

ROBIN

MARY GRANT BRUCE

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Robin flung the gate open.

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ROBIN

BY

MARY GRANT BRUCE

*Author of Hugh Stanford's Luck, A Little Bush Maid,
Mates of Billabong, Norah of Billabong, 'Possum, etc.*

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ROBIN FLUNG THE GATE OPEN

“IS ANYONE HURT?”

“KEEP BACK!”

CHAPTER I

CALTON HALL

“GONE!” said the cook, tragically.

“They *can’t* be,” said the parlourmaid, with that blank disbelief that is so helpful in times of stress. “Did you look in the cake-tin?”

“Did I look in the cake-tin?” demanded the cook, in tones of fury. “They was never in the cake-tin, and they aren’t now. Wotever may be the custom in your home, Elizer, it’s not my ’abit to pile up fresh cream-puffs in a cake-tin when they’re all filled with cream and just ready for a party. ’Ow’d they look, I arsk you, all messed up, and the cream stickin’ ’ere and there on ’em in blobs? I left ’em spread out singly on them two big blue dishes, same as I could serve ’em in two jiffs. And they’re gone.”

“There’s the dishes, right enough,” said the parlourmaid, still bent on being helpful. She inspected faint traces of cream on their blue expanse, with the air of a Sherlock Holmes. “They been there once, anyone can see. Oh, have another think, Cook, dear—you must have put them on the cake-plates!” She dashed hopefully at a large safe, peered into its recesses, and lost heart visibly on meeting only the cold stare of a big sirloin and a string of pallid sausages.

“Anyone as ’ud think I’d put cream-puffs in the meat-safe—!” said the cook, wearily. “’Ave sense, Elizer, if it’s any way possible. I tell you, I left ’em on the blue dishes; there’s the cake-plates all ready for ’em, clean d’oyleys an’ all. An’ not a cream-puff left! Well, you can search *me*. I give up.”

“But where can they have gone to?” wailed Eliza, dismally.

“I dunno. But there’s young limbs in this school as is equal to anything. It ain’t the first time things ’ave disappeared from my pantry. Scones I’ve missed, time and again; and there was sausage-rolls last week, and ’alf a jam-sandwidge another time. Lots of little oddments, as you might say. But this is ’olesale, an’ no mistake!”

Eliza was understood to murmur something feebly about the cat.

“Cat!” said the cook. “There’s cats enough and to spare, goodness knows, but cats don’t browse on scones and cream-puffs. It’s two-legged cats, or my name’s not Mary Ann Spinks—you mark my words, Elizer! Not that I’d mention names, nor even red ’air; but I have me suspicions!”

“Red hair!” ejaculated Eliza. “You aren’t thinking of Lucy Armitage? Her that’s a prefect?”

“I am not,” said the cook. “Prefeck or no prefleck, that one ’ud never ’ave spirit enough to come a-raidin’ anyone’s pantry. Not that I ’old with raidin’, Elizer, ’specially when it’s me own pantry. But I was young meself once, an’ I remember there was an apple-tree me an’ me brothers used to visit. Not our own apple-tree. I ’ave me memories. The apples weren’t any too good, ’specially as we always collared ’em green. It wasn’t ’ardly the apples we cared for, but the fun of it. Ah, well, one’s only young once, an’ the school food ain’t any too good either, as I well know.” The cook sighed, and apparently gave herself

up to her memories.

“But raiding’s just stealing!” said Eliza, whose youth held no such recollections of buccaneering. She regarded the fat cook with a cold and disapproving eye.

“Not when you’re young it ain’t,” defended the cook.

“Well, I don’t see any difference,” Eliza stated. “Don’t the collect say to keep one’s hands from picking and stealing?”

“Ah, the collecks!” said the cook. “Them as wrote the collecks weren’t young, either. ’Tisn’t all of us lives up to ’em all the time—until we grow up, of course, that’s to say.”

Eliza was thinking deeply.

“Red hair!” she murmured. “Young Robin Hurst has red hair, and so has Annette Riley. Is it either of them you’re thinking of, Cook?”

“I’m not thinkin’ of anyone in particular,” averred the cook, definitely. “Not my business to think. Wot you an’ I ’ave got to bend our minds to is Miss Stone, an’ wot she’s goin’ to say when she finds there’s no cream-puffs for her party.”

“My Hevins, yes!” agreed Eliza. “And she’s that particular about having them always!”

