



WINGS ABOVE
BILLABONG

MARY
GRANT BRUCE

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WINGS ABOVE BILLABONG

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Wings Above Billabong

CHAPTER I

SKY RIDERS

HIGH in the cloudless blue of the Queensland sky Freddy Paxton was flying southward.

It was a day of perfect flying weather. The wind was with him; air-pockets seemed to have no existence. He sat at his ease, the plane needing only the lightest touch on the control stick, the wind singing in the wind-struts. Freddy also sang, in sheer lightness of heart.

This was a joy-ride for him. Generally his flying was a matter of everyday work, roaming over the vast expanse of his father's cattle-station, near enough to the ground to inspect fences, to note the water-courses and dams that might be drying up; or to visit outlying huts, carrying rations and stores. The rear cockpit of his plane, an old fighting machine brought from England after the war, had been reconditioned to take such burdens.

The cattle on the station knew the plane, scarcely lifting their heads as it droned over them while the skyrider craned over the edge of the cockpit with a keen eye for any beast that might have got into trouble—bogged in a muddy creek or trapped by a fallen tree. Then the plane would circle and come gently to earth so that the airman might deal with the situation. Sometimes it would be necessary to fly back to the homestead for help. But there were not many situations with which Freddy could not deal single-handed.

Such work was an everyday matter, and even Freddy's father, who had been hard to convince, now admitted that the plane did the work of several boundary-riders and often did it better. It suited Freddy admirably, for, having seen much flying service in the war, he had acquired the airman's scorn for what he termed "earth-crawling." He accepted the fact that he must make a living by means of the beasts of the earth. Only he preferred to do it, as far as

possible, from the air.

But it was not the kind of flying he loved. It meant cruising at his lowest speed, so near the ground that he had had many narrow escapes from especially tall gum trees, or from hill-tops that seemed to rush at him suddenly when his attention had been diverted to a bullock. Such little incidents certainly lent variety to the work; but Freddy had a profound regard for his plane, knowing that if it crashed it was extremely unlikely that he would ever be able to buy another. He schooled himself to care, but it fretted a soul naturally careless.

To-day there was no work, no need to look earthward. Hundreds of miles of free air lay ahead, in which he could fly as high as he pleased. Far below him, the surface of Queensland was like a map swiftly unrolled—Freddy felt the utmost indifference as to whether it was there at all. He was alone in the sky, and the roar of his sweetly-running engine was music in his ears.

He had thought of making a midday halt for lunch, boiling the billy by a little river that ran through a wide plain where he had often camped. But the joy of the heights was too much for him; he abandoned the idea, contenting himself with nibbling sandwiches as he flew. Food seemed a matter unworthy of serious consideration when one was on top of the world.

He gave a half-regretful sigh when at last it was time to leave the upper air. The plane dropped gently, lower and lower, until, flying slowly now, he saw a rocky hill, tapering to a cone. To the west of it a white-roofed house showed, built high on stilt-like piles, for the discouragement of white ants. He circled over it, coming down gently on a smooth stretch of grass, where he taxied easily towards a shed. As he came to a standstill, greeted by a wild chorus of barking dogs, a shirt-sleeved figure dashed from the house and ran to meet him. They pumped hands.

“I say, this is great!” said the shirt-sleeved one enthusiastically. “Out you get, old man, and tell me all about it.”

“You got my wire?” Freddy asked, climbing out and stamping on the ground to ease knees that had developed a certain stiffness.

“Rather; only I don’t know what it means. ‘Arrive to-morrow be prepared accompany me Victoria.’ You might have said a bit more about it while you were at it,” said Jack Young, laughing.

“Well, it’s clear enough, isn’t it? I don’t believe in wasting money or telling telegraph operators any more than is good for them,” returned Freddy placidly. “Anyhow, are you prepared?”

“How does one prepare for what one doesn’t know anything about? I’ve spent the day overhauling the old bus, and I believe I’ve plenty of shirts and socks. But if you’re going to get married, and want me to be best man, it’s no go: my kit won’t run to glad rags.”

"Me!" ejaculated Freddy, in horror. "Are you off your head? I don't do things like that. This is strictly business, I'm off for a spot of gold-mining."

"Well, that's mad, of course, but it's more like you," said his friend, much relieved. "But where on earth are you going gold-mining in Victoria?"

Freddy lit a cigarette and propped his long form against the plane.

"Oh, it's the Lintons' show. You remember Jim Linton, and his brother-in-law, Wally Meadows?"

"Fellows I met with you at the races in Melbourne last year? Rather! And Mrs. Wally. Jolly nice girl. Have they struck gold?"

"They seem to have struck it pretty thoroughly. There's rough country out beyond their home station, and it's there they've found it. Nobody knows about it yet; they've asked me to come along and peg out a claim before the find leaks out and a rush starts."

"Where do I come in?"

"Well—Jim said that I could bring along anyone I liked, so I thought of you."

"By Jove! Do you mean that I can peg out ground too?"

"Well, rather. That's the idea, of course. Apart from that, Jim wants me to be there to keep an eye on things, because he and Wally have to get busy at the Billabong shearing."

"Shearing!" Jack's voice held the profound contempt the cattle-man feels for sheep. "Do you mean to say that they're on gold, and they mean to leave it for a thing like that?"

Freddy chuckled.

"You don't know Jim and Wally. Forty gold-mines wouldn't worry them if they had a station job on hand. As far as I can judge—Jim isn't exactly a fluent letter-writer—they're rather bored with the gold business. Not exactly resenting it, especially as it's pulled a pal of theirs out of the mud; but the thrill of the first find is over, an' now they're yearning to be on horses again."

"Well—if you call it being on horses to go after *sheep*——" began Jack.

"Well, not altogether. But don't you worry, old son: if you come down to Billabong they'll show you plenty of bullocks that will open your eyes, and give you all the riding you want. Billabong is mainly cattle. And their horses—oh, boy!"

"Sounds better," said Jack, relieved. "But are they going to leave a gold-mine to look after itself, apart from you and me, while they hack wool off sheep?"

"Oh, I gather that there are men working it. All the Billabong men have been at it, and the claim they've opened up belongs to their friend—chap called Bob Rainham. He'll be there. But he's English, and rather young, and Jim reckons he'll need support, especially if the news gets out and there's a

rush. What about it, Jack—are you on?”

“On? I should say so! Dad won’t mind; there’s nothing much to keep me here. If I can manage to dig up some nuggets I’ll become quite popular with my family. Dad was a little peevisish when I crashed last month!”

“Crashed, did you? Any damage?”

“Had to get a new wing, that’s all. Made a rotten landing, and tried to dig a hole with my right wing. But she’s flying like a dream now. I say, Freddy, do you want me to be a passenger, or can I take her?”

“Just whatever you like,” said Freddy, largely. “There’s plenty of room on Billabong for two planes. Jim will just lean against the side of a shed an’ push it in, an’ that’ll be a hangar!”

“He’s big enough,” Jack laughed. “He’s not the fellow you rescued when he was hurt out in the bush, is he?”

“No; that was Wally. Good thing it wasn’t Jim. Wally’s long enough, in all conscience; I’m not likely to forget the job it was to get him into the plane with a broken leg. I’d have needed a derrick and hoisting tackle if it had been Jim—and there weren’t any such luxuries about that day.”

“Must have been rather a picnic,” commented Jack. “I say, it’s rather fun to be going to the Lintons’. They gave you a jolly good time when you flew there, didn’t they?”

“Oh, Billabong’s an awf’ly cheerful place. I’ve been there twice since my first trip—that was when Wally got married to Norah Linton. They’ve a youngster now—very jolly kid, just like Wally. Calls me Uncle, and makes me feel no end ancient. But he’s a great nipper, an’ mad keen on horses.”

“He can’t be very old yet, to be thinking of horses,” remarked Jack.

“Risin’ two, or a bit younger, I think Davie is. But he has sense. I rather fancy any kid in that family would naturally have sense.”

“Who else is there? Any girls?”

“No, unless you count Bob Rainham’s sister, Tommy: and their place is a few miles away. By the way, Jim has just got engaged to Tommy. And of course there’s his father. He’s a great old chap—very like Jim, an’ often he doesn’t seem much older. You’ll like ’em all. It’s the sort of place where you feel you belong as soon as you put your foot on the verandah.”

Freddy paused and turned a severe eye on his companion.

“An’ talking of putting feet on verandahs, do you mind if I mention I came down here in one hop, an’ if I don’t get a drink soon I won’t answer for the consequences?”

“Oh—sorry, old man! But you shouldn’t spring such surprises on me. My brain won’t stand it. Come on over to the house. We’ll fix up the bus afterwards.”

He led the way towards the garden gate, talking as he went.

“Dad and Mother are out, or they’d have been over to see why I was keeping you there starving. Hugh’s somewhere with the cattle. I invited him to help me overhaul the Planet, but he didn’t appreciate the honour I was offering him.”

“You haven’t managed to convert him to flying yet?”

“Not a hope. He’s been to Brisbane with me a few times, but he hates it. Says one fool in a family is enough. Well, I’m quite content to be the fool,” said Jack cheerfully. “Hugh is like your Billabong people—only happy when he’s on a horse.”

“Oh, I believe I could convert Wally and Jim, if I had time enough. They’ve been up with me quite a lot, and Jim nearly got keen. I gave him a few lessons, and he handled her jolly well. But I haven’t got him to the point of buying a plane yet.”

“Queer, isn’t it?” pondered Jack. “The one thing really worth doing, yet some chaps can’t see it! Why, in twenty years I bet even kids will be flying to school! Look at the motors on the roads round Sydney and Melbourne—I reckon the air is the only place where there’ll be elbow-room soon.”

“And you haven’t seen England,” said Freddy grimly. “If you had, you’d say Melbourne and Sydney roads were great open spaces. But we’ve got the best of it now. Jack. It won’t be half so much fun when planes get really thick; there’ll be air police, and regular air-lanes marked out with signals, and anyone who takes a line of his own will be called an air-hog. All sorts of new crimes then—‘nose-diving to the public danger,’ or ‘failing to stop when summoned by police-whistle.’”

“Then you and I will be spending most of our time in the dock,” was Jack’s prophecy. “All the more reason for flying while the flying’s good. Here we are—is it tea or something stronger?”

“Tea—gallons of it, please,” responded Freddy. He stretched himself in a long chair in the verandah while Jack disappeared into the house, shouting to unseen helpers.

The sound of a car heralded the return of Jack’s parents a little later. They expressed themselves resigned to any adventurous move on the part of their son.

“One thing seems certain,” observed Mr. Young—“you can’t keep a boy within his home fences when he owns an aeroplane. And I know something of David Linton; anything he is running is good enough for Jack. Though my mind fails to picture you digging, son, even for gold. Did you ever handle a spade, I wonder?”

“Only at the beach, when he was seven,” said his mother, smiling.

“I’ll have to learn how, that’s all,” responded Jack, stoutly. “Anyhow, I’m not worrying about the digging. The main thing is that I’m going to have my

longest flight yet! After that, things will just sort themselves out. You can expect me back with the Planet staggering under a load of nuggets.”

“And what then?” asked his father.

“Then you won’t have to worry about land-taxes and other jolly little things of that sort. And you can have a trip to England, Mother—and perhaps I’ll come too and buy the latest type of monoplane. Oh, yes, and I’ll fly her back!”

“Not with me as a passenger,” said Mrs. Young firmly.

“Couldn’t have you—I’ll need all the space for petrol. I’ll fly over your ship in the Red Sea and drop you a note.”

“Well, there’s such a thing as counting your chickens while they are still in the shell,” laughed his father. “I’ll continue to hold off the Land-Tax Commissioners as best I can until I see those nuggets. Meanwhile I shall pin my faith, as usual, on bullocks. You are in command of the flying-squad, of course, Freddy.”

“Oh, rather, sir. I’m the senior officer, and I’ll see that the rest of the squad obeys orders.” He fixed a severe eye on the rest of the squad. “You’ll fly gently in front of me, so that I can keep an eye on you.”

Jack chuckled.

“I think I see you flying gently behind me, old man! By Jove, it’s too good to be true that I’m going! When do we start?”

“Early as possible to-morrow morning. Pack your kit to-night, and bring all the most disreputable things you’ve got. Gold-digging isn’t exactly a full-dress party.” He hesitated. “An’ don’t you make any mistake about this trip being only a joy-ride, Jack. It’s likely to be a job of hard work as well, with the Planet safely tucked in a shed several miles from you.”

Jack screwed up his face, and then laughed.

“Oh, I know. I won’t let you down.”

“Wouldn’t have asked you to go if I’d had any doubt about that,” was Freddy’s cheerful rejoinder. He rose. “It’s time I went out and saw to the old bus.”

“You’ve got to look at my Planet, too,” said Jack. “She’s very posh. I’ve been fitting her with head-phones.”

“Now I call that pure swank!” stated Freddy.

“It’s Mother’s fault: she comes up with me sometimes, and she likes to chat in the air. And she paid for them, so I didn’t see why she shouldn’t have them!” grinned Jack.

“I must tell my mother that, in case she feels inclined to follow your example, Mrs. Young,” said Freddy. “Though I don’t know what I’d do with phones, for nobody at home will fly with me!”

“Perhaps they know you too well!” suggested Mrs. Young mildly.

All the people of the homestead turned out to see the flyers start early next morning; maids clustering near the planes, station hands eager to swing the propellers. The Planet also was an old war machine, a little smaller than Freddy's Kestrel, and, like her, reconditioned for station use; the pilot's seat in front, with a roomy rear cockpit. Jack eyed her with the pride with which a young mother gazes at her first baby. He put on his flying helmet, adjusted the goggles, and took his seat in the pilot's cockpit, whence he beamed on all the world.

"You first, Jack," Freddy said. "Off you go!"

"Right oh! Good-bye, Mother—so long, everybody!"

The Planet's engine roared suddenly. She taxied over the grass, rose, gained height, and soared towards the south.

Freddy leaned over the side of the cockpit.

"I'll look after him, Mrs. Young. Don't you worry."

"No, I won't worry," she said. "Happy landings, Freddy!"

The engine blared. A moment later there were two glittering shapes in the sky, lessening rapidly as the drone of the engines died away.

CHAPTER II

AN EVENING OFF

SOMETHING had gone wrong with the engine of a shearing plant. In the long shed the shear-blades faltered suddenly and grew still. The men handling the half-shorn sheep on the boards expressed their opinion of the engine crew with the pithy eloquence characteristic of shearers, and waited impatiently for the moment to resume work.

It did not come. Sheep that had been lying half-stupefied under the blades began to wake up and struggle, so that presently each man was wrestling with a captive determined on freedom. The shed grew loud with bleating and rough voices. Outside, the sheep waiting in the pens caught the infection, raising a confused outcry. Dogs grew restless: there was a chorus of sharp barking.

The boss of the shearing gang had turned out a sheep just before the power failed. He waited for a few moments, glad to stand upright to ease his aching back. Then, with an angry exclamation he strode out of the shed.

"This is a rotten outfit," growled one of the men. "Third time this week that mouldy engine's broke down. Hope Carmody'll let the owner know what he thinks of him."

"Carmody said last time it went wrong that he'd never touch this shed again," responded the man nearest him. "Lie still, you brute, can't you?"—to the sheep. "If an owner hasn't got sense enough to make sure of his plant before we come along he's only got himself to blame if he gets his place black-listed."

"Me for the old days every time," put in an elderly man. "Hand shears might a' been a bit slower, but they didn't let you down."

There was an outcry of dissent. Most of the shearers were young men, who knew only the modern method and scorned the ways of yesterday. Everyone had something to say about it; the elderly man, though heavily outnumbered, maintained his point, hurling figures of shearing records at his opponents. Voices were raised in proportion to the increasing noise from sheep and dogs; so that the gang boss, returning with a heated countenance, had to shout before he could make himself heard.

"Engine's died on us!" he yelled, thumping with a stick on the floor to command attention. "Two hours work to get 'er goin' again. That means knock-off for to-day."

An angry growl followed his words. Every man in the shed resented enforced idleness, since the desire of all shearers is to "cut out" a flock as

quickly as possible and to hurry on to the next job. The stick thumped again for silence.

“I’ve told the owner he’s got to compensate us, so that’s all right. We’ll have to finish this lot somehow. Hands up, anyone who can use hand-shears!”

A few hands went up. The work was adjusted, and the slower clash of the hand-blades began on the half-shorn sheep. The other men poured out of the shed, feeling for pipes and cigarettes. Outside, the station hands, glum-faced, were moving the sheep from the pens to a small paddock.

“Well, I’m not sorry, for one, to knock-off two hours early,” observed a short young fellow, who, with a taller companion, had been one of the first to escape from the reeking shed. “The last two hours is the worst of the day.”

“Same here. Gets you in the back well an’ truly by this time.” The tall man paused to rub his back against a post. “The other chaps seem to stand it well enough.”

“They’re better broke to it than we are. It’s not our game, Alf. My word, I’ll be glad when I can chuck it. I’ll be thankful never to look at a sheep again—unless he’s mutton!”

“Well—what’s a man to *do*? Hard enough to get work anywhere, these times. An’ the only job you’d like is your old job, Bat—an’ you can’t get back to that.”

Bat’s face darkened.

“No; that’s done with. Oh, well, I’ll get on to something new after a bit. But it’s got to be something that’s not so much like hard work as shearin’. There’s easy money lyin’ round if one keeps one’s eyes open.”

“Yes, but the trouble is the police keep their eyes too well skinned,” said Alf mournfully. “Melbourne ain’t healthy for either of us now.”

“Too right it isn’t. Well, if we hang on to the shearin’ business to the end of the season we’ll have enough to see us to Sydney. Or p’r’aps to the West. I’ve always had a fancy to get up to Broome an’ try my luck on a pearlin’ lugger.”

“Mighty little chance of easy money there, I’ve been told. They watch the catch pretty carefully.”

“Oh, there’s ways. A chap I knew had a dodge of dippin’ an oyster in hot water to make it open. Then if there’s a pearl you slip it out, drop the oyster in a tin of sea-water, an’ it shuts up tight. An’ a pearl’s easy hidden.”

“Yes—but how many oysters would you open before you lit on a pearl?” demanded Alf scornfully. “They aren’t all decorated with pearls—not by long chalks.”

“Oh, I know it’s a gamble. But just think if it comes off—one little bit of a stone worth hundreds of pounds! Maybe thousands.” He sat down on a log, his eyes eager. “That’s the way I’d always like to make money—quick an’ big,

with a bit of danger hangin' to it. Not sloggin' along at some dreary job that never gets you any further."

"Some day something quick an' big will hit you, Bat," grinned his friend. "An' then you'll find yourself behind bars again, like when you tried to be one too many for that chap in Melbourne. Anyhow, I feel as if I'd better keep off other people's places for a bit. Pity, 'cause it makes life so dull: once you get used to helpin' yourself when you want to, it's hard to settle down to bein' a good boy. But the police get *so* interferin'!" He sighed.

"Oh, I've had all the police I want for a bit. I'll be careful. But I'll watch for a chance, an' when it comes—I'll grab it!" He jumped up impatiently. "I say, what's the use of hangin' around here all the evening? Nothin' to do but talk to a set of country louts."

"Better not let 'em hear you callin' them names," warned Alf.

"Not me. They think we're country louts, too, seein' we hardly say a word about anything but sheep. I'd like to forget sheep for a bit. Tom Wicking said I could borrow his motor-bike some time or other—how about havin' a spin in to the township? There might be a cinema, an' anyway we could get a game of billiards."

"I'm your man," agreed Alf. "Hope to goodness Tom hasn't gone off on his bike himself."

Luck was with them, for Wicking was grimly occupied with needle and thread—mending a pair of grease-soaked trousers that had encountered the point of a shear blade when a sheep kicked. He lent his bicycle willingly, on condition that it should be filled up with petrol in the township. The two friends made a hurried toilet in the sleeping shed, and were presently spinning down the gravelled track to the homestead gate.

Others were ahead of them, for several of the shearers had motor-bicycles: there was plenty of dust hanging over the tree-fringed road that led to the township. As a road it had little to boast of; Alf, perched on the carrier, objected bitterly to its bumps and pot-holes. Bat was possessed with the joy of speed. He paid scant attention to the growls that reached him faintly through the sputter of the engine.

Not until they were on the outskirts of the township did he slacken his pace, and then it happened suddenly. They had turned from the bush track to a more civilized road. On one side were trim cottages, with bright-hued gardens round them; on the other a wide paddock stretching to a river near which stood a larger house. Bicycles and motor-cycles were abandoned on the strip of grass that fringed the road. Across the green expanse people were hurrying to join a little crowd that had collected in the paddock a hundred yards from the fence.

Bat uttered an exclamation of astonishment, braking hard; an operation which caused Alf's face to encounter his back with considerable force.

“What on earth do you think you’re doin’, you silly ass?” snapped the justly indignant Alf, feeling his nose gingerly.

“Doin’! Look there!”

Alf followed the direction of his pointing finger.

“Lor!” he said. “Planes! Two of ’em. Who’d a’ thought of seein’ such a thing in a mouldy little place like this? No wonder you shoved your brake on, though I wish you’d keep your back out of my face when you do.”

“This is where we get off,” said Bat, ignoring all minor matters. He wheeled their steed to the side of the road. “Come along!” He ran to the fence, climbed over it quickly, and hurried towards the crowd. In a moment, however, a thought struck him. He paused, waiting until Alf caught him up.

“Some of our crowd are over there,” he said warningly. “Careful what you say in front of them, Alf. I don’t want any of them to know that I know one end of a plane from another.”

“O.K.” Alf nodded comprehendingly. “You an’ me are just two country lads, come to gape at a plane for the first time.”

“That’s the idea.” They went on slowly.

A harassed man was in charge of the planes, his face showing anxiety.

“Keep your hands off, you boy there, d’you hear! You can look, but you can’t touch a thing. No, you can’t sit in one, Charlie Jones, not if you asked all night!”

“You belong to this outfit?” Bat asked mildly.

“Not me—but one of the chaps that came in ’em paid me to watch ’em. It’s a two-man job, with everyone wantin’ to finger them.” He raised an angry voice as a boy’s head appeared over the edge of a cockpit. “Get down out of that, or I’ll warm you!”

“I’ll give you a hand, if you like,” offered Bat kindly. “Me an’ my mate can look after one.”

“You’re a white man,” declared the uneasy guardian. “I can manage one, but a bloke ’ud need eyes in the back of his head to look after two, with every fool boy in the place wantin’ to crawl all over ’em. You two take on the biggest.” He sighed with relief as his new allies ranged themselves on either side of the larger plane.

Nothing could have suited Bat Harris better. He leaned against the plane in a careless attitude, his dark face expressionless; yet the boys who crowded round suddenly felt that it would be unwise to take any liberties with the machine he guarded. They kept at a discreet distance, talking loudly—those who had been lucky enough to see the landing acting as showmen-in-chief, with a fine air of authority.

Behind his stolid mask Bat was studying the planes eagerly. There was nothing about them that he did not know; he, who had been a pilot before

crime had pulled him down. Pulled him down literally, from the sky he loved and the only life that had seemed to him worth living. All the hunger to get back mounted within him as he looked. That hunger had grown through repression in long months of jail-life and of sweating in greasy shearing sheds; it haunted him in his dreams. Now, the very feel of a plane that he could never hope to fly seemed to give him new energy. Perhaps luck was turning: perhaps to touch a plane again was the first step towards getting back from the depths.

One of the shearers strolled over to him presently.

“Ever been up in one o’ them things, Bat?”

“Not likely. The ground’s good enough for me.”

“Same here. I went once, over in New South Wales, but never again. Talk about bein’ sea-sick!—I never was so glad to get out of anything in all me life.”

“I’ve heard it takes people that way,” rejoined Bat.

“Funny how fellers’ll pay for machines like this. I believe one costs as much as half a dozen cars.”

“You don’t say!” said Bat innocently. “Well, a good car’s worth a paddockful of them, I’ll swear.”

“Anyhow, you can pull up a car pretty well anywhere—an’ that’s more than you can say for a plane,” remarked the shearer profoundly.

“Too right it is!” agreed Bat.

“Well, I’ve had enough,” the other remarked. “There ain’t so much to see, take it all in all. I’m off to the township.” He whistled softly to his friends and they strolled away together.

Dusk was closing in; little by little the crowd thinned. It was not very amusing to stand in the cold half-darkness, looking at the misty shapes of the planes. When the last earnest small boy had gone the guardian turned to the silent man beside him.

“Well, you an’ your mate done me a good turn. I’d like to stand you a drink, only I can’t leave here until the chaps that own them come back.”

“That’s all right,” Bat said. “We don’t want anything. Are they goin’ on to-night?”

“I dunno. They only asked me to stay here while they got a feed. They’ll be back pretty soon, I expect.”

“Well, we’ll be gettin’ along. Good night, mate.” He touched the plane for the last time, gently. Alf was waiting for him by the propeller. They walked across the paddock in silence.

Ahead, and moving towards them, came two points of light—cigarettes, glowing in the dusk. They heard footsteps and the sound of voices.

“Duck in here a minute, Alf.” Bat caught his friend’s arm, and they slipped noiselessly among some bushes.

“What’s the game, Bat?”

“Nothing—only I’d just as soon keep out of the way. Might be old acquaintances, an’ I’m not keen on meeting any. Ss-sh.”

Two men came slowly past their hiding-place. Bat strained his ears to catch their voices—it might be that he would recognize one. But they were strange; so much he knew, though he could not hear what they were saying. Only, when they were almost past, one phrase caught his ear. A few words only, but they galvanised his whole being into activity.

“*If they’ve found gold on Billabong—*”

It was the shorter man who said them, and his companion interrupted him swiftly.

“Steady, Jack. Might be some one about.”

The voices ceased, and the men went on towards the planes. In the gloom Bat waited, his mind whirling, until he judged it safe to move. Then he touched Alf’s arm and walked rapidly to the fence.

“Friends of yours?” Alf asked.

“No—never saw either of ’em before.”

“I thought they might’ve been some of your old flyin’ pals, somehow. I felt you stiffen.”

“No; they’re strangers. Alf, did you hear what they said?”

“Couldn’t catch anything except the big chap tellin’ the other feller to hush up. What was it?”

“You’ve got to keep it to yourself,” Bat warned. “I only heard half a dozen words, but they’ve got me thinkin’ all right.” His voice sank to a whisper: he halted, putting his face near Alf’s. “That chap said ‘If they’ve found gold on Billabong!’”

“Well, whoever they are, let’s hope they’re lucky,” said Alf, much mystified. “Where’s Billabong, anyway? Somewhere in the West?”

“West—your grandmother! Don’t you know the next station we’re bound for when we cut out here?”

“No, I don’t think so—I leave all that to Carmody. That’s his job. Oh yes, by Jove—I remember, now, I did hear. Place belonging to a man named Linton.”

“Yes, an’ that place’s name is Billabong. *Now*, do you catch on?”

Alf whistled softly.

“Never heard of any gold worth mentioning round about there.”

“No; an’ by the way the big chap shut the other fellow up it’s pretty clear someone doesn’t want anything heard. When things are kept dark, that’s the time I begin to get interested.”

“Well, I don’t think so awful much of it as you seem to,” Alf said. “I ain’t no gold-miner. Too much like hard work; an’ we’ve not got enough cash saved

to take any chances. I reckon we're better off shearin', if you ask *me*."

"I'm not going to do anything in a hurry, Alf. But you never know. I got a queer sort of feelin' that there's something in this for us. Suppose there did happen to be a big find on this Billabong place—suppose you an' I managed to get in before it got known. Why, there might be a fortune in it!"

"Well, there might. I'm quite ready to jump in with both feet if there's a chance. But I never did have much luck, an' it's hard to believe it's comin' my way."

"That's a fool way to think. At all events, our game is to keep our mouths shut an' our ears extra wide open. We'll make friends with the hands on Billabong—they're certain to know if there's anything unusual goin' on. If there is, well, I'm quite ready to go on sayin' nothin' if Linton makes it worth my while. You can be jolly well certain he doesn't want a rush started on his place."

They had arrived at the fence. As they climbed over it a voice of authority hailed them.

"This your motor-cycle?"

"Lor, it's a blooming bobby!" groaned Alf, miserably, under his breath. "Yes, it's ours, constable. Anything wrong?"

"You've no business leaving it here without a light. What have you got to say about it?"

"Sorry, constable," said Bat. "Fact is, we only meant to leave it for five minutes while we had a look at those planes. But the chap lookin' after them was havin' a hard time with the crowd, an' we stayed to help him."

"Nice yarn!" said the man of law. "I suppose you're shearers? Your lot gives trouble enough in this town."

"These chaps are all right, Mick," said a voice out of the darkness. The guardian of the planes was getting over the fence. "They did me a good turn over there—the boys 'ud have had half them planes for soovyneers if they hadn't helped me. I offered 'em a drink, but they wouldn't wait."

"Oh, well, if you say so, George, it's all right," said the policeman. "Lucky for them you came along, that's all. Cut along, boys, an' don't get in my way again."

"Lor, that was luck!" breathed Alf as they rode towards the main street of the township. "Our old pal George came in the nick of time, didn't he? Next question I saw tremblin' on that bobby's lips was 'Where's your licence?' An', not havin' any, we'd have been for it twice over."

"Too right we would," said Bat cheerfully. "Now p'r'aps you'll believe our luck's in, Alf. Who says we aren't goin' to strike another patch on that Billabong place?"

CHAPTER III

BILL

A BOY of twelve sat on the cap of the stockyard fence at Billabong, his red hair a spot of flame against the dusty soil and the grey fences. He had come there because it was a vantage-point from which no trees blocked the view in one particular direction; a direction that had held the eyes of most of the people of Billabong since early morning. Finally Norah Meadows, the daughter of the house, together with her friend Tommy Rainham, had refused to look any more, declaring that their eyes had grown tired.

“We’ll leave it to Bill,” said Norah. “He would be sure to see them first, in any case.”

Bill Blake was quite determined that he would see them first. Hadn’t he tumbled out of bed an hour before anyone in the house was up, because he knew that Freddy Paxton had once before dropped from the skies upon the Billabong home-paddock just at sunrise? True, this amazing occurrence had been explained by the apologetic Freddy—his first explanation being made to Mrs. Brown, cook, housekeeper and presiding genius of the station. Brownie was always the first person astir, and the airman had sought her kitchen like a homing swallow, demanding tea.

“I’ll never do it again, I promise you, Brownie,” he had said. “It was the moon. Quite full, like a rippin’ old silver tea-tray in the sky. I meant to go down somewhere for the night, but it was too gorgeous, so I stayed up in the ceiling. An’ then the clouds came up an’ blotted out my moon, an’ I couldn’t find anywhere to land. So I had to fly in rings round the ceiling until it was light enough to find Billabong. Never again! Brownie, where’s a bed?”

Bill knew that the story was a standing joke against Freddy, who was indeed unlikely to risk a repetition of it, especially when accompanied by a second plane. Still, although he had never met the flying man, he had heard enough of him to feel that the unexpected might possibly happen. The arrival of two planes was not a thing to be missed—no such excitement had ever come his way during the holidays he had spent at Billabong. He took no chances of being caught napping.

Moreover, Bill felt a certain responsibility in the matter, for was he not, at the moment, the only representative of the men of the Billabong family? Not that he belonged to it, except by an informal kind of adoption; which meant that all his holidays were spent on the station, where nobody had any doubt that he “belonged.” Jim Linton called him his offsider. The world might

contain titles more honourable, but Bill could imagine none better.

Jim and his father and Wally Meadows were all away, living out in the hills at Bob Rainham's gold mine. That was a place of many thrills, and Bill had been intimately connected with the finding of it. It had even been conveyed to him that a bit of the mine belonged to him. But that was a thing hardly to be grasped; and it did not seem to matter nearly so much as the fun of the actual finding.

Bill had camped at the mine himself, where there was the extra thrill of sleeping in a cave. He had picked up bits of gold, which made you feel terribly excited at first, but the excitement didn't last. You would have to pick up so many bits before you had enough to buy a station—which Bill considered the only use for gold. So, although he liked to ride out to the mine occasionally, he was not sorry that he had been sent back to the homestead with Norah and Tommy. There was always riding there, and no lack of things to do. Jim had said, "You look after the girls, Bill." He had a pleasant feeling of being in charge.

That being so, it was clearly his job to be on hand to welcome the airmen. Norah and Tommy, though extremely sensible, were but girls: it never seemed to Bill that they were really grown-up, in spite of the fact that Norah was married and had Davie, and that Tommy was some day to be married to Jim. Grown-up people had always meant to Bill people who were severe and difficult to understand. But that was before he knew Billabong, where nobody was like that.

However, it was his job to look after the girls, and to take from them the burden of looking after men visitors. He was to show the visitors their rooms, to offer them baths; in a word, to be host. Further responsibility was laid upon him, for to-morrow he was to be their guide to the mine. And then everything would be as it should be, and Billabong become itself again; for the newcomers would take charge of the mine, and all the men of Billabong would leap joyfully upon horses and come back as swiftly as hill-tracks would permit, to run the shearing. And that meant more work of the best kind for Jim's offsider.

So engrossed was he with these thoughts, coupled with watching the sky, that he started violently and nearly lost his balance at the sound of a voice. Old Murty O'Toole, the head stockman, had come across the yards behind him.

"No sign yet, Mather Bill?"

"Not a sign," Bill answered despondently. "I've thought I saw them about a dozen times, but it was always cockatoos."

Murty climbed up to the cap beside him.

"It's hearin' them you'll be before you see them," he said. "Them ingines do sound a terrible long way off. Did ye ever fly in wan o' them conthraptions,

now?”

“No; but I want to awfully. Norah says Mr. Paxton might take me up. I do hope he will.”

“Yerra, he will, wance he knows ye want it. There’s nothin’ he likes better. He offered me the chance of goin’, lasht time he was here.”

“Did you go, Murty?”

“I did not. Mothor-cars I’ve got used to, more or less, though I’d never look at the best of ’em beside a good high buggy an’ a pair of horses like the Masther used to dhrive in the ould days. But at laste, mothers stay on the ground. I’ve no fancy to go roarin’ round the sky in a thing like a tin beetle. I’d like to feel there was something undher me, if I had to get out suddint.”

“I believe you’d love it if you tried it once, Murty,” Bill said earnestly. “You’d like to see all Billabong spread out below you.”

“I would not, then. I’d far rather be ridin’ over it, the way I cud look at the cattle quiet an’ aisy. ’Tis set in the ould ways I am, Masther Bill. An’ the new ways is all noisy an’ smelly. A mother’s bad enough; but I’m tould that in an airypplane ye’d have to yell like a fog-horn to make a man hear ye, an’ him sittin’ beside ye. What way is that to thravel, for a quiet man?”

“I think it would be so gorgeous to be up in one that I’d never think of the noise,” affirmed Bill. “I wouldn’t want to talk, anyhow.”

“Nor me, neither—I’d be too much occupied wid houldin’ on. There’s wan thing that surprises me, Masther Bill, an’ that’s to think of Mr. Bob flyin’. He’s that quiet an’ innocent-lookin’, but Mr. Wally’s afther tellin’ me that he was a holy terror in an airypplane in the war.”

“I know he was,” exclaimed Bill. “I’ve seen his medals and things. He doesn’t know I have, but Tommy showed them to me. She’s awfully proud of them.”

“An’ niver a wurrd does anywan hear out of Mr. Bob about it. He’ll talk about sheep like as if he was wound up, but I’ve niver heard him mention fightin’.”

“Had too much of it, I specs,” said Bill wisely. “Jim and Wally don’t talk much about it, either. I never knew Jim was a Major until Norah told me.”

“Ye’d niver know it from him. I only spoke to him the wanst about it, an’ all he said was that ’twas mighty little to be wan, when it only meant that so many betther men had been killed. But the Masther tould me different,” finished Murty softly.

He put his hand on the boy’s arm suddenly.

“Whisht, now, Masther Bill—d’ye hear annything?”

Bill stiffened. From far away came a faint sound. As they sat motionless it deepened slowly.

“That’s a plane—I know it is!” Bill shouted. “Oh, Murty, do you see

them?”

Murty had no intention of being the first to see them.

“Me eyes aren’t what they used to be. Watch, now, Masther Bill. Two of ’em oughtn’t to be harrd to pick up.”

Bill strained his eyes over the tree-tops. Suddenly he shouted.

“There they are—flying together! I’m off to tell the girls.” He climbed down the high fence like a monkey and raced towards the house, calling as he went:

“Norah! Norah! They’re coming!”

The garden gate banged behind him. He fled through the shrubbery, taking short cuts; leaped garden-beds, dodged round bushes, still shouting; and came out on the gravel sweep near the house just as a tall dark girl and a short fair one ran round the corner of the verandah.

Bill jerked his hand skyward.

“There they are! Come on, girls!”

Beyond the homestead, where the trees thinned, was a level sketch, roughly fenced in so that bullocks should not stray upon it. The grass had been cropped short by sheep, but it held no animals now, and along the middle and to one side a wide strip had been mown and rolled. A tall pole carried a white wind-indicator which blew out stiffly in the breeze. Two sheds were built against a fence.

“Look at them! My word, they’re coming fast!” gasped Bill, panting.

The droning was filling the air. From every point appeared the station folk, eager to see. Housemaids were at the yard gate, dwarfed by the mighty bulk of Mrs. Brown, a commanding figure in stiffly-starched white apron. Murty was already in the landing paddock; at his heels a slender blackfellow, moving with the noiselessness of his race.

“Keep well back, Bill,” Norah warned the boy.

The planes were dropping slowly, coming round in great circles, flashing silver when the sunlight caught them.

“Golly, they’re lovely!” breathed Bill. “Which is which, Norah?”

“The big one is Freddy’s. Look, Bill, he’s going to land first.”

The big plane roared over them, very low now. It turned, and sank gently. The wheels took the ground with scarcely a tremor: in a moment it was running smoothly up the fairway towards the sheds. As it stopped Freddy twisted in his seat to watch Jack’s landing.

Jack was in no hurry to leave the air. Freddy, he reflected, knew every inch of this ground, but he was a new-comer—he had no intention of making an awkward landing before a crowd of strangers. He circled slowly, studying the ground and the fences. Then he came down in a perfect three-point landing and taxied up to his leader. The two planes stood together, wing to wing. Freddy

chuckled softly.

“Very nice!” he murmured.

They climbed out of the cockpits, pushing up their goggles. Billabong surged to meet them.

“Hullo, Norah—Tommy—jolly good to see you again! You know Jack, Norah—Jack, this is Miss Rainham, until she tells you to call her Tommy!” Freddy pumped everyone’s hand. “I say, is this Bill? I’ve heard a lot about you, Bill—you’re the explorer, aren’t you?”—at which Bill’s cheeks became as red as his hair, though it was undoubtedly gratifying to find this big airman gripping his hand and smiling at him in so friendly a fashion.

Freddy needed more than one hand for his greetings. He charged down upon Mrs. Brown, who was waddling across the grass.

“Brownie, you’re not a day older! But I thought I’d find you gold-digging!”

“Me—with my figger! All the gold-mine I want is in me kitchen, Mr. Freddy, an’ it keeps me busy enough. Ain’t it nice, though, to see you again!”

“Nice to be here. Hullo, Murty! How’s the place?”

“Sure it’s not all it might be, sir. Billabong’s shplit up into camps, an’ it’s only Mrs. Brown that houlds it together at all, at all. ’Tis high time that you came to straighten out things.”

“Tall order for me!” laughed Freddy. “I’ll do my best, anyhow. Good day, Billy!” He waved a friendly hand towards the black boy, and a flash of white teeth made a streak across the dusky face. “You all right?”

“Plenty!” murmured Billy. He grinned widely again, and sidled over to the planes. Bill was there before him, eyes glued to the instrument board of the Kestrel.

“I say, you people have made a topping landing ground for us, Norah! Or is it that Wally and Jim have decided to take up flying, after all?”

“There’s no sign of it yet,” Norah said, smiling. “They have no time nowadays to think of anything so light-hearted as flying. It’s the other way round—they spend their days deep underground instead of in the air, like you.”

“Will it last, do you think? I can’t imagine Jim and Wally at that sort of game.”

“It’s hard to realize, even when you see them. They really are a shocking spectacle—whenever we go out there we find them clay from head to heels. Freddy, at one especially tense time they grew beards!”

“Beards!—oh, my sainted Aunt!” gasped Freddy faintly.

“But you will do it too, Freddy—you and Mr. Young,” put in Tommy Rainham, gleefully. “It happens, when you become a miner. When we visit you at the claim we shall only recognize you by your general outlines. All the rest will be clay and whiskers!”

“Freddy, have we got enough petrol to escape?” demanded Jack, casting a longing glance at the planes.

“There’s no escaping from these people, old man. Once they rope you in, you’re done, even if it means whiskers. Oh, well, if the boys can stand it, we can, I expect. Do they never leave this excavatin’ sort of life, Norah?”

“Oh, yes—they turn up every Saturday night. They say they come to see us, but we think that the real attraction is hot baths. They become extraordinarily clean, spend Sunday respectably—which means that they sleep a great deal—and if they happen to notice a spade anywhere they shudder. We try to remember to put all digging implements out of sight.”

“Then towards evening they grow restless,” Tommy said. “We know the symptoms quite well now. Shortly after the restlessness comes on the temperature rises, and very soon after that the patients may be observed on horses, going hard for the hills.”

“It sounds as if they’d got the disease horribly badly,” Freddy said dolefully. “Do you think we . . . ?” He hesitated.

“Oh yes, you’ll be just the same,” laughed Norah. “It’s terribly catching: even Tommy and I are not free from it. Get your things out and come in to the house, and we’ll tell you all about it. Jim said he hadn’t given you many details.”

“Did you ever know Jim write more than he had to? Not to me, anyhow.” Freddy turned, to find that Murty and Billy had already retrieved the luggage from the planes, and having done so, had relapsed into absorbed examination of the machines.

“Oh—thanks, Murty. Coming up with me this time?”

“Not for me, thanks, sir. But here’s a lad that’s very wishful for a trip.” The old Irishman smiled down at Bill—who reddened, looking at his boots.

“No reason why he shouldn’t, is there, Norah?” And Bill’s heart leaped.

“Not if you will take him. I wrote to his father for permission, and Mr. Blake seems resigned to anything Billabong suggests for Bill. I hope you’ll live up to the character I gave you for careful flying, Freddy!”

“Do I ever do anything else?” demanded the airman indignantly. Jack Young grinned, but said nothing. Freddy turned a severe eye upon him.

“Now, if it were Jack——” he began. “Oh, well, you’ll find out all about him in time. Coming in, Bill?”

Bill hesitated.

“Could I—could I sit in her for just a moment, do you think?” he begged.

“Rather—in you hop.”

Bill hopped with energy. He sat in the pilot’s seat, leaned back, and scanned the sky as though he proposed taking off immediately. A slow smile of joy lit his face.

“Do I have to come in to lunch, Norah?”

“You do. But not just yet. May he stay there, Freddy?”

For a moment Freddy looked doubtful. The curious ways of small boys with planes were not unknown to him.

Norah smiled.

“You can trust Bill. He won’t finger things.”

“If you say so, then it’s all right.” Freddy bestowed a friendly smile on the plane’s occupant and turned away.

The little procession moved towards the house, leaving Bill in his glory. He leaned forward, pretending to grip the joy-stick: looked hard at the propeller, seeing it, in imagination, beginning to turn slowly and then to become a flashing blur: in his mind heard the engine wake to quick throbs that deepened to a steady roar. And then—the sky!

A slight sound woke him from his dream of glory. He looked down. Billy was standing with one black hand on the wing, his face wistful.

“Hullo, Billy! I was nearly thinking I was flying.”

“Plenty!” agreed the blackfellow. They were allies of long standing: Billy was a person of very few words, but the native tongue, however halting, loosens with a child. He came a little nearer.

“Mas’ Bill——”

“What’s up, Billy?”

