

*Hugh Stanford's
Luck*

Mary Grant Bruce

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Hugh Stanford's Luck

Date of first publication: 1928

Author: Mary Grant Bruce (1878-1958)

Date first posted: Nov. 16, 2017

Date last updated: Nov. 16, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20171125

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

HUGH STANFORD'S LUCK

BY
MARY GRANT BRUCE

*Author of A Little Bush Maid, Mates of
Billabong, Norah of Billabong,
'Possum, etc.*

AUSTRALIA:
ANGUS & ROBERTSON LIMITED
39 CASTLEREAGH STREET, SYDNEY
1931

WHOLLY SET UP AND PRINTED
IN AUSTRALIA BY
HALSTEAD PRINTING COMPANY
LTD., ALLEN STREET, WATERLOO
1931

REGISTERED AT THE GENERAL
POST OFFICE, SYDNEY, FOR TRANS-
MISSION THROUGH THE POST AS
A BOOK

First Platypus Edition, March 1928 2000 copies
Second Platypus Edition, Oct. 1928 2000 copies
Third Platypus Edition, May 1931 1000 copies

To
L. M. W. P.
WHO HELPED

Mordialloc,
1925

CONTENTS

COLOMBO	1
AUSTRALIA	17
COMING HOME	32
THE LUCK OF THE PRIEST	56
SETTLING DOWN	72
THE SADDLE AGAIN	87
DEVELOPMENT	108
A SOUND IN THE NIGHT	123
THE LUCK HOLDS FOR JOAN	139
CHRISTMAS	155
GEORGE STANFORD'S STORY	167
HOW HUGH SOLD HIS LUCK	187
HOW THE LUCK CAME BACK	204
SIX MONTHS LATER	218

CHAPTER I

COLOMBO

"WELL, if you don't like Australia, son--all you've to do is just to drop me a line and come back."

The boy leaning on the verandah railing turned and shot a grateful look at his companion.

"It's awfully good of you, Mr. Harvey," he said; "and I don't want to go. I'd far rather stay in Ceylon. But--you know--Father--" He stopped, finding his voice uncertain.

"Yes, I know, old chap. Your Dad was very keen that you should go to his people, and you naturally want to do just as he wished. Any decent fellow would. Of course you'll go, and you'll shake down to it in no time, and end up by being a jolly good Australian--and, take 'em all round. I believe the Australians are hard to beat. Your Dad's brother is bound to be a good sort--his letters would make you feel that, even if one didn't naturally expect it from George Stanford's brother. All the same--"

Maurice Harvey paused, and looked fixedly for a moment at the glowing end of his long, thin cigar. He was a plump little man, pale as are most Europeans who live in Ceylon, with a cheery face and twinkling blue eyes. They were very kindly as he looked again at young Hugh Stanford.

"All the same, I want you not to forget something," he said. "I'm one of your trustees, Hugh, old son, and--failing your Uncle Robert--I'm your guardian. I've no youngsters of my own, so I've just naturally looked forward to the time when you'd grow up and help to work your Dad's plantation, next to mine. It's hitting me pretty hard to lose both of you. And if you aren't happy down under, just you drop me a line and before you know where you are I'll be across to that Kallowra place to suggest that after all it's Ceylon air that suits you best, and that it's time your Ceylon guardian took a turn at his job. It's a hundred to one you won't need me. But I want you to keep it at the back of your mind, Hugh."

"Thanks ever so much, Mr. Harvey," Hugh said. "I'm not likely to forget. Of course, everything ahead seems strange and queer. I haven't got used to doing without Father yet--I've a feeling all the time that I hear his voice, and that presently he'll come round a corner, whistling--the way he always used to."

"I know, old chap--I know," Maurice Harvey said. "It's tough, Hugh. But it will get easier in time. Things just naturally can't go on hurting always, like they do at first. And you're young. That helps. There will be heaps of new

interests and new friends: and your Uncle Robert sounds so like your Dad that I expect you'll be great chums with him and his boys."

"I feel all right about Uncle Robert," said Hugh. "It's the boys I'm scared of. I've never known any boys, you see. And it isn't as if I were like other fellows, Mr. Harvey. Big, strong fellows don't want anyone like me."

He moved restlessly, and a crutch that had been leaning against the railing slipped and fell with a clatter that seemed to lend emphasis to his words. Maurice Harvey leaned forward involuntarily, as though to pick it up, and then sat back: Hugh hated to be helped, he knew. He sighed as the boy recovered it, with a deft sideways jerk. Looking at him as he stood propped against the post, slender and straight and broad-shouldered, it was hard to realize that one leg hung uselessly, hidden by the long trouser-leg--trousers that of themselves made people turn to look at him, since they were worn at an age when most boys thought of nothing beyond knickerbockers. But Hugh dreaded that anyone should look at his "queer" leg. He liked to cover it up.

Mr. Harvey drew at his cigar, and spoke slowly.

"I had a dog once, when I was in the Argentine," he said. "Best old dog ever I owned. A mule kicked him when he was just beginning to be useful, and broke his leg--smashed it so badly I thought the kindest thing to do was just to give him a bullet and be done with it. But I'd an old Mexican cook who was a great hand with sick animals, and he was fond of old Blackie, and he begged to be given a chance to cure him. He made a good job of it, too. Blackie was as lame as a duck ever after, but the leg was sound enough; and he did as much work with it as the ordinary dog does with a full set of spare parts. He'd the pluck of twenty dogs, and he just naturally made up his mind that he wouldn't be beaten by any old game leg. If I'd a tough job with cattle anywhere, Blackie was the dog I'd pick out to help me."

He paused, looking very straight at the boy.

"That'll be you, son," he said. "You've never let your leg get you down, even when it hurt worst. You've kept yourself fit and strong, and done all you could to develop your muscles in every way. Some boys would have lain down to it, but you never did: I'll say that for you. It helped your father no end--and he nearly broke his heart for you when it first happened. But as time went on and you kept on being a mate to him I know there were days when he clean forgot that you were lame. So don't let it get you down now, Hugh, old boy. There are worse things than a queer leg, and one of them is a heart that's perfectly good in every way except that the pluck has been left out. Thank goodness, you've your full allowance of pluck, Hugh, and it's going to pull you through everything."

"I feel as if the allowance were a bit short when I think of Australia," Hugh said. "Father and you were always so awfully good to me, and made all sorts of

excuses for me. One couldn't expect that with strangers. Oh, well, I suppose I'll worry through, somehow: and I'll stay out there until I've finished with school, as Father wishes. But I tell you straight, Mr. Harvey, if you're here when I'm eighteen you'll find me back on your doormat some morning asking for a job!"

"And you'll get it, old son--nothing surer. I'm going to hoe in at making the plantation one of the best on the Island, and there'll be any amount of work waiting for you. For goodness' sake learn all you can about book-keeping, for there's something in the very look of a column of figures that just naturally makes my spine feel like dough! I'll turn over all that part to you the minute you arrive: not to mention the management of the natives: I'll never be able to talk to them the way your Father and you could. Then I'll just sit back and get fatter and fatter, while you do all the work!"

"That's a bargain," said Hugh Stanford, solemnly. He held out a thin hand and grasped his friend's. "I'll be fourteen soon; it's only a little over four years. And you'll write often, and tell me all about the plantation and everything, won't you, Mr. Harvey?"

"Rather, son. My spelling is about as dicky as my sense of figures, but you won't mind that, I believe. And you'll do the same by me, Hugh? I'll be awfully anxious to know how everything goes with you. There's one thing, you know, old chap, that I don't believe you're taking sufficiently into consideration, and that's your Aunt--your Uncle Robert's wife. You never knew your own mother, and the old housekeeper is almost the only woman you've come in contact with, in Ceylon. You just naturally can't imagine what an educated, motherly woman is like. But you'll find out, and I reckon it will be a mighty big thing for you."

"Oh, Aunt Ursula has four children of her own," the boy said, heavily. "I expect she's rather bored with the prospect of having a lame nephew from the loneliest part of Ceylon to look after. Ten to one she's wondering if I'm civilized or not."

"Her letter didn't sound like that," said Maurice Harvey, quietly.

"No--but letters don't tell one anything. Oh, well, I'll find out soon enough. The only thing I can do is to be as little of a nuisance as possible. I say, Mr. Harvey, there's nine o'clock striking! Oughtn't I to be off?"

"I suppose you might as well get on board and get to sleep quietly before you sail," said Maurice Harvey. He got out of his long chair with an effort, "Gee, I'd better not get any fatter before you come back, Hugh, or I won't get done half the work I'm planning!"

They went down the steps of the Galle Face Hotel, where they had stayed for a day after the journey from the plantation. It was a very dark night, with a sky of velvet blackness, lit by innumerable stars. The lights of Colombo made a dull glow, low down on the horizon; near at hand were twinkling points that

showed motor lamps, dimmed to await the arrival of their owners, or the glimmering lamp of rickshaws, flitting through the dusky gloom. Within the hotel were brightness and mirth and music; a dance was in progress, and the band was crashing out such a melody as negroes loved in old plantation days. Hugh's crutch tapped in time to it as they stood waiting for Mr. Harvey's car, which came up in a moment, a dark-faced Cingalese at the wheel.

"Like to drive, Hugh?"

"Rather!" the boy said eagerly. "I don't suppose I'll get any chances in Australia."

"You ought not to get one here," Mr. Harvey answered, laughing. "Out in the country it's different, but Colombo is another matter--and if the police anywhere catch a thirteen-year-old driving, trouble will be apt to occur. However--you're off to-night, and we'll chance it, old man." He settled himself beside the boy. "We have plenty of time; no need to go straight to the pier unless you want to."

Hugh very certainly did not want to. He turned the car away from the hotel, and they slid off through the velvety dusk, along a smooth road. The life of the East that never seems to sleep, was all around them. Rickshaw coolies trotted swiftly past; bullock-carts creaked at the side of the road, and motors flashed by, their head-lights suddenly revealing the scarlet blossoms of the gold-mohur trees, and as suddenly turning them to blackness again. Everywhere were natives, padding on noiseless bare feet; late as it was, half-naked brown children played and squabbled in dust-heaps by the footpath. It was all the life that Hugh Stanford had known, the life he had loved: before him lay only the unknown, and he shrank from it with all a nervous boy's dread.

The car purred gently along. His father had taught him to drive when he was a very small boy--it was the only thing that he could do without feeling that his lame leg hampered him, and he knew the big car and its engine as well as any mechanic. They turned into a less-frequented road, and he let her out in a burst of swift speed that devoured the miles tirelessly. Then they came back to the main road and drove more soberly; past the Galle Face, where the band still brayed wild jazz-music, and so, in sight of the harbour and the riding-lights of the ships at their moorings. They turned into the busy streets of Colombo and slid down towards the water-front, threading their way in and out of the press of traffic. A sailor, half-drunk, whom they barely missed as he reeled across the road, looked after them with a bewildered expression of wrath.

"Kid drivin'!" he uttered. "Ought to be in bed hours ago!"

Hugh did not hear him. He guided the car gently to a standstill near the pier, and got out, making an awkward business of it as he groped for his crutch. As he limped by, he patted the car on the bonnet.

"Good-bye, old lady," he said. "I'll come back and drive you some day."

"She'll do me until you come," said Maurice Harvey. "Then we'll choose a new one together, old man. No difficulty about a licence for you then, eh?"

They went slowly along the pier; all Hugh's luggage had already gone on board. People were beginning to hurry back to the ship; each car that flashed down brought a load of cheery, tired people, loaded with curios and sated with a long day's sight-seeing. The launch that waited was soon packed, and they slipped quietly away from the pier, edging in and out among boats, big and little. Someone had brought a mandolin, and presently began to strum an air; and soon half the people on the launch were singing:--

I'm goin' back to Dixie, no mo' I'm goin' to wander,

I'm goin' back to Dixie, I can't stay here no longer,

I miss the old plantation,

My friends, an' my relation,

My heart's turned back to Dixie, an' I must go.

They sang it with a touch of real feeling, home-sick suddenly for the land to which they were going. But to Hugh Stanford, whose heart seemed all to be in the cemetery where his father lay, and in the plantation behind the hills of Kandy where he had known only happiness, the words struck home with cruel force. He gripped his crutch, staring out to sea. Then he felt Maurice Harvey's big hand on his knee, and comfort came in the touch. After all, he had one good friend: and Ceylon and Australia were not so very far apart.

The launch came to rest, rocking quietly beside the great bulk of the mail-steamer that towered above them, light streaming from every port-hole. He limped up the long gangway, shrugging aside a stranger's well-meant offer of help. Mr. Harvey knew the Captain, and quickly made his way to him, so that he might introduce Hugh. The boy liked the big, kindly man in his trim uniform, who greeted him cheerily.

"Glad you're coming with us, my boy; I knew your father. You'll have a quiet trip; not many youngsters on board, and we're singularly free from boys this time"--at which Hugh experienced a throb of relief. No one knew how he dreaded boys.

"I'll keep an eye on him, Harvey." Hugh had gone to look over the side, and the Captain spoke in a low tone. "He can manage for himself in most things, I suppose?"

"Oh--quite. He's fiercely independent. They've given him a little deck-cabin to himself--he's very sensitive about his leg. Keep an eye on him, old man, he's a good youngster, and desperately lonely."

"Poor kid," said the Captain. "I'll see that he's all right, as far as I can. Well, good-bye, old chap, this is my busy time." He went off quickly, and Mr. Harvey crossed the deck to Hugh's side.

"I must be off, Hugh, old son. That's the last launch for the shore."

They gripped hands. The young face was white and strained in the glare of the electric lights of the ship.

"I'll just have a look at your cabin," Mr. Harvey said.

They found it easily: a cosy little place with a comfortable sofa and the berth neatly made up. A pleasant-faced young steward hovered near. Mr. Harvey drew him aside for a moment's conversation and slipped something into his hand.

"I'll look after the young gentleman, sir," said the steward, pocketing his tip. "He'll be right as rain here, and the bathroom's not far off. You can depend on anything I can do for him."

"Oh, he'll have a great trip, I'm certain." Maurice Harvey said.

A warning blast came from a bugle.

"All visitors ashore!"

Hugh went to the head of the gangway with his friend. People were coming and going in a merry crowd; there was a hum of chatter and laughter. He felt a sudden loneliness that brought a hard ache into his throat: a fierce longing to be going down the gangway again, back to the life he knew and loved--the life where his lame leg had never seemed to count. Then the memory of his father's face came before him, and he straightened up proudly.

"Good-bye, Mr. Harvey. Thanks ever so for bringing me down. And--I'll be back when I'm eighteen."

"That's a bargain, old chap. I'll be expecting you."

They shook hands again. Mr. Harvey went quickly down the steps to the waiting launch. It cast off almost immediately. Hugh leaned on the rail to watch it turn and cleave swiftly across the dark water towards the twinkling lights of Colombo.

CHAPTER II

AUSTRALIA

HUGH STANFORD found the voyage on the *Mahratta* a much happier time than he had expected. There were no boys of his own age on board; indeed, the only boys who counted at all, the others being babies under four, were cheery twin brothers of seven, who regarded him as a very superior person because of his long trousers. They were also immensely interested in his crutch, which they failed to realize as a handicap, looking upon it, instead, as something like a stilt. Hugh's movements with it seemed to the twins a new and fascinating gymnastic exercise, and they made the lives of their parents a burden by repeated requests for crutches their own size. Somehow Hugh found them very comforting.

There were several families returning to Australia, and Hugh discovered, rather to his own surprise, that he liked little children. Babies just able to toddle came to him with a happy confidence and made a friend of him from the first; it was pleasant to feel that they liked him and depended upon him for help in both their games and their small difficulties. The babies' friendship made him allies among the fathers and mothers--among the latter, especially, since mothers are apt to lead a wearing life on board ship. The Captain did not forget his promise to Mr. Harvey, and never came along the deck without a cheery word for him; while several times he was included in merry afternoon tea-parties in the Captain's cabin, where his lameness did not seem to matter at all. An interesting place was the Captain's cabin, full of curious things gathered from many ports, and of grimmer mementoes that spoke of the Great War--during which the *Mahratta* had been a troopship, and had very nearly been torpedoed several times. Sometimes, after the tea-parties were over, some of the men stayed on in the cabin, smoking and talking, and Hugh was allowed to perch on the bunk and listen--which he did with all his ears. Those were the times he liked best. He had always been accustomed to being with his father and Mr. Harvey, and to hearing them talk, and his lameness had helped to give him a power of keeping still that is not very common in boys of his age. The men liked the quiet youngster who was always so keenly interested, though he never spoke unless he were addressed. They told many stories for his especial benefit.

"That's a pretty decent kid," one of them said to the Captain one evening, after Hugh had gone away in response to the dressing-bugle. "An orphan, isn't he?"

The Captain nodded.

"His mother died when he was a baby, I believe. I knew his father--very nice fellow, an Australian. He was in Ceylon for twenty years, and died a few months ago, leaving this boy. An uncle in Victoria is to take charge of him. Bit rough on a youngster only accustomed to plantation life to have to find his feet alone among an Australian family, especially with his handicap of lameness. Maurice Harvey would gladly have kept him in Ceylon, but it seems his father wanted him to go to his own people." The Captain shrugged his shoulders. "I'd have left him with Harvey, if I'd been his father. I was a lonely boy myself, and I know what it's like."

"This youngster will make good, I should say," the other man remarked. "He has plenty of backbone, even if he is lame."

"Oh, yes, and he comes of good stock--that always tells. But he's a bundle of nerves, and cruelly sensitive about his lameness. I'm sorry for him: he's a nice little chap. He has decent manners, too, and they're not too common among boys, nowadays."

"No: and the fact won't endear him to a good many other boys. He's a queer mixture of child and man. My wife says she has to resist an inclination to mother him, which he'd probably resent very much. Well, I shall be late for dinner if I don't go to dress."

Hugh had looked forward to the Australian ports without interest. He knew nobody, and felt no wish to explore them alone; but at both Fremantle and Adelaide he found himself taken in charge by the twins' parents, Captain and Mrs. Barlow, pleasant English people who were coming out to settle in New South Wales; and they packed a very solid amount of sight-seeing into the mail-steamer's brief visits. The time at Adelaide was especially delightful; Captain Barlow hired a motor, and they spent a glorious day in the hills, exploring the winding roads that curve in and out among bush-clad peaks, and slopes and valleys made beautiful with orchards. They lunched on the crest of a ridge, looking over mile upon mile of sloping hills to the plains below, seeing Adelaide beneath them, like a giant chess-board, and beyond, the sunlit blue of the sea. With glasses Hugh could pick out the *Mahratta* lying at the Outer Harbour. She looked curiously home-like and friendly. He caught his breath with a sudden shiver. There were only two days more of the pleasant friendliness on board--after that, everything was unknown and terrifying. How he wished the voyage could last for months!

The cheerful young steward, who had not failed to keep his promise to Mr. Harvey that he would look after Hugh, came to call him early on the following Monday.

"Here's your tea, sir," he announced. "We'll be through the Heads and into the Bay in half an hour. Pilot boat's just comin' out. If I was you I'd have me bath after we're in the Bay if you want to see the Heads."

"All right, steward," Hugh answered. He was still a little bewildered and sleepy: he had been dreaming that he was back on the plantation, walking through the tea bushes with Mr. Harvey: it seemed to him that he could almost hear the familiar voice telling him that the picking that year was "just naturally" going to be the finest they had ever had. It made him ache with home-sickness. He gulped down the hot tea, flung on an overcoat, and limped out on deck.

The first rays of the sun were sending a golden path of light across the water, and on this path the pilot steamer lay rocking lazily. Her boat was coming across, the pilot sitting in the stern, muffled in a thick coat. They came swiftly, the sailors rowing with the deep-sea stroke; in a few minutes they were alongside, and the pilot came hand over hand up the ladder, giving Hugh a jolly "Good-morning, young man!" as he landed on the deck beside him. He made his way quickly to the bridge; Hugh saw the Captain greet him, and presently the dull throb of the engines told that they were again under way. The *Mahratta* came round in a great circle; before them tossed the broken water of the Rip, and slowly, as they steamed, the channel opened between Point Lonsdale and Point Nepean, and they passed between the great lighthouses and came within sight of Queenscliff on the left.

Hugh turned back to his cabin when they were well on their journey up the Bay. He dressed himself carefully, anxious that the unknown relations should have no cause for feeling ashamed of him, and finished his packing. Barnes, the young steward, came to strap up his heavier luggage.

"Great thing to have a cabin to yourself," he remarked cheerfully. "Gives you room to keep all your trunks with you. You got nothing at all in the baggage-room, have you, sir?"

"No, nothing," Hugh answered.

"Then I'll have all this out nice and 'andy for you after breakfast. Someone meeting you, sir?"

"Yes--my uncle."

"He'll be glad you haven't got to wait to dig out more boxes," said Barnes, pulling hard on a stiff strap. "Some of the luggage people have 'ud surprise you. There's a lady in 53 as'll need a whole carrier's van to transport her stuff. There, that's all right, and don't you worry about anything, sir. You go down and get a good breakfast now; you ain't looking any too fit this morning. You don't want your uncle to think the *Mahratta* ain't treated you well."

"I wish I didn't have to leave her, that's all," said Hugh. "Thanks, Barnes, you've been jolly good to me." He held out some money shyly, but the young steward drew back.

"No, thanks, sir, all the same. The gent as came on board with you fixed all that up--and goodness knows you ain't given me much to do. It's been a

pleasure to look after you, 'cause you always treat a chap like a 'uman being, which is more than a good many passengers do." He smiled cheerfully, but the smile died away as he watched the boy limp along the deck. "Poor little kid--it's hard on him!" he muttered, shouldering a trunk.

Everyone was breakfasting in a hurry, anxious to finish packing; the sound of many "good-byes" was in the air. A number of people came up for a final word with Hugh. The Captain paused as he passed his chair.

"Got everything ready, my boy? That's right. Let me know if your people don't turn up in good time--not that there's any risk of that, I expect." He patted his shoulder as he went.

Hugh found it difficult to eat. His mouth was dry and his throat ached; the food seemed dry and tasteless. He drank his coffee and went back to the deck. The grey blur that meant Melbourne was very close now. Someone pointed out different suburbs to him--Brighton, St. Kilda, Williamstown, and, ahead, Port Melbourne, over which two aeroplanes were flying slowly. They drew nearer and nearer to a long pier, where a cluster of people waited. Beyond, he could see a road with many motors at rest. The great ship came in, inch by inch, and Hugh found that his heart was thudding with nervousness as he scanned the faces on the pier, looking for someone like his father. There seemed no one who resembled him at all. One or two faces made him hope that they did not belong to his uncle--hard, cold faces. But he could not make up his mind that anyone reminded him of the dear face that was never for long absent from his dreams.