“Don’t I know it!” the cook uttered. “ ’Cause why, they’re my specialty, an’ always ’ave been, wherever I’ve cooked. ‘Cream-puffs, of course, Cook,’ says she, yesterday, as sweet as sugar; ‘it isn’t a Calton Hall party without your puffs, you know!’ An’, though I says it, Elizer, they was never better.”

“Fair melted in me mouth, the ones you gave me, Cook,” said Eliza, soulfully.

“They would so. I must say, I’d like to see ’ow they manage ’em in the drorin-room, all in their Sunday best,” pondered the cook. “I can’t eat a cream-puff meself without needin’ a wash afterwards. But I s’pose they ’ave their dodges. Well, they won’t get any this afternoon to worry about, an’ that’s that. An’ it’s near four o’clock now, Elizer, an’ we’ve got to think of a substichoot.”

“My goodness!” Eliza uttered. “What are you goin’ to give ’em, Cook?”

“Fancy Mixed!” said the cook, grimly, advancing with slow dignity towards a tin that graced the upper shelf.

“Biscuits!” breathed Eliza, faintly. “She’ll take a fit, Miss Stone will. I never saw biscuits at one of her parties, all the time I’ve been here.”

“No, an’ you never won’t again, if I know it. I reckon I’ll keep the key of me pantry firm an’ tight in me pocket after this. It’s lowerin’ to me pride to send in fancy-mixed, but there it is—I ain’t a jugular, to conjure up a fresh set of puffs in ten minutes. Oh, well, they won’t starve: me scones take some beatin’, an’ there’s the other cakes. But them puffs lend tone to a party, Elizer, as you well know: an’ this particular party’s goin’ to be lackin’ in tone. Just you make the biscuits look as respectable as you can, while I make the tea: the bell’ll go any minute.” And Eliza, sighing deeply, prepared to face the tragedy of the drawing-room.

Meanwhile, under a great pine-tree that stood in the corner of the Calton Hall playground, three girls sat in a state of palpitating expectancy. School was dismissed for the day, and the “crocodile” walk, loathed by the boarders, which usually followed hard

upon the heels of the last lesson, was not to take place—a joyful omission which always signaled the afternoons when Miss Stone gave a party, since the junior governesses, who escorted the “crocodile,” were required in the drawing-room to assist in pouring out tea. Sounds of mirth came from the tennis-courts, where a hastily-arranged tournament was in full swing. Across the playground the space sacred to juniors echoed with the shrill cries attending a game of rounders: other enthusiasts made merry over basketball. But the three under the pine-tree, although ready for tennis, were evidently a prey to emotions deeper than could be excited, at the moment, by any ordinary game.

“I know she’s been caught!” Annette Riley breathed, anxiously. “She ought to have been here ages ago.”

“Oh, give her time,” said Joyce Harrison, endeavouring to be comforting. “She might have been delayed in ever so many ways. Ten to one she’s found that the whole thing is no go, and she’s given it up, and is getting into her tennis things.”

“Not Robin,” said Betty O’Hara, quietly.

“Well, Robin can’t do everything she wants to, no matter how plucky she is,” Joyce responded. “And I really do hope she isn’t going to pull this off. She’s been in such an awful lot of rows already this term—Miss Stone’s getting madder and madder about her. I wish that silly ass of a Ruby hadn’t dared her to go raiding the sacred pantry.”

“So do I,” said Annette. “Everyone knows it isn’t safe to dare Robin to do anything. If you told her she wasn’t game to climb feet foremost up the electric-light pole, she’d be doing it in five minutes!”

“Ruby Bennett takes advantage of that,” Betty said hotly. “Half the scrapes that Robin has been in this term have had Ruby’s nasty little jeers at the bottom of them. And Robin’s such a dear old blind bat that she never sees it.”

“Well, Robin seems to like rows,” said Joyce. “But there will be an awful one if she’s caught this time.” She dropped her voice dramatically. “When Mother was down last week Miss Stone talked to her in her very stoniest manner about my being friends with Robin—said all sorts of horrid things about her wildness, and that she had a bad influence in the school. Poor old Mother was quite worried about it, until I made her see that Robin is just the straightest ever—she does mad things, but she wouldn’t tell a lie if she were burned alive!”

“I should just say she wouldn’t!” uttered Betty. “Robin a bad influence, indeed! I never heard such rubbish. Why, there isn’t a junior that wouldn’t lick her boots! Prigs like Lucy Armitage, of course——”

“Oh, old Lucy isn’t bad,” said Annette. “She’s rather overweighted by being a prefect, that’s all. She’s worried about Robin too, because Miss Stone told her she meant to make an example of her, next time she broke a rule. And Robin’s simply incapable of not breaking rules!”