“Plenty that pfeller fly well,” stammered Billy. “Mas’ Bill—thinkit him takit this pfeller some day?—jus’ little?” He waved his hand in a gesture that took in all the sky. “Mine likit plenty.”

Bill looked at him, seeing all his own longing reflected in the dark eyes.

“Don’t see why he wouldn’t,” he said. “Tell you what, Billy; I don’t know him very well myself yet, but when I get to know him a bit better, I’ll ask him.”

“*Plenty* you good boy!” said Billy joyfully.

CHAPTER IV

ALOFT

I SHOULD like to know," said Freddy Paxton, "to what extent this mine of yours is a secret, Norah."

Lunch was over, and they were sitting on the wide verandah: Freddy and Jack stretched at length in deck-chairs, and Tommy curled up on a 'possum rug on the floor. Norah was knitting, but the knitting did not progress very quickly, so often did her eyes stray to where, on the buffalo-grass carpet of the lawn, her son Davie rolled contentedly with Bill and a big dog as playfellows.

"That is something we should rather like to know ourselves," she answered. "There is no secret where all the station people are concerned, of course. But they are as interested as we are in not letting it go any further."

"It was Bob Rainham's find originally?"

"Yes. He got the first specimens when he and the boys were out after cattle in the hill country. Then they were very cautious—they didn't even tell Tommy and me, for fear of raising false hopes. You see, Bob has had a pretty hard time lately: so hard that he was faced with a mortgage on his farm. That was because he and Tommy were proud and unfriendly and wouldn't let us know anything about it!"

She smiled down at Tommy, who was quite unmoved by the accusation.

"Knowin' something of Bob—and Tommy," said Freddy, "I can imagine that was the stiff necked sort of thing they *would* do."

"Yes. It annoyed Jim so that he is going to marry Tommy. I think he means to break her spirit!"

"Now that's interestin'," Freddy said. "The way yours is broken since you married Wally?"

"If you go on interrupting me, Freddy, how do you expect me to tell you about mines?" demanded Norah, severely.

"Go on—I withdraw everything," said he generously.

"Well—they told Dad, and had another inspection of the place; and it seemed so promising that they took Murty out to investigate thoroughly, because Murty was a miner once, in his wild youth, and he knows more about it than anyone else. And he had no doubt that they had struck something worth having, though they couldn't make sure until they sank a shaft."

"Oh!" said Freddy mournfully. "I pictured the stuff lyin' round in chunks."

"Well, there were small chunks. But Murty stuck to it that the real gold was underground. That meant a lot of work, of course—blasting rocks away

and doing very hard sinking. So all the men had to be brought into it. We all took out miners' rights and pegged out claims under Murty's directions, but the work itself was concentrated on Bob's claim. We call it The Hope."

"And The Hope turned out trumps?"

"Very much trumps. More than we dared to hope. They sank the shaft until it bottomed on rock, and that's where the really good results began. It was terribly exciting when they got to the bottom. That was where Murty hoped to find the heaviest gold; if his idea was right it should be just above the rock. Well—he *was* right."

"Do you mean . . . big nuggets?"

"Oh, no; nothing spectacular, though plenty of small nuggets have been found. But all the soil is rich gold-bearing stuff. It has to be all washed out, and that means work for a long while. Then the other claims have to be tested—they are sinking a shaft on another claim now."

"What men have you?"

"Our own men and several others: prospectors who had been in the hills for a long while. The boys let them into it on condition that they should work for wages and a percentage on our claims first. They have pegged out claims for themselves, but they won't sink on them yet—until our claims have been proved. All these men have been making only the barest living: they jumped at coming in on the boys' terms."

"I see," pondered Freddy. "But you can't expect to keep it a secret for long, can you?"

"Not if it is a really big thing. That's what has to be proved. There is always the chance that the first claims may be only a pocket. They are along a shallow gully where a stream must have flowed ages ago, and the gold may have been all water-borne, so that there may be none in the ground outside the gully."

"If that's so, it's certainly a matter of 'first come, first served,' isn't it?"

"Yes, and it may be limited to Bob's claim, because it's a curious spot, all shut in by rocks which may have trapped whatever gold there was. That is why we are so anxious to keep it a secret for the present. We ought to be able to do so, because the place is so lonely. The mouth is cut off by rocky hills, except for a very difficult track made by the prospectors: then the hilly country comes down to the river that flows between it and the main part of Billabong. It is all densely timbered and very rough: until Jim and Wally took it up as an out-station for young cattle no one ever went there except a few fossickers. And they were thought to be mad!"

She put down her knitting, looking earnestly at him.

"You see, Freddy, if the news got about there would be a rush. People would pour into the hills—many of them men of the worst type. The timber

would be felled, the ground cut to pieces and made useless for cattle or anything else; and it might be all for nothing: just heart-break for a great number of men. We don't want to keep the gold all for ourselves, supposing it is there. We only want to make sure first. Then, if it is really more than a pocket, the rush must come; but we shall have established a little colony of decent, steady men in the middle of it, and they will help the authorities to keep order."

"I suppose your father would report it quietly to Melbourne and have mounted police sent out and generally check any wild goings-on."

"Yes. He says that the first thing to do would be to improve the northern track and set up a general store there. People wouldn't realize it, but they would simply starve in those hills—that has almost happened to some of the old prospectors. They lived by carrying in bare necessities like tea and flour from Broad's Creek, ten miles north, and then trusting to shooting an odd kangaroo or wallaby; and there are blackfish in the creeks. A large number of men couldn't do that."

"And, as you say, that would be the last thing that scallywags from Melbourne or Sydney would realize." Freddy knitted his brows. "It looks like being a job of work, Norah."

"A very big job—if it comes off. Not the sort of job we ever hankered after, for Billabong. But Dad and the boys are determined that if Billabong turns into a gigantic mining camp it's going to do it decently."

"But, Norah—it could never spread to your own Billabong. It would only be in the hill country."

"We hope so. Dad doesn't think gold would ever be found on this side of the river; it's the wrong kind of soil. But we might have hopeful people looking for it. However—we don't mean to meet that particular trouble halfway."

"I must say," remarked Freddy, regarding her critically, "that for people who may be on the edge of makin' a big pile you seem—well, un-excited!"

"Don't you believe it!" Norah laughed. "We've been living on thrills for weeks. Only thrills subside after a while."

"If you had seen everyone on the day when The Hope produced its trumps you would not have thought them calm, Freddy," said Tommy, twinkling. "Such a celebration! I believe Mr. Linton danced with old Lee Wing!"

"Now, that must have been a sight worth seein'," chuckled Freddy. "Has Lee Wing deserted his cabbage-growing to indulge the Chinese passion for gold-digging?"

"Not he—he doesn't seem to have any more use for gold than Murty has. But he's quite invaluable as Camp Cook. We have put in an unworthy substitute to grow vegetables. The place doesn't seem the same without Lee

Wing,” said Norah. “He has ruled our kitchen-garden since before I was born, and I miss him badly.”

“Norah, what are you doing with the gold you’ve got already?” Freddy asked. “Are the boys using sacks of it for pillows?”

“Well—the work has so far been more sinking than gold-mining,” she said. “When the regular washing-out of the great mullock-heaps begins we hope to have more to deal with. One nice little bundle, after coming here in instalments, was put into a grubby old bag and Bob and Wally, in old clothes, drove to Bendigo and sold it to a bank.”

“Were questions asked?”

“The boys were vague on that point. I’m quite sure their answers were vague. Anyhow, it was sold, and Bob immediately began to study motor catalogues for a new car for Tommy. Only he hadn’t time to buy it: the mine swallowed him again.”

She began to laugh.

“This family isn’t really fit to have gold. We can’t take it seriously enough. The boys leave little parcels of it about in all sorts of places, and if the parcels get mislaid it doesn’t worry them—nothing like the hullabaloo that stirs the house over a missing pipe!”

“Whew!” whistled Jack Young. “I wonder if I could ever feel like that!”

Norah considered him.

“Yes, I think so. Unless you really wanted it badly to buy something.”

“A new plane, for instance?” he said eagerly.

“Yes. You would be very keen to get enough to buy it, and you’d weigh your little bit of gold every day, as Bob did until he knew there was enough to save his farm. After you had the new plane you wouldn’t feel so keen. The gold would just be stuff you dig up—like potatoes!”

“I’ll try to believe it!” he said, looking as though belief could not develop. “I suppose the fun is in getting it—not just having it.”

“Just that,” Norah said. “There’s only a real thrill at first. After that, if you think too much about the actual gold it seems to become . . . well . . . a bit grubby.”

That was altogether foreign to Jack’s previous ideas, yet suddenly he felt that it was true. He felt dimly that Norah seemed able to make unlikely things sound true, because she herself so completely believed them. He liked to listen to her: her voice was deep for a girl, and very gentle—but when anything moved her there came into it a sudden ring that made you want to hear it again. She had shown that she could be serious enough, yet laughter was never very far from her; he remembered how they had laughed throughout lunch at all sorts of ridiculous things.

His thoughts went back to their first meeting, at the races in Melbourne,

when she and Jim and Wally had so clearly been bent on having a good time, and had carried him and Freddy along with them. Races—theatres—gay dinners followed by gayer dances. What a week it had been! And now these merry people were up against a job of work, and were taking it seriously even while they joked about it. Jack was aware of being very glad that he was to share the job.

Freddy was speaking.

“Well, I promised young Bill a flip. How about it, Norah? Any other passengers?”

“I say, Mrs. Meadows, will you come up in my Planet?” Jack asked eagerly. “She isn’t as big as Freddy’s bus, but she’s quite comfortable.”

“I’d love it,” Norah said, smiling at him. “Tommy and I were hoping we should be asked. We have been aching to fly, ever since Freddy’s last visit.”

“Then you’ll come with me and Bill, Tommy?” Freddy said. “Good. What will become of Davie, Norah?”

“I’ll take him to Brownie.” She raised her voice. “Bill!”

It was a signal Bill had been hungrily awaiting. He knew that the grown-ups had had to discuss business, and that his part had been to keep Davie away, since the presence of a gentleman not yet two, who was, moreover, apparently made of quicksilver, was apt to interfere with any discussion. Bill thought, however, that they had had time enough to talk over all the affairs of the world.

He gathered himself up from the grass with a bound and shot over to the verandah.

“Are we going?” He fixed his eyes on Freddy.

“All hands aloft,” responded Freddy. “Look at your man there—he’s annoyed.”

Davie was coming over the lawn, hauling at the dog’s collar—torn between a desire to catch Bill and a determination not to leave Kim behind. His black curls were full of bits of buffalo-grass, his cheeks scarlet with wrath. Rapidly he uttered a great many things, none of them clear, except to himself.

“Come along, Kim!” Bill gave a low whistle.

All dogs were friends with Bill. Kim quickened his pace immediately, with the result that Davie, still holding fast, was carried along briskly, which was just what he wanted. Wrath turned into delighted chuckles. Norah moved to the edge of the verandah, sitting down. She held out her arms, into which Kim safely delivered his charge.

“Horse!” said Davie. “Wide a horse!”

“Not now, old man,” said Norah. “Brownie now.”

Davie was a being of fixed purposes, but he had learned that his mother was equally determined; that when she said “Not now,” in a certain tone it was wise to accept a substitute. Luckily the one she offered was acceptable. He said

“Bwown!” joyfully—knowing well that in Brownie’s kitchen mysterious delights always awaited him. Last time he had made scones. He did not know many things more entertaining: soft white lumps that went into queer holes and shapes when you punched them, covering your fingers with a substance wholly delightful that could be lingeringly licked off. “Bwown!” said Davie, and tugged at his mother’s hand.

Norah picked him up and carried him to the kitchen, where Brownie received him with enthusiasm. There was less enthusiasm in her reception of the news that they were about to fly.

“I dunno if you ought, with the Master and Mr. Wally away. All of you, too!” said Brownie. “I’d like to feel that at least some of you were on the ground.” She looked anxiously at the tall girl she had nursed as a baby. “I know Mr. Freddy’s careful—but I’d say that other young feller could be a bit harum-scarum.”

“Don’t you worry, Brownie—why, Mr. Young’s mother flies with him to Brisbane, hundreds of miles,” Norah told her. “And we’re going to be extra careful, because it’s Bill’s first trip.”

“Well, I won’t come out to see you start, or it ’ud only upset me,” declared Brownie. “You an’ me’ll make scones, Davie, darling.”

“And we’ll be back to eat them,” laughed Norah.

Tommy was waiting for her, holding her coat and cap. They hurried to what Bill firmly called the aerodrome, where Freddy and Jack were busy with sundry adjustments, while Bill, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, stared fixedly at the Kestrel. His lips were pressed tightly together.

He was not happy. This was the moment for which he had longed ever since he knew that Freddy was to fly to Billabong. He had felt that he simply did not know how to wait for it to come. To fly—well, every boy wanted that. But to fly in a machine that was staying with you, with a pilot you actually knew! Not many boys had such luck.

And now, to his utter disgust, he was suddenly afraid. Just as the beautiful dream was coming true, when in five minutes he would be shooting across the sky, he had become all different. His legs did not seem to belong to him: his heart was beating in a queer, jerky fashion: his hands felt wet and prickly. He did not know how he was going to walk to the plane; to think of climbing into it made him feel sick.

He cast a despairing glance at Norah. She had not looked his way: all her attention was given to the things the airmen were doing. Then he heard Tommy’s voice beside him. Once before in sharp need he had been glad of Tommy’s voice—for a moment he remembered that time.

“Queer things, are they not, Bill?” Tommy did not speak like most people; she had been brought up in France, and her English was just a little different.

Bill liked it—in Tommy; it caught his attention now.

“There is a question I have always wanted to ask Norah, only I am ashamed,” she said. “I often wonder if she knew how terribly frightened I was on the first time Freddy took us up.”

Bill did not answer, because he couldn't. Tommy did not seem to notice.

“It is so shaming to be afraid, when one is grown-up,” she said. “If I had been little of course it would have been quite natural. And I did not dream that I was going to be frightened: I had been looking forward to going up, just as you are now, all excited and happy. But suddenly, at the last moment I began to quake and shiver inside me. Oh, Bill, I never told anyone, but I would have loved to run away!”

There was a queer sound from Bill which might have meant anything.

“It was most lucky that suddenly I remembered something Bob had told me. He said that ever so many people were like that just before they went up for the first time. People who became first-class pilots after. Bob was afraid himself. That cheered me, because—well, you know what Bob is. And he said that it doesn't last a moment, once the plane moves. I found that, Bill. It goes away immediately.”

“True?” said a small voice.

“Quite true. Immediately, Bill. I clung hard to that thought. I said over and over to myself—‘This goes away—it goes away!’ I found myself saying it in French—‘*Ça passe, ça passe, ça passe!*’ And then I was in the plane, and she began to move, and all of a sudden I could say ‘It's gone!’ ”

“Quite gone?”

“Every bit. I was just loving it. And when you are up, of course you have no sensation of height, any more than you have in a car. You feel that you have found a new world—that you own it. Oh, it is even better than you could ever have dreamed, Bill!”

The planes had become alive. Both propellers were spinning: the engines began to roar. Freddy, unfamiliar in his helmet and goggles was in the Kestrel, beckoning to them. There was no time to think. Bill felt Tommy's hand close firmly on his wrist; in a moment his foot was on the tread-plate and he had scrambled in, Tommy close to him in the rear cockpit. She glanced down at him, smiling a little to see that his lips were moving steadily. Bill was saying his lesson.

Freddy looked round.

“All set? We're going to fly over the mine—Bill's choice. Norah will show Jack the way, so we'll let them lead.”

The propellers had become spinning blurs, the noise of the engines deafening. The Planet moved slowly forward, bumping over the ground. She turned into the wind, running past them. Bill could not look round; all he could

do was to grip himself tightly, murmuring—"It goes away—it goes away!" Only "it" did not seem to be going away: he knew he was trembling.

Then they were moving. It seemed a crawl at first, until they swung round into the wind and taxied up the mown grass, their speed increasing rapidly. There was a little bump, a long hop, a faint jar. Then utter smoothness, and the wind suddenly roaring in their ears and the earth dropping away as the plane went up in a long low slant. Fences and trees were a blur beneath them: ahead was only the welcoming blue of the sky. Bill found himself shouting:

"Tommy! I'm flying!"

Where was Fear? It had vanished in a flash. He could hardly imagine that he had ever been afraid. All his being seemed full of a wild joy that was unlike anything he had ever known. "A new world," Tommy had said. That was just what it was—a new world.

They climbed steadily for a few moments, then turned again and swooped down in a slow dive over the homestead and circled it twice. The lagoon was a mirror lying among the trees. Peering over the side Bill picked out the orchard and outbuildings: waved and shouted to the little forms by the stables, Murty and Billy, and again, with extra vigour, when they roared over the back yard, where Brownie—forgetting her resolve not to look—gaped upwards with Davie in her arms.

The Planet turned her nose towards the hills, and they followed, gaining height rapidly. The bullocks on the Far Plain looked like ants. Bill broke into laughter to see the horses fling up their heads and gallop away wildly as the great birds flashed over them. Freddy banked, and all the earth seemed to tilt—a startling but wholly delightful sensation. Bill looked up at Tommy, his face scarlet with excitement, his eyes dancing.

"Oh—isn't it *gorgeous!*" He caught hold of her hand giving it a grateful squeeze, and she laughed back at him. He knew that she said something, but he couldn't hear it—and knew it didn't matter. Nothing mattered now.

They passed over the river, a thread of silver among the trees. Below them now was the dense timber of the hill country. Not very easy to pick up the mine among the trees: the Planet missed it at first and the planes soared beyond the farthest hills, coming out over the bare tableland that led to the township of Broad's Creek. That was all to the good, in Bill's view, because they had to bank again and swing round, heading again for the hills. They flew slowly then in circles, with the Kestrel following the Planet closely; and presently Norah signalled with a handkerchief, pointing downwards.

"There's the mine!" Bill yelled.

A thread of smoke drifted slowly upwards; Lee Wing's cooking-fire. They flew as low as the pilots dared, swooping again and again over the tiny cleared space where clay-coloured figures gesticulated and waved, scarcely to be

distinguished among great heaps of yellow earth and felled timber. They shouted, though they knew no shouts could be heard. Finally the Planet soared swiftly away, going higher and higher, and Freddy opened his plane's throttle and followed, until the world was only a green blur below them.

He turned in his seat, shouting to his passengers:

"Any hurry to go home?"

"No!" yelled Bill. Tommy shook her head, laughing.

"Well, hold tight, and we'll do a little switchbacking!"

The rest of the flight was a confused dream of delirious joy. Long dives that seemed as if they could only end on the ground, but turned miraculously to effortless upward soaring; again the eagle's swoop down, flattening out and banking in splendid curves. They flashed over Cunjee township, where the afternoon train was just crawling in. Bill chuckled to think of the guard, who was one of his friends: he would be staring up at them, he knew. If only he could tell him where he was!

Farther and farther, the wind whistling through the wires, the engine's beat like a chant of triumph in Bill's ears: until the sun dropped westward, and it was time to think of home. One last banking turn; and then a straight race to Billabong with the throttle fully open and Freddy leaning back with the careless air of the pilot who leaves his machine to fly itself.

All too soon the red roof of the homestead was in sight. Below them, as the Kestrel banked, lay the landing field, the white wind-indicator standing out stiffly. They dropped down; Freddy switched off the engine. The ground seemed to rush up to meet them. Under the pilot's light hand the Kestrel's tail dropped as he eased off the glide. There was scarcely a jar as the landing-wheels touched the grass; the plane bounced lightly, the engine roared again for a moment, and they were running fast up the smooth turf, coming to rest near the Planet.

Freddy turned, pushing up his goggles.

"Well, young 'un—like it?"

"Like it!" Bill gasped. "Oh, it's ripping! I say, could we go up again some time?"

"That depends on the mine. If my boss gives me any time off—why not?" He smiled at the boy's delighted face. "He'll make a flier all right, Tommy, won't he?"

"But of course," Tommy said calmly. "I always knew he would. Freddy, that was a lovely trip. How my poor Bob must have ached to be with us—it was almost cruel to romp about in the air over those poor earth-shovellers!"

"Oh, we'll bring them back and take them to sweep the cobwebs off the sky some day soon," he told her, helping her to jump down. Bill was already on the ground, looking at the propeller as if it were curious to see it so still. He

walked round the Planet to see the long brown mark her tail-skid had left in the ground. Little tufts of grass and dusty clods showed where it had bitten.

“You’ll be looping the loop some day, old chap,” said Jack Young’s friendly voice. “That’s fun, if you like!”

“O-oh!” said Bill. “Can you?”

Jack nodded. “Easy, when you know how.”

“I saw it—at the pictures,” Bill said. “It was wonderful. You didn’t do it to-day, did you? Not with Norah?”

“He did not,” Norah put in. “I know my limitations, Bill.”

“Wally’s a bigger man than I am,” remarked Jack solemnly. “I don’t see myself doing stunts with his property on board. But now that I’ve landed her safely—care to see it, Bill?”

“Golly!” uttered Bill.

“Careful, now, young Jack,” warned Freddy. “I promised your mother I’d keep my eye on you.”

“Well, so you can,” was Jack’s placid response. He climbed into the Planet, adjusting straps and buckles. “Give me a start, old chap.”

Freddy swung the propeller. The engine blared, settling to a steady throb. Jack gave it a couple of minutes before he moved off, while he tested rudder and controls. Then he was gone. The Planet rose lightly, skimmed the fence, and streaked westward on a long upward slant.

She had reached a height that made her only a silver dot in the sky before she turned, racing back towards the landing ground in a tremendous dive. Almost directly over the watchers, her tail went down and she zoomed upwards, rocketing into the sky. Higher and higher; until her nose came slowly back, the sun flashing on her upturned wings as she went over in a smooth inverted curve that brought gasps from the onlookers and even an admiring ejaculation from Freddy. She fell rapidly, until Bill held his breath; then, the engine’s deep roaring filling the air, she flattened out and began to climb again.

Three times she soared and looped and dived, rolling and spinning like a maddened bird. Jack straightened her out for the last time, circled once or twice, and came back to earth. He was laughing, his sun-tanned face a little flushed.

“Any more for the sky before she goes to bed?”

Bill, still panting with wonder and delight, saw a wistful black face that peeped through the wing-struts. His promise to Billy came back to him.

He ran over to Freddy, putting a half-timid hand on his arm.

“I say, sir—Billy’s awfully keen to go up. D’you think Mr. Young would mind giving him a turn?”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t.” Freddy walked over to the Planet, spoke to Jack in

a low tone, and turned, beckoning to the black boy.

“Here, Billy! Want to go up?”

Billy came forward at a run.

“Plenty! But not——” He swept his hand round in an expressive whirl.

“No, no loops, Billy. Just an easy canter. Hop in!”

The bare black foot touched the tread-plate and he was behind Jack with a cat-like swing. He sat gripping the edge of the cockpit tightly, his face as expressionless as an idol’s, while the plane moved away. Then they sailed into the air.

Billy leaned over the side. There was no inch of the Billabong paddocks that he did not know. Long years before, his tribe had roamed over them when they were wild country: Billy had had no other home.

But this was a new Billabong that he saw. The great paddocks seemed to contract to little patches—hard to think that it took so long to ride over them. The shorthorn bullocks were tiny things that crawled: the lagoon no larger than a plate. He did not like it. It was queer, unnatural, to see his own country so changed.

He sat up straight, and the joy of their rushing flight took him. This was better; a beautiful loud noise and the wind booming in his ears. Jack, glancing at him, saw his mouth expand in a wide grin. It was still there when, five minutes later, they landed.

Billy got out reluctantly, met by Bill’s excited questioning.

“What do you think of it, Billy? Ripping, isn’t it?”

“Plenty this pfeller likit,” said the black boy. “Him plenty easy.” He looked round at Jack; too shy to speak, but his eyes were grateful.

“We’ll go again some day, Billy,” said Jack, climbing out. “What now?”—as he saw that something more was coming.

“This pfeller clean car—pretty good,” stammered Billy. “You likit I clean your plane, Boss? Can do.”

“Do let him, Jack,” Norah said. “He’ll do it beautifully.”

“Jolly good offer,” said Jack, glancing at the marks of travel which the Planet showed freely. Its polish was dimmed: there were dusty black patches and streaks where oil had been blown on to fuselage and wings. “I’ll come out presently and show you how, Billy.”

“All ri’, Boss. Mine clean *two* planes, all same,” said the delighted blackfellow.

“I’m coming to help,” piped Bill. “I’ll be back directly after tea, Billy.”

That was one of the best parts of the day, Bill thought, later on. Freddy and Jack had done more than merely directing the cleaning: they had shown him the engines, explained the workings of the controls, and discoursed on flying from the technical point of view, using terms simple enough for a small boy to

grasp. They had interspersed the informal lecture with stories of flying that thrilled Billy as much as they thrilled the white boy. Then they had gone away, leaving them to work: and the rest of the afternoon had been a happy orgy of oil and rags and polish. The owners came back to pronounce the work well and truly done, after which all hands had rolled the planes into the sheds that did duty as hangars. Bill had shot home the heavy wooden bolts. There were no locks; but planes were not easily stolen—especially on Billabong.

Getting clean was a lengthy job that evening. Bill came out of the bathroom glowing with much scrubbing, and trotted to find a coat. His room was a mosquito-netted enclosure at the end of the balcony, shared with Jim, when Jim was at home: he gave a happy little sigh to think that in a couple of days Jim would be back in it. And then there would be shearing, with all its work and excitement. He whistled gaily as he brushed his red hair.

On the balcony, as he came out, was Tommy, ready for dinner: a very dainty Tommy in a frock of misty green. She was looking across the plains to the hill country, so deep in thought that she jumped when she found him near her.

“Did I ever see anyone so well groomed! You have had a great day, Bill.”

“Gosh, yes!” said Bill. “One of the very best days I ever had. I did wish Jim had been here, though.”

“Yes,” said Tommy. “That would have made it even better.”

“Things never seem quite the same if Jim’s out of them,” he said.

“Not quite the same,” she agreed.

Bill joined her at the balcony rail. Together they looked across the paddocks in silence.

“Tommy,” he said presently. “Did you know how scared I was this afternoon? Before I flew?”

“You didn’t show anything, Bill,” she told him swiftly.

“Well, I’m jolly glad if I didn’t. You—you don’t think *they* knew . . . ?”

“Freddy and Jack? No, certainly not. There was nothing to show them.”

Bill sighed with relief.

“I’d have hated them to know I was such a fool. But . . . you knew, Tommy.”

“I think I just felt it, Bill. Perhaps because I had been afraid myself—and because Bob had told me how men feel.”

She chose her words carefully, and the “men” was balm to Bill’s self-respect. He looked up at her gratefully.

“It did me good when you told me about that. And the thing you told me to say. I was scared stiff, you know, Tommy.”

“But it went away.”

“Rather—just like you said. Tommy, you were no end of a brick to me!”

“Oh, we have forgotten all about that,” she said lightly. “Bury it quite away, Bill.”

Bill considered this.

“No, I don’t think I want to,” he said. “It’ll help me, if I remember it some other time when I get scared of anything.” He drew a deep breath. “Gosh, Tommy, it is lovely to think I never need be scared in the sky again!”

CHAPTER V

INTO THE HILLS

BILL was up early next morning, for he had a day of responsibility ahead. His was the task of taking Freddy and Jack out to the mine. This could have been done equally well, he knew, by either Murty or Billy; indeed, Bill had expected that one of them would be sent, and had privately resolved to beg that he might accompany the party. Thus it had been a blissful moment when Norah had asked him gravely if he would mind acting as escort.

Nor was that all. He was to stay away for the night, sleeping in the big cave where his own special little bunk always stood ready: and next day he would come galloping home with Mr. Linton and Jim and Wally, all rejoicing that the dull grind of gold-mining was to be exchanged for real station work once more—the cheerful business of shearing. It was no wonder that the world was all rose-colour to Bill.

He paused on the balcony on his way to his bath to look at the weather. That was rose-colour too: not a cloud in the sky, and the sun already chasing the morning mists away over the flats. Birds were busy in the trees below him: a pair of blue wrens hopped about on the lawn, looking for breakfast, the little cock brave in his shining livery of blue and white and black, his long tail perkily upright. Bill watched them for a moment. Then he realized that pyjamas gave scant protection against the chilly morning air and ran off to shiver under the cold shower, restoring warmth by a hard rub down.

Brownie gave him tea in the kitchen. He drank it hurriedly and made for the stables, nibbling a biscuit as he went. The horses had already been brought in from the paddock; the three they were to ride were in the stable-yard, and Billy was grooming Struan, Jim's big grey. Struan was to carry Freddy, by Jim's orders; an honour, as Bill knew, for Jim did not lend his best horses to everyone. A good-looking bay, Jack's mount, stood in the corner of the yard: near him a little black mare, Topsy, the pride of Bill's heart.

She whinnied as he came up to the gate. Billy glanced round, grinned a morning greeting to Bill, and continued to remove mud delicately from Struan's hock. Bill called softly: the black pony came to meet him, rubbing her head against his shoulder. He talked to her; presently her nose sought his pocket, and the boy laughed as he fished out the apple that never failed to be there for her.

She took it from his palm daintily. He stroked her neck while she crunched it; then she followed him to the door of the harness-room, standing quietly

while he took off his coat and brought out a brush. There was never any need to put a halter on Topsy when Bill groomed her—and no other hand made her toilet whenever he was staying at Billabong.

It was a job he loved: he would not have scamped it even if he had not loved it, for Jim, who had been his teacher, exacted a high standard of grooming. From forelock to pasterns Topsy had to shine before Bill was satisfied. Struan and Russet were finished and enjoying their oats when at length he put down the brush, looking with satisfaction at her satin coat.

“Plenty good,” remarked Billy. “Mas’ Jim thinkit all same, mine thinkit. Mine bin put her feed in loose-box, Mas’ Bill.”

“Thanks,” Bill answered. He led the mare into the stable, eyeing her with pride as she plunged her nose into her breakfast. Then, coat over arm, he returned to the house.

Davie met him on the verandah and demanded to be taken to find a horse. Bill rather liked Davie—as much as a boy of twelve can be expected to like a baby. For Norah’s sake he occasionally suffered many things at his hands. Had he disclosed his inmost thoughts he would have admitted a conviction that Davie was most admirable when asleep. Still, he belonged to Norah, who undoubtedly thought a lot of him; in Bill’s eyes any property of Norah’s had to be treated with respect.

This morning, however, he had no time for babies. He disengaged carefully the small fingers that gripped his riding-breeches. “Not a hope, old chap!” he said airily, and passed on, leaving Davie to console himself as best he might.

He looked into the dining-room. Breakfast was nearly ready: through the window he could see Tommy in the garden, gathering flowers. Heavy feet sounded on the stairs: Bill looked round to see Freddy and Jack coming down, laden with bulging valises and dressed in well-worn coats and breeches. That looked like business. He greeted them in a manner modelled on Jim’s, suggesting the back verandah as a suitable dumping-ground for the valises.

It was somewhat disconcerting to see Freddy return from the verandah with Davie perched on his shoulder, holding on by his hair and energetically demanding “Horse!” Freddy plunged out through the front door and galloped madly round the lawn, giving an unsurpassed imitation of a fiery steed, urged to greater efforts by the sandalled feet that drummed on his chest. Jack strolled into the garden and joined Tommy.

“Well!” muttered Bill expressively. He suddenly discovered that he was still carrying his coat, and that his hands were in urgent need of washing. Lucky that he had found that out before Norah came on the scene. Feeling not quite so grown-up, he raced to the bathroom.

The gong sounded before he was ready. He tore downstairs, finding everyone at the table—Norah smiling at him over the big tea-pot. Davie had

disappeared, and there seemed a chance of people realizing that this was a day of serious things. He ate a very large breakfast, smiling faintly when someone commented on the fact that he was unusually silent.

“Oh, Bill is a responsible person to-day,” Norah said. “He has cares on his shoulders. Been busy at the stables, Bill?”

Bill muttered “A bit,” and felt embarrassed, since the two men looked at him.

“Got something steady for me to ride, Bill?” inquired Freddy. “None of your wild young ones for me, I hope.”

Bill grinned, knowing something of Freddy’s reputation in the saddle.

“Jim said Russet for Mr. Young and Struan for you,” he said.

“Then we’ll struggle out somehow, Jack,” said Freddy. “Struan and I made friends last time I was here, and I seem to remember seeing Tommy sailing over fences on Russet.”

“No fences for me, thank you, with a big valise on my saddle,” responded Jack firmly.

“Oh, there’s no need. This is a quiet trip. But they put me on a young black horse of Wally’s one day, and I haven’t forgotten it. And did he buck!”

“But you stayed with him, Freddy,” said Tommy.

“I don’t know that I’d put it quite that way. He didn’t get rid of me, but there were times when I seemed to be so high above him that it was sheer luck to hit the saddle again. That ride was full of air-pockets!” laughed Freddy. “Has Wally got him any steadier yet?”

“He is probably madder than ever—poor Wally hasn’t had a chance to ride anything exciting lately,” answered Norah. “They can’t take young horses over the hilly tracks to the mine. The black is turned out: Wally is looking forward to a gay time when he gets him in again.”

“He’ll have it,” pronounced Freddy. “I should like to see the first experiments—though I never saw the horse that could shift Wally.”

Norah smiled slightly.

“Oh, Zulu—that black horse—did it once——”

“Well, I say, Norah, that wasn’t Wally’s fault!” broke in Bill indignantly. “You know it was only that beastly rabbit-hole!”

Norah received this championship of her husband meekly.

“Well, yes. Wally was out on the Far Plain alone, and Zulu didn’t like a quail that got up under his nose, so he tried to buck; and when Wally discouraged that, he bolted. Then he put his foot in a hole and came down, and Wally flew over his head for quite a long distance.”

“Was he hurt?”

“Only in his temper, he said. Zulu made for home—he jumped the fence, with the saddle half-way round; luckily he had put his foot through the bridle

and broken it, or there might have been worse trouble.”

“And poor old Wally walked home meekly! I’ll bet he was annoyed,” laughed Freddy.

“He was annoyed, but he didn’t walk home. One of our old ponies was turned out on the Far Plain; Wally caught him and rode him in, using a piece of string for a bridle. Darby is very ancient, blind of one eye, and small and tubby; and he had a winter coat like a yak’s—can you imagine Wally on him, with his feet nearly on the grass?”

Freddy chuckled deeply.

“Lovely sight! I hope you didn’t miss it, Norah?”

“No, that was the pleasant part. We hadn’t seen Zulu, who had stopped at the lagoon for a drink: but we were all in the garden at Little Billabong when Wally burst into view on Darby. If you can call it ‘burst,’ that is!” she added reflectively.

“‘Waddled’ would be better,” suggested Tommy.

“He refused to stay put while I got the camera,” laughed Norah. “And that was a pity. He removed himself hurriedly to catch Zulu and teach him manners.”

She glanced round the table.

“Everyone finished?”

Bill was up like a shot.

“The horses are ready whenever you like, Mr. Paxton,” he said eagerly.

“No lettin’ the grass grow under our feet with Bill in charge.” Freddy pushed his chair back. “All right, General: we’ll get a move on. Don’t let that urchin of yours catch sight of me, Norah, or he’ll want to ride me again, and I’m not equal to it directly after breakfast. Between him and Bill I’ve got to toe the line to-day.”

Bill might have resented being classed with Davie had he waited to hear the finish of Freddy’s remarks, but he had not. He was out of the room like a flash, gathering up his felt hat as he tore through the hall, cramming it on his red hair, and so to the kitchen, to bid Brownie a hasty good-bye. Visions of staggering to the stables with the valises, one by one, had crossed his mind: but they had disappeared, collected by the thoughtful Billy. Bill fled in pursuit, finding the three horses ready bridled, the valises strapped to the saddles.

“Startin’ now, Mas’ Bill?”

“When the others come,” said Bill, frowning. He knew the ways of grown-ups, who always seemed to have things to talk about at very important moments. His forebodings were justified, for it was quite ten minutes before anyone appeared—a period he spent restlessly wandering about the yard, too impatient even to talk to Topsy. Billy leaned against the gate-post with the complete stillness of the blackfellow, his eyes on the back verandah.

“Comin’, Mas’ Bill.”

“About time, too,” growled Bill. He strode to Topsy, slipped her rein off the hitching post and led her out to meet the advancing procession: the girls on either side of Jack and Freddy, with Davie skirmishing in the rear. Norah picked up her son, disregarding his emphatic demands for a horse.

“You’re safer off the ground, old chap. No, you can’t have Bill—he’s busy.”

“Topsy!” pleaded Davie. Bill’s heart softened. He let the little mare up to them.

“You can pat her nose, Davie, but that’s all.” Davie accepted the invitation with energy, and Topsy seemed to enjoy the touch of the eager little hand.

“All set!” Freddy and Jack finished their inspection of girths and pack-straps.

“Good-bye, everybody! Don’t let your commando drop over the side of a hill, Bill.”

“Oh, they’d make a lovely three-point landing if they did!” said Bill, with a broad grin.

“And to think he flew for the first time yesterday!” said Jack, looking at his guide with an awe-struck air. “Well, it shows what the study of literature will do. Carry on, Squadron-Leader! we’ll try to keep in formation behind you.”

Once on the march Bill lost all sense of responsibility. It was not possible to be grave with these two cheerful Queenslanders, who beguiled the way with stories of flying and made jokes at each other’s expense, treating him in no way like a small boy, but making him feel that he was one of themselves. Moreover, they were men with an eye for cattle. Jim’s little “offsider” had ridden over the run so often, schooled by the Billabong men to use his eyes, that he was able to point out different types of bullocks fairly accurately—these were station-bred, those others bought down in Gippsland; or the great shorthorns on the river-flats, waiting their turn to be sent to Melbourne markets as fat cattle.

The men liked him. He was not bumptious; there was always a touch of shyness about him, as if he found words a little difficult. But over the cattle his enthusiasm bubbled out; his round, freckled face grew flushed, his eyes bright. For to Bill cattle stood for all that was happiest on Billabong: long days in the saddle, with Jim as his chief teacher; work and fun and excitement; all that had changed him insensibly from a boy who was friends with nobody to one who was everybody’s friend. Bill could not have put it into words. He knew that all Billabong had helped him, and he was quite sure that the bullocks had had a share in the helping.

“You seem to know a bit about ’em, old chap,” said Jack.

The boy looked embarrassed.

“No, I’m an awful duffer. You see, I’ve always lived in Melbourne—you can’t learn about cattle there. But Jim tries to teach me the differences. Only I forget such a lot when I go back to school.”

“Oughtn’t you to be at school now?”

A smile of wicked joy dawned.

“My school’s quarantined. Measles. Gorgeous luck, isn’t it?”

Freddy and Jack agreed promptly that it was.

“And what are you going to do when you leave school?”

“Going to have a station,” said Bill firmly. “Of course I’ll have to begin with a tiny little one. But Jim’s going to show me how, so it’s all right.”

“I reckon whatever Jim says is all right with you,” observed Jack, watching him.

“You bet it is,” Bill said.

They cantered quietly through some of the wide paddocks. There were many gates; Bill always shot ahead when they neared one, so that he could be the gate-opener, and Freddy and Jack, quick to see that his pride as host was concerned, did not interfere. They would thank him gravely as they passed through, which Bill considered extremely decent. So they came to the river, crossed the home-made bridge, and struck into the foothills.

Beyond them the higher hills towered. They passed through the fence that marked the boundary of the station, coming at once into rough country where the way ran over stony ridges and dipped sharply into gullies. It was slow progress, though quicker than it had been a few weeks before. Then there had been no track save the narrow paths made by grazing herds of young cattle: now there was a well-beaten track, the result of constant travelling between Billabong and the mine.

“Plenty of going and coming there, Bill,” remarked Freddy.

“Yes. It’s mostly Billy and pack-horses. He’s always going backwards and forwards with stores and supplies. They take a lot of feeding at the mine, you know,” said Bill learnedly—“you’d be s’prised at all the meat we have to kill. And of course we go out a lot. Norah and Tommy camp in the cave sometimes.”

His face lit up.

“The cave’s just ripping. It’s a huge big place, and there are passages winding right into the hill, and lots of smaller caves. We’ve had adventures there. I’d like to explore them all the time, but I’m not allowed there on my own, ’cause it’s pretty dangerous in lots of places.” He looked suddenly hopeful. “If you thought you’d like to have an explore there I’d be let go with you.”

“Rather!” said Freddy. “There would be a polite fiction that we were looking after you, but in reality it would be you who would be shepherding us.

What about lighting? Are they all dark?"

"All but the big one, but we've got petrol lanterns and lots of torches. I say, do you think we could possibly go this afternoon? It's the only chance I'll have, 'cause we're coming back early to-morrow."

"We'll see what Jim says. Or is Mr. Linton the boss out there?"

"I don't quite know who's really the boss. If Murty was there you'd say *he* was, 'cause he knows most about mining, so what he says goes. Jim says Bob is truly the boss, 'cause it's his claim—"The Hope," you know—only the men say it ought to be called 'The Dead Cert,' now, since they found the gold. Only, you know . . . Bob . . ." He hesitated.

"You mean Bob isn't exactly bossy?" grinned Freddy.

"'M. Bob's never bossy—he's too quiet. You don't know him, do you, Mr. Young?"

"No."

"Well, Bob's just a ripping chap, even though he's so quiet. You'll like him, 'cause he knows all about flying—just you get Tommy to tell you about him in the war. But—well, he's English, and he always thinks he's a new chum still. The men don't think so, 'cause they know how he's worked out here and made friends with everybody. But just because he thinks that way he'd never say he was boss."

"Sounds a white man," was Jack's comment.

"My word, he is! Jim says he's gone out of his way to help lots of people. And Jim says he'd hate to be up against Bob in a fight. Only of course that's just a joke, 'cause they're never likely to. They're chums."

"Well, I don't know yet who's boss!" said Jack, laughing.

"I s'pose you'd call Mr. Linton the boss; the men do, anyway. But he really doesn't boss things, you know. He says he's just a passenger, 'cause they won't let him work down in the shaft. All the same, he does heaps of work above ground. Wally works like fury, but he'd roar with laughing if you said he bossed anybody." He paused.

"That seems to leave only Jim." Freddy's eyes twinkled.

"I s'pose it does. I think he's about as much boss as Mr. Linton. But it doesn't matter," added Bill comfortably—" 'cause they'll all go back to Billabong to-morrow, except Bob, and then you'll have to be boss, Mr. Paxton!"

"Not on your life, with Bob there!" said Freddy hastily. "I'm only going to be the last-joined recruit—barring Jack, and I'll undertake to boss *him*."

"Sez you!" Jack grinned.

"Look!" Bill pointed ahead. "There's the camp smoke."

They saw a thin blue curl that drifted over the trees that crowned a steep ridge.

“The camp’s just over that rise,” announced Bill. His mouth twitched at the corners. “Please, would you both mind riding very carefully, ’cause we’re nearly there, and I promised Jim I’d deliver you both undamaged!”

He dug his heel into Topsy. The little mare responded instantly. She trotted briskly down the slope, broke into a hard canter across the gully, and pounded up the ridge. A long shrill coo-ee floated back to them. Bill was signalling their arrival.

“Do we crawl slowly in after that red-headed scrap?” demanded Jack, laughing.

“I’ll say we don’t!” Freddy gave Struan his head and they dashed in pursuit.

CHAPTER VI

MINING

THE track wound up the ridge, winding through the trees. On the farther side there was no timber. All had been cleared away: here and there were the marks of fires where the piled wood had been burned, and in places other heaps were drying.

“Jove, what a mess!” exclaimed Freddy, surveying the gully that lay beneath them.

It was not a pretty sight. The gully was shallow, and not very wide. To the left it ended in a rocky hill-face where the opening of a large cave showed like a black mouth. Tents were pitched here and there, the ground everywhere worn bare by the traffic of heavy boots, or heaped with masses of broken rock.

