubling any more as to the presence of the sawn-off bus in a high-class garage in Bowral.

The driver of the bus went across the street to the Levenson Hotel, and entered the sacred portals. Here, too, his appearance caused a slight feeling of constraint in the minds of the hall-porter and the clerk; he hadn’t troubled to take off his dust-coat, and it and the ancient cap pulled rakishly down over his eyes did not give the accustomed impression of confidence which the Levenson felt was its due. However, his light footsteps came unconcernedly across the hall to the desk of the office. His eyes smiled at the clerk, and the clerk’s reserved expression vanished.

“My name is Tucker,” he told the clerk; “Thomas Tucker. I telephoned for a room——”

“Oh, yes, Mr Tucker. Number nineteen—James!”

The hall-porter hurried forward.

“Take Mr Tucker up to number nineteen, please.”

Mr Tucker had telephoned from Mrs Dampier-Wynyard’s house at Moss Vale, which put his eccentricities of dress in a sanctified light, so to speak. The hall-porter took his cue from the clerk and banished his unworthy suspicions. He took also Tommy’s suit-case from his hand.

“Allow me, sir,” he murmured, leading the way to the lift.

The lift door snapped to, and the clerk went back to the office, thinking more of the new guest’s sudden luminous smile than of Mrs Dampier-Wynyard. The smile seemed to change even this changeless hallowed hall . . .

James came back and paused at the office door.

"Who's this Mr Tucker?" he asked.

"Friend of Mrs Wynyard's. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Notice his queer smile?"

"No," lied the clerk. "I've got other things to think about. What about his smile?"

"Oh, nothing," James said again. "Rum sort o' cove—can't get him out o' yer head." He drifted out to the steps, and stood looking thoughtfully at the aristocratic street.

At the end of some twenty minutes or so the new guest also came back, minus his dust-coat and cap, and clad with a debonair quietude which set off the shock of grey hair and the elfin distinction of his narrow brown face. To-morrow was his fortieth birthday; but only from the shock of hair was this to be guessed; in all else he was thirty—a very good thirty. His footstep was muscular and precise, his body spare and trim, his skin clear and unlined. Except for the kindly crow's-feet which flashed to the corners of his eyes when he smiled, as now, at sight of an old gentleman looking at him from the far corner of the hall. He crossed the hall and held out his hand to the old gentleman, who shook it and made room for Tommy beside him on the settee.

"Well, Mr Michael Faraday," the old gentleman said, "as a legatee, a £50,000 legatee, you are the most casual client I've ever had, in a half-century's experience. It's more than two months since I first wrote you of your Uncle David's death and his leaving of this fortune to you, and you haven't even deigned to acknowledge my letters. Don't you like money?"

"Oh, yes." Tommy smiled, but there was no enthusiasm in his voice.

"You don't sound as if you had even a decent respect for it. When I wrote you I would be here for this month, to spend my usual holiday in Bowral, I said to myself: 'I'll bet that young devil won't bother to turn up.' But you have, and I'm very glad to see you. Have a drink, or a cup of tea, or something, Michael?"

"No, thanks, Mr Bayliss. I'm a disappointment to you, then, for not turning catherine-wheels about this money?"

"Yes, you are, Michael. I don't know that catherine-wheels are an essential, but at least you ought to have dropped this street-singing and peddling, and come down to Sydney to handle the money or instruct me what to do with it. It—it's not respectful to such a block of cash to ignore its existence in that high-handed way."

"I'm sorry." But the becoming enthusiasm was still absent from Tommy's voice. "The money was there—it wouldn't run away; and I had a lot of things to attend to before I could get round to it."

"Such as street-singing and peddling. Yes, I know the sort of urgent business you have to attend to. Well, now you are here you'll find there's some urgent quill-driving to do, in signing your name to a number of urgent documents, some of which have to be brought up from Sydney. So you won't get away under a week or so. How do you like that?"

"Very much. I'm forty to-morrow. And my—my wild oats are sown."