“But she never does an underhand thing, as half of Miss Stone’s pets do,” said Betty. “Everyone knows that girls whose parents have money are all right in this school: Miss Stone keeps her telescope to her blind eye where they are concerned. If Robin’s mean old uncle were a bit more generous to her, she wouldn’t be Miss Stone’s black sheep. He must be a horrid old pig! Robin and her mother have a perfectly vile time at home. It’s no

wonder the poor darling kicks over the traces when she gets away from him.” She fanned herself with her racquet. “I wish she’d come—it will be time for our set very soon.”

“Wonder if Miss Stone has caught her and locked her up,” conjectured Joyce, gloomily.

“Not much she hasn’t!” said a cheerful voice—and the three girls sprang up with exclamations of delight as a fourth whirled suddenly into their midst, laughing.

“Robin!—you didn’t manage it?”

“You weren’t caught?”

“Tell us what happened!”

“Easiest thing ever,” said Robin Hurst cheerfully, sitting down on the thick carpet of pine-needles. “I waited until the front-door bell was going every two minutes and Eliza was marking time between rings in the hall, and then I slipped into the servery. Cookie was up to her eyes in hot scones: just as she was brooding over the cooking of a great oven-trayful I dodged into the pantry—and oh, girls, you should have seen the cream-puffs!”

“Cream-puffs—wow!” said Annette.

“They were just waiting for me—two big blue dishes full. It seemed a sin to leave any, so I didn’t. That little suit-case of yours just held them all, Annette, darling—it’ll be a bit creamy, but I’ll clean it for you.”

“And nobody saw you?”

“Not a soul. It didn’t take two minutes. I shot up the back stairs just as Eliza came out—she was too full of importance to glance upwards, and tennis-shoes are nice quiet things. We’ll have a gorgeous supper to-night—and I’ll show Ruby Bennett I’m not as scared as she tried to make out.”

She laughed defiantly, tossing her hat from her mane of bright red hair. Even though shingled, Robin Hurst’s hair was a defiant mop, resisting all her efforts to make it resemble the sleek demureness of her schoolfellows’ heads. Its very colour was defiant: no such head of flame had ever before enlivened the sober rooms of Calton Hall. It blazed round a narrow delicate face, with clear pale skin that made its owner furious by its trick of blushing at the slightest provocation. Until humourously-inclined schoolgirls had found that the pastime was dangerous, it had been considered rather good fun to make Robin blush—to see the quick wave of colour surge to the very roots of her hair, and even down her neck. That was two years ago, when she had been a new girl, shy and uncertain of herself. Now that she was nearly sixteen, no one took liberties—it was too much like jesting with gunpowder.

For the rest, she was tall and very slender—almost boyish in her clean length of limb; with brown eyes that were rarely without a twinkle, and a mouth altogether too wide for good looks, with a little upward quirk at the corners. Lessons were abhorrent to her; history and poetry she loved, but in every other subject she held a firm position at the bottom of her class, and was wholly unrepentant about it. The teachers liked her, while they despaired of her. Miss Stone, the principal, regarded her with cold disapproval, as a girl who was never likely to reflect the slightest credit on the school. From the first she had shown a disregard of law and order that landed her perpetually in trouble. Whatever

might be her deficiencies in class, she was possessed of an amazing ability for getting into scrapes—and for laughing her way out of them. She took her penalties cheerfully, and was ready to plan fresh mischief the next day.

An impatient hail came from the tennis-courts, and the four girls gathered themselves up and ran to answer it. Over a hard-fought set Robin apparently forgot altogether that any weight of crime lay upon her shoulders—possibly because she did not regard the raiding of a pantry as in the least criminal. She prepared for tea with serene cheerfulness, that deepened a little as she met Ruby Bennett's enquiring eye.

"Well, how did the raid go?" asked Ruby, lightly. One was never quite sure of one's ground with Robin: it was necessary to feel one's way.

"What raid?" queried Robin, with an air of sublime innocence. They were filing into the dining-room, and conversation was frowned upon by the authorities during the procession.

Triumph flashed into the other girl's face.

"I thought you wouldn't be game!" she said, smiling unpleasantly. She went to her place, radiating satisfaction. Miss Stone was not present; it was usual for her to remain in seclusion on the evening following a party. The teachers, especially the junior ones, looked rather troubled, as if the festivity had not brought pleasure in its train. They were preoccupied, and when conversation at the long tables rose above its permitted hum they failed to quell it with their customary promptness. There were plates of biscuits on their table—Fancy Mixed—but they seemed to regard them without appetite.