Farther down a roughly-built hut formed one side of a square, the other three sides marked by low walls of piled rocks, forming a wind-break for a wide stone fireplace. From an iron bar hung great blackened pots and frying-pans, over which a squat figure in grease-stained blue dungaree was bending—Lee Wing, the Chinese cook.

Beyond, as the gully dipped, was more chaos of broken rock, blasted away to give access to the main feature of the camp—the shaft of Bob Rainham’s claim. It gaped skyward, a yawning mouth surrounded by a decking of timber. High above it towered the derrick by which buckets of clay were hauled from the hidden depths. A stout pony could be seen, harnessed to the windlass: she moved slowly away as they watched, the rope lengthening behind her, and a bucket appeared at the mouth of the shaft. She stopped at a whistle; a man unhooked the bucket, slipped an empty one on the hook, and whistled again. The pony backed along her track: the bucket disappeared as the rope wound round the windlass. Reaching the end of her run the pony stopped, not waiting for a signal, and composed herself to slumber until the next whistle should break across her dreams.

There were mullock-heaps everywhere, great conical piles of the sand and clay brought from below. Raw and yellow and hideous, they marred the ground that had once been the bed of a rippling stream where ferns and maiden-hair had fringed the dancing water.

The gully opened on the farther side where another shallow ravine led down a gentle slope to a creek a short distance away. It had been cleared of timber, in more thorough a fashion than anywhere else. Here were none of the jagged tree-stumps that stuck out of the ground in every other direction; every

stick had been removed, humps levelled and hollows filled up.

The reason for this was apparent. A bush-made cart on low wheels was moving down the cleared track, piled high with mullock. Near the creek a huge pile could be seen. The cart reached it; the pony drawing it wheeled and backed. A tall man drew out the pin that held the tail of the cart: in a moment the box-like body tilted, its load shooting out to swell the heap. The cart was readjusted: the pony, unbidden, began the journey back to the shaft, where men waited to shovel in another load.

Men were busy at the creek bending over a long trough. The water had been dammed back above it in such a way that a gentle flow entered through the holes bored in the end of the trough, washing through the dirt shovelled in by the men. Workers stirred it gently with wooden paddles so that the fine gold could sink by its own weight to the bottom, where ridges held it safely: at the lower end the clay-stained water escaped, darkening the creek for some distance.

Jack Young looked round the great mullock-heaps and back to the trough.

“*What* a game!” he uttered. “How long do you think it will take them to wash all that dirt?”

“If seven men with seven troughs
Washed it for half a year——”

misquoted Freddy lazily.

“They’d need all that,” stated Jack. “And this is only the first shaft! Well, it seems that you and I are booked for a pretty long job, old man. Where has Bill got to?”

“I see Topsy’s head sticking out behind that mullock-heap,” said Freddy, looking towards the claim. “So I suppose Bill has gone to earth there. We might as well follow.”

They moved down the slope. As they picked their way among the stumps of the saplings Bill suddenly reappeared; by his side was a young giant in rough clothes liberally caked with clay. Bill gave a shout as he saw his fellow-travellers.

“There they are, Jim!”

“One wouldn’t forget Jim Linton,” remarked Jack. “Biggest chap I ever saw.”

“He’s the only fellow I know who makes me feel undersized,” Freddy admitted.

The man who came towards them was of towering height, with a mighty pair of shoulders. Lean and muscular, he gave the impression of radiating strength. It was not only in the huge frame, with its light, easy movements; there was strength in every line of the good-looking face, in the direct glance

of eyes that, like Norah's, were steady and grey. There was a gravity in Jim Linton's face that had not been there before the war had taken him, little more than a schoolboy, and had taught him the lesson of suffering; the few years since the war had not been long enough to wipe away all that so hard a lesson had meant.

Just now there was only pleasure in the deep-set eyes as he came to welcome the new arrivals.

"I'm jolly glad to see you," he said, shaking hands warmly. "Jolly good of you both to come."

"We thought the boot was on the other leg." Freddy jumped off his horse. "Aren't we going to begin picking up nuggets immediately?"

"Well, hardly. But I hope we'll be able to make it worth your while to have come. We've pegged out claims for you in a likely spot. Did you get miners' rights?"

"Rather. We took them out on the way up." Freddy laughed. "You didn't give me many particulars, but you were pretty definite that we needn't arrive without our little licences to dig."

"Oh, well, I knew Norah would tell you all I didn't tell," said Jim easily. "When you have been here for awhile you'll realise that letter-writing isn't much fun at the end of a day's work."

"That's all right: Norah has put us wise to all your illegal goings-on. Where are the others, Jim?"

"Wally and Bob are under ground at the moment; it's their shift down below." He nodded towards the shaft. "They will be up presently, as it's nearly dinner-time. Dad is down at the creek, overseeing the washing."

Freddy glanced back at the tall figure near the creek.

"Great Scott, it is your father!" he ejaculated. "I thought there was something vaguely familiar about him. But he's pretty well disguised, isn't he?"

Jim laughed softly.

"Anyone who's close to the shovelling is apt to get disguised. That stuff is dry and powdery; it settles gently on Dad, layer after layer, until you can only tell him by his height. We tell him there's a nice Viking touch about his yellow hair and beard—they take the clay colour beautifully."

"Wally says Mr. Linton ought to be washed out in the trough every evening, 'cause he's sure there's lots of gold scattered all over him," stated Bill gleefully. "But Mr. Linton won't let them do it," he added with regret.

"I used to think that your father couldn't look anything but well groomed, no matter what work he was doing—and I've seen him at a variety of jobs," said Freddy, still gazing in a bewildered fashion at the figure by the creek. "But I hadn't pictured him mining."

“No—and the queer thing is that he seems to like it,” Jim answered. “He works like a nigger: there’s only one job we’ve been able to keep him from tackling, and that’s the shaft. We all threatened to strike if he insisted on going down it, so he gave in more or less meekly.”

He glanced at his watch.

“We must hurry up and let your horses go. Leave your saddles here—we can take them up to the cave presently. I’ll have to go back to the claim now. Bill will show you the horse-paddock.”

Under Bill’s guidance the Queenslanders led their horses for some distance, arriving at a rock-walled gully through which ran a tiny stream. A rough fence had been erected across its mouth. Several horses were grazing there already. They greeted their companions with loud whinnying, and a big black horse came trotting slowly to the slip-rails to meet them.

“That’s Monarch,” said Bill. “He always comes to meet Struan and Topsy. They’re great pals. I expect Mr. Linton’ll ride him back to-morrow.”

The horses were turned out, the slip-rails replaced, and the travellers made their way back to the mine. As they drew near it a long whistle shrilled from the kitchen. It was evident that the pony near the shaft knew the dinner-call; she became alert, with ears pricked, ready to move. In a moment her signal came: she walked down her track, hauling the rope which drew up the bucket.

A hand came out of the shaft, gripping the rope. Next appeared a very dirty felt hat and an equally dirty face beneath it: and out of the bucket came a young man almost as tall as Jim Linton. He drew a deep breath, tossing aside his hat and revealing black hair, that curled crisply, and bright dark eyes.

“Wally!” shouted Bill, and raced towards him.

Wally Meadows turned with a smile that lit up his face.

“Hullo, Bill, old son! I thought you’d have turned up. How’s everything at home? Norah and Davie all right?”

“They’re awfully well,” said Bill. “I think they’re pretty glad you’re coming home.”

“So am I,” said Wally emphatically. He took part of a mullock-heap in his stride, going to meet the Queenslanders. Bill remained peering down the shaft, waiting impatiently for the return of the bucket.

This time it disgorged a short fair-haired fellow with a very pleasant face. Even under the coating of grime it was easy to recognize Tommy Rainham’s brother.

“Hallo, Bob!” Bill pumped his hand. “I’ve got lots of letters for you. One from Tommy.”

“None for me?” demanded a deep voice behind him.

“Oh yes, she gave me one for you too, Jim.” He fished out a package, and Jim pocketed his solitary letter carefully. “Norah said all the others could wait

till you came. And, Jim, Murty told me to tell you the roan bullock that got hurt is all right again.”

“Good business,” said Jim. “Come and be introduced to the new miners, Bob.”

Greetings were briefly exchanged, and they all trooped down to the creek. The pony had been taken out of the cart and, with harness removed, was already enjoying the contents of a nose-bag. Mr. Linton, crouched at the edge of the water, was vigorously using soap. Much splashing followed: he stood up, feeling for a towel which had seen better days. From this his face presently emerged, reddened with rubbing, but startlingly clean in comparison with those of the other labourers.

“You make me envious!” said Wally. “Me for the soap!” He plunged towards the water.

David Linton greeted his guests warmly, in a deep pleasant voice that was like Jim’s. Father and son resembled each other closely: the big squatter’s hair was turning grey, but he moved as lightly as his son, and was not less erect.

“This is the only wash-place we can offer you. When I want to be luxurious I bring down a tin basin, but usually I find that Lee Wing has bagged it for a stew. You’ll find that Lee Wing is the only tyrant out here—none of us dare to be late for meals. His second whistle will go in a moment. The first means ‘Knock off work, and wash.’ ”

“Nobody wants to be late,” affirmed Wally, relinquishing the towel to the dripping Bob. “First whistle is a lovely sound when you’re in the depths of the shaft. We can’t wear watches down there, so there’s no means of knowing how the time goes—and it goes extremely slowly. Then comes the whistle, and we bless old Lee Wing and have a free fight to see who gets the bucket first.”

“Free fight be hanged!” said Bob. “Your legs being twice as long as mine, you make one stride and grab the rope while I’m still toddling from my corner!” He chuckled softly. “Bill, I had a pleasant moment yesterday. Wally caught the rope, but he missed the bucket with his foot—the pony went off, and I had a beautiful view of Wally being hoisted, holding on for dear life and kicking frantically, with the bucket dodging him every time.”

Shouts of laughter greeted this picture, in which Wally joined cheerfully.

“Yes, and the beastly thing hit me in about fifteen places. And there was Bob encouraging me from below, telling me he’d catch me on the first bounce when I dropped—and Jim too weak with laughing to help me out when I got to the top. Oh, we have no end of larks when we become miners! Come along—I see Lee Wing preparing to whistle.”

The men were already eating near their tents. The Billabong party passed them at a little distance, going on until they reached a cleared space near the mouth of the cave.

"This is the dining-room," announced Bill.

"Gilded luxury, I call it," Freddy said. "I thought we were coming here to rough it!"

A rough table built of split timber occupied the centre of the space. There were a few stools, made in the same way, with pieces of hairy raw-hide nailed to the tops. Other seats lay here and there—pieces of rock, more or less smooth.

"You see, rock is our main furnishing material," said Mr. Linton. "Inexhaustible supply, but a trifle difficult to handle."

"It only wants inventive genius plus the eye of faith," Jim affirmed. "You look at a chunk of rock for awhile and at first you think it's hopeless. Then it dawns on you that if you turned it over or sideways it might make quite a good seat. Then you try to trim it a bit with a cold chisel, and if it splits the right way you're all right."

"And if it doesn't?" inquired Jack.

"Why, then you pad it with a coat—somebody else's coat for choice—and you use it just the same," Jim responded. "The only thing is not to be too fussy. Wally was quite fussy one day when I used his coat, and he'd carelessly left his best pipe in it!"

"Yes, and a nice mess you made of it," said Wally mournfully. "I had to go all the way to Billabong for another."

"That's what *he* said," grinned Jim.

Lee Wing arrived with a smoking joint of beef on a tin dish. He beamed widely as he put it on the table, returning at a Chinese jog-trot for a pan of potatoes. Mr. Linton began to carve swiftly, piling the enamel plates.

"You two can have stools because you're not broken in to rock yet," Wally informed Freddy and Jack. "We made them first for the girls, and they were so admired that we hope to have a whole set made some day."

"They're very posh," said Jack. "Will they stand our weight? If you can't guarantee them I'd rather try a rock."

"Why, they stand up under Jim," said Wally indignantly. "They creak protestingly when he sits down, but they're sound stuff. You can make some more if you like, on Sundays. Sunday is the only day when we have time for the fine arts."

"If there was no Billabong, or no girls there, we should probably have more stools," remarked Mr. Linton. "Jim and Wally have developed a regrettable habit of leaving us abruptly on Saturday nights."

"Don't you and Rainham go, sir?" asked Freddy.

"Oh, we could, of course. But Bob and I are lazy people; we rather like our peaceful Sundays here."

"We sleep," said Bob tersely.

“Well—a good deal,” admitted the squatter, smiling. “To tell the truth, I’m half afraid to go. I might not be too willing to come back if I once found myself in my easy chair in the smoking-room at home.”

“Getting tired of the work, sir?”

“No, not a bit. I’ve enjoyed it tremendously—only I don’t believe in mixing it with home. I’ve decided not to go back to-morrow with the boys.”

“I say!” protested Bill. “Norah *will* be wild!”

“That’s what I told him, Bill,” Bob remarked, looking rather uneasy.

“Not she,” said Norah’s father. “Norah has sense. The boys can run the shearing quite well without me, and I want Bob to go. He can bring his sheep over from his place and have them shorn with the Billabong lot.”

“We’ve had awful arguments over it,” Bob said. “But they were three to one, so I had to knuckle under.”

Bill caught Jim’s eye. He had opened his mouth to speak, but he closed it again and devoted himself to beef. To his mind came memories of scraps of conversation at Billabong, where they sometimes worried about Bob.

Since the sinking had begun Bob had not left the mine. Also, he had insisted on working always in the shaft; just as he had insisted that, since the claim was his, it was his right to take the most dangerous part in the blasting operations.

Bob was strong, Bill knew, but he had not the mighty muscles of Wally and Jim. He was beginning to look fine-drawn and haggard: there were dark circles under his eyes. Norah and Tommy talked about it each time they had visited the camp—not to Bob, but riding home. They had discussed the uselessness of trying to make him take even a few days’ holiday. Tommy had looked troubled.

Now, Bill suspected, Jim and the others had managed it. Jim generally managed things—quietly, without fuss: and Bill had gradually realized that in a matter of sparing Tommy any worry Jim would make a very respectable attempt to secure the moon—if the possession of the moon could ease matters.

He chuckled inwardly to think how it had been managed. They couldn’t get Bob away from the mine unless they had been able to persuade him that another job was more important. Until the mine had happened nothing mattered so much to Bob as his sheep. So they had used the sheep. Shearing wouldn’t be exactly a rest-cure, but it would be very different from shovelling clay for hours at a stretch, deep underground.

Bill looked across at Jim. Catching his eye he executed a laborious wink. Jim’s mouth twitched at the corners, but he made no further sign. Bill was satisfied.

Dinner over, the Queenslanders had to be introduced to the sleeping-cave, a large and lofty chamber where twenty men could have slept without feeling

crowded.

“You were jolly lucky to have this so handy,” commented Freddy, suitably impressed.

“Uncommonly lucky,” David Linton said. “We did not realize it at first—it was over-grown with scrub in front, and the entrance partly blocked with rock that had fallen. But it’s invaluable now: we have headroom and space, and if rain comes everyone can eat under cover.”

“Bill says there are more caves leading off this.”

“The whole cliff is honeycombed with them, we believe. We have explored to a certain extent, but we have had no time to do much in that line. It needs care. Don’t try any exploration without a good light—even then it is necessary to go slowly, in case the floor is unsafe. We have blocked up two dangerous passages, and there may be plenty more like them.”

“I’m not keen on the game,” said Jack. “This big cave is all right, but I don’t think I want to go wandering round inside a hill.”

“Tommy’s like that,” said Bill sadly. “It’s a pity.” His admiration for Jack waned a little: it was necessary to remind himself firmly of his heroic qualities in an aeroplane. After all, he reflected, a man couldn’t be everything. Even Jim, who was beyond all other men in his eyes, couldn’t fly a plane.

The recruits demanded to be put to work, but this was denied them on their first day. Instead, they were advised to watch the various operations at the creek and the shaft, and to get acquainted with the men who composed the gang of workers.

“They’re all good chaps,” Jim said. “Independent and casual, of course; but if you take them the right way they’ll do anything for you. And they’re all mad keen to get on with the job, because they want to get to their own claims. All but our own two men, Dave and Mick, that is. They’re stockmen, and they don’t want to leave Billabong. The only thing they can think of doing, if they get gold, is to buy a racehorse apiece, and they don’t seem in any hurry about that!”

“They’ll twin-soul with Jack,” remarked Freddy. “He only wants gold so that he can buy a monoplane.”

“Same idea. Bill’s the man with real ambition—he’s going to buy a station!”

“You bet I am!” said Bill.

They watched the clean-up at the end of the day’s washing at the creek. All the water was drained off carefully, leaving a coating of slimy mud at the bottom of the trough. Flecks of yellow gleamed in it: more came into view as David Linton scraped it up, putting it into a tin dish. Along each of the wooden ridges nailed crosswise on the bottom were lines of gold. The rich slime was washed again and again, each rinsing carrying away more soil, leaving the gold

behind. Freddy and Jack exclaimed at the final result.

“Well, you *are* on it, and no mistake!”

“Not too bad,” Jim said. He poured the glittering heap into a little bag made of heavy linen. “This isn’t quite clean, of course: we do the last washing of all at Billabong. I have quite a package to take to-morrow.”

“Billabong will be worth sticking-up—if there are any bushrangers about,” said Freddy, laughing.

“Yes, but there aren’t. Anyhow, we’ll get it to a bank as soon as the shearing is over.” He stood up, straightening his shoulders. “It’s a back-breaking game—give me cattle!”

CHAPTER VII

BACK TO BILLABONG

BOB RAINHAM was like a boy as they rode home next day. Care had weighed upon him for a long time; so long that he could scarcely believe that the weight had lifted at last.

Fortune had at first smiled upon him and Tommy. They had come out from England after the war, settling down on a farm not far from Billabong. The Lintons had been fellow passengers on their ship; they had liked the English boy and girl, had brought them to Billabong and instructed them in the ways of their new country. Mr. Linton's advice had guided the purchase of Creek Farm, just as Norah had joyfully helped Tommy to settle into the little house of which she was so proud.

It was a good farm, and it had done well in the beginning. Then bad seasons and depression had brought black clouds across a sky that seemed all blue. Bob and Tommy had struggled manfully against the increasing tide of difficulties: working ceaselessly, striving to conceal their plight, even from their friends.

That had been a bad time. Bob did not like to think of it now. He dreamed of it sometimes; dreams from which he woke panting, unable to realize for a moment that they were only dreams.

The gold had come to save them. He had kicked it up, literally; kicked up a pebble that flashed at him a gleam of something that was not stone.

Left to himself he might not have made much of a discovery that seemed too fantastic to be true. But the Lintons had flung themselves with gay enthusiasm into the task of proving his find. All the energy of Billabong's men and women had come to his aid, from Brownie to little Bill. It warmed his heart to think how they had rejoiced when the claim had begun to yield its gold.

He knew he could never pay back all he owed them of help and comradeship: just as he knew that they recognized no debt. But he was proud, and his pride could only find vent in ceaseless work. It seemed to him that the harder he worked the sooner would the others feel free to develop their own claims; and so he toiled until his slight frame ached so that sleep was slow in coming at night. It became a point of honour with him to do more than any other man at the mine.

Lately he had begun to realize that it could not go on. Not a pleasant thought: it kept him company night and day. He had wondered how soon he

must tell them. Then had come the quiet request from Mr. Linton that he should go to help over the shearing. He had hung back, his stubborn pride holding him, but they had carried too many guns. Bob reflected that a fellow hadn't much chance when David Linton and Jim and Wally had made up their minds.

Being conquered, he had decided that the decent thing was to accept the situation whole-heartedly. He knew perfectly well that they wanted him to have the rest that comes with change of work, and that it would be churlish not to take it happily. Having thus arrived at what Wally would have called "a spot of common sense," Bob suddenly found his spirits soaring. He astonished the camp by singing loudly in the early morning as he went down to the creek to bathe. Bob was scarcely aware that he had sung; but he noticed that everybody seemed to beam upon him kindly when he came back.

They left for Billabong soon after breakfast. The horse he rode was fresh and eager; its mood chimed well with Bob's, so that both were glad when the hills were left behind and country was reached where speed was possible. Jim and Wally had an equal urge to hurry, and Bill wanted to do whatever Jim did. It followed that long before Norah and Tommy had ventured to hope for their arrival they heard the sound of galloping hoofs. They rushed out to the verandah.

Across the home paddock swept the four riders; neck and neck at first, since Bill had been given a start when they left the gate. Then Topsy began to fall back, and Jim and Wally drew slowly ahead of Bob in the next hundred yards. They sat down and rode the finish as they had ridden finishes against each other a hundred times before—over the springy turf, round the bend where the lagoon curved out to meet them, up the last stretch; where weight told, and Wally's chestnut drew ahead of Struan. But it was a close thing. The grey was only a length behind when they pulled up at the gate just as the girls reached it.

"You seem in a hurry!" said Norah politely.

"So did you," Wally retorted. "Very quick thing of yours over the lawn."

Jim said nothing. He sat still on his horse for a moment looking at Tommy; and Tommy looked back at him with a little smile. Then Bob dashed up, with Bill a valiant fourth, and conversation became general and confused. Out of the welter Wally could be presently heard, demanding his son.

"He's asleep, thank goodness," said Norah. "Some misguided person told him you were coming home to-day, and he woke very early, insisting that you should be produced immediately—and he's never ceased insisting since, until I persuaded him to have his morning rest."

"That's what I call proper filial devotion!" said Wally proudly. "Only the best fathers get it. May I wake him up?"

“Not if you don’t want a family brawl,” Norah hastened to reply. “I need a little calmness before Davie takes the floor again.”

“Then you may come and help me to unsaddle.” He tucked her hand into his arm and they walked off together, looking absurdly young to be considered as parents.

In the stable-yard were Murty and Billy, each wearing an air of satisfaction that could only be called smug.

“This is the ould times come agin,” said Murty. “’Tis good to see ye all back, Masther Jim—an’ to be knowin’ that ye’ll not go tearin’ off to the wild country before we’ve had a chance to be lookin’ at ye. If we only had the Masther we’d be in the heighth of contint.”

“He’ll be in before the shearing finishes, Murty.”

“I was thinkin’ he wouldn’t be out of it altogether. Let you leave that saddle to me, Masther Jim; ’tis enough if you get your valise off of it. An’ how’s the mine?”

“Doing well—I’ve a nice little packet from it in here,” Jim said, touching his valise.

“That’s good news, Mr. Bob. Sure, you’re only at the beginnin’ of what you’re going to find. Masther Bill, did you hand over them young lads of yours safely yesterday?”

“Rather, Murty. They didn’t give me a bit of trouble.”

“Ye had them well in hand. Very docile they looked, an’ they goin’ off under your conthrol. ’Twas different when they was up in the air—ye weren’t boss then, Masther Bill!”

“Oh, Murty, did they take you up?” asked Bob.

“They did not, sir; nor they never will. But they had Billy here careerin’ all over the sky. ’Twas a great sight entirely. Billy’s been a bit above himself ever since.”

Billy grinned ecstatically.

“Plenty quick way got round them pfeller bullocks, Mas’ Jim!”

“Better than a horse, Billy?”

“*Baal!*” The aboriginal “No!” came swiftly. Billy put his hand on Struan’s nose.

“That’s more our game,” said Jim contentedly. “Sky-riding is all very well now and then, but it’s horses for you and me. Give these fellows of ours a good feed, Murty; they’ve had only native grass lately.” He shouldered his valise, leading the way to the house.

Murty called to him.

“I’m afther finishin’ the little bag you were wantin’, Mr. Jim.”

He dived into the harness-room, coming back with a small bag of raw-hide.

“’Tis sewn up very strong, an’ I rubbed grease into it, the way it’s supple.

'Twill not soil y'r hands—I've polished it. The string to tie up the neck is kangaroo leather—riveted on, it is. If ye wind it round the neck a few times it'll never shlip."

"That's first-rate, Murty. I never saw anyone who could beat you over working up green hide," said Jim, examining it. "Exactly what I wanted. Thanks very much."

"Nice work," remarked Wally, as they walked away. "For the gold?"

"Yes. Those little bags Norah made are right enough, but I wanted something stronger as well. This thing will hold a lot of smaller packages, and it's easily carried in a valise."

"I'm glad to see it," Norah said. "Now that they have a central home perhaps I shan't find so many of your little bundles lying about. Did you remember that you left one on the bathroom shelf last time you were back?"

"I did—but I knew you'd find it," said he, laughing. "Never mind, Nor—we'll get it all away as soon as we can manage the time. I'll put the lot in Murty's bag and lock it up safely. And then I don't want to think once more about gold until the shearing is over."

"Then let us get it put away as soon as you've had a word with Brownie," Norah begged.

"Not getting worried about it, are you, old girl?" he asked, looking at her curiously. Norah was noted for not encouraging worries of any kind.

She smiled at him.

"No; but I have occasional bursts of prudence, and then I'm stern with myself for not worrying enough. We're all of us too casual about those little packages."

"Right oh—we'll mend our ways. And there's Brownie, charging out on top gear!" He quickened his pace to meet the old woman who waddled towards the gate of the back yard. "Hullo, Brownie! Gay as ever? You look it!"

"Gay as ever, now that the house'll wake up again," said Brownie joyfully. "It's only half awake when you're all away; there's always an uncomferable feelin'."

She beamed on them all as they crowded round her, exchanging greetings. Brownie's welcome was always one of the chief factors in a Billabong home-coming. It began at the gate, continued up the path to the back verandah, and was prolonged into the kitchen, a huge and shining place where people sat on tables, chaffing each other and cracking ridiculous jokes for the pleasure of hearing Brownie's fat chuckles.

To-day the gathering ended as it usually did—by Brownie's suddenly becoming alive to the fact that there would be grave danger to the next meal if she were withheld any longer from its preparation.

She fluttered her white apron at them as if she were shoo-ing away a flock

of chickens.

“Take ’em all out, Miss Norah, my dear. Goodness only knows if that Daisy has washed the potatoes yet—she sets dreamin’ in the scullery if I don’t keep an eye on her all the time.”

“Who’s Daisy?” inquired Bob.

“She’s me new offsider. Miss Norah thought I ought to have one, but there’s times when I think I had more peace of mind without her. I caught her readin’ a noveletty the other day when she’d ought to have been washin’ up: propped on the back of the sink, it was, an’ Daisy moonin’ over it, an’ the water all cold an’ greasy. Uses me best copper preservin’-pan for a mirror, so’s she can powder her nose. *I’ll powder her some day!*” said Brownie grimly. “Out with you all now, there’s dears!”

They trooped off; Wally ran upstairs—for the second time—to peep into the room where Davie slept, in the hope that he had awakened. Jim took Norah’s arm.

“Now for the little bundles. Come along, Tommy: Norah’s being stern with me about being tidy.”

“All the others are in the safe,” said Norah. “You’ve only to add the one you’ve brought home.”

In the smoking-room she opened the safe that was let into the wall, revealing a number of neat linen packages. Jim unstrapped his valise.

“There’s the latest. A nice plump one, isn’t it? Give me the others, Nor.”

They watched him as he packed them deftly into Murty’s leather bag, fitting them closely together. He wound the long strip of kangaroo hide tightly round the neck, finishing the ends with a complicated knot.

Bob picked it up, weighing it in his hand.

“Beautifully heavy: I wouldn’t care to carry it very far.”

“I think it looks rather like a Christmas pudding,” stated Bill, fingering the brown hide. “Wouldn’t it be jolly in-indigestible!”

“We’ll let a bank digest it,” Jim said. “Now, Bob, I’ll take care of it if you’ve done with it. Or would you like to keep it for a pillow?”

“I’ve lost enough sleep over it already.” Bob tossed the weighty package to him: he caught it and placed it on the lower shelf of the safe, where it sat in curious contrast with the neat piles of documents. The lock clicked.

“There—that’s done!” said Jim with his hand on Norah’s shoulder. “Your old Christmas pudding done with—you can sleep with an easy mind, Nor.”

“I never sleep any other way,” she returned placidly. “It’s your own mind that ought to feel eased.”

“Mine!” echoed Jim. “There never was an easier mind than the one I’ve got. All it wants now is to wander round and look at something that isn’t a gold-mine. The lagoon, I think. Come and show it to me, Tommy!”

CHAPTER VIII

FLIGHT

THERE was no work done on that first day of home-coming.

Wally announced that Davie was shockingly out of hand and needed an intensive course of fatherly discipline. This he proceeded to give him by lying flat on the lawn while his son sat on him; varied by rowing him about the lagoon while Norah sat in the stern trying to restrain the small boy's excitement. This excursion ended by Davie's falling overboard, so that he had to be rescued by his father, who hauled him ignominiously back by the seat of his trousers. Everyone got very wet over this diversion and it was necessary to return to the house for dry clothes. It was voted a very successful afternoon.

Jim and Tommy disappeared unobtrusively after lunch. The sound of a motor, rapidly dying away, hinted at their departure for an unknown destination. Foiled in a desire to join this expedition, Bill fell back upon Bob for company.

"They're gone!" he said tragically. "I wanted to go, too, but they never heard me, an' I yelled like fury, too!"

"People who have just got engaged become awfully deaf," Bob told him gravely.

"I don't see why," said the bereaved Bill. "Jim always takes me."

"It just happens, so one leaves them to get better. They've got lots to talk about, I expect. Never you mind, Bill—Jim will want you lots of times."

"Well——" said Bill, and kicked at the gravel. "You doing anything special, Bob?"

"I am," said Bob firmly: "and I can do with a mate, too, if he likes the sort of thing I'm after. Bill, do you know that I haven't seen a plane for donkey's years? And there are two sitting in their hangars down yonder!"

"Golly!" Bill said, his face suddenly joyful. "Oh, *come* along, Bob! I can tell you lots about 'em—Freddy and Jack showed me. They're bricks, you know, Bob—they told me I wasn't to call them 'Mr.' any more. They were ever so decent to me about the planes an' everything."

"They're bricks all right," said Bob as they went towards the paddock. "We yarned about planes half last night, out at the camp, and they actually gave me leave to take up the buses—either of them—if I liked. I flew both types in the war."

"Do you think you'll go up this afternoon?" Bill cried.

"I'd better wait for Jim or Wally, I think. But it will be simply topping just

to look over them. I never liked anything so well as flying.”

“I say——” Bill hesitated. “Do you know, I’ve never heard you say one word about flying, all the time I’ve known you?”

“Well—why should I yap about it?”

“But you loved it. And . . . well, Tommy has told me a bit.”

“I did love it, but that’s no reason to make a song about it. Especially about war flying: that sort of thing is better kept to oneself. But I’m going to have a plane some day, Bill, if the old claim goes on behaving itself. Then we’ll do a bit of sky-scouting, shall we?”

“Me? I *say*, Bob——!”

“It would be rather fun,” said Bob dreamily, “if I happened to fly down to Melbourne about the time school holidays begin, and if you happened to be asked up to Billabong—as generally seems to happen——”

“And if you happened to pick me up instead of me going in the train——”

“And we happened to come down on Billabong just as Jim was getting the car out to go in to Cunjee to meet you. Rather a jolly lot of happenings, don’t you think?” finished Bob, laughing at the excited face.

“But could they happen—truly?”

“No reason why they shouldn’t. I’m only just beginning to allow myself dreams of what may be ahead—this particular dream is a very mild one compared to some I’ve had. I want to fly to New Zealand; in fact, I don’t know where I *don’t* want to fly to!”

“A boy at school told me no one has flown to New Zealand yet,” said Bill, deeply impressed.

“It’s only a question of time before some one does it. You’ll see how soon flying to England will be quite ordinary. We’re only on the threshold of what planes are going to do: things that people howl over now will become just commonplaces, not worth mentioning.”

“And by the time I’m old enough to be a pilot I s’pose planes’ll be simply marvellous.”

“Marvellous judged by our ideas now. But then, everything is getting marvellous. It’s rather exciting to think I may be able to go in for new things, when I had thought I’d spend my life on Creek Farm, trying to keep bracken-fern down. Three cheers for the old mine, Bill!”

They had arrived at the landing paddock. Bob opened the shed where the Kestrel stood, his eyes kindling as he saw her. Billy had worked over her as well as he had promised: there was not a speck on her shining fabric, and the engine glistened.

There followed for Bob an hour of complete enjoyment. He knew both planes: and always he had loved the mechanism of the fighters he had flown. With Bill at his elbow, keen to understand, he went lovingly over every part.

The old days came sharply back to him: almost he might have been overhauling a machine on an aerodrome behind the British lines before taking a cargo of bombs on a visit to the enemy.

Perhaps it was the boy's eager interest that loosened his tongue. He began to talk of those days a few years back: disjointed talk at first, half to himself; gradually slipping into war stories. Bill hung on every word, begging for more. Presently they were lying on the grass in the sunlight, and the stories came freely. Very seldom of his own doings—to Bob there seemed so many things better worth telling. The pipe he had lit went out as he talked: when he found that it was cold he laughed at himself, half-ashamed.

"I've been letting my tongue run away with me. All your fault, Bill. But it's rather jolly to bring the old times back."

"It's gorgeous!" Bill said happily. "Wish you'd tell me heaps more, Bob."

"I'll remember some other yarns another day. No repeating what I've told you, remember, Bill. This is private conversation."

Bill nodded. That made it all the better, he thought.

Quiet feet came over the grass: black Billy, who had seen the shed doors open.

"Engines all right, Mas' Bob?"

"Jolly good—but I'll show you a place you missed." Bob jumped up and went into the shed.

"Too dark in here now; help me run her out, Billy." They pushed the Kestrel out into the open.

"That's the place, Billy. Easy to miss, and it doesn't matter much, only that you made such a good job of all the rest. Mr. Paxton will be pleased."

"Mine fix it one-time," said Billy, dashing for cleaning materials. Bob pottered about the engine while he worked: then drew back and admired the plane as a whole.

"By Jove, I'd love to take her up!" he broke out suddenly.

"Oh, go on, Bob!" Bill begged. "You know Freddy said you could."

"I wonder if I ought. Might be awkward if I found I'd forgotten all I ever knew when I took off." Yet he knew in his heart that he had forgotten nothing. His fingers itched to grasp the stick again.

"*You* forget!" Bill said scornfully. "I bet you'd fly as well as ever you did!"

Bob looked, and longed, and was conquered.

"By Jove, I will! Could you swing her, Billy? I'll show you how."

"Plenty mine knows that. Mas' Paxton teach mine long time ago." Billy had sprung to the propeller, his eyes gleaming.

Bob climbed into the plane. Freddy's flying helmet was there; he put it on, with the old sense of familiarity growing stronger. He sat still, getting the feel of the pilot's seat once more; then he tried the controls and rudder and worked

the ailerons and elevator planes.

“Swing her, Billy!”

The black boy spun the propeller. Presently the engine blared out, and the Kestrel quivered as it was warmed up. Bob glanced sharply to see that the boys had got out of the way. Bill was standing clear, his face a mixture of delight and anxiety, his mouth half open. Bob waved his hand gaily.

“All clear!”

He opened the throttle. Bill saw the propeller whir faster. The machine rolled forward and turned into the wind. The roar of the engine grew louder as the Kestrel taxied away. For a moment Bill had a sensation of blind panic. What if Bob had forgotten things after all?

Bob had not forgotten. With the first touch of the controls his old mastery came back to him with all its old thrill. The landing ground was pure joy after the takeoffs he had known in Flanders: the Kestrel was a living thing beneath him. The pace increased. She bumped gently twice; then the ground dropped away from her, and she slanted upwards, roaring into the west.

Bob was a boy again. His mind went back to his learning days in England, to the long solo flight that had won him his pilot's wings. That had been a time of care-free flying—no bombs to drop, no chance of an enemy machine swooping from above with a sputter of machine-gun fire. Later that had come in full measure. But on the day above the English fields he had had only the responsibility of the plane and of his own life; and it sat lightly on his shoulders. He had known he could do all and more that was required of him; the hawk-eyed judges below mattered nothing to him as he dived and soared and banked, pulling off all the tricks he dared before it was time to come down. Then they had growled at him mildly, snubbing him for doing unnecessary things. He had taken the snubbing meekly: he knew he had got his wings.

As he had felt that day so he felt now, as he circled over the station: the old glorious sense of freedom, of conquest of the air. He saw the mine far below—where Freddy Paxton, looking sharply up, gaped to see his beloved Kestrel sailing across the blue; then, as he watched, grinned, and muttered, “That chap's O.K.” Neither Freddy nor the mine existed for Bob at the moment. He banked, and flew in a direct line for his own farm.

It was queer to sail over it, looking down at the paddocks where he had toiled and sweated. The white cottage by the creek gleamed at him; there was a grey mist on the flats, a mist that moved. He looked sharply before he realized that it was a flock of his sheep. Cows were stringing over to the milking shed, looking like Noah's Ark animals. Bob was aware of a deep gladness that he had not to milk them. Then, as if longing to get away from milking and bracken-fern and all things earthly, he pulled back the control stick and

climbed into the upper air.

Sailing there, his whole being alive with joy, the thought of Bill came to him. Queer how the kid had somehow contrived to get him talking, he pondered. For years he had held his tongue about flying; even with the Queenslanders the night before he had said little, letting them tell stories, putting in a word now and then to keep them going. Just what Bill had done with him.

He saw again the round freckled face, the eager eyes. When Bill grew excited he always ran his fingers through his hair; it had stood up, a ruffled thatch of red, as he listened. What a comical little beggar he had looked just before the plane moved off, his mouth open in his anxiety. "I wonder if he's standing there yet!" Bob muttered. "I fancy he'll be watching still."

Dull work, watching, while another fellow, more lucky, had the freedom of the sky. At that thought Bob acted suddenly. He put the machine into a dive, swooping down until the trees on the Billabong plains stood out clearly, the homestead beyond them. Circling, he picked up the white wind-indicator. There were still two figures near the shed; two faces, one black, one pink, staring upwards. Bob turned into the wind and came back to earth.

As he switched off the engine Bill raced to meet him, the black boy following.

"You hadn't forgotten a bit, Bob! You—you were splendid."

"She's a nice old bus," Bob said. "Care to come up, you two?"

Would they care! The two faces answered him without need of words. Bill dashed at the plane with an incoherent yelp. They piled in: the engine roared, and they were off—climbing, climbing.

Jim and Tommy, motoring slowly along the track through the paddock some time later, heard overhead the roar of a plane, flying low. Its shadow raced across the car as it thundered over them. Jim braked to a standstill, looking up.

"Freddy's plane!" he exclaimed. "Bob's never taken her up!"

"If he has, he has taken passengers," said Tommy. "I see two dots that are certainly heads."

"Pretty risky," Jim said uneasily. "He hasn't flown for years."

Tommy laughed softly.

"Jim, if Bob has taken other people up that means he has tried himself alone first. He would do that. And that means——" She stopped, her blue eyes dancing.

"Well?" He looked at her, uneasiness leaving him at what he saw in her face.

"It means that my old Bob is having just what he needs. That he has got back all his confidence in himself. He has been grubbing in the earth—he has

shouldered burdens for such a long time. Even the gold has not helped him much yet, because he has been too tired to realize all that it means. You don't know what it is to me to see Bob up there, doing the thing he always loved best."

"For just one time," said Jim slowly. "Will it last, do you think. Tommy? Won't he slip back?" His smile was rather troubled: he did not want her relief and pleasure to fade.

"I think he will be quite different now," she said. "Flying had always a magical effect on Bob. He used to say that it made him see things clearly—brushed the dust from his mind. And he will realize that this is only the first of many flights. He will not slip back, Jim—I know Bob."

Jim slipped in the clutch and the car moved forward. The plane was droning far away towards the sunset.

"Well," he said—"there seems to me only one thing to do, Tommy. After these planes go away the sooner we have one in the shed, for Bob himself, the better!"

"Will the mine stand it, Jim?"

"I think it will," he told her. "If not—well, we'll manage it somehow."

CHAPTER IX

BILL AND A COW

THE party round the breakfast-table next morning looked thoroughly business-like.

Everyone was in riding-kit. Before the arrival of the shearing gang the sheep must be collected from outlying parts of the run and settled in paddocks near the shed; a slow matter, owing to the deliberate method of travel preferred by sheep. In addition, Jim and Wally wished to ride round the cattle, which had been neglected during the mining operations. The mine had absorbed nearly all the men of Billabong; bullocks had looked after themselves except for hasty inspection now and then by Billy and the girls. Murty, hurriedly recalled from camp a few days earlier because of an accident to a bullock, had become uneasy: he had begged that all should be inspected thoroughly, adding gloomy pictures of beasts bogged in swamps or caught under a fallen bough.

"I'm afther forgettin' them too long," he had reproached himself, working over the injured beast. "Sure, I had a right to remember that bullicks is like children—lave 'em alone too long an' they'll get into mischief. I'll not be aisy in me mind till we've looked over every wan on the place." And he growled deep things about gold. Murty was a stockman, not a miner.

He was very happy that morning, for Billabong was itself again. It was like old times to turn out of his room over the stables as soon as it was light, having already seen from his window that Billy was even earlier astir, bringing the horses across the misty flats. The mob was strung out, old stagers in the rear, walking quietly while more excitable young ones cantered ahead or tried to break back to the grazing they had left. Billy jogged behind them, riding a bare-backed pony; taking the unruly ones quietly, since he knew well that they would all fall into line presently. It was natural that youngsters should kick up their heels and try to show their independence: having done so, they would settle down and come trotting into the stock-yards.

Jim and Wally had been down to the yards before breakfast to look over the horses with Murty and decide which should be ridden. These had been caught and the others turned out again. Some, it seemed, were not willing to go; they had hung about while their companions were led up to the stable-yard, and even now two or three lean heads were poked over the fence, having watched the process of grooming and saddling, still anxious to see what was going to happen next. They moved away slowly when, later on, came the sound of gay voices and the riders appeared: Bill racing ahead, anxious to get

to Topsy, the others more slowly.

Excitement and flying had told on Bill. He had slept heavily, not waking when Jim, whose bed was near his on the balcony, had slipped quietly away, deciding that it was as well not to rouse a small offsider who had a long day ahead. It had been something of a blow to Bill's pride to be called by Norah with bare time for his bath before the gong sounded. He had looked reproachfully at Jim when he came into the dining-room: but Jim had given him a pat on the head with, "Wouldn't wake you, old man—I've got too much for you to do to-day," in the tone that always gave Bill a warm, comfortable feeling; and he had promptly forgotten his grievance.

It had been arranged that the riders should divide; Jim, with Tommy and Bill, going in one direction, Norah, Wally and Bob in another, to work through certain paddocks, meeting at an agreed spot for lunch. This was no day for sociable riding. To each worker was allotted a section of a paddock, in which every bullock must be inspected, every part of the ground ridden over: with an eye to fences for a broken rail or a loose wire.

It was slow work, but Bill loved it. Not so delightful, of course, as riding alone with Jim, as he had ridden so often on other jobs, when they could keep together. Those were the days!—to ride side by side, with Jim's deep, quiet voice teaching him the points of the cattle and all the things he must know before he had a station of his own, or telling stories of other men and other bullocks. Or, perhaps, just companionably silent—which Bill now knew was one of the best parts of friendship.

Still, this solitary riding had its charm; not the least part of it being the knowledge that he was trusted. He had a responsible job, exactly the same as each of the grown-ups. Jim knew well that the sharp young eyes would not miss a bullock, that each gully and ridge would be inspected as keenly as he could do it himself. Bill had earned the trust in many holiday times spent at Billabong. One did not gain the honourable title of offsider until one had proved that one's whole heart was in the job.

It was *great*, to be responsible. Bill hugged the thought as he rode. Not, of course, that he could act for himself if he found anything seriously wrong—twelve-year-old strength has its limits. But he could be relied upon to bring correct reports, to gallop for aid that might be needed. Jim would never think of going to look over a section of country that Bill had reported free from trouble.

