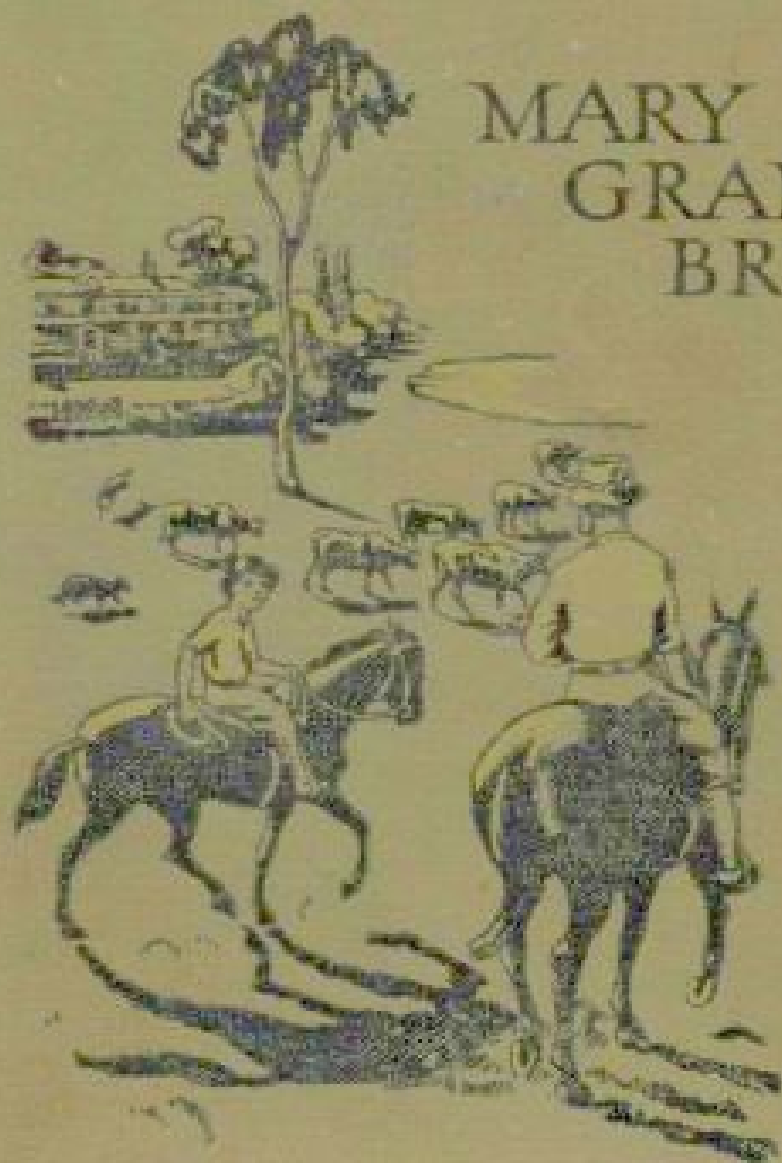


BILL OF BILLABONG

MARY
GRANT
BRUCE



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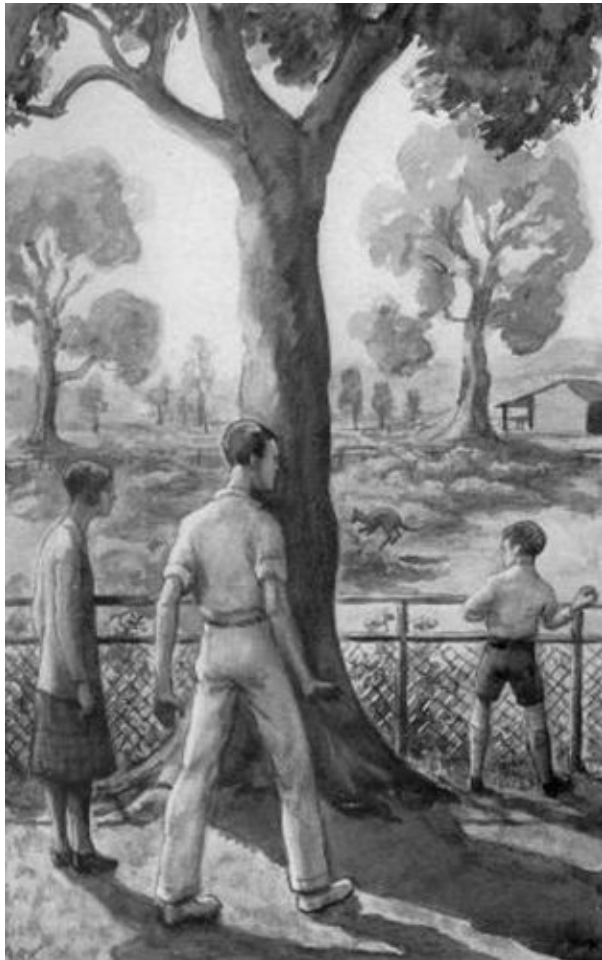
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JIM AND WALLY
NORAH OF BILLABONG
TIMOTHY IN BUSHLAND
GRAY'S HOLLOW
GLEN EYRE
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON
A LITTLE BUSH MAID
'POSSUM
DICK
CAPTAIN JIM
DICK LESTER OF KURRAJONG
BACK TO BILLABONG
THE STONE AXE OF BURKAMUKK
THE TWINS OF EMU PLAINS
BILLABONG'S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



“He caught sight of the wallaby hopping about in its enclosure.”

Bill of Billabong

[Frontispiece

BILL OF BILLABONG

BY
MARY GRANT BRUCE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
A. A. KENT

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BILL OF BILLABONG

CHAPTER I

OLD TRACKS AND NEW

JIM LINTON was straining barbed wire along a fence, working at it with the concentrated vigour that he put into most things, especially into a job he thoroughly disliked. It was not easy work for a man many inches over six feet, since he was stretching it near the ground, so that he had to crouch in a very uncomfortable position, gripping the wire as though it were an enemy, while his helper hammered in the staples that held it to the posts. The helper, a tall old man with a humorous, kindly face, looked not much happier than his master. Murty O'Toole was a stockman, and no friend to barbed wire.

"There's the end of it, bad scran to the dur-rtty stuff!" he said, thankfully, as the last staple went into place. He dropped his hammer and wielded the wire-clippers vengefully. "I do be wonderin', sometimes, what the man was like that invited barbed wire. He must have had a cross mind, intirely."

"It gives me a cross mind to deal with it," Jim answered, straightening his long back with a sigh of relief. "Beastly thing, however you look at it. Probably he kept pigs himself, Murty."

"Well, indeed, there's nothing else that'll discourage pigs," agreed Murty. "An' if they were to go on gettin' into his garden there'd be no holdin' Lee Wing. Last time they uprooted his cabbages on him he talked about makin' thracks back to China."

"I wouldn't blame him," Jim said, feeling for his pipe. "Well, those two strands ought to keep them guessing for awhile." He glanced at the sleek pink pigs that slumbered under a tree in the corner of the little paddock, looking pictures of peaceful innocence.

"Lee Wing will be able to plant his next lot of cabbages in peace."

"Unless that black image of a Billy leaves the gate open again," rejoined Murty, with a grin. "An' I dunno is it always by accident he does that same. 'Tis as good as a picnic to Billy when Lee Wing gets excited."

"Billy had better let me catch him leaving it open," affirmed Jim. "I'll put him on to digging out sword-grass if he does—you might tell him so, Murty."

"Yerra, that'll discourage him like the barbed wire does the pigs," said Murty, cheerfully. "Will ye be gettin' home now, Mr. Jim? It's late, an' the

Masther'll be lookin' out for ye."

"He won't have had time this evening," Jim replied. "He was going over to tea at Miss Norah's."

"He was; but he comes home an' stands on the verandah wondherin' when you'll be in," said the old man. "An' 'tis lonesome comin' home to an empty house."

"Do you call any house empty that's got Brownie in it?" demanded Jim.

"Well, I would not"—and Murty's twinkle deepened, remembering the remarkable girth of Mrs. Brown, the housekeeper of Billabong station. "An' 'tis always lookin' out for him she is. But the place is quare an' quiet now that Miss Norah's gone."

"Bless you, Murty, she hasn't gone far!"

"She has not. But far enough, for all that. There's a terrible vacancy in Billabong since the little Misthress got married. She an' Mr. Wally always made a great shtir about the place, wid the light-heartedness of them." Murty looked at him half-wistfully. "You'd betther watch it, Masther Jim, or 'tis the way you'll be gettin' too quiet entirely—an' the Masther, too."

"That's what Miss Norah says," Jim admitted, with a laugh. "She thinks we need something to wake us up. But the place keeps us busy enough, Murty." He picked up his tools. "Better go in yourself and get some tea. We'll call it a day."

"An' worrks all ye think about these times," grumbled Murty to himself, looking after the big fellow as he strode towards the homestead—Billabong House, half-hidden by its deep mass of orchard trees, now pink and white with blossom. "Worrk all day an' come home to talk about the worrk all the evenin'. I know ye! An' 'tis only a boy ye are yet, for all the bigness of ye, an' had ought to be havin' a boy's fun. Glad I'd be if something did come along to wake ye up—an' the Masther too. What call has he to be thinkin' himself ould?" And Murty, who had nursed Jim and Norah Linton as babies, collected the remnant of the hated barbed wire and strolled home through the orchard, to talk with his crony, Mrs. Brown, of the good old days when children had romped together over Billabong.

There was, however, no lack of laughter on the verandah of the homestead when Jim appeared. His first alarmed thought was that he had dropped into a party of visitors, and he cast a glance at his rough working clothes and his grimy hands. Then his brow cleared.

"Oh, it's only Tommy and Bob." He went forward with a quick step.

Bob and Tommy Rainham turned gladly to meet him. They were brother and sister, English, their short stature and fair hair and skin contrasting sharply with the tall dark Australians on the verandah behind them: David Linton, of Billabong, lean and grizzled, and, perched on the arm of his chair, his daughter

Norah, whom the old servants still called “Miss Norah” because it was so difficult to remember that she was married. Her husband, Wally Meadows, supported this view, declaring that Norah lacked all the customary dignity of a wife. Jim and his father took the standpoint that this was fortunate, since a dignified wife would have been terrifying to Wally. Thus everyone was satisfied.

“You all seem very cheerful,” said Jim, surveying them from the steps of the verandah. “Murty drove me in, assuring me that I should find Dad moping.”

“He does not seem mopish,” replied Tommy Rainham. There was a quaint preciseness in her speech, the result of a French upbringing. “But then, Wally has been showing us a new balancing exercise on the verandah-rail, and when Wally does that no person can mope.”

“Where is he?” Jim looked round enquiringly.

“He fell off into the verbena-bed, so he has gone to wash,” said Tommy, happily. “The verbena-bed seemed to have been hoed and watered quite recently. It was not a fortunate moment to choose to fall there.”

A rumpled black head appeared on the level of the verandah-rail.

“I’ve found a hoe,” announced Wally Meadows. “I’d like to tidy up this bed before Hogg sees it. But a hoe won’t mend squashed verbenas. I say, sir, I’ve made an awful hash of three of them.” The tone was contrite, but the corners of his mouth twitched.

“Don’t worry,” said David Linton. “I would part with three more to see you do it again, Wally. I haven’t laughed so much since you and Norah fell into the lagoon on your wedding-day.”

“That was one of our best efforts,” remarked Wally, hoeing dexterously. “But we never repeat them, do we, Nor?”

“I would rather you did not repeat this one,” said his wife, surveying him from above. “Your flannels were beautiful when you came over, but they’re a depressing sight now. You look as if you had wallowed in a paint-box.”

“Yes, verbenas do make queer stains, don’t they?” agreed Wally. “I feel like Joseph’s coat of many colours. Well, that’s all I can do, and I only hope that Hogg won’t stroll this way for a few days.” He restored the hoe to its place and joined the group on the verandah—stained and muddy, but cheerful.

“It might have been better for me if I’d gone out working with you, Jim, instead of entertaining these unfeeling people,” he said. “How’s fencing?”

“Finished, thank goodness,” said Jim, looking with disfavour at his hands, which were scratched and bleeding in several places. “I’ll leave the next barbed wire job to you, if you like.”

“I’ll take it,” rejoined Wally, promptly. “To-morrow?”

Jim gave a low chuckle.

“Hear him, Tommy! And himself that knows there’s no more barbed wire going up on Billabong!”

“I guessed that there was some reason for his energy,” said Tommy. “But we have plenty at the Creek, if he should happen to be idle, have we not, Bob?”

“Too much,” answered her brother. “Come along any time you like, Wally, and I’ll fix you up.”

Wally sighed.

“If I weren’t so busy looking after Norah——” The rest of his remark was lost in derisive comments from the others. Tommy and Bob smiled quietly at each other. They were recent settlers, making their way on a little farm by dint of hard work and dogged courage: and they knew that no job was too tough or unpleasant for Jim and Wally. They knew that whenever matters were very strenuous at the Creek farm the Billabong family would appear suddenly with a car-load of provisions and tools, plunging into the work blithely, attacking it with practical knowledge, iron muscles, and—best ingredient of all—laughter. Tommy and Bob owed much to Billabong. Billabong acknowledged no debt save that of friendship—and knew itself well paid.

Old Brownie, who declined to depute the duty to anyone else, appeared with a little tea-tray, placing it on a table by Jim’s chair. She moved with a curious lightness and quietness for one of her massive build. Jim’s smile, and his “Thank you, Brownie,” brought an answering smile that included them all. It was balm to her faithful old heart to see the verandah crowded, to hear gay voices and laughter. Then her eyes fell on Wally’s long legs in their once-white flannels, and she uttered “Oh, Mr. Wally, my dear, your pants!” in a tone of horror.

“Nice sight, isn’t it, Brownie?” he said, lightly. “Never mind—I’ve a wife to clean them now!”

“You send ’em over to me, Miss Norah, an’ I’ll do them in two twos,” said Brownie. “He was always like that with a new pair!” She shook a plump finger at the culprit and waddled off rapidly—knowing that Murty and a gossip awaited her in the kitchen.

“Brownie seems to have the measure of your foot, Wally,” grinned Bob.

“She ought to. She’s mothered me long enough.” The big fellow looked at Norah with a little smile. “I believe that the only thing she has never forgiven me is taking Nor away.”

“Murty and Brownie are really getting depressed about us—did you know, Dad?” said Jim, lazily, stirring his tea. “They think we’re turning into hermits or monks or something like that. I don’t quite know what we can do about it.”

“Norah’s as bad,” said David Linton. “She comes over fifteen times a day and looks at me with an enquiring eye like an old mother-hen. I don’t want to

check the number of your visits, my daughter,” he added, hastily. “Make it thirty, if you like!”

“We like to keep the track well worn,” said Wally. “Lonely things, disused tracks.”

“That one won’t be lonely. I’m thinking,” said David Linton. “It gets great attention—from both ends.”

“Well——” began Norah, and hesitated; “I don’t like to think of you and Jim being too quiet. Big Billabong seems to have a sort of hush over it now, unless Wally and I come over and stir you up. I have painful visions of you two, talking of nothing but shorthorn bullocks.”

“Rubbish!” said Jim, firmly. “We have the new Herefords!”

“Yes, and the Berkshire pigs. I know,” nodded Norah.

“You underrate our sources of delight,” remarked her father. “Don’t forget the wireless. If any wireless in Australia can emit a better series of crackles and howls than ours when Jim gets really worked up over it, I have yet to find it. There are times when it shrieks in agony, and other times when it just booms like a bittern. No dull moments, with a wireless like ours.”

“H’m!” Norah’s tone was comprehending. “And then Jim says he’d like to take an axe to the darned thing; and you both smoke another pipe and go to bed.”

Jim and his father exchanged a guilty glance and Jim was understood to murmur something about people who had second-sight.

“Oh, well, things have a way of coming along to stir up this family,” said Norah. “It always happens. And I won’t be sorry when it does, because there is a middle-aged look coming over you both—and I won’t have it!”

“Let’s hope it won’t be another jump in the income-tax,” observed Jim. “That always stirs Dad beautifully. But the most stirring thing I see ahead is the fact that Wally and I must get out into the new hill-country and explore it properly. Then you can come over and take care of Dad, and pretend that it’s old times and we’re away at school. And Tommy and Bob will get fussed about you, thinking that you are getting dull and middle-aged, and wear out the track between here and Creek Cottage!”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said Bob, rising. “Meanwhile, the Creek calls—or the painful knowledge that I have to get home to milk. Come along, Tommy.”

Billabong came to the stables to see its visitors mount and ride away; Bob bade Jim an affecting farewell, begging him to hold back the advance of old age before he saw him again—which led to Bob’s being withdrawn from his horse and placed firmly in a feed-bin. The horse took advantage of the discussion to trot off down the paddock, and was with difficulty retrieved by Tommy.

“Brute!” uttered Bob, gaining his saddle for the second time and scowling

at Jim from a safe distance. “Age hasn’t withered your muscles, anyhow—I could wish it had.”

“Come again, soon, Bobby: it always stirs me up to see you, and that’s what Norah wants,” laughed Jim. He turned to Norah as they went off.

“Dining with us—old mother-hen?”

Norah considered.

“I think we weren’t. At least, I seem to have ordered dinner at Little Billabong. What do you say, Wally?”

“There’s always the telephone,” said Wally, comfortably. “I’ll ring up and say we’re unexpectedly detained. It’s only the third time this week!”

CHAPTER II

THE TWO BILLABONGS

THE TWO houses of Billabong were more than a quarter of a mile apart, and the trees between grew thickly, so that one might at first have thought that the site of the newer house had been carefully selected with the purpose of shutting it off from the old homestead. There was a road connecting them but it was not a straight road. It wound in and out among the trees as if it tried to hide itself or to make it quite a puzzling matter to reach Little Billabong.

To hide Big Billabong was difficult, for it was many-angled and lofty, and the red-brick stables and out-buildings stretched away from the red-brick house so that the whole was like a village. There were many glimpses of it to be caught from Little Billabong. But the new house was of one storey only, and though its rooms were large they were not many; though, indeed, its master and mistress said they were too many, since they lived principally on the wide verandahs that encircled it. From Big Billabong one would have said that it could not be seen at all.

David Linton knew better, however, though for the most part he kept his knowledge to himself. He knew, and he had confided the secret to one other person, that from one point in his house it was possible to look through the tree-trunks that seemed so effective a screen. It was curious that this one point was the big window of his den—a room sometimes dignified as the study, sometimes called the smoking-room, but at all times the heart of Billabong homestead.

To look through that green tunnel among the trees it was necessary to stand on just one spot on the carpet. There was grave danger that David Linton's secret might leak out, since the carpet, which had seen its best days, having arrived at a period of dignified shabbiness, was at this point showing more obvious signs of wear. Billabong's owner had not noticed this. Perhaps he did not realise how often his feet were drawn to the one place whence he could see his daughter's home.

Just outside the window a deep cane chair stood on the verandah. It was David Linton's special chair, and, sitting in it, he had the same view: the green tunnel through the trees that ended in the verandah of Little Billabong, with one window in sight. By day one might see Norah on the verandah or moving in her garden: by night the window winked a light of greeting through the tunnel. To Norah's father it was as though a wireless ray linked the two

houses.

Yet it was not necessary, for, wherever one might be about the two Billabongs, each house was always conscious of the other. The trees between, that hid them, did not keep them apart. An imaginary ring-fence encircled them, holding them together, so that the two houses made one thought, one life.

That, indeed, was what it amounted to. Through many years Billabong Station had known but one house, one family; David Linton and his son and daughter, and the Queensland orphan boy, Wally Meadows, who had slipped into their life and become as a son of the house. There had been no upheaval when Norah and Wally had decided to be married. It meant no real separation. Billabong merely produced another house, dropped it among the trees of the homestead paddock, and said, "Bless you, my children—especially if you don't go away!"

Norah and Wally had no wish to go away. Life without Billabong, or without Jim and his father, did not even occur to them. The land that had seen them grow from childhood had seen their marriage: had watched them drive off adventuring, in the full knowledge that they would come back. Three months they wandered, finding adventure, indeed, and with it a happiness that deepened day by day: and meanwhile David Linton and Jim, assisted by Bob and Tommy Rainham, had pored over plans of houses, disdaining architects, none of whom seemed to grasp exactly what Little Billabong should be. Then the wanderers came home and entered into the discussion; so that most of the plans were scrapped. And finally, out of all the talks, grew up the new home.

It was something of an experiment in houses, and an architect would certainly have torn his hair over it. It was oddly shaped, with big bow windows thrown out in unexpected places, so that the verandah had to wander round them, forming sheltered nooks and corners; and it was built round a wide central space, a courtyard where palms and shrubs grew in great oaken tubs, and basket-chairs and lounges invited one to forget the heat of the most scorching summer day. There was an inner verandah, surrounding the courtyard, as well as the outer one; part of each screened off with mosquito-wire to form insect-proof rooms. And the house had a flat roof, edged by a broad railing, whence the owners of Little Billabong could look across their world.

"It looks like nothing earthly," Jim Linton had said, when the plans were completed. "But I believe it will be rather jolly to live in."

Norah and Wally had no doubt on the point—nor was their confidence disturbed when Tommy made the discovery that they had omitted to have a front door! Indeed, it seemed to them hardly necessary. They solved the problem, Jim asserted, by pulling the rooms further apart and slipping into the

space thus obtained a square hall which allowed the world to walk through the house into the courtyard. Plans, in the eyes of Norah and Wally, were only made to be adjusted—by people of firmness.

At one end of the courtyard a tall screen of lattice, creeper-clad, shut off the working part of the house. This had its own verandah, and it was thoroughly practical—Norah and Mrs. Brown had seen to that. They had planned the kitchen section of Little Billabong with more lingering care than was given to the drawing-room: the men at this point being driven off to plan dull matters of drainage and electric plant.

All these, and many other, matters took time, but at last the foundations were laid, and Little Billabong rose into being. Nobody wished to hurry its building. Life and work on the station went on as of old, steadily, quietly. Perhaps Norah sewed more, in company with Tommy, since there were such matters as curtains and cushions. Certainly Hogg and Lee Wing, the Billabong gardeners, led a double life, for to Hogg it was inconceivable that an alien hand should plant Norah's flowers, just as Lee Wing was firmly determined that none but he should guide the destinies of "L'il Missee's" vegetables. They permitted working-bees, when even the horse-breaker lent a hand with the digging; but Lee Wing and Hogg supplied the brains. Over the construction of the stables Murty O'Toole and Dave Boone came into their own, planning details with artistic care; permitting a garage, but revelling in loose-boxes. And so, out of the united love and work of Big Billabong, the new home grew.

Easier to build it than to go to live in it, Norah thought. Even when all the workmen had gone away; when the last remnant of building litter had been tidied up; when all the curtains were hung and the new furniture in position, with the new cushions plumped into the new easy-chairs; when the maids whom Brownie had trained—daughters of old Billabong stockmen—were all agog to take possession of their new rooms—still Wally and Norah hesitated.

Finally, it was David Linton who turned them out tactfully, by the simple means of inviting himself and Jim, with the Rainhams, to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Walter Meadows at Little Billabong. So that Norah, who had been allowed to know nothing of the arrangements, found herself—somewhat bewildered—presiding at her own table for the first time. The house was full of flowers, the rooms all ready, the maids installed. There was nothing to do except bid the guests good-bye at the end of a merry evening and enquire of Lizzie, the new cook, if she had materials for breakfast. And Brownie had seen to that.

So it was that the old home of Billabong seemed to split into two. But there was no real cleavage. They were still one home; and the four inmates wandered in and out of the two houses until Jim said that it was difficult to tell where each belonged. Norah called each house "home" impartially, and Wally

declared that she constantly forgot that she had ever been married.

They were all very busy. Life on Billabong had never been idle, and now there was far more to do. Wally had bought from Mr. Linton part of the station land—his own homestead and the paddocks that stretched away to the foothills: good fattening paddocks where store bullocks could be trusted to develop into the prime beasts for which butchers competed eagerly in the Melbourne sale-yards. Other land he had acquired, less good, but with possibilities of irrigation: already a scheme was on foot, and Norah and he planned crops of lucerne which should help to take the sting out of a bad season.

But this was not enough, and there was a tameness in it which suited neither Jim nor Wally. There was wild, rough, range-country to the north, little known, save to gold fossickers, few of whom had ever managed to do more than scratch the barest of livings out of the search. David Linton had long had his eye upon it as an adjunct to Billabong's smooth acres.

"There's money in it," he said one evening, as they strolled back from inspecting the foundations of Little Billabong. "Not to be dug up—at least, I think not, though you never know. But that's as it may be. The money I see is in store-cattle."

"They'd need to be goat-footed, wouldn't they?" Wally asked.

"Oh, they develop that fast enough if you put them there as youngsters. It's rough, of course, but there is plenty of good grazing in the gullies and pockets, and there's always water. We have to buy all our store bullocks, and pretty good ones: they cost a good bit. I should like you boys to consider taking up a stretch of that country, buy cheap young ones, and turn them out on it. I always planned doing it—when I had two grown sons to take a hand. Until then it was rather too much to consider."

"I'd like it," Jim said, with decision. "Billabong as it stands, even with Wally's new land, is not big enough to keep us all busy. And it's too tame. You've got the place to such a pitch of perfection that it runs on greased wheels. Wally and I need something to keep us from getting sleek and lazy."

"Not much sign of either about you," remarked his father, glancing at the lean, tall figures. "Still, I agree; and moreover, I think it's up to every Australian, who has the chance, to do something towards reclaiming waste land. I should be glad to see you boys putting your mark on that country. Plenty to be done there, with judicious clearing and burning off useless timber: many of the best gullies must be choked with fallen stuff. You could give employment, too, and that is a big reason for doing it, with so many men needing work."

"It's a great idea," Wally said. "We'll go in for raising our own calves, and Norah shall feed all the delicate ones on the bottle. How about fencing that

country? Wouldn't it be difficult, sir?"

"Not such a big thing as it looks," Mr. Linton answered. "The ranges beyond are a barrier in themselves: no cattle could get up most of them. There might be a few places to fence, but not many. The river would be your western boundary, and you could wire the east. And you could take up the land from the Government on very low terms: no one has ever wanted it. There would be very little in it except as an out-station to Billabong."

"Oh, let's do it!" Norah cried. "We're sure to find adventures in that wild country!"

Wally regarded his wife with something of concern.

"Young woman," he said firmly, "I should think you had had adventures enough to last a lifetime. I have reached an age when I want peace."

"I don't believe it," said Norah,—“and you don't, either. You know very well that peace is the last thing that agrees with you!"

"There's something in what you say," said Wally, twinkling. "And having married you I'm not likely to get it!"

"Cease ragging, you infants," commanded Jim; "this is serious. Does the Billabong firm take up this country or not?"

"Why, didn't I say we would?" inquired Norah, meekly. "I thought it was all settled."

"You don't settle things quite so easily—not where Government is concerned," remarked Mr. Linton. "However, we may as well begin to study plans and make applications. So we'll get to work to-night."

That was months back, and now the new country was added to Billabong in the joint names of Linton and Meadows, and already young cattle were grazing in the area enclosed by the new wire-fence that climbed dizzily up stony rises and slid as abruptly into deep hollows. The owners had not, as yet, fully explored their territory—not a matter to be done in a hurry. But to them all there was joy in the knowledge that it was theirs—that beyond the old boundaries there was an undiscovered land with new possibilities of work and adventure. Something of the pioneer spirit was in them. David Linton, looking on quietly, was glad at heart that it was so—that Billabong had not reared its children to become "sleek and lazy."

CHAPTER III

PERCIVAL

JIM MET his sister with an accusing face.

“It was you, I believe, who uttered fears that Dad and I might feel dull?”

“Did I?” asked Norah, meekly. “And don’t you?”

“It was you who drew pathetic pictures of us sinking into a grim old age with no happy laughter ringing in the ancient halls,” went on her brother, disdainingly to answer. “You thought that we were becoming sour and melancholy, just because you’d happened to get married, and that the house felt empty, and that the echoing spaces . . . well, echoed; and that something ought to be done about it.”

“Jimmy, what’s happened? Do they echo? You look grim enough for anything.”

“Well, you’ve wished it on us. And its name’s Percival.”

Norah subsided into a chair on the Billabong verandah and clutched her head.

“*What* is named Percival. Not the new Shorthorn bull?”

“Bull!” said Jim, tragically. “No bull I ever saw, even in a china-shop, was likely to cause the upheaval of Percival. He’s ours—Dad’s and mine. We’ve inherited him. I ask you, what on earth is Billabong going to do with anyone with a name like that!”

“If I had the ghost of an idea as to what you’re talking about,” said Norah, resignedly, “I might give an opinion. I never heard of anyone called Percival. I didn’t think they grew nowadays. Do be sensible, Jimmy, and tell me what it’s all about.”

Jim permitted himself to laugh, though somewhat ruefully.

“Well, it’s rather a bomb-shell,” he said. “’Member the Vernons?”

“Dad’s old friends? Rather. They used to come to the school and take me out to tea. Kind, but rather terrifying—they loved to ask in detail about all my studies, and it paralysed my enjoyment of the cakes. Are they coming here?”

“No, but Percival is.”

“But they haven’t any children.”

“They haven’t any now. But they have Percival.”

“If only you would stop saying that painful name and *tell* me, Jimmy——” said Norah, patiently.

“Well, you read that letter. I was just coming to show it to you when you

hove in sight among the trees.” He took a letter from his pocket and tossed it to her. “Never mind the beginning: he takes some time to come to the point. Here’s where Percival comes in.”

Norah read aloud.

“‘My wife’s illness, and the fact that the doctors have enjoined rest and quiet for some months, makes our problem rather urgent. As I told you when I last saw you in Melbourne, we have charge of a small boy—the Blakes’ young son, Percival. They left him with us when they went to America. I must admit I never cared for the plan—we are rather beyond the age for enjoying the care of a nine-year-old. But Margaret rather fancied the idea: she thought it would wake us up. Percival certainly does that. Not that I see much of him personally, as I am away all day. Margaret has borne the brunt, and as she takes her responsibilities seriously it has tired her greatly. It may very possibly have contributed to her illness.

“‘Now that she is convalescent the problem becomes acute. The boy is not to go to school until his people come back: he was ill last year, and his mother is nervous about boarding-schools—quite unreasonably. He goes to a little school near us in the mornings, and for the rest of the day is at home, with nothing to do but get into mischief. It’s hard on him, of course: he is not a bad youngster, and a suburban house and garden don’t give him much chance of occupation. We tried several young ladies, as afternoon caretakers, but each resigned, with painful unanimity, after a little experience of Percival, declaring that he needed a man’s handling. If I could only send him to school I’d gladly pay his bills myself: as it is, I’m hanged if I know what to do with him.

“‘I was wondering if you would think it an unwarranted imposition if I asked you to take him for a while. I would not suggest it if I were not in such a fix. Billabong would certainly give him more scope, and your young people would probably teach him a good deal of sense. His lessons do not matter: they are only a form, as it is, and his people would be delighted to think of him in the country.

“‘If you could take him, even for a month or two, it would give Margaret time to pull round, and we could make some other plan. I am very harassed, or I would certainly not think of shifting my burden to your shoulders. But, remembering their breadth, I feel that even Percival would not daunt you as much as he does me!’”

“*Well—!*” ejaculated Norah, looking up with a puckered brow.

“Percival sounds rather a lad for a peaceful family to handle, doesn’t he?” said Jim.

“What does Dad say?”

Jim laughed.

“His first remark was, ‘We’ll see what Norah says.’”

“But what does he feel about it himself?”

“Hard to say. His first expression was one of pure horror. Afterwards, as he pondered over it, I fancied it changed to the look he wears when he’s after a stubborn bullock. Something of the Happy Warrior—you know.”

Norah nodded.

“But he can handle a bullock with a stock-whip, and he can’t very well contemplate anything so simple with Percival.”

She turned the matter over in her mind. “I feel a bit sorry for Percival. It can’t be easy for a small boy to be good in a very prim house like the Vernons’. Not that I ever was there, but I remember the teas—and the cross-examinations. They were all that was kind, of course—but——”

“Yes, one can imagine the ‘but’—especially with a nipper of nine. When you’re that age you want to have the way of goodness made pretty smooth if you hope to stick to it,” said Jim, with the air of one who reviews his long-ago and murky youth. “When I was nine——”

“Oh, Jimmy, you’re slipping!” laughed Norah. “The air of outrage with which you met me is being rapidly displaced by a look of benevolent old age. I see you dandling Percival on your knee.”

“Not a dandle!” said Jim, firmly. “He’ll have to learn sense if he comes here.”

“Then you’re facing the awful probability.”

Jim smiled.

“Well—you know Dad. Did you ever see him refuse to help a lame dog over a stile?”

“Never. And I rather think he will look on Percival as the lame dog.”

“Which is just the way I thought you would look at it,” said her father, arriving in time to overhear the last words. “Still, it’s a bit of a problem, isn’t it, Norah? I have been taking counsel’s opinion about it.”

“From——?” Norah paused, enquiringly.

David Linton subsided into his big chair and drew out his pipe.

“When your mother and I became engaged,” he said, “I had to ask your grandfather’s consent in due form. More of a business those days than it is now, I can tell you: and your grandfather was a stern old man. I don’t remember that you did any quaking when Wally asked me for you (if he ever did!) but your mother quaked very considerably. She went into the garden to do so, and there her father suddenly appeared, fresh from the interview. He fixed her with an eagle eye, and said sharply, ‘So I hear you want to get married, Mary?’ And she quaked more than ever, and murmured dutifully, ‘Yes please, Papa.’”

“I never did *that!*” affirmed Norah.

“You certainly didn’t. Well, your grandfather had had a Chinese cook for

thirty years—old Kow-Lang: a great old chap, devoted to them all. He brought the eagle eye to bear on her still more fiercely, and said, ‘Well, if Kow-Lang approves, I expect it’s all right!’ At which point your mother suddenly discovered he was laughing at her, and ceased to quake. She looked up at him with a twinkle, and said, ‘Oh, but of course, Papa, dear, David consulted Kow-Lang first!’ ”

He rammed the tobacco into his pipe, and his smile was half a sigh.

“Well, there isn’t any Kow-Lang in this instance, so I think we’ll go by Brownie. I’ve been talking to her, because if we take in a small boy much of the brunt of his presence will fall on her.”

“As if you didn’t know what Brownie would say!” laughed Norah. “It’s a foregone conclusion, once you consult Brownie. She is far too soft-hearted to think of leaving a little boy in a suburban fastness.”

“Well—aren’t we all?” David Linton smiled at his son and daughter. “Poor little animal! I suppose I ought to say ‘Poor Mrs. Vernon!’ but somehow I’ve a fellow-feeling for Percival.”

“Wally and I will take him if you like, Dad.”

“You probably will—a good bit of him,” said her father. “But he had better live here, nominally, anyhow. Jim and I have room for an extra responsibility, now that Wally has shouldered our heaviest one, haven’t we, Jim?”

“I like that!” said Norah, scornfully. “Me, that have just the number of helpless men to look after that I always had, and another house! Why I haven’t even time to use grammar!”

“Wally wouldn’t know you if you did,” said Jim. “Here’s Brownie—I knew she couldn’t keep away from a family conclave. So you’re game to begin training the young all over again, Brownie?”

“Ah, well, now, Master Jim, you couldn’t leave a poor little feller where he wasn’t wanted,” said Mrs. Brown, casting a soft glance upon him. “Well I know it. Who was it always brought the lame wallabies and the sick lambs into me kitchen to look after, from the time he was four?”

“Wallabies and lambs are quite another matter,” said Jim laughing. “This young one sounds no lamb; though he may be something of a wallaby—and a pretty lively one, at that. Sure you can stand it, Brownie?”

“To tell you the truth, Master Jim, my dear, I’m not thinking of it as anything to stand,” said Brownie, comfortably. “I’m one as likes a child about a place, and a small boy’s a heartsome thing, even if he keeps you busy. There’s a kind of quietness over Billabong nowadays—it’s high time something woke us all up. It’ll be like the old days, to have little pants to patch again!”

“If I’d known that idleness was wearing your spirit, Brownie——” began Jim.

“Ah, get along with you!” said Brownie, waggishly. “I’m not bereft of jobs, old as I am. But truly, my dear, what’ll a child be on Billabong but just an amusement to us all? You think of that poor little feller in a tidy house in a tidy street in Toorak, with an old lady and gent that never had chick nor child of their own to put ’em up to the ways of children. They’d be kind of course; but there’s some sorts of kindness as just roughs up a boy the wrong way. If you ask me, a boy of nine is that full of boy-feelin’s he’s got to get rid of ’em or bust!”

“I picture him busting over Billabong,” said Jim, resignedly. “Well, we’ll all help to pick up the bits. Will you write to the Vernons to-day, Dad?”

“Ah, why not tallygraph?” begged Brownie, insinuatingly. “Sooner he’s out of that house, the better for everyone.”

“Right as usual, Brownie,” said Mrs. Linton. “I’ll get one off at once. I suppose they can tie a label round his neck and put him in the train in the Guard’s charge.”

“Trust Mr. Vernon!” said Jim. “I fancy he won’t let any minor considerations stand in the way of transferring Percival.”

CHAPTER IV

PERCIVAL TRAVELS

THE SMALL boy who stood in the doorway of the first-class carriage could not, by any stretch of the imagination, have been called pretty. He was thick-set and sturdy, with large hands and feet; and his undistinguished features were so covered with freckles that comparatively little ordinary skin was visible to the casual glance. Brown eyes, set widely apart; a nose that tilted upwards; a wide mouth set in a straight line that made smiles seem far from it; a good forehead, topped by a shock of unruly red hair. Add a distinctly sulky expression, and it is not to be wondered at that an elderly lady, seeking a seat, took one glance at Percival Blake and hurried on to another compartment.

Old Mr. Vernon, on the platform, surveyed the boy with a worried air.

"I wonder if that lady was going far," he said. "It would have been nice to have her in your carriage."

"Don't want her," said Percival, sullenly.

"That, I am afraid, was evident," Mr. Vernon remarked. "But I would much prefer to think of your travelling with some responsible person."

"Oh, I'm all right," grunted the boy. "Don't you worry about me."

"Well, you are in the guard's charge," said the old gentleman. "But do not leave your carriage at any station, or you may find yourself left behind."

"Um," said Percival.

"And do be careful not to lean out of the window. I know of a boy who was killed that way, although he had been repeatedly warned not to do it."

"Silly bloke he must have been," was Percival's comment.

"I hope you will not use words like that at Mr. Linton's," Mr. Vernon's voice was pained. "Indeed, I can only trust that you will give as little trouble as possible at Billabong. As I told you last night, Percival, you will not find Mr. Linton and his family as lenient as Mrs. Vernon and I have been. They are, I believe, busy people, all of them: they will not have time to put up with irritating mischief. Remember that, my boy, and you will doubtless have a happy time. Otherwise you will probably discover that Mr. Linton is not a man to—ah—spare the rod."

"You told me that twice already," said Percival, with surprising energy.

"Do not be rude, Percival. Rudeness gets a boy nowhere. Or it gets him to unpleasant places. Be a little gentleman, as I know you can be if you try, and remember that you must consider the feelings of others. I have grave misgivings about sending you to Mr. Linton—but I know he will be firm with

you. So, I should say, will be his young people: from what I can remember of his enormous son you are not likely to find undue leniency.”

“Might’s well go to gaol, I believe,” mumbled Percival.

“Oh no, no. Your treatment depends entirely on yourself. Be a good little boy, don’t give trouble, and—Ah, here is the collector. Have you your ticket handy?”

Percival produced it, holding it out in a hand that bore many traces of rubbing along the edges of the doorway. Mr. Vernon shuddered faintly.

“You had better wash your hands before you eat your sandwiches. And again before you reach Cunjee, where you get out. Is your money safe?”

“Um,” said Percival, diving an exploratory hand into his pocket and jingling coins.

“And you have your book?”

“That’s a rotten book,” said the boy, casting a glance at a volume lying on the seat. “Can’t I get a comic?”

“Mrs. Vernon told me it was a very nice book for a boy. And comic papers are worthless. Wretched stuff to fill your mind with.”

“Dad always lets me have comics on a train journey.”

“Well—if he does——” said the old gentleman, uncertainly. “But——”

Percival waited for no more. He left the carriage with a flying leap that carried him past his guardian, and sped to the bookstall, cannoning into more than one person on his way, while the old gentleman watched him with an air of anguish, which deepened as he observed the guard preparing to wave his green flag. A whistle sounded. Doors banged. Percival shot from the bookstall with a bundle of vividly-coloured papers, darted across the platform and sprang into the carriage, a porter holding open the door and remarking, “Cut it pretty fine, didn’t y’?” The train moved off slowly, while Percival leaned from the window, exhibiting a face which seemed mysteriously to have gained streaks of grime. He waved his cap, his red hair flaming gallantly.

“G’bye, Mr. Vernon!”

“Good-bye,” said Mr. Vernon, faintly. He would have said more, had words been at his command in time. But the train disappeared round the curve, the red head was withdrawn. Percival had gone.

“Well—David Linton can deal with him!” murmured Mr. Vernon. He turned away into the roar of the Melbourne streets, an elderly gentleman suddenly relieved of the custody of high explosives.

Alone in his compartment, Percival began immediately to dispose his possessions so that any intruder might feel discouraged. A small suit-case, hauled down from the luggage-rack with a vehemence that sent it hurtling to the floor, was tossed into one corner, an overcoat into another, a large package of food into a third. In the fourth the boy settled himself with his bundle of

literature, sorting comic papers from penny-dreadfuls with an expert hand.

As he finished this task, the book on the seat caught his eye. He picked it up with an air of loathing. It was a bright blue book, entitled *Little Joe: or What Use Am I?*; and it opened at a picture where Little Joe was shown on his way to school. A lad of surpassing worthiness, evidently, in a velvet sailor suit. He had golden curls. Percival gazed at the picture malevolently.

“Blitherin’ calf!” he ejaculated hotly. His eye wandered to the cover of one of the penny-dreadfuls, where a hero in cowboy outfit was depicted in the act of hurling a Mexican over a cliff: and there was no doubt as to which picture soothed the soul of Percival.

“I’d like to see *you* handlin’ a Mex.!” he remarked to little Joe. “Handlin’ a white mouse ’ud be about up to you!” His anger kindled against the curly-headed one. The book shot into the air, and as it came down he caught it on his foot and kicked it to the roof, narrowly missing the lamp. Then a Berserk rage seized him, and he kicked the book violently until he realised that crawling under the seats to retrieve the victim for further punishment was turning his blue serge suit into something distinctly second-hand. So he projected his person half-way through the window and whizzed Little Joe at a cow, peacefully grazing near the line. The cow, struck on the flank by this unexpected missile, flung up her head and galloped off. Percival subsided with a chuckle.

“Jolly good shot! An’ that’s all about Joey.”

He looked about him. Slowly the joy of being alone, of owning no man—or woman—master; the buccaneer spirit of high adventure, took hold of him. He danced wildly up and down the floor, leaped on the seats, climbed into the luggage-rack and performed complicated gymnastics, singing a loud, tuneless chant. Finally he missed his footing and came headlong to the floor, and the chant ceased abruptly. He picked himself up and discovered that his nose was bleeding freely.