Mr Bayliss sat up and touched the bell. "That's the proper spirit," he said. "Now you *must* have a drink, and I'll have one, too, to drink to your reformation." He looked uncertainly at Tommy. "You mean it, Michael?" he said. "You're going to do your job in the world, handle your money and see that it grows, adding its power to the power of the community?"

Tommy looked thoughtfully at the bubbles bursting in the soda-water. "I've been doing my job," he said softly, "all the time. But a man's job changes when he's forty and has £50,000 thrown at him."

“Indeed it does, and I’m very glad you see it,” Mr Bayliss said heartily, pouring the soda-water into Tommy’s whisky. “You’ll be a credit to me yet. Now we’ll get these documents up—oh, by the way, Michael, have you got the letter I wrote you about the probate—the second, I think, of the half-dozen you didn’t answer?”

“The probate?” Tommy fished out some papers from his pocket and put them on the table; two letters and a snapshot slipped from his hand to the floor, and Mr Bayliss stooped and picked them up. “Thank you—oh, do you remember old Gerrard, the chap who had to have the Paravane treatment for his eyes, to save his sight?”

“Gerrard? Oh, yes—a man with a young daughter; you asked me to keep an eye on them eight or nine years ago. Yes, I remember them. Why?”

Tommy handed him the snapshot. “He doesn’t look as if he needed much treatment now, does he?”

The smiling, strong-eyed face of the man in the photograph suggested anything but curative treatments. He was standing beside a bank of flowers in a trim and pretty garden.

“No, there’s obviously nothing wrong with him,” Mr Bayliss said. “They started a market garden for flowers and what-not—but I suppose you know that.”

“Yes; we correspond occasionally. Rosa sent me that last week when I wrote them. I was coming here to see you.” Tommy finished searching through the papers, and put them back in his pocket. “No, I’m sorry, Mr Bayliss. There’s no letter here from you about any probate business.”

“H’m. What a good business man you’d make, Michael. Well, it doesn’t matter. There’s a copy on the file in the office, and I’ll get them to send it up with the papers.” He stood up. “I’m going out now, Michael. Will you dine with me here to-night, if you’re not engaged? I think a little champagne might do us good—fifty thousand is a solid lump of money, you know.”

Tommy laughed. “Do you think that’s a respectful way to refer to it? Yes, thanks, I’ll dine with you with pleasure—a travelling tinker is not crowded out by his dinner engagements.”

“What are you going to do, now that the tinkering has, shall we say, served its purpose? Going back to Europe?”

“No fear. I’m an Australian now. No. Davenport, a customer of mine in the West, wants to sell his place—a small place, half station, half farm. I’m going to buy it, and live there and develop it.” He looked at Mr Bayliss, the luminous smile crinkling his eyes, but a light of seriousness in their depths, too. “Stake in the country and all that, you know,” he added.

“Good.” Mr Bayliss chuckled. “I told you you’d be a credit to me yet. See you at seven-thirty.”

Tommy watched the old upright figure going through the doorway. A long life, full of effort and achievement. How much of their happiness and security did his thousands of clients owe to him and his wisdom? How much——

“Tommy! Tommy!”

He shut off his thoughts and looked round. Ah, over there. A young man was gesticulating frantically at the door of the writing-room, his expression of excited pleasure impeded by two golf-bags. Young Denis Hume. The young man finally dropped the bags and hurried across the hall.

“Tommy!” he exclaimed again. “What a bit of luck! Where’s the bus?”

“In a garage, and soon to be no more.”

Hume’s face fell. “No Tommy’s bus any more. Good lord, that’ll be a blow. Have you come

into a fortune?"

"Something like that. But the main point is that I'm forty to-morrow, and it's time I settled down. How's Mrs Hume?"

Mrs Hume, Denis's mother, was well, it appeared—had taken a cottage in Bowral for the spring and summer, and would hang, draw, and quarter Denis if Tommy didn't spend a few days with them. Tommy would be glad to do so, as from to-morrow—say the week-end?

"A long week-end, until Tuesday," Denis stipulated, and Tommy thanked him, laughed, and agreed.