Topsy moved as if she entered into the spirit of the work. Bill always felt that she understood. To-day she did not dance impatiently, longing to be given her head, to gallop over the smooth green stretches; she went soberly, turning of her own accord towards one little knot of cattle after another. The bullocks took scant notice of them; they went on grazing as the pony drew near, a few

raising mild eyes of curiosity, dropping them again, chewing the cud with slow enjoyment. This was merely a boy they had seen very often: and he had no dog to annoy them by prowling near their heels. They scarcely glanced after the rider when he passed by.

In a far corner he remembered that there was a shaky rail in the fence. It was an old three-rail fence, posts and panels of heavy split timber, grey with age, bearing patches of grey-green lichen. Sometimes in a wet season knobs of a hard fungus, bright scarlet in colour, grew here and there on the old slabs.

Jim had shown him the shaky rail. It was rotting slowly in the middle, sagging a little, but the tough fibres held firmly.

"It's good for a while yet," Jim had said. "But if a bullock had an inquisitive fit and started rubbing it, it would go. That's the sort of place one has to watch, Bill."

Bill was glad that he had remembered it when he drew near the place, coming out of a belt of timber that screened it. The rail had broken; the mortise-holes in the posts still held its ends firmly, but the middle had given way; the splintered broken ends falling upon the second rail, which propped them precariously. Three bullocks, greatly interested in this phenomenon, were examining it—one great head, with spreading horns, was thrust over the gap.

"Yes, you *would* come poking round!" said Bill professionally. "Next thing, you'd decide it was a nice place to hop over, and then there'd be trouble."

The bullocks took no notice of this remark. Bill checked an impulse to shout at them lest the sound should startle the inquisitive bullock into jumping the gap; he circled, reaching the fence fifty yards lower down, and came back to the break, walking Topsy close to the rails. This flanking movement made the cattle draw back, though still unwilling to leave. Bill slipped his pony between them and the gap, waving a threatening arm.

"Get back out of this!" he shouted. "Ba-a-ck!"

He ended with a long shout that convinced the bullocks that retreat was desirable. They wheeled and lumbered away into the trees. Bill slipped off Topsy and examined the break.

"I'll have to get something to block it," he muttered. There was fallen timber on the ground, boughs stripped off by the winter gales. None were very suitable for his purpose, and they were heavier than he liked; he was panting by the time he had dragged all he needed from under the belt of trees. He filled up the gap as well as he could, building a curious erection, with spiky pieces sticking out in a manner which he hoped would discourage the bullocks from further poking.

"Gosh, that looks awful!" he said, looking at the finished work. "But it's the best I can do, and it ought to last until after shearing, anyhow."

He reported the matter to Jim when they passed into the next paddock. Jim said, "Good man; I expect it's all right." Which was exactly what Bill had hoped he would say.

Everyone was in high spirits when they forgathered for lunch. The place was a grassy hollow near a creek where makeshift yards had been erected some years before, so that cattle could be drafted without making the long journey to the homestead. The yards were seldom used; grass grew in them thickly. The horses were unsaddled and turned into them to feed, and their riders sat on the bank of the creek to eat their sandwiches.

"I'm beginning to come alive again," stated Wally. He had finished eating and now lay flat on his back, looking happily up at the interlaced boughs against the sky. "What about you, Bob?"

"Me? Oh, I began to think I was alive yesterday morning, but I wasn't really sure until I went up in Freddy's plane in the afternoon. Then I knew. And now—all this . . ." He made a little gesture that included all the peace and beauty of plain and hill and creek.

Tommy looked at him, her face very contented. He was sitting with his back against a tree, his fair head bare. All the lines of worry had been smoothed from his face.

"It's really rather like being un-buried," he said. "One grubs away out there, deep underground, hour after hour, thinking of nothing in particular. I used to imagine I would think of the gold all the time, but I found I didn't. It's having one's mind a grubby unpleasant blank that makes one tired inside, I believe."

"But can't you fix your mind on all the pleasant things the gold will bring?" Norah asked.

Bob looked puzzled.

"Well, that would seem the obvious thing, and of course I've tried. Only, in practice it doesn't work out very well. I can do it better at night, if I don't sleep. Down in the shaft, though, I seem only to think of the bucket I'm filling, or where to hit next with my pick. Silly, I know, but . . ."

"I'm like that," said Wally serenely. "It's really devotion to duty, only Bob won't see it that way. My devotion was so strong the other day about thinking where I was going to hit that I quite forgot that Bob was in the shaft, and when I swung the pick back I nearly brained him. He was so peevish about it!"

"Well, I ask you!" expostulated Bob. "I happened to look up in the nick of time, and I had a split second to dodge. Wally swings a pick as if it were a stock-whip."

"These are the little incidents that lend colour to mining," smiled Wally. "Like the day Dave was standing near the shaft and forgot how near the edge he was."

“What happened?” Tommy asked.

“Oh, he took a step backwards, and there wasn’t anything to step on. Luckily the shaft wasn’t very deep then, and there was a good deal of loose earth at the bottom. But, even so, Dave was annoyed.”

“I like the way they feel for each other’s mishaps, don’t you, Tommy?” smiled Norah. “So sympathetic!”

“Why, of course we were sympathetic!” said Wally indignantly. “We looked down at once to see how many pieces he was in, but he was all in one.”

“He was standing up, prodding himself all over for breakages and making the shaft ring with his remarks. So of course we all howled with laughter, and that made him even more fluent. That was one of the brightest moments we had,” said Jim, with a deep chuckle.

“There’s only one thing that we can be tragic about, and that’s food,” Wally said. “Do you remember the day the kangaroo called on the camp, Jim?”

“My hat, yes!”

“He came out of the scrub, Tommy, a big old-man kangaroo, and started to cross the gully. We were just coming back to dinner. One of the men chucked a clod at him and he turned up the gully in tremendous hops. Lee Wing was coming out of the cooking-place with a big pan of sausages all sizzling hot, and the kangaroo bounded almost over him.”

Wally sat up, his face alight with the memory.

“It really was funny, if we hadn’t been so hungry. Lee Wing gave a yell you might have heard at Billabong. He was perfectly certain the kangaroo was going to eat him, and he hurled the whole outfit at him—sausages, pan and all! The pan missed, but the sausages fairly rained on the kangaroo—and never did I see a beast make better time than he did to get out of Lee Wing’s range!”

“You know,” Jim said, “we believed old Lee Wing had forgotten all his Chinese. Well, he hasn’t. He stood there, transfixed with horror, pouring out floods of the most awful-sounding Chinese. I suppose he meant it for the kangaroo, but the kangaroo hadn’t stopped to hear it. I never saw Dad laugh so much. He became so weak that he had to sit down on a log and recover.”

“I thought you said it was tragic!” Norah told him, twinkling.

“So it was, after we had stopped laughing. We’d looked forward to those sausages. I can tell you, it hurt to see them distributed all over a kangaroo. But we had to soothe old Lee Wing down and get him to dig out cold beef.”

A soft chuckle came from Bob. They looked at him inquiringly.

“Did you ever wonder what became of those sausages?” he asked gently.

“No,” said Wally. “We knew. All we could do was to try to forget ’em.”

“Well, I happened to see Lee Wing nosing round that afternoon where he had chucked them. I thought he was just tidying up—you know the way he won’t leave the smallest bit of rubbish on the ground near the camp. But—do

you happen to remember that we had an extra good stew next day?"

"E-e-eh!" said Jim, horror dawning slowly in his eyes. They all gazed at Bob expectantly. Norah began to laugh softly.

"You!" threatened Wally. "You knew——!"

"I didn't," Bob defended himself. "I ate my stew, and I thought what a jolly good one it was, and how it improved a stew to have chunks of sausage in it. Most ennobling effect. It was only when I had scraped up the last bit on my plate, wishing I could have a third helping, that I began to think. And then I remembered that the sausages that got buzzed at the kangaroo were the very last we had in camp!"

"And you let us go on eating?"

Bob's blue eyes twinkled.

"It would have been cruelty to animals if I'd stopped you. You were all wolfing stew joyfully—there wouldn't have been any sense in making horrible announcements. Besides"—he grinned happily—"I'd eaten mine. I thought we might as well be on the same footing!"

"Brute!" said Wally. Further remarks were lost as the party gave itself up to shouts of laughter.

"We can try to believe that the old Chinese heathen washed them after he picked them up," remarked Jim, when speech was possible. "I don't know," he added with a touch of gloom—"water's pretty scarce at camp, and he hates carrying it up from the creek. Oh, well, I'll try to forget your beastly revelations, Bob: anyhow, we're all alive still." He looked at his wrist. "Time we got busy again."

The horses were saddled and they set off, dividing forces as before. The first paddock was explored without incident; the cattle were peaceful, the fences all in good order. Jim was waiting with Tommy at the next gate when Bill cantered up with his report.

"We'll have to keep our eyes skinned in the next stretch," he said. "There are a few cows with calves here. Take a good look at any you meet, Bill, to see if they're strong and fit. They'll have to be brought in as soon as shearing's over."

Bill hoped, as he rode away, that it might be done while he was still at Billabong. It was rather fun to bring in cows with calves; the youngsters knew nothing about being driven and were apt to behave like mad things, racing in every direction, while their mothers tore wildly after them—heads and tails erect, losing all semblance of respectable matronhood. Just the work Bill and Topsy loved. He looked keenly at the calves he met, noting with satisfaction that they showed both strength and activity.

"They'll take some handling!" he promised himself cheerfully.

The paddock was very large, and he was soon out of sight of the other

riders. There was plenty of timber; not only huge gum-trees, she-oak and blackwoods, but dense clumps of low-growing tea-tree as well; the land was flat, a cold place in winter, and the scrub had been deliberately left to shelter the cattle. This made progress slow, for every shelter-belt had to be examined. The tracks showed clearly that they were used as camping-grounds at night, but no beasts were in them now. All were out enjoying the sunshine.

One large patch of scrub stood on a low rise. As Bill rode towards it he heard sounds of distress—the plaintive cry that showed that all was not well with a calf, and now and then an agitated bellow in answer. Bill touched Topsy with his heel and trotted forward quickly.

They entered the clump, pushing through the outer fringe of bush. Within, it opened out; beaten tracks led round tea-tree patches, with here and there a space bare of growth. It was in one of these that he came upon a domestic tragedy.

A calf, younger than most of those he had seen, was trapped half under a bush. Only its head and shoulders were visible, and part of its back. The rest had slipped into a hole in the ground, presumably the home of a wombat. Bill hoped that the owner of the hole was not there as well, somewhere under the unwilling prisoner. The calf bleated steadily, its eyes wild with fear and bewilderment.

The eyes of the mother were not less wild. She stood in front of her baby, her head low: sometimes nosing it gently, making little sounds of encouragement, then drawing back with a louder call of distress. All the earth near the hole was beaten flat by her trampling. Her udder showed that it was long since the calf had been able to drink. Topsy snorted, moving uneasily in a way that indicated that this was an unusual situation—one that she did not like.

“Poor little brute!” said Bill, looking at the calf. “Well, I’ve got to try to get you out.”

He slipped to the ground and led Topsy aside, putting the end of her bridle over a bush, after a moment’s thought. It was not a secure fastening, but that was a thing Topsy did not need: and if the cow in her alarm should charge in her direction she could pull away easily.

He went forward with quiet steps. The cow drew back, eyeing him nervously. Bill spoke to her in as soothing a voice as he could produce. It seemed to have an effect upon her, for she made no movement even when he stood by the miserable head that lifted weakly from the hole.

Bill knew enough not to hurry matters. He was nervous, for he knew that the cow had not been handled for a long time; but he thought deliberately and remained quite still, talking quietly. Not until he could venture to hope that the cow was accepting him as a friend in need did he stoop slowly towards the prisoner.

The cow moved restlessly, coming a step nearer. Bill slipped his hands under the calf and tugged. The calf wailed loudly: there was an angry bellow from the mother. Bill looked up just in time as she charged.

He sprang back, dodging to one side, the cow's sharp horn just missing his shoulder. She did not attempt to pursue him; checking herself with a long slither that raised a cloud of dust, she stood over the calf. For a moment she stared at the boy with angry eyes; then dropped them and began to lick the captive's head.

"You silly old idiot!" Bill shouted angrily. "Just as I felt him move! I'd have had him out in a minute if you'd only had an atom of sense!"

The cow said nothing, but continued to lick. The calf made up for her silence by wailing more piteously than ever.

"Wish to goodness I had a stock-whip," uttered Bill. "I'll have to chase the old brute away somehow."

Pushing his way through the scrub he selected a long, whippy branch and with considerable difficulty managed to break the tough stem. He returned to the scene of action. The cow raised a suspicious head, uttering "Moo-oo!" in a hollow voice.

"Well, you've jolly well got to get out of the way," said Bill. He shouted, rushing forward, striking at her. Instinct triumphed for a moment over maternal devotion. The cow wheeled and fled, Bill in hot pursuit. As the scrub swallowed her he flashed round, racing back to the calf. One more pull ought to do it.

He did not get the chance to give it. The calf's loud outcry smote on the ears of the fleeing cow; she doubled back, bursting out of the scrub just as Bill got his grip. Bellowing, she charged across the space: and again only a lightning dodge saved the boy.

This time the cow meant business. Too infuriated to pay any heed to the calf, she plunged into the tea-tree, so close on Bill's heels that he could feel her hot breath. He ran like a hare, twisting and doubling: in his heart a sudden amazed conviction that he was going to be killed. "Jim!" he gasped as he ran. But Jim was very far off.

A little ahead a stout young gum sapling had managed to find space to grow. Bare of branches, for every young shoot had been rubbed off by cattle, it shot up, rearing its crown of leaves twenty feet from the ground. Bill dodged round it: the cow was too close upon him to dodge. Her head came into violent collision with it, a horn on either side of the trunk. The shock sent her back on her haunches, half-stunned.

At the crash Bill glanced round, giving a gasp of relief. He did not wait for further developments. Running at the top of his speed, he reached Topsy, flung the bridle over her head and scrambled into the saddle. Before he was fairly

there Topsy was heading for the open plain.

Bill's heart was pounding like a hammer.

"Gosh, that was close!" he gasped. "My word, I was glad to see you, Topsy!"

He looked round. There was no sign of the cow. He checked the pony and rode slowly round the clump of scrub, with a wary eye for the enemy. There was no sign of her, and presently he mustered up courage to ride into the tea-tree again, ready to wheel and fly if the cow showed fight.

"I'm not going to chance her horning you, old girl," he told Topsy. "We'll go steady."

Very cautiously he rode to the edge of the open space. The cow had returned to the prisoner. She tossed her head angrily, but her feet remained firmly planted over her baby. The encounter with the tree had shaken her; there was a cut on her forehead from which blood oozed slowly.

"I bet your head aches!" said the wrathful Bill. "Serve you right, you old goat! Well, you've got me licked, but I bet Jim'll teach you a bit of sense."

There was nothing to be gained by remaining any longer—the cow's head might ache, but she was quite equal to defending her offspring. Bill accepted his defeat with a very bad grace and went in search of Jim.

His pride was bitterly hurt. Nothing was so dear to him as being able to ride back to Jim reporting a job done. Now he had to own himself beaten, and Jim would be forced to put aside his own work because his offsider wasn't good enough for his job. It was awful to have to go to him with such a wretched report—and after everything had gone so well in the morning. Jim had said "Good man!" then. He wouldn't be able to say it now. It was with a heavy heart that he tightened his reins, shaking the willing pony into a canter.

Jim was riding slowly towards the gate when he saw them coming. Tommy was not yet in sight; she was still working, hidden by trees. Bill waved his arm, and Jim turned, trotting towards him. Bill would not signal unless something were wrong. He studied the boy's face, smiling a little. Bill hated being beaten, and his hot temper always struggled to master him at such moments. It was clear to Jim that it was struggling now.

"Jim!" The boy's voice was breathless. "There's a calf stuck in a hole, and the beastly old cow won't let me go near her. I tried twice, but she's as stubborn as a mule!"

"Cows are like that," said Jim. "Is the calf all right, do you know?"

"I don't think it's hurt, but it's stuck tight. I-I'm awfully sorry, Jim. I only got one pull at it, and——"

"You were off Topsy, were you? Is the cow savage?"

"Only when you touch the calf. She nearly got me twice."

Jim looked at the flushed face: saw the lip that trembled.

“You had two tries, then? Good man!” he said: and his smile made Bill’s heart leap. “Look, Wally’s not far off in the next paddock. You cut over to him as hard as you can make Topsy travel and tell him I want him. I’ll wait here.”

Bill was off like a shot. He was back with Wally in a few minutes.

“Can I come too, Jim? I do want to see how you manage her?” he begged.

“All right, but you’ll have to keep well away on Topsy. A cow can be nasty.”

Bill was fairly certain that he knew that, but it was cheering to see that Jim did not regard the job lightly. They rode fast towards the tea-tree clump.

“In here? Well, be ready to get Topsy going quickly if she breaks your way.”

They rode into the scrub, Bill eagerly peering through a gap. The cow was where he had left her. She bellowed angrily as they came near.

“Poor little beggar,” he heard Jim say. “Well, you’ve got to move, old girl, even if we have to hurt you.”

A stock-whip spoke suddenly. There was more sound than sting in its fall, but the cow leaped aside as it touched her flank. The horses were upon her in a flash, hustling her away from the calf; again and again the whips rang out like rifle-shots, terrifying her. She could not see her calf; the only way that was clear led to the open, and she plunged towards it blindly, closely followed by the riders. Not until she was a hundred yards from the scrub did they pause.

“I’ll hold her,” Wally said. Jim nodded. He turned and rode back quickly.

The cow wheeled in a moment and tried to return. But always the tall rider blocked the way and the bewildering whip spoke its message of authority, although, after the first lash, it had never touched her. No matter how she twisted and charged he was always a shade quicker.

Jim came back to the bleating prisoner. He knelt over it, feeling below the cold body to find out how it was held. Then he heaved steadily; and up from the wombat-hole came the captive, struggling violently, and rending the air with its cries.

“Glad you can kick,” remarked Jim, taking no notice of its struggles. He passed his hands over every part of its body and legs; and presently glanced up at Bill, who had edged nearer.

“No damage, only it’s stiff—no wonder, poor little brute!” He rubbed the calf gently, and in a few moments it was able to stand somewhat shakily, hanging its head and trembling.

“There!” said Jim, straightening up. “The next best thing is Mother. Watch her come back, Bill.”

He swung into his saddle, giving a long, shrill whistle. It reached Wally’s ears, and immediately he ceased to take interest in the cow. He coiled his whip, riding aside; and the cow passed him like a whirlwind, galloping for the scrub.

She plunged through it, bellowing; and suddenly the bellow dropped to an amazed lowing as she checked and trotted to her baby. The calf took a couple of staggering steps towards her: she nosed it eagerly, turning her head to press it into her flank. In a moment it was drinking ravenously.

“My word!” said Bill. “I was wild with her a bit ago, but I’m sorry I was, now.”

“She’s had a pretty thin time,” Jim said. “I wonder how long she’s been on guard? She needs a drink nearly as much as the calf did.”

They rode out on the plain. Wally had not waited: he was cantering back to his own job. They followed slowly.

“Wonder how that cow hurt her head,” Jim remarked. “That wasn’t the whip—she was touched only once, on the back.”

“Oh!” said Bill. “She got that when she was after me.” He told his story, in answer to Jim’s questioning.

“I just hated having to give in and bother you,” he finished. “If she’d even been a bullock it wouldn’t have seemed so bad. But an old cow——!”

“That’s how you think, is it? Well, old chap, I can tell you it’s safer to handle a dozen bullocks than to get between a cow and her calf in a case like this. You might have noticed that I got Wally to help me.”

Bill nodded.

“I got Wally because it’s too risky a job for one man—even if one man could do it. I could have done it, but only by being cruel—driving her far enough away, using the whip, to make her exhausted. That’s a fool way to work, so I got Wally. But you, on your own—why, you hadn’t the ghost of a chance, old man. It’s rather a wonder you’ve alive!

“And you remember,” went on the deep voice, “that though a decent man always tries to save an animal if possible he’s a fool if he chances his life for anything like that calf. And the man who gets on foot between a half-wild cow and her calf is chancing his life.”

Bill reddened.

“Not—not wild with me, are you, Jim?”

“If I’m wild with anyone it’s myself, for not warning you better,” said Jim. “But I never thought you’d meet a calf in a wombat-hole! You may have been a bit of a fool, but you certainly aren’t a coward, offsider!”

CHAPTER X

DETECTIVE WORK

TO BILL, at least, the next few days were altogether happy.

From early morning he was in the saddle; and although the work of bringing in the sheep had not the thrill of being out after cattle, still it was fun to Bill. There was the long ride to the far paddocks, to begin with, going fast all the time: then the job of collecting the sheep, which was slow, but interesting, since the sheep made demands on the intelligence of those who sought to find them. Cattle were simple, large beasts which never thought of trying to hide. But sheep had ways of their own, and even when they exasperated you they kept you interested.

It was like a game of hide-and-seek, and the seekers had to be wideawake. Only new-chums would imagine that the sheep you saw easily when you went into a paddock were all the sheep you had to find. They were the dull members of the flock. The clever ones were anywhere and everywhere; lying in patches of bracken, tucked under the lee of a log, nestling in groups among rocks which they somehow realized gave them protective colouring. On a hot day they went to cover within a hollow log or the shell of a dead tree; on a cold one they drifted into scrub-covered gullies, disappearing under the densest bushes. Bill declared that the climbing of trees was the only sport they had not mastered—as yet.

Nor, when found, did they want to come with the finder. By nature retiring, they hung back modestly, taking advantage of any careless moment to fade away once more. This playful habit was not exhibited if you had a dog. The mere sight of Kim, Jim's old collie, or of Wally's slim red kelpie, Sandy, produced an immediate change of heart in all sheep in their neighbourhood; their utterances, loud and prolonged, showed that their one desire was to go in any direction the dogs wished.

Bill had no dog, and was therefore treated by the sheep as a person of no account. They found, however, that what he lacked in one direction he made amends for in another by a horrible activity, very distressing to a sober-minded sheep. Mounted on Topsy, whose lithe black form was unpleasantly suggestive of a dog, he would come charging into their secret hiding-places, uttering yells that broke across their sleep: yells of so penetrating and shattering a nature that even fat old ewes would find themselves bounding down hillsides almost before they knew they were awake.

Even the more cunning ones, sheep which crouched, wide awake, in their

lairs, not blinking an eyelash when a horse went by, found themselves unsafe when Bill was a finder. Where Topsy could not go, having four feet, a two-legged boy could scramble: a sheep snugly tucked into a hollow log was never free from the possibility of a hard young hand closing firmly on a hind leg, hauling pitilessly; when the owner of the leg would become a victim to panic and back out in a flurry of bleating, to find itself impelled by a hearty kick to join its companions on a long and weary journey. Since the sheep were all wearing their thickest overcoats, the kicks did not hurt them, but they filled them with a wholesome respect for Bill.

Once the victims were routed out and set in motion, the mob-spirit took hold of them, causing them to desire to join forces with any woolly brethren ahead; so that after a time there would be long lines of sheep stringing across a paddock with the riders and dogs bringing up the rear, all converging upon the gate. Gradually the lines would meet and merge until the united mob could go no further; when new hope would dawn in them and they would split up, hastening along the fence to right and left, believing, perhaps, that as the gate was thus left to the enemy those disturbing people would pass through it and leave them behind.

This was always the moment for the dogs. They needed no word of command; silently they would slip away, circling out to head the mobs back in the way that sheep should go. Someone would ride forward, open the gate, and pass through, riding slowly on: the sheep, brought back, would regard the opening disdainfully, walking past it with an expression which denied that it was there at all. This haughty attitude persisted until the increasing pressure of the mob caused a few to ooze through the gateway. They would at once march off in the wake of the horseman: and the remainder of the mob, with an air of surprised recognition that said, "Why, here's a gate!" would hasten to follow, surging and struggling in the opening in their ardour to pass through—many leaping, goat-like, into the air, coming down on the dense mass of woolly backs, and producing further confusion.

After the first paddock was left the mob kept together, going meekly until the next gateway was encountered. There was no more excitement: riders and dogs moved slowly, and often the horsemen would dismount, strolling forward, their horses following with the bridles on their necks.

The shearing shed itself was some distance from the house, from which its stark ugliness was hidden by a belt of trees. There was another barn-like shed which provided sleeping quarters for the gang of men who would shortly invade Billabong: at one end a room was partitioned off, roughly furnished as a kitchen. Yards were built right up to the shed, and beyond them were the small paddocks where the sheep would await their turn under the shears. Everything was arranged for quick and easy handling of the flocks: not only

that the work of the clip might go forward smoothly, but also to save unnecessary hardship for the sheep—for which, under the best conditions, the shearing time could never be considered a picnic.

For Billabong it was usually a very cheerful time; one of ceaseless hard work, but that was everyone's desire. The shearers wanted to be done with the job, to draw their pay and hurry on to the next station. The sheep, knowing nothing of what was to befall them, wailed unceasingly to be released from cramped paddocks and abominable, dusty yards so that they might wander at will over the wide plains and deep gullies they loved. Their owners rejoiced at the end of each day's work, and tapped the barometer anxiously lest it should show any symptom of falling—since rain meant wet sheep, and a cessation of all work until they dried out; to say nothing of the risk of exposure for the flocks that had already been shorn. Long working hours were as nothing, if only the job could be done in fine weather.

Thus everyone worked at top speed from the moment the blades began to move, and asked nothing better; and since Billabong was a happy station, its men friendly to all comers, shearing always passed off cheerfully. Once it had not been necessary to employ strange shearers. The main industry of Billabong was cattle, with a small number of sheep, and the station workers could deal with the clip. Of late years, however, Jim and Wally had enlarged their flocks. Australia was passing through difficult times: it had become prudent to think in terms of wool and mutton as well as of beef.

To the Lintons sheep could never give the joy that cattle held for them. They were cattle-men, delighting in their splendid herds. Sheep were different; crawlers, nothing individual about them. Still, they tackled the sheep-work light-heartedly, and the shearing, with its whirl of hard work and the excitement of running a race with time, had become one of the yearly jobs they liked best.

It was certainly a pity that it had ceased to be purely a station matter, but they had now too many sheep for that. Shearers had to be engaged, gangs with their own cook and his mates, who ran their share of the business in an autocratic fashion. It was easier for the homestead—but the house servants had never grumbled at the extra work, even though the cooking had been never-ending.

Brownie, who had once directed it all, had paid only one visit to the shearers' kitchen. She had gazed disdainfully at the battery of blackened pots and pans, the greasy figure of the cook who scowled over them, a cigarette drooping from his upper lip. There were strange smells: flies were everywhere, unchecked, unheeded. Brownie had looked, shuddered, and retreated. She never came again.

Still, although the old feeling could never be recaptured, the shearing

passed off pleasantly enough each year. The men were treated well. Their bunks were comfortable, there were two bathrooms: on Sundays those who wished could have horses to ride over the paddocks. The station hands took no part in the actual shearing: theirs was the task of bringing the sheep to the yards and getting them out of the way when shorn. They did their work with a quick efficiency and friendliness that made the shearers contented. In the evenings there were invitations for them to join the groups round the camp fire, where “singsongs” took place; the Billabong men could sing a song or tell a story with the best.

Old Murty O’Toole, the head stockman, was a universal favourite; the fame of his Irish stories was handed on from one gang of shearers to another. Sometimes Jim and Wally strolled over to the fire, careful to come only as guests, not as owners. The shearers were quick to detect their attitude and to give an invitation—“Sit down, Boss, an’ have a yarn.”

Good yarns they were in the firelight, everyone pleasantly relaxed after the long day, well fed, the pipes glowing redly in the dusk. Stories of war, of England, of droving, of adventure in every out-back corner of Australia; there were few things the lean brown men had not experienced of open-air life. They told their stories in the dry Australian way, in short terse sentences with queer turns of phrase, the speaker rarely permitting himself the ghost of a smile even when an unexpected twist in his yarn drew shouts of laughter from his hearers. “Good chaps!” Jim and Wally would comment as they strolled homewards.

This year was to give Bill his first experience of a shearing, and he looked forward to it with all a boy’s delight. For weeks he had pumped the men with questions about details, especially as to the part anyone of his age could play in the proceedings: as to which there was a certain vagueness in the answers.

“There’s always jobs for the askin’,” Murty had said. “An’ more jobs for them as can see them without bein’ asked. You just keep y’r eyes skinned, Masther Bill, and you’ll find you’ll be as handy as a pocket in a shirt.”

He had added a word of warning.

“Watch y’r step, though, when you’re annyways near the shearers. They’re queer, at laste some of ’em are. We’ve had luck on Billabong, always gettin’ good gangs of dacint nice fellas, but they’re not always like that.”

“Oh, I know,” said Bill wisely. “I’ve heard lots—about strikes and things.”

“If they’re the ould kind, all men from the counthry, there’s not so much of that. It’s the lads from Sydney an’ Melbourne that stir up the trouble, an’ there’s plenty of them in shearin’ gangs nowadays. ’Tis not harrd to learn the job, an’ they make good money in a season; then back they go to loaf about in the cities all through the summer, or else to work at the docks. ’Tis dock-hands are the worrst; full up they are of all sorts of wild talk about Labour an’ Capital.”

"I don't see what that's got to do with shearing," said Bill.

"Sure, nothing at all. But they're great-soundin' things to talk about. Them's the lads as want to do no labour an' own all the capital. Ah well, we've not had anny of 'em on Billabong yet, an' please the saints, we won't," finished Murty piously.

"Jim 'ud fix them, I bet," was Bill's firm comment.

"He might, then. Or maybe his men. But apart from that, Masther Bill, let you be careful not to get in the shearers' way. If there's anny cross-grained fellas among 'em they'll take anny chance of a grievance. You'll see that all of the hands leave the shed pretty well alone. It's the gang's while they're here; we keep to our work outside. Go in there with Mr. Jim or Mr. Wally or Mr. Bob—but you'll not find that Mr. Bob will be much there unless 'tis his own sheep that are being shorn."

"I—see," said Bill. "'Cause he'll be an Owner then."

"Yes—an' the gang'll know it. Owners are different. You'll be all right if you go into the shed with an Owner, but don't go by yourself—lasteways, not until we make sure that it's a plisant sort of gang. I know of a station where there was a breakdown in the machinery, by raison of a fella with a grievance droppin' a monkey-wrench into it unbeknownst: an' he tried to put the blame on a little lad that was the Owner's son, who'd been pokin' round by himself."

"Mean brute!" said Bill hotly.

"He was: an' somehow there was an all-round row worked up over it, an' it ended in the gang strikin'. That's aisy enough, when you get men takin' different sides. Best to give 'em no chances, Masther Bill."

Bill had thought much over this unpleasant story, and had decided to run no risks. It would be easy to see plenty of the shed under Jim's wing; and after all, the work he liked best would be outside the shed with the sheep, where there would be no need to watch his step for unforeseen chances of trouble. Even though he could not see how it was likely to occur, he knew well that strikes did take place over the most shadowy grievances. It was all very stupid, Bill thought: not like grown-up men at all.

Strikes and other troubles were very far from his mind as he strolled round with Jim on the last afternoon before shearing began. All the sheep were ready; paddocks that had been kept empty for many weeks were now thickly dotted with grey forms. Even the yards next to the shed were filled with sheep, so that there would be no delay in the morning. All the air was echoing with their ceaseless bleating.

The shed was bare and clean. Its floor shone with the grease of other years; fragments of the wool of past shearings were caught in the cobwebs among the rafters. Over all hung the smell that never leaves a shed—a mingling of many smells, combined to make, at least, in Bill's opinion, a not unpleasant whole.

The belts of the machinery sagged idly now; a pair of shears, sharpened and polished, hung on a hook inside each pen where a shearer would work. Tables, well scoured, awaited the fleeces; at the far end stood the tall wool-presses, their bright red paint the only note of colour in the drab surroundings.

In the engine-room were Bob and Billy, putting the final touches to the toilet of the power-plant. Nothing had been left undone to ensure smooth working; every part had been overhauled as carefully as if it were the engine of a plane.

“There!” said Bob, a grimy figure in oil-soaked dungarees. “She’ll run like a dream. Filled that oil-can, Billy?”

Billy grunted assent, fingering the engine lovingly. For a blackfellow, who had known only horses for most of his life, he had a curious passion for machinery. It was a useful passion, since he regarded it as a holiday to be allowed to clean a motor. Bob was the only one who shared it, and even Bob lagged behind Billy in his enjoyment of grease and dirt.

“Well, they can come any time they like,” said Jim. “All we want now is fine weather, and, thank goodness, there isn’t a sign of anything else.” He glanced round as Wally came in. “Has the mail come yet, Wal, do you know?”

“I don’t think so,” Wally answered. “There’s dust on the road, but too much of it for one car. I rather fancy it’s the gang arriving.”

Bill dashed out to see. From the homestead the road was not visible, but in dry weather the dust rising from its unmetalled surface showed where it ran. A pale cloud, rapidly increasing, hovered over it now.

“It’s the gang all right,” said Jim. “Too fast for anything but motors. Let’s go over to the huts to receive them.”

They went slowly to the sheds. As they reached them the beat of motor-cycle engines became audible, and in a few moments two riders whizzed round a bend of the homestead track, crouched low over their handle-bars. They dashed up the last stretch, left the track for the grass, and bumped over its uneven surface until they pulled up beside the Billabong group. The leader jumped off, greeting Jim with a smile.

“’Evening, Mr. Linton. All ready for us?”

“Ready and very glad to see you, Carmody,” said Jim, shaking hands. Greetings were exchanged all round, and Bill became happily embarrassed when the gang leader, bending a keen grey eye on him, stated that he was just about the size he needed for a rouseabout.

Other motor-cycles arrived almost immediately, and presently the main body brought up the rear in a motor-truck, driven by the cook. Luggage and equipment was piled on it, while men sat on any available space, their legs dangling over the side. A few shearers who had been at Billabong before grinned in a friendly way at the homestead men. New hands muttered a gruff

“G’day,” or limited themselves to a nod. There was a mild scrimmage to secure kit-bags, and the men hurried into the hut to select their bunks, finding that those in the best positions were already appropriated by the motor-cyclists, whose hats, placed on the pillows, were enough to defend them against all comers.

The cook, a very fat man, gave the briefest of greetings. He hastened to the kitchen, followed by laden cook’s mates. A moment later the crackling of sticks in the stove could be heard, and presently the cook came out, looking placid.

“I might ’a remembered what your kitchen was like, Mr. Linton. Last place was a fair cow—’ardly a shelf, an’ the stove full o’ last year’s ashes. Nice thing to strike after dark, it was!”

“Oh, we do the best we can for you, Harry,” Jim said. “You’ll find plenty of firewood, I think; let us know if it begins to run short. And how’s the baby?”

“Fancy you rememberin’ her!” beamed the cook—a proud father whose family photographs were always tacked up on the kitchen wall. “Grown a fair trick, she has: I never heard anything like the way that young one talks.” He plunged into ecstatic discourse regarding his daughter, breaking off regretfully to return to his professional duties.

The men had come out of the hut and were strolling about, most of them inspecting the sheep critically, from the point of view of the shearer—light or heavy fleeces. A thickset man came up to Jim.

“G’day, Mr. Linton. Old lady still here?” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the house. “Mrs. Brown, y’know. Can I have a word with her? She doctored me a fair treat last year when I cut me laig.”

“Rather—you’ll find her in the kitchen. Leg all right now, Joe?”

“Right as rain, barring a bit of a scar. Well, I’ll mooch over.”

He sauntered away. Not far from the house he encountered Bat Harris, who was wandering idly, casting looks of admiration at what could be seen of the garden.

“Nice place,” Harris said. “You’ve been here before, haven’t you, Joe?”

“Too right I have. It’s a bonza place,” said Joe. He rather liked young Harris, who struck him as a quiet, civil fellow; and he was not unwilling to show himself as one who had privileges on Billabong. “How’d yer like to come in with me? I’ll interjuce yer to the fattest an’ the best-hearted old woman in Victoria.”

“What, in the house? You aren’t goin’ there, are you?”

“I’m goin’ to the kitchen. She’s the housekeeper—awful good sort. I hurt my laig last year, an’ she used to bandage it every day.”

“Think she wouldn’t mind if I went with you?”

“Not she. Got to behave pretty, of course. I wouldn’t take every chap there.”

“Well, I’d like to come. Thanks, Joe.” They fell into step together.

“Nice people here,” Joe told him. “Young Meadows’ wife found out that two of our chaps were keen on flowers an’ things, an’ she gave ’em an invite to go all round the garden one Sunday. I wished I’d thought of sayin’ I was a gardener meself, only she might a’ found out that I didn’t know a marigold from a leek. You a garden fiend?”

“Well, hardly that, but I know a bit about ’em,” Harris said. “Used to go an’ look round the Botanical Gardens in Melbourne. They’re wonders.”

They had entered the back yard, and Harris looked round it keenly. It was a wide, well-kept expanse of gravel, edged with beds full of shrubs. Creepers covered the fences—climbing roses and masses of starry clematis. Over them rose the big two-storey house, with a balcony running round three sides.

Brownie came out on the back verandah as the men crossed the yard.

“Well, if it isn’t Joe Carter! Come along in, Joe. An’ who’s your mate?”

Joe effected introductions, and they followed her into the kitchen, where a pretty girl in a cretonne overall looked eagerly at them, with an evident desire to make their acquaintance: a wish that Brownie discouraged airily.

“You get on with your work, Daisy. I’ll be comin’ for those vegetables presently, an’ you got no time to lose.” Daisy retired reluctantly into the scullery, having already arrived at the conviction that the older man was not worth a second thought, but the younger had possibilities for a girl who found housework cramping to her style. She powdered her nose before the copper preserving pan and thought bitterly of the tyranny of Mrs. Brown, who had clearly never known youth and romance.

Bat Harris had not failed to notice her expression. He pigeon-holed it in his memory and gave himself up to the work of getting on the right side of Brownie.

He had not met her type before, but he was shrewd enough to appreciate it. This was no old woman to impress by city ways or by putting himself forward; he was quiet and respectful, letting Joe do most of the talking. Presently he ventured a comment on what might be considered Brownie’s own territory.

“Your back yard’s a bit of an eye-opener, Mrs. Brown. It’s better than most people’s gardens.”

Brownie looked pleased.

“Mr. Linton always says he can’t see why back yards shouldn’t be nice to look at, if you’ve got plenty of room,” she told him. “But it’s not every young man as ’ud notice it.”

“Oh, Bat’s a reg’lar home bird, I believe,” put in Joe, glad that his companion had said the right thing. “Likes mooching round gardens, he’s told

me. You tell Mrs. Brown about them gardens in Melbourne, Bat—where you used to go Sundays an' wander about."

Thus encouraged, Bat embarked on a description of Melbourne's famous gardens that held Brownie spellbound.

"Wisht I'd seen 'em," she said. "I was only once in Melbourne, an' the noise an' all had me fair dithered. I went down for the Show, but I couldn't stand it. I just packed up an' came home. An' there's really a lake with lilies all round it! I never knew they'd got places like that in Melbourne."

"What I like," said Bat, "is the jolly little corners—places where shrubs and ferns are grown so as they make little nooks where you can be quiet by yourself. Peaceful, they are."

He did not add that his enjoyment of such nooks had generally been heightened by the presence of a friend and a pack of greasy cards. The information might have lessened his hostess's approval of his description.

"Well, I'm sure you make it sound all lovely," she said. "I must tell my young lady that there's another young fellow come that likes gardens. Billabong's ain't at its best yet by a long way, but I'm sure she'd let you go round it."

Bat expressed modest gratitude, adding that when a man spent his time going from one shearing shed to another it was rather a treat to get into a place that felt like home. Brownie's kind old heart was touched.

"You just look into my kitchen now an' then," she told him. "I don't ask the shearers as a rule: most of 'em wouldn't care to come, an' I wouldn't care to have 'em, but a quiet young feller is different. Now then, Daisy—finished that job?"

Daisy had come in, her pretty face sulky.

"Well, there was only the veges, an' I've done 'em all," she said. "Can't I help you get tea, Mrs. Brown?"

"Oh, well, if you're sure they're ready you may as well," said Brownie, relenting. To be severe was never easy for Brownie, who had trained many "offsiders" in her time, though never one quite so modern as her present recruit, whose ideas on dress and facial adornment were sharply in conflict with her own views. With stupidity, Brownie could be amazingly patient, but Daisy was not stupid; she took her own line with a quiet mulishness that had more than once wrung from her teacher the remark that it was a thousand pities her mother hadn't made more use of a slipper.

"Well, they're only young once," Brownie reflected, watching the swift change in the girl's face as she briskly set about the preparation of tea. It brightened even more when the shearers accepted an invitation to stay: she tossed an occasional remark at them, and was soon on excellent terms with Joe Carter. Harris was less forthcoming; he gave most of his attention to Brownie,

discoursing on horticulture and homes. Only when they said good-bye did he allow himself to look steadily at Daisy for a moment—a look which caused the girl to redden.

“So he does know I’m in the room after all!” she thought half-angrily. She buried herself in a novelette that night to study Lady Esmeralda’s methods with young men who needed to be taught lessons in the treatment of beautiful girls.

Strolling over the paddocks in the evening with Alf, Harris was jubilant.

“I told you our luck was in!” he said. “Talk about luck! I never thought I’d get into the house the very first evening.”

“Well, you ain’t got no further than the kitchen,” responded Alf practically.

“That’s as far as I want to get. The house doesn’t interest me. But I’ve made friends with the old woman, an’ I’ll bet she knows all that goes on here. Joe says she’s been here donkey’s years, and they treat her like one of the family.”

“I been talking about that old woman to another fellow that’s been shearing here before,” Alf said slowly. “An’ I don’t believe you’ll ever get out of her anything she don’t want to tell, no matter how smart you are. He told me a lot of yarns about her that the old stockman told him. You’d think she was as soft as butter, but she can be a holy terror when she likes!”

“She isn’t going to be a holy terror with me,” said Bat confidently. “She thinks I’m a lovely young man, all potty about flowers. But even if I can’t get round the old woman, I’ve a second string—that girl in the kitchen’s only waitin’ to be asked out.”

“Joe Carter said you didn’t get on too well with her,” responded Alf. “Said you left all the running to him.”

“Don’t you worry about that.” Bat smiled unpleasantly. “I’ve got her guessing. It’s always wise to hang back a bit at first if you want ’em to take an interest in you.” He lit a cigarette. “That girl won’t say No if I borrow Wicking’s motor-bike an’ ask her to come for a ride some evening.”

“Well, you may find out something, an’ then again, you mayn’t,” Alf said. “I don’t think much of your chances. All the same, Bat, I’m beginnin’ to believe that there is something to find out. I been nosin’ round a bit an’ talkin’ to anyone I could pick up with——”

“You didn’t hear anything about gold?” the other interrupted sharply.

“Of course I didn’t. No one on this place is goin’ to yap to a stranger. But I did find out that some of them are away: some of the station hands. An’ the Boss is away too—old Linton. Queer, you know, at shearin’ time. Carmody says he’s always been up to his neck in it other years.”

“Yes, it’s queer,” Bat said thoughtfully. “Or it may just mean nothing at all. I wonder.”

“An’ there’s something else,” Alf went on, with a grin. “Fact is, while you’ve been having tea-parties with the ladies I seem to have been doing the work. I’m beginnin’ to fancy meself as a detective. I don’t know whether I hadn’t better keep it to meself for a bit until I’ve put a few more clues together _____”

“Oh, cut out the Sherlock Holmes business,” said the other roughly. “Let’s hear your precious find.”

“Easy on. No need to lose your hair, old chap. Well—I was takin’ my little walk around, an’ I got to a paddock right on the other side of the house. That redheaded kid was runnin’ across it to a big shed, so I thought I’d nip across too. An’ I bet you half a dollar, Bat, you can’t guess in three guesses what’s in that shed.”