“Broken, by the feel of it,” he remarked into his handkerchief. “Golly, it hurts!” He sought the wash-basin.

When he reappeared he was sobered, and considerably cleaner, though his swollen nose shone with a lustre that even its freckles could not hide. He opened his parcel of food, not because it was luncheon time or even that he was hungry, but because it was a joyful thing to eat, when and how he chose. Between sandwiches and comic papers the hours flew pleasantly. He ate oranges at intervals, throwing the peel on the floor. But this brought him back to the realisation that law and authority still existed in his world, for the guard appeared at the window during a stoppage and regarded him with an air of heavy disapproval.

“Here, I say, young feller, you can’t turn a carriage into a dirty uproar like

that,” stated the guard.

“ ‘Snobody here,” retorted Percival.

“Might be, any minute. Anyhow, I’m here,” said the guard, firmly. “Just you pick up all them peels an’ pips. Lively, now!” He watched while the unwilling Percival obeyed; there was something compelling in the eye of the guard, who looked as though he had small boys of his own.

“Now just you be’ave. No more nonsense, even if you are a man on your own,” said the guard. “Want anything?”

“No, thanks,” said Percival, sulkily. He returned to his paper, with the air of one who desires no further conversation.

There was a halt at a refreshment station an hour later, and the guard reappeared.

“Want dinner?”

“Had it,” said Percival, who was, indeed, replete. “But I’d like a cup of tea or something to drink.”

“Well, go ahead,” said the guard. “Refreshment-room’s over there.” He jerked a thumb in a vague direction. “Plenty of time, but don’t cut it fine, like you did at Spencer Street.”

Percival grunted. Life to him was mainly composed of grown-ups who reminded him of his former errors. He supposed they liked it, and anyhow, you didn’t have to listen. He found his blue cap on the floor, brushed it negligently on his knickerbockers, and dived into the throng on the platform. Mr. Vernon had told him not to leave the train, but his new caretaker had said he might. That, too, was like grown-ups: you never could be sure that one would forbid what another permitted. There was no counting on them. But Mr. Vernon, with his innumerable “Don’ts,” was fast receding from his horizon. Ahead of him lay a new world that seemed likely to be very unpleasant: a stern world, peopled by large, busy people who would stand no nonsense. He hated them all—these people who did not “spare the rod.” But the moment was his own, and he could forget the dark shadow of Billabong.

The platform was full of strolling people. Few seemed to notice him, though he fancied he caught an occasional glance at his red hair. How much that hair had to do with Percival’s prickly attitude towards life only he himself knew. He hated it with a vehemence of which not even his mother dreamed. Nobody could ever let it alone. His family lamented it: ladies who came to call commented on it: boys in the street sang out “Hullo, Ginger!” as he passed. Its flaming tint seemed to lend flame to his thoughts. It was a thing you never could forget if you owned it: it shrieked at you from every looking-glass. That was one reason why Percival rarely looked into a mirror, but trusted to luck about his appearance, though he knew luck often failed him, so that grown-ups made caustic remarks and sent him back to make himself tidy. But even if you

dodged mirrors you caught lurid glimpse of your head in shop-windows. And even if you didn't, the world never let you forget that your hair was red.

He found the refreshment-room, decided that lemonade was better than tea, and drank it luxuriously through a straw—though his enjoyment was embittered by the fact that the waitress, with a sly glance at his head, had suggested ginger-ale. There was time for the leisurely inspection of the engine which he had wanted to make at Spencer Street, only Mr. Vernon had been too fussy about missing the train. The engine-driver, a friendly man, was toasting sausages in the furnace, and Percival watched the operation with breathless interest. That was a true meal for a man! The driver, his cooking finished, caught sight of his eager face, grinned, and offered him a sausage already cooling on a piece of tin. Percival did not want it, but no fear of discomfort would have made him refuse such an offer: he accepted it gratefully, and they ate together while the driver explained the finer points of the engine. The bell rang as the sausages came to an end: Percival licked his fingers and rubbed them on his trousers, as did the driver, and raced back to his carriage.

Time dragged a little after that. Reading began to bore him, and he found little to amuse him in looking out of the window. The label on his suit-case caught his eye, and he found some satisfaction in scratching out "Percival" with his knife, for he hated his name as heartily as he hated his hair. The result did not entirely please him, so he erased also the "Master" that Mr. Vernon had carefully written. It looked better when the label simply said "Blake." The knife led him to attempt a little enlargement of the lettering on the carriage door; but a jolt caused an ugly gash on the smooth red wood, and a wholesome awe of the guard made him decide that carving might have unpleasant consequences. He looked at his watch. Three hours yet. He sighed heavily. There was a faint inner conviction that it might have been wise to have refused the sausage.

The train stopped at a station where a vast array of milk-cans to be loaded promised an unusually long stoppage. Percival got out. He dodged past the porters who were banging the cans into an empty truck, and strolled down the platform. Beyond the guard's van was a crate, from the bars of which protruded the heads of half a dozen hens. Percival's eyes brightened.

He flipped a head with his cap, and the hen withdrew it with a protesting squawk. Tail feathers came into view, to Percival's mind simply asking to be pulled; and he pulled them. Chaos began to reign within the crate and unholy joy in the small boy. The next few moments were busy, both for Percival and the hens. So interesting was this game of heads and tails that he did not notice the ringing of the bell. Only when the whistle from the engine woke the echoes, drowning the frantic cackling of the hens, did he look round. Then he jumped.

The train was already moving slowly. Percival uttered a loud yell and began to run desperately after it. Simultaneously the guard caught sight of him from the open doorway of the van. The guard also yelled. There was a moment of frantic running, a porter dashed forward, heads craned from the windows. Then the boy found himself, between the guard and the porter, swung into the van, landing in a heap upon a pile of mail-bags. The station disappeared.

“Well, if you aren’t more bother than a ’bus full of monkeys!” ejaculated the guard, angrily. “Haven’t you *any* sense? By rights they ought to send a nursemaid out with you.”

Percival had no reply, even to this bitter insult. He had no breath. He remained upon the mail-bags, panting heavily.

“Whatcher want to be leavin’ your carriage for?” demanded the wrathful guard. “Goodness knows, I’m busy enough, ’thout lookin’ after you at every station!” He stared at him contemptuously. “Sulky, eh? Well you just sit there, anyhow. If I’m to land you safely at Cunjee I’ll keep you under me own eye.”

Percival sat there. The guard, muttering darkly, turned to his shelf and made laborious entries on long sheets of paper, licking his little stub of pencil between each entry. Percival watched him anxiously for a few minutes, wondering if he were writing about him—being painfully familiar with the notes of complaint his school-mistress was wont to send to Mrs. Vernon. Then his attention wandered to his new surroundings.

He decided that they were more interesting than the first-class carriage. The van was large and very crowded. A pile of luggage occupied one end: he could see his own trunk, and he wished that he dared move to scratch out the “Percival” that stared at him on its label—deciding that it might be done when the guard got out at a station. There were boxes and parcels of every shape and size, crates of fowls, young fruit-trees tied up in sacking, bags and baskets of mail, hampers of pigeons, motor tyres, petrol-cans, machinery parts; even the propeller of an aeroplane, at which he gazed with awe and longing. Bicycles hung from the roof. In one corner was tied a collie-pup, whining distressfully from time to time. In Percival’s horny little soul there was one soft spot—he loved dogs. Looking at the guard’s back, he wondered if he dared crawl over and talk to the pup.

He decided that it was worth risking. Very cautiously he crept to the corner, putting out a hand which the pup welcomed with an eager red tongue. Percival sat on a box, and they talked together silently, finding comfort in each other. Presently the guard turned round, and relaxed into a faint smile.

“Found the pup, have y’? Well, two pups can keep each other in order. Just you stay quiet there, an’ don’t get in my way—there’s mighty little room in this van.”

Percival was content. He talked to the pup openly, and the pup answered

with a wagging tail, nosing about him happily. They drew into a station, and he plucked up courage to speak to the guard as the tram slackened speed.

“He’s hungry.”

“Reckon that’s likely. The chap that put him aboard didn’t leave him any food.”

“I say,” Percival ventured, “I’ve got lots of sandwiches in my carriage. Can’t I make a dart for them when we stop, and feed him? I won’t be half a jiffy.”

“Sure you won’t go missin’ the train again?”

“No—true’s life, I won’t. I’ll run like fury.”

“Well you got four minutes, an’ the dog’s hungry, right enough. All right—but no tricks, mind.”

Percival attempted no tricks. He ran like a hare to the deserted carriage, rescued his sandwiches, with complete disregard of his other belongings, and was back at the van in two minutes. The puppy welcomed him joyously, becoming wildly excited at the sight of food. The train went on, and the guard looked at them with something like approval.

“Guess he’s happy now. I’ve been sorry for the little chap—I gave him water, but I hadn’t any food for him.”

“Have some,” suggested Percival. “He won’t eat all these.”

“You will, though,” said the guard, laughing. “Never saw the small boy yet who had too much tucker.”

“I’ve had too much already,” confessed Percival, truthfully. “Go on: have some.”

“Well—if you’re sure,” said the guard, yielding. “I’ve been too busy to think of food.” He took a sandwich, and ate it in one bite: and then several more. Peace descended upon the van. It was clear that the guard was a man who, having eaten a friend’s salt, forgot his former misdeeds. He talked of the troubles that beset the life of a guard, and Percival listened, making sympathetic sounds at intervals.

Another station came, and the guard became very busy, handing out boxes to a lad-porter. Just as he waved his flag Percival noticed a motor-tyre bearing the name of the station. He sprang to the door with it.

“I say—did you forget this?”

“By George!” said the guard. “Here, Bill, catch!” He bowled the tyre across the platform and leaped in as the train gathered way.

“Good boy—I’d clean forgot that one. And them motor chaps do get nasty if their tyres don’t turn up on time. Well, you got some sense, anyhow.”

After that, the journey became pure happiness for Percival. The guard permitted him to act as a junior assistant, gathering up the goods for each station and helping to hand them out. He became very friendly and

companionable, explaining the ways of the road, the failings of station-masters, and the iniquities of regulations and inspectors. He did not ask his name, to Percival's relief, but called him "Son," which had a curiously heartsome sound. As the stations came and went Percival developed a superior attitude towards the porters, directing them firmly as to their activities in the van—which the porters were too busy to resent, whatever they may have felt. The hours flew by.

"Well, the next's Cunjee, an' I'll be sorry to lose me mate," said the guard at last. "Comin' back, are y'?"

"Some time—month or two."

"Well, if I'm on board you can travel in the van if y' like. What say?"

"Rather!" The boy looked up delightedly. "I like vans much better than carriages."

"Mightn't say that if you always travelled in 'em," said the guard. "Anyhow, I'll take you along any time." He glanced at his watch. "We're behind time—have to hurry at Cunjee. You cut along for your other things soon's we stop: there's nobody been in your carriage. Someone meeting you, son?"

"Mr. Linton, I s'pose."

"Goin' to Linton's, are you?" The guard suddenly became aware that his assistant was deeply travel-stained. "My word, I'd have sent you along to have a wash-up if I'd known that. Here, you rub yourself down a bit."

He produced the remains of a grimy towel, and Percival rubbed down heartily. The result was not brilliant.

"Well, you seem to have it all over now, instead of only in streaks," commented the guard. "Can't be helped. Not the first time Mr. Linton's seen a boy grubby, I'll be bound. An' there's the whistle, so be ready. So long, son, an' good luck."

CHAPTER V

PERCIVAL ARRIVES

THE CUNJEE platform was never a crowded one. It was a long, gravelled expanse, shaded for most of its length by pepper-trees, under which a few dogs were always sleeping. Jim Linton, standing with the station-master as the train drew in, saw a small boy drop from the still-moving van and race along by the carriages. He disappeared within one, emerging in a moment encumbered with small luggage: then stood still and looked about him blankly.

“My man, evidently,” said Jim. “Queer way he travels.”

The busy hours in the van with the guard and the collie-pup had helped Percival to forget his fear and hatred of his unknown future. Now it came back to him in a wave as he stood alone upon the platform, gripping his suit-case, while his overcoat trailed on the ground. He stared ahead; and to his eyes the vision of the huge man who came striding towards him was not reassuring.

Percival had never seen anyone so big. Even in a crowd Jim towered head and shoulders over most men: here he seemed gigantic, and his quiet face suggested to the little boy only grimness and hostility. Never had he felt so small, so alone. He had a wild yearning to get back into the train: to go anywhere, even back to Mrs. Vernon. He wanted his father—suddenly, terribly. But there was no help for him anywhere. He set his teeth. At least, this giant should not see how afraid, how lonely, he was.

Jim’s vision was of an amazingly dirty youngster, with a sulky, defiant face, half concealed by grime. His collar was beyond hope, his tie crooked: his clothes conveyed the impression that not only had he travelled in the van, but slept in it. Even to Jim, who was not accustomed to judge by externals, there was something disturbingly unattractive about Percival. He merely nodded when asked his name—Jim did not guess that speech was at the moment impossible to him because of the lump in his throat: nodded again in answer to Jim’s, “Got anything in the van?”; and presently found himself in a big car outside the station without having uttered a word since his arrival.

No one else was in the car, which was something of a relief to him: it gave him time to get hold of himself. Jim took the wheel and they passed through a small township, threading their way among cars and buggies and horsemen. The shops looked busy. Jim’s hand was constantly raised in answer to greetings.

“It’s sale day,” he remarked. “Cunjee wakes up once a fortnight. On all other days it’s sound asleep.”

“What’s sale day?” Percival found his voice to ask.

“Oh, people bring in stock to sell and other people come to buy them.”

“My father sells stocks,” said Percival, looking puzzled. “But he goes into Melbourne to sell them. He doesn’t take them anywhere.”

Jim stared for a moment, then repressed a smile.

“Haven’t you ever been in the country, Percival?”

“I’ve been to Macedon, and to Dromana. We go there for holidays.”

“That’s hardly real country—not like this. Stock, in the country, means sheep and cattle: possibly pigs. People bring them into the township yards to buy and sell.”

“Oh!” said Percival, with an uneasy feeling that he had made an ass of himself. He did not dare to look up to see if the big man were laughing at him. But Jim’s voice sounded quite grave when he spoke again.

“We shall have to teach you a lot about stock.”

“Do you keep it—them?”

“Rather: that’s how we earn a living. Billabong is a cattle-station, but we have sheep as well.”

“What do you do with them?”

“Fatten them. We’ll have plenty of work for you once we break you in to it.”

There were never words more innocently uttered, but they brought back all Percival’s fears. Then it was true, all that Mr. Vernon had said about these Lintons. Hard, stern people, who did not spare the rod. They were going to break him in to work: and he hated work and dodged it whenever he could manage to do so. He had a dismal vision of himself, drawn from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; a small slave, feeding unknown foodstuffs to unknown beasts. The lump rose in his throat again, and he remained silent, a prey to dreary thoughts of the future.

“Tired?” asked Jim, after a time.

“No. Is it far?”

“Fourteen miles by one road, seventeen by the other. We’re going the longer way, because it’s a better track. Not that it is much to boast about, for a car. We used to do it with horses when I was going to school.”

“That was a long time ago, I s’pose?”

“Well—not yesterday,” said Jim, with a laugh.

Percival grunted. It seemed to him merely silly to think of this big man remembering his school-days. Why, they must be ages back. He couldn’t know how a boy felt, with his father and mother at the other end of the world; a father and mother who did not dream that their only child was facing the stern reality of being broken in. If they did, they would come back fast enough. The thought brought hope: he could write to them. But a letter took a long while to

go, and come; and meanwhile there was now, and the now was all that counted.

He lost himself in a maze of dreary anticipation and self-pity, staring with unseeing eyes at the country as the big car purred along. They had crossed open plains, and were running through timber, where the bush came up to both sides of the road. It was interesting bush, and the evening air was bringing out all its mingled scents; but they did not reach Percival. To him every mile meant a mile further into prison.

After a time they turned into a side-track, and presently stopped at a white gate. Percival did not move.

“Think you can open it?” Jim asked.

“I s’pose so.” He got out, leaving the door open: and was called back.

“Always shut a car door when it has to move on,” said Jim, pleasantly. Percival obeyed sullenly, and went forward to wrestle with the gate.

It was not a very easy gate for a small boy, and at first he thought he could not manage it. Jim watched him silently—Percival seemed to feel the quiet eyes boring through his back. It made him set his jaw and determine to master the stiff latch.

When it yielded he had a momentary feeling of triumph—swiftly succeeded by the thought that he had been rather stupid to show his taskmaster that he could be useful. So he fumbled with the catch deliberately when he shut the gate, until Jim left the car and came to take over the job.

“That’s queer—it’s generally easier to shut than to open. Wants a bit of adjusting: we’ll bring some tools down soon, and some oil. We don’t believe in not having things ship-shape and Bristol fashion on Billabong.”

Percival had not much idea what this meant, nor did he care. He rather hoped he had annoyed the big man; certainly he had made him get out of his comfortable seat in the car. But his pleasure in this gentle thought was lost in the knowledge that a new ordeal was close upon him.

Ahead, through the trees he could see a big red building that he knew must be Billabong. There would be more of the dreaded strangers there, and he would have to meet them, to try to talk to them, to feel them looking at him—at his dirty face and clothes, his ugly features, his red hair. It had never been concealed from Percival that he was not a beauty. He did not care much, as a rule, but just now it smote him. Still, he would have borne ugliness serenely—if only he did not feel so miserably small.

The car wheeled round a belt of shrubbery and stopped at a gate, amid a chorus of barking from the dogs, which arrived from every point of the compass. Percival climbed out. There was another big man coming across the yard; almost as big as Jim, but with iron-grey hair and beard. He found himself greeted kindly—not that he trusted the kindness, telling himself it was only put

on. Then he was in the house, and given over to a very fat old woman. Percival had to admit to himself that she certainly looked as though it would be a great effort to be anything but kind.

“Poor lamb!” said Brownie—which was exactly what Percival thought himself. “Tired, I’ll be bound: it’s a cruel long journey, and you all alone. Never mind, you’ll feel a different man after you’ve had a wash, an’ then tea’ll be ready. The master wouldn’t have his until you and Mr. Jim came.”

She led him upstairs, talking all the time in her comfortable old voice. It was never necessary to answer her; which in itself was soothing. And his room did not suggest a prison; it was bright and airy, with jolly pictures on the walls and interesting-looking books in a little shelf. Brownie poured out hot water.

“Now just you have a real good soaping, face an’ all. I know well how dirty one gets on that train. There’s brushes on the table—never mind waiting for yours. We put your bed in here, but I shouldn’t wonder if you’d rather it was out on the balcony, like Mr. Jim. Easy to take it there to-morrow. Now I’ll be back in a few minutes when you’re ready.”

She went away. Percival washed with unusual thoroughness, splashing himself and his surroundings impartially. He decided that it would really have been better to remove his coat first, but shrugged his shoulders, dabbing at large wet patches with the towel. He brushed his hair with a few hasty strokes that seemed to have merely the effect of irritating it, cast a despairing glance in the mirror, and then turned to the window.

He looked out over the wide plains of Billabong. The spring grass rippled in green waves under a light breeze. He could see cattle dotted here and there, and far away to the right a solitary rider was bringing in a number of milking cows, letting them stray leisurely, snatching mouthfuls of feed as they came. Nearer the house great trees hid the further view: a red-gravelled road wound among them, soon lost to sight. Through the trees he caught a glimpse of chimneys, from one of which smoke drifted lazily. He wondered who lived there, and if there might be any other boys. If there were, it would not be so lonely.

The long window opened upon a wide balcony. He stepped out upon it, looking nervously up and down its length: seeing, at the far end, a space shut off by mosquito-wire, behind which was a bed with a little table beside it and an electric lamp. That was evidently where the big man slept, whom the old woman called Mr. Jim. Percival wished it were further from his window: he would have preferred him on the other side of the house. He had no notion of adopting Brownie’s suggestion that his bed should be taken out near Jim’s. “I’ll see more than I want of him without that!” he muttered.

Leaning over the edge of the balcony he saw a garden, gay with flowers: beyond were fruit-trees, which made more appeal to him, though it was too

early for fruit. Men were working in the garden. It was all very peaceful: not like the Toonak streets, with their ceaseless rush of motors, or the rattle and roar of the long train journey. But Percival was not sure that its loneliness did not outweigh its peace: and, in any case, he doubted if peace was what he wanted.

Indeed, he was not certain of what he did want. Not to be back with the Vernons, who fussed over everything he did and talked perpetually of conduct becoming a small boy. Nor was he sure he wanted his own home, where he rarely seemed to see his father, while it had long been made clear to him that he got on his mother's nerves. Life there had been mainly spent with a succession of governesses who disliked him as cordially as he disliked them. The only alternative was boarding-school; and schools made you work. Percival hated work. He had never known any kind of work that he would like. He did not think that such a thing existed.

Brownie came in, casting a shrewd glance at his ill-groomed figure, but saying nothing about it. She led him downstairs and ushered him into the smoking-room, where Mr. Linton and Jim were reading newspapers. Tea was laid on a side-table—the sort of tea to appeal to any boy. Cakes iced and cakes plain were there: sandwiches peeped from a napkin, hot scones were sending up a warm and comforting steam. At least it was evident that they did not starve you on Billabong.

“That's right, old chap,” said Mr. Linton, putting down his paper. “Come and sit down—you must be more than ready for tea. Had a good journey?”

“'M,” said Percival. He sat down on the edge of a chair.

“Travelled in the van, didn't you?” Jim said. “I saw you making a bolt from it at Cunjee.”

“Some of the way.” He accepted a scone, and took a large and buttery bite that made further speech impossible.

“Rather fun, being in the van. I used often to travel that way. Wright is a good fellow.”

Percival sent his tongue in pursuit of outlying fragments of butter adhering to his cheeks.

“Who's he?”

“Wright?—oh, the guard. I suppose Mr. Vernon told him to look after you.”

“'M.”

“Did you know anyone travelling?” asked Mr. Linton.

“No.”

“Have a sandwich?” suggested Jim, beginning to feel rather helpless. Percival took one with a grunt which might or might not have been gratitude. Jim rather thought not. He cast about for something to say to this queer

youngster.

“Sorry to leave the Vernons?”

“No,” said Percival, definitely.

“Well, it must have been rather a dull house for a boy,” said Mr. Linton. “There will be more for you to do here.”

Percival looked at him dully. He wondered when they would begin to set him to work. They talked enough about it. He ate steadily, answering in monosyllables when he was addressed: ate more than he wanted, since he did not know what would happen when tea was over, and it was easier to avoid speaking when he was busy with food. But the end came over a piece of cake which he found himself unable to finish. He put his plate aside and sat silently, looking as miserable as he felt.

“Like to go out?” asked Jim, pitying him.

“’M.” He slid from his chair.

“I’ll come with you, if you like.”

“I’m all right,” said the boy, hurriedly, edging towards the door.

“Well, don’t lose yourself. Go anywhere you like—except into the little paddock where the bull is.”

Percival did not know a bull when he saw one, but he mumbled acquiescence and made his escape. The door banged behind him.

He hurried out of the front door, afraid that Jim might change his mind and come after him. A path led into the shrubbery: he ran along it, glad when the trees shielded him from the house. It was quiet in the green depths, and the path wound in and out, so that to follow it had a feeling of adventure.

Presently he came to a hedge in which a gate was set. He opened it and passed into the kitchen garden, where there were orderly rows of vegetables and long beds of strawberries, white with blossom. There were raspberry canes, too, but he did not know what they were. He prowled about aimlessly. An old Chinese, busily hoeing, greeted him with a friendly smile and “H’lo, l’il Master”—to which Percival returned the faintest of greetings, for he had all the Australian boy’s unreasoning contempt for “a Chow.” Lee Wing looked after him, raising his scanty eyebrows. “Him stlange l’il gentleman,” he muttered. “Not like ours.” Lee Wing had not left Billabong for five-and-twenty years, and in that time he had known only two boys. This one was a novelty.

Beyond the garden stretched the orchard, a mass of fragrant bloom. Percival roamed through it without interest; an orchard that held no fruit meant nothing to him, very naturally. He came to a fence, from which he could see the stables. They were more attractive, and so were the stock-yards, stretching beyond them. But there were men there, and he did not dare to go near them. So he turned back across the orchard, climbed the further fence, and came out into the homestead paddock.

He went slowly towards the trees, avoiding the red-gravelled road that he had seen from the balcony. They were beautiful trees, red-gum and box, that had been carefully tended and protected from cattle; many had low-growing limbs, so that they were easy to climb. He looked at them longingly.

“I s’pose there’d be a row if I did climb,” he muttered—with memories of Mrs. Vernon’s horror when she had found him half-way up a tall pine. He decided not to risk it, and rambled on.

Presently he found himself almost out of the timber, and in sight of a house; he knew it must be the one of which he had caught a glimpse from the balcony. He stopped, irresolutely, wondering who lived there. Then the sound of cantering hoofs drew near, and, fearful of being discovered, he swung himself into the lower boughs of a tree, peeping through the branches.

He saw two people riding, a man and a girl. They were coming fast, the horses anxious to get home. Their voices came to him clearly: happy voices that echoed among the trees when they broke into laughter. The boy peered at them eagerly; they sounded so merry, so young—not like the two huge men at Billabong.

They swept by him. Percival knew nothing of horses, but he liked to see the two they rode; a big black and a bay, full of fire and spirit, reefing and pulling hard: good to look at. And the faces of the riders brought a sense of comfort: even in his momentary glimpse he thought they were jolly. He watched them ride into the stable-yard and dismount: watched them turn to pat the horses. “B’lieve they’re talking to them!” he said aloud. That was very puzzling: why would one talk to a horse? Then the stables hid them, but he remained in the tree, watching, until they came out and walked over to the house.

“They look pretty decent,” was Percival’s comment. “Wonder if they’d let me go there some time.”

It was growing dusk, and he knew he must return, much as he dreaded the big house and the big men. He climbed down slowly, sitting for a tune on the lowest branch to contemplate his gloomy future. There would be a meal to be endured, he supposed; he would have to sit with the two big men, and they would ask him strings of silly questions and he would have to try to answer: and he would be conscious all the time of his beastly hair. He wished with all his heart that it were not so long. No one at the Vernons’ had had time to take him to a barber; they did not seem to think that it mattered how long a fellow’s hair grew, though they talked enough about brushing it. And now there was no barber within miles and miles, so that it would only get worse and worse. He wished he were allowed to wear a cap at meals: he didn’t feel quite so bad when he could cover it.

Well, it was no good waiting any longer, and he was growing cold. He

slipped to the ground and dragged slowly through the trees. It was almost dark among them: he felt a little afraid. There might be animals he did not know in this wild country.

As the idea crossed his mind he heard a rustle and a footstep; and suddenly became rooted to the ground in terror as he came face to face with a black man. A short, thick-set fellow with a broad, ugly face, black as his boots, who seemed as astonished as was Percival. He pulled up short, staring at the boy. Then he came forward.

Terror lent Percival wings. He uttered a loud yell, dodged aside, and ran wildly through the trees, shriek after shriek rending the air. He heard the blackfellow call—what he said he did not know, but he felt that he was shouting to his fierce tribe to head him off. The boy's screams redoubled, and so did his speed. Even when he was safely out of the dim recesses of the timber, with the lights of the house in front of him, he still screamed wildly, sobbing as he ran, hearing in imagination black feet that pounded behind him.

The gate opened and Jim came racing towards him. It was early in the season for snakes, but he could think of nothing else that would cause such a frenzy of terror. He caught the boy by the shoulder.

“What's the matter, Percival?”

“Blacks!” sobbed Percival. “Quick, run!—one nearly got me. Quick, they're coming!” He twisted from Jim and rushed on towards the house.

Jim was beside him in a few long strides.

“Stop, you little duffer! Blacks your granny! There aren't any in the district.”

Percival knew better. He continued to flee. Like a rabbit he bolted through the gate, dodging past people who seemed to be hurrying from every direction. Crying loudly as he ran, he fled upstairs and darted into his room. Then he crawled under his bed and waited for the attack.

CHAPTER VI

THE END OF PERCIVAL

I DON'T WONDER that the Vernons called him a problem," remarked Jim. "Rummett youngster I ever saw," said Wally. "If one could find out anything he liked to do!"

"He doesn't seem to have any tendencies—except climbing trees," Jim said. "There he certainly shines. Brownie has all the patching she was hankering after."

"Yes, and it seems hardly fair, since he's barely civil to her," Mr. Linton commented. "But then, civility doesn't seem Percival's way."

"I don't believe he can help that," said Norah, thoughtfully. "It's more manner than words."

"But he has hardly any words," said Wally, laughing; "did you ever know anyone so silent?"

"You wouldn't have said he was silent if you'd run across him when he was fleeing from poor old Billy," Jim grinned. "He certainly gave tongue then. Billy was nearly as frightened as he was."

"It was bad luck," said Tommy Rainham. "His first night, poor little boy, and he had never seen a blackfellow before. I should certainly have behaved in the same way when I first came from England, if it had happened to me."

Everyone shouted with laughter.

"You!" said Jim. "Tell us something else, Tommy. Who fought the burglar?"

"Oh, he was a poor white thing," said Tommy, turning pink. "And I was very afraid, even then. But to meet a blackfellow in the dusk, all alone—ugh!"

"I wish I'd warned the boy," said Mr. Linton. "But of course that never occurred to us. Billy is as much a part of the furniture of Billabong as Brownie is. Nobody ever thinks of him as black."

"Anyhow, we tried not to let him think he had made an ass of himself, poor kid," said Jim. "Brownie mothered him—that's a relative term, because I don't fancy anyone could mother Percival—and put him to bed and fed him there. And we were careful not to allude to the tragedy next day."

"But he thinks of it, and I'm sure he is horribly ashamed," said Norah. "He simply dreads meeting Billy. For that matter, he dodges all the men. Probably he thinks they are laughing at him."

"Doesn't he dodge everyone?" asked Bob. "I try to behave like a benevolent uncle whenever I meet him, but he usually melts away before I

finish a sentence.”

“He’s like that with everyone,” Norah said. “And yet, I don’t think it’s ordinary shyness. I don’t quite know what it is.”

“If he were shy he wouldn’t be so difficult.” Jim frowned over the problem. “He’s not too shy to be thoroughly disobedient. No power on earth will make him shut a gate. Lee Wing and Hogg are united for once—they’re both on the verge of lunacy because of the number of times the calves have got into the gardens. He let the pigs out yesterday, and we had no end of a merry time getting them back.”

“Did he help?” Bob asked.

“He did not. He was not there. I believe he was up a tree, watching the fun. At any rate he came strolling in like a red-haired cherub when it was all over, and everybody hot and bothered. I tried to be a benevolent uncle in my few words to him, but he merely sulked.” Jim laughed. “I don’t think much of this uncle game. I have to stand over him every morning because he leaves his room like a pig-sty.”

“And you so tidy!” grinned Wally.

“I’ve got to be, in self-defence; and it weighs on my mind.”

“It would,” agreed Bob. “What about riding?”

“He won’t ride. Says he doesn’t think he’d like it.”

“Well, what does he do all day?”

“Wanders round like a lost fowl, or lies on his bed reading. He simply won’t go anywhere with anyone.”

“Well, he has one point,” said Norah. “He likes dogs.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Linton, brightening. “And the queer thing is, they like him. Old Tyke is a nasty-tempered dog with strangers, but he and Percival are quite good friends. But if one meets him with a dog he’s off at once.”

“He makes a fine art of keeping out of one’s way,” Jim said. “But hang it all, one doesn’t want a child to be like that. I was afraid before he came that he’d be under my feet all the time; now I’m always wondering where the little beggar is, and what he’s doing.”

“And it’s usually something pretty bad,” said Mr. Linton. “I am beginning to think we are too soft with him.”

“Well, he seems to have given you all something to think of—if you needed it,” said Tommy laughing.

“He certainly has done that. It’s only a fortnight since he came, but Jim and I feel as if it were a year. We look back sadly to our piping times of peace.”

“Send him to us for awhile,” suggested Wally. “Norah will find the way to his stony little heart.”

“We’ll try him for a bit longer, thanks, my boy. I don’t like being bested by anything the size of Percival.”

“He’s queer,” said Norah, knitting her brows. “He seems to me always on the defensive—as if he expected something unpleasant to happen. I wish I could find out what it is.”

“Something unpleasant *will* happen if he lets the pigs out again,” said Jim. “It would have happened before, only he’s such a mite to punish. I wonder what he’s doing now?”

At the moment Percival was throwing clods at a tame wallaby which Norah kept in a little paddock. From the recesses of a tree he had seen Wally and Norah stroll across to Big Billabong; a little later, Bob and Tommy Rainham had ridden up. That meant they would all be there for tea: a circumstance which instantly decided him to forego that meal. This was the easier because his pocket was bulging with ginger-biscuits, purloined from the pantry when Brownie’s back was turned. He had been nibbling them all the afternoon, and tea made no appeal.

He decided to explore Little Billabong, since its master and mistress were not there: and after roaming through the garden and the stables and talking to a dog tied up in the stable-yard, he caught sight of the wallaby hopping about in its enclosure. That was interesting: he had always wondered how fast a wallaby could go. So he collected a supply of clods and proceeded to find out.

The wallaby was too astonished at first to realise that it was actually being attacked. Its existence was peaceful and sheltered, and it looked upon humans as a kindly race, generally equipped with milk or biscuits. Moreover, Percival’s aim was bad. But it improved with practice, so that the wallaby became indignantly aware that clods could hurt. It fled as far as the paddock fence would allow, taking refuge in a corner behind a bush, from which Percival was enthusiastically trying to dislodge it when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

“You little beast!” said Wally, indignantly.

The boy’s arm went up as if to ward off a blow. Norah and Wally looked at him in silence.

“I’m not going to hit you,” said Wally, contemptuously. “Not that you don’t deserve it, only we don’t like hitting little things—even if they’re nasty. But if I catch you ill-using an animal again, young man, I won’t promise to keep my hands off you. Now you clear out!”

Percival went off slowly, his head down. He walked until he was fifty yards away. Then he ran—he did not quite know why. Perhaps it was to get away from the vision of Norah’s face. But it stayed with him.

He gained the shelter of his room, unseen, and pitched face-downward on his bed. The face was still there. It looked at him, just as it had looked by the wallaby’s paddock. Not hot with anger, like Wally’s: not contemptuous. Only sorry.

He knew they must all hate him. He had tried very hard to hate them all, because he had thought they meant to be unkind and hard; and when he had found no unkindness something seemed to have spurred him on to do silly, aggravating things; some stupid, sullen urge within him, the outcome of all the years in which he had known himself a nuisance. Now he knew he did not hate them: he hated himself.

And Norah had looked sorry. Even when he had hurt her pet, when Wally's cheerful patience had been swept away in a surge of disgust, she had not changed. She had looked at him with pitying eyes, as if he were the one in pain.

He wriggled off the bed with an impatient movement, straying across the room, until he came up to the mirror. It gave him back a miserable face, crowned with a wild mop of flaming hair, standing on end in every direction. He looked at it almost with horror.

"B'lieve I'd be decent if it wasn't red," he said. "B'lieve it's my hair does it."

A sudden resolve took him. It had been growing within him for a week, since he had come upon a bottle marked "Dye" in one of his raids on the storeroom. It was dye that Brownie had bought for wool, but Percival did not know that: dye was dye to him, and this was brown. He had nourished secret pictures of himself, his red mane turned brown, like other people's: no longer a flame that told of his coming half a mile off. He longed horribly to be like other boys. And this bottle might do it.

His mind was made up swiftly. He locked his door, poured some of the liquid into the bottom of his soap-dish, looked at it a moment, and drew a deep breath. Nothing could make him look worse than he did, anyhow.

He dipped his brush into the dye and drew it across his hair. It turned brown instantly: a fine rich brown like his suit-case. That was inexpressibly cheering: he looked delightedly at his reflection and took another dip. The beautiful colour spread. It had a glossy sheen; it was altogether unlike the hair he had suffered for nearly ten years. He attacked it triumphantly, pouring in more and more dye, brushing it this way and that until not a hair remained red, so far as he could see—he had to trust that the back looked as beautiful as the front.

Much of the dye went on his blouse, but that mattered little to Percival; nor did it trouble him that the brush was as brown as his hair. It would wash, he supposed: what harm if it didn't? It would but match his new and lovely hair. So he brushed happily until his head began to resent the unaccustomed grooming; then tidied the wet mass, with a careful parting. He stared at his reflection in growing delight. Freckles didn't matter—lots of boys had them, and turned up noses, too. All that counted was that his hair was no longer red!

“Why—I *look nice!*” he said aloud. He smiled widely at himself. It was the first time he had smiled since he came to Billabong.

The noble brown hair was still wet. He thought it would be better to let it dry before he went out to show himself. Percival was curiously eager to exhibit his changed aspect to Billabong. No thought of shyness possessed him. He would go out and let them see he looked decent: and he would tell Norah he was sorry. Queer how much easier it was to say you were sorry when your hair was brown.

There was a letter to his mother half-finished on his table; letters, with Percival, were of laborious growth, to be compiled bit by bit. This one had been particularly hard to write, since there was so much about his doings at Billabong that he could not tell. But now the words came more quickly: he finished a description of old Tyke, and plunged into something more thrilling.

“And I have dide my hare. It is a nice brown. You will like it, becós it looks ever so much better than it did when it was red, wich you never could bare. It is easy to part now, and it lies down. I am very ankshus to show it to you, you wont know me. I could show Dad how to do his on the bit that is geting gray, over his ears. When I——”

“You there, Percival?”

It was Jim’s voice, downstairs. Percival dropped his pen, his hand going swiftly to his hair. It felt dry. He sprang to the mirror for a last look before opening the door.

“Percival!” called Jim.

He heard, but he did not move. His mouth opened in horror as he stared at himself in the glass.

Gone was the rich brown hair. It was not even red—would that it were! It shone no longer: ropy and lustreless, it seemed to shriek at him in derision—a deep green!

“Percival!” The voice was on the stairs now. What could he do? There was nowhere to hide; if there were, he could not hide a green head for ever. Wild thoughts of throwing himself over the edge of the balcony darted into his mind. It would be easier to do that than to open the door and face Jim.

Yet he must face him. Jim was at the door already, his voice impatient as he rattled the handle, finding it locked. “Come here—I want you!” came the sharp command.

“All right.” The boy’s voice was lifeless. He dragged himself across the room and turned the key. The door opened.

“I want——” began Jim. He stopped short, gaping.

For a moment he had a wild desire to laugh. Then he looked at the boy’s twitching lips, and the desire left him swiftly.

“You poor little kid!” he said slowly.

He shut the door, putting a hand on the quivering shoulder. A desperate sob broke from Percival: he tried to fight the tears back, unavoidingly. They had to come. He groped for a handkerchief, and found none. Then a very large one was put into his hand, and Jim was patting him, not trying to check the heavy sobs.

“There, old man,” he said, presently. “Buck up; there’s nothing in the world to worry about. Just mop up your eyes, and we’ll see what’s to be done. Here, if you wash your face you’ll feel better. Come along.”

He led him across the room, and washed the tear-stained face himself, his big hands as gentle as Percival had seen them over a sick puppy.

“There, that’s better. Is this what you did it with?” He picked up the dye-bottle. “H’m, no wonder. This is wool-dye, and it has to be boiled in. Couldn’t very well boil your head, could you, son? Rotten stuff, dye: you never know when it will let you down.”

“Will it—will it stay like this for always?” choked Percival.

“Of course it won’t,” Jim answered swiftly. “Don’t you worry; we’ll help. Now, I wonder what we’d better do. If there weren’t such a mop of it it would be simpler.”

“They wouldn’t let me have it cut,” Percival said, in a choked whisper. “And I do hate the beastly stuff so. It makes me feel sick every time I see it. You—you don’t know what it’s like to have red hair.”

Jim looked at the miserable face.

“Well, I don’t, of course,” he said. “But I’ve known dozens of chaps with red hair; and it’s a queer thing, Percival, but most of them were specially good chaps.”

“Couldn’t be,” he thought the whisper said.

“Don’t you be in any hurry to say, couldn’t be. There’s something rather fine about red hair, and if a fellow has it, it’s up to him to find out what it is.”

“It’s—it’s *beastly*.” The voice was still a broken whisper, but there was fury in it. “People look at it and call you ‘Ginger,’ an’ ‘Carrots’ an’ things. An’ it won’t look decent. Mother said once it was just a ‘flickion.’”

Jim’s eyes hardened, but he spoke lightly.

“She won’t say that when you’ve learned to boss it. Someone’s always got to be boss, you know, and you’re not going to let it be your hair. Anyhow, I know the only thing to do just now; we’ll go and find Norah.”

“Oh—I couldn’t. I chucked clods at her wallaby. An’ she’ll laugh.”

“Norah? Not she. And if you think Norah is going to worry about anything when a fellow’s in a hole—well, you don’t know Norah. I don’t really think you know any of us yet, and perhaps we don’t know you. Here, where’s your hat?”

He looked round, saw a soft felt hat and covered the green mass carefully.

“No one will see it. Now come along.”

He took the boy’s hand and they went downstairs together—to Percival’s intense relief, meeting nobody. Jim talked cheerfully as they went along, and somehow the small hand stayed within his.

“I was hunting for you to show you a tremendous flight of black swans: they settled on the lagoon. But they will probably be there when we’ve got most of the hair off.”

“Off? But there’s no barber here.”

“Isn’t there? Norah’s as good as any barber: she learned in the War, when she had a lot of people to look after and most barbers were away fighting. That was in England: you’d better get her to tell you all about it some day. Norah’s a pretty useful person, you know. Not much she can’t do.”

“I—I don’t want Mr. Meadows to see me. He’ll laugh.”

“Wally is a great chap to laugh,” agreed Jim. “He makes a joke of most things. But not another fellow’s bad luck. He’ll only want to help. Anyhow, he won’t be there; he’s gone after some bullocks with Dad. Just keep up your pecker, old man, and I promise you faithfully, you’ll be the first person to laugh.”

They came into the garden of Little Billabong, where Norah was on her knees, planting seedlings. She looked up, glad to see them together.

“Good boys, to come over.” She glanced keenly at Percival. “Anything wrong, Jim?”

“This chap has had a bit of hard luck,” said Jim. “Got your scissors handy, Nor? He wants a hair-cut.”

His look spoke more clearly than his words. Norah got up.

“Yes, of course. Come into the bathroom: I’m too grubby to touch anyone.”

“You’ll have to excuse him if he doesn’t take off his hat in the house,” said Jim, as they entered. “This is a private matter, Nor.” He tossed his own hat on a chair.

Percival hesitated. Then, to his own astonishment, his hand went up and his hat followed Jim’s. He set his teeth, looking up at Norah, fighting to keep back tears.

Norah might have been colour-blind for all the emotion she showed.

“It is a bit long, isn’t it?” she said, cheerfully. “You’ll find it ever so much easier to keep tidy when I’ve done my worst to it, Percival.”

He found himself quickly in a chair, a sheet pinned round his neck. The scissors went snip-snip. Great locks of green hair fell about him, and Jim brushed them from his sight as they fell, chatting carelessly with Norah about the bullocks Wally had gone to seek with Mr. Linton.

“Rather a nuisance, their getting out.”