Slowly the *Mahratta* came to rest, the long voyage to Melbourne over. Just as the gangway rattled into position a tall man came into view, striding quickly along the pier in the manner of one who fears that he is late. He paused near the foot of the gangway, looking upwards; and Hugh knew that his quest was over, for, just for a moment, it was as though his father looked at him. His eyes met those of the tall man, and he smiled involuntarily, and lifted his cap.

Robert Stanford came up the gangway three steps at a time.

"We couldn't be in any doubt about each other, could we?" he said, taking Hugh's hand in his great brown one. "I'm supposed to be like your father, but you are his very image. How are you, old chap? Had a good voyage?"

"Yes, thank you." The boy's voice was very low; it was all that he could do to command it. Then he caught the look of pity in his uncle's eyes as he glanced at his crutch, and straightened himself proudly. "I--I'm afraid I've given you a lot of bother in meeting me, Uncle Robert."

"Bother? Not a bit! I'm more glad than I can tell you to get you, my boy. If I could have managed it I should have gone to Colombo to bring you over myself. I was always hoping to pay your father a visit, but somehow I never seemed able to manage it." He sighed. "He and I were great chums, you know,

Hugh. I used to think there was no one like him."

"I don't think there ever was," Hugh said.

His uncle let his hand lie on the boy's shoulder for a moment.

"Later on--when you feel you can--I want to hear all you can tell me about him. Now I must get you up to Melbourne as quickly as I can--Aunt Ursula is longing to get hold of you. She came down from Kallowra with me to meet you, but I wouldn't let her come to the pier. It's cold here in the early mornings, and she isn't very strong. Have they got your luggage out of the baggage-room yet, do you know?"

"It's all on deck," Hugh answered, pointing to his heap of boxes.

"Good man!" said his uncle, with evident relief. "We want to start home this afternoon, so it can all go to Spencer-street Station to wait for us--I'll get hold of a carrier." He strode away, and soon returned. "That's all fixed up. Said all your good-byes, Hugh?"

Hugh nodded.

"There's the Captain, Uncle Robert. He's been awfully good to me."

"I must thank him," Mr. Stanford said. They went together to meet the Captain, who detached himself from a group of agents and passengers as Hugh shyly introduced his uncle.

"I'm glad the little chap's fixed up all right," he said. "He has been a first-rate traveller--mind you come back on the *Mahratta* some day, Hugh. Good-bye, old fellow." He shook hands warmly, and Hugh limped for the last time down the gangway.

A taxi waited for them not far off, and soon they were passing swiftly through long, dusty streets that seemed to Hugh hideously drab and dull after the red roads and the glowing life and colour of Ceylon. Presently they turned across a bridge, over a brown river crowded with lesser shipping, and swung up a hill, and into the roar of Collins-street. The car pulled up before a big, quiet hotel.

"Here we are, Hugh. Aunt Ursula will be waiting upstairs."

A good many people were standing about in the wide entrance-hall. Mr. Stanford nodded greetings to right and left, and Hugh felt curious eyes upon him as he followed his uncle slowly to the open doorway of the lift. They got out at the second floor and crossed to a room of which the only occupant was a tall woman who rose quickly to meet them.

"Well, I've brought your new son, Ursula!"

Hugh found himself looking into steady grey eyes full of a light that was something quite new to him, since never before had he seen the mother-look on a woman's face. Just for a moment they gazed at each other, and into his heart came a great throb of relief, for he knew that he need not have been afraid. Ursula Stanford put both hands lightly on his shoulders and kissed him

on the forehead.

"Hugh, dear, I'm so glad you have come," was all she said.

CHAPTER III

COMING HOME

IT was late in the following afternoon before they came to Kallowra, the Stanford's station in the North-west of Victoria. They had left Melbourne the night before, and Hugh had a vague memory of being taken out of a train when he was half-asleep, and of finding himself in bed soon after, in a hotel room in a busy town. There had been no time to see it in the morning, for there was another train to catch; they had travelled, with a couple of changes--each time into a slower train--until after lunch, when they had arrived at a lonely township standing in the middle of a bare plain. Here their way led away from the railway line, and they journeyed on by the Kallowra motor, which had been left in the Scardale garage on the Stanfords' journey to Melbourne a week before.

"I'm always so glad when I get into the car and realize that I have only to sit still until I reach home," Mrs. Stanford said, happily, as they left Scardale behind them and took the long road across the plain.

"Not you!" said her husband from behind the wheel. "That's the time you begin to wonder how much has gone wrong, and how many legs and arms the youngsters have broken since your eagle eye was off them! That is one of the peculiarities of women, Hugh."

"Don't believe him, Hugh," said his wife, laughing. "I'm really a very placid person--and it doesn't do a bit of good to worry, since things happen whether I'm there or not. And I don't think Harry and Joan are as bad as they used to be; a few years ago they had an amazing power of getting into mischief, but advancing age is bringing them a certain amount of common-sense."

"They needed it," said Mr. Stanford, dryly. "Do you remember the day they tarred themselves?"

Mrs. Stanford laughed softly.

"Oh, they were only ten and eight then. We were having a tennis-court made, Hugh, and when the men were having dinner they came upon the tar, and it was too much for them. They took off nearly all their clothes and tarred each other thoroughly. Their father came on the scene just as they had finished; and they turned and fled. Unfortunately Harry tripped over a shovel, and shot head-first into a heap of soot--we had just had the chimneys swept, and the soot had been saved for my roses. Can you imagine the figure that rose out of the soot-heap, Hugh?"

Hugh chuckled--he rarely laughed.

"I'd like to have seen him," he said. "What happened to them, Aunt Ursula?"

"Oh, we cleaned them as best we could--but it took weeks to get all the marks off. It wasn't necessary to punish them; they were a sore and sorry pair before the scrubbing was half done. That was four years ago, and they have a distinct dislike to being reminded of the tragedy."

The road had developed many "pot-holes," and Mr. Stanford was giving all his attention to the car--dodging in and out and muttering under his breath unpleasant things about the makers of roads. Hugh looked up at his aunt. He was more at ease with her than he had dreamed he could ever be, but still he found speech difficult.

"Will you tell me something about them at Kallowra--the children, I mean, Aunt Ursula?" he asked. "I don't know much about them, except that there are four."

Mrs. Stanford smiled at him.

"They are very anxious to know you--at any rate, the younger ones are," she said. "George, the eldest, is away at boarding-school, and as he is in the crew and the eleven he is a very great man, and does not think about junior boys at all. When he leaves school he will probably become much younger, and even now I get occasional glimpses of the little boy I knew; but with the others he is terribly grown-up. You mustn't mind it, because he is really rather a dear, and very fond of them all."

"Tell me about the younger ones," Hugh begged.

"Harry comes next--he is nearly fourteen, and should be at school himself. But we have a very good tutor for them, and he was getting on so well with him that we decided to keep him at home this year--especially as we have had heavy losses, and ready money was a little short. Boarding-schools are expensive luxuries, you know, Hugh. Then there is my one girl, Joan, who spends most of her time in wishing she were a boy. As she can't be one, she tries to be as like one as possible, and, if I allowed it she would live in riding-breeches and model all her pursuits on Harry's. Indeed, she isn't far behind him in most things, and I believe she is the better rider of the two. She is twelve, and then comes a gap of six years before the baby, Mervyn, who isn't quite as strong a person as we should like to see him." A shadow came over Mrs. Stanford's face. "But we think--we hope--that he is outgrowing his delicacy, and that in a few years he will be a hardy ruffian like all the others."

"I'm to have lessons with them, I suppose?" Hugh asked.

"For the present, we thought. Later on your father wanted you to go to school--if we thought it wise, and if you wished it yourself. You have your own money for school and the university, if you choose. Your father said in his letter to us--the one Mr. Harvey wrote for him when he was ill--that he wanted

you to choose your own life."

"Yes--he told me," Hugh nodded. "But I know I'm too young to make a choice now."

"Well, yes. But we realize that you were always your father's companion, and that has made you older than your years. Suppose you don't worry about it for a while; get used to us and to like being out here, and try to be as happy as you can. We do want to see you happy among us, Hugh, dear."

"You're very good, Aunt Ursula," he said, a little formally--words were never easy to Hugh, but his glance was grateful.

Mrs. Stanford hesitated.

"There is something I want to ask you about," she said, "and I hate hurting you; but it is necessary for me to understand, and I hope that we are going to be such good friends that nothing I say will really hurt. Will you tell me about your leg, Hugh? What you can do with it, and what you must avoid. Does it hurt you at all?"

"Only when I get tired," he said, flushing. "I have to rest it then. But it's really ever so much stronger than it was--I was on two crutches for a long while. I can do an awful lot with it, though of course, it makes me horribly slow."

"I think you're quite wonderful with it," she said. "You move so quickly that you make people almost forget about it." He sent her a swift glance of gratitude. "Is there any treatment for it, Hugh? Anything that can help it when it gets tired?"

"Father used to rub it sometimes when it ached badly," Hugh said. "But I can stick it without that."

"Ah, let me help that way," she said, quickly. "I can rub very gently, Hugh."

"Oh, I couldn't bother you, Aunt Ursula. I just try not to think about it. It's no good giving into the old thing, you see."

She was wise, and did not press the point; but there was one question more, and she asked it almost nervously.

"Hugh, is it certain that nothing can be done for it--nothing to cure? You had good doctors after the accident?"

"They were supposed to be very good," he said, dully. "They said I was lucky to keep the leg at all. Father used to think he'd take me to England, but they said it would be no use." He paused, and she saw his hand clench and unclench as it lay upon his knee. "Aunt Ursula--there's one thing--" He stopped.

"Tell me, old boy."

"Would you--would it be very inconvenient if I had a room to myself?" he asked, desperately. "Any cupboard of a room--or a tent--if you hadn't a little

room to spare, where I could be by myself. I--I do hate other people seeing it--and I've never been with boys--"

She interrupted him quickly, her voice wrung with pity.

"But of course, Hugh. That is all arranged. I knew you would like to be alone. Kallowra is a shabby old place, but there are plenty of rooms. Yours is rather a jolly little room, near mine, with a little sleep-out verandah opening off it--you would like to sleep in the air, wouldn't you?"

"It sounds lovely," he said, a great relief in his voice. "Thanks, ever so, Aunt Ursula--you do understand. I'll try not to be more bother than I can help."

"You'll never be a bother, my dear boy. And now I am going to forget about your leg, unless you want to remind me of it yourself--only do remember that it would comfort me very much if I could help you. Thank goodness, we have finished with that bare old track across the plain. I don't think the most patriotic Australian could call the first twenty miles out of Scardale pretty. Now we are coming to the part I love."

They had been approaching a long line of dense timber, and soon their path lay across a marsh, where the road was a raised causeway. From pools on either side came the croaking of innumerable frogs. Herons were stepping daintily among the marsh-grasses; those near the causeway flapped lazily into the air as the car came by. Soon they crossed a river, on a high bridge, and then the road turned and ran parallel with it, following its windings, and rising gradually, as the swamp was left behind. The track was of gravelly red sand, over which the car purred gently; on either side were tall trees, almost meeting overhead. Between them they caught glimpses of the swiftly-flowing water.

"This is a jolly road," Hugh said.

"Yes, isn't it? We have another twenty miles of this before we get to Kallowra, and we all love it. George says he knows that the twenty miles at the Scardale end are twice as long!"

"I like a road where you can't see far ahead," Hugh remarked. "Our road from the plantation down to the coast was like that; it wound in and out of the bush, and you were always coming on something unexpected."

"How did you get about there?"

"Oh--pony-carts and rickshaws and cars. Father and Mr. Harvey used to ride a good deal, but they wouldn't let me ride after my accident; the doctors said it wouldn't hurt me, but father was always nervous about it; but he meant to let me start riding again. I had talked him into it, and he was looking out for a steady pony for me when--when he fell ill."

"Would you like to begin here, Hugh?" queried his uncle, from the front seat; and Hugh jumped.

"I didn't know you could hear, Uncle Robert. I would like to try again, only--Oh, perhaps I'd better not."

"Not with my harum-scarum crowd, just at first," said Mr. Stanford. "You and I, I think, just by ourselves, until you get thoroughly used to managing for yourself. We'll conduct the practising strictly in private, old chap. If I were you I'd go in for mounting from the off side. I have an old pony that will stand for a year, though he's no slug when once you're on him. Will you try him?"

"Do you think I could, Uncle Robert, without--without making too big a fool of myself?"

"Certainly I do. It will seem queer at first, until you're used to mounting, but I see no reason why you should not ride as well as any boy, and it will help you in a lot of ways; there's nothing like riding for giving one confidence and nerve."

"I used to try and forget that I wasn't like other boys, on the plantation," Hugh said, "but since I came away it feels as if everyone were looking at my beastly leg."

"As a matter of fact, if they are looking at you at all they're noticing your long trousers," said Mrs. Stanford, smiling. "Boys of your age don't wear them out here. But I warn you, Hugh, we're not going to look at either; we're going to regard you as just an ordinary boy, and not treat you with a bit of respect. I don't believe you need it!"

"Indeed, I don't," he said, quickly. "There's nothing in all the world I want so much as just to be an ordinary boy."

"Then that's settled," said Mrs. Stanford.

They swung round a bend in the road, and she uttered a stifled exclamation, for just in front the track was completely blocked by a team of bullocks drawing a huge waggon piled high with wool. Mr. Stanford swerved abruptly to the left, missing the leaders by a hair's breadth. The car skidded in the soft dust, sidled in crab-like fashion to the edge overhanging the river, and the front wheel went over. A yell of dismay rose from the bullock-driver as Mr. Stanford jammed on his brakes.

"Jump out, Ursula, and take the boy," he said, sharply.

Hugh was out almost before he had spoken: he had flung open the door as the car tilted. His crutch lay along the back of the seat he had occupied with Mrs. Stanford; as she sprang out he grasped it, and almost leaped towards a big, sharp-angled stone a few yards away. Dropping his crutch he hugged the stone to him and crawled to the back wheel. There was just room for him to worm his way between the tyre and the edge of the road, and he jammed the stone under it, pressing it home with all his force so that the wheel could slip no further. It was done so quickly that there was no time to interfere. Mr. Stanford's warning shout fell on deaf ears. His wife was deadly pale as she saw the boy crawl back to safety.

"He has chocked it very firmly, Robert," she said, quietly. "I think you can

get out." She thrust another stone under the front wheel.

Mr. Stanford released his foot-brake gingerly and joined his family on the road.

"That was the quickest thing I ever saw--but you had no business to do it. Hugh," he said. "If the car had slipped again you'd have had no earthly chance."

"Better than if it had gone over with you," said Hugh, smiling faintly. He was flushed, and very dusty.

"Well, you're a man, old chap," Robert Stanford said. "Now, the job is to haul her back. Lucky there are plenty of bullocks--and my own bullocks, too! That's the Kallowra wool, Hugh; it would have been a queer thing if it had ended the Kallowra owners!"

Hugh looked with interest at the great pile of wool-bales, stacked on the waggon. But his eyes came back to the team.

"I've never seen such bullocks," he said, drawing a long breath. "Aren't they beauties, though! Are they all yours, Uncle Robert?"

"Yes, and a jolly fine team they are," said his uncle--"even if they did nearly put us in the river!" He turned with a frown to the bullock-driver. "You ought to know better than to come up to a blind corner like this without going ahead to see that the road was clear, Jones," he said, sternly.

"You didn't 'oot," said the man of bullocks, sourly.

"No, I didn't. But if I'd hooted twenty times over it wouldn't have made any difference to bullocks. Well, you'll have to take off your leaders and pull us back, that's all. Lucky it's no worse."

Hugh watched the operation with much interest as the car was jacked up and brought back to safety, none the worse for her attempt to dive into the river. Then Mr. Stanford backed her to the corner, where the road widened; and slowly the great team creaked and swung past them, the driver, sheepish and surly, urging them on with whip-cracks that sounded like rifle-shots. The car purred away again down the river-road.

"Hugh--you should not have done that," Mrs. Stanford said, very low. She was still white and shaken.

"And see the car go over, with Uncle Robert, perhaps?" demanded her nephew, much aggrieved. "We lost a motor-truck that way in the hills; father said then that if anyone had had sense enough to chock the other wheels in time she wouldn't have gone. But our natives weren't used to cars; they called them "devil-waggons," and they always lost their heads if anything went wrong. Father told me if anything like that ever happened to remember to chock the wheels as quickly as I could." He paused and looked up at her appealingly. "So I just had to."

"Yes, I see you had to," she said, gently. "Well, you probably saved the

car, Hugh--and your uncle."

The sound of galloping hoofs was heard, and in a moment two figures came into view, racing towards them.

"Those youngsters!" exclaimed Mr. Stanford.

His wife did not look surprised.

"Did you think they would be able to restrain themselves until we reached home?" she asked, laughing. "I have been wondering when they would appear." She leaned forward, her delicate face flushing.

"Is it--?" Hugh asked, suddenly nervous.

"It's Harry and Joan. They are always together--and generally in mischief." She waved delightedly as the pair dashed up: a boy and girl, very like each other, dark and handsome, with merry, confident eyes.

"Hallo, everybody! You all right, Mother? Hallo, Hugh!"

Hugh smiled back at them.

"Yes, everything is all right, darlings," said their mother. "It's lovely to see you again. Is Mervyn well?"

"Fit as a fiddle," said Joan, laughing. "He wanted to come, but we knew the pace would be too hot for old Topsy, so he's up in the pine-tree, looking out for you. Had a good voyage, Hugh?"

"Yes, thanks. I say, what a jolly pony." He looked with open admiration at the little brown mare she rode: a beautiful, impatient thing that somehow suited her mistress.

Had he known it, he could have chosen no more direct way to Joan's regard.

"Yes, isn't she?" she said. "She's my very own, and she can race any horse on Kallowra. Oh, well, come along, Harry; now we've seen them we can tear ahead and open gates. My word, you're got a pile of luggage on board, Dad--the old car looks like a carrier's van! That's all cars are fit for!" They wheeled their ponies and shot off at racing pace. Mr. Stanford smiled under his moustache as he slipped in his clutch and the car followed.

"Joan has no use for anything that hasn't four legs," he said.

They turned from the river-road a few miles farther on, following a rougher track that led to an open gate beside which Joan waited. It was the brown pony that made Hugh certain it was Joan, for she was ridiculously like her brother, and their riding clothes were almost the same--coats and breeches of a workmanlike khaki, and soft felt hats under which Joan's bobbed head looked just like a boy's. Harry was to be seen in the distance, cantering towards the second gate. Beyond, a grey stone house showed dimly, set in a cluster of trees. They went through without stopping, and presently the little girl flashed past them again, shouting cheerily as she went. She passed the gateway ahead of them and raced towards the homestead.

The gateway of a great gravelled yard stood wide to receive them. As they pulled up beside the back verandah a small flying figure shot round the corner of the house and leaped upon the running-board, engulfing Mrs. Stanford in a bear-like hug.

"I was up in the top of the pine-tree and I got stucked on a branch that was all dead spikes, and I thought I'd never get down in time!" said the new-comer, breathlessly. "Wouldn't either, if my blouse hadn't tored! Mummie, I'm glad you're back! Hallo, Dad!" He transferred his hug to his father, who had got out of the car.

"Suppose you say 'Hallo' to Hugh," said Mr. Stanford, laughing.

Mervyn put out a grubby hand, deeply stained from the pine-tree, and gave his cousin a friendly smile.

"I've been awful anxious for you to come," he said, in a friendly little voice. "I've got just heaps to show you, and I'm wanting ever so to hear all about the black people in Ceylon."

"They aren't black at all," said Hugh, laughing. "But I'll tell you about them, all the same."

"Oh, aren't they black?" said Mervyn, his face falling. "We made sure they would be. We rather thought you'd be a bit black yourself, but you aren't, is he, Harry?"

"He's just like you," said Harry, from his pony. He looked at Hugh in something like astonishment.

"Well, that's true enough," said Mr. Stanford; "I wonder we didn't notice it Ursula."

Indeed, the cousins were queerly alike. Both were fair, with grey eyes and light hair that refused to keep tidy; both had firm lips and square chins that carried a hint of obstinacy. They were a sharp contrast to the dark, glowing faces of Harry and Joan.

"Those two might be the Cingalese," said their father, laughing. "Let your ponies go, kiddies, and come and tell us all that has happened. There is any amount to carry inside."

Other people had come out: a pleasant-faced woman who seemed a sort of housekeeper, and was known as Nurse, and a short, dark young man, Mr. Vernon, whom Hugh guessed to be the tutor. Two men came over from the stables to help unload the car.

Hugh got out, slowly. He gripped his crutch, feeling that everyone was looking at him as he limped into the house, following his aunt. He heard Harry's clear voice:--

"Why, he's in long pants, and he's younger than me!"

And Joan's:--

"Silly idea, I call it. He's only thirteen, isn't he, Dad?"

And Mr. Stanford's:--

"Hold your tongues, both of you!"

Hugh's face was flushed as he looked up at his aunt. But she was smiling kindly.

"I told you those long trousers of yours would astonish the natives," she said, patting his shoulder. "You mustn't mind my bush urchins, old boy; they don't mean anything unkindly. Tell me how you like your room."

She opened the door of a little room, furnished very plainly, with a solid table and a low bookshelf full of attractive-looking volumes. There was a long window, under which a low couch stood; a comfortable old couch that looked as though it had had years of knock-about wear and was good for as many more. Near it, a door that was half of coloured glass stood open, giving access to a square verandah where a bed was covered with a bright rug. The verandah looked across miles of rolling country that gradually rose into timber-covered hills.

"Oh, what a jolly place!" Hugh cried. "Is it really mine, Aunt Ursula?"

"Yes, it's absolutely yours," Mrs. Stanford said. "I want you to remember that, Hugh. See, there is a big verandah-blind that completely shuts in your sleep-out; you can put it down whenever you wish. And if tired times come, or home-sick times, or if the old leg aches--just come and lock your door and no one will worry you." She put her hand on his shoulder. "We do want you to be happy with us, Hugh."

"I'd be a brute if I weren't," he said, huskily.

He sat down and looked about his small domain when she had gone out, shutting the door behind her. It was all his own--the dread of having no place of privacy, a dread that had haunted him ever since he had known he must leave Ceylon, was banished for ever. And they all seemed kind--and welcoming. After all, there might be worse places than Australia--and Kallowra.

CHAPTER IV

THE LUCK OF THE PRIEST

"HUGH, can we help you unpack?"

Hugh looked up in some surprise. The night before, he had been too tired after the long journey to think of anything but going to bed; this morning, the spectacle of his boxes was not a cheering one. There had always been native servants to do this sort of thing for him. That time was over, he knew, and he was very willing to adjust himself to Australian conditions. Still--there were many boxes.

"Thanks, awfully, Joan," he said. "But I don't like bothering you."