Mr Bayliss's dinner was eaten, and his champagne drunk, to the accompaniment of much wise, affectionately-administered advice; and on the morrow Tommy, a debonair forty, greeted Mrs Hume on her veranda, his suit-case being seized by a beaming Denis. Tommy was presented to a Miss Marlow, who flushed very becomingly and followed Denis and the suit-case.

"A pretty girl, don't you think, Thomas?"

"Very. Denis seems to think so, too."

"For a vet you are remarkably sensitive. Denis does think so." She sighed, her handsome eyes resting thoughtfully on Tommy's face. "Life is complex, isn't it, Tommy?"

"Very," he said again. "Why, in particular?"

She continued to look at him. "Remembering that you are forty, rich, and no longer a tinker, I should suppress my——"

"No, you shouldn't," he interrupted. "Carry on, Mrs Hume, please."

She laughed and carried on. Young Denis was in love with Elizabeth Marlow, and she with him; but, life being complex, she wouldn't marry him if he didn't abandon his writing and get a safe position in an office. In a way she was right; the Marlows were far from rich, and she, as the only daughter, had had a rather dreary experience of the dangers of not being rich or at least secure. So her determination to be safe was wise—from her point of view; from Denis's it was not so wise. The Humes, in their turn, were also not rich; but they were content to let Denis continue his attempts to achieve print because of his great happiness in that endeavour, and of their belief in his final success, because of some elusive quality in Denis's personality which both baffled and fascinated them. But now, more, much more, than half of his happiness was bound up in Elizabeth, who would not let him have herself and his writing, too; and—in short, life was very complex.

Tommy murmured a vague sympathy, and sat lost in thought. This particular complexity was almost a static: art and love were traditionally, historically, at war. Denis had published a couple of short stories and an article or so, and that was a thin basis to start housekeeping on; on the other hand, he was a terrific worker—wrote on and on, to teach himself the art of saying his thoughts so that readers should hear them. He had written three novels and scores of long and short stories—all unpublished, but not therefore all valueless, but, tied to a desk in an office for the safety his love demanded, all certainly wasted. Hence Tommy sat deep in thought, his comment taking the sole form of his murmured sympathy.

He looked up at last with a smile in his eyes. "How old is Denis, Mrs Hume?" he asked.

"Twenty-three. And he's been writing since he was fourteen. Poor Denis!"

"And Miss Marlow is younger, I think?"

"Twenty-one. A very confident, strong-minded twenty-one; but a darling girl."

"Quite," said Tommy, still thoughtfully. "Oh, quite."

Presently the light in his eyes changed to the radiant smile. "Shall I sing you a little song, Mrs Hume? You see me smiling, but it is to cover a sudden sorrow; and I think the sound of my own voice in song would distract me. If you don't mind, of course."

"Mind?" Mrs Hume stood up indignantly. "It may be nearly my last chance of hearing your heavenly voice. Mind? I'm ashamed of you, Tommy!"

So he sang her three little songs, one Spanish and two French, and all most decoratively sad, his fascinating tenor voice filling the house with melody. Dusk was just touching the trees as he gently closed the piano; his eyes seemed to be watching the soft coming of night, elfin, haunting eyes seeing some clearing in the bush and the slow filling of the clearing with firelight. A billy of coffee, three cigarettes, and sleep, with the mighty Australian night on guard. His eyes narrowed, staring into the imagined picture. There was the sawn-off bus, the rugs, the lean-to tent, the fire, and the quiet man drinking his coffee. And here was the dusk creeping in on her stealthy feet up to this veranda, where there was no bus, no eucalyptus-scented fire—nothing save a man of forty, worth £50,000.

Looking again into the drawing-room, he saw that Mrs Hume had gone from the room; so he sat down at the piano again, singing softly to himself until the chiming of little bells in the hall reminded him that he must go up and change his clothes. This he did, the mood of sorrow still upon him, and lifting only at the sight of Mr Hume at the head of a dinner-table specially decorated in honour of Tommy's fortieth birthday. Mr Hume raised his cocktail.