“Oh, it only means a ride—and Dad and Wally never dislike that.” She clipped carefully round an ear. “Billy is very ashamed of himself: he left the slip-rails down for a moment, and the bullocks were quicker than he was.”

“Not often one can say that of Billy. By the way, he’s scheming to make friends with you, Percival.”

“Me?” said Percival, flushing. He had taken very special pains to keep out of black Billy’s way since their first unlucky encounter.

“Yes, you. He’s awfully sorry he ran into you in the dark that night. Says he ought to have known better than to let you see him suddenly. Of course we’re all so used to the fact that Billy is black that we never think of it.”

“Isn’t he wild with me?”

“Billy?—not he. He understands. And he’s exercising an old pony to be ready for you when you feel like riding.” Jim laughed. “He looks very funny on him. I found him riding him after the cows the other day: he said, ‘Mine get this pfeller ready for little Master.’ That’s a long speech for Billy.”

He did not give Percival time to reply, but went on talking to Norah. Percival found he had something beyond his hair to think of. He wanted with all his soul to ride, but his mingled shyness and sulks had made him refuse every offer. And Billy, whom he had hated, was getting a pony ready for him. The hot ache was behind his eyes again: a tear stole out. He put up his hand under the sheet to wipe it off, hoping that Jim would not see.

Jim was very careful not to see. He talked away pleasantly, of the black swans on the lagoon, of the Rainhams’ new sheep, of a ’possum his dogs had tree’d the night before. And presently the scissors stopped, and Norah slipped the sheet from his neck.

“I’ve given you a very close crop, Percival. That will make it easier to get it right. What did you put on it, old chap?”

“Wool dye,” Jim answered for him.

“Oh, yes,” said Norah, as though wool-dye were a very common application for hair. “Well, we’ll try cold water first; hot may only set it.”

Followed a strenuous twenty minutes, spent by Percival with his head in a basin, while Norah tried water of varying temperatures. The result was not altogether a success. The dye yielded so far as the scalp was concerned, to Norah’s secret relief—she had been uneasy as to its irritating the skin. The hair faded slightly. But it remained obstinately green.

“I’m afraid that’s the best I can do,” she announced regretfully, as she finished rubbing the green head with a soft towel. “I’m sorry, old chap. But I’ve left so little of it that it really doesn’t matter much.”

Percival looked at his head in the bathroom mirror, biting his lips. He had hoped great things from Norah’s deft hands: and he was still green. He turned away to the window, trying hard not to cry.

“Everybody’ll stare at me——”

Norah put an arm across his shoulders.

“Percival, we’re all friends on Billabong. We don’t stare at people here—we’re only sorry when things go wrong. You will find that no one will even look at your hair. Even the men would not—and your hat will hide it outside the house. It will fade every day, and I’ll keep it clipped as it grows.”

“An’ then it’ll be red!” he said dismally.

“He hates his hair, the old duffer!” said Jim. “Did you ever hear such bosh, Nor?”

“If you had it you’d know,” the boy said fiercely. “Beastly, blazing stuff! Nobody ever lets me forget I’ve got it.”

“If that is so,” said Norah, with decision, “suppose you start being proud of it?”

“Proud!”

“Yes, proud. I’ll help you. Remember, to begin with, that red-haired people generally have brains and pluck. Believe that you have both. If you have brains and pluck you can make the best of anything; and we’ll make the best of your hair. I’ll keep it cut short—you had a mane like a lion—and I’ll teach you to make it look thoroughly well-groomed. If a head is well-groomed it doesn’t matter a rap what colour it is.”

The boy looked at her, not quite so heavily.

“Aw, the boys’ll call me ‘Carrots’ and ‘Ginger’ just the same!”

“Percival,” said Jim, solemnly, “you have two fists. I should say you have pretty decent muscles. I’ll teach you to box, if you like. Then you can deal with any boy who makes stupid and rude remarks. Is it a bargain?”

He was astonished at the change in Percival’s face.

“You—you’d really teach me to box?”

“Rather. Want to learn?”

“I’ve always wanted to since I was little. Dad said I could some day, but Mother said I’d get my nose broken. I wouldn’t care if I got it broken fifty times if I could lick one boy.”

“Does he need licking?”

“He’s a beast! He’s bigger’n me, an’ he yells out things about my hair an’ my *awful* name. Yells out ‘Per-ci-val’ in the street, an’ in school. It’s bad enough to have red hair ’thout havin’ a name like that!”

“Don’t you like it?”

“*Like* it!” said Percival, bitterly. “Would you like it? It’s a hijjus name. Mother likes it, but Dad doesn’t. He always calls me Bill.”

“Did I hear you say Bill?” queried Jim, his eye kindling.

“‘M. Bill’s a man’s name—not like Percival.”

“Shake hands,” said Jim, extending a large paw. “I agree with you—we all

agree with you, don't we, Norah? No boy can be a real boy if he has to answer to 'Percival' all the time. And Billabong can't live up to it. Henceforth you are Bill."

"You—you'll really call me Bill?"

"If you'll let us," said Norah, laughing.

"*Let* you! Why, I—I—if I don't have to be called Percival I don't care if my hair's green or blue!"

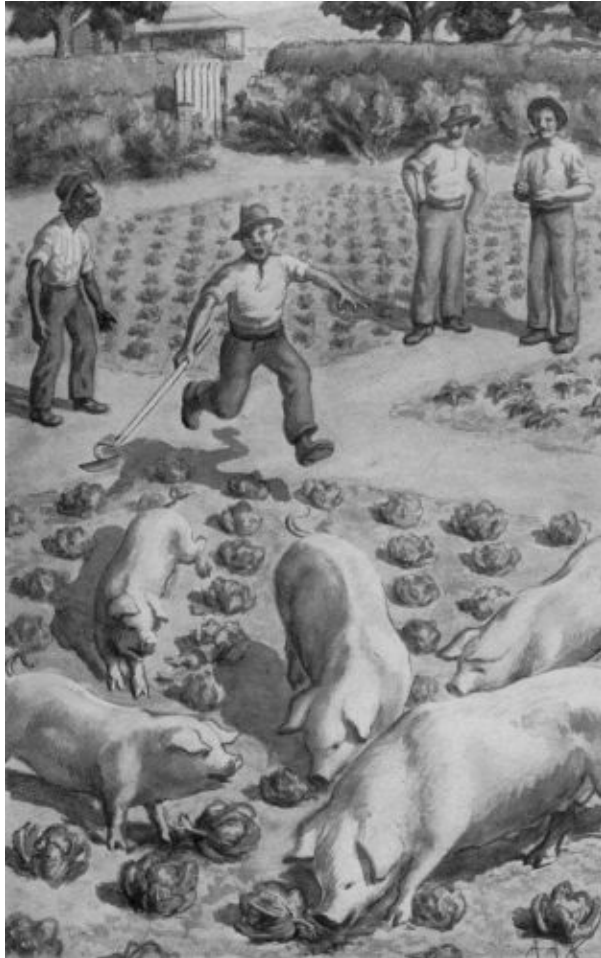
"Then it's Bill you are," said Jim, solemnly. "We'll bury Percival."

The boy struggled with himself for a moment. Then he looked squarely at Jim.

"I've been a beast. I—I thought you were all going to be horrid to me, an' that's why I was a beast. I'm sorry." His eyes turned to Norah. "I wish I hadn't chucked clods at your wallaby." His mouth twitched.

Norah patted the green head.

"All that is finished with," she said. "Jim, would you bring Bill's pyjamas over here this evening and tell Dad he is going to stay with me for a few days? Oh, and tell Billy that Master Bill will want his pony in the morning!"



“ ‘He let the pigs out yesterday, and we had
no end of a merry time getting them back.’ ”
Bill of Billabong [Page 58

CHAPTER VII

THE BEGINNING OF BILL

THE GUEST of Little Billabong awoke late next morning, a little puzzled to find himself in a strange room. He looked round sleepily. Then he remembered.

A great wave of happiness surged over him.

“I’m not Percival any more. I’m Bill!” he said aloud. “Bill!” He lingered over the name—it felt so different, so new, to be just Bill. Percival was gone—dead—buried. Horrid little beast he had been, lonely and sullen: always looking out for trouble—and finding it. But Bill couldn’t be lonely, because he had friends.

The carolling of magpies was borne to him through the open window. It seemed to him that he heard them for the first time: certainly he had not known how jolly they sounded. The fresh morning air blew across his bed. He heard Wally’s voice, somewhere in the garden, a care-free, happy voice that chimed with his new feeling. Wally had looked into his room the evening before, just as he was ready for bed. He had said, “Hullo, old lad—so you’re going to stay with us. That’s ripping!” That was all: he hadn’t seemed to be aware of the green hair.

Bill put up a hand to his head. It felt queerly light, so closely shorn was it. He wondered had it faded at all, deciding that it was too much to hope: wondered if everybody knew about it; hoped a maid would not be in the room at breakfast. He had resolved, as he went to sleep that he would face people bravely, as Jim and Norah expected him to do. Still——. The unaccustomed brightness faded from his face.

Then the door opened and Norah came in, carrying a tray.

“Morning, Bill. We had breakfast early, and you were sleeping like a thousand tops, so I thought I wouldn’t wake you.”

She put the tray on the table by his bed. There was a blue teapot and blue china; a little rack of crisp toast; pats of butter nestling under sprigs of parsley, cool and fresh. A soothing smell of bacon drifted from a covered dish.

“I say!” said Bill. “Oh, you shouldn’t have.”

“Rubbish!” said Norah, cheerfully. “Feel all right this morning?”

“M.” He sat up. “Is it—is it any better?”

Norah inspected his hair closely.

“I think it has faded a little.” She was by no means sure, but she knew the value of hope. “But what does it matter?—it will soon be gone. Just have your

breakfast, and you'll find me in the garden when you're dressed. All the men-folk are going into Cunjee in a few minutes, so you and I must look after each other. And I have a plan, but I won't tell you until you come out."

Bill hesitated.

"Don't you want to go into Cunjee too?" he asked.

"I do not. I have a much better plan than that."

"You—you aren't staying just for me?"

"For you—and myself. We're going to have a jolly day, Bill. Now, do you really *like* cold bacon? for I'm sure yours will be only slabs of grease if you don't eat it quickly." She laughed at him, going out. The door was carefully shut.

It was a very good breakfast, and it was rather exciting to have a teapot all to himself. The feeling of being new deepened as he ate. He heard the car drive up, crunching the gravel: there was a little interval, everyone talking happily, and then the slam of the door and the car went off. It was something of a relief that he would not have to face all the family, though he was conscious of a desire to see Jim. Then he fell to wondering about Norah's plan, and hurried with his dressing. The green hair was not a pretty sight, even after he had given it a long and hopeful scrubbing in his bath. He brushed it furiously, crammed his hat over his ears, and went to find Norah.

She was dressed in riding kit, and there were two horses tied up under a tree by the garden fence. Norah was spraying rose-bushes.

"There you are, old chap. Just look at these aphids: they grow in millions every night. I'll get you to help me with them some time."

"Help you now," said Bill, gruffly.

"No, I think I've discouraged them enough for the present. I'll tell you what I want to do, Bill. It's too lovely a day to waste: I've got lunch packed, and we'll ride out to the Far Plain and have a picnic by the river, all to ourselves. There will be nobody to see you, once you get away from the house, so you can take off your hat and let the sun treat your hair. I'm sure it will fade it quickly."

"O-oh!" said Bill. Then his face fell. "But I can't ride."

"Anyone can ride old Darby. He's as quiet as a lamb; if you fell off him, he would just stop and go to sleep until you climbed on again. I think he sleeps while he's walking if he gets a chance; only, of course, you won't allow that. You won't say when you come home to-night that you can't ride."

Bill looked at her doubtfully.

"Truly?"

"Yes—truly. Did you ever ride on a merry-go-round, Bill?"

"Yes, lots. At St. Kilda."

"Well riding Darby is as easy as that! All you have to do is to sit on him.

I'll take a leading-rein for you if you like, until you get used to him. Only, Jim thought that probably you would rather I didn't. Just as you feel, though."

Bill considered this. A leading-rein sounded rather comforting—if you had never been on a horse. Still—Jim had evidently believed he would scorn it. And Jim, since last night, had become a person he wanted to please. Jim had not let him down when he was in a hole.

He raised his eyes suddenly.

"I don't want to be led."

"Then you shan't be." Norah looked pleased, too. "Come along: we may as well start."

He followed her, his heart beginning to thump a little. These people knew such a lot about horses. He didn't believe they had ever had to learn to ride. How could they know how queer he felt?

Yet Norah seemed to know. She slipped the pony's bridle from the fence.

"The first thing you have to think is that your horse is a real friend, and that he likes you as much as you like him. He's not a machine: he's flesh and blood, and he has a heart, and he can think. So you've got to make friends." She pulled up a milk-thistle. "Darby loves those. Just give it to him, and pat him while he eats it. That's one way of getting introduced."

It was a new idea to Bill. He took the thistle and held it out gingerly. Darby crunched it, looking at him with wise old eyes. He certainly looked peaceful. Bill patted the smooth neck. He hoped the thistle would take a long tune to finish. But Norah did not wait for that.

"Now you stand here—so—fashion—and I'll give you a leg-up. He won't move until you let him know you want him to. Spring when I say 'Three.' One—two——"

He found himself in the saddle, his heart thumping more than ever. He clutched the pommel.

"I'll lead him for a minute, just to let you get used to the feel of him, Bill. Sit straight and square. All comfy?"

He nodded, his lips pressed tightly together. Norah strolled across the grass, one hand on the pony's neck. Darby moved lazily. They made the round of the little paddock, while Norah told him a story about Jim's early days. Bill found himself smiling at it. He felt less shaky.

"Seems easy—riding," he said.

"Easiest thing that ever was. Would you like to have the bridle? Hold your reins so that you can just feel his mouth."

She kept near him for a dozen yards. Bill decided that this was better than being led.

"Now take him to the fence by yourself and come back to me." Norah stopped, smiling at him. "Give him a touch with your heel, or he'll go to

sleep.”

Bill obeyed, with a sudden feeling of loneliness. But Darby was not a pony to make any small boy afraid. He wondered, as they drew near the fence, if he could make him turn—and accomplished it with a violence that would have astonished any steed less sleepy. Bill had a sensation of mastery. After all, the horses of the roundabout had gone much faster. He gave another touch with his heel, harder than he knew. Darby broke into a jog.

“I say!” gasped Bill. “Will he bolt?”

“Not he!” said Norah, laughing. “You’re getting on well. Bring him along.”

He jogged back to her, a little relieved when the pony stopped.

“Did I do it all right?” he queried anxiously.

“Splendid. Now you go round the paddock by yourself. Make him trot this time: canter if you like. You won’t fall off. There’s always the pommel to hold on by.”

He kicked Darby again into movement. The old pony trotted off obediently, while his rider bumped all over the saddle, and found he liked it. He decided that he certainly would not canter. But at the far side of the paddock Darby, disliking the bumping, broke into a slow canter of his own accord, and Bill, after an instant of horror, realised that it was much easier than trotting. He relinquished his grip on the pommel, sitting up straight. A gleam came into his eyes.

“I say—I cantered!” he exclaimed, as they came back to Norah.

“And stuck on very well,” laughed Norah. “You’ll be a horseman, Bill. Now I think we’ll start.” She mounted her own horse, with due care for a parcel tied to the saddle. They went through the gate and into the open paddocks.

Bill’s fears had left him from the moment that he had cantered and had not fallen off. Riding was easy; there was nothing in it, once you set your teeth and did it. He jogged along blissfully, leaving everything to Darby; liking the feel of the saddle, the strong easy movement under him, the sense of having mastered something new and strange. Norah had taken possession of his hat, but it did not trouble him that he had green hair—who would care, riding for the first time?

He began to realise the joy of the open country. Until now he had seen it from the balcony, or caught glimpses of it in his solitary prowlings in the homestead paddock, and it had looked wide and desolate; he had hated it as he hated all things. Now it had suddenly grown near and friendly. They rode through the spring grass, a carpet that yielded under the horses’ hoofs: wonderful for cantering, for it felt as though it were all on springs. Here and there were peaceful cattle; Norah talked of them, dispelling his idea that all

cattle were bulls and very fierce. He learned with astonishment that she loved them. She spoke of work among them as if it were a game something you really liked to do.

“Is that the work I’ll have to do?” he asked suddenly.

“Have to?” She looked puzzled, and Bill turned his face away, feeling awkward. “There’s no ‘have to,’ Bill. But I hope you will be coming out with us soon. I’d hate you to miss all the fun it is. Wait until you can gallop after an obstinate bullock when he has made up his mind that he wants to stay in a certain place and you and Darby know better! You’ll have to learn to use a little stock-whip—at least, you won’t have to, but you’ll want to.”

“Could I?” He looked eager.

“Why, of course you could. And you will learn to manage the dogs, and see how they work—and make them work for you. I know you will like that; you’re friends with the dogs already. Old Tyke doesn’t take to everyone as he has to you.”

“True?”

“Yes, quite true. He has a queer temper, especially with strangers.”

“Like old Tyke,” said Bill, feeling pleased. “Only I didn’t know if I was let make friends with him.”

“Bill!” The tone was sheer amazement.

“Well, Mrs. Vernon wouldn’t let me go near her old Peke. She said he didn’t like boys.”

“Oh!” said Norah; and thought awhile. “Well, we like you to be friends with all the animals. And with us. Come on—we’ll have a canter. I want to look at the fence over there: Billy was sent out to mend it this morning where a limb fell on a panel.”

They found black Billy straining wire diligently: he grinned widely as they arrived, remarking “Plenty I’il mas’r ride that pfeller Darby now!” At Norah’s request he showed Bill how he had tightened the loosened posts and spliced snapped wires, straining them into position with a little contrivance which the boy found interesting. It was not very easy to understand Billy’s explanations, since his principal word was “Plenty”; but his gestures were illuminating, and the black hands made things clearer than the halting tongue.

“He’s nice, isn’t he?” Bill said as they rode away. “I never thought he was.”

“Wait until you know him,” Norah answered. “Billy is the sort of person who would quite cheerfully give anyone his head if it would do him any good—that is, if he liked him. And he wants to like you, Bill. All blacks like people who aren’t very big.”

“Does he?” Bill considered this for a time. “I think he’s decent, ’cause I did yell at him.”

“That was only a mistake. No one remembers people’s mistakes.”

“*Don’t* they!” said Bill, bitterly. “People always remember mine, an’ keep talking and talking about them. I—I’m always making them.”

“Oh, Bill!” said Norah, earnestly, “that is just an ass of an idea! Get it right out of your head. If you think you’re going to make mistakes, you’ll make them. Not that we don’t—every one of us—now and then. But one just learns by one’s mistakes. Now we’ll forget all about it. And there’s the river!”

They were among the trees, and as she spoke they came in sight of a long line of wattles, gleaming in the full flush of golden bloom. In their shade the little river ran swiftly, swollen by melted snow from the hills; the yellow balls of blossom dropped from above and were borne away, dancing in the current. The trees were full of birds: as they sat still on their horses they could hear a ceaseless chirping and rustling, and honey-eaters darted to and fro, seeking building material for their nests. Norah drew a long breath of satisfaction.

“You’ll have to love my river as much as I do, Bill,” she said. “Now we’ll find our pet camping-place.”

She rode along the bank, Bill at her horse’s heels. Soon they came to a place where the river split in two round a tiny island on which the wattles grew so thickly that it was nothing but a hill of gold. The current ran on its further side; only a very narrow channel separated it from the bank on which they rode. Here the water was slow and shallow: looking down Bill could see a tangle of submerged limbs and logs that almost dammed it.

“I say, this is a jolly place!” he said.

“Isn’t it? We often picnic here.”

The bank fell away beyond the channel in a saucer-like depression, covered with soft short grass, where little green orchids raised helmet-like heads in every hollow. The river rippled almost to its level. Beyond, it widened into a great pool. Blackfish were leaping there, falling back with splashes that sent a succession of ripples widening to the banks.

Darby turned of his own accord and walked slowly to a tree a little distance away, where a low bough jutted out. He pulled up, standing with drooping head. Norah laughed, following.

“Darby knows this place as well as we do. This is where we always tie up the horses. Do you think you can get your saddle off, Bill?”

She slipped to the ground, and so did Bill, only he came to the ground on the wrong side: which did not trouble him.

“Bill,” said Norah, “that’s what is called the ‘off’ side. You’ll have to remember it, because you don’t get off that side, but this, which is the ‘near’. I want you to get on again and do it the right way.”

“Now?” He looked at her over Darby’s back, feeling hot. “It’ll do when we’re starting again, won’t it?”

“It would with slack people, but not with you and me. I want you to remember, so that you won’t do anything wrong when Jim and the others see you. With me, of course, it doesn’t matter, and it really would not with them—only, don’t you think it would be rather jolly to show the others you can do things like a stockman?”

She looked gravely at him. Bill hesitated a moment. Then the sulky face cleared.

“Right-oh!” He began to climb on Darby laboriously.

“Not that side, old man. This is the side for ascending and descending. Trot round, and we’ll have a bit of practice.”

He came obediently, finding it easy to obey when he was treated as a man and a brother.

“I’m not going to give you a leg-up. There’s a right and wrong way of doing everything, and you are going to mount and dismount really well.”

“Does it matter much?”

“It matters tremendously. With old Darby, you could climb over his tail and he would never move. But when you’re promoted to a better pony you would find it very different. Besides, it *is* the right way, and you have got to be keen because of that. Now—watch me.”

She showed him how to stand, how to hold the reins and swing himself into the saddle. The boy was quick and active; he picked up the trick in a few moments and practised steadily. Norah watched him, approving of the way he set his jaw, obstinately refusing to fail. She reflected that doggedness was a good thing, once it was guided into the right channel.

“Tree-climbing has stood to you,” she said, when he was in the saddle for the tenth time. “Did you ever do gymnastics?”

“No. Never had a chance. I’d like to.”

“I’ll get the boys to fix up a home-made gym. for you. They can show you all sorts of tricks. Jim is too big now, but Wally is an expert.”

“Would he teach me? He wouldn’t be bothered with me.”

“He would not think it a bother: he’d be interested. And you would do well; I’ve watched you in a tree.”

“Have you? I didn’t know.”

“There’s quite a good view from our verandah of the tree you like best,” said Norah, smiling. “I used to climb it myself, so I have liked watching you. Wally says he wonders you don’t turn into a tree-kangaroo!”

Bill suddenly broke into a shout of laughter. Norah joined him, but her eyes held pity. She had not heard him laugh before.

“Do that often, old chap—it suits you,” she said. “There’s a lot of laughter knocking about Billabong, and you can’t be out of it. Now, that’s enough. I’m quite satisfied with my pupil. Jump off and I’ll show you how to off-saddle.”

He accomplished this, put the saddle under a tree and tied up the pony. Then he looked up at her, puzzled. Norah had not moved.

“Aren’t you going to unsaddle yours?”

“Not when I have a man to do it for me.”

“Oh! Can I?”

“Certainly: Captain is quite steady.”

This was harder, for he had to stand on tip-toe, and the buckles were stiff. But he was keen by this time, and presently the saddles were stowed together, and Captain tied up.

“Thank you, Bill,” said Norah, gravely.

“Is—is it cheeky to ask you something?” Bill questioned.

“I don’t think it can be. Ask away.”

“Well,” said Bill, rather confused—“I’ve seen you unsaddling Captain lots of times. When I was up trees.”

“So I do,” said Norah. “And Wally and Jim let me do it, because they know I like to let him go myself. But they always offer: and they will like to see you offer. Because I happened to be born a girl. Do you see how it is?”

Bill thought a moment.

“‘M. I see,” he said, nodding. “They—they look after you, don’t they?”

“Awfully well—always.”

“Well, I will, too.” He met her eyes, and they smiled at each other.

“We’re all going to be mates,” said Norah, comfortably. “Now we’ll have lunch.”

They lunched in the grassy hollow, drinking river-water from a little folding cup; and Norah showed where it was safe to take drinking-water, from a place where the current ran free and unchecked by rubbish. Afterwards they explored the bank and watched birds: Bill found how much may be seen by the watcher who can keep perfectly still, and learned more about birds and nests than he had ever dreamed. He liked it; liked Norah’s way of telling him facts, interspersed with little stories of the wild things of the bush. His power of observation was quick, and developed rapidly. It was he who caught sight of a native bear perched in the crook of a limb, peering at them in puzzled fashion: he clutched Norah’s arm silently, pointing.

“Is he savage?” he whispered.

“No; he’s very dear, and very stupid in the day time. He can’t see us well, because he has night eyes. His voice is the only alarming thing about him—when he walks about in the night he makes a noise like a whole drove of pigs. You wouldn’t think anything smaller than an elephant could make such a row. I had one for a pet once, but they’re not very intelligent pets. His true name is Koala.”

“Well, I like him,” said Bill. It was hard to get him away from the little

bear, until he realised that he would sit there all day, blinking peacefully.

They came back to their camping-place and built a dam across the narrow channel. That was tremendous fun: over it Bill lost the last remnant of his shyness. He could not be shy with Norah, who behaved as if she, too, were only nine, and got just as wet and muddy as he did, and was even more enthusiastic.

It was hard work, too, although it was such fun. They collected logs and sticks and made it a really workmanlike dam, with a good foundation; then they plastered it with clay until the water was thoroughly discouraged and went to join the open stream beyond the island. Bill slipped in twice and was soaked above the knees—he looked half-nervously at Norah when it happened the first time, but she merely laughed at him. He reflected that she didn't seem to know that there was such a word as "Don't."

They were quite tired when the dam was finished. They sat in the hollow and, deciding that it was tea-time, finished the sandwiches that had been left from lunch. Bill stretched himself luxuriously.

"I think this is ripping!"

Norah looked at him, her eyes very friendly.

"You will soon think everything ripping," she said. "Bill—why did you hate us all?"

He flushed, and was silent.

"Don't tell me, if you don't want to," she said. "But I'd like to understand."

"Don't hate you now," he muttered.

"But did you?"

He broke a stick into small pieces, slowly.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter a bit," Norah said. "We'll talk about something else."

"No." He threw away the last scrap of the stick. "I—it was just 'cause I was scared, I think. I'd got into such an awful lot of rows at the Vernons'. An' Mr. Vernon was jolly glad when he heard I could come up here. 'Cause he said I'd get taught sense. Said I'd get licked."

"Bill!"

"Yes, he did. He said Mr. Linton wouldn't spare the rod. He was always saying it. Jawed me all the time, 'bout behaving myself. He said I'd have to work . . . an' I thought work was beastly. I knew I wasn't any good for anything, so I reckoned I'd get licked all right. An' then when Mr. Jim met me he said something about breaking me in to work. I thought that meant licking me into it."

He shot an appealing look at her.

"I just didn't understand."

“Poor old chap!” Norah said gently. “Did you really think we seemed people who would lick a small boy—and a guest?”

“N-no. But I wasn’t sure. An’ I was lonesome.” He made a great effort. “It wasn’t really that I was scared of lickings. I’ve had lots. It was—you know—strangers—an’ everything.”

“Large, hard strangers with rods—I know,” said Norah. “It’s being licked that hurts, I should think, not the licking itself. And everything was strange and queer, wasn’t it?”

“‘M,” he nodded. “I knew you couldn’t like me, of course, an’——”

“Not like you? Why?”

“Oh, well, nobody does—’cept Dad, when he’s got time. I’m always in rows. When you’re ugly an’ got red hair nobody likes you. I heard Mother tell Dad once I’d worn out her patience. I d’no how it is some boys get born like me.”

The heavy, hopeless look had crept back into his face. It caught at Norah’s heart.

“Bill,” she said, “did you ever do any work?”

“No. Not real work. I only make messes of things and get into rows.”

“We do want you to work here,” said Norah. “A boy who has no lessons has to work, to keep happy. And we want you to be really happy.”

“I’ll do any work you tell me,” he said, quickly.

“I’m sure you will. But work here isn’t just giving people jobs. It’s life. The work we want from you is sharing our life—doing all the things we do. Riding after cattle, bringing in the sheep, looking after any sick beast, gardening, chasing my wandering turkeys. Things like that, all day and every day, mixed up with training the dogs, and climbing trees, and swimming in the lagoon when the weather is warm, and trips to Cunjee and other places—Creek Cottage, too, because Tommy and Bob want you to be friends. That’s our work—our life. It’s full of odd jobs, and we all help each other, and make a joke out of most of them. Don’t you think you could take a hand?”

“It sounds—*gorgeous!*” he said. “Only——”

“There isn’t any ‘only,’ ” said Norah, swiftly. “Can’t you get it into your silly old head that we want you?”

“But nobody does.”

“Then we’re nobody. We were all looking forward to having you—ever so much. Billabong needs a small boy, to keep us from getting too grown-up. And the only thing that can make us really savage—like you thought us—is if you talk utter nonsense about being ugly. If you like a person you simply don’t believe he’s ugly, and anyhow, you’re not.”

“Oh!” said Bill, unbelievably. “I know——”

“Only people who look cross are ugly,” said Norah. “When you laugh as

much as we mean you to laugh, and your mouth turns up at the corners, which it soon will—then not even Mr. Vernon could call you ugly. As for your hair, as I told you last night, I mean to make you proud of it yet. All the unhappy time belonged to Percival, and we did away with Percival last night, and we've got Bill. And Bill is going to be made into a thoroughly good station-hand and astonish his parents. Is it a bargain?"

She put out her hand to him, laughing. Bill's shot out to meet it. Then his lip quivered. He turned his head away, deeply ashamed of the tears that crept slowly to his cheeks.

"'Didn't mean to blub!" he choked.

"Sometimes it does one good to blub, when one isn't unhappy," said Norah gently. "And there isn't anyone here."

She patted his shoulder gently, very afraid of hurting his pride; it was a mother-touch that Bill found curiously comforting.

He pulled himself together and faced her, presently.

"I'll be good—true, I will. I'll try not to be a goat."

"You won't be a goat at all. Just remember not to be discouraged if things go wrong. If you laugh enough they always come right."

She looked at her watch.

"Good gracious! I didn't dream that it was so late. We must go home, Bill."

They saddled the horses and rode home quietly, with light hearts. The past was finished—put away. Norah devoted herself to riding instructions, and Bill concentrated doggedly on acquiring the decent hands and seat which she seemed to think more necessary than mere beauty. He succeeded, as anyone will who concentrates on any point; Norah looked at him approvingly as they cantered up to Little Billabong.

Tommy Rainham came out to meet them.

"They kidnapped me and brought me home," she explained. "Bob will drive over for me this evening. Bill, I thought you could not ride—and I behold you riding like Murty himself. Me, I took weeks to learn, and all the time I quivered like a jelly. Jim was very scornful of me, though he tried not to show it."

"He'd be scornful of me, I think," said Bill, "I'm an awful duffer."

"He'd better not," said Norah firmly.

"But he cannot," Tommy said. "When Bob and I need an extra hand mustering sheep we shall come for you, Bill. Then we'll clothe you in dungarees and keep you for the shearing. And Jim can demand you in vain."

Bill grinned. He could not find words to reply to all this, but it was gay and friendly. And Tommy's eyes were kind as well as gay.

It was not until he was changing his muddy clothes that he remembered

something about her.

“She never even looked at my hair. By Jove!”

He looked at it in the glass. It was still a verdant green.

“Anyhow, I’m jolly glad I did dye you!” said Bill to his hair.

CHAPTER VIII

BILL OF BILLABONG

T IRED, BILL?"

"No," said Bill, sturdily.

"Well, you've had a long day. Much the longest in the saddle for you, so far," said Jim.

He was riding an immense black horse, suited to his own height: from far above he looked down on the small boy on the pony beside him. They were tailing behind a small mob of bullocks, bringing them across a paddock. The grass was knee-deep: the horses brushed through it, snatching a fragrant mouthful now and then.

"Yes, but it's been ripping, hasn't it?" Bill said, eagerly. "I do like cattle. And I did turn that bullock by myself, didn't I?"

"You certainly did. He might have been galloping still if you hadn't headed him."

"Oh, well, I s'pose it was Topsy that really turned him," Bill said, honestly. "She knows more'n I do about bullocks."

"She's pretty knowing, but you kept her going well. We'll make a stockman of you yet. Do you think you could ride ahead and get the gate open? I wouldn't trust these fellows not to break back if I left them."

"Rather!" said Bill, beaming.

He touched the pony with his heel and she trotted off. Bill was careful not to go too near the cattle: they must not be disturbed in their quiet progress, or, as he knew now, they would probably wheel and bolt back to the open spaces behind them. So he swung round them in a wide semi-circle, reaching the gate well ahead of the mob.

He slipped the pony's bridle over a post, opened the gate on foot and propped it back. Then he climbed on Topsy laboriously, aided by the knowledge that nothing would make her move before he was safely in the saddle: made another wide circuit and came in behind the cattle, at a little distance from Jim, who sang out "Good man!" approvingly. That was all Bill had hoped for. Crowns and laurels were as nothing to him beside Jim's "Good man!"

The bullocks pretended that the open gateway had nothing whatever to do with them. They declined even to see it, walking calmly past it as if it were part of the fence. This necessitated much shouting by Bill and a little stock-whip cracking by Jim; at which the bullocks appeared mildly surprised that

humans should make such a fuss, turned, and strolled lazily through the gateway, scattering at once in the further paddock; Jim went ahead to keep them together, leaving the gate to Bill.

Ahead lay the lagoon, its wide stretch of water glimmering in the sunset. The cattle knew it of old; they had come a long way, and were thirsty. The leaders broke into a lumbering jog, and presently they were all trotting steadily.

“We’ll let them go,” said Jim as Bill came up. “They’re due for a drink, and they can take their time.”

Most of the bullocks were in the water when the riders arrived at the lagoon. The horses followed, equally eager for a drink. Monarch, Jim’s big black, waded in steadily, Topsy at his side. It did not appear that Monarch realised that what was shallow for him was deep for Topsy, though it was very evident to Bill. The water splashed his boots: he lifted them in his stirrups, and presently kicked them free, holding them as high as he could in front of the saddle. He shot a glance at Jim, but Jim did not seem to be looking. Bill wondered how much further he would go.

Then Monarch put down his great head and drank, and Topsy followed suit. Their long sucking draughts sounded very satisfying. Bill slid a hand to the back of his saddle. He had never been able to conquer a little fear, out on a pony in the water; there seemed so little in front of him when Topsy put her head down far and spread her forelegs as the mud gave under her hoofs. He had visions of sliding over her ears; he would not be drowned, he knew, but he dreaded making a fool of himself.

Then he decided that it would not do to be seen holding on, and he withdrew his hand, clinging as tightly as he could with his legs—not very easy with short legs that stuck out straight in front. He felt himself slipping, and brought one leg up over the withers. That gave him more purchase, but it nearly proved his downfall when the little mare suddenly decided that she had had enough and returned with a lurch to an upright position. Bill clutched the pommel just in time. He shot another glance at Jim.

Jim had been fully aware of all these details, but to be conveniently blind was part of his scheme of training. He talked of the ways of bullocks, and how to deal with some of these ways, as they rounded up the mob, heading them towards the small paddock where they were to spend the night. He was careful to give Bill little jobs—the pursuit of a lazy straggler which returned to the water and had to be driven out of the shallows with much splashing and shouting; the guarding of the road leading to the stables, since the cattle decided that it was their road and had to be convinced that they were wrong. Presently he nodded towards the gate ahead.

“Get forrard and open it, Bill. Then you ride through and stand a bit to one

side. I want you to count them as they go through.”

“O-oh!” said Bill. This was heavy responsibility. It was promotion. “Think I can, Jim?”

“You’ve got to learn. I’ll bring them along easily. The skies won’t fall if you get them wrong.”

Bill did as he was told, taking up a position inside the paddock, his face stern with the sense that much depended upon him. The bullocks came stringing through the gateway; he held his right hand up sideways as he had seen the men do, pointing at each beast as it came, counting steadily. Curious, how the hand helped you, he thought: it seemed to influence the bullocks, to separate one from another. Then they came more quickly, and his brow grew furrowed in the effort to keep pace with them. The last dozen went through almost in a bunch. That was tense work: you had to keep your eyes in several places at once, and the tossing horns and heads mixed themselves up horribly. His counting grew a little rattled, but he held on as best he could. As the last Shorthorn trotted by he looked up nervously at Jim.

“Fifty-three?”

“Not quite right,” said Jim, and smiled at the suddenly-downcast face. “Never mind: counting needs a bit of knack and practice. We must get them right, of course. Come along: we’ll count them along the fence. Get ahead and round them up while I shut the gate.”

That meant cantering, which was always joy. Topsy scurried across the paddock, her rider a little dashed in spirits at having failed in his count, but relieved that Jim took it as a natural thing. He headed the straying cattle. Jim came up and helped to drive them quietly back to the fence. Then he was sent ahead.

“Leave room for them—don’t get too close to the fence. They’ll string along quietly.”

This was easier; the bullocks had no longer the feeling of being driven, only of straying out to feed. They were placid and unhurried, keeping along the fence until they were beyond the small rider, so quiet at his place a little way out in the deep grass. Topsy was grazing peacefully; they knew she was not thinking of hustling them. That made for peace of mind and gentle progress: not for stopping, for they knew that as long as the horses were there they were meant to move. Bill’s hand was up again, counting: Jim watched him, a twinkle in his eye, as he joined him.

“Fifty-five,” said Bill, firmly.

“Right, mate. Good work. Now we’ll get home.”

Bill liked the home comings. It was jolly to ride into the stable-yard at the end of a long day; to slip the saddle and bridle off Topsy, knowing she would stand still until he had taken them into the harness-room, returning with the

apples she and Monarch loved. Jolly to hold the apple out on your palm, while Topsy took it gently; the days seemed far back when he had been quite sure she would bite him in the process. Jolly to rub her down and talk to her as she crunched it; to release her with a final pat and see her trot slowly away down the paddock with Monarch while he and Jim walked over to the house: and if you felt a bit stiff, that was only the natural result of a long day. A man's day.

No matter how late they were there was always tea. Brownie seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of when they were approaching the house. It was waiting on the verandah as they came out after washing their hands: the old woman was standing by the table.

"You're late, Mr. Jim," she said. "I think you work that new man of yours too hard." She smiled at Bill, and he returned the smile. They were great friends.

"Not much!" Jim pitched his hat on a lounge. "Can't tire him out, Brownie; he's a good man on a job. But we want a drink, don't we, Bill?"

"M," said Bill, casting a ravenous look at the table; "*And* tucker."

"Well, there's plenty for you, only don't spoil your dinners." She filled cups briskly. "You sit down, Master Bill; I'll bring them."

Bill obeyed, stretching out his short legs in imitation of Jim's long ones. He sighed happily, sipping his tea.

"This is jolly good, Jim!"

"It is," Jim agreed. "Where's everyone, Brownie?"

"All over at Little Billabong. Miss Tommy and Mr. Bob, too: they came to lunch."

"Oh," said Jim. "Shall we go over there, Bill?"

Bill hesitated. He liked Little Billabong almost as much as Big Billabong, and there was always fun in meeting Tommy and Bob Rainham. Still, the verandah was peaceful, and when he was alone with Jim there was a great sense of mateship. Brownie saved him from the need of answering.

"You needn't, Mr. Jim. They left the horses here, and they'll all be over presently. I think Miss Tommy said they could stay to dinner."

"Then we'll stay here, Bill, and let them find us."

That suited Bill very well. He ate his tea happily, in silence. Never a person of many words was Bill, and he had grown quick of understanding the times when Jim liked to be quiet. Once, he used to think that when big people were silent it meant that they were cross. He knew better now.

He tossed fragments of biscuit to Tyke, the collie, thinking how different his world had grown. They were all friends. He had thought they meant to be hard and stern, to treat him as the nuisance he had always known himself, except, perhaps, with his father—and even his father was angry with him more often than not. Now he knew that these people of Billabong wanted only to

treat him as a man and a brother: to make him one of themselves, sharing their work and their fun.

Nobody was cross. If he did stupid things someone would say, "Oh, have sense, Bill!"—but there was never anger behind the words, so he could not resent them. They were definite enough, and he knew he had learned a good deal of sense. It was easy, when everyone was willing to teach; just as it was easy to be good when you had plenty to do.

He had learned what a jolly thing work was—the mingled work and play of a big station, that left few idle hours. Everyone shared it, everyone was happy and busy. Everyone liked everybody else. The word love did not enter into Bill's reflections. He did not realise that it was really love that had touched him, breaking away the hard shell of sulky defiance which had grown iron about his heart. He would have been surprised to know that he had only now begun to be really alive.

Sometimes, lying in bed at night before sleep touched his eyelids, he would remember the last of the terrible time—the day he had dyed his hair. That awful happening had seemed the final horror, giving him helpless into the hands of his enemies, for their anger and mocking. And out of it had come peace. They had been like the man in the Bible who picked up the fellow who had been all shot up by robbers, Bill thought. They had tended his wounds, never angry, never once laughing at him. Just friends.

And they had called him Bill. He still hugged himself to think that he was Bill. Just as no person on Billabong had ever seemed to notice his green hair while it lasted, so had no one ever again said "Percival." Percival, that unpleasant little boy, seemed to have died that night, and Bill, whom nobody thought unpleasant, had risen from his ashes. It was *great* to be Bill.

He liked them all now, from Mr. Linton to black Billy. But to Norah and Jim, who had rescued him, he gave a very passion of dog-like gratitude and affection. Somewhat to their own surprise, the feeling was shared by Jim and Norah. The wave of honest pity that had swept over them at the sight of his misery had grown into liking as they saw him face his misfortune pluckily: and the liking had deepened. All Billabong had united in the desire to make a man out of the little lost dog. Only he was especially the property of Jim and Norah.

It was six weeks since the calamity of the dye, and his hair had long returned to its original red, after passing through some curious shades of colour as the green faded; changes which had not troubled him, since everyone had been blind to them. Bill had learned that even red hair may be ignored when it is kept well-groomed, and, since Norah wished it, he groomed his as thoroughly as he brushed Topsy.

Topsy was his pride and joy. She was black, like Monarch, and no pony would ever be so beautiful to him. He had learned to ride remarkably quickly.

His first experiences—and tumbles—had been gained with Darby, that very quiet old pony, blind of one eye and full of wisdom. Then, in three weeks, Jim had announced that he was fit for something better, and Topsy had been brought in for him.

Bill had thought he would be nervous, but he had loved her from the first. She had breeding, which Jim and Mr. Linton had taught him to recognise: her paces were beautiful, her manners good. She might dance with him occasionally, but he quickly discovered that it is not necessary to fall off when a pony dances. To him was given her entire care: no hand was allowed to groom her but his, and Jim exacted a high standard of grooming, just as Bill had learned that saddle and bridle, bit and stirrup-irons, must always be polished to inspection-standard. He grew keen himself, so that Murty O'Toole declared that he was a holy terror on saddle-soap. It had become necessary to get him working clothes: grey shirts, riding-breeches and leggings. Bill regarded them as the only wear fit for a station-hand; and if there were a loftier ambition than to be a station-hand, he had yet to discover it.