"Oh, Harry and I haven't anything to do. Mother said we could have a holiday to-day, and Mr. Vernon's gone fishing. We thought if you sat on a stool and took things out, Harry and I could put them away. It wouldn't take half the time."

"No, it wouldn't," Hugh agreed. "Shall we begin now?"

"Let me come, too," Mervyn begged.

"Oh, the kid'll only be a nuisance," Harry said.

"No, I won't, so there! I'll be ever so good, Hugh; I won't touch a thing."

"Oh, let him come," Hugh said.

It was a queer medley of things that they tumbled out of the battered cabin-trunks and heavy Eastern baskets. Clothes came first, as being the most uninteresting. Joan exclaimed at the number of light things; innumerable suits of white drill and tussa silk.

"Why, you must live in white clothes, over there!"

"Well, there's plenty of hot weather, you see," Hugh said.

"Goodness knows there's plenty here," remarked Harry. "Jolly sensible things, I call them; I don't know why Australians don't go in for them."

"Think of the washing!" said Joan, practically.

"Yes, I suppose that counts," Hugh remarked, wrinkling his brows. "It never seems to matter in Ceylon; the native tailor comes and sits down on the verandah and makes suits by the dozen, and the native washer-man doesn't worry if you wear three and four a day."

"Mrs. Carter 'ud take a fit," said Joan, with decision. "She's always grumbling at the wash."

"Oh, well, I needn't wear them here," said Hugh. "It can't be as hot here as it is in Ceylon." He tossed out the last of the thin suits.

"Those soft ones would make ripping pyjamas," said Harry, looking at the light silk.

"Good idea; I'll wear them out that way," responded their owner.

"I'll put them all in this bottom drawer," Joan said, stowing things away vigorously. "Mother wants us to put all your clothes in the chest of drawers and the wardrobe, so's she'll know how to manage them for you. Why, every blessed thing you've got seems to be new!"

"Mr. Harvey thought I'd better bring new things, and then there wouldn't be so much trouble mending for me," said Hugh.

"What about hats? They take an awful lot of stowing away."

He emptied a square basket that seemed to hold only hats: straws, Panamas, a big grey Terai that was really two hats in one, and excited the Australian children greatly, and three or four sola topees, white and khaki.

"One 'ud think you had nineteen heads," said Harry. "An old felt is good enough for me. But that's a jolly good sort of hat, all the same." He put on a topee, and regarded himself in the mirror with approval. "It only weighs about an ounce."

"They're rather jolly in the summer--you try one some day," said Hugh. "Girls wear them, too."

"They're rum things, I think," said Joan, bluntly. "I wouldn't see myself in one!"

Harry clapped the one he had been trying upon her bobbed head.

"Doesn't look bad, does it, Hugh? I've seen her look worse, many a time!"

Joan sent it flying with a swift jerk.

"Don't like other people's things," she said, curtly; and Hugh's pale face flushed. "I say, Hugh, I think we'll have to store all your hat shop in that basket affair; they'll never fit into the wardrobe. It'll look all right, if we put it over in the corner. Hurry up--we'll put ties and hankies in this little drawer, and collars and socks in the other." She tossed things in, pausing occasionally to ram down the billowing masses by main strength. "That all the clothes?"

"About all, I think," Hugh said. "That other basket is full of books. We can put them in heaps on the chest of drawers, can't we?"

"Yes, they'll do there. Hand them up, Harry: I'll stack them. My word, you have a lot of books! George will be borrowing them all the time, when he comes home."

"I hope you'll all take them whenever you like," Hugh said. "Those are just some I like best; I've a whole lot more in Ceylon. Father was always getting books."

"Oh, Harry and I never look at a book if we can help it," said Joan, airily. "George and Mervyn are the book-worms in our family. There never was a book written that could come up to a horse!"

"Much you know!" said Mervyn, sturdily.

"You be quiet, kid," said his sister. "Babies shouldn't interrupt. What next,

Hugh?"

Hugh sent a half-smile at Mervyn, who had flushed angrily.

"Oh, this is just odd things," he said. He opened a box and began to unwrap many odd-shaped packages. Queer things were among them for his room: objects he had chosen from his father's room in Ceylon. There were some good brass-work boxes and jars; little squat grinning gods; native weapons; a tiger-skin rug that turned the old couch into something barbaric and splendid. There was a lacquer writing set; a little clock in a carved ivory case; a beaten silver vase with curious raised figures on an ebony stand. The children exclaimed over the medley of things--altogether wonderful to Australian bush youngsters.

"I'll show you the queerest of all," Hugh said.

He took from an inner pocket a case of soft leather, beautifully tooled in red, and drew from it a little jade image. To the others it looked not nearly so interesting as many of the other curiosities.

"What is he?" Harry asked.

"He's a little god, and he's ever so old. Older than anything in Ceylon, some people say. He's supposed to be made of very wonderful jade, and his eyes are pigeon's-blood rubies. An old priest gave him to Father years ago. Father found him ill in the jungle, and took him home and nursed him--nobody knew where he came from. He died after a while, but before he died he gave Father this image. He told him to keep it 'more carefully than his right eye,' and it would always bring him good fortune. Father called it his Luck."

"And did it bring him good fortune?" Joan demanded, excitedly.

"Well, it sounds queer, but if it didn't, something else did. Everything had gone wrong with Father until then. The plantations never paid, and he had illnesses, and all sorts of things went amiss. But after he got the Luck everything changed. He said he didn't seem able to make a mistake--from being very poor he grew to be quite well off. Father used to laugh at himself for believing in the Luck, but, all the same, he did. At first, when the old priest gave it to him, he thought he would sell it, because he was very hard up, and it's worth an awful lot of money--the rubies alone are very valuable; but afterwards, nothing would have made him part with it, I believe. He always carried it about with him."

"Well, it looks a rummy sort of old thing to have any power," Harry said. "I don't think much of that sort of idea--it's like believing in fairies and all that kind of bosh, and only kids like Merv believe in fairies!"

"Don't you be too sure!" said Hugh.

"Why, you don't, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's hard to know what to believe in, sometimes. Anyhow, I'm not going to part with the Luck."

Hugh stowed it carefully away in his pocket and changed the subject.

"There's rather a jolly trunk over there," he said. "I've got some things for Aunt Ursula in it."

He limped across to a long flat basket, covered in thick canvas: and Mervyn was at his heels in a flash, bringing the little stool.

"There's something for you, too, Mervyn," said Hugh, giving him a grateful glance.

He fumbled among a bunch of keys and unlocked the two heavy locks that secured the basket. Lifting the lid he drew out a flat wooden box and put it into the little boy's hands.

"For me?" asked Mervyn.

"Rather. See if you like it."

Joan jerked off the lid of the box, and Mervyn gave a delighted shout. A long native canoe lay before them--a beautiful model about two feet in length, made of dark-red wood.

"What a rum boat!" Harry exclaimed. "What's this platform-affair at the side?"

"That's the outrigger. It's a catamaran, like the natives use--you should see them bring them through a heavy sea. The sails and mast are underneath it in the box, Mervyn; I'll help you fix them presently. Got any water you can sail her on?"

"There's the big dam," said Mervyn, ecstatically. "Oh, Hugh, you are a brick! I never saw anything like it!"

"We'll have heaps of fun with her," said Hugh, contentedly.

Beautiful things began to appear from the long basket trunk. There were soft lengths of exquisite silk, shimmering in delicate colours; scarves in which ran metal threads that gave a wonderful sheen to the material, although the whole was as soft as down; squares of woven heavy silk to make cushion covers. There were pieces of queer, barbaric jewellery, and carved ivory; a long roll of tussa was wound about some splendid brass jars and vases, out of one of which came a set of black elephants, ranging from a big fellow eight inches high to a midget standing an inch at the shoulder.

"Oh, what beauties!" Joan cried out. "I do like those fellows!"

"Do have them," Hugh said, quickly. "I hoped you'd like something out of here."

Joan drew back.

"Why, they're yours. I wouldn't take them."

"Me!" said Hugh. "What would I do with a herd of elephants? Do have them, Joan." He gathered them up and put them on the floor in front of her.

"I say!" Joan muttered. "It--it's jolly good of you, Hugh. Oh, I'd love them!" She sat cross-legged on the rug and ranged them in a line. "I'll have a procession on my mantelpiece." Her dark little face was glowing with colour.

"There's something else I brought for you," Hugh said. "You see, I knew Uncle Robert had one daughter, but I didn't know the sort of thing you'd like." He put a flat case on her knee, touching a spring. It opened to show a necklet of moonstones, set in silver: a slender, delicate thing.

Joan looked at it without enthusiasm. Ornaments meant nothing to her; the pale beauty of the moonstones waked no such feeling in her heart as the quaint ebony elephants; but she thanked Hugh pleasantly enough, and said that it was very pretty, and the boy understood. He turned to Harry, a little nervously.

"I hadn't an idea what Australian boys liked. No good bringing you and George silks or moonstones--or elephants, but I thought these might be useful to keep odd things in." He brought out two heavy brass boxes, plain and solid.

"I think they're no end jolly," said Harry. "Thanks awfully. You oughtn't to have bothered about us, Hugh."

"Oh, it was fun getting them ready. That was the only part of the packing I liked. I got this for Uncle Robert. At least, I didn't get it--it was Father's; I thought he'd rather have something Father had had himself."

It was a box of wonderfully carved sandalwood. The fragrance of the wood, as he unwrapped it, filled the room. Within it were photographs of Ceylon--Hugh glanced at the first one and shut the box abruptly, with a little catch in his breath. It made him realize how home-sick he was, just to see the waving tops of the palm-trees and the creaming waves breaking on the white beach.

Mrs. Stanford gasped over the armful Harry and Joan brought her, presently.

"Why--he mustn't! These things are too beautiful--too good. How did a boy ever choose such things!"

"He said some lady they knew in Colombo helped him, and Mr. Harvey. He doesn't seem to think anything of them," Harry said. "This is a top-hole box he gave me, anyhow!"

"You can keep that for me, Mother." Joan tossed the case with the moonstones on to the shimmering silks.

"Joan--what a lovely thing! But you can't wear it yet, my daughter."

"Me wear it? Not much!" said Joan. "I suppose it's very fine, and all that, but that sort of affair isn't in my line. Just you come and see my elephants!"

"Where is Hugh? Has he finished unpacking?"

"Nearly. There's only one little box, and he said he'd do that by himself." Joan capered off, whistling.

Mrs. Stanford put the Eastern gifts aside and went to Hugh's room. The door was ajar; she hesitated for a moment.

"May I come in, Hugh?"

A muffled voice answered, and she entered. Hugh was standing before his

table, looking at the contents of his last box--a number of framed photographs. There was Maurice Harvey, stout and good-natured and cheerful; there were pictures of the plantation--coolies among the tea-plants, pickers coming home with high-piled baskets poised on their heads, a wide-verandahed house set on a hill among great trees; and there was one at which he was gazing with dry eyes that ached: a big man in riding-kit and pith helmet, on a great horse, who seemed to return his steady look with one of perfect understanding. Ursula Stanford put her arm lightly across the boy's shoulders, standing behind him.

"Shall we hang them up together, just you and I?" she asked.

Hugh nodded. She went away returning in a moment with hammer and nails and wire, and locking the door behind her. Together they decked the room with the Cingalese pictures, hanging the father's likeness where Hugh could see it from the couch or from his bed on the verandah. There was a little shelf on the wall, beneath it, and on this she put the vase of beaten silver.

"We'll keep this filled with flowers--shall we?" she asked. "Do you like gardening, Hugh?"

"Yes, Aunt Ursula. Father loved flowers, too, and we always worked in his special garden together."

"Then you shall have your own garden, and grow flowers for his vase. There is a good place, just outside your sleep-out. And until your own flowers grow you must take my best roses."

The boy's set face relaxed. He looked round the room, his eyes travelling from one to another of the familiar scenes. They came back to his father's face.

"I think he looks happy," he said. "I--I guess he knows how jolly good you are to me, Aunt Ursula."

CHAPTER V

SETTLING DOWN

THE weeks went by, and Hugh Stanford gradually settled down to life at Kallowra among his father's people.

It never grew quite easy to him. In a hundred ways each day he realized sharply his physical inferiority to these strong, energetic youngsters of Australia, who went about their many occupations with a quick sureness that was quite impossible to him.

Perhaps he would not have felt it so much if he had not tried to meet them on equal terms--to keep up with them, so far as he could. He hated acknowledging that there were things he could not do; and he was so deft in his management of his lameness that he did accomplish a great deal. But not all the will in the world, nor all the pluck, could make his lame leg equal to a good one.

The children were very good to him, on the whole. They treated him with an off-hand kindness, and he soon found that in the matter of noticing his lameness they were almost as sensitive as he was himself; so that his old terror of being ridiculed quickly vanished. Mervyn frankly adored him, and would follow him about for hours if there were a chance of making him talk about Colombo or tell stories of the natives and of life on the plantation in the hills. Hugh liked the friendly little fellow, and was often grateful for his companionship; but, after all, he was only a six-year-old, and the gap is very wide between six and thirteen, especially when "thirteen" happens to be old beyond his years. Curiously enough, it was Joan whom Hugh wanted most.

And Joan did not want him at all.

Never was any small girl more entirely a product of the Australian bush than Joan Stanford. She hated lessons, and hated the house; books, she frankly stated, "made her sick," and a wet day was to her a calamity. Flowers, frocks, sewing, and all domestic pursuits, she treated with lofty scorn; she dodged music-lessons and practising with persistent determination, and wore out the patience of her instructors during the weekly morning in the kitchen when it was her mother's resolve that she should be instructed in the gentle art of cooking. The most delicate part of a sponge-cake's composition--the supreme moment in the baking of a pie--the boiling-point of a sauce--all were as nothing to Joan if a strange dog barked or a cat was reported with new kittens. Instantly the kitchen knew her no more, and the outraged instructor would protest feebly in the wake of a flying, floury figure. Joan scorned aprons as "silly, pussy-cat things;" and as she invariably wiped her flour-daubed fingers

on her skirt or, more often, her riding-breeches, she presented a peculiarly streaked appearance towards the end of a cooking-lesson.

"And the worst of it is she can cook!" the old cook would mourn. "There's many a grown woman hasn't half Miss Joan's knack with pastry. It's awful to see her go to waste, like!"

"She ought to have been a boy, that's very certain," her father would say, almost as mournfully. For Robert Stanford had already three sons, and he set great store by his one daughter.

But none of his sons had the instinctive sense for dealing with animals that Joan possessed; rarely, indeed, did he hire a man who could help him as capably on the run, or who could train a dog to handle sheep or cattle like this tall young daughter with her quick eye and her sharp, decisive voice. The most stubborn bullock, mulishly determined to disobey law and order and remain in the paddock he preferred, became meek when Joan and her brown pony Gipsy appeared on the scene, armed with the small stock whip she could use to such good effect. Where pace and dash were needed Joan and Gipsy were in their element; they raced over the plains like mad things, or scurried across the rocky hills at a rate that often brought Mr. Stanford's heart into his mouth, accustomed though he was to the sure-footed pony that never stumbled or made a mistake. Wild riding was the sheerest joy to Joan, and Gipsy enjoyed it as much as she did. Yet, they were equally useful when judgment and care were required of them, and could be depended upon just as certainly when dairy cows had to be gently handled, or a flock of ewes with young lambs "nursed" over a distance. Theirs was the natural instinct for dealing with stock; but, as Mr. Stanford pondered ruefully, it would have been far more to the purpose if one of the boys had had it.

George, the eldest boy, did not care for stock at all. He loved his home and the wide country round it, and he rode well: but animals bored him as heartily as flowers and music bored Joan. The only animals which interested him were dead ones, and when he was ten he was found laboriously cutting up a defunct rabbit, "to see how its joints worked." Since then, he had never wavered in his determination to be a doctor, and now he was in his last year at a big public school, with a very good chance of a scholarship that should take him on to the University. A satisfactory boy, George; his father was quite proud of him, but, somehow, he never seemed quite to belong to Kallowra.

Harry was more like Joan, with less of her obstinate character. She overshadowed him in most respects, though a girl and two years younger; he was more easy-going, and less reliable in outdoor matters. He worshipped her blindly, and was quite content to follow wherever she led. They were scarcely ever apart. As soon as they were released each day from the schoolroom--a moment when Mr. Vernon was understood to utter loud sighs of relief!--they

fled into the outer world, riding, fishing, swimming, or exploring together; content with each other and asking for nothing more. The first streaks of daylight usually brought them from their beds on the verandah, and they played tennis until breakfast-time--swift, hard-hitting sets that sent them into breakfast glowing-faced and ravenously hungry. It was small wonder that in such a partnership there was no room for Hugh.

They did not mean to show him that he was not wanted. Before he came, their parents had talked to them seriously about him, and they realized, in the abstract fashion of their years, that they must be good to him--that a boy so especially hard-hit by misfortune needed something especial in the way of consideration. They made plans at first that included him, so far as it was possible; but, little by little, as his presence in the house lost its novelty and became a matter of course, they slipped back into their old companionship and left the lame cousin more and more to his own devices. It was only natural. Even while Mrs. Stanford recognized and sighed over the fact, she could not see how to alter it. They were never unkind, but he simply did not fit in.

Hugh recognized it more quickly than anyone. He had never expected much; just at first, when he had been a new interest, he had had a wild hope that it might be possible for him to be a companion to these independent youngsters; but the hope soon died. He settled down into the old dull resignation, a little heavier because of the hope that had lit his grey sky for a little while. As long as he lived he must drag the burden of his crutch.

Then a new light dawned for him.

It was Saturday afternoon, and he was alone in his sleep-out, reading; the others had all ridden away after lunch, and Mrs. Stanford was entertaining callers from a station ten miles away. Suddenly he heard a step on the gravel path, and looked up to see his uncle.

"I've got the old pony in, Hugh," Mr. Stanford said, cheerfully. "How about a ride?"

Hugh flushed hotly.

"Do you think I could, Uncle Robert?"

"No reason why you shouldn't," returned Mr. Stanford. "You did ride--before you were hurt?"

"Oh, yes. But that's a good while ago. I suppose I'd be all right--if I could get on."

"Well, getting on might be simply a matter of lifting you into the saddle," his uncle said, "and I guess I could manage that; but I'd like to make you independent of help, and old Bouncer is just the pony for that. He'll stand like a rock. Come and we'll try him, old chap."

Hugh reached for his crutch and followed Mr. Stanford out. They went through the garden and across to the stable-yard. Behind the stables was a little

paddock, and here they came upon a pony tied to the fence; an iron-grey pony, low-set and cobby, with a wise, kind head. Hugh went up and patted him, and the grey rubbed his nose against the boy's coat, sniffing at him delicately.

"He knows more than most humans," remarked Mr. Stanford. "Look, Hugh, there's a bit of a drop in the ground here; if I lead him below the rise he'd be very easy to mount. I take it that you can't put much weight on your left leg?"

"No--I can't trust it if I do."

"Well, you must mount from the off side, that's all; and there's no special difficulty in that, if you try to forget that you ever got up in the ordinary way. Bless your heart, there was a fellow in Ireland who used to ride after he had lost both legs, and I believe there was no harder rider in the hunting-field! He had a special saddle built, but the man who told me about him said he could have ridden in any saddle. We'll have you after cattle in no time. You look here, Hugh."

He led the pony below the little rise, and threw his leg over him from the wrong side again and again. It seemed easy, and Bouncer stood as quietly as if he were asleep.

"Now, you try. Gather up the reins, and steady yourself against him--I'll take your crutch, old man. Just feel that you've got your balance well before you try to get on. I wouldn't bother about stirrups--just vault on."

Hugh did it, and was surprised to find how easy it was. He sat on the pony's back for a moment, rejoicing in the good "feel" of the saddle once more; then he dismounted, a little awkwardly, and doggedly set himself to practising, again and again. Mr. Stanford leaned against the fence, smoking, and watched the boy, now and then giving him a word of advice. It pleased him to see how quick Hugh was to try to follow it.

"The exertion doesn't hurt your leg, does it?" he asked once.

"It makes it tired, but I believe it would only do it good. Anyhow, I'm not going to poddy the old thing!" Hugh responded. He vaulted on again; it was becoming quite a simple matter now.

"It's reversing the action, and getting off, that is most difficult," he said. "All right with a pony as steady as this, but if he moved away I'd go down."

"And would that hurt you?"

"I don't suppose so--not more than it would hurt anyone else. Only--a fellow doesn't like to look a fool." He reddened.

"Certainly not. I just wanted to know, that's all. Of course, with old Bouncer you need never worry; he's trained to stand. But when you get promoted to a better pony--as you certainly will--

"Do you really think so?" Hugh's eyes were eager.

"I don't think at all: I know." Mr. Stanford pulled at his pipe, considering

the question. "Suppose we rigged a couple of straps, so that you could carry your crutch, and slip it out before you dismount; then you would be independent if the pony did move. Think that would work?"

"Yes, I think so. I'll practise with Bouncer. Do you think I could come over here and practise by myself every day, Uncle Robert? I can't keep you all the time. Then, if I do get a few spills I wouldn't mind--by myself."

"Certainly you can. As long as falling doesn't hurt you, a few spills would only help to give you confidence. Don't you worry, old chap, I'll have you all over the run before long. Then you can write and tell that friend of yours in Ceylon that we're making a stock-rider of you."

"My word, you're a brick, Uncle Robert!" uttered the boy. He sat upright in the saddle, drawing a long breath; then, suddenly, with a "Who-whoop!" that was altogether boyish, he shortened his reins, dug in his knees and sent Bouncer off at a sharp canter. The old pony, as his uncle had said, was no slug; he responded gamely, and they raced round the paddock. Mr. Stanford was smiling broadly as they pulled up beside him.

"No doubt about you on a horse, old chap," he said. "Well, I didn't think George's son could fail to ride; and you've got his seat and his hands." He sighed. "We were great mates as boys, you know, Hugh, he and I. How about stirrups? Wouldn't you like them?"

"Oh, I'd rather have them of course, Uncle Robert, but I just couldn't wait." He was flushed and laughing. "Oh, but it's good to be on a horse again!"

"It's rather good to see you looking like a kid, instead of like an old man," his uncle said. The stirrups were hanging on the fence; he adjusted them on the saddle, altering their length to suit Hugh. "You'll have to get breeches and leggings; meanwhile there are sure to be some leggings of Harry's about. Come for a ride?"

"Rather! Have you got time?"

"Certainly I have; also, I want to look at some bullocks in the outer paddocks. I'll go and get my horse; he's in one of the loose-boxes." He returned in a few minutes, leading his horse and carrying a pair of leggings. "Better put these on, or your trousers will be up round your knees."

As he helped to adjust the gaiter on the lame leg he felt the boy wince.

"Does it hurt you, old chap?"

"No, it doesn't hurt a bit, Uncle Robert," Hugh said. "I--I'm only a fool about it."