"Many happy returns, Tommy, my boy," he said, "and the best of luck!"

Tommy looked round the table, at the bright, affectionate faces, the flowers, the twinkling silver; suddenly the firelit clearing crossed his vision again as he raised his glass, but he smiled at it, the crinkling crow's-feet flashing into life beside his eyes.

"Many thanks," he said. "And the best of luck to you!"

The morrow was one of those fair Bowral mornings wherein a little breeze hums gently from the east instead of the west, softening the mountain air and quickening all gardens and flowery places into life. Tommy walked down into the Hume garden in mid-morning, conscious of the fresh, vivid health of the place. It really was the best of all possible worlds, he told himself; sorrow had no place in it now, or at any other time.

Young Mr Hume did not share Tommy's optimism, judging by his face; nor was young Miss Marlow so much in love with this fair morning as it deserved, since her eyes were veiled and expressionless over a chin jutting a shade too much. Tommy sat down in silence between these two and smiled, first at the lady, and then at the gentleman. The smiles were returned perfunctorily in the unbroken silence. Presently young Mr Hume plucked up courage and opened his mouth.

"You're a wise sort of cove, aren't you, Tommy?" he asked, glancing past Tommy at Miss Marlow.

"Yes, very, I think," Tommy told him modestly.

"Well, don't you think Tommy could help us out, Elsa? Couldn't he be a sort of chairman and give the casting vote?"

The hardness abruptly vanished from Miss Marlow's face. She turned to Tommy, her eyes almost beseeching. "Would you cast the vote for us, if we left it in your hands, unloaded the responsibility on you, Mr Tucker?"

"It is too much for you?"

"Much too much," she said earnestly.

“And for you, Denis?”

“It’s beyond me, Tommy,” Denis sighed.

“Well, you must put your cases, you know. I have only a hazy idea of the situation.”

Miss Marlow looked once into Tommy’s grave, quiet eyes, and thereafter looked down at her hands while she spoke. “I love Denis,” she said, “with all my heart, and nothing would make me come between him and his career. He’s been writing for a good many years now, and has earned practically nothing at it. Perhaps the incentive of me would force him to earn something by writing, but I know enough of the struggling household to foresee the sort of circumstances in which we should live. A job in an office is offered him, with enough salary for us to start on, and I say that he should take it and write in his spare time. Only on the background of his salary will I consent to marry him.”

Tommy turned to Denis, who was not so glib in the statement of his case.

“There are only two things I want to do on earth—write and marry Elsa. I’ve been fighting like a tiger for years to get the strength of true expression, and I *know* I am getting nearer to it. But I can’t get any money at it yet. If I took old Spalding’s job I should get my Elsa; but it would take me ten years of my spare time to get the hang of my other dream.”

His bewildered eyes trailed into silence, and Tommy took his eyes from Denis’s face and looked hard at a nodding rose.

“Love,” he said gently, “is the gift of life. Work is life itself. Before you knew Elsa, writing was your life, wasn’t it, unproductive as it was?”

“Oh, rather! It is now, in a way.”

Miss Marlow glanced at Mr Hume, but not unkindly.

“But at times you confuse the gift with the actuality?”

“I can’t help it.”

“You, Miss Marlow, have your man and his work, his life, both in your charge. If Denis takes old Spalding’s job, in five years he won’t be your Denis. He’ll be very nice, no doubt, and very reliable; but he won’t be your man. And it’s your man that you want, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I know all that you’re saying, Mr Tucker. That’s what makes my problem.”

“We are always in a hurry, and in our hurry we do things which take years to patch up, and *are* only patched up in the end. Denis wants to write; with all his heart and soul he wants that. It is his work, and therefore his life. And that makes it the first thing. The second thing is yourself. Our job is not to decide which of these two things he shall have; that is already decided—he must take his work. But to discover some way in which he can have both. That is where the disastrous hurry comes in. We must wait until Denis’s work and life can afford him the gift of his love.”

“Wait!”

