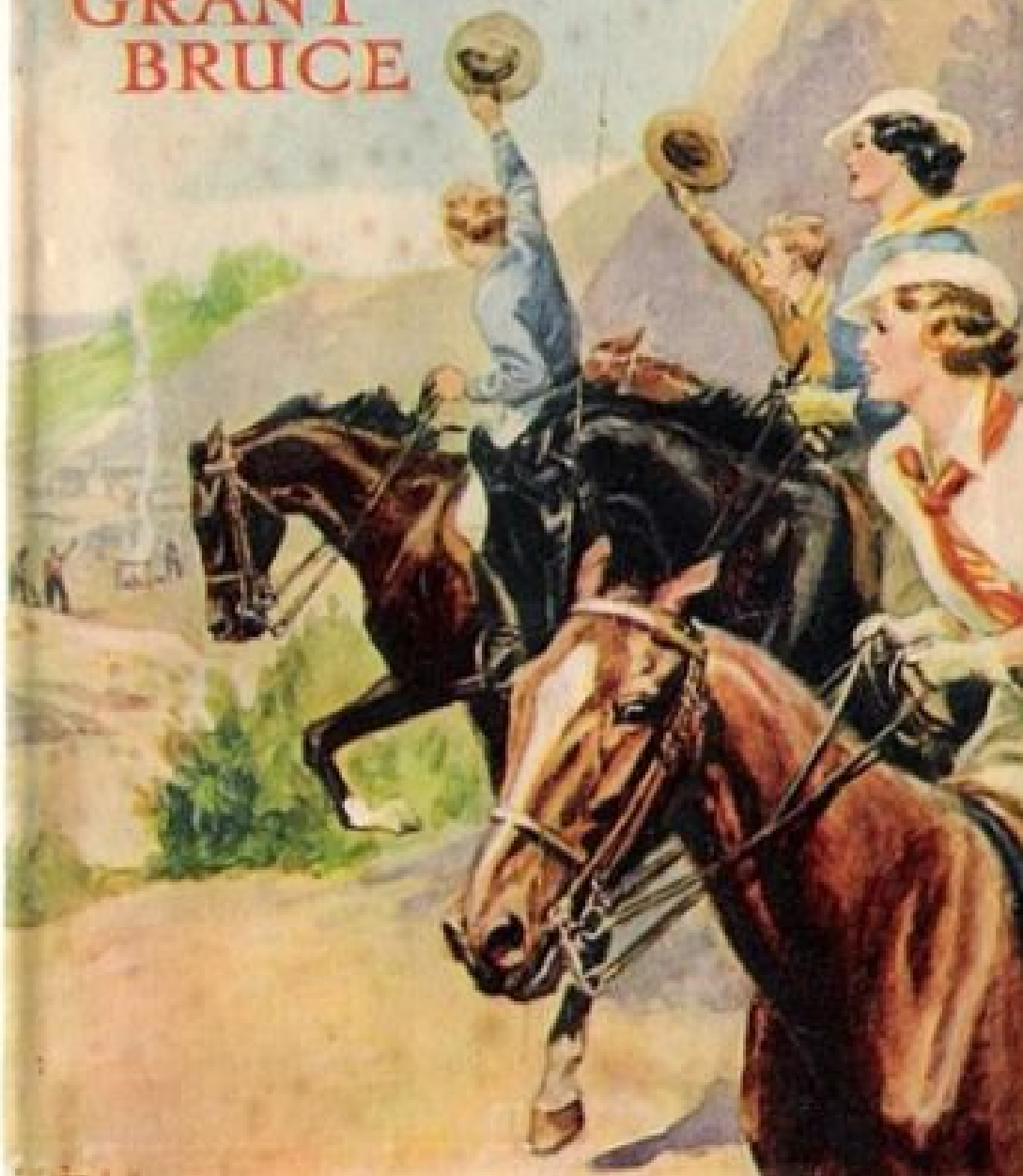


BILLABONG GOLD

MARY
GRANT
BRUCE



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SUCCESSFUL STORIES
BY
MARY GRANT BRUCE
PUBLISHED BY
WARD, LOCK & CO., LTD.

A LITTLE BUSH MAID
MATES AT BILLABONG
TIMOTHY IN BUSHLAND
GLEN EYRE
NORAH OF BILLABONG
GRAY'S HOLLOW
FROM BILLABONG TO LONDON
JIM AND WALLY
'POSSUM
CAPTAIN JIM
DICK LESTER OF KURRAJONG
BACK TO BILLABONG
THE TWINS OF EMU PLAINS
BILLABONG'S DAUGHTER
THE HOUSES OF THE EAGLE
THE TOWER ROOMS
BILLABONG ADVENTURERS
GOLDEN FIDDLES
THE HAPPY TRAVELLER
BILL OF BILLABONG
ROAD TO ADVENTURE
BILLABONG'S LUCK
"SEAHAWK"
WINGS ABOVE BILLABONG
CIRCUS RING

BILLABONG GOLD

BY
MARY GRANT BRUCE

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To
B. M. G.

Billabong Gold

CHAPTER I

AN INVITATION

“S HALL you go, Jean?” asked Betty Yorke.

“Goodness, no!” answered her sister decidedly. “It doesn’t tempt me in the least.”

“But you used to like going to Billabong.”

“Oh, I did, when I was only a kid. It was fun enough then to spend most of one’s time on a horse, and any odd moments playing tennis. But really, Betty, I’ve grown out of that sort of thing. It would bore me to tears to spend weeks there now.”

“You and Norah Linton were great friends once,” said her mother regretfully. “I liked her better than your present set, Jean—they’re too advanced for me!”

“Oh, my set’s all right,” Jean answered. “They know how to keep things going. And I like Norah almost as much as ever when she comes to Town and goes to dances and races, and sees everything there is to be seen. She’s great fun then. But nothing ever *happens* at Billabong. The same old round—and I’m not built for station life, Mother. I like a ride now and then, but give me cars!”

“Well, I suppose they have cars,” remarked Betty. “They seem fairly civilized.”

“Cars—yes; but they only think of them as useful necessities for getting from one place to another. Not to be seriously considered beside horses. And Norah’s wrapped up in that small boy of hers; she’s never been the same since she married Wally Meadows. Too domesticated altogether. She wears the most appalling clothes——”

“Oh, I say, Jean!” protested Betty.

“You only see her in Town. She turns out well enough then, but at Billabong——!” Jean tilted a very pretty nose. “Woollies and old coats and

skirts, when she's not in riding-breeches. I never thought I'd be able to get her into a decent wedding-dress; a nice rush it was, too, when she and Wally tipped themselves into the lagoon just when they ought to have been dressing to get married. Just picture them—arriving drenched and covered with mud, and all the wedding-guests waiting on the verandah! And they thought it a howling joke!”

Betty giggled.

“I wish I had seen it,” she said.

“Well, I didn't think it was funny. No, I've outgrown Billabong. As for going there now—why I wouldn't leave Melbourne this month for anything. I'm booked for dozens of things.”

“What are you all conspiring about?” asked Mr. Yorke, appearing on the scene.

“Oh, it's not a conspiracy, Father. Only I've just had a letter from Norah Meadows. She wants me to go up to Billabong. She and Tommy Rainham are alone there; at least, except for that small boy, Bill Blake, who spends all his holidays with them.”

“Tommy Rainham? Is he the young Englishman who settled near Billabong?”

“No, it's his sister——Jim Linton is engaged to her. I don't know why they call her Tommy.”

“I do,” said Betty. “Her name's Cecilia.”

“Well, that's an excellent reason,” remarked Mr. Yorke, taking a cup of tea. “But why are they alone, Jean? Where's Norah's father, and that enormous brother of hers—Jim, isn't he? To say nothing of her husband.”

“They seem to be camping out in the ranges beyond Billabong. Norah's rather vague about it—she says they're prospecting for gold, and Bob Rainham too. It sounds a bit queer. They never used to go in for that sort of thing.”

“Oh, quite sane men become queer if the gold-bug bites them,” observed her father. “Not that I believe there's any gold in that district. Still, I don't know much about it, after all. Does Norah want you to join the fossicking party, or just to hold her hand because she is lonely?”

“I don't believe she's lonely at all. Norah never is. She says they go out to the camp now and then, and sometimes Mr. Linton and the boys come in to the homestead. She seems to think it would be a good time for me to go up. Dick is asked too. I told her in my last letter that he was at home because of his school being in quarantine, and she jumped at that, because young Bill Blake is in the same box—he goes to Dick's school. So she thinks Dick would be a good mate for Bill.”

Mr. Yorke showed rather more interest at this information.

“That's very nice of Norah,” he said. “And uncommonly good for Dick.

That boy is simply living at cinemas when he isn't knocking about the streets—not that there's much else for the poor youngster to do. He would jump out of his skin at the chance of going to a station." He stirred his tea. "What about it, Jean?"

"Nothing doing, I'm afraid, Father," she laughed. "If you only knew all the engagements I've got ahead!"

"Oh—your engagements!" he said, with a touch of impatience. "Can't you let them slide for a few weeks?"

"Father, you know I can't. It would mean letting down ever so many people. And I don't want to go to the country. Not a little bit. Why don't you send Dick up by himself?"

"Certainly not," said her mother firmly. "Norah has one boy visitor on her hands; I'm not going to add to her responsibilities. Think of what Dicky's mending would be, to say nothing of any other consideration!"

"She wouldn't mind," said Jean carelessly. She lit a cigarette, leaning back in her chair. "Norah takes responsibilities in her stride. I believe young Bill was rather a terror when he first went there, but she managed to tame him. She would think nothing of having a second youngster to look after."

"Not my youngster," returned Mr. Yorke. "No—Dick must stay at home if you won't go, Jean. I wouldn't mind sending him if her men-folk were there, but it's another matter when she is alone with the Rainham girl. It's a pity, though; Dick would have loved it."

"It's a beastly shame!" said a furious voice.

The face that appeared at the window of the drawing-room was red with anger and very dirty. In calmer and cleaner moments it might have been called good-looking; indeed, when Dick Yorke was washed and brushed, his fair hair reduced to such sleekness as its tendency to curl allowed, his mother thought fondly that he would have looked beautiful as a choir-boy. To which his father would have responded grimly that Dick certainly possessed all the possibilities with which choir-boys are credited when off duty. Just now, he stared fiercely at his family, keeping his heaviest scowl for his elder sister.

"Dick, you've been listening!" exclaimed his mother with an attempt at severity.

"Well, I never asked you to talk when I was sitting just outside on the verandah, did I?" demanded the fierce voice. "Can't I be on my own verandah if I like?" The voice was a little breathless; one might have suspected that the speaker was inclined to choke. "I—I couldn't help hearing you talking, could I? An', anyhow, it was my business. I s'pose you'd never have told me I'd had an invitation. An' now you won't let me go!"

"Steady, Dick," said Mr. Yorke.

"I'm . . . *being* steady," said the voice with a gulp. Dick pointed an

accusing finger at Jean. "You'd let me go, too, only she won't take me. She's just mean! Just 'cause she's got her own car an' heaps of fat-headed friends, an' she thinks she's someone! Stickin' red paint on her lips an' powder on her silly nose, an' plucking out bits of her eyebrows, an'——"

"Dick!" His father rose threateningly.

"Well, doesn't she? You know jolly well she does, an' you don't like it either—you said so. Only you won't make her take me to that Billabong place—you just let her do every single blessed thing she likes. An'—an'—it just is a beastly shame!" The choke in his voice became overpowering; his head vanished suddenly. Feet pounded along the verandah and died away.

In the drawing-room there was silence for a moment. Jean had flushed a little, but she laughed.

"Dick's manners!" she said expressively. "Really, Mother, he's a bit out of hand. He certainly isn't fit to go away to stay at Billabong or anywhere else, if you ask me!"

"Well, it's enough to make the poor little chap lose his temper." Betty's tone showed where her sympathies lay. "He does love the country, and it's so dull for him at home."

"So I suppose you mean I ought to put everything aside and take him?"

Betty hesitated.

"No, I don't mean that," she said honestly. "You wouldn't enjoy it, and you have all your own plans made. Only—well, I wish Dicky hadn't heard anything about it, that's all."

"He shouldn't have listened," said Jean sharply. "Someone will have to teach him that that sort of thing isn't done."

Betty got up with an impatient movement and began to collect the teacups. She was taller than Jean and darker; her light-brown hair held tints of copper where the light caught it. She lacked her elder sister's prettiness and her air of perfect poise, but there was a different attraction in her round face with its wide brow and the grey eyes that were rarely without a twinkle. Somewhat overshadowed by Jean, Betty took her path through life unobtrusively. "Betty finds fun easily; Jean makes hard labour of it," Mr. Yorke had summed up his daughters.

He looked rather uneasily at them now; a hard-worked business man, family disagreements bewildered him, and he would not take sides. He had a vague feeling that fatherly duty demanded that he should go in search of Dick and reason with him on the subject of good manners; and he knew it was the last thing he wished to do. So he filled his pipe slowly and waited for someone to speak.

Mrs. Yorke broke the silence.

"Oh, well, it can't be helped. We must try to make it up to Dicky in some

way, poor darling. How I do wish that wretched school would reopen!”

Jean said, “It will be a mercy for everyone when it does.”

Betty flashed round on her.

“You might at least be a little sorry for him, Jean, even if he *was* rude to you. He’s only a small boy, after all.”

Jean raised her eyebrows, looking at her enquiringly.

“You’re awfully concerned about him, Betty. Why don’t you take him up to Billabong yourself?”

“I?” Betty looked astonished. “I’m not invited.”

“That doesn’t matter a scrap. Norah only wants a mate for Bill Blake; she would be just as glad to see him come with you. And you’d fit in there far better than I could now; you like that sort of thing. And you know you always worshipped Norah at school.”

“Well, but every junior did that,” admitted Betty. “A girl who shines at every game as Norah did can’t help being put on a pedestal by all the small fry. But Norah hardly knew that I existed.”

“Oh, well, let her know it now,” Jean said lightly. “Honestly, I know it would be all right if you were to go. I’ll write and tell Norah that I can’t leave home, but that you’ll take my place—I know perfectly well what she’ll say.”

Betty hesitated. It was very tempting. There were not many places to which one could go without an invitation, but she believed that Billabong was one of them. As a small girl she had listened eagerly to Jean’s stories of holidays spent on the station—it seemed to her then, as it often seemed now, that Jean had all the luck. At school, even though she and Norah Linton were parted by the incredible distance that separates a senior from a junior, Norah had more than once been friendly and kind. And there had been glimpses of her now and then, in recent years in Melbourne, that had always made Betty want to know her better. She thought of her now: tall and serene and merry-eyed; a girl who seemed to shine with happiness, who had the gift of communicating happiness to others. “I don’t believe she would think it queer if I did go,” she thought.

Jean was watching her, guessing at her thoughts.

“You had better let me write, Betty. Norah will give you a tremendous welcome. And you can go and tell Dick he can begin to pack!”

That was a consideration to sway Betty. She looked at Mrs. Yorke.

“Mother, do you think it would be all right?”

“I don’t see why not,” her mother answered. “Norah is rather a dear, you know; I think it might be a most successful visit—and, Betty darling, what a blessing for poor Dick!”

“Do it, Betty,” urged her father. “After all, you can always come home when you like if you’re not enjoying yourself.”

Betty made up her mind, throwing care to the winds.

“Right!” she said. “I’ll go and tell Dicky.”

Dick was brooding miserably in his room. He wished he had never listened to the grown-ups talking; he wished someone large and unforgiving would deal effectively with Jean; he wished that severe engine-trouble would develop in her green sports car, in which he so seldom was a passenger. Not a fatal trouble—Dick’s respect for a sports car was too deep for that, whatever he felt at the moment for the car’s owner. He tried to picture it breaking down at an extremely awkward moment; there was some grim satisfaction in the picture. But across it would keep drifting the thought of a cattle-station, with mobs of bullocks and unnumbered galloping horses; of wide spaces where a boy could really gallop.

He heard Betty’s quick step and began in a hurry to turn over the leaves of his stamp-album, looking up defiantly when she came in.

“Hullo, Dicky!” she said gaily. “We’ve been talking about Billabong——”

Swift hope transformed his face.

“She—she isn’t going to take me, after all?”

“No, Jean can’t. But suppose I were to go with you instead, old chap?”

“You!” he said with a gasp. The stamp-album slid to the floor; he flung himself at her, engulfing her in a bear-like hug. “That’s just a million times nicer! My word, Bet, we will have a time!”

“Oh, it won’t be very exciting, Dicky,” she told him. It was a remark they were to remember with some amazement later on.

CHAPTER II

IN THE HILLS

A MAN on a tired horse was riding down a steep hill. Dense scrub stretched away on every side; the horse picked its way carefully along a faint cattle-pad that wound in and out between the trees, always watchful for loose stones that might cause a stumble. The rider sat him lightly, his hand firm on the bridle, whistling happily, while his glance took in every detail that could be seen near him. They reached the foot of the hill with a scramble down a deep drop. Below rippled a shallow creek. The horse stopped of his own accord when he reached it and put his nose thankfully into the clear water.

“Yes, you can do with a drink, old chap,” said his rider.

He was young and very tall, his clean-shaven face marked by various encounters with tough scrub, but altogether cheerful. Jim Linton was doing one of the things he liked best—riding a good horse through wild country after cattle; all the more pleasant because for what seemed to him an age he had been given up to the utterly uncongenial task of digging. It had been a keen relief that morning to turn his back on pick and shovel, to saddle his great black horse and disappear into the ranges. Even though pick and shovel must have their turn to-morrow, he would have had to-day.

“Come up, Monarch, old boy!”

He gathered up his reins. They splashed through the creek and took their way up the wide gully through which it ran. Soon another gully showed at right angles. They turned into it.

Almost immediately the country changed sharply. The ground became less rugged, sloping gently upwards. Not a tree was to be seen over a wide area that lay before them; a bare and desolate expanse, scarred by man so cruelly that the kindly Bush seemed to have retreated from it in horror.

Man, indeed, had been very busy. The ground was trampled until scarcely any grass was left. Thickly dotted everywhere were tiny stumps of felled scrub, spikes that compelled a rider to go carefully for his horse's sake. Great black patches showed where the felled timber had been burned. In orderly lines were stout wooden pegs, driven well home into the ground; there was no part of the cleared land that had not been pegged out thoroughly. Here and there, on the outskirts, were small tents, smoke-grey with age and grime; beside them the faint light of cooking-fires showed, and figures could be seen moving about them. The day's work was over for the miners.

“By Jove, what a grim place we've made it look!” Jim uttered.

Always the stark ugliness of the diggings smote him afresh on returning

from a Bush expedition—the degradation of what had once been lovely. Tonight he did not look at it for long. He rode aside until he reached a place where two long hill spurs enclosed a well-grassed space, where the faint trickle of a spring could be heard. A bush fence had been run across the opening from spur to spur; within the enclosure horses were grazing. A big chestnut lifted his head and whinnied as he saw them, and Monarch neighed in answer.

Jim dismounted, turning his horse into the enclosure with a farewell pat. Carrying his saddle and bridle, he came back to the clearing and made his way up a wide and shallow depression that marked its centre. Here was as yet no digging: but soon he reached the gaping mouth of a deep shaft, near which a derrick towered. Broken rock littered the ground or was roughly piled: tall heaps of mullock had to be skirted, yellow and ghostly in the evening light.

Ahead of him were hills, blocking in all the northern end of the clearing. The rock-face rose sheer and unclimbable, stretching away on either side as far as the eye could follow it, clothed here and there with clumps of fern or tough shrubs that had found rooting-place in a cranny. A black opening showed the mouth of a cave; in front of it was a level plateau, fenced in by piled rocks. Bush huts and tents stood on the plateau; iron pots swung from a bar over a stone fireplace where a fire glowed redly. A squat figure in blue overalls turned at Jim's step, and a broad Chinese face grinned widely in welcome.

“Boss look out for you long time, Mas' Jim.”

“I'm later than I meant to be, Lee Wing. Something smells good there. Everyone home?”

“Not Mas' Wally an' Missa Paxton. Come soon, all li', you bet. Hot water, Mas' Jim?”

“You're a genius, Lee Wing.” Jim stowed away his riding-gear, turning thankfully to the comfort of soap and water. He raised his dripping face as a grey-haired man, scarcely shorter than himself, came out of the cave.

“Had a good day, Jim?”

“Oh, topping!” said Jim, from his towel. “Nothing exciting, cattle all right everywhere, and no sign of wandering prospectors. That's all a man could want, isn't it, Dad?”

“I should say so. Jack and I had a good day, too. Found everything well at home, and all the family in great form.”

“That sounds good. Any letters for me?”

“Quite a lot, but I expect this is the one you'd rather have first.” He smiled, diving into an inner pocket for a blue envelope. “I told Tommy that the amount she and you save on postage isn't fair to the Government!”

“Queer to think there will be a post office out here some day, if ever the mine turns out a big thing,” Jim remarked, pocketing his letter.

“May I be out of it before that day comes!” said David Linton fervently.

"I've lit the cave lamp; better go there and read your letter in peace. I'll keep a look-out for the boys."

"As if they couldn't get in without you!" chaffed Jim: knowing well that his father would watch as long as anyone was away from camp. He dived into the cave; David Linton sat on a log smoking, looking into the silent Bush. Lee Wing pattered round the fire, lifting pot-lids to glance anxiously at the contents.

"No sign of them?" said Jim, reappearing after an interval. "Wonder what they're up to."

"I wish they'd come. This is no country for riding after dark."

"Boss, better you an' Mas' Jim an' Missa Young have supper one-time," pleaded Lee Wing earnestly. "Evellything him get welly too-much cook."

"Did I hear someone couple my name with supper?" demanded a voice from a tent, sleepily.

"What are you doing in there, Jack?" called Jim. "You haven't gone to bed, have you?"

"Well, I lay down for a minute to think," said the voice. "I think better that way. And I don't quite know what happened next!" The owner of the voice appeared, looking sheepish. "You did say supper, didn't you, Lee Wing?"

"Welly near spoil," said Lee Wing sadly.

"Oh, let it stew a bit longer," said Jim largely. "They'll turn up any minute." He checked himself, holding up his hand. "There they are!—I heard Wally's voice."

Jim was credited with being able to hear half a mile farther than anyone else, so they settled down to smoke peacefully, knowing that the horses would have to be turned out. It was ten minutes before they heard heavy boots crunching among the rocks, and two tall figures, saddle-laden, strode into sight.

"Sorry we've kept you waiting," Wally Meadows said. "We put on all the pace we could, but that's not saying much in the hills in darkness." He tossed his hat aside, running his hand through his crisp black hair, a look of strain on his dark face. "Norah and Davie all right, sir?"

"Fit as possible: so is everyone else at the homestead. I've messages and letters for you, but they'll keep until you've eaten. Hurry up, Lee Wing!"

Lee Wing was already hurrying: a mighty dish of stew was steaming on the bush-made table in a moment, flanked by baked potatoes and an enormous pot of tea. The five men ate quickly: all were saddle-weary, and there was little comfort in the roughly made stools and chunks of rock that formed the seats. The night was warm and still; when the meal was over they relaxed on the ground, propped their backs against logs, lit their pipes, and were ready to exchange notes on the day's events.

It was not often that David Linton and his boys all left the clearing in the wild hills where the goddess Luck had tempted them from quiet station life by the lure of gold. Two or three might go together to the homestead, Billabong, where all their hearts lay, leaving the others on guard at the diggings. To-day, however, had seen a general clearing-out. Gold that had been won had to be taken to the homestead; cattle in the hills demanded an inspection—or the boys had comfortably persuaded themselves that they did. There were faithful station-hands working at the shaft, together with a sprinkling of prospectors, glad to earn wages for a time before chancing their luck on the claims they had been permitted to peg out. The Linton party had downed tools enthusiastically and scattered in several directions.

Jack Young and Freddy Paxton, who did not belong to Billabong, but were merely borrowed, listened to the quick fire of questions poured in by Jim and Wally concerning everything and everybody at the homestead. The gold had been taken to the bank by Bob Rainham, another of their party; that was a minor matter. Jim considered it far more important to hear that Bob's sister Tommy had attained distinction by being lightly cast into a pool of muddy water by a pony which had at the last moment decided that it had no desire to jump the log-fence for which Tommy had headed. It had propped: Tommy had continued over the fence alone. The story, as retailed by Mr. Linton, brought forth hoots of unfeeling laughter.

"My wife hasn't been doing wild things like that, I hope?" asked Wally.

"No; Norah got all she wanted out of looking on. She says she wouldn't have missed it for all the gold in the claim. She told me to tell you that Davie went out proudly wearing your best hat, and threw it into the pigsty——"

"Not my new one!" gasped the startled father.

"I think so. But they got it back. They seem to have been doing a good deal of riding and steeplechasing, partly to keep young Bill occupied. It's rather dull for him nowadays: Norah says he misses us a lot."

"Oh, Bill's all right," said Jim.

"Well, Norah thinks the boy is dull. She has written to Jean Yorke to ask her to bring her young brother for a visit. He'd be a mate for Bill."

"Good notion," said Wally, "only I'll bet Jean won't come. She has no love for Billabong since she grew up. Do you remember her last visit? She turned up her nose at everything. Even at me. And on my wedding-day, too." He sighed—and gave a low chuckle.

"Well, you shouldn't have taken a mud-bath in the lagoon," remarked Freddy.

"Why not? it was my last hour of freedom," returned Wally, looking absurdly young to be considered as a husband. "No, Jean simply scorned me that day—even when we went off in the car, all in new clothes. I had a lovely

new hat that day, too,” he ended.

“I’ll bet you didn’t wear it long,” grinned Freddy.

“No farther than the first gate. Then I fished my beautiful old one out from the tool-box or somewhere, and I don’t seem to remember what happened to the new one. I have no luck with new hats.”

“We haven’t heard much of what you and Freddy did to-day, Wal,” said Jim. “You were awfully late getting home. Any trouble with the cattle?”

“No, they’re all right. I don’t suppose we saw nearly all of them, but all we did come across look well. Half-fat, a lot of them; and there’s a sprinkling of decent calves running with those cows Bob bought. There’s good feed in the gullies, and they’re all fairly quiet.”

It was a satisfactory report, but Jim, watching his face as the firelight fell upon it, saw that it had an unfamiliar gravity.

“Is there anything else, Wal?” he asked.

“Yes, worse luck. It didn’t seem worth telling you before we had had the home news—no need to spoil that. But I’m afraid we’re in for the first of the rush.”

“Oh, hang!” exclaimed Jim. “Prospectors?”

“Not single fossickers; I wouldn’t have bothered much if that was all. But there are at least two lots of men making their way into the hills from the north. We caught sight of one crowd early in the afternoon; they were down in a gully, making heavy weather of getting across it. Not much wonder, as it was pretty well choked with scrub mixed with brambles. Freddy and I were on a hill some distance off.”

“Did they see you?”

“Not much! We kept the horses under cover and watched them. Ten or twelve of them, I should say. They got through the worst of the scrub and then they decided to call it a day; there was water not far off, so they camped. I expect they’ll be along in a day or so.”

“That depends on how much they know of the country,” Mr. Linton said. “They could wander for a good while without getting near here, unless they’re working on information.”

“I’d like to know who supplied it,” Freddy said.

“The wonder is that it hasn’t got out before. Even though it’s to the interest of the fellows working here to keep quiet there must be a fair sprinkling of people who know something about it. One can’t tell how much the shearing crowd picked up. Oh, well,” continued Mr. Linton, “it’s no use worrying about that now; all we can hope is that they are a decent lot. You said you saw others, Wally?”

“Yes. That was what made us so late. We struck off to the east after they settled down; then we came round in a half-circle. We were watching pretty

carefully, after what we'd seen. If we hadn't been, we should never have spotted the second lot. I don't suppose they were trying to hide themselves, but they'd got a fairly well-concealed camp down in a hollow among rocks. About half a dozen men. I left Freddy with the horses on a ridge and worked down as near them as I could. Rather an unpleasant crowd; very rough type."

"On foot, were they?"

"They were camped, but they have horses. The first lot had only a couple of pack-horses, but all my particular friends must have been mounted. They looked distinctly tough. A huge chap about the size of Jim seemed to be their leader: I wasn't near enough to hear what he said, but he appeared to be laying down the law pretty freely. I wouldn't think, either," said Wally reflectively, "that they were a crowd that would be much concerned with the law."

"I expect they'll know enough about it to have miners' rights, anyhow," Jim said.

"Sure thing. Otherwise—well, I'm glad our claims are properly pegged and under lease. Nobody could interfere with boundaries marked as clearly as ours. But we'll have to watch out from now on; no more peaceful mining for us, taking a holiday whenever we feel like one."

"No," said Jim, with a sigh. "And the girls and Bill won't be able to come out freely without some sort of escort. That's a bore, if you like—won't they hate it!"

"They will have to knuckle under, though," Wally said. "I wouldn't have them riding through the lonely country between here and the Billabong boundary if these fellows are prospecting it."

"Then we shall have to think of the cattle, too," remarked Mr. Linton. "A few men won't trouble them much, but if those you saw are only a first instalment there will be mighty little quiet grazing for Bob's bullocks."

"Yes—and worse than that, bush-fires. It's too early for fires yet, but before long the scrub would burn. Fellows of this type would chuck down matches and cigarette-ends everywhere, or knock out a pipe on a rotten log and leave it to set the country alight. As for expecting them to be careful with their cooking-fires—well, I ask you!" Wally looked wrathful, and then laughed. "Don't we get fun when we go mining!"

"We must try to scare them properly about fires," said Mr. Linton. "After all, it's not to their advantage to risk a blaze that might easily sweep down on their own camps, or block their way out by fallen timber. I don't think we need worry much on that score; even the really rough customers have a wholesome dread of a bush-fire. Thank goodness there's nothing left to burn near our claims. I thought old Murty was a bit drastic over having the scrub cut all round us, but I'm glad of it now."

"Yes, we're safe enough," Jim observed. "Well, I'll warn all our men the

first thing in the morning, Dad, and tell them that if any strangers show up they're to be sent to you. And I'll warn them against being drawn into yarning with visitors. The less they know about our claims, the better."

"Yes—and the first job to-morrow is to put up a strong fence of bush round the shaft and the sluice-boxes. We don't want them inspected by any casual who happens along. We'll put all hands on to that, Jim."

"Right you are." Jim got to his feet slowly, stretching himself. "I'm off to bed. This may be the last really peaceful night we're likely to spend at the old claim."

"Well, minin' is apt to get a bit borin' at times," remarked Freddy, joining him. "I'm not sure that it won't be rather fun to have a little spot of war!"

CHAPTER III

STRANGERS

BILL BLAKE'S feelings were mixed as he drove with Norah Meadows to the township of Cunjee to meet the visitors.

He was not at all sure that he wanted them. At first it had seemed rather jolly when Norah had told him that a boy of about his own age was coming to Billabong. There would be fun in showing him things, in introducing him to all the station life that to Bill was the best thing in the world. Dick Yorke was not altogether a stranger: he had the nodding acquaintance with him that a boy in a big school has for a fellow in a higher form. He did not belong to Dick's set. And that made him feel doubtful. Dick was the younger, but he was well ahead of him in school.

"Wonder if he'll put on airs?" mused Bill.

It had never troubled him that he was a duffer at lessons. He disliked them thoroughly, doing as little work as he could to avoid unpleasant consequences, giving all his heart to games. All the fellows he liked did the same, with a lofty disregard for people who swotted. If Dick was a swot, and it seemed very likely that he was, they would certainly fail to twin-soul. He remembered vaguely having seen him go up to receive a form-prize at the last Speech Day—a function spent by Bill and his chums in a wriggling agony of boredom, enduring as they might the uplifting orations of the big-wigs on the platform. None of the band was ever likely to be summoned to a prize-table.

"If he's a swot it's going to be awful!" he thought.

There was another depressing thought. As the only boy on the station he had had a very good time. Jim Linton had adopted him as his "offsider," teaching him all that should be known by a boy whose heart was set on becoming a station-owner himself when the fetters of school could be flung aside. All the grown-ups had made a friend of him, making him one of themselves. He had shared with them adventures that made him tingle to remember. Even now, though life was admittedly a bit duller, with all the men out in the hills, he had his own place; even a special responsibility, in that Jim had told him he depended on him to look after Norah and Tommy. Bill liked that. But how was the new boy going to fit in?

That a new girl also was coming did not concern him much. Norah and Tommy would no doubt find occupation for her: probably she would be useful with Davie, Norah's small son, who, as Bill knew only too well, was able to keep anybody busy. Girls meant nothing to Bill, except Norah and Tommy, who were, he considered, pretty well as good as men. But the boy——!

“Either he’ll be too big for his boots, or else I’ll have to look after him as if he was a kid,” his thoughts ran. “An’ I don’t know which’ll be the worst.”

He glanced up sideways at Norah, who was apparently thinking only of driving. She looked straight ahead, her face serene as she swung the big car round bend after bend of the narrow bush road. It was a road that demanded concentration, since a turn might suddenly bring them on a crawling mob of sheep or face to face with a long team of bullocks drawing a laden wagon; obstacles that were awkward for a Rolls-Royce. Yet Bill knew that Norah had an uncanny way of guessing at his thoughts, and he felt a bit uncomfortable. The Lintons, one and all, had strong views on responsibility to guests: and Norah had told him that he was in the position of a host, being part of Billabong. The queer part was that he had found it quite easy to be a host when strange men had come, friends of Jim’s, on their way to join the camp in the ranges. But a boy seemed altogether different from grown-ups.

Norah was well aware that something was wrong. There were times when Bill chattered like a magpie: others when he maintained a comfortable silence, knowing by instinct that his companion did not wish to talk. This, she knew, was not a comfortable silence. Something was worrying him: she was able to guess the reason. She cast about in her mind for a way to help him.

“I wonder how Dick Yorke’s feeling,” she observed. “It must be rather horrid, that last half-hour before getting to a strange place.”

“’Um. I thought it was, first time I came,” agreed Bill. He grinned. “I don’t now!”

“No, you belong now. But I shouldn’t wonder if Dick has his heart in his boots. Well, we won’t let it stay there long. He may be like a fish out of water for the first few days, though. We’ll have to get him busy at something or other, Bill.”

“Hope he’s the sort that likes getting busy,” Bill growled. “I don’t know an awful lot about him, you know, Norah.” He hesitated. “I’ve been wondering how it’s going to work out.”

“Like we were before you came that first time. Seems a long while ago, doesn’t it, Bill?”

“My hat, yes!” he said. “Gosh, Norah, I was blue that day!”

“No wonder; and I expect Dick may be a bit blue, too. But it worked out all right, Bill, didn’t it?” She flashed a smile at him; she had no intention of dwelling on the time that it had taken for Bill to adjust himself to Billabong. “If we all help Dick along he will fit in. I’ve my own problem, you know, Bill: Betty Yorke is almost a stranger to me. Tommy and I have been wondering very much—just as you have.”

The boy looked surprised. It had not occurred to him that grown-ups had these difficulties too. He found it comforting.

“Do you think she’ll be awfully towny and all that?”

“One never knows,” said Norah solemnly.

“I say, what’ll you do with her if she is?”

“Oh—just break her in gently, like Murty with the young horses. But she’s keen on riding, Bill, so that’s one gleam of hope.”

“Billabong riding, or just Town riding?” asked Bill with a grin.

“That’s what we’ve got to find out. I hope she won’t get too many shocks in the process. If she is only used to gentle canters along Alexandra Avenue—well, it may be a little awkward. But it’s stupid to go ahead to meet trouble, isn’t it? And there’s Cunjee—and goodness, Bill, is that the smoke of the train coming down the hill? We’ll have to hurry.”

The car left a cloud of dust behind it over the last mile into the township. Norah and Bill ran through the booking-office and out on the platform as the train slowed down.

“There they are!” said Bill excitedly.

Betty and Dick saw two hurrying figures: a tall, dark-eyed girl with hair that curled under the brim of her hat, and a sturdy freckled boy of twelve, square-chinned and obstinate-looking. His hair was a vivid red. No beauty was Bill; but there was something disarming in the half-smile with which he greeted Betty. He turned to her brother.

“Hullo, Yorke,” he said.

“H’lo,” rejoined Dick. They looked each other up and down like two terriers taking stock. Bill was instantly conscious that beside his own grey shirt and shorts the new-comer was almost indecently well dressed.

“Looks as if he was ready to go to church!” he thought; and did not pause to remember that a fond mother had—probably with some difficulty—clothed a protesting son for his journey. It was worse than he had feared. Bill sought relief by seizing the largest suitcases in sight.

“Here, I’ll take those,” muttered Dick.

“No, you get something else,” growled Bill. He strode manfully towards the exit.

Norah’s fears had fallen away from her from the moment that she saw Betty. Here was a person whose heart was clearly in her boots—but one who was going to fit into Billabong. “I’m so glad you’ve come, Betty,” she said: the firmness of her hand-grip said more than her words. Betty’s heart leaped back into its normal situation.

“Even though I asked myself?”

“That makes it all the nicer,” said Norah comfortably. “Dick, you’re just the size I hoped you would be, because it’s the right size for the pony we’ve been getting ready for you. Come along—you must be dying for tea.”

They packed into the car. Norah did not make the mistake of putting the

two boys into the back seat to make friends with each other. That moment, she knew, was not yet.

“I’ll take the small cases in front, Betty, and put you in the back with a gentleman on each side,” she said. “Bill can point out all the beauties of the landscape to you—there aren’t enough of them on this particular road to keep him busy. Quite comfortable?” The car edged past a wood-carter’s dray and settled into a steady speed.

Bill found Betty easy to talk to. He realized quickly that she was really interested—not just making conversation in the heavy manner so many grown-ups adopted with anyone his size. He decided that she was hardly grown-up at all. She had sense, too—didn’t ask him patronizing questions. She said, “Marvellous luck for you to be having all this time away from school, isn’t it?”—and then left the hated subject of school alone. She said straight out that she didn’t know a thing about cattle, and would he tell her which were Herefords and which were Shorthorns, if they saw any in the paddocks along the road. She admitted that sheep didn’t attract her; Bill had all the cattleman’s scorn for sheep, and he said, “Jolly good thing!” And she didn’t turn a hair when a motor-bike whizzed round a bend, nearly crashing into them, and Norah had to swing aside so sharply that they went into a really hair-raising skid in the dust, and very nearly went down the bank of a creek. Betty had only laughed, twisting round to look at the track of the skid. “Norah’s going to like her, all right,” Bill thought.

He was not so sure about Dick. The new boy hardly talked at all. Certainly, he hadn’t said anything when they were spinning round in the dust; that counted as one point to him. Bill couldn’t tell if he were interested in any part of the journey. He sat well back in his corner, so that Bill could only see his legs—and legs do not tell much, though it was some comfort to notice that his knees were dirty. Bill knew how very dirty his own knees became on the long journey from Melbourne to Cunjee. Dick did not offer to get out when at length they came to the gate of the homestead paddock: but Bill was honest enough to admit to himself that his own movement had been so quick that it scarcely gave Dick time to offer to open it. He knew, indeed, that he had sprung out of the car with an extra shade of haste, just to emphasize that it was his own job.

Then they were at the house, with Tommy and wee Davie running out to welcome the new-comers, the girls whisking Betty off to her room; and now he had to be host. He took Dick upstairs to his own room, where very special treasures hung on the walls: his own stock-whip, an old revolver, the boomerang and throwing-sticks that had been made for him by Billy the black “boy” who had served Billabong since his piccaninny days. There were grey streaks in Billy’s hair now, but nobody ever thought of him as anything but a

boy. Bill saw Dick's eyes go quickly to the trophies, but he said nothing.

"This is my room—we're sharing it," Bill said. "I'll show you where to put your clothes. Bathroom's just across the passage."

It was a jolly room, long and narrow, with a big window opening upon a wide balcony. There were two little easy-chairs of woven grass, two writing-tables, two chests of drawers, a wardrobe; but no beds.

"Where do we sleep?" Dick asked. He liked the room, but he was far too tongue-tied to say so.

"Oh, on the balcony, of course. Jim sleeps there, too, when he's home." A shadow came into Bill's eyes; one of the things that made it hard to welcome the stranger was the knowledge that when Jim came he would not be alone with him on the balcony for the long yarns in the early morning, the fun and companionship that Jim had given him so freely. It would be hard to share them with a third person. Very likely, he thought heavily, Jim would not want to yarn at all. But there was no sense in dwelling on that.

"I'll show you," he said.

They went out on the balcony. At one end was Jim's room, shut off with mosquito wire-netting: near it, his long bed, a hard narrow stretcher: then two small stretchers, side by side, covered with gay cotton spreads.

"I say, that's jolly nice!" Dick said. "I can't sleep out at home: there's a sleeping-porch, but the girls bagged it."

"It is rather jolly," said Bill, shortly. And Dick looked at him, and knew quite well he did not want him there.

Speech dried up under that knowledge. He was very silent as they washed and brushed in the bathroom. They went downstairs; Bill looked into a big drawing-room, and finding nobody, led the way through a window to the verandah. There was tea ready on a couple of tables; the only person in sight was an old woman, very fat, but surprisingly light of foot. She moved from one table to another, giving deft touches here and there. Turning, she saw the boys. Her broad face smiled hearteningly at the stranger.

"Here's Dick, Brownie," said Bill.

"An' very pleased everyone is to see you, Master Dick, I'm sure." Dick found his hand shaken warmly. Brownie, who had brought up the children of Billabong and was now carrying on the good work with Davie, had room in her heart for all things small and young; and she was quick to see that here was someone who had not yet found his feet. "I hope you're quite comferable in Master Bill's room—if there's anything you want, you just come to old Brownie for it. There's always a welcome in my kitchen."

Dick had not known kitchens where there was any welcome whatever. Somehow, however, the idea of a kitchen presided over by this motherly person seemed curiously inviting. He smiled back at her.

“Thanks—I’ll come, too,” he said.

Gay voices sounded, and the girls came out on the verandah. Dick found himself taken in charge by Tommy Rainham, who was small and dainty, with hair as fair as his own. She was English, he knew, and he hadn’t felt sure that he would like her. The only English person he knew was a boy at school who had unfortunately been so scornful of all things Australian that the fellows in his “dorm” had felt obliged to take strong measures with him. But Tommy seemed quite unlike this misfit. She was merry, talking quickly, putting him at his ease. Norah, too, was all that Dick summed up as “jolly decent.” He wondered why Jean had spoken so crushingly about her clothes. Perhaps her pale blue jumper and skirt were her best things, put on to welcome them. They looked all right, he thought. And the hot scones and home-made bread and butter, the bewildering variety of cakes, were marvellous, and he was awfully hungry—which everyone seemed to think was what he should be.

He felt very much better when tea was over. Bill had been cheerful, too, though too busy to talk much. Dick looked across the spreading paddocks, dotted with great red-gums. They stretched far away, ending in a dim blue line of hills; groups of cattle grazed here and there. Not far from the house he could catch a glimpse of a tree-fringed lagoon.

“What do you think of our country, Dick?” Norah asked, watching him.

“It’s—it’s awfully big and empty after Melbourne,” he said. “But it’s exciting—sort of Wild West feeling. Like what you see on the films.”

“We can’t live up to the films, I’m afraid,” she told him with a smile. “But we do have some excitement now and then. Bill, I think you had better take Dick and show him round the place.”

“All right,” said Bill, wishing he felt more inclined for the job. “Come on, Yorke.” He clattered down the verandah steps, and they dived into the shrubbery together.

CHAPTER IV

BILLABONG

DICK found that there was more to see than he had imagined. Big stables, the stalls empty of horses now; garage space for half a dozen cars; the great woolshed, dim and empty, but still smelling of sheep and wool and oil after the busy time of shearing. There was the shearers' sleeping-hut and cooking-shed; the engine-room, housing a silent engine that woke only once a year to drive the blades. He saw the heavily fenced stock-yards; listened while Bill described how the bullocks were brought in for drafting and branding; felt himself thrill at stories of wild scrub cattle that had to be subdued by the combined efforts of men and horses and dogs before they could be yarded. They climbed the high fence of the breaking-ring, perching on its rounded cap; he heard of buck-jumpers, and of the men who sat them, with half the population of Billabong sitting on the cap to watch the fun. "That's the time I like best of all," Bill said. "It's simply *great* when the young horses come in."