Spring had deepened into early summer. Each day seemed to bring new things to do. It was warm enough to bathe now. Bill had learned to swim at Dromana—it was a secret satisfaction to him that at least there was one manly accomplishment that had not to be taught him. There was always an early morning bathe with Jim; a brisk one, since the water was then of a stinging coldness. On hotter days, when work allowed it, there were jolly swimming-parties, when they all frolicked in the water and Jim and Wally taught him new and complicated dives. They liked his courage. He would practice a dive, grimly disregarding the number of times that he fell flat from the spring-board, until he mastered it; coming up again and again, with a face redder than his hair. "It's certainly 'Ginger for pluck' with that young one," said Wally.

There was never any dull time. He helped Norah with her fowls, though he regarded them as inferior beasts, not as worthy of consideration as the pigs. He gardened with her; not enthusiastically, but happy because it was her garden—and he was quick to pick up the quiet chivalry of Jim and Wally, to regard Norah as a person to be protected. He studied sheep with Mr. Linton and with the Rainhams, who had a curious affection for beasts so inferior, Bill thought, to cattle. And he learned to laugh, which was perhaps the greatest thing of all.

It did not all come at once. There had been times when the old black dog of sullenness had seemed to ride on his back again. But the others were watchful and comprehending: always a job of work would occur, to be shared; something to give him responsibility, to show him he was wanted. So that gradually the black dog grew discouraged and presumably went away to find the grave of Percival—and stayed there.

Bill came out of his dreams and glanced at Jim, who seemed to have fallen

asleep. So he sat very still, lifting a warning finger at Tyke, who was snapping at flies; and fell to thinking again.

This had been a beautiful day. To begin with, it was his birthday, and he had come down to a very exciting breakfast-table, finding, in place of a porridge-plate, an array of bewildering parcels. Sensible things: a knife that was a perfect magazine of tools; books that bore no resemblance to *Little Joe; or What Use Am I?*; a bridle that made him gasp with joy; chiefest treasure of all, a light stockwhip that Jim himself had made. Everyone had been jolly, delighted that he was ten. He had spent a blissful time after breakfast, greasing the new bridle; and then had come the long day after stock with Jim, who always treated him as a man. He thought of his last birthday, in the Melbourne suburb. It seemed worlds away.

Voices came through the trees. He looked up, seeing Mr. Linton and Wally and Norah, with the Rainhams, Jim opened his eyes, yawned, stretched himself, and said, "By Jove, Bill, old man, I believe I've been asleep. Come and we'll meet the family."

It seemed that the Rainhams had also discovered that it was Bill's birthday. They wished him good luck, and patted him on the back; and presently another parcel appeared containing a Swiss box of carved wood, which Tommy defied him to open. It was a cunningly-contrived box, key and keyhole lurking behind a little sliding panel which it took Bill twenty minutes to discover; and meanwhile something within the box rattled in a manner that was mysterious and maddening. Finally the key yielded its secret, and the box opened, disclosing a Swiss bear on a toboggan; a merry bear, evidently ready for the wildest slope.

"Tommy!" said Bill delightedly.

"I thought you would rather have him than anything I could buy in Cunjee," said Tommy, smiling at the upturned face.

"But he's your pet bear!" said Bill, who had seen him in a place of honour at Creek Cottage—one of Tommy's memories of Swiss winters.

"And now he is my friend's," said Tommy. "And I like my friend to have him."

There seemed no more to say, so Bill shook hands, very hard. He slipped away presently, to show his treasures to Brownie in the kitchen. Murty and Mick Shanahan were there; it was pleasing to watch their great hands wrestling with the mysterious box, failing completely to discover the little panel.

"That's the quarest little contraption ever I seen," said Murty, becoming discouraged. "The man that's after making that had more brains than an ould Irishman, Masther Bill. Let you open it."

"Hold on!" said Mick. "I b'lieve I see the dodge." He took the box hopefully. It soon became evident that he did not see it. Mick grew hot.

“Darned fool of a thing, if you ask me,” he said. “I reckon it’s a have. Does it open at all, Master Bill?”

“’M,” said Bill, grinning. “Just wants brains.”

“Oh, brains does it?” Mick snorted. “I alwuz knew I was brainless. You try it, Murty: it’s got me bested.”

“I will not,” said Murty, calmly. “Yerra, man, you said you saw the dodge. Kape on quiet an’ patient. Another hour’ll do it.”

“Here’s Billy,” said Mick, as a black face appeared at the door. “Here, Billy, see if you can get this open.”

“No vi’lence, Billy,” warned Murty. “Master Bill says it opens aisy as a flower. Though ’tis meself ’ud be wishful to take an axe to it!”

Billy turned the box over and over, his black fingers busy. Suddenly his grin made a flash of ivory across his face. The panel slid open.

“Plenty simple!” said he, carelessly.

“Well, of all the black haythings!” ejaculated Murty. They opened the box and examined the bear like children with a new toy.

Billy had something else, however. Half-shyly he put his hand inside his shirt and drew out a boomerang—not the carved monstrosity that the simple blackfellow produces for the tourist, but a working boomerang, of heavy red wood, beautifully balanced. He held it out to Bill.

“For Mas’ Bill,” he muttered.

“I say, Billy!” The boy flushed. “You didn’t make that for me!”

“Plenty,” said Billy, much embarrassed. “Mine teach throw that pfeller, eh?” He grinned sheepishly.

“Will you? Oh, you brick, Billy! I say, Murty, isn’t it a beauty!”

“It is that same, an’ no mistake,” said Mr. O’Toole, examining it. “Must a’ sat behind a shtump in the paddock to make it, f’r I’ve not laid an eye on it. An’ that same took no short time to make. Eh, Billy?”

Billy looked more embarrassed than ever.

“Ah, go on, Murty—don’t ask awkward questions,” Brownie said, coming to his rescue. “Sometimes I think that Billy’s the only man on the place as does any work!”

“Plenty!” said Billy approvingly.

“An’ the only one that doesn’t come cadgin’ cups of tea in me kitchen!” pursued Brownie, with a twinkle. “Get along with you all, now. I got the dinner to see to, an’ it’s an important meal to-night.”

This hint was lost on Bill in the excitement of racing out to try the boomerang. He forgot that he had ever been tired—who could be tired with a blackfellow’s real weapon, all his own, and a real blackfellow to teach him to use it?

He finished his first lesson with a distinct respect for the blacks. The

boomerang refused to do anything for him that a mere stick would not do: he hurled it with all his force again and again, trying to copy Billy's attitude and grip; and the boomerang rose into the air, twisted foolishly, and fell to earth. Then Billy would take it, throwing it with no apparent effort; and it went with a long skimming flight, or wheeled so swiftly that it was little more than a flicker in the evening light: and then, turning, came flashing back to rest on the grass at the thrower's feet. It seemed a thing alive, with moods and intentions of its own, when Billy threw it. With anyone else it was a silly curved stick. There was some relief in finding that Murty and Mick were not much more useful with it than Bill himself.

"Niver in me born days cud I throw one of them unchancy little things," declared Murty, after an effort in which he had put forth strength enough to fell an ox, with no result worth mentioning. "Let you try it, Mick. I like to see you showin' y'r muscle."

"Ah, muscle!" said Mick bitterly. "I near ricked me shoulder larst time, an' much good it did me! Look at that black image, now!" as Billy flicked his wrist and the boomerang soared twisting over the tree-tops. "If you or me had the nerve to throw near the trees we'd smash it agin the nearest trunk."

"That wan 'ud knock the eye out of a mosquito five hundred feet up," said Murty, with unwilling admiration. "Look at that now!"—as the boomerang fell a yard from him, causing him to give ground with a leap that brought a gurgle of laughter from Bill. "Ah well, Masther Bill, he's cot y' young, so you've a chance to learn. I'll have to live an' die with me ould shtock-whip."

A long coo-ee sounded from the house—Jim's signal.

"I'll have to cut," said Bill, hurriedly. "Thanks awfully, Billy. It's the rippingest boomerang I ever saw!" He picked it up and fled, leaving a well-contented blackfellow.

There was barely time to bath and change. The gong sounded just as he was ready. He achieved a lightning descent by sliding down the banisters, arriving in the dining-room rather breathless, hair shining, and a face in which sunburn, freckles, and the polish given by much soap strove for the mastery.

"You seem in a hurry," remarked Mr. Linton.

"I was nearly late," said Bill. "Oh, and Billy's made me a gorgeous boomerang! I—oh-h!"

He opened his eyes and mouth widely as the cover was removed from a mighty turkey.

"Seems to be a birthday," said Bob, laughing.

They were all smiling at Bill. He flushed happily. It was jolly to think it was his birthday turkey—that they had made a party for him. A good thing, too, to be as hungry as he was, with a turkey like that, with little frizzled sausages nestling under its sides. He looked across at Jim.

“Well, he’s earned his birthday dinner,” said Jim. “A handy man after cattle, Dad. Do you think we can give him a steady job?”

“If you say so—he’s the manager’s offsider, and you’re the manager,” returned his father, carving swiftly. “We’ll tell his people not to hurry back from America—eh, Bill?”

“Oh, please do!” Bill said, fervently. “I don’t see how I can ever go back to Melbourne!”

“Well, we’ll stick to you as long as we can,” said Jim. “And afterwards—well, there are holidays!”

Bill could not have told how the turkey tasted. He ate in a dream. The shadow of going away had been heavy upon him every now and then. It slipped away now. They truly wanted him to stay!

“You can’t have any pudding,” Norah said, as the turkey, a discouraged remnant, vanished. “There isn’t one.”

“Not on a birthday?” demanded Wally, aggrieved. “I thought I was sure of a swagger pudding when I dined away from home!”

Norah ignored this insult.

“We didn’t seem able to work in a pudding, Brownie and I,” she said. “That was because Bill and Jim went away all day and wouldn’t come to tea with us. So the next course is a little out of order, but you must put up with it.”

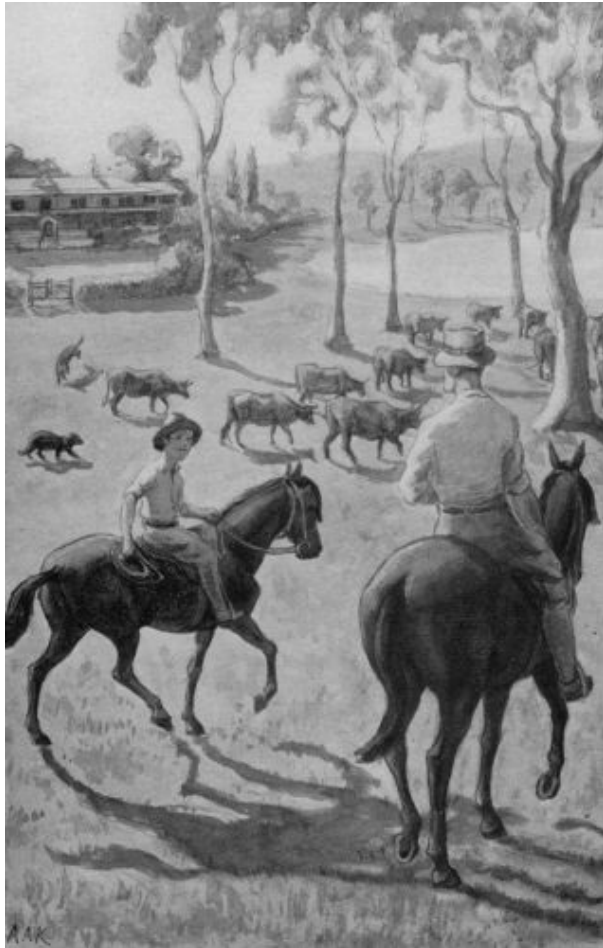
Brownie brought in the next course herself, refusing to trust it to any other hands. But she did not put it before Mr. Linton. Instead she carried it solemnly to Bill’s place, and set it before him.

He looked at it, and then, with shining eyes, at the faces about him.

It was a most magnificent cake. To Bill it seemed about the size of a cart-wheel. It was brave in white icing and silver frills, and round its edge burned ten pink candles in little silver holders. But it was neither the candles nor the silver that caught Bill’s eyes and made him feel queer and choky.

It was an inscription in pink lettering, running across the glistening white surface:

BILL OF BILLABONG.



“‘We’ll let them go,’ said Jim as Bill came up.”
Bill of Billabong [Page 91

CHAPTER IX

PLANS

JIM AND I," said Wally, "have made up our minds to leave you all."
"Including me?" asked his wife.

"Including you. You may return to the ancestral home, if you like, to console it for Jim's absence. Or you may have Bill to stay with you at Little Billabong. I don't mind," said Wally, generously.

"You seem to be arranging matters with a complete disregard of my feelings," remarked Mr. Linton. "I may not be willing to receive a deserted wife. I'm pretty sure I can't spare Bill. No one can find my lost pipes with the deadly certainty of that boy. I'm beginning to think he hides them himself."

"Quite likely," said Jim. "I like to see the gleam in Bill's eye when he trots up with anything you have lost."

"I suppose it would be too much to ask where you mean to go," Norah said, declining to be side-tracked on to Bill. "Is it Melbourne? I believe I could manage with a new frock or two."

"You have heaps of frocks, and it isn't Melbourne," replied Wally. "Guess again."

"Then you're going out into the ranges," said Norah, quickly.

"Bull's eye this time." He smiled at her. "Jim and I think it's time we explored our country a bit more thoroughly, don't we, Jim?"

Jim nodded, stretching his long legs on the grass. Bill had gone to bed; the warm evening had drawn them all out to the lawn. There were deck-chairs for anyone who wanted them, but Jim and Wally preferred the springy cushion of the buffalo-grass.

"It's time we went, and we won't get a better opportunity. There's not much doing just now, and what there is the men can attend to. We ought to see what possibilities there are for grazing. I believe we aren't running nearly as many cattle as we could out there."

"You will camp, of course?" said Mr. Linton.

"Yes. We'll take a pack-horse and enough tucker for a week."

"What about a tent?" asked Norah.

"Oh, there's no need for a tent. We can easily put up a wurley. Plenty of good bush for that."

"Jolly," said Norah, wistfully. She fell silent.

"How about you, Bob?" asked Jim. "Would you care to come?"

"I don't know if I ought to spare the time, but I should love to," said Bob.

“What do you think, Tommy?”

“I think you should go,” returned Tommy, firmly. “You work too hard, and you never take a holiday. You will wake up one morning and find yourself old from never having any fun.”

“Oh, work is fun enough when you’re making a place into what you want it,” remarked Bob. “And I don’t notice that you’re idle yourself, Tommy. Has any one seen Tommy work-shy?”

It was agreed unanimously, amid mirth, than no one had.

“Ah, but my work is half pottering,” said Tommy, when she could make herself heard. “A little thing here, a little thing there——”

“Expresses you exactly,” said Wally joyfully.

“If I could talk to you in French, as I would wish——,” said the justly-incensed Tommy.

“We wouldn’t understand you, I hope,” interposed Jim.

“It might be as well. I could say all I feel, and you could not reply. And that would be a relief. But I do want Bob to go with you. He works—I would say like a navvy, but that I have not seen one of your navvies work too hard. And they do not work fourteen hours a day, which Bob does. On his lazy days, that is.”

“True for you, Tommy,” agreed Jim. “Well, Bob?”

“Would you have Tommy to stay with you, if I went, Norah?”

“Oh, yes,” said Norah, placidly. “She will certainly come with us.”

The united gaze of the party became bent on Norah.

“I thought there was something brewing,” stated Wally. “There generally is, when you’re silent. What is the wild thought in your mind?”

“There isn’t one. There was, for a moment, when I thought of you boys camping in that exciting country alone. Now, of course, it is quite clear. We’ll all go.”

“And I thought I was going to be free for once,” mourned Wally. “’Twas but a dream!”

Jim was looking amused.

“I had my doubts all along,” he said. “Knowing Norah.”

“Isn’t it rather a tall order, Norah?” asked Mr. Linton. “Do you include me? And Bill?”

“Why, of course,” Norah answered. “You know perfectly well that awful adventures happen to this family if it doesn’t stick together. We let Wally go away alone once, and he got into no end of trouble. It was so unsafe for him to stray about by himself that I had to marry him!”

“But he wouldn’t be alone this time,” said Mr. Linton, disregarding Wally’s heated protest. “He would have Jim and Bob.”

“Dad—you know you want to go!”

“Well——” began Mr. Linton.

“And Tommy is dying to. Aren’t you, Thomas?”

“Me? But certainly,” said Tommy.

“And as for Bill—well, you can imagine what Bill will say. He won’t say much in words, of course, but it won’t be necessary. I wouldn’t leave Bill behind for anything.”

Jim and Wally looked at each other and began to laugh helplessly.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Well, she’s your sister, so you ought to know,” returned Wally. “And it isn’t safe to argue with her; she’d leave us behind and go alone if we did. I never argue now: I get up on top of the house and bay the moon. When do we start, Norah?”

“Oh, I’ll leave all that to you,” said Norah, cheerfully. “It is really your party, and we’ll try not to be in the way. You’ll be so thankful when you come back to camp after a long day and find a hot supper waiting. You will come, Dad, won’t you? We can’t do without you.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll come,” said David Linton. “I should rather like to see that country myself. But I’m not so sure about Bill. He is rather young, don’t you think?”

“Oh, my offsider is tough enough,” said Jim. “He had a very long day in the saddle to-day, and he was fit for boomerang-throwing at the end of it. I don’t think we could leave him behind; it would break his heart. Of course, he can’t knock about in the ranges with us. You girls will have to keep him near the camp.”

“We can do that. Will a week be long enough for you, Jim?”

“I should think a week will show us all we want to see. Not that it matters much. There isn’t any hurry.”

“I was thinking of food,” said Norah, practically. “Of course it’s quite easy: Billy can come out from time to time with a fresh supply. We can’t take much meat, in this weather. Brownie and you and I will have to hold a council, Tommy.”

“Will there be any game, Mr. Linton?” Tommy asked.

“Very little. No rabbits, thank goodness,” said the squatter. “Wallaby and kangaroo—not that they’re much good, except for soup. There might be fishing—I don’t know much about those mountain streams. A few birds. But we shall have to depend on our own stores, in the main.”

“How I love the pig!” sighed Norah. “He solves many problems. How much bacon goes to one pack-horse, Dad?”

“We shall have to work out horse-loads pretty accurately,” answered her father. “Well, we’ll make lists to-morrow. When do you want to start, boys?”

“Ask Norah!” said Wally, meekly.

“Oh, in a few days,” said Jim carelessly. “Bob, we’ll go when it suits you.”

“I should like to finish cutting my bracken-fern,” said Bob, thoughtfully. “Would Monday next do?”

“Oh, not Monday—or Brownie will be cooking all Sunday,” said Norah. “Make it Tuesday.”

“Tuesday be it,” agreed Jim.

“In that case, Tommy,” said Bob, with decision, “we will now to horse, and go home. No more loafing for me this week.”

“I’ll come over to see you to-morrow, Tommy,” promised Norah, as they saw them start. “We shall have millions of things to plan.”

“Well, don’t plan clothes,” warned Jim. “ ’Tis not much of them you’ll be carrying. One change, one toothbrush apiece, and one hair-brush for the whole camp!” At which Tommy shrieked delicately and rode off in a hurry, lest further horrors should fall on her ears.

Bill’s bed lived on the balcony now, not far from Jim’s. He awoke next morning to see his neighbour sitting on the balcony railing in his pyjamas, lost in thought. It was clear that he had just arisen: his hair was chiefly on end, and he yawned widely. Bill rubbed sleepy eyes.

“Hallo!”

“The same to you,” said Jim, politely, but that his politeness was to a large extent lost in another yawn. “Great morning. Come for a swim.”

“Ugh!” said Bill, liking his blankets better than the thought of the lagoon. “It’ll be cold.”

“You needn’t remind me of that,” said Jim. “I’ve been trying to believe that it wouldn’t. Never mind, Bill, we won’t swim far.”

“It isn’t swimming far I mind, it’s hitting the water,” Bill said. “And the minute before I hit it.”

“Yes, that’s an evil moment. But we’ll be heroes. Will I pull you out, or will you come quietly?”

“I’ll come quietly,” said Bill, with haste. “It’s worse when you pull me out.” He made a great effort and reached the floor. “Ugh-h! Let’s run, and get warm before we get colder.”

They trotted gently through the wet grass towards the still water, where a flight of black duck squattered off at their approach, beating the surface with their wings before they rose and sailed over the tree-tops. The water was indeed cold: it took courage to go in from the spring-board, but more to wade in slowly. Not a morning to linger, no matter how hard one swam. They were both red-faced and glowing as they came back to the house.

“What do we do to-day?” Bill asked hopefully, as they dressed. All days were hopeful, but those when he worked with Jim were the best of all.

“Well, I’m going to run up the horses from the river-paddock this morning.

I want to look over them for pack-horses. This family is going camping.”

Bill’s eyes widened.

“*All* the family?”

Jim nodded, lathering his face carefully.

“Do I——” said Bill, hurriedly. “I mean, am I——?”

“Are you one of the family, do you mean? Certainly you are.”

“Then——” the breathless voice hesitated “. . . do you mean——?”

“That you’re going too, old man? Well, I’m rather reckoning on my offsider. Like to come?” Jim shaved delicately round a corner: then the razor paused as he watched the reflection of the boy’s face.

“Like to!” gasped Bill. “I say!” Words failed him. A grin of utter delight widened; slowly as he stared at Jim’s back.

“Where?” he managed to get out.

“Somewhere in the ranges. Wally and I want to have a look round there, and Norah won’t be left behind. So the end of it is, everybody’s coming. Bob and Tommy too.”

“Why—we’ll be a crowd! Will I be sleeping in a tent? I’ve always wanted to sleep in one.”

“No—we’ll make wurleys—that’s a blackfellow’s hut. Make ’em out of bush. New accomplishment for you, Bill,” said Jim, speaking with some difficulty, owing to lather.

“And sleep on the ground?”

“Not much!” mumbled Jim. “Sacking bunks, stretched on cross-sticks. I had all the sleeping on the ground I wanted during the War. Hang it! I’ve cut myself!” He dabbed at blood with cotton-wool. “That comes of trying to talk and shave at the same time. Take my advice and never do it.”

“No,” said Bill, absently. “When do we start? I don’t take pyjamas camping, do I? Will we hunt our own food? Can I shoot?”

Jim chuckled.

“Just you get dressed and go and ask Dad all those,” he said. “*He* doesn’t have to shave.” He applied more cotton-wool to his chin, and Bill fled.

Mr. Linton was not to be found, so he sought Murty, and learned much from that experienced camper. The bell sounded for breakfast: he raced in, hungry, but too excited to know whether he were eating porridge or bacon. Mr. Linton and Jim were discussing plans: he listened, his eyes dancing. It was almost too amazing to be true. He was ten, and he was going camping!

The day passed in a blissful dream. He helped Jim and the men to run in the station mob of horses, which in itself was wild excitement, but seemed only an incident compared to the great adventure ahead. In the afternoon he rode with Norah to Creek Cottage. The girls became immersed in talk of food and blankets: necessary, Bill supposed, but not uplifting. He saw Bob in the

distance, cutting bracken, so he found a fern-hook and went to join him. Fern cutting was a dull job, but still, it was man's work. Also, he knew Jim would have gone to take a hand in it.

Bob Rainham smiled to see the small figure trudging sturdily towards him.

"Hullo, Bill! Got a hook, have you? Good chap. They're not tough at this end of the paddock, because Tommy sallies out and cuts them every now and then. Of course, they grow again while you're looking at them, but they don't have time to grow tough. Up on the hill they're simply sinewy."

"What's the good of ferns?" Bill asked, making savage onslaughts on a clump near him.

"I wish I knew," said the Englishman, with as much gloom as his cheerful face could express. "They certainly keep one from getting fat. And down by the creek, where they used to be really big, I could get a stem strong enough to break a snake's back. Apart from that I never found any use for them; they're just one of these little things sent to try us. Mind your leg, Bill."

"Jim says they get discouraged if you keep on cutting them long enough," remarked Bill.

"I believe they do, in about fifty or sixty years. With luck." Bob pushed his hat back from his hot forehead, cutting steadily. "It's queer to think I used to like them in my own country. Thought they were pretty! I told that to one Australian, and he's never respected me since."

"My mother thinks they're pretty," said Bill, with the condescension a man may feel for the weakness of women. "She puts 'em in vases an' things in the drawing-room."

"I believe Tommy might, if she didn't know the awful effect it would have on me," Bob admitted. "When you've cut the brutes hard for over two years and see the prospect of cutting them for goodness knows how many more, you change your ideas of beauty. Bill, my lad, if you swing that hook round so far you'll get your own leg to a certainty. Not so much of the follow-through about your stroke, old chap."

"Right-oh," said Bill, abating his excess of zeal, though he continued to cut industriously. "Bob, you're coming camping, aren't you? I'm going."

"Rather! It ought to be topping. Jolly that you're going, too, old chap."

Bill beamed on him, and showed his gratitude by abolishing a clump of ferns with one sweep.

"I thought they might think I was too small. But of course I'm ten now."

"Of course," agreed Bob. "When a fellow is ten, and has sense, he's certainly fit to go camping. I believe"—considering—"you'd have had enough sense when you were only nine."

"Do you—truly!" Bill cut furiously.

"Yes, quite. You have picked up a lot lately. One does, at Billabong. I had

awfully little sense when I first came out, you know.”

“But you were grown-up. Why, you were in the War, flying!”

“Oh yes, but that doesn’t teach you much about Australia. It’s all so different. I did all sorts of mutton-headed things. A fellow has to learn, whatever his age is.”

Bill pondered over this. It was comforting to feel a sense of equality with someone grown up: someone who had medals and crosses and things. They were kept out of sight in a drawer, but Tommy had shown them to him. He knew stories about them, thrilling stories of German aeroplanes brought down, after a struggle in mid-air with machine-guns. There was in his mind a secret pedestal, on which Bob was enthroned as hero. And yet he could admit cheerfully that he had done “mutton-headed things.” Bill’s heart warmed to him.

“When I’m big,” he said, “I want to have a station like Billabong. I s’pose I’ll have to begin with a little one, like yours, but I’ll get one just like Billabong d’rectly I can. Think I could, Bob?”

He wondered if Bob would laugh at him, and he felt hot.

But Bob was quite grave.

“Why not? You’ll have to go to school and learn things, but you can keep on planning. Best thing you can do is to get your people to let you come up here in the holidays, so that you won’t get out of touch with the country. The earlier you learn sheep and cattle, the better; if I’d had the chance to study merinoes when I was ten perhaps they wouldn’t look all the same to me now. Great handicap. But you need not really stop learning them. Then when you leave school—well, Jim or Wally or I will give you a job until you feel you can take up land for yourself.”

“I say—you wouldn’t, really!” Bill’s eyes danced.

“So far as I can see now I would,” Bob said, seriously. “I’m not saying it just to please you, Bill. Ten isn’t a very big age; but if a fellow makes up his mind when he is ten to do a certain thing and sticks to it through his school-years—well, that fellow will be worth a job when he leaves school. He’ll be worth helping towards what he wants. So it just depends on yourself, you see. I believe you will stick to your idea.”

“Oh, I will, Bob—I promise.”

“No,” said Bob, with firmness. “Don’t promise anything. Make up your own mind, if you like, but don’t forget that you may change. Or your people may want you to change, and you must consider them. If they give you a free hand, and your wish remains the same, that’s all right. We’ll help.”

Bill was silent for a moment, thinking. Something was stirring within him—ambition, confidence in himself. He looked up at Bob gratefully.

“You’re—you’re jolly decent,” he said. “You don’t talk to me as if I was

just a kid.”

“Well, not all the time.” Bob smiled at him. “Be a kid as hard as you like for a long while yet; but there’s no harm in thinking ahead a bit. It’s jolly easy to drift along, just slacking, trusting to luck that something will turn up. But if you have an idea at the back of your mind—well, it just grows with you, and by the time you’re big it has grown into something worth having. If you think hard enough of a thing you often make it happen, I believe.”

“My word, then, I’ll think!”

“All right, old chap, think. But do your job too. Your job will be school.”

“I hate school!” Bill said, vigorously.

“That’s where you’re all wrong. There was a fellow called Percival who hated school. He thought he hated lots of things, didn’t he?”

“’M,” said Bill, turning a lively red.

“I’m not raking up old sores. But just you look squarely at poor old Percival. He was like a fellow in dark glasses: all the world looked dark to him. Then one day he took them off and found that he was really Bill, and that this is a very jolly old world, after all. Isn’t that so?”

“’M,” Bill nodded.

“Well, I’m jolly certain Bill is not going to continue Percival’s mistakes. That poor chap was sure he hated school. But Bill knows better. He knows that people like Jim and Wally loved it, and he’s going to find out why they did, when he goes there, and get the very best out of it, so that he’ll grow into the sort of man they are. He will most certainly not do that if he hates it—it’s only rotters who hate a good school.”

“Didn’t think of that,” Bill said.

“That was because you were nine, I expect. All sorts of new thoughts come when you’re ten. Jim’s sort of thoughts.”

He turned again to his fern-hook; in their talk they had unconsciously stopped working. A long whistle shrilled across the paddock.

“That’s Tommy’s police-whistle,” said Bob. “Carries a long way, doesn’t it? She says it’s the only dinner-bell I would ever hear. Just now it means tea, Bill, so you and I had better chuck work for to-day. Thanks for lending a hand, old chap.”

They shouldered their fern-hooks, and walked back over the paddock to the white cottage on the hill above the valley. Not that Bob’s fern-hook was long out of action. He paused now and then to lop fern-shoots; green croziers thrusting upward among the scarcely withered fronds of a previous cutting.

“Pretty dears, aren’t they?” he said with a grim chuckle, annihilating a promising family with a single sweep. “Talk about mushrooms! I wish they came up in a single night with half the energy of bracken fern. By the way, I’m thinking of growing mushrooms for the Melbourne market. I believe there’s

money in it, and it would be rather interesting. We'll think out all sorts of things like that when you come on the land, Bill."

"'M," said Bill, doubtfully. "I like cattle better."

"Yes, but you can grow cattle and other things too. It's good fun to make a place do its utmost. And cattle take a long while to grow into money, and one has to pay bills and income-tax, always supposing you've any income to be taxed."

"Doesn't everyone have income?" queried Bill, innocently.

"Depends on how hard people work, most of 'em," said Bob, laughing. "But you'll find out all about that soon enough. Only it's as well to make up your mind, even at ten, that yours is coming out of your own brains and muscles some day. That's the income that is worth having."

Bill thought it over; it lay at the back of his mind, even during the jolly tea on the cottage verandah, when Tommy chaffed him for being solemn because he had grown so venerable. He was unusually silent while riding home.

"Tired?" asked Norah, as they drew near the gate of the homestead paddock.

He shook his head.

"No. I was just thinking."

"Yes?" She waited.

"Thinking 'bout work," he said. "I used to think it was all a horrid fag. But you all like it—an' Bob does. Bob's decent, isn't he? He talks to me 's if I was grown-up."

"Not too much grown-up, I hope," Norah said, smiling at the serious little face.

"Oh, no. But I like it. Makes one see—oh, lots of things." He stared ahead of him, as if the future had come alive, beckoning. "Makes a chap feel he wants to start."

"Well, I think you're making a pretty good start," said Norah, practically. "Didn't Murty say yesterday that you were as handy as a pocket in a shirt after the calves when they got out? That's Murty's highest praise. Keep on as you're going, Bill, and you'll be all right. And there's Wally coming down to the gate to meet us!"

Wally had the gate open as they came up. He was riding a young horse, newly broken-in: an excitable chestnut that danced about as if he were on springs, pawing the ground and whinnying loudly to Captain and Topsy. Wally sat him lightly, seeming unaware that he was riding anything less steady than a plough-horse.

"Hullo, you wanderers! I began to think you were lost."

"Oh, Bill was looking after me," said Norah. "I should have been lost in very good company." She smiled at him as they passed through the gateway,

seeing the welcome in his eyes.

The gate swung to with a clatter, and the chestnut leaped as though he hoped to touch the sky.

“I’ll shut it, Wally,” Bill cried. “Please let’s.”

“All right, but hurry. This fellow seems to think he has an appointment somewhere.”

Bill wrestled with the catch, not aided by Topsy, impatient to get home. The chestnut danced on his hind legs; then, coming to earth, tried to get his head down to buck. Wally’s lithe body yielded to every bound, his face unconcerned as he talked to him as one might talk to a fretful baby.

“Steady, old lad. You’re not going to buck, so you might as well give up the idea. Ready, Bill? Off you go—I’ll race you home!”

Bill dug his heels into Topsy. The little mare went off at full speed. The chestnut’s first few strides, as he followed, were chiefly in the air. Then he settled into a stretching gallop that soon left Topsy far in the rear; until Wally steadied him, and, wheeling round, came back to join Norah, who was cantering Captain steadily.

“You’re taking things quietly,” he laughed. “Not in a hurry to get home?”

“Oh, I was home—when you came,” she said. “And Bill would like to win. And I knew you’d come back to me.”

CHAPTER X

THE START

ALL ABOARD!" Mr. Linton's deep voice rang out from the stable-yard. He stood with his hand on the bridle of a great bay horse that still champed the last mouthful of his breakfast oats. Near him, Jim and Wally were tightening the straps of valises on their saddles, while Bob was girthing up an impatient grey mare which objected to the process and walked round and round with a view to increasing its difficulty. Bill, already mounted on Topsy, was outwardly calm, but inwardly seething with impatience. He had been ready since seven o'clock, and had almost resented the necessity of waiting for breakfast. At six he had superintended the departure of black Billy, who had gone ahead, driving three laden pack-horses in a slow cavalcade. Bill would gladly have gone with him, had he not been restrained. One could not, he thought, start too early when one was going camping.

Murty held Norah's horse—it was still his pleasure to groom and saddle for the "little Mistress" whenever there was an opportunity. Tommy's brown mare was in Dave Boone's charge. Mick, with no responsibilities, leaned against the fence, chewing a straw. There was work waiting; but it was not to be imagined that Billabong should fail to give its explorers a good send-off.

"All aboard! Where are you girls?"

"Coming!" Norah called.

She came across from the house with Tommy; Brownie waddling beside them, a little breathless, but still able to pour out advice.

"You'll 'ang the 'am up as soon as you can, won't you dearie? In a cool place—I dunno what'll be left of it after it's jogged all day on a pack-saddle. An' don't trust that black boy to unpack the corned-beef, or he'll let the flies at it, sure as you're alive. Eat the fowls first—they won't keep on you, in this weather. I wish I could remember what I've forgotten, but me silly 'ead always lets me down!"

"Oh, Brownie, darling, I'm sure it can't be anything. You know you never really forget. And we checked all the lists."

"I never 'ave that feeling without it means something," said Brownie, darkly. "Ten to one I'll remember it when you're well out of sight an' the men off in the paddocks. Gen'lly-as-a-rule, it comes to me in the middle of the night. Well, it's not the tea, an' it's not the flour. Nor the bacon. So you won't starve, anyhow. An' it's not the fryin'-pan, 'cause that was clankin' a fair treat

as Billy went off.” She knitted puzzled brows. Suddenly they cleared.

“There now!” she said. Turning, she made for the house, her waddle increasing to a jog.

“She really shouldn’t,” said Wally, looking at her in a worried manner across his saddle. “She isn’t built for speed. Hi, Brownie, let me go back for whatever it is!”

Something like, “Quite all right, Master Wally, my dear!” came from the retreating figure.

“Brownie, you wicked woman!” Norah caught up to her and seized her firmly. “You’re not to run, even if you’ve forgotten the bacon! We’re not catching a train. What is it? I’ll bring it.”

“Well, I know the Master’s in a ’urry to be off,” panted Brownie. “An’ it’s only a little thing.” Suddenly she put her hand into the pocket of her voluminous white apron, and a slow smile widened across her face. “Well, now, if I haven’t got it, after all! Talk of stupids! It’s all right, dearie. Just a little something for Master Bill.”

She waved to him, and he trotted across to her. Brownie put a hand on his knee.

“You put that in your pocket, Master Bill,” she said. She produced a battered silver coin and pressed it into his hand.

“But there aren’t any shops in the ranges,” said Bill, bewildered.

“No, an’ you couldn’t buy anything with that if there was,” she said, with a fat chuckle. “That’s a luck-penny, that is.”

“Why, it isn’t a penny at all!”

“No. But that’s what we call it. That was given me for luck long ago, an’ didn’t I get me place here within a month! And my son Joe carried it all the years he was at sea, an’ he was wrecked twice an’ blown up once, an’ he came out with never a scratch! An’ his brother had it in the War, an’ he was the only man in his company not wounded, an’ he got the D.C.M., too! It’s a true lucky coin, dearie, an’ I thought when I come across it last night, ‘Well, now, I would like Master Bill to have that, with him goin’ campin’ for the first time.’ ”

“Oh, Brownie!” Norah laughed at her. “Don’t you think there are enough people to look after him?”

“Why, of course. I wasn’t thinkin’ of danger. But campin’ is a great adventure for a little feller, an’ there’s no ’arm in a little extra luck in an adventure, now is there, my dear?” She patted his knee. “Might help you to run across a gold-mine, for all you know: there’s plenty as say the ranges have any amount of gold in them yet.”

“Oh, I say!” said Bill, much uplifted. “Truly? Then I’d buy a run like Billabong!”

“An’ you couldn’t do better with it, dearie. Now, put that luck-penny in your pocket, an’ when you find the gold-mine you’ll bring me a lovely nugget, an’ I’ll have it made into a brooch.” Her motherly old face was very kind as she looked at him. “But even countin’ out gold-mines, I’d like to feel you had it. Good luck go with it, an’ give you a lovely time.”

Bill slipped the coin into his pocket and shook hands with her firmly.

“I’m dead certain to have that,” he said. “And I specs it’ll bring me a bit of extra luck, too, Brownie. Thanks ever so.”

“*Are you people ever coming?*” demanded Mr. Linton, patiently.

“Oh!” said Norah. She hugged Brownie, and fled towards her horse. Murty swung her into the saddle.

“’Tis a great reshponsibility ye have, with all these light-hearted young things to look after, Miss Norah,” he said. “There’s the Boss now—sure, isn’t he lookin’ the youngest of the lot of ye? Kape your eye on him, or he’ll be gettin’ losht on ye in thim ould hills, the way he did wance before.”

“I’ll be firm with him, Murty,” she smiled, shaking his hand.

“Well, I’ll be glad to see ye all back. The place do be quare an’ lonesome when ye’re all away. ’Tis meself ’ll be ridin’ out to see what’s become of ye if there’s no sign of ye this day week.”

He stood back, pulling his battered felt hat from his grizzled head. There was a chorus of “So-long!” as they strung out of the stable-yard.

The horses were fresh and eager after a three-days’ spell. To-day there were no young ones among them; only experienced old stagers would be of use in the rough country into which they were going. But there was breeding in every Billabong horse; they went off with a gay impatience worthy of Wally’s chestnut, now grazing peacefully with the mob under the box-trees by the lagoon, whence the men would presently turn them into an outer paddock. He whinnied as the riders went down the track, and Captain responded with a long shrill neigh.

“Listen to them saying ‘So-long,’” said Bill. He turned in his saddle to wave his hat to Brownie, with a farewell shout; and Brownie waved her apron until she seemed enveloped in a snowstorm. Bill sighed comfortably. They were really off at last.

There was but little cantering-ground ahead, once they entered the hill-country, so they made the most of the good going of the paddocks. Across the rolling acres of the Far Plain they gave the horses their heads, settling down to a steady canter that soon left the homestead far behind. They strung out as the long stride of the horses ridden by Jim and his father carried them ahead: Wally and Norah came next, while Bill brought up the rear with the Rainhams.

It was glorious riding, in the crisp freshness of the early morning. About them the flowering grasses rippled like a crop, through which the horses’

hooves cut long swathes that soon would lift again and hide their tracks. They could see the trails left by Billy and the pack-horses, when the grass had been heavier with the night dews which had now dried. At the gates Mr. Linton and Jim waited, so that in the main they kept together; and so they crossed one huge paddock after another until they came to the river. Once there had been only a ford by which to cross; an awkward place when the stream was high. In later days Jim and Wally had made a bridge, cutting down a couple of tall, slender trees that grew on a rocky part of the bank, so that they fell across the water. It was still a source of pride to them.

“But how did you make ’em fall so straight across?” Bill asked.

“We didn’t. They fell as crookedly as they knew how,” Jim answered. “Then we lopped off all the branches and dragged the trunks into position with a team of bullocks, and put on a decking of slabs.”

“And then we thought the job was done,” said Wally “and we were horribly proud of it. But the first cattle we took across it were so astonished that they started fooling about on it, and one bullock fell in. Bill, you never heard such a splash!”

“Wish I’d seen it,” grinned Bill.

“It was worth seeing, I can tell you. He landed flat on his back, all his poor legs waving. And he gave a bellow like the siren of a steamer. The others were so scared that we had the work of the world to keep them from going in, too. And the one that had dived floated down-stream because there wasn’t any landing-place. He got out at last, but his nerves were so shaken that he brooded alone for days.”

“I specs he was afraid the others would laugh at him,” remarked Bill.

“They probably did. I never heard a bullock laugh, but I suppose they have ways of their own. So then we built a railing on both sides, and made a really fancy job of it. I don’t think the chaps who built the Forth Bridge were any prouder than we were.”

“It’s a beautiful bridge.” Bill looked at it respectfully.

“Well, it saves a lot of work,” David Linton said. “We used to have some pretty nasty crossings at the ford.”

“D’you remember the time when the flood came down and we had to cross those young bullocks from the low-lying ground?” Jim said. “That was a day, Bill! The river was over its banks and these cattle were trapped, and the water rising as hard as it could. They had never seen so much water, and they were very jumpy. We got them into the ford, but it wasn’t really a ford any longer: they had to swim. Then they started ringing in the middle—swimming round and round in a circle. You can’t imagine the sea of idiotic faces and horns. Murty managed to break up the circus and get them headed for the bank. But it wasn’t a nice job.”

“Too risky altogether,” Mr. Linton said. “I saw a good man killed that way in New South Wales: his horse was swept from under him, and he went down among the bullocks. Hadn’t a chance, poor chap. I would not have let Murty tackle the job, but he was in before I could stop him.”

“Murty’s a hard man to stop when his mind is made up,” Wally remarked. “Once he sets his jaw and begins talking in a mixture of Irish and English he doesn’t care for either man or bullock. I had a fellow like him in my company in the War; a Kerry man, he was. Worth any ten men in a tight place, chiefly because he made the others laugh. He got a Blighty one in the leg at last, and it was a pretty awful job getting him to the dressing-station, but he smoked his old black pipe and joked all the time. Until he fainted; when we were all rather glad.”

“Murty would do that,” said Norah softly.

They rested on the bank for half an hour, the boys exchanging stories of the War, while Bill listened with all his ears. Then girths that had been slackened were tightened, Jim opened the gate to the bridge, and the horses picked their way in single file over the tarred decking, that bore marks of amateur adze-work: not that these damped the pride of the architects in their first big job done together.

They were in timbered country now, and progress was slower. There was only a cattle-track to show the way, and even this, to Bill’s eyes, was often imperceptible; but Jim led the way steadily, diverging now and then to look at bullocks, but always coming back to the line where an occasional faint mark showed the way Billy had taken.

It was two hours more before they came upon him, walking his horse quietly, behind the lazy pack-horses. He showed his white teeth in a grin as they overtook him.

“These pfellers plenty slow.”