“Wait!”

The two dolorous voices were like tragic shadows on the morning.

“Yes. It’s rotten, I know; but it really is the only way. His father and mother are sympathetic and willing to provide him with the necessities of life while he is——”

Tommy’s voice ceased, and for a while he stared at the nodding rose. That vision of the clearing in the firelight was before him again, the bus, and the lean-to tent. Suddenly a light flashed up into his eyes, and he looked up.

“My dears,” he said, “pray silence for your chairman, who is a very remarkable man. He has an idea. There is an old sawn-off bus for which I have no further use, a tinker’s kit, and a good deal of assorted stock. All this I will sell to Denis, thereby saving his soul and ultimately giving

him his love as well.” He leaned back and looked triumphantly into their puzzled faces. “Don’t thank me for settling the whole thing for you,” he added resentfully; “that would embarrass me.”

“But you can’t sell anything to *me*,” Denis said. “I haven’t a bean—have I, Elsa?”

“No. Do explain, Mr Tucker, and take that offended expression off your face.”

“There is now no Tommy Tucker, pedlar and tinker. But there is his bus and stock for sale. Let Denis buy it and follow in the footsteps of the late lamented Tommy Tucker. I will teach him the general principles of rough tinkering and of buying and selling the kind of stock that is most popular.”

“But I *can*’t buy it——”

“Dash it, man, get your father to buy it, or give me half a crown for it. Can’t you see what it can do for you, you silly ass?”

“Oh!” The gasp came from Elsa, and Tommy turned hopefully to her. “I see—I see! He’ll be earning his living, he’ll have the quiet, the sort of hermit’s life, nothing to distract him——”

“You know, I think you must be a genius, Denis. You really need some one to think for you.”

The idea had at last penetrated. Denis beamed at the company. “I say,” he said fatuously, “I say——”

Tommy became serious. “If he peddles and tinkers for five years, writing hard in the oceans of spare time at his disposal, he will force himself to get the hang of the writing he loves. For five years,” he repeated, looking hard into Elsa’s face.

She returned the scrutiny calmly. “It isn’t the writing that makes me agree to wait for him for five years,” she said, smiling pleasantly at Mr Tucker. “It’s the fact that he’ll be earning his living instead of living on his people. The writing is his affair, but the other’s mine.”

Tommy’s radiant smile shone upon her.

“I beg your pardon for doubting you, Elsa. I might have known that you would see far beyond my own stumbling thoughts into the matter.”

Elsa’s grave eyes were on Denis. “Go peddling, my love,” she said, “and learn your soul’s desire. In five years come back to me, in triumph, or for comfort. I shall be waiting.”

Denis turned to her, and Tommy slipped silently across the lawn, plucking the nodding rose as he passed.

For three days he laboured at the induction of Denis into the mysteries of tinkering and the buying and selling of travelling stock. His pupil’s brimming enthusiasm conquered his natural inaptitude for the job; at the end of the three days he showed considerable promise, and Tommy was satisfied that his successor would not shame him. It was arranged that the instruction should continue during Tommy’s stay in Bowral, and that Denis should take the road with the bus in a fortnight’s time, going first down to Sydney to get some books and kit that he wanted. Mr Hume insisted upon paying a fair price for the bus and outfit, and Tommy retaliated by lending the money to Denis to buy his summer stock.

The week-end over, Tommy drank a cup of tea with Mrs Hume, sang her two songs, and went back to the hotel, that vision of the firelit clearing insistent before his eyes. How many times had he seen the shadows gather, how many times in the nine years sung for his supper to the bandicoots and the night, as Rosa had told him to sing, years ago! And now, no more would the bandicoots and the shadows come close to listen to him. That was over. He was forty, rich; he would soon have a stake in the country, this beloved country his vagabonding

had taught him to know. The rosy circle at the heart of the night, the waning fire, the silence. All that was for tinkers and wandering minstrels; no £50,000 man need apply. He sighed. It was hard to lose. The red roads in the morning, the multitudes of friends into whose houses he could go unannounced and certain of welcome, the strong volume of his life back there in the tinkering days—and this pallid business of exclusive hotels and a soft bed every night . . .