"Do the men get bucked off?"

"Mighty seldom. Sometimes a girth breaks, and then, of course, they go with the saddle. But they know how to fall—they're up again almost as soon as they touch the ground. I saw a man slung once; the horse he was on was simply mad, and he *did* go to market!"

"What's that?" asked Dick, puzzled.

"Oh, just bucked for all he was worth, and a bit more. He bucked himself clean out of the saddle—got it over his head somehow—I don't know yet how he did it. He just made a ball of himself in the air: got his head down between his forelegs, right under him. Didn't you ever see a horse buck?"

"No. I've only seen riding-school horses. They're a bit lively sometimes, but that's all."

"You can ride, though?"

"Well, I've learned." Dick felt that he must be prudent. In his riding-school he had been confident enough, but if Billabong expected him to ride buck-jumpers there might be shocks ahead for all concerned.

"Oh, we've got a quiet old pony for you," said Bill carelessly; and Dick did not know whether to feel relieved or annoyed. Perhaps Bill realized that his tone had not been all that could be desired, for he added, "At least, Norah reckoned you ought to try a pretty steady one first, just to see how you got on with him. She feels sort of responsible, you see."

"It's all one to me," said Dick, rather loftily; and conversation languished. They climbed down from the fence, and Bill headed for a long low building

overgrown with rambler roses.

“What’s that place?”

“Oh, that’s the men’s quarters. Murty O’Toole lives there—he’s the head stockman. Only he sleeps over the stables when Jim’s away. There’s a lot of men—Mick Shanahan an’ Dave Boone an’ Hogg—he’s the gardener—an’ Lee Wing——”

“What—a Chow?”

“Better not talk about him like that,” warned Bill sharply. “Old Lee Wing’s an awful good sort—been here ages, and everyone thinks no end of him. Anyhow, there’s only Murty here just now, and Hogg: all the others are out at the camp. We’ll see if Murty’s in his room.”

A tall old man was sitting by his door, polishing a pair of stirrup-irons. He got up quickly as they appeared.

“Is it Masther Dick you’re after bringin’, then?” he said; and Dick, looking at him, knew that here was a friend. “’Tis the heighth of luck for Masther Bill that you’ve been able to come; sure he wants somewan his own size to knock about with. It’ll be like ould times to see two boys rampagin’ over the place—we haven’t had that since Mr. Jim and Mr. Wally were small. An’ that’s not yesterday.”

“They’re not small now, Murty,” grinned Bill.

“Sure they are not. An’ I put Mr. Jim on his first pony when he was littler than wee Davie. An’ picked him up lots of times when he fell off—not that he ever liked bein’ picked up. That was the boy with a temper! An’ is it your first time on a station, Masther Dick?”

Dick nodded. “It’s pretty jolly, I think.”

“You’ll think that all right, when you get into the ways of it. Everywan has to settle down a bit at first—but you’ve a good mate to show you the ropes. Masther Bill’s well broken in now, but he was as wild as a hare itself at first.”

Bill would hardly have described his first weeks at Billabong in that way, and he reddened slightly. Then he grinned—nobody could take offence at old Murty.

“He’s been showing me lots of things,” said Dick. “I’d love to see some buck-jumpers.”

“Would ye now? Well, it might be; leastways I know Mr. Wally wants a young horse handled. Only he’s pretty busy just now. Anyhow, I’ll remember—there’s more than wan youngster that ’ud be a thrifle onaisy if he found a saddle on his back for the first time. Remember that grey colt, Masther Bill—that wan ’ud do some buckin’ if we cot him.”

“He would so,” said Bill eagerly. “I say, Murty, do you think Mick would ride him when he comes in?”

“When they come in—yerra, Billabong’ll be itself again then,” said old

Murty. His face had clouded. "It's glad I'll be when that time comes."

"So'll I," said Bill. "Oh, it won't be very long now, Murty."

Dick wondered what they meant, as they walked on, leaving the old Irishman to his burnishing, but he did not like to ask. And there were other things to see: model pigsties, which didn't interest him at all, cowsheds where everything was so clean, so sparkling with white paint that he almost expected to see the cows in silk frocks. Silken they certainly were: sleek Jerseys, standing meekly while being milked by a black-boy. Bill greeted him with a friendly, "Hullo, Billy!" The black glanced up, showing two rows of gleaming teeth, startlingly white in his dusky face. Dick felt that the glance took him in from head to heels. He had never before seen a black-fellow, and he wasn't quite sure if he should greet this one. But, having made one mistake in speaking of a Chinese as a Chow, he decided to be careful; and Billy's smile was infectious. He grinned in response and said "Hullo!"

"Plenty glad l'il Mas'r come," said Billy in a great hurry, looking pleased. He dug his head into the cow's side and went on milking.

"Is he a good sort?" asked Dick as they went outside.

"Billy? I should just about say he is! Jolly good rider an' everything; an' I reckon he'd kill anyone who tried to do any harm to one of the Lintons. He and I are pals—he made me those native weapons I've got in my room. Did you see 'em?"

"Yes—rather! Can you throw them?"

"Not extra well," admitted Bill. "It's awfully hard for anyone except a native. But he's teaching me."

Dick wondered if he might be allowed to share the lessons. It seemed suddenly to him to be a most desirable thing to learn: something out of the ordinary to be able to boast of at school. Bill, however, said nothing. He was already thinking of other matters.

"Now I'll show you something really exciting!" he said.

He led the way through an orchard. They climbed the fence and came out upon a long clear space of closely cropped grass—part of a paddock surrounded by very low wire fencing. At one end a tall pole held an object that fluttered in the light breeze, at the sight of which Dick pulled up with an exclamation of surprise.

"A wind-sock! You don't mean to say they've got a plane!"

"Two!" said Bill, rather dashed at having his surprise anticipated by the wind-indicator. "You just come an' look."

He raced towards sheds that stood against the fence, Dick at his heels. They tugged open the heavy doors. "There you are!"

"My hat!" breathed Dick, peering at the dim shape within. "Pretty big, isn't she. I say, who flies her? Jim Linton?"

“No—he hasn’t learned yet. Though he does know a bit about it,” added Bill, to whom it was pain to admit that Jim was lacking in any knowledge. “She isn’t his, you know: she belongs to a friend of his called Freddy Paxton. An’ the other’s Jack Young’s: she’s the *Planet*, an’ this one’s the *Kestrel*.”

“Let’s look at the other.” They dashed to the next shed and gazed rapturously at the second plane.

“I s’pose we couldn’t get into her,” sighed Dick.

“Well, I’m let, ’cause I promised I wouldn’t touch anything. But——”

“I wouldn’t touch a thing,” begged Dick. “True as death I wouldn’t.”

“Well, I expect they’d let you. But you’ll have to be jolly careful. They’d just about skin me if they found anything wrong.”

They climbed in. Dick sat in the pilot’s seat, quivering with suppressed joy. Bill did not stay long.

“Oh, it’s pretty slow to be just sitting in one when you’re used to it. I’ve been up in them both—dozens of times.” He climbed out, Dick following him with reluctance. “I s’pose you’ve never been up?”

“Yes, I have—but only a little bit of a flip. I loved it, though.”

“They let Billy and me clean them—engines and all!” stated Bill proudly. The effect on Dick was all that he had hoped.

“They never! Golly, you’re lucky! Is it hard?”

“Oh, not when you know how. Takes a bit of learning, of course,” Bill said carelessly. “Freddy and Jack are awfully particular.”

Deep longing to share in so glorious a work racked Dick. He tried not to show his envy.

“Is there anyone else who can fly them?”

“There’s Bob Rainham, of course. He’s Tommy’s brother. They’ve got a place a bit away from Billabong. Bob’s really the swaggerest pilot of the lot, ’cause he was in the English Air Force in the War. He was awfully young then, but he knocked out heaps of enemy planes. Freddy was in the War too, but he didn’t get the medals an’ things Bob did. Bob wants a plane of his own more’n anything else in the world. I expect he’ll be able to buy one—now. Freddy an’ Jack use theirs for looking over their stations.”

“They don’t live here, then?”

“Oh, no. They just hopped down from Queensland to help. They’re out at the camp.” Bill stopped suddenly, as if he were saying too much. Dick looked at him curiously.

“We’d better shut up the sheds,” Bill said.

He rammed the heavy bolts home carefully.

“You’ve got a jolly nice aerodrome,” Dick commented.

“Pretty good. We fenced it, an’ then we turned in a whole mob of sheep an’ they ate the grass right down to the ground. Then we put them out, and we

mowed the runway. Billy keeps it mown. He just loves the planes.”

He paused, knitting his brows.

“I was just wondering if I’d shown you everything. Oh, there’s the lagoon; it’s rather jolly. We can cut across here.”

He dived through the fence and headed towards the red-flowering gums that grew near the water. A cloud of birds rose as the boys approached it, but not in fear; they did not fly far.

“My word, what a lot!” exclaimed Dick.

“Yes, it’s a bird sanctuary. Mr. Linton won’t have a gun fired within coo-ee of the lagoon. They’re awfully tame. Can you swim?”

“‘Course I can.” Dick was nettled: it was not a question to put to a boy of his age, and of his School. “I could swim nearly before I could walk.”

“Oh!” said Bill—who could not have said as much. “I only asked you ’cause no one who can’t is allowed to go in the boat without a grown-up.”

“It’s a big enough old tub,” Dick said, looking at the boat lying beside a little jetty that ran out from a wooden shed.

“It’s a jolly good boat,” returned Bill. “Has to be big, because we dive off her. We swim here every morning. Sometimes we bring tea down in the evening an’ have a bathing picnic. That’s fun.”

“It would be,” Dick agreed. He strolled on to the shed, looking at the spring-boards that ran out over the water. Within were dressing-rooms: a verandah was cluttered with folding chairs and a table. Evidently Billabong used the lagoon thoroughly.

“Over beyond those trees is where Norah and Wally and Davie live,” Bill said, pointing to where a glimpse of a house could be seen. “That’s Little Billabong. Only they don’t live there much now, ’cause of everyone being away: Norah says it’s easier if everyone’s at Big Billabong, when there’s so much work about sending food out to the camp.”

“What’s the camp?” asked Dick, devoured by curiosity.

“Oh, just where they’re camping,” replied Bill; and seemed to think he had explained matters sufficiently. “We can’t see the horses to-night—they’re all turned out in the big paddock. Billy’ll bring ’em in to-morrow morning.”

“Don’t they ever mix you up, with him being Billy and you Bill?” asked Dick incautiously. He met a blank stare.

“No, they don’t. Why should they?”

Silence fell. Bill swept the landscape with his eyes, as if trying to remember any further points about Billabong; and found none.

“Well, I think that’s about all,” he said with an air of relief. “I vote we go back to the house.”

They went home without speaking. Three pairs of eyes raked them from the verandah as they came, and each of the girls knew that so far there might

be companionship, but certainly not comradeship. The explorers sank heavily into chairs, their faces showing that while they were not very glad to be anywhere, it was better to be in a crowd.

Matters were eased by the arrival of little Davie. Dick had not yet reached the age of considering it beneath his dignity to play with the very young: he frankly liked this small friendly person who adopted him at sight. He and Kim, the old sheep-dog which rarely left Davie, also made friends; the three were presently rolling on the lawn together. Bill made no attempt to join them. He sat looking glum for a time, and then slipped away.

"I must unpack," said Betty regretfully. "Not that I have the slightest wish to leave this verandah." She raised her voice, calling to her brother.

"Dick! What about your unpacking?"

"Can't come now," he called back from the lawn. "This chap won't get off my chest!"

"Well, come to my room when he gets tired of you." She went off, contented at seeing him happy: his expression as he came home had not been reassuring.

"It's going to be really awkward if those two youngsters don't get on well together," she thought, as she attacked her luggage.

"Such a pity, too—we could have a lovely time here, I know. I'm so glad Jean didn't want to come!"

She had almost finished when a tap came at the door.

"Can I come in, Betty?" Dick entered, somewhat dishevelled. "Want me to help?"

"We'll see to your things presently. Sit down, if you can find anywhere to sit—yes, you can move those things. What do you think of Billabong?"

"Topping place," he said.

"And Bill?"

There was a pause.

"Oh—I dunno. Rum chap."

Betty glanced at his downcast face.

"It's a bit early to judge, Dick. Very likely he isn't the kind of fellow who makes friends easily."

"I've got a feeling he just doesn't want to," said Dick. "I bet you he never wanted me to come here. Gosh, it was beastly some of the time going round with him to-day. He showed me everything, of course, but . . ."

"Yes, Dicky?"

"Well, just as if he knew he had to. Made me feel jolly small. 'S if he owned everything himself and I was a regular outsider."

"Little beast!" said Betty hastily.

"Too right he was," agreed Dick. "Do we have to stay here weeks an'

weeks, Bet?"

Betty realized that her tongue had run away with her.

"We certainly shan't stay if you're not having a good time——" she began.

"I'll never have that!"

"But we can't run away in a hurry, you know. Go slow for a few days. Bill may wake up feeling quite different to-morrow. He can't really be a beast, or Norah and Tommy wouldn't like him. And they do."

"They haven't got much sense then."

"Well, they seem to have a good deal. And they're awfully keen for you to have a jolly time here. Just do your best to get on with Bill, and we'll see how things work out."

"Oh, I'll stick it as long as I can," said the boy. "It's not so bad if I know we really needn't stay a dickens of a time. And everyone's nice, barring Bill. Betty, what's the secret about the camp?"

"Why do you think it's a secret?" she countered.

"Well, every time Bill said anything about it he suddenly shut up like an oyster. I asked him straight out once, an' he made me feel I'd put my foot in it. Didn't tell me anything, either."

"I suppose he has been told he is not to talk too much," Betty said. "But there's no harm in telling you as much as I know. It seems that they have found gold in some country where they run scrub cattle in the ranges. They don't know yet what it's worth, so all the men are busy opening it up. And they are keeping it quiet, because if they let it be known, the whole place will be overrun with the sort of people they don't want."

"Golly!" Dick's eyes shone. "There'd be a gold-rush?"

"Yes. And that would be no fun for Billabong. You see, a gold-rush attracts some good people, but a far greater number of really bad ones."

"I know—two-gun men, and gamblers and horse-thieves, and all that lot," he said eagerly, with the expert knowledge that comes from the cinema.

"Well, we're not exactly in the Wild West, old man," Betty laughed. "Still, there would be plenty of unpleasant people. The Lintons nearly had bad trouble with some of the shearers who were here last month; but they managed to avoid it. And now Norah and Tommy are a bit worried because Jim has sent them word that they can't come home this week-end, as they usually do; and he doesn't want the girls to go out to the camp. Evidently there is something unusual going on. So it's just as well you and I are here, Dicky, to help them to take their minds off things."

"I say, will there be any fighting?" he asked, wide-eyed. "Here?"

"Heavens, no! There isn't any chance of people coming through Billabong. Even if they did hear of the gold, it's easier to reach that country from the north. Nobody has any idea of fighting—just you get the Wild West out of

your mind, Dick. The Billabong men will have to be on the watch to see that nobody tries to jump their claims, that's all. That worries the girls, because so far they have looked on the whole business as rather fun; and now it is beginning to look like something more serious. And the Lintons do hate being serious!"

"Well, I think it all sounds jolly exciting," Dick stated. "I do hope, if fights do come, that I'll see some. Does Bill know all about it?"

"Pretty well all. Bill seems to have been mixed up in it from the very first."

"I wish he'd talk about it to me," mourned Dick. "Can I tell him I know?"

"Better not, until he speaks of it. He may have had his orders. You might remember, Dicky, if things are difficult, that perhaps Bill is a bit worried, too. He just worships Jim, Norah says, and he doesn't like being cut off from him."

Dick considered this.

"Well, I reckon it would be nicer for him if he let me into it a bit," he said. "It would be fun if we were both in it. All right, Bet, I'll do my best not to hit him when I'm dying to!"

CHAPTER V

MCGILL

“I ’M dead sick of this! Did you ever see such God-forsaken country, Todd?”

“No. Nor I hope I never won’t again,” said the individual addressed. “Nor have a moke like this to haul round it. C’m up, you brute!”

He jerked violently at his horse’s bridle, catching a sapling with his free hand to pull himself up a stony rise. The horse followed with a scramble: then the ground gave way under its hind-legs and it slithered back down the hill, dragging Todd with it. On the lower level they crashed into several other horses and the men who held them: their arrival was unpopular, and a scene of general confusion and heated language followed, horses plunging wildly in the struggle to keep their footing.

“Well, you needn’t sling off at me,” objected Todd, when something like order had been restored. “I never asked to climb up the side of a young mountain. An’ I don’t believe there’s any good in it, either. We’ll be wanderin’ round here all night, if you ask me. Have you got any idea at all about where you’re makin’ for, McGill? ’Cause if you have, you might as well be the one to go ahead an’ break a track.”

He looked angrily at a huge, thick-set man who leaned against a tree, his arm through his horse’s bridle. McGill turned a cold eye upon him.

“I’ve got no more idea than you have. All I’ve been told was to head south-west after we got into the hill country, an’ I’m doin’ my best to do that. I didn’t reckon on bringin’ out people that needed nursin’ an’ lookin’ after. Some of us are leadin’ pack-horses as well as their own—you an’ Henry have only got one apiece. What are you grumblin’ about?”

At the threat in his voice Todd grew more subdued.

“Well, but what’s the use? We seem to be gettin’ into worse an’ worse places. We’ve camped in these hills two nights already; if it goes on we’ll have all our tucker eaten up before we ever see the blessed gold-mine.”

“That’s true enough,” said another man. “The horses are beginning to knock up, too. It’s your show, McGill, but you don’t know as much about horses as some of us do.”

“Too right you don’t,” said a lean bushman. “If you did you wouldn’t risk a pack-horse’s laigs on places like this unless you had to. It ain’t sense.”

Low growls of assent showed that the majority of the men supported the speaker.

“Well, what’s your idea, Mooney?” McGill asked sullenly. “Got one, I

suppose?”

“My idea is that one man had better do the scoutin’ round for a track. I don’t mind bein’ the one; my horse is handier than most of the others. If you chaps like I’ll get up to the highest peak I can climb, an’ take a look-see. With any luck I ought to be able to spot smoke somewhere. These minin’ fellows must have camp-fires.”

“If they aren’t all a dream!” put in another. “I’m beginnin’ to think McGill’s been had with a tall yarn.”

McGill swung round upon him with a threatening gesture. The man stood his ground.

“Oh, you can hit me, I suppose, McGill—it’s your game, isn’t it? But it won’t do you any sort of good; you can’t afford to have any of us clear out on you. An’ there’s more than one of us will clear out if you keep on makin’ the mistake that you can bully us. Are you dead sure you can trust whoever it was put you on to this business?”

McGill swallowed his anger, forcing himself to answer with something like civility.

“Do you think I’d have come if I hadn’t been sure? I can trust him all right; only he couldn’t give me clearer directions to start with. Well, what say we get down to level ground an’ let Mooney do his bit of scoutin’?”

The men agreed enthusiastically; anything was better than fruitless scrambling through the hills. Mooney waited only to cram some food into his pockets, and to tie a quart-pot to his saddle.

“Goin’ to be out all night?” asked Henry dolefully.

“Y’ never know,” said the bushman. “It’s as well to be on the safe side, anyhow.” He rode away into the scrub.

The men had a rough meal, played cards, smoked and slept. McGill walked up and down the little stretch of level ground, brooding uneasily. He was more anxious than he cared to admit. He had taken a chance in coming into unknown country on comparatively slight information—a chance word dropped in the bar of a Sydney hotel by a man whose record, McGill knew, was of the kind described as “well known to the police.” He had been working as a shearer: he knew gold had been found in the hills south of Broad’s Creek. But when McGill had proposed an expedition he had been almost fervent in his refusal to accompany it.

“Not me: I’m not popular there. But you go, mate. There’s something in it, true as life!”

It was not the first time they had had dealings together; McGill did not believe that he would put him on a wrong scent. “What would he gain by it?” he asked himself, pacing up and down the scrub-ringed patch. “Alf’s never been anything but straight with me, whatever else he’s done. I reckon he

knows better.” His fist clenched as he pondered on what he would hope to do to Alf if he found that he had sent him on a wild-goose chase. “Oh, rot!” he muttered. “He’d never dare.” For the hundredth time he looked at his watch and longed for a sign of Mooney’s return.

It came while the men were still sleeping in the hot sun. A stick cracked under a horse’s hoof; there was a crashing in the scrub as Mooney forced his horse through it. He jogged towards McGill, his face showing satisfaction.

“Any luck?”

“Yairs, it’s O.K.,” drawled the bushman. “I seen a smoke as soon as I got up the peak. Not much, but it’s south-west: I reckon it must be the place. Then I scouted round to see if I couldn’t pick up a track; and sure enough, I did. I believe we’d have found it sooner if we’d taken the straight line from Broad’s Creek, only you had your own notions about that. Anyway, it’s a passable track; there’s more than one horse been over it. Got any tea? I could do with a drink.”

The men came to life with renewed spirits. Packs were adjusted, riding-horses saddled, while Mooney squatted beside the embers of the fire and boiled up black tea. They whistled and sang as they followed him into the bush.

It was hard going for a while, but there was no more grumbling now that something definite lay ahead. Sooner than they had expected they came to the track. It was not well-defined, but hoof-marks were plainly visible, and the scrub had been broken aside here and there.

“An’ to think it was as near as this!” said Henry.

“Blimey, we might a’ wandered in the bush for ever without strikin’ it, the way we were headin’ this morning. Wonder if it’s the right one?”

“Well, it’s bound to lead somewhere,” said Mooney. “And there can’t be more than one settlement in here, I reckon.” He took the lead; they pushed on.

It was late afternoon before they came in sight of the clearing. A low whistle of astonishment broke from Mooney.

“Well, I guess your dream’s a pretty solid one, McGill!”

“Too right it is,” McGill uttered. “Whoever’s managin’ this show knows his business.”

The track had led them to the east of the mining area. They looked across the cleared space with its orderly lines of pegs, quick to notice that as yet there had been no digging on any of the outer claims. In the middle a shallow creek ran: beyond it, at its widest part, they could see washing troughs and sluice-boxes, walled in from the landward side by a fence of stout saplings and thickly woven bush. Another such fence enclosed the space from which a derrick rose: the yellow mullock-heaps showed them that a shaft was hidden in the enclosure. From it a pony moved slowly down the slope to the creek,

drawing a cart heaped with wash-dirt.

Men were working at the creek, bending over the long troughs; others were shovelling mullock near the shaft. McGill looked about him, scanning tents that showed no signs of life; then up to the plateau under the cliff, from which a thin trail of smoke drifted. There a squat figure moved about. "Looks like a Chow," he muttered contemptuously; and did not dream that the slant eyes of the man in the flapping overalls had seen him from the moment he had emerged from the scrub; were watching him jealously now.

"Look over there, Mac." Mooney jerked his arm towards the southern end of the clearing. "Looks like we ain't the first visitors. Those blokes are peggin' out new ground."

McGill turned, and swore softly. It was clear that the men he saw were newly arrived. Horses, still bearing packs, were tied to a sapling: men were working swiftly with measuring-lines, driving pegs at intervals.

"They've got ahead of us, it seems," he said. "Well, there's plenty of ground left yet, boys. We might as well go an' have a word with them."

They rode across the clearing, halting by the pack-horses. The man with the line had finished his task and was coiling it up. He glanced at them sharply.

"This section's pegged."

"So I see," returned McGill pleasantly. "We'll keep off your boundary, mate. I see you've got a bit of the creek."

"You bet we have," was the curt answer.

"Know anything about the ground?"

"Don't know a thing meself. The old bloke up at the main camp advised us to peg here. He's the boss of the crowd that's got all this." He swept his hand in a comprehensive gesture that included all the clearing.

"He didn't welcome you, I'll bet."

"I wasn't lookin' for welcomes. Got to get busy now." He turned on his heel and strode off.

"Well, we'd better ride up an' see this boss he talks about," said McGill.

They rode past the shaft, peering with sharp curiosity over the brush fence. The workers at the mullock-heaps did not look up; Billabong stockmen, they seethed with useless resentment at the invasion. Before they reached the plateau two tall men came from it to meet them.

"Good day." The voices were quiet and courteous.

"You the boss here?" McGill asked.

"This land is part of our out-station."

"No private ownership where gold's concerned, I reckon," snapped McGill. "We've got as much right to dig as you have. Want to see our miners' rights?"

"Oh, no. I'm not a policeman. The police will see to all that later on, I

expect. Did you want to see me?"

"Well . . ." McGill was a little taken aback. "The chap down there said we'd better. But I reckon we'll just start peggin' out ground."

"I've no authority about that, except where our claims are concerned. But you can't make any mistake as to them. They are all secured in proper form." David Linton's keen grey eyes travelled round the group, noting each hard-bitten face. "I will be quite frank with you about your chances, if you like."

"Oh—will you?" The tone was suspicious. "Well, heave ahead, Boss."

"There have been prospectors in these hills as long as I can remember. We are the first to find gold in any payable quantity, and we stumbled on it by accident. We are not experts; but our advisers are inclined to think that what we have struck is a pocket, formed by volcanic action long ago when a wall of rock was thrown across the gully running down from here. We have blasted away a good deal of the rock, finding a certain amount of gold. We are now exploring farther, in the hope of finding a reef." He paused. "Is that clear?"

"Clear as mud," grunted McGill. "Means you've had all the luck."

"That's as may be. The point I want you to understand is that there is a very strong chance that the gold is held only in this area in the middle of our claims. If there is a reef—and that's very uncertain—it probably originated under the cliff. There is a cave—you can see the mouth—where we have protected ourselves by pegging also. I don't want you to think you've struck another Coolgardie. There's a probability that the whole thing may never amount to much, and that anyone working beyond our ground may get nothing."

"And you expect me to believe that, do you?"

Jim Linton moved restlessly. His father's voice, however, sounded faintly amused.

"Most certainly I don't. You know nothing about us: I should be a fool if I expected you to believe that I was telling the truth. And you would be fools if, having come so far, you didn't try your luck. But we consider that it's only decent to warn you, as we shall warn everyone who comes. For their own sakes I hope there won't be very many."

McGill looked black. From his men came discontented growls.

"Well, I may be all wrong," said the squatter, with a faint smile. "Go ahead, anyhow: except for the people who came to-day you're the first to have a chance. Have you made any arrangements about tucker?"

"We've brought a lot." McGill nodded towards his pack-horses.

"Well, you can't get any nearer than Broad's Creek when you need more."

"That's a deuce of a way to go. Rough travellin', too."

"Yes. But you won't be any worse off than the old prospectors; they all had to get there. And not all of them had pack-horses."

“What about the south? No township there?”

“Nothing nearer than Cunjee, and that’s more than twice as far as Broad’s Creek. Our station lies between here and Cunjee—the main property. This rough country is where we run store bullocks. There is no road through to Cunjee.”

“H’m,” said McGill, turning the unwelcome information over in his mind. “Oh, I reckon we’ll manage. Anything else?”

“You’ll find plenty of good water; there are springs in various places, as well as creeks. Snakes everywhere, so I should advise you to watch out. We can’t say we’re pleased that strangers have come, but if people give us a fair deal we want to keep on good terms with everyone. One thing I should like to ask you—we’ve a lot of cattle in the hills, and we don’t want them driven about unnecessarily. Of course we shall have to move them if a rush comes; meanwhile we should like to get ahead with our work here, not waste time mustering them.”

“Right you are. We’ll remember.”

“And I’m sure I needn’t warn you about fire. It’s the easiest thing in the world to start a bush-fire if people aren’t careful.”

“That ’ud take the shine out of your bullocks,” said McGill, with a grin.

“We should probably lose them all. But we wouldn’t be the only ones to suffer: every man who comes here would be hit. Creeks poisoned by carcasses, tracks blocked everywhere. You wouldn’t enjoy struggling across the hills through a wilderness of burned timber every time you had to go to Broad’s Creek!”

“My oath, we wouldn’t!” put in Mooney fervently. “I reckon I know what it is to have to get through burned country.”

McGill turned on him angrily.

“Reckon you’re the only one who knows anything, don’t you?”

“Not me, Boss,” was the cheerful answer. “But I know *that*.”

McGill swung himself back with a snarl. He found Jim Linton looking at him steadily, his face quite expressionless. For a long moment the two huge men stared at each other. Then McGill’s eyes dropped.

“Well, we’d better make a move if we want to get our ground pegged out before it gets dark,” he grunted.

“Very wise of you,” was David Linton’s calm answer. “There may be quite a lot more of you here by the morning!”

He stood watching as the band rode away. Not until they had left the pegged ground did he turn back to the plateau.

“Keep an eye on those fellows, Lee Wing, and let me know where they peg.”

“All li’, Boss.” The Chinese went off noiselessly. David Linton sat down

on a log and looked up at his son.

“Our new friend is rather a nasty piece of work, I think, Jim.”

“Fine specimen of an unhung ruffian, I should say,” agreed Jim. “Wally was right: they’re a tough crowd altogether. The first gang were choir-boys compared to them. Did you notice the leader’s ear, Dad?”

“I did. Not pretty. Legacy of the prize-ring, evidently.”

Jim nodded.

“Yes; fine cauliflower ear. I wouldn’t have minded being the man who gave it to him. Heavy-weight boxer a bit gone to seed, I should call him. We wouldn’t be badly matched, Dad, he and I.”

“You’re lighter, though you may be a bit taller. I couldn’t be certain without seeing him standing up. Are you thinking of taking him on, Jim?” asked his father placidly.

Jim laughed.

“I might have my hands full. But I felt I wouldn’t dislike a few quiet moments with him. There was no love at first sight between that warrior and me.”

“Keep out of his way,” advised Mr. Linton. “The last thing we want is unpleasantness of any kind, especially with a gang of that description. Not a decent face in the lot. Heigho! I’m afraid our good days of mining are over, son. I wonder what the next invasion will be like.”

“Don’t worry,” grinned Jim. “We’ve struck bedrock in that line this evening—the next lot can’t possibly be as bad.”

CHAPTER VI

PERSONAL CONTACT

TOMMY and Norah stood on the flat roof of Little Billabong, having come over on a visit of inspection while Betty wrote a duty letter home. It would not be a long letter, she had assured them: very soon she would follow them to Norah's house.

They had wandered through the empty rooms, finding them depressingly tidy and lonely. In Davie's nursery a Teddy bear, with one ear and a hole through which stuffing stuck out, sat on the floor and looked at them as if he were the guardian of the place.

"Ugh, it's all different!" said Norah, screwing up her face. "Come up aloft, Tommy: I can't breathe down here!"

They leaned over the railing and watched a couple of ponies walk slowly down the hill from the stables of the big house, showing that Bill and Dick had come home after a ride. Presently they saw the two boys sauntering through the trees.

"Not tea-time yet—and they don't quite know what to do with themselves," said Norah. "Tommy, I'm afraid this isn't going to be a success."

"I am beginning to feel anxious," admitted Tommy. "Why is it? They ought to suit each other so well."

"I wish I knew. Dick is a nice little chap; I like him—well, everyone does. And Bill is . . . just manfully trying to do his duty by him!"

"Yes, and isn't it an awful sight! Bill trying to speak like your father, suggesting suitable things for the guest to do. And the poor guest responding politely!"

"And each with as much expression as a wax-work. If they would only stop calling each other Yorke and Blake it would be less painful. I tried to suggest to Bill that it was slightly formal, and he withered me by saying people did it at school. So of course I felt a mere woman, dealing with things too great for me. What can we do, Thomas?"

"I should like to knock both their heads together," said Tommy with unusual fierceness.

"Meaning the heads of Dicky and Bill? Well, at least it would be one way of establishing personal contact!" said a rueful voice. They turned hastily, a little embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," Betty said—"I forgot I was wearing tennis-shoes, so that I came on you like a thief in the night. But it doesn't matter, does it? We've all been thinking the same thing." She smiled at them.

“We’re worried, Betty,” Norah told her. “When two perfectly normal small boys continue to be icily courteous to each other, something ought to be done about it. But we don’t know how to take action.”

“I keep thinking it can’t possibly last,” said Betty. “If it does, then of course I’d have to take Dick home. But——”

“Oh, you *can’t!*” exclaimed Norah and Tommy in one voice; and Betty looked from one to the other, very much wishing to stay.

“We just love having you both,” Norah said. “It’s the very nicest thing that you came, Betty. And we can’t bear to think that Dick isn’t happy: we keep thinking that the ice will break.”

“Well, I thought that at first,” said Betty. “But the days go on, and it freezes harder. Oh, aren’t small boys queer—and aggravating!”

“They’re funny creatures,” Norah agreed. There seemed no more to be said. With puzzled faces they looked helplessly at the boys, still visible in the lower branches of a tree, climbing listlessly.

It had not been a successful day, Bill knew; but then no days were any good now. He didn’t quite know why. The new boy wasn’t a fool—didn’t do silly things: he had to admit that. He rode quite decently: he swam better than Bill himself. The last rather rankled: Dick’s diving was far beyond anything he could do. He didn’t know anything at all about cattle, though, and really very little about horses. Well, you couldn’t expect him to, of course: he had had no chances. He asked Murty lots about them, but after the first day he had not asked Bill. Bill, in the moments when he was frank with himself, knew why.

He had been fairly honest in his mind, thinking things over the night before when they were in bed on the balcony. A slow business, now, that going to bed: none of the fun there used to be when, even if Jim were away, the girls used to come out, pretending he needed tucking up, which of course was only rot, but making no end of a jolly time about it, so that he often went to sleep still laughing. They left him alone now that Dick was there, to roll into bed in a dull fashion, each mumbling “G’night.”

It was queer how difficult it was to get to sleep after that. Last night it was ages before sleep came. Uncomfortable thoughts came to him, making him twist and turn long after Dick’s quiet breathing told that he was more peaceful. Out there on the balcony, where Jim and he had had so many straight talks, talks of the kind that helped a boy who had to fight a bad temper, it was easy to remember some of the things Jim said. They crowded into his mind, almost as if Jim’s quiet voice was speaking slowly. Not the sort of things to make him feel comfortable—now.

Jim never preached at him—he hated what he called pi-jaw. Always Bill felt in their talks that they were just discussing things, as man to man. Difficulties—not only Bill’s; the sort of difficulties every fellow had, little or

big. Jim had them himself, which was one of the things that made it so easy to yarn with him. It put them on the same footing.

They talked about Fear sometimes. Jim hated it more than anything, and of course Bill considered that was natural; no one had any time for a coward. But Jim had ideas about fear that rather surprised him. He thought so many things were forms of it. Cruelty, for instance: Bill had argued against that, but Jim had stuck to his belief. "A cruel person is always a coward, right in his heart," he had said.

There was sense in that, Bill saw, when he thought it over; and Jim had no use for anyone who wouldn't take the trouble to think things out. That didn't mean that he expected you to agree with him always. He liked a fellow to have a mind of his own, not a mind of someone else's making. "But *use* your mind," he would say. "Make the thing do its job!"

There was something else that Jim was very certain was a kind of fear. That was—jealousy. Bill wriggled unhappily in his bed as he remembered. Jim believed it with all his heart.

"It's *always* fear. The chap who is jealous is just afraid of something; afraid of losing, afraid that the other fellow is a better man than he is, afraid that he's going to miss the mark somehow. Bill, old chap, there's a lot in facing up to the real meaning of a thing. I've known people who simply despised fear; but they let themselves be jealous—and never realized it *was* fear. If it could have been brought home to them, they'd have tackled it. You think it over."

Always Jim's words—"You think it over." And because to young Bill Blake Jim meant everything that was brave and jolly and generous, he had thought it over as honestly as he could last night, and had seen where it hit him. He *was* jealous: unwilling to admit any other boy into the place he had won for himself at Billabong.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "An' that means I'm just funkng."

He made up his mind to do something about it. It was one thing to go about thinking you were just calm and proud, determined to act the good host, no matter how much you hated it; but it was quite another matter to boil down that dignified attitude to pure funk. He knew that if he looked at it from that angle things would get better. So he felt relieved, and promptly fell asleep.

But it wasn't so easy in the morning. For one thing, he forgot all about his good resolves for a while; he woke late, finding Dick already in his bathing-suit, so that Bill suspected that he had meant to go down to the lagoon without waking him. That was irritating; so was the fact that he fell perfectly flat in his first dive. The smarting of his body was less sharp than the conviction that Dick had laughed. He was very proud and calm as they trotted back to the house. Then, while brushing his hair he suddenly remembered. He looked at

himself in the glass with disfavour.

“Won’t do. I’ve got to get a move on.”

Such moves do not always come to order, especially when you have built a hard shell round yourself. Bill found that he was tongue-tied. The pleasant things he had planned to say simply would not frame themselves. Unluckily, too, Dick seemed less approachable than usual: he had begun to feel indignant as well as bored, and he saw no reason why he should continue to be long-suffering. He argued several points more or less warmly during the morning; snapped angrily at him once or twice; refused bluntly to come out, saying he would rather read. And, in the peculiar way of boys, Bill, even though he found it hard to keep his temper, liked him better than he had done yet!

They rode in the afternoon, but it was not a joy-ride. Bill felt resentful; Dick, having once begun to assert himself, found that it was more satisfying than being meek. He had a feeling of guilt when he remembered that Betty would be troubled if they came to open warfare, but after all, sisters didn’t know everything, and he was sick of knuckling under. Therefore, politeness fell from him, and he felt regrettably cheerful, even if guilty. With bewilderment Bill realized that the guest was actually jeering at some of his remarks. That was hard to bear; it was very much harder when he criticized Topsy, the black pony Bill regarded as beyond any pony that had ever looked through a bridle. He held himself in; but they finished the ride in silent hostility.

That wouldn’t do, Bill knew. He made a laborious effort to improve matters when they had let the ponies go.

“Too early for tea. Say we go and climb trees.”

Bill loved climbing, and he had already proved that the guest equalled him at it. Dick agreed without any enthusiasm; they strolled to a red-gum with the wide-flung branches that made a climber’s paradise and went up it easily. But it was poor fun to scramble round a tree with anyone with whom you were not really matey. They sat in the lower branches, exchanging occasional monosyllables. When Dick got up and began to climb higher Bill did not follow.

Something floated down past his face; he glanced at it and saw that it was a fragment of a bird’s nest that he knew. He had shown it to Dick when he first came, telling him, for no particular reason, that it was not to be touched. His temper flamed suddenly as he looked up and saw that Dick was pulling it to pieces.

“Hi!” he shouted. “You leave that nest alone!”

“What for?” Another fragment fell.

“ ’Cause I said so. It’s my nest.”

“Never saw you using it,” returned Dick with a grin. “Who gave it to you,

anyhow?"

"Never you mind who gave it to me. You just keep your hands off it." He jumped up angrily, beginning to climb.

"It's only a rotten old nest," called Dick. "What good's it to anybody?"

"You don't know a single thing about nests. The bird may come back to lay again."

"Well, she can jolly well build herself another if she does," Dick said defiantly. "Did'ums want its nest, then—here, take it!" The remainder of the nest hurtled through the branches, and Bill took it—full in the face.

The next couple of minutes were spent in spitting and spluttering. Some of the nest had gone into his eyes: when at length he had rubbed them clear it was to see Dick, choking with laughter, swinging down on the opposite side of the tree. Bill went in hot pursuit. His opponent, however, having reached the ground, stood waiting for him. They glared at each other.

"You hit me on purpose!"

"No, I didn't—it was just luck." He giggled. "You did look funny!"

"I'll make you look funny if you don't watch your step!" choked Bill.

"Will you? You just try!"

"You look funnier than I did, with that silly grin on your ugly face!"

"Couldn't be done—old carrot-head!"

That was the last, the most deadly, insult that could be offered Bill. The temper that goes with red hair flamed into action. He made a rush and smote his adversary heavily on the nose.

Dick retaliated with a quick left that landed on his eye, making him see a bewildering number of stars. They went at each other hammer and tongs; each boy knew something of boxing, and after the first wild moment the battle raged in a furious silence only broken by panting breaths and the thud of hard young fists. They were evenly matched, and far too angry to feel pain: blow after blow found its mark, blood streaming from both noses. Once they went into a clinch and wrestled savagely; flung apart, and the fists rattled again.

From the roof of Little Billabong three amazed ladies watched with the deepest interest.

"Ought we—*must* we interfere?" breathed Betty.

"Not for worlds!" said Norah firmly. "This is no matter for women!" At which Tommy, whose eyes were dancing, breathed a sigh of relief. They gazed breathlessly.

The battle was still at its height when it ended abruptly. A rush from Dick drove Bill, fighting hard, out of sight behind the trunk of the tree—much to the regret of the watchers. His heel caught on a projecting root; he fell backwards, his head meeting the ground with a thud. He passed into temporary oblivion.

Opening his eyes a little later to a whirling world mingled with stars, he

gradually became conscious of a face hovering over him. To Bill the face also seemed to rotate; then it steadied. There was much blood upon it, together with an expression of horror.

“I say, are you killed?” gasped Dick.

“You—it wasn’t you knocked me out!” stammered the prostrate warrior fiercely.

“No, of course it wasn’t—it was that beastly root. Are you hurt much? Let’s look at your head an’ see if it’s bleeding.”

Bill preferred to feel for himself. He touched the back of his head, gingerly at first, then with more confidence. No blood appeared on his fingers. Dick breathed more freely. He helped him to sit up, keeping an arm round his shoulders.

“Lean against the tree; you’ll feel better in a minute. Shall I go and get you some water or something?”

“No—I’m all right,” said Bill with an effort. A faint grin showed as he became conscious of Dick’s bruised and blood-stained face. “I say, do I look as funny as you do?” He caressed his nose, which was already beginning to swell. “I bet I do!”

“I reckon you got home on me most. I don’t care, as long as your head’s all right. You don’t think you’ve got con—concussions or anything like that?”

“Not me!” Bill stated. “Gosh, that was a gorgeous fight! An’ I don’t believe you’re any more marked than I am. Let’s have another go sometime, with the gloves on. There’s two sets here.”

“Rather! Only it’s got to be somewhere where there’s nothing to trip a man up. You’d have been going yet, only for that root.”

“I d’know. You nearly had me licked once or twice. I wish you’d teach me that upper-cut of yours: I never get mine quite right.”

“You got a good many others right,” said Dick with a rueful smile. “Tell you what—we ought to be able to improve each other a lot if we practised. Let’s.”

“Right-oh.” Bill got to his feet. They looked at each other, suddenly embarrassed. Bill made a great effort.

“I—I’ve been pretty beastly to you since you came. Sorry.”

“No, you haven’t. An’ I’m sorry I said that about your hair. It was foul.”

“Oh, that’s nothing—I’m always called Carrots an’ things like that.” They exchanged awkward smiles, conscious of great contentment. The past fled away: only the present remained, full of possibilities. Also, as Bill was the first to realize, of immediate needs.

“I say, we’re in an awful mess,” he said, becoming aware of many smears on their clothes. “We can’t show up at the house like this.”

“They’d fuss, wouldn’t they? Women always fuss about a little bit of

blood.”

“Well, nobody’s really fussy here, but they might get a bit of a shock. Will Betty mind awfully when she sees your face? I’m afraid we’re going to be pretty well marked, no matter how much we wash.”

“Oh, Bet’ll be all right. She’s got sense.”

“Good thing,” said Bill, much relieved. “But I wish we could get washed up before anyone spots us. Not much chance of getting up to the bathroom, though.”

“What about the lagoon?”

“I say, that’s a brainy idea!” Another inspiration struck him; a slow grin dawned. “Our shirts and shorts are pretty messy—how’d it be if we just fell in as we are? Off the spring-board. By accident.”

“Oh, gorgeous!” chuckled Dick. “Sure you’re all right to walk down?”

“Yes, thanks, old man. Head’s just a bit funny, but that’s nothing.”

“Well, you hang on to me, or it might go queer when you walk. Go easy, now, Bill. There’s lots of time.”