“You’ve made very good going, I think, Billy,” Mr. Linton said. “Packs all right?”

“Plenty. Baal them slip at all.”

“That’s good. You’d better camp for lunch, Billy. Then you can get on as far as the boundary.”

Billy nodded, riding on ahead of his charges and dismounting. The pack-horses immediately began to graze, realising that further exertion was not demanded of them.

A little creek sauntered not far off. The riders made their way to it, unsaddled their horses and tied them up. Mossy logs on the low banks made comfortable seats after the long morning’s ride, and the deep shade of the wattles was grateful, for the day had, as Brownie had foretold, grown very hot. Bill balanced himself on a half-submerged root and drank deeply, by a loud

but satisfying process of suction: an operation which combined the advantage of washing his face. He rubbed it with his sleeve and declared himself hungry.

"Everybody ought to be hungry," remarked Norah, unpacking food from the valises. "Here's a cup for anyone who doesn't want a bath, like Bill."

"Egg-and-bacon pie!" said Wally faintly, casting himself on the grass by Norah. "Blessings on Brownie!—I could eat a wolf. What else, Nor?"

"Oh, sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs, and things. All rather warm and dry, I'm afraid; but there's lettuce in a wet cloth somewhere. It doesn't suit food as well as you might think, to be rolled up tightly in a valise and then bumped about on a saddle under a hot sun. But we're hardy explorers, aren't we, Bill?"

"'M," said Bill, happily. He accepted a large wedge of pie, and became unable for further conversational efforts.

"Nobody minds anything," declared Tommy. "Why should we?"

"Not you, because you never seem to get hot," said Jim. "You're always pink and cool when the rest of us are mopping our crimson faces and only making them look streaky. How does she manage it, Bob?"

"It's a mystery," said Bob. "I wish it was one that ran in the family. I burn a brilliant scarlet, but she never turns colour. Anyhow, you needn't talk of being crimson: all you Australians merely grow a deeper walnut colour. It's very irritating."

"Oh, no, Bob, not a bit," said Norah, pleasantly. "We never notice it."

"No, I suppose I have that to myself, as well," Bob grinned. "When I peel. But you needn't rub it in, Norah." He sighed, attacking a sandwich. "I have to do the rubbing also—with lanoline. It doesn't seem to make me more beautiful, but the agony of shaving is lessened. Bother that mare of yours, Tommy!—she has rubbed her bridle off again."

He scrambled to his feet and caught the brown mare, who, having rid herself of her bridle, was peacefully wandering away. Bob contrived a halter with a piece of stout string and returned to the creek.

"You could tie her up with a bit of wool and she'd never pull away," he said. "But I'll back her to discard any bridle; and when she does, she thinks she's at liberty to go home."

"She did that in Cunjee one day." Tommy laughed at the memory. "Cunjee had the entertainment of seeing me running violently all the way down the main street in wild pursuit. Indeed, I might have run all the way home, if an infant about six years old had not caught her. A stern infant, that one; he rebuked me loftily for not looking after her. And I made the mistake of offering him a penny, and he would not take it. I have wondered ever since if it was because it was not threepence."

"Oh, I don't think many youngsters would take money for catching a

horse,” Jim answered. “Not for a lady, at all events. They’re independent kids. One who looked a year or two younger than Bill was really useful to me near the trucking-yards one day: my cattle boxed themselves up with some wandering cows, and I was alone, and had very little time. This hero worked like a good ’un, and we got them sorted out. I was just feeling in my pocket—it was to have been a shilling, Tommy, and it was worth it——”

“Capitalist!” said Tommy, fiercely.

“Don’t be abusive. Anyhow, I had no chance to get my hand out, for my infant said, ‘Well, so-long, mate!’ and walked away, leaving me too paralysed to speak.”

“Another sandwich, Bill?”

“No, thanks, Norah.” Bill rose, stretching himself, and strolled over to the horses. They saw him untie Topsy and lead her to a patch of good grass in the open. He slipped the bit from her mouth and let her graze.

“There’s a careful man considering his beast,” Wally remarked.

“Our Bill gets on to an idea quickly,” said Jim. “When he began to ride he looked on a horse as a contraption that took you from place to place. Now it’s different.” He looked at Bill and Topsy approvingly.

“He’s a good little lad,” Mr. Linton stated. “We shall miss him when he goes.”

“Any news of his people coming back, sir?” asked Bob.

“They seem very indefinite. I had a letter from Mr. Vernon yesterday, saying, without any enthusiasm, that they were ready to take him back if we wished. I put the matter up to Bill.”

“What did Bill say?”

“He stood very stiff and straight and just looked at me—rather like a dog that doesn’t know if he’s going to be beaten. Then he said in a sort of fierce whisper, ‘Do I have to go?’ And I said in a hurry, ‘Not much, you don’t!’ Poor old Bill turned red to the roots of his hair and gulped, ‘Thanks, sir!’ Then he turned and bolted out of the room. I saw him climbing the highest tree he could find, to let off steam, I suppose—he went up it as quickly as a monkey, and sang loudly in the top branches. I like Bill,” Mr. Linton finished.

“Everyone does,” Wally said. “I wonder what his people are like. He never seems to have had a fair chance until he came here.”

“He doesn’t talk much about them,” Jim replied. “One gathers that his father is very busy on the Stock Exchange and plays golf on Saturdays and Sundays. His mother seems to put in most of her time at bridge. They really have only a sort of nodding acquaintance with Bill, I should say: he leads a governess existence, and gets into perpetual rows. When they go away for holidays Blake appears to take some notice of him.” There was an unusual bitterness in Jim’s pleasant voice.

“Poor kid!” Bob uttered.

Jim knocked out his pipe against the log on which he sat, grinding out the ashes with his heel.

“What chance has a boy like that? Because he isn’t a beauty his mother is ashamed of him, I gather. Anyhow, Bill thinks so—and he regards it as very natural, which makes my blood boil. He’s always in the way, and gets told so. If they’d send him to a decent school—but they keep him messing about with incompetent governesses, and then expect him to grow into a man. If ever I meet those people I shall find it hard to keep a civil tongue in my head—I’d love to tell them a few straight facts.”

“Same here,” Wally nodded. “And Bill has the makings of a pretty good sort of man.”

“A real good sort. It’s rather pitiful to see how he has expanded here, just because he has been treated decently. He’s quick and intelligent, and since he is no longer afraid of getting into rows he doesn’t do fool things. Fancy a youngster getting to the age of nine without ever having had any real friendship with his people! They aren’t fit to have a boy,” Jim ended in a deep growl.

There was no doubt that all his hearers agreed with him. Yet it was so unusual for Jim to show feeling that they looked at him silently for a moment. The angry disgust of his words, the scowl on his face, were foreign to Jim—who took most things with a laugh or a shrug.

“Well, I can’t help getting a bit hot under the collar,” he said, half apologetically. “Fact is, I’ve got fond of the little chap. He was such a poor little angry lost dog: and once he found out that he was among friends he was so jolly grateful. Couldn’t express it, of course, any more than the dog could: but he shows it a hundred times a day. He’s always at my heels, looking out for something he can do. I’ll miss it when he goes. It’s tough to think of his going back to his old life, when he’s happy here. It suits old Bill to be happy.”

He looked across the grass where the red head showed over the neck of the black pony.

“I would keep him willingly,” Mr. Linton said. “Now that Wally has grown up it’s time we adopted another boy, I think!”

“You certainly have a way with lost dogs,” Wally laughed.

“And emigrants,” added Tommy. She put her hand on Norah’s. Nobody spoke for a moment. Then Norah leaned forward.

“Jim, we might manage something. When the Blakes come back some of us could take Bill to them and try to get them to send him to school. I believe his father would listen to you.”

“I’d rather talk to him than the mother,” Jim growled.

“You could do that. If you told him what we think of Bill he would see that

it was time to take him away from governesses. Then we could get him here in the holidays—they would probably be glad enough to let him go. Later on it would be easy enough to give him a job here.”

“He and I talked about that yesterday,” Bob said. “It seemed to Bill rather like a dream of heaven!”

“Well, we’ll try to work it,” Jim agreed, his brow clearing. “I don’t want to part with my offsider altogether—and I want still less to see him go back to hating the world. Hate’s a rotten outfit to start life with.”

He rose, shrugging his shoulders; a little ashamed of his outburst.

“Never saw me wrathful before, did you, Tommy?”

“Yes, I did,” said Tommy, smiling up at him. “You were very wrathful when I had the burglar at the Cottage. And more so when you did not catch him!”

“Oh—well!” said Jim, with a twinkle in his eye. “And when we did catch him, who patted his head and made us let him go? Tell me that, Tommy!”

“If you begin raking up old stories we shan’t make camp to-night,” David Linton said, rising. “Wait until this evening. It’s time we gave the horses a drink and saddled up.”

“By Jove, yes!” Jim looked at his watch and whistled. “Bill!”

“Yes, Jim?” The red head popped up smartly.

“Water your pony, old chap. Time we started.”

“Rather!” Boy and pony trotted obediently to the creek. Five minutes later the riders moved off through the trees.

CHAPTER XI

SETTLING DOWN

AT THE wire-fence that formed the original boundary of Billabong, Billy waited, a black embodiment of patience, while the pack-horses grazed not far off. Since Jim and Wally had taken up the range-country a new gate had been made in the fence, fastened by a heavy padlock. Jim took the key from his pocket, dismounting to open it. They drove the pack-horses through.

“You can’t lock it again, Jim,” his father observed. “Billy has to come back.”

“Yes. There’s no need, either, when we’re about on this side. I don’t know that there’s much need any way, but you never can tell what prospectors are knocking about among the hills.”

“Did you ever meet any, Jim?” Tommy asked him, as they rode on.

“Only one old chap, and he said he’d had enough and was getting out. They get the colour here and there, and I believe a few tiny nuggets have been picked up from time to time. But it is too difficult to get food; and indeed, all the gold they ever find is not enough to keep them in tucker, so far as I know.”

“They cannot bring food in from the Cunjee side, can they?”

“Oh, they could, with pack-horses. But the average fossicker can’t afford a pack-horse; if he has an old screw to ride it’s about as much as he’s likely to manage, and a man can’t carry much food on a riding horse. It’s really easier to get into this country from the other side; there are two or three tracks over the saddle of the range, and there’s a little settlement beyond there. Only a tiny place, Broad’s Creek—the remains of an old mining township. That is generally the jumping-off place for fossickers.”

“And what do they do when they fossick? That is a funny word,” said Tommy, considering it. “I do not think it has a French translation.”

Jim chuckled.

“I don’t suppose it has. You could say to use a pick. But that isn’t enough—it doesn’t give you the sense of prowling about, almost sniffing for gold. No, when you write a book for French people about Australia, you will have to say ‘fossick,’ and make ’em get the feel of the word.”

“But how dreadful!” said Tommy. “I, to write a book! Never!”

“Well, I would think so, if I had the job,” Jim agreed. “But there’s no knowing what you will do, Tommy. I knew a fellow in France who wrote books, and he said there was a lot of fun in it; but it seems to me that it’s easier

to drive bullocks than words! Anyhow, when a fossicker gets into likely country he pitches some sort of a camp—pretty miserable affair, as a rule—and then he goes wandering round with a pick, and, if he can carry it, a shovel. I should think the pick is usually enough. And he—well, you see, he just fossicks!”

“Yes, I see. He picks with his pick here and there, and hopes for the best?”

“Just about that,” said Jim, grinning. “If he’s an old hand he knows the kind of ground to tackle; if he isn’t, he wastes a lot of time in perfectly useless places. When his luck is in he may get the colour—a tiny speck of gold somewhere; and then, of course, he concentrates on that place. He looks very closely into the earth among the roots of a fallen tree, and the hole it has left—lots of finds have been made that way, or where there has been a landslip. There are plenty of landslips in the hills: the winter rains weaken a spot, and some time or other it comes down, and there may be gold showing. You never know. I think those three words sum up all the philosophy of a fossicker.”

“It seems a dreary life—to be alone in the wild country, working for so little.”

“I don’t think a fossicker finds it dreary. Certainly not an old hand. They’re at home in the Bush, and it talks to them. And always there’s the sense of adventure—never knowing when a lucky stroke of the pick may mean a fortune. They go to sleep thinking of it, and they wake up with the thought every morning, and it keeps them going. I believe,” said Jim, thoughtfully, “that many an old fellow who has made a big strike isn’t nearly as happy afterwards as he was in the old days when he prowled in the Bush, always seeking and hoping. Some of them have left the swagger places they’ve bought, and gone back to it.”

“I think I can imagine that,” Tommy agreed. “To seek and hope—that would be better than growing fat in a snug house in a town.”

“Yes—the man who is never lonely in the Bush can be desperately lonely in a town. They have nothing to do: they can only eat and drink a certain amount, and wear good clothes and hate the feel of ’em. And no ambition left. I don’t wonder at the man who gets thankfully into old clothes and makes back for the old life—and the old hope. It really isn’t cash they want; it’s gold.”

“‘Cash’ does sound a poor sort of word, does it not?” Tommy pondered. “But ‘gold’—yes, it beckons. I think I will become a fossicker while you are riding in the hills.”

“Well, there’s a pick,” Jim told her, laughing. “But I don’t see you using it long, Tommy. You might try washing for gold if you like; we’ll be near a creek.”

“What does one wash?”

“One washes earth—the clay of the creek bed. One takes a tin dish and

puts the earth into it—they call it ‘dirt,’ but *you* won’t, of course!—and one covers it with water and shakes it round and round, rather like rocking a baby in a cradle.”

“But one does not rock a baby round and round,” protested his hearer. “It would be extremely bad for the baby!”

“Oh, well—any way you like,” Jim said, smiling. “You wiggle it, let’s say. That loosens up the dirt, and the gold, being heavier, drops to the bottom of the pan. It takes time and patience, Tommy, but then you have acquired both in your devotion to sheep. Then, when you think you’ve rinsed it enough you pour it off very gently, and look with fevered eyes for specks of gold in the bottom of the dish. Generally there aren’t any.”

“Oh!” said Tommy. “It does not sound exciting, the way you tell it. But if there are specks?”

“Why, then you wave your hat and shout ‘Eureka!’ which means; if Murty were saying it, ‘Hurroo! I have it found!’ And you scrape all the sediment out of the dish carefully, and go on washing dirt all day, and many days after.”

“I do not care for this way of getting rich,” Tommy stated. “I thought one wandered about and saw beautiful gleams in the ground and picked up large nuggets.”

“Some have done it,” said Jim. “They’re the lucky ones. But I’m afraid this country has been so thoroughly wandered over that there are no nuggets left. Still, you never know, Tommy. It does no harm to keep one’s eyes open.”

“I suppose so. But if one goes about looking always at the ground, one misses so much else—I want to see birds and trees and beautiful things. I do not think I would become a successful gold-seeker, Jim.”

“Take my advice and seek it in your beloved sheep,” Jim told her. “It’s much surer there. Now I’ll have to go ahead, Tommy: there isn’t room for two horses abreast up this gully. Don’t let your reins slack—this is pretty rough going.”

They had been climbing slowly but steadily, winding in and out among the foothills. No track was visible, but Jim had not hesitated. Now, as they rounded a spur he led the way up a steep narrow gully, rocky and treeless, where loose stones gave under the horses’ feet and careful riding was necessary, even at a walk.

It was a stiff pull; the horses were sweating when at length they gained the top. They found themselves on more level ground, among trees. North of this ridge there was another steep descent, beyond which rose yet higher hills. But Jim turned sharply eastward, and they followed the ridge for half an hour. Wally remained behind, to help the black boy to urge the laden pack-horses up the stiff climb. He left his own horse on the ridge and went back on foot, helping the struggling animals with his cheery voice, patting them as they

stumbled on the loose stones. Above them his horse whinnied as if to encourage them; Billy brought up the rear, shouting in a queer mixture of tongues.

The pack-horses came out on the ridge at last, and stood with hanging heads and dripping sides.

“Good lads!” said Wally. He went from one to another, stroking them. “Wish I could get the packs off and give you a drink—you earned it. We’ll spell them for a few minutes, Billy.”

“Plenty,” said Billy, dismounting. “Them pfallers climb all same rock—wallaby!” He grinned, rubbing his horse’s neck. It did not occur to him to ask whether Wally knew the way that they must take; there was no path, but, to his blackfellow’s eyes, the party ahead had left a hundred tracks. Billy could have followed unhesitatingly. But he liked the fact that Wally had waited for him.

Jim led his followers in single file along the tree-grown ridge until it ended suddenly in a steep bluff. They looked down from it upon a winding valley between the tangled mass of hills. A little creek sang through it, far below them, running swiftly to join the river they had crossed in the morning, though it had many miles of tortuous bends to cover before it came out into the wider stream. Under the bluff the valley widened into a little grassy plain, dotted with trees, the creek running at its farther edge.

“There’s where we camp,” Jim said, pointing downwards. “It looks as if it had been made for a camp,” Norah remarked. “How do we get down, though?”

“Oh, there’s a way, a hundred yards back; but I thought I would bring you here to see the view. Wally and I saw this place when we came out last time, and it struck us as a good spot to camp.”

“Have you been further than that valley?” Mr. Linton asked.

“Not in this direction. We have explored near our boundary fences, of course, but we have a lot to find out about the country in between. But we’ll know more before we go back this time. Well, suppose we get down.”

He wheeled his horse and led the way back for a few moments, halting where the ridge sloped gently downwards. There was a natural path a little from the top: a ledge, some distance of which was visible before it was lost to sight behind a mass of rock.

“We went down on foot, but it’s quite easy for horses,” he said. “I’ll lead. Don’t ride too near the edge, Bill, and don’t forget to hold your pony up.”

Bill did not like it very much. Topsy slithered down the first slope, and he had visions of going on, unchecked, down to the bottom. But they reached the ledge in safety, and he followed at Jim’s heels, setting his teeth, determined not to be afraid. They edged past the rock. The ledge wound gently downwards, sometimes rather too narrow for comfort, sometimes broadening; quite an easy path, he found, though his saddle was inclined to slip forward on Topsy’s

neck.

On the lower side they looked down upon a sea of tree-tops, a tossing mass of dark green, growing so thickly that they could see nothing of the gully into which the ridge dropped. Above them its side was bare, the sparse grass scarred in more than one place by old landslips. One had evidently come down not long before, for loose earth and stones littered the ridge, and a little way down the great mass of the slide had come to rest against a clump of trees. Crushed bushes and saplings showed the force of its descent.

“Plenty of those in the hills,” Jim said, pointing to it.

“Aren’t you afraid of one falling on some of your bullocks?” Bill asked.

“There’s always the chance, of course. But the bullocks are pretty wary—something seems to warn hill-cattle when a landslide is coming. Murty declares that the Good People warn them.”

“Who are they?”

“Fairies—only an Irishman calls them the Good People.”

“Murty doesn’t believe in fairies, does he?” Bill asked, surprised.

“I’m hanged if I know. He might not admit it, if you asked him. All the same, there are things he won’t do, for fear of offending them. And I believe he was in earnest when he said they warned the cattle.”

“Well, you don’t believe it, do you?”

“Me? No, of course not. I think that cattle hear things that we don’t—movements in the earth, or the first faint cracking of tree-roots when the slide is just going to start. Anyhow, I hope our cattle have quick ears. I should hate to think of some poor brute lying with a broken leg, with no one to put him out of his misery.”

Bill thought over this conversation as they rode downwards. It puzzled him. He had been told at a very early age that there were no such things as fairies. Only babies believed in them, he thought. Someone had given him *Peter Pan*, and his mother had said it was a very silly book, so that Bill was ashamed to admit that he had liked it. That a grown-up should actually believe in fairies was puzzling enough, even had it been just an ordinary grown-up, such as a governess.

But Murty! Murty, who knew all there was to know about cattle and bush-fires and snakes and bushrangers and horses. Murty whom he had come to regard as a person of knowledge and power, second only to Jim: whom no job could daunt, for whom no question was too hard to answer. And he believed in fairies! Nothing could remove Murty from the pedestal he occupied in Bill’s mind—but it is to be feared that he wobbled slightly on it.

Bill forgot his problem a little later when the ledge ended in the gully already opening out into the creek valley where they were to camp. The horses pricked their ears, eager for good grass and water; Topsy broke into a little jog.

Jim rode on to the far end of the tiny plain, where the bluff on which they had stood seemed to shoulder forward, as though it wished to reach the little creek, which rippled not fifty yards from its base. Someone had evidently camped here long ago: the poles forming the framework of a rough hut still stood erect, though the roof and sides were gone, and grass grew thickly within.

“Here we are.” Jim dismounted, pulling off his saddle. “Glad enough to get rid of that, aren’t you, old man?” He rubbed his horse’s nose.

“This is a lovely place,” Tommy said. “I wonder who lived here.”

“Some of your fossickers, I should think. He must have had a pretty substantial hut, and he certainly had good bark to roof it—it was all lying about the ground when Wally and I came this way. We picked it up and stacked it; it was too good to be left to rot. It’s over there.” He nodded towards a number of slabs of thick iron-bark, leaning against a rock. “It only wants nailing on to make a perfectly good hut.”

“First-rate,” Mr. Linton said, approvingly. “And the spur is almost solid rock at this place—no danger of landslides.”

“No; we can build wurleys against it. Well, we’ll get as much as we can done before the pack-horses turn up.”

Everyone was soon at work. The horses were let go, hobbled to prevent their straying too far. Saddles and bridles were stowed under a tree. Bill was set to gather firewood, making a pile near the blackened stones where two uprights and a cross-bar still stood—the one-time cooking-place of the last camper. There was plenty of dead wood strewn under the trees; his pile grew rapidly. Jim and Bob had brought hatchets in their valises; they went off to a patch of scrub further down the creek, where they lopped brushwood to build wurleys—upright poles must wait until an axe arrived with the pack-horses. Tommy and Norah accompanied them, gathering up the brushwood, which they carried back to the camp: under protest from the boys, who declared that it was not girls’ work—protests which the brushwood bearers loftily disregarded. Mr. Linton carried the slabs of iron-bark to the hut framework and placed them in position, ready for nailing.

Voices sounded on the ridge above, and presently Wally rode out of the gully, followed by the pack-horses, Billy bringing up the rear. Then activity redoubled. The girls and Bill were recalled from wood-gathering to unpack the loads, while all the men settled to the work of hut-building—at which the blackfellow was worth any two white men. It was agreed that the bark hut should be a general living-room and storehouse—a dining-room in case of bad weather; while sleeping-huts were erected at the foot of the cliff. Those for the male members of the expedition were mere shelters, for Tommy and Norah something more ambitious was built.

“This is a desirable suburban villa,” declared Tommy, as she arrived with Norah to inspect the work—each carrying an armful of blankets.

“Girls must be kept dry—and Billy has found a tree with good bark,” responded Wally: his utterance less cheerful than usual, since his lips held several nails. “There!—I’ve dropped ’em—pick ’em up, Norah, like a dear. You are going to have an elegant bark roof and front with a door.”

“What about a window?” asked Norah, cruelly.

“You don’t get one. If you want to look at anything you come outside to do it. Your sides will be brush, so you’ll get plenty of air.”

“And the door won’t be a door, only a doorway,” Jim said. “You can have a refined piece of hessian for a door—there’s the bit I wrapped the axe in.”

“Must we sleep in there?” Tommy said, peering into the murky interior of the ‘villa.’ “Will it not be stuffy?”

“Talk of black ingratitude!” said Wally. “We build ’em a palace, Jim, and they turn up their noses at it! Norah hasn’t said so, but I know her nose.”

“Oh, you knew I wouldn’t sleep in there unless rain drove me in,” his wife said, calmly. “We’ll have our bunks just outside, Tommy. But it’s a beautiful hut in case of rain, and to dress in. I suppose you will put on a verandah, won’t you, boys?” At which Wally grasped the axe menacingly, and they fled.

“Tommy, come and make a fire,” said Norah, when they were out of earshot. “We’ll boil the billy. They’re so hot, poor things, and they wouldn’t dream of asking for tea—but how they will love it!”

“I also, how I will love it!” said Tommy. “It seems years since I drank anything.”

“Then you take the billy to the creek while I get the fire going,” Norah told her. “No, I’ll get Bill—that small boy is doing every bit of heavy work he can. I saw his red head a moment ago, shining over a load of brushwood three times too big for him: he fled to it as soon as we had finished the unpacking. Where are you, Bill?” She raised her voice.

“I’m buildin’ a hut, Norah,” came a voice, with a protesting note in its pipe. “Must I come?”

The girls looked at each other and laughed.

“One may not detach a man from his work,” Tommy said. “Tell him so, Norah—I will get the water.”

“It doesn’t matter, Bill,” Norah called. She lit the fire, and very soon they carried a steaming billy of tea to the builders, who greeted them with shouts of welcome.

“Merciful women consider their beasts—sometimes,” said Wally, sitting on the grass with a pannikin in one hand and a large slice of cake in the other. “I wondered lately why we had brought you, but now there seems reason in it. Bill, how do you like making camp?”

“Gorgeous,” said Bill, with his mouth full.

“Bill is working harder than any of you,” Norah remarked. “Which job do you like best, Bill?”

“Oh—wurleys. Billy’s showing me how to build one. It’s going to be a beauty.” He stretched himself happily. “Camping’s great!”

“Sometimes,” said Mr. Linton, dryly. “There have been times when I have wished myself under a roof that did not drip.”

“I don’t b’lieve it’s going to rain,” Bill stated, defiantly.

“Neither do I—just now. But I remember a time when I was travelling, and had to camp in pretty thick bush. And it rained—*how* it rained! And there were leeches.”

“Ugh!” shuddered Tommy.

“The brutes dropped from everywhere. Trees, tree-ferns, creepers—everything seemed full of them. If you stood under a tree for a minute you found half a dozen on your neck.”

“But what are they?” Bill asked, bewildered.

“Unpleasant little black insects that look like a tiny thread of cotton. They fasten upon you and suck your blood until they swell out tremendously.”

“But would they kill you?” Bill’s eyes were wide. “I didn’t know you had things like that in the Bush.”

“We have none in this part of the country. That was in South Gippsland, where the scrub is very dense and very wet. They wouldn’t kill you there unless you sat permanently under a tree and let them do their worst. I didn’t. I had one unpleasant night and then I fled. The beastly things even got into my boots.”

“They’re pretty fierce in the Himalayas,” Wally said. “A fellow in France told me that there are parts of the jungle that the leeches simply rule during the rainy season. Neither men nor animals can stay there: they have to get out and leave it to them. He said that a few hours in the leech jungle would be enough to kill a man; he’d be absolutely covered with leeches.”

“What beats me,” said Jim, “is what they live on when they can’t get blood to suck. They must need it pretty badly, to judge by their energy when it’s within their reach.”

“I s’pose they eat each other,” suggested Bill.

“They wouldn’t get any blood to speak of then. And any other food must seem very flat to them. Well, it’s a mystery, but we can’t stop to discuss it now. Come along, Bill, or you won’t get your wurley finished before dark.” At which Bill forgot all about leeches, and fled.

The sun had set, and the short twilight was closing in, before the camp was in readiness: by which time everyone was earnestly looking forward to occupying the sacking bunks slung on crossed sticks outside the row of bush

huts under the cliff. No one dreamed of sleeping inside: the night was warm and still, and fine weather seemed a certainty. In the old hut were stored the provisions, carefully wrapped to exclude ants, while from the lower boughs of a gum-tree close by hung makeshift meat-safes—boards, furnished with hooks and draped with mosquito-net tied at the bottom. Logs had been rolled near the fireplace to serve as seats. Tommy and Norah had the evening meal ready when at length the workers downed tools and came across to them.

“Looks all jolly and homelike, doesn’t it, Bill?” said Jim, casting a satisfied glance round the little valley. “Especially food.”

“I’m nearly too tired to eat anything, I b’lieve,” Bill said. “But it’s lovely.”

“Come to the creek for a wash, and you’ll feel better. You’ve worked like a horse. Soap handy, Nor? We need it.”

“All ready,” Norah said, producing soap and towels. “Don’t be long: I’m just going to make tea.”

“I had dreamed of a bathe, but it’s too late,” Wally flung his hat on the grass, revealing a grime-streaked face. “There’s a ripping bathing place, too. Do you want any firewood chopped, Nor, before I get to grips with the soap?”

“No; Bill has found plenty of short wood. Hurry, Wally; it will be dark very soon.” She smiled up at him from the fire, and Wally followed the others to the creek.

Bill found that he was not too tired to eat. He sat on a log and gnawed chicken-bones, scorning a knife and fork, or even a plate. Others might use them, but to Bill they seemed unworthy of a camper: and washing afterwards was a needless formality when there was grass everywhere on which to rub one’s hands. But the red head nodded before the meal was over. He slipped to the ground, leaning his back against the log. His eyelids drooped.

“Bed for you, Bill, old man.” Jim’s voice seemed a long way off.

“Goin’ to help wash up,” he muttered drowsily.

“Not to-night. Off you go.”

Jim hauled him to his feet, patting his shoulder. He bunked, rubbing a fist into each eye.

“I b’lieve I’m sleepy,” he announced.

He found himself stumbling as he went across to his wurley. It seemed a long business to get into his pyjamas; over the unlacing of his boots he was almost asleep. The cool touch of the grass under his bare feet roused him a little; he left his clothes lying where they fell and crept between his blankets. For a moment he heard the voices round the camp-fire and the song of the creek beyond.

“It’s jolly,” he murmured—and was asleep even as he spoke.

CHAPTER XII

THE NEW COUNTRY

THE SUN was rising when Bill stirred and woke. Something had been singing in his dreams. It was still singing as he turned in his bunk, feeling the unfamiliar touch of blankets under his cheek. Where were the sheets?—and the pillow? What was wrong with his bed? it was all queer. He yawned deeply, looking up. Where had the balcony roof gone? There was only sky!

The magpie in the tree close by broke into a fresh gurgle of deep song. He grew wide awake in a moment—and remembered.

“O-ooh!” he said; and hugged himself under the blankets. “I’m camping!”

He raised himself on one elbow, looking about him. The row of bunks stretched away under the rocky bluff; Norah and Tommy on his right, the others on his left. All were very still, save for an occasional snore. There was a subtle joy in finding himself the first awake. All the silent camp seemed his: all the Bush with its still greeting, the more still for the murmur of the creek in its narrow bed. Even the magpie had grown quiet, though it was yet in the tree; looking at him curiously, alert but unafraid. Bill smiled at it.

“H’lo!” he said.

The magpie, very naturally, did not reply. But Bill thought it looked friendly. He sat up, taking in his surroundings blissfully. There was the old hut, bark covered and grey: the ashes of the camp-fire, carefully scattered; the billy upside-down beside it. Upside-down on the logs near it were eight pannikins, washed and left to dry, and a pile of plates. He counted the pannikins carefully. It was queerly satisfying to see them there; to realise that he was truly in the Bush, where people did not use uninteresting things like cups, did not bother about saucers.

“I’ll camp out always when I’m a man!” he muttered.

A memory of a phrase in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, which Norah had read to him, drifted to his mind. “Folk that live in housen.” Puck did not think much of them, nor did Bill at the moment. “Folk that live in housen.” They could never know the glory of such a waking-up as this.

He decided that it was no longer possible to keep still, and rolled quietly out of his blankets. The air was pleasantly warm: no need for anything over his pyjamas. He thrust his feet into sand-shoes, stealing away from the sleepers: triumphing in his heart because they still slept and the camp was all his own. Even the queer hump on the ground in a red blanket was motionless, fifty yards away—the hump that was Billy.

The chink of a hobble-chain caught his ear. He turned, seeing the horses grazing at the end of the valley. Bill did not want humans at the moment, but he wanted Topsy as soon as he saw her, and he made for the horses.

Topsy edged away coyly: the head was the red head she knew, but the pyjamas were unfamiliar. Bill stood still, speaking to her, and the little mare came to him slowly, rubbing her nose against his shoulder while he talked in a low voice, telling her the things he could not say to anyone else—even to Jim. Then she fell to grazing again, and Bill strolled to the creek.

It was an interesting creek. Just at this point it was in a great hurry, having raced round the bend in a burst of curiosity to see what lay beyond. Then, finding itself in the valley, it cut itself a wider bed and grew quiet, though the current still ran swiftly in the middle. There were wattle-trees on either bank, a few late blooming ones still a shower of gold; and in the narrows there were submerged logs and fallen trees that divided the water into a network of pools. Bill decided that they might hold fish. Certainly there would be bathing where the stream ran clear and wide. And all kinds of thrilling places might lie hidden round the bends. You never could tell, with any creek; and the wild and wandering hill-waters held possibilities beyond those of the tamer streams of the plains. There might be rapids, waterfalls, little secret places in deep gullies among the rocks. There might be gold. But gold did not call to him so much as the other adventures of the singing stream.

He sat on a log for a while, watching the racing water in the narrow channel. Then he wandered down-stream until he came to the stretch near the camp once more: a queer little figure in the silent morning, his red hair a vivid spot of colour, his striped pyjamas probably the first the creek had ever seen. He caught sight of his reflection in the water and laughed.

“I do look rum!” he said. “Wonder if anyone’s awake yet.”

He glanced across to the huts. No one stirred. A brilliant thought came to him.

“I’ll make morning tea. What a lark!”

You would need to be a small boy on your first camping morning, a boy awake alone in a sleeping camp, to know what the thrill of the next twenty minutes meant for Bill. He had never made a fire, or made tea; but he had often watched Jim and Wally do both at picnics, and his brain was one which held details. He made a little heap of frayed bark and laid sticks across it, as he had seen them do. The matches were in the hut; he struck one carefully, holding his breath as the tiny flame caught the tinder-like bark, crept among it, began to lick the sticks hungrily. When it was burning well he raced to the creek to fill the billy.

“Oh, I do hope they won’t wake!” he breathed.

Someone had awakened already. Jim was lying on his side, watching him,

a twinkle in his eye. Not for worlds would he have risen to spoil the small boy's joy in his plan—all he hoped to do was very clear to Jim as he saw the quick, anxious look towards the bunks as Bill caught up the billy and fled. He watched him return carefully and put the can on the fire: laughed quietly at the rush to the hut for the tea materials, as though the water might boil before he could bring them back. Then Bill sat on the log, brooding over the billy, with many a backward glance at the sleepers; bounding to his feet when at last the lid rattled and the steam came out in a welcoming puff.

“Wonder how much tea he's putting in!” murmured Jim.

It was a point on which Bill was uncertain, but he thought it best not to err on the side of stinginess. He knit his brows, wondering how to get everything over to the bunks in one trip. It could not be done, he decided. So he stole over with the billy and the tin of condensed milk; returning for the sugar and the pannikins—strung together by a string through their handles. Wally stirred during his absence.

“You awake, Jim?”

“S-sh!” Jim whispered. “Bill has a game on.”

Bill came creeping back, trying unavailingly to prevent his load clattering. But there was comforting stillness. He ranged the mugs on the grass, and poured out the tea with a face of stern seriousness. Then, a pannikin in either hand, he stole towards Norah's bunk.

“Tea, girls?” He tried hard to make his voice as offhand as Jim's would have been. But it came in an excited pipe. In their distant bunks Wally and Jim chuckled, muffling the sounds with their blankets.

Norah rolled over, becoming, as was her habit, broad awake in a moment. Tommy merely groaned.

“Tea? Bill, you angel! Wake up, Tommy, someone has got tea.”

“Ow-w-w!” yawned Tommy. “I think I need more sleep.”

“No, you don't,” Bill said, sternly. “You want tea.”

“I do, indeed,” said Tommy, rubbing her eyes. “And more sleep.”

“Well, you take this,” commanded Bill. “Hurry up—I've got the other pannikins to fill.”

“But who brewed it?” Norah asked. “Jim?” She sat up, looking down the row of bunks. “Why, they're all in bed! Bill, you never made tea!”

“'M,” said Bill, nodding. “Hope it's decent.”

“You didn't light the fire?”

“Did,” said Bill, grinning delightedly. From Jim and Wally came a long wail.

“We—want—tea!”

“Oh, here, take it, Tommy!” He thrust the pannikin into her hand, running back to the billy.

"Well, you're a great lad, Bill!" said Mr. Linton. There was a thankful chorus as the tea went down the line. Bill kept Jim's to the last, and Jim said briefly, "Thanks, mate." The small boy glowed.

"Biscuits in the hut, Bill, darling," called Norah—and Bill went for them at the double. He sat on his bunk with his own tea, receiving the joyful comments of the multitude with a violent effort at unconcern, belied by his dancing eyes.

"I've been up ever so long. Been exploring down by the creek. It's a ripping creek. The horses are all right Jim."

"Good man!" said Jim.

"An' there's a gorgeous bathing-place. Coming?"

"Rather! Everybody going to bathe?" called Jim. There was a chorus of assent, mingled with groans.

"I think I'm too old," Mr. Linton suggested delicately. Jeers greeted this remark.

"Well, I'll be the first hero," Bob said, throwing off his blankets. "Race you into togs, Bill." Six figures in pyjamas dived into the wurleys. David Linton looked, laughed, and decided that there was something infectious in the atmosphere of youth. He followed more slowly.

The hill water proved rather a shock to early morning bathers; it was icy after the milder temperature of the Billabong lagoon. No one showed any desire to stay in long. Faces were still scarlet when they gathered round the camp-fire for breakfast. Wally was presiding over a huge frying-pan: a heartening fragrance of sizzling sausages greeted them.

"Come along, everybody," shouted the cook, brandishing a fork. "Each man line up with his plate." He dispensed sausages swiftly. "Now then, Billy—how many can you eat?"

"Plenty!" said Billy, hopefully. He went off, grinning, to eat behind the hut.

"Billy is in no hurry to start back," remarked Mr. Linton. "He suggested to me just now that it would be a good thing if he cut plenty wood first: and when I agreed to that he looked bashful and said, 'Plenty this pfeller make table or two longa camp one-time.' So I said he could."

"How will he do that?" asked Tommy.

"Oh, he'll drive in uprights and make some sort of a table-top with slabs or shingles—it depends on what wood he can split. They will be narrow, but it is handy not to have to stoop for everything, when one is getting a meal ready. And I've never enjoyed carving on the ground, especially for a family of this size."

"I was thinking of doing it, but I'll gladly leave it to Billy," remarked Jim. "One always wants to make all sorts of contrivances round a camp; if I gave way to the ideas that surge within me I'd start now and have this place

thoroughly fitted as a summer residence by the time we had to go home. And I wouldn't have looked at cattle!"

"You'd better curb those ideas," Wally told him "I brought you out here to spy out the land, not to act as a house-furnisher and decorator."

"I demand one thing, though," said Norah. "I want a hanging shelf."

"Never did I meet a woman who did not want a shelf," said her father, resignedly. "Where is it to be?"

"Just a big sheet of bark, Dad. It could hang by ropes at each end from one of the straight limbs. Just to discourage the ants from sugar and jam and milk and oddments."

"It won't discourage the flies."

"Oh, I have plenty of mosquito-net. I'll deal with the flies—and goodness knows, there are plenty to deal with!" She brushed them away from the sugar as she spoke.

"Very well; I'll fix it," he said. "And I'll tell Billy to put a long bench inside the hut; it's really rather a nuisance to store everything on the ground. What are your plans, boys?"

"I think we'll take it easy and poke about this neighbourhood this morning," Jim answered. "We might get the horses and explore a little in the afternoon. Then, to-morrow morning, we should like to take some food and make an early start, not getting back until night."

"Can I——?" began Bill, hurriedly—and stopped.

"Not to-morrow, old chap. But you can come this afternoon, if you like."

It was as much as Bill had dared to hope, so he went on with his breakfast happily. One day at a time was good enough for Bill—especially such days as these.

"It is the rule of this camp," said Norah, when they had finished, "that every one makes his own bed. Then no one can make unpleasant comments when his blankets fall off. I'll make yours, Bill."

"No, you won't," rejoined Bill. "At least, I mean, I didn't mean to be horrid, Norah. But I can do it."

"Well, we'll help each other," she said, smiling at him. "Blankets are wily things until you get used to them, especially on a bunk."

"Mine fell off in the night," said Bob. "I woke somewhere about dawn, very cold, with everything but me on the grass. I wasn't a bit amused, and the grass was very cold for a barefooted lad wallowing round in the dark." He sighed. "That, of course, was why I wasn't up to make early tea!"

"Then of course he will make it to-morrow, Bill, will he not?" asked Tommy. "And it will not be half so good as yours."

"Don't count on me," requested Bob in haste. "There are lots of things that make me sleep late in the morning—when I've no cows to milk. By the way,

Bill, how are the milking lessons getting on?"

"All right," Bill told him. "I can milk two of the cows. I can't manage old Bessy: she kicks. I tried, but she sent me and the bucket flying, and I got all over milk, and Brownie said I'd better stick to the ones that didn't kick—till I was bigger, anyhow. But I'll beat her yet. I bet I will," he ended fiercely.

"Joe says Bill is a good pupil," Norah observed.

"Joe says I could get a job on a dairy farm after a bit," Bill stated. "But I don't want one. I'm going to have a cattle-station."

"You stick to that, old man," said Jim. "Anyone can milk cows, as far as I'm concerned. You and I will go in for Shorthorns."

At which prospect of bliss Bill could only open his mouth and stare at him, speechless. Jim rose, patting the red head.

"Time we washed up," he said. "We can't be as lazy as this every day."

No one was inclined for much exertion. They made the camp ship-shape—it came as something of a shock to Bill to find that neatness in a camp seemed as necessary as it was at Billabong. Everyone lent a hand, so that the work was quickly finished. Then they strolled to the creek and followed it down-stream, coming presently to a place where the banks were high and rocky, so close together that the imprisoned water foamed wildly far below, leaping over boulders in its struggle to press onward. Bill tossed in a stick; the water took it and dragged it below the surface, tossing it out presently to whirl it round and round in an eddy. Then it was sucked out of sight again, and this time it did not reappear.

"Not a nice place to get caught," remarked Mr. Linton. "The current runs very deep in that cleft—it would not be easy for a strong swimmer to get out. Keep away from the banks here, Bill, if you go exploring alone."

Bill assented, regretfully. He liked the wild, fighting water: it seemed to call to something in him that he could not understand. He would have liked to watch it for hours.

Farther down there was an abrupt bend, where the stream hurled itself against the opposite wall and then shot away, out of sight. As they followed it a dull roar came to their ears. Round the bend the banks fell away rapidly, and they saw that ahead was a great shelf of rock forming the creek-bed, ending with a steep drop. The water swirled forward. Then it gathered itself into a smooth green wave and curved downwards, out of sight. The roar of its fall echoed through the Bush.

"Oh!" said Tommy, breathlessly, "you did not tell us you had a waterfall all your own!"

"I didn't know it," Jim said, laughing. "It seems you and I have a lot to learn, Wal."

They scrambled down the steeply-shelving bank to the foot of the fall. It

was not very large, but the driving force of the stream, still high from melted snows, made it impressive enough in its setting of dense scrub. There were little half-drowned ferns clinging to every crevice in the rocks, swaying wildly as the flying drops caught them. Below, the stream widened, and the force of the rushing water grew gradually less as it cut its way through ground that was free from rocks. It curved out of sight presently, so quietly that it almost seemed ashamed of having been so excited in the granite cleft.

“This is a jolly place,” said Bill, firmly. “Can we stay here?”