Mr. Stanford fastened the buckle in silence. He laid his hand on the boy's knee as he finished, looking him straight in the eyes.

"One doesn't want to talk about what hurts you, old chap. But I think it would be easier for you if you tried not to mind it so much--at any rate, among your own people. Try not to think of it; or if you must, to be thankful you've a

leg left at all. It's the things you cover up and brood over that hurt worst in life, Hugh, boy. There, you look pretty workmanlike now; those leggings fit you very fairly. Come along and see something of Kallowra."

CHAPTER VI

THE SADDLE AGAIN

THAT was the first of many rides, and Hugh never forgot it.

They went out of the house-paddock and across the plain until they reached the river, where they splashed through a ford. On the other side they began to climb a stony hillside to a timber-covered ridge, where they rode slowly along while the dogs worked through the trees, rousing bullocks that were spending a drowsy afternoon in slumbrous comfort. The sound of Mr. Stanford's whip, rattling in a succession of echoes round the hills, urged the cattle to a slow trot, until they were all gathered in the far corner of the paddock so that their owner could count them and note how they were progressing towards that luckily undreamed-of haven of all bullocks--the fat-cattle market.

"Coming on very well," he said, as they turned their horses' heads down the ridge again. "I'll have to move them into the fattening-paddock soon. Know anything about cattle, Hugh?"

"Not a thing, Uncle Robert."

"Well, you'll have to learn. Even if you are going to be a tea-planter, no knowledge ever comes amiss; and when Harry goes to school next year I'll need a mate."

"But you'll have Joan."

"Joan's mother thinks she is getting to be too much of a boy, and I believe she's right. She'll have to keep her poor nose much closer to the grindstone of lessons and domestic pursuits next year than she has any idea of at present; and even if I have Joan, she is a girl, and a man wants a son to knock about with. I believe you would like the life, Hugh."

"I should love it, Uncle Robert; but do you think I could be any use?"

"Of course you could. It will be the very thing for you, too; you look a different fellow, already. You'll be as handy on a horse as my own youngsters; and if you want to learn, and will really watch the stock and try to pick up knowledge, you'll be no end of a mate. Lots of boys come to a country place and have quite a good time riding round, and at the end of their time they don't know a Shorthorn from a Hereford; but a fellow who really cares to learn is soaking in information all his time."

"Well, nobody could be more of a new-chum than I am," Hugh said. "Tea is the only thing I've ever had a chance of learning about--Father said I was beginning to know a little about it. But if you'll teach me something of cattle and sheep, Uncle Robert, I'll do my very best to learn."

"That's a bargain, then. Now, those fellows we've just been looking at are

half-fat; in the next paddock I'll show you something better."

They went through a gate at the foot of the ridge and into a paddock that had once been cultivated. Mr. Stanford showed Hugh how the old furrow marks still showed beneath the thick mat of grasses that covered the ground.

"This is all clover and cocksfoot now, and it's a great fattening-paddock. We top them off on the river-flats, but they do very well here." He whistled the dogs to heel. "No need to disturb these fellows," he said, indicating the bullocks grazing and lying about. "They're very placid and used to being looked at."

They rode here and there among the quiet cattle. Some rose heavily to their feet as the horses drew near them; but many remained lying down, lazily chewing the cud, and, presumably, reflecting only on pleasant things. Mr. Stanford showed Hugh the different points and markings, and made him try to pick out the fattest beasts, explaining to him where he went wrong. He was very painstaking and patient, and made the lesson so full of fun and interest that Hugh enjoyed every moment of it.

"You'll do," he said, in a satisfied tone, as they turned towards home. "You haven't got anything to unlearn, which is a very good thing; and you've a well-trained eye, and that is a better. Observation is worth all the genius I ever met. Look straight at either a man or an animal and you'll learn to size him up--and both man and animal will be apt to respect you. We'll work all over the place now, bit by bit, until you know every paddock and can begin to recognize the beasts in them. I believe you'll find it interesting."

"I'm jolly well sure I shall," Hugh said, eagerly. "I don't know when I've enjoyed anything so much."

"Well, that's all right. I've enjoyed it, too, but I think it's enough for one day, all the same." Mr. Stanford opened a gate that led into the big homestead-paddock. "Well, we've been walking nearly all the time. Are you tired, or shall we canter over to the house?"

"I'd love a canter," Hugh said.

They went off across the grass, threading their way at a smart pace in and out among the trees; Mr. Stanford's big bay trotting while little Bouncer stretched himself out to keep up with him. This time there was no attempt to seek concealment behind the stables; they clattered up to the back gate, the noise of their coming bringing Mrs. Stanford out to meet them.

"Why--*Hugh!*" she cried, her sweet face flushed with pleasure. "This is a beautiful surprise. I didn't know you could even ride!"

"Can't he!" uttered her husband. "Why, I'll have him cutting-out cattle before long. We had mounting-exercise on Bouncer, and then this young man went off, and there's been no holding him! We've been up on the ridge, and in all sorts of places."

"That's just the best news I've had for a long while," Mrs. Stanford said. "Will you take me out riding some day, Hugh?"

"Will you come, Aunt Ursula?" he asked, delightedly.

"Indeed, I will. My riding-days aren't over yet, though I've never taken to breeches and a man's saddle--wherefore my daughter thinks I can't ride at all. You and I will have some great times."

"I don't know if I'll be able to spare him," Mr. Stanford remarked, gravely. "He shows signs of being a very useful hand on the place, and I'm going to train him, in the hope that he'll adopt cattle and forswear tea! I predict Mr. Harvey arriving from Ceylon some day and doing battle with me for possession of him. I warn you, Hugh, I won't let you go easily!"

"None of us will," said his wife. "However, it's almost time for afternoon-tea--and I'm sure neither of you will forswear that! Are you coming in now, Robert? The Munros have gone. They could not wait."

"Yes--we've finished for to-day. Will you get off here, Hugh?"

"Oh, I'd rather let him go myself," Hugh said, "and my crutch is in the little paddock."

"So it is. Off you go, then."

Mrs. Stanford followed them, watching while Hugh dismounted beside the fence where his crutch leaned. He managed it deftly enough this time, and, tucking the crutch under his arm, slipped the saddle from Bouncer's back. He patted the pony's neck.

"Shall I let him go here, Uncle Robert?"

"Yes--he'll find his way into the big paddock." Mr. Stanford watched the boy as he took off the bridle and dismissed Bouncer with a final pat.

"You like to do your own jobs?" he asked.

"Father always taught me to let my own pony go, even when I was a wee little chap," Hugh said. "He said every decent man did that, if he could, and groomed him too. I'd like to groom him next time, Uncle Robert. I know I can manage it."

"So you shall. Can you bring the bridles, while I take both saddles?"

"Rather," Hugh replied. He gathered up the bridles, and followed his uncle to the harness-room. Together they walked over to the house, while the boy's heart sang with joy. Lame leg and all, he had been treated as if he were any ordinary boy--he was wanted! Light had come into his grey sky.

Joan and Harry dashed up on their ponies, quick to notice the borrowed leggings.

"Hallo! Hugh been riding?" Hugh could have laughed at their faces of blank astonishment.

"Yes, we've had no end of a ride," Mr. Stanford said.

"What horse, Hugh? Bouncer, I suppose?"

There was something of patronizing contempt in Joan's voice, and Hugh flushed under it, but he answered quietly.

"Yes. He's a jolly good pony to ride."

"Oh, not bad," Joan said, carelessly. "Mervyn likes him;" at which her father resisted a desire to shake her.

"Hugh will be riding something better than Bouncer soon," he said. "Better let your pony go, Joan. Is that a car coming up the track?"

"Oh, I forgot--it's Mr. Warren," said Joan. "We opened the gate for him. He's coming to afternoon tea, I suppose. Those other people still here?--oh, no, thank goodness, their car has gone. Then we can come in to afternoon-tea, Harry; I don't mind Mr. Warren."

"Young monkey!" muttered her father, as the pair trotted off to the stables. "I'm glad for you to meet James Warren, Hugh. Did you ever hear your father speak of him?"

"That would be Jim Warren. Yes, often," Hugh answered. "Father used to tell me all sorts of stories about him and you and himself. He said you were great chums when you were boys."

"Yes, we three were always together until George went to Ceylon. Jim was the only one who never married; he has a fine place twenty miles from here. Now and then he goes to England or America; indeed he has travelled a great deal, and his house is like a museum--full of beautiful things. He'll be interested in your Indian and Cingalese curios, Hugh; but most of all he will want to see you, I know."

"Does he know I--I'm lame?"

"Yes, he knows. Don't worry your head about Jim Warren; he's the kindest soul alive. Go ahead, and tell your aunt that he is coming. I'll wait here for him."

Mr. Stanford came into the drawing-room presently with the new arrival: a tall, heavily-built man with a trim, grey beard.

"Here's old Jim, Ursula, and he's only waiting for you to ask him to stay the night!"

"He should not need to be asked," Mrs. Stanford laughed, greeting him. "He knows his room is always ready!"

"Well, I'll admit I brought my bag," said Mr. Warren. He had a deep voice, and a big, jolly laugh that was very pleasant. "I wanted to see you both; it's a long time since you called on me. And I want to see George's boy."

"Here he is," Mrs. Stanford said.

Hugh limped forward and found his hand imprisoned in a huge brown one. Two very blue eyes looked into his.

"Yes, you're like George," said Mr. Warren. "I saw you when you were a very small youngster, Hugh; too young to remember me. And I'm very glad to

meet you now."

"Father often talked about you," said Hugh, very low.

"I expect he would--though I don't suppose he told you all the larks we used to be up to when we were your age."

Hugh's eyes twinkled.

"Well, he told me a good deal, sir."

"Oh, did he?" asked Mr. Warren. "Better not give me away too much to young Harry and Joan--I believe they have a certain amount of respect for me. That graceless young daughter of yours rides more wildly every day, Ursula; she opened the gate for me, and then proceeded to demonstrate the superiority of horseflesh against mere engines by taking short cuts and arriving here well ahead of me. As if a man could ask a car to do above ten miles an hour on this abominable track of yours! It's a disgrace to Kallowra, and I wonder how you dare take your own car over it, Bob!"

"The track's older than the car," returned Mr. Stanford, serenely, "and the car cost so much I haven't been able to afford to make a new track. You're too pampered, that's what's the matter with you, Jim. To have four youngsters to bring up makes one superior to such little matters as bumps on one's homestead track; even if I notice them when I'm driving, a little pondering on George's school-bills make them seem as nothing. I can tell you, young George's expenses for the last few years make a parent sit up and think!"

"Oh, well, he's won his scholarship, Bob, and that's something," said Mr. Warren, comfortably.

"Thank goodness he has. Youngsters nowadays want a jolly sight more than their fathers had--that's the mischief of it. When we were boys of his age we wore the things we could afford and we did the things we could afford; boys of to-day have to do all that other fellows are doing, and wear the same remarkable socks and shirts that other fellows are wearing, or they think the world will crash about their ears. And it's all utter bosh: I don't believe any decent boys really judge another fellow by his socks and shirts."

"The socks of the present generation pain Robert extremely," said Mrs. Stanford, laughing, as she poured out tea.

"They do," agreed her husband. "They make me see red. If I ever have the ill-luck to run an office--"

"You won't," said Mr. Warren. "You'd be engaged in slaughtering office-boys!"

"I believe I would," laughed his host--"if they insisted on dressing like dukes and earls. If I did run an office I'd look out for the fellows that didn't turn their ankles into an imitation of Joseph's Coat of Many Colours, and give them all the rises in screws!"

"Only there wouldn't be any, I suppose," said Mr. Warren. "They all do it.

Tell you what, Bob, the boys of to-day don't have half the fun we used to get, if they do pay ever so much more for it."

"No!" said Mrs. Stanford, firmly. "I protest! When you two begin to compare your day with the present you become lost in your own eloquence; and this is a peaceful gathering. Let's talk of the weather. Hugh, will you give Mr. Warren his tea?"

The visitor laughed, and subsided. He watched the boy under his beetling grey eyebrows as Hugh moved about the drawing-room with tea and cake, noting, with a half-sigh, how deftly he managed to convey his load. Mrs. Stanford knew that Hugh liked to be asked to help; he hated to be put aside and classed as useless. The boy had never looked so well; the afternoon's ride, the sense of companionship with his uncle, had given him a new light in his eyes, and a fresh colour in the cheeks that were usually too pale.

"Bring your own cup over here, old fellow," Mr. Warren said. "I want to have a yarn with you."

Hugh obeyed, and for the next half-hour they talked of Ceylon, which at one time Mr. Warren had known well. It was delightful to talk to him of the familiar scenes and places; unconsciously, words of Cingalese crept into his speech, and he knew he had no need to translate them. Then Mrs. Stanford produced the gifts Hugh had brought and the guest examined them with keen interest.

"You didn't bring any rubbish," he said, "and it's easy enough to get rubbish in Colombo if you aren't careful."

"You should see Hugh's room," spoke Harry, who was engulfing cake at an alarming rate. "He's got all sorts of queer things."

"I'd like to see it," said Mr. Warren. "May I, Ursula?"

"I am sure Hugh would like to take you," Mrs. Stanford said.

"Rather!" said Hugh, eagerly. "Will you come, sir?"

He led the way, Joan and Harry bringing up the rear. "The Ceylon room," as the children called it, moved Mr. Warren to admiration; he went from one object to another, fingering them with the joy of the collector.

"You're a fortunate youngster," he remarked. "I know two or three men whom it would be hardly safe to trust in this room--in fact, I don't know that I'm quite to be trusted myself! Don't be surprised if you find me turning burglar some night. I suppose you didn't bring out half your father had, Hugh?"

"Oh, I brought only a few things," Hugh answered. "Mr. Harvey is taking care of all the rest. Father was always collecting."

"Hugh's got the queerest of all in his pocket, I'll bet," said Joan. "Show him your Luck, Hugh."

The boy brought out the little leather case, and produced the jade image. He laid it carefully in Mr. Warren's palm.

"Whew-w!" whistled the big man. He carried the Luck to the window and examined it carefully. Presently he brought out a pocket magnifying-glass which he screwed into his eye and again pored over the grotesque carving, turning it in all directions. Hugh watched him in silence, well satisfied. Joan and Harry became bored; they saw no interest in this reverent examination of a bit of green stone, even if it did have rubies for eyes, and presently they clattered out of the room. Mr. Warren did not notice their going. It was some minutes later when he turned again to Hugh.

"And to think a kid carries it round in his pocket!" he uttered. "Why, men have been murdered for such things as that--it's unique! It ought to be in a museum for safety. It's immensely valuable, and I'll bet it has a wonderful story hanging to it. You ought to treat it with more respect, boy." He looked severely from the Luck to Hugh. "It isn't safe--it's criminal to risk it."

"Father always carried it," Hugh answered. "He told me to do the same, so of course I've got to; but I do take great care of it, Mr. Warren. It isn't quite as if I could tear round like other chaps; it really doesn't run much risk."

"Tell me how your father got it," said Mr. Warren. He sat down, still holding the Luck as though it were egg-shell china.

Hugh told him the story, and the big man listened, nodding occasionally.

"Yes, I can understand how you feel about it," he said. He gave it back to Hugh with an almost comical reluctance, and watched him put it carefully away in its case and restore it to his pocket. "But do watch it--and hold your tongue about it. Even in Australia a thing like that isn't safe."

"It might not be, in your collection, Mr. Warren," Hugh said, laughing, "but no one is going to suspect a boy like me."

"That's true enough, I daresay. Still, it gives me the creeps to think of it knocking about in a boy's pocket. Well, I must try not to think about it. I almost wish you hadn't shown it to me--no, I don't, though!" He laughed at himself; then he laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Tell me more about your father, old chap."

Hugh found it unexpectedly easy to talk. He brought out his photographs, with many little mementoes of his father that, so far, no one else had seen. Mr. Warren asked many questions, and listened to his stories, nodding his big, grizzled head, and drawing the boy out with reminiscences of his own. The time flew by quickly for them both.

"Well, I always looked forward to seeing him again," he said, at length. "It was a big sorrow to me when I heard that he had gone, but I'm glad to know his son is like him. We've got to be friends, old chap. You'll come and stay with me at Warrenhurst now and then, I hope, and we'll get to know each other better."

He put out his hand and gripped the boy's. Hugh found great comfort in the

firm clasp. He tried to stammer out a reply, and made a poor business of it, but Mr. Warren understood.

"That's all right, son," he said. "We'll make an alliance, and I'll expect you over as soon as your uncle can bring you. I want you to see my little collection. And for goodness' sake, be careful of that Luck of yours--and remember if you ever get hard up and want to sell it, I'm to have first offer."

"I'll remember," Hugh said, smiling. "But I'll need to be jolly hard up, Mr. Warren, before I ever part with the Luck!"

"I'm afraid you will," acknowledged the collector, ruefully.

CHAPTER VII

DEVELOPMENT

MR. Warren left early the next morning, renewing, as he went, his invitation to Hugh.

"You've got to lend him to me now and then, Ursula," he said. "After all, you have four of your own, and you shouldn't be grasping!"

Mrs. Stanford smiled.

"Even if I had fourteen, Hugh would still have his special place," she said, "but we'll lend him to you, for all that, Jim, whenever you like to arrange it."

"Well, don't make a hopeless curio-maniac out of him," said her husband. "He thinks he's going to be a tea-planter, and I have hopes of transforming him into a good Australian. If *you* try to turn him into a collector, goodness only knows what will become of him!"

"It sounds as though it might be rather a disastrous mixture," admitted Mr. Warren, "but I'll do my best to keep him off collecting, in the hope that I may yet get hold of some of his treasures."

"I like your chance!" grinned Hugh's uncle.

"I don't think it's exactly a bright one," his friend said. "However, I'll keep on hoping. I'll be over next week and take him back with me, if I may."

"What do you say, Hugh?"

"I'd like to go, if you don't mind, Uncle Robert."

"Then, that's all right. We'll expect you for the night when you come, Jim."

Mr. Warren agreed, and presently was bumping down the despised Kallowra track in his little single-seater car. Hugh and Mr. Stanford, who had arranged another ride, went off to the stables, and Joan and Harry strolled down the path that led to the orchard. It was almost time for lessons, and they liked to be as far as possible from the schoolroom when Mr. Vernon rang his bell; they counted as an advantage every minute by which they shortened the hours spent in the dismal pursuit of learning.

"Well, *I* think they're making a silly fuss about Hugh," Joan remarked. "One 'ud think he was somebody!"

"Oh, he's not a bad kid," said Harry, pacifically.

"Never said he was. But everyone goes on just idiotically about him."

"How? I don't see it."

"Well, Mother's always fussing round after him, and Dad talks about his riding as if no one had ever got on a horse before. And goodness knows, old Bouncer's nothing to get excited about; why, you or I wouldn't be seen riding him!"

"Well, no, but then we haven't got a lame leg."

"Well, even if he has, I don't see that riding old Bouncer is anything wonderful."

"But Dad didn't say it was."

"Oh, well, you know the way he talked, and now Mr. Warren's just as bad--we've known him all our lives, and he's always been a friend of ours--and he hardly looked at us all the time he was here. I think it's sickening!"

"Oh, what's the good of getting in a wax about it?" Harry asked, lazily. "It's only because Hugh's a stranger, and he's lame; and even if he were a blackfellow Mr. Warren would get excited about anyone who owns all the curios Hugh's got!"

"He might, but he wouldn't ask him to stay. We're ever so much more his friends, and he's never asked us."

"Well, you know jolly well you'd never go if he did. You always say you hate any place except Kallowra." Harry regarded his sister with some amazement. "What's got hold of you, Joan? I think you're making a jolly lot of fuss about nothing!"

Joan kicked at a stone impatiently.

"Oh, everything's different since Hugh came," she said, reddening angrily. "I know Mother and Dad think we ought to be always at his heels, and taking him about with us; and now that he's begun to ride, I suppose we'll have to. It'll spoil all our fun. We'll have to make Gipsy and Lancer go plodding along with old Bouncer--you'll see, Harry! I don't see why he couldn't have stayed in his old Ceylon--he likes it ever so much better than Australia."

"Oh, that's all bosh!" Harry answered. "He had to come; his father fixed it all up before he died. It's a bit of a nuisance sometimes, but after all, he doesn't worry us much."

"Yes, it's all very well for you, but you'll be going away to school next year, and then I'll have nobody but Hugh--Mervyn's only a baby."

"Well, it's a good thing you'll have somebody." Harry's slower brain was bewildered; Joan's outbreaks of bad temper always puzzled him.

"I don't want Hugh, stupid." The red danger signal flushed in Joan's cheeks. "Oh, I suppose I'm very horrid, Harry, but I--I just can't stand lame people. There's something queer about them. I felt just like it when we had that lame Chinaman working in the garden. They make me go all creepy."

"Well, I don't see that Hugh's a bit like that old Chow--" Harry began.

"Oh, you never see anything!" flashed his sister. The school-bell clanged out suddenly, and she turned and raced away in answer to it. Harry followed more slowly. Girls were rum things, he pondered. It would not be half so bewildering to be at school, where fellows did not go off like a packet of crackers about nothing at all.

Hugh was very conscious of Joan's attitude to him as the time went on; not that she was ever anything but courteous to him, if one may apply the term "courtesy" to the manner, half rough, half casual, that was always hers. But he knew instinctively that she avoided him; that not only did she find excuses for not riding with him, but that she never remained long in a room if he were there. Hugh did not expect much from anyone, and to resent her treatment never occurred to him. Indeed, he felt vaguely guilty about it, recognizing that his presence at Kallowra made a disturbing factor in her life. He would have liked to be friends, but since that was evidently out of the question, the only thing he could do was to be as little of a nuisance as possible.

"She just hates my being here," he thought. "Well, I'll just keep out of her way as much as I can." And he did so.

Apart from Joan, his own days began to be full of interest. He found lessons unexpectedly pleasant; Mr. Vernon was a born teacher, and revelled in at last having a pupil who did not regard books as natural enemies. Hugh had been well grounded, and his reading and talks with his father and Mr. Harvey had broadened his mind, giving him a wider general knowledge than is usual in boys of his age. There were many afternoons when he remained reading with the tutor, and discussing what they had read, long after Joan and Harry had been released and were careering over the paddocks; just as there were days when lessons were relaxed for him altogether, so that he might go out on the run with his uncle, since Mr. Stanford regarded open-air life, riding, and all the new interests that riding brought, as equally beneficial to the lame boy as ordinary learning. He became eager about sheep and cattle, and picked up their points as quickly as Joan herself. Mr. Stanford was equally keen that he should learn. He found himself becoming unexpectedly fond of the boy, who reminded him more and more of the brother who had shared his own boyhood; who in many ways was more of a companion to him than his own sons had ever been. The long quiet rides about the run were times of happiness to both.