On the roof of Little Billabong the watchers had been driven almost to desperation by the disappearance of the fight. They murmured fretfully against the width of the concealing tree-trunk; were occasionally filled with hope by catching sight of part of a leg, only to be deprived of it a moment later.

“What on earth can they be doing?” Norah exclaimed. “Do you think they can be tearing each other to pieces on the ground?”

“Tooth and nail!” said Tommy mournfully. “And we can’t see a thing! Oh, why does your father grow such stout trees, Norah?”

“My goodness!” Betty cried excitedly. “Look, girls!”

The warriors had come into view. They moved slowly, held by a common purpose; their arms were about each other, the fair head and the red one close together. Thus mutually supported, they progressed towards the lagoon. The sound of voices, of laughter, floated from them.

“Better than I’d dared to hope—bless them!” uttered Norah. She put her arm through Betty’s. “No need for you to think of packing up now—is there, Tommy?”

“I think,” said Tommy solemnly, “that personal contact has been established pretty thoroughly! Let’s go home and celebrate!”

Brownie was sitting in the kitchen when she became aware of two bashful figures in the doorway that opened on the verandah. They had wrung as much water as possible from their wet clothes, which clung to their bodies and dripped slowly. Both faces were ornamented with discolorations and swellings.

Bill had one eye hardly visible: the other was dancing as he looked at her.

“My Heavens!” uttered Brownie.

“Ssh!” said Bill. “Brownie, we—we’re a bit wet. Be a sport, an’ bring us some dry togs. We could change in the laundry, couldn’t we?”

“But——” began Brownie, gazing at their battered faces in horror. She stopped: both boys had begun to giggle helplessly. They propped each other up and rocked with stifled laughter.

Brownie’s old face cleared wonderfully. She beamed on them.

“I never see anybody wetter,” she said, her voice joyful. “Off you go—I’ll have your things down in two twos.” She waddled off, chuckling as she went.

She was back in a few moments, laden with clothes and towels. Brush and comb came out of the big pocket of her snowy apron.

“There you are—leave your wet things there an’ I’ll see to ’em. No, I never met a soul. They’re all out on the verandah.”

“I s’pose they’ve had tea?” asked Bill regretfully, pulling his shirt over his head.

“Yes, but there’s a kettle boilin’ in the kitchen. Hungry, Master Dick?”

“Raging—aren’t you, Bill?”

“My word, yes! Brownie, you’re a brick!”

“I better go an’ see what I can find,” said Brownie, resisting a desire to prance. She glanced sideways at Bill’s eye. “Had it better be a bit of raw beef-steak, do you think?”—and was gone.

A little later, Norah, crossing the hall, heard shouts of mirth coming from the kitchen. She hesitated; then went quietly along the verandah. Amid the Babel of voices she was unnoticed for a moment as she stood looking in; then Brownie caught sight of her, and whatever emotion might have been raised in Norah’s heart at the sight of the boys’ scars of battle was swallowed in silent laughter at the remarkable facial contortions by which the old woman strove to convey to her that silence on the subject was golden.

Norah’s left eyelid fluttered. She went in; and Dick and Bill, seated together on the table, each wolfing a large slice of bread and jam, paused with open mouths and looked at her modestly.

“You almost make me hungry all over again,” she said cheerfully.

“Have some,” invited the boys in chorus.

“No—I mustn’t: I’ve eaten a huge tea. We were thinking of running into Cunjee in the car—anyone want to come?”

The question was put so naturally that each boy had a moment of amazed wonder. Was it possible that she hadn’t noticed anything? Each looked at the other; and decided that it was not possible.

“Sorry, Norah,” said Bill hurriedly. “I—well, Dick and I thought we’d go out an’ practise with the boomerang. If you don’t want us, I mean.”

“Much better idea,” agreed Norah. She felt her mouth twitching—and fled.

CHAPTER VII

GOLD BRINGERS

DICK sat in the fork of a tree, waiting more or less patiently for Bill to appear. Someone had called to him as they had left the house: he had said, "You go on: I'll catch you up in a jiffy," and had gone back to answer the summons. But there seemed nothing to be gained by going far without Bill. Dick had come to a tree with an inviting fork, so he had climbed into it instead.

It was a good place to sit in, with the sunshine filtering through the branches and with birds all round him, chirping and twittering in the trees. A jolly morning—but then, all mornings were jolly now. He thought of the first days, remembering with amazement how hard they had been to get through. It was queer to think that he and Bill had ever been such idiots as to believe they couldn't be mates.

That Dark Age was done with—almost forgotten. No longer did Bill labour to tell him about things, while he tried to make the right comments: now he only wanted him to do things—with him. Wonderful what a difference that made. They shared in everything, and no day was long enough for all that they wanted to pack into it. From the first moment of waking and racing off to bathe, to the sky-larking that always was part of going to bed—all was fun. Bedtime was almost the best part, Dick thought, considering what a dull and lonely business it was at home. Pillow fights were apt to occur: often the uproar brought the girls out, but only to join in the laughter. Even if a pillow shot over the edge of the balcony nobody minded. Nobody said, "Oh, you haven't got your slippers on!" when he or Bill fled down by the fire-escape to get it back. Nobody said any "Don'ts." Somehow, there seemed no need for people to be always saying "Don't" to him nowadays.

And the long yarns in bed, after the girls had said good night and gone away laughing. Dick believed he liked those talks in the dark better than anything else.

Sitting in the tree, happily turning things over in his mind, he heard the distant sound of horses' hoofs. He glanced across the paddock. Two men came cantering. One he recognized at once—Bob Rainham, who had been at the homestead before, on some mysterious errand that took him away to a bank; coming back next day, but only for a brief stay before returning to the camp. Dick had liked him—a short, square-built Englishman with a slow, pleasant voice. He was glad to see him coming.

But it was the other rider who held his eyes. He had heard enough about Jim Linton to feel certain that this great man on the black horse must be Jim.

There could not be two men so big. Dick slipped down from the tree, feeling suddenly nervous.

He was shy of meeting Jim. Bill had talked so much about him, painting him in such glowing colours, that Dick had a conviction that he couldn't possibly live up to him. Jim would find him horribly ignorant of all the things that mattered on Billabong: not like Bill. Where the station affairs were concerned Murty said that Bill was "as handy as a pocket in a shirt." Dick knew that such high praise couldn't be given to himself. Ordinarily, it did not trouble him, but now he had a sense of being very small and inferior.

"I'll go and tell Bill he's coming," he thought. "Then I'll keep out of their way. They won't want me."

He slipped through the trees; but as he came into the open he saw that the riders had changed direction and were heading towards him. A voice shouted. He paused uncertainly.

Jim was in the lead as they swept up; he got off, holding out his hand.

"Hullo, old chap—you're Dick, aren't you?" Dick found his hand swallowed up in a long sinewy one. "I caught sight of you dodging in the timber. I've been hearing a lot about you, Dick: Norah says you're no end of a help. Rather a comfort to know there's another fellow on the place, with all of us away."

Dick flushed, quite unable to answer. Bob was off his horse too, greeting him with equal friendliness. They led the horses towards the house; he walked between them, all his nervousness gone in a moment, knowing that he was welcome.

"Have you come to stay?" he asked hopefully.

"No such luck, old chap. We must go back on Monday. But it's something to have a couple of nights at home and see you all. Is Billabong treating you well, Dick?"

"Oh, it's just gorgeous here!" he said earnestly. Jim looked pleased.

"Still riding old Barney?"

"No. Only the first day. I'm riding Bongo now."

"Good business—they didn't take long to promote you. We try strangers out on old Barney; we have to be careful since the time we put a fellow on a horse that was a bit too much for him, and he got slung off into a patch of blackberries. Very sad for him, but rather funny."

Dick gurgled—then looked up and made confession.

"Bongo got rid of me once."

"Did he, now? How was that?"

"Well, we were after a bullock—and he swung one way when I thought he was going another. I . . . I just found he wasn't under me!"

"Bigger men than you have had that happen to them with a quick cattle-

pony. Have you got the hang of his little ways now?"

"I think so. Haven't been off since."

"That's good. Bongo isn't the easiest pony to handle, but when you're used to him he's a good 'un to ride."

"I think he's great," said Dick. "Bill and I have awful arguments, 'cause I say Bongo's better than Topsy."

"I can imagine that the feathers would fly then," laughed Bob. "Look at him now!"

Bill had come in sight, climbing over the garden fence. As he dropped to the ground he saw them. For a moment he stood petrified; then, with a wild yell, he raced to meet them. He was quite incoherent, between breathlessness and joy, when he arrived. The new-comers pounded him on the back; they went on, Jim's hand on his shoulder.

"Look here," said Bill, recovering speech, "you go on to the house and give the girls a surprise. They'll have forty fits. Dick an' I'll take the horses and let 'em go."

"You're two white men," said Jim. "Rub them down well and give them a feed, will you?"

Dick swelled with pride as he took the bridle of Bob's bay mare. No longer was he a small boy: he had been taken into fellowship, accepted as a worker. The bay mare, who was leading a life remote from all that went with stables, must have been faintly surprised at the energy with which she was groomed.

"Here, that'll do," said Bill at last. "She'll think she's entered for the Melbourne Show." He was hopping with impatience. "Stick her in a stall, an' we'll get the feed out."

That was done, and they raced towards the house. Bill made for the back yard.

"They're dead certain to be in the kitchen. Jim always goes to see Brownie—an' Brownie hangs on to him with one hand an' reaches for the big teapot with the other. She knows Jim!"

They were all there, looking more serious than usual.

"I wouldn't call it exactly a rush," Jim was saying. "We thought it was coming with a vengeance when the first lots dropped in—both in the same afternoon. Mighty thankful we were that we'd had warning enough to fence in the shaft and the sluice-boxes: it's something to be able to work without onlookers. But there have been no more large gangs. A few odd prospectors have come, mainly fellows from about Broad's Creek who saw the first crowd come through. They have all pegged claims beyond our land. You'll see a lot more clearing when you come out."

"Do they bother you in any way?" Norah asked.

"They're all too busy; every man Jack of them is digging for all he's worth.

Gold-fever running very high.”

“Are they getting anything?”

“The first lot, down at the end of the shallow gully—our gully—have got a little, but nothing exciting. They are quite a decent crowd: civil when you speak to them, but evidently keen on keeping to themselves. So far as the others go, we haven’t asked; we limit ourselves to passing the time of day with them when we happen to meet. Mick heard that they had found the colour here and there; nothing more. They’re all playing the game about the cattle, and generally keeping the camp decent.”

He paused to drain his cup, and handed it back to Brownie.

“May I have another, Brownie? It’s pretty good to have tea with milk again.” At which Brownie was understood to murmur something about a “poor lamb!”

“It’s the second crowd we don’t like,” Jim went on. “They’re an unpleasant lot.”

“We gathered that from your letters,” said Norah, “—not that you said much. I asked Billy when he came back from taking out your rations, and he looked grave and said, ‘Some pfeller them be plenty nasty pfeller, mine thinkit.’”

“That’s a true word,” remarked Bob. “Plenty nasty is just what they are.”

“We’ve had very little contact with them,” Jim said. “Nobody is encouraged to come up to our camp: if we have to speak to anyone we stroll down by our boundary. McGill and his men are the only fellows who have tried to butt in. Dad saw them poking about among our outer claims on the second day, so he went over to them and asked if they had lost anything. You know how Dad would say it.” He grinned.

“I can imagine,” smiled Norah. “Very courteous, but not exactly inviting.”

“Just that. The men looked a bit awkward, and McGill tried to be off-hand and masterful, and said they had a perfect right to examine our pegs. He raised his voice a little, so Wally and I strolled along and looked interested. Dad was quite calm. He said, ‘Oh, certainly. I hope you have found them all in order; we have gone to a good deal of trouble to make them legally safe.’ And he kept his eye steadily on McGill—and somehow they just drifted away, looking rather small.”

“Not that anyone could easily make McGill look small,” remarked Bob. “That’s a gorilla of a man, Norah! Bigger built than Jim, with a face like the back end of a tram-smash!”

“Oh—how?” Tommy was deeply interested.

“Well, he could never have been easy to look at in his brightest days—extraordinary brutal face—and now he has a leaning nose and a thick ear. Very dark, with black hair growing down nearly to his eyebrows, and several teeth

missing. He's really a prize exhibit."

"He sounds attractive," said Norah. "What are his men like?"

"Well, hardly in McGill's class, but they're a tough gang. I should think a policeman would be interested in every one of them. However, they're not likely to cause us any trouble: I don't see how they can, even if they wanted to. Still, it makes a considerable difference to feel that they're even there." Bob frowned. "It was all rather jolly until the strangers came, but now we feel that we've got to be strictly business-like."

"Well, it means that some of us will come in pretty regularly with the gold, and that's not too bad," Jim put in, looking at Tommy. "We rather thought that the coming of the outsiders discouraged the gold in the shaft for a few days, we got so little. Then we came on the best patch yet. I've some specimens in my valise that will open your eyes. And the washing has been very good. Bob's dream-plane must be nearly in sight."

"O-oh!" said Dick, round-eyed. "Could I . . . well, I've never seen real gold-mine gold in all my life!"

"Haven't you, old man? Well, have a look at some now."

Jim's leather valise was on the table. He unrolled it, disclosing several dirty little bags, tied at the neck. Choosing one that looked very knobby, he untied it and rolled out its contents.

"Glory!" uttered Dick.

Dull heavy lumps rattled on the table. Some were partly quartz, with thick veins of yellow showing in the stone; but there were others of pure gold; nuggets of all sizes, rough and shapeless or worn by water into almost rounded pebbles. Exclamations broke from the three girls.

"Is *that* how you get it?" uttered Betty. "My goodness, how exciting!"

"Jim, we've never seen any specimens as good as this," Norah said gravely.

"No. It's very hopeful. You know the cross-cut Murty started from the shaft, running up towards the hill—where he reckons we may find the reef this pocket bled from——"

"Oh, do tell me what that means," begged Betty. "Does gold bleed?"

"No, but a reef carrying gold may. A reef may be shattered by pressure or by volcanic action, Betty, and then the water that generally accompanies a reef flows through the ruptured part, carrying the gold with it, taking the line of least resistance."

"Soft ground you mean?" Betty's brow wrinkled in an effort to understand.

"Yes—or wherever the water can find its way most easily. It works along, year after year, perhaps century after century, deep under ground; and the gold that comes from the broken reef goes with it. Some, of course, sinks down and is held on what we call the gutter—stone below the soil: some goes on

indefinitely, unless there's anything to stop it. Got that?"

"I think so. Go on."

"Well, we think that's the sort of thing we found. Bob dropped into a place in a shallow gully completely blocked by masses of rock, with a very slight trickle of surface water, and found the first specimens. We blasted away all the rock and sank a shaft, and now we're investigating the gutter at the bottom of it. But we've found nothing worth having beyond our shaft. So it looks as if the rock had blocked the gold and held it back."

"And is the water running underground all the time?"

"No. It's dried up. Underground streams do that sometimes—lots of gold has been found in other places where dead rivers once ran. But you see, Murty's theory is that by tunnelling back along the gutter we may hit the main reef, that our gold bled from, and that's what some of us are doing now. Murty is an old miner; so are some of the fossickers we have taken on as workers, and they agree with him."

"And if you strike the main reef," said Betty, "it would be a tremendous find?"

"Judging by the gold we've got already it should be. But remember, that is supposing that there *is* a reef. We may never find one. Bob's discovery may turn out to be just an odd pocket of gold."

"Wouldn't that be one in the eye for that old McGill!" came from Bill.

"And for all the others, poor wretches!"

"To say nothing of yourselves," added Betty.

"Oh, I think we'd stand that all right," said Jim, with a shrug. "Bob has got a good deal out of it already, and he'll get more. That's quite certain. And we're all so darned pleased about *that*, that we don't much care about the rest."

"Well, I do," said Bob. "You have all worked like galley-slaves to dig out my hole—I think it will be rotten if you don't get something yourselves. I wouldn't so much care if you'd agree to go share and share alike in all we've got, but you're such a stiff-necked, obstinate crowd of——"

"Oh, Bobby, Bobby!" said Jim severely, "—before Brownie and the new lady, too! You come and have a nice bath!" He placed his wide-brimmed felt hat firmly over Bob's face, flinging one mighty arm round his shoulders; fighting and spluttering, the protesting mine-owner was bodily removed from the kitchen and forced upstairs. From the bathroom came presently sounds of splashing and song.

"It's a pity they always come home so awful dirty from the mine," mourned Bill. "They always go away an' bath for hours an' hours! Doesn't it seem a waste of time!"

CHAPTER VIII

SUNDAY CALLERS

BILLABONG lay wrapped in the peace of a Sunday afternoon.

The house was curiously silent. In the kitchen Brownie nodded over a weekly paper, her spectacles dropping on her nose from time to time, rousing her to an effort to read a few more words. The housemaids had gone for a walk; there was no chance of being disturbed, for Hogg slept peacefully in his quarters, and Murty, who usually put on a respectable coat and paid her a visit on Sunday afternoons, was away at the diggings. Even Billy was absent; that morning had seen him setting off for the camp with a pack-horse loaded with fresh meat and bread. Brownie's head nodded finally, and the spectacles fell into her lap unheeded.

On the front verandah Norah lay in a long chair, reading. All the others had gone out, carrying baskets, to picnic in a tree-fringed hollow beyond the orchard; she would follow them with Davie when it should please that energetic gentleman to awake from his afternoon sleep. Bill and Dick had nobly offered to stay behind to keep her company, but she had refused to accept the sacrifice—possibly realizing that Davie's slumbers might benefit by their absence.

The boys, however, had found that the first part of the excursion was not altogether entertaining. The baskets had been left in the hollow; then Jim and Tommy had strolled away across the paddocks, deep in talk, and presently Bob and Betty had wandered in another direction. Grown-ups were apt to behave in this manner, Bill knew: it was regrettable, but nothing could be done about it. He suggested to Dick that they should fill in time by inspecting the aeroplanes. They disappeared into the sheds, leaving the hollow deserted—save for Kim, on guard over the picnic-baskets, lest an inquisitive bullock should stray that way and be prompted to nose about them.

Norah's book was interesting; it held her attention completely, except that one ear was always subconsciously alert for a sign of movement from the smoking-room, where Davie slept under a rug on the couch. She was glad to be quiet; yesterday they had talked and ridden, danced in the evening and played uproarious games with the boys; this morning had been given to swimming and boating on the lagoon. Perhaps, too, she was a little lonely: sometimes it was hard to be reconciled to Wally's long absences at the mine. There were moments when—but for Bob's sake—Norah could almost have wished that they had never struck gold.

The click of the garden-gate brought her sharply to full consciousness of

her surroundings. She gave a quick glance, with an unreasoning hope that it might be Wally, unexpectedly returned.

It was not Wally. Two horses were tied to the fence; crossing the lawn slowly were two men, who looked about them with open curiosity. Norah's heart beat a little more quickly. Bob's description of McGill had been graphic; apart from the great size of the man she looked at, there was no mistaking the face that was like "the back end of a tram-smash." Beside him was a dark, thick-set fellow, his hat pulled down over his eyes. They were roughly dressed and unshaven: not the type that Billabong was accustomed to see on its front lawn. Norah was aware of a wave of anger that they should deliberately have used that entrance. Men coming on business to a station went to the back, looking for men.

She put down her book and rose, going to the head of the low flight of steps. McGill swept his hat from his low forehead with an exaggerated gesture. His companion, Norah noted, did not remove his hat at all.

"Afternoon, miss," said McGill affably. "Nice place you've got here."

"Did you want to see my brother?" Norah's voice was cold.

"Oh, I reckon we see him pretty near every day, out beyond there." He jerked his thumb towards the hills. "No, we knew we wouldn't find him at home. Must be lonely for you, with them all away."

"We have plenty of people here." Her tone did not convey, she hoped, anything of the uneasiness she felt, knowing that except for one old woman and a little child Billabong was unguarded. She remembered the gold the boys had brought home: it was in the smoking-room, waiting to be taken to the bank next day, and her heart sank. Then she pulled herself together. These men might be rough and uncouth, but there was no reason to believe they were house-breakers.

McGill was faintly amused. He had no idea that Bob and Jim had left the camp; from words dropped by the men with whom he had talked at the diggings he had gathered that the homestead was left to women and children. It had struck him that it would be entertaining to see where the Lintons lived: he was certain, too, that to learn of his visit would be extremely annoying to the two whom he mentally described as "the old fool and his young pup of a son." Already he regarded them as enemies; there was pleasure in the thought that he could show them that their home was not beyond his trespassing. He showed his broken yellow teeth in an ugly grin as Norah spoke again.

"You must have come out of your way," she said. "How did you get here?"

"Oh, we're prospectin'," he said. "Mightn't suit us to stay out in the hills; but if there's gold out there it might be anywhere else in this part of the country. So we thought we'd take a look round, me an' my friend. An' that black-fellow of yours was obligin' enough to leave the padlocks off your gates.

Very nice of him, we thought. So we followed the track right in here.”

“If you are prospecting, you are wasting your time,” Norah told him coldly. “Any miner could tell you that this is not gold-bearing land.”

McGill laughed.

“Funny,” he said with a sneer. “That’s the sort of talk your dad handed out to us at the diggin’s—an’ his crowd pickin’ up gold all the time! He must think we’re soft.”

“Whatever my father may have told you is true,” she said. “You may all find nothing at the diggings: but of course you can prove that.”

“We’ll do that all right. Meanwhile, it’s interestin’ to have a good look round the district. I expect you’ll often see us here.” He chuckled inwardly to see her angry flush.

Norah said nothing. She was listening to a new sound. With all her heart she hoped that Davie would not stir before she had got rid of these offensive callers. If only Brownie would hear him and take care of him! She felt that she could not bear Davie to come near McGill.

“What about us arrangin’ to get meat an’ flour from you?” McGill asked. “You kill your own meat on the station, I reckon, so you’d make money on it. I could ride in here quicker than goin’ to Broad’s Creek.”

“We do not sell meat. And there is no road open to strangers into Billabong. It was only by accident that you found the gates unlocked today.”—Was that Davie? Did she dare to leave the men on the steps while she went to give him to Brownie?

McGill scowled. His question had scarcely been meant seriously; he knew well that the request would be refused, but he enjoyed baiting this good-looking girl who looked at him with steady grey eyes that were like her brother’s. Yet something in her gaze and in her unmoved tone stung him. He decided to go a little further.

“All this country’ll be open pretty quick when the rush comes. Your fences an’ your padlocks won’t last long. It’ll be just as well for you people to treat other people civilly.”

“I hope we shall always do that,” Norah said.

“Then you better ask your old man about rations. I’m givin’ you advice for your own good.”

“I think you must give that to my father. And now I suggest that there is nothing more for me to discuss with you——”

“Mum! Mum!” said a cheerful voice.

Out upon the verandah, in white vest and tiny knickerbockers, came Davie, rosy with sleep, his black curls a tangled mop. “Mum!” he cried again, running to her. Norah turned swiftly and caught him up. She faced the men again, holding him with one arm. Davie hid his face against her hair, suddenly shy

before the strangers; then, as suddenly recovering himself, he lifted his head, looking at them squarely.

What he saw did not appear to impress him favourably. He wrinkled his nose with distaste and said, "Go 'way!"

"Nice-mannered kid," was McGill's comment. "Is he yours?"

Norah saw no need to answer this.

"If you want anything else I will send my brother to you," she said. "Otherwise—I am busy now."

"You'd be a long while fetchin' your brother, wouldn't you?" asked McGill, with a dry laugh. He was secure in his belief that Jim was in the hills; and Norah, knowing that Jim might almost as well have been in that far place, began to feel her loneliness. Without Davie to hamper her she had faced the intruders unmoved, except by annoyance. But that little burden, wriggling impatiently in the crook of her arm, gave her a sense of something akin to helplessness—as new to Norah as it was unwelcome. She forced herself to speak without a quiver in her voice.

"I can send my brother to you at once: he is at home."

"Then why don't you?" He laughed incredulously. "You know jolly well he isn't. Anyhow, I reckon you might at least offer us a cup of tea before we go. We've had a long ride, haven't we, Todd?"

"Too right we have," agreed Todd, speaking for the first time. "A drink of something wouldn't do us any harm."

"No," said Norah. "I can't offer you anything."

"Is that the way you treat strangers? I guess you'd better think again," McGill told her. He came a step nearer. Davie removed his finger from his mouth, pointed it at him accusingly, and said, "Bad man—go 'way!"

"Not much, we don't, without a drink. An' you'd as well keep the kid quiet," snapped McGill.

There came a quick waddling step and Brownie was beside Norah. She gave the men stare for stare, her old face wrathful.

"What do you think you're doin' here?" she demanded. "Get off the place at once!"

The men had fallen back, but McGill's eyes were watchful. No one else was in sight. He made up his mind that there was no one else to come; and the suggestion that had been a mere impulse of impudence stiffened into a resolve. They would make these women give them tea, wait upon them—just to show them that men were not to be treated like dirt. It would be something to see young Linton's face when they told him at the camp that his sister had served them with a meal. If Jim showed that he didn't like it McGill felt well able to deal with him.

He cast a contemptuous glance at Brownie.

“This your guardian angel? She’d better mind what she’s sayin’. We’ll go when we’ve had a meal, an’ not before.”

Possibly Norah’s guardian angel was even nearer than Brownie. A small fair head peeped through a curtain—Dick, who had been hailed by Jim in the paddock, with a request to run up to the house to fetch his pipe. That was glory and honour for Dick. He had raced up, his feet quiet in the hall in gym shoes, and had checked suddenly, hearing loud voices. With an undefined feeling of something wrong he had slipped into the dining-room to look out unseen.

The sight of the group made his heart pound. His first instinct was to leap out on the verandah as a reinforcement. Prudence came to his aid.

“I couldn’t do a thing—what good would I be to her? I’d better fetch Jim and Bob.”

He was in the hall again, keeping close to the wall as he ran. Rounding a curve, he raced madly through the house, across the yard, over the kitchen garden, taking beds of vegetables as they came. Through the orchard, over the fence, shouting, waving his arm. Jim and Bob saw him, and began to run—but they were some distance off. Nearer was Kim, who had sprung to his feet with a short questioning bark.

“Kim!” panted Dick, with a wild hope that the dog would obey him “—find Davie—find Davie! Sool him, Kim—sool him, boy!”

Kim was not every man’s dog: there were few people from whom he would take orders. But he and Dick were friends; and the words “Find Davie” were part of his daily routine. He smelt danger. One sharp bark, and he bounded off in the direction shown by Dick’s arm. “Sool him, Kim—hold him!” He went over the fence like a flash, a racing black shadow among the trees.

Dick gasped with relief, tearing on to meet the boys.

“What’s up?” they shouted.

“Quick!” he panted. “Those brutes of men—front verandah—Norah an’ Davie—oh, do go quick!”

He saw Jim’s face change: saw him charge forward, settling into his stride, his long legs taking him over the fence in a clean leap. Bob was not far behind: Bill and the girls running hard. Dick panted after them, longing to be able to keep up, his breath gone.

Jim took his own line. There was a shorter way to the house for one who could jump hedges: he followed it, and plunged across the garden towards the side verandah. A sharp cry reached him. He set his teeth, racing on.

“You’ll get no tea here,” Brownie had flung back at McGill. “Billabong doesn’t feed the likes of you!”

“Billabong’ll have to learn where it gets off, I guess. It’s about time that station people began to learn what’s comin’ to ’em—keepin’ a whole country poor!”

“Blood-suckers, that’s what they all are,” contributed Todd. “’Igh an’ mighty!” He spat contemptuously on the gravel by way of indicating his attitude towards Billabong and all it contained.

“You!” said Brownie, with a world of scorn. “Fellers like you, as never did a decent day’s work, thinkin’ you can talk big, an’ bully women. Why, you’d run like rabbits if you met a man!”

The soul of a Viking dwelt in Brownie—but it was imprudent talk. The men snarled, and McGill came a step higher.

“You keep your mouth shut, old woman. We’ll deal fast enough with your men when the time comes. Get along an’ fix up a meal, an’ don’t waste your breath.”

“P’f!” returned Brownie loftily. She turned to Norah. “Run in, dearie, and bring Mr. Jim. I’ll deal with these two till he comes.”

“Yes, we know that yarn,” sneered McGill. “You’ll do no runnin’, either of you; you’re goin’ to do a spot of work, for a change.”

“*How-wid* man!” remarked Davie with conviction.

Todd croaked with laughter. McGill’s face darkened.

“That brat needs a lesson, missus. You give him to me—I’ll look after him while you’re gettin’ tea.” He put out a great hand, covered with black hair. Davie shrank back, hitting at it with both little fists.

“If you dare to touch him!” said Norah, very low. Her eyes blazed defiance at the brutal face.

For a moment McGill hesitated, and Todd looked uneasy.

“Oh, come off it, Mac,” he muttered. “Let’s get goin’—what’s the use of stayin’ here?”

“You can do as you like,” McGill flamed. He made a sudden move forward, catching at Davie’s wrist. “Give him to me, I say!”

From the shrubbery came a lean black form, running low. Kim always worked in silence. He flashed across the lawn, fury mounting in him as he heard his little master’s wail of fear. One spring, and his teeth sank into McGill’s leg. He hung on grimly. A loud yell rent the air.

“Oh—*good* dog, Kim!” breathed Norah. “Hold him, lad!”

McGill stumbled backwards to the gravel, yelling and cursing: finding that it is not easy to deal with a cattle-dog who has carefully chosen his grip from behind.

“Let go, you brute! Todd—do something, can’t you, you fool?—he’s killin’ me. Call him off, missus!”

Todd made an irresolute move.

"I'd be careful, if I was you, young man," warned Brownie, a glint in her eye. "When that dorg's made to let go he gen'lly-as-a-rule lays hold on the man that interfered."

Todd immediately abandoned any idea of rescue work, prowling at a discreet distance round the struggle. McGill's cries increased—and suddenly Davie burst into shouts of laughter. "Dood old Kimmy!" he cried delightedly. "Bite him!" and Kim held on.

Upon this scene, coming round the corner of the verandah like a whirlwind, arrived Jim—at the sight of whom Todd gave a startled yelp and at once retreated towards his horse. Jim's face relaxed as he saw that Kim had the matter well in hand. He was beside Norah in two strides.

"All right, old girl?"

She was very white, but she nodded, glad to feel his arm round her.

"I think you ought to get Kim off, Jim. There's no more fight left in your gorilla."

There was not. Already McGill had turned his wailing and entreaties in Jim's direction.

"Get him off me, Boss! Ow!—he's savagin' me, I tell you. Stop it, you beast, you!" He beat ineffectually at Kim's head with his hat. "Oh—take him off!"

"Kim!" said Jim in a voice of thunder.

Kim turned on him large eyes that said reproachfully, "Master, you can't really mean I'm to let this vermin go!" His jaws remained fixed.

"Come here, Kim!"

Kim was spared the anguish of voluntarily releasing his foe. The stout cloth of McGill's trousers gave way under the strain; Kim fell backwards, instantly recovering himself with the swift twist that could dodge the panting kick of a bullock. But there was no power of kicking remaining in McGill. He subsided upon the grass, groaning; and Kim, after one slighting glance, trotted up to the verandah and laid a frayed and blood-stained piece of cloth at his master's feet. He looked up at him, his tail wagging happily. Davie gave a shout of joy and surged down upon him, his arms round the black neck.

"Good old dog!" Jim said quietly. He lifted his voice, calling to Todd.

"You'd better see to—that," he said curtly, nodding towards the prostrate McGill. "Norah—what happened?"

Bob burst upon them as she told him, the others not far behind. Dick was the last to appear.

"Oh, did Kim get him?" he gasped.

"Well and truly," was Jim's grim answer. He pointed towards the lawn. "There's all he left, Dick, old chap. By George, you had your wits about you!" And Dick reddened as Bill smote him proudly on the back. Together they

gloated over the spectacle of the groaning figure on the grass, and admired the unavailing contortions it made in the effort to see the result of Kim's teeth.

McGill got to his feet at last, urged by the uneasy Todd, who was only too anxious to get away. Jim and Bob walked over to them.

"Does he need bandages or iodine?" Jim asked Todd.

"Aw, I don't reckon he wants tyin' up," said Todd. "He's not that bad. A spot of iodine 'ud be a good thing, though—it's safer. Never can tell what a dorg-bite'll do."

Iodine was brought by Bill, whose expression showed that he considered that Kim should be the one to be disinfected.

"Can he ride?" Jim had not glanced at McGill.

"Lord, yes! He'll have to."

"Then take him away and fix him up." He handed Todd the bottle. "And get off the place—quickly!"

"We'll get off—but you ain't heard the last of this, not by a long way," snarled McGill. "I'll pay what I owe you before I've done with you—an' your brute of a murdering dorg, too!"

Jim looked him up and down for a moment without speaking.

"If you hadn't been hurt I'd pay my debt to you here and now," he said between his teeth. "As it is, we've all heard what you thought of the lesson my dog gave you. He's quite ready to give another—get out of my sight if you don't want him to begin again. I'll give you one minute to be on the other side of that gate—and not that, if you open your mouth again."

The visitors wasted no time in reaching the gate. Beyond it, the watchers saw them pause behind the hedge. Todd's voice came.

"Better have it on now, Mac. Bend over, an' I'll shove it on in a tick."

The heads disappeared. There was a pause; then a howl of pain.

"Iodine!" chuckled Bill delightedly. He clutched Dick; they rolled on the lawn together, choking with laughter.

Going to bed that night was a pretty wonderful time, Dick thought. There had been a monumental pillow-fight to begin with, with Jim and Bob joining in. Both beds had to be re-made when it was over. The girls had helped in that, and had tucked them up when at last they had been tired enough with laughing to consent to lie down. People had been awfully nice to him. Not that they said anything much—they just made him feel that the day had made him part of Billabong. He liked to think of the way Jim had gripped his hand when he said good night.

Norah had waited until the others had gone, sitting for a moment on the edge of his bed.

“Thank you for what you did for us to-day, Dicky,” she whispered. “We shan’t forget. Mind if I say good night?” She bent and dropped the lightest of kisses on his forehead—and was gone.

Dick didn’t mind, somehow. He thought happily of her low voice as he snuggled into his pillow; even though he knew he hadn’t done anything wonderful, it was great to feel that they had made him a friend.

There was another thing that caused him to give a little wriggle of contentment, smiling to himself in the dark. Something that lay in his collar-box, very carefully wrapped in paper supplied by Bill. They had gloated together over the trophy, agreeing that it held memories that should give it a place of honour in any fellow’s collection. “Pretty near as good as a Red Indian’s scalp,” Bill had said. Not a striking object—only a frayed and bloodstained scrap of dirty cloth, once part of a trouser-leg.

CHAPTER IX

PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

“THE mischief is,” said Bob, “that we can never feel sure that this sort of thing won’t happen again.”

“Why should it?” Norah said. “They only managed to get into Billabong to-day by an unlucky chance. Poor old Billy will be so furious with himself when he hears about it that he’s never likely to be careless again about locking the gates. And I don’t believe that McGill would risk another meeting with Kim.” Her eyes danced. “Never could I have dreamed that a bold bad man could be deflated so quickly!”

“Well—you can laugh now——” began Jim.

“Oh, I know it was no laughing matter before Kim arrived. I was beginning to be afraid that we should have to give in, if only for Davie’s sake. But when Kim charged in—well, it was just heavenly to see that bullying giant reduced to yelping and begging. I suppose if I had had nice womanly feelings——”

“You’d have been more than human—which, thank goodness, you never were,” Jim said. “The cowardly brute! My only regret is that I didn’t get my hands on him myself. But old Kim did his job thoroughly.”

“It’s queer,” remarked Bob. “That fellow is—or was—a prize-fighter; he must have been able to stand up to any amount of pain in the ring. And he howled like a kid over a dog-bite. I don’t believe young Bill would have made that amount of fuss.”

“He’d expect pain in the ring—and Kim seems to have been quite unexpected.”

“Totally,” said Norah with satisfaction.

“And it would be an unfamiliar pain, and he felt himself helpless. He could end a prize-fight himself by lying down, if he wanted to, but that wouldn’t have discouraged Kim at all.” Jim put out his foot and rubbed the back of the dog lying in front of him. “You old battle-hound!” he said—and Kim licked his shoe gratefully.

“If a dog can be said to smirk,” said Tommy, “it would be the word for the satisfied air Kim has worn ever since. Now, I—if I had bitten McGill——”

Shouts of delight drowned any further reflections on this point.

“But, seriously,” Jim observed, when order had been restored, “we’ve got to plan what we’re going to do. I’ve had one lesson to-day: no more for this child. McGill and his crowd may not risk coming again—personally I’m inclined to think they won’t. However, we can’t reckon on locked gates stopping anyone who wants to come.”

“But who would want to come?” asked Tommy.

“How do we know? McGill was obviously lying when he spoke of prospecting here—nobody with a claim anywhere near the mine would dream of that—but there may be wandering fossickers. Whoever knows about the gold connects it with our name and Billabong, and people may come in from the Cunjee side, ready to dig in any old place. We can’t be certain.”

“And we’re not going to take risks,” Bob said firmly.

“But we have Hogg always on the place, and Billy most of the time,” said Norah. “And the dogs: we can bring them all up to the house. Really, boys, Tommy and I are not nervous—and can you imagine Brownie developing nerves?” Her eyes twinkled. “*How* I wish you could have heard the way she talked to McGill this afternoon!”

“She would,” agreed Jim. “But did it do any good?”

“Well, no. But you must admit that McGill is in a class by himself. We could have dealt with any ordinary man.”

“Norah, old girl, it’s no use talking. I know you three aren’t afraid, and you hate being protected and all that—but even if you could persuade the rest of us—and you can’t—do you think Wally would stand the idea of you and Davie being without a reliable man at hand now? Hogg is old: Billy has to be ration-carrier, off the place half his time. No, there’s only one thing to do: one of us must be here always. I vote we take it week about, eh, Bob?”

“Sound idea,” agreed Bob. “And since you and I have had this spell at home, suppose we send Wally back for a week. How about it, Norah?”

“Oh!” said Norah, sighing happily.

“She withdraws all opposition, you will notice,” grinned Bob.

“No, I don’t!” said Norah suddenly. “You and Jim have had only two days, and it’s ages since you had any time off, Bob. Make him stay a full week, Jim, and then send Wally in. How about that, Tommy?”

“Yes, I vote for that.” Tommy looked at her brother searchingly; they all knew that it was a point of honour with him to try to work twice as hard as any of the friends who were developing his claim. His slight frame was not built for the heavy demands he made upon it; responsibility and anxiety had put lines into his brow that should not have been there.

“No, that’s not fair,” he began, “I’m perfectly well able——”

“To stay and guard Billabong,” interrupted Jim, laughing. “You’re hopelessly out-voted, old man. Anyhow, I doubt if we could get Wally out of the new tunnel this week—he’s convinced that he’s going to strike the reef any minute. Another week may teach him a bit of patience, and he’ll be glad enough to get his back straight again. You can be watch-dog here and show Betty all the things the girls haven’t shown her. By the way, we’ve never thought of asking you if you have nerves, Betty. You can’t have suspected that

we'd offer you brigands and prize-fighters and what-nots when you left your peaceful home!"

"No—I was never warned," answered Betty, with a twinkle. "I thought I was just coming to learn all about cows and things. But the what-nots are far more exciting!"

"Melbourne girl makes good!" declared Jim solemnly. "Well, that's all settled, and we don't want to hear any more arguments from you, Bobby."

"If you stay here long, Betty, you'll find that McGill can't teach the Lintons anything about bullying!" declared Bob. "It's size that does it, I suppose: Wally's not much better. Any more orders, James?" He deftly caught the cushion Jim flung at him and tucked it under his head.

"Well, you had better parade your troop every morning and teach them the finer points of self-defence. Brownie ought to be pretty good at ju-jitsu," said Jim reflectively. "Dick and Bill could form a special boomerang-and-spear squad, under Company-Sergeant-Major Billy—who ought to be de-rated, by the way, for leaving fortifications unguarded to-day, but I suppose we'll have to let him off. Hogg will have to be instructed to work near the house any time you're not actually on the premises, and I think it would be no bad thing if Billy fixed up his bunk on the verandah: he always sleeps with one eye open."

He paused, knitting his brows.

"Awfully hard to plan being careful at Billabong—it's a thing we've never had to think of before. Oh, yes, sentries; Kim to have fixed quarters near the front door——"

"But Davie simply won't stand that!" expostulated Norah. "He wants him nearly all day."

"Let him have him," returned Jim benevolently: "only when he's off duty with Davie he returns to front door as laid down in regulations. Verandah by day, inside the hall by night. Kim will understand. Other dogs to be assembled and distributed to various strategic points."

"In full marching order with fixed bayonets and iron rations and water-bottles filled," murmured Bob dreamily.

"This, Betty," stated Tommy, "is what is known as a backwash of war."

"Backwash your grandmother!" said Jim, "—it's a full-blown campaign. All sentries to be instructed to bite low—and to bark high—if any invader fails to give the pass-word. Let's hope Bill won't walk in his sleep. Should attack be made by air, all ranks to fall in before hangars and pass bombs to Wing-Commander Rainham."

"Are bombs part of our military stores?" demanded that officer, much interested.

"Lack of equipment should never hinder a staff-officer from giving orders," said Jim firmly. "Anyhow, it didn't in the only war I ever fought in."

What else?—oh, locks, Bobby. That's going to be really difficult, because no one on Billabong ever locks a door, and probably none of the keys will work. As for the windows——!" He sighed, but immediately grew cheerful. "I shall be gone in the morning, so it will be your job to overhaul the lot!"

"And there are so many of them!" said Bob mournfully. "I thought I was going to have a nice rest."

"Oh, you can sit in an armchair and tell the girls how to do it. The boys will be thoroughly happy if you give 'em an oil-bottle apiece——"

"I shan't, though," protested Norah. "Oil is no fun to clean up."

"Women must learn to adapt themselves to military necessities," said Jim, in his best parade voice. "Anyhow, you will probably be in the kitchen, boiling down bones to extract glycerine for Bob's bombs."

"*Do* say that very quickly six times!" begged Tommy. "I never heard so many b's brought in so beautifully!"

"Let's all say it!" cried Betty. The council of war dissolved immediately: some minutes later Brownie, drawn to the scene by extraordinary noises, found the staff-officer and his subordinates, red-faced and choking with laughter, making spluttering sounds that suggested the popping of out-size soda-water bottles. Kim was dashing from one to the other, barking delightedly.

"My soul!" said Brownie. "Whatever are you all blob-blobbering about?"

Tommy became calm with an effort.

"We are preparing for war, Brownie!" she told her impressively.

"I'd have said it was for a lu-natic asylum—but that's much the same thing, ain't it?" returned Brownie. "An' Miss Betty, what I thought was so sensible, as bad as the rest of you!" She beamed on them all.

"'Twas Miss Betty that led us on, Brownie," Bob cried. "We never were as mad as this before she came!"

"Well, she may have shown you a new way of bein' mad, but goodness knows you've always had plenty of your own, all of you," was Brownie's retort. "Don't you start it again, or you'll have all those blessed children woke up. They'll sleep through most things, but not that blob-blobberishness. Oh, and Mr. Jim, Billy's just back. He met them two men out beyond the station. They never spoke a single word to him, but he said they looked plenty angry. An' he was that 'orrified when he heard they'd got here, along of him leaving the gates unlocked, you couldn't think. I never saw a black fellow go such a funny colour as he did. Sort of green. He's nearly scared to face you, but he's that wild with himself I believe he'd almost welcome a thrashing!"

"Does anyone see our old Billy getting thrashed?" smiled Norah.

"Well, of course not—but I truly believe it 'ud soothe his feelin's. Did you want to see him to-night, Mr. Jim?"

"No." Jim answered. "I'll see him before I start in the morning. I'd have to

be stern if I talked to him now, and I'm not equal to it—I've laughed too much!"

"An' thank goodness you all could!" murmured Brownie to herself, going back to her kitchen. "Eh, but it was lovely to see them playin' the fool—an' to think of Miss Norah's face this afternoon before that blessed Kim came! Well, thank the Lord, none of 'em's really ever grown up!"