No one was inclined to leave this new plaything. They sat down on moss-grown logs, while Bill dashed wildly up and down the slope, tossing sticks into the water above the fall and racing back to see them carried over the lip and whirled away below. It had its charm, even for older people: Wally and Norah joined him soon, and presently the others followed, until Mr. Linton was left alone, peacefully smoking. Sticks grew too tame: the boys levered logs to the edge of the cleft and sent them crashing downwards; and the stream treated them as though they had been feathers, flinging them head-foremost over the fall.

Never had Bill known such a game. It woke something new in him; something they had not guessed. He raced up and down, excited, eager: tugging at logs beyond his strength, uttering gay little shouts of joy as the stream took them, to play with him. His hat had disappeared, his face was scarlet, his eyes dancing. The sound of the happy little voice floated down to David Linton; he listened to it, pipe in hand.

“Poor little lad!” he said to himself. “He’s growing young again!”

Memories of the hard-faced, sullen youngster who had come to Billabong, hating the world, came back to him. They were memories that hurt a man who had known only happy children: who had loved to see them happy.

“Well, I’m glad we’ve managed to bury Percival,” he thought. “It’s our job to see that no one brings him to life again.”

He fell to wondering how this calamity might be prevented; and was still deep in the problem when a hail from the bank above brought him to his feet. It was time to get back: Jim had looked at his watch, amazed to find how the morning had slipped away. They followed the creek back to the camp.

The horses were caught and saddled after the mid-day meal, and they rode in the opposite direction, climbing from one rise to another, dipping into deep gullies between. Here and there they came upon little knots of cattle, the young bullocks which had been turned into the ranges some months earlier. Their owners looked them over keenly, well pleased.

“They’re coming on better than I thought they could,” Wally commented, riding slowly round a dozen of the half-wild beasts that showed a strong desire to gallop away from the presence of man. “There’s plenty of good feed in these

hills, Jim.”

Jim nodded assent.

“It seems to suit them. We’ll have to come out and muster them all before long; they’re getting as wild as goats. There they go!”

The bullocks decided that there was danger—that to remain was not prudent. They flung up their horns suddenly and raced off down a long gully, bucking and kicking as they went. Bill broke into a shout of laughter.

“They do look funny! I b’lieve they think they’re horses.”

“We shall need good dogs when we muster out here,” Wally said.

“Yes—and sure-footed horses. It’s no joke galloping in this country.”

“*Could* you gallop?” Bill asked, looking doubtfully at the stony rises where sparse scrub clung to the hungry earth.

“Sometimes one wouldn’t think so, but one does,” said David Linton, laughing. “It’s queer what country one can gallop over, with a good horse under one. When you see a bullock getting away from you, Bill, you don’t always stop to notice what the going is like.”

“I might,” said Bill, truthfully. “But Topsy wouldn’t!”

“And after all, you leave it to the horse,” added Jim. “He knows his job.”

They did not go far: Tommy was not used to long and rough rides, and she still looked tired from the day before. Not that Jim or Wally mentioned this. Instead, they stated that they wanted to keep their horses fresh for the next morning, and headed for home—for which Tommy was thankful, though nothing would have induced her to say so. It was one of Tommy’s unexpressed fears, that an English girl with a French upbringing could never become a really good Australian.

In spite of this concern for his horse, Jim did not turn him out when he got back to the camp. He tied him to a tree, and made a sign to Bill, who trotted over to him on Topsy.

“Don’t let your pony go,” Jim said. “I want her presently.”

“Me too?” inquired Bill.

“Oh yes, you too. Tie her up and bring me the axe.”

Bill went off obediently. Jim walked to the scrub near the end of the little plain, scanning it for saplings. He had selected the type he wanted when Bill arrived, panting, with the axe, having run all the way. He watched while Jim felled the sapling, lopped off its crown, and cut two stout forked sticks. These he proceeded to sharpen to a point, while Bill watched him, puzzled.

“That’s that,” remarked Jim, when the second crotched stick was ready. “Know what I’m doing?”

“N-no,” admitted Bill. “At least, I know what you’re doing, but I don’t know what it’s for.”

“Well, you’ll see presently. Can you carry one of those?”

He shouldered the sapling, taking it out on the open ground: returning for the axe and the other stick.

“Now, we’ll drive these two into the ground, Bill.” He did so, with blows from the axe-head. “And now we’ll drop the sapling into the crotches. And there you are. Now do you know?”

Bill was round-eyed.

“O-oh! It’s a jump!”

“Guessed it in one,” said Jim, laughing. “Do you think you could put Topsy over that?”

Bill drew a long breath.

“I don’t know. But I’ll try.”

“Good man. You’ll do it all right. But we’ll make a better job of it before we start. We’ll pack up the space under the bar with tea-tree; she’ll jump a brush fence much better than an open one. And we build wings, and then she won’t run off at the sides. I don’t fancy Topsy would, anyhow; but we may as well make sure.”

Wally strolled up and offered to help, and the jump was quickly finished. It was a low jump, but it looked formidable enough to the small boy, who had never tried a leap. His heart pounded a little as they went for their horses: the pounding increased when he faced the fence. He hoped that Jim could not guess that he was afraid.

Jim spoke quietly, approving the set little face.

“I’ll give you a lead on Monarch. Ride up with me, and we’ll let them look at it.”

“Don’t let Monarch lean against it, or it will collapse,” chaffed Wally.

“Not it—it wasn’t you who drove the props in,” returned Jim. “Now they know just what it’s like, Bill, so they have no excuse for not jumping properly. You’re quite all right, old chap: take her at it at a canter, sit back, and keep your hands down. Knees well in.”

They turned the horses and walked them back a little way. Jim glanced at him.

“Feel all right?”

“Y-yes, Jim.”

“Of course you are. Never doubt that when you’re going to jump. Throw your heart over a fence, and your horse will follow it—that’s a sound old rule. Start Topsy just as I get to the fence.”

He wheeled, giving Bill a smile of encouragement. Monarch cantered off steadily, popping over the fence almost in his stride. Jim turned in his saddle, watching.

Topsy followed him fast. She had been a show-ring pony in her day, and the mere sight of a jump enlivened her. Bill found that he had little time to feel

afraid. He sat very straight, trying to remember all he had been told—wondering if Jim would be horribly ashamed of him if he grasped at the pommel. It was tempting: he kept his hands down with an effort, gripping with his knees. Then he suddenly found himself in the air—miles high, it seemed. Where was the saddle? he certainly was not sitting on it. Then he felt it again, and they had landed—and he was still on Topsy, and she was pulling up of her own accord beside Monarch. And Jim’s hand was on his shoulder, and he was saying, “Good man!”

“I say!” he gasped. “Did I do it all right?”

“Jolly good for a first attempt,” Jim told him. “Didn’t he, Wally?”

“Rather!” Wally assented. “Nothing much in it, after all, is there, Bill?”

“I don’t know much about it,” confessed Bill. “She just seemed to shoot up into the air ’bout fifty feet, an’ I thought I was going to glory. I nearly did come off, didn’t I, Jim?”

“Well—there was daylight between you and the saddle,” Jim said, smiling. “But you’re not the first who has shown daylight, by a long way.”

“And he got back all right—which is more than some do,” remarked Wally.

“I—I was scared, you know, Jim,” Bill admitted, shamefaced.

“There are several kinds of fool—and one of them is the man who never admits that he’s been scared,” was Jim’s dry comment. “Plenty of plucky people have been very badly scared, but that doesn’t matter if they go ahead and do their job. You would have jumped a great deal better if you hadn’t been wondering if you’d fall off. That’s so, isn’t it?”

“’M,” said Bill, reddening. “I s’pose so.”

“Well, now you know you won’t. So take her back and put her over it again. There’s no need for me to give you a lead this time.”

Bill obeyed, still a long way from being confident. There was a lonely feeling in facing the jump by himself. But it had to be done; he gave Topsy her head and hoped for the best. Topsy trotted at first; the jump was too low for her to be really interested. She broke into a slow canter just before she reached it, and went over it easily.

This time Bill believed that there had been less daylight visible. He was rather pleased with himself as they trotted up to Jim.

Jim, however, did not look very pleased. Bill waited for a word of commendation, but none came.

“You didn’t listen to me, old chap.”

“Me?” Bill looked up at him, bewildered. Jim smiled.

“No. I said, ‘Put her over it,’ didn’t I?”

“Well—I did!” The tone was injured.

“That’s what you didn’t do. You just let her take you over it. That’s a very

different thing. Topsy knew you were leaving it to her, so she just took her own time and jumped it anyhow.”

“Oh!” said Bill, hanging his head.

“You see the difference, don’t you, Bill? The man on top has got to be the master. If you don’t boss Topsy she will boss you—and that is no good to either of you. Try again, and this time pick the exact spot you mean her to jump—and send her at it as if you meant it.”

The dogged strain in Bill came to the top as he rode away. For the first time he was angry with Topsy. He had trusted her and he felt that she had let him down.

“Well, you jolly well won’t do it this time,” he told her.

It astonished him to realise how quickly the little mare felt his mood and responded. There was no trotting when he wheeled and sent her at the jump: He held her straight at the centre of the bar; she went hard and fast, pricking her ears as she took it lightly. Bill had not time to think of sticking on; his knees seemed to grip of their own accord. This time Jim’s “Good man!” came sharply, and the boy flushed at his tone.

“There’s a difference, isn’t there, Bill?”

“Rather! That was great!” Bill said. “At least—I don’t know if I stuck on enough. But I liked the feel.”

“Of course you did. You were boss that time, and Topsy knew it. Off you go again, and remember to keep your hands down.”

The next jump was equally successful, and Bill began to feel thoroughly at home. Nevertheless, he hesitated at Jim’s next words.

“I think we’ll raise it a bit, Wally.”

“Oh!” said Bill, doubtfully. “Think I can go higher?”

“Well, she cleared it last time with plenty to spare. It’s really too low a jump for her. You’ll find a higher one just as easy.”

Bill was not sure. He had begun to think he had done pretty well; well enough for a first attempt. He watched rather gloomily while Jim and Wally added another sapling to the jump. It seemed to Bill a very fat sapling. He was not sure that Topsy liked its look any better than he did himself.

“There you are, Bill. Send her over!”

He rode at the little fence awkwardly, changing his mind in the last few strides as to the best place to jump. Topsy resented the pull to one side: she held on with determination, tossing her head; then checked for a moment, and bucked over it roughly, stumbling as she landed. Bill shot over her head in a neat curve, coming to rest in a patch which unfortunately harboured a thistle.

He was up in a moment, scarlet with anger. Topsy had stopped dead and was looking at him; he ran at her, seizing the bridle, and kicked her.

“That was your fault, you brute!”

He raised his foot again, while Topsy struggled to pull away. A hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

“Stop that, Bill! A man doesn’t kick his horse.”

“Yes, I will, then! It was her fault.”

“I think you won’t.” There was something in the slow voice that made him pause. He stood still, panting. Tears were near, but he was too angry for them yet. He saw Wally stroll away slowly.

“You let me go!” He wriggled his shoulder, but the big hand did not move. There was silence for a moment. Then the tense little body relaxed. His breath came quickly. He went down in a heap at Jim’s feet, sobbing.

Jim sat down on the grass near him and smoked in silence. The heavy sobbing spent itself, but the boy remained motionless, his head buried in his arms. Jim put a hand on his shoulder presently, and this time there was only friendliness in the touch.

“You see, old chap,” he said quietly, “a man never loses his temper with an animal, if he’s worth his salt. It doesn’t pay, and it isn’t fair. A man expects to get the best out of his animals, and he has to begin by being just. If you have to punish an animal never do it when you’re angry.”

“She chucked me off,” came the choked voice.

“No, she didn’t. You fell off. And it was your own fault: you muffed her at the jump. There wasn’t any sin in that; bigger men than you have done it. But it isn’t the square thing to blame Topsy.”

There was no sound from the heap on the grass.

“She trusted you,” Jim said. “You and Topsy are mates. When you went off she did the decent thing—she stopped and waited for you. Some day you’re going to be a good man with horses; but you’ve got to remember that it’s a big thing when they trust you. You can’t let them down. And a man does not kick a horse—even a bad horse.”

“Won’t she be mates any more?”

“She’ll be mates just the same as ever—because you’ll let her see it was just a mistake, and you’re sorry. It isn’t going to happen any more. You and I know that.”

Bill struggled with himself for a moment. Then he scrambled to his feet and went to Topsy. The little mare rubbed her nose against his shoulder as he patted her. Jim stood up and looked at them both. Bill turned to him suddenly.

“I’m sorry. I was a beast.”

“There’s a beast in most of us, hidden away somewhere,” Jim said, slowly. “I’ve got one, Bill. I’ve a rotten bad temper.”

“You! You never get wild.” Bill looked at him wonderingly.

“Well, I’ve learned to keep my beast in his place. But he’s there, and I know it. It’s a good thing to know, because you can be sure of keeping on top,

if you're watchful. Something you've got to learn, Bill, old man."

"I'll never learn," said Bill, miserably. "I just get mad all over, and I can't keep it inside me."

"I was like that when I was your size. Dad talked to me about it, and he gave me a saying to think over. He didn't make me learn it, or write it out, or anything like that; he just asked me to think it over. And I did, because I cared a lot for Dad. It was a saying about a man who ruled his spirit being greater than one who captured a city."

"But he couldn't be!"

"You think it over. I saw towns taken in the war, and very often the chap who got the credit didn't do the work himself. Other people did it for him. But no man on earth can help you to rule your spirit—it's a job you've got to tackle off your own bat. And—it's a pretty fine thing to do, Bill, old man."

Bill thought it over, standing with his arm across Topsy's neck; and Jim drew at his pipe and looked across the plain to the creek, where Wally sat on a log, watching the racing water.

"I—I'll have a jolly good try to—to rule it, Jim," said a low voice.

"And I'm ready to make a bet that you'll do it," Jim said, meeting his eyes. "Anyhow, I'm relying on you, mate. Now, how about putting Topsy over that fence once, just to show her you're good friends? A pony like Topsy doesn't like finishing a job badly—and neither do you."

Topsy seemed to understand very well; she romped over the jump in a way that brought a thrill to her rider's heart.

"Oh, I say—that was ripping!" he cried. "Can't she jump, Jim!"

"She can; and you sat jolly well. Tell you what, Bill—when we go home we'll fix up a set of jumps in the back paddock, and we'll all have steeplechases." And with that blissful vision ahead Bill rode back to camp in the condition described by Brownie as "a dither of joy."

CHAPTER XIII

BILL GOES EXPLORING

THE DAYS slipped away so quickly that Bill lost count of them. Jim and Wally returned from their first exploration, tired but happy, since all their cattle were doing well; they had found but one dead beast, and the possibilities were better than they had hoped. There were many stretches of good grazing, both on the wider ridges and in the gullies; they had seen more than one valley like the one in which they camped, where the grass grew thickly and the shelter from the hills had served the cattle well during the winter.

“But it’s hard riding,” said Jim. “Indeed a good deal has to be done on foot. The horses feel it. They’re not used to this sort of country. Dad, I think we’ll have to stay out here longer than we planned at first.”

“Hooray!” said Bill, softly.

“Well, I don’t suppose anyone minds staying longer,” Mr. Linton observed. “What does the family say?”

The remarks of the family showed clearly that they were prepared to remain indefinitely—save for Bob, who murmured unhappy things about fern cutting.

“But I can go back by myself,” he said. “There is no need for Tommy to come.”

“Oh, bother your old ferns!” Wally told him. “It’s time you forgot them for a bit, Bob. Look here—stay as long as we do, and when we go back we’ll come over and help you with them.”

“You have plenty of your own work, old chap; thanks, all the same.”

“No, it’s a good idea,” Mr. Linton said. “We can certainly help you with them, Bob.”

“We will make an expedition in force,” Norah affirmed. “All of us; the men, too. When Billabong descends in a body on your ferns there will not be much left of them at the end of the day. Bill will lead the attack, won’t you, Bill?”

“’M,” agreed Bill, energetically.

“Well, that’s settled,” Jim said, cheerfully, “so don’t worry us any longer, Bob. I propose that we explore ranges one day and take it easy the next, to spell the horses——”

“And you?” queried Norah, gently.

Jim grinned.

“Well, Wally and I don’t feel as young as you might think after a day like to-day. We shan’t be sorry to have a loaf to-morrow.”

“I am footsore,” declared Wally—“and that’s a thing I didn’t expect. But when you scramble up and down a few dozen of these ridges you become aware of your feet. We don’t walk enough, as a rule, to harden them, I suppose. There is a blister dawning on my left heel.”

“A blister is a small thing, but it’s no fun,” remarked Jim. “I found that out in Germany, when we were escaping from the jolly old Hun. So we’ll go easy to-morrow. When does Billy come out again with tucker, Norah?”

“On Saturday. I can send a note to Brownie when he goes back; she can send us supplies every third day.” She laughed. “Billy won’t mind how long we stay here. He loves coming out into the Bush—even with a pack-horse.”

But it was not Billy who appeared on Saturday. Instead, Murty O’Toole rode into the camp with a laden pack-horse, just as the sun dipped behind the hills.

“Hallo, Murty!” Mr. Linton greeted him. “Where’s the black boy?”

“He’s afther having a bit of bad luck, sir,” said the Irishman, carelessly. “I dunno whether you wouldn’t call it bad judgment. Anny way, ’tis a broken leg it’s landed him with!”

“You don’t say so!” They gathered round Murty, concern on every face. “Poor old Billy! Is it a bad break, Murty?”

“It is not, but quite simple: I misremember the name the doctor put on it, but it’s here,” said Murty, tapping his shin. “That’s all that’s wrong wid him, barrin’ that he’s in the worst of tempers.”

“I don’t wonder,” said Norah. “Poor old Billy—to have to lie still for weeks. How did it happen, Murty?”

“That was the bad judgment.” The Irishman’s eyes twinkled. “He tuk it into his head that he cud ride Mr. Wally’s chestnut—the young one. ’Twas himself knew well he had no right to be touchin’ him. I towld him ’twas as well his leg was bruk.”

“Well!” said Wally, expressively. “Is the chestnut all right, Murty?”

“Right as rain, sir: not a scratch on him. Billy got on him in the yard: I’d run them in to get old Whitefoot here, and left ’em while I had me dinner. I’m thinkin’ the temptation was too much for Billy. He saddled him up an’ got on him, an’ the chestnut went to market good an’ plinty: I never saw a horse buck harder.”

“I didn’t think any horse could have got rid of Billy,” Jim said.

“Well, he stuck him all right. But the horse managed to cross his legs, an’ down he came, an’ the boy’s leg under him. So that was how,” finished Murty.

“What did you do?” asked Norah.

“Yerra, we tied up his leg—Dave’s a mighty good first-aid man—and we

took him to Cunjee in the big car. I was in dhread of me life with Dave dhrivin', but luck was wid us. So Doctor Anderson made us leave Billy in the hospital. I wint in yestherday to see him. Very sour, he was."

"He would be," nodded Wally.

"He have no conversation," Murty said, grinning. "'Plenty' is about all he'll say, an' the nurses seem to mistrust it—'tis thinkin' they are that he's askin' for more nourishment, an' they not wishful to give it. But I tuk him in his knife an' some wood to carve boomerangs an' waddies, an' he'll be happier."

"What will the nurses say to that, I wonder?" Tommy pondered.

"Well, now, they looked glum. But I raisioned with them. 'Is it yourself?' says I, 'that 'ud be recoverin' if you had to lay still, an' you not able to read or even crochay—an' wid no light chat about you to pass the time?' I says. So they saw the rights of it. There's wan wid a twinkle in her eye, an' she said she'd shweep up the mess he'd be makin'. An' Mick an' Dave'll go an' see him on Sunday an' talk to him about bullocks. By that time he'll have all the nurses throwin' boomerangs!"

Bill shouted with laughter, and Murty regarded him gravely.

"An' how's campin', Masther Bill? As good as you thought it 'udbe?"

"Better!" said Bill, happily. "And I'm learning to jump, Murty."

"D'ye tell me? 'Tis a great man ye are. An' 'tis a fine little camp, sir, an' ye all look well. I'd say Miss Tommy must be the cook."

"No one pays compliments so beautifully as you, Murty," said Tommy, laughing. "It is sad to have to admit that I am scarcely allowed to look at the frying-pan."

"An' why would ye?" demanded Murty, unblushingly changing front. "Is it to work ye'd be comin' out, an' you always workin' at home? Ah, well, let ye all lay in to-morrow, an' I'll get breakfast before I shtart back."

It was pleasant to have the old Irishman at the camp-fire that evening; there was always laughter when Murty was about, and he had all the news of the homestead—little things, but they meant much to Billabong's people. They were sorry to see him ride off in the morning, the pack-horse walking slowly ahead.

"I'll be back wid ye on Tuesday," he called. "Take care of Miss Norah and Miss Tommy, Masther Bill!" And Bill waved his hat and shouted "Rather!"

He had often the care of the girls—or so he liked to think—for the call of the ranges was too much for David Linton and Bob, and all the men used to go on the exploring expeditions every other day; often not returning until darkness had almost set in. On these evenings they were usually too tired to talk; sleep would overcome them almost before supper was eaten. Norah and Tommy had the meal always ready; Bill claimed the job of unsaddling the horses—not a

difficult task, even for a small boy, as they were glad enough to stand still. There would be a lazy breakfast next morning, when yesterday's adventures would be told—by both parties, for the girls and Bill were not contented to remain in camp all the time. They used to take their lunch into the Bush, exploring lonely gullies and the windings of the creeks. There were fish in many of the pools; hungry hill-trout and blackfish that even Bill could catch. They made a welcome change from Brownie's cold provisions and the tinned foods with which the girls concocted wonderful stews.

Bill learned something of cooking. He was keen to learn, since it was clear to him that to be a good camper a man must cook—and Jim and Wally were almost artists with a frying-pan. Bill learned to prepare fish, to fry eggs and bacon, and even tried his hand at a stew. It would probably have been a very good stew, had not the cook in his enthusiasm made up a roaring fire when left to watch it, so that the stew burned so thoroughly that not even Bill could eat it. Happily, it was for a dinner when only the girls were there. They kept the matter a dark secret, and Bill spent a laborious hour discovering how hard it is to scour a badly-burned stew-can with ashes and sand. It was educational, but depressing.

The riders came in one evening earlier than usual, with news of another camp. They had found, far to the west, a hut by a creek, where two men were prospecting.

"They were more astonished to see us than we were to see them," Jim said. "Decent old chaps, both of them: they had not seen any of our cattle, and had no idea that the country had been taken up. They gave us a cup of tea, and seemed glad of a yarn."

"Were they getting any gold?" Tommy asked.

"A very little. I should say not enough to keep them in tucker. One of them had picked up a tiny nugget, and they had got a little by washing. They were hopeful, though. It doesn't take much to make a fossicker hopeful."

"I should like to see a nugget," Tommy said, dreamily. "It would make me realise that gold is really to be picked up—not only made out of sheep and things. One makes money that way—not gold."

"Well, you can see this one," Jim said. "I bought it for you, so that you would know one if you met one. Don't get excited, Tommy—it didn't cost much. It is not what you'd call a monster."

"You bought it for me! Jim!" said Tommy, round-eyed. "But you shouldn't."

Jim fished in his waistcoat pocket with finger and thumb.

"Where is the thing? I believe I've lost it. No, here it is."

He put it into her palm—a tiny lump of rough gold, not as large as a pea. Tommy bent over it delightedly.

"I might kick hundreds of these aside every day without noticing them," she said, somewhat startled at the thought. "I shall have to go about with my nose almost on the ground if such things as this are lying here and there."

"You wouldn't see them as plainly as that one," Jim told her. "That is polished—I wonder how often the old chap who found it had rubbed it up. He handled it quite lovingly. It hurt him to part with it, one could see, though he was glad of a little cash; they were almost out of supplies, and one of them was just going to start off to the township across the ranges."

"Well, don't lose it, Tommy," advised Bob. "You'll need it next time you go to Melbourne to buy frocks!"

"Much frock that scrap would buy!" said Jim. "Don't build on it, Tommy."

"I shall keep it—for luck," Tommy said. "It will be like the luck-penny Brownie gave to Bill. Thank you, Jim." She looked up at him, smiling. "When the luck comes home I shall have this set in a brooch and wear it to remind me of the days when I was a poor immigrant."

"I don't know how much luck you are looking for," said Bob. "It seems to me ours caught sight of us the day we took our tickets for Australia, and it's been chasing us hard ever since!"

"Oh, mine goes further back," Tommy said, under her breath; remembering War days when Bob was a lad in Air Force blue, and Fear had walked beside her and haunted her dreams. It seemed to her that Fear could never touch her now.

"We are thinking of making a rather longer job of our next ride, Norah," said Jim, after a moment's silence. "It's very rough country to the east, and to get back to the camp cuts so much off a day. So we're going to take our blankets and some tucker and camp out for a night."

"You too, Dad?"

"I should like to go," David Linton admitted. "This exploring business seems to be suiting me, Norah: I'm getting young again."

"I like that!" Wally protested. "He's the toughest of us all, Nor. This country doesn't seem to worry him, no matter how much it stands on end."

"We want him, too; we can't size up country the way Dad can," said Jim. "We'll look after him, Nor—if he'll let us—and choose a dry spot for him to spread his blankets. No difficulty about that, in this weather. Bob is going to stay behind to help Bill to manage you girls."

"No need for that," Norah said. "Tommy and I are quite safe with Bill." At which Bill sat up very straight and looked fierce and protective.

"Oh, I should be easier in my mind if you had a man in the camp at night," said her father. "There is always a chance of wandering prospectors."

"Besides which, Bob wants to stay," remarked that gentleman. "I'm not hardened to hill-riding like these people; I think one day at a time is enough for

me. Until I came out here it did not occur to me that I was soft; but——” He paused expressively.

“You aren’t soft!” Bill defended.

“It does not strike anyone that he is, does it, Bill?” Norah looked laughingly at Bob. One of the chief pleasures of the camp had been to see him forgetting his cares and the ceaseless hard work of his farm. At home they drove him early and late; neither he nor Tommy spared themselves, in their ambition to make the utmost of the land they both loved. It had been a joy to watch them becoming like happy children in the peace of the Bush.

“Well, you never get on a horse unless it’s to go after sheep or to ride over to Billabong, old man,” Jim said; “and that doesn’t harden you for riding in the ranges. Not that you let anyone see it, all the same. But this ought to be a holiday for you; and someone must stay to see that Bill cooks properly.” He winked at Bill, who received the signal with understanding and secret pride, and forbore to defend his cooking. Jim had many ways of making Bill feel that he counted in the life of the camp; comforting ways, when one was only ten.

Bill was kept very busy when the morning came for Mr. Linton and the boys to set out. His was always the job of getting in the horses, and it was a task he loved. He would set out in the dewy freshness of the morning, bridle on arm, whistling as he tracked the horses by the faint clink-clink of the bell on the old pack-mare’s neck. Even if they had wandered quite a long way up the creek it was wonderful how far the sound carried in the stillness. To Bill the wise and gentle faces of the horses seemed always to wear a look of welcome as he came up. He would greet them all by name—since there was no one there to hear—talking to them, as he threaded his way through the little mob to Topsy; stopping now and then to pat a great neck. Topsy was always glad to see him—that was beyond doubt: he used to tell her quite a number of things as he put on her bridle and slipped off the hobbles that must have fretted her free spirit. Bill sympathised with her very much for having to wear them. Then he would scramble on her back, and they would drive the others slowly back to camp, Bill’s shrill whistling heralding their coming. He always whistled a little out of tune, but nobody minded that.

This morning he was late in starting. Everyone was late, for they had had a disturbed night. The previous day had been hot, and in the night a sudden thunder-storm had passed by, pausing to drench the camp in its passing. The sleepers, awakened by the first heavy drops of rain, had made a wild rush for their huts, dragging their blankets as best they could, leaving the sacking bunks to their fate. It had not been very easy to rearrange the bedding in the dark; mingled groans and laughter had echoed between the claps of thunder. Most of the wurleys had leaked more or less: it had been necessary to tuck their heads under the blankets and hope for the best. Thus the night had been eventful, and

sleep broken—so that nobody awoke early.

There was no trace left of the storm save in the wet grass and the rain-washed trees; it was a brilliantly fine morning when Bill went for the horses, leaving Wally wrestling with the problem of lighting a fire with soaked wood. The creek, refreshed by the rain, ran swiftly through the narrows before the waterfall, near which the horses were clustered. Bill brought them home and helped to saddle up and to roll blankets. Tommy and Norah were hard at work, packing food and cooking breakfast. It was soon over and the riders ready to start.

“Look after the camp, Bill,” was Jim’s farewell word. “If Bob doesn’t do what he’s told, just report him to me when I come back!”

“Right-oh!” grinned Bill.

“Norah’s in your charge, mind, Bill!” from Wally.

“Rather! I’ll take care of her.” He stood very straight, trying to look as tall as possible. They rode away, pausing to wave and to shout good-byes as they turned out of the valley. Then they were lost to sight, and the world felt rather empty.

None of those who were left behind seemed to have much desire for active execution. They made the camp neat and hung on the boughs of the tree the blankets that had received most of the drip in the night. Bob and Bill inspected wurley roofs, patching doubtful places with sheets of bark. Then they sauntered to the creek, where Bill and Norah fished while the others sat on the bank, happily lazy, rousing themselves to assist when Bill got into difficulties over landing a blackfish of unusual size. In the struggle Bob slipped knee-deep into the water, amid heartless jeers from Tommy and Norah: Bill being above noticing any such minor calamity in the tense anxiety of the moment.

“All very well for you to laugh,” said Bob, removing water-logged boots and socks. “I shall have to hang out to dry like the blankets. Let’s stop fishing and bathe. You’ve quite enough for lunch.”

They bathed until hunger drove them from the water. Bill fried the fish for lunch with the mingled pride of fisherman and cook, which is one of the high points of earthly pride; glowing with satisfaction when the elders pronounced them the best fish that anyone had ever tasted. Sleep fell on Bob afterwards. He yawned hugely as he scoured the frying-pan; then he stated that he wanted to think for a little, and stretched himself under the tree to assist the process of thought. Presently a gentle snore bore witness to its depth. He slumbered peacefully, his fair, sunburnt face extraordinarily young and boyish as it relaxed.

“Feel like fishing, Bill?” Norah whispered. “Tommy and I will read until he wakes up.”

Bill hesitated.

"I think I'll go for a walk," he whispered back. "It's too hot to fish—I don't b'lieve they'd bite now."

"Don't go far then, sonnie," she told him. "Look out for snakes—it's a snaky day. And you won't go near the waterfall, will you, Bill?"

"All right," he promised. "And I'll take a snake-stick."

There was always a supply of snake-sticks in the camp, since no one knew when the need for them might arise; they had not, indeed, troubled the camp, but several had been killed near the creek. Bill selected a long and supple one with which he had already killed—under Jim's direction—a black snake which had made its appearance at the bathing-place. It bore a notch in the handle carved by its owner with the pride of a head-hunter over his first trophy. Bill fingered the notch lovingly as he set off.

He decided to make his way up the creek; the country was wilder there, and less familiar to him. It was cooler, when he had rounded the first bend into the gully. A little breeze came down it, laden with the hot, sweet scents of the Bush. Birds were everywhere—magpies, kookaburras, flycatchers; he sat for awhile on a log to watch a pair of blue wrens, the little cock in his beautiful livery of blue and black and white like a gleaming jewel in the sunlight as he flitted about, flirting his long tail. Black cockatoos screamed in the trees beyond the creek. Then he heard a whip-bird's call, and it led him a long way, for he had never yet succeeded in catching sight of one, no matter how near seemed the long whistle and sharp crack of the strange note.

To-day he had no better luck, although once or twice he was sure he saw the bird, flitting through the trees ahead. He ran more than once, when the cry grew fainter; it would be something to tell Jim that he had managed to track the shyest bird of the Bush. But it was always too clever for him, and at last he gave up the chase, realising that he was getting too far from the camp.

He had come further than any of their walks had led them. Here, the creek narrowed to a thread, the gully shutting it in, and the scrub grew so thickly that it would have been hard for horses to force their way through the tangle of undergrowth and fallen timber, out of which great gum-trees reared proud heads towards the hot sky. It was the very place to appeal to Bill; he stood on the bank, peering into the dim recesses of the scrub, looking longingly at the water that pierced its way among the green overhang.

"Wouldn't matter if I explored a bit," he said. "I don't b'lieve even Jim and Wally have been in here. I might find some bullocks they've missed."

He thought hopefully of this. It would be splendid to go back with news of cattle. He understood enough of them now to be able to report on their condition. He would count them very carefully and describe their markings. That no tracks were visible did not trouble him; tracks might easily be missed on the hard ground. Bill decided to push on a little, and made his way along

the bank, scrambling over fallen trunks and through dense bushes.

The gully grew wider soon, the creek becoming placid as it found more room. He came to a place where the rocks in its bed had heaved upwards, so that it ran in pools and shallows, broken by round boulders which divided the current in many directions. Here the banks were low. Bill felt thirsty, and he was very hot. He took off his boots and socks, wading in until he could drink; and then sat on a rock and dabbled his toes in the current, rejoicing in its cool touch. The rock underfoot was smooth; paddling was pleasant work.

"I'd get on better if I stuck to the creek," he said: talking aloud to himself as he always did when alone in the Bush. Sometimes he felt as though another boy were with him, answering him; and this boy seemed to approve of the idea. He urged him on.

He went back for his boots, cramming his stockings into them and tying the laces together so that he could hang them round his neck. Then he paddled slowly down the creek, slipping often on the rocks, but always able to save himself by clutching at a boulder.

The scrub came down in a green wall presently, so dense that there was no way of leaving the water. It did not trouble Bill: he was quite content to push on, believing that sooner or later it would open out. He edged along by the further bank, where the boulders were fewer, his arm brushing the thick green mass of the dogwood that thrust itself over the water, feeling for footing with his snake-stick. It was treacherous going; he chuckled to think of Norah's comments in case he should sit down suddenly and be forced to return to camp drenched.

Presently he was almost down. A stone turned under his foot throwing him sideways. The stick broke, and he lurched into the dogwood, clutching at it with his free hand.

It parted under his weight. He stumbled into it, expecting to find himself against the low bank. But there was no bank; only a tiny inlet, where the water trickled slowly, choked with rubbish save for a space he could have jumped. The bushes closed behind him, hiding the creek. He stood in the semi-darkness of the little runlet, the scrub meeting over his head.

Bill drew a long breath. Here was exploring!

"Wonder where this leads to," he said. "Or if it leads anywhere. I s'pose it ends up in a minute or two."

He decided he would go and see: and pressed on between the bushes. They scratched his face, and the paddling was not pleasant; but soon the bushes thinned until he could see rocky banks shutting him in on either side. The tiny stream shallowed to nothing, ending in muddy grass, and he came out into a queer place.

It was a narrow defile, completely shut in by great walls of rock. Sparse

bushes clothed them, clinging to patches of earth that had lodged here and there. It was probable that in winter the flooded creek forced its water right up the defile; there was good grass a hundred yards up, where it grew wider; and here stood a giant tree. Straight and smooth its trunk shot up towards the light, bearing no branches until it spread into a feathery crown of leaves that towered above the walls of rock that had protected its growth. There were few such trees in the hills. Perhaps, centuries back, the wind had carried the seed, dropping it in this shut-in spot, this little patch of fertile soil where no storm might reach it, so that it grew into a monarch of the forest.

Yet in the end the storm had found it. Out of the sky lightning had struck it, splitting it downwards, so that the great trunk was cleft and splintered, and one wide branch, whitened and bare, drooped downwards, still held by strands of wood, but for ever barren. The tree had done its best to repair the cruelty that had marred its beauty, sending out new growth wherever it could: but it was a thing marred. The pity of it smote even the little boy who saw it—perhaps the first human being who had looked on it from the ground, so hidden was its home.

“Oh, by Jove, what hard luck that you got struck!” Bill ejaculated. “I never came across a tree like you.”

He walked up the little valley, fascinated by its strangeness. No exit from it was visible, save by the way he had come. The walls were smooth for many feet from the ground, affording no footing for a cumber. Beyond the tree, a hundred yards further, a mass of rock closed it in completely—possibly brought down by the lightning that had struck the tree, for the rocks were piled in a confused mass, with sharply split edges. Here the valley had again grown narrow; above, on the right hand, the wall overhung, crowned with bushes.

It was a silent place. Not even the note of a bird broke the stillness; no breeze stirred the leaves. The sun blazed down into it, so that the shade cast by the great tree was pleasant to Bill. He sat down under it and gazed about him, feeling that it was all his own.

Yet there was a sound. Something like the faint far-off tinkle of a tiny bell. It seemed to come from the mass of rocks ahead; a puzzling sound. It caught Bill’s ear, and he lifted his red head inquiringly.

“What’s that? Can’t be a horse-bell—it’s too tinkly.”

Curiosity grew upon him. He put on his boots and stockings, and ran towards the place whence the faint tinkle seemed to come.

It was more distinct as he reached the rocks. He listened, peering among their confused masses; then climbed upon the lower stones, finding a ledge that could be reached with a hard scramble. The tiny chime caught his ear again.

“Wonder if it’s a bell-bird?” he said. “Jim said there weren’t any here, but I can’t see what else it could be.”

A movement brought him to a place where a new interest showed; a space between two boulders that seemed like a narrow entrance to a cave, since there was empty darkness behind it. He peeped in, trying to pierce the dim shadows.

“It looks like a cave,” he said, excitedly. “Must be a very tiny one. Wish I had some matches.” His eyes danced. “Gosh, won’t it be ripping if I find a real cave all by myself!”

He edged his body between the rocks, making a hesitating step into the darkness. There might be no footing—he realised that he must be cautious. Then he paused and turned back quickly.

There was a dull grinding noise outside: a sound of rending wood. Bill looked up at the overhanging bank. The trees and bushes at its edge were swaying forward curiously, with a noise of cracking roots. Earth and small stones began to slither down the face of the rock wall. Then came a dull roar, and the whole overhang pitched forward.

Bill gave a choked cry, springing back into the cleft as the air darkened above him. A stone caught him on the head. He fell forward. The roar of the landslide echoed down the little valley and died away.

CHAPTER XIV

JIM RIDES BY NIGHT

BILL IS late," said Tommy.

Norah glanced at her watch for the twentieth time.

"Much too late," she answered, a little furrow between her brows. "I don't feel easy about him, Tommy. He never stayed away so long before."

"Bill is such a reliable person that one never thinks of worrying about him," Tommy said. "He always remembers the time, and comes back, whistling."

"I've been listening for his whistle for ever so long. Let's wake up Bob, Tommy, and we'll all go to meet him."

Bob had not stirred. He turned over sleepily when gently prodded by Tommy's foot, blinking at her.

"Ow-w-w," he yawned. "I believe I dropped off to sleep. Jove, I'm stiff!" He struggled to a sitting position, and yawned again. "Want some tea, girls?"

"I think we'll go to meet Bill, Bob," Norah said.

"Right-oh. Where's he gone?"

"He went for a walk along the creek. But he should have been back long ago: I told him not to go far, and he never disobeys."

"Oh, he has found something that interested him and forgotten the time," Bob said, cheerfully. "Bill is a sensible old chap: he can take care of himself. Anyhow, come along and we'll find him. We're sure to meet prowling along the bank."

They set off happily, Norah's uneasiness waning before Bob's unruffled confidence. It was only while sitting still that little fears had begun to creep into her mind: once she was on the move it seemed certain that each bend in the creek would reveal the little red-haired figure coming towards them.

But bend after bend was rounded, and there was no sign of Bill. Norah's uneasiness began to return.

"I don't know that we are wise to go so far," she said, stopping. "He might have turned up any of these gullies. Let's coo-ee, Bob. It would be quite easy to miss him."

They coo-eed loudly and long. The hills took up the sounds and gave them back in a hundred echoes. But none of them, listen as they might, seemed Bill's voice in reply.

"Oh, he can't possibly have got bushed," Bob said. "He has been too well schooled. Most likely we have missed him in one of these belts of scrub. I

wouldn't mind betting that he is back at the camp now, feeling rather indignant at finding nobody there."

"Bob, I don't believe he would leave the creek," Norah answered.

"No, he wouldn't go out of sight of it. But he might very well have gone after a native bear or something in the scrub, knowing he could always get back to it."

Tommy was thinking.

"We don't really know which way he went," she said. "At least, I don't. Did you see him go, Norah?"

"No, I didn't." Norah looked relieved. "Do you remember, we went into the hut to look for books? and when we came back he was out of sight. I came this way because he likes best to go down the creek. How stupid of me to be worried! He must have gone up the creek instead, and of course he is back at camp now."

"Oh, sure to be," was Bob's cheerful answer. "Let's go back. I hope it has occurred to the lad to get the billy boiling. Tea has a lovely sound to me. This is the hottest afternoon we have had."

"That is from last night's rain," remarked Norah, "it has made everything steamy. Yes, tea will be good. Hurry up—I don't like the idea of poor old Bill feeling deserted."

They were quite light-hearted as they turned back: the explanation was so simple. Bob chaffed Norah gently on jumping to conclusions, and Norah responded that it was easy for one to be wise whose brain had been refreshed by deep slumber. Nevertheless, they hurried round the last bend that brought their valley in sight.

It was still deserted. No heartening smoke curled upwards from the fireplace; there was no sign of a small eager figure running to meet them. Their cheerfulness fell away from them.

"He may be in one of the huts," Bob said. "Bill! Coo-ee!"

The long shout died away. They looked at each other blankly. Then Norah set off towards the huts, running. She looked into each, in a wild hope that he was hiding—ready to jump out and give them a surprise.

"Not a sign of him," said Bob, who had kept by her side. His face was grave, though he refused, as yet, to be afraid. "Look here, Norah, it's foolish to make up our minds that there is anything wrong. You never can tell what a small boy is up to."

"But Bill is sensible. He doesn't do stupid things. Bob, I *know* he would not go out of sight of the creek."

"I don't believe he would," admitted Bob. "But anything may have kept him playing about. We'll go and look for him, but I'm perfectly certain he'll turn up any minute."

“Then we’ll scatter,” said Norah. “You go up the creek, Bob, and Tommy and I will go back towards the fall. I have a feeling that he went that way. We can keep a little distance apart and hunt up the gullies.”

“Well, don’t get bushed yourselves,” warned Bob. “You’re all right, Norah, I know—but don’t let Tommy wander up right-angled gullies alone. What about riding?”

Norah considered.

“You might get your horse,” she agreed. “The scrub blocks the way up-stream, and you might make round it a bit. But I think we should feel more free without horses. And he cannot have got far away on foot. Oh, we’re sure to come across him presently.”

“There is always the chance that he may have caught his foot in a hole and sprained an ankle,” suggested Tommy. “That would be easy to do.”

“Yes. But he won’t sprain his voice, and we’ll hear him.” Bob forced a smile. “Don’t worry, girls. We’ll have him back in no time. If I find him I’ll ride down stream at once to let you know.”

The horses were not far away. Bob caught up saddle and bridle and strode quickly towards them, while the girls hurried off in the way they had come.