Mr. Warren, as he had promised, came over a week after his first visit and took Hugh back with him to Warrenhurst, a big, comfortable house with every sign of luxury and wealth, but lacking all the cheery home atmosphere that made Kallowra so pleasant a place. Hugh liked the kindly man whose loyalty to the friend of his boyhood was so strong that it had made him ready to care for the lonely boy that friend had left behind him. At first he felt a little shy; but no one could long retain that feeling with James Warren. In many ways the big man was himself a boy at heart, and he had an instinctive knowledge of the ways and the feelings of boys that made him the cheeriest of companions. He did not ride much, declaring that his weight was too much to ask any horse to endure; but there were few places into which he would not take his powerful little English car, for all that he grumbled humorously at the Kallowra track.

They made many excursions together, so that Hugh became fairly well acquainted with his new country; and though his affection for the palm-trees and hills of Ceylon never wavered, the boy grew fond of the wide spaces of Australia--his father's birthplace.

Then, too, Warrenhurst boasted one of the finest amateur collections of rare and beautiful things in Victoria, and Hugh had been sufficiently trained in such things by his father to make him understand and appreciate much of what he saw. There were few countries in which Mr. Warren had not travelled, and from each he had brought back curiosities. They spent many evenings in poring over the contents of drawers and cabinets, while Hugh listened eagerly to stories of adventures and risks cheerfully taken to secure some rare object. It woke something in his heart of the "go-fever," the lust of wandering, that is the inheritance of every collector, although he knew that for him such joyous adventures could never be. They were not for a fellow doomed to hobble through life on a crutch.

Between Hugh and his aunt grew an affection that strengthened daily. They spent much time together, riding, gardening, even walking. She bent all her energies towards developing his strength, realizing that although he was naturally a wiry and muscular boy, the long period of helplessness that had followed his accident had weakened him in everything but willpower. That remained unimpaired, and the boy's own dogged determination to be as others were, backed up all her efforts. It even helped him partially to conquer the shrinking sensitiveness about his leg--where she was concerned.

"Hugh," she said, one hot day of early summer, "Can you swim?"

He flushed. "I could--once, Aunt Ursula."

She was sewing, and she did not look up from her work.

"I wish you would bathe," she said. "There is a very good swimming-pool in the river, not far off; you and I could easily go down to it."

He glanced down at his long trousers.

"I think I'd rather not, if you don't mind," he said, miserably.

"I would not ask you to go with the others. But I am sure it would be very good for your leg; swimming brings into play muscles that otherwise do not get much chance. It would be a tonic for you in every way. Hugh, old boy, I know how you feel about it; but couldn't you put your feelings aside--just with me? Try not to mind; I shouldn't be thinking about looking at your leg if we were swimming together--and we could have some very good times. Suppose you come with me now--I can give you some of the boys' bathing-togs."

Hugh hesitated, every nerve shrinking from the prospect. Then some words of his father's came to him. "You'll bite on the bullet, I know, son." He squared his shoulders. He would bite on the bullet now.

"All right, thanks, Aunt Ursula," he said. "I'll come."

They went down to the river together. There were two little dressing-sheds, built of woven branches. Mrs. Stanford left him to undress, and before he was ready he saw her come out and plunge into the cool stretch of tree-fringed water. She swam away up-stream, not glancing backwards, even when she heard the splash that told her he was in the stream. Presently he swam up beside her, and she greeted him with a smile.

"It's lovely, isn't it? Feel all right?"

"Yes, rather!" he said. "And it is lovely, Aunt Ursula. I'll race you down the pool!"

They swam down together until they reached a log, fallen half across the river, where it was easy to rest. She chatted gaily, determined to give him no chance to think; and Hugh, his lame leg half-hidden under the brown ripples, suddenly found that he was enjoying himself hugely. The leg did not seem to matter at all in the water, especially as Mrs. Stanford never glanced at it. He nerved himself to a new effort, and drew himself farther up on the log.

"I'm not going to mind--with you," he said, sturdily. "It's silly to care so much, and I'm not going to have you come and swim with me and try to avoid looking at me all the time. So there's the beastly old thing, Aunt Ursula. Perhaps, if you don't mind looking at it, I won't hate it so badly!"

She put her hand on the shrunken leg with an infinitely gentle caress.

"I don't think it's so terrible at all," she said. "Don't think so much about it, Hugh-boy; there's nothing to shrink from. If I fell off my horse--as an old lady like me might well do!--and sustained a badly-flattened nose, would you think I musn't be looked at?"

"Oh, Aunt Ursula!" he protested, laughing; and she laughed as well.

"I don't believe you would," she said. "When one cares for people, Hugh, one sees in them nothing that hurts the eye. We'll go swimming every hot day, and get so used to the old leg that we shall never think about it."

"Oh, but you are a dear!" he said. He slipped into the water, and thrashed his way up the pool with swift over-arm strokes. She followed more slowly, finding him clinging to an overhanging branch and kicking happily, revelling in the cool touch of the water.

"It's painful to realize that you can swim rings round me, as Joan would say," she remarked, laughing. "Teach me that over-arm stroke, Hugh, and my daughter will have an added respect for me. At present she and Harry regard me as an old hen in the water!"

After that, there were few hot days that did not find them swimming and splashing in the wide reach of the river; and gradually, even as his muscles strengthened, Hugh lost something of the bitter loathing that used to surge over him whenever he looked at his leg. After all, it was still good for something, and Aunt Ursula, who was such a common-sense person, never seemed to

think it a thing to shrink from. He even learned to make little jokes about it; rather grim little jokes, it is true, but they helped him; and Ursula Stanford watched the light growing in his eyes, and was satisfied.

CHAPTER VIII

A SOUND IN THE NIGHT

"Oh, hang the telephone!" uttered Mr. Stanford.

"What is the matter, Robert?" Mrs. Stanford paused as she crossed the hall, her arms full of flowers.

"This wretched thing is out of order again, or else they've gone to sleep in Scardale. I've been trying to raise them for ten minutes, to get on to the agents, and I can't get a sound."

"What a nuisance!" said his wife, "Is it urgent, Robert?"

"Well, I wanted to speak to them about those bullocks I'm sending in next week. I suppose there's a tree down across the line again. It can't be helped, and I can't wait. I told McIlwraith I'd meet him at ten o'clock at the Five-mile Gate, and I'm late already."

"Can you leave the message for me to deliver, in case I can get through during the day?"

"Yes, it's all I can do." He was scribbling on the telephone-pad as he spoke. "If the line isn't fixed up before I get back I'll have to drive into Scardale, and that will mean a whole day wasted. Well, modern inventions are all right unless they go wrong, and then they leave you in very bad holes! I must go, anyhow." He kissed his wife. "Take care of yourself. I'll be back to-morrow evening if I can possibly manage it."

She went to the verandah to watch him ride off; his horse was fresh and eager, and went down the track in a series of pig-jumps which his rider did not appear to notice. He was on his way to meet a neighbour who had sent word that cattle belonging to both places had broken out of their paddocks, and were making off into wild and hilly country twenty miles to the west. It might be two or three days before they were able to get them back, unless luck favoured them greatly. Already a stock-man had set off for the foot of the hills, leading a packhorse laden with tent and supplies. Mr. McIlwraith would bring his men. They meant to make a quick dash to head off the cattle before they found their way into the steep gullies where mustering them would be no easy matter. Harry and Joan had begged hard to go. They watched with glum faces as the big bay and his rider passed out of sight round a clump of trees.

"I don't see why Dad wouldn't take us."

"He will take you out there some time when he goes alone. But you can't go camping-out in that rough country with strange men," Mrs. Stanford said. "Just bring me out the vases from the hall-table, Joan, please." She glanced at her daughter as she came out again. "Are you quite well this morning?"

"Well, I do feel a bit queer under the wishbone," admitted Miss Stanford, inelegantly. "Why? Do I look queer?"

"Your colour isn't as good as it might be, and your eyes look heavy. You haven't been sampling the gooseberries, I hope? I felt them yesterday, and they're as hard as bullets."

"No, I haven't touched them, truly. Oh, it isn't anything. I'll be as right as pie this afternoon," said Joan, who had a curious hatred of any form of illness, and would rarely admit even the most insignificant ache. "Harry and I want to go down to the river and take our tea--may we, Mother?"

"Yes, of course, if you're sure you're all right. Mind you tell me if you feel anything more, Joan, and I'll give you some medicine."

"Goodness, I don't want any medicine!" Joan said, hastily. "All right, Mother; we'll go after school. May we have some sandwiches?"

"Cake too, please!" put in Harry.

"I'll have a parcel ready for you." Mrs. Stanford hesitated, hoping they would offer to take Hugh; but they said nothing, and she turned to her task of arranging flowers, sighing a little as the boy and girl ran off together. To force Hugh upon them would be only a mistake, she knew. Perhaps it was not fair to expect them to adapt their swift feet to his lagging pace. Yet it must be hard for him to feel that he was always left out of their plans.

If Hugh ever felt it hard, he did not show it. He was very cheerful when they met at lunch, and plainly delighted when his aunt suggested that he and Mervyn should accompany her for a ride after school. They had a long excursion across the plains, returning through one of the river paddocks so that Hugh could report to his uncle on the condition of some bullocks they had moved together a fortnight earlier. He counted them, and to his great satisfaction, made the tally correct; and, finding a broken panel in a fence, he and Mervyn managed to block it up with some fallen limbs, sufficiently to discourage any inquisitive bullock until it could be properly mended. It was with the comforting sense of having done something worth while that he rode home, racing against Mervyn for the last half-mile.

Joan and Harry came in about dusk, tired and cheerful, and were soon in bed. Hugh spent the evening with Mrs. Stanford, putting record after record on the gramophone while she knitted by the fire that was still a pleasant thing in the chilly nights. Then he begged for "real music," and she laid aside her work and played to him while he lay on the hearthrug, delighting in the soft music which throbbed and sang in the quiet room. After a time she sent him off to bed, declaring that she herself was tired, and would go, too; and soon darkness and silence settled down upon the Kallowra homestead.

Hugh went to sleep at once, and knew nothing for a few hours. Then he awoke, and realized, with a groan of impatience, that his leg intended to ache.

It often gave him trouble if he had exerted it unusually during the day, and mending the fence had been hard work for him. He was glad that his aunt was asleep, for she had looked tired. If she were awake it was wonderful how often she guessed that the leg hurt him, and came quietly in the dark to rub it, as his father once used to come. He had grown to love the touch of her gentle fingers; they had curious power to magic away the ache. He could hardly believe that he had once shrunk from the very idea of her feeling him. Still, she was tired to-night, and he preferred to wrestle with his aches alone.

He sat up and rubbed the leg for some time, and then made use of all the exercises that the doctor in Colombo had taught him to practise night and morning, so that he might keep it as fit as possible. Hugh never omitted these, and now he went through them all, bending, stretching, and twisting the leg as much as possible, and kneading the muscles. They hurt him a good deal, but the aching grew less. He was very wide awake when he had done as much as he could stand, and queerly restless. Bed became impossible to him, as it often did after one of these disturbed hours.

"I'll get up and walk about a bit," he muttered.

He put on dressing-gown and slippers, and limped up and down his little verandah for ten minutes. The moon shone on the quiet garden, lighting up the flowers; their scent came to him in waves. It seemed to call to him. He went out on the path and moved along quietly between the dew-drenched rose-bushes.

Almost unconsciously, he had drawn near the part of the long verandah at either end of which Joan and Harry slept. Realizing it, he turned to move away quietly, and suddenly stopped, checked by a sound that was like a sob. For a moment a thrill of fear ran through the boy; then it came again, and he knew that it was Joan's voice: and fear was lost in quick concern. He limped to the verandah.

"Anything wrong, Joan?" he whispered.

"Who's that?" came a startled voice.

"It's me--Hugh. I thought I heard you groaning or something. Anything the matter?"

"I've got the most awful pain," Joan said, in a voice muffled by bedclothes. "I've been awake for ages with it."

Hugh was by her bedside.

"Poor old kid!" he said. He put a timid hand on hers, and found it wet. "I'll go and get Aunt Ursula."

"No, don't. I never bother anyone if I'm queer. I've had this before at night, only it's never been so bad. It goes away after a bit, as a rule; but it's a sticker to-night, and no mistake! Don't you worry, Hugh--o-oh!" Her voice ended in a long stifled moan, and she clutched at his wrist in a grip so desperate that he

felt it for hours after.

He waited until the paroxysm subsided, and spoke gently, patting her head. Her forehead felt clammy and damp.

"Joan, old girl, I've got to get your mother. She ought to know."

Joan was past protesting; the pain had been too prolonged, and she could only lie, panting feebly. But she had a faint smile for her mother when Mrs. Stanford hurried to her bedside a few moments later.

"Sorry I'm such a goat, Mother. I expect if I had a hot-bottle or something it would go away."

Mrs. Stanford asked a few quick questions, while Hugh hovered on the path. She turned to him presently, speaking with an odd edge to her voice.

"Run and get Nurse, Hugh. And could you get a fire going in the kitchen?"

"Rather!" Hugh said, thankful to be of use. His crutch had never tapped the floor so quickly as when he fled down the passage to Nurse's room. Summoning her, he went on to the kitchen, rejoicing to find plenty of light wood in readiness for the morning. The fire was burning sharply under a kettle of water when his aunt entered.

"Got a kettle on? Oh, you good boy! Can you tell me when it's nearly boiling?"

"Right-oh, Aunt Ursula. How is she?" But Mrs. Stanford was gone, not hearing.

She came back with a rubber hot-water bag when he told her that the kettle was singing. Her face was tense with anxiety as she filled it.

"She is very ill, Hugh. I think it is appendicitis. You know, I was a nurse before I was married. And the telephone is out of order; I can't get the doctor quickly. Mr. Vernon is dressing; he will ride in for him. But it's forty miles--it will take so long. My little girl!" The mother's voice broke.

"Can't he take the car? He'd be no time in that."

"He can't drive. No one can drive but your uncle, and we couldn't get to him. That it should happen just when he went away! If he were here I would take Joan to Scardale at once. I know she must have an operation, and it may be urgent. Even an hour sometimes makes all the difference in these cases."

"Aunt Ursula--I can drive!"

Mrs. Stanford paused in the act of screwing up the cap of the hot-water bag.

"You! You couldn't drive the car, Hugh?"

"I can, Aunt Ursula, truly, I can! It's almost the same as Father's car, and Mr. Harvey's, and I've driven them--lots. Father taught me ever so much about the engine and all."

"I must take this to her," said Mrs. Stanford.

She went off at a run, and Hugh refilled the kettle. Presently she came

running back. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"Hugh, do you really know how? It would be terrible if you went wrong--it might kill her."

Hugh had been thinking hard.

"You can trust me, Aunt Ursula. I wouldn't dare to try if I didn't know it was all right. Look here--send Mr. Vernon on if you like, in case the car breaks down. But if the car is all right I can take her in--easy."

"But--your leg!"

Hugh gave a queer un-boyish laugh.

"It's about the only thing my beastly leg doesn't let me down over. I love driving. I've driven in the Colombo traffic, and all through the hills."

"But you never told us you could drive!"

"Well, no, I didn't. It would be talking about oneself: and no one would want to let a boy touch his car--except Father and Mr. Harvey. They knew. Oh, Aunt Ursula, I'm truly quite safe. Mr. Harvey said I could easily have had my licence if I'd been old enough."

She drew a deep breath.

"I could send on Mr. Vernon, as you say," she said. "He could telephone from one of the places on the way. If--if you could, we could have her at the doctor's inside two hours."

She searched his upturned face with her eyes. It was a face that could be trusted: older than his years.

"Go and see if you can bring the car round," she said. "Uncle Robert always leaves her ready for immediate use."

Hugh limped across to the garage in the moonlight, and threw back the doors, turning on all the car lights. His heart thumped a little as he took his place at the steering-wheel, and switched on the engine; but she started with a steady roar that was very comforting. He let the engine run for a moment and then started the car cautiously. She moved out gently, and he took a wide circle round the cleared paddock by the house while he experimented with the controls, sighing with relief as she answered to the slightest touch. It was not for nothing that he had studied her when his uncle drove, or alone in the garage; she was all plain-sailing to him. He drew up by the gate of the back yard, his head-lights making a wide track of light down the paddock.

Mr. Vernon came running across the yard.

"Is she all right, Hugh? You can manage her?"

"Yes, Mr. Vernon. She's quite easy."

"Then I'll get a horse out of the stables and go on." The tutor raced off, and Hugh glanced at petrol-register and oil-gauge, finding everything in running order. He went inside, meeting Harry--a miserable Harry, heavy with sleep and anxiety.

"We saw you going round the paddock," he said. "They're bringing Joan out. I'm coming too, to open gates. Sure you can do it, Hugh?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Hugh answered. "Open the gate for them while I get my coat."

He limped to his room quickly. There was no time to dress, but he flung on a heavy overcoat, and dived for something that always lay under his pillow at night. He slipped the Luck of the old priest into his pocket.

"I guess we'll want you to-night," he muttered.

Mrs. Stanford and Nurse were carrying out Joan's limp form, wrapped in rugs; Mrs. Stanford in clothes donned hurriedly, her hair still about her shoulders. She leaned across to Hugh as he slipped into his seat.

"You'll jolt as little as possible, Hugh? I know the paddock-track is bad."

"Just as little as I can possibly manage, Aunt Ursula," he said. He dropped his voice. "But--you want me to hurry?"

"Yes--once you get out of the paddock."

Hugh nodded. Nurse put in the last cushion and hot-water bag, and shut the door, standing back from the car, her kind face wrung with distress. A feeble voice from the rugs came to her.

"Buck up, Nurse! I'll be back soon!"

"That you will, my lamb," said Nurse, letting tears run down her cheeks unheeded. "Take care of her, Master Hugh."

"You bet I will, Nurse!" He started the car, and they moved slowly away.

CHAPTER IX

THE LUCK HOLDS FOR JOAN

GALLOPING hoofs ahead of them told that Mr. Vernon was already on his way, taking the short cut across the paddock where the car could not go. There was comfort to Mrs. Stanford in the sound, for, although in her sore need she had placed herself and her precious charge in the hands of the slender lad at the wheel, she could not but realize that the night-drive over unfamiliar roads was a heavy task for him--and always there was the possibility that something might go wrong. But as Hugh took them cautiously over the rough track, coaxing the car over deep ruts and skirting bumps and holes, confidence in him grew and strengthened. Once or twice an unavoidable jolt drew a smothered groan from Joan; and, even in her sharp anxiety, the mother felt a quick pang of sympathy for the boy who was striving to save her suffering.

They crawled through the paddocks. Hugh drew a deep breath of relief as they passed the last gate and came out upon the road. Even here, the track was rough enough to necessitate very careful driving, especially as the moonlight threw deceptive shadows before them, and there were deep pools of blackness that might equally be shadows or pot-holes; but soon they turned into the river-road, and he was able to increase the speed. He drove with his eyes glued to the track ahead, sounding his horn loudly as he neared every bend; whatever happened, he wanted to avoid any sudden swerve.

"Just you watch all you know in case there's a cow on the road," he warned Harry. "Tell me if you think you see anything moving ahead."

Below them the river sang and gurgled over its rocky bed; above, the night-wind soughed gently in the trees. The car ran beautifully, the engine purring with a deep, contented sound that was music in Hugh's ears. He centred all his energies on his driving; but always one ear was on the alert for the slightest movement, the faintest moan, from the back of the car. A jolt hurt him with almost a physical pain. Mercifully, the road was good, and they had it almost to themselves. Once a kangaroo hopped across in front of them, and rabbits darted to and fro, their eyes gleaming like great jewels as the powerful head-lights caught them. They passed Mr. Vernon soon; he slackened his pace and Hugh slowed the car for an instant.

"Telephone ahead from the first place you can, and let the doctor know we are coming," Mrs. Stanford called.

"Right," the tutor answered. "Car going well, Hugh?"

"Couldn't be better," Hugh replied. He pressed the accelerator and they shot forward again.

Now and then, as they followed the winding track, paroxysms of pain caught Joan, and she struggled and moaned; but gradually they lessened, and Hugh's knitted brows relaxed. Presently Mrs. Stanford leaned forward, speaking in his ear.

"She has gone to sleep. Push on as much as you dare, Hugh."

The boy obeyed, and they whirred on through the night, with his heart in his mouth at every bend. But they met no one; and soon the road left the river, turning over the high bridge to the direct road across the plains to Scardale. The twenty miles ahead was the dull road they usually hated; but Hugh welcomed it with all his heart, for its straight-going was an untold relief after the blind turns by the river that might conceal a flock of sheep or a bullock-waggon, or a hawker's cart travelling without a light--any of the obstacles that may encumber a bush track; with always the chance of a new-fallen tree or a sudden landslide from above. They made the spice of the road in ordinary travelling. But to-night, the urgency of their errand needed no spice of danger. All he wanted was to reach Scardale quickly--quickly, before the pain should again wring the little, motionless figure on the back seat. He put on speed, racing over the moonlit plain.

And Heaven was very kind to them. Joan was still asleep when they turned into Scardale, and drew up by the red lamp glowing dully before the doctor's gate. As they stopped, the door opened and the doctor himself ran out to meet them.

"I got your message," he said, springing upon the running-board. "We won't disturb her here, Mrs. Stanford; they have everything ready for us at the private hospital."

"Straight ahead and round the corner, Hugh," said Harry, quickly.

Joan stirred and woke as the car stopped for the second time--woke with a cry of pain. It lingered in the boys' ears long after she had been carried in, and the door had closed behind Mrs. Stanford, and they were alone in the darkened road. Hugh switched off all but the rear light. Getting out, he walked up and down, glad to move. The long strain of driving had told upon him, and he knew suddenly that he was very tired. He came back to find Harry standing uncertainly by the car, his face white and miserable in the moonlight.

"What had we better do, do you think, Hugh?" He shivered as he spoke.

"Get into the car and keep warm; that's the best thing," Hugh answered. "Come in here, old chap."

They got into the back seat together, wrapping themselves in a rug. There was comfort in being close together; they snuggled into a corner, not speaking, but very glad of each other. And presently, being only tired children, they fell asleep, and slept peacefully until moonlight gave place to dawn--while, in the hospital, the doctor worked quickly to bring little Joan Stanford back from the

Valley of the Shadow, to which her feet had drawn very close.

It was the doctor who found them waking when he came out in the dawn, a tired man, but well pleased with himself.

"Hullo, young men!" was his greeting. "Been asleep? that's sensible."

"How is she?"

"She'll do all right, but it was a near thing. I wouldn't have answered for her if it had been an hour later. She's asleep now, and the nurses are putting Mrs. Stanford to bed. She has had about as much as she can stand, poor soul."

"Can't I see Joan?" Harry's face worked pitifully.