CHAPTER X

WALLY DECLARES WAR

JIM reached the mine just as Lee Wing was performing the solo on a tin dish with an iron spoon that summoned his people to wash before dinner. Wally and Jack, clay-stained from head to foot, came out from the shaft enclosure, hailed him joyfully, and ran down the slope to the creek to wash. They came back more slowly, stooping a little from long hours of work in the tunnel.

“Hullo, old man. Bob not come back?”

“No, he’s coming later. How’s the tunnel?”

“Getting on well, but no sign of a reef yet. Murty says it’s all right—too soon to expect anything. All well at home?”

“Yes, they’re in great form. Davie seems to have grown a lot.” Jim knew that details of Davie were always expected by his father, but sometimes they were hard to supply.

“He would—and me not there to see!” said Wally tragically. “Some day I’ll go home and find that lad in long trousers, I suppose. Is he talking much?”

“Quite a lot, only I don’t always understand it. Norah says she does, so I suppose that’s all right. I rather think it’s a foreign tongue.”

“You couldn’t be expected to understand. I shall, of course,” was the lofty reply. “Visitors well broken in yet?”

“Oh, rather. Betty is a real good sort—you ask Bob!” said Jim, smiling. “Bill and the small boy were at loggerheads for the first few days, and then they had a stand-up fight and lammed each other’s heads off, and they’ve been bosom friends ever since.”

“Very sound way of startin’ a friendship,” said Freddy approvingly.

“It worked all right. Young Dick’s a good youngster: first-rate mate for Bill.” They gathered round the table: Jim glanced towards the outer claims beyond the creek. “Seen anything of the gorilla and his party?”

“Not much—some of them went off scouting yesterday. I haven’t seen the gorilla to-day,” said Wally, attacking his dinner hungrily.

“I have,” put in Mr. Linton. “I don’t think he’s in his best form. The others are working, but he is having a day off after his ride. He’s limping and using a stick. Saddle-sore, I suppose.”

“No, I think he’s dog-sore,” said Jim grimly. Four pairs of eyes turned on him in enquiry.

“He and a pal paid us a call yesterday——”

“Not at Billabong?” came sharply from Wally.

Jim nodded. “And Kim met him—and they didn’t get on very well

together, from McGill's point of view. Not from Kim's."

"No!" exclaimed Wally delightedly. "Did he eat him, Jim?"

"Some of him. It cost us a bottle of iodine. I don't think Mr. McGill will call again," Jim said slowly.

"Was there trouble, Jim?" asked his father, watching his face.

"Well—there was unpleasantness." He told the story. Wally's dinner was forgotten. He sat listening in silence amid quick questions and wrathful exclamations from the others. Not until Jim had ended did he speak.

"She—Norah's all right, Jim?"

"Right as rain, Wal. She never turned a hair—she was laughing and fooling with us in the evening."

Wally said something under his breath. He pushed his plate away.

"I'm going in to see her. My shift in the tunnel is over for to-day."

"As if that mattered!" said Mr. Linton impatiently. "Stay as long as you like, Wally."

"Oh, I'll be back to-morrow: but I'd like to go now." He dived into his tent, unheeding a wail from Lee Wing that duff was ready. In a few moments he reappeared, dressed for riding. He brought his saddle and bridle out of the cave and strode away towards the horse-gully.

They saw him ride out presently, but he did not take the track home. Instead, he turned, splashed through the shallow creek, and rode towards the strangers' claims.

"I'd have gone with him if I'd known he meant to go there first," said Jim uneasily. He jumped up and went quickly towards the creek.

Wally had felt no need of supporters. In his mood of furious anger he would have faced a dozen McGills.

The men were smoking round their dinner-fire as he approached. McGill was in a tent, but at the sound of hoofs he came out, limping on his stick. Wally sat looking at him steadily.

"Two of you went to my home yesterday and insulted my wife," he said. His eyes went round the group. "I don't know which of you was the second man: perhaps you'd like to tell me."

No one spoke. Todd's eyes did not meet his.

"No? Only plucky when you've a woman and a baby to deal with, I suppose. But I know *you*." The scorn in his tone stung McGill like a whip-lash as Wally faced him again. "You're the sort of sneaking cur that crawls behind men's backs to bully women, you cowardly brute! Well, you found one you couldn't frighten yesterday—and a dog that's a better man than you are. You won't be proud of his teeth-marks among your prize-fighting scars!"

McGill gave a roar of fury.

"If I wasn't lame, you young——"

“If you were not lame,” said Wally, with longing in his voice, “I’d be able to use my stock-whip on you now. As it is, I must wait for that pleasure. Better nurse him well, you fellows—you must be proud of him. And you had better all watch your step: every man on the diggings will know about this and have you all marked down. We’ll make sure that there are dogs waiting for you at any other houses where you may plan to sneak in when men are away.” His lip curled. “Well, we know now that a dog is more than a match for the biggest of you!”

That taunt brought the men to their feet, cursing. Wally looked at them unmoved.

“Well—is the one of you who prefers to hide in the crowd ready to stand out and fight me? There’s nothing I’d like better.”

Todd did not stir. An angry growl came from the group.

“No? I’m not surprised. Well—good day—*gentlemen!*” He swung his horse round.

As he turned, McGill, stung beyond control, flung his stick at his head. It missed, one end striking the horse. The big brown plunged wildly, scattering the embers of the fire; one hoof caught the billy that simmered beside it and kicked it yards away, crushed and battered. A shout of dismay escaped the campers.

“Good work!” said Wally, sitting his dancing horse easily. “And so like you, McGill, to wait until my back was turned!”

He rode away slowly, without a backward glance; finding his friends waiting for him on the other side of the creek.

“I was coming to join you, only I fancied you’d rather play a lone hand,” Jim said. “We’d have been with you in a couple of minutes if there had been trouble. Were they hostile, Wal?”

“They were pretty sheepish, except McGill,” replied Wally cheerfully. “I feel a good deal better now that I’ve told that brute what I think of him. Did you see him try to land me with a stick?”

“We did. That won’t do him any good with his own crowd, I should say. I wish Bronzewing had landed him!”

“Well, he did the next best thing—he completely ruined their billy. Made a horrid mess of it. Judging by the howl from the crowd, I rather think it’s the only one they had.”

“Oh, very nice!” cried Freddy joyfully. “And such a long way to Broad’s Creek to buy another!”

“Yes. Queer—I went over simply aching for blood, and all I did was to smash their billy. But I feel so much better!” said Wally. “Well—see you tomorrow.” He touched Bronzewing with his heel and trotted across the clearing.

The road home had never seemed so long. Only slow riding was possible

through the miles of rough hill country where the pack-horse's track wound in and out among the spurs, or crossed stony ridges that dipped sharply into deep gullies, dense with undergrowth. Usually, when he rode through the hills his eyes were ceaselessly busy, roving here and there in search of cattle, half-consciously aware of every detail of their condition, noting whether they looked at him incuriously or flung up their heads in fear and trotted off to hide themselves in yet deeper scrub. To-day he saw nothing. All his mind was fixed on Norah, and his heart leaped ahead to join her across the miles that stretched between them.

The temporary satisfaction he had gained from flinging his scorn at McGill died away, and again his blood boiled at the thought of what she had endured yesterday. He knew more deeply than anyone her sensitive pride, the gallant courage that could only be touched by a threat to her child; he ground his teeth, realizing what it must have meant to her to feel helpless to protect Davie—to see that brutal hand raised to threaten him. In all their care-free lives on Billabong humiliation had never touched them. Danger had brushed them many times, but always they had shared it. To Wally it seemed incredible that Norah should have had to suffer insolence and threats, and he not there to shield her.

“But she stood her ground—bless her!” he muttered. “I’ll bet any other girl would have given in, rather than make a monster like that angry. She kept her pride.”

Yet she might not have won, but for Kim: at the stab of that thought he urged Bronzewing on sharply, crashing through a ravine and up the farther side. Wally checked at the top, seeing an astonished figure a few yards ahead: Billy, leading his pack-horse, mounted on the old mare that could almost have taken the track blindfold. Billy had not dreamed of meeting anyone: and Wally was the one whom of all others he most dreaded facing just now.

“Hullo—what brings you out again so soon, Billy?”

“Stores come out from Cunjee; Missis Brown she thinkit Boss need um,” Billy stammered. “Mine bringit meat yes’day—not stores.”

He slipped from his horse and came towards Wally, putting a hand on Bronzewing's neck.

“Mas’ Wally—this pfeller bin plenty sorry. Plenty fool, mine, leave gates not lock. Mas’ Wally, mine kill any pfeller touch Miss Norah an’ l’il Mas’r. Plenty you know that true?” he begged.

Wally's heart melted at the unhappiness in the black face.

“Plenty I do, Billy, old man. I’d leave Miss Norah and the wee boy in your charge any day, and know they’d be safe.”

Billy relaxed into an approach to a smile.

“Plenty glad,” he muttered. “Mine bin kick mineself. Nebber knowin’ any

pfeller come our way—thinkit gates not matter. Nebber again!” His voice dropped; something of the savagery of his long-vanished tribe transformed his face. “Mas’ Wally—any harm if mine track that big pfeller along a scrub, kill him? Nobody know. Better him plenty dead.” His eyes glistened. “Mine got war-boomerang!”

“You can use it, too, if he shows himself at the house again,” Wally said swiftly. “He’ll ask for it then. But not anywhere else, Billy. He’d be plenty better dead, but the police-fellows plenty troublesome. No go, Billy—understand?”

“Plenty!” murmured the black-fellow sadly. “Pity, Mas’ Wally!”

“Yes, a pity, but it can’t be helped. Well, carry on with your load, and don’t worry, Billy: everything’s all right.” He shook up his horse and moved forward, the dark dog-like eyes watching him until the scrub hid him.

The long slow ride through the ranges was over at last; with relief Wally came down across the foothills where quicker going was occasionally possible. Dense scrub gave place to clearer ground where trees were able to grow with wide-flung branches. The track wound in and out among them: he trotted along, hearing the flap-flap of great streamers of bark hanging half-peeled from the smooth trunks high overhead; brushing among saplings where the young leaf-tips glowed scarlet and copper, brilliant against last year’s foliage. Then came a glimpse of the fence he had longed to see, the outer boundary of the station, and soon he was unlocking the heavy padlock that secured the gate. Even in his gladness at being comparatively near home Wally frowned, remembering how McGill and his man had come to that gate in their aimless ride yesterday; how they must have chuckled at finding it unsecured against them.

More light scrub, and then the shining ribbon of a little river, spanned by a log bridge. Beyond it the going was clear: he cantered steadily across one wide paddock after another, Bronzewing growing more and more eager as he neared his stable. The home paddock at last, with the red roof of Billabong gleaming among the deep green of English trees; with the gold of blossoming wattles fringing the glitter of the still lagoon. Wally strained his eyes for a glimpse of a well-known figure as he cantered over the springy turf.

No one was to be seen: but on the verandah Kim sprang to his feet and welcomed him with a bark of delight. Too eager to wait to let Bronzewing go, Wally slipped his bridle over the gate-post and crossed the lawn with long strides, Kim leaping to meet him. Wally took the lean black head in both hands, rubbing his ears.

“Great old dog!” he said. He left him, springing up the verandah steps.

The door stood wide, the hall was empty for a moment. Then round the curve came Brownie, her face alert, a little anxious.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh, Master Wally, my dear!” Her hands went out to him: Wally put his arm round her shoulders.

“Well, you old fighter!” he said, and hugged her. “What a woman for poor bushrangers to bump into! Bless you, Brownie dear. Where is she?”

“Upstairs,” she told him delightedly. “In the bathroom, givin’ Davie his bath. Eh, but they’ll be glad to see you!”

Wally took the stairs three at a time. The bathroom door stood ajar: he paused for a moment outside it, his dark face breaking into a smile.

From within came wild splashing and a gay little voice raised in laughing protest.

“No! Not come out!”

Wally put his head round the door. Norah’s back was towards him: Davie stood dripping in the bath, kicking the water joyfully, in the effort to swamp a red duck that rode the waves dangerously. Suddenly he looked up. An amazed shout came.

“*Dad!*”

Norah flashed round. They looked at each other for a long moment.

“Did you know how much I wanted you?” Her lip quivered. His arms were round her: she put her face against his coat, clinging to him. Davie made a frantic effort to climb out unaided, slipped, and fell flat in the bath with a despairing yell.

Wally rescued his son, wrapping him in a large bath-towel, from which the wet curls and rosy face struggled. He held his family tightly: Davie talked loudly and incoherently, while Norah and Wally did not talk at all. It was enough to be together.

CHAPTER XI

JIM MAKES A FRIEND

WORK at the diggings went on steadily. Day after day cartloads of wash-dirt travelled slowly down the slope to the creek, where, under David Linton, men toiled at the long sluice-boxes. The gentle flow of water separated earth and sand from the gleaming particles of gold that sank by their own weight, to be trapped in the riffles of the troughs. A makeshift battery had been put up, to deal with stone that might hold gold: all day the noise of its pounding echoed in the hills and gullies. And day by day more plump little bags were added to those that went to the bank each week; day by day Bob Rainham's future grew more secure.

Deep in the shaft the workers toiled in shifts, the sound of pick and shovel coming dully from below. Hard as the labour was, it held constant excitement, for the shaft was excavating the pocket to which the dead river had carried its precious freight, and many nuggets came to light, to be tossed into a box fixed to the wall. The windlass drew up the leathern buckets of wash-dirt unceasingly: the nuggets waited until the end of the shift, to be taken to the surface by the ascending pair of workers—when there was keen excitement, with every available head bent over the scales, to see if the record weight for a shift's nuggets had been beaten.

The tunnel that went off at right angles to the shaft drove its slow way towards the north, every yard shored up with props of timber. There was thrill in the thought that each stroke of the pick might reveal the hidden reef on which their hopes were set. But in point of fact, as Wally said, they forgot to think about it. Slogging there in the darkness, dimly lit by a hurricane lamp, its glass freely splashed with clay, they ceased to think of anything. Strike and shovel, shovel and strike; stripped to the waist, bodies streaming with sweat, heads heavy in the foul air, the struggle with the earth made gold seem a far-away dream. But the hope lived, and old Murty's cheerfulness never flagged. "Time enough yet," he would say. "Wan of these days we'll dhrive into her. Then we'll have the fun of Cork!"

More and more claims had been taken up round the original block. There was no real rush, and—much to the relief of the owners—no news of the find had got into the newspapers: but from time to time men dropped in, in twos and threes, and established themselves wherever hope prompted. The scrub fell before them: tents and huts sprang up like mushrooms. None of the strangers had as yet found any worth-while gold. They worked doggedly, with the age-old belief of the miner that each new day would bring luck.

After the first feeling of annoyance at being invaded had subsided, David Linton and his party found little cause for complaint. The men were, on the whole, quiet and law-abiding. Drinking was almost unknown, since drink was too difficult to obtain; most men who made the long rough trip to Broad's Creek were unwilling to give space in their packs to anything but necessary rations. No attempt was made to trespass on the outlying claims belonging to Mr. Linton's workers. The strangers might cast longing eyes at the wide area of untouched ground that lay round the central shaft, but they went cheerfully enough to peg their claims farther out. If gold were found in one place, they reasoned, it might be anywhere else in the neighbourhood.

With nearly all, the Linton party were on friendly terms. They were ready to give advice to anyone who asked questions; they made no secret of their own proceedings, though they did not encourage idle strolling on their ground. Since the average Australian miner has his own code of "the decent thing," very little curiosity was shown. They liked the frankness displayed by the station people, and they knew that if a reef were found it would not be kept a secret. Moreover, quick aid was forthcoming in case of illness or accident; when a man went down with fever David Linton visited him daily with medicine, and Lee Wing trotted backwards and forwards, carrying cans of soup such as the ordinary digger does not know. The miners decided that the Linton crowd might have the luck, but they were decent over it.

But there was no friendliness between the central camp and McGill's party. No further clashes had occurred. David Linton had strongly urged the boys to avoid any.

"It would do no good to come to open warfare," he said. "They have had their lesson, and they know what we think of them: they're not likely to intrude on us again. We're all too busy to waste any time on them. Keep out of their way." And though Jim and Wally still thirsted for vengeance, they realized the justice of the advice. The work was the main thing; private quarrels could wait. The McGill claim was beyond their boundary, and there was no need for them to meet.

Jim was returning from inspecting the horses one afternoon when he saw a miner walking away from the diggings, carrying his swag and wearing a coat. Coats were unknown, except, perhaps, on Sundays: Jim wondered what was the matter. The man was a quiet fellow, working a claim alone; more than once he had been grateful for a newspaper passed on to him from the central camp. He hailed him through the trees.

"What's up, Carston? Not clearing out?"

"Yes, worse luck." The digger looked worried. "A chap come back from Broad's Creek 's afternoon with some mail for me. I got to get back to Melbourne. The wife's very bad."

"I'm awfully sorry," Jim said. "But you aren't going to hump your bluey all the way to the Creek, are you? I thought you had a horse."

"So I had—but I've sold him to another bloke to pay for me ticket to Melbourne. I'm near cleaned out," Carston answered. "Oh, I'll get there all right, but I got to keep movin'." He took a step forward.

"But it will take you ages to get through to the Creek on foot," Jim said, aghast. "And your wife ill, and wanting to see you—why on earth didn't you come to us?"

The digger shook his head with the stubborn pride of his breed. "I ain't askin' favours," he said curtly.

"That's no favour—it's only common humanity. And you know we've spare horses."

"An' how'd I have got a horse back to you if I'd borrowed one? 'S all right, Mr. Linton, thanks all the same. I'll get along."

"Get along be hanged!" said Jim. "I never heard such rot." A thought struck him. "Look here, Carston: even if you rode to Broad's Creek it's a long journey to Melbourne, and there's only one train a day. It's far quicker from Cunjee. I'll get a couple of horses and take you in to Billabong, and my sister will run you to Cunjee in the car. You'll be with your wife to-morrow."

The man hesitated, unwilling to accept, though his longing showed clearly in his face.

"Aw, I can't——" he muttered. He looked up at Jim miserably. "Mr. Linton—she's darned bad."

"And probably the sight of you will make her twenty times better," returned Jim. "You can't risk keeping her waiting an hour longer than you have to. I'll go and get a couple of bridles—wait here and help me catch the horses."

They rode to Billabong almost in silence. Carston was wrapped in his own anxious thoughts, and Jim knew that it was kindness to leave him alone. Only when they had almost reached the homestead did he ask a question.

"Where's your wife? At her own home?"

"No—they've taken her to the Alfred Hospital. It's an operation, you see—had to be done in a hurry. Yesterday, me sister said it 'ud be. She ain't too strong at the best of times." His voice shook. "Lord, I wish I'd been there!"

"You try not to worry," Jim said, feeling the uselessness of the advice.

"Worry!" The word was a groan.

Billabong welcomed them gladly. Carston found himself sitting in the kitchen with kind faces round him and Norah's assurance that they would catch the early train in the morning. Presently he was left to Brownie's quiet talk. There was something soothing in the old woman's presence: he was able to eat the meal she put before him, to feel less hopeless.

He had just finished when Jim came in quickly. He was smiling.

“Good news for you, Carston. I’ve been on the telephone to the Alfred—your wife got through yesterday splendidly, and she’s doing well.”

“Now, ain’t that lovely!” breathed Brownie delightedly. Carston sat with compressed lips, looking at him dumbly.

“I took the liberty of sending her a message in your name,” Jim said. “Told them to tell her you’d be with her to-morrow and sent her your love.”

“Did you hear what she said?” burst out the digger wildly. Jim shook his head with regret.

“No chance. They won’t let one excursion round a hospital on a long-distance ’phone, worse luck. But you can sleep easy to-night, Carston.”

“Too right, I can—an’ thanks, Mr. Linton. By George, I won’t forget what you’ve done!”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Jim told him. “Well, turn in early—Mrs. Brown will look after you. I’ll see you before you start in the morning.”

Brownie came to the smoking-room a couple of hours later.

“It’s that man of yours, Mr. Jim. He wants to see you.”

“I thought the beggar would be in bed.” Jim heaved his long form from the depths of an arm-chair. “And I’m so comfortable! What on earth does he want, Brownie?”

“There’s something on his mind, if you ask me,” said Brownie darkly. “He’s been walkin’ up an’ down the back verandah, an’ when I told him he ought to be in bed, he said he couldn’t. Then after a bit he came an’ asked if you’d mind goin’ out. He don’t look comferable at all.”

“Well, I suppose I’d better go and see what’s worrying him,” said Jim. “Back in a few minutes, girls.”

He found Carston on the verandah. The light from the kitchen showed his face, uneasy but determined.

“Mind if we stay out here, Mr. Linton? There’s something I’ve got to tell you.”

“Right,” said Jim. “Go ahead.”

“It’s McGill’s crowd,” said the man slowly. “They’d skin me if they knew I’d got wise to any of their games; an’ I tell you straight I’m scared of them. But you’ve been a white man to me to-day. . . . I reckoned at first I wouldn’t say anything, but . . . well, I sort of found I couldn’t leave it at that. Not after what you done. Look here, Mr. Linton, do you know much about that bloke Walker that’s workin’ for you?”

“I’ve known of him for a good while. He’s one of the old prospectors who used to pick up a living by fossicking in the ranges before we ever thought about gold.”

“Then you trust him?”

“We—ell . . .” said Jim slowly. “I’ll admit I wouldn’t pin a whole lot of faith on Walker. But he has a decent wife: we know a good deal of her. And two youngsters. That’s why we let him come in on the show and peg out a claim. You see, we wanted the ground held by men who weren’t strangers—and he was only too glad to let his claim wait while he earned a bit by working for us.” Jim hesitated. “As a matter of fact, we saw to it that this particular claim was taken out in his wife’s name.”

“She don’t live hereabouts, does she?”

“Not now. She took her children away on a visit somewhere. They used to live in a hut in the bush.” He looked mystified. “What about it?”

“Well, Walker’s a good deal thicker with McGill and his lot than most men on the field would care to be. I made up me mind when I came that I’d keep meself to meself, an’ not poke me nose into anyone’s business. So I go moochin’ about alone in the scrub on Sundays, an’ sometimes in the evening, an’ I’ve seen ’em together, lots of times. They never seen me, though: I move pretty noiseless. An’ Walker goes over to their camp, but never in daylight; he doesn’t know how many times I’ve seen him slippin’ into McGill’s tent. An’ I’ve overheard a bit.”

He paused uncomfortably.

“Well, I don’t mind sayin’ I’ve listened. It sort of amused me to see how close I could get to ’em: there’s rocky places in the gullies where they go—I’ve lain on top of a rock an’ heard them talkin’ down below me. Not that I cared tuppence about their business, but—oh, well, it was something to do.”

“You had your own nerve,” Jim commented, looking at the little man with some amazement. “If McGill had caught you I wouldn’t have liked your chances.”

“Well, I began to be scared after a bit. They’re not nice to know, I guess. So I made up me mind I wouldn’t track ’em any more—an’ then, what must they do but come an’ sit down quite close to some rocks where I was takin’ it easy! I could ’a’ chucked a stone on top of McGill’s hat. You bet I lay flat, hardly darin’ to breathe. An’ this is what I heard, Mr. Linton. That there Walker’s lettin’ them start work on his claim.”

“Is he so!” said Jim quietly.

“He wasn’t with them, an’ they were talkin’ pretty freely. They aren’t what a man ’ud call real miners, you know.” His voice was scornful. “They reckoned they’d only to strike a gold-field an’ pick up nuggets—at least that’s what most of ’em seemed to think. Sloggin’ with a pick, day in and day out, is a game they find very tirin’. They want to get rich quicker. They’ll start work on Walker’s block all right, but it isn’t diggin’ that’s made them keen on gettin’ hold of it. It’s because it’s just across the creek from your sluice-boxes.”

Jim's face was grim, but unconvinced.

"But what do they think they can do? It's a dashed nuisance to have them so close to us, working on our ground—we'll owe Walker something for landing us with that. But——"

"Don't you make any mistake, Mr. Linton. They know from Walker how often your sluice-boxes are cleaned out. The creek's easy waded: they reckon on doin' a bit of cleanin'-up for you. In fact, McGill's got pretty large ideas: he's got Walker tryin' to find out on the quiet where you keep your gold that's ready to be sent in to the bank. An' if there's a chance of gettin' hold of it—well, McGill's not goin' to be afraid of hurtin' you over the job!" His voice was serious. "I tell you straight, that chap's got you set—you an' your brother-in-law. He's spoilin' for a chance to get at you."

"He can have *that* whenever he likes," said Jim swiftly.

"Well, he's no soft job to tackle. He may be a bit gone to seed, but he was a dangerous man in the ring. He knows all about the game, but he's not a clean fighter—there's no dirty trick he isn't up to. It's no shame to an ordinary man to think twice about takin' him on. I don't know what you're like with your hands—you're more his size: but your brother-in-law's too light a weight to tackle him. He might as well try hittin' one of them Pyramids of Egypt. What with you an' Mrs. Meadows doin' all you are for me . . . I just had to warn you."

"Well, you've given me plenty to think about," Jim said. "And I'm very grateful, Carston. You needn't think you've run any risk in warning us. We'll keep that to ourselves. And when you come back there will be work for you with us if you like. Honestly, I don't think much of that claim of yours. But if we strike the reef—well, we'll make sure that you have a look-in."

"Aw, I wasn't headin' for anything like that," broke in Carston. "Tell you the truth, I'm not likely to come back. So you just forget it."

Jim hesitated, remembering a certain matter of a horse.

"Is it cash?" he asked.

"That's my business," was the curt answer.

"Not altogether. If you're short of money, how are you going to look after your wife properly when she comes out of hospital? It's not sense, Carston. Not justice, either—you've given me information that may save us quite a lot of money. I'm going to take a hand now." He put his hand on the little man's shoulder. "You're going to take enough to give Mrs. Carston all she needs and bring you back to the diggings. Otherwise—well I believe my sister would go off to Melbourne and take over Mrs. Carston herself! Very obstinate person, my sister."

It meant a long argument, for the miner's pride was up in arms, but in the end Jim won. Certain notes changed hands—Carston looking thoroughly

unhappy over the transaction.

“Cheer up, now,” grinned Jim. “I won’t see you in the morning after all: now that I know all these interesting things I’ll start back for the diggings before dawn. My regards to Mrs. Carston. Why not bring her back when you come? There’s always room at Billabong—and Mrs. Brown has a passion for fattening convalescents. And we’ll reckon on you to fight on our side.”

“My oath, I’ll do that!” said the little man.

“It’s a bargain, then. Well, good journey—and good luck.” He gripped the miner’s hand, then disappeared into the house.

Carston stood looking after him. His hand went into his pocket mechanically: he fingered the little package of notes, realizing all they meant to him of peace of mind and security.

“I’ll get her some grapes as I’m goin’ out to the hospital to-morrow,” he muttered. “Great big ones.”

“And if you an’ Mr. Jim have finished talkin’ the leg off an iron pot,” said a patient voice from the kitchen doorway, “p’raps you’d have sense enough to go to bed. I reckon you could do with it.” Brownie looked keenly at his haggard face. “Or p’raps a cup of tea ’ud be no bad thing first. Come an’ tell me all about your wife while I make it.”

“I reckon I could do with that, too,” said Carston. He followed her into the kitchen.

The news that Jim took back to the smoking-room somewhat damped the spirits of the house-party. Jack Young, whose week it was on guard at the homestead, was all for battle. Jim shook his head.

“We can’t do anything. What right have we to say a word against it if Walker chooses to allow them on his claim? The only person who could do anything is Mrs. Walker, wherever she may be. I don’t suppose her precious husband would give us her address. And she mightn’t want to interfere, even if she did know. Oh, I’m not going to worry myself about it. It’s a nuisance, but it only means keeping our eyes skinned. And it’s not so unpleasant as it would be if Walker’s claim were actually on our side of the creek.”

“The creek isn’t much of a barrier.”

“No: but the enemy has no excuse whatever for being on our bank. That means a good deal. Don’t worry your heads about it, girls. We’re well able to look after ourselves.”

“I was wondering,” Norah said: “Bill and Dick have been begging us to let them go out for a while to the mine. I told them I would ask you if they would be in the way. But now that this business has cropped up it might not be wise for them to go.”

Jim turned the matter over in his mind.

“I don’t see why not,” he said. “McGill’s games are not going to make any

difference to our ordinary routine. Oh, let the little chaps come; they're sensible youngsters, and we can trust them not to get into trouble. It would be rather fun to have them—we're apt to get a bit solemn out there, and they'd wake us up."

"There will be wild scenes in the morning when we tell them," smiled Tommy. "Will you take them out with you?"

"No," he said. "I'll have to make tracks before any of you are up—the sooner Dad and the others know McGill's plans, the better. But Bill knows every yard of the way; they don't need an escort. They can come whenever they like."

"This household is shrinking steadily," said Betty. "When am I to be shown the mine, Jim? Norah says I'm thoroughly station-broke now—I want to enlarge my experiences."

"Well, I flew you over the diggings yesterday," said Jack, rather aggrieved. "And you said it looked beastly!"

"So it did, compared to the rest of the Bush. Just a blot. But it might be interesting to be right down on the blot, seeing how it worked."

"You don't see anything but how we work," Jim told her. "But that's very edifying—and we look lovely when we come out of the shaft."

"Yes—you really mustn't judge them by the spick-and-span people they are when they come back here," said Tommy. "Out there they grow long beards—really long ones, like Father Christmas."

"I suppose that's to catch the nuggets in," mused Betty. "Golden-bearded, like Vikings. Oh, do let me come out and see, Jim!"

"I don't think any of you would behave with proper dignity if you did come out," said Jim severely. "A more graceless set of women I never saw! But come whenever you like: there's lots of cave-room, and plenty of work. We might be cleaner if we had you three to wash for us!" He chuckled. "That's an idea—you might start a laundry for the whole diggings. You can't imagine how popular you'd be!"

CHAPTER XII

WALKER'S CLAIM

“WELL, I'm dashed!” said Freddy Paxton.

Breakfast was over: he had lit his pipe, strolling down from the plateau for a quarter of an hour's satisfying smoke before disappearing into the earth for his morning shift in the tunnel. This time, however, the pipe was to prove unsatisfying.

His idle gaze, travelling round the clearing, came to rest upon a claim on the far side of the creek. Instantly he became rigid. The pipe almost dropped from his mouth.

Men were working busily on the block. In one corner tent-poles had been erected; as he looked, the grey canvas fluttered up into place. Nearer, two miners were digging, throwing up great shovelful of mullock. One paused for a moment to straighten his shoulders.

“It's McGill!” uttered the bewildered Freddy. “Well, of all the confounded cheek!”

He watched for a few moments; then turned and went swiftly back to the plateau.

“I say, Mr. Linton! That swine McGill is tryin' to jump one of our claims!”

David Linton looked blankly astonished.

“But that's utterly ridiculous, Freddy. Even McGill hasn't nerve enough for that.”

“Well, he's doin' it. Tent up, fellows diggin', an' all set an' merry. Nearly opposite our sluice-boxes, too. He's picked his spot well—means to be quite matey with us, I suppose. We'll be able to shout lovin' messages across.”

Wally had gone striding down the slope. He was back in a moment.

“It's Walker's claim,” he reported. “They're there in full force. By Jove, what a fool the man is! You'd think he'd know that every digger on the place will turn out to protect Walker. If they didn't, no fellow's claim would be safe.”

“It seems incredible.” David Linton knitted his brows. “Well, the first thing to do is to get hold of Walker. Where is he working, Wally?”

“In the shaft. He'd have seen them if he'd been above ground. Shall I get him up?”

“Better not, I think. It would mean disorganizing the shifts, and he'll be up in another hour in any case.” Mr. Linton glanced at his watch.

“Well, can't we go over and tackle them?” asked Wally impatiently.

“You forget we have no authority, my boy. If they'd jumped any of the

claims held in our names—well, we should be getting busy now. As it is, Walker is the owner—or his wife—and he’s the only man authorized to take action.”

“I forgot that,” admitted Wally. “Jove, what a pity Mrs. Walker’s gone away! Can’t you imagine that horny-handed woman sailing in like a tigress defending her young? I think even McGill would show her a clean pair of heels.”

“If he has ’em,” said Freddy doubtfully.

Mr. Linton was thinking.

“I should like to handle this thing carefully,” he said. “The jumping of a claim isn’t a matter for us alone: it’s for the whole place.”

“But Walker’s our man,” protested Bob. “It’s up to us to back him, surely!”

“Of course; but equally up to us if it were any other man’s claim. It affects every digger, and it must be dealt with as a camp matter. Walker must go over to them and lodge a protest——”

“They’d sling him into the creek!”

“Not if a few of us go with him, I fancy,” was the dry answer. “But they certainly won’t hand him back his claim with a polite bow. That clears the way: our next step is to go round all the claims and call a public meeting.”

Glum faces looked at him. This was far too peaceful a method for the boys.

“No good, lads: we’ve *got* to have law and order, and make every decent digger feel that he’s taking his share. We can’t boss the camp. We must forget that we were once responsible for all this land. That ended when the first new claim was staked out. If there isn’t mutual responsibility in the crowd no man would be safe. The next thing would be to get in a police force.”

They agreed resignedly.

“No need to worry, anyhow,” said Mr. Linton. “McGill and his roughs can’t stand against the whole weight of public opinion. We’ll get going when Walker comes up.”

The shaft released Walker an hour later. Lee Wing greeted him as he stepped out of the bucket.

“Boss wantee you up top-side. Makee hully.”

“What’s he want, Chink?”

Lee Wing’s slant eyes showed no sign of feeling.

“Not knowing. Him catchee welly angly, think-so. Him say you come one-time.”

Walker, a tall weedy man with shifty eyes, hesitated. He glanced across the creek towards his claim, and looked extremely uneasy.

“I leckon Mas’ Wally come down quick an’ lively, you no hully. Him catchee angly, too, all li’,” suggested Lee Wing softly.

“You keep your yabber for somebody else!” snapped Walker. He muttered to himself, “Suppose I might as well get it over.” Slowly he walked to the plateau, Lee Wing following closely. Wally was the first to see him.

“I say, Walker!” he sang out. “Did you see what’s going on at your claim? Those swine have jumped it!”

“Yairs, I seen ’em,” said Walker slowly.

Wally stared at him.

“Did they say anything to you about it yesterday?”

“Well, as a matter o’ fact, they did. They ain’t been too satisfied with their blocks. They reckon they’re no good.” He stammered a little, conscious of a battery of astonished eyes.

“That has nothing to do with us,” said Mr. Linton sharply. “You surely don’t mean to say that you gave them permission to dig in your block?”

“Well, not exactly permission. Fact is, they gotta right now.” He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. “I mean, that is, I’ve sort o’ sub-let it to them. Pity not to start workin’ it.”

There was dead silence. The eyes seemed to bore into Walker until he could endure them no longer. He faced them with an effort.

“Well, I don’t see what’s the harm. They made it worth me while. I mean, you can’t expect a bloke not to look out for himself.”

“We let you in here under a definite agreement,” David Linton said sternly. “You gave your word that your claim should not be touched until the central block was fully tested, and you agreed that we were paying you high wages, in addition to full rations. And the claim is not yours: it is your wife’s.”

“The old woman’s ’ud do what I do. A man’s wife’s the same as himself.”

“By Jove, yours isn’t!” exclaimed Wally. “Mrs. Walker’s a better man than you are, any day!”

“That welly tluе,” Lee Wing was heard to observe gently.

“If you had honestly decided that you wanted to end our agreement, we should have met you in some way,” Mr. Linton went on. “Instead of that, you have gone behind our backs and let the worst set of men in the camp loose on our land. Whatever they paid you to do it, Walker, I think you’ll find it won’t prove worth it.”

The contempt in his tone brought a gleam into Walker’s dull eyes.

“Yous ain’t got no call to go abusin’ them like that——”

“My daughter camped in the Bush and nursed your wife when she was helpless—and you know that McGill had insulted her!” Mr. Linton’s voice rang out. “Good Lord, man, haven’t you common decency?”

Walker had no answer to that. He stared at the ground, his dull face blank.

“Well, there’s nothing to be gained by discussing it,” the squatter said after a long pause. “You’ve let us down as badly as you could, and that finishes

things as far as you are concerned. I'll pay you what is due to you, and you can go and join your friends. Take your tent off our land, and don't let us see you near the workings again."

"You—you mean you're sackin' me?"

"You didn't expect anything else, surely?"

"I—well, I never reckoned on that," said the man stupidly. "I ain't got no claim to go to now."

"That's your look out. You're no worse off than when we rescued you from fossicking at starvation pickings. It is hardly likely that we should employ any man who is on intimate terms with McGill and his gang, even if that man didn't happen to have sold us as you have." Mr. Linton made a brief calculation on the back of an envelope, and took out his pocket-book. "There's your money. I'll give you half an hour to get your tent away."

Walker took the money without a word. He slouched away, head down and shoulders humped.

"I believe he's half-baked!" burst out Wally angrily. "Did the fool think we were going to ask him to tea?"

"Bewilderin' cove," observed Freddy. "My hat, if he really counted on stayin' on he'll find he's let himself in for a packet of trouble! McGill's lot won't welcome him: they've got his claim, an' he's got no rations."

"Oh, he can get to Broad's Creek—he has a horse. I'm afraid I've no sympathy to spare for Walker," said David Linton. "We've got our own troubles. It's no light matter to have that crowd at such close quarters. The creek isn't much of a barrier."

"I suppose it would seem a trifle pointed if we planted a barbed-wire entanglement down the middle of it," said Bob mournfully.

"It's a lovely idea, though," Freddy added. "Picture McGill gettin' bushed in it!"

David Linton scarcely heard these pleasant suggestions. He was deeply troubled. It had hit him sharply to be betrayed by a man in his employment; happy relations between him and his workers had been almost unbroken during many years at Billabong. Worse than this was anxiety as to the future. Jim and Wally had already been hard to restrain where McGill was concerned; with this new affront he knew that a clash was almost inevitable. Wally, with all his pluck, would be no match for the prize-fighter in a hand-to-hand encounter: he doubted seriously whether Jim would fare much better. And—quite apart from personal damage—to be thrashed by McGill would lower their standing in the camp: would leave McGill triumphant, and matters generally in an infinitely worse state than before. The squatter frowned heavily, and doubted for the hundredth time whether it had been a fortunate thing to find gold on Billabong.

"Hullo, here's Jim!" Bob exclaimed. "What on earth has brought him back

so early?”

Jim rode in, bursting with his news—to find the others equally eager to tell him theirs. They discussed the matter from every angle, in the light of Carston’s revelations.

“Well, I’ve been thinking over it pretty hard all the way out,” Jim said at length. “Of course, I didn’t expect to find that things had happened already—but that’s a detail. And you’ll probably think I’m sinking into a prudent old age, but I’ve come to the conclusion, Wal, that it’s not good enough to think we can settle the affair by trying to batter friend McGill.”

Wally looked at him enquiringly. Prudence where his own skin was concerned was entirely foreign to Jim; this was a peculiar development, considering how earnestly they had yearned together for the chance of a fight. Wally felt rather dashed in spirit. But he made no comment, for, as he reflected, you never knew what was up Jim’s sleeve.

But David Linton’s heart had leaped at his son’s words.

“What’s your idea, Jim?”

“I think there may be a better way. McGill has been swaggering a good deal about what a wonderful fellow he is as a fighter; Carston says he has half the men on the place terrorized. We might alter that if we were able to lick him, but it’s only common sense to admit that there’s a strong possibility of his licking us instead. We’d look pretty small in the eyes of all the diggers then—as they say in Lee Wing’s country, we should ‘lose face.’ That would be most undesirable. But how cheerful it would be if we could plan for McGill to lose face in some way!”

“Jim, you have brains!” exclaimed Freddy delightedly.

“But I haven’t—at the moment, anyhow. I can’t find any workable idea. But we are at least one point ahead: if we can trust Carston, we know that they mean to try a spot of burglary.”

“I should say we can certainly trust Carston,” his father said. “This morning’s happenings are just what he told you.”

“Exactly,” Jim nodded. “I’d have trusted him, anyhow, but then you didn’t see the poor chap as I did. So we know that we’ve got to watch out; and they don’t know we know. One for us. What we’ve got to think of is how to circumvent Mr. McGill’s get-rich-quick intentions; not merely to save ourselves from losing a few ounces of gold, but so that he’ll lose face over the job. It would be pretty gorgeous if we could make a fool of him publicly.”

“My aunt, yes!” chuckled Wally. “But how?”

“I haven’t a notion. But if we all put our brains to it, I expect it will come. Meanwhile, I suggest that our line is to ignore them completely. They’ll probably expect us to make some protest about Walker’s claim; if none is made it will puzzle them——”

“They’ll just think we’re meek,” said Wally wrathfully.

“All the better if they do: they’ll have less hesitation about coming to investigate our sluice-boxes. I could almost wish you hadn’t had to fire Walker, though of course it was necessary; we could have fixed things so that he would carry carefully selected information to the enemy. But it doesn’t matter: we’ll work out a plan somehow.”

“What a bit of luck that you got on terms with Carston!” Bob said. “If you hadn’t, we should all have been feeling furious and helpless because they had got on to our ground—nothing ahead but all sorts of unpleasant possibilities. Now we know that they’re planning even more active measures, and that gives us something to plan for, too, so we’re all quite cheerful.”

“Yes, it makes a mighty difference,” Freddy said happily. “And now, I suppose, we should go in different directions into the lonesome Bush, an’ spend the rest of the day rackin’ our minds to think up brainy notions about the best way to receive burglars in a sluice-box!”

“You may suppose that,” said Bob firmly, “—and then, again, you may not. What is really going to happen is that you and I are about to depart hand-in-hand for the tunnel, and rack our muscles over the little spot of work we’ve been dodging all the morning!”

Freddy groaned heavily.

“I’ve been wonderin’ when that awful thought would strike you. Serve you right if we drove into the reef, an’ got so excited that we forgot to make any plans at all!”

“I’d take that chance!” said Bob.

They linked arms and went off down the hill. The others scattered to pick up their share of the day’s work, leaving the plateau to Lee Wing.

Lee Wing sat motionless on a log, fingering the knife with which he had been peeling potatoes while listening in silence to the talk. He stared in front of him, eyes mere slits in his broad face, a ghost of a smile now and then twitching his lips. Murty, coming up the slope, saw him, and mentally compared him to “a yalla Chinese idol.” He did not know that Lee Wing was pondering deeply on that pleasant pastime of his countrymen known as “to cause to lose face.”

CHAPTER XIII

IN CAMP

IT was a day of days for Dick when he and Bill set out for the camp. To make the journey without any grown-up escort was in itself cause for hidden pride; he felt like an early explorer about to plunge into an unknown land. Beyond the ride lay all the mysterious excitements of camping in a cave, of seeing a real mine, where gold might be lying about wherever he happened to wander. Though Bill seemed to think this unlikely, Dick kept his secret hopes—was not the motto of all diggers “You never know”?

He was still excited, but by that time very glad to leave the saddle, when they arrived at their journey’s end. People were still working; only Lee Wing was at the plateau, cooking. He greeted the boys in the manner of a host.

“Welly glad you come. Bunks all leady top-side, Mas’ Bill.”

They carried their valises into the cave that looked out upon the plateau. Dick exclaimed at its height and size.

“Pretty big, isn’t it?” Bill said. “The opening was all blocked up with fallen rocks when we came first. I loosened one of them with a lever, an’ jolly near killed myself—a whole lot of them came down with a rush. Gosh, I had to hop it! Then Jim an’ the others cleared them all away, an’ I can tell you they were pretty surprised when they saw the size of it, ’cause the opening’s not so big.”

Even though the world outside was bathed in sunshine, the great cave was cool and dim. Bill lit a petrol lamp: in the sudden brilliant light Dick saw a lofty vaulted roof, with down-dropping stalactites, twisted into curious shapes. At the end of the cave was a recess high up in the wall, running far back: over its edge curved a curtain of petrified rock, gleaming with stripes of many colours. Sparkling points everywhere had sprung into life. Dick was suitably impressed.