It was hard to realise that fear could come to them so quickly out of the Bush that they loved as a friend. Hard to think that at any moment the freckled face with its infectious grin might not peep at them through the dogwood, grey felt hat well back on the red hair, lips beginning to shape themselves to whistle. A hundred times Norah pulled up sharply, thinking she heard that whistle or the high voice that always sang a little out of tune. But she knew he could not be near; he would have been swift to answer the long “Coo-ees” they sent ringing out every few moments. They could hear Bob’s shouts at intervals for awhile, growing fainter as he drew away from them. Then there was no sound save the screech of cockatoos flying high overhead or a kookaburra’s harsh laughter.

Tommy kept to the creek, scanning every yard of the water, watching for a track that might tell of a foot which had slipped on the bank. Norah hunted tirelessly up and down the gullies, never going far from the stream, since every instinct told her that Bill would not have done so. But as time went on they searched unlikely as well as likely places. Norah came upon Tommy forcing her way into a dense belt of scrub; together they struggled into its green depths, scratching their hands and faces without mercy, until the thorny undergrowth became impenetrable. Norah stopped.

“This is no use, Tommy. He would never have gone in here—there would be no sense in going.”

“He would be too afraid of coming back to you all tattered and torn,” said Tommy, with a little choke in her voice that spoiled the laugh she tried to

force. "Shall we go back, Norah?"

"Yes; this is only wasting time. It's getting late, Tommy." She looked at her watch, drawing her breath sharply. "Tommy—we've just *got* to find him before dark. Let's hurry."

The sun was setting as they reached the open spaces again. They hunted feverishly, whistling and shouting until their dry throats would scarcely utter a sound; knowing how quickly dusk came down. Only when they could see but a few yards away did Norah call a halt.

"We must get back to camp, Tommy."

"And leave him?" Tommy's tone held horror.

"Tommy, darling, we can't find him in the dark. We should only lose ourselves, or break an ankle, and that would mean less chance for Bill. We've got to be sensible. The only thing is to get back while we can see anything at all, and pray that Bob has found him."

Bob was not to be seen when at last, after a hard scramble in the dark, they reached camp. They lit the fire and prepared a meal, speaking little. In Norah's mind was a wild longing for the others—Wally and Jim, and her father. They knew so much more of the wild country: could tell what was best to do. Nothing ever seemed so bad if only they were there to share it.

Then she remembered what they would expect of her, and stiffened herself. She must be reasonable and hopeful. Bill was a sturdy, sensible youngster—one whom a night in the open would not kill, though he might be badly frightened. She put from her, almost savagely, the thought of accident. He might so easily have become bushed: but he had been taught the dangers. He would not wander about aimlessly: he would scratch up a sleeping place and wait for the sun to guide him. Her heart lifted as she remembered how often the boys had told him what a man should do if he got bushed. Bill would keep his head; of that she felt certain.

She was almost cheerful outwardly when at length Bob's horse loomed up out of the darkness, though she saw that his rider was alone.

"Any luck?" Bob shouted.

"No."

"I couldn't see so much as a track—not that that says anything, on this hard ground." Bob dismounted, the firelight throwing a gleam on his anxious face. "Poor little chap! Norah, what can we do?"

"We can't do anything except keep a big fire going—enough to show a light if he should reach any point from which he could see it. It would comfort him, even if he could not get back."

"But, I say—I can't sit still and do nothing," Bob protested.

"We must, Bob," she said. "I don't like it any better than you do, but it would be madness to try to get about in the dark. We could go a little way, of

course, and shout. But that is a risk for him: he might try to reach us and come to grief over the edge of a gully. It is safer for Bill's sake, to do nothing."

"I suppose it is." Bob's voice was dismal. "But it's pretty tough to leave that poor little kid out alone."

"We have just got to make the best of it. There's no use in thinking of what we should like to do. Our job is to get a meal and to have as much sleep as we can, and be ready to start out at dawn." Norah spoke steadily. "And to make up our minds that he's all right. I've great faith in Bill."

"You're just like Jim," said Bob, with a dry laugh. "Jim always makes one feel one is a fool to worry. All right, I'll let this fellow go. How is the wood supply, Norah?"

"Plenty. Hurry, Bob: we'll have something to eat as soon as you are ready."

They ate almost in silence: food at first seemed distasteful, but they knew it was necessary, and it became less of an effort as they went on. Then Bob piled up the fire as much as he dared while the girls prepared packages of sandwiches to take out next day, and made ready for breakfast. All the time they listened: pausing often, as if at a signal, straining their ears to hear a whistle or a call. But there was nothing save the long cry of a mopote, or the chink of the pack-mare's bell.

They went to bed, when their preparations were finished, but there was little sleep for anyone; their brains held too many pictures. Now and then someone would get up to replenish the fire, moving noiselessly in the hope that the others slept. Before dawn they were all dressed, and Bob had the horses ready, for they had decided that searching on foot meant too great a loss of time. They breakfasted hurriedly, shivering in the chill of the dawn. The sun had not peeped over the tree-tops when they were in the saddle. Norah left a note where Jim could not fail to see it if he returned before they got back to camp.

"Something may bring them home early enough to help to-day," she said, hopefully. "But we may meet Bill very soon: if he has just waited for daylight he may appear at any moment."

"Keep a look-out up every gully," Bob said. "And if you get off your horse, Tommy, don't go far from her: it's awfully easy to get confused in the scrub."

"I won't," promised Tommy. They tried to smile at each other as they separated.

The long hot day crept on, leaden-footed, as they searched. With each hour the sense of the magnitude of their task deepened. Down stream, where the country opened out, and there was less undergrowth it was not so difficult: but further back it was a wild jumble of ridge and valley, clothed in dense timber,

with thick scrub masking the thousand little gullies that seamed the stony hills. It did not seem possible that in such country a child could have gone far; and always they felt that Bill would not have risked leaving the line of the main creek that he knew. With this conviction grew the certainty that he had met with an accident. He might be quite near at hand, lying under some bush, or rock, unable to call to them; they felt that they must search every yard of scrub, every inch of the creek. And it was work for fifty men.

They were utterly exhausted when evening brought them back to camp once more. Tommy and Norah came first, and Norah rode very near to her friend: the little English girl had hunted tirelessly all day, on horseback and on foot, refusing to rest, but now she was reeling in her saddle, her face dead-white save for the long red scratches of the prickly scrub.

“There’s Jim!”

The words broke from Tommy’s dry lips. She caught at Norah’s hand.

“Thank God!” said Norah, gripping her. “Hold tight, Tommy dear—you’re nearly home. I feel as if it will be all right now they’ve come.”

The little knot of men by the camp-fire turned, and Jim and Wally came running to meet them. There were no questions asked: the faces of the girls told their own story.

“You must be dead-beat,” Jim said, his voice very quiet. “We got in twenty minutes ago—we knew you’d be back soon, so we just got the billy boiling.” He lifted Tommy bodily out of the saddle as they reached the others. “Sit down and put your backs against that log: you can talk when you have had a cup of tea.”

Norah and Tommy sat on the grass and drank gratefully. Food was out of the question for the moment, but the hot drink gave them new life.

“Bob will be in presently, I suppose?” Mr. Linton asked. He was sitting on the log, one hand on Norah’s shoulder. Wally had dropped to the grass by her side.

“Yes—he thought of camping wherever he happened to be, for the night, but we realised that he ought to come back. You see, we didn’t know if we might find the little chap hurt, and all of us would be needed.”

“I’ll swear Bill hasn’t gone far from the creek.” Jim’s voice was confident. “He gave me his word he would not. You’ve kept to the creek, Norah?”

“As far as we could. It is blocked by scrub so often. We’ve tried not to cover the same ground twice. But it’s so bewildering, Jim—one gully is so like another, in the timber. And there are stony ravines one can’t climb down.”

“Yes—I know, old girl. It’s cruel country to hunt in—and for you two—!” He looked at their torn coats and breeches, their bleeding hands. “We’ll get him, Nor, dear—don’t lose heart.”

“I felt it would be all right if you were only here,” she said. Her voice

failed her. She bit her lips to keep the tears from coming, catching at Wally's hand.

"Bill is sensible," said her father, quietly. "And he is strong and tough. We'll find him." The calm strength of his voice was comforting.

"But it needs plenty of helpers," Jim said. He was eating mechanically, forcing the food down with great gulps of tea. "So I'm off home for the men."

Norah looked up with a start.

"Jim! Not in the dark?"

"I'll be all right," he told her, with a smile. "Old Monarch and I can get home from anywhere. Don't you worry. I'll get a fresh horse and be back early in the morning with the men. If only Billy hadn't chosen this particular moment to break his leg!"

"Yes—Billy could have tracked him anywhere," Mr. Linton said. "But you'll tell Brownie to wire for black trackers as soon as she can get on the telephone to Cunjee, Jim."

"Yes, of course. We'll have half the district out here as soon as the news gets round. That can be left to Brownie. And we'll bring out everything that is needed in case the little chap is hurt. Keep up your pecker, Nor—the one thing we mustn't do is to imagine that we shan't find him." He looked at Tommy, pity in his eyes. "Turn in soon, Tommy—and you ought to stay in camp tomorrow."

"Oh, Jim, I could not!"

"You're not fit to go out," he said, gently. "Well, look after them, Dad. And keep cheerful, all of you."

He got up, his huge form towering over them in the dusk. There was something steadfast, comforting, in his voice.

"Take care of yourself, Jim," David Linton said. They all knew the perils of the dark ride ahead of him. Wally rose with an abrupt movement and went to bring his horse.

"I can't afford to get hurt at the moment—so I promise to be careful," Jim said with a short laugh. "Well, so-long, everybody. Thanks, Wal."

He swung himself into the saddle, and in a moment the dusk had swallowed him. They sat silently, hearing the scrambling of Monarch's hoofs climbing the ledge above them—the ledge that was not pleasant riding in broad daylight. Tommy's hand slipped into Norah's, who held it tightly. So they waited; and presently a cheery shout came down to them from the crest of the ridge. A sharply-drawn breath ran round the group.

"He's up, thank God!" said David Linton. "That's a nasty place."

"There's the other cleft," Tommy said, almost in a whisper. "The steep place . . . we climbed up——"

"He promised me to go down that on foot. He had everything planned in

five minutes after we read the note, in case you came in without Bill. Jim's mind moves quickly," said Jim's father. "He knows enough of this country to realise you can't have too many men looking for a lost youngster. We'll see him back in about half the time it would take anyone else to do it."

Jim had spoken confidently, but his heart was heavy as he threaded his way, more by instinct than by sight, through the trees on the ridge-top. Stories of other people who had been lost poured into his mind; people who had not been found in time, even in country less bewildering than this. There was that old woman, lost in another range of hills, not a hundred miles from Melbourne. She had not gone far, and there were scores of men out hunting—and it was more than a week before they found her body. There were children: the stories were legion of children. Some found in time, not all; and the marvel always was how they wandered so far, often crossing terrible country.

He realised to the full how little he knew of the ranges. There were belts of wild scrub they had always had to skirt: patches where creeks could not be crossed or where deep ravines were more impassable than the creeks. Much of that country looked as if giants had played with it while it was still soft, scoring great cracks in it, tossing rocks here and there in mad confusion; and then the trees and the scrub had taken charge of it, century after century, covering all the heights and depths with unchecked growth.

And his little offsider was lost in it.

He set his teeth as the dangers crowded themselves into his brain. Snakes: Bill was cautious and quick ordinarily, but a tired child would be neither. Holes that gave underfoot, hidden by tangled grass, where even a man might break a leg or lie half-buried, unable to move. The creek held a thousand chances of disaster: a paddling boy might slip on a stone, knocking himself senseless on another as he fell into the water. There were ravines with overhanging edges so easily able to break away under a quick step. Bushed people nearly always lost all sense of locality: hard enough to keep it at any time, when obstacles so often made one change direction. Jim's bump of locality was remarkable, yet he knew how many times he had been thrown out of his reckoning, glad enough to hit on a line that he knew.

He jerked himself away from the bitter thoughts.

"Rot!" he said aloud. "I'm going to find him."

The difficulty of his way claimed his attention. There was only faint starlight; under the trees the ground was black, and he had to trust to his own instinct and Monarch's to keep to the crest of the ridge. Boughs caught his face as he rode—one swept off his hat, and he did not trouble to look where it fell. The great black horse stepped warily, ears pricked. He knew well that only necessity made his master bring him on such a journey in the dark. He was weary after two long days in the ranges, but he went with all the willing

obedience of his good breeding: realising, perhaps, that it was his job to keep his rider safe.

They came to the steep descent, and Jim dismounted. He plunged down it on foot, Monarch following like a dog: and so, slipping and scrambling, they somehow reached the bottom and again turned into the trees. Until the moon rose it was not possible to go out of a walk; and even at a walk the journey held constant risk. But when the pale light began to filter through the trees Jim took advantage of every short stretch of level ground: and presently Monarch no longer waited for the light touch of his unspurred heel, but broke into a trot whenever trotting was possible, as though his spirit were in tune with his rider's, urging him on; swinging out to avoid fallen logs that only his eyes could see in the bracken, dodging trunks and boughs by a hair's breadth, scrambling down precipitous slopes: always sure-footed, always hurrying.

Jim dismounted when at length they came to the outer gate of Billabong. He rubbed the wet black neck.

"By Jove, you're a great horse, old man!" he said. "I believe you know all about it." And Monarch rubbed his head against him, as if indeed he knew.

Once in the familiar paddocks Jim gave him his head; it was still rough going, but to Monarch it might almost have been level plain. He took his own track, choosing it swiftly, unerringly: moving as though the years had fallen from him and he was still young, still full of the fire of youth. Over the bridge the rattle of his hoofs on the slabs woke all the echoes and brought a chorus of frightened twitterings from the trees on the bank. He came through the last of the timber at a swinging trot, and the open plain lay before them.

Jim had no need to urge him. He stretched out his neck, with a quick snort, and broke into a hard canter, heading for his stable. Jim leaned forward on his neck, to ease him: and in response the canter turned to a gallop, and they swept over the plain. Paddock after paddock fell behind them. At the gates Monarch would stop almost in a stride, standing like a rock while Jim leaned to open and shut them: then, unasked, he would break into a gallop again as he swung round, the thudding hoofs eating up the distance quickly enough even for Jim's impatient heart.

They came across the home paddock almost at racing pace, seeing the dark bulk of the house among its trees and the gleam of the moonlight on the still lagoon. As the swift feet sounded on the gravel of the stable-yard a window above was flung up with a clatter, and Murty's head was thrust out.

"Who's here? Is it yourself, Masther Jim? What's wrong?"

"Bill's lost," said Jim, curtly. "Chuck down the keys, Murty, will you? And turn out the men."

He dismounted stiffly. Murty uttered a swift Irish phrase, and the keys clattered at his feet. Jim unlocked the stable, switching on the light as he led

Monarch in. He flung off saddle and bridle, while above came voices and exclamations, and the sounds of men dressing in haste.

Murty was down in a moment in shirt and trousers, to find Jim rubbing down his horse, talking to him under his breath.

“Begob, you’ve travelled, Masther Jim!” he ejaculated, staring at Monarch, the heaving, dripping body and foam-flecked nostrils. “I’ll see to him, sir.” He tried to take the cloth from Jim’s hand. Jim shook his head.

“I wouldn’t give this job to anyone,” he said, between his teeth. “By Jove, Murty, he’s a wonder!—he’s come every yard of the way as if he knew Bill’s life was hanging on him. I never had to ask him once—he made his own pace. Where are the horses?”

“No distance off—an’ I’ve a horse in the little paddock, ready to shtart out to ye in the morning. I’ll have them in in five minutes.”

“Well, let Mick do that. Get across to the house, Murty, and tell Brownie. Say I want brandy and medicines and all the things we’ll need if we find him hurt. She’ll know—bandages and all that.”

“I will. Is it long the little lad’s been missin’ Masther Jim?”

“Two nights.”

Murty caught his breath.

“May the Holy Mother above be watchin’ him!” he uttered. Turning, he ran furiously towards the house, as Mick Shanahan and Dave Boone came pounding down the stairs.

“Hand me a dry cloth, Mick. Then get the horses in, quick as you know how. Dave, follow up Murty and see that the kitchen fire is going: we’ll want a meal of some sort before we start. Brownie will be on the job in a few minutes, but you can see to the fire.” Jim was rubbing carefully round Monarch’s ears, not ceasing while he spoke. The horse’s laboured breathing was growing easier: he drooped his head contentedly under the touch of the hand he loved. “Think he’s all right, Dave?”

“He’ll be all right in half an hour.” Dave had begun to feel the horse as soon as he entered the stable. “But you’ve given him a hard go, Mr. Jim.”

“He gave it to himself. I’ll never believe he didn’t understand as much as I did—he’d have broken his heart to get me here quickly. Cut along, Dave: I’ll be over when I’ve got him dry and comfortable. Tell Mick I’ll ride Struan.”

“Right, Mr. Jim.” Dave disappeared, and Jim went on talking to Monarch.

“Can’t give you anything to eat or drink yet, old man. You’ll get it presently. And the best paddock on Billabong isn’t good enough for you after this. Stand over, old lad. I believe you’d take me back as you came, if I asked you. Wonder if there’s another horse in the country that would carry my weight the way you did to-night. I’ll swear there’s not. There—you’re bone-dry, corners and all.”

He tossed away the cloth and stood patting him for a moment. Monarch whinnied softly in answer, contented: the hard friction of the rubbing, the quiet voice that talked to him, soothing him, had eased his sense of strain. There was dumb devotion in the eyes that looked after Jim as the half-door shut and he was left alone in the darkened stable.

Lights had flashed up in the house. Two maids, in varying stages of half-dress, were busy in the kitchen. Upstairs, Brownie, in a voluminous purple dressing-gown, was packing medicines and bandages, while Murty filled brandy-flasks.

“Oh, Master Jim, my dear!” The old face quivered pitifully, but she did not cease work.

The big fellow patted her shoulder.

“Don’t you worry, Brownie—we’ll get him. The mischief of it is, Dad and Wally and I didn’t know until this evening—we’d been away from camp for two days. He’s been missing since yesterday afternoon. We didn’t get back to camp until dusk.”

“The wee lad that he is!” said Murty, pityingly.

“An’ Miss Norah an’ Miss Tommy?” Brownie asked.

“They’re knocked out. Been hunting all the time—and it’s awful country to hunt in. Brownie, you must raise the district as soon as the post-office in Cunjee opens. Telephone to the police, and tell them to send for black trackers. You’ll know all there is to be done.”

“I’ll know, Master Jim, my dear.” The tears rolled down her cheeks, falling on the busy hands. “But please God you’ll have found him yourself before the district can get there.”

“Please God we will. Tell people they must be prepared to camp. I won’t rouse Archdale to-night. He will have to be on the line between Billabong and the camp, bringing out supplies. You were going to start in the morning, Murty?”

“I was, Mr. Jim.”

“Archdale can bring the stores out: the pack-horse will take the track if he just drives him ahead. They’re getting a meal ready for us in the kitchen, Brownie?”

“Yes, Master Jim. But couldn’t you take an hour or two’s rest?”

“Ah, now, do, Master Jim,” begged Murty. “Sure you were riding all day in the hills, an’ you’ve done that cruel trip in the dark. ’Tisn’t fit that you’d be shtarting straight back—an’ to tackle the day that to-morrow’ll be for ye.”

Jim smiled at the anxious faces.

“Bless you, I’m tough as a whip,” he said. “I’m going to be on my little offsider’s track as soon as there’s light enough to look for it.” He touched Brownie’s shoulder. “Don’t you worry, Brownie, dear—and I promise to do

my best to keep Norah and Tommy from being knocked up. If there are enough men to search we may be able to keep them in camp.”

“I’ve me doubts,” said Murty, grimly.

“An’ me. I know what they’ll be doin’,” Brownie mourned. “Oh, if only I wasn’t fat an’ old!”

“Don’t you realise it’s worth anything to us to have you here, organising things?” Jim asked her. “Now then, Murty, we’ve got to eat something and be off.”

They devoured eggs and bacon in the kitchen, where the maids were swiftly making piles of sandwiches to be carried for the searchers next day. There were many little flasks of brandy, many packages of bandages and chocolate and whatever might be needed by the one who should find Bill. Brownie had forgotten nothing. The valises were strapped to the men’s saddles when Jim strode out to the waiting horses, the old woman trotting by his side.

“Good luck, Master Jim. You’ll bring him back, I know.”

“I’ll bring him back.” Jim’s face was set in grim lines, but his voice rang fearlessly. “Thanks, Brownie, dear—you’ve been a brick.”

The big iron-grey was fretting with impatience. Already hoof-beats were dying away in the distance—the men had raced ahead to open gates. Jim leaped into the saddle, and Struan was off with a bound. Brownie stood at the gate, listening, until the sound of his galloping was lost in the moonlit night.

CHAPTER XV

MAN OF ALL WORK

BILL CAME to himself with a feeling that not only had the earth opened and swallowed him, but had hit him very hard in the process.

He was lying on his face in a slit among the rocks. There seemed a mighty weight upon his legs and feet—he was not sure whether they still belonged to him. His head ached violently: he lay still for a while, dazed and bewildered by its throbbing.

The place where he lay was almost dark, but a little light trickled through the broken rocks above his head. As he grew clearer in mind he remembered—saw again the topping mass of earth and stones that had come crashing down towards him, and recalled his leap forward into the slit. He wriggled cautiously. The weight on his legs was not so bad as he had thought: it yielded. Hope sprang up in his heart. He made a violent effort, and found himself free.

He sat up, putting a hand to his forehead where the throbbing was most acute. It was wet. He looked at his fingers and found them red.

“Gosh, I’m bleeding!” he remarked in amazement. There was interest in his astonishment. Since it was clear that he was not killed, to be wounded held a certain thrill. Jim also had been wounded; he had seen his old tunic with the little crown on the cuff, and the little gold stripes, each of which meant a wound. Jim’s “offsider” felt a new flush of comradeship.

He took out a very grubby handkerchief, mopping his brow gingerly. It certainly hurt, and the handkerchief showed plenty of red: there was a big bump that felt uncommonly sore.

“I must have come a whack!” he pondered. He had a queer swimming sensation that made him glad to lean against the rock. But it passed after a little while, and he began to take interest in his surroundings.

Where the landslip had come down all was blackness. The mouth of the slit was completely blocked by the fall, and a good deal of rubbish had been shot in among the rocks. High overhead was daylight, but it came only through the broken rocks six feet above his head, which roofed his place of refuge. As Bill’s brain gradually cleared he realised that there was no escape by the way he had come: and for the first time fear came upon him. Was he trapped here? trapped where they could never find him?

He got to his feet unsteadily, propping himself by the wall. The slit seemed to end a few feet away: a very efficient little prison, so far as he could see. But—since there was nowhere else to go—he went forward cautiously.

At its end he saw, with a gasp of relief, that he was not entirely shut in. To his right, all was solid rock; but on the left hand was a jumble of shattered stones not more than three feet high, and beyond them was more light. He scrambled over them painfully, scratching his knees on their sharp edges. There were more boulders ahead, but between them was space. Bill edged his way onward, twisting and turning; trying to choke back the panic at his heart that told him that at any moment the difficult path might end in impenetrable stone.

But the light grew; and presently, skirting a huge boulder, he uttered a cry of joy. A dozen yards further on he could see clear space and green boughs against the blue of the welcome sky.

He pushed on. The rocks ended abruptly in a four-foot drop into a very narrow ravine. It was like the one he had left beyond the landslip, with high and unscaleable walls, where bushes clung to the crevices; so narrow that there were places where the boughs of the taller trees on its topmost edges seemed almost to touch each other. Fifty yards away it turned sharply—so sharply that at first Bill thought it ended, and his heart, that had leaped to see it, sank again, for it seemed only an extension of his trap.

Then hope suddenly flared. From the depths below him came a little tinkling sound that was vaguely familiar; he puzzled over it for a moment before he remembered that it was the very sound that had caught his ear before the landslip fell. He peered into the sparse bushes, seeing nothing.

Then a movement caught his eye; and as he stared anxiously the bushes parted and he saw a goat. A white and brown goat, grazing contentedly, finding food where no other animal could have found it, its sharp head moving quickly here and there: and on its neck was a little bell that chimed faintly at each thrust of the head.

Bill's yelp of joy startled the goat; it jumped, and then gazed at the rocks in perplexity.

"That goat can't have come from nowhere," Bill told himself. "Not with a bell on its neck, anyhow. Wonder can I get down?"

Experiment told him that he could. It was not very easy, with an aching head that persisted in swimming; but he managed it somehow, dropping on the ground below with a bump that shook him badly, so that he was content to sit quietly for a few moments. The goat, after an alarmed bound, decided that he was harmless. It went on grazing as if small boys dropping from the skies were an ordinary thing in its existence.

"It's a tame old goat," Bill remarked. "If I drive it along it'll lead me somewhere." The thought crossed his mind that a goat could probably climb where he could not, but he rejected anything so humiliating.

Thirst drove him to action before his throbbing head allowed any action to

be pleasant. He longed for water: and where there was an animal, water, he thought, could not be far off. So he struggled to his feet and stumbled along the deep glen. When he came near the goat he said "Shoo!"—a remark treated by the goat with disdain. A stone, thrown with very bad aim, made it decide that the intruder meant business. It sprang away into the bushes and Bill heard the hard little feet scattering the stones as it ran off down the ravine.

He followed as quickly as he was able. The turn showed that the glen led on, like a snake wriggling its way through the bush, the walls never becoming lower. The goat trotted on confidently, pausing to nibble occasionally, but always springing ahead as Bill approached.

It seemed to the boy that he walked for hours. It was cruelly hot. The sun, indeed, could not pierce down, so thick was the screen of bushes overhead; but the place was like an oven of breathless heat, devoid of air. Walking was anything but easy, on ground so rough and stony. He stumbled often, and the throbbing of his head grew more insistent until all the air seemed a dancing blur before his eyes. His throat and tongue were dry; thirst became a pain. But he set his teeth and struggled on, with a dull conviction that, whatever happened, he must not lose sight of the goat.

He was almost at the end of his endurance when, rounding a corner of the terrible glen, he saw that it widened slightly. There was better grass ahead: the goat had stopped to feed. Then it walked across the green patch to an overhanging rock, put its head down, and with a thrill of relief Bill saw that it was drinking.

He followed it at a staggering run. A little spring dripped out of the hillside above the rock: the water came trickling over it, to fall into a hollow where it formed a pool.

To the boy it was a glimpse of heaven. He fell on his knees at the edge, putting his face down to it, and drank until he could drink no more. The very touch of the water revived his strength. He sponged his forehead with his handkerchief, and then lay flat on the grass. The goat browsed near him, the tinkle of its bell giving him a comforting feeling of companionship.

The heat roused him presently. He looked longingly at the cool pool, and in a few moments his clothes were off and he was wallowing in it luxuriously—to the evident amazement of the goat. Then he rolled in the hot grass to dry, dressed slowly, and drove his guide onward.

Bend after bend, and still there seemed no end to the strange ravine: no sign of life except for an occasional glimpse of a snake. He had no stick, and for once in his life he was without inclination to tackle a snake. All he wanted was to find some way out of the trap that held him—to get back to the camp that he knew was further away with every dragging step. Thirst began to torment him again, and with it doubt as to how long he could hold out.

"If Jim knew, I bet he'd be after me quick an' lively," he muttered. A hot ache came at the back of his eyes when he thought of Jim.

Ahead, the goat suddenly broke into a trot and disappeared, giving a joyful bleat. It was answered by another. Bill followed round a sharp turn: and stopped short, staring at what he saw.

The glen ended in a wider valley—narrow, indeed, but not like the cleft in the ground from which he had emerged. Surrounding it were beetling walls of rock, from which he could see no possible exit. There was good grass in it; the trickling of another spring sounded at one side, where, near a pool, a goat was tethered by a rope that was long enough to allow it to browse. This goat bleated, steadily, a high, distressful sound that seemed almost a cry for help. Bill heard it subconsciously; but he was more interested by something else.

At the far end, built almost under the jutting rock of the cliff, was a hut. It was a rather large hut, with something solid in its appearance—not like the makeshift buildings of the camp, although its material was bark, cut in thick sheets. There was actually a window; without glass, certainly, but still a window; and the door that swung open was made of split palings.

Near it was a small tent, smoke-grey with age; in front was a fireplace carefully built of stones, with a cross-stick from which a blackened billy hung over grey ashes that held no fire. There was no sign of life about the place, save for the goat that bleated despairingly. But as the boy hesitated there came another sound—the angry crying of a child.

"Why, there's a kid there!" said Bill.

As if his words had been heard, a child appeared in the doorway. A very small boy in ragged shirt and tiny knickerbockers: with tousled yellow hair and a very dirty face. Never had a small boy looked more thoroughly unhappy. He was not crying, but he stared out with a face of sullen despair and bewilderment, as though all his small world had suddenly gone to pieces. Behind him the loud crying went on steadily, growing louder.

"Must be two of 'em," said Bill, brilliantly. "Someone's in trouble."

The child in the doorway caught sight of him, starting as though he had seen a ghost. He drew back as if to hide himself in the hut; then, changing his mind, darted out of the shadow and came racing to meet him.

"Come on—quick!" he panted.

"What for?" demanded Bill.

"Mummy's hurt her leg." He tugged at the boy's arm. "Oh, *come on*,"—and Bill obeyed.

He peered into the dim hut, half-nervously, seeing an untidy interior, with a few bits of bush-made furniture. On the mud floor sat—and screamed—a child a little younger than the boy who had run to meet him. There were two bunks with tumbled grey blankets hanging down: and on one lay a woman with a

white face drawn in lines of anxiety and pain. She turned her head wearily and spoke to the child on the floor.

“Oh, *shut* up, Pansy. It’s no good howlin’. Mummy’ll try’n get up presently.”

Pansy checked in the middle of a howl, staring at Bill. She twisted to her feet, rushed to the bunk, and buried her head in a blanket.

“Mummy!” called her brother. “Here’s a boy!”

The head on the dirty pillow came round sharply. To Bill it was incomprehensible that anyone could look at him with such frantic eagerness.

“Who’s with you?”

“Nobody,” said Bill. “I’m bushed. What’s up?”

“You—you’re not all by yourself?” The relief changed to utter disappointment.

“Yes, I am.” He came in slowly and stood by her, a wave of pity surging over him. “I say, what’s up?”

“Hurt my knee,” she answered, briefly. “I can’t get about—an’ the kids are near starved. Look here—can you milk a goat?”

“Never tried,” said Bill. “I’m game to try, though: I can milk a cow.”

“Then for ’eaven’s sake, go an’ milk ’er,” begged the woman, feverishly. “She won’t give you no trouble—the poor brute’s half mad to be milked. Bucket’s there.” She had risen on her elbow: now she dropped back with a groan.

“Want milk!” wailed Pansy.

“Me too.” The small brother thrust the bucket into Bill’s hand. “I’m firsty.”

“Poor kid!” said Bill. “You and Pansy come along. Bring a cup or something. Here, I’ll take this pannikin.”

They followed at his heels, the bush child’s dread of a stranger disappearing in the hope of being fed. At the sight of the bucket the tethered goat tugged at her rope and bleated wildly. Bill regarded her with some doubt.

“How does she get milked, sonny? Do they leg-roped her?”

“No—she stands quite still. Mummy sits on that log. I can hold her.”

Bill untied the end of the rope that was not attached to the goat and led her to the log. She was urgently desirous of being milked, and stood quietly. It was not quite an easy task, for at the first spurt of milk the small Pansy intercepted the stream with the pannikin, hitting Bill’s nose with it violently—a mishap which affected her not at all. She drank as soon as there was a mouthful in the mug, returning to the source of supply—Bill prudently averting his nose. Then the little brother’s self-control deserted him; he left the goat’s head and demanded turn-about, and the mug darted backwards and forwards between them and the goat until Bill lost his temper and ordered them away.

“You’ve both had some—now you can jolly well wait till I’ve milked her!

Hold her head, kid.”

His own head was throbbing violently: to lean forward made it ache more than ever. But he worried through his job as well as he could, while Pansy licked the inside of the pannikin as far as her small tongue could reach, and the boy watched hungrily. Once he spoke.

“Can you make porridge?”

“No,” said Bill. “Why?”

The boy’s face fell.

“Mummy can’t, either, now. An’ there isn’t anything else to eat. Couldn’t you, if you tried awful hard?”

“I don’t know,” said Bill, doubtfully. “Might, if she told me how.” The goat moved, and bumped his damaged forehead, and he uttered an angry exclamation—“Stand over, you old beast!” The boy relapsed into awed silence.

Bill squeezed out the last drops of milk, sitting back with a sigh of relief. Pansy instantly plunged the mug into the bucket and withdrew it brimming.

“Here, you go easy,” commanded Bill. “You’ll spill that, and there isn’t enough to waste.” He took possession of it and gave each child a drink. “I guess your Mummy will be glad enough of some.”

He had the prudence to take the bucket with him while he tied up the goat; it was clear that Pansy was entirely non-moral where milk was concerned. They trotted beside him back to the hut.

The woman was lying still. There was a shade of hope in her dull eyes as the trio came in. Pansy’s voice shrill and joyful as she ran across to the bunk.

“Had a dwink, Mummy! Had lots o’ dwinks.”

“That’s something, any’ow,” muttered the mother. “You too, Vic?”

“’M,” said the small boy, with deep satisfaction. “I’m hungry, though.”

“You have some,” Bill said, proffering the mug.

“No—keep it for the kids,” she said. “There’s little enough. You might get in some water, if you like. Could you bring some from the spring? There’s a kerosene tin outside.”

Bill was conscious of being very tired as he dragged his way back from the spring. He tried to bring more water than his strength would allow, and had to pour some away: even with the burden lightened he could not manage it without several rests. He wanted badly to lie down, to ease his head. But he reflected grimly that he had come to a place where lying down seemed an unlikely recreation. Everything puzzled him very much. The only thing that stood out clearly was that he had dropped into weighty responsibilities—and he must shoulder them as best he could.

He gave the woman some water; she drank long and eagerly, holding out the cup for more.

“My word, that’s good!” she said. “I haven’t had a drop all day—an’ it’s fair ’ot in ’ere, an’ no mistake.”

“Haven’t you any man here?” demanded Bill.

“My old man’s gone for tucker. Ought to be back before now—I dunno what’s happened to him. An’ we’re mighty near run out. All the flour’s gone; there’s only oatmeal left. Where’d’ you come from, son?”

Bill told her.

“Why, you’ve pretty near been killed!” she ejaculated. She peered at him in the dimly-lit hut. “Lor’, you’ve got an awful bash on your forehead! You ought to be lyin’ down, I believe. But I don’t see ’ow you’re goin’ to, yet awhile.” She sighed. “It was a fair godsend to see you come in—an’ me ’ere all but ’elpless. An’ the kids ’owlin’ for food.”

“Jolly rough,” said Bill. “Is your leg very bad?”

“It’s my knee,” she said, disgustedly. “As if I couldn’t ’ave ’ad more sense than to fall over. Caught it on a sharp rock, an’ it’s swelled up like a pumpkin. I kep’ goin’ as long as I could, but this morning I couldn’t move. Tried to get out an’ light the fire, an’ it beat me altogether—I went an’ fainted. Me! I never did such a thing in all me born days. Frightened the wits out of the poor kids. They ’aven’t ’ad a thing to eat all day.”

“I say!” Bill exclaimed. “Well, you’ll have to tell me what to do. I’d better light the fire, hadn’t I?”

“You get the fire goin’ an’ the billy on. Then you come back an’ if you get me the things I can mix the porridge an’ tell you ’ow to cook it. Think you can?”

“I ’spect so. I can cook sausages.”

“Don’t mention them,” she said, faintly, her eyes ravenous. “Lor’, I wonder if I’ll ever see a sausage again! Well, you go on, son. Pansy’ll start cryin’ again presently, I bet.”

The children hung about him wistfully as he made the fire in the stone fireplace outside the hut. The milk had taken the sharp edge off their hunger, and they knew food was a hopeful prospect; in which they were more hopeful than Bill, who was dismally realising that he had never seen porridge cooked. However, he could but trust that his queer hostess’s directions would be sufficient. He hung the billy over the fire, warned them sternly to keep away from it, and went back to the hut.

It was not such a difficult matter as he had imagined. She was able, sitting up on the bunk, to mix the oatmeal and water: he cooked it in a black iron pot, stirring it feverishly with a stick, since she had warned him solemnly against letting it burn; from time to time carrying it to her to see if it were done. The smoke got into his eyes, making them water, and he cooked himself almost as thoroughly as the porridge; but at last it was ready. He ladled out platefuls for

the children: they fell on it wolfishly, sitting on the floor.

“Well, that’s a comfort, any’ow,” said the mother, looking at them with softened eyes. “Have some, son?”

“No, thanks—I’m not hungry. You will, won’t you?”

“I couldn’t,” she said. “But I’d give something for a cup of tea. Could you make it?”

“Rather,” said Bill, brightening. Tea was something he understood.

“Well, you got to go steady on the tea. There’s mighty little left. I’ll show you how much to put in.” She looked at him keenly. “I won’t have any unless you do.”

“All right,” said Bill. “Tea sounds good.”

They drank it together, while the children ate until the porridge-pot was scraped so cleanly that further washing of it was an unnecessary refinement. Over the tea they learned more about each other. The absent husband was a prospector, whose fossicking had been fairly lucky. The family had camped in the ravine for several months. There was a way out, a difficult path that could scarcely be seen unless you knew where to look for it, she said; they had a pony and a pack-mare, and at intervals Mr. Walker made expeditions for supplies, remaining away several days.

“Likes a bit o’ the township when ’e gets a charnce—like all the men,” said his wife; and Bill nodded gravely. “But ’e’s overdone it this time. Not as we’d ’ave been so short if Pansy ’adn’t got ’old of the flour an’ made mud-pies with it when I was milkin’ the goat. Young limb!” She looked proudly at Pansy, diligently scraping the pot. “An’ then I ’ad to go an’ ’urt me knee. An’ what to do about you *I* dunno, Bill. I could tell you ’ow to get up the rocks, but you’d never find your way back to your camp.”

“Couldn’t I keep to the edge of the gully?” he asked, blankly.

She shook her head.

“You don’t know what it’s like. Me old man’s told me, though. The scrub’s that thick you can’t get near the edge, an’ there’s other gullies runnin’ ’ere an’ there that you can’t get across—you’d ’ave to go way off in the scrub to get round ’em. Me old man says this is the queerest place ever ’e seen, it’s that lost in the scrub; you could be ’unting for ages before you’d find it.”

“But—but they’ll be awfully anxious,” Bill faltered. “I promised I wouldn’t go far.”

“Son, it ain’t safe for you to try an’ get back—not through that awful country. You’d get bushed in half an hour. I’m real sorry, for they’re bound to be anxious—but at any rate you’re safe ’ere, even if there’s only porridge to eat.”

He looked at her, his lip quivering, for all his manhood. It had not occurred to him that he could not get back, once he had known there was a way out of

the gully. Visions of Norah's miserable anxiety came to him—of Jim's coming home, to find him gone. It seemed more than he could stand.

Mrs. Walker spoke again.

"An' there's us," she said. "I told you you were just a godsend when you came walkin' in. I was fair desperate."

"'M," said Bill. This was another viewpoint. If he could get out—even if he could—was it the decent thing to leave them in their plight? He believed Jim would say it was not.

"You ain't very big," stated Mrs. Walker. "But if you'd been seven foot high you couldn't 'ave 'elped me more'n you did. Milked, an' got the kids fed, an' made tea; an' you only just crawled out from under a landslip, with a bump on your 'ead the size of an aig. Well, what I say is, you're a man. But if you try to get back to your people, the kids an' me ain't much better off than we was, are we?"

"I s'pose not," he said, slowly. "Do you think Mr. Walker will come soon?"

"Might come slitherin' down the 'ill any time. An' when 'e does 'e'll go straight off on the pony an' find your camp."

"If he doesn't come soon Jim will find me. I know jolly well he will."

"You bet 'e'll find you," she answered. It seemed the only thing to say, looking at his troubled face. But in her heart she was doubtful. She had heard too much about the country surrounding her lost gully.

"Well, I'll have to wait," he said, heavily. "I couldn't leave you, anyhow, unless I was certain of bringing some of them back to you to-night. What will I do now, Mrs. Walker?"

"If you could put some water in that tin basin I'd put some more wet bandages round me knee. Tore up me last old sheet for 'em, I did. I soaked 'em last night, but there wasn't any more water, an' I couldn't get to the spring. Then you just go into Mr. Walker's little tent an' lay down on his bunk. It's about all you look fit for, you poor kid."

Bill did as he was told, glad indeed to lie down—there seemed no inch of him that did not ache. But the little tent was unbearably hot and stuffy, and Mr. Walker's blankets smelt as never blankets smelt before—at least, to Bill. He came out very soon and lay under a tree, wondering what they were doing at the camp. They would have become anxious long ago: he pictured them searching for him, calling. Before his mind came Norah's face, afraid, as he had never seen it. He wondered whether she would be angry with him. But that thought did not stay.

"No, she won't," he muttered. "She'll know I didn't mean to get lost."

All his troubled heart cried out for Jim—Jim who never failed, who was always steadfast, immovable. If Jim only knew! But it was not possible that he

could know until to-morrow night. And with that his good angel put hope into his heart. Mr. Walker might get back at any time, and then perhaps Jim need not be worried at all: and Norah's anxiety might not be for long. And meanwhile, he had his job.

The thought strengthened him: even his head seemed to ache less. He got up presently and went to the pool, where he bathed it for some time: then, refreshed, he walked back to the hut. The children, who had been watching him curiously all the time, at a discreet distance, trotted in at his heels.

Mrs. Walker was looking better. She was sitting up on the bunk, her hair neatly brushed. Her keen, hard face seemed younger as she smiled at him.

"You didn't 'ave much of a lay-down," she said. "I was 'opin' you'd gone off to sleep. Just you let me take a look at that 'ead of yours, son."

She inspected the bump narrowly.

"Well, you got a beauty, an' no error. Just as well it bled. I washed out a bandage for you. You go an' soak it in clean water, an' I'll tie it round your 'ead. Must keep dirt out of that cut. Could you stick it if I put some iodine on it?"

Bill agreed, and stood without flinching while she dabbed the wound, though his eyes blinked rapidly and he had to clench his teeth on his lower lip.

"You just watch this boy, Vic," commanded his hostess, improving the occasion. "Not an 'owl out of 'im when 'e gets a lick of iodine. There you are, son; that'll do fine. I ain't got much in the way of med'cine, but iodine's a thing I won't be without. Good thing you got it so clean. Now I'll put a wet pad on it, an' it'll 'eal lovely." She tied up his head with an expert hand.

"Thanks," said Bill. "That feels ripping. How's your knee?"

"Well, it ain't pretty. But it feels better, for all that: can't beat cold water. I managed to 'obble round a bit 'oldin' on to the chair.

"You shouldn't, should you?"

"Wiser not to, but what's one to do? When me old man comes 'e'll knock me up a crutch some'ow. But I'll keep it quiet now, if you don't mind doin' the jobs."

"Course I don't," said Bill, eagerly. "Tell me what to do now."

"Well, there's not much for anyone to do. Only porridge to cook, an' tea to make—we can't ring any changes on the meenyoo." She laughed, grimly. "You just make a bit of porridge for yourself whenever you feel like it."