"You certainly can't, son, just after a pretty stiff appendicitis operation. Anyhow, she's asleep, and doesn't want anything. You two are to come along to my house and tumble into bed there. Stay where you are--I'll drive."

He got in, and in a few moments they were at his house. Dr. Orde raised his eyebrows and whistled comically as Hugh emerged from the car, a quaint enough figure in overcoat and pyjamas, bath-slippers on his bare feet and his fair hair in a tousled mop.

"Got you out of bed to drive, did they?" His smile suddenly vanished as Hugh drew out his crutch from the car, and for a moment he showed his surprise. "You--you did drive, didn't you?"

"Yes--he drove every bit as well as Dad does," averred Harry, stoutly. "Even over that beastly track in the paddock he hardly bumped Joan at all."

"And that was just as well for Joan," remarked the doctor, gravely. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come along old man--you've earned a good sleep. I'll have to fix you up with a suit of my boy's when you get up. He hasn't got any knickerbockers, I'm afraid, but you can make long 'uns do, I expect."

"I'd rather have long trousers, please," said Hugh quickly--in his voice a note of relief that puzzled the doctor.

"That's all right, though I'm afraid you'll have to take a reef in the legs. Well, you're ready for bed, so you have one pull over Harry. I'll bring you pyjamas, Harry--hurry into bed." He showed them into a room.

They needed no second bidding. Just as they were growing drowsy the doctor came in again with two tumblers.

"A glass of hot milk won't hurt you," he said. His tired face was very kind as he sat on the edge of Hugh's bed and watched him drink it.

"That was awfully good," Hugh said. "Thanks, ever so, sir. You must be deadbeat yourself."

"Oh, doctors are used to broken nights." He drew the blankets round the boy's shoulders, and pulled down the blind, darkening the room. "Go to sleep now, and don't get up until I give you leave."

Hugh had slipped under his pillow a little flat case. As sleep came down, enfolding him, his hand stole up and held it.

"I'm glad I brought you, old Luck," he murmured.

Then he slept, to dream of the Luck, and of his father, and of driving an immense car on a road that was all blind turns and deep pot-holes, while within the car someone was crying--little broken cries that hurt him very badly to hear. He woke to find himself grasping the Luck tightly, and looking up at the doctor. The blind was up, and sunshine flooded the room.

"Well, you've had a great sleep," said the doctor. "Feel like a bath and breakfast?"

"Rather, thanks, sir. How's Joan?"

"Going on splendidly. I've just been down to see her. Mrs. Stanford is going to stay in Scardale for a few days, and you'll have to take the car back after lunch with Harry--they'll be very anxious at Kallowra. It's against all the laws, of course, and I'll have to engage our one and only policeman in deep conversation, so that he won't notice you. It's your reckless aunt that has arranged it," added Dr. Orde, laughing. "I offered to find a licensed driver, but she declined with thanks. Said she knew you would like to take the car back yourself."

Hugh's eyes sparkled.

"That was jolly good of Aunt Ursula," he said.

"Oh, she's an understanding person. And there's a strong chance that you'll have to come in again, for she wants clothes and things brought to her tomorrow, and if your uncle isn't back the matter will naturally devolve on you."

"That will be jolly," said Hugh, twinkling. "I hope Uncle Robert won't get his bullocks mustered too soon!"

"What are they about in Ceylon, to let youngsters of your age drive?" inquired the doctor. "No police there?"

"Well, we don't have them straying about much in the hills," Hugh answered, "and hills--and natives on the roads--are great training. They teach you caution, I can tell you, sir."

"Well it's a good thing you picked up the lesson. As far as I can see," remarked the doctor, "it would save me trouble if I could land our policeman in bed for a few days with some mild complaint. The worst of it is, he looks abominably healthy! We'll have to dodge him somehow."

Mr. Stanford got back to Kallowra late that night, and hurried to the town early the following morning, that he might see for himself how his belongings were faring; but after all, it was Hugh who was at the wheel of the car. "I'm told you can drive, Hugh; will you run me in this morning?" was all his uncle said, and Hugh accepted the request as gravely, but he went out of the breakfast-room feeling two inches taller; and if, during the few weeks that followed, when the motor was constantly on the road between Scardale and the homestead, they encountered the constable, it was remarkable to see how that

worthy custodian of law and order found occasion to admire the scenery in the opposite direction; proving that tact, as well as stern vigilance, is of importance in preserving the peace of a district.

Hugh drove Joan and her mother back to Kallowra one warm evening in December; a white-faced Joan, with a good deal of her abrupt prickliness smoothed down, but serenely happy. They were becoming great friends, for the boy had spent long hours by her bedside in the hospital. The months when he had lain helpless and in pain in Ceylon had given him a quick comprehension of the weariness that illness meant to the active little girl. He seemed to know by intuition what would help her through bad hours, and had a hundred devices for occupying her mind. He read well, and was not easily tired. Joan had found an unexpected joy in the books he brought, and the sound of his quiet voice kept her placid and interested through many an afternoon when lying still at first seemed almost intolerable. They even grew merry together--a fact that gave supreme joy to Mrs. Stanford.

"I'm almost as glad to hear Hugh laugh as I am to hear Joan," she said to Dr. Orde. "He has hardly ever laughed until now, and his father used to tell us that he was such a merry boy; but his lameness seemed to have crushed all his happiness. It isn't that he mopes; he is too courteous for that, but one has felt that in his heart he is almost an old man."

"This business is going to help him to grow young again," the doctor said. "Poor lad--it's a hard load he has to carry. He'd have been as fine a man as his father."

"He'll be a fine man as it is," said Mr. Stanford doggedly. His uncle's steady refusal to believe that he was different to others was one of the things that helped Hugh most. It helped him to "keep the flag flying;" and only Hugh knew how hard it often was to manage that.

But his leg did not matter as he wheeled the car through the front gate and up to the open door of Kallowra--it was an entry in state this evening, and everyone at the homestead was waiting to welcome its daughter home. Mr. Stanford sprang out of the motor and carried her to the verandah, where she insisted on standing, though her legs as yet were wobbly and unfamiliar.

"Lend me your crutch, Hugh," she called, laughing. "I believe I want it more than you do!"

"Not you!" said Hugh, grinning. "It's my off-leg, and I can't spare it. Give her gentle trotting exercise up and down the verandah, Uncle Robert!"

"If I see you trot!" remarked Mrs. Stanford, threateningly.

"Me!" uttered Joan. "I'd be better at crawling, I think!" She tried to walk a few steps, uncertainly. "Hang on to me, Daddy--my knees haven't got any bones in them."

"Just give your poor old knees time," said her father, picking her up in his

arms. He carried her to a lounge, whence she looked round, sighing with content.

"Oh, it's lovely to be home after that old hospital! How's Gipsy, Tom?"

Tom McLean, the "odd man" who had been on Kallowra before she was born, came forward, beaming.

"She's in great nick, Miss Joan. Master Harry'll have to ride her a bit, or she'll be jumpin' out of her skin before we can get you in the saddle again. I'll bring her round for you to see to-morrow."

"She's taken to reading books, Tom," said Harry, solemnly. "I don't expect she'll be bothered with riding any more"--at which Tom's face of dismay was a ludicrous sight.

"Well, I never thought you'd do a thing like that, Miss Joan!" he exclaimed, ruefully. "The place'll go to the dogs!"

"Don't you worry," said Joan, merrily. "I'll be on Gipsy just as soon as ever they'll let me, Tom. But I couldn't hold even old Bouncer just now; I've no more backbone than a caterpillar!"

Hugh had limped up the steps, and was standing close to her. She put out a hand and laid it on his arm.

"Anyhow, Master Hugh is doing my jobs, isn't he?" she said, deliberately. "Dad tells me he'll know as much about cattle as we do, and more, before long."

Old Tom fairly beamed.

"We'll have a darned good workin' arrangement when we have the three of you goin'," he said. "The Boss'll be able to take a trip to England when you and Master Harry and Master Hugh are all ridin' round together an' managin' Kallowra!"

CHAPTER X

CHRISTMAS

GEORGE STANFORD came home a few days before Christmas--a tall, fair-haired fellow, very like Mervyn, who reminded Hugh sharply of his own father. He had little tricks of speech and manner that might have been copied from the uncle he had never seen--that other George Stanford whose picture looked down from the wall of "the Ceylon room." It made Hugh want to be friends with him. But George was very much the senior public-schoolboy, and younger boys had very little interest for him. He had finished with school, now, and was on the threshold of the University; with such great matters claiming him, the other children were rather beneath his notice. He treated them with a sort of brusque kindness, so long as they did what he told them. Joan, as a semi-invalid, had a special claim to consideration, particularly as she was unusually gentle; and Hugh excited a certain amount of mild interest as a stranger from a far land. But after the first few days it was evident that they were small fry to him; a fact which his brothers and sister accepted as only natural. They would, in truth, have been rather bored had he insisted on sharing their very various pursuits.

Hugh would have liked to see more of George. He had been brought up with older people, and it made the society of a big boy seem very desirable to him. But he accepted the situation with philosophy, and devoted a good deal of his time to Joan, who was gaining strength with amazing rapidity. She was allowed to walk about slowly--and was inclined to interpret "slowly" with an energy that was devastating to her mother's peace of mind. Mrs. Stanford was very glad of Hugh as a watchdog, knowing that when she was with him Joan was sure to adapt herself to his dragging pace. She welcomed the growing friendship between the two with all her heart.

Hugh had had no experience of Christmas as anything but a very mild festival. There had always been a holiday on the plantation, and a special Church Service, followed by a rather solemn dinner, to which Mr. Harvey invariably came. But Mr. Harvey came to dinner every Sunday, so that that was nothing unusual. There was an exchange of presents, which rather marked the day; but on the whole it did not differ much from ordinary life. Christmas in a big household was an altogether new experience to him, and a very cheerful one. There was a queer feeling of bustle and excitement; everyone was preparing gifts for everyone else, turkeys were being fattened in a little yard--carefully covered with wire-netting for fear of foxes--and the kitchen seemed in a perpetual orgie of baking cakes, the aroma whereof hung like a

benediction over the back premises. Hugh had written to Mr. Harvey some time before, asking him to send him a box of oddments from Ceylon, suitable for Christmas presents, and he had many qualms of anxiety lest it should fail to arrive in time. But it turned up a few days before the great event, and he and Joan spent a delirious hour of enjoyment while they unpacked it in his room. It was an exciting box, for Maurice Harvey, being afraid of sending too little, had sent a good deal too much. But neither Joan nor Hugh were disposed to quarrel with that.

Christmas morning brought gifts for everyone in alarming numbers. Joan's present to Hugh was a tiny clock set in a little brass motor-car, an object which her mother thought rather terrible, but which Joan had picked out of an illustrated catalogue, and had set her heart upon, as the only suitable thing to give him. There were many other parcels for Hugh, including one from Ceylon; but the most amazing present waited for him outside--a beautiful Welsh pony, little inferior to Gipsy, but with more soberness of spirit than Joan's favourite.

"He's guaranteed to stand as well as old Bouncer," said Mr. Stanford, whose gift he was. "But he'll leave Bouncer standing still, when it comes to travelling; and he can jump. He'll be all right for you for a couple of years, Hugh." He cut short Hugh's efforts to stammer out his thanks. "When I've a good man on the place I like to mount him decently," he said, smiling--his hand on the boy's shoulder.

Mr. Warren came over for dinner, to grace which the hugest and fattest turkey had died nobly. Joan was for the first time since her illness permitted to dine with the family; so that it was really a very great occasion, and everybody was extremely merry. Afterwards there was a general disinclination to move, and for a time quiet reigned; but they had planned a picnic tea by the river, and accordingly they set out when the day grew cooler, Mr. Warren taking Mrs. Stanford and Joan in the Kallowra car, while the others rode. Caradoc, Hugh's new pony, justified all that had been said in his favour. He stood like a rock while the boy mounted, and went like a gentleman afterwards, though he showed that he had plenty of spirit and pace.

"Well--do you like, him, old chap?" asked Mr. Stanford, as they pulled up after a gallop, during which they had jumped two logs, to Hugh's great content.

"Like him! Why, he's perfect, Uncle Robert!" Hugh's face was glowing. "I never thought I'd be able to ride anything as good again."

"So far as riding goes, you'll be able to handle anything on the place in a year or so," Mr. Stanford said. "Mounting and dismounting may handicap you; but it's always possible to educate a horse to stand. That pony is just full of intelligence, and he has been exceptionally well broken-in: as a rule, we Australians break in our horses in far too rough-and-ready a fashion, but

Caradoc has been taught manners, as every horse should be taught. You'll be able to train him in all sorts of ways that will help you, if you take him patiently."

"One could make a real friend of this fellow," Hugh said. "I believe he will know every word I say to him."

"He will--and a good horse is a mighty good friend to have. Well, I was glad enough to see you on old Bouncer, and now I'm even gladder to see you off him. Joan can't turn up her nose at you now."

"Oh, Joan's all right," Hugh said in swift defence. "Her nose turns down all the time now!"

"And it suits the young monkey a great deal better!" remarked Joan's father, laughing.

They made a merry camp by the river, where they boiled the billy and attacked the picnic baskets in a manner that suggested that the mighty turkey and his accompaniments had been only a dream; and afterwards journeyed home in the twilight, the riders making a triumphal escort for the motor in its careful progress across the paddocks. It was still early when they reached the homestead, and Mr. Warren demanded music. They gathered round the piano and sang choruses, old and new, until they were tired, while Mr. Stanford smoked in his great easy chair and watched them with contented eyes. Then Mrs. Stanford played--"real music"--until it was found that Mervyn was fast asleep on his father's knee, and Joan no less soundly slumbering on the couch, and the long, happy day came to an end.

Mrs. Stanford came out to Hugh's verandah after he was in bed.

"Quite comfy, Hugh? Leg not aching?"

"No, it's a very good leg to-night, Aunt Ursula. And I'm ever so comfy, thanks."

She tucked him in with deft mother-touches.

"Has it been a good Christmas, son?"

"It's been wonderful, Aunt Ursula. Of course, I've missed Father--you know I can't help that."

"I wouldn't want you to help it, Hugh. I want you to miss him always. You were his mate, and you never could forget. But he would want you to be happy."

He put up an arm and held her for a moment--one of the shy caresses that she loved to receive, for they were very rare from Hugh.

"I am happy, Aunt Ursula. I never thought I could be as happy as I am. Do you think he knows?"

"I am absolutely sure he knows," she said. "Do try to be sure of it yourself, Hugh."

"I just am," he said. "I've felt as if he were ever so close to-day. My word,

he'd have liked Caradoc!"

He snuggled down among his bedclothes with a little, contented sigh. Mrs. Stanford dropped a light kiss on his forehead and went back to the drawing-room, where presently Mr. Warren announced that Christmas was too strenuous for him, and that he required a long night's rest. He went off to bed, leaving the husband and wife alone.

Robert Stanford smoked in silence for a time, watching his wife's flying fingers as she knitted, apparently intent upon the turning of a heel. Then he asked a question.

"Does it strike you that anything is wrong with George?"

"I was wondering when you would notice," she said. "I have not been happy about him since he came home."

"I thought he was a bit quiet, from the first," said her husband. "I put it down to regret at leaving school; it's the severance of a big tie, after six good years. I remember I felt it pretty badly myself. But it seems to me there is something more than that. He's unnaturally quiet."

"Yes, quite unnaturally. And he is trying not to show it. But if you watch his face when he is off his guard, it falls into lines I don't like to see. Something is worrying him."

"Have you said anything to him?"

"I asked him if he had any worry, but he tried to put me off so quickly that I didn't like to ask any more. He is nineteen, and one can't force his confidence."

"No, I don't want to do that. And he may be concerned in some other fellow's trouble, so that he is not at liberty to say anything. One remembers difficulties of one's own. . . ." Mr. Stanford relit his pipe, which had gone out. "A boy of his age isn't the easiest thing to handle. Whatever it is, I don't think it's money. I asked him the other day if he wanted any, and he said quickly, "Oh, no, I'm all right." And I happen to know Warren gave him a fiver to-day; he half-apologized to me for doing it, but as he said, the boy will have unusual odd expenses next year."

"It was very good of him. George told me about it," said Mrs. Stanford. "Money has never seemed to trouble George, you know, Robert--or rather, the lack of it. He has always recognized that we couldn't give him as much as many boys have, and he has kept within his allowance."

"I wouldn't give him much if I had it. He has always known he would have to work hard, and, as you say, he has been very sensible about saving. His health is all right, I suppose, Ursula?"

"Quite, I think. He has never much colour, or a large appetite, so one can't go by the fact that he doesn't eat much. Otherwise, he is quite fit. But I don't think he is sleeping well, and there is a drawn look about his eyes. He gives me

the impression that he is trying to be cheerful and interested all the time--and a boy of his age shouldn't have to try."

"No, and he makes a bad fist of it pretty often. Oh, well, I don't see that we can do anything; at least, not yet. If it goes on for long I must speak to him, I suppose. But it may be something that will blow over. Don't trouble your dear head too much about it."

"I'm trying not too," said Mrs. Stanford, smiling at him. "He has always been a good boy, and I feel that we can trust him. But how much simpler it is to cure their worries when they are little, Robert! It's quite a comfort to think that Mervyn can't have any difficulties that I can't heal with either a bandage or a kiss!"

CHAPTER XI

GEORGE STANFORD'S STORY

EVERYONE was out, and the Kallowra homestead lay wrapped in the drowsy content of a January afternoon. It was one of the days when Joan had to visit Scardale for medical inspection--which she resented, declaring that she was now perfectly well. Mr. Stanford had taken her in the car, with his wife, Harry, and Mervyn, while Hugh had preferred a solitary ride in the paddocks. Caradoc and he were staunch friends. The pony would come up to him anywhere in the open, standing motionless while his master mounted him. The family declared that he knew every word Hugh said, and that before long, they would chat together amiably. There were times when Hugh could almost believe it, himself.

He came in about four o'clock, flushed and cheerful after a long canter; and having brushed Caradoc down and presented him with two apples--a ceremony that he never omitted--he went across to the house. The cook met him with an offer of a cup of tea, which he enjoyed sociably with her in the kitchen. The servants, men and women alike, were all Hugh's friends. They liked his quiet, courteous ways, and the manner in which he took no service for granted; wherefore the cook had always an eye for his welfare, and produced her best cakes when she could lure him to the kitchen. She was a fat, motherly woman, with boys of her own. "Poor chap!" she muttered, as she watched him limp away after he had insisted on helping her to wash their tea-things. "He's the makings of no end of a man, if only he weren't a cripple."

Hugh was pleasantly tired. He found a book and lay down on his bed on the verandah. Half an hour later he looked up at a passing shadow, and beheld George, who had gone out early for a day's fishing. He came up with a slow step and sat down on the edge of the verandah with a friendly nod.

"Hullo, kid--you all alone?"

"Yes, the others aren't back yet. Had a good day, George?"

"No--no luck at all. Couldn't get them to take anything: too many grasshoppers about. The fish get all the feeding they want, and they're lazy." George picked up stones and threw them listlessly at a lizard that was watching him with bright, unwinking eyes.

"There was tea in the kitchen not long ago. I'll get you some, if you like," Hugh said.

"Oh, I don't want any, thanks. I had some fruit as I came through the orchard. Have an apricot?" He produced a huge yellow one from his pocket, and gave it to Hugh, following it with another for himself. They ate them in

silence. During the weeks since Christmas, George had become rather friendly with his young cousin. They had been drawn together by a week of wet weather that had kept them almost constantly in the house. George, wandering into Hugh's room to look at his Cingalese possessions, had found them interesting, and had been mildly impressed with the Luck. "It's a rum old thing, but somehow, it makes you look at it," he said. He liked to hear about Ceylon; and, finding that Hugh delighted in hearing tales of school, unbent from his dignity to tell him some. Dignity once abandoned is not easily recaptured; and the big fellow found that the younger boy had a mind in many ways equal to his own: that he had read almost as much, and had perhaps seen more of men and of life than had George himself. These things George would not have admitted, even in his own mind; but he did acknowledge to himself that Hugh was "not a bad kid to yarn to," and they had had many long talks together, either sitting on Hugh's verandah or riding over the Kallowra paddocks. Mrs. Stanford was glad of the friendship and encouraged it in quiet ways. It seemed to her that the cloud was lifting a little from her son's face.

But it was heavy enough this afternoon, as George sat on the edge of the verandah, pitching stones at the spot from which the lizard had long since scuttled away in disgust. He did not seem inclined to talk; and one of the things he liked in the younger boy was that he could be a silent companion. When George fell into a fit of brooding--as he frequently did when they were alone--Hugh wisely held his tongue. He went back to his book now, occasionally glancing at his companion's down-bent head. There was no sound save the droning of bees in the sunny garden.

"Well, I'm not much of a talker, am I?" George observed, presently, with a half-laugh.

"You needn't talk unless you want to," said Hugh, cheerfully. "People can't want to be speaking always."

George got up and moved restlessly about. He crossed the garden to where a sprinkler was playing on the rose-bushes, and altered its position. Then he returned to the verandah and sat down again, pulling his hat over his eyes.

"I want to talk," he said, with a kind of pent-up energy. "I'll go off my head if I can't yarn to someone. You'll keep your mouth shut if I talk to you?"

"Well, rather," said Hugh, in bewilderment. "Anything wrong? Father used to tell me lots of things that worried him. He said things seemed simpler if you had a yarn about them to someone."

"I'm in an awful mess," George said. "I've been thinking and thinking about it--I don't seem to have done anything but think for weeks and weeks. I can't stick it any longer."

He looked up, his young, good-looking face drawn and desperate. Suddenly Hugh felt as if he were very much the older of the two. He gave him

a friendly little smile.

"You tell me, if you feel like it. It might make you feel better, if you did. You needn't be afraid I'll tell anyone."

"No. I know you wouldn't," George said. "You seem ever so much older than Harry; one couldn't tell him, any more than one could young Mervyn. And it's the very mischief to know something awful and to have to keep it altogether to oneself."

He was silent a moment, digging his heel into the path.

"I owe the most awful lot of money," he said.

"That's hard luck," said Hugh. "More than you can pay? I've got about ten pounds, and you're welcome to that."

George gave a short laugh.

"Thanks, old chap, but it wouldn't help much. I owe nearly a hundred!"

Hugh whistled in spite of himself.

"I say, that's a lot!" he said. "Can you tell your father?"

"I'd rather go and work on the docks than do that," George said. "Not that I'd mind working on the docks, or anywhere else, if I could. I'd do any sort of work, if I could get time to pay up. But that's just what I can't do, and I've won this beastly scholarship; so I'm booked for the University, whether I want it or not."

"I thought you did want to go?"