These things did not trouble the pupils, who were unusually hungry—hard exercise in the playground having more effect upon the appetite than the slow and sinuous meanderings of a walk in crocodile formation. They ate all before them, and did not grumble unduly at the jam, which was that peculiar blend that arrives in very large tins, and is said to be nutritious—as, indeed, it may well be, having as a basis the wholesome turnip and vegetable marrow. Calton Hall was one of those semi-fashionable private schools that loom attractively in advertisements and preserve a certain amount of outside show, while assisting profits by a steady system of cheese-paring in matters under the surface: its boarders owed much of their healthy appearance to the fact that the digestion of youth is tough and long-enduring. Tea being over, they dispersed for the half-hour of liberty before preparation: during which time Robin and her friends were at some pains to avoid Ruby Bennett. That damsel was clearly bent on triumphing openly. Since, however, she could not find Robin, she philosophically postponed her jibes until bedtime, when her victim would be at her mercy in the dormitory.

Ruby was not the only occupant of Number Four who went up to bed with a keen sense of anticipation. Every girl knew that she had dared Robin Hurst to raid Miss Stone's pantry: eight out of the twelve had gathered, more or less indirectly, that Robin had not taken up the challenge—and it was always interesting to see Robin baited, especially by Ruby Bennett, who had a very unpleasant knowledge of the best places to plant her winged darts. Robin's peppery temper lent peculiar excitement to the frequent encounters between them.

It was, therefore, extremely disappointing to find that Robin took all Ruby's jeers meekly on this eventful evening. She said very little, and what she did say was vague: she

alluded apologetically to the manifold risks of raiding before a party, and led them to infer that her spirit had quailed at the task. Ruby rose to the occasion with vigour, though she might have been warned by her adversary's suspicious humility: now was her chance to be avenged for many encounters when Robin had triumphed. She let all her smouldering jealousy of the more popular girl find vent in her sneers, until Number Four marvelled at Robin's self-restraint.

That lasted until the lights were out and the teacher on duty had made her round. Then came stealthy movements and choked laughter; and the flash of Annette's electric torch revealed Robin perched on the end of Betty's bed, an elfish figure in pale-blue pyjamas.

"Friends—Romans—countrymen!" she declaimed. "Are you awake?"

Ten convulsive moments demonstrated that the dormitory was indeed astir. There was a sense of development in the air. Betty O'Hara giggled hopelessly. Ruby lay still.

"Miss Stone regrets—I feel sure she regrets—the poor and insufficient food set before you at the evening meal. She realizes that more is owing to you; that you cannot be expected to sleep without a little extra nourishment."

"Robin, you lunatic—what have you been up to?" ejaculated someone.

"I am not a lunatic," said Robin, with dignity. "I am the commissariat department of this dormitory, just as Ruby is its top-notch orator—when she gets a chance. It is my joyful privilege to beg you all to sit up—which I perceive ten of you are already doing—and to invite you to join in Miss Stone's party festivities. Willingly and gladly have her guests denied themselves that you may now feast on Cook's extra-special cream-puffs!"

Smothered yelps of joy broke out from the beds, and leaping figures hastened to form a ring round the red-haired speaker. Many hands patted her on the back, until she begged for mercy.

"Keep off, you stupid! And for goodness' sake, be quiet, or you'll have Miss Bryant in! Got the suit-case, Betty?"

"Robin, darling, how did you do it?"

"Quite easy, when you know how," said Robin, airily. She opened the suit-case, and the torch revealed a mass of cream-cakes, more or less amalgamated by this time. But no one was critical.

"Help yourselves, everybody." No second bidding was necessary. Ten hands plunged into the booty, and choked sounds of satisfaction arose. From Ruby's bed came neither voice nor movement.

"Cream-puff, Ruby?" invited Robin.

"No, thanks," said Ruby, sulkily.

"Too bad!" said the commissariat department. She selected a fairly undamaged puff, and took it over to Ruby's bed, holding it within an inch of her nose. The nose twitched longingly, but pride was stronger than hunger.

"I don't want it, I tell you. Take it away!"

"Oh, I really couldn't," said Robin, lightly. "They're ever so good, aren't they, girls? I couldn't bear you to go without any, when I really did risk my life and liberty to get them for you." She laid the delicacy gently on Ruby's pillow, disregarding a furious command

to take it away, and capered back to the circle of girls, who were choking with laughter, between mouthfuls.

"All gone!" said Joyce, mournfully. "Oh, but they