“Glory, what a place! It’s like a fairy palace in a pantomime with the light on. Where do those openings go?” He pointed towards dark gaps in the sides.

“Simply everywhere. The hill’s like a big honeycomb with caves: those are the mouths of long twisty passages. We’ve explored a lot of ’em, but I don’t think we know half about it yet. Everyone’s been too busy, you see.”

“Can’t we start now?” demanded Dick hopefully.

Bill looked mournful.

“Orders are awfully strict. I’ve given my word never to go without the others. You see, they aren’t certain if the roofs are safe, and in lots of the passages the floor is broken—or it just stops suddenly, and you look down into nothing.”

“But we could take torches. We’d be all right.”

Bill shook his head obstinately.

“No go, old man. I’ve promised, an’ they rely on you to promise, too.”

“Oh, all right: if you can’t go, of course I won’t. But they’ll take us some time, won’t they?”

“You bet they will. We know a good many little caves, but they’re not much compared to the Hall—that’s this big fellow. There’s one tiny little one, at the end of a twisty passage that goes in ever so far: they call it my private cave, ’cause I liked it so much. The floor’s very dangerous in one part of the passage leading to it—it was always a nasty bit, an’ the boys have broken away a lot of the jagged edges that looked as if they might break in.”

“Then you can’t get to it now?” said Dick, disappointment in his voice.

“Yes, we can. They’ve bridged the gap with planks.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “If I tell you something pretty important, you’ll never let on?”

“Rather not! Go on!” Dick begged.

“Norah said I could tell you, just ’cause you’re one of us now. My private cave is where they store the gold!”

“Golly!” breathed Dick.

“Of course, it’s a dead secret—none of the men know, ’cept Murty an’ Lee Wing. It’s taken there as soon as it’s washed clean an’ bagged-up. Then, once a week or so, it goes in to Billabong, an’ then to the bank.” He pointed a finger. “See where those overcoats are hanging on a spike on the wall? The opening’s behind them.”

“It must be a tiny little opening.”

“Only a slit; Jim can just get through it. You wouldn’t think there was anything there, would you?”

“Doesn’t look as if there was anything at all but coats. Nobody would find that passage in a month of Sundays.”

“No, it’s an awfully safe place. And it’s an awfully long way in, and you’d think the passage was ending every minute, it twists so. We have to go pretty carefully. Well, that’s all we can see of caves now. This is your bunk, an’ that’s mine. Mr. Linton’s is the big one near the door. The boys don’t much like sleeping in the cave unless it’s howling wet—they’re out in the tents.”

Dick decided that a bunk in a cave was even better than a tent. “You’ve got more head-room here,” he said, looking up into the great vault above him—a very small figure in the middle of the cave: and Bill, on the same level, agreed solemnly, remarking that here one could stretch. Then a whistle sounded, and they dashed out to meet the returning workers.

The days that followed were sheer delight. They were free to go where they chose, to explore the Bush on their ponies, to take a hand with gold-washing if they felt like it—an occupation which at first seemed mysterious and exciting,

but which very soon became rather back-breaking and dull. There was fishing in holes where the creek, wide and shallow near the camp, grew deeper, flowing between high rocky banks: they found that they became extremely popular whenever they returned with a string of blackfish and mountain trout, with an occasional eel as a makeweight. There were evenings when they went—under careful escort—exploring hidden caves, climbing up rocky shelves and finding new wonders of coloured formations, jewel-like in the glow of their torches; worming their way in single file into the heart of the cliffs, to emerge in some rocky chamber that seemed to hold the stillness of ages. In one there was a heap of bones: Bill and Dick gloated over them in grisly curiosity, until the picture built up by imagination, of wounded black-fellows crawling home to die, was crushed by Jim, who remarked, “Pretty big kangaroo, that one must have been!” They consoled themselves by the reflection that a black-fellow had probably brought the bones there to gnaw. It was clear that blacks had once used the caves: Bill had once found a stone axe, and in more than one cave blackened walls and roof told of cooking-fires.

The boys were not merely guests: there were many odd jobs about the camp for willing hands and quick young feet. Lee Wing, who took a turn at work outside his own province whenever an extra man was needed, was glad to be spared the task of getting firewood. Fish had to be cleaned, potatoes washed, the camp kept tidy; the boys did their share. It was rather fun to have an occasional lesson in camp cooking, too. Dick never forgot the evening when a plum-duff of his own compounding came to the table: his trembling anxiety when it came out of the pot, still mercifully whole. Then the exaggerated alarm with which the party attacked it, after Mr. Linton had carved it in the nervously alert manner of one who fears that an innocent exterior may conceal a high explosive: followed by urgent eating, and plates passed up for more, ending with a vote of thanks to the new cook, proposed by Freddy in a speech of flowery eloquence. A great evening—and only by a last-minute effort had he been able to save a slice for Lee Wing.

With the outside diggers they were on very friendly terms. Their instructions from Jim had been brief: “Be civil to everyone, and don’t poke your noses into their affairs”: and they found that it paid to follow the advice. The miners liked to see children about, once they realized that they were not likely to be intrusive: there were nods and greetings when the red and yellow heads came near, and men would straighten tired backs and pause to yarn for a few minutes, leaning on their shovels. In more than one tent they were made welcome after hours of work were over: they repaid the hospitality by shy gifts of fish or firewood, or by carrying a bucket of drinking-water from the spring. Little matters; but meaning a good deal to men who ceased work in the evening almost too weary to set about the business of preparing a meal.

Only one part of the diggings was forbidden ground: the claim across the creek where McGill and his men were sinking a shaft. The orders had been definite.

“Don’t go anywhere near there, and don’t show any curiosity about them. If they run across you outside their claim, don’t talk if you can avoid it, but be civil if they speak to you.”

“We don’t want to speak to them—the cows!” said Bill inelegantly. “Don’t want to be civil, either—why, they’ve stolen that claim!”

“No, they haven’t. All that the camp knows is that Walker let them have it. They’re within their rights. It’s not our game to show that we’re even annoyed: and you two have got to play our game.” Jim’s voice was final. The boys said no more, whatever they thought privately.

McGill and his followers were not popular in the camp. People were unwilling to antagonize a man of McGill’s strength and moroseness; but when he sauntered to a camp-fire in the evening his hosts soon found that they had promised to visit someone else, or that it was time to turn in. His habit of boasting wearied them. “Makes y’ sick,” a digger phrased it. “Talks as if no one but himself had ever packed a punch. An’ he’s too dashed proud of himself for havin’ got that claim in spite of the Lintons.”

“Too right,” agreed a mate. “An’ any one of Linton’s crowd’s worth a paddockful of McGills, if y’ ask *me*.” It was the general opinion of the miners; but they were careful not to take sides. McGill went his triumphant way unchecked, confident in his own mind that the camp recognized him as the one man among them all who had had sufficient daring and cleverness to play a leading part.

“They all sing pretty small when I’m about,” he told Todd. “I reckon they’d all follow me if it ever came to a proper show-down with the Lintons. They know well enough I could lick any three or four of ’em with one hand.”

“That ain’t everything in running a camp,” growled Todd.

“It’s nine-tenths. Once a chap’s made himself a leader he can do most things. You just wait and see.”

Bill and Dick rarely encountered him. Indeed they took much care to keep out of his way—not from fear, but from an inner conviction that if the meeting were more than a passing one they might find themselves unequal to obeying Jim’s injunction to be civil. Therefore their efforts to avoid him were more than once so marked that McGill himself noticed them. He grinned unpleasantly, seeing two slender figures dodging away in the scrub.

“Scared stiff!” he muttered. “The whole lot have sung pretty small lately, since we got hold of some of their ground.” There was an extra shade of swagger in his manner as he went on; it showed itself when he met Walker.

Walker was not a happy man in those days. He was far more stupid than

evil: it had seemed to him, under the arguments of the McGill band, a promising idea to let them in on his wife's claim. It lay idle, they had argued: he could not work it himself—why not get it started? They had paid him a sum large enough to be tempting. And he was still to retain a controlling interest in the block, to be the principal shareholder in any profits; McGill had promised largely, inwardly sure of his own ability to keep what he had once got his hands on. The Lintons, too—why should they object? Walker could still go on working for them. And Walker, who had seldom more than one idea in his self-centred mind, had given in.

But the hopeful position had altered sadly with his prompt dismissal by David Linton. No welcome awaited him when he turned up at the claim with his news. Until now he had been courted and flattered, but he quickly realized that a man in a good job with a promising claim to sub-let was a very different proposition from the same man, out of work, his claim passed from him. And needing food!—that was a serious matter, when the obtaining of food meant two days of toilsome travel. “You can git!” said McGill curtly.

But the bovine Walker had a stubborn streak, and he declined to “git.” One card was still in his hand; he played it for all it was worth. The claim was not legally his, but registered in his wife's name. “If I go,” he said, “I'll go for me wife. I'll bring her back, an' the police with her!”

The very mention of the word “police” was depressing to McGill and his band. They had made terms, sullenly: Walker could work with them, sharing their food; could pitch his tent near their main camp. Walker found it anything but a happy arrangement. They kept him at arm's length, no longer a sharer in their discussions; the harder and more distasteful parts of the work were left to him, his food cut down as much as possible. Lonely and bitter, realizing too late that he had made a bad bargain, Walker slogged at the work of digging, always eagerly watching for the first sign of gold—conscious of unfriendly eyes that watched him with no less keenness.

He was poking about the mullock-heaps when McGill appeared. The others had ceased work for the day: their voices came from their camp, beyond the cleared land.

“What are you hangin' round for?” McGill demanded unpleasantly. “Tryin' to get a nugget or so on your own?”

“Why shouldn't I? I'd show up anything I got.”

“I wonder!” sneered McGill. “Only your word for that. Well, you better get along an' help with supper.”

“You don't do much in that line,” muttered Walker angrily.

“No. I'm boss of this show—an' I'd advise you not to forget that. Clear out!”

For a moment Walker stood his ground uncertainly. Then, at a threatening

movement from the big man, he turned on his heel and walked off slowly.

The interview had been watched with much interest by two sharp pairs of eyes on the other side of the creek. Bill and Dick had doubled back to keep an eye on the enemy.

“He bullies Walker no end,” said Dick, with satisfaction. “Serve him right!”

“Yes—good enough for him,” Bill responded. “Jim says he doesn’t think much of Walker’s chance of getting a decent share, even if they do strike gold. I wish Mrs. Walker ’ud turn up—I bet she’d be wild if she knew.”

“Could she do anything?” Dick asked doubtfully. “She’s only a woman.”

“She’s a holy terror when she gets talking, though!” said Bill, who had once spent more time than he cared for as the unwilling guest of Mrs. Walker. “I reckon she’d scare even McGill. Look, there’s Lee Wing down at the creek. Let’s go and see what he’s up to.”

They trotted down. Lee Wing sat on the sloping sand of the bank near the sluice-boxes, gazing placidly across the stretch of shallow water. Behind him were three stakes, driven deeply into firmer ground: tied to the stakes were lengths of pliable wire, the free ends of which had been flung out into the creek.

“He’s got yabbie-lines out,” said Bill. “That’s a thing I never thought of doing, Dick. We could go yabbie-fishing.”

“What’s yabbies?” asked Dick, disregarding grammar.

“Sort of fresh-water crayfish. Mostly they’re pretty small, but sometimes they’re whacking great things. You put a chunk of meat on a big hook, an’ they hang on to it with their claws, an’ if they’re really interested in the meat they’ll let you pull ’em up, but you never know if they’re going to drop off. It’s fun,” explained Bill, all in one breath. “Jolly good to eat, too.” They slithered through the sand and subsided near Lee Wing, who looked round and grinned silently. “Any luck, Lee Wing?”

“Not yet. Leave um here allee night, catchee morning—perhaps.”

“I didn’t think you’d get yabbies in a creek like this,” said Bill. “Thought it had to be deeper water, in dark holes with trees growing round to shade it.”

“Not able tellee where yabbies live,” said the cook hopefully. “Not got other placee, so tly here. You likee if I catchee um an’ boilee.”

“You bet! Got strong hooks?”

“Welly. Stlong wi-ah, too.”

“I say, will you lend them to us some time? We could try down in the scrub.”

“Makee others for you. I leckon leave these here allee time, come look-see evely mornin’. Good chance, that.”

“Right-oh—thanks awfully, Lee Wing. Bet you we catch the biggest!”

"Bet you I do," returned the cook emphatically.

"Well, we'll have to weigh them. I say, did you see McGill just now? We thought he was going to hit Walker."

"Me, too. Solly not."

Bill chuckled.

"Isn't he bloodthirsty, Dick! Lee Wing, what would you do if McGill came across and helped himself to your yabbies before you came to look at 'em in the morning?"

"Be welly closs," said Lee Wing, his thick voice placid. "But me on watchee here now, Mas' Bill."

"You!" Bill stared at him.

"Not likee leave th-th-thlieuth-bloxes alone now," said the Chinese, while Bill and Dick almost choked with the laughter that always seized them when he attempted certain English words. Their surprise at his news helped them to keep straight faces, and they stared enquiringly. "Mas' Jim let me bling blankets down here, all same watch-dog."

"But—is it because of McGill? *You* couldn't stop him if he came over, Lee Wing."

"Not here for fightee. Only make welly big hullabaloo on tin pan, bling evelybody one-time," jabbered Lee Wing happily.

"Wow! I wish they'd come! Where do you sleep, though?"

Lee Wing cast a wary eye across the water before he answered. They were sitting on the sand almost opposite Walker's claim, the wide shallow stream flowing gently between. A few yards up the bank from them lay the sluice-boxes in the narrow ditch that had been dug for them before letting part of the water into the channel. The sand on either side of the boxes was trodden hard by the feet of the gold-washers.

The boxes lay on the open side of the three-sided enclosure of brush fencing which shut off the work from the curious glances of strangers. The building party had not stinted their work: the densely brushed walls were seven feet high, and ran back for over four yards before they met the back section. Mr. Linton liked to have clear working-space about him, and he had seen the possibility of being forced to put a night-guard to sleep there.

Lee Wing withdrew his gaze from the opposite bank. McGill had gone away some time earlier; there was no sign of life on the claim.

"Come look-see," he said, getting up.

The interior of the enclosure lay bare as they looked into it, save for a few old boxes that might have been seats for workers off duty.

"Haven't you even a bunk?" asked Dick, puzzled. The Chinese grinned.

"You two no good scouts," he chaffed them.

Bill stared again. "By—Jove!" he exclaimed suddenly, and ran farther in.

“You cunning old villain, Lee Wing—just look here, Dick!”

An inner wall of brushwood had been built, a yard from the back fence. It ran almost all the way across; at one end a space had been left, just wide enough for a man to enter. Behind it, as they peered in, were blankets, folded in orderly fashion.

“Welly comf’tabubble bunk,” said Lee Wing softly. “Bling my gong down evely night, all leady makee hollible shindy. Slip in after dark, makee no light at all.”

“And suppose they went for you when you made your hollible shindy?” protested Dick anxiously. “You’d be caught like a rat in here, Lee Wing. I think it’s a pretty tough job to take on alone.”

There was sudden warmth in the glance that the Chinese turned on him.

“Me all li’, Mas’ Dicky. Got welly good bolt-hole. You look-see.”

He drew aside the brushwood of the back wall, showing where a place had been weakened near the ground.

“Me makee dive thlough there—if got to. But not thinkee likely.”

“I’d hate to have to do it,” said Dick gloomily. “I’d think that they’d grab me by the hind-leg.”

“Me welly slick with hind-leg, all li’,” said Lee Wing, undisturbed. “Now we clear out—no wantee anyone see us here. You two not come here again, please? This my secler—not any good if McGill get any idea me here. See?”

“Rather!” Bill assured him earnestly. “Jolly good of you to trust us, Lee Wing.”

“Oh, yes, me tlust you all li’.” The old fellow patted each head, smiling down at them. “Tlust you allee time. Tlust you two to jolly well findee out my secler s’posin’ me not tellee you, eh? Welly much safer me tellee you myself!”

The true inwardness of this having slowly dawned upon his hearers, they became speechless with laughter.

“If ever I say nice things to you again, you old humbug!” gasped Bill.

“All tluer,” said the unmoved Lee Wing. “Tluer that I tlust you, too. Welly good boys—pletty near all time, anyhow! Now you lun away: I fix my bunk.”

They went, softly, feeling delightfully like conspirators in a secret plot. Lee Wing muttered under his breath as he turned into the inner compartment.

“An’ if I tellee you evelything you gettee whole lot more ’cited—but not good for l’il boys to know too muchee.” He stepped over his blankets, stooping to pull aside a piece of sacking that seemed carelessly flung on the ground. Beneath it was a deep, clean-cut hole. Lee Wing bent over it, making little adjustments, chuckling under his breath. Then, satisfied, he replaced the sacking and came out of his lair—to find Jim standing in the enclosure.

“All set, Lee Wing?”

“All li’, Mas’ Jim.”

Jim looked unhappy.

“I don’t like it, you know. It’s putting too much on your shoulders. If I could only think of a better way—but there’s a flaw in every idea we get. I wish you’d chuck it, Lee Wing.”

The broad face showed pure horror at the suggestion.

“You not bother, Mas’ Jim. This one-man show—an’ him small man. An’ Chinese. Chinese mans movee quick, quiet. Plomise you me be all li’. No danger.”

“Wish I felt sure of that,” Jim said gloomily. “Here you are, night after night, getting no sleep——”

“But welly happy. Some things more better than sleep.”

“And danger if anything does happen—whatever you may say about it. And I ought to be doing it—it’s my job.”

“But you altogether too muchee large—spoil evelything. An’ . . . Mas’ Jim . . .” A yellow hand touched Jim’s sleeve gently. “Your job *my* job, allee time.”

CHAPTER XIV

RAIDERS IN THE DAWN

“YOU seem to be pretty certain it’ll be all right,” Mooney said.

“Well, you know as well as I do what Walker told us. The sluices are cleared out when they’ve got time; it’s a long job, and they wait until it’s worth doing. They did it last Wednesday. By Saturday night there ought to be plenty of gold for the takin’ in the first box—that’s where all the heaviest bits get trapped. We won’t bother with the other boxes.” McGill looked confident. “Sunday mornin’, just before dawn, is our time.”

“Well, it’s your job,” Mooney said. “Not mine.”

“I don’t want you,” snapped his chief. “Todd an’ I can pull it off.”

He leaned back against a tree, pulling at his pipe. They were sitting in a rocky hollow in the scrub, far enough from the diggings to be able to talk without being overheard: unless such a one as Carston had been there to gratify his detective instincts by lying on the top of a boulder. But Carston was far away now: the group of hard-featured men had the hollow to themselves.

“I’ve studied it all out,” McGill said. “Night after night I’ve watched, an’ though you can hear someone movin’ in one or other of the camps earlier on, they’re all dead asleep just before daylight. Specially on a Sunday morning, when nobody gets up early: they sleep like dead men then. There’s really no difficulty in it. I waded nearly across the creek last night, just to see—the sand’s as hard as one needs underfoot, an’ the water’s never up to my middle, even in the deepest part.”

“B-r-r!” muttered Todd. “It’s a cow of a time to go paddlin’!”

“You won’t think of that once we’re in. We take a straight line across: got to keep to it, too, ’cause that darned old Chow has been an’ set yabbie-lines out from the bank below the boxes.”

“Silly ol’ fool he must be,” remarked Mooney. “There’s no yabbies in a creek like this one.”

“A Chow wouldn’t know that, I reckon. Anyhow, we’ve no need to go near them; they’re south of the sluice-cut, an’ the straight line across is the shortest, so we’d choose it in any case. I know just where to go in: there’s a sapling stump at the place, dead opposite the boxes. Once we get to that it’s time to take to the water.”

“I reckon,” said Todd gloomily, “that it’s goin’ to be none too easy to get the tarpaulin cover off that box. Walker told me they lash it down pretty tight an’ ship-shape.”

“Yes, but he told me just the way they do it. I’ll cut the cover open if I

can't get it off quick enough. But I'd rather not; we may be able to call other nights if we leave things lookin' the way we find 'em. Your job is to help me with the cover an' then to hold our sack open while I shovel in the stuff. When that's done, you get back with it, quick as you can without splashin', an' take it over to our camp."

"An' we plant it where nobody'll ever think of lookin' for it—clear away from here," said Mooney with a dry smile. "I'll have a horse ready, an' be miles away before the diggings wakes up. Leastways, if all your plan comes off, McGill."

"It'll come off, all right. I'll fix up the cover soon as Todd's gone, an' paddle home to bed. With any luck, the whole thing oughtn't to take a quarter of an hour."

"Better be pretty careful you don't leave wet trousers where they can be spotted," counselled Henry.

"What do you take me for?" was the contemptuous answer.

"An' if an alarm's raised while you're workin'—what then?"

"We knock out anyone who comes near us, an' make for the scrub if we're blocked from the creek. It oughtn't to be hard: people are pretty confused when they're waked up in a hurry before it's light." He turned to Todd. "Only, don't you risk gettin' into close quarters with that young Linton, Todd, if he happens to come along."

"Not me!" Todd said firmly. "He's a bit over my size."

"You leave him to me: there's nothin' I'd like better than a crack at him or his brother-in-law. All the same, I don't want it just now: I'd like to get the job over nice an' peaceable. It's goin' to be just jam for us if we can help ourselves to a bit of their takin's from time to time: it's not only the stuff itself——"

"Well, that's all *I* want," put in Mooney.

"Is it? I want more. I'm goin' to enjoy seein' that high-an'-mighty lot nicely fooled, with people laughin' at 'em. They think they're everybody, an' we're goin' to show them they've made a mistake. I've other things up my sleeve for Linton's lot. But the gold'll do for a starter."

"It 'ud put a stopper on us if they put a chap on to guard them boxes at night," remarked Todd. "I've wondered they haven't done it before now."

"It's just because they're so dashed confident about themselves. They don't dream that anyone 'ud have the nerve to interfere with 'em. All they've done is to have that brushwood screen round the boxes, an' it's the very thing that's right into our hands—gives us perfect cover to work without bein' seen. I'm real grateful to 'em for puttin' it up."

"Well, it's all set for to-night, then," said Mooney. "You an' Todd turn in early: then it's Henry's job to wake Todd and me an hour before daylight an' send him over to your tent. Then it's up to you two. I'll have the horse waitin'

when Todd comes back.”

McGill nodded.

“That’s right. An’ if you let yourself go to sleep, Henry, you’ll get what’s comin’ to you. We’re dependin’ on you to wake us.”

Henry quailed before the threat in his voice.

“Oh, I won’t make any mistake. No trouble to me to keep awake if I’ve got to. I got little ways of managin’ it.”

“You make jolly well sure that they’re good little ways!” growled McGill.

Whatever were Henry’s methods of defying sleep, he made no mistake about rousing Todd in good time next morning. Shivering and apprehensive, Todd huddled on a few garments and picked his way cautiously across the clearing. McGill woke at a touch, springing up menacingly—then gave a reassuring grunt.

“Oh, it’s you! Right-oh.” He was ready in a few moments. They wrapped blankets round their shoulders, waiting in silence until McGill judged that it was time to start.

Outside the stuffy little tent the air struck keen and chill. A dying moon gave faint light: the eastern sky had begun to grow pale. All the world seemed asleep except for a mopoke hooting from a distant tree. Slowly, noiselessly, the two men groped their way along the bank of the creek until McGill, in the lead, halted, his hand on a sawn-off sapling stump.

“You keep behind me,” he whispered. “Slow, mind: we don’t want to set ripples goin’ more’n we can help.” He faced the dim outline of the brushwood enclosure across the water and waded in.

The cold touch of the stream, slowly mounting up their legs as they moved, almost made their teeth chatter. On, step by step, the water waist-deep now, and Todd nervously catching at McGill’s sleeve as his foot slipped on a stone. They steadied themselves; waded on again, the stream shallowing. Then they felt their feet moving on an upward slope, knees and legs free once more—quiet, quiet, to prevent splashing!—and at last the hard-packed sandbank was underfoot, the long outline of the sluice-boxes before them. McGill felt for the lashings of the cover.

From his lair in the back of the enclosure Lee Wing watched, crouching.

It was about this time that Dick woke in the cave, disturbed by a movement and the brief winking of a flashlight.

“Hullo!” he murmured sleepily. “That you, Bill?”

“Sh-h!” Bill sat down on his bed, bending so that he could hear. “Don’t make a row, or you’ll wake Mr. Linton.”

Dick had no wish to make a row. "What's up?" he yawned.

"Oh, nothing—only I woke up a bit ago, an' I can't get to sleep. I got up to look at the time: it must be nearly light outside."

"Oh, go back to bed!" groaned Dick.

Bill hesitated.

"Don't want to," he said. "I expect I'm a silly ass, but I keep thinking about old Lee Wing—what he told us about last night. I'm sort of bothered about him."

"Oh, he's all right," protested the sleepy voice.

"He mightn't be. Not if anyone caught him asleep. I say, do wake up, Dick! Would you be game to come down an' see?"

The word "game" spurred Dick's drowsy faculties. He rubbed his eyes, rolled over, and sat up.

"I'm game if you are. Will we have to dress?"

"Oh, stick on coats an' gymshoes. We'll just prowl down an' have a look-see."

Cautiously they crept past the long bunk near the door: but David Linton slept the sleep of a tired man, and did not stir. It was dim light on the plateau: they went across it silently as cats, and gained the track below. There they ran lightly, turning from it presently at a whisper from Bill.

"We'd startle him if we went near the enclosure. Let's get down to the creek an' sneak along the bank."

The creek was a grey streak in the dawn. They turned up it, making no sound on the sand, jogging slowly. Ahead loomed the enclosure: it was all they looked for at first. Suddenly Dick gripped Bill's hand.

"Bill! Look—there's somebody at the boxes! Two men!"

They halted, panting and uncertain. Bill swung half round.

"We'll have to cut back for the others——"

Dick broke in, his voice suddenly rising to an excited cry.

"Oh, look, Bill! *Look!*"

Lee Wing had not hurried. Every moment of growing light furthered his purpose. He knew exactly how long it would take to uncover the sluice-boxes—had he not himself arranged the ties over the tarpaulin so that some would yield encouragingly and others take longer? Moving with the complete soundlessness of an Oriental, he uncovered the hole at the end of his bed. It was warm in the hole; the tin can he drew out was heavy, and pleasantly hot to his hands. He held it to himself lovingly as he wriggled backwards, inch by inch: glad when at length he could work round so that he faced outwards. One of the old wooden cases—he had placed it to an inch—gave him cover as he

crawled forward. Very slowly he got to his feet, keeping well against the brushwood. He cast a glance towards another box, where lay carelessly a tin basin and an iron spoon. Inch by inch he stole outwards, scarcely breathing.

The men at the sluice-box worked steadily, tie after tie yielding, much to McGill's gratification—he had no wish to cut the cover. Todd was less cheerful. His fingers were awkward, and the light was growing far more quickly than he liked. He thought uneasily of their return journey across the creek, visible to anyone who might happen to be early astir. A sigh of relief escaped him when at length the last knot gave under his fingers.

"That's the lot," McGill muttered. "Get hold of the cover an' peel it back."

As they straightened up, a dark figure darted into the open. There was no time to move or speak before calamity fell upon them. Lee Wing swung his tin can with a dexterous twirl, holding it by the base; an inky stream of hot tar shot outwards in a spreading semicircle, with McGill and Todd in its path. It checked, and swung back again in a second deluge.

The hands of the two men flew to their eyes as the first shower struck them. There was a mingled howl of rage and dismay, of terror of the unknown horror that had come out of nothing. They stumbled backwards into the water as Lee Wing took careful aim with his almost empty can. It caught McGill on the head, adding a generous dressing of tar to his hair. He shouted, striking out blindly at the unseen foe: slipped, and went on his knees in the water, dragging Todd with him.

Above the cries of the tarred rose a long yell of triumph—"Hi-yah!"—as Lee Wing leaped for his gong. He beat it frantically, springing down the bank into the creek; not yet was his plan complete. The men, blackened and half-blind, were stumbling aimlessly in the water. Voices were shouting from every part of the diggings, heavy feet running; but near him were two small figures that raced towards him, shouting with laughter.

"Oh, you topper, Lee Wing!"

"Oh, *good* boys!" gasped Lee Wing thankfully. "Help me dlive 'em downst-steam—catchee labbie-lines!"

Dick and Bill yelped with joy, flung off their coats, and dashed into the water. To McGill and Todd, already sufficiently bewildered, it seemed that a hundred yelling enemies were upon them. They fled down-stream, incapable of any thought but that of getting away—anywhere out of reach of pursuers who were almost upon them with the ceaseless clamour of beaten metal. The walls of Jericho might well have fallen to the shattering clang of Lee Wing's gong as he flourished his ladle and crashed his blows, his long "Hi-yah!" rising above all other sounds.

Not a soul on the diggings was asleep half a minute after the first outbreak. Jim and Wally were quickest on the scene; men in every stage of undress raced

across the clearings, shouting questions that nobody could answer. To the early arrivals was given the privilege of beholding a curious sight—that of two men with faces and persons plentifully smeared with black, who uttered strange noises and fled before one small Chinese and two boys who were even smaller. Not for long, however, did they flee; apparently a mysterious hidden influence laid hold of them at the same instant. They stumbled heavily, losing their balance: with a united bellow they fell headlong, disappearing with a splash that sent waves rocking to the bank. Nothing was left but an agitation that spoke of the tumultuous movements of large bodies under water.

“Oh, great snakes!” choked Wally, “they’ve fouled the yabbie-lines!”

A thunderous shout of laughter went up from the men on the bank. Lee Wing left the water instantly, ceasing to beat his gong. His work was over. Silently, his face impassive, he watched for the heads to reappear.

They emerged presently, still fighting with the clinging lines. A hook had caught in McGill’s trouser-leg, seeming to add greatly to his inconvenience; choking and cursing, he managed to get hold of his knife and cut it loose.

“Caught anything, McGill?” shouted a digger.

The question was the signal for a storm of chaff. Unfeeling remarks rained upon the men in the water, coupled with hints as to the care of the complexion and hair. At first the joking was good-natured enough; but as a word ran round, the temper of the crowd changed.

“They’ve been trying to get at the boxes!” a man shouted. There was a menacing growl. Someone else cried out, “The old Chow tarred ’em!” People surged round Lee Wing, laughing, patting him on the back—turning back to the water where McGill and Todd had no problem so pressing as that of trying to clear tar from their eyes. They succeeded after a time—enough to glare at the watchers and fling a torrent of angry oaths at them. It was drowned in shouts of laughter.

“Don’t stop!” cried a man. “You’re a dashed sight funnier than nigger minstrels!” He sat down abruptly on the bank, rocking himself to and fro.

McGill looked at Todd, and Todd looked at McGill. For the first time the realization of their appearance smote them. They swung round, their heads down, and splashed towards the opposite bank: and the laughter followed them.

“Well, McGill’s finished as far as the diggings are concerned,” Jim said. The miners had inspected the sluice-box cover and the tracks surrounding it: had seen Lee Wing’s lair and pieced together the story of the morning. There was deep anger, even though mirth broke out again and again in the midst of wrathful comments. David Linton had led his party back to the plateau, where

Lee Wing was stolidly brewing tea.

“Yes—it went off perfectly,” Wally agreed. “I never thought Lee Wing could do it—though he was certain enough.”

“Did you know all about it?” Bill asked, astonished.

“Oh, yes—we couldn’t think up a decent plan, but he came with his, all cut and dried; we wouldn’t hear of it at first, but he begged so hard that we gave in. He’s a sticker!” said Wally admiringly; “every night he heated his pot of tar to thin it down so that it would throw easily—and then he’d line his hole in the ground near his bunk with burning charcoal, and put his little pot to bed!”

“Him welly hot all li’ this morning!” remarked Lee Wing, proffering a mug of tea. “Him thlow glandly. Splead everywhere.” He looked suddenly at the boys, who, having changed from very wet pyjamas, were basking on a log by the fire. “Mas’ Bill—how-come you two there jus’ when me wanted you?”

Bill hesitated.

“I dunno. I just woke up an’ felt a bit worried about you. Didn’t know why. So I hauled Dick out of bed, an’ we mooched along to the creek.”

“Golly, I’m glad we did!” Dick sighed happily. “I wouldn’t have missed being in that show for a million pounds!”

“I never did think I’d find myself herding McGill down-stream as if he was a bad-tempered bullock!” chuckled Bill. “An’ he went, too!” The memory overcame him; he hugged himself, rocking with joy.

Lee Wing considered them both, hesitating.

“You two welly handy for me.” He paused, searching for words: they came gruffly. “Leckon you better give me two lot pyjama, all same wash!”

CHAPTER XV

HOW MCGILL WENT SHOOTING

“THEY may think they got the better of us,” McGill said. “But I’ll have something to say about it yet!”

“Well, there’s precious little doubt they won *that* round,” was Todd’s sour answer. He kicked angrily at a sulky fire. “Hang this pot!—it ought to have been boiling long ago.”

“Shove on some more wood. They’ll be back for supper before long.”

“Well, they won’t find it ready,” growled Todd. “You an’ I weren’t cut out for cooks, that’s certain.”

“Nor we won’t stay long as cooks. This beastly tar’s beginnin’ to wear off a bit, don’t you think?”

“Not so’s you’d notice it—plenty left yet.” Todd glanced at his companion’s face. “I wasn’t no beauty when I looked at meself this morning.”

McGill grunted, his hand going to his blackened cheek.

“What I can’t stick,” he said, “is the way everyone grins when they see one of us. They’re afraid to say anything, of course, but you can sort of feel ’em laughin’. Even that fool Walker sniggers at us.”

“Yes—an’ it’s funny what a lot of ’em find they’ve got some errand or other that brings ’em past here. They don’t mean to miss the show.”

“Funny—I *don’t* think!” snarled McGill. “That young Meadows came by when I was at the spring this morning. Never said a word, but just looked me up an’ down as if I was dirt. I’ll spoil his pretty face for him yet!”

They were alone in their main camp, having withdrawn as far as possible from the haunts of men since the morning that had seen their downfall. Not until they had inspected their faces in the one pocket-mirror possessed by the gang had they realized the full extent of Lee Wing’s attentions. The sight had stricken them into dismayed silence. They had looked in turn, while their friends, angry and disgusted as they were at the ludicrous failure of the expedition, had not been able to restrain their chuckles.

“’Strewth, you look as funny as a pantomime!” Mooney had grinned.

They did. Great streaks and splashes of tar marked each face in fantastic patterns. Their open-necked shirts had allowed necks and chests to receive a full allowance: each nose was a rich black. Tar was matted in their hair—McGill’s was especially well decorated; the backs of their hands glistened with it. Even though Lee Wing had carefully practised the swing of his tin can beforehand, luck had surely attended him in the final swinging. His most hopeful dreams could have pictured no better a result.

There was no sympathy forthcoming from the rest of the gang. They made no secret of their contemptuous disappointment.

"If it had been the whole crowd that tackled you—or even two or three of them big fellows," said Mooney. "But one little ol' Chow!" The scorn in his slow drawl was biting.

"Yes—if you'd put up a fight we wouldn't look such fools," another man said. "You always talk so big about your fightin', McGill."

"Reckoned you'd take all Linton's crowd on one-handed. Then one measly Chink comes along an' turns you into a show for the whole blooming camp!"

"What chance had we?" McGill cried. "We never saw a thing—never had a moment——"

"Well, whose fault was that?" Mooney retorted. "You an' Todd reckoned you were clever enough to do it all—you wouldn't have another man along with you——"

"'Cause there'd only have been more row with three," McGill cut in.

"Well, you two made enough row for a whole zoo after the Chow got goin'." Mooney grinned at the recollection. "But what do the pair of you think you were doin', not keepin' a watch? One 'ud think even a kid could have had sense enough to keep his ears open for anyone stirrin'. But you two were so dashed sure of yourselves—too sure to take precautions almost any fool would have taken."

McGill came at him threateningly, his fist clenched. Mooney stepped aside, but without haste, and the other men closed in round him, angry and defiant.

"You can chuck that, McGill," Green said quickly. "We've had enough—you lift a hand to any of us an' the lot of us will deal with you. An' then it'll be the finish. For two pins we'd all clear out now an' leave you an' Todd—you're pals. Tared with the same brush, you might say," he added with a wry grin. "You've made a proper show of us; even if they don't know for certain that we knew all about it——"

"I reckon they've their own ideas," interjected Mooney.

"I reckon so. Anyway, you've been swaggerin' round, lettin' on you were the boss here: an' now you're nothing but a laughin'-stock for every man on the diggings. You just better sing small, 'cause we're not in the mood to stand much."

It was bitter medicine to swallow, and McGill did not take it gracefully. But the four men against him were angry and determined, and for the present the spit had gone out of him. He found it curiously weakening to see a man, even while speaking wrathfully, begin to splutter—to realize that it was at his blackened face. Mooney was frank about it.

"Sorry," he said, having broken down unfeelingly. "But it 'ud make a cat laugh to look at you!"

McGill ceased to bluster. Outwardly, at least, he became almost meek.

“Well, I’m goin’ to move over to the huts. One of you can have my tent. I’m not goin’ to show up on the claim until I get this foul stuff off my face.”

“Nor me neither,” grunted Todd.

“You won’t get it off in a hurry,” Green told him. “I’d hate to have your job. Well, we’ll carry on with the diggin’, an’ you two had better take on the cookin’ for the lot of us, an’ keep the camp tidy. You’ll have plenty of time, in between hoein’ off tar!” They had given in without a word. There was no doubt that McGill had “lost face.”

Dealing with the tar proved a horrible business. Water, of course, ran off it ineffectually, merely seeming to add to its glossiness. They knew of no solvent but grease—and grease of any kind was woefully short. They happened to have almost run out of bacon, and the little that was left was very salt; not a soothing application for aggrieved skins, though while it lasted it had some effect on the tar. Henry, rather more soft-hearted than the others, went round the other camps, begging for grease: the request had been foreseen, and he was met by regretful assurances that there was none to spare—assurances that were delivered with broad smiles, not of a sympathetic nature. Some heartless souls countered by asking if they had any tar to spare. This, being faithfully retailed by Henry to the sufferers, produced language that was described by the messenger as fit to make a mopoke’s feathers curl.

Nothing was left to them but heroic efforts with a razor and by scratching: neither method adding to comfort. As for their hair, close-cropping seemed the only help—but with what? The unwilling Henry again made the round of the camps, and again came back empty-handed—nobody seemed to possess scissors, even though more than one digger’s head bore signs of having been trimmed on the previous Sunday. With pocket-knives that might have been sharper the victims sawed at each other’s hair, managing to hack off tarry locks in a way that left tufts sticking up from blackened scalps; an effect which threw their friends into such convulsions of hysterical mirth when they returned in the evening that the amateur barbers deeply regretted their efforts. The word went round the camps, and there were few miners who missed the chance of passing by next day.

They passed, but they did not speak. McGill might try to comfort himself by pretending that they were afraid of him, but in their hearts both men winced under the stinging contempt of the silent and amused glances. They had committed the unpardonable sin of trying to rob fellow-diggers; they had not succeeded, and there was only one witness against them, so that no direct action could be taken—but they knew that in the eyes of the miners they were outcasts. Hardened ruffians as they were, the knowledge of the weight of public opinion stung them. It would have been easier to stand open chaff than

the wordless scorn that was heaped upon them. “They go past, an’ they just stare,” said Todd, “till I feel like as if I was a blooming hyena in the zoo. An’ if I say ‘Good day’ they just don’t hear.”

Their tempers were on edge this evening as they made listless attempts to prepare supper. They had slept heavily during the long hot afternoon, rousing themselves late to begin the work; and now the firewood, hastily gathered, and of the wrong kind, refused to burn well. Already they had been forced to put up with scathing comments on their cooking: it seemed fairly certain that there would be more to-night.

The men came in sight presently, walking slowly through the sparse timber that surrounded the camp, their shoulders sagging after the long day’s work. No greetings were exchanged; the digging party flung themselves on the bunks, waiting to be told when supper was ready. It was never easy for McGill to endure having to work for them; his face was thunderous as he got out the tin plates and cups, the black-handled knives and forks.

“You fellows never goin’ to be ready?” shouted Green presently, in an impatient voice.

“When it suits us,” growled McGill.

“Beats me how you’re so slow every blessed night. You’ve got nothing to do but cook—why can’t you start a bit earlier? You two were keen enough on havin’ meals on time when someone else did the cookin’.”

Other discontented voices backed up Green’s protests. McGill and Todd were prudent enough to make no audible reply. They did what they could to hasten matters, glumly certain that there would be further uncomplimentary remarks when eating began.

This was so. Hungry as the diggers were, they found it hard to eat the sloppy stew that the cooks ladled out to them.

“Something’s got to be done about the grub,” stated Mooney bluntly. “Call this stew? I say it’s hog-wash. An’ the spuds are as hard as stones. If you fellows think we’re goin’ to dig all day an’ come back to this sort of stuff, you’ve got another think comin’, that’s all.”

“An’ pretty quick, too,” added Green, sawing at a half-cooked onion. “We don’t care what your faces look like—you’ll have to come back to work, an’ let someone cook who’ll take a bit of trouble over it.”

“Can’t do much with tinned stuff,” Todd mumbled. McGill ate doggedly, intent on showing that the stew was a good stew. Since his lazy day had left him without appetite, he found this painful.

“Well, Henry managed to make it eatable when he was cook,” Mooney growled. “Green’s right; you two are more use on the claim. I’m hanged if we’re goin’ to be half-starved just to save your vanity—your faces mayn’t be pretty, but I’d sooner look at them than eat stuff like this.”

McGill cast about in his mind for a way of escape.

“Tell you what,” he suggested. “I reckon I could get something better. What say I go out with the gun to-morrow an’ see what I can pick up? A few birds or a wallaby ’ud give more flavour to this bully beef.”

“Are you any good with a gun?”

“Not too bad. I reckon I’d bring home something. It ’ud make a big difference.”

The men hesitated. Any addition to the dreary routine of camp food was tempting; they knew the value of game as a flavouring to “salt horse.”

“Well, you’d better try,” agreed Mooney. “But if there’s shootin’ to be done, you needn’t think you’re goin’ to have it all to yourself. We’ll take turns. An’ for goodness’ sake don’t bring home crows or laughin’ jack-asses, thinkin’ they’ll cook up well, because they won’t. An’ come back in time to cook whatever you get properly.”

To take orders was a new thing for McGill, but he dared not show his resentment. He grunted what might be taken for assent, and spent the remaining daylight in cleaning the gun. Todd watched him enviously next morning as he rode away, a sack rolled on his saddle.

“If he fills that he’ll do well,” he muttered. “Not much chance, I reckon. But he’ll have a good time, anyhow, while I clean up camp. I’m fed up with this game!” He scratched drearily at an outlying globule of tar on his cheek.

McGill felt something like contentment when the diggings could no longer be seen and he was hidden in the early morning freshness of the Bush. He had no intention of coming back too soon, even if luck came his way. This was better than fiddling round the camp, he thought, letting his horse take its own pace, brushing through dew-wet scrub and pausing on stony ridges to scan the trees in the hope of birds. A flock of bright-hued parrots settled in a tree not far away: he managed to drop two of them, stowing them in his bag with a comfortable feeling that he had justified himself in coming out to hunt. A little later a lucky shot brought down a pigeon.

After that, however, no chances came to add to the bag. He rode on, taking a winding course; becoming more keenly alert with the knowledge that time was flying, and that three small birds would go a very little way among so many men. The scrub grew thicker. He realized that the noise made by his horse in crashing through it would scare away any game, and decided to try what he could accomplish on foot.

Tying his horse to a sapling he went cautiously along a narrow gully. It wound in a curve between high banks covered with bushes. Underfoot the grass was better than usual; a cattle-track ran through the undergrowth, and McGill followed it until, rounding a corner, he saw a clearer space, ending in a stony rise. A spring in the rocks dripped gently to a tiny basin. Three calves

were drinking from it: sturdy little fellows, just old enough to stray away independently.

Hidden by the bushes, McGill looked at them with longing. Here was food better than stringy birds or tough wallaby; fresh meat, such as he had not tasted for weeks. His mouth watered at the thought. Meat; and he dared not shoot.