“I’m not goin’ to try one, let alone three,” snapped his friend. “I wish you’d get on with it an’ not talk so much.”

“Right, I’ll get on with it. Sittin’ in that shed, all nice and pretty, is one of them planes we saw last week. An’ the other’s in another shed.”

The effect of his revelation was all that Alf had hoped for. Harris stared at him speechlessly.

“You’re sure they’re the same planes?” he asked after a moment.

“Dead sure. I’m not quite a fool, even if I’m no flier.”

“Did you try to get anything out of the boy?” Harris paused. “Who is he, by the way? He doesn’t look like the rest of the people here.”

“No, he isn’t one of the family. He stays here a lot. I tried to do a little pumpin’, but I was afraid to let him see I was interested in anything but a casual way. All the same, it struck me that the kid had had his orders.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well—we potted round the planes, an’ got quite chummy, up to a point. He’ll talk the leg off an iron pot when it’s about sheep or cattle, or about flyin’; he’s mad keen on the planes. But directly I brought in the Boss—I just dropped a remark about him bein’ in Melbourne, as a sort of feeler—he shut up like a clam.”

“H’m,” muttered Bat.

“So then I said, changin’ the subject, like, ‘I suppose Mr. Linton flies his planes himself.’ An’ he says, quick, ‘Oh, they’re not his; they’re Mr. Paxton’s and Mr. Young’s.’ An’ I says, innocent as a baby, ‘Oh, they’re here for the shearin’, of course.’ An’ the kid says, ‘No, they’re away.’ But before he said ‘away’ there was just a bit of a pause, as if he’d meant to say something else, an’ changed his mind sudden.”

“Away, are they?” Harris said slowly. “Away! That’s what they told you about Linton and the men. By Jove, Alf, we’ve got to find out where ‘away’ is!”

It was generally Brownie's habit to do her thinking in bed, since her days were too busy to include meditation. In bed she could review quietly the events of the day, noting what had gone wrong and reflecting on how to put it right to-morrow; or, more often, just rejoicing in detail over the hours of a day that had seemed to hold only sunny hours.

Such days of brightness had been fewer since Daisy had been added to her staff. That young woman managed to put many pin-pricks into life in the kitchen. But Brownie knew that most problems solve themselves if thought over quietly; even Daisy might mend her ways, or else realize that she did not fit into Billabong, and remove herself from it.

"An' that 'ud be the best for everyone, I'm sure," mused Brownie. "Only I can't worry Miss Norah now, with all she's got on her mind. I'll just keep a hold on my temper an' treat the child as well as I can, an' I expect the Lord'll help me. I'll want Him to help a lot if I find her nasty lip-stick in the spoon-drawer again!"

She dismissed Daisy from her thoughts. They turned to the young man who had come with Joe Carter, and she gave Bat Harris some moments of meditation.

"He certainly seemed a nice young feller. So quiet an' civil in his ways; none of your free-an'-easy young chaps. Didn't offer to light a cigarette in me kitchen, neither."

Brownie was growing sleepy. The thoughts became disjointed.

"He did talk nice about gardens . . . I thought once or twice it was a bit too nice to be true, but I expect it was only my nasty mind . . . and no silly nonsense with young Daisy, for all she kept lookin' at him . . . I was glad of that . . . have to keep my eye on her while the shearers are here . . . but young Harris didn't give her no encouragement . . . a nice young feller . . . only I wish he didn't show so much white in his eye!"

CHAPTER XI

SHEEP AND DIPLOMACY

VERY early next morning the long whistle of the engine shrilled out, echoing among the hills; and the shearing had begun.

Bill found it fascinating. Whenever he had a free moment he loved to watch the work in the shed. He did not forget Murty's warning to keep out of the way; there could be no poking about among men who were so busy that had a small boy strayed into their path they would probably have walked over him without noticing him. He would flatten himself against the wall near the door by the pile of wool-bales that grew steadily throughout the day; not moving until it was time to slip away unobtrusively.

Never had he seen such work. Between meal-breaks it flowed on unceasingly. Each shearer worked beside a pen of sheep; a man would grasp a struggling animal, dump it on the shearing-board, and with the first touch of the shears the struggles usually ceased while the blades ate into the wool. The fleece peeled off like the skin of an orange: it was almost startling to see the creamy-white wool underneath the grey-brown exterior as the soft mass fell in crinkled heaps on the board.

Now and then a red mark, oozing blood, started up on the shorn skin as a shear blade erred by a hair's breadth. The man would shout—"Tar here!"—not ceasing to cut. A lad would run up with a pot of tar, daub the cut swiftly, and retreat. The blades whirred on. The last snip came, the fleece falling clear. A shove, and the sheep, bewildered in its nakedness, slid down a chute, struggling to its feet, to find that it had slipped through a doorway into a pen in the open air among a group of huddling bare bodies. The shearer stood up, grasped a new victim, and began again.

A boy had seized the fleece, flinging it on a table with a dexterous twist that spread it flat before a man with hand-shears. Snip-snip; the dirty end-locks fell away, leaving a rough square. It passed to the wool-classing tables where Jim and Wally worked, examining each fleece to determine its quality and decide into which section of the clip it should go. Bill knew it was expert work: he watched them with a new respect.

"Wool away!" The fleece was deftly folded: a boy raced up, grabbed it, hugging it to him, and was off to the presses, where the great brown sacks hung in the tall framework. Fleece after fleece was flung in: a man followed them as the pile mounted, stowing them tightly, treading them down; pausing often to receive another bundle from the man below. All in the shed were

greasy, but none so greasy as this man; from his brow to his boots he shone, his red face gleaming as if polished. The packing was complete, the wool foaming over the top; men hung on the lever and the great weights came down, pressing the fleeces into a compact shape. The door of the press opened: the bale came out, ready for the end to be sewn up. Then a stencil plate was clapped on, a paint-brush swept over it; the bale, hard as iron, its sides straight and smooth, was finished, the station brand on its side. It went to join a stack of its fellows; already the next was half-filled.

When he first watched, Bill thought that the whole shed was chaos. Only as he grew used to it did he see how orderly all was. Each man was a cog in the machinery, doing his job and no other: no man moved a yard farther than was necessary. Only the rouseabouts were mobile individuals, who had to leap quickly to any emergency. They kept the pens filled with sheep, they raced for new shear-blades, for oil or tar, for rag if a man sustained a cut—it had to be a bad cut to receive any notice. They swept up the clipped pieces, throwing them into a bin. And when a meal-break came they dropped all other things and fled gladly to help the cook's mate to bring in tucker.

Huge eaters, shearers, Bill thought. They began with a mighty breakfast, chops forming the main dish. Midway between dinner and supper were breaks known as "smoke-ohs"—buckets of hot, sweet tea and baking-dishes piled high with great slabs of the currant cake they called "brownie." It had to be eaten at top speed to give time for a cigarette afterwards. The men would hurry outside, still eating while the cigarettes were lighted. All too soon the whistle went, and in a moment the shed rang with the heavy boots tramping down the boards.

There was little talking. Nobody had time for it; and a man had to shout to be heard over the steady roar of the machinery, the clash of the blades, the click of little hooves as the sheep moved restlessly on the floor, the occasional shouts and the running of the rouseabouts: and over all the high-pitched ceaseless calling of the sheep. All the sounds mingled, just as the smells mingled—the acrid odours of the sheep, the reek of the fleeces, blended with oil and tar and sweating human bodies.

Among it all moved the figure of Carmody, the gang boss, dominating the scene. He worked at the presses, unless he relieved Jim or Wally at the classing tables; hard as he worked, his eyes were always busy, sizing up his men, watching the general progress of the work. Nowadays a boss had to go warily with his gang if he did not want a strike to work up out of a fancied slight or injustice. Shearers had become quick to anger, fiercely independent; Carmody had to make himself blind to many things that would once have been swiftly checked. But one thing he would not overlook—every man knew that the leader would tolerate no unnecessary roughness with the sheep. This point

having been made clear to each shearer as he joined, it was accepted by all: if a man transgressed he knew he would get no backing from his mates. They took no notice when an occasional angry roar from Carmody indicated that the rule had been broken.

Bill had not much time to stand watching in the shed. Outside there were many things to do. The sheep were like babies, to be cared for all the time. They came from the shears in a state of helpless bewilderment, shivering and huddling as the keen air struck sharply on their defenceless bodies: as soon as a pen was full the gate was opened and they were urged out—not an easy matter—and driven to yards some distance away to be drafted. Here tar had to be ready, so that cuts might be doctored which the shearers had ignored: it was Bill's job to drive them into a narrow race where Bob and Murty looked them over, branding each as it was let out.

Then they had to be taken to their place of release: wethers in one paddock, ewes in another. In the ewes' paddock were their half-grown lambs. From the moment when they had seen their mothers taken away they had wailed night and day to have them back; but now that the parents returned, eager for their children, the lambs remained uncomforted, for they did not recognize them. Were *these* their mothers? these strange pink creatures, lean and excited, their sides hard and cold to the touch of an inquiring nose? The lambs had known only large and cosy mothers, thickly upholstered in wool; mothers made to snuggle against when the wind was cold. These peculiar beasts who ran at them, calling—one might as well snuggle against a wire fence! The lambs uttered indignant "Baa-aas!" and fled away.

To matrons who had just undergone the indignity of stripping, who shivered still with fright and cold, this was the last straw. They knew their children perfectly well: each could have picked her own lamb out of a thousand. It was devastating to find one's son or daughter, or it might even be twins, and then to be repulsed with angry hoots. It was clear to the ewes that as a result of the horrifying experiences of the last few days the lambs had gone mad. Only a mad lamb could fail to recognize its loving mother. And as each loving mother had no idea how funny she looked, she raced in pursuit of her distracted offspring.

Bill used to double up with laughter at these proceedings. He liked to watch the gradual sorting-out that followed the first moments of tumult and anxiety. A lamb would conquer its fear, recognizing that the voice that proceeded from the strange-looking scarecrow that followed him was really the one voice in the world that mattered. He would halt and let her come near; still full of suspicion, but otherwise empty, since he needed a drink very badly. The ewe's sharp bleat would change to a softer note; and suddenly the lamb would know that all was well, and rush at her, butting her with his round head in his

efforts to obtain milk.

More trouble might ensue. It was an ordinary thing for a lamb to butt at such moments, and Mother had never objected. But it is one thing to be butted when wearing a dense mat of wool; quite another when lean sides, stinging from lately inflicted cuts, have no covering at all. Even the most devoted mother-ewe may then resent the impact of a bullet head with the weight of an impatient lamb behind it. The lamb might find itself angrily flung aside—and all the bother would begin again. Wally declared that the cries of the bewildered lambs might be translated, “She loves me—she loves me not!”

So the work went on all day, with long lines of sheep flowing in from the paddocks to the shed, to flow back again later, shaven and cold. Dogs raced hither and thither, rounding up unruly wethers; whips cracked to hasten the pace of laggards. Men and boys and dogs grew steadily dustier and hoarser, increasingly glad to dash for a drink whenever an opportunity occurred. And Bill, who was everybody’s rouseabout, thought that he had never experienced so splendid a time!

The shearers were free at the end of the day before the station men: for the gang there was only blade-sharpening to be done in readiness for next day, but the others had still to dispose of the last-shorn sheep. Work over, the shearers embarked upon the process known as “cleaning themselves,” which varied according to the energy of the individual; then came the cook’s signal for the evening meal, a solid affair that left many unwilling to do anything but play cards in the bunk-house. A few dashed off on motor-cycles; others visited the stables or strolled to the lagoon, where flocks of water-fowl swam placidly, well aware that their territory was a bird-sanctuary.

Gradually Bat Harris developed a habit of sauntering to the homestead kitchen in the evening. Brownie had no cause to regret her invitation. He was never in the way—indeed, he was quick to lend a hand if a job of work offered. Always he was quietly companionable, giving most of his attention to Brownie.

Five and twenty years on Billabong had given Brownie the firm belief that a horse which shows too much white in the eye is not an animal to be trusted, and she had grown to believe the same of a man or woman. There was no doubt, she told herself, studying Harris’s dark face, that he did not come up to standard in this respect. But the warmth of her heart made it difficult for Brownie to suspect anyone. “Anyhow,” she thought, “what’s it matter? He’ll be gone soon. An’ he’s that nice an’ civil I’m sure it’s a pleasure to see him come into the kitchen.”

Daisy certainly thought so. The visitor made a pleasant break in a life that she found anything but gay; he had plenty to talk about, and little by little he managed to include her in the conversation. She watched eagerly for his

coming—careful to do her watching from the scullery window, where Brownie was unlikely to catch her unawares. Also, she grew careful with her work; it did not pay to annoy her chief, who could so easily repay annoyances by excluding her from the gatherings in the kitchen. Brownie’s mind grew calm; she even entertained hopes of making her offside into something worth while.

She made no objection when Harris idly suggested one evening that Daisy should show him the kitchen-garden.

“It ain’t what it usually is, just now,” she said. “But it’s not bad, for all that. It’ll do you good to have a run out, Daisy.”

“That’s just about her idea of a nice lively outing!” broke out Daisy when they were out of earshot. “Kitchen-garden, indeed! I dunno how people live in a dull place like this.”

“It sure is dull for a girl like you,” he said. “More used to towns, aren’t you?”

“Too right I am. I only came here because Mum made me—an’ I’ll make tracks as soon’s I’ve got a bit of money saved. Then I’m off to Melbourne.”

“That’s the idea, if you want fun,” he said. He looked at her deliberately. “And pretty girls ought to have fun. Didn’t anybody ever tell you you were pretty, Daisy?”

She flushed. “You’ve said that to lots of girls before, I bet.”

“Sure I have. But you’re the prettiest of the lot. I say, what about comin’ out with me on a motor-bike on Sunday?”

“You got a bike?” she asked eagerly.

“I can borrow one. Like to come?”

“My word, I would! Thanks awfully, Bat.”

“It’s me to say thank you. I get fed-up with hangin’ about the bunk-house after work. An’ we could have more fun than comin’ to see a kitchen-garden.” He gave a short laugh. “I s’pose I’d better look at it while I’m here, or I won’t be able to say what I think about the cabbages. They keep it nice, don’t they?”

“It’s not bad,” Daisy said carelessly. “There’s an old Chow looks after it as a rule, but he’s away.”

Bat pricked up his ears. Someone else who was “away”!

“Not the only one of your chaps who’s on holiday, is he?” There was no interest in his voice.

Daisy hesitated.

“I don’t know as you’d call it a holiday exactly. But I’m not supposed to know anything about it.” She gave a little giggle.

Rather to her disappointment Harris did not ask any question. His heart had leaped at her words; but it was no part of his plan to go too fast. He turned the conversation to herself, setting himself to administer a judicious mixture of flattery and sympathy until the girl was convinced that she was the only

subject that interested him. As no conviction could have been more satisfactory to Daisy, she returned from her outing in an uplifted frame of mind. She would have liked to stay longer, but Harris was firm.

“No good puttin’ the old lady’s back up,” he said. He gave her arm a fleeting pressure. “I want her to let you come again.”

That was sense, Daisy knew, though she was not very sure that she wanted to be sensible. No such young man had come her way in the township where she lived. This man had been in cities like Sydney and Melbourne, but he treated her as nobly as Lady Esmeralda in the novelette wished to be treated, though in the case of that high-born and sorely tried damsel it didn’t always come off. “Like a real gent,” she thought proudly. He had even suggested a meeting in Melbourne. Life had suddenly become rose-coloured.

Brownie looked up from her knitting with a look of approval as they entered the kitchen.

“Good lad—you didn’t keep her out long,” she said. “Some of you young fellers forget the time when you take a girl out.”

“Daisy thought you might be wantin’ her,” Harris said. “An’ I’m goin’ to turn in early: just a letter to write an’ then I’m goin’ to hit the blankets. The day’s quite long enough when one’s shearin’.”

He said good-bye and walked back towards the bunk-house. The sound of an engine came faintly to his ears: he halted abruptly, lifting his head to listen.

“That’s no car engine,” he muttered.

The sound grew louder, turning to a steady droning. Harris swung round. An aeroplane came into view, rising beyond the house. It soared steadily for a time, then banked and shot over the homestead in a long dive. Far north it flew, climbing again steadily.

Harris watched it until it was only a speck in the sky. His whole being ached to be in it—free of all this business of back-breaking work and desperate scheming. The thought of Daisy came to him with a feeling of sharp distaste that would have considerably disturbed that young woman, now happily dreaming over her walk. Girls!—what were they, compared to a ship that would lift you into the sky, going like a bird under you!

“Lord, if I could only get back!” he uttered.

What chance was there of getting back! Only amazing luck could do it—such luck as finding gold. His face hardened.

“Well, I swear I’ll find out what’s goin’ on here,” he said. “Even if I only got enough to get away an’ make a start somewhere else—outside Australia. A pilot can always get a job in America.”

He went on to the bunk-house. No one was there: he flung himself on his bed, staring at the dusty rafters. Presently there was a step, and Alf came in.

“Hullo!” he said. “I was lookin’ for you. See the plane?”

“Who took her up?” Harris asked.

“That young chap with fair hair—Rainham, I think his name is. Meadows went with him, an’ the red-headed kid.”

“Wonder where they went.”

“They didn’t tell me,” said Alf with a grin. “Joy-ridin’, I expect. How’d you get on over yonder?”

“The girl knows something,” Harris said, dropping his voice to a whisper. “I don’t know how much—but there won’t be any trouble in gettin’ it out of her when I’m ready. An’ I’ve found that there’s someone else ‘away’—wherever ‘away’ may be; an old Chow gardener that’s generally here.”

“H’m!” said Alf thoughtfully. “I believe there’s something in it. There never yet was a gold-field in Australia without a Chow mixed up in it!”

CHAPTER XII

DAISY

PERCHED on the pillion seat of a motor-bicycle, Daisy was experiencing the highest thrill that had ever touched her.

They had left Billabong drowsing in the peace of a Sunday afternoon, the shed silent and deserted, the shearers for the most part asleep. No one had seen them go. She had asked leave for a long walk and had gone slowly through the orchard, taking a line across the home paddock so that trees soon screened her from view. Then she had hurried until she reached a bend in the track where Harris awaited her with the borrowed machine.

He had lost no time in putting the station far behind him, choosing a road at right angles to the Cunjee track, where other riders of the gang might have met them. Daisy delighted in the speed. She clung to Harris firmly, giving shrill little bursts of laughter as they swept along or whizzed sharply round corners. The excited remarks she screamed at him remained for the most part unanswered, but that did not seem to matter: she realized that the wind took them away.

“Wish that sniffy old Mrs. Brown could see me now!” she thought. “I bet she’d open her eyes.”

Harris was contented that noise and speed spared him the trouble of making any effort at conversation. Talking to Daisy bored him heavily: and how much of it he had done! He thought with dull anger of the evenings he had spent with her, listening to her silly chatter and feeding her vanity with pretended amusement and flattery. It had been his plan to let her think that she was the only topic of conversation that really interested him; she had poured out deluges of confidences—grievances against Brownie, the dull records of life in a little township, dreams of a future existence in a city, based on the experiences of Lady Esmeralda. He had sympathized with all, hiding his contempt.

He hoped that this was the last time for playing the dreary part. Once he had found out what he wanted, Daisy could go hang, for all he cared. Shearing was drawing to a close; it would be easy to avoid meeting her again in private before the end came. There was only one more talk that mattered. He knew he had worked her up to a pitch when a little careful handling would draw from her all he needed to know.

He slowed down where the road crossed a creek. On either hand the bank shelved gently, bearing wattle-trees golden with blossom. It was a lonely

place: the track showed little traffic and no house was in sight. He turned to look at her as the engine stopped.

“What do you say to a rest for a bit, Daisy? This looks rather a jolly place.”

Daisy agreed. The pillion seat, even though padded with sacking, made a rest seem desirable, the grassy banks inviting. She jumped off, remarking “Ow! I’m stiff!” and watched Harris wheel the machine away from the bridge. He helped her over the fence into a paddock and they strolled along the creek bank until they came to a sunny hollow where the grass grew thickly. They sat down. Daisy threw off her hat, patting her hair.

“I do feel untidy! Do I look all right, Bat?”

“You always do,” he said. He fished in his pocket and tossed a package into her lap.

“O-oh, chocolates!” Her eyes widened. “You’re a real wizard, Bat. How did you manage to get them?”

“Oh, Alf went to Cunjee last night an’ I got him to bring them.”

“I say, you’re a dear!” she breathed. “Have one, Bat.”

“Chocolates are for little girls,” he told her. “I’d rather smoke.”

He lit a cigarette. They were silent for a few moments. Daisy ate happily, admiring the picture on the chocolate box. She glanced at Bat with equal admiration. A real gent, he looked, her thoughts ran; just the sort to know what was the right thing when he took a girl out. What a time they’d have when they met in Melbourne!

They had to get there first, though, she remembered. The thought brought a sigh. Bat looked at her inquiringly.

“I was thinkin’ how I’ll miss you when you go,” she said. “There won’t be a soul to talk to then, an’ no fun.”

“Oh, you won’t be here always. It only means waiting a bit.” He smiled. “Then you’ll come down to Melbourne an’ get a job where you can see a bit of life. Tell you what would suit you, Daisy—a job as a cinema attendant. Easy work, an’ a snappy uniform to wear.”

“My word, I’d like that!” she exclaimed.

“Not hard to fix. I know a swell place where they might take you on. We could go and see them.”

“Oh, Bat, could we really? That’s lovely of you. Why, I could see all the films for nothing!” She gasped at the magnificence of the prospect.

“You sure could—better films than you’d ever see in the country. Well, you just save up your money for a bit, an’ then you’ll be your own boss.”

“I just feel as if I couldn’t wait to go,” she said. “I’ll have to, of course, but my goodness, it will be dull!”

“But you’ll have other people to talk to, won’t you?” he said carelessly. “You said some of the station chaps were away. They’ll come back some time,

I suppose?"

"Oh—those fellows!" said Daisy contemptuously. "They're precious little good. They haven't got an idea in the world beyond horses an' cattle an'——" She stopped uncertainly.

"An' sheep?"

"No—they hate sheep."

"There doesn't seem to be anything else anyone *could* have ideas about in a place like this," he said, laughing. "What does a man do up here, I wonder, if he isn't mad about animals? I couldn't stick it."

"Oh, I know something they do. They never talk about it to me, but I keep my ears open all the same. I'm funny that way," she said—"if there's something kept quiet I always find it out!"

Bat tossed away the end of his cigarette.

"Not much to keep quiet on a station," he said, with a hint of a sneer. "It's what they call the simple life up here—an' gosh! most of the people are simple!"

"Well, I'm not!" she flashed. "I could tell you something that would make you open those lazy eyes of yours!"

"Sez you!" he laughed. "Someone been committin' a murder, eh? Don't you go tellin' me you know where they've planted the body!"

"No, but true, Bat. There really *is* something. I wouldn't tell a living soul except you, but you're different."

"I'm scared of people that tell me things," Bat bantered. "Might end in me bein' dragged in as a witness, an' if there's one thing I hate, it's police-courts!"

"Well, you can laugh if you like," said the offended Daisy. "But you'd laugh another way if I told you all I know." She leaned forward. "I don't see why I shouldn't tell you, anyhow: I been wondering if you could get something out of it. Something real big, Bat!"

His voice took a softer note.

"It's a shame to laugh at you, you're such a good-hearted kid," he said gently. "I believe you're always thinkin' how you could help me. You bet I won't forget it, Daisy—there's precious few people ever worried their heads about me."

"You poor old chap!" mourned Daisy, softening in her turn before this affecting picture. "Well, look here, Bat—I know you'll never let on I told you—but I've found out that the Lintons have struck gold up in the hills!"

"Ah, go on!" he uttered incredulously. "This isn't gold country—I may be a townie, but I know enough for *that*."

"You don't know the hills. Back in the ranges behind the station it's quite different."

"How did you find out?"

“Well, me suspicions got raised. Soon as I came here. There’s always loads of provisions goin’ out into the bush: that black boy goes backwards an’ forwards with a pack-horse nearly all the time. An’ the boss is out there, I know. So are Mr. Jim an’ Mr. Wally, nearly always, but they come home on Sat’dy nights with their boots all caked with clay. You got to dig to find clay, in this part of the world.”

“I say, you’re a bit of a detective, aren’t you?” exclaimed he admiringly.

“Well, I ain’t simple, like you thought I was. I didn’t know what it meant, an’ if you ask Mrs. Brown any questions you get shut up quick an’ lively. But once or twice I was in the wash-house when they thought I was somewhere else, an’ I heard a bit of what she an’ old Murty were talkin’ about. It’s gold all right.”

“But what did you hear, exactly? Is there much of it?”

“Well, so far as I’ve heard, they don’t seem sure. Murty was a miner once, an’ he said something about it’s bein’ all in one pocket. They’re diggin’ to make sure, ’cause if it’s only in a pocket there wouldn’t be a reg’lar mine.”

“No—it would just fizzle out,” Bat said slowly.

He was conscious of a sinking feeling of utter disappointment. Not until this moment had he realized how much he had counted on a big thing. And now this silly little ass, after raising his hopes, had dashed them to earth. Anger surged up in him.

“Well, I don’t think much of your precious secret,” he said with contempt. “Anyone can strike gold—about a bob’s worth.”

“I bet they’ve got more than a bob’s worth.” She looked stubborn.

“Oh, I suppose they have—but not enough to make a song about. You seemed to think it might be some good to me—an’ it’s only a pocket! Just what *would* happen to rich people like these. I suppose they’ll buy another Rolls-Royce!”

He took another cigarette and lit it, angrily conscious that his hand shook a little. He would have to tell Alf, who waited for him to return with a very different story. All the glittering fabric he had built up was dissolving like a pricked bubble. There would be no rich claim, no getting back as he had dreamed; only the dreary business of shearing, day after day, to put a few pounds together. He knew how quickly those pounds would melt in the city, once the shearing season was over.

Daisy was looking at him miserably, a hint of tears in her eyes.

“I say, Bat, you’re not wild with me, are you? I didn’t mean to raise your hopes, exactly. You didn’t seem as if you cared one bit about it, an’ now you look as cross as two sticks.”

“Well—you said ‘something real big.’ A man can’t help gettin’ a bit excited when he hears about a gold strike. It’s rather a wash-out to find there’s

nothing in it after all your mystery.”

With anyone else Daisy’s temper would have flared out. His tone stung her. But—never had she been taken up by such a nice young man! And there was the chocolate box flaunting its gay ribbon at her: and the motor-bicycle: and the half-promise of the place at the swell cinema. Bat was not the only builder of a bright dream. She sought desperately for words to make him look kindly at her again.

“But look here, Bat—I don’t believe they know for certain it’s only a pocket. If it is—well, it must be a good one. An’ if there’s one good place it ’ud be worth your while tryin’ for another. You don’t know what you might find!”

“I can’t chuck shearin’ an’ buy a digger’s outfit an’ go prospectin’ on a chance like that,” he said sulkily. “I’d do it fast enough if I thought there was anything in it. But who knows if they’ve got enough gold to make as much as a tie-pin!”

“I do,” said Daisy.

The words came explosively. She reddened to her ears, looking at him with a mingling of fear and defiance. Bat stared with a new interest. For once the silly little ass did not look quite so silly. Then he sneered.

“I suppose you’ll tell me next that they show you everything they find?”

“No, they ain’t likely to. They hardly know I’m alive, most of ’em. My work’s supposed to be only in the kitchen. But when one of the other girls was sick I had some jobs to do about the house. That’s how I know, Mr. Clever!” she flung at him.

“Oh, come off it!” said Bat wearily. “No use gettin’ ratty because I can’t be excited over a trumpery——”

“It *ain’t* trumpery! I had the bathroom to clean out one day after Mr. Jim had been home, an’ there was a funny little bag left lyin’ about. I picked it up—a wee little bit of a thing it was—an’ I all but dropped it, it was that heavy. Like a lump of lead. Gave me a fair shock, it did, somehow. It was tied up with a string, so I undid it; an’ it was gold!” she finished triumphantly.

“Well, I never said they hadn’t found any at all,” Bat said with dreary patience. “One little packet doesn’t prove much.”

Daisy hesitated, evidently struggling with herself. Then she threw discretion to the winds.

“This is a dead secret, Bat. I hadn’t ought to have seen it, but—well, I did. Promise you’ll never tell.”

“Cross my heart an’ wish I may die,” said Bat in a flat voice. Daisy flushed, but went on.

“Well—it was the day they all came back for the shearin’. After the planes came, an’ those two fellers went out with young Bill—they never came back,

but the other three did. Mrs. Brown had sent me to scrub the verandah, an' I was on me knees outside the smokin'-room window when they all came in. You know the room—it's the one I pointed out to you over the fence one day."

"Downstairs room where the verandah goes round a bay window?" Bat was impressed in spite of himself by something in her face.

"That's right. The windows were open, but the curtains were half across them: they're a sort of net that you can see through. They were all chaffin' each other; an' I dropped to it in a second that it was about gold. Mr. Jim said he was goin' to lock it up, an' he asked for the other packets. There's a safe let into the wall on the far side from the windows: Mrs. Meadows unlocked it, an' there was a whole lot of little bundles just like the one I'd seen in the bathroom."

"That looks more like business," Bat said, as she paused.

"Too right it did. Mr. Jim hauled another out of his valise—bigger than any of the others. He had a queer sort of bag with him, made out of bullock-hide—Murty makes that sort of thing—an' he sat down an' packed all the little bundles into it an' tied it up round the neck. Young Bill said it looked like a Christmas puddin'. Then Mr. Jim locked it away in the safe an' said something about taking it to a bank."

"Hope they enjoyed the trip," said Bat bitterly.

"Oh, it must be there yet—they've never been away since. I wisht I could show it to you, Bat. It did look a lovely thing to own—when you knew what was inside it." She put a half-timid hand on his arm. "*Now* will you believe I knew enough to talk about!"

"Well, you've certainly picked up a bit," he said grudgingly. "But it doesn't amount to anything for me. They must have hit on a good pocket right enough, only nobody can tell if it's any more than that."

"Oh!" she said mournfully. "An' I did hope it might be some sort of a chance for you!"

He took pity on her distressed face.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll give you my address, an' if you hear of its bein' a bigger thing than I can see it looks just now, you write to me straight away."

"My word, I will!" she promised, somewhat cheered. "An', Bat—if you needed a digger's outfit an' you were short of cash I'd let you have my money. All I've got."

"Jolly decent of you, kid," he said. "I'm afraid there's mighty little chance of me wantin' it." He pulled her to her feet. "I reckon we'd better get back to the bike."

He took the road home at a speed that almost terrified Daisy; not that he wanted to get back, but because swift movement was some relief to his angry

mind. In the paddock Daisy left him, feeling uneasily that her wonderful afternoon had ended dismally. His leave-taking was short. "See you again some time," he said; the next moment he was rushing up the track, leaving a long cloud of dust in his wake.

Alf was waiting for him, but with no particular anxiety for his news. The mine had always been too vague a matter to cause him excitement. They found a quiet corner among the trees by the lagoon while Bat told his story.

"So it's all a wash-out as far as we're concerned," he ended. "I wish I'd never heard of the dashed thing. I've been letting myself build castles in the air, an' they've all gone west. An' when I think of all the time I've wasted over that fluffy-haired idiot I could kick myself!"

Alf was silent, thinking deeply.

"Well—go on an' say 'I told you so!' can't you?" Bat said irritably. "That's about the only thing left to make this a really pleasant Sunday afternoon!"

"I got to think," was the stolid answer. Alf lay flat on his back, closed his eyes, and gave himself up to meditation. Bat smoked in silence, heavy with his own thoughts; glancing now and then at the sharp-featured face that told him nothing.

Not until the third cigarette was almost at its end did Alf open his eyes. He sat up, holding out his hand.

"Give us a fag, will you? I've run out." He lit it and blew carefully an accurate ring of smoke. Then he favoured Bat with a peculiar smile.

"When you grin like that," said Bat, "you've generally got a big idea. What is it this time? It 'ud be a relief to hear anything cheerful."

Alf cast a wary glance round and spoke softly.

"The idea's all right, if you're game to join in. Doesn't it strike you that it's just too bad to leave that nice little bundle of gold to the people who packed it up?"

Bat stared at him.

"That's even madder than my castles in the air."

"Why?"

"Well—puttin' everything else aside, how would you propose to get it? An' havin' got it, how would you get it away?"

Again Alf grinned.

"One thing at a time, an' I'll take the easiest. Gettin' it would be my job _____"

"But it's in a locked safe, man!"

"I was trained very careful," said Alf placidly. "I'll admit I had hard luck sometimes, along of policemen bein' where they weren't wanted; but my trainin' was sound. An' the first thing my trainer put me on to was safes. It 'ud

surprise you, Bat, to see the collection of safes he had, down in a cellar. An' one of the things I found out was that most of the safes supplied to trustin' householders are just—punk!" The last word came out sharply. "They look lovely an' solid, an' when a man builds one into the wall of his house he breathes easy, thinkin' no nasty burglar'll ever worry *him*. An' nine cases out of ten, he's right: but it's only because the nasty burglar doesn't visit him!"

"But——"

"You let me talk. Of course big places—banks and city offices—have safes that get you guessin' with time-locks an' other little dodges: but the average safe's just kid's play to a chap that knows his job. I tell you, Bat, it's made me laugh many a time to think of the happy householder, when I was openin' his safe. So trustin'—an' he might as well have stowed away his stuff in a cake-tin. Or better," added Alf reflectively—" 'cause ten to one I'd never have thought of lookin' in the cake-tin!"

"You're pretty smart, I know," Bat said. "But even you couldn't do it without special tools, could you?"

"Not easy—though it's wonderful what you can do, if you've got time to work. Only time's what you generally haven't got. But I told you I was trained very careful. I've a little roll of tools that never leaves me: even when I've found it healthier to get away from Melbourne an' do a spot of shearin', my little roll comes too. I paid a lot for them funny little things—too much to leave them where they might be found."

"But you'd be puttin' your head into a regular hornets' nest! I don't see myself keen on tacklin' people the size of young Linton an' Meadows."

"I'd hate to," said Alf with feeling. "Only, I wouldn't call when they were up. Take that room; it's downstairs an' goes round a corner, an' Daisy told you everyone sleeps upstairs. An' they'll be sleepin' pretty hard these times, seein' the rate they're workin' at all day. Why I'd even bet that not a window's locked: they never worry about windows in a lonely place like this. All I've got to do is to walk in an' have three minutes with that safe. It's a gift!"

"I don't like it," Bat said uneasily. "An' if you did bring it off—how on earth d'you think you could take it away? You don't imagine every man of the gang wouldn't have his kit searched, do you?"

"I wouldn't wait to see. That's the part that had me thinkin' so long. First I thought over borrowin' one of the motor-bikes, but it wouldn't do; too easy tracked. An' then it just suddenly come to me how easy it was considerin' I was travellin' with a qualified pilot!" He grinned.

"Good Lord!" gasped Bat. "You've got a nerve, Alf!"

"But it's *easy*! All we have to do is to nip into one of them planes, an' we'd be hundreds of miles away before they knew we'd gone. I know she'd make a row startin' up, but they're a good way from the house—we could

chance it.”

“You’re clean mad,” stated Bat. “Do you think you can stay up in a plane for ever? An’ when we come down, what would you propose to do? All the police in Australia would be lookin’ out for us to land!”

“I would hope not to land on their door-mats,” said Alf modestly. “That ’ud be your job. Look here, Bat, stop makin’ objections an’ just think it out. You know jolly well we could come down in some out-of-the-way place an’ leave the plane. We could burn her: you know how little is left of a burnt plane. An’ then we make a quiet getaway. We haven’t got much cash, of course: that’s a pity, but we could manage. We could always sell a little bit of the gold—not enough to excite suspicion. I’m not sayin’ it’s exactly a tea-party. But I do say it’s the chance of our lives!”

He stood up, looking intently at his friend.

“I’m goin’ for a walk. You just sit here an’ think. I’ll be back in half an hour.”

Left alone, Bat put his head in his hands and tried to think clearly; not an easy matter, for his brain was spinning.

He had no scruples of conscience; that sort of thing had ceased to trouble him long ago. But the risk was another matter. It was less than a year since he had been released from jail; another term of hard labour seemed to stare him in the face as he pondered over Alf’s wild plans.

Curiously, it was the method of escape that decided him. He did not think that the gold alone could have done it. But to capture a plane! to be free of the skies once more with a hundred chances of escape to a new life where there would be no one who knew his past—that was worth all the risks. He thought it over, trying to see how he could save the plane—to burn her would be heart-breaking. He could not see his way clearly, but luck might favour him yet.

Alf came back at the end of his half-hour, to find him smoking placidly. Bat looked up and nodded, smiling in a wry fashion.

“It’s mad, of course, but I’m game to chance it.”

“I thought the plane would fetch you,” Alf grinned. “Well, we’ll get a joy-ride out of it, anyhow!”

“Hope we’ll enjoy it, that’s all. Once we’re off the ground I don’t care much for anything, but the start is goin’ to be the trouble. Still, I believe we ought to manage it all right.” Bat pondered for a few moments. “When do you reckon we ought to do the job?”

“I’ve been thinkin’ that out. There’s not so much time left; an’ anyhow, what’s the use of waiting? Tomorrow won’t do, because I promised Wicking I’d go to Cunjee with him in the evening an’ he might think it queer if I backed out. Besides, we ought to turn in very early the night we start, to get a little sleep. What about Tuesday night?”

“Suits me,” said Bat. “The moon will be full on Tuesday night; an’ we’ll want light to handle the plane.”

“O.K.” Alf nodded. “Sure you haven’t forgotten how to fly, of course?”

Bat’s slow smile held a touch of scorn.

“Me?” he asked. “Sure you haven’t forgotten how to be a burglar?”

CHAPTER XIII

THE BEGINNING OF THE JOB

IT was Tuesday night, and in the long bunk-house there was no sound save the heavy breathing of sleeping men, deepening here and there to steady snoring. The door at one end was partly open; through it came a glimpse of moonlight.

From the deep shadows half-way down the lines of bunks came a dim figure moving with cat-like steps, slowly and noiselessly. Alf carried his kit-bag in one hand, his boots in the other. He did not turn his head as he passed Bat's bunk, but each man was keenly aware of the other. He slid quickly through the moonlit opening and stood against the outer wall.

In a moment Bat joined him. They stole round the corner, gaining a place of shadow. There, silent, they waited for nerve-racking minutes, listening for any stir that would show that their departure had been noticed. None came. Alf touched his companion lightly; they put on their boots and, in single file, walked softly away.

A wide circle took them round the homestead, keeping far out in the paddock. No lights showed from the house. They found a log under a tree and sat down on it, permitting themselves to speak in whispers.

"We're far too early yet, of course," Alf said. "I didn't dare to wait any longer, or I might have gone to sleep. Pretty tantalizin', hearin' the chaps snorin' beside me. I could do with a sleep." He yawned widely.

"I could do with a cigarette," said Bat. "I suppose we can't risk one?"

"Too right we can't. I wouldn't strike a match out here, not if you paid me. It seems safe enough, but it's surprisin' how far a light can be seen."

"I'd give something if it was all over an' done with, an' we were safely up aloft in the bus!" uttered Bat. "I can't stick the idea of creepin' into the house. Takin' the plane is easy work, but the house job's another matter."

"In some ways I'd rather go an' open that safe alone," remarked his companion. "A new hand at the game is apt to get a bit jumpy, an' you haven't been trained to move quiet. Not what *I* call quiet. But there's no doubt you'd be handy to hold the torch an' keep watch. When I get interested in a lock I'm apt to forget other things. That's perfessional enthusiasm."

"It 'ud be a long while before I felt like that, I reckon."

"Oh, I dunno. Locks are terrible interestin' things. An' when you've been into houses a few times at night you don't worry: you just realize that it's long odds against anyone wakin' up. I've often stopped an' had a meal in the

kitchen. Quite easy an' comfortable, after I'd finished with a safe!"

Bat shuddered. Hunger at such a moment was something quite beyond his understanding.

"Now, just you make up your mind it's all right," said Alf. "I tell you, this place is a gift—a room on the ground-floor, easy window to open, an' all hands dog-tired an' sleepin' like logs. We could go in whistlin', and get all we wanted. People sleep extra heavy near dawn. I don't reckon to be more than five minutes in that room."

"Seems too good to be true."

"Don't you believe it: I wouldn't mind havin' a bet with you on it. Of course, I haven't seen the safe yet—but I'm not scared of any country safe. An' you've only got to hold the light an' keep your ears open. Put it clean out of your head that there's any danger."

Bat only wished he could. It was hard work to keep one's courage up, sitting on a log in the chilly moonlight, tired and longing for sleep. They had snatched a few hours' uneasy slumber by going to their bunks early in the evening, knowing that they would be waked up when the rest of the men came to bed: but it had not been real sleep, such as men needed after a long day in the shearing shed. He was no coward when action was required of him, but this weary business of waiting chilled him in more ways than one.

They relapsed into silence, huddling against each other for warmth. Time crept by slowly.

"Well, I guess we could make a move," Alf said at last. "By the time we get the plane out we might begin to think of the safe."

Bat rose thankfully. They picked up their bags and made their way across the paddock to the landing ground. It lay dim and empty except for the hangars at one side. The wind-indicator fluttered, ghost-like, from its pole.

In the landing ground Bat assumed command. In other matters he acted under Alf's orders that night, but where a plane was concerned the burglar was meek. Very carefully, choosing the Kestrel because its shed was farthest from the house, they opened the door and rolled the machine into position for starting.

They dared not use a torch; but the moon was full, and by its light Bat examined the plane as well as he could. On Monday evening Bob had overhauled the engine: they had strolled past, watching him with profound satisfaction. There was something humorous in seeing the work done for their benefit. They had chuckled silently over the joke.

"I'd like to thank that nice chap," Bat had muttered. "He ought to know what a good turn he's doing us!"

All was ready at length. They stowed their overcoats and bags in the rear cockpit and left the landing ground, moving like shadows back to the house.

The garden gate could not be used, since a gravelled path led to it; as Alf said, loose gravel had been the enemy of many a good burglar. They climbed the fence and slipped through the shrubbery. Beyond it a smooth lawn stretched to the edge of the verandah.

“Made for us!” Alf whispered. “Nice folks here—so many annoyin’ people put gravel round their houses!”

They removed their boots and socks, and stood up, studying their way. The house was wrapped in deep silence. Bat had learned from Daisy, by an off-hand question, that the beds on the balcony were on the farther side, another point in their favour. He would have cared even less to cross the verandah had Jim and Bob been sleeping just overhead.

“Now, you’ve got to remember that there’s no hurry,” Alf whispered in his ear. “We aren’t going to dawdle on the job, of course, but we’ve got to make every move slowly. It’s jumpy movements that wake people who ought to be asleep.”

“All right,” Bat muttered. Alf’s complete coolness amazed him. He knew himself to be as jumpy as a cat; but his companion went about his job as unconcernedly as if he were sauntering into the bunk-house to go to bed. There was something steadying in his calmness.

Foot by foot they moved across the open space, the dew-wet grass cold under their bare feet. They gained the verandah. The windows were closed; but the one they tried was unlocked, and it went up noiselessly. Holding their breath, they listened.

No sound came; and after a moment Alf slid over the window-sill, standing behind the curtains for another long minute. Bat had been told what to do. He remained motionless while his companion, feeling his way inch by inch, tiptoed across the room and shut the door into the hall and locked it. The faint light of a torch covered with his hand was Bat’s signal to follow him.

He took the torch, holding it close to the lock of the safe. Alf looked hard at it for a moment, allowed himself a faint smile, and felt in his pocket for a tool. Each tool was in a separate pocket—there could be no fumbling with a roll. To the watching Bat the next operation seemed like magic. A fine steel blade, notched in a peculiar fashion on both sides, was inserted into the lock; a few delicate movements, a sideways twist. The safe door swung slowly open.