"I want it more than anything else in the world," said the boy, quickly. "I've looked forward to being a doctor since I was a little kid. But how on earth am I going to get a chance to pay? It will take me all my time to live on what Dad can allow me when I'm at Trinity."

"He'd never see you in trouble about money," Hugh said. "It's a lot, but he'd manage it for you somehow."

"I'd rather be shot than tell him. He's had a lot of losses during the last few years, and he's hard hit; of course, he'll be all right after a few decent seasons, but just now I know he's very pushed for ready money. And, even with my schol., the University will cost him a good deal, and young Harry has to go to school next year. He wanted to bring Mother down to Melbourne for the Speech Day, but they felt they couldn't spare the money. Then, Joan's illness has cost a heap. He told me all about things when we were riding round together; he wanted to let me know I'd have to be very careful about spending next year. How on earth am I to ask him for a hundred?"

"No, I don't see how you can," Hugh said, gravely.

"And there's the worry for him besides; he'd be so awfully ashamed of me. And Mother would have to know. I can't face telling them, though there have been times since I came home when I've just ached to tell Mother. She'd understand how a fellow gets let in sometimes--if he's a fool. And I know well

enough I've been that."

"Father used to say," remarked Hugh, "that only fools would say they had never been fools!"

"Well, I've been one, right enough. It began with such a little thing. I was treasurer for a school subscription--a present to a master who was going away--and I had a hole in my pocket, and I lost the money--about five pounds. That seemed bad enough at the time, and I worried over it no end, because I didn't want to write to father. By Jove, I wish I had!"

"What did you do?"

"A fellow found out, and lent it to me: one of the day-boys. Not a bad sort, but pretty keen about money: and after a bit he put the screw on me, and said he must have it back. When I asked him for time he said he couldn't wait, but he could put me on to a fellow in Melbourne who could lend it to me, and we went to see him. He seemed a decent sort of chap, this Montague; let me have the money all right, but he said he'd have to charge twenty per cent interest. I knew that was stiff, but I'd heard you had to pay a lot of interest for small sums, so I signed a paper to say I'd pay it."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, I went on saving what I could to pay it off, but I hadn't got it at the end of three months, so I signed another paper, and gave him what I had. And then I found out that his twenty per cent wasn't for a year, but for three months, and I knew I hadn't a hope of paying. It was just mounting up and up. I got pretty desperate, and I told the first chap, Harkness, the one who had put me on to Montague. He said it was hard luck, but he knew of a horse that was running in a race the week after that was dead safe to win. He'd got inside information from the jockey. He suggested that I should borrow some more from Montague and back the horse--he knew how to get the money on for me.

"But would Montague lend you more?" Hugh asked, bewildered.

George laughed bitterly.

"I think he'd have lent me anything, so long as I signed more papers. He knew my father was Robert Stanford of Kallowra. Anyhow, he didn't make the least difficulty, and I gave Harkness the money, and he backed the horse. And the brute didn't win, didn't go near winning. By Jove, I felt like throwing myself in the Yarra that night, and I've felt like it ever since."

He caught his breath with a sound that was like a groan.

"And the end of it is, I owe Montague ninety-seven pounds. And the interest, the beastly twenty per cent interest, is mounting up every day."

"Is he worrying you for it?"

"No. He says it will be all right. But I've got sense enough to know it won't. I'm afraid of the oily brute. I've heard of another chap he lent money to, and who couldn't pay, and somehow it got found out--one of the masters got wind

of it. There was an awful row, and this fellow was expelled; not publicly, but his father had to come and take him away. His father looked awful, just broken-hearted. It's the disgrace of it. They couldn't expel me, because I've left, but it would be almost as bad to have the name of the school dragged in. You'd rather do anything than bring dishonour on the school."

The broken sentences ceased, and the boy put his face into his hands. Hugh looked at him in pity and bewilderment. This was a thing bigger than he had ever been called upon to face.

"I say," he said, after a while, during which he had thought desperately. "I don't know much about my money, but I know I'll have enough, some day. Father told me I'd never need to worry. Mr. Harvey is managing it. If I wrote to him he'd send me a hundred pounds, I know. He told me I was never to be in need of anything without telling him. I'll write and ask him for it; no one but you and I need know anything about it."

George lifted a horrified face.

"Write to a stranger! I couldn't, for anything."

"Mr. Harvey isn't like a stranger. He's the most awfully good sort."

"I don't suppose he's a stranger to you, but he is to me. A nice lot he'd think of your Australian relations if he knew one of them was sponging upon you for money! You don't realize what a lot a hundred pounds is."

"I know it's a lot, but Mr. Harvey would manage it," Hugh said, doggedly.

"He might; but if he did his duty, he'd write and ask Father about it. Anyhow, it's absolutely out of the question, Hugh, old chap--thank you all the same. If you had it, I believe I could take it, 'cause you're such a decent kid; and I'd work my fingers to the bone to pay you back as soon as I could. But it's quite a different matter to tell a stranger; that's altogether impossible. It would be easier to tell Father straight out, and I suppose it will have to come to that--though the idea of the Yarra seems simpler." There was utter weariness in the boy's voice.

"Well, that's all rot," said Hugh, bluntly. "If you chucked yourself into the Yarra the whole thing would come out. The first thing this Montague man would do, he'd go to Uncle Robert for the money, and very likely everything would be in the papers, with the school dragged in."

"Yes, that's true enough," said the older lad, drearily. "And one can't be a cur, anyhow, so I'm a fool to think about it. If I could only see a way to get the money! But I've thought and thought until I'm nearly mad, and it does no good. I sent Montague the fiver Mr. Warren gave me on Christmas Day, and that will keep the interest down a little."

"How much have you paid him altogether?"

"Twelve pounds. I sold a lot of things at school--my microscope and other things."

"And you only owed him five to begin with!"

"Yes--and I've never had any fun out of a penny of it. It isn't as if I'd ever chucked money about. I knew jolly well Dad hadn't any for me to play the fool with."

"Well, I think that's the best part of it," Hugh said, sensibly. "If you *had* played the fool you'd have cause to feel ashamed. That's what's going to make it all right with Uncle Robert when you do tell him."

George looked at him gratefully.

"You're a good kid," he said. "I'm glad I told you. It's been a bit of a comfort to get things off my chest."

"You let me write to Mr. Harvey, old man," Hugh pleaded, eagerly. "I know he'll make everything all right. He's so kind--and--and understanding."

"He would be with you. But for a fellow in Australia he knows nothing about--well, he'd just be like any other sensible man, Hugh."

"Then I'll tell him it's for myself."

George laughed, but his eyes were kind.

"I've been an awful fool, but I'm not quite a cad yet," he said. "There are some things a fellow doesn't do, Hugh, old chap. Never mind, you've been a brick, and I feel a bit better. I'll just hang on for a week or two in the hope of a miracle happening, and then I suppose I'll have to tell Dad. There's the car coming--I must go and meet them." He went off with slow steps.

Hugh turned the problem over and over in his mind during the hours before bedtime, but he could see no way out. He had read a certain amount about the ways of money-lenders, to which body of astute gentlemen he recognized that Mr. Montague must certainly belong. He knew that to be in their clutches was a very serious matter for anyone--a very terrible matter for a boy of nineteen. Wild thoughts of cabling to Mr. Harvey for help crossed his mind; to be dismissed because of the complete impossibility of keeping the reply secret in a house where every telegram was communicated first ever the telephone. If he wrote, he could not hope for an answer in less than six or seven weeks; and then, George had forbidden him to write. There seemed no help that he could give.

He longed to be able to help. Everyone had been so kind to him at Kallowra. He could scarcely believe that he was the same boy, miserable and shrinking, who had landed from Ceylon a few months ago. They had refused to notice that he was a cripple; he was one of them in work and play, and the years ahead held new hope. It would be something of repayment if he could help, even if nobody knew. And George had come to him, out of all the others, in his trouble; there was pride in that, and the swift affection that a younger boy gives an older one who has trusted in him and given him his confidence. If only he could help him out!

But there seemed no way, and he went to bed early, tired of thinking. George had been unusually cheerful during the evening; he had played games and sung choruses with the others, and his mother's face had been happy as she watched him. It hurt Hugh the more that he knew that the boy's merriment had been forced. He lay awake for a long while, thinking out all sorts of impossible schemes by which he could obtain a hundred pounds and slip it quietly into George's pocket; and when he fell asleep, it was to dream that he had found a huge nugget in the back paddock, and was throwing it at an unpleasant person, rather like Shylock in "The Merchant of Venice," as he pictured Mr. Montague to be.

He woke with his leg aching, and the problem of George's difficulties still sharply uppermost in his mind. Dawn was breaking; the sun, not yet risen, sending a pale light over the eastern plain. He turned wearily, pushing his hand under his pillow; it closed, as it always did, upon the old priest's Luck. With the touch, an idea came to him.

The Luck! It was worth anything--he did not know how much. Certainly a hundred pounds; probably very much more, but that did not matter. Mr. Warren had told him, laughingly, that if he ever sold it, he must have the first offer. Surely Mr. Warren would give him a hundred pounds for it now! They were great friends. Hugh believed that he would buy it from him, and ask no questions.

Could he do it? Never before had he realized how much it meant to him. His father had always carried it and believed in it, and he loved it for his sake. In a blind way, that asked no explanation, Hugh believed that it had brought luck and happiness to him also. He had felt that he could not leave it behind on the night that he had driven Joan to the doctor--when they had been barely in time. Luck had followed him ever since he had carried it. He had expected to carry it all his life, guarding it as his most precious possession; but family honour and family pride were precious possessions, too, and if the Luck would save them----?

He slipped the little green image from its case, and held it against his cheek. As on Christmas Day, he felt that his father was very close to him.

"You wouldn't mind if I sold it?" he whispered. "You'd understand, Father?"

A sense of peace came over him. Whatever he did, so long as he ran straight, he knew that his father would understand.

CHAPTER XII

HOW HUGH SOLD HIS LUCK

No one asked any questions when Hugh went off after breakfast, saying that he was going for a ride. He begged for sandwiches, remarking that he might have a picnic lunch by himself, and his aunt agreed, smilingly. She welcomed anything that made the boy feel that he was capable of independent action. She watched him as he rode off, sitting erect on Caradoc, his crutch strapped to the saddle. Certainly, she thought, the pony had done wonders for him.

Hugh wasted no time. It was twenty miles to Warrenhurst, and twenty back, a long ride for him. He had had several long excursions with his uncle and George, but forty miles was very much in advance of anything that he had done, and he knew that he must save his strength. Also, he had been taught that when you ride upon a long journey it is wise to take your horse very steadily at first. So he rather astonished Caradoc by keeping him to a fast walk for the first few miles. Then he gave him his head, and cantered briskly eastwards.

It was very hot; so hot that Caradoc begged to be allowed to drink whenever they passed a waterhole--all yellow and muddy at this time of the year. So hot that long before his journey was over Hugh heartily wished he had brought a bottle of water for himself instead of sandwiches--the very thought of eating which made his dry throat feel yet more parched. He broke leaves from blue-gum trees and chewed them as he rode; it was doubtful whether they made him feel any better, but at least they gave him something to think about besides being thirsty. Most of the way led across a bare shadeless plain, with only an occasional tree; he halted when he came to one, to snatch a few moments respite from the blazing sun. The plain ahead danced in a shimmering heat-mist.

It was a lonely journey. Once he passed a lumbering motor-van, packed with furniture, with a man driving his wife and two little children; a perambulator, lashed to the top of the van, swayed and creaked as they jolted over the uneven road. Then he pulled over to the fence to get through a flock of sheep, which were defying all their drover's efforts to get them along. Both the man and his dog had swallowed so much dust that they had little voice left. The man nodded to Hugh, and muttered that it was a cow of a day, and Hugh heartily agreed as Caradoc picked his way among the crouching, panting sheep. The acrid smell of the wool made the hot air yet more heavy. He was glad when he got through them at last, and shook the pony again into a canter.

James Warren had a guest at Warrenhurst, an old friend and brother-collector whom he had not seen for years. The hot day had made but little

difference to them, for they had browsed all the morning over the collections; and as each piece had something of a history, it was a lengthy business, and bade fair to last all the afternoon as well. Mr. Warren had told his guest of the boy from Ceylon who had more interesting things than are ordinarily given into the heathen keeping of a boy of fourteen; notably of the queer jade image that ought certainly to be in a museum, if not in so carefully-housed a collection as the one at Warrenhurst. Sir Henry Durant had whistled at the recital, and shuddered slightly.

"And he carries it about with him--that urchin!" he uttered. "Good heavens, Warren, it oughtn't to be permitted!"

"You'd hardly call this particular boy an urchin," Mr. Warren said, thoughtfully. "He's a queer boy; lame, poor lad. He was his father's companion always, and I must say he values his things. As for the Luck, as he calls it, he thinks the world of it. I believe he sleeps with it under his pillow."

They had finished a late luncheon, and he rose from the table. The dining-room windows looked out upon the long drive leading to the house. He glanced through as he passed, and uttered an exclamation.

"Talk of an angel! Here comes young Hugh Stanford himself!"

His guest joined him at the window, and saw a slender lad on a brown pony coming slowly up the drive. At the garden gate he pulled up in a patch of shade, and got off stiffly on the wrong side, leaning against the pony's shoulder as he unfastened a crutch tied to his saddle. Then he pulled off the saddle, tied the pony in the shade, and came through the gate. Mr. Warren hurried to meet him.

"You haven't ridden all the way over, Hugh! Glad to see you, old chap, but you shouldn't have chosen such a day. It's enough to knock you out altogether. Come in, and have some lunch. You look as if you could do with a drink."

"I'd like a drink, thanks," said Hugh, his parched lips making speech a difficulty. He limped slowly after Mr. Warren, and into the dining-room, where he stood, swaying slightly, while his host hurried to the sideboard.

"Sit down," said Sir Henry Durant, sharply. He was at the boy's side as he spoke, and put him gently into an armchair. Hugh leaned back for a moment, his face white under its coating of dust, uneasily conscious that the stranger was feeling his pulse. But he was too shaky and queer to protest; and it was heavenly to lean back with closed eyes, away from the blinding glare outside. Then Mr. Warren was at his side with a brimming glass of something cold and sparkling. Never had there been so wonderful a drink. He roused himself to take it.

"That was ripping!" he said, gratefully. "I'm awfully sorry to be such an ass. It's pretty hot outside." He tried to stand, and was firmly repressed.

"Stay where you are," Mr. Warren ordered. "You'll feel all right in a

minute, and then you must have something to eat. Nothing wrong at Kallowra, I hope?"

"Oh no--everything's all right. I just thought I'd ride over to see you, sir." Hugh was getting hold of himself again; the horrible feeling of utter weakness was passing away.

"Too much of a ride for you, old chap--on such a day as this, at any rate. However, you're here, and there's a brother-collector for you to meet--my friend, Sir Henry Durant. I've been telling him about you and that Luck of yours that I mean to steal some day when the temptation gets too much for me." At which Hugh suddenly flushed scarlet. "Feel all right now? How about a wash and a bit of lunch?" He rang the bell.

"I want a wash awfully," Hugh answered. "Could some one look after my pony, Mr. Warren? He's just by the gate."

"I'll send a man out--don't worry about him." He went off to give orders, and Sir Henry bent over Hugh.

"Don't try to stand until you feel you can," he said, in a quiet, authoritative voice. "There isn't any hurry. Just close your eyes and keep quiet for a few minutes." Which Hugh was glad to do, until Mr. Warren came back, when he got to his feet, declaring himself quite recovered. The idea of food was hateful to him; but after splashing in cold water he felt better, and managed to eat at least a fraction of the meal that Mr. Warren pressed upon him. Sir Henry had left the room, and he felt more at ease without the presence of a stranger.

"Finished? Well, that's not much of a lunch," Mr. Warren said, regretfully. "Come along to the library, and we'll talk to Durant. Got that Luck about you, by any chance? I'd like to show it to him."

"I came to see you about the Luck, sir," said Hugh, in a low voice. He hesitated. "Will you buy it from me, Mr. Warren?"

"Buy it? Why, I thought you'd as soon sell Caradoc!"

Hugh smiled faintly.

"I want to sell it," he said, "And I thought you would like to buy it. I--would you give me a hundred pounds for it, sir?"

"It's worth a great deal more than that, my dear boy," said his host, gravely.

"Is it? I don't care. I only want a hundred pounds." His voice shook a little. "Do say you'll buy it, Mr. Warren."

James Warren looked at him in silence for a moment.

"There's something queer here," he said, at length. "Why are you in such a hurry to sell it, all of a sudden? You can't need the money." He pondered, and then glanced up, quickly. "Your uncle isn't in any difficulties, Hugh?"

"Oh no. He doesn't know anything about it," Hugh answered. "It's just a matter between you and me. I've got to sell it; I do want the money, Mr. Warren."

The big man shook his head.

"You can have all the money you want, any time you want it," he said. "But as for buying the thing, and for an absolutely ridiculous price--well, I'd rather not, Hugh. It's a big temptation, I'll admit, but it wouldn't be a fair thing--unless you can tell me that you've grown tired of it, and don't want to look after it any more. Which I don't believe you can truthfully say. Better make a clean breast of it, Hugh, and tell me why you want the money. What can a youngster of your age do with a hundred pounds?"

Hugh gripped the arms of his chair. This was worse than he had dreamed.

"Mr. Warren, I do want it," he said, looking his host straight in the eyes. "I need a hundred pounds badly. I haven't done anything that isn't straight, and I'd be awfully glad if you'd trust me and not ask me any questions--and promise to keep it just between ourselves. I couldn't possibly take your money if you won't take the Luck. But do trust me and give me a hundred pounds for it. It's--it's really awfully urgent." His lip quivered, but his eyes did not waver.

James Warren pondered deeply.

"Well, you're your father's son," he said. "You look just like him, too, and I never knew him do anything that was crooked. All right, old chap, I'll take your luck, and I'll give you a hundred for it--with the one stipulation, that at any time you wish, you may buy it back for the same sum. Do you want cash, or will a cheque do?"

"Oh--cash, please!" said Hugh hurriedly. "A cheque wouldn't do at all. And thank you ever so, Mr. Warren. I know it's asking a lot for you to trust me. And you won't say anything to Uncle Robert?"

"I won't; unless you tell me I may. But I don't like secrets, Hugh, and that's a fact."

"I hate them myself," Hugh said. "Only, I can't help this one, Mr. Warren."

"Very well--we won't say any more about it. Lucky for you I've the cash. I don't keep such sums knocking about the house as a rule, but I drew out money to pay some men who are working on a contract for me." He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Remember old chap, you have only put your Luck in pawn."

Hugh shook his head.

"I couldn't think of it that way, sir," he said. "It belongs to you now, and I'll never ask for it back." He took the little leather case from his pocket and put it in Mr. Warren's hand. "It brings luck, you know; they say it never fails; so I hope there's a big slice of luck coming to you through it, Mr. Warren."

"And what about you giving it up?"

"Oh, I guess I've got a good bit from it already," Hugh said. "My share hasn't been a bad one." He took the envelope Mr. Warren handed him, putting it in the pocket where the Luck had lain. "Thanks very much, sir. I think I'd

better be getting back now. It's a long way home, you know."

His host uttered an indignant snort.

"You don't think you're going to ride back all that way! Why, it isn't to be thought of!"

"Oh, I must," Hugh said, quickly. "I'll be all right, really. I've got to get home."

"Well, I'll drive you home, my boy. Riding is out of the question; you're pretty well done up now, and it's a blazing day."

The worry in Hugh's eyes deepened.

"I--I didn't want anyone to know where I was," he muttered, "Truly, Mr. Warren, I'd rather go by myself."

"You wouldn't get there," said his host, decidedly. "Why, you were nearly all out when you got here--have sense, old chap. Forty miles in this sun would be more than I'd care to tackle myself."

Hugh knew that he spoke the truth. But at the moment it was almost the last straw to his powers of endurance. All that he had spurred himself to do, all that had kept him going during the scorching morning, had been with the hope of the end of the day, when he could put the money into George's hand, knowing that he had saved him. He stood up, his face whitening.

"If I had a rest for an hour I'd be all right," he said. "Do let me go, Mr. Warren. I know I can manage it. I'll go very steadily."

Then the room began to whirl round him. He made an uncertain step forward, but his grip loosened on his crutch. It slipped from him, and before Mr. Warren could catch him, he fell heavily. The world went out. He lay very still.

James Warren was on his knees beside him in a moment.

"Durant! Here!" he shouted. Sir Henry came in quickly.

"This is more your job than mine," Mr. Warren said. "Poor youngster! Keeled over all in a moment, and I think he hit his head. Idiot that I was not to get him in time!"

Sir Henry was examining Hugh with swift, competent movements.

"I don't think there's much wrong," he said. "He's exhausted, that's the chief thing. Help me to get him to bed, Warren. It's the only place he's fit for."

Between them, they carried the limp form to a bedroom, and undressed him. When the lame leg was laid bare, Sir Henry suddenly lost all interest in everything else. He bent over it, studying it closely; feeling it with long, sensitive fingers.

"So that's it?" he observed. "How did he do it, Warren?"

"Accident; a buggy-smash in Ceylon about two years ago, I think. But don't bother about it now. Is his head hurt, Durant?"

"I don't think so," Sir Henry said, absently. At the moment Hugh's head

was of no concern to him. The leg held his attention captive. He moved it backwards and forwards, holding it firmly yet lightly, watching the play of the muscles under the skin. Mr. Warren watched him impatiently, almost annoyed as the moments went by and still the long fingers studied the leg as though there were eyes in their delicately-seeking tips.

"He's coming to--his eyelids flickered," he broke out, presently. "I wish you'd look at his head, Durant. The leg is an old story."

"That's a very interesting leg," Sir Henry remarked. He left it, apparently with reluctance, and turned to look at Hugh's face. Consciousness was coming back. James Warren, with an oddly quick movement, drew the sheet over the boy's legs.

"Hates it to be seen," he said in a low tone.

"Feeling better?" Sir Henry asked, as Hugh's bewildered eyes opened. "That's right; now all you have to do is to lie quiet and go to sleep. You will be quite fit after a rest."

"I must get home," Hugh whispered.

"Don't worry about that, old chap," Mr. Warren said. "I'll telephone and tell them you are here. Just go to sleep, as Sir Henry says. He's a doctor, you know, and you must obey orders."

Hugh tried to speak, and failed. But the big man saw the pleading question in his eyes. He bent down, speaking gently in his ear.

"I'll keep the business quiet," he said. "It's just between you and me. I'll tell them you came here for a ride and got a bit tired. Go to sleep, old chap."