He shook his shoulders. These were no thoughts for a man of property. He must range himself and realize his position; He began by handing his suit-case to James, who, properly shocked at the idea of Mr Tucker carrying it in person from Mrs Hume's cottage, took it up in the lift and placed it tenderly on the floor of Mr Tucker's room.

In a quarter of an hour he was back again at the door of Mr Tucker's room, his knock interrupting Mr Tucker in the business of changing his suit.

"There is a lady below, sir—a Miss Gerrard—to see you."

"Oh, thank you. Will you ask her to sit down in the drawing-room, and tell her that I will be down in a moment?"

"Very good, sir."

Putting on his collar, Tommy remembered the dark-eyed child sitting staring into the fire. She was grown-up now—yes, he made a mental calculation: sixteen and nine were twenty-five. It would be good to see her. From Gerrard's letters and her own sparse notes he could feel, all during the years, the child developing. But it was the child that he always saw in memory, the dark, quiet eyes in the rosy circle in the bush, the firelit sanctuary that was a haven to him when he first saw her, and became home to him thereafter. Glancing once at the grey-haired man in the mirror, he patted his tie into place and went down.

In the drawing-room a lady was looking out of the window, turning to face him as he entered. A sense of loss seemed to flow over him in a heavy tide as he looked at her—loss of the dark-eyed child and the youth that she meant to him. What had he, a grey-haired man of forty, to do with this quiet, regal woman looking gravely at him from the window?

"You've changed," her deep voice said, her eyes travelling swiftly over his head and face, the set of his shoulders, the brown thin hand he was holding out. Was there a shadow of disappointment in her eyes? It was no matter for surprise if there was, he thought, the sense of loss filling his heart again. He knew now whence that feeling of home in the firelit clearing had come: from the dark eyes of this child staring into the eucalyptus-perfumed fire. For nine years, up and down the State of New South Wales, clearings in the bush, firelit sanctuaries from the night, had meant home to him. He had thought it was the quiet, the peace at the end of the day, the Australian night—all kinds of things; but it was her eyes, the eyes of that child. And he was forty, and all that merry tinkering was a memory, a dream that had gone . . . The eyes now searched him for the marks of the years.

"Yes, I've changed," he said, the life gone from his voice. "So have you; but for the better, the magnificent better. How is your father?"

"Very well," she said, a shade of disappointment in her tones. "He said that I was to have a holiday, that the farm could afford it now; so I came to Bowral to see you."

Tommy shook off this depression and smiled at her, watching the warm radiance of her answering smile. "The flower-farm? It's a success, then—it can give its administrators holidays?"

"Yes. It has been very lucky. Father was able to start as soon as his treatment was done, his health was so good after the tinkering. And—and I found that I knew a lot more than he or I

thought I did; living and reading to him in the bush had really educated me, while it kept me looking thirteen when I was really sixteen; so a year's schooling was enough for me, and the rest of your money capitalized the farm."

"Tell me about the farm."

Listening to the quiet words giving him the story of hard work and effort, and the gradual making of the place and the home, he was conscious of the feeling that he was back home again sitting beside a perfumed fire. Some spirit in the room seemed to lay a hand on him, making him believe that he had always, all his life, sat in this place in the sound of this voice. There was a radiance, a heroic dismay, in the thought—

"And now," she concluded, opening the bag and putting a paper on the table, "I've brought you this—it's really what I came for. That's the first instalment of our debt to you."

He picked up the paper, a cheque for £300. A smile crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"But you don't owe me anything—don't you remember that I bought your father's Strad?"

"Yes, I remember." She was closing her bag and looking down at the catch. "Once, when he was ill, I took that—that Strad to a violin expert who happened to be in Singleton; he was very nice, and he said that I might get five pounds for it if I were lucky. I didn't tell father, because I wanted him to keep his dream that some day the violin would buy him back his eyes."