They looked in eagerly. Before them lay the raw-hide bag, its stout sides bulging. Bat took it out, marvelling at its weight, and swept the light round the shelves. No other package was there.

“I’ll take that.” The almost soundless whisper was the only time Alf spoke. He did not believe in chatting over a job, he explained later—but nothing would have made him leave the precious bag in Bat’s care while they were inside the house. Too well he knew how easy it was for a nervous new hand to

drop an object. He took the torch as well, pocketing it. They crept across the room to the moonlit window.

Again they stood listening. The stillness was unbroken; they crept out and glided back, breathing more freely when they gained the shelter of the shrubbery. Bat chafed inwardly at the slowness of their progress. He knew it was necessary, but he ached to move swiftly, to feel himself out of reach of the silent house and all that it held of danger. But Alf's orders had been very definite on that point. "Better to take half an hour to get to the fence than run the risk of one stick snappin' under your foot," he had said. "You keep behind me, and put each foot down as if you were steppin' on glass."

There was comfort in having their boots on again: more comfort in finding themselves beyond the shrubbery and safely over the fence. They went softly across the moonlit paddock until they reached the landing ground once more. Bat's heart lifted at the sight of the plane, a misty white shape on the runway. This was work in the open—better than creeping fearfully into a dark house.

Within the shed they had come across a large piece of soft sacking. They wrapped the bag of gold in it and stowed the bundle in the cockpit.

"Ugh!—I'm cold!" muttered Bat. They put on their overcoats.

"What about makin' a start?" Alf asked. "Is it too early?"

"It'll be dawn soon," Bat whispered back. "I reckon we can go now."

He shivered a little. Starting was their most dangerous moment. They had to take their chance of rousing the homestead by the noise of the engine; he dreaded the minutes they must give her to warm up before they could take off. Once in the air he feared nothing, but he knew how those minutes would crawl.

Still, they were some distance from the house; farther still from the stables and the shearers' sleeping quarters. Even if Jim Linton awoke—and Bat feared Jim more than he had ever feared anyone—it would be a moment before he realized anything was wrong: longer still before he could reach the landing ground. Bat shook off his anxiety. All their plans had gone like clockwork so far—luck was not going to fail them now.

He climbed into the cockpit, putting on Freddy's flying-helmet; and with the first touch of the head-gear that had once been so familiar all his confidence came back. He signalled to Alf.

"Swing her!"

There were two false starts before the engine woke with a shattering roar. Bat throttled it back; the sound lessening until it was ticking over gently to warm up. Even the lower sound was sufficiently startling in the intense silence of the sleeping world. Alf had run back, ready to jump in. He stood near the tread-plate, watching the house with narrowed eyes. Bat stared at the needle on the dial, listening to the beat of the engine. She was very cold—better to give

her as long as they dared.

Billy was always a light sleeper, and possibly that night the blackfellow instinct that feels, rather than hears, strange movements told him that something was wrong. He woke and listened, but no sounds came. Still, he was uneasy.

He came out of his little hut, sniffing the air. Nothing: yet a vague feeling sent him wandering towards the house. He climbed over the orchard fence and padded down one of the long avenues between the apricot-trees until he reached the paddock beyond. There he stiffened for a moment, peering towards the aeroplane sheds. A glimmer of white showed near one, like the ghost of a plane.

Billy gave a guttural exclamation and trotted towards it, keeping in the shadow of a hedge. Two figures came into his view: his hawk eyes told him instantly that they were strangers. He ran on noiselessly until he was near enough to see them clearly.

“Two pfeller shearers!” he muttered, halting. “What they doing?” He thought rapidly, realizing that he had no chance against two men. “Better mine get Mas’ Jim.”

He wheeled and ran back along the hedge. There was a weak place in it: he slipped through it, and once out of sight ran more rapidly.

Behind him came a sudden burst of sound as the engine roared into violent life. Billy leaped as if he had been shot. Then he raced like a hare for the house.

The men had not seen him. Tense with the strain of the moment they waited while the engine ticked steadily. Alf’s gaze never wavered from the direction whence danger might come. In the cockpit Bat sat like a statue, his hand gripping the control stick. He dared not move too soon. In open ground he could have risked an earlier start: not in this paddock where he must gain height enough to clear the fence. Dawn was breaking—the uncertain light made care even more necessary.

An uneasy growl from Alf came to him.

“Can’t we start?”

“In a minute,” he gave back, leaning over the edge of the cockpit to speak. He was less anxious now: there was no sign of movement from the house. If they came now he felt he could be in the air before they could reach him.

“No sense in hurryin’ her,” he told Alf. “We’ve got to get plenty of height at once, soon as we start.” He gave a short, triumphant laugh. “We’ve dished them all right. They can’t get us now.”

Suddenly Alf wheeled round. Behind them came pounding feet: a figure

dashed round the end of the wing with a shout.

“Hi! What are you doing with that plane?”

CHAPTER XIV

AN OFFSIDER'S DAY

ON Tuesday morning Norah and Tommy had ridden away early to Creek Farm. The time had come for Bob's sheep to be mustered and brought to Billabong to be shorn; the mustering would be too long a job, single-handed, for the man he had left in charge. No men could be spared from Billabong: but the girls welcomed the chance of taking a share in the work.

"We can have them all mustered in the home paddock by the evening," Norah had said. "Your man can't leave, of course, Bob; but he can help us to get them out on the road early in the morning and we can bring them over."

"Things should be slacker to-morrow," Bob had said. "I could ride to meet you and give you a hand with them on the road. Would you come, Bill?"

"Rather!" Bill would have liked to go with the girls, but he knew there was work for him at home. To help with Bob's sheep would be jolly; the droving was not exciting, but he knew they would ride hard so that they would meet the sheep as soon as possible. "Then, if the girls wanted to hurry home, they could leave the mob to us, couldn't they, Bob?"

That had been happily settled, and Norah and Tommy had cantered off after an early breakfast, leaving their men-folk to the routine work of the shearing. It was drawing to a close; a few days more would see the departure of the gang, and the station would settle down to its usual peace. Bill spent a busy morning helping Murty to clear a paddock of all other stock in readiness to receive Bob's sheep. They came back to find that a careless rouseabout had left a gate open, with the result that two mobs had "boxed"; shorn and unshorn mingling in bleating confusion. That meant work for all the available Billabong men, who wrestled with the problem, uttering hearty remarks concerning the rouseabout. It was late before Jim and his helpers were able to go back to the house for lunch.

Lunch was jolly, Bill thought. A little queer, without the girls: but it was pleasant to have a man's party, feeling himself one with Jim and Wally and Bob, who seemed, on such an occasion, to think he was a man too. They were all in high spirits, exulting in the thought that shearing was nearly over and that the fine weather had held throughout. None of the shorn sheep had suffered: everything had worked smoothly. "As good a show as we've ever had," Jim said: "we're going to cut out in record time."

"Top-hole," Bob agreed. He was looking bronzed and fit—all the weariness born of the mine had fallen from him. He looked at Bill, his blue

eyes twinkling. "We must have some more flips up aloft before I go back to camp, old chap."

Bill beamed at him. He did like Bob, he reflected: always Bob went a bit out of his way to be nice to him. It was jolly to remember that he would be helping him with the Creek sheep next day. He registered a private resolution to take the dustiest part of the droving.

Brownie came out as the men were finishing their brief "smoke-oh" on the verandah.

"The mail, Mr. Jim."

Jim took the leather bag and unlocked it. He distributed letters quickly. There was one for Bill, from his mother in Melbourne; he read it without much interest, for Melbourne seemed very far off and dull when you were working on a station. It was peculiar, too, to be cautioned against wet feet; to be reminded to be always clean and tidy. He looked at his stained dungaree trousers, smiling to himself. Mother would undoubtedly be horrified if she could see him now. How lucky that she couldn't!

Jim had a little pile of opened station letters beside him. He was frowning over one.

"I say, Wal, this is rather a nuisance." He tossed the letter over to Wally. "I can't very well deal with that: Dad will have to see it."

"Nothing wrong?" Bob, who was in the happy position of having no letters, looked up from the pages of *Punch*.

"No—only a business letter for Dad. But it means that he may have to refer to some agreements and other papers in the safe here before he answers it. I can't handle it without him."

"Wants an answer at once, too," Wally said. "Why couldn't the blessed people have waited until we'd cut out! They've chosen our busiest day."

"It wouldn't have mattered if the girls had been here," Jim remarked. "They could have taken it out. I don't see how we can spare a man this afternoon: but Dad ought to get it."

"Couldn't I take it to him, Jim?" Bill suggested eagerly. "If you can spare me, that is," he added.

Jim thought a moment.

"I believe it's the only thing we can do," he said. "Not that I can spare you very well, old chap, either; but I need all the men. You'd be all right—you know the track as well as any of us."

"Right oh!" cried Bill joyfully. "Will I ride Topsy?"

Jim shook his head.

"I think you'll have to give Topsy a spell: she has been going pretty hard lately and you had her out all the morning. Better take Cricket: she's in the horse-paddock."

Bob dropped *Punch* and jumped up.

"I'll get her for you, Bill, while you change: I can put her in the yard on my way over to the shed. Good ride, old man." He went off quickly.

"I'll write a note for you to give Dad, Bill," said Jim. He disappeared within the house, and Bill raced to his room to get into riding-kit. Jim was in the hall when he came down. They walked to the stable-yard together, pausing at the gate.

"Well, look after yourself, offsider. Cricket's a bit apt to stumble on rough ground, but she's all right if you hold her up. I don't suppose Dad will be able to come back to-night, but you won't be sorry to have another night at the camp. We'll look out for you before lunch to-morrow. So long, old lad." He strode away to the shed.

Cricket was not only caught, but saddled: Bob had left her tied up near the gate, ready to start. She was a brown mare, good of her class, but it was not the class of Topsy. Bill regretted, as he mounted her, that he had not known in time to spell Topsy that morning. He carried a light hunting-crop, never necessary with the pony he loved, but Cricket could be a slug on occasions. As he rode past the lagoon he touched her with it.

"Just to let you know I've got it, that's all," he told her sternly. "You get a move on yourself, or you'll know more next time!"

But his hand was light on her mouth, and he sat as one meaning business; therefore Cricket knew he was a friendly master, and she went well, finding it pleasant enough to carry a feather-weight over the paddocks on so lovely an afternoon. She cantered easily and Bill enjoyed every yard of his ride. After the hard work among the sheep, work that was always full of dust and smells, it was a holiday to be free to go at the pace he liked, the cool breeze laden with bush scents, no responsibility save the letter he carried in his pocket. Pleasant, too, to know that though it was a holiday he was on a responsible job. Jim had said that it was a real help that a man had not to be taken off work for the errand. "You're a useful old offsider," he had told him, a smile in his eyes.

That was good to remember, if you were only twelve. It helped to put aside the only thought that troubled him. If Mr. Linton decided not to come home that night Bill must lose his chance of going with Bob to meet the sheep in the morning, and that was really a depressing consideration. He had looked forward to it, not only because it was the kind of thing he loved, but because it meant helping Bob. Bob did so many decent things to him—some that were wonderful, like flips across the sky in the Kestrel. Bill hated letting him down.

"Of course he'll understand," he thought. "But I do hope Mr. Linton will come home to-night."

He hurried as much as possible on the way out. Cricket did not need the whip; she fell in with his mood, going willingly, so that even in the hills they

made good time. They came to the camp just as the men were leaving off work for the day.

Lee Wing greeted him with a broad grin.

“All down at cleek,” he said, pointing towards the stream. “Want tucker, Mas’ Bill?”

“Heaps of it, presently, Lee,” Bill told him. “I’m as hungry as a hawk.”

He tied up Cricket and ran down the slope to the creek, Freddy and Jack shouting a welcome to him. Mr. Linton looked up quickly from the gold-washing.

“Hullo, Bill. Everything all right?”

“Right as rain,” answered Bill, shaking hands. “Only Jim sent me out with a letter.” He handed it over and talked to Jack and Freddy while Mr. Linton sat down on the grass to read it.

“H’m,” said the squatter presently. “This means I must go home for a day. Can you get on without me, boys?”

“Oh, we’ll get on somehow,” responded Freddy. “Jack can do my work and I’ll pretend I’m doing yours, sir. But don’t stay away too long, or I won’t answer for the camp discipline!”

“Are they good miners, Mr. Linton?” inquired Bill, grinning.

“They’re standing up to it very well, Bill,” the squatter answered. “The only times that I find them giving way is when one of their planes flies over us. Then they look disgustedly at picks and shovels and utter hollow moans.”

“Who wouldn’t?” demanded Jack cheerfully. “But we’re glad Rainham’s doing a bit of flying—and mining isn’t such a bad game after all, Bill. My hopes of a new plane are mounting steadily.”

“Shearing going well?” Mr. Linton asked.

“Oh, simply ripping: Jim’s awfully pleased,” Bill told him. “He said I was to tell you that the clip is the best we’ve ever had. We’re going to cut out in a day or two if the weather holds—and there hasn’t been a drop of rain all the time.”

There was a flicker of a smile in the eyes of the Queenslanders at the “we” the boy used so confidently. But David Linton’s face was unmoved.

“That’s first-rate news, Bill. Had any trouble with the shearers?”

“Not a bit. Jim says they’re a jolly good lot on the whole. Two of ’em are awfully keen on the planes: they always come to look at them if they’re out of the hangars.”

“Not flyin’ men, are they?” Freddy asked.

“Oh, no. At least, they never said they were. They just seem to like to look.”

“Must be a nice change from hacking off wool,” observed Jack. “Which plane does Rainham like best, Bill?”

Bill laughed.

“He can’t make up his mind. I think that’s ’cause he loves ’em both so much that the one he happens to be flying is the best! Bob looks just awfully well now, Mr. Linton. Jim told me to tell you. He’s been working like a nigger, but he’s never too tired to take a plane up in the evening if there’s time.”

“You seem to have come out quite full of good news,” said David Linton, smiling down at him. “It’s rather refreshing to see you, Bill, old chap.” He put a hand on the small shoulder. “Come along: we’ll see if Lee Wing has anything ready to eat. You won’t be sorry to have some tea.”

“Are you coming home to-night?” Bill asked him hopefully as they strolled towards the camp.

“To-night! Too big an order for me, I’m afraid, old fellow,” the squatter answered. “I’ve had a very long day, and the thought of a long ride now doesn’t appeal to me. We’ll make an early start in the morning.”

Bill was silent. Mr. Linton glanced at the round face that had become suddenly a little downcast.

“Anything wrong, Bill?”

“N-no.” The boy hesitated. “I say, Mr. Linton, do you mind if I go home by myself?”

“What, this evening? Any special reason?”

That was like Mr. Linton, Bill thought. He didn’t jump on you with both feet as some men would have done. Even if you were small he always seemed to believe you must have a bit of sense somewhere.

“Well, it’s this way,” he said, looking up at him. “I’d like to stay—you know I love being out here. Only, I’d promised Bob this morning that I’d help him with his sheep early to-morrow. It’s—it’s a sort of engagement, you see.”

“And you don’t like to let him down?”

“He’d get on all right, I know,” said Bill honestly. “But I said I’d help.”

David Linton walked on in silence. He was tempted to say that he would ride home that night, after all—but that, he knew, would only distress Bill. To let the boy go alone—he hesitated about that. It was a long ride, and part of it a very rough one. Bill was young, and he was responsible for him.

On the other hand, for more than two years Billabong had set itself to the task of making a man out of Bill. He had come there first, a lonely, unfriendly little boy, unhappy in his city home, hating the world. Billabong had taught him the fun of work, the happiness that lies in comradeship and loyalty. Now, although the rights of his parents were always respected, he was Billabong’s Bill.

“I wonder if I’m wise to check him,” David Linton thought. “He loves the camp: a night out here is always a treat to him. And all the same, he wants to get back to his job.” He wavered. Before all other things Billabong’s owner put

loyalty.

Beside him Bill tramped sturdily, thinking his own thoughts. He would not ask again, Mr. Linton knew; Bill did not argue. Nor would he feel any grievance if his request were refused. But in his mind there would be a regret, because of his friend.

“Well—I don’t see why you shouldn’t go,” said the deep voice—and Bill’s heart leaped. “I don’t like coming between a man and his promise. You’ll be tired, Bill, but you must take your chance of that.”

“I’ll be all right,” said Bill confidently, his eyes grateful. “Sure you don’t mind, Mr. Linton?” He hesitated. “You know I’d have liked to ride back with you . . . only . . . well, it seems a bit like shirking Bob’s sheep.”

“I quite understand, old chap. You won’t get home until long after dark, you know.”

“Yes, I know I won’t. But I can be out of the hills before dark, and there’s a moon. I’m not scared.”

“Then we must hurry up,” Mr. Linton said briskly. “Cut along and tell Lee Wing to give you some tea—say he’s not to wait for us. I’ll get your horse a feed.”

Bill ate in haste, amidst chaff and expostulations from Freddy and Jack, who had not been sorry to see a new face at the camp, especially such a cheerful one; there was genuine regret at his determination to go back.

“We were looking forward to hearing all the gossip of Billabong,” mourned Freddy, as, the meal over, Bill made ready to start. “Tell Brownie I’m pining for her.”

“You don’t look it,” responded Bill solemnly.

“That’s because I’ve learned to pine in secret. It’s wiser, when Jack is about—he has no sympathy. Well, so long, and don’t break your neck on those hills.”

“Tell Jim I’ll be home in the morning,” David Linton said. He gripped the boy’s hand. “Go carefully, Bill.”

“Yes, I will, truly. So long, everybody!” They watched him ride slowly up the ridge. He did not look back. In a few moments the scrub hid him.

It had been a little hard to leave the friendly cheerfulness of the camp, to face the sombre stillness of the hills and gullies that lay ahead. Bill realized that he was not as fresh as when he had left Billabong. Cricket, too, though she had less reason than her rider to feel lazy, appeared to have resented being called upon to carry him again: she went sluggishly with none of the spring of the outward journey.

“You’ll feel better when we’re out of the hills,” Bill told her. “Then you’ll know you’re heading for home, and I’ll hardly be able to hold you.”

This hopeful forecast seemed unlikely to prove correct as he pushed the

brown mare at the hills. He went as fast as he dared, holding her carefully: she stumbled more than once, but always he was ready to hold her together. It made them very slow on all the downward slopes—they were tricky riding, even with a sure-footed and alert horse. Bill sighed to think how lightly he would have taken them on Topsy.

Dusk seemed to come rapidly, and the pale globe of the moon made riding even more uncertain, seeming to cast strange shadows on the track. They had been an hour already, and they should have been much farther ahead. Bill glanced at his watch, scarcely able to see the hands. He whistled.

“They’ll all be in bed by the time I get home, at this rate,” he muttered. “Won’t Jim be astonished when he finds I’m there in the morning!”

That was a very comforting thought. He made a mental picture of it; it was so engrossing that he was caught unawares when, as they rounded a corner of a narrow hill ledge, a rabbit flashed out of the bracken under Cricket’s nose. She shied violently. The edge of the path gave way under her, and she crashed down the side of the hill.

Luckily, it was not far. She landed on her feet on the level ground below, and stood trembling. Bill, who had saved himself by frantic clutching at the pommel, found himself trembling also. He felt shaken and bruised, and very angry.

“Well, you are a blithering old fool!” he shouted. Then he pulled himself together, and patted her wet neck.

“I suppose you couldn’t help it. Anyhow, we’ve got to get back to the track. Come on, old girl.” He touched her with his heel.

The mare did not move. She stood with legs wide apart and head drooping. Bill tried his whip—a half-hearted stroke, which brought no response. A wave of anxiety swept over him. This was worse than he had thought.

“Gosh, she’s hurt herself!” he gasped.

He slipped to the ground and examined her legs. There seemed nothing wrong with them; she did not flinch when he ran his fingers down them, nor could he find any trace of a wound. But he could not make her move.

He spent a long while, in fast-mounting despair, trying to discover what was wrong. A visible injury would have been less depressing; at least he could have tried to deal with that. To be able to find nothing might mean an inward hurt, perhaps something very serious. Bill took off the saddle and felt her back: he crawled under her, feeling her carefully. He tried to lead her: to his relief she moved for a yard, but stopped again.

“Well, you moved, anyhow, and that’s something,” he told her. “Perhaps it’s only a strain, or something like that. But what on earth am I going to do now?”

He turned the problem over unhappily. There was nothing he could do for

Cricket except to take off her bridle and leave her. For himself the question was—to go on or to return?

Bill told himself it was a toss-up. They had passed through the worst of the hill country; to retrace his steps on foot would be a slow and rather dangerous business, with the added disadvantage of being compelled to wake the tired men in the cave when he reached the camp. Billabong was much farther away, but the walking would be easier; if he got there before daylight he knew he could gain his bed on the balcony unobserved. His heart failed him for a moment as he thought of the weary distance ahead. Might it not be better to get back to the camp?

“It’s a toss-up, and a beastly one!” he said. “Backwards is just about as bad as forwards, as far as I can see.”

But forwards meant Billabong, and perhaps a possibility of keeping his engagement with Bob. That was a thought with more hope in it. And going back was always a tame thing to do. He remembered a fragment he had heard Jim quote:

*“If we go forward we die,
If we go backward we die,
Better go forward and die.”*

“Well, I’m not going to die, anyhow,” he said with sudden firmness. “It’s going to be pretty beastly either way, but I’m going on.”

He stowed his saddle and bridle near Cricket, hoping that Mr. Linton would see them when he rode past in the morning. They would be evidence that he had not been hurt, but had gone ahead on foot. A last pat to Cricket, who received it without interest, and he began the climb up to the track.

A steep climb: the earth gave under him, and twice he barely saved himself from slithering down the hill again. He reached the track at last, breathless and scratched. A moment he stood, panting, and the silence of the hills seemed to rush at him, an invisible force. Fear gripped him, but he flung it aside.

“That’s rot!” he said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. Well, here goes!”

He set off briskly. The moon was bright now, climbing over the tree-tops on the hills; it was easier to see where he was going except when the track dipped into deep gullies. There he had to hope for the best, and often the best was poor: he stumbled over stones and often only knew he had strayed from the path when a hole caught his foot and flung him down. To fall heavily several times does not improve either staying-power or temper; Bill was tired and full of wrath when at last he came to the final downward slope.

He trotted down it because trotting seemed easier than walking, and sat down on a boulder that lay among the ferns. He was very hot; his feet were bruised and sore from the many stones they had encountered roughly.

Somewhere in a fall his cap had fallen off and he had not troubled to look for it. He drew in deep breaths of the cool air; it fanned his hot cheeks, and gradually his disgust with things in general gave place to thankfulness that he had done with the hills.

“I’m over all the bad part,” he said, flicking his boot with his riding-whip. “There’s a lot ahead, but it’s all easy going.” Presently he rose and went on.

Compared with the track through the ranges the foothills were certainly easier going—yet hard enough for tired young feet. Bill plodded on gamely, stopping to rest now and then. He knew that his progress was very slow. It became wiser not to think of Billabong and his bed on the balcony, so great a distance ahead.

Another welcome landmark was passed—the fence dividing Billabong from the out-station. He had looked forward with sharp eagerness to the familiar paddocks inside that fence, where there would be no stones. They would feel like home.

But he had not reckoned with the moonlight and the trees. The way led among great box-trees and red gums; he knew and loved them all in daylight, but they seemed fantastically different now. The moon, shining on pale trunks sixty feet above the ground, its light broken by the canopy of leaves, showed great patches of light and shade that took grotesque forms. Lower down, knots and buttresses were like giant heads that frowned or grinned at him as the movements of the leaves sent rippling shadows across them. The very grass underfoot was different, chequered with patches of light and deep pools of blackness.

The track was blotted out by the shadows. He lost it altogether for a time, wandering aimlessly among the bewildering tree trunks; knowing himself a very small boy now, and very much afraid. When he stood still, trying to regain his sense of direction, the bush was suddenly alive with mysterious sounds and rustlings. A loose sheet of bark flapped overhead: the long wail of a night bird—“Mo-poke! Mopoke!”—moaned from a distant tree. It made him shiver: he felt his teeth chatter, and set his jaw angrily to control them.

There came a sound behind him. He flashed round, his heart pounding, and a nocturnal animal—’possum or wombat—scuttled off into the deeper shadows. Somehow, he took comfort from his glimpse of it. At least it was definite: not flickering lights and shadows that made all the world unreal.

“It’s all rot to be scared!” he said aloud. “If Jim was here too I’d be liking it all.”

Jim had told him that it depended on a man’s own self whether he liked the bush. Bill remembered something of what he had said. “You’ve got to be friendly with it if you want to be happy in it. You’ve got to watch it and get to know it, and let it talk to you. Lots of people say they hate the bush, but it’s

only because they've never tried to make friends with it. It's like being with men—you've got to do a bit of giving of yourself if you want friends."

Bill had found it easy enough in the daytime. His thought grew steadier as he remembered how often he had ridden through this country, loving it all.

"It's all the same now," he said. "There isn't a thing different, only I'm tired and scared. I *won't* be scared. I—I've got to make friends again."

He let his gaze travel round deliberately, looking the great trees up and down; and quite suddenly, they seemed his friendly trees again, and all his fear had gone. He felt confident, happy: there came a curious feeling that something was taking care of him. The moonlight lay like a path among the trees: he followed it, hesitating a moment when it ended.

As he stood still a new sound came. He lifted his head, listening keenly for a moment: then gave a joyful little shout.

"That's the river! *Now* I know where I am!"

He hurried on, the sound growing clearer, and in a moment the trees thinned, he saw the dark mass that meant wattles growing on the banks, and the stream was at his feet. He turned along it, whistling in his new light-heartedness. A hundred yards farther the bank shelved gently down to a spot he knew—the cattle came there to drink. The moonlight fell full on the swiftly flowing water, turning it to rippling silver.

"Golly, I do want a drink!" he said.

He went down to the edge, lowering himself among the stones so that he could put his face into the water. It seemed to put new life into him: he went quickly along the bank, knowing that the bridge was near. A moment later it was in sight and his feet rang loudly on the decking as he crossed it.

"Well, I'm not home, by a long way," he said. "But I don't reckon there's any chance of going wrong again."

The moon was wholly his friend now; the dense timber belt was passed, and the paddocks stretched before him bathed in pale light. Sometimes he went on steadily, sometimes sat on a log to rest. Once, leaning back against a tree under which lay a specially comfortable log, he fell asleep. He did not know how long he slept, and when he awoke he was cold and stiff, but strangely happy; as if the protecting influence had drawn very close to him in his slumber.

"It'll be morning soon, I believe," he said, glancing at the sky as he stamped and shook himself. "What a queer night I've had! Wonder what Jim'll say?"

He hurried on. There was no need to go by the gates between the paddocks: he could take a bee-line now, climbing over the fences as he came to them. The fence of the home paddock came at last: far across the grass the homestead loomed, deep in its trees. Never had there been so welcome a sight!

The line he took led him through the landing ground. He headed towards it, his heart lifting anew as he became able to pick out the dark outlines of the hangars.

“Wonder if Bob will be able to go up to-night?” he pondered. “If he does _____”

The roar of a starting engine cut across the words. Bill jumped, uttering a startled exclamation. A moment the sound crashed into the stillness of the dawn; then it died to a steady throb.

“Something’s wrong!” he shouted. “Bob’s taking out a plane!”

He ran across the paddock as fast as his tired legs would take him, chafing at the distance, tripping over tussocks, panting in his eagerness. It did not seem possible that he could get there in time. But the engine was still throbbing quietly when he ducked under the fence and ran round the corner of the shed. He halted suddenly in the shadow, staring at the men and the plane.

The pilot was not Bob. He was leaning out, speaking to his companion: even in the flying helmet his dark face was clear. In his bewilderment and sudden anxiety Bill lost his head. He raced forward, shouting at them.

Things happened swiftly. The man by the plane darted at him: one sinewy arm was flung round him, the hand of the other clapped across his mouth, stifling his instinctive shout—“Jim!” The pilot leaped to the ground, his face terrible in its anger.

“It’s the red-headed little demon! What’ll we do with him?”

“Knock him on the head,” Alf growled.

“Not for me.” Bat shook his head. “We’d have all Australia on our trail.”

Alf swore viciously.

“Well, are you going to let him go? He’ll raise the whole place—if he hasn’t done it already. You fool, we’ve got no time to waste!”

“Chuck him in the plane,” Bat said suddenly. “That’s safer than anything—we can land him somewhere or other.”

Bill had a confused sense of angry words and quick movements. The choking hand was withdrawn: before he could catch his breath a handkerchief was thrust into his mouth. With his arms held tightly to his side he was hustled to the plane and flung into the rear cockpit, Alf following him with a bound and gripping his arms again.

He could see nothing. He crouched on the floor, struggling, blind with anger and gasping for breath.

The note of the engine swelled to shattering noise. They were moving: he could feel the wheels bumping over the grass. There was a lift, a stagger, another bump. Then, nothing but the steady roaring and the scream of the wind.

CHAPTER XV

PURSUIT

MAS' JIM! Mas' Jim!"

Jim Linton turned in his sleep, sighed, and woke. From his bed on the balcony he could see the first streaks of dawn in the sky. Near him was Bob's bed, its occupant a motionless heap beneath the blankets.

"Did you call?" Jim asked drowsily. "Too soon to get up yet."

"Mas' Jim! Wake up, Mas' Jim!"

A guttural voice, low and urgent. Jim was suddenly broad awake, raising himself on his elbow. Over the balcony railing came a tousled head, a black face, as Billy, having swarmed up a post, clung to the ironwork, calling him.

"What's up, Billy? A fire?" Jim was out of bed: a stride took him to the ratlings.

"Mas' Jim!—two pfeller shearers takin' plane. Listen!"

He held up a finger. A droning sound came clearly. Bob suddenly flung himself out of bed.

"What's that?"

"Billy says two of the gang have taken out a plane. They must be mad!"

"Stealin', mine thinkit," Billy growled. "You two come, one-time."

Jim and Bob had dashed at their clothes.

"You cut back, Billy. See what their game is."

"Watch their direction if they're off the ground, Billy!" Bob cried. Billy was already sliding to the ground. He shouted back "Plenty!" as he disappeared into the shrubbery.

"He won't be there in time if they mean business," Bob snapped. "We'll have to follow up in the other bus. Carry on, Jim—I'll be after you in a minute."

They had waited only to draw trousers over their pyjamas and thrust their feet into boots. Jim went over the balcony railing, following Billy's route. Bob caught up his coat and socks as well as his own, dived into his room, and clattered downstairs. A moment later he was out on the lawn, carrying heavy overcoats as well, running hard.

Jim had gone like a hare, but before he reached the landing ground he knew he was too late. The low sound suddenly swelled to a full-throated blare. Over the trees beyond him he saw the Kestrel rise, winging her way upwards.

Jim uttered a savage exclamation, racing on. He found the black boy staring upwards.

“Couldn’t catch um, Mas’ Jim!”

“Come along—we’ll get the other plane out!” Jim shouted, racing past him. They swung back the doors of the Planet’s shed and rolled the plane out on the runway. Bob panted up, dropping his load, and sprang to the plane.

“Swing her, Billy!”

The engine started easily: he throttled it back to a steady throb, thankful that it had been overhauled recently. He swung to the ground.

“Get your things on, Jim. Watch the Kestrel, Billy—don’t take your eyes off her!”

“Baal,” grunted Billy, his gaze fixed on the Kestrel, now no larger than a bird in the north-west sky.

“Trust you to remember these things!” Jim said, struggling into his clothes. “I only thought of getting here in time.”

“Rather—but two of you were enough, and I knew we couldn’t go up in pyjama coats.” Bob had annexed Jack’s flying coat of heavy leather: he was fastening it with swift fingers. “What on earth are these men up to, Jim? They’re absolutely mad!”

“Mad as hatters, I should say. Who were they, Billy? Did you see their faces?”

“Mine thinkit them two pfellers come often look-see planes. Them name Alf an’ Bat.”

“Did you ever hear if they could fly?”

“Baal. On’y they look plenty. That pfeller Bat him plenty walk-about with Daisy,” added Billy, whose eyes rarely missed anything that took place on Billabong. “Him no good, mine thinkit.”

“H’m!” said Jim. “Well, I don’t see what Daisy would have to do with his collaring a plane. How much longer, Bob?”

“Can’t hurry her when she’s dead cold,” said Bob. “A minute more.”

Sounds of flying feet came, and Wally dashed up. Behind him at a little distance Murty pounded along.

“What’s up?” Wally shouted.

Jim explained briefly, and Wally stated the universal view that the thieves were mad. “Unless,” he added doubtfully, “they’re only a pair of harmless lunatics who just wanted a joy-ride.”

“A bit too thick, I’m afraid,” said Jim. “Though it’s possible, of course. Well, we’re off for a joy-ride after them. I only hope the fools won’t crash Freddy’s plane.”

Bob shouted from the pilot’s seat.

“Ready, Jim!”

Jim leaped to his cockpit. Bob taxied into the wind, the purr of the engine rising in a steady crescendo as the plane gathered way. The tail rose as it raced

along the turf like an arrow; a couple of hops and the Planet skimmed the fence and soared upwards.

Bob was by no means confident. He had flown both planes, and knew there was little to choose between them, given an equal start. But the Kestrel was well away: his last glimpse of her had shown her a mere dot in the sky. She must have gone at her top from the start, not waiting to gain height until well out of sight of Billabong.

He had no faith in Wally's idea of a joy ride. Reckless young flying men might play a prank of that kind with a friend's machine: but Alf and Bat were not that type. He had a nodding acquaintance with them; had spoken to them occasionally in the evenings, had encountered Bat once in the kitchen, quietly talking to Brownie. Once he remembered finding him on the landing ground when he brought the Kestrel down after a short trip with Norah. Bat had volunteered help in putting the plane back into the hangar. Bob knitted his brows, trying to recall whether he had shown any knowledge of flying matters. He thought not: Bat had seemed a very ordinary young fellow, civil and pleasant, but only casually interested in planes.

"If it were anyone but Billy who had recognized them I'd say he was wrong," he reflected. "But Billy has eyes like a cat's in the dusk."

Whoever had taken the Kestrel had planned the business well and was no novice at handling a plane. But why should they take her? Flying had certainly increased rapidly in Australia in the few years since the war, but planes were by no means a commonplace yet: a man could not steal one as easily as he could steal a car. Unless he were a fool, or had some plan up his sleeve that Bob could not guess at, he could not hope to escape detection. A plane could not be hidden in any odd corner: could not be re-fuelled without spending a good deal of money. Shearers certainly made good money, but Bob was unable to picture them running planes for fun.

He gave up the problem and concentrated on the task before him. The Planet was arrowing in the direction taken by the Kestrel: he flew low as long as he dared, hoping to catch sight of it again by an initial overtaking effort. When this hope died he began to climb; he must gain height, for it was quite possible that the Kestrel had circled and taken another direction.

He soared until the earth was only a blur below them, flattened out and banked, sweeping the air with his glance in every direction as he flew in widening circles. Jim, he knew, was doing the same: and Jim had eyes almost as keen as Billy's, and was full of deep anger that such a thing should have been done to Freddy's plane while it was in his care. A guest's property was almost a sacred thing in Jim's eyes. Bob reflected that he wouldn't care to be in the thief's shoes if Jim could get his hands upon him.

The Planet dived and soared and circled, taking one direction after another,

but no flicker of a far-off wing came to encourage pilot and his passenger. If the Kestrel had continued on a straight course Bob knew they had no hope now. Their only chance lay in the possibility that the fugitives were making for some destination that would compel them to circle when they fancied it safe. Time drew on, and that faint chance became even less probable.

Bob decided on a last expedient. He slipped on the head-phones, signalling to Jim to do the same.

“I’m going to switch off the engine for a moment. Listen as hard as you can; if there’s a plane anywhere we’ll hear her.”

Jim nodded. They removed the phones and Bob switched off. In the sudden silence they strained every nerve to listen. For a moment there was no sound but the wind whistling in the wings. Then, from the west, they caught a faint droning that made their hearts leap.

“By Jove, we’ve got her!” Jim shouted, as Bob flashed a smile at him.

The engine purred again, rising to a deep, vibrating roar as the Planet banked and shot westward with ever-increasing speed. Light cloud-masses blocked the view: they passed through them, coming out into clearer sky, straining their eyes ahead. Far off a wisp of white cloud parted: a tiny point of light, flashing in the blue, showed them their quarry. Bob whooped in triumph, as the Planet, throttle fully open, roared in pursuit.

The other plane was flying fast and high. There was no sign of indecision in her course from the moment they sighted her; she went like an arrow, evidently anxious to maintain her lead. Higher yet the Kestrel flashed across the sky in her wake. Bob’s lips were set tightly: he was experiencing all the old joy of hunting in the air with the enemy in sight and bent upon escape. Where they were he neither knew nor cared. He did not trouble to glance earthward; every faculty was bent on anticipating any move by the leading plane. At any moment she might alter her course in an effort to shake him off. Bob was very sure that he was not going to be out-generalled by a bandit pilot.

Jim signalled to him by a tap on the shoulder, and he adjusted the head-phones.

“What’s the plan of action?”

“Haven’t got any,” Bob answered cheerfully. “I can only hang on to her tail until she gets tired. I hope to goodness her petrol will give out before mine does.”

“She can’t shake us off, can she?”

“Not if she’s going full out now, and I rather think she is. In fact, we’re overhauling her a little. She’ll have to come down sooner or later. Then we’ll drop, too, and—well, the next move is up to you!”

Jim grinned, asking nothing better. He leaned back, his eyes watching the plane ahead. For the first moment that morning he felt contented. The only

thing lacking to complete his enjoyment was a pipe: and perhaps the opportunity for that would come when they landed. Then he remembered that his pipe and tobacco lay on his dressing-table at Billabong, and he shrugged his shoulders, laughing at himself silently.

Bob did not even need a pipe. He hummed an old Air Force song as he drove the Planet onward, utterly happy now that he knew he had the measure of the plane that droned ahead. He wondered idly, without any apprehension, what the scene would be like when they landed. The men might show fight, but he doubted it: Bat and Alf, as he remembered them, were not of a type that would stand up to Jim for an instant, even without reckoning his own fists, which were not to be despised. They would probably cave in pretty quickly.

“Unless they’re armed,” he reflected. “That would certainly be a little awkward.” He dismissed the thought lightly. This wasn’t America, where all the bandits went about decorated with revolvers.

Then there would be the business of getting the Kestrel home. Pity that Jim couldn’t fly her. Well, they would have to compel the bandit to do that, with Jim sitting behind him to keep him in the way he should go. They might have to scout round somewhere for more petrol, but that wouldn’t matter. Nothing mattered now.

He stiffened suddenly.

“By Jove, he’s dropping, Jim!”

The leading plane was beginning to lose height. They overhauled her rapidly as she came out of an easy dive, flattened on even keel, and banked. Looking down Bob saw level plains, with only one building in sight—a long low house among trees.

“They must have run out of petrol,” he told Jim. “I suppose they’re taking their chance of getting some down there.”

The first plane circled, turned into the wind, and landed. Little black figures could be seen running towards her from the house some distance away. Above her, Bob dropped in a wide spiral to make his own landing. Jim was leaning over the side, tense with excitement, his fists instinctively clenched.

Suddenly, as they banked, a violent exclamation of anger burst from Bob’s lips. He pulled the control stick back savagely, and with a roar the Planet shot skywards.

“What in thunder are you doing?” shouted Jim.

Bob pointed downwards to where the first plane stood, her number black against the silver of her wings.

“It’s not Freddy’s plane at all! We’ve been chasing some perfectly harmless chap who’s in a hurry to get home!”

“Good Lord!” uttered Jim. He stared earthwards, seeing a group of puzzled men gazing up at them. “My hat, they must think we’re mad!” He broke into

deep laughter.

“Well, you can laugh!” said Bob with bitterness. He was far from laughter; anger and disgust filled him in equal measure. “I never felt such a fool in my life!”

“But, Bob, she’s the dead spit of Freddy’s bus.”

“I know she is—in everything but her number. I ought to have remembered that Freddy isn’t the only man who bought an old war machine,” was the angry answer.

“And anyone would have sworn she was trying to get away from us,” Jim went on.

“Haven’t you ever made up your mind that another fellow wasn’t going to pass you when you were driving your car?” snapped Bob. Then the ridiculous side of their misfortune swept upon him, and he joined Jim in helpless laughter.

“Well—there it is,” said Jim, when they had partly recovered. The Planet was droning back on the way that she had come, flying a thousand feet up. “It’s no use calling ourselves fools; and I don’t suppose we’ve really lost any chance of overhauling the Kestrel. She’d lost us before we got off the ground at home. What’s to be done now?”

“Go home, I should say—and hope that our gas will hold out for the distance. I think it’s all right, although I can’t be sure until I pick up my bearings. The Kestrel is a matter for the police now.”

Jim nodded agreement.

“Yes. I’ll get them on the telephone as soon as we land.”

They flew on, always watching for a glimpse of another plane, though without any real hope. None came in sight. They were alone in an empty sky.

Jim had begun their flight from Billabong in hot anger, and it had lasted during their first searching of the air: but it was characteristic of him that he could never resume anger after he had been made to laugh. Now, although they were going home to admit defeat, he had become serene. There was no sense in being worried. No plane was likely to remain hidden for long when every police-station in every State was warned to be on the look-out. Some bright young trooper or constable would get on its trail when the thieves had to refuel, and then it would only be necessary for the Planet to fly to the scene of the capture with a second pilot on board to bring the Kestrel back. He hoped Bob would be able to accompany Freddy or Jack on the mission. And if the worst came to the worst, and they heard that the Kestrel had crashed before being found—well, Billabong could stand Freddy a new plane.

This being comfortably settled in his mind, Jim began to enjoy the flight thoroughly; nor did he lose his cheerfulness when Bob, looking troubled, announced that they must land to find more petrol. They came down on open

ground not far from a large township, where Jim had no difficulty in finding a garage owner willing to supply him.

There was delay, however, for it took time to discover a means of getting the petrol to the plane. The garage man, though interested, declined firmly to allow tins of petrol to be carted in his only available cars, a Buick and a Vauxhall, each of great lustre; and Jim, for all his desire to get away, could not blame him. Finally a battered half-ton truck was discovered, loaded with milk-cans, and perched on this, Jim clattered out to rejoin Bob.

He found him in the rear cockpit; the pilot's seat was occupied by an entranced small boy who, having an unwelcome half-holiday so that the dentist might relieve him of a hollow tooth, had encountered the plane on his way back from the scene of torture. No cavity in the mouth, however gaping, can be remembered for an instant by a boy who is permitted to grasp the joy-stick of a plane while its pilot shows how it is worked: with the further thrill of seeing the plane re-fuelled. They waved good-bye to him as the Kestrel took the air again; he stared up at them with the solemn joy of one who knows that he will be the hero of his school for at least a week.

Billabong came in sight at last, its people hurrying out to greet them as they landed.

"No luck?" asked Wally, who had raced up from the woolshed.

Jim shook his head.

"Never caught sight of them—and we lost a lot of time chasing a strange plane. We must ring up the police. Does Carmody know anything about the men?"

"Carmody is in a state of black rage," said Wally. "He says that his gang is disgraced for ever. Neither he nor any of the gang had the slightest idea that either of the men had any knowledge of planes."

"Well, there is nothing to be gained by worrying now," Norah said practically; "and you poor boys must be starved. Come in to breakfast—unless you'd rather call it lunch!"

"We'll call it anything so long as it's a square meal," Jim rejoined. "I could eat a house. Also, I am still wearing my pyjamas, and I want a bath. Are Dad and Bill back yet?"

"No, but they are sure to be here soon," Wally answered. "We rather thought they'd have turned up before this."

"All right with you, Tommy?" Jim possessed himself of her arm.

"Oh, yes—especially now that you are both home," she said, smiling up at him. "It has seemed a long time since you went away. But we will not talk about unpleasant things—you are to be fed immediately. Brownie has been getting desperate about you."