Or—did he dare? He toyed with the thought, gripping his gun, longing to put it to his shoulder. Cattle-shooting was a crime from which any Australian naturally flinched. The penalty, if he were found out, was not a light one. But who would find out? The Lintons could never have mustered and numbered the young calves in the hills: he could easily hide what he could not carry away. To strike any blow at the Lintons, even if they never knew, appealed to him strongly: he grinned savagely at the idea, wincing as his tar-stiffened face resented even an effort to smile. With that wince a new thought came to him, more tempting than even the prospect of meat.

“Grease!” he muttered eagerly. “One of those calves ’ud give us all the grease we wanted to get this stuff off our faces.”

But for that thought he might not have risked shooting. He hesitated still; and the calves, their drink over, turned away and began to move towards the bank. Two leaped up it like goats: the third paused a moment to nibble a tuft of grass. McGill’s gun came swiftly to his shoulder. The calf suddenly walked after the others: his finger trembled on the trigger, his aim wobbled in the effort to follow the moving dappled body. Just at the foot of the bank the calf stopped again. The shot rang out, and the little animal dropped.

The echoes of the report seemed thunderous in McGill’s ears. He felt that they must bring every man in the district on his track—and then laughed at himself, remembering how often he had heard a shot in the hills, and had taken no particular notice of it. Other miners had guns and went after game now and then.

“Anyhow, the sooner I get it out of the way, the better,” he decided. “A gully with a spring in it is no place to leave my tracks—too many cattle use it.”

Leaving his gun hidden he ran forward. The other calves had bounded out of sight at the shot: he dragged the dead one up the bank, relieved to find that the scrub on top was fairly thick, with rocky places here and there. It was easy to conceal the carcass when he had cut off as much meat as he could carry. The crows would act as scavengers, he knew; and no casual wanderer would be likely to poke about stones in a dense thicket of undergrowth. He scattered loose earth over the traces in the gully, retrieved his gun, and set off towards his horse.

“I needn’t bother my head if I do meet anyone,” he muttered. “I’ve only to say I’ve a couple of wallaby in the bag.”

The load was heavy and awkward, and his horse objected to it strongly.

McGill was not sorry when he reached camp. Todd, moodily smoking, sprang up to meet him.

“Any luck?—oh, by Jove, you have! What is it—kangaroo?”

“Something better. Take it—my arm’s nearly broke. Anyone about?”

“Not a soul.” Todd looked into the bag, then dropped it, something like fear on his face.

“What on earth have you been doin’, Mac? Are you clean mad?”

“I’ve been takin’ what came in my way,” returned McGill sourly. “You needn’t fuss—nobody’s goin’ to know outside this camp.” He dismounted stiffly. “We’ll have a decent supper to-night, anyhow.”

“But—cattle-stealin’!” protested Todd.

“You don’t need to know a thing about it. Who’s to say I haven’t been to Broad’s Creek for fresh meat? And there’s more to it than meat, you ass—grease for our faces! Let’s get busy and start boilin’ some down right away. Not much fat on the meat, but I reckon there’s enough for us.”

Todd was torn between fear and excitement. He looked at his friend with a flash of admiration.

“By gum, you’ve got nerve, Mac!”

“I told you I wasn’t goin’ to be bested.” Some of his old swagger had come back to McGill. “Hop lively now, an’ get the fire goin’.”

“I dunno what the other chaps’ll say,” Todd observed doubtfully, moving to obey.

“They can say what they like. If they don’t like eatin’ fresh veal, there’s always bully. Lots of it!” was the grim response.

The men came back in the evening with little hope of better food. Eating their hasty lunch of soggy damper and tinned jam, sitting among the mullock-heaps on the claim, they had decided finally that McGill should be compelled to act under orders.

“Face or no face, I’m not goin’ to be poisoned,” stated Mooney. “I’m not afraid of him—an’ none of you need be. He’s lost his dash.”

“Too right he has,” agreed Green. “Not been the same man since the ol’ Chow tarred him.”

“Well, he’s had his last day of loafin’ about camp. You take over the cookin’ to-morrow, Henry. You ain’t much to talk about with a shovel, but there’s no doubt you can make a tin of beef an’ an onion into something pretty nearly like food. We only need to be firm an’ let him see there’s not goin’ to be any argument about it.”

Thus filled with high resolve, and reasonably certain of a supper that would give them ample grounds for caustic remarks, they downed tools at the end of the day and sauntered homewards. McGill and Todd were busy at the fire: a smell drifted towards the diggers that brought interested sniffs from them.

“Jove, I believe he got something after all!” Green said. “Is that wallaby, do you think, Mooney?”

“Must be. Well, it’ll be tough, but thank goodness it’ll be fresh.” He stopped abruptly. “Why—look at ’em!”

The men at the fire had turned. Their faces were red and glistening; unbeautiful, certainly, but most of the tar had gone. They bore themselves confidently.

“Hullo!” said Green. “Been to a beauty parlour?”

“Something like it,” grinned McGill. “Supper’s ready—look sharp.”

This was something new, and in the presence of fresh food they had little interest to spare for the complexions of the cooks. But over his first mouthful Mooney looked up with a quick question.

“This isn’t wallaby. What have you been up to, McGill?”

“That’s my business. You’d better eat your supper and ask no questions.”

“I like to know what I’m eatin’. Did anyone sell you this meat?”

“No,” said McGill. “I shot it. An’ what have you got to say about it?”

They looked at him blankly, their forks in mid-air.

“Well——” Mooney said. “You know as well as I do what’s comin’ to you if you get caught over a thing like that.”

“Ah—get caught!” returned the other scornfully. “I’m not fool enough for that. It’s my show, anyhow—you can keep clean out of it. No need for you to go round tellin’ everyone you’re not eatin’ wallaby.”

“No,” said Henry thankfully—and put his fork in his mouth with lingering enjoyment.

The others hesitated. It is easy to maintain principles of conduct when not hungry: not so easy for tired and ravenous men whose nostrils are filled with the savour of their first good meal for many days. They hesitated—and were lost. Forks followed the example of that of Henry. They ate in silence until the dish was empty. Green was the first to speak. He pushed his plate away with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Well, I don’t know where you got it from, an’ I don’t care. But you can go on callin’ at the same shop as long as you like if I can get a supper like that every night!”

“Same here,” sighed Henry.

McGill chuckled.

“It’s a shop that isn’t likely to give out. You leave it to me—as long as I’ve a horse an’ a gun there’s no reason why any of us should eat tinned dog. Cheaper, too; an’ a sight nearer home than Broad’s Creek.”

“M-m!” said Mooney. “Seems to me you’re takin’ on a pretty big job if you come up against Linton an’ his crowd. They’ll get you sooner or later.”

“There’s just one thing I’m waitin’ for,” McGill retorted, “—an’ that’s my

chance to get even with that lot. An' I'll do it yet!"

CHAPTER XVI

CAMP VISITORS

BETTY made her first visit to the camp on a glorious summer morning. The three girls had ridden away early, leaving Freddy on guard over Billabong—a duty which he proposed to discharge by stretching himself luxuriously on a long chair under a tree in the garden.

“And if you’re really likely to be worryin’ about young Davie, Norah, I could easily take him up in the *Kestrel* an’ let him wave to you at the camp,” he offered kindly. “I can fly quite low over the diggings now that so much scrub’s cleared away.”

Norah had declined this generous offer with haste and firmness.

“I’m fairly sure of Davie when he’s on firm ground, with Kim and Brownie somewhere handy,” she said. “But not in a plane, thank you, Freddy. He’s so small that you might forget he was there, and loop the loop in that casual way you have.”

“Well, what harm—if I strapped him in?” demanded the airman. “You’d deny your unfortunate child the simplest pleasures, Norah. Can’t begin too soon to make ’em air-minded. By the time Davie’s old enough to go to school he’s sure to want to fly his own plane down to Melbourne!”

“He may want—but then, he wants lots of things now that he doesn’t get,” returned Norah serenely.

“All wrong. That’s what the scientific Johnnies call creatin’ repressions in the young mind. You should never do it,” stated Freddy, with an air of profound learning. “Sets up complexes; an’ then they go mad later on. I’ve noticed lots of signs that way about Davie—wild look in his eye, an’ all that. All due to the heavy hand you an’ Wally keep on him, poor child. An’ he would have been quite intelligent, too, only——”

“But he’s rather intelligent now,” put in Betty. “Think how he makes use of things for his own purposes. That’s brains. Look at him now, using an ordinary old pipe for a hammer on the steps, and so contented——”

Freddy’s hand went mechanically to his pocket.

“My holy Aunt!” he ejaculated in anguish. “That’s my best pipe—you young fiend, Davie!” Swift strides took him to the steps: there were sounds of heated argument between him and the hammerer. The matter ended in the pipe being given up in return for a gallop round the lawn on its owner’s shoulder. Freddy returned with a somewhat sheepish look, putting his burden down on the verandah: and Davie promptly said “Pipe!”

“Not much—you’ve had your pound of flesh, old man,” said Mr. Paxton.

“Get one of your father’s.” Sadly he inspected sundry dints on the bowl of a well-polished briar, and began to ensure its safety by filling it.

“Just look at the wildness of his eye!” said Betty reproachfully. “You’ve given him an awful pipe-repression.”

“It can burst out on the pipes of his unfortunate family. I’ll find all I can for him after you’ve gone.”

“I’m beginning to feel doubtful about leaving him to your tender mercies,” Norah said. “Talk about my heavy hand——”

“Don’t you worry. I’ll watch over him like a faithful hound, an’ if Brownie hears a dyin’ yell it’ll be me defendin’ him from McGill—or Hogg. Poor old Hogg nearly slew him yesterday when he strolled over his pet begonias. Nice fleshy plants, just the right height for him to kick. Davie likes plants that go down with a squash, don’t you, Davie? We’ll go an’ find some more when these fussy people have gone!”

Norah carried away a vision of her son perched on Freddy’s shoulder by the first gate: each well contented with the other.

“We’ll be back in good time.”

“Don’t hurry: you’ll bring Bob back with you, an’ then I’ll have to go back to pickin’ an’ shovellin’. An’ I’m so fat after a week here that I know I’ll never get into the tunnel. Though a day with Davie alone is goin’ to take some of the weight off me!” He sighed heavily: looking back presently they could see him again giving a spirited imitation of a restive horse. Davie’s gay little shouts of laughter came to them.

“I think two boys are in for a good day!” stated Tommy. “Brownie will have such a restful time—and Kim, too.”

“And Freddy will be terribly sorry for himself this evening, and tell us the saddest stories of Davie’s sins—and very probably we’ll hear from Brownie that Davie had no afternoon sleep because Freddy insisted on taking him out on a horse!” Betty laughed.

“And Davie will show no signs whatever of repressions—whatever complexes I’ll have to deal with to-morrow!” Norah predicted. “I wonder sometimes how my son keeps his head at all, he’s so over-uncled for his size! Only he doesn’t recognize anyone as an uncle. We tried to make him say it to Jim, but he evidently thinks it’s a nasty word.”

A few miles from the diggings two wild riders burst out of the bush and galloped along a spur to meet them—Dick and Bill, waving their hats and shouting.

“You’ve been awful slow! We thought you’d have been here ages ago,” Bill cried.

“Hullo, Bet!” Dick brought his pony beside Betty, looking up at her with dancing eyes. “Gosh, I’m glad to see you!”

"Isn't it an age!" she said. "And oh, Dicky, you seem to have got very big!"

"Well, I'm growing, aren't I? And don't you look at my clothes, 'cause nobody thinks about clothes out here!"

"I wouldn't dream of it," said his sister, turning away an eye that had quailed slightly at the sight of stained and torn garments. "I should say they're exactly right for the diggings."

"You bet they are! These aren't my best—I mean they're a bit worse than my other lot—but I couldn't be bothered changing."

"Why would you?" agreed Betty. "Just let me know when they begin to drop off you, so that I can send out some more."

They looked at each other and laughed. Dick said, "You're rather a sport, Bet!" and put a brown and dirty hand on hers for a brief touch. He was altogether brown; his nose was peeling, and freckles powdered it freely. There was about him a new look of sturdy independence.

"You like it—out here?" she asked softly.

"Oh—it's *gorgeous*! You don't mind me being away so long, Bet?"

"Rather not! I'm having a wonderful time."

"Then that's all right, 'cause I am, too," he said joyfully. "But it's ripping to see you again, all the same. Oh, I've got such heaps to tell you when I get a chance!"

Bill was making announcements at the top of his voice.

"Did you bring your own tucker? You needn't have, 'cause we've got a scrumptious dinner. Wild duck!—Jim an' Bob rode to the swampy creek the night before last, an' got heaps of 'em. An' Lee Wing's made some awfully swagger pudding, but he wouldn't tell us what it was. We tried to look into the pot, but he hunted us off with a stick of firewood, the old meany!"

"Nobody's going to do any work this afternoon!" Dick contributed.

"Yes, an' everybody's shaved!" shouted Bill.

"Oh!" said Betty regretfully. "I was so looking forward to seeing the long beards!"

"You ought to have come out yesterday an' taken them by surprise. Gosh, wouldn't they have been ratty! Wally's was lovely, Norah—it makes him look no end of a bushranger, 'cause it's so dark."

"I think it just makes him look as if he never washed!" said Dick. "Sorry, Norah—I forgot he belonged to you."

"If he doesn't wash, he won't belong any more," rejoined Norah sternly. "I shall inspect him very closely, Dick."

"Well, he uses a lot of soap when he comes out of the tunnel," Dick told her. "But then, of course, he's simply *got* to," he added, as if in explanation of a curious habit.

"We're starting dinner with yabbie soup," cried Bill. "Dick an' I caught the yabbies, but they were only measly little fellows—none of 'em six inches long. We put one down Jack's neck, an' he nearly hit the sky!"

"Yes, an' he slung us both into the creek," added Dick, grinning at the memory. "One after another. Golly, that man can run!"

"You asked for it—with Jack," said Tommy. "I can think of quite a lot of things I would rather have down my neck than a yabbie. So many claws and spikes as they wear!"

"Well, they make jolly fine soup—we've had it lots of times. An' Lee Wing chops 'em up an' mixes 'em with rice—oo-oh!" Bill licked his lips. "But we keep hoping to catch 'em big enough to eat whole. We nearly got a whopper one day, but he dropped back into the water—as soon as he got a look at Dick," he finished, grinning—and pulled his pony aside to dodge a charge.

"Are we near the camp yet?" Betty asked.

"Just down this slope an' across the next gully," Bill answered. He pointed ahead; a tall grey-bearded figure was just visible, emerging from the trees. "There's Mr. Linton coming to meet you."

Norah touched her horse with her heel and trotted quickly forward. They saw her canter up the opposite slope until she reached her father. She jumped off and they walked back to the camp arm-in-arm.

"He's been watching and watching," Bill said. "And didn't he go round the camp this morning—an' made us, too—pickin' up every bit of nothing—anything he reckoned made it look untidy! I believe he'd have made us dust the rock-seats, only we didn't have a duster," he added, not without gratitude.

The camp bore out all that he had claimed for it; the joyful figures, hurrying to greet them, were singularly clean as far as faces and shirts were concerned—and tactful people refrained from looking in any pointed manner at trousers and boots that bore signs of an honourable old age. Jim certainly murmured to Tommy, looking at her daintiness, "I wish my boots came up to yours in polish!"—and Tommy's reply made it clear that his boots mattered to her not at all when he was in them. Norah and Wally sat on a log close together; it was suspected that they talked of Davie, since a monologue by Norah was punctuated by such exclamations as "By Jove, *did* he!" and "Good man!" For the moment Betty found herself entertaining and being entertained by Mr. Linton, Jack and Bob, with Dick and Bill excitedly talking on the outskirts of the group, and Lee Wing hovering near with a billy of hot water in case the distinguished visitor should care to wash her hands. Life, Betty reflected, was certainly not dull.

Dinner was an uproarious festival, with soup served in tin cups, and pauses between courses while volunteers hurriedly washed the plates, to be ready for

the next event. The wild duck were enough to tempt the most delicate appetite—had there been any such: Lee Wing's date pudding justified all the anticipation it had excited in the small boys. He saw it disappear with satisfaction on his yellow face, watching his people from the shadow of the cooking-hut: remembering happily the quick gay greetings of the visitors as they met him. Always his people made him feel that he was a part of them, not merely a servant. Being prepared to die cheerfully for them at any moment, should it happen to be necessary, such things counted with Lee Wing. Not that he wished to join his ancestors yet: it was far more amusing to grow vegetables at Billabong, to cook for the camp, with an occasional high light such as causing their enemies to lose face. Very well satisfied was Lee Wing with life as he found it.

Norah called to him presently. They were sitting round the table, the meal over, too comfortably happy to want to move.

"Lee Wing," she said gravely, "how is tar?"

The old Chinese allowed himself a broad smile.

"Welly fine, Missie No-lah. Plenty more if any lobbbers wantee. But"—sadly—"no more lobbbers come."

"I shouldn't think they would!" she laughed. "You made it too hot for the last ones."

Lee Wing took this statement quite literally.

"Heap too muchee hot, Missee No-lah. Him plenty sting. Welly funny. Pity you no see that large man—him that tly touble you an' Mas' Davie. Me thlow tar welly hard for that!"

"Yes, I'm sure you did. Thank you, Lee Wing," she said. "Robbers and large bad men would have a poor time when you were about."

"You bet!" said Lee Wing.

"But be careful," Norah said. "Don't give him a chance of catching you alone."

"We're always telling him that," Jim said. "But will he take care? Not he!"

"Not flitened," said the Chinese carelessly. "Me savvy him, all li'." He nodded as if at his own thoughts and turned back into the cook-house.

"Have you seen the gorilla lately, Jim?" asked Tommy.

"Only across the creek. He's at work again, though not every day: I don't fancy McGill and regular work are good friends. The others go on pretty steadily, but we don't know what luck they have had in their shaft. McGill and Todd got rid of their tar quite suddenly."

"How sad!" said Tommy. "I was rather hoping to see it."

"You'd have loved it," Dick told her earnestly. "'Specially their noses!"

"The diggers generally were quite sorry when they showed up with clean faces," said Bob. "Very red and sore, but not black. It used to be the favourite

amusement to walk past their camp and admire. I wonder how they got it off.”

“Probably went to the chemist at Broad’s Creek and got something for it,” Jim said. “The only other news about them is that Walker has cleared out.”

“Oh?” said Norah. “Do you know why?”

“Because they made life too deadly for the poor wretch, I should think. He had a hunted sort of look from the time he went to their camp. As far as we know, he didn’t tell anyone he was going—just faded out. Well, he made a pretty bad hash of his affairs, and he let us down, but one can’t help feeling sorry for him.”

“I’d have given him another chance if he hadn’t put himself under McGill’s thumb,” Mr. Linton remarked. “And it might have been quite safe; I believe he would have been so relieved to come back to us that he’d have thrown them over altogether. But of course we could hardly risk it: he knew too much about our affairs, and they might have got hold of him again.”

“No: I suppose it wouldn’t have done,” said Norah. “And the other men—our own men—wouldn’t have liked to work with him again.”

Her father laughed.

“Mick and Dave? I almost think they’d have gone on strike. And as for Murty—well, his only comment on Walker was, ‘ ’Twill be as good for him if I don’t lay me two eyes on him again.’ ”

“That’s rather the way I feel,” said Jack. “I’ve no time to spare for a man who lets you down. By the way, Norah, did anyone tell you that we’re suspecting some hungry soul is doing a bit of cattle-duffing?”

“No,” said Norah resignedly. “What next?”

“We don’t quite know,” Jim said. “But we’ve jolly well got to find out. We’ve all been too busy lately to go round the cattle, and anything might happen with so many strangers here. Fresh meat would be pretty tempting to them.”

“But how much do you know?”

“Bill and Dick were the detectives,” Jim laughed. “They’d better tell you themselves.”

“Well, we were out riding,” said Bill eagerly, “an’ we got farther away than we meant to, ’cause it was jolly country, an’ anyhow, we’d taken our lunch with us. An’ we were poking up a long gully when we heard a smell.”

“Was it loud?” asked Betty, with interest.

“Well, pretty loud. I mean, it wasn’t very bad, but it was enough to make us think we’d better track it down. So we tied up the ponies an’ made believe we were black trackers——”

“You ought to see Bill black-tracking,” grinned Dick. “He does it all with his nose!”

“Yours’ll get punched if you’re not careful,” returned the aggrieved Bill.

“Anyway, there wasn’t anything else to work with—no broken sticks or blood or anything. But the smell got worse, an’ it led us up a hill where there was a lot of scrub an’ rocks, an’ we found what was left of a calf. Not an awful lot—only the head an’ bones an’——”

“Steady on details, old man!” laughed Bob.

“Well, I wasn’t goin’ to say everything there was. Anyhow, that’s what we found. So of course we knew there’d been foul play, so we made sure we could find the place again an’ we came back an’ told Jim.”

“But how did you know it hadn’t died of whooping-cough or something—whatever calves do die of?” asked Betty.

“ ‘Cause it had been skinned. I was goin’ to tell you its hide was there only Bob got fussy,” Bill chuckled. “If calves die of their own accord they don’t take their hides off first!”

“You score—sorry, Bill!” grinned Bob.

“Well, Dick and Bill weren’t the only sleuth-hounds. Murty went out for a ride last Sunday, and he made another find. Same thing: a calf, with as much meat taken as a man could carry away. It’s a wasteful fashion of getting food,” said Mr. Linton. “I’d rather give a decent crowd a calf now and then, and let them make full use of it.”

“But a decent crowd wouldn’t steal, surely,” Betty remarked.

The squatter hesitated.

“Well—it’s a big temptation. They’re all living on wretched food; can’t you imagine, Betty, how a man would feel, out in the Bush with a gun, when a calf came his way? I wouldn’t condemn a fellow altogether if he did pot that calf. But that doesn’t say that we can allow them to make a habit of it.”

“It’s dashed hard to deal with,” Wally said. “We can’t tell whether it’s one man or more than one: or if a whole gang is in it. And we can’t be always on the watch—we’re too busy. It would mean having one of us scouting round all the time, trailing any digger who went out with a gun. The calves aren’t worth that to us.”

“No,” said Norah thoughtfully. “You have no idea who would be most likely to steal, I suppose?”

Wally gave a half-laugh.

“Oh—of course our thoughts went at once to our friends across the creek. And Lee Wing has scouted in the scrub near their camp, and swears he smelt fresh meat cooking.”

“You bet it’s them!” said Bill. “It’s just the sort of thing they’d do.”

“But, even if it is, the difficulty is to sheet it home,” said Mr. Linton. “I wish we could, if it is McGill’s crowd—it might be one way of getting rid of them.”

“Well, you know Dick an’ I could keep watch an’ track them if they went

out,” said Bill sorrowfully.

“I know you offered to, old boy. But it’s too risky—it’s a man’s game. I’m responsible for you both, you see.”

Dick and Bill looked at each other and silently regretted the nervousness of grown-ups where boys of twelve were concerned.

“Oh, luck may give us a move in the game,” Jim said. “Anyhow, the thing is more annoying than important—we’ve got other matters to think about. And one of them is the reef——”

“You haven’t found it, Jim!” broke in Tommy.

“Would we be sitting here like garden ornaments if we had, old stupid! We’d have greeted you with yells and bonfires. No, but there is a change in the part we’ve been cutting into for the last few days. I’m not expert enough to judge, but Murty is muttering to himself and looking mysterious. He won’t say anything definite, but somehow we’re all feeling a bit on edge—as if things might happen at any moment.”

“Very silly, too,” said Bob, “—when we’ll probably go on as we are for weeks and weeks.”

“You bet we won’t!” said Bill confidently. “That blessed old reef can’t hide itself much longer. I say, can’t we show Betty the tunnel? She’s never seen one.”

“Only the sort trains go through,” smiled Betty. “I’d love to see this one, Bill.”

“You won’t come up half so clean as you are now,” he warned her.

“P’f!” Betty tilted her nose. “I didn’t come out into wild country to keep clean!”

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE TUNNEL

STANDING under the spreading legs of the derrick that towered high above the shaft of Bob's claim, Betty peered down into the murky depths. Far below a pin-point of light glimmered. Nothing could be seen except the wire rope of the windlass, straight and taut, but soon disappearing in the gloom.

"What happens?" demanded Betty.

"There's a bucket on the end of that rope," Dick told her. "A whacking great leather one—Murty makes 'em. Presently it'll come up, full of wash-dirt, an' Mick'll take it off an' put on an empty one."

Mick Shanahan, on duty at the shaft-head, shook his head.

"Not so sure about it's bein' wash-dirt. Reckon Murty'll be comin' up himself soon. 'Bout time he did—he wouldn't knock off for dinner to-day."

Bob uttered a hasty exclamation.

"The old sinner! Can't you deal with him, sir? He's working himself to death over the blessed tunnel."

"I've known Murty nearly thirty years, Bob, and after the first six months I gave up trying to deal with him when he'd set his heart on a thing." David Linton's eyes twinkled. "Certainly the thing would generally be for somebody else!"

"Yes—that's what gets me," Bob said dismally. "He'll never touch a bit of this gold for himself, no matter what we say."

"He's getting his fun out of it, Bob—don't worry," said Norah quietly. "We'll take extra care of him after his job is done—and you know it would break his heart to leave it to anyone else now."

"I suppose so," Bob muttered. But he looked uncomfortable.

A whistle came from below. The pony roped to the windlass woke up and moved slowly away. The rope began to wind up, creaking loudly; and presently a head came into view, and a lean hand gripping the rope.

Murty's face, when it became visible, did not invite anyone's pity. He swung up out of the depths, left the bucket with the easy spring of a young man, and beamed on the waiting group.

"Isn't it the heighth of luck ye'd all be here to-day! Ah, no, Miss Norah—Miss Tommy—I'm a sight too dirty to be shakin' hands with ladies. An' Miss Betty, too!" He reversed the gear, whistling to the pony: the bucket disappeared again. "There's another waitin' to come up. We've somethin' worth showin' you this afternoon, Mr. Bob!"

"Is it——?" Bob hesitated.

"It is then. I dhruv me pick into her an hour or so back, an' Dave an' I've been clearin' the dirt away iver since, the way we'd make sure. But 'tis the reef herself—no mistake about it." He took Bob's hand and pumped it; and Bob had no words.

"Is it promising, Murty?" Mr. Linton asked.

"Well, sir, 'tis a case of crushin' now, before we'd know. The bathery'll tell us pretty soon. But from what we cud see in the light we do be havin' down there—well, I'd say ye'd all be able to ordher thim airypalanes like Mr. Bob's wantin'. If so be ye couldn't find a better way of spendin' good money!" he added, twinkling.

"Wait till I get you up in mine, Murty!" said Bob.

"Is it me? An' horses all over Billabong, jumpin' out of their skins to be ridden! I'm wishful for somethin' that kapes at least a partt of itself on the ground all the time. Hurroo!—here's the bucket!"

Lumps of dark rock, large and small, filled the bucket. They passed from hand to hand, eager eyes scanning glistening surfaces where the pick blows had split the stone across. Here and there a thin seam of yellow showed.

"Is that all?" Dick's voice was disappointed. "I thought it would be in big blobs!"

"Not in rock, Masther Dick. Yerra, it's better than I thought." Murty held a scrap close to his eyes, twisted it here and there to let the light catch each surface. "That'll crush in a way that'll surprise us, or me name's not O'Toole. I dunno yet what the width of the reef is, Mr. Bob—we've cleared a good bit, but we're not all the way acrost her."

"Oh—can't we go down and see?" cried Betty.

"Is it yourself?—to be standin' in that dirty ould bucket, houldin' the rope? I dunno is it a place for ladies at all," hesitated the Irishman.

"No use, Murty—they've made up their minds," laughed Wally.

"What—all of them? Begob, if they knew as much of it as we do, Mr. Wally, they'd not be thinkin' it a picnic. Well, I'll go furrst—an' let you be careful an' keep a tight hould on the rope."

"All I want to know is, do I arrive at the bottom with a bump?" demanded Betty.

"Yerra, no—the rope's just the right len'th. She comes down as aisy an' light as a bird. An' I'll be waitin' to steady you, Miss—only don't lave go y'r grip till I have ye cot. There's some that feels a thrifle giddy when the bucket stops."

The grey head vanished: presently the bucket came back, and Betty climbed in amid torrents of advice and promises to send any last messages home. Suddenly the daylight fell away from her. Bob had given her a torch: she held it with her free hand, flashing it on timbered walls with glistening

earth showing between the slabs. Once she tried to look down: the effort was not a success, and her head whirled as she tightened her grip on the rope. Finding herself still alive she looked up instead, letting the torch-ray fall on the circle of peering heads that watched her a little anxiously. Then came a gentle bump, and Murty's firm hand was on her arm.

"Are you all right?" came a hail from above. She called back.

"Yes—but don't look down when you're coming; it's beastly!"

"An' that's a thing I'm afther forgettin' to warnn ye about—bad scran to me for an ould fool," said Murty, crestfallen. "But ye kem down in great shtyle, miss. Careful, now—the floor's not what one'd call made for dancin', 'tis that oneven." He helped her out: she stood back against the wall, while the bucket was drawn up again.

Norah was down in a moment.

"Had a good trip, Betty? Tommy's not coming—she hates shut-in places. Jim has marched her off somewhere. What do you think of mining?"

"Very murky game," responded Betty. "In fact, there isn't anything but murk." She strove to make out objects in the dim light of a hurricane lantern that stood in a niche. "How on earth do people work in a place like this?"

"Sure, the besht way we can, miss, an' hopin' each of us won't shplit the other fellow's head, nor he ours. But it gets aisy wance one's in the swing of it. Keep back, now—here comes the bucket agin." Murty gave a low chuckle. "An' the two—both of them's in it!"

Dick and Bill arrived, and found that getting out was complicated, since they tried to do it simultaneously and there was no room to manipulate their legs. This took time, and impatient people at the shaft-head set the bucket moving upward again before the business was completed; so that the combatants yelled loudly and had to be plucked into safety by Murty and Norah.

"The pony thinks her job has suddenly become a circus," said Wally, who was the last to arrive. "She's very peevish. Where's everybody?"

"Sure, they've had to overflow into the tunnel—the shaft wouldn't hould them," Murty said. "Let me go ahead now, with the lamp." He edged past the group in the tunnel and led the way.

"I suppose it was foolish of me to think it would be like a railway-tunnel," said Betty. "All I could think of was a nice round hole, with neat brick-work lining it. I would call this thing a slit."

"An' what else wud it be, miss? But it does its job. Watch the wall, now, for there do be rocks juttin' out here an' there—when we come to an extra tough one we worrk round him."

"But how did you know where to make it? Was there any reason for starting it just where you did?"

“Yerra, the besht reason in the worrld,” said Murty. “That pocket in the bottom of the shaft had the sorr’t of rough specimens in its gould that’s only found when there’s a reef not far off. So we looked for the direction they kem from, an’ followed that up.”

“Oh—is that where—what was it they told me?—they bled from the reef?”

“’Tis yourself knows all about it,” said Murty, much impressed. “Bled’s what they did—think, now, of a wee stream of gould makin’ its way along here ages ago when there was wather to carry it. Little heavy bits droppin’ here an’ there where a shtone ’ud hould ’em back: an’ all lavin’ a thrack for us to follow.”

“And it had to run downwards—so that’s why the tunnel slopes upwards?”

“Mr. Bob,” said Murty, “aren’t you afther tellin’ me that the new young lady didn’t know annything at all about minin’ an’ such-like? An’ here she is, wid a grip on the matther like an ould-timer!”

“That’s the result of the way we’ve all been educating her, Murty,” laughed Bob. “She’s really growing quite a credit to us. Very knowledgeable about cattle, too—you’d be surprised what she knows about calf-diseases!”

“Bob,” said Betty haughtily, “that remark was ill-timed and . . . well, low-down. Ouch!” She stumbled over a stone and saved herself by clutching at Murty.

“Watch y’r step, miss—keep that wee torch of yours lightin’ you. An’ don’t be attindin’ to what Mr. Bob ’ud be sayin’—wasn’t it himself was a new chum not so long ago, an’ very English in his ways? When I’ve time to lave off gould-huntin’ there’s lots of quare stories I can be tellin’ you about him when he furrst kem out.”

“Murty, I thought you were my friend!” said Bob hastily. To which Murty’s only reply was a deep chuckle.

The tunnel sloped gently upwards, wriggling in unexpected turns, but always coming back to the original direction. Great shoulders of rock stuck out here and there; underfoot were slippery stones and patches of boggy soil through which they toiled heavily. Heavy props and slabs supported the roof, from which came an occasional trickle, ice-cold when it fell unexpectedly on faces and necks. Betty’s feet were aching, though nothing would have induced her to admit it, when at last Murty stopped, holding up his lamp so that the dull beam fell on a rock-face ahead, closing them in.

They crowded round him to examine it. To Betty it looked much the same as any other part of the place, but the quick comments of the other tunnellers were full of suppressed excitement. Chips of quartz passed from hand to hand; she watched the keen faces scrutinizing them closely, the play of light and shadow and deep darkness as the torches flashed here and there. There was something unreal about it: she felt as if she were watching a scene in a film,

taking no part herself. Bob's head and shoulders had disappeared into the hole hewn in the rock face. He straightened up presently, giving place to Wally, and made his way to her.

"Hold out your hand, like a good girl!"

She obeyed. Bob dropped a little lump of quartz into her palm: clean cut, with sharp edges. A thick powdering of gold almost covered one side.

"Does this buy aeroplanes?" she said, smiling at him.

"That sort of stuff does, Betty—and other things. If there's enough of it: and Murty seems to think there's no doubt of that."

"I'm so glad, Bob." She turned the gleaming fragment over, her face intent.

"Gosh, that's a bonza specimen!" Dick's head appeared suddenly. "Can I have it, Bet? It would be ripping in my collection!"

"No—you'll have to go mining for yourself, Dicky," she said, and put the lump into her pocket: and Bob looked relieved.

"I think it's time we made a move," said Mr. Linton's voice. "The air here is pretty heavy. We'll have to make a ventilating shaft, Murty, now that we've found her."

"We will, so. It's been headachy worrk for the lasht bit. But there's lots to be arranged now, sir; the job'll be beyond us afther this."

They tramped down the slope almost in silence. There was relief in coming once more into the shaft, able to look up and see overhead the circle of blue sky: a new sense of freedom when they had made the ascent and gained outer space and fresh air. Dick and Bill raced off with their specimens to be the first to give the news to Lee Wing. The others followed slowly.

"Well, that's that," remarked David Linton, sitting down on a log on the plateau.

"And that means——?" Norah smiled.

"The end of my career as a miner. Not that I'm really entitled to call myself one—this battalion of mine has always bullied me into taking the soft jobs."

The battalion made violent protests.

"You've worked as hard as any of us, sir," Bob told him. "And longer hours—and taken less time off."

"Hear, hear!" said Jack.

"Those fellows at the south claim said you were a blooming marvel, the way you stuck at the washing!" Bill assured him earnestly.

"Well—we've all done our bit," the squatter said. "Not bad fun, too; and it's been worth it. But, as Murty says, the job is beyond us now—where is Murty, by the way? How are we to have a family council without him? Dick, will you go and bring him here—carry him, if he won't come along gently!"

Dick was off like a shot. He returned in a few moments, escorting his prisoner severely.

“Sit down, will you, Murty. I wish you wouldn’t keep out of the way when you might know we wanted you.”

“’Twas a bit of a wash I was afther givin’ meself, sir,” said Murty, grinning broadly. “An’ why wud I be intrudin’ meself when there’s company _____”

“Murty!” said several threatening voices.

“I wish you wouldn’t talk so much,” remarked the squatter patiently. “Look at Lee Wing—he doesn’t talk. He gets tea, thank goodness! Murty, I was saying that I’m finished with mining. Practically, that is: I’m not going to desert my beloved sluice-boxes without a final clean-up. We know we’ve got our reef, but the next thing is to send enough stone away to the proper quarter to have it assayed.”

“It is, sir. But there’s no doubt about the result of the assay.” The old man fished a shining specimen out of his pocket and looked at it lovingly. “That shtuff’ll set tongues waggin’ when it’s crushed. An’ from now on it’ll be a job for machinery an’ somethin’ more than man-power——”

“And that means we float a company. I haven’t the foggiest idea how that’s done, but I imagine there will be any number of people only too willing to instruct me.”

“The difficulty will be,” laughed Jim, “to keep them off you. We’ll have to see to a police body-guard for you when you go to Melbourne on this business.”

“It’s a great thing to know just how ignorant one is,” said his father. “Bankers and lawyers will have to handle everything: and they’ll put me on to experts to establish the mine and carry it on. We ought to be able to keep the thing private until all those matters are settled. After that, of course, the newspapers will get hold of it—and then anyone who cares to stay will see what is really meant by a gold-rush.” He sighed happily. “I shan’t be one to stay!”

“Then our furrst job is to get plenty of stone out,” said Murty. “Then there’ll be experts sent up to inspect the reef for themselves. A few days more’ll get all the rock we need.”

“And then no more tunnel for you, Murty O’Toole!” said Bob energetically.

“Well—I’ll not be sorry, Mr. Bob. Though, indeed, I’ve had a power of enjoyment out of it. But it’s findin’ gould that’s fun—not just diggin’ an’ blashtin’ it out when all the excitement’s over.”

“I say,” said Bill, who had sat listening with mounting horror. “Do you mean you’re just goin’ to give all the claims away to some company of people? After all the trouble you’ve had?”

“We are not, Bill,” returned Mr. Linton with perfect gravity. “We are hard

stern people who only give a mine away when we are well paid for it. When we float a company we remain part of the company—only we sell enough shares to pay for all the working of the mine. Then—we trust—we draw a useful income from dividends on those shares. That clear?”

Bill nodded, much relieved. There was another question he would have liked to ask, but asking it was too difficult. Bob saved him the trouble.

“And some of those shares will be yours, Bill, old son. Finders’ rights.”

“But I never found it, Bob! You did that all by yourself.”

“Well, if I dropped into a rock-hole and found things, you were the one to come along and haul me out of the hole. Don’t argue, Bill—isn’t it all arranged that those shares are going to come in handy some day when you want to buy a station?” And Bill flushed to the roots of his hair and became happily silent, dreaming of the future.

“There’s wan thing, sir,” remarked Murty. “Before the news gets out ’twould be as well for us to muster ivery head of cattle on Mr. Bob’s land an’ take them off.”

“And a merry job it will be, in these hills!” predicted Bob.

“We can’t leave them though,” observed Jim. “They can go into our hill country for the present—but goodness knows if we’ll be able to keep prospectors out of that, either.”

“If ’twas meself was a prophet,” Murty said, “I’d prophesy there’ll be no gould found, only what’s in the reef—an’ it makin’ back to the cliff. I’d say ye’ll have men all over these hills, an’ have to take away all the cattle that’s in them at all. An’ I’d say that in the lather end the prospectors’ll clear out, ivery lasht wan of them—an’ ye’ll be able to take your land back an’ shtock it up again—wid an eight-strand fence of barbed wire bechune it an’ the mine. ’Tis the finest of young well-bred cattle ye’ll be puttin’ on it when that day comes.” He paused, his face lighting up. “An’ may I be there to ride in behind them!”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LADY WHO CAME TO STAY

“I WAS never cut out to be a digger,” said Green solemnly.

He leaned on his spade, his eyes roving with disfavour over the mullock-heaps surrounding their shaft and the cleared blocks that lay beyond. His blue shirt, soaked with sweat, clung to his body: his face, sunburnt and grimy, expressed complete boredom.

“Well, you’re no worse off than any of the rest of us,” was McGill’s sour reply. “It isn’t our trade, either. But it’s no use grumblin’.”

“All very well for you. You an’ Mooney get days off, out shootin’. We don’t.”

“It’s not my fault if you two can’t shoot for nuts. An’ you’re glad enough of bein’ able to live on fresh meat. Much you’ve got to complain about.”

“Well, it does seem as if it was goin’ on for ever,” put in Todd, his head suddenly emerging from the shaft. “I thought we’d have sunk this blinkin’ hole deep enough to have rigged up a derrick by now—but there’s enough stone to keep twice as many fellows busy.”

“I know that well enough,” McGill said. “But what else can we do? We’ve got a claim that was good enough for one of Linton’s men, an’ we can only try it out thorough.” He hesitated. “An’ there may be other chances yet. I’ve not given up the idea of gettin’ into their cave some time.”

“I reckon you’ve as much chance of doin’ that as of jumpin’ over the moon,” Green said bluntly. “You’ve had one try at helpin’ yourself to their takin’s, an’ what good did it do you? Precious little! Oh, I’m not rubbin’ it in”—as McGill’s face darkened—“only I mean, they’re pretty sure to be keepin’ a close enough watch now. That ol’ Chow’s never far away.”

“He’s goin’ to get what I owe him some day!” vowed McGill.

“He’s too cute for you, Mac. Much chance you’d have of gettin’ near him.”

“Well, you wait, an’ perhaps you’ll see,” said McGill darkly. He glanced southward, and his eyes widened with astonishment.

“Well, I’m hanged! Look there!”

They saw a woman coming slowly towards them along the bank of the creek. She was tall and incredibly thin; her face, tanned to a deep brown, seemed all skin and bone, with a sharp nose and deeply set dark eyes. A shapeless felt hat was pulled well down on her head: she wore riding-breeches and a faded yellow jumper. One arm was thrust through the bridle of a pack-pony that bore a heavy load and moved as though it hoped that not much more exertion was required of it. At her side paced a brindled dog with a bob-tail: a

powerful brute, almost as lean as its mistress.

The men stared blankly at her. They might not have been there at all, for all the attention she gave them. She arrived at the next claim, dropped the pony's bridle and went round the block, carefully examining the pegs. Apparently satisfied with her inspection, she came back, removed the pony's load and dumped it on the ground. The bewildered miners watched in silence while she led the pony a little distance away, and let it go. It moved off in an aimless fashion towards the trees: its mistress slouched slowly back to the claim.

This time she seemed to have become aware of their existence.

"G'day," she said.

They mumbled something in response. To see a woman at the diggings was in itself remarkable: but this was a peculiar woman, and words of greeting did not come readily.

"Diggin'?" she asked.

They said they were. There seemed, indeed, nothing else to say.

She moved nearer to their shaft and looked at Todd, who was standing on a ladder so that his head was just visible above ground—in which position he resembled a gnome emerging from its dwelling. Todd, acutely conscious of being at a disadvantage, almost blushed.

"'Eavy work?" asked the stranger.

"Yes—dashed heavy diggin'," he answered.

"Standin' on a ladder, I meant," she said. Todd gasped feebly. She turned away as if neither the shaft nor Todd held any further interest for her, and looked the other men up and down. Mooney and Green had but a fleeting glance, but her eyes lingered longer on McGill.

"You the boss?"

He nodded. "Did you want anything?"

"No. Just lookin' round."

She moved off, wandering among the mullock-heaps: again she looked into the shaft, this time ignoring Todd, who remained on his ladder in a kind of paralysis. McGill began to regain his self-possession.

"Well, you seem mighty interested in our block, missus."

"Seems a nice block," she said calmly. "Doin' any good?"

"Oh—fair."

"Isn't that nice! Any nuggets?"

"Ah, that 'ud be tellin'," said McGill waggishly. "Are you thinkin' of doin' a bit of diggin'? Hard work for ladies."

"Me? No fear. I leave that to other people." She picked up a piece of stone and examined it closely. Annoyance succeeded McGill's half-puzzled amusement.

"I say, missus, this is private property," he snapped. "We don't care for

people pokin' round here 's if they owned it."

"Fancy!" she murmured. "But that's how, you see. I do own it."

Stricken to silence, they gaped at her for a full minute.

"Then—then you're Walker's wife?" McGill managed to say.

"That's right. Mrs. Walker's my name. You weren't expectin' me, were you?"

"Why should we? We've leased this claim."

"'Oo from?"

"From your boss, of course."

"'Oo's that?" she asked in a genuinely puzzled tone.

"Why, Walker!" McGill said furiously.