Bill shook his head.

"I'm not hungry. What about you?"

Mrs. Walker was very hungry indeed, but she concealed the fact.

"I don't feel as if I could fancy any to-night. An' the kids can't 'ave no more. There's milk yet, if they want that. How's the firewood, son?"

"Plenty."

“Mr. Walker lef’ us a good stack. Well, then, there’s only water to get: just as well to ’ave some in before dark. An’ then you an’ me could do with another cup of tea before bed-time. You’ll sleep in Mr. Walker’s tent.”

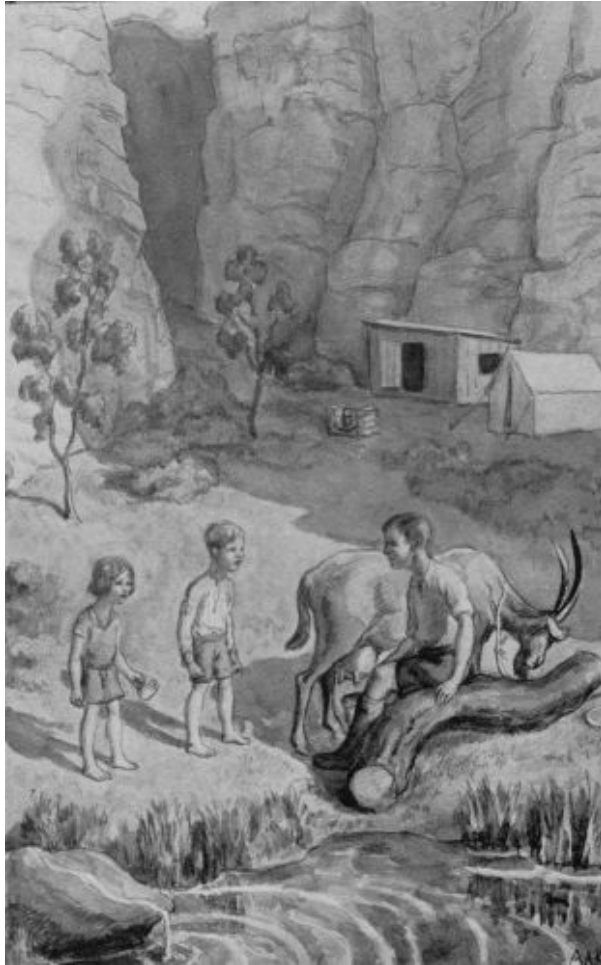
Bill had his own views on this, but he said nothing. Night under the stars called to him more than a tent heavy with memories of Mr. Walker.

“Well, you get the water, Bill,” she said. “An’ then you an’ me might ’ave a bit of a yarn. There’s times in this gully when I’d just give me best ’at—if I ’ad one—for a yarn with someone.”

They yarned while the evening shadows crept down the ravine, and the hut grew dark. Vic and Pansy played outside until they grew sleepy, when they came in and crawled into their bunk without any formality of undressing, a tousled yellow head at either end of the blankets, little grimy feet sticking out here and there. Bill found himself beginning to nod. Mrs. Walker caught him in the middle of a yawn.

“You get off to bed, son. We’ll all feel better in the morning.”

He dragged the blankets from the tent out into the open. It was queer to go to bed half-undressed; hard to think that only last night he had lain in his bunk, hearing the merry voices round the camp-fire. It seemed an age ago. A great wave of home-sickness came over him, but he fought it back. Jim would expect his “offsider” to play the man. Yet it was a hard fight. The cool fingers of sleep came mercifully to end it.



“Bill untied the end of the rope . . . and led the goat to the log.”
Bill of Billabong [Page 217]

CHAPTER XVI

BILL LOSES A JOB

BILL WOKE in the early dawn, stiff and sore from the hard ground. He looked about him in a bewildered fashion, expecting, for a moment, to see the other bunks, the line of quiet sleepers. Then, with a sigh, he remembered.

He turned over, picturing the other camp. They would be awake early there too, he knew. He thought of Norah's face as it would look this morning, and choked back a sob at the picture, so different to their merry beginning of each day. They would be hurrying through breakfast, scattering into the scrub to look for him, racked with anxiety. And he was here, caught in this queer crack in the earth, where fifty men might look in vain.

Well, it was a new day, and there was always a chance. At some blessed moment he might hear a coo-ee that he could answer: or Mr. Walker might appear, in his wife's words, "slitherin' down the 'ill." And meanwhile, he was the man of the party.

No one was stirring within the hut. Bill washed at the pool, rejoicing that his head, though sore enough, ached no longer. Then, taking the axe, he went to look for a stick that would make a crutch for Mrs. Walker.

Luck was with him: he came upon a straight and slender stem, growing out of a half-fallen tree in such a manner that he could cut it with a rough crutch-head. It was not ideal in shape, and the cutting was difficult; but he managed it, and spent some time in trimming it carefully with his knife.

"If she pads the top with a bit of rag it'll be better than hobbling round with that old chair," he said. He carried it back to the hut triumphantly.

Pansy and Vic were sitting in the doorway, blinking sleepy eyes. Mrs. Walker greeted the crutch with rapture.

"Well, if you ain't the great kid! I'll get about as spry as a cricket with that. Me old man couldn' 'ave done it better."

"You've got to keep still, though," Bill said, firmly.

"Oh, I will that. I know well enough what a knee can be if it gets nasty. But I won't feel so out-an'-out 'elpless with a crutch." She sighed. "My word, I won't forget yesterday in an 'urry! Me not able to stir, an' the kids an' the goat all bleatin' at me. Well, we'll all 'ave some burgoo this mornin'."

"What's that?" Bill's voice was hopeful.

"Oh, same as last night," said his hostess. "'S another name for porridge, son." At which Bill's hopes faded, and he went to milk the goat.

The day went by on leaden feet. For all that he was the only worker, there was so little to do. Perhaps it was as well, since he was still shaky: glad enough to sit still, when the necessary jobs were finished. There was no fixed time for anything. Meals occurred when the children's clamouring for food became too insistent to be ignored. Bill was not hungry, and Mrs. Walker said she was not, so that most of the meagre dish of porridge went to Pansy and Vic. At intervals he brought ice-cold water from the spring and his hostess bathed her knee and renewed the dressing on his head. Then there were no more duties.

It was very hot. The hut became unbearable, even for Mrs. Walker. Bill made a pile of folded blankets in the shadow of a big rock, and she hobbled out on her crutch, her face twisted with pain at each step, and spent the day with her back propped against the crag, the injured leg sticking out stiffly. Even in the shade, the heat of the shut-in valley seemed a living thing that struck at them fiercely. The children spent most of the mid-day hours in the pool near the spring, sharing it with the tethered goat. They were strange little children: silent at their play, for the most part, save for a fierce dispute now and then, which usually ended in loud crying from Pansy, lasting only a minute and ending as suddenly as it had begun. Their mother took no notice of these outbreaks. "Lor', they'll learn to settle up their own quarrels," she said easily: and continued to talk.

How she talked! Never had Bill heard so ceaseless a flow of eloquence. She was, as she had told him, starved for a yarn. But he soon found that to yarn with Mrs. Walker required no conversation on his part; all she wanted was a listener. He began to understand why Vic and Pansy were so silent. Indeed, there was little chance for any other talker when their mother held the floor.

He learned all about them in that long, hot day, lying in the shade that was scarcely less burning than the full sunlight. The sharp nasal voice went on ceaselessly. He heard of her early life on a farm in the Mallee, where existence seemed made up of sand, heat and flies: of her marriage—there was great detail of the festivities in the little tin-roofed farmhouse. Mr. Walker had a farm also, but a drought was too much for him: the little home had to be sold. "And darned lucky we were to get out of it without bein' in debt," added the wife. "So there we were, with the two kids an' very little else." She told it cheerfully; to Bill it seemed very terrible, but this queer, lanky woman spoke of it as if it were only an incident. Life had always been so grim a struggle that one disaster more or less hardly counted.

He gathered that Mr. Walker did not altogether regret the lost farm. At the best it was only scratching for a living, with no chance of ever doing well. And in both husband and wife there was the gold-hunger that is rooted deeply in so many Australians—the conviction that some day a lucky stroke of a pick may turn up a nugget big enough to make farming seem a very poor matter. So he

drifted here and there, fossicking, while she took her babies back to her old home, where there was very little room for them and everything was uncomfortable and Pansy got sandy blight in both eyes. This annoyed Mr. Walker, who declared that they would be better off camping in the clean Bush, and that he would greatly enjoy having his meals cooked for him.

“An’ you can’t wonder,” stated Mrs. Walker. “It’s a fair cow for a man to come in dead-beat after an ’ard day’s work with a pick, an’ ’ave to turn to an’ cook ’is own tucker. So ’e got a tent an’ a pack-’orse, an’ we started out with ’im.”

They had been in many places before they came to these hills. Here luck had been kinder than anywhere else.

“Nothin’ excitin’, as you might say,” Mrs. Walker added. “No pickin’ up of nuggets as big as potatoes—no, not yet as big as peas, neither. Wish we ’ad. But ’e gets the colour, an’ specks of gold ’ere an’ there, an’ it all mounts up. An’ livin’s cheap. No ’ouse-rent an’ no rates an’ taxes—’e shoots a few birds, an’ ’e snares a wallaby now an’ then, an’ ’e goes fishin’ on Sundays. That’s ’ow we know it’s Sunday. Though we did lose count once, an’ when ’e went to the township for the next lot of supplies ’e found we’d been keepin’ Sunday on Monday for quite a long time.” She laughed. “Don’t suppose it mattered.”

“How did you find this place?” Bill asked.

“Oh, Mr. Walker dropped across it when ’e was prospectin’ round. Found gold ’ere, too, but it didn’t last long. ’E brought us ’ere, ’cause of the springs. It’s not so easy to get good water when the creeks are low; an’ if you camp near a creek you’re wore out watchin’ the kids don’t fall in. It’s very safe ’ere, though there’s lots of times I feel like a rat in a trap—I’d give anything to stretch me eyes a bit. Gets on your nerves, so to speak. But Mr. Walker reckons it’s a good camp. ’E put up the ’ut, ’cause our big tent was leakin’ too much to be pleasant. I will say that was a comfort: you get mighty tired of livin’ in a tent. No place to ’ang up anything. I reckoned we’d settled in for good an’ all when he brought the goats ’ome.”

“He didn’t bring them on the pack-horse, did he?”

“No, ’e drove ’em. Nice job ’e ’ad with ’em too. I never see a man in such a temper as ’e was by the time ’e got ’em ’ere. ’Ad to catch ’em singly an’ drag ’em down the cliff. ’E blindfolded the first with ’is ’at, the way she wouldn’t know ’ow to get out again: an’ when ’e put ’er down she off down the gully like mad with ’is ’at on, an’ it took ’im two days to find it—she got rid of it in the scrub.”

Bill gave a little gurgle of laughter, and she looked at him wistfully.

“Sounds like old times to hear anyone laugh. We don’t seem to have a thing to smile at ’ere—I don’t b’lieve the kids know ’ow to laugh. Mr. Walker ain’t what you might call talkative. Even when ’e comes back from the

township 'e doesn't seem to 'ave picked up anything to tell, let alone any jokes. An' I must say I do like a bit of a joke now an' then. Know any jokes, Bill?"

Bill racked his brains for a joke, and of course failed to find one. It troubled him—she was so eager, suddenly, like a child waiting for a treat.

"'Fraid not," he confessed. "We laugh at heaps of things at Billabong, but I can't think of any to tell you." Then, as her face fell, he had a flash of memory.

"I'll tell you how I dyed my hair, if you like."

He flushed a little—the remembrance still held for him more tragedy than comedy. But he felt that he must produce a joke for her somehow—and although no one at Billabong had ever laughed before him at the incident of the dyeing, Bill had no doubt that it held possibilities of mirth. He told it as a joke, and had the satisfaction of seeing his hostess rock helplessly with laughter.

"If that ain't the best thing ever I heard!" she gasped. "Crumbs, I'd like to 'ave seen you when it was green! Did it take long to get right again?"

"Oh, a good while. It went all queer and streaky. But I was too busy to think of it. I was learning all about cattle and things."

He fell silent, remembering the happiness of that learning. Jim would be riding back to camp now, with his father and Wally: returning to find him gone. He writhed in spirit to think of how the gladness of the home-coming would be spoilt. They would be tired, looking forward to a lazy day tomorrow; and instead they would have to turn out and hunt through the Bush for him. It would be a fuss; and Jim hated fusses. And it was all his fault. Oh, if only he had never gone wading in the beastly creek!

Then his glance fell on the humped mass that was Mrs. Walker's bandaged knee, showing clearly through her thin skirt. He looked at the children; and at the goat. And there came to him a sudden comforting conviction that Jim would say it had been worth while.

"D'you think Mr. Walker's sure to come home to-day?" he broke in upon another long reminiscence by his hostess.

"Why 'e ain't 'ome now's more'n I can say," she returned, sourly. "Well enough 'e knows we must be pretty short of tucker, even though 'e don't know Pansy made mud-pies of the flour. 'E'll get the len'th of my tongue all right when 'e does show up. Not that 'e ain't the best ever," she added, rather hastily. "Never lifted 'is 'and to me—an' 'e'd better not! But when men gets into a township after a long time in the Bush they just forget everything. Time don't mean anything to them. They just prop themselves against a verandah-post an' yarn."

"Do you think he's still doing it?" Bill asked, alarmed.

“Aw, no, Bill, ’e’s not as bad as that. ’E’s on ’is way back, or my name’s not Lizzie Walker. All ’e’s done is, ’e’s carried ’is yarnin’ on a bit too long, an’ ten to one ’e’s ’urryin’ ’ome now, pretty ashamed of ’imself. Not that ’e’ll show it; that’s not Mr. Walker’s way. But ’e’s probbibly bought me an extra dress-len’th an’ an extra bag of lollies for the kids, jus’ to make up. That’s all right, but I wouldn’t much worry if ’e ’ad to live on short allowance of porridge an’ nothin’ else for a bit, like us. That ’ud show ’im.”

She sighed.

“’Stead of which ’e’s most likely been livin’ on sausages an’ fresh beef at the pub. Well, women ’ave the thick end of the stick to carry in married life, an’ don’t you forget it, Bill, when you’re grown up.”

She rambled off into a long account of an illness she had endured in the hut. The details were intimate and grisly, but Bill scarcely heard them. His mind was occupied with visions of Mr. Walker, propping up a verandah-post in the far-off township. He had an uneasy feeling that he was there yet.

And day after day crawled by, bringing nothing to break the stillness of the hidden gully. It was a stillness that held no peace. Bill’s mind was torn with the knowledge of what his friends must be suffering; always he carried the vision of them hunting through the Bush, calling ceaselessly, growing more hopeless with each day’s search. Twice he thought he heard a long coo-ee, far off, and once a stockwhip crack. He answered them, shouting until his throat was dry, and Mrs. Walker joined in, high and shrill; but there was no reply, and hope again died away.

Peace was even further from the woman. Each time the children begged for food she measured out the oatmeal with a more sparing hand, dread in her heart as the scanty supply in the tin grew lower and lower: and when Vic and Pansy wailed that they were hungry still, when they had scraped out the pot, she stilled them with sharp anger that hid a glowing fear. She looked ravenously at the second goat. There was food, if they could but kill it.

But how? Her knee was still almost useless, and the goat was wild and active. Even if Bill could catch it, a doubtful matter, the butchering was beyond a ten-year-old boy and a helpless woman. They were both weak with hunger, for she scarcely touched the porridge; and Bill, quick to realise the necessity, took very little more than her meagre allowance. They drank much water and allowed themselves tea twice a day: the goat’s milk was kept for the children. Bill began to feel himself dizzy when he got up suddenly; it was an effort to perform the little jobs of the camp.

He was milking the goat one evening when an idea came to him, so obvious an idea that he stopped in blank wonderment at himself for not having thought of it before.

“Well, we are idiots!” he muttered. “Jim must think I’m a bright sort of a

bushman!”

He hurried through the milking and went back to the hut as fast as he could. Mrs. Walker was sitting propped up on her bunk. Even in his excitement it seemed to Bill that there was a new shade of anxiety on her haggard face. Outside Pansy was wailing dismally. But that was no new thing for Pansy.

“I say, Mrs. Walker!” He stammered in his eagerness. “We ought to have thought of something before. I’ll make a fire in the morning—a big fire, and heap green boughs on it. You know, a fire that will make a big smoke. We can water the boughs if they don’t smoke enough. Jim will see it—some of them are sure to see it. Weren’t we fools not to think of it!”

He stopped, checked by the despair in her face.

“Yes, I was a fool all right,” she said, slowly. “’Course I ought to ’ave thought of it—on’y I kept thinkin’ I’d see Mr. Walker comin’ down the ’ill any minute, an’ I suppose this bloomin’ pain makes me silly. Well, you’re only a kid, an’ not used to the Bush. But I deserve anything you can say to me.”

“But we’ll do it now,” he cried. “They’re sure to be hunting for me still. I’ll get the wood ready now, and light it first thing in the morning.”

“No go, Bill,” she said, briefly.

“But why?” He stared at her.

“Why? ’Cause that young limb of mine ’as just emptied out the last box of matches into the water.”

“The last box?” he faltered.

“Yes. I thought she was pretty quiet, an’ I sent Vic in to see what she was doing. An’ she yelled an’ fought ’im, so I ’obbed in. They’re all there—floatin’ about in the kerosene-tin. Well, you’re off duty as a cook, Bill; there’s no more fires for us till Mr. Walker comes. An’ oatmeal-water ain’t very fillin’—not for kids, let alone you an’ me. It’s a case of tighten our belts an’ say our prayers now, son, an’ no mistake!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE HELP THAT CAME

JIM LINTON rode into the camp after dark. The fire was glowing redly; he could see the silent group gathered round its glow. The silence told him that there was no need to ask the question that had been in his heart. So it had met him, night after night.

There was another camp now, at the far end of the valley: a second fire sent a red greeting across the dark. Men were there: helpers who had gathered from far and near to help in the search for little Bill Blake. Others rode out daily; there was a regular supply of food from Billabong for all comers.

Strange, quiet camp-fires. No cheerful voices came from them. People came in too tired to talk, after the hunt that lasted through every hour of daylight. And there was nothing to say: only to compare notes as to where each had been, and to make plans for the search that would recommence at dawn. They ate in silence, smoked a little, and one by one turned in to the blankets.

Norah and Wally came across to Jim as he rubbed down his horse and hobbled it. The big grey moved slowly away towards the creek and the three went over to the fire.

“Jim—I want Norah and Tommy to go home,” Wally said. “They’re worn out.”

“I know,” Jim nodded. “It would be better if they went. But——” He hesitated.

“You know we can’t,” Norah said, very low. “It would be like giving him up. And I’ll never do that.”

“You won’t give him up,” came Jim’s swift answer. “None of us will. We’ll find him yet. But if you girls knock up altogether it will be a bad business, Nor. It won’t help Bill.”

Norah’s lip quivered.

“I know. We’ll promise not to go far from camp, if you like. But I must stay, boys. I couldn’t go away. If—*when*—you find him he may need me.” She slipped her arm through Wally’s. “Don’t try to send me away.”

“Well—if you’ll be careful——” he said, unhappily. “But I’m wretched about you when you hunt all day. It’s rough work for men, let alone for you and Tommy. I don’t know how you have stuck it out so long.”

“Oh—hope keeps one going,” she said. “And I’ll never give up hope.”

The firelight showed a ring of lined faces. All were set in haggard endurance; eyes held the weariness born of incessant watching. Tommy was on

the grass, her back propped against the log on which Mr. Linton sat. She smiled faintly at Jim.

“Food here,” she said. “And soap and water just at the end of the log.”

“I want the soap and water more than the food,” said Jim. He splashed gratefully in the basin. “Any word of the black trackers, Dad?”

“Two will be out to-morrow. They have been working with the police at some case near Beechworth.”

“But is it any use?” Bob asked. “I don’t know much about a blackfellow’s abilities, but surely the track must be fresh, even for them. And so many other feet have crossed and re-crossed every place Bill can have been.”

“I’ve known blacks pick up one trail from a crowd and follow it until they got their man,” Mr. Linton said. “If only we could have had Billy out here at once I’ve not the slightest doubt he would have found Bill. But it isn’t so easy now, as you say, Bob; and the ground is terribly hard.”

“Still, it’s one more chance,” said Jim, firmly. “And those fellows can see a sign where we could see nothing. Well, they’re welcome to all I’ve got if they find him.”

“They’ll find him,” said Wally, steadily. “It isn’t possible that one small boy can dodge all this crowd much longer.”

No one spoke. They had all schooled themselves to refusing to believe that there was any chance of not finding Bill. Even when the slow, cruel days dragged out, when it seemed that the searchers must have combed every yard of the scrub-covered hills and gullies, when physical weariness dragged down their hearts, not one of the Billabong people would admit the possibility of failure. Some of the other men were openly despairing now; men of experience, who realised that each day made it more probable that if they found the child it would be too late. But no one dared hint such a belief to the searchers from Billabong—who held their heads high and spoke cheerfully of their certainty of success.

“I’ve a feeling that if I once admitted I was afraid I’d never find him,” Jim had told Wally. And Wally had forced an attempt at his old grin, and retorted, “Who’s afraid?”

But it was hard to keep it up. Jim tossed and turned sleeplessly in his bunk that night, seeing all the time a little figure, a red head and a freckled face—hearing a voice that called him. Lying alone, he faced what he refused to admit to others: the knowledge that a hundred men might seek in that country in vain. They would find him—some day. That was certain. But he knew well that it would probably be too late.

He fell into a restless doze after midnight, waking at length with a violent start. The luminous dial of his watch told him that it was three o’clock. Sleep refused to come again, and he found it impossible to lie still. He got up quietly,

thrust his feet into sand-shoes, and moved away, walking aimlessly until he came to a log near the creek. There he sat, smoking and thinking; and presently Wally joined him.

“Saw you dodging off, so I thought I’d come and smoke too,” he said. “Couldn’t you sleep, old man?”

“Not much. One keeps listening. Stupid, of course—there isn’t anything to listen to but mopokes and hobble-chains.”

“I know,” Wally nodded. “One does it all day: I pull up a hundred times, thinking I hear the little chap call. Jim, it’s getting a pretty bare chance.”

Jim clenched his teeth on his pipe-stem, making no answer for a moment. Then he said slowly:

“We’re going to find him, Wal. It won’t be the first bare chance we’ve pulled off.”

“No. But we were a few sizes bigger. He’s such a little chap.”

“Look here, Wal,” said Jim, and paused. “I’ve been lying awake, scared. Darkness makes it easier to be afraid for him. And I tell you, I *won’t* be afraid. You know we’ve always believed that what we said we’d do, we *would* do. If we keep that belief it’s three parts of the way towards succeeding. Wherever Bill is, he’s trusting us to find him. And we will find him, and we’ll find him in time.”

The deep, slow voice held a ring of confidence that put new heart into Wally.

“It helps—if you can feel like that,” he said.

“Well, I’ve got help,” Jim said. “You and I don’t talk much about some things, but we know what we believe. That little old French priest who looked after me when the Germans had me, when I was helpless, used to talk to me. He was strong on praying with faith. Once he said, ‘My son, a prayer made with faith and courage goes very straight to the Master—never pray as a doubter.’”

“Norah believes that,” said Wally. “She told me she was able to hang on to faith when I was nearly dead in Brisbane. She—she said she felt as if she was able to *demand* me back from God.”

“And if you’d been able to see her face as I saw it that night you’d have known she was doing it,” said Jim. “And—you came back.”

For a few moments they were silent. Closely knit in friendship as they were, it was not easy for Jim and Wally to put some things into words.

“Well—I’ve prayed pretty hard over Bill,” Jim said, suddenly. “And tonight I realised I was praying as a doubter, for the first time. And I got up and came over here and—and I apologised. I said, ‘I don’t believe You brought that lonely little chap to Billabong to have him die in the Bush—I know You’re going to let us find him.’ And a sort of wave of peace came over me,

Wal, and I do know it. I've got faith back. We're going to get him."

He stood up, his huge form in the light pyjamas like a statue in the gloom. To Wally it was as though he were indeed a statue of faith and courage, and his own heart leaped in answer.

"Then you've got your answer, old man," he said, swiftly. "We'll find him. Let's go and dress: we'll start out as soon as there's light enough."

They turned, and saw Norah coming towards them. She had thrown a light coat over her pyjamas: her feet made no sound on the grass.

"I saw your pipes glowing," she said. "And I had to find you. Wally—Jim—I've had a dream."

Wally's arm went round her in swift alarm at her breathless voice.

"Are you all right, Norah?"

"Yes—yes. Oh, it was so vivid! Boys, I saw him—Bill. Quite clearly: it lasted so long that I could see every detail."

"Tell us about it," said Wally, soothingly. "Was he—was he all right, Norah?"

"He was standing under a tree," she said. "In a queer place, all shut in by high walls of rock. You might find lots of places like it in the hills, but I have not seen such a tree anywhere. A huge tree, quite by itself: the trunk was perfectly smooth, not a single branch until it spread out in a big mass at the top. And it had been struck by lightning; the trunk was split and blasted at the top, and a great white branch was hanging by shreds."

Jim started as though he had been struck.

"I've seen that tree, I believe!" he uttered. "I was looking at it from the top of a queer little shut-in place near the creek a few days ago. I didn't try to climb down, because I could see the whole place from the edge—it was a fight through the scrub to get to it. But anyone would remember the tree. You never came across it when you were hunting, Nor?"

"No: never. But the dream was very clear. The walls were high, and the scrub grew to their very edge on top. And scrub masked one end, and the other was closed in by a great mass of jumbled rocks as if the sides of the gully had fallen in ages ago."

"That is the place I saw," Jim said, slowly. "Was that all, Nor?"

"Not quite. He stood under the tree, and he looked up at it, almost as if it were a friend—I saw his little face, happy and interested—you know the way Bill looks. And then he walked forward towards the rocky end. And I woke up."

She put out a hand to each.

"Do you remember? . . ." she said, "Once before, I had a dream—long ago when old Billabong was burned. And it woke me in time to get to the stables and let the horses out. Oh, darlings, I don't believe dreams are sent for nothing

—I believe they are sometimes given. And you have seen the place, Jim. Can we find it?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, thoughtfully. “I don’t know how we’d get down into it—but there might be a way from the creek. If Bill ever got there he must have got in from the end hidden by scrub, and that is the end nearest to the creek. But——” he hesitated. “Norah, did you see anything queer about the rocky end?”

“No—just bare, jumbled rocks.”

“No earth and bushes?”

“None at all. Why, Jim?”

“They are there now,” he said. “When I looked down into that place there had evidently been a landslip pretty recently. I could see where it had come down: and the rocks were half-covered.”

They faced each other in the growing dawn, realising what his words might mean. Norah felt her heart grow cold.

“I won’t believe it!” Jim said, half-savagely. “If that dream was given you—and it is a dream of a real place—it wasn’t given to crush our hopes. Come on—it will be light enough by the time we’re dressed. We won’t wake the others.”

They scrambled into their clothes hurriedly, collecting the parcels of food, the little flasks of brandy, with which every searcher went out. The camp remained quiet. But as Jim left his hut a low whistle summoned him to his father’s bunk.

“You’re going out early, Jim,” David Linton whispered. “Don’t go far without breakfast. It isn’t sense, my son.”

“We won’t,” Jim returned, softly. “But we have an idea. Keep Tommy in camp if you can, Dad: we’ll be back before very long.”

“Well, watch Norah. Take some biscuits and chocolate.”

“All right.” He dived into the hut. When he joined Wally and Norah near the creek he carried a light spade and a coil of rope.

“Iron rations,” he said, dividing chocolate and biscuits between them. “We’ll eat as we go.” He led the way up the creek with long strides as the first flush of dawn came into the sky. No one spoke. It was as though a silent force drove them on, and they could not go quickly enough.

Half an hour later Jim halted where a densely-wooded hill drove a long spur right down to the creek. The scrub faced them like a wall.

“Now the place where your tree grows is in there,” he said, pointing at the green depths. “I got through it, and it is a man’s-size job: I knew as I went that Bill had never done it. It’s just as bad from the other side.”

“Then, if my dream is true, Bill must have got in from the creek,” Norah said.

“We’ll say your dream is true. Now we’ll leave the hill alone and study the creek. It’s quite possible to wade: rather the sort of place to appeal to Bill.”

“Then I vote we take to the water,” Wally cried. “Is it boots off?”

“Oh, hang boots!” Jim went down the bank like a charging bull, turning to give a hand to Norah. They splashed and stumbled through the water, scanning every foot of the scrub that grew to its edge on the side next the hill. Turn after turn, parting the bushes, seeing only rock and earth behind them—until Jim uttered a shout.

“By Jove, here’s an inlet!”

He crashed sideways into a thicket of dogwood that hid him for a moment. Then his head came back.

“We can get along here. Mind your footing, Nor—it’s not difficult. Put your weight against the bushes.” He held them back to help her. Wally followed, and they made their way in single file along the overgrown trickle of water. There was another shout of triumph from Jim, and they were out in the open.

“There’s your tree!”

Norah stood very still, looking straight ahead. She was pale under her tan. A little shiver took her: she caught at Wally’s arm.

“Boys! It is the very place—the place I saw in my dream.”

They were all a little shaken; all of them breathless, realising that the incredible had happened—help from the Unseen, when all their own efforts were vain. They looked at each other like children, almost afraid.

Jim was the first to speak.

“Well, you saw him go towards the rocks,” he said. “So that’s where we go.”

He was off at a run, the others at his heels. They looked blankly at the landslide heaped in confusion over the lower part of the rocks.

“He’s not under it,” Jim panted. “I’ll swear he isn’t under it. Stay there—I’m going to climb to the top of the fall. Those rocks are all a loose jumble—there may be a way through.”

He scrambled up, the loose earth giving with his weight at every stride. Already the landslide had settled down a good deal: the top was fairly firm. Wally and Norah, unable to stay behind, followed him—choking back the thought that under their feet might be the end of their quest.

Jim was peering among the rocks, his eyes blazing with excitement.

“They’re loose enough,” he said. “If Bill got in among them the slide would have trapped him, and he’s there yet. Bill! Are you there?” He lifted his voice in a long cry, and they held their breath to catch an answer that might be very faint.

“He may be past shouting—not past help, though,” Jim uttered. “I’m going

to clear away some of this earth.”

He struck at it furiously with his spade, shovelling it aside: and Wally and Norah fell upon it with their hands. The tide of excitement was rising in them all: something told them that they were on the trail at last. And presently Jim’s spade struck through the earth into space, and a crack in the rocks came into view.

“We’ve got it!” Jim sang out. “Lend a hand here, Wal.” He shovelled with the strength of ten men. The crack widened until they could wriggle into it.

“It goes on,” said Jim. Excitement died from him suddenly in the knowledge of what he might find. “We must be careful. I don’t want to tread on the little chap. Hold on while I strike a match.”

The tiny flame sputtered and flared in the gloom, showing the narrow passage, littered with earth and stones. It was barely wide enough for Jim: he dropped his spade and went on cautiously lighting matches to show each step. Just as one went out he saw something that glittered; with the flare of the next one he pounced upon it.

“Look!” The word was a cry. He held out his hand. On the great palm Brownie’s silver coin gleamed at them.

“It’s Brownie’s luck-penny!” Norah said, her voice choked. “Oh, bless her for giving it to him! Go on, Jim—carefully.”

They edged their way along, looking anxiously for any space into which a little body might have crept. But there was nothing: and presently they came to the heap of stones and climbed over them, and wriggled between the boulders until daylight broke in upon them and they came in sight of the continuation of the ravine. At each step they had hoped to find Bill. It was with something of blankness that they gazed at the silent gully ahead.

“Well, it leads somewhere,” said Wally, after a moment. “Come along.” He dropped down lightly, holding out his hands to Norah. “Better than finding him trapped in that unpleasant jumble of rocks.”

They set off along the gully, taking it at a pace very different to the weary crawl of Bill’s lagging feet days before. As they went they scanned the slopes on either hand; but they made unlikely hunting-ground. Bill would not have left the easier going in the bottom of the ravine. The strange track twisted interminably—on and on.

“This is the sort of place I’ve been afraid of,” Jim said. “Plenty of them in the hills—and the scrub grows so closely on top that you could fall down into one before you realised you were on the edge. I’d give something to know how far this leads. Nor, are you very tired?”

“Tired?” she said, looking at him in a bewildered fashion. “This is the first day since we lost him that I’m not tired. Oh, do hurry, Jimmy! I’m perfectly certain at each bend that I’m going to see him.”

Yet, when they rounded the last rocky shoulder and did see him, they could only stand in silence and catch at each other. The relief was so sudden, so overwhelming, that it held them motionless.

Jim spoke first.

“He’s been hurt. His head is tied up.”

They saw a small, purposeful figure, bare-legged and barefooted, a tiny boy at his heels. There was a kerosene-tin in his hand: he carried it as though the weight were too heavy for him, resting it now and then, but never for long before he picked it up on his journey towards the hut.

“But he’s staggering!” Norah cried. “Something is wrong.” She started forward.

Bill’s head came round quickly and he saw them. The tin slipped from his fingers, falling sideways: he looked at the three tall figures in a dazed fashion, his lips parting in an attempt to speak. Then he sat down suddenly.

Jim was the quickest across the grass. He went down on his knees beside him, an arm round his shoulders, scanning the pinched white face.

“What’s up, old offsider?”

“Nothing. Only my legs went funny. Oh, I knew you’d find me, Jim!” He put out a hand that shook oddly, clutching at Jim’s coat.

“Find you! I’d have found you if I pulled the hills down!”

They were all about him now: he looked from one to the other, smiling faintly.

“I’m sorry . . . knew you’d be worried. I’d have tried to get back, only I couldn’t leave. Had to . . . had to milk the goat.” The voice ended in a whisper. Jim caught him as he fell back.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE END OF THE HUNT

WELL, IT WAS about time someone came along," said Mrs. Walker. She stood in the doorway of the hut, leaning on her crutch: a gaunt spectre of a woman, her eyes like dark caverns in her dead-white face.

"What have you done to him?" flashed Jim.

"Done to 'im? 'E's starvin', that's all. We're all starvin'. Food's right out. An' your boy wouldn't eat any, before it was right out. 'E's lived on water for near two days. We kep' the goat's milk for the babies, but they're pretty well 'ungry too." She licked her dry lips. "I s'pose you didn't bring any tucker?" Then she swayed. "I'll 'ave to be gettin' back to me bunk—I'm all in."

Wally was at her side with a bound, helping her across the hut. Norah turned to Jim.

"Quick, Jim, a fire. I'll make hot chocolate."

Billabong folk moved quickly. In a surprisingly short time there was boiling water and mugs of steaming chocolate were ready. The three Walkers sipped it and ate biscuits with an air of bliss beyond imagination.

Bill came to himself to find Norah beside him and his head pillowed on Jim's folded coat.

"Lie still, Bill, dear. Just take sips of this."

She slipped an arm under his head, holding a cup to his lips. It was water, oddly flavoured: he did not like it, but it made him feel comforted and stronger. And presently there was chocolate that tasted like a drink made in heaven. He smiled up at her as she fed him.

"Did I frighten you awfully?"

"Never mind that now; we've got you safely. Is your head hurt, Bill?"

"Only a bump. It's better. The landslip hit me, you know. I—I couldn't get back, Norah."

"I know, old man." The quiet voice was very soothing. "Don't trouble about anything: it's all over now."

"Was Jim wild with me?"

"No, never for a moment. How could he be?" She laughed into his eyes, and he gave a great sigh of relief.

"Gosh, this is lovely! Can I have some more?"

"I'm going to break some biscuit into it for you. Would you like that?" And Bill's slow grin of delight was sufficient answer.

In the hut Jim and Wally were listening to Mrs. Walker. Food had put new

life into her—perhaps the sight of the children’s food more than her own. She was weak, but eloquent.

“So what’s become of Mr. Walker I’m sure I dunno,” she finished. “An’ but for that boy of yours me an’ the kids would ’ave been dead by now. ’E’s a man, ’e is. Set to, an’ did all there was to do: milkin’, an’ carryin’ water, an’ cookin’, as long as there was anything left to cook. An’ starved ’imself, an’ ’im only fit to drop when ’e got ’ere. Made me this crutch, without ever bein’ asked.”

“Did he?” Jim took the crutch and looked it over. His voice was gentle.

“’E did so. An’ yarned to me like an old man. Well, any time I think of an angel from ’eaven I’ll see ’im with freckles an’ red ’air.”

“You must leave me here,” said Norah, when the case was explained to her. “I’ll do all I can for them, but of course you must bring food—all the most nourishing things. There will be plenty of carriers—perhaps you could bring me some blankets, for I’ll have to stay here. Wait: I’ll look at that poor soul’s knee.”

She came back in a few minutes.

“I think it only wants rest. She says the swelling has gone down a good deal—but it isn’t a nice knee. I’ll write down the medical stores I want. Must you use the track we came by, or is there a way round?”

“There must be a way round, of course,” Jim said. “I’ll find it when I’ve got supplies on the way to you: but it might take too much time to look for it now. Well, we’ll hurry, Wal. What shall we bring you, Bill?—a beefsteak?”

Bill grinned up at him.

“Anything but porridge,” he said.

Much of the camp by the creek had moved to the ravine by nightfall, for while Wally and two other men carried back loads of supplies, Jim and Mr. Linton set out on horses to find an easier way to the hut. Having discovered this they returned for pack-horses and transported bedding and other necessities—including Tommy, who declined to be left behind. The descent of the cliff, directed by Mrs. Walker, was a remarkable spectacle, affording huge entertainment to Vic and Pansy—whose small world had suddenly become peopled with heavenly beings who all carried sticks of chocolate and handed them out at the mere sight of a child.

Camp was pitched by the spring for the Billabong people, and the helpers rode away, singing—each man with a farewell word for Bill. Jim had seen to it that a messenger had rushed the good news back to Brownie; already the district was rejoicing, and Bush mothers, putting their children to bed that night, breathed thankful prayers for the little lad who might never have come back. The Bush holds many terrors for mothers, and a child’s peril strikes home to each.

"I'll bring Topsy round for ye soon as ye're off duty, Masther Bill," said Murty. "Great experience 'twill be for her, to be gettin' down that cliff. I dunno will she take it on her head or her tail!"

"I wouldn't risk her legs," Bill responded. "I think it would be better if I climbed up to her, Murty."

"Well, indeed, 'twill be no pleasure-ride up," assented the Irishman. "Ye might do worse than tackle it on foot. But ye'll need a bit more condition on ye before then. 'Tis no credit to Billabong ye are at all."

"Oh, he'll soon fatten," said Jim. "You'll see a change in him when you come back, Murty."

"Wait till Mrs. Brown do be gettin' hold of him," threatened Murty. "'Tis aisy guessed what the cookin' in her kitchen's goin' to be. 'Tis a pity, now, that I niver could injuice her to learn to ride, or she'd be out here to begin to fatten him."

"Wouldn't she be funny getting down the hill!" chuckled Bill.

"She'd have to rowl," declared Murty.

Brownie, indeed, made up for her enforced absence by paroxysms of cooking, and the deluge of concentrated nourishment which arrived daily from Billabong would have been alarming but for the insatiable appetites of the Walker family, who had scarcely finished one meal before they began to look hungrily for the next. They fattened visibly; Jim lamented that bullocks failed to put on condition with such satisfactory swiftness.

It was four days before Mr. Walker appeared. A shrill clamour from Vic and Pansy announced his arrival; and the Billabong people, who had been conducting a meal at the hut, prudently withdrew to their camp.

He came across to them half an hour later—a long and dried-up man, curiously like his wife, but without her gift of speech.

"Well, yous all done me a good turn," he said, awkwardly. "Specially this chap, isn't it?" He pointed towards Bill, who became very red. "Bit o' luck for my old woman an' the kids when you come along, ole feller."

Bill's red deepened. He endeavoured to find a suitable reply, and failed. So he said nothing, and looked hard at his boots: a method of response which suited Mr. Walker very well. He looked at him approvingly, and lit his pipe with an air of relief.

"What kept you so long?" Mr. Linton asked.

"Pony went lame on me. Had to spell 'er in the township. I was a bit worried, an' I'd 'a been worse if I'd known 'ow bad things were. But 'ow could I tell? A feller can't turn 'is back without things goin' crooked."

"They were crooked, all right," said Jim. "You were very near finding no wife and youngsters."

"Too right I was," agreed Mr. Walker. "'S far as I can see, the 'ole lot of

them 'ud 'ave been gone but for your boy. An' the goat," he added gloomily. "Well, I'm a bad 'and at sayin' things, but I'm reel grateful to yous all. An' if ever yous want a good turn done, I'll be darned glad of the chanst of doin' it. Specially you." The forefinger marked down Bill again, and once more Bill's eyes fell to his boots. Mr. Walker withdrew.

"I wonder how much his pony was lame," Wally said, thoughtfully.

"About as much as you or I," Jim answered. "I think Mr. Walker was happy among the fleshpots of the township. Well, I wouldn't mind seeing him on a diet of porridge for a week or so. Do you think his wife is fit to be left yet, Nor?"

"Not for two or three days," Norah said. "If I leave her she'll only try to move about. And her knee is not really ready for that yet."

"Well, I think you have had enough," said her father, unexpectedly. "So I told Murty to bring out Mrs. Archdale to-morrow—she is quite willing to come and look after things here for a week. And we'll up camp and make back to our old spot for a few days. And then we'll go home, because I begin to feel that I should like to eat off a table again."

"Oh!" said Norah, weakly. "How you do manage your families!"

"Well, I have to be firm when I have so many of them," said the squatter, laughing. "What do you think, Bill?"

"Do I have to go away soon?" was Bill's answer. His eyes sought Jim's, and it was Jim who replied.

"You don't, old man. You stay just as long as your people will leave you after they come back. And then we'll go down to Melbourne together, and I will explain to them the way a man has to be trained when he's going to run a station some day."

"Will they listen to you?" The voice trembled.

"I think they will. There are several things I can point out to them. One is the necessity of a fellow spending all his holidays on a station, learning about cattle."

Bill's eyes began to dance.

"O-oh! I wonder if they'll let me!"

"We'll make it urgent," said Jim. "I can be very urgent when I like. I'll tell them—oh, I'll just say that I can't do without my offsider!"

The boy looked up at him dumbly.

Jim put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, old man," he said. "We'll take a walk down the gully and plan out all we're going to do." They went off together, the small figure trotting happily beside his friend.

Tommy and Bob and Wally had strolled over to the cliff. Norah leaned against her father's shoulder, and they sat together in the silence they loved.

“He’s a great little lad,” said Mr. Linton presently. “I like to see Jim with him. He is good for Jim. But I wake with a start yet, Norah, to think how nearly we had to face going back without him. Only for your dream——” He paused.

“I keep thinking of it,” Norah said. “And the more I think, the more puzzled I get. Because I’m not a dreaming person, Dad—I’m too practical.”

“Well, why should one think God isn’t practical too?” asked her father. He put his hand on the slender brown one where the new wedding-ring gleamed. “I wouldn’t be puzzled, my girl. Just give thanks to the Giver of the dream.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Bill of Billabong* by Mary Grant Bruce]