They talked gaily over the table, refusing to discuss stolen planes until the

hunger of the flyers was satisfied: and if there was a shadow in Tommy's eyes when she glanced now and then at Bob, she took care not to allow him to see it. Shouts of unfeeling laughter greeted the story of the wrong plane that was nearly captured.

"Bill will never let you forget that!" Norah said.

"He will not," Jim agreed. "Poor old Bill—won't he be disgusted when he finds that he's been out of all the excitement?"

He pushed back his chair, looking gratefully at Tommy when she produced his pipe.

"Bless you!" he said. "I want that badly. Wal, can Carmody throw any light on why those idiots wanted to get off with a plane?"

Wally hesitated, glancing at Bob.

"Oh, we've found the reason they wanted it," he said. "Bob, old man, the plane isn't all the swine got away with. They've taken your gold as well."

Bob stared at him for a moment. Then he laughed.

"You looked so appallingly solemn that I thought you had something awful to tell me," he said. "Anything else to break gently, Wal? Did they leave Davie?"

"They did," said Wally, laughing in his turn. "And I might have known you'd grin at our kind efforts to soothe the blow, you old war-horse!"

"You don't mean that they broke open the safe!" Jim exclaimed.

"The safe doesn't seem to have worried them at all. We found it open, and Bill's Christmas pudding gone—the door leading into the hall was locked. I suppose they locked it to prevent any inquisitive person from dashing in while they operated."

"Much dashing any of us did!" groaned Jim. "To think we slept through it all! I'll never forgive myself!"

"Oh, bosh!" said Bob firmly. "Who'd ever think of burglars here? Wally, they must have been fairly accomplished at safe-breaking."

"Absolutely," Wally agreed. "There's no sign that it was tampered with. I suppose you're sure it was locked, Jim?"

"Quite. I had to go to the safe late last night; Tommy was with me, and we were admiring the Christmas pudding. I didn't take out the key until I had locked it—it's in my pocket now." He produced the key, and they all looked at it as if it held the clue to the mystery.

Jim brought his clenched fist down on the table.

"I'll track those swine down if it takes my last penny!" he said angrily. "If they'd only hit at us!—but it's Bob and Freddy who get the kick. Bob, old man, we'll make it up to you. You won't——"

He broke off as a quick firm tread came up the hall.

"There's Dad!"

David Linton came in hurriedly as they jumped up. He wasted no time in greetings.

“Is Bill home?”

“No.” Norah’s voice held mild surprise. “Did you send him ahead of you, Dad?”

“He started back yesterday evening,” Mr. Linton began. Norah gave a low cry.

“Yesterday!”

“Don’t worry, Norah. I’m sure he’s all right. I thought I’d find him here. I came across his horse this morning—she must have slipped down a bank and strained herself. But he couldn’t have been hurt: his saddle and bridle were carefully stowed. He must have gone ahead on foot.”

“How far out?” Jim asked sharply.

“Half-way through the hills. He got through them all right; the track is dusty, and I tracked his boot marks nearly to our fence. I lost them there, but I picked them up again at the gate.”

Jim gave a great sigh of relief.

“Nothing can have happened to him if he got out of the hills. Bill couldn’t lose himself once he was in our paddocks.”

Tommy turned pale suddenly.

“The—the river?”

David Linton smiled at her.

“That’s all right, Tommy. I found his tracks in the dusty patches near the bridge. I haven’t really worried, except that I thought the little chap would be tired out. But where on earth can he be?”

“He couldn’t have got on a wrong track once he’d crossed the bridge,” Wally said. “I wonder if the poor kid curled up under a log and went to sleep. He must have been dead beat long before he came to the bridge.”

“It’s just possible, I suppose,” Norah said slowly. She looked out of the window as if in the hope of seeing the red head showing above the low hedge.

Instead, she saw Murty. He was coming quickly, his face grave as he strode up to the window.

“Good day, sir. Masther Bill didn’t come home with ye?”

“Not with me, Murty. We’re just wondering where he is. He ought to have been home long ago.” David Linton explained the position rapidly.

The old man’s look of anxiety increased.

“Did they tell ye, sir, that there’s two men that’s afther stealin’ wan o’ the planes about dawn this mornin’?”

“Good Lord, no!” exclaimed the squatter. “How in the world——”

Murty interrupted him. Something in his face brought them all near him, tense with a sudden uneasiness. He held out a slender hunting-crop.

“The wee lad had this with him. An’ I’m just afther findin’ it in the grass by the shed where that plane was.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE CHRISTMAS PUDDING

BILL, struggling and choking on the floor of the cockpit of the Kestrel as she roared skyward, felt the cruel grip on his arms relax. He used his freedom to snatch from his mouth the handkerchief that was stifling him, and spent a minute in gasping attempts to breathe freely again. Tears rained down his cheeks: a wave of shame swept him as he felt for his own handkerchief, until he realized that he was not crying. His eyes ceased to water as his gasps lessened, his lungs filling with air. Crouched on his hands and knees, he struggled to gain command of himself.

He was far too angry to cry. Rage at the brutal treatment he had undergone mingled with rage that these men had dared to steal the Kestrel. He had no personal fear. There had been a moment when he had been horribly afraid, for there had been no doubt that Alf was in earnest when he had suggested knocking him on the head: but it had passed. They were not going to risk their necks by murdering him. Sooner or later they would land and let him go.

His anger mastered him, and he wriggled to his knees, shouting at the man who sat above him.

“You thieving brute! Wait till the police get you——”

A swift blow from a heavy hand knocked him backwards. He struggled up again. Alf caught him by the shoulder, bending down until his mouth was close to the boy’s ear.

“There’s plenty more where that came from, if you give any cheek. You keep your tongue quiet, do you hear, you little devil?” Bill blinked under the flow of evil epithets that followed. Sinewy fingers seemed to be eating into his shoulder; the face near his own was dark with fury. He tried to glare back.

“You behave yourself, if you don’t want to be chucked over the side. We don’t care if you fall out—it ’ud save us a lot of trouble. Stay where you are an’ don’t open your mouth, or I’ll put you to sleep in a way you won’t like!”

Alf released his shoulder with a movement that flung him again to the floor sideways. His head encountered something hard. Stars danced before his eyes: a choking sob broke from him. He writhed into a more comfortable position, hiding his face on a kit-bag, and became motionless, trying to think.

That was the first round, and it had showed him how helpless he was. Alf evidently asked nothing better than to hurt him: the pilot had seemed more merciful, but he was in the front cockpit, all his attention centred on flying, and nothing could be hoped from him. It was clear that only a fool would do

anything further to annoy Alf, who might, on the other hand, let his wrath simmer down if the captive gave no trouble.

“I’ve got to seem tame, no matter what I feel,” Bill thought.

Red-haired people are not naturally tame, especially when stinging under blows and injustice. It was hard to calm himself; his head throbbed and his mind seemed to race in time with the racing plane. Gradually he became able to take stock of his position, twisting his head round.

He was crouched on the floor immediately behind the pilot’s seat in a huddle of bags and sacking. Nothing was visible except the pilot’s back above him; to his left his eyes encountered Alf’s feet and legs, travelling up until they rested on his face. The shearer was gripping the edge of the cockpit with one hand. He stared straight ahead, taking no further notice of Bill.

“Wonder if I dare look out?” the boy muttered.

He decided to attempt it by degrees. First he wriggled into a sitting posture, careful to keep his feet from touching those of his companion. Alf glanced down sharply, but, seeing that he looked docile, left him alone. Bill stayed where he was, feeling strength and self-command come back to him in the free air.

He was sheltered from the rush of the wind that whipped into Alf’s face. Above was only the clear pale blue of the early morning sky. They were rushing across it with the throttle fully open—Bat had headed north-west after his first dash from the ground, bent on leaving Billabong as far as possible behind him. The roar of the engine filled all space. Bill ached to see more.

He tucked his feet under him, and with deliberate movements kneeled on the floor, steadying himself with one hand on the edge of the cockpit. This was no better, so far as seeing went, but at least it brought no interference from Alf. Bill hoped that he was taking it for granted that a small boy must wriggle or die.

His knees began to resent the hardness of the floor. Very cautiously he manœuvred a kit-bag into such a position that he could use it as a seat; he perched himself on it, looking up at Alf with an expression which he hoped signified tameness.

What he saw puzzled him for a moment, and then filled him with a wholly impish delight. Alf glanced at him briefly and looked away again, his lips tightly compressed. There was a curious greenness on his face, anxiety in his eyes. He sat very still. Bill realized with inward howls of joy that his war-like neighbour was one of the unfortunates who suffer from air-sickness!

For the moment there was nothing further to fear from Alf. Nausea, that great leveller of mortals, surged within him; when the plane oscillated or dropped slightly a low groan escaped his lips. Bill had ceased to exist for him: he was all unconscious of the dancing brown eyes that were bent upon him,

alight with unholy expectation.

Rarely had Bill enjoyed a more satisfying moment. To be beaten up by a gentleman who showed an urgent desire to murder you: to be forced to endure at his hands curses, threats and pain: and then to see your enemy wilt and turn green under the influence of the very thing he had been at such pains to steal—it was a rapturous sight. Bill had never known what it was to be sea-sick, so that he could only guess at the emotions that filled the heaving breast of his foe; but he dimly realized that if he were able to possess himself of a weapon and advance upon Alf with the intention of carrying out his own prescription of a knock on the head, Alf would almost have welcomed the proceeding.

There was no weapon, however, nor was one needed. Stronger forces had their way with the unhappy bandit: his anguish mounted with a maddening slowness as qualm after qualm shook him to his depths. There came a moment when Bat decided to lose height and put the machine into a dive. Alf slipped helplessly to the floor: kneeling, his head went over the side. The roar of the engine mercifully veiled sounds of horror.

The stricken one struggled back presently, his eyes streaming. Sitting in a limp heap on the floor, too shaken to try to regain the seat, his blurred gaze fell on Bill—who, leaning forward, benevolently offered him a grimy handkerchief that had recently been used as a gag. Alf took it meekly and pressed it to his face. He turned his back, huddling against the side of the cockpit with his head on the seat. He longed to die.

Bill gazed at the collapsed form, shaking with laughter. Clearly, this was his chance. He scrambled up to the seat, and immediately forgot all his troubles in the excitement of the flight.

They were still flying high, arrowing across the sky at tremendous speed. The engine thundered in his ears. He looked down: far below, bush and plain fled away behind them, with an occasional grey blur that meant the crowded houses of a township—seen for a flash, and then gone. Now and then he caught a glimpse of a road, a thin grey line: Bill would not have known they were roads had not he caught glimpses of a moving patch of light as the sun struck on the windscreen of a car.

The wind seemed to cut through him. He had no overcoat, and his jacket was a light one: with all his eagerness to see, he was forced to yield to the cold presently, cowering down in the shelter of the cockpit. He was shivering from head to foot, his hands numb.

“I’ll get warm a bit,” he thought. “Then I’ll have another look out.”

Alf was still motionless, his back to him. Bill turned from him contemptuously, wishing he had an overcoat. He snuggled as well as he could under the heap of sacking, pulling an end across his chest as he made room for himself among the kit-bags.

His hip encountered something hard and knobby, and he winced, pushing at the obstruction angrily through the sacking. It did not move: a small thing, but with a curious dead weight. Bill pulled the sacking aside. For a long moment he stared at it, petrified with dismay.

“It—it’s Bob’s gold! The Christmas pudding!” he gasped under his breath.

The red-brown package lay uncovered before him; a strange little thing to be fraught with so many dangers. A pang of fear shot through the boy: he tossed the end of the sacking over it, turning to glance apprehensively at his captor. Alf had not stirred. Bill’s heart beat more gently as he turned back again.

It seemed a long time that he crouched there, boiling with anger and revolving a hundred plans, each more useless than the last. Everything was clear to him now. He had puzzled as to why the men should steal the plane, since they must know that sooner or later they would have to abandon it. That mystery had baffled him from the first. Now it was a mystery no longer. They would fly as far as they could, where pursuit could no longer trouble them. Freddy might get back his plane, but they would have Bob’s gold.

“Gosh, I’d like to drop it out!” he muttered furiously.

But could he? He remembered the weight that had astonished him when he had lifted the “Christmas pudding” on that jolly day that seemed so long ago now. Alf might come to life at any moment, galvanized into new activity by seeing him moving quickly and standing up in the cockpit: even if he got the Christmas pudding over the side they might know where it had dropped. They would land to look for it, disposing of him at the same time.

Even if they did not see, how could he trace it again? He chewed over the problem despairingly. If he dropped it in bush country there would certainly be an end of it; if he chose a settled district there was an even chance that it might kill some unlucky person who chanced to be strolling below—perhaps smash up a motor-car or a house. That could not be risked. Whether he left it alone or tried to drop it out he could not conceal from himself the fact that Bob was exceedingly unlikely to see his Christmas pudding again.

Anger had taken away all feeling of cold, and he decided to look out again. He scrambled up to the seat. They were flying over brown plains now; ahead a broad streak of silver cut the landscape. He saw the pilot half turn, pointing downwards, for a second: heard him shout something he could not hear. But he knew, looking at that wide and gleaming ribbon of water.

“It’s the Murray!” he shouted.

It seemed incredible that they should be there already. He wondered for a moment how he would ever get back when they landed him, leaving him alone and penniless. But that could take care of itself when the time came.

The river had vanished, and with its passing came a throb of loneliness as

he realized that for the first time in his twelve years he had left Victoria. New South Wales lay beneath him, unknown and vast. He wondered where they were heading for, how far they could fly. That depended on petrol: he knew Billy had put some in the tanks, but whether he had completely filled them he had no idea. Probably the pilot himself did not know. Anyhow, it seemed to Bill that at the rate they were flying they might reach Queensland—if it was to Queensland they were heading.

Alf stirred, sat up, and looked miserably about him. He chose an unfortunate moment. The Kestrel shot into a patch of bumpy air, hit an air-pocket, and dropped suddenly, bringing up with a thump. It was too much for the unlucky Alf. He groaned loudly: once more his head disappeared over the edge of the cockpit, and paroxysms shook him.

No feeling of delicacy hindered Bill's enjoyment of the distressing spectacle. He shook with mirth, flinging at the unheeding sufferer such taunts as might have been expected from a schoolboy with a varied vocabulary. They were impolite remarks of remarkable pungency, and they relieved Bill's troubled mind exceedingly. His one regret was that the victim heard none of them.

Alf slipped back at last, relaxed into his former position, and became dead to the world, at which Bill uttered silent cheers. For a time he watched the surface of New South Wales, his mind all the while wrestling with the problem of the gold. To throw it over the edge seemed to hold more dangers than ever. Alf had roused once; if the plane had not treated him so unkindly he might have shown symptoms of recovery. It might come at any time, Bill reflected: he didn't see how a man could go on being sick for ever!

"I wonder if I'd kill him if I hit him with the Christmas pudding?" he pondered, looking at the back of Alf's defenceless head. "It certainly could give an almighty wallop!"

He toyed with the idea for a few happy moments before he decided regretfully that its natural disadvantages were too great. No other scheme presented itself, and again he realized that he was growing too cold to remain in the seat. He cast another glance at New South Wales, of which there seemed a great deal, and subsided to the floor.

He wriggled about under the sacking, hoping to make a nest sufficiently comfortable to allow him to sleep. Excitement and anger had helped him to forget his long night of walking; now, a tide of weariness swept over him.

"I believe I could think a bit better if I had a few minutes' sleep," he muttered. He wriggled irritably. "This beastly floor's as hard as a brick!"

His elbow encountered a substance that yielded unexpectedly. He jerked forward, realizing that the fuselage of an old plane was not calculated to bear much pressure.

“Soft enough,” he thought, poking his finger into it. “No wonder Freddy’s had to patch it in such a lot of places.”

With the thought, an idea flashed into his mind, and weariness fled from him. His head came up with a quick movement as he glanced at Alf. No stir in that quarter. Bill settled back with a sigh of relief.

He slid the Christmas pudding along the floor until it sat on the boards at the edge, almost touching the fuselage. Then, taking out his pocket-knife, he cut very carefully a triangular slit in the fabric just where it met the floor. The wind blew the loose piece inwards, enlarging the hole; he put the bag of gold against it hurriedly, stuffing the sacking round it, so that the hole was invisible.

“There you are, old chap!” he murmured delightedly, addressing the bag. “One kick, and out you shoot! An’ I can do it without a soul seeing me!”

Even with the padding he had contrived, the hole was by no means wind-proof. The rushing air found its way in until the floor of the cockpit was almost as cold a place as the seat. It had an unexpectedly restoring effect upon Alf, who stirred after a few minutes, raising a dishevelled head.

“B-r-r!” he said. “It’s cold.”

He drew himself up to the seat while Bill remained huddled over the sacking, wondering how long it would be before he became frozen to the floor. Sharp thrusts of wind pierced him as if knife-edged, sweeping round the cockpit. He glanced up at Alf, who was visibly shuddering. What if he should demand the sacking as an extra wrap? He certainly looked as if he needed it.

Probably the fear would have been realized had not his companion’s attention been distracted from his own discomforts. The droning roar of the engine was unexpectedly broken, changing to a succession of spluttering coughs that died to a silence that was startling to ears long attuned to violent sound.

Alf sprang forward, leaning over the pilot’s shoulder.

“What’s up? We aren’t going to crash, are we?”

Bat spat an angry answer at him.

“We’ll crash all right if you don’t keep your silly head out of my way! Petrol’s gone. I’ll have to get down as best I can.”

Bill had sprung to his feet, looking over the edge. They were gliding rapidly; it was strange to feel movement accompanied only by the swish of the air along the wings and fuselage. The whirring propeller ran to a standstill: the speed of the plane slackened.

He searched the ground with his eyes. They were passing over thick bush; his heart sank at the hopelessness of dropping the gold in such country. Then, as they lost height, still gliding on, the bush gave place to sparsely timbered paddocks. A road ran on the left hand. Farther yet, and a creek showed ahead. Beyond it a marshy place glittered.

“That’s my place,” Bill muttered. “I’ll shoot it out as soon as we’re past that swamp.”

He fixed his eyes on it, leaning out as far as he dared. They were over it now: he paused a moment to be sure. Already he had loosened the sacking. Underneath it his foot pressed against the bag of gold.

Now! He pressed slowly and steadily. For a moment the bag seemed to resist him. Then it gave suddenly, and his foot followed it out through the hole. He clung with both hands to the cockpit ledge to steady himself, his heart leaping into his throat. Below him a house had rushed into his field of vision.

“Golly! I hope to goodness it didn’t go down near there!” he muttered.

There was no time for wondering. The marsh and the house were gone: the Kestrel was over thick trees again, and Alf began to gibber frantically with fear. They cleared a wide stretch of timber with very little to spare—the under carriage almost grazed the topmost boughs.

Beyond was a partly cleared paddock, so large that they could not see the fences: level, for the most part, and dotted with grazing sheep. Bat gave a short exclamation of relief. He banked and then side-slipped, crossing some low-growing scrub with hardly any way on. When the plane was a few feet above the ground he brought her nose up, stalled, and came down in a rather bumpy “pancake” landing. The Kestrel rolled gently to a halt.

Three horses were grazing close by: two weedy chestnuts and an old pony mare. So quietly did the plane settle that for a moment they were not alarmed; then they flung up their heads and cantered off. Finding that it appeared harmless, they pulled up, hesitated, and trotted slowly back, looking at it with mild curiosity before they began to feed again. Clearly, they had seen planes before.

Bat turned to his passengers, permitting himself a faint grin.

“Not too bad a landing,” he said. “Mighty good thing for us those trees ended where they did!”

Alf was still trembling.

“My oath, I thought it was all up with us!” he stammered.

Bat looked at him, his lip curling. Was this the calm and unperturbed Alf who had broken into a safe so short a time ago, making him feel a very second-rate accomplice?

“You look pretty green,” he told him with a touch of contempt. “Been feelin’ sick?”

“Sick!” The word was an explosive. “You bet I have. I’ve had an awful time! Wish I needn’t ever see the blanky thing again!”

He climbed out slowly, laboriously. Bat joined him on the ground.

“What’s the next move?”

Bat drew him a little farther from the plane, dropping his voice when he

replied.

“Next is to get some petrol an’ then shake off the kid. We haven’t passed over a township lately so I’ll have to look for one ahead. You’ll have to stay here.”

“I *would!*” groaned Alf. “An’ I need a drink more’n I need anything in the world!”

“I’ll bring some back. The bus can’t be left; neither can the kid. We can’t run the risk of him gettin’ away to tell his little story before we’re in the air again.”

He glanced towards the Kestrel. Bill had just decided that the moment had arrived when he might gracefully withdraw. One leg was over the farther side of the cockpit when Bat’s harsh voice rang unpleasantly on his ears.

“You get back into the bus or I’ll give you something to keep you quiet. Quick, now!” He made a threatening stride forward. It was sufficient hint for Bill, who returned to his seat, considerably discouraged.

“We haven’t enough cash for petrol, so I’ll have to get some of the gold out. I’ll only take enough to make a bank think I’m a hard-workin’ prospector who’s had a little stroke of luck. Then I’ll hire a car to drive me back with it; an’ I’ll get tucker.”

“I suppose it’s the only way,” Alf agreed gloomily. “Don’t be any longer than you can help. It’s jumpy work, stayin’ here on my own with all that gold. I’m all queer yet.”

“Oh, you’ve got your little red-headed pal to yarn to,” Bat grinned. “I’ll bet he’d like a chance of tellin’ you all he thinks about us! But I’ll be as quick as I can possibly be. The air’s the only place I feel safe in.”

He moved a step, but paused.

“You’d better take him for a stroll while I unpack the stuff. The less he knows, the less he can tell anyone.”

He raised his voice.

“Hop out, kid, an’ come here. Look slippy!”

Bill hopped out obediently. He came forward, wondering what was to happen to him next.

“You an’ me are goin’ for a walk,” Alf told him. “An’ don’t you try any fancy tricks about dodgin’ away, ’cause I’m pretty good at anything up to the quarter-mile.” He turned away, the boy falling into step with him. Bat was climbing into the plane.

“What are you going to do with me?” Bill demanded.

“If I had my way I’d bury you in a nice neat grave,” Alf told him pleasantly. “But my mate’s a kind-hearted man, an’ he won’t have you killed. We’ll see——”

From the Kestrel came a shout that was almost a howl. They swung round.

Above the rear cockpit showed Bat's face, distorted with fury.

"Alf! It's gone!"

"What!"

"It's gone! There's a hole in the fuselage. Hold that kid!"

Bill had turned to run. Alf sprang at him with a savage threat, seizing his collar. He dragged him back to the plane.

"Do you mean it's busted its way out?" he asked breathlessly.

"Busted—nothing! There's a clean knife-cut in the fuselage. The kid's dished us. An' you without a thing to do but watch him!"

"Nothin' to do!" groaned Alf, with bitter memories. "My oath, I had—I was busy!"

"Yes, you were busy, you poor fish!" Bat spat at him scornfully. "Strewth, but I chose a rotten mate!" His rage choked him for an instant. Then he shouted at Bill.

"You did it, you little brute!"

Bill trembled, but not altogether with fear. The red head went up. His eyes met his accuser's squarely.

"Yes. It wasn't yours."

"None of your talk—you're here to answer questions. When did you drop it? How long back?"

"Oh—ages ago!" The words came almost of themselves. They did not seem untrue to Bill. Everything that had happened to him felt ages ago.

Bat swore fluently.

"Any idea where? Tell me, or I'll break your wretched neck!"

"I wouldn't tell you if I could," said Bill, losing control of himself suddenly. "You—you're two beastly thieves!"

He twisted himself free with an unexpected movement, ducked under the tail of the Kestrel, and raced wildly towards the horses. The men were taken by surprise for an instant; and Alf, despite his statement of prowess up to a quarter-mile, was in no condition for running. Bat leaped across the cockpit to spring out, but his foot caught in the loose sacking, and he stumbled heavily, missing his leap.

Bill, glancing over his shoulder as he ran, could hardly believe his luck. He slackened his pace a little as he drew near the horses. Two had begun to trot away, but the old pony stood quietly, looking at him with the wise eyes that had known many children. The boy forced himself to speak quietly.

"Steady, old girl! Steady, now!"

She moved, but slowly. His hand closed on her mane; with a frantic effort he was on her back, shouting at her, drumming on her sides with his boots. Bat was almost upon them: the other horses, thoroughly frightened, were cantering off. The pony shied away from the running man, breaking into a canter that

quickened under Bill's heels to a lumbering gallop. They swept down the paddock in the wake of the horses, scattering the sheep as they went.

The sound of Bill's wild shouting died away as the men faced each other.

"Dead finish," said Bat. "Jove, but the little beast had pluck!"

"What now?" asked Alf.

"You an' me for the nearest place where we can get a train."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere—what's it matter? All we've got to do is to get out of this district as quick as we can."

His voice was flat and lifeless. They came to the Kestrel: he climbed in and passed out the kit-bags. Back on the ground, he put his hand for a moment on the side of the plane: a light touch like a caress. They shouldered their bags and walked heavily away.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SEARCH

THE old pony had a trace of good breeding. She responded nobly to Bill's shouts and urgings, galloping hard behind the frightened chestnuts.

Bill had no means of guiding her; he feared at first that the leading horses might swing out and circle back towards the plane, the mare following. Instinct, however, kept the chestnuts along the line of the timber, and the boy breathed more freely as the distance widened rapidly between him and his enemies. He gripped the mane with one hand, using the other to supplement the good work his heels were doing on the mare's ribs.

No fence loomed ahead yet to check their progress—another reason for relief. Now and then Bill stole a hasty glance over his shoulder. There was no sign of pursuit, but he could scarcely believe that it would not come. Back at the plane his delight and triumph over the men's discomfiture had conquered fear; but that had faded for the moment, and it was a thoroughly panic-stricken little boy who drove the old pony on with shrill yells.

The chestnuts dropped to a trot presently; the mare slackened a little, but kept going until she reached her companions, when her pace slackened to a jog. It lasted until they dipped into a shallow depression, where sheep tracks wound among low-growing scrub. There she stopped. Her expression clearly showed that she considered that she had done her bit.

Bill thought so too, as he looked back, his heart leaping with breathless relief. The enemy had accepted defeat. They were moving away from the plane, away from him, making for the road. Their kit-bags were on their shoulders and they walked with bent heads, dejection in every line. He gave a whoop of joy that startled the pony.

"Golly! They're clearing out!"

It was almost too wonderful to believe. He hardly dared to admit it; for awhile he sat motionless, his heart pounding, watching until they had climbed the fence and gone some distance along the road. Each yard that took them farther from him gave him new confidence.

"They'll never turn back now!" he muttered.

But it was not until the dragging figures were only dots in the distance that he dared to relax his watchfulness. The pony stood quietly, her head drooped: the boy on her back stared steadily at the grey ribbon of the road that wound its dusty length into some unknown region that was altogether beautiful to Bill because it was swallowing up his foes.

He accepted his escape at last, uttering a long sigh of thankfulness, and let his mind turn to his next step. There was no doubt as to what he must do. Somewhere, not far off, the gold had fallen, and he must try to find out what had become of it. He dared not make back to the road lest the men should return; besides, the Christmas pudding had dropped on this side of the road.

"I'll go through the trees," he said. "That ought to be a short cut, anyhow. Gosh, what a lot of walking I do these times!"

Weariness crept over him. He was ravenously hungry and thirsty, but more than anything he longed for sleep. The quiet hollow called to him; he thought enviously how lovely it would be to crawl under a bush, and sleep and sleep. He yawned heavily just to think of it.

It would not do: he knew that. The gold was still his responsibility. Back at Billabong they would be worrying about him, although they could not know that he had been taken away in the Kestrel. He must get into touch with them somehow, though he did not know how it was to be done, since he had not a penny. That would have to be settled when he had looked for the gold.

"I've got my watch, anyhow," he said aloud. "I could sell that. Even if I got only a few bob for it I could wire to Jim. But I've got to find the Christmas pudding first."

He tried to make the pony turn, but the old mare was wily. This queer little rider had startled her into more exertion than she cared about already: he had no bridle with which to show that he was master, and she stood firm, hanging her head stubbornly. Bill fished in his pockets until he found a collection of string which generally accompanied him, on the principle that you never knew when bits of string would come in useful. He disentangled them, knotting them together.

"Not too bad," he said, looking at the result. Jumping off he fixed the string on the pony's head, halter-fashion, with two ends to serve as reins. He led her a few yards in the way he wanted her to go before he remounted.

She moved off obediently, though he could not urge her to more than a jog. They reached the timber, where he found that there was a fence concealed by the trees. No gate or slip-rails could be seen. He abandoned regretfully his hope of riding all the way to the marsh near which the gold had fallen: still, it was possible to save a certain amount of walking by riding along the fence until he was near the road, and he jogged on, his eyes alert for any sign of Bat and Alf.

A few hundred yards from the road he checked the pony. Slipping to the ground he took off the halter. He patted her neck and rubbed her grizzled nose.

"You just about saved my life, old girl," he told her. "If ever I get the chance I'll buy you and see that you've a good home as long as you live!"

The old mare looked at him quietly, liking his voice and touch. He left her

with a final pat and slipped through the fence into the timber.

“Jim would help me to buy her, I know,” he said, as the trees hid him. “We could find her a home up here, I believe, if it’s too far to get her to Billabong.”

Billabong seemed very far indeed just then. He had not the slightest idea of his whereabouts beyond a vague conviction that it was somewhere in New South Wales: and that, as he knew, left a wide margin. It did not concern him greatly. He plodded on, keeping as straight a line as he could, edging in and out between the trees. Luckily the ground was clear, with no undergrowth of scrub or brambles to make the way harder for tired feet. Cattle grazed here and there, big bullocks that looked at him without interest.

Sooner than he had expected he came out at the far side of the timber belt. A level paddock lay before him. Not far from the road he recognized the house over which he had passed in the Kestrel: he hoped fervently that the Christmas pudding had not fallen near enough to it to do any damage or to attract attention.

He struck across the paddock, keeping as far as possible from the orchard and outbuildings that lay at the back of the house. It was well surrounded by trees; unless people were looking out carefully they would hardly notice a small figure. Bill was particularly anxious not to be noticed. Whenever trees or patches of scrub grew he took advantage of their cover, moving quietly when he drew near cows or sheep, lest he should disturb them into running. They took no notice of the silent-footed passer-by.

He passed the orchard, unseen so far as he knew. Beyond was a little rise; he topped it, and the marsh came into view, the tree-grown line of the creek behind it. The sight was too much for Bill, whose mouth felt as if it were lined with dry sand: he made a bee-line for the creek, found a place where he could reach the water, and drank until he could drink no more.

“Golly, that’s good!” he uttered, sitting back on his heels. “I reckon the level of the creek is a bit lower now!”

He washed his hands and face, scrubbing himself with wet palms; the cool touch of the water took away a little of his tiredness.

“Wouldn’t I give something for a swim!” He looked at the swiftly-flowing stream, longing in his heart. Even to paddle would be something, for his feet and legs, encased in riding kit, ached cruelly.

“Yes, an’ when you’d be paddling like a kid someone ’ud come along an’ pick up the old pudding!” he told himself bitterly. “You get on with your job!”

It almost seemed to him, as he climbed heavily up the bank, that there were two Bills; one a tired small boy, hungry and sleepy, a boy who tried to believe he was not lonely and homesick—the other a stern and commanding Bill, who drove on the weaker one, refusing to let him whimper. He rather hoped that the stern Bill felt more alert than he did in the matter of hunting for a lost bag of

gold.

Skirting the marsh, he looked skyward, trying to recast the line of the Kestrel's flight. It was queer how different things looked when you were on the ground. From the plane he had felt fairly certain that he knew where the Christmas pudding had gone down. True, the moment when it had resisted the pressure of his foot might have been longer than he thought; it was hard to calculate how far the plane had travelled in that anxious instant of delay.

"It *couldn't* have been far," he muttered. "I tried just to miss hitting the water with it. It ought to be within the next hundred yards, surely!"

He knew what he must look for—a hole in the ground. The pudding would not be sitting on the grass, well in view, wherever it was: its weight would have half-buried it, perhaps buried it altogether. Unless, indeed, it had struck something hard. If the something were a piece of wood, that piece would now be a mass of splinters, easy to detect; but if the gold had hit a chunk of rock—well, that was a different matter, and Bill whistled apprehensively as he pictured the result. The rock might have splintered to a certain extent, but he fancied the pudding would have suffered more.

"Prob'ly it would have bust all over the place. Then the little bags inside would fly everywhere, an' they'd bust too. My goodness, I hope there's no rock about!" he mused.

Fortunately, there seemed to be none. The ground sloped upwards towards the white picket-fence that girdled the house and garden. Near the marsh the grass was rough and tussock-strewn: higher up it became smooth, cropped fairly closely by sheep. There were no trees or fallen timber. Bill felt as he surveyed it that his hunt could not last very long.

"I believe I'd see it from here if it had dropped on the smooth grass," he said. "The hole would show up like a brown splodge against the green. An' there isn't a sign of one. It just *must* be somewhere among these old tussocks."

He went backwards and forwards, mapping out his progress so that he would cover every yard of the ground. When he reached the road fence he climbed to the top rail and stood upon it, one foot on a post, searching the ground with his eyes in the hope that from the height he would see the brown, newly disturbed earth he longed to find: but there was nothing, and he jumped down with a sigh and went on his slow progress.

It was not easy walking. The ground was rough, the tussocks tripped him perpetually. He stumbled over them, growing hotter and hotter, and increasingly bad-tempered. The sun beat down on his bare head; it had been aching for a long time, and now it began to throb, slowly and heavily, as if it resented being continually bent towards the ground. When he stood upright the top of his head seemed to lift and then drop back with a thud that made him wince. He would pull himself together and plod onward.

He did not give in until he had combed all the tussocky ground. There was nowhere else to look, for he was now not far from the garden fence, and the bare turf that stretched up to it was unbroken by the smallest mark. Bill knew that his worst fears were realized.

“It’s fallen somewhere near the house,” he told himself miserably. “An’ prob’ly when I go in to look I’ll hear that it’s killed someone or done something awful. Wonder who lives there? I hope they’re not very savage people, that’s all.” A new thought of dismay crossed his mind. “What if it’s some low-down man who’s seen the bag drop an’ just collared the gold? Much chance I’d have of his giving it back to me; he’d simply stick to it an’ say nothing to anybody. An’ I can’t prove a single thing. Who’s going to believe a stray kid who says he’s been throwing gold out of a plane?”

He pictured the scornful laughter of the low-down man, and the weaker Bill came near to whimpering. The stern Bill came to his rescue, taking command.

“Jim ’ud say I was a fool, to be looking out for trouble. He may be quite a decent chap after all. Anyhow, I’ve got to tackle him, an’ I may as well get it over.”

He walked slowly up the rising ground. Circling a little, he saw two pepper-trees overhanging a gate in the white picket-fence. The house could scarcely be seen; it was set far back in a mass of trees and shrubs. No movement or sound broke the silence.

The gate opened upon a path that wound through the shrubbery. He followed it, coming out into a part of the garden where there were neat flower-beds, bright with spring flowers. Across an expanse of well-kept lawn lay the house, long and low and white-painted. There was a wide verandah covered with masses of blossoming clematis.

Bill hesitated at the edge of the lawn, wishing he could see some sign of life. None came, however. He squared his shoulders and marched across the lawn.

CHAPTER XVIII

“SHE WANTED ADVENTURE”

HERE’S your tea, Miss Barb’ra!”

Miss Barbara Berkeley came out of a blissful dream in which she was taking a prominent part in a cowboy round-up seen on a recent visit to a cinema. She looked regretfully upward with sleepy blue eyes, her white hair framing her pink-and-white face on the pillow.

“Tea? Oh—thank you, Eliza. Is it a fine morning?”

“Lovely.” Eliza, a raw-boned maiden of fifty, strode in manly fashion across the room, pulling aside the light curtains that fluttered across the open window. “Not a sign of rain. We’ll get the sweet-peas in to-day all right.”

“How nice!” murmured Miss Barbara sleepily. Eliza’s footsteps died away; she lay still for a little while, too comfortable to move. It was curious to be translated so abruptly from the back of a plunging mustang to considerations of sweet-peas. So very dull. Miss Barbara had not ridden for thirty years, and then it had been on a side-saddle of antique pattern, borne by a white pony, very staid and fat. Nothing would now have induced her to ride anything at all. But in the dream the mustang had seemed entirely suitable: the most natural mount alive. It was very pleasant to remember how they had charged together over the prairie. She fancied that she had waved her hat and yelled.

The dream receded: she remembered her tea now, and the fact that it would be getting cold. Nibbling her bread-and-butter, she planned her day. A good thing it was fine, since there was the five-mile trip to the township in the afternoon. She must call on the wife of the new doctor; there was shopping to do, pleasantly broken by tea at that new tea-shop which was so exciting to the township. Miss Barbara reflected with satisfaction that it would no longer be necessary to have tea in the dingy room behind the baker’s shop, where they gave you very black tea, well stewed, and where flies buzzed and crawled ceaselessly over the sugar. She did not take sugar, fortunately; but she disliked seeing the flies, and she always placed her hand-bag carefully over the sugar-basin. There might be germs on the bag, but there were certainly worse germs on the flies.

That would take all the afternoon, and in the morning there would be the usual odd jobs, coupled with planting out the sweet-peas. She hoped that Eliza would let her take part in the planting: she had said “we,” but when it came to the point Eliza was so apt to do all the work herself, making her sit meekly watching on an upturned box. This was especially likely to happen with a trip

to the township in prospect: poor dear Eliza had such definite views about her becoming tired. Very kind, but——“I’m *not* getting old!” Miss Barbara told herself firmly.

The thought induced activity: she jumped up briskly, went through her morning programme of deep-breathing by the window, and hurried off to her bath. Breakfast appeared five minutes after she went into the dining-room. Miss Barbara ate her omelette daintily and rejoiced for the hundredth time that Eliza was not one of the heavy-handed cooks who regard the making of an omelette as a chance to produce a fabric resembling shoe-leather.

“Providence has seen fit to deprive me of many things,” she reflected. “But it has left me someone faithful—who can cook.”

The things of which Providence had deprived her were not wont to weigh heavily on Miss Barbara, and she dismissed them airily now. Her peculiar dream occupied her thoughts with a sense of exhilaration. She knew that it was a kind of dream wholly unsuited to a maiden lady long past her youth; she was not sure that she ought not to be horrified at having indulged in it. “But I’m not!” she thought gaily. “I don’t know when I’ve enjoyed anything so much!”

It was all due to the films, she supposed. They were very curious. When you visited them they carried you quite away from the quiet life of every day, wafting you into a region where adventure was the normal thing. The strange part was that it stayed with you: each day was flavoured with fascinating memories.

Fairy tales had had the same effect upon her in the days of long ago. She had lived then in a fairy world, making up her own stories, peopling her life with the “Little People” until she was convinced she actually saw them. It did not do to tell this to grown-ups; they were severe in those days, and when she had tried to speak of her fancies she had been gravely rebuked. So she had learned to keep her fairy world to herself.

It had passed, and life had dealt her many hard blows: they had battered her, but had left her spirit unbowed. Now, after the storms had come calm: the old house she loved, her garden, Eliza—who might be a dragon at times, but was queerly understanding. And, perhaps because she had always kept at least one eye alert for adventure—the films.

People thought she was ridiculous to like them, at her age. (Miss Barbara privately considered that it was a trifle indelicate for those outside one’s own family to hint at one’s age.) The clergyman had gently suggested that the pictures shown in Taroo were sometimes of a quality unsuited to ladies. The old doctor had bluntly told her that she ought to take better care of herself than to go traipsing out at night—as if, Miss Barbara had retorted, one could waste one’s life in taking care! Ladies of the township had raised mild eyebrows when she spoke of a picture, and had changed the subject to the church bazaar.

Only Eliza remained; and the general disapproval lent to their excursions the delightful sense of doing something faintly naughty that had enlivened her fairy world in childhood. They would drive into Taroo in the Ford car that, like Miss Barbara, had seen better days; they would march into the ramshackle building known as “the hall,” where an enterprising travelling company brought films once a week—Taroo was far from enjoying a picture theatre of its own: they would sit together on hard wooden seats; and for both the world on the screen would become the only world that mattered.

Miss Barbara loved the drives home that followed—the discussions, the recalling of incidents, living the excitement over again. Their tastes varied: Eliza had a leaning towards the sentimental, while her employer frankly preferred the robust. The discussions might occasionally become slightly heated, but they prolonged the flavour.

Next Saturday night promised a special feast. There was to be one of the flying films that thrilled her even more than those of the wild West. The mere sight of a plane thrilled Miss Barbara. They passed overhead now and then, and the first droning in the sky would bring her running out to gaze as long as the faintest dot remained visible. In her most adventurous moments she longed to fly in one herself. But as this was out of the question she contented herself with the hair-raising aviation of the films.

She thought happily of Saturday as she went out after breakfast to feed her fowls. It was a little difficult to mix poultry with planes; she had to detach her mind as her Wyandottes crowded urgently about her, demanding their rations.

Miss Barbara regarded fowls more as a duty than a pleasure. She considered them dull birds, of grasping habits: but this did not prevent her from being thorough in their care, though when they annoyed her she was as stern as her nature permitted—not that fowls pay any attention to sternness.

Their run was all that the most exacting birds could desire: a wide space with shrubs and pine-trees dotted about it; at one end the neat shed that was whitewashed with unflinching regularity. Laying-boxes were placed here and there: a dish of shell-grit invited the hens to improve their constitutions.

Miss Barbara moved among them, inspecting details, using her ladle to tap sharply a red cock that endeavoured to help himself from her pail of food. She left to the last the bird she most disliked, a hen of broody tendencies, whose desire to sit perpetually had led to her imprisonment in a coop. The coop, cunningly fashioned by Eliza from a stout wooden case, stood under the thickest of the pine-trees. Miss Barbara poked food through the bars that formed the front, and was greeted with ill-tempered snarls by the hen.

“I think we shall really have to make you into pie!” Miss Barbara told her severely.

She came out, stooping a little under the low-growing boughs, and crossed

the yard to the gate. Something made her glance upward: and immediately she uttered a delicate shriek, and dropped pail and ladle with a clatter.

An aeroplane was rushing towards her, lower than she had ever seen one fly. It came silently—there was no roaring, such as she had always connected with planes. Miss Barbara promptly decided that it must, on this account, be one of a new and superior kind. On it flew, its great wing-spread casting a racing shadow on the ground. It seemed to fill the sky as it skimmed over her.

She cried out again, her excitement turning to sudden panic. Something was falling from the plane: something that looked at first like a cricket-ball, swiftly becoming larger. It seemed aimed directly at her. She stared up at it, too paralysed to move.

The thing fell with terrible swiftness and force. It struck the pine-tree squarely on the topmost crown, shattering it: plunged down from branch to branch, leaving a trail of splintered timber, and landed with a bang on the coop of the broody hen. The sides of the coop collapsed, and the lid crashed down. The hen, flattened, expired without a groan.

Miss Barbara, very white, leaned against the gate, gasping feebly. A foot or two from the ruined coop—now the sepulchre of the hen—the destroying object lay motionless—a red-brown thing, its sides deeply scarred by its passage through the pine-tree.

“It—it is a Bomb!” uttered Miss Barbara.

Somehow she unfastened the gate and ran wildly, expecting each moment to hear an explosion. It did not come; she reached the house in safety and tottered into the kitchen.

“Eliza! Eliza! We have been shelled!”

“*Shelled!* Us? ’Oo by?” demanded Eliza.

“An aeroplane—a very terrible one!” gasped her mistress, collapsing on the nearest chair. “It threw a bomb at me, Eliza!”

“It didn’t ’it yer?” asked Eliza, gaping.

“Providentially I had just left the spot where it fell. Oh, Eliza—it killed the broody hen!”