"Oh!" she said. "But you got it wrong if you think 'e's me boss. Only me 'usbind, that's all 'e is. An' so 'e leased it on me, did 'e? 'Ow like 'im!"

"Well, you ought to know him best," said McGill. "Anyway, he did lease it, so there you are."

"Too right I'm 'ere. Like a 'ome to me, it is—only spot of ground I can call me own."

"But we've leased it, I tell you!"

"Yes, you keep tellin' me that, don't you? I'm pretty near believin' it. Got it all in writin', of course?"

McGill hesitated.

"Well, your boss—I mean, your husband's got that," he said awkwardly.

"That's funny," said the flat slow voice. "'E wouldn't need your part. Clever men like you 'ud never be on a claim without a writin' to say it was all dinkum for you to be there. I'm not clever, but I've got me writin' all right, to say it's mine."

"Well, when Walker comes back he'll tell you it's all straight," said McGill angrily.

"Now, that just shows you don't know Mr. Walker," she said. "Mr. Walker's the carelessst man that ever lived. You can't never depend on 'im *comin'* back. So often 'e just don't. Why, there was once 'e left me an' the kids, an' went to get tucker, an' 'e simply forgot—an' we all but starved. 'E was so surprised when 'e did turn up. An' so was I."

"What are you getting at, missus?" asked Mooney sharply. "Do you reckon we're goin' to clear out an' leave this block just because you come along an' say you're Mrs. Walker?"

"Lor', no!" she said. "I don't think you're that kind of men at all. Why, it 'ud look as if you were afraid, wouldn't it? No, I only just wanted to know how things stood; an' of course I know now, don't I? So I'll just pitch my tent quite close an' settle in, an' it'll be so nice to watch you all diggin' it up."

"You——!" began McGill. "You aren't reckonin' you're goin' to camp

here all alone?”

“Not on my block,” she assured him. “With you all so busy I’d be in your way. That next block’ll do me nicely. An’ not all alone, neither. I got my dawg. That’s ’im over there. Stripey’s ’is name. I call ’im that because ’e’s brindled,” she added kindly.

“You can’t settle down on another fellow’s claim,” cried McGill.

“Oh, yes, I can—on that one. The gent that owns it said I could. Nice gent, ’e is. Name of Shanahan.”

“That’s one of Linton’s crowd.” He eyed her with a new suspicion.

“Is it? I dunno. ’E was sittin’ on a log over there, an’ I asked ’im if there was anywhere I could camp near my claim, an’ ’e said ’e wasn’t usin’ ’is, an’ I was welcome. But not to dig, of course. Just to picnic, like. Well, thanks for the nice chat, gents. I’ll get busy now.”

She turned away and sauntered towards her pack. McGill lost command of himself. He sprang after her, his voice threatening.

“You’d better think twice, if you reckon you’re comin’ spyin’ round us. We’ll pull your tent down if you dare to put it up near us!”

Mrs. Walker whistled faintly. At the sound the brindled dog got up slowly and came towards her.

“See ol’ Stripey?” she asked. “’E’s that faithful, ’e just can’t bear people that come near my things. I know you’d ’ate to worry ’im, but ’e mightn’t mind worryin’ you at all. You just run along back to your diggin’, mister. I feel real mean when I think of all the time you’ve lost chattin’ to me.”

She put her hand on Stripey’s head, and the dog looked up at McGill, drawing his lips slightly back from his teeth. His intentions were so clearly unfriendly that the big man hastily stepped back.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Mrs. Walker approvingly. “Wants careful ’andlin’, Stripey does, along of ’im bein’ so faithful. There was a man he didn’t like up Wodonga way, an’ one day—oh, well, that wouldn’t interest you, I expect. But ’e’ll take no notice of you unless you come on to the claim Mr. Shanahan’s lent me. ’E’d know you were trespassin’ if you came there, you see.”

“You’d better keep your ugly brute of a dog out of our way,” blustered McGill. “An’ don’t let us catch you trespassin’ on *our* claim, or there’ll be trouble.”

“But I couldn’t trespass there, seein’ it belongs to me, could I?” she drawled. “A person can’t trespass on a person’s own property. That’s law. I learned up a lot about law before I come here.”

“There’s a law about leases——” began McGill angrily.

“Too right there is. Part of it says there’s got to *be* a lease.”

“Didn’t I tell you there was one?”

“Oh, yes, you told me. Only you don’t seem to ’ave it. Lots of owners ’ud

make no end of trouble about that, but I'm not fussy. You just carry on diggin', an' don't mind me."

"Did Walker send you here?" demanded McGill, struck by a new thought.

"Not much! I 'aven't set eyes on Mr. Walker since I don't know when. Fact is, it was so long that I reckoned I'd better mooch along an' see what 'e was up to. An' now 'e's gone orf somewhere. Oh, well, I'll have a better 'oliday than if I 'ad 'im to cook for. This is goin' to be a real 'oliday for me an' Stripey, you know, mister. I've always wondered what it 'ud feel like to sit about an' just watch other people workin'. Now I'm goin' to find out."

She gave him one of her peculiarly disconcerting looks. There was no enmity in it—merely the half-puzzled gaze one might give to a hitherto-unclassified species of a curious animal. McGill raged inwardly under it, but he found nothing to say. Then he found himself staring at her back. She walked off and began to unfasten the ropes of her pack.

Work on the claim for the rest of the day was disjointed. It was difficult not to watch the strange woman. She laid out her blankets in the sun, took out a short axe, and sauntered to the scrub. Stripey remained on guard, sitting by the pack and facing the men, his wary eye scarcely leaving them. Mooney attempted to make friends with him, but his advances were received with a low snarl and the significant baring of the teeth that had discouraged McGill.

"Got a narsty temper, if you ask *me*," said Mooney; and left him alone.

Mrs. Walker returned after a time, dragging long and slender saplings, and proceeded to cut tent-poles and pegs with all the dexterity of one long used to axe work. She put up her tent in the farthest corner of the block; a workman-like little tent it was, equipped with a serviceable fly. Her belongings disappeared within it; she collected stones and built a fireplace, with forked sticks supporting a cross-bar to hold cooking-pots. The miners made a show of unconcerned working, but beneath it they watched these proceedings with horrified fascination. The unwelcome visitor had clearly come prepared for a long stay.

Mrs. Walker did not look at them at all. She moved here and there, never hurried, but never idle, whistling gently as she went. They were to become painfully familiar with that whistle. Another trip to the scrub supplied her with firewood; she chopped it up and stacked it near the cooking-place. She boiled the billy and made tea, carrying it into the tent: afterwards mixing a damper expertly and putting it to cook in the embers. If she felt the eyes that were constantly bent upon her, she gave no sign. But the brindled dog did not cease for a moment to remain on guard.

The damper came out of the ashes: they noted with pain that it was all that a damper should be, both in appearance and smell. When she took it into the tent she reappeared carrying a very small camp-stool and a calico bag. She

walked to the boundary between the two claims, planted the stool carefully, and sat on it. From the bag came a half-made stocking. She began to knit.

They saw, however, glancing at her covertly, that she had no need to use her eyes for knitting. Her fingers flew, but her glance roved round the claim, taking in every detail of the work above ground. They dug and shovelled, more and more embarrassed under the silent gaze. All conversation ceased among them. Green and Mooney, working in the shaft, were more fortunate than Todd and McGill, who felt the eyes boring into them, even when their backs were turned. The low toneless whistle went on unceasingly.

McGill flung his shovel down savagely at last—at which Stripey bristled and stirred.

“Well, I’ve had enough for to-day,” he growled. He called to the men in the shaft. “Knockin’ off, boys!”

“Knock off early, don’t you?” said the knitting figure.

“That’s our business, isn’t it?”

“Why, of course it is. I was only passin’ a remark. I got to get used to the ways of diggings, you see. Now when Mr. Walker was workin’——”

“We know all about how much Walker works. *He* never hurt himself by doin’ too much.”

“Ah, a man gen’ly falls in with the ways of the people he’s workin’ with,” she drawled. “An’ was Mr. Walker diggin’ my claim along of you?”

“Yes, he was—until he got sick of it an’ cleared out on us.”

“Fancy that!” she said sympathetically. “I dunno ’ow ’e could have brought ’imself to leave you all. ’E must ’ave missed you.”

The mild gaze travelled round them all. They had an uncomfortable feeling of being schoolboys standing meekly before a teacher. Her knitting-needles clicked incessantly.

Wrath surged within McGill.

“We didn’t miss your precious Mr. Walker, anyhow——”

“*Not* my precious,” she said gently. “Very ornary, Mr. Walker is. But you mustn’t wait, talkin’ to me. You all look so ’ungry. I’ll be seein’ you in the mornin’.”

There was a note of finality in her voice—as if the school-teacher had said “Run along home now, children!” McGill made a last effort to assert himself.

“I’ll thank you not to nose about this claim when we’re away. We’re rather particular about keepin’ our business to ourselves.”

“Oh, you would be,” agreed Mrs. Walker. “I don’t wonder, I’m sure. Well, ta-ta!”

No retort occurring to them, the indignant band departed, muttering heavily among themselves. At the edge of the scrub they looked back. She was wandering about the claim with an air of being entirely at home.

"I've a good mind to go back an' hunt her off it—the cow!" exclaimed McGill.

"Aw, what's the use?" Mooney said. "She can't do anything to us, an' she'll get sick of it pretty soon. Leave her alone. We can't be rough with her, even if she does look more like a goanna than a woman!"

They went on; and Mrs. Walker, having perceived and appreciated their pause, chuckled deeply and seized the opportunity to borrow one of the discarded shovels. With this she dug a storm-water trench round her tent. Pausing to admire her work when it was done, she became suddenly conscience-stricken.

"Crikey! I've been an' started diggin' on that Shanahan feller's claim! Funny if I'd turned up a nugget." She searched the loose earth, but found nothing. "I'll 'ave to explain to Shanahan. I guess 'e won't mind—'e's a decent chap. But it was a pretty awful thing to do."

Some time later, as she sat by her tent knitting, she was gladdened by the sight of McGill and Todd taking down the tent on the other claim. Both looked excessively bad-tempered. McGill had forcibly expressed distaste for seeing his new neighbour when he got up in the morning. "Bad enough to have to see her when we're workin'—I'll keep as far away from her as I can any other time," he had said, enlisting Todd's aid. "An' I'm not keen on havin' that dog of hers at close quarters. I wouldn't sleep easy, knowin' he was about."

The days that followed were very painful to the miners. The joy of work had never been perceived by them: but work now became a daily penance under the supervision of their neighbour. She seemed to have an unholy way of getting all her own jobs done before they appeared, leaving her free to bring her camp-stool to the boundary, to sit on it, to knit—and to whistle. So far as they could judge she knew only three tunes, and none of them very well—but this limitation never troubled her. The low, insistent piping went on mechanically. Even more penetrating was her gaze. They felt it through their backs—and whenever possible they worked with backs turned to her, though they found it made little difference.

Daily the maddening feeling grew that they worked under a keen-eyed superintendent. Nothing that they did escaped her eyes. At times she would rise, stretch herself, and prowl round their claim, careful to keep outside the boundary; there were occasionally almost comical moments when she found that she was within the line, when she would step back with exaggerated haste—doubly infuriating, since they knew that as soon as they left in the evening she walked over every yard of the block. Watching from the trees, they sometimes saw her pick up a dishful of mullock and take it to the creek to wash it; certain as they were that she would find little or no trace of gold, they raged at the sight.

She rarely troubled to speak to them. They tried—after consultation—being heavily friendly in their attitude, but this made her at once withdraw into her shell and adopt a manner almost demure. Sometimes, as they worked, a caustic comment on their methods would come unexpectedly; the flat drawling voice had a curious power to sting them. And there was never anything to be gained by talking roughly in reply, for she would merely answer in the half-submissive way that had a biting quality all its own: and presently another veiled taunt would come. Nor could they talk to each other with any satisfaction, knowing that keen ears heard every word, and that she was likely to join in at unexpected and awkward moments, giving a turn to the conversation in which they never came off best.

From the other side of the creek David Linton's people watched this pantomime with considerable amusement, mingled with some uneasiness. It was somewhat of a relief to them when Mrs. Walker jogged into their camp one evening after dark. She was riding her pack-pony bareback and looked very cheerful.

"I'm glad you've come," Jim said, taking the pony from her. "We're not happy about this game of yours, Mrs. Walker. I wish you'd camp on our side of the creek."

"Bless you, that crowd's not worth bein' worried about!" she said unconcernedly. "They fair 'ate me, of course, but they're all that scared of me old Stripey they daren't come within ten yards of me. Crumbs, Mr. Jim, it is funny; I just sit on me little stool an' laugh an' laugh inside. I 'aven't 'ad such a good time for years!"

"We thought you would be finding it pretty dull," Wally said.

"Dull?" Her voice was astonished. "When you've lived alone in the Bush as long as I've done, with not a soul to see or speak to, there's not much you'd call dull. Even when I had the kids with me they weren't much more talkative than Mr. Walker—an' 'e was never chatty. Now I reckon I'm seein' life!"

"Well, you may be—of a kind. But——"

"Don't you bother about me. You warned me fair an' square the day I turned up, so I knew what I 'ad to deal with. An' it's much better for them to know nothin' about me bein' friendly with you."

"I don't care what they know," returned Jim. "We think it would be far safer for you if they understood that we are backing you."

"Aw, no!" she said, almost with pleading. "We talked that out the day I came, didn't we? True as life, I'm all right, Mr. Jim. You can't imagine how I'm enjoyin' meself! It just does me good to watch 'em doin' all the work that Mr. Walker had ought to be doin', an' to know they ain't goin' to get a thing out of it!"

"And if they did strike gold—would you know?"

"I don't reckon they'd be able to 'ide it from me. I've studied those chaps until I know almost what they're thinkin' of. Mooney's the only one with any brains. *He* might keep a thing to himself, but the others 'ud give it away somehow. For one thing, if they came on gold they'd never leave me alone near the claim at nights; it's only while they're diggin' for nothin' that they reckon there's no danger in me prowlin' round after they've gone. All the same, it 'urts their pride 'orrid that I do it!" She gave a grim laugh.

"Did they see you coming here this evening?" asked Wally.

"No fear. I mooched off with the bridle after they'd gone 'ome, an' got the pony an' rode off into the scrub. Then I made a circle round, so's to get to your camp from the far side. Stripey's on guard at the tent. I thought it 'ud be rather nice to see some real 'uman bein's for a change."

"Glad you did," Jim said. "We've some tucker my sister sent out for you, and we were wondering how to get it to you. Young Bill wanted badly to take it across, but we'd promised you to keep away."

"It's jolly good of your sister," she said rather absently. She was silent a moment; then looked up half-shyly.

"He's gone to bed, I suppose?"

"Bill? Yes, he and his mate turn in early. They sleep in the cave."

"Um." She nodded. There was another pause.

"Think I'd wake 'im if I 'ad a look at 'im? I got a soft spot in me 'eart for young Bill. I see that red 'ead of 'is dodgin' about this side of the creek, an' it's sort of tantalizin'—I'd like fine to take a peep at 'is face for a minute. Him an' me were cobbbers."

"Carry on—you won't wake him," said Jim. "Take this torch."

She went with noiseless steps into the cave. Bill slept deeply. She shaded the light with her hand and looked at him for a long moment. When she came out her face had softened curiously.

"Just the same—freckles an' all," she said. "Well, I'll be goin'."

CHAPTER XIX

SKY SCOUTS

“CARE for a fly, Betty?”

“Love it!” said Betty promptly. “Who is going?”

“Tommy and Norah scorn the idea,” Bob answered. “They actually say they prefer to bottle peaches. No doubt I shall be glad of the peaches later on, but at the moment it strikes me as a mild form of lunacy. You aren’t peach-mad, are you?”

“Well—when they’re on the tree, perhaps,” smiled Betty. “But even then, when compared with flying——! How soon, Bob?”

“No time like the present. Come on.”

They went joyfully, pausing to glance into the kitchen, where Brownie and the girls were dimly to be seen amid steam and glass jars.

“The smell is lovely,” said Betty. “I could almost stay.”

“The heat is far less lovely,” returned Norah. “Go and fly, children—and be prepared to fan Tommy and me all the afternoon. There isn’t room for anyone else at this job.”

Jack Young’s plane, the *Planet*, was already in position outside the hangar, where Bob and Billy had spent a happy hour in overhauling her. The black-boy stood near the propeller.

“I thought the *Planet* would be best, because she’s got head-’phones,” Bob said. “Rather jolly to be able to talk.” He helped her to her seat. “Where shall we go?”

“All over the sky!” returned Betty generously.

“Suits me,” was Bob’s answer. He climbed in. “Swing her, Billy!”

The engine blared: Bob throttled it back, sitting eager-eyed until it had warmed up. Flying was the thing he loved best in life, and for years he had been without it until the blessed chance that brought Freddy and Jack skimming into his horizon. Now he was free of the air again, with the added zest of having with him a girl who was no less keen. It was no wonder that he forgot the mine, his farm, and all the cares of every day when at length they were able to taxi over the clipped grass, to rise smoothly, and to soar into the western sky with earth only a dim chequer-board far below them.

In spite of having head-’phones, they did not talk much: it was enough to go arrowing into space, rising above drifting masses of piled white clouds, seeing only blue all about them. The day was windless; there was hardly a bump in the air. They gained height rapidly in effortless soaring, and cruised in the pure atmosphere of five thousand feet, their lungs feeling as if clean-

washed by its lightness.

“You look happy.” Bob glanced down at her, smiling.

“Do you have that feeling that the air beneath us is quite solid?” she asked. “As if it lifted you up and carried and held you, so that you couldn’t possibly fall?”

He nodded.

“Just that. Riding on it, as well as cutting through it. That’s being airborne, just as you’re sea-borne in a yacht.”

“I know,” she said eagerly. “One isn’t really sea-borne in a big ship—it’s too heavy—just ploughs through. But a yacht on a windy day! that’s flying and dancing over the water. And this is something like it—only better.”

“A thousand times better,” Bob said. He leaned back easily, letting the *Planet* fly herself. “You’d make a pilot, Betty. Will you let me teach you when I get my own plane?”

“Bob!—could I really?”

“Of course you could. I mustn’t try experiments with another fellow’s plane, but she’s an old war bus, anyhow—you wait until I get mine! She’s going to be the very latest—every new dodge.” He launched into a catalogue of technicalities: she listened with respect, understanding only a fraction, but carried away by his enthusiasm.

“It sounds marvellous! How do you know all about it, Bob?”

“I’ve read every aviation magazine I could lay my hands on ever since the War,” he said. “It was like reading of wild dreams then—but now it’s going to be dream-come-true. If I can manage it, I’m going to England to buy her, and I’ll fly her out.”

“Oh!” said Betty. That did not seem so good. England was very far, and the seas wide. She fell silent again, while Bob put the *Planet* into a long dive until the earth seemed rushing up to meet them. They soared again, banked, and went off in a wide circle. Town after town showed beneath them, little irregular patches of red and grey roofs: rivers were silver ribbons, swift passenger-trains like motionless caterpillars. The time raced by. Bob glanced at his watch at last, unwillingly.

“We’ll have to make for home or we’ll keep them waiting for lunch. Betty, I’m going to fly over our country near the diggings. I’ll go as low as I can—will you keep a pretty sharp look-out to see if you can spot anyone moving near the cattle?”

“Rather!” said Betty. “It would be useful if I could see your friend the calf-killer.”

“Very useful indeed. Of course it’s only a bare chance that you could make out anyone in all that timber. Still, you never know: if I cut down speed as much as possible you’ll have a chance. Watch for any moving cattle.”

Betty leaned over the side as they swept across the clearing of the mine, trying to distinguish between the little figures that looked up and waved. Jim she could always detect: nobody was so huge. Near him were two small forms that capered and gesticulated: and across the creek a scraggy figure in breeches and yellow jumper stared upward fixedly. Then the clearing was left behind, and they were cruising slowly over the scrub. She could make out cattle here and there, all peaceful. They came round in a circle. Suddenly she stiffened, leaning farther out, concentrating all her vision on a gully beneath them.

Not until it had ended in a hill did she twist back into her seat.

“Can you fly over that line again?”

“I’ll do my best,” said the pilot, beginning to bring the plane round. “Seen anything?”

“I’ve seen McGill. He was on foot, with a gun.”

“Sure?” asked Bob, a little doubtfully. “It’s very easy to be mistaken, Betty.”

“Yes, but he’s so big. I’m certain it was McGill—he isn’t like anyone else. And there was no mistaking the gun; it was on his shoulder, and the sunlight caught the barrel full. And he looked up and saw us, and dodged under cover.”

“Well, you couldn’t mistake *that*,” said Bob. “Pity we didn’t come along just as he was shooting. I’ll bet he felt tempted to pot us, instead of a calf!”

They tried to make out the hulking form again, but without success. The man whom Betty had seen remained well hidden from any prying cruisers of the sky. Bob gave it up after a time and headed for home.

There was still a fragrance of peaches about the back verandah, but Tommy and Norah, fresh from a swim in the lagoon, bore no traces of cooking. They listened with interest to the flyers’ story.

“Billy is going out with stores after lunch,” Norah said. “I’ll send a note to Jim. It’s just as well to let him know—though I don’t quite see what he can do. Poor Gorilla! how he must love to go for an unlawful expedition into the scrub, if only to get away from Mrs. Walker!”

Jim, reading her letter that evening, had no sympathy to spare for the gorilla. They discussed the matter over supper.

“I’m getting pretty sick of it,” he said wrathfully. “I suppose it’s because I’ve never had a chance of getting even with the brute. First old Kim deals with him, and then Lee Wing; and now I have to see that queer fish Mrs. Walker annoying him every day. That’s funny, of course; but one doesn’t care about seeing a woman take on the job. If only I could catch him red-handed!”

“We’d be no use in the scrub,” Wally said despondently. “It would never be possible to get near him without his hearing us.”

“Well, I believe Billy could,” said Bill. “Isn’t he a black tracker?”

“He’s black enough—and of course any native can track a bit,” said Wally.

“But even if he saw him shooting he couldn’t deal with him, Bill. Do you want our one and only black-fellow flattened into pulp?”

“Well, Dick an’ I’ve had lots an’ lots of talks about it,” returned Bill stubbornly. “We tried tracking McGill a bit one day, on foot—oh, you needn’t look at us like that, Jim; we never meant to go far or to get near him, ’cause we promised we wouldn’t. But we just went along a bit. An’ it was easy, ’cause we could always hear him and his horse, but he never heard us. Not once.”

“We were jolly sick because we had to chuck it an’ turn back,” said Dick ruefully. “I know we could have followed him all day. You can get across heaps of places where a rider has to go round.”

“Yes, but we can’t waste day after day on the chance of catching him,” Jim answered impatiently. “Even if people of our size could dodge through the scrub like you youngsters—which we couldn’t.”

“No, but what about Billy? Say he tracked after McGill an’ saw him shoot a beast—well, then he’d be a good while skinning it an’ cutting it up, wouldn’t he? Couldn’t Billy cut back to the camp like smoke an’ tell you? An’ couldn’t you an’ Wally an’ all of us go out to meet McGill bringing the meat back to his camp? If you caught him with it red-handed it ’ud be pretty near as good as seeing him shoot it, wouldn’t it?”

Bill paused for breath, keeping on Jim an eye that was for once defiant: then softened.

“Ah, do, Jim! It ’ud be such howling fun!”

Jim considered the plan in silence, while the conspirators watched him breathlessly.

“Well, I believe there’s something in it,” he said slowly. “What do you say, Wal?”

“I think anything is worth trying,” was Wally’s answer. “I’m as sick as you are of feeling that the thing is going on, without our raising a hand.”

Bill and Dick, having clutched each other delightedly, broke out anew, speaking as one man.

“An’ Billy’s here, too!”

“So he is,” observed Freddy. “An’ it’s very likely the beggar might have been put off shootin’ this morning by Bob’s plane scoutin’ round just over him. If so, he might be plannin’ another try to-morrow.”

“Him not bling any meat home this day,” put in Lee Wing. “I hidee in sclub watchee him come home—him not cally anythling. Him look welly wild.”

“Had he a gun?” Jim asked sharply.

“Too li’ he had, Mas’ Jim. Double-ballil gun, all li’.”

“Well, that looks hopeful,” said Jack. “If they’re out of meat he’ll very probably go out again to-morrow. Why not talk to Billy and see what he says?”

"It's only wasting a day of Billy's time, even if nothing comes of it—and Billy isn't over-pressed with work," Wally remarked. "Let's give it a go, Jim."

"Right you are. Cut along and fetch him, will you, Bill?"

The boys raced off together—Dick far too excited to remain behind. They were back in a few moments, escorting a bewildered black-fellow who had been hustled along without any explanation as to why his presence was urgently desired. But when the plan was made clear to him he grinned delightedly, and became almost fluent.

"Plenty mine savvy. Them pfeller longa camp plenty cheeky pfeller. Mine track 'em longa scrub orri'."

"Sure you savvy, Billy? No good tracking anyone who isn't carrying a gun. Then if he shoots a beast you hurry back to tell me. Got that?"

Billy nodded very hard.

"Savvy orri', Mas' Jim. Not let that pfeller know mine catch 'im."

"No—leave him alone. Get back as quickly as you can."

"Plenty. Mine hidem scrub early to-morrow, watchem horses longa that one."

"All right. And watch yourself as well, Billy—no taking risks. If that big fellow catches sight of you, get out of his way one-time."

"Him not see me, Mas' Jim," said Billy confidently. "Not hear me, neither."

"No, I don't expect he will," said Jim, laughing. "That's all, then, Billy. Get some tucker from Lee Wing to take out with you. We'll keep a sharp look-out for you to-morrow."

Billy hesitated.

"Mas' Jim . . . you bin get gun plenty ready if catchem that pfeller, mine reckon."

"Not much—this isn't going to be a gun-fight, you old fire-eater," Jim laughed.

"But he bin got gun," demurred the black-fellow unhappily.

"Yes, but only to make war on calves. Don't you worry, Billy; we'll look after ourselves."

"Mine thinkit him plenty sulky pfeller," murmured Billy, looking anything but convinced. "You better watchem hard."

"We'll do that. You needn't trouble your head about him, Billy—why, he's scared of Mrs. Walker!" Jim grinned.

"Plenty," the black-fellow agreed solemnly. "But not scared of *you*, Mas' Jim." He walked away, deep in thought.

CHAPTER XX

GIANTS' MEETING

SO often now had McGill made his raiding expeditions into the scrub that he had ceased to take any precautions in leaving his camp. It was in a lonely place, well hidden by scrub; even though not far from the nearest camp, nobody had time to be away from work between breakfast and the midday snack that was all that the diggers permitted themselves. Even if he were seen, who was going to question a man's right to go out after bush game?

He was very contented as he rode off. Yesterday's expedition had certainly been a failure, thanks to those young fools in the aeroplane who had chosen to cruise overhead, making him uneasy and scaring the cattle, so that there was little chance of a shot. He did not think it at all likely that they had seen him, considering his quick duck under cover: but they had remained long enough to make him give up all thought of shooting.

Still, there had been compensations, since Mooney had been willing to give up his turn with the gun for the next expedition. Mooney had watched the plane and had not liked it at all: he had no wish to risk being spied upon from above on any unlawful occasion. McGill, confident of himself, was delighted to take a second day off work—doubly welcome since Mrs. Walker's activities had made the claim a place of penance to them all.

From a thick lightwood tree two dark eyes watched him go: saw him heading south-east. Billy chuckled silently. He knew the lie of the country well, and the silent gullies where a man might find stray beasts seeking shade. He slipped down from his tree and struck across the nearest spur.

Soon McGill came riding slowly beneath his vantage-point on a hill-side rock. Billy waited until he was out of sight, and followed him. That gully held nothing: the horseman had to climb the opposite ridge. It was steep work; the horse slipped and stumbled on the dry grass and loose stones, the man urging him on with his heel. Behind him a shadow flitted across the gully and went up lightly, fifty yards away. On the ridge McGill halted to let his horse breathe. He lit his pipe: the scent of the tobacco came to Billy's nostrils, making him long for a smoke himself. He went so far as to draw out his pipe and fondle it, but in a moment it went back into his pocket. There could be no smoking for him until his work was done.

Nothing could be seen in the gully below: McGill decided to leave it alone. He turned along the ridge. The scrub was sparse, so that Billy had to keep well back. Once, as a flock of parrots streamed overhead, crying, McGill turned sharply. Billy, only half-concealed behind a slender tree, stiffened; not

dodging, as a white man would have done, but becoming as rigid as the tree itself. He breathed again when the rider's eyes followed the birds in their flight, coming no lower. They moved on.

Calves were scarce that morning. The hunt went on for more than two hours, and not once had the white hunter any suspicion that he was also the hunted. No stick cracked under Billy's foot: no branch, held aside to permit his passing, was allowed to swing back into position with a swish. There were times when he wriggled under bushes, flat on his stomach: other times when he was forced to drop far behind in open country, so that to make up ground it was necessary to make a cast across the ridges, every sense alert to find the direction taken by the enemy.

Once McGill, finding the scrub in his path too dense, turned without warning and came riding back along the way he had come. There was little cover, and Billy was right in his path. The black-boy rolled out of sight behind a log, flattened himself against it, and lay motionless. Had McGill ridden by on his side of the log he must have been seen: but Billy's luck held. The slow hoofs went past him: McGill's eyes were busy ahead, and he saw nothing of the half-concealed figure. Billy was severe with himself in his mental comments as he took up the chase, knowing that he had been guilty of carelessness unbecoming a black-fellow, who ought to have known better.

The long pursuit ended in a ravine after McGill had begun to circle on his way back to camp. Billy, on an overhanging ridge, saw the calves first, and trembled lest McGill should not see them too. It seemed likely that he would miss them: the ravine was narrow, and he had glanced into it once already without success. Billy decided to risk pitching a stone down.

He jerked it outwards: it fell, rattling on a boulder below. A slight sound, just what might be made by a moving animal. McGill checked at once, pulling his horse round to look down. Delight came into his face as he caught sight of red and white hides, half hidden in the bushes. He dismounted, and went cautiously down.

There was no need for Billy to move. Even more delighted than McGill, he watched him stalk the calves, saw him reach a point where he could take aim. The black-boy prayed to whatever gods he had that the aim would be true.

McGill made no mistake. A calf went down, the others racing, panic-stricken, out of sight. Billy waited to make sure that all was over with the calf. McGill was busy with it when his tracker, his face alight with satisfaction, slipped away on his homeward journey.

Jim and Wally were working at the sluice-boxes when they saw three runners. Dick and Bill had been long on the watch: they had caught sight of Billy as he neared the diggings, and now raced ahead of him. The black-boy jogged behind them with the long stride that had covered the ground tirelessly

since he had left the scene of the shot.

“He’s got him, Jim! He saw him shoot! Didn’t we tell you he’d do it!”

“Plenty time, Mas’ Jim,” Billy said carelessly, as they hurried to meet him. “Mine takit short cut: that McGill pfeller him longa gully, sit down longa calf. Got him orri’: good calf, too.”

“Didn’t we say Billy would do it!” yelled Bill, hopping on one foot.

“Good man, Billy,” Jim said. “You’ve had a long job.”

“Mine bin plenty walk-about longa scrub,” said the black. “Him bin stupid pfeller—him got eyes, ought to seen mine one time. But him nebber. You catchem now, gib him plenty yabber, Mas’ Jim.”

“How long do you think he’ll take to get home, Billy?”

“Mebbe hour. Look, Mas’ Jim—mine know way him come. Say mine campem longa ridge over there——” He pointed a black finger. “Mine see him come, light ’em smoke signal. Plenty time you come then.”

“Gosh, that’s a brainy idea!” cried Bill. “Dick an’ I could keep watch, Jim, an’ let you know as soon as we see Billy’s signal. We’ll never take our eyes off the ridge—true, we won’t.”

“No smoke long time yet,” said Billy, damping this enthusiasm.

“All right,” agreed Jim, who was by no means willing to lose an hour’s work in keeping watch. “But don’t get into an argument, you two, and forget all about signals!”

“As if we would!” said the pair indignantly—and discovered that he was laughing at them. “Well, you *would* pull a fellow’s leg!” growled Bill. “I thought you meant it.”

“Would I have the nerve, when this is all your show?” grinned Jim. “At least—up to a point,” he added.

“I say, Jim, we can come over when you go, can’t we?” begged Bill, his grievance forgotten in sudden anxiety.

Jim hesitated, looking at them doubtfully.

“Well—you can come, but you’ve got to keep well out of the way. Really well out, I mean, kids. In the far distance.”

“Right-oh!” agreed Bill. They went off hurriedly, lest the restriction should be made more exact.

“What’s a far distance, Bill?” enquired Dick, as they settled themselves on a log overlooking Billy’s ridge. They could see the black-fellow moving about, collecting firewood and green boughs.

“I reckon it’s as far as we like to make it, don’t you?” They wriggled with suppressed laughter.

The hour went by slowly; and not only for Bill and Dick. Before it was over, Jim and Wally ceased work and collected Freddy and Jack from the shaft. They washed their hands and faces at the creek, with a vague idea that

they would not care to find McGill cleaner than themselves; then sat down to smoke while watching for the boys.

“Slow game,” remarked Jim. “I’d much rather have caught McGill on the scene of action: this business of tackling him in cold blood doesn’t appeal to me at all.”

“Better than nothin’, though,” returned Freddy.

“An’ you mightn’t be so cold about it when you get warmed up!”

“Well—that might be,” admitted Jim, slightly cheered. “Hullo—there come the kids!”

They came as fast as their legs would carry them.

“He’s lit it, Jim! Regular big smoke!”

“Well, here goes over the top!” said Wally.

Near the cliff the creek was shallow, with stepping-stones. They crossed it, Bill and Dick keeping discreetly to the rear, and walked down the bank until they came to the claim, where, at the moment, Mrs. Walker was allowing herself the pleasure of a boundary prowl. She looked at them in surprise, but beyond lifting their hats, they made no sign. They went past her to the shaft. From below, the faces of Mooney and Green stared up, blankly amazed. Todd and Henry dropped their tools and ran forward.

“We’re going to pay a visit to your camp,” said Jim curtly. “Perhaps you had better come, too.”

Mooney came up the ladder like a cat.

“What’s the idea? There’s nobody there.”

“I rather think there will be, pretty soon. Anyhow, we’re going. You can do as you like.” He turned and walked across the clearing with his friends.

Behind them the four men consulted a moment urgently together.

“He’s on to McGill’s game!” exclaimed Todd, with alarm. “What are we goin’ to do?”

“Can we head Mac off?” snapped Green.

“No knowing what direction he’s comin’ from,” returned Mooney. “He maybe there already, for all we know. Come on!”

“Anything the matter, gents?” asked a bland voice. “I ’ope there’s no trouble!”

“Oh, *shut up!*” cried the exasperated Todd. They hurried away. Mrs. Walker giggled softly and followed. Running feet behind her made her look round, and suddenly she beamed on seeing Bill and Dick.

“Well!” she said, and wrung Bill’s hand. “I thought I was never goin’ to set me eyes on you any nearer than acrost the crick. How’s yourself, Bill?”

“Hurry, Mrs. Walker!” Bill urged, disregarding all greetings. “There’s going to be no end of a row at the men’s camp!”

“Is that so?” She lengthened her stride. “Is it the big bloke they’re after?”

“Yes—he’s been shooting our calves. He’ll be coming in with the meat any minute now.”

“Sounds like the butcher-boy in the mornin’,” observed Mrs. Walker. “Well, I reckon ’e’ll get paid this time if Mr. Jim catches ’im.”

“We want to be there when he comes,” panted Bill. They increased their pace, tearing on ahead.

“Well, I do see life on this place!” ejaculated Mrs. Walker. She jogged after them.

There was no sign of McGill yet. When the diggers hurried into their clearing they found their visitors waiting. Mooney cast a quick glance round, then edged unobtrusively towards the far side.

“If you’re thinking of slipping away to warn your friend I should advise you not to trouble,” said Jim. “He’s been tracked all day; one of our men is shepherding him now.”

“I’ll go where I like, an’ no orders from you!” Mooney retorted.

“Better think again,” said another voice gently; and Mooney wheeled, to find Freddy beside him, looking faintly amused. Since Freddy was tall and muscular, and since his eyes held a certain gleam under their amusement, Mooney stayed where he was.

Word had mysteriously flown round the diggings that trouble was brewing. Men left their claims and hurried to the scene. It fell to Mrs. Walker to be the self-appointed mistress of the ceremonies.

“Keep back, please,” she said definitely, as the first arrivals appeared. “They don’t want no one interferin’. It’s what you might call a private show.” They obeyed her like sheep, gazing curiously from the edge of the scrub.

Jim had glanced round with some annoyance at their approach, but he had no time to think of them just then. His ears were held by another sound; horse’s feet, the bushes giving under a heavy body. Mooney opened his mouth to shout a warning, but Freddy was too quick for him. A long arm encircled his neck swiftly, a large hand was laid on his mouth.

“Keep quiet!” The words were low, but the arm was like a vice. Mooney struggled to free himself, finding that he might as well have struggled against a stone wall. Then the hand dropped, and he found himself free, as McGill rode into the clearing.

He came carelessly, whistling softly to himself, a man well pleased with his day’s work. The horse stopped; and in the fear and bewilderment that surged over McGill at the sight of the silent men awaiting him the heavy bag he carried slipped from his grasp and came to earth with a thud. Todd made a dive for it, but Wally was too quick for him: he shouldered him off with a force that sent him reeling, and picked up the sack.

“Keep your eye on that, will you, Harrison?” He put it down at the feet of a

man who stood watching.

For a moment McGill had a wild impulse to wheel his horse and take to the scrub. He glanced round: but there were men behind him now, and the way was blocked. Slowly he slid from the saddle. Mooney came forward; he gave the bridle into his hand.

“Better give me the gun.” Mooney’s tone was uneasy. He knew that the gun would be unloaded, but he preferred to see no weapon in McGill’s hands. To his relief, his leader made no objection; he relinquished the gun, and turned to face Jim.

“You seem to have worked up a nice little party to meet me, Linton!” he sneered.

“Four of us: one less than your own crowd,” said Jim. “That’s all that concerns you—though I’m not sorry to have some outside witnesses. Probably you won’t mind telling the party what you’ve brought home in that bag.”

“Wallaby,” said McGill quickly—and scowled at the laugh that went up from the edge of the clearing.

“Wallaby,” echoed Jim gravely. “A good heavy one, I should say. Harrison, would you mind letting everyone look at McGill’s wallaby?”

Harrison responded eagerly. He up-ended the bag; the grisly mass of raw meat rolled out on the grass. Another laugh went round. Someone said, “Rum shape for a wallaby, ain’t it? I bet that chap had horns!” And Mrs. Walker’s slow drawl came—“Oh, but Mr. McGill always shoots such great *big* wallabies!” There was a roar.

“Well,” said McGill defiantly, “—what have you got to say about it?”

“Only that we think you and your crowd have made this place too hot to hold you,” Jim said. “We knew you tried to steal gold, though we couldn’t catch you red-handed. Still, our man blackened your faces, so we called that quits!”

Another ripple of laughter went round. McGill flung a furious curse at the crowd in general, and came a step nearer Jim.

“And we knew you were shooting our stock, but we didn’t take the trouble to prove that until to-day,” the quiet voice went on. “But to-day you’ve been tracked ever since you went out. It will be quite easy to bring home the rest of the calf you shot, and show that this meat belongs to it. I’m glad there is a party, though it’s bigger than we planned. It’s just as well that decent men should see for themselves what you and your gang are—sneak-thieves and cattle-stealers.”

There was no laugh this time as he paused. Instead came the menacing growl of angry men.

“I’ll make you take that back, you ——!” shouted McGill.

“Watch him, Jim!” warned Wally, very low. McGill caught the words.

“An’ you, too, you young cur! I’ll deal with you when I’ve finished with your pal!”

“But why not now?” asked Wally smoothly. “Or do you prefer only to attack women and babies?”

Again the murmur of indignation came from the ring of miners. Black as thunder, McGill snarled vindictively and sprang at Wally. His clenched fist shot out: Wally side-stepped just in time, coming back at him fiercely.

A mighty shoulder hurled itself against McGill, thrusting him aside.

“No, you don’t, Wally!” Jim cried. “He’s mine—this isn’t your show, old man!”

“It’s mine as much as yours!” Wally protested angrily. He pushed forward.

McGill was slowly taking off his coat. He tossed it to Green.

“I’m ready for both of you,” he said contemptuously. “When I’ve finished with one I’ll have plenty left for the other. I’ll make you both sorry you ever got in my way!”

Without warning, he made a rush. On the alert as Jim was, he had barely time to snap his head to one side from a lightning blow. The iron fist grazed his jaw, tearing the skin. The crowd shouted; and Jim lost his temper.

For an instant they stood glaring at each other; then Jim sprang fiercely at his assailant. McGill was ready for him, meeting him with a staggering punch. They fought savagely, with whirling arms; for the moment they were primitive men, the veneer of civilization stripped from them. There was no science, but only white-hot fury, in the blows they rained on each other’s bodies; blows that none but giants like themselves could have endured. Quickly as they had come together, they sprang apart: leaped again and clenched, struggling together for a moment. They broke away, and again the pile-driver blows volleyed. The silent watchers held their breath, watching for one or the other to go down.

Jim was the first to regain command of himself, and to see the folly of hoping to land a knock-out blow in one rush. He knew that he was pitted against a man whose strength equalled his own; who had probably more science, and certainly more command of ring tactics. Only caution could prevent his downfall. A deep breath and a shake of the head, and his fighting wits were clear again. He had held his own, but barely; still, he was quicker on his feet than McGill, and he had youth and hard condition on his side. Well, his brain must work for him.

Warily he began to circle, guarding and warding off rushes, keeping his enemy moving in the hope of wearing him out. His eyes were steady, watching for an opening. It came; his fist shot out like a piston-rod. The drive caught McGill’s jaw, landing him on his back a man’s length away.

A shout came from the men, a high shrill cry of triumph from Bill and

Dick. But almost as quickly as he had fallen, McGill was on his feet again, rushing in with a succession of stinging blows, his face evil with fury. Jim warded off some of the slashing hits—not all. He fought calmly, but inwardly he was anxious. All his strength had been put into that knock-down blow, but McGill was undefeated. In that moment of loss of confidence his defence weakened. Wally groaned as McGill feinted with his left and drove his right to his opponent's jaw, knocking him off his feet.

Jim rose slowly. McGill rushed in, and was met by a quick jab that reached his eye. For the first time the prize-fighter gave ground, doubt mingling with the fury that consumed him. The first knock-down blow he had put down to bad luck: now his rapidly closing eye warned him that the amateur he had thought of with contempt was a foe to be reckoned seriously. He made another desperate effort for a knock-out. The crowd gasped as Jim slipped aside, landing his adversary heavily behind the ear as he plunged past him, and the ground seemed to shake as the giant went down.

He came back with new caution. The fight became as dogged as it was fierce, each man striving to wear the other down. Backwards and forwards they struggled, first one having the advantage, then his opponent. Wally, rigid with anxiety, took comfort as he saw that Jim's coolness remained; that he saved himself more than McGill's rage enabled him to do, content to land fewer blows, but to make sure that those few told. McGill's breathing became more laboured, his foot-work slower.

"Jim's holdin' him well," Freddy muttered.

Wally nodded, too strained to answer. The fighters were circling cautiously, wary eyes on each other. Suddenly Jim drove in, his fist reaching McGill's nose with disastrous effect. Mrs. Walker broke into a delighted cackle of laughter.

"Ow, that was a beauty!"

The shrill, hated voice enraged McGill almost as much as the blow. Blind with anger, he charged furiously, his fists flailing. There was little skill behind the maddened onslaught: Jim stopped him momentarily with a couple of hard body blows. The last spark of sanity dropped from McGill. A roar of disgust came from the men as his heavy boot flashed up, catching Jim on the thigh.

There was a storm of protest. Jim had collapsed, his leg useless for the moment. Wally was beside him; Freddy and Jack ready to deal with McGill, should he try to use his boot again, their faces dark with wrath. McGill went back a few steps, triumphant, but uneasy. Triumph conquered, however.