For a moment he looked at her in silence. This £300—and he with £50,000. He should give her back the cheque, force her to take it. It represented years of effort and self-denial; its return would mean much to the flower-farm. But suddenly the smile lit his face. No; because of those years and the triumph of bringing the cheque to him, he couldn't return it. For her pride's sake he must keep it. He put it in his pocket.

"Thank you," he said. "I am discovered, but I don't apologize. You know—"

He fell silent abruptly, looking into her face, this royal face that once was the dark-eyed child's. The dark eyes were upon him now, on his grey hair, on his forty years; but the radiant dismay seized and shook him again, pouring a flood of eternal sunshine into his heart. He took one step across the room, and suddenly was on his knees beside her chair, staring up into the beacon of her eyes.

"Rosa," he whispered, "is it true, is it true?"

"It is true, my beloved."

"But I am old, forty; and you—"

She put her hands on his shoulders. "You do not age. I watched you when I saw you just now, for the first time for nine years—watched your hair and your dear merry eyes—oh, but I was hungry for the sight of them—"

Suddenly he stood up and caught her out of her chair into his arms. "My dark-eyed child," he said, "I am home again; home for good at last. We'll go down to your father to-night."

Mr and Mrs Michael Faraday passed the Elite garage in Bowral, their new car earning a passing glance of admiration from the proprietor and Bill, his off-sider. The car ran through the town and up the hill to the right, coming to rest at the Humes' gate.

"Now," said Mr Faraday to his bride, "if we can get the bus, my rosy light, if this young penny-a-liner has not started on his travels, our honeymoon can be a real—"

The group surrounding the bus on the lawn shut off his words. In silence his bride and himself walked over to them.

Denis and Elsa were looking proudly at the new inscription on the tarpaulin.

"Hallo, Tommy," Denis said casually; "how goes it?" He turned back to his intent

admiration of the inscription.

Elsa smiled equally casually and returned also to this inscription. Tommy read it.

MR AND MRS HUME
PEDLARS, HATS AND FROCKS
RENOVATED
TINKERS, HAIR BOBBED AND
SHINGLED

Fearing to break the absorbed silence of the company, Tommy turned in mute inquiry to Elsa.

“Yes,” she said, that becoming flood showing for a moment, “I thought of a better way, Mr Tucker—a way that saves five years and the chances of five years. We were married last week, and we take the road to-morrow.”

Tommy withdrew his bride from the intense atmosphere of this company.

“That puts the lid on it, rosy light,” he said. “We can’t ask for the loan of his bus now, can we?”

“No, of course we can’t.”

“And we can’t go tinkering in a Rolls-Royce.”

“No, not tinkering, Tommy Tucker, dear.”

He looked into his bride’s dark, splendid eyes.

“Do you know if that clearing where I saw you first, where I sang ‘Annie Laurie’ for my supper, is fenced or built on? But of course you don’t.”

“Yes, I know,” she said quietly. “It’s exactly the same as it was nine years ago.”

“Then come with me,” he said, “and buy bread and butter in Bowral.”

The fire had waned to a dull rosy glow throwing fitful, fugitive gleams on the Rolls-Royce against the shadow of the bush. Tommy threw his cigarette butt into the fire and smiled at Rosa, the crinkles coming and going beside his eyes.

“You won’t forget the bandicoots and the night, will you, Tommy Tucker, dear?” she said. “That’s the tree you stood against nine years ago.”

He leaped to his feet and stood against the tree again, throwing back his head. The wandering breeze fell still, and the night was suddenly hushed. Presently a heavenly tenor voice filled it with melody, with a tide of sweetness and hope, the singer watching the dark-eyed child staring into the fire. The night caught its breath and listened.

To-morrow, be kind,
To-morrow, to me!
With loyalty blind,
I curtsy to thee!

God save you, To-morrow!
Your servant, To-morrow.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

A table of contents has been added for ease of use.

Printer errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in spelling and hyphenation have been preserved.

[The end of *The Happy Vagabond* by Margaret Fane and Hilary Lofting]