“Hevings!” uttered the handmaid. She pounced on Miss Barbara, lifting her bodily.

“You just lay back in my armchair—you’re white as a ghost. A little spot o’ brandy is what you’re goin’ to ’ave.” She dashed from the kitchen, returning swiftly to hold a glass to Miss Barbara’s lips.

“No more, Eliza. You know I do not like it. Though indeed my dear father always said that brandy was most reviving,” quavered the sufferer. “I will take one more sip. Oh, Eliza, can it be an invasion? The Japanese?”

“Wot ’ud the Japs want to be invasin’ us for? There wasn’t anythink about it in the paper, was there?”

“No—but they might not give warning. It was so—so unusual, Eliza. So huge!”

“But I never ’eard a sound of it!”

“That was the terrifying part. It made no sound. And the thing in front that always turns so fast was quite still. I think,” said Miss Barbara, trembling, “that it must be a very modern make of aeroplane.”

“Lor’!” ejaculated Eliza. “An’ it knocked out the old ’en! Good job it wasn’t the new rooster! You’re sure she’s dead?”

“Quite,” breathed Miss Barbara with a faint shudder. “Oh, quite, quite dead, poor thing! I think it must have been a painless end, Eliza.” She pulled herself together. “We must do something. The—the bomb may explode at any moment. Bombs always do!”

“Where’s it now?”

“In the fowl-run. I thought it would explode before I could escape. Eliza, I did not think I could run so fast!”

“Good job you did,” said Eliza. “But look here, Miss Barb’ra—wouldn’t it have exploded by now if it’s ever goin’ to?”

“I don’t know. I have never learned much about such things.” She searched her memory for technical details. “I believe there is such a device as a Timed Fuse. Its time may not be up yet.”

“Well, if it’s goin’ to take its time an’ explode when it feels like it, we’re goin’ to keep our distance from the fowl-run,” spoke Eliza decisively. “Don’t you show your nose outside the back gate!”

“But, Eliza, the hens will be in grave danger if it explodes!” protested her mistress.

“The ’ens’ll ’ave to take their chance. You an’ me aren’t goin’ to be blown up to save ’em, anyhow. Did you see where the airyplane went?”

“I did not look,” confessed Miss Barbara. “From the instant that I saw that dreadful thing falling I could only watch it.”

“Well, I’ll go an’ ’ave a squint round,” said Eliza. “If it’s goin’ to ’ang about, droppin’ them things, the sooner we take to the bush the better.”

She strode into the backyard and stared round the sky.

“Not a sign,” she said, returning. “It’s goodness knows where by now. I don’t b’lieve it’ll come back. Why would it?”

“It may be that it did not mean to drop the bomb on me,” suggested Miss Barbara. “It seemed deliberate, but perhaps my judgment was hasty. Could it have fallen accidentally, I wonder?”

“Too right it might,” Eliza agreed. “Same as an old ’en’ll drop an aig in the yard casual-like. But they’d ought to be more careful with them nasty things. It’s give you a real turn, Miss Barb’ra. You just get into a chair on the verandah an’ take it easy, or you’ll never be fit to go out after lunch.”

Miss Barbara was not sorry to obey. She still trembled: it was comforting to have Eliza put her into a deck-chair and tuck a rug round her.

“I’ll put your book an’ paper beside you. But my advice is, just you drop off an’ ’ave a nice nap.”

Miss Barbara snuggled down under the rug comfortably, not caring to read. Her panic had passed; in its place something of excitement crept over her. It had really been a wonderful happening: terrifying, of course, but what a thing to remember! All that was gay and adventurous in her leaped at the memory of the great plane that had rushed at her across the sky. It was like a film drama come to life. And she had actually been under fire!

“How stupid I was to be so afraid!” she murmured impatiently. “But for that I should have so enjoyed it all!”

She wondered if other invading machines would come; for a time she toyed happily with the idea of luring them to destruction by ingenious devices. It was a difficult matter for one with less destructive instinct than a rabbit, but she told herself firmly that to be patriotic one must be ruthless. Finally, tired out by excitement and ruthlessness, she fell asleep.

She woke with a start, hearing a step on the gravel path. A boy stood there, looking at her doubtfully: a sturdy well-knit boy in riding-breeches, his jacket crumpled and stained. His round freckled face was rather pale and bore an expression of worry. His red hair badly needed a brush.

“I say, did I wake you?” he asked anxiously.

CHAPTER XIX

REST AFTER STORM

NO," said Miss Barbara, sleepily and untruthfully. She sat up, blinking at the sunshine. "Did you want anything?"

"I was looking for . . . I mean, I thought . . . I just wanted to ask . . ." He stopped, uncertain how to go on. Bill had screwed up all his courage to confront a truculent man: it was rather disconcerting to find instead a white-haired little old lady who looked rather like a sleepy child. He wondered if she were an invalid: if it would be better to ask to see someone else.

Miss Barbara smiled at him.

"Are you in trouble, little boy?"

"A bit," he said. "Only I don't want to bother you, if you're ill. Shall I find someone—well, I mean, is there a man about?"

"We haven't any men here, and I'm not ill," she said briskly. She cast aside the rug. "Can you not tell me?"

He paused, wondering how to begin.

"I suppose you didn't notice a plane coming over this morning?" He hesitated.

"Indeed I did. It came right over my fowl-run." Suddenly she jumped up. "Oh—have you brought news? Is it really an invasion?"

Bill opened his mouth in bewilderment.

"An—*invasion*?"

"Yes. We thought that it must be one, for, you see, it dropped a bomb on us. In my fowl-run. Quite close to me."

To her surprise, her visitor went scarlet with horror.

"Oh, I say, I'm most frightfully sorry! Did it give you an awful fright? You're quite sure it didn't hurt you?" he cried.

Miss Barbara looked very kindly at him. This was an extraordinarily sympathetic little boy.

"Oh, no. Only a hen. And not a very good hen. But, well, yes, of course it was alarming. And we are still uncertain as to when it will go off!"

"Go off?" echoed Bill feebly.

"Yes. Bombs always do, you know. They have Timed Fuses," said Miss Barbara learnedly. "We do not dare even to let out the hens, though I am dreadfully afraid they will all be killed when it explodes." She stopped, becoming aware that her visitor was shaken by some strong emotion. He choked twice.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It really isn't a bomb, you know. It—it's quite harmless, truly it is."

"How do you know?" demanded Miss Barbara suspiciously.

"Well—you see, I shoved it out of the bus!"

"Don't be silly!" she said impatiently. "There are no buses about here. And it was nowhere *near* the road."

Bill choked again.

"Sorry—I meant the plane. Bus is only slang, you know. I—I was in the plane."

"You!" She looked at him as severely as she was able. "Are you telling me an untruth?"

"Honest, I'm not. I was there all right. I shoved the—the thing out on purpose, 'cause I had to. But I never knew I was near a house; not until it had dropped. An' then I nearly had a fit!"

Miss Barbara considered him. It was all very fantastic: he did not look at all like a flying person, judged by the films. But his face was honest: he met her eyes squarely.

"But——" she began slowly.

"Look here!" he interrupted her. "I can prove it. I can tell you just what it was like—a roundish sort of bundle, reddish-brown, and hard as a brick."

"I did not feel it—but, yes, it must have been extremely hard!" she said, wincing at her recollections. "And it is as you have described it——"

"Oh, is it all right?" he broke in excitedly. "It isn't bust-up or anything?"

"It is intact," said Miss Barbara with a touch of acidity. "But not my hen!"

"I'm terribly sorry," he told her. "I'll pay for the hen—true, I will. Please, can I go and get it?"

"I don't understand at all," she said. "There may be something very wrong in all this, and I am not sure that I ought to let you have it. What is in the bomb?—I mean, the bundle?"

The boy's face became obstinate.

"I mustn't say. Jim might tell you when he comes, but I can't. Only—it's terribly important, an' I'm responsible."

"But who is Jim? Was he in the aeroplane?"

"No fear—I wish he had been. Only then, of course, I wouldn't have been there!"

Miss Barbara sat down again, passing her hand over her brow.

"If you could make yourself a *little* clearer——"

Bill's head was throbbing violently. He tried to collect thoughts that would insist on remaining scattered.

"I'm sorry . . ." he muttered. "I must look an awful fool, I know . . . but I've got such a beastly headache!" He found himself swaying, and clutched at

the verandah post. "Could I—could I just sit down a minute?" Without waiting for a reply he sat hastily on the verandah. Things whirled round him unpleasantly: even the shrubs in the garden would not keep still.

Miss Barbara flung suspicion to the winds.

"Why, you're hurt, I believe, you poor little boy!" She bent over him anxiously. "Surely you did not fall out of the aeroplane?"

"No—it's only I'm tired. I've been up all night." The words came unevenly. Bill realized to his deep shame that tears were very near.

"When did you last have a meal?" demanded Miss Barbara, studying his face.

"Oh, I had something at the camp about five yesterday," he said. "That doesn't matter, but——"

"You are not to talk any more just now," she commanded. "Sit in this chair." She pulled him up and helped him to her deck-chair. Bill didn't want to be helped: he didn't want anything but to be shown the whereabouts of the fowl-run. But it was wonderful to lie back against a cushion, feeling the throbbing grow less. His eyes seemed to shut of their own accord. He tried to mutter thanks, but she was gone.

Miss Barbara pattered to the kitchen and swiftly explained matters to the astonished Eliza.

"Just a cup of your nice strong soup to begin with, Eliza. A little cream well stirred in. Then we shall see how he is later."

"Poor kid!" said Eliza, moving rapidly. "An' he was in that airyplane!"

"It seems so. A bus, he called it. Did you ever hear that term applied to an aeroplane, Eliza?"

"Not me—but there's heaps I don't know," said the handmaid modestly. "I'll bring it out, Miss Barb'ra."

"Do, Eliza: I must find the aspirin." She hurried off. A few minutes later Bill found himself roused and compelled to swallow aspirin, followed by a cup of something that tasted marvellous. He drained the last drops lingeringly.

"My word, that was good! I say, I'm giving you an awful lot of trouble." He struggled to his feet. "Could I go and get that—that bundle now, please?"

Miss Barbara hesitated, but the anxiety in his face conquered her.

"I think your head will not get better until you have your bundle," she told him, half-smiling. "I will come with you."

She led him through the house and out to the fowl-run. He held the gate open to let her pass through, following her quickly, his eager eyes roving in search of the bag. "There it is!" He was across the space like a flash, diving under the pine-tree, tugging at the bag. On his knees, he turned it over, examining it closely.

"Not a break!" she heard him mutter. "Good old Murty!"

He backed out, pulling the bag after him. The face he turned to his hostess was so radiant that she was almost startled.

"It's all safe! Oh, I never thought I'd find it like this!" He checked suddenly, as if afraid that his tongue was running away with him. "You—you've been awfully good. Jim will thank you properly when he comes."

"You seem quite sure that he will come," she said.

"Oh, yes, he'll come," Bill answered calmly. His glance, returning to the bag at his feet, encountered the wreckage of the coop. "Gosh!—was that your hen?"

He giggled helplessly. To her astonishment Miss Barbara found herself giggling also.

"It was . . . thorough," he said. Then his eyes travelled upwards, and dismay drove the smile from his face.

"Oh—your tree!" he exclaimed.

Miss Barbara, who loved her trees, looked. She sighed.

"That was thorough, too, wasn't it?" she said.

"Thorough!—why, it's awful!" There was horror in his tone. He stared up.

From top to bottom the bag had ploughed its way, leaving ruin behind it. Branch after branch hung broken and splintered, the raw wood contrasting sharply with the deep green of the pine needles. Oozing sap filled the air with its scent.

Miss Barbara looked curiously at the boy's distressed face.

"You did not trouble about the hen so much," she said. "Why——"

"Oh, hens!" he interrupted with a touch of scorn. "I could buy another hen when Jim comes. But—a tree!"

"You like trees?"

"I never thought of 'em once," he said. "Not until Jim taught me to look at them. Jim's awfully keen on trees, so I am too, now. I . . . I feel as if I'd killed something." He turned to her miserably. "You must just about hate me. An' it isn't any good saying I'm sorry."

"When I see you so sorry I do not care so much about the tree," she told him. "Don't think of it. Now bring your bundle back to the house, because you must have some real food. And perhaps you will tell me something about yourself—and Jim."

Quietly studying his tired face as they walked back to the house, she decided that her queer visitor must be fed before he attempted to talk. The excitement that had lit his eyes in the fowl-run had died away; he walked with dragging steps, and the weight of his bundle evidently tried him—curiously, she thought, for so small a bundle. It made her vaguely uneasy to watch him; there was something un-boylike in the strained young face.

She led him into her dining-room and told him to rest while she prepared

food for him. He thanked her, with an awkward apology for giving trouble: and she hurried to consult Eliza.

“No heavy food, Eliza. Soft-boiled eggs, and some buttered toast. And hot milk. He does not look starved, but so dreadfully tired!”

“Face like an old man,” said Eliza, seizing a saucepan. “It give me a turn, so it did. What ’ave them fellers in the airyplane been doin’ with ’im?”

“I don’t know. They surely cannot be his friends, or he would not have left them.”

“Well, you’ve only got ’is own story,” Eliza said darkly. “You watch ’im, Miss Barb’ra. We don’t know a thing about ’im. They may be a gang of thieves for all we can tell.”

“Oh, but he is *too* young, Eliza. And there is something I like about the child.”

Eliza looked doubtful.

“If there ever was a kid you didn’t like, well, I haven’t met it yet!” she said. She unbent a little. “Not as I wouldn’t say this one don’t look the right sort. Any’ow, he’s fair knocked out, an’ we couldn’t turn ’im off the doorstep, even if ’e did nearly kill you!”

“You know perfectly well that you are just as foolish about a child as I am, Eliza!” returned her mistress, laughing. “I daresay you would have fed him even if he had managed to kill me!”

She carried the tray of food to the dining-room. Bill was sitting bolt upright in a hard chair.

“You should have rested,” she said, putting the tray on the table.

He shook his head.

“I was afraid I’d go to sleep,” he said. “My word, I’m giving you a lot of bother!”

“Nonsense!” said Miss Barbara briskly. “Now, you are not to talk at all until you have eaten everything on that tray.”

She took her knitting and sat down near the window where he could see her. He ate in obedient silence while her needles flew rapidly. Bill, looking at her, thought she was the most peaceful person he had ever seen.

Nevertheless, she was uneasy. She reflected that she knew nothing about him or about the bundle he guarded with such care—even to placing it on the floor by his chair. It was obviously heavy: presumably it was valuable. And he might have no right to it whatever.

She was no more suspicious naturally than a dove, but the study of the films had implanted within her a belief that crime lurked in the most unlikely guises. And she considered that she had spent a morning worthy of any film. Suspicion may be pardoned an elderly lady who has awakened from a dream of cowboys, followed by a reality of a gigantic aeroplane shedding a

mysterious bundle on her fowl-run and a no less mysterious small boy on her doorstep.

"I must not be foolish!" she told herself severely. "I must question him very narrowly. But . . . he seems such a nice little boy!"

The nice little boy interrupted her musings abruptly.

"Please, could you lend me some money for a telegram if I gave you my watch?"

Miss Barbara raised her eyebrows.

"But why do you want to give me your watch?"

"Well . . ." said Bill gruffly, "I could hardly ask you to lend me money just without nothing, could I?"

"If I were willing to lend you money I would not be willing to take your watch. I am not a pawnbroker, you see!" countered Miss Barbara with spirit.

Bill sighed. He was so utterly tired that the task of explaining himself seemed almost beyond him. All his being longed for sleep. But before he could sleep a telegram must go to Jim. He did not know how he was to send it, any more than he knew where he was going to sleep. The world seemed full of pressing problems that he must solve unaided.

"Finished?" said his hostess, looking at his plate. "Then suppose you sit in that armchair by the window and tell me a little."

Bill looked at the chair with longing, but shook his head.

"Please, would you mind if I sat here? I'm certain to go to sleep if I lean back. And I mustn't."

"I should greatly like to put you to bed without letting you talk at all," she said. "But go on."

"You see," said Bill, "Jim's Jim Linton, and he lives at Billabong. That's a station, an' I'm staying there, at least I was until last night, an' it's in Victoria, an' it must be millions of miles away by now." He paused for breath. "An' that bundle belongs to him. Well, it's really Bob's, and Bob's his friend, but it's easier if I only talk about Jim. An' please don't ask me anything about it, 'cause it's a dead secret, an' I mustn't tell, but Jim can tell if he likes, when he comes, an' he'll come as quick as lightning when he gets my telegram 'cause he'll be most awfully anxious about it an' the Kestrel——"

"The Kestrel?" asked a faint voice.

"Oh, yes, she's the bus I came in. Two beasts of shearers stole her from Billabong early this morning before it was light, an' I came along just as they were starting 'cause I'd been walking all night after my horse fell down a bank, an' they grabbed me an' slung me into her so's I wouldn't give the alarm. An' nobody knows where I am, an' they'll be looking for me in the bush. An' we flew for ages an' one of the men got sea-sick—oh, that *was* a lark!" He paused, grinning widely, but his hearer was past speech.

“So he didn’t take any more notice of me, an’ then I nearly had a fit, ’cause I bumped into the—the bundle, an’ so I knew they’d stolen that too. An’ I cut a hole in the fuselage so’s I could drop it, an’ we ran out of petrol an’ I had to drop it in a hurry, an’ that’s how it killed your hen. An’ so, you see, I’ve simply got to telegraph to Jim as quick as ever I can, only I haven’t got a penny.”

He ceased like a clock run down. The weight of his head seemed suddenly too much for him: he put his elbows on the table, propping his chin in his hands, and looked at her pleadingly.

“If you will, Jim’ll pay you twenty times when he comes. An’ please, could you tell me where to go to telegraph? Is it very far?”

Miss Barbara appeared to come out of a dream.

“But . . . how did you get out of the bus?—I mean, the aeroplane? And where is it?”

“Oh, she’s just over the trees not far from here. She had to come down.”

“But the thieves? Are they near her too?” she asked in alarm.

“No, they beat it like smoke——”

“The aeroplane? But why?”

“No,” said Bill patiently: “I mean they cleared out as hard as they could. I could tell you about that another time, if you didn’t mind, ’cause it ’ud take such a long time to tell now. Is it very far to the telegraph place? I ought to be getting along.”

Miss Barbara rose from her chair and walked to her writing-table. She placed before him a sheet of paper and a pencil; he felt her hand on his shoulder.

“Write your telegram, my dear. I will take it in the car—at once: and I will send it as ‘urgent.’ And you are to be my guest and go to bed.”

“Oh!” he said. “Oh, you are a brick!” His voice choked.

Miss Barbara could not recollect that she had ever before been called a brick, but she rather liked the sound. She patted his head.

“I won’t talk to you any more,” she said. “Just write all you want to say. When I send it I will add my address, so that he will know where to come.”

He looked at her gratefully and squared his elbows to his task. Jim’s name and address came first; then he bit the end of the pencil savagely to aid thought. This would be read to Jim over the telephone from Cunjee: he must be very careful. Conscious of Miss Barbara’s eyes, he looked up presently.

“Takes a bit of thinking. And I don’t spell awfully well, but p’r’aps you wouldn’t mind putting the words right when you send it?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind,” she said. “I will run away to dress and to tell Eliza I want the car. So take your time.”

Bill thought that was better. She was terribly kind, but it was a bit hard to

make up an important telegram with a grown-up standing near you. He yawned heavily as he frowned over the paper.

A little later, Miss Barbara, returning, found the telegram ready. The writer's head lay pillowed on his arms on the table, one freckled cheek showing. He was fast asleep: so fast that when they lifted him to a couch and covered him with rugs, his eyelashes did not move.

Miss Barbara mopped her own eyes.

"He looks so little and helpless. You must watch him now and then, Eliza."

"If I could get them boots an' leggin's orf of 'im I'd be better pleased," stated Eliza. "I reckon I'll 'ave a try." She did so, with surprising deftness. Bill slept on.

Miss Barbara, with knitted brows, was studying the telegram.

"I suppose he knows what he means," she murmured. "But it is certainly a little peculiar."

The message was written in large round characters. In places the pencil had gone through the paper, as if the scribe's feelings had been too much for him.

Jim Linton Esq.,
Billabong Station
Near Cunjee
Victoria.

Kestrill here all right. Pleas come for me in Plannett. Chrismus
Puding saife.

BILL.

CHAPTER XX

HAPPY LANDINGS

BILL slept for six hours without stirring. He woke to find the room silent and peaceful, with Miss Barbara knitting in an easy chair. Beside him, on a stool, sat the Christmas pudding. It took him a few minutes to realize where he was.

“I say!” he uttered, bewildered. “How did I get here?”

“We put you there.” She smiled at him. “You needed a sleep very badly. How do you feel now?”

He wriggled out of the rugs that covered him. Sitting on the edge of the couch he rubbed both eyes.

“I’m all right, thanks, but I do feel horrid,” he said frankly. “All hot and sticky. It’s these clothes, I s’pose—I’ve had them on since yesterday.” He looked at his riding-breeches with disfavour. “Gosh! Where are my boots?”

“Eliza took them. I wish we had some other clothes for you, but you would look very funny in my things, wouldn’t you?” Miss Barbara put down her knitting and rose quietly. “But a good hot bath will make you feel very different. I will show you your room.”

Bill stood up, feeling shy and awkward.

“Are you sure you—you really want me to stay here?” he faltered. “I’m quite all right now, you know—I could go somewhere or other.”

“If you talk like that, I shall be cross,” stated Miss Barbara severely. “We do not often have a guest, Eliza and I—and you are a very exciting one.” Her smile was a comforting thing: it gave him a sense of warmth, of being looked after. However he might feel to-morrow, Bill was not sorry to be only a small boy to-night.

He picked up the Christmas pudding and followed her. There was a jolly little room made ready for him; there was a hot bath that gave new freshness to his body. When he went back to his room his coat was brushed and pressed. Of his boots and gaiters there was no sign: but there came a tap at the door, and Miss Barbara entered, carrying a pair of soft slippers.

“I believe these would fit you. Someone sent them to me, but they are too big. No—you are not to think of your boots. To-night it does not matter how you look.”

Bill thought his legs certainly looked queer, with blue slippers lending a neat finish to breeches; but they were comfortable, and as his hostess seemed to think that comfort was the only thing that mattered he accepted them

thankfully.

He grew quite at his ease over the supper table, and Miss Barbara, watching him narrowly, decided that she liked her guest. Certainly, he was no beauty, but there was something attractive in the honest freckled face. He had reduced his hair to order, so far as it would submit to a long-tailed brush: she noticed that his nails were well kept. His table manners were those to which she was accustomed; he was quick to anticipate her needs, and he stood by his chair until she had sat down. Such details counted with Miss Barbara.

Bill decided that he had never met anyone quite like her. She had white hair, which to his mind denoted extreme old age, and she was quaintly old-fashioned; but there was always a twinkle in her eye and her laugh—which came often—was one of those quick low laughs that simply made you join in. To his amazement, he discovered that she liked films: that she could talk about them—not the sort of films that bored him, but really sensible ones, the only kind he thought worth seeing. Fighting pictures, planes, Wild West, all sorts of adventures; this remarkable old lady seemed to like them as much as he did. They grew quite excited over cinema memories, one following another with “Oh, and *did* you see——?” Miss Barbara’s discourse on pictures was sprinkled with expressions that often made him shake inwardly with laughter, but there was no doubt that she was a kindred soul.

After supper they settled down in armchairs. The evening was chilly: a bright little fire of mallee roots burned companionably. The lamp had a rose-coloured shade that filled the room with a soft glow. Bill stretched out his legs with a little contented sigh.

“Oh, it *is* nice here!” he said.

The little lady beamed at him.

“It is very nice to have you. I like a man about the place, Bill. I had four brothers—once; I was the only sister, and we did everything together.”

“That’s like Jim and Norah,” he said. “And Wally. They were always chums.”

“Tell me about them,” said Miss Barbara.

It was not hard for Bill to talk about Billabong; and he had a listener who drew him out by unflagging interest. She did not ask many questions; she knitted quietly, letting him talk in his own disjointed way, slangy and abrupt, yet always conveying the picture of the people he loved.

“I feel that I know them all now,” she said, when he ended. “And I am very glad that I am to meet one of them. Will your Jim come alone, do you think, Bill?”

“Oh, no—he can’t fly, you see. He’ll have to bring Bob.”

“Fly?” She looked puzzled: then her face lit with excitement. “Do you mean he will actually come here in an aeroplane?”

“Why, of course he will. That’s what I meant in my telegram. The Planet.”

“Is *that* what it meant! But this is wonderful! I shall see it quite close—oh, Bill, perhaps I shall see it land!” Her eyes were dancing. “I have always longed to see one near at hand.”

“Rather! I say, Miss Barbara, would you like to go up? Would you be scared?”

“To—to fly?” Her knitting dropped to the floor. “Bill, I should love it of all things!”

“Bob’ll take you. He’d love to. Or Freddy either. He’ll have to come too, you know, ’cause they’ll want a second pilot to take the Kestrel back.” He gave her a glance that was half shy, half affectionate. “I think they’ll be fighting for the job of taking you up. They’ll just want to do anything in the world for you—you’ll see!”

“But—but I have not done anything——”

“Haven’t you?” said Bill gruffly. “Well, you wait until the boys come, that’s all!”

“Oh!” said Miss Barbara, much flustered. “They must not be foolish.” She sought to change the subject. “Bill, you have not told me about this morning—how you escaped from the miscreants in the other aeroplane. Tell me all about it—I do so love adventures!”

He told her, and the knitting remained unheeded on the floor as she listened, her blue eyes round with excitement and horror. Eliza, entering with a tray bearing cups of cocoa, found that no one took any notice of her: she became one of the audience, and the cocoa grew cold.

“Miss Barbara, do you think I could ever buy that old pony?” Bill finished. “I’d love to think she had a good home always.”

“That’s Joe Smith’s old pony!” said Eliza excitedly. “I know them three horses well. An’ Joe ’ud sell ’is own grandmother if ’e ’ad anythink like an offer!”

“Jim would lend me the money, I know,” Bill said. “But I wouldn’t have anywhere to put her.” His face fell.

“Now, Miss Barbara, couldn’t we take ’er ’ere?” Eliza demanded. “She’d make no difference on this place.”

“I will take her gladly, if she can be bought. We can consult Mr. Linton,” Miss Barbara agreed. “Oh, Eliza, is that cocoa?”

“It is—an’ stone cold. I got that int’rusted I clean forgot it. Don’t you worry—I’ll hot it up in two twos!” The gaunt handmaid strode off with the tray.

“You think they are sure to come to-day?” Miss Barbara asked next morning. It was a cloudless day: they had gone out to the garden after breakfast. Bill was quite unable to keep still. He watched the sky, his cheeks

flushed with excitement.

“Oh, certain!” he said confidently. “I can’t tell when, of course, but it might be any time now. I say, Miss Barbara, do you think I could fix up something so as they’ll spot this place?”

“Anything you like,” she said largely. “How could we do it, Bill?”

“Well, I thought of sheets. If you had a couple of old sheets you could lend me I could spread them out on the grass on each side of the garden fence. They’d show up splendidly in the paddock that way; you’d see them well from the air.”

“Why not?” queried Miss Barbara gaily. She hurried to her linen cupboard: together they spread the sheets a little distance from the house, weighing them with stones.

“Jolly good,” approved Bill. “This side of the paddock will make a ripping landing ground. I expect they’ll bring the Kestrel up here too; she’s in a pretty awkward place.”

“Two aeroplanes in my paddock!” breathed Miss Barbara. “That I should see such a thing! Anything else, Bill?”

“If you had a red flag?” he suggested. “Or any thing red that I could make a flag of. That would be splendid out in the middle of your big lawn.”

“We’ll see,” she said. “Come on!”

Search failed to reveal anything red, and Bill’s spirits drooped a little. Eliza, however, on being consulted, promptly produced a red flannel petticoat: the combined efforts of the three attached the garment to a clothes-prop and erected it on the lawn, where it fluttered proudly.

“Now we can’t do another single thing!” said Bill. “But they’ll spot us easily.”

“It is all so wonderful,” Miss Barbara murmured. “How can they ever find us at all, Bill? The air has no sign-posts!”

“Oh, they’ve got maps an’ compasses an’ things,” he explained vaguely. “They’ll make for Taroo, you see. If I’d had any sense I’d have given your position in my telegram. Are you north of Taroo, or what?”

“Let me see.” She hesitated. “When I am in bed the sun rises on my right hand. Then that is the east. I always have to think that way,” she explained, as Bill looked at her inquiringly. “So then I look towards the north, and of course Taroo is the other way. Yes. I think we might have said that we are five miles north of Taroo, Bill! Will it matter much not to have said it?”

“I don’t think so,” said Bill hurriedly. “They’ll make for Taroo, anyway, an’ they’ll circle round and round. They’ll be looking out for the Kestrel, an’ once they spot it they’ll know we’re not far off. You can see an awful lot from a plane, you know——”

He broke off suddenly.

“Listen!” He caught at her hand. “Come on—quick!”

Miss Barbara found herself running at amazing speed. Out of the gate they went, across the paddock to the sheet that lay on the grass.

“They’ll see us here, an’ they’ll know this is the side to land,” Bill panted. “It’s the Planet all right! Can’t you hear it?”

A deep droning came out of the south. It swelled rapidly.

“Look!” he shouted.

The Planet grew from a grey dot to a flashing silver-winged bird. She was flying low; at first Miss Barbara’s face fell, thinking she would miss them altogether. Past them she roared, far to the west: then she tilted, coming round in a swinging curve. Three times she circled in narrowing rings, the third brought her above the white patch on the grass where two little figures waved wildly. A handkerchief fluttered from the rear cockpit.

“They’ve got us!” yelled Bill.

She was dropping now, and the heads in the cockpits grew larger, while Bill danced madly. Down and down. The engine ceased suddenly. A moment later the wheels touched the grass and she was running lightly towards them.

“Come on, Miss Barbara!” Bill tore forward. Then he checked, turning.

“You come too.” He seized her hand, and they went to meet the Planet together.

The biggest man Miss Barbara had ever seen dropped lightly to the ground, coming towards them with long strides. Bill flung himself at him, not speaking. Jim’s great hand gripped him.

“All right, old man?”

The face Bill raised to him was sufficient answer. Jim turned to Miss Barbara.

“Is it Miss Berkeley? I think we must have a good deal to thank you for.”

Miss Barbara found her hand swallowed up and shaken very hard. It seemed to happen a great deal as the other occupants of the plane joined them, bent on greeting her, when they were not pounding Bill on the back.

“Jim, she’s been wonderful to me!” Bill was saying. “She’s done every blessed thing she could!” He hopped on one foot. “An’ she wants to fly, Bob!”

“Now? Certainly!” said Bob.

“Oh, no—no!” Miss Barbara was flushed and laughing. “You must all come in at once for some tea.”

Jim was looking quietly at her with a little smile.

“We’re all in the dark,” he said. “This adventurer of ours departed into space without mentioning that he was going, and we don’t know anything that happened.”

“I think you will find that he did not fail you,” she said.

“We gathered that from his telegram. But that didn’t seem to matter much

to any of us. The big thing was that he was safe—and that he'd found a friend." He turned quickly to Bill. "Sure you're all right, Bill? They didn't hurt you?"

"Oh, I've got an odd bruise or too, but that's nothing," returned Bill airily. "Oh, Jim, I've got such *heaps* to tell you!"

"Come to the house," said Miss Barbara firmly. "You can tell it much better over a cup of tea."

Eliza, peering excitedly from the fence, saw the procession begin to move. She fled to the kitchen, and presently appeared, laden with refreshments. They sat on the verandah, with an excellent view of the red petticoat that waved over the lawn.

"Now I will leave you," Miss Barbara said when the cups were filled. "You must have so much to hear, and——"

"Don't let her go, Jim," interrupted Bill.

"I didn't mean to," said Jim calmly. "Please stay, Miss Berkeley."

"She doesn't know everything yet," Bill said. "I couldn't tell her what was in the Christmas pudding, an' she didn't mind a bit!"

"Well, you needn't have any more secrets," remarked Jim. "Fire ahead, old chap!"

Miss Barbara watched their faces. Bill told his story rapidly, without any self-consciousness. Not once did he appear to think that he had done anything unusual; things had just happened, and he had grappled with them as best he could. His friends listened almost without comment: now and then a quick question came so that a point might be made more clear. When he came to the cutting of the fuselage he looked half-nervously at the Kestrel's owner.

"Will it matter much, Freddy? I didn't like doing it, but I couldn't see any other way."

"No, it doesn't matter a bit, old lad," Freddy said, and smiled at him.

Bob jerked in an ejaculation a little later.

"You called them beastly thieves! Oh, good boy, Bill! But you had your nerve."

For the first time Bill was embarrassed. He reddened, looking down.

"It's queer," he mumbled: "I wasn't afraid then. I was beastly scared most of the time, but just then it was—well, it was gorgeous! If you could only have seen them when they found the bag wasn't there! I sort of felt that if they killed me it didn't matter—it was worth it!"

"I wish the wretched gold had been at the bottom of the sea!" Bob growled. "Carry on before we explode!"

The rest of the story did not take long. Bill did not enlarge on his feelings in his fruitless hunt for the Christmas pudding.

"So I made up my mind I must chance going to ask at this house," he said.

“Gosh, I was scared then! An’ I came here an’ Miss Barbara was on the verandah, an’—well, there wasn’t any more to worry about.”

They were silent for a moment.

“You picked your house well,” Jim said. “And—you did your job well right through, old offsider.” And at that, Bill’s lip trembled. He gathered himself up and fled into the house.

“Let him go,” Miss Barbara said, nodding her head wisely. “He has been keyed up to his highest pitch all this morning—and he has had to carry too much for a child.”

“It doesn’t bear thinking of calmly,” Jim said. “And we knew nothing! But how are we going to thank *you*, Miss Berkeley?”

His look made Miss Barbara almost tremulous.

“But, my dear boy!—he was so little, and in trouble. Anyone would have done the same. And I have so enjoyed it all—so exciting! I feel as if I were living in a film!”

“Beginning with havin’ a bomb nearly dropped on you!” remarked Freddy. “It would make some people very peevish. To say nothing of your hen!”

“She died in a good cause,” was Miss Barbara’s placid answer. “And now, what are your plans? I do so hope you will not go back to-day.”

“We couldn’t,” Freddy answered. “I must overhaul the Kestrel and get more petrol somehow. We could go to Taroo for the night. Is there a hotel there?”

“Oh, you are not to think of that,” she told them eagerly. “Bill and I have it all planned out; he seemed to know what you would have to do. You are all to stay here——” She was interrupted by protests that they could do nothing of the kind.

“But it is all arranged. There is plenty of room in this rambling old place, and we shall love to have you. I have a car—a very shabby one, I’m afraid—and it can go to Taroo after lunch for petrol or anything else you need. And this evening you must all talk to me. Please!” she begged.

They looked at each other and back to her eager face—and gave in.

“May I go and find Bill?” Jim rose.

“I think you will find him in his room. The third door on the left,” she told him. So Jim went in search of his offsider: and what they said to each other was their own affair, and took a long time.

The party was divided after lunch. Freddy, with Bob and Bill, took off in the Planet—to the unbridled excitement of Miss Barbara—and flew in search of the Kestrel. Jim got out the Ford, looked thoughtfully at tyres which were in an advanced stage of decay, and awaited his hostess near the garden gate.

She came out, a dainty figure in a dove-grey coat, a little grey hat hiding her soft white hair. The pink and white of her face reminded him of apple-

blossom.

“You drive yourself?” he asked her.

“Yes, but I know young men do not like to be driven.” She settled herself beside the driver’s seat. “I thought I was very daring to learn to run a car, but I find we understand each other—I take her gently, for she is not very young.”

Jim drove with respect for the tyres; they talked as they went, and by the time Taroo was reached their friendship was established. Miss Barbara suggested that she should be put down in the main street for her shopping.

“You will find the garage round the next corner,” she told him. “Shall we meet at the post-office?”

That suited Jim very well, for he had plans of his own. He made haste to the garage; it was some time before he left it. The back of the Ford was piled with petrol cases; notwithstanding which she might have been said to prance to the place of meeting. Miss Barbara, standing on the footpath, opened her eyes widely as she beheld her car. It was resplendent with four new tyres.

She flushed deeply. Jim jumped out to open the door for her.

“You should not, Mr. Jim!” she said under her breath. “Oh, you should not!”

“You mustn’t mind,” he said gently. “Won’t you let me give myself a little pleasure? And you know, Miss Berkeley, there was a little matter of a hen!”

There were tears in her eyes as she smiled up at him.

“That ridiculous hen!” she said. “You are putting an amazing value on her!”

“Not too great,” he said. “And there was a tree—Bill has told me about the tree. He thinks more of that than of any risk he ran himself. I can’t pay for the tree—oh, I can’t pay for anything you have done! Won’t you get in?”

They drove out of the township in silence.

“When I think of what our little chap might have struck——!” Jim said, his voice low. “Any house but yours. I don’t suppose he’d have met unkindness, but he might so easily have met suspicion, curiosity: or people who’d have been all over him with excitement. He couldn’t have been in any condition to bear more than he had borne already. And you gave him peace. You just understood.” He put his hand over hers as it lay on her knee. “Your ears would burn if you could hear half that Bill says about you!”

“He—he is such a kind little lad,” she said tremulously. “He makes too much of it—and you too, Mr. Jim. For I did so little.”

“I don’t think it’s what you did, exactly. It’s what you were. He was overstrained, and you gave him what he needed to get back to normal. He can’t put it into words, of course, and neither can I, for that matter: but we all know. And we shan’t forget.”

He smiled down at her.

“Now shall I let her out a bit, so that you can see if she likes her new shoes?”

“Do!” said Miss Barbara happily. The Ford leaped as if her lost youth had come back. She whizzed along the unmetalled road, leaving a cloud of dust behind her.

The conviction of living in a film grew upon Miss Barbara as the day went on.

She flew. Complete in leather coat and flying helmet she soared over New South Wales, tense with excitement, exulting in every moment in the sky. As Bill had predicted, Bob and Freddy strove together for the privilege of taking her up; the natural result was there had to be two flights, so that the Kestrel and the Planet would be equally honoured. She was faintly astonished when the boys congratulated her on her courage in the air.

“But it feels so safe, so simple!” she exclaimed. “It would not occur to me to feel any nervousness. Are many people timid?”

“It has been known,” said Bob gravely.

“I was jolly well scared stiff!” owned Bill. It was a special joy to him that his little lady had shown the boys what she was made of.

He disappeared with Jim later on. Miss Barbara, making a hurried excursion to feed her fowls and gather eggs, found them in the fowl-run. Jim had found tools; all the broken pine boughs were neatly sawn off and carried away. Of the tragedy of the coop nothing remained.

“Oh!” said Miss Barbara.

“It’s beauty has gone for ever, I’m afraid,” Jim remarked. “One can only say that at least it’s tidy. It won’t look so bad when the scars fade.”

“I was hoping we could have spliced up some of the branches and tied them back into place,” Bill said mournfully. “But they were too smashed.”

Miss Barbara put a light hand on his shoulder.

“I am never going to be sorry about it,” she said. “Each time I look at it I shall remember the day that brought me a friend.”

Eliza, who had spent a day of frenzied cooking, considered that the good old times had come back to the house that night. There sat Miss Barbara, a little flushed, wearing the soft grey frock that saw the light only on great occasions; Bill beside her, Jim at the foot of the table, Freddy and Bob in between. There were flowers everywhere; the old silver, the best glass, sparkled on the lace mats. And there was a dinner which, Eliza reflected proudly, they would not improve upon, no matter where they came from.

It was a very gay dinner; the boys brought out their best stories, their most ridiculous jokes; and their hostess laughed until she could laugh no more. Eliza

went about the table with tight-set lips: occasionally she withdrew hurriedly, and deep explosive chuckles were heard in the hall. They ended by drinking Miss Barbara's health with musical honours; Bill's treble soared above the deep voices as they sang that she was a Jolly Good Fellow. Miss Barbara wiped her eyes and beamed upon them all.

If it only could come again! The thought was the only one that stung as they sat in the rose-shaded drawing-room afterwards. The old times had indeed come again with these courteous lads who treated her as if she were eggshell china. To have one bring her chair to the fireside corner, another to place her footstool, a third to adjust her cushion to the most comfortable position—yet in the afternoon they had treated her as a flying comrade, not a porcelain lady. She did not know which she liked best. It was hard to know that to-morrow it would all be over; like a dream from which one woke, or a film that ended on the screen, leaving only the drab cinema hall.

"Miss Barbara," Freddy was speaking. They had asked if they might use her name, declaring that "Miss Berkeley" sounded too remote, and had begged that she would cease to call them "Mr." "Miss Barbara, will you make a date with me?"

"A date?" she said. "How does one make dates, Freddy?"

Freddy's eyes twinkled.

"Sorry. I mean, shall we make an appointment? When I fly between Billabong and Queensland, may I come this way and call on you? If you can bear it, that is."

"Bear it! But how lovely!" she uttered. "Would you really come to see an old woman?"

"Certainly not; I'd come to see you. Then that's fixed. I'll send you word in good time before I leave Billabong."

"I have a better idea," stated Jim. "You needn't think you're going to have all the fun, Freddy. Miss Barbara, what if you made him turn round when he comes and bring you down to Billabong?"

Miss Barbara gasped.

"To—to fly there?"

"Why not? It doesn't take long. You needn't think that you're going to shake this family off easily: it won't be shaken. And there's such a lot of it that you haven't met yet. All the best part."

"But, my dear," she said. "Your father—your sister . . ."

"Well, you'll get letters from them that will make you understand how they feel about it," he laughed. "I want a promise that you'll come."

"Would you fly with me, Miss Barbara?" demanded Freddy devotedly.

"Oh, anywhere, Freddy!" They noted with joy that there was actually a dimple at the corner of her mouth. "Only—it seems so . . . so much to expect,

that they will really want me——”

“She’s afraid of being a gate-crasher!” stated Bob solemnly. Shouts of joy hailed the idea.

“Miss Barbara, I do mean it,” Jim said, order being restored. “It—it isn’t only that we owe you so much that I know Dad and Norah will never be satisfied until they tell you so personally. But apart from that, we want you—yourself.” He turned to Bill. “Don’t you think it’s a brilliant idea, Bill?”

“No,” said Bill. “I think it’s a rotten one!”

Four pairs of eyes gazed at him in bewilderment. Bill remained unmoved.

“Well, I do!” he stated. “You’ll get her to Billabong some time or other; an’ ten to one I’ll have had to go back to school, an’ I won’t see her. An’ all the others will be wanting to see her *now*—not to wait ages. An’ there’s the Kestrel going to-morrow, with simply heaps of room for her!”

The room was stricken into silence. Jim was the first to recover speech. He broke into laughter.

“Well—at least one of us has brains! I take off my hat to you, Bill.” His look was eager as he turned to his hostess. “Could you, Miss Barbara? I never thought of it, but of course, it’s the only idea—if you’ll come.”

“Say you will, Miss Barbara!” Freddy and Bob begged together.

Bill got up and perched on the arm of her chair.

“Couldn’t I help you pack?”

Miss Barbara began to laugh helplessly.

“What can a lone woman do among you all?”

“Give in, of course,” returned Bill promptly. “What about Eliza? Couldn’t you park her somewhere?—I mean,” he amended, “couldn’t she go away, or something?”

“Her sister would come. But——”

“That means ‘Yes’! Doesn’t it, Jim?” Bill shouted.

“We all hope so,” Jim said. “Only we don’t want to rush you, Miss Barbara. We need not hurry away if to-morrow would be too soon. Only come.”

The light of adventure dawned in Miss Barbara’s eyes.

“Well—why not, my dears?” she said gaily.

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[The end of *Wings Above Billabong* by Mary Grant Bruce]