"I said I'd deal with you!" he snarled. "Where's your other man?"

Jim had got to his hands and knees, power coming back to his injured leg. Suddenly he was on his feet, brushing Wally aside, his lips set in a grim line. McGill's fists were ready, but he had no defence that could master the

whirlwind that rushed upon him. One blow almost lifted him from his feet, another crashed home on the point of his jaw. He dropped like a log, face downwards on the grass, and lay still.

“An’ that, I think,” said Freddy, “is out.”

Jim waited in a tense silence. No one spoke until the great bulk of the man on the ground heaved itself upwards. The prize-fighter struggled to a sitting position, glaring round him stupidly. His head dropped into his hands, his elbows on his knees.

“Coming again?” asked Jim.

McGill shook his head, not raising it.

“I reckon he’s got what was coming to him,” said Harrison. “About time, too, when a man uses his boot in a decent fight. I never want to see a thing like that again—the swine! But those were two bonny hits you finished him with!” He swung round. “How about three cheers for Linton, boys?”

The cheers came with a vigour that astonished Jim almost as much as they embarrassed him.

“Oh—thanks,” he said with a forced smile. “Come on, boys.” He limped off, followed by his friends: hearing, as they went, hoots and jeers flung at McGill. For once, the crowd had no compassion for a beaten man. They drifted back to their work, excited and scornful.

McGill struggled to his feet presently and stood swaying. At a little distance were his men, standing in a sullen group, each face showing anger and shame. They kept their eyes from him.

More energetic figures caught his glance, and his battered face grew convulsed with hatred as he looked at them. Across the clearing was Mrs. Walker, performing an ecstatic war-dance with Dick and Bill. For McGill, the sight of the wildly capering trio was the last straw. A bitter curse broke from him as he lurched into the darkness of his tent.

CHAPTER XXI

MCGILL PAYS A DEBT

MCGILL was left to himself that night. He had no wish for food; when his aching nose told him that supper was ready he turned from the thought of it with loathing. Henry came in after a time.

“Here’s a cup of tea,” he said curtly; and went out.

McGill drank the tea thirstily, returning to his bunk. He was too exhausted to take off his clothes; all his body ached, and his head sang when he moved. Worse than pain was the stinging knowledge of utter defeat. All his boasting had ended in this; there was not even the consolation of having fought fairly. He writhed under the memory of the scornful taunts that had reached him.

It was long before he fell asleep. When he awoke the sun was well up. Stiff and sore, he got to his feet and went slowly into the open.

He blinked in astonishment at what he saw. The men were busily roping packs: not far off stood the horses, already saddled. Breakfast was over; a fire smouldered in the cooking-place.

“What on earth are you up to?” he growled.

They looked up, their eyes taking in every detail of his bruised face and unkempt figure.

“Clearin’ out,” said Todd shortly.

“What for?” he asked, his dulled senses still bewildered.

“Because we aren’t keen on stayin’ here any longer.” Mooney stood up and faced him. “Thanks to you we’ve made this diggings too hot to hold us—like young Linton said. He drove it home, too, didn’t he?”

McGill’s answer was an oath.

“Oh, you can talk foul and you can fight foul, too, it seems,” snapped Mooney. “Well, we’re not a very particular lot, but we’ve had enough.”

“An’ you’re goin’ to leave the claim?”

“Much good the claim’s been to us, or likely to be, as far as we can see. We’re sick an’ tired of slavin’ in it, with that woman of Walker’s hangin’ round all the time. She’s only waitin’ to see if we strike gold: she’d take steps then fast enough to prove it was hers. An’ we wouldn’t have a leg to stand on, thanks to you again, an’ the way you let Walker fool you. We’ve done all their hard work for them, an’ not a pennyweight to show for it. An’ now there’s this cattle-stealin’ business, an’ you lettin’ yourself get tracked. Well, we’ve had all we want, an’ we’re clearin’ out.”

McGill looked from one to the other uneasily. Their hard faces were grimly set: they took no notice of him, going about the business of loading pack-

saddles.

“Well, you might have given me a call earlier,” he growled. “Hasn’t anyone caught my horse?”

“No—nobody’s caught your horse. Reason why, we’re goin’ on our own. You can run your own show after this; not with us. We’ve done with you.”

“You—you can’t clear out on me like that!”

“Can’t we? Well, we’ll be doin’ it in five minutes, if you care to watch. There’s not a man among us who’d be seen in your company—after yesterday. We’ve left your horse an’ an old pack-mare, an’ there’s tucker enough to last you for a couple of days. Anyhow, there’s plenty of calves to be had for the shootin’,” he sneered. “An’ Mrs. Walker might put you on at the claim, workin’ for her on wages!”

“All ready, Mooney!” sang out Todd.

“Right-oh!” He walked across the clearing and swung himself into the saddle.

McGill was tongue-tied. His head whirled; when he tried to move forward his stiffened limbs would not obey. Staring stupidly, his mouth half-open, he watched them ride off. Not a man looked at him again. The scrub swallowed them up; the clinking of bit-rings and quart-pots died away.

Slowly realization of his position forced itself upon him. He raked the embers together and warmed up the remains of a billy of tea that stood near, drinking cup after cup, muttering to himself. For the next hour he sat on a log, alternately raging against the friends who had shaken him off and trying to make plans for the future. No clear ideas would come. He was half asleep when a step roused him.

Mrs. Walker stood a few yards away, the brindled dog beside her. Her keen eyes roved round the deserted clearing, empty of all the usual camp litter.

“Everyone gone?” she asked cheerfully. “I thought somethin’ must be up when none of you gents came to work on my claim this mornin’. Old Stripey an’ I thought we’d mooch over an’ see. So they’ve chucked you?”

“Clear out!” growled McGill.

“Oh, I wasn’t thinkin’ of stayin’. You wouldn’t want anyone botherin’ you, feelin’ the way you must be feelin’. Mr. Linton *did* leave ’is mark on you, I must say! Pretty sore, aren’t you?”

McGill got to his feet threateningly; and Stripey bristled.

“Don’t let the old dawg frighten you,” she urged kindly. “’E never does a thing unless people come too near. Quite a nice nature, Stripey’s got, I always say. Like a ’uman bein’. Some ’uman bein’s, that is. It’s the other sort that don’t get on too well with Stripey. Well—sure there’s nothin’ I can do for you?”

“You can clear out!” said McGill between his teeth.

“Too right I can. I can see you’re not inclined for a nice chat. If I was you, I’d go an’ ’ave a real good swim in the creek—you’d look better then. At least, a bit better. An’ veal might do that eye good, if you’re out of beef. It’s wonderful soothin’. Well, so-long. Oh, an’ if you’re wantin’ all your picks an’ shovels, your mates left ’em in my claim. I s’pose they reckoned you’d be doin’ a bit on your own. But don’t you worry about workin’ until you look more like yourself!”

“You can keep your dirty claim!” snarled McGill.

“Why, I always meant to,” she drawled. “Not comin’ back to it? Well, I must say Mr. Walker an’ me are real grateful to you all for all the work you done. An’ I wish you all the luck you deserve—every bit of it!”

She lounged away; Stripey looked at the man longingly, pausing for a moment.

“Come on now, Stripey,” he heard the slow voice. “The gent don’t really want you!” Stripey obeyed: McGill listened to her low whistle growing fainter.

When the fury with which her visit had filled him died away he remembered her advice about a bathe. There was something in that: a glance in his little mirror told him how much his face needed water, and brought a flood of venomous remarks about the man who had battered it so thoroughly. He pulled his hat over his eyes and went slowly through the bush until he came to a part of the creek far south of the diggings.

Here there was a deep pool, overhung with trees and shallowing towards a sandy bank at one end. An hour went by, spent between swimming and lying in the hot sun. He began to feel more like himself; sore and bruised, with one eye hardly visible, but with stiffness lessened and strength flowing back into his tough body. As yet he had no desire for food: he drank water freely and exercised his limbs. Then he smoked a pipe luxuriously, and fell asleep, propped against a rock in the sunlight.

The fierceness of the heat woke him later. It was a blazing day: the rock against which he leaned almost scorched his fingers when he touched it. He flung off his shirt and trousers and dived into the pool. When he emerged new energy had come to him. He dressed, and drew out his pipe, glancing at his watch.

“Two o’clock, by Jove! I’ll smoke this out an’ then go back an’ get something to eat.”

Filling his pipe, his eye was caught by streaks of tar that still clung to the base of his finger-nails. The sight brought back the memory of his disaster at the sluice-boxes, and a furious wave of resentment shook him as he lived the scene over again; mingled with passionate longing to get even with Lee Wing. It had been no small part of the humiliation of that morning that a despised Chinese had been the one to defeat him so utterly. He had boasted always that

he would have his revenge; there had seemed no hurry, with months of work ahead on the diggings. His chance would certainly come.

“An’ now I’ve lost my chance, along of that darned calf!” he muttered. “I wish I’d never laid eyes on a gun!”

But—had he lost it? Was there not still a possibility of getting even?

He bit on the stem of his pipe savagely as the idea took root in his mind. Weeks of work just across the creek had made him familiar with the routine of the Linton workers. How often he had watched them going up the slope to the plateau for their midday meal: coming down again just an hour later to settle to the afternoon programme. Then at four o’clock, so punctually that they could have set their watches by him, the toilers on Mrs. Walker’s claim would see the old Chinese carrying down his can and basket with afternoon tea, remaining until he could take back his lightened load. That meant that from lunch until tea-time he was alone at the plateau. Even the small boys, individuals whom McGill had good cause for hating almost as heartily as he hated Lee Wing, always went out somewhere in the afternoon—riding or fishing or exploring. No one stayed at camp—except Lee Wing.

“He’s alone there now!” he thought, with a thrill of excitement.

It would be safe enough to go to see. He knitted his brows, trying to remember the camp surroundings. There was bush still standing as a partial screen between it and the clearing; denser bush on the Billabong side as a shelter for the plateau and the huts, running up to the cliff-face where he had seen the mouth of the cave. The cave!—that was another idea. He had always sworn to get inside it.

“I’d have over an hour—perhaps more,” he thought. A deep chuckle broke from him. “By Jove, if I could pull off *two* jobs!”

He thought it out quickly. To work round beyond the camp would be best, coming to it, unseen, from the Billabong side. He would come prepared to be humble, supposing he found any of the Lintons there: it would be simple to spin a hard-luck yarn—his mates had deserted him, leaving him without food and tobacco—could they give him enough to carry him on until he reached Broad’s Creek? He knew quite well that they would not refuse—they despised him too much. He would not enjoy appearing as a beggar, but it would safeguard him. And he might not have to do it. Very certainly not, if Lee Wing was alone.

It was pleasant to feel his wits alert again, so that planning came easily and quickly. The scheme was cut and dried in his mind when he shook the ashes from his pipe and pocketed it. He set off through the bush, blessing the chance that had brought him to bathe at a place half-way to his destination.

“Well, that cow Mrs. Walker did me one good turn,” he thought. “My head was so thick this mornin’ I’d never have thought of bathin’, only for her. Pity

she'll never know I've something to thank her for."

His bruises were forgotten as he made his way quietly through the scrub, keeping a keen watch in every direction. He saw nothing; even the birds were silent in the summer midday hush. So he came to the bushes where the ground was scarred with the winding tracks made by the traffic from Billabong.

He halted, listening intently. No sound came. Foot by foot he crept onward until at last the plateau was clear before him. It was just as his hopes had pictured it; deserted, except for old Lee Wing, fast asleep as he sat on a stool in the shade, his head bent forward.

McGill had not seen him at close quarters since the morning the Chinese had baptized him with tar. Malignant rage surged up within him as he looked at the placid face. Almost he forgot caution; then, checking himself with an effort, he listened again, scanning every part of the bushes below the plateau. All was motionless and quiet. He stole forward.

Lee Wing was dreaming, but some inner sense warned him of danger. He sprang up, choking back a cry of alarm.

McGill towered over him, giant in size, his disfigured face brutal in its hate and triumph. He caught him by the shoulder.

"Call out, an' I'll kill you!"

Lee Wing had his own reasons for not calling out; they had nothing to do with McGill's threat, but they were even more effective. He remained silent, looking his enemy in the eyes.

"You thought you had the laugh on me, you yeller dog of a Chow!" said the low furious voice. "I'm goin' to have the last laugh."

"My laugh velly muchee good. Worth all you can do." A faint grin narrowed the slant, unwavering eyes.

McGill spat out a curse, shaking him furiously. He dragged him into the middle of the plateau.

"If I had time I'd give you some of what you gave me!" He released him, glaring down at the impassive face.

Lee Wing folded his arms, standing with the curious dignity of his race. He knew his fate was upon him—that there could be no escape. The best thing was to get it over soon.

"Not possible—you had all our tar all-leadly," he gave back. "Makee you cly out all li'—white cur!"

The great fist crashed into him, and he dropped like a stone. McGill bent over the motionless body for a moment, panting with a blend of passion and enjoyment. He rose and kicked it. Then, turning, he ran towards the cave.

CHAPTER XXII

BILL'S PRIVATE CAVE

IT was some time earlier that Bill and Dick had decided that the day was too hot for any ordinary occupations. They had spent most of the morning naked in the creek; smarting bodies now told them that they had had rather too much of the sun. Riding made no appeal under the circumstances; to fish was even less inviting, since it was certain that no self-respecting fish would come up from the depths to look at a bait in such breathless heat. They lay on the ground in the shade of the sluice-box enclosure, becoming steadily hotter, increasingly ready to snap at each other.

Jim, working at the boxes, took pity on them, offering a suggestion.

"You youngsters have chosen as airless a place as you could find," he called out. "Why don't you go up to the cave? It's always cool there, and you could explore a bit, so long as you don't go up the dangerous passages."

"I say, that's an idea!" said Bill. "Are you on, Dick?"

"Rather! We were mutts not to think of it before."

"Well, off you go," said Jim. "I tell you what we'll do—we'll all give work a miss after tea and go down to the Bush to bathe. Freddy and I are beginning to think this heat deserves to be recognized."

"If you weren't altogether mad, you'd have taken a day off, after that merry little mill of yours yesterday," stated Freddy, glancing at Jim's bruises. "Goodness knows we'd all have been overjoyed to sit an' fan you with tree-ferns! Public benefactor, isn't he, Bill?"

"I'm all right," returned Jim, rocking the sluice-box steadily. "I know my face isn't looking its brightest, but then I don't work with my face!"

"You work with your leg, though—an' there's a bruise on your thigh like the kick of a mule."

"Well, that's what it was!" remarked Bill solemnly. "Do you think McGill will ever show up again, Jim?"

"I think not. Now that his gang have decided that he's not nice to know, and left him alone in his glory, I fancy he'll fade away gracefully."

"Not so much grace, by Mrs. Walker's account of him," observed Freddy. "My hat, I'd have given somethin' to see the interview between them this mornin'! As a source of irritation to a beaten-up man I should say Mrs. Walker hasn't her equal in Australia!"

"We could so easily have gone with her if only she'd let us know, couldn't we, Dick?" mourned Bill. "We do miss lots!"

"Well, we didn't miss that fight," returned Dick happily. "That's

something I'll remember as long as I'm alive!"

"What your mother would say to me if she knew I had let you be there ——" began Jim, with some anxiety.

"She'll never know," Dick assured him hurriedly. "Mothers don't have to get told everything—not the really int'resting things!"

"That's as well for me, in this case. I suppose," mused Jim, "that if I really did my duty to my country I'd proceed against that beggar for cattle-stealing. But it would be such a confounded nuisance."

"He'd certainly look better behind bars," agreed Freddy. "Oh, well, never mind—he's sure to get there some day. Meanwhile, he's been given a lesson that's likely to keep him quiet for a bit. We're not goin' to be troubled with him any more, so why worry?"

"I don't worry; but I'll be glad when I know he's really gone," Jim said. "I've always been a bit afraid that he'd try to pay Lee Wing out in some way. However, it's never any use bothering about Lee Wing, because he only laughs at one." He pushed his hat back from his streaming forehead. "Whew, it's hot! Why don't you kids go up to the cave?"

"We're going," said Bill. "I say, Jim, would it matter if we went along to my private cave? That's the best of the lot."

"No accounting for taste—I think it's a loathly little hole," returned Jim.

"That's only because you're too big for it—it just fits Dick and me. And it's a ripping cave for playing smugglers in."

"Well, carry on," said Jim carelessly. "Only don't scatter the gold round in your activities—there's quite a lot there."

"Oh, we don't bother about the silly old gold!" Bill returned. "Come on, Dick!" They ran off, forgetting the heat.

Lee Wing was finishing washing dishes when they arrived at the plateau. He welcomed them with a wide smile, and mentioned that there were peaches in a box in the first cave.

"Good—oh!—they'll be cold as ice," cried Bill. "Does it matter how many we eat, Lee Wing?"

"Thlee each. No more come out until Fliday. Evelybody wantee peaches to-day."

"Well, three's better than nothing. Coming exploring with us, Lee Wing?"

The Chinese shook his head.

"Leckon hab l'il sleep. Welly hot work bein' cookee to-day, Mas' Dick."

"I bet it was," Dick said. "Sorry we didn't help you, Lee Wing. Look here, we'll bring the spring-water over when we come back, won't we, Bill?"

Bill nodded. "Don't you go an' get it, Lee Wing, will you?"

"Me plomise. You two good boys," he told them, looking pleased. He wrung out his dish-towel and hung it carefully on a bush.

The cave was refreshingly cool. They secured flashlights, stowed away peaches inside their shirts, and pushed aside the mackintoshes that hung over the entrance of the passage leading to the cave of Bill's heart. With unusual care they went along its many sharp turns and twists, since the peaches were ripe and squashy, and a bump would have produced awkward results. They crossed the bridge over the gap in the floor, going in single file, careful not to look down into the blackness on either side. Finally the little cave was reached: a small place, very lofty, with air coming in from cracks in its sloping roof. It was empty, except for a row of podgy little linen bags ranged against one wall.

They prudently extinguished one torch and sat down to eat. Sounds of luscious suction came, and bliss was too deep for any words.

"Gosh, those were good!" Dick cast away his last well-sucked stone with regret. "Wish we'd had a dozen. I say, Bill, it is a ripping cave!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Bill turned the beam of his torch into every part, his expression that of a proud proprietor. "Even if we have to keep away from here when that old Floating Company comes, I'll always be glad I had it for a bit."

"I bet you will. Why, even one of the seniors at school 'ud be glad if he had a private cave of his own!"

Bill was struck by an impulse of unexampled generosity.

"Tell you what, Dick—half of it can be yours, if you like. I don't see why we shouldn't have it between us."

"I say!" gasped his chum. "You don't really mean it, do you?"

"Yes, I do. We've gone shares in lots of things since you came. Even in Jim!"

"No, we haven't," Dick said honestly. "Jim's jolly nice to me always, but you're his offsider, an' you know jolly well no one else is that. It wouldn't be fair, anyhow."

"Oh, well, he likes you awf'ly, I know. You can always tell by the way Jim looks. But about the cave—it's half yours now. True as life, Dick!"

"Then will it be all right if I say 'our' private cave now?" Dick hesitated. "It doesn't sound the same, does it?"

"You bet it does. An' I'll give you one of the flashlight photos Wally took of it. I say, I wonder if he'd take another, with both of us in it? I'll ask him."

"Golly!" breathed Dick. "My word, you are a brick, Bill!" Then, having drawn as near to sentiment as manhood permitted, they hurriedly decided to be opposing bands of revenue-men and smugglers, and forgot everything else in a rough-and-tumble on the floor; in the course of which one flash-lamp was kicked over and broken.

"Bust it!" said Bill, examining the ruin. "We'll have to make tracks now—it's strict orders always to have two torches in a cave, in case one battery dies. Gosh, that floor is hard!—you've skinned my knee."

“Well, you bumped my head until it’s got a lump on it like a turkey-egg!”

“Then we’re all square. Come along.”

They hurried away, Bill in the lead. Not many orders were laid upon them, but the caves had a code that not even the men transgressed. Both were glad when the plank bridge was crossed: even if the battery failed they could feel their way along now.

McGill was standing uncertainly in the great cave. The striking of matches had shown him little, and he had failed to notice the neat row of torches lying on a ledge in the wall. The uncomfortable conviction forced itself upon him that he had attained his ambition to no purpose. He had won his way into the cave—but certainly there was no gold lying about for the taking.

“I might have known they’d have a mighty safe hiding-place,” he muttered. “Much chance I’ve got of finding it! I believe I’d better clear out before anyone comes along an’ finds the old Chow.”

He moved towards the opening. A sound came; for a moment he stood rigid, fear holding him. Was that a voice? He caught his breath to listen.

It came again, clearly this time—a high boyish voice, full of laughter. “Oh, you rotter, Bill!—can’t you keep your great foot out of my way?” it cried.

McGill swung round. A coat on the wall was swished aside, the gleam of a torch flashed, and the boys burst into view. Bill turned to hold the light on the coats as he drew them into position.

“Look out, Bill!” shouted Dick.

It was a useless warning. They found themselves gripped by two enormous hands. McGill’s voice was dreadful in their ears.

“Keep quiet, if you don’t want to get hurt. Give me that torch.”

He snatched it, having transferred both their wrists to one hand. It was not a light grasp—they winced with the pain of it. They were silent, panting.

“Where does that lead to?” McGill asked, nodding towards the half-covered entrance. “Won’t tell, won’t you? I’ll teach you sense!” The cruel grip tightened until they felt as if their wrists were cracking.

“Better give in—that’s nothing to what I can do to you. Is that where the gold is?”

There was no answer. Both boys were struggling against crying out. A smothered sob broke from Dick under the torture as his wrist ground against Bill’s.

McGill slackened his grip slightly, dropping the torch into his pocket.

“Well, I know I’m on the right track, or you’d have said so. There’s no use in your shoutin’, so you needn’t begin; the old Chow can’t hear you.”

“You brute, you haven’t hurt Lee Wing!” burst out Bill.

“Haven’t I? He won’t move for a long while—an’ neither will either of you, unless you do as you’re told.” He moved his hands quickly, catching each by the back of the neck. “I’m goin’ to put one of you into that little hole you came out of, an’ deal with the other. Who wants to be the first? It’ll be very interestin’ for the other to hear him.”

No answer. He pushed them roughly towards the opening.

“Well, make your choice. Or are you goin’ to have sense, an’ tell me what I mean to know?”

“Yes, I’ll tell you,” said Bill, sulkily.

Dick’s heart seemed to leap into his mouth. Well he knew how terribly afraid he had been—and still was—of giving in. But that Bill should yield so soon—Bill, of all people! The sob that came from him was a real one—a sob of dismay.

“I thought you would,” McGill was saying triumphantly. “The gold’s in there?”

“Yes.”

“You’re telling me a lie, I believe!” said the voice sharply.

“No, I’m not. Am I, Dick?”

“No.” Dick brought out the word with an effort.

“Is it far?”

“Yes. Long way in.”

“Well, you can both go ahead an’ show me the way. Is this the only torch you’ve got?”

“There’s more over there—in the wall.”

“Give me your wrists.” He grasped them together, and handed Bill the torch. “You light us over to the others.”

“We ought to have one each,” said Bill’s dragging voice. “It’s pretty dangerous in one place.”

“If it’s not too dangerous for kids I reckon it can’t be much. But you can take one.” He put it into Dick’s free hand, taking a large one himself. Roughly he dragged them to the entrance and thrust them in before him.

“Now go ahead—an’ remember I’m on your heels, if you think of tryin’ any monkey tricks. I’ll break both your necks if you do.”

Bill led the way quickly, his head down. Behind him Dick followed, his mind in a whirl. His heart was like lead. What would Jim—what would the others—think of them? They had been trusted with the secret, and they had betrayed it.

They came to the gap in the floor, and Bill paused.

“This is the dangerous bit. Better go carefully.”

“Do your men come over this bridge?” rapped out McGill.

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, it’ll hold me. Get on with you.”

Nevertheless, as the bridge creaked under his weight, he had a moment’s qualm. He was relieved when it was behind him. The boys had gained a slight lead: enough for a low whisper to escape his ears.

“Dick!”

“Yes?”

“Keep near the door if you can—and be ready!”

No more than that, and no time to answer, for McGill was upon them: but a new hope flooded Dick’s being. He could not guess at his chum’s meaning—but there was something. He was tense as a coiled spring when they came to the cave. McGill hustled them in before him.

“This the place?”

“That’s the gold.” Bill pointed his torch at the linen packages.

“Stand there—against the wall—both of you. Don’t you dare move.” The man turned the full ray of his flash-lamp on the bags.

“Good Lord!” they heard him mutter. He gave a low incredulous whistle. “That’s all gold?”

“Yes—ready for the bank.”

Shrewder men than the prize-fighter have had their wits disorganized by the sight of gold in bulk—gold for the picking up. McGill stared at the packages, wondering how he was going to make the most of his marvellous good fortune. Dick silently edged a little nearer to the door: then stiffened as their captor half turned.

“Here—you, red-head! Pick up two of those an’ stand by.”

“All right,” Bill said sullenly. He came closer. His hand shot out with a lightning movement, and McGill’s torch leaped from his grasp and shattered its bulb on the rocky floor.

“Run, Dick!” Bill shouted. He had squirmed from McGill’s reach the moment he had struck his torch away. They were out in the passage, running swiftly. Behind them came McGill, roaring in pursuit. Bill switched off his torch, guided by the glimmer ahead that was Dick’s. It disappeared—that was the first sharp turn. Bill sobbed with relief, swinging out as he ran, to avoid the corner; and had the satisfaction of hearing his enemy crash into it. He could not hear all he said, but there was a good deal of it. There was laughter in his heart as he raced onwards.

“You all right, Bill?”

“Yes—just behind you. Keep going. Stop when you get across the bridge,” he panted.

Never had they thought that the twisty passage could be taken so fast. Their gym shoes were soundless on the floor; dimly, far behind them, they could hear McGill’s heavy boots and his furious shouts. Each sound lent wings

to their feet. Then the bridge was ahead; they were across. Bill switched on his torch, putting it on the floor.

“Put yours the other side. Quick, Dick! Help me to pull the planks away!”

“Oh—*gorgeous!*” gasped Dick.

They caught the ends of the heavy planks, tugging desperately.

“Will they fall in?”

“No—they’re too long. Keep well back—they’ll slide pretty easily once they move—move back as yours comes.” Panting, heaving, they dragged them clear of the gap. It yawned before them, black and empty.

“*That’s done!*” said Bill, with satisfaction. “And that just about dishes the old brute!”

“What do we do now?”

“Get back as far as the next turn. We’ve got to frighten him. He really could jump that gap, but I don’t reckon he’ll try—not by match-light, anyhow. Gosh, wasn’t I glad when I saw his torch was broken! He’d have been ever so much quicker after us if he’d had the torch to light him. I knew we were all right once we were round the first turn. Did you hear the wallop he came against it?”

They ran on, choking with laughter that had a catch in it more than once. Small hands gripped each other in the dim passage and clung tightly.

The sound of stumbling feet and muttered curses, the lighting of matches that died away all too soon for his comfort, heralded the approach of McGill. He rounded a turn. Some distance ahead, two torches, carefully directed, shone upon the faces of two small boys who stood waiting.

McGill blinked in astonishment. He had thought them outside the caves by now. Was this some new trick? He paused irresolutely.

“We waited to warn you,” called a clear young voice. “Better watch your step if you don’t want to get killed. The gap’s just ahead of you—and there’s no bridge there now!”

The stunned McGill leaped backwards—a movement which brought yelps of laughter from the watching pair.

“Oh, you’ve plenty of room yet. But go steady—the floor’s awful unsafe on each side of the gap. That’s why the planks are so long—they’re laid over the unsafe part.”

The sound that came from McGill was like the roar of a tiger at bay.

“I wouldn’t go within several feet of the edge, if I were you,” came the merciless voice. “I’m not light—an’ you weigh simply tons more than I do. The rock’s cracked in heaps of places.”

“Yes, an’ when it breaks away it goes down millions of feet,” came a second voice. “Pretty well down to the middle of the earth! An’ there’s water there. We’ll hear you splash if you go down!”

“You young fiends!” shouted McGill. “I don’t believe it.”

“Well, you try,” was Bill’s calm answer. “You’ll never be able to tell if you don’t. An’ perhaps you won’t be able to tell afterwards,” he added, as an afterthought.

“But we will!” came from Dick.

The desperateness of his position moved McGill to action. Slowly, testing every step, lighting matches as he came, he moved forward. Since he was still a considerable distance from the gap, this proceeding threw the boys into paroxysms of silent mirth.

“He must have used nearly a box of matches, I believe!” chuckled Dick. “And he isn’t anywhere *near* it yet! Golly, I wish the others were here!”

Thus walking delicately, the enemy at last came within sight of the gap: and swore loudly on realizing how many matches he had wasted. But there was a new note of seriousness in Bill’s voice.

“For goodness’ sake, look out! We know you’re an awful brute, but we don’t want to see you killed!”

McGill looked down. The gap, a few feet away now, yawned hungrily. It was difficult to see how wide it was: he could not guess at the state of the floor on the farther side. He looked ahead; the faint light of the torches showed the boys’ faces, but nothing more; and the faces looked anxious enough. This, indeed, was genuine, since they did not know at what instant they might have to fly, should the foe make up his mind to risk the jump. He looked back again: the gap seemed darker after the torch-gleam. Then his match burned down to his fingers, and he flung it away with an exclamation of pain.

The torches wavered violently as their holders shook with mirth.

“He’s scared blue!” whispered Dick. “I don’t believe he’ll ever jump it.”

“Look—he’s lighting another match,” Bill chuckled.

The match flared. McGill took a cautious step forward, and the boys grew tense, ready to race for safety. But he dared not risk the unknown. Instead, he tried bargaining.

“Look here, you two—I’ll give you a fiver if you’ll put them planks back. An’ I’ll swear not to touch you.”

“Who’d take your word?” came Bill’s scornful answer. “We wouldn’t, that’s dead certain!”

“I’ll put the money in my match-box an’ chuck it across,” pleaded McGill, his voice almost humble. “An’ if you shove the planks just so far that I can reach them you could scoot, if you don’t trust me.”

“We’d see you in Jericho before we’d touch your beastly money!”

“You think again. Two kids like you could have a lot of fun with a fiver.”

“Not half the fun we’ve had making a fool of you!” Bill retorted: “We’ve got you trapped like a rat—an’ you reckoned you could do what you liked with

us, you poor fish! An' now you can stay there until we send some one your own size to talk to you!"

"An' most likely he'll beat you to a jelly, like he did yesterday!" added Dick.

The torches disappeared abruptly. McGill shouted wildly, but no reply came. He struck a match, his fingers shaking as he saw there were but three left in the box. The feeble light burned out, and the darkness and silence closed in upon him.

Bill gripped Dick's arm as they turned the corner.

"Dick!"

"What's up? Anything wrong, Bill?"

"Oh, I am a brute!" Bill cried. "I clean forgot what he said about Lee Wing—I believe he'd hurt him. An' I've wasted all this time talking!"

"My goodness—let's run!" gasped Dick.

They ran even faster than they had run from McGill. Turn after turn, knocking themselves against the sharp corners, the wavering lights casting mysterious shadows on the uneven floor. The cave at last—they dashed through it, and out upon the plateau.

Jim and Wally were there, bending over Lee Wing, who lay on the ground, his head pillowed on a coat. His face was a curious green colour, and there was a large bump on his forehead, but he managed a smile as he saw the boys.

"Him not find you?" he asked weakly.

"Oh, Lee Wing, did the beast hurt you much?" They were on their knees beside him, panting.

"Him tly all li'," said Lee Wing. "But Chinese mans welly tough. Me watchee his eye, dlop down just as he hit. Not get so muchee that way. But nearly enough. Mo' blandy, Mas' Jim?"

Jim held a cup to his lips, lifting him gently.

"Don't talk, old chap. We'll settle with your man as soon as you're better."

"Me tellible aflaid boys come out, him see them," the old man said. "Him not find you, Mas' Bill?"

"Oh, yes, he found us," said Bill cheerfully. "He's awfully sorry he did, now, I bet!"

"Bill!" exclaimed Wally and Jim together.

"Well, he did, but it's all right."

"Did he hurt you?" asked Jim sharply.

"Oh, a bit. That's nothing."

"How did you get away?"

"Well, he asked us very nicely to take him to where the gold was, so of course we did," said Bill, grinning widely.

"You young imps, I believe you've been up to him!" Wally exclaimed.

“For goodness’ sake get on with it, Bill!”

“Oh, well,” said Bill, “we took him up to my, I mean our, private cave. An’ he was awf’ly pleased an’ excited when he saw the gold. So we left him there an’ came away. In a hurry. An’ we just shifted the bridge as we came!”

“*What!*” shouted Wally. Lee Wing broke into a weak cackle of laughter.

“Oh, you welly good boys! Him fall in?”

“No such luck,” Bill said. “But he’s sitting on the far side now, an’ I expect he’s wondering what’s going to happen next.”

“What’s going to happen to him is the inside of a jail, as soon as I can get him there!” said Jim angrily. “If only I’d done it before! Feeling better, Lee Wing?”

“Head walkee round a bit, but all li’, Mas’ Jim.” He looked at Jim pleadingly.

“Well, what is it, you old villain?” Jim asked. But his voice was tender.

“Thinkee any harm keep large man sit in cave till me can go look—see? Much mo’ better than golilla in cage?” begged McGill’s victim earnestly.

“Yes, we’ll do that for you, Lee Wing,” Jim told him. “And you needn’t hurry!”

CHAPTER XXIII

ADVENTURERS ALL

BILLABONG had suddenly come back to life again, for all its people had deserted the diggings, leaving Murty in command, and had come back to welcome David Linton home.

They had ridden away on a bright morning, with the Bush alive with birds and all the horses so fresh and eager that saddling up was a business coupled with a good deal of excitement. For most of the party there were no regrets as they looked for the last time at the clearing where they had worked so long. Dick and Bill had felt mildly depressed the evening before, making a careful tour of all their favourite haunts, ending with a final visit to their private cave; but even there it was easier to laugh than to be sad at saying good-bye. They had paused on the bridge, living over again the moment when Lee Wing had confronted his enemy across the gap.

“I’ll never forget it!” Dick had said gleefully. “McGill sitting there, all green with fright and lonesomeness, and old Lee Wing looking at him in that funny way of his—just as if he was some grubby insect!”

“Yes, and *wasn’t* McGill scared when he saw him! And Lee Wing was so polite! ‘Hope you findee your new hotel welly comf’tablil, Mis’ McGlil!’ And Jim and Wally just standing there, saying nothing, until Lee Wing had done looking at him. Didn’t he show the sort of cur he was, too, when Jim told him he’d have to stay there until the police came!”

“My hat, yes! I’ll bet he hated it, even though they did give him tucker and a torch. I wouldn’t have let him have a single thing!” Dick’s voice was unforgiving: his bruised wrist was still painful. “But it was gorgeous when the police came! You know, I’d always wanted to see what real hand-cuffs were like.”

“So had I. I nearly saw them once in Melbourne, on a smash-and-grab man, but the crowd was too thick. Anyhow, this was better—and the policeman was jolly decent, letting us put them on our wrists, wasn’t he? I bet McGill didn’t enjoy that long ride in, wearing ’em!”

“I bet he didn’t. Bill, are you scared about having to go to the court an’ give evidence?”

“Oh, a bit. But Jim and Wally say the lawyers and judges and all the other chaps will make things easy for us. I believe it’ll be rather a lark—and after all, we’ve only to answer questions. That’s easy enough.”

“Yes, and won’t we be able to gloat over the chaps at school! Oh, well, we’ve had heaps of fun, even if it is nearly over. School won’t be so bad, with

all we've got to remember!"

The ride home had had its thrills, with ponies far too excited to be sedate on the hill tracks, so that memories and good-byes were forgotten in the need for steadying them. Even Freddy had come to grief when his horse, shying at a snake, had gone down a steep slope in a flurry of shifting stones, turning over at the bottom so that Freddy shot into space. But no damage was done, and the fallen one was greeted with unfeeling hoots as he dragged his much-sobered horse up the hill again. And there was a jolly sensation of home-coming when they reached Billabong, with the girls and Davie meeting them in the paddock, and old Brownie wildly waving from the verandah. Bill and Dick, unsaddling in the stable-yard, agreed that while life on the diggings was the real life for men, there were worse things than getting back to Billabong.

David Linton arrived in the afternoon in state, having flown home from Melbourne in the *Planet* with Bob.

"I never thought I should take to the air," he remarked, stretching his long limbs on a deck-chair. They had all gathered on the lawn for tea. "Once, I scorned to come home in any other way than behind horses. Three of them, for choice—and no plane will ever give me the thrill of a good three-in-hand, Bob, whatever you may think."

"I know what they'd give *me!*" said Bob grimly. "I prefer a nice safe plane!"

"Well, I had to say good-bye to driving, much to my sorrow, and take to a motor; and now I've been beguiled into the air. I wonder what it will be next. But I'll admit that there are points in dodging that long railway journey and finding oneself at home almost before realizing one had started!"

"It's rather lovely to have you back," Norah told him. "You've never been away so long before."

"I thought I was never going to escape from large masses of business men, all more excited about me than they'd ever been at any time," he said, laughing. "Wonderful how important one becomes with a gold-mine up one's sleeve."

"Those experts they sent up were excited, too," Jim said. "They spent ages underground with Murty. He said, 'Very off-hand an' careless in their manner they were at furrst, lettin' on to me that people like us were not to be thrust to know gould when we saw it. But the reef brung them to meekness!' Their report was very glowing, Dad. All we could have hoped."

"Oh, yes. And all the business is finished and off my hands, to my joy. The mine manager will be up in a few days, and the road in from Broad's Creek will be started immediately. No more responsibility for us, and no more digging."

"No more tunnels and no more sluice-boxes!" chanted Freddy softly.

“No: but shares for you and Jack—to say nothing of other people,” Mr. Linton said, looking at the two tall Queenslanders. “Shares don’t seem to me, somehow, to be much payment for the way you two fellows leaped in and helped us when we badly needed help—but they’ll serve to remind you that Billabong would like to see as much of you as you care to give, when there isn’t a hard job of work on hand.”

“Don’t you dangle false hopes before them,” warned Jim. “I’ll engage to work them any time they come. Always jobs on Billabong!”

“Yes, but not in tunnels,” returned Freddy. “Any other little oddment, Jim—such as teachin’ you to fly. But you needn’t think we haven’t enjoyed the jolly old tunnel, an’ all the box of tricks out beyond. Jack an’ I think it’s been no end of a time—don’t we, Jack?”

“I wouldn’t mind if it was beginning all over again,” said Jack. “Life’s going to be pretty humdrum after this.”

“Don’t you believe it!” Norah told him. “The next adventure may be just round the corner.”

“But it is!” said Wally calmly. “If they think they’re going to get away before we’ve moved all the cattle off the ranges, they have another guess coming. And that particular muster will be anything but humdrum.”

“Hooroo!” murmured Jack.

“Do we——?” demanded Bill; “I mean, can Dick and I——?”

“Be in it?” Wally finished for them. “Well, we’re relying on you both. We can’t spare either of you two warriors!”

The warriors looked at each other in silent ecstasy. Presently they slipped away to the back yard; where urgent instructions from Bill, followed by strange whistling sounds, a few faint cracks, and an occasional yelp of pain, testified to Brownie that Dick was enduring a lesson in the use of a stock-whip.

“And when the cattle are all moved—and goodness knows where you are going to put them all——” began Mr. Linton.

“In the sale-yards, most of them, I should think,” interposed Jim lazily.

“Not all,” Bob said. “I’ve talked that out with Mrs. Walker, in silence and alone. That Amazon deserves something, don’t you think? So she’s going to have some of my cattle and when the rush comes she’ll open a butcher’s shop and make an enormous fortune selling meat to the rushers.”

“By Jove, you think out things, Bob!” Wally said admiringly. “She’ll shine at that—and how fat Stripey will get! But she’ll need a man to help her. Amazon and all as she is, she can’t run that kind of job single-handed.”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it past her,” Bob answered. “She’s a lady of great force of character. But she’ll have a man; I gather that she knows exactly where to lay her hand on her Mr. Walker!”

“You don’t say so!” exclaimed Mr. Linton. “I thought Walker had retreated

for ever.”

“No fear. He ran away and told her his sad story, so she came down to handle the matter. And did she handle it!” grinned Bob. “As for Walker, he’s at home—wherever that may be—looking after the babies!”

“How did she come to tell you all this?” demanded Tommy.

“I don’t know, unless it was because of my nice face,” returned Bob. “We met—’twas on a log—and fell into a heart-to-heart talk, somehow.”

“And you never told us!”

“I don’t tell everything a lady says to me on a log,” said he with dignity. “Anyhow, she told me all her troubles, and you ought to know by this time that when Mrs. Walker gets started she’s exceedingly difficult to stop. She smoked five of my cigarettes during the outburst, too—said she’d never smoked while she was shepherding the McGill crowd, because she felt that when she was near them she must always be the perfect lady!”

His hearers dissolved into helpless laughter.

“Well, and wasn’t she? You ask McGill! At all events, we discussed all the troubles, beginning with the deficiencies of Mr. Walker, and then her dark doubts that the claim would ever be any good; and the generally murky outlook for the babies. We always came back to the babies, somehow. And then a bullock happened to stray in sight of us, and after that, ideas simply flowed upon us. Hence the butcher’s shop!”

“Nice ideas!” said Betty softly.

“I rather liked them,” Bob said. “She’s an independent person—didn’t want to take the cattle at first. I had to be very eloquent, pointing out how much she’d done to discourage the unpleasant crowd, and what a lot of enjoyment she had given us over it. Also that I’d have to sacrifice the bullocks in any case, to get them out of the way. So we ended by fixing it up joyfully, and took a most affectionate farewell of each other.”

“Well, I doubt if her claim is any good, but they’ll make pots of money with a shop,” Freddy remarked. “Probably she’ll add groceries an’ what-nots to it as she goes on, an’ end by makin’ it a second Myer’s. An’ I’ll see Mrs. Walker rollin’ round in large streamlined cars while I’m still a poor bullock-puncher!”

“Very likely,” laughed Tommy. “And when all the bullocks are disposed of, and the company is floated——”

“Young woman,” said Mr. Linton sternly, “what do you think I have been doing all this time? It floats now!”

“Sorry!” she said, smiling up at him. “That was a bad mistake. But when all the things are done that must be done—what is the next adventure?”

“Mine is to sit serenely in Billabong and forget all about mining,” he said firmly. “If anyone wants me, I’ll probably be found leaning lovingly against a

Shorthorn bullock!”

“Mine is much the same—only at Little Billabong,” came from Wally. “Norah is going to have that adventure, too, aren’t you, Nor? *And* Davie.”

“Yes—thank goodness!” she said. “But I think the track between the two Billabongs will be pretty well worn again. The grass has had time to grow on it lately.”

“Mine is home and duty—also Jack’s, if he has any conscience,” said Freddy.

“I haven’t—but I’ll have to go all the same,” Jack rejoined. “My people have begun to write really annoyed letters.”

“What is yours, Bob?” Tommy asked.

“Mine?” He stretched himself happily. “I can’t begin to plan it all yet, it’s so big. It’s a bit of an effort to realize that you and I aren’t just struggling cocky farmers now, Tommy. Melbourne first; I think I’ll see a lot of Melbourne, for a while, anyhow. And the first thing there is to buy your new car. A blue one.” He put out a work-scarred hand and laid it on hers for a moment. “But you’ve got to choose your next adventure after that for yourself.”

“She won’t have to,” said Jim calmly.

They looked at him enquiringly.

“That’s the first time you have said a word for ages,” Norah told him. “Is your great brain hatching something, Jimmy?” There was deep gladness in her eyes as she looked at him, and then at Tommy. The roses in Tommy’s cheeks had brightened.

“Oh, an awfully big adventure!” he said. “I believe all your little adventures will have to wait for it. Tommy and I can’t very well get married without the lot of you to help!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Billabong Gold* by Mary Grant Bruce]