At the moment, Hugh wanted nothing so much. He was too tired to protest any more. Presently a hand was slipped gently under his head, and Sir Henry's voice--it seemed a long way off--told him to drink something; the glass was at his lips. He obeyed, gulping the drink awkwardly. Then again he felt the cool touch of the pillow against his cheek, and he drifted away into sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

HOW THE LUCK CAME BACK

IT was a very silent Hugh who drove back to Kallowra with Mr. Warren and Sir Henry Durant the following afternoon. He had had a rather troubled morning, for Sir Henry had come to see him in his room and had put him through a very searching inquiry about his leg, asking many questions and making a detailed examination that had hurt him a good deal. Hugh did not mind that, though he thought it a rather useless proceeding. Nor did he mind Sir Henry seeing it, since he was a doctor, and doctors were beings who were admittedly on a different footing to other men. Sir Henry had spoken vaguely about exercises and treatment that might strengthen it. Hugh had had many exercises; did he not wriggle and twist and pommel the old leg every day, much as Sir Henry was doing, he thought? But he liked the quiet man, with the kind eyes, even if the whole business did bring back to him the knowledge that he was only a lame fellow, who could never be anything else. If it interested him to look at a queer leg Hugh supposed that it was only because such things were part of his job.

He was rather nervous about his return to Kallowra. His aunt and uncle might well be annoyed that he had ridden to Warrenhurst without asking permission, especially as he considered that he had made such a fool of himself when he got there. He had caused a fuss; and a fuss was the very last thing he wanted to cause on this particular occasion, when he had desired to draw no attention to his movements. George would certainly suspect that he had got the money from Mr. Warren. Still, Hugh thought he could manage George; and after all, the chief thing was that the money was there. The very touch of the stiff envelope in his breast-pocket was comforting.

Possibly Mr. Warren had squared matters over the telephone; for when they arrived at Kallowra no one seemed to think he had done anything very terrible. His uncle shook hands with him and chaffed him about "turning into an overlander." Mrs. Stanford showed more concern, but it was only for his health; and Hugh was soon able to convince her that he had quite recovered. No one else was about. He left the grown-up people talking, and went quietly to George's room--becoming suddenly embarrassed to find George himself there, sitting on his bed with his head in his hands.

"I say, I'm sorry," Hugh said. "I had no idea you were here."

"Come in; it's all right," George said, dully. "Got back all right? You were a bit rash to tackle that ride over to Warrenhurst. Must have been jolly hot."

"It was, a bit," Hugh admitted. "I suppose I was a goat, but I thought I

could do it. Anyhow, it's all right." He fidgeted, feeling suddenly awkward. "I say, George--you know about that money."

"M," said George.

"You haven't told Uncle Robert yet?"

"No. Fact is, I was trying to make up my mind to tell him to-night. Jove, I wish I were a little chap again and could just take a licking and be done with a thing! It's a rotten job."

"You needn't tell him," Hugh said. He took the envelope from his pocket and held it out. George opened it in bewilderment, that deepened as he drew out the crackling notes.

"What on earth!" he ejaculated. "Five twenty-pound notes! A hundred pounds! Where did you get it?"

"That's my business," Hugh said, laughing. "You needn't worry about it, George; it's mine, and I didn't steal it. And you're jolly welcome to it." He turned and limped to the door with amazing swiftness.

George sprang after him, catching him by the shoulder.

"Stay here, you young ass!" he said. "Do you think I can take a hundred pounds from you like that? Hugh--you haven't told anyone?"

"No--what do you take me for?"

"I beg your pardon, old chap," said the bewildered George. "I didn't mean it--but you've taken me by surprise. But how did you get it?"

"Well, I can't tell you that," Hugh answered. "But it's all right, George; truly, it is. And you can square that beast of a Montague straight away."

George drew a long breath.

"By--Jove!" he said, slowly. "But it can't be done, Hugh. Don't you see that I can't take your money?"

"No, I don't," Hugh answered, sturdily. "The money's there, and if you don't take it I'll only stick it in a drawer. Surely it's better to square Montague, and not worry Uncle Robert. It--it just isn't sense not to use it."

George looked at him for a minute in silence, his hand clenched on the notes.

"You've got this from Mr. Warren," he said.

Hugh flushed.

"That's my affair," he said.

"You couldn't have got it any other way. How did you manage it? He wouldn't give a kid like you all that money."

"I got it honestly, if that's what you mean," Hugh said, hotly.

"Great Scott, I didn't think you stole it!" George's troubled face broke into a wintry smile. "I'm sorry, old chap--I must seem a brute. It's just awfully good of you, Hugh. But don't you see that I can't take a sum like this as if it were sixpence?"

"Well, you can take it and not bother your head about it," Hugh replied. "I wouldn't tell you if it weren't true, George. It's absolutely my own, and no one need ever know that you had it. When you're a doctor and making heaps of money you can pay me back if you feel you've got to; but I won't want it. Think of all your people have done for me! Why, Uncle Robert and Aunt Ursula have just treated me like a son. I don't see how you can bear to give them the worry--I can't bear it, anyhow. You've got to take it, and that's all about it!" He turned, and limped out of the room.

George Stanford sat down on the edge of his bed, and looked at the notes. The temptation was almost too strong, to use them and say nothing about the matter. The money was there, looking at him--ready to magic away all his difficulties, and to save his father and mother from distress and anxiety. Hugh's half-angry words rang in his ears, almost compelling him to do as he wished. But--something had taken place at Warrenhurst, of which he knew nothing. He could only guess: and whatever he guessed but deepened the conviction that Mr. Warren must suspect Hugh of something crooked, even though he had given him the money. To have that on his soul was a load heavier than any he had borne yet.

He thought for half an hour, turning the matter over and over, and failing to find any solution. Finally, in a kind of desperation, he crammed the notes into his pocket and went out. Across the lawn he saw Mr. Warren, pacing down a long path, and he squared his shoulders and strode to meet him.

"Can I speak to you for a minute, Mr. Warren?"

"You can," said that gentleman, briefly.

"Hugh has been getting money from you, hasn't he?"

"Did Hugh tell you to ask me?"

"No, he didn't. He won't tell me a thing. But I want to know. He couldn't have got it anywhere else. And I can't have you thinking there's anything wrong about Hugh. He's white, right through." George squared his shoulders, his young face set in determined lines. "It was for me he wanted it, Mr. Warren."

"I thought as much," said James Warren. "Not that Hugh gave you away, by so much as one word. But I couldn't see how it could be anyone else." His tone was full of relief, and suddenly he put out his hand and gripped the boy's. "And I guess it's all right, isn't it, George?"

"I've been an awful fool," George said, flushing. "But there hasn't been anything crooked about it, Mr. Warren; and I couldn't say that if I let you wonder about Hugh."

"I shan't wonder, now," Mr. Warren said. "You needn't tell me anything unless you want to, George. Still--I'm an old friend, and I was once young, myself--I fancy it might be as well if you told me. Some shark got hold of you,

son?"

"I'd like to tell you," George said.

Mr. Warren heard the story in silence.

"H'm," he said, when the boy had finished. "Montague; I'll bet his father was plain Moses. Yes, it's a good thing you told me, old chap. A boy of your age has no earthly chance when he gets into the hands of the Jews. A clever money-lender can skin much older fellows than you. Well, you've nothing to be ashamed of, even if you've been a bit foolish, and I rather fancy the lesson will be cheap at a hundred pounds. Not that it's going to cost that."

"But I owe ninety-seven, Mr. Warren," George said, earnestly.

"You let me deal with Mr. Moses--Montague, old chap. I'll make him sorry his father didn't stay in Palestine, or Germany, or wherever he came from! Just give me a plain statement of the debt, and every scrap of writing you've got about it, and I'll see the gentleman when I go to Melbourne this week. It will be quite an enjoyable interview--for me. I don't fancy Mr. Montague will derive much pleasure from it. He'll think himself lucky if the police don't get him--the greasy scoundrel!"

George's lip quivered. He turned away and went down the path, struggling to command himself--his self-control slipping in the over-mastering rush of relief. Mr. Warren watched him with a kindly eye. Presently he came back, master of himself again.

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Warren. Jove, if I'd only told you before! I've had a brute of a time."

"Yes, I suppose you have. Well, it's very hard for a boy to know what is best to do. But you can take it from me, old chap, that if you ever get into any difficulty the best person to go to is your own father--and the sooner the better. Every father was once a boy himself, and he'll understand. Keep away from money-lenders and betting--they're rotten bad patches for anything you've torn--and then you can go with your head up, even if you do need a hand over the mending. I'll fix this up for you, and do it gladly. But when it is done, take my advice, and tell your father the whole thing."

"I will, Mr. Warren," George promised. "And can't you tell me about Hugh? How did he get the money from you?"

"He sold me his Luck."

George gasped.

"Not that thing with the big ruby eyes that he values so much? The thing his father gave him when he was dying?"

"Just that. I wanted to give him the money, but he wouldn't take it in any other way."

"Well--by Jove!" George uttered.

"Of course, I'd never have kept the thing--a horrible temptation to a

collector, too, I can tell you! But Hugh vowed he'd never take it back, and I believe he would have kept his word. As it is--will you give it to him when I've gone?" He took out the Luck and handed it to George. "Take care of it," he said, anxiously.

"I don't see how I'm ever going to pay him back," George said, in a low voice. "I've never done a thing for him; and that Luck was like part of himself."

"Well, it gave him pleasure to do it," Mr. Warren said. "Tough young beggar he is, too; he wouldn't tell me why he wanted that money, no matter how much I pressed him. I'm glad he can have his Luck back, though. He'll want it all."

Something in his tone made George glance up quickly.

"Anything wrong with him?"

"Well--nothing more than he always has. But Durant--he is staying with me, you know--saw his leg yesterday, and he thinks something can be done for it."

"Not Sir Henry Durant--the big surgeon?"

"Yes. We're old friends. He examined the leg pretty thoroughly, and gave me an opinion in medical terms a yard long. As you're a budding doctor, they might convey more to you than they did to me. But the upshot is, he's hopeful, and they say Durant never expresses hope without very good reason. He's talking to your father and mother about it now."

"Did he say anything to Hugh?"

"No. He says the treatment may take a good while, and it may be painful; possibly he will operate, but he cannot be certain yet. He wants the leg X-rayed. There's no use in raising Hugh's hopes before we are more sure. It would be too cruel for the poor youngster if it came to nothing. But I'm glad he'll have his Luck with him. He has a queer faith in it."

"By Jove, it would be splendid if they cured him!" George exclaimed, eagerly. "He's such a brick of a kid, it's a jolly shame for him to be a cripple!"

"Cripple or not, he's a man," said James Warren.

CHAPTER XIV

SIX MONTHS LATER

THREE boys came hurrying abreast down the long platform of Spencer-street Station. One glanced at the clock, and gave an exclamation of relief.

"Oh, we've plenty of time! That old watch of yours needs doctoring, George--don't they teach you to cure watches, up at the Shop?"

"I dropped it into some acid the other day, and it hasn't seemed as healthy since," admitted the medical student. "But there's lots of kick in it yet. I'll dissect it to-night, and find out where the trouble is. Anyhow, we needn't hurry. You and Harry go on and get your seat, Hugh, while I snare you something to read."

They were standing outside the door of the carriage as he rejoined them, his hands full of magazines. Hugh was taller than Harry now; he had grown mightily during the preceding months--months that he had spent chiefly on his back. The crutch was gone. He walked with a very slight limp, and the sole of one boot was thicker than the other. But he carried himself as lightly and easily as the boy beside him; and though there were lines on his face that pain had graven deeply, his eyes were a boy's eyes, clear and merry.

"That's all right." George tossed the magazines through the window. "Sure you're not tired, Hugh? I didn't mean to give you such a rush."

"I'm not tired--and I rather like a rush," said Hugh, smiling. "It's no end of a lark to be able to run, after hopping on one leg for ages. I'm going to train, up at Kallowra, so that I can play football when I go to school. It'll be rather jolly when I can go, Harry. It makes a difference, having you there, and knowing so many of the fellows. They've been bricks coming to see me."

"Oh, you've been the star attraction," said Harry. "The chaps say they liked to pop into the hospital and see you--the whole form buzzed about it the day you first walked by yourself! As for old Durant----"

"What about him?" asked a quiet voice, as Sir Henry Durant appeared beside them. Whereat Harry blushed, and modestly retired into the background.

"I was up in this direction, so I thought I would look in and say good-bye to you, Hugh," said Sir Henry, much amused.

"Jolly good of you, sir," Hugh said. "It's thanks to you I'm walking home, and not hopping."

Sir Henry looked him up and down with pleased eyes.

"Well, you're a very satisfactory job," he said. "I will own I had doubts now and then; but we pulled it off in the end--even better than I had expected.

And you backed us up well, Hugh. It was pretty beastly at times, wasn't it?"

"Well--not exactly a picnic, sir. But it was worth it."

"Yes--very well worth it. Old Jim Warren will be pleased, I know. Give him my salaams, and tell him I return him his brother-collector in excellent condition. You might also tell him you offered me the Luck. But he will never believe that I refused it!"

"He refused it himself, once," Hugh laughed. "I believe I'm meant to keep it, after all!"

"You had better get over that habit of offering it indiscriminately," said Sir Henry. "Some day you'll meet some one who will accept it with howls of delight!" He shook hands, warmly. "Good-bye, my boy. Keep up the rubbing and exercises, and look me up when you come down to school. I'll expect to see you without any limp." He went off with long strides.

"Nice old bird, isn't he?" said Harry. "He never turned a hair when he heard me call him 'old Durant.' Look what he left in my hand!" He displayed a shining half-crown. "That solves the problem of a blow-out in town as I go back--unless George means to take me to tea, in which case I shall apply it to other problems!"

"No chance," said George, hastily.

"I was afraid not," said Harry, with resignation. "You tell Mother, Hugh, that the last hamper was scrumptious, and that I don't see how she can improve upon it for the next one, unless she thinks of putting in a few more sausage-rolls. They always go down well. The chaps in my dormer get absolutely eloquent about old Cook's sausage-rolls. And tell Joan----"

The whistle sounded, cutting short Harry's messages. Hugh bundled into the carriage, leaning from the doorway, as the train pulled out of the station, and waving his cap as long as he could see the two boys. Then he sat back, with a long sigh of utter happiness.

He had the compartment to himself, which was as well, for at the moment it hardly seemed large enough to hold all that he felt. His thoughts flew back to the first time he had made the journey, ten months before. Then he had been miserable, lonely, a cripple; dreading the life ahead and afraid of those with whom he had to live. Now, all the world had changed. Everyone was his friend, and he was going home, to a welcome as glad as had been his good-bye to the boys at Spencer-street. It was really home now, and he need not hobble into it on a crutch. The miracle had happened--he was a cripple no longer.

He tried to read; but he found that he could not fix his attention on the page, and presently he tossed the magazine aside, looking out of the window as the winter darkness came down. There was no darkness for him. The roar of the train, the swinging rush across the country, chimed with his triumphant heart. There was a song in the rattle of the wheels, the clangour as they pulled

up at wayside stations, the long-drawn breaths of the engine as again they drew out to race over the darkened land. It had sung within him since the first day he had walked alone--when he had flung his crutch, with a shout, over the balcony railings of the hospital; a boy again, like other boys. No longer lame--no longer lame!

He took the old priest's Luck from its case and looked at it. In the light of the lamp the ruby eyes glowed with a deep, uncanny fire; they seemed to look right into his soul. His father had said, "Keep it always, for luck, son," as he lay dying; and Hugh remembered how he had almost laughed in his bitterness, thinking that the world held no possible good luck for him. Yet everything had gone right, beyond his wildest dreams, and it was the best of all possible worlds.

"Were you the Luck-bringer, old chap?" he asked the solemn face of jade. "I wonder?"

His thoughts went back to the scorching day when he had ridden to Warrenhurst to sell the Luck--torn by the knowledge that he was giving up the thing his father had given him to cherish always. "Keep it more carefully than your right eye," the old priest had said. Hugh had felt that he deserved to lose good fortune; that it was betraying his father's trust to take money for the talisman that had been his last gift. He recalled every mile of the weary journey; the sick feeling of loss that had overcome him when he saw the Luck pass into Mr. Warren's possession. Yet he had seen no help for it. And in the very act of renunciation the Luck had brought him the greatest magic of all--and had come back to him. He sighed happily as he buttoned his coat over it. Then, suddenly realizing that excitement and joy had made him very tired, he curled up in his corner and went to sleep.

It was a clear, frosty night when he left the train at the junction: and he journeyed next day through brilliant sunshine, enjoying every minute as it passed, yet longing for the moment of his arrival at Scardale. As the little branch-line engine puffed into the station he saw them waiting for him--his uncle, Joan, and Mervyn, all with eager faces, with Mr. Warren's tall form in the background. He sprang out and went to meet them, swiftly.

"Oh, Hugh, I'm so glad!" It did not seem like Joan, brusque and off-hand. She was half-crying, half-laughing, with a new softness in her face. He had not hands enough for them all. His uncle's arm was across his shoulders; there was an odd quiver in his deep voice, and the words of welcome did not come easily. Only his grip on the boy's shoulder tightened until it almost hurt. Mervyn was prancing round him, uttering delighted squeals.

"By Jove, it's wonderful!" Mr. Warren's big voice boomed out. "I'll take off my hat to Henry Durant when I see him! Quite fit, Hugh?"

"Fit as a fiddle, thanks, sir. I can turn somersaults!"

"I'll come and see you do it to-morrow. Where's your luggage? We mustn't keep him here, Bob. That aunt of his will be longing to get hold of him."

"She wanted to be at home to welcome you, Hugh," Mr. Stanford said. "But she gave me severe orders to hurry!"

The Kallowra car waited beside Mr. Warren's single-seater, the owner of which refused to go out with them.

"No--you'll want him to yourself to-night. I'll be over to-morrow. But I had to come in and see him walk, so that I could believe it!" He pumped Hugh's hand again. "Will you sell me the Luck now?"

"No," said Hugh, laughing. "But it's yours whenever you like to claim it, sir."

The big man sighed comically.

"That's putting too great a strain on a fellow," he said. "I think I'd better emigrate!"

Mr. Stanford opened the door of the car.

"Bundle in, kiddies. Hugh, will you drive?"

Hugh's eyes sparkled.

"Oh!--may I, Uncle Robert?"

He swung himself in with a lithe movement that made Mr. Stanford recall sharply how often he had watched him twist himself painfully to the seat behind the wheel. A deep purr from the engine, and they moved slowly out of the station-yard, waving farewells to Mr. Warren. The open plain lay before them.

"We've had a week of frosts, Hugh, and the roads are as good as they can be," his uncle said, lighting his pipe. "You can let her out, if you like."

It was just what Hugh needed. He pressed the accelerator, and they spun over the plain at a rate that soon left Scardale far behind them. There were a hundred questions to ask and to answer; but soon Hugh fell silent, too happy to talk. Over the marsh causeway and across the bridge they flashed, slackening a little as they came to the winding river-road. The river sang in its bed far below, swollen with winter rains. There was music and welcome in the song. It seemed to know that he was coming home--and not a cripple.

Never had the road been so short. Hugh sat erect, his lean hands gripping the wheel. He had thrown off his cap, and the wind of their going ruffled his fair hair. Mr. Stanford, sitting by him, saw the new strength and peace that had come into his face. The car seemed a live thing under his touch. They spun silently round corner after corner, and at last came to the turn-off to the Kallowra track. Joan was out to open the gates before they came to a standstill. They bumped cheerfully across the paddocks; leaning forward, Mr. Stanford pressed the button of the hooter, so that it blared a long note of greeting to the homestead.

Mrs. Stanford came out upon the verandah. The car dashed up to the gate, wheeling in a half-circle. She saw a tall boy in a grey suit who sprang from behind the wheel, and came running to meet her, with swift, certain steps. She held out her arms with a little cry of joy, and he came to her as her own boys would have come, and put his face against hers, holding her closely.

"My dear son!" she whispered.

She put him from her presently, holding him away, with the tips of her fingers on his shoulders; looking at the slender, erect figure, with eyes dim with gladness.

"I'll want to watch you all the time," she said, "for fear it isn't true!"

"I used to feel like that," Hugh said. "I'd wake up every morning thinking I had only dreamed it--afraid to move my leg, I was so certain it would only be the old lame horror. But I've got over that now. It's really a good leg, Aunt Ursula, and Sir Henry says it's mine for keeps!"

Mr. Vernon came out, his face full of pleasure; there were greetings from the servants, from his old ally, Cook, to the Chinese gardener. Hugh went among them, shaking hands, and found himself patting Cook's shoulder very hard, because she was crying unashamedly into her apron. Caradoc was as fit as possible, Tom McLean told him, and would be ready for him in the morning. Hugh discovered later that he had spent the greater part of the day in grooming him. There were a score of things for him to hear about, including a clutch of white mice, which Mervyn proudly displayed for his inspection. Mr. Stanford rescued Hugh at last.

"Let the boy come in," he said, laughing. "He'll be here in the morning." He drew him into the smoking-room where a great fire blazed. "There's a cable for you, Hugh."

"For me?" Hugh tore it open, and looked up with his eyes glowing.

"That's nearly the best thing of all!" He gave the paper to his uncle, who read it aloud.

"'Delighted. Starting to see you next week.' And it was signed, 'Maurice Harvey.'"

"I don't think there's anything left to wish for!" Hugh said, solemnly.

He went to bed early that night, tired, for full strength had not yet had time to grow; and lay quietly, hoping that his aunt would come to him. Presently he heard her soft step. She sat down on the edge of his bed, and he put out his hand and held hers in silence.

"I never thanked you properly for your letters," he said, after a little. "But Tuesdays and Fridays were always the best days of the week. You never missed once."

"It was all I could do to help," she said. "That--and to pray. I prayed very

hard, Hugh."

"I did, too," he said, very low. "And I knew you would."

He gave a great wriggle, putting his arm around her.

"Would it bother you awfully if I called you Mother?" he said. "Aunt doesn't seem to fit you, somehow--not now."

"I would love it," she said, and dropped on his brow the only kiss she ever dared give him. But he held her tightly, in a hard, boyish hug.

"That's good--Mother," he said. "Oh, I'm so happy! You think Father knows, don't you?"

"I am very sure he does, Hugh."

"Won't he be glad!" he said. "Poor old Father--he did hate to see my beastly crutch! I threw it away, you know. It went into a bed of geraniums, and I've never seen it since. Oh, and I'm going to school next term, and I'll be able to play football and be like the other fellows! It's just too good to be true!"

"But it is true, Hugh. That's the glorious part. You can forget all the hard times now."

"I want to forget them," he said. He put his hand under his pillow and drew out the Luck.

"This old fellow knows too, I believe," he said. "Father said he would bring me luck. I like to think he did. All the same--Mother--" He stopped.

"Yes--my son?"

"I know jolly well he wouldn't have been of much account if you hadn't prayed as hard as you did," Hugh said.

Halstead Printing Company Ltd.,
Allen Street, Waterloo

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.

[The end of *Hugh Stanford's Luck* by Mary Grant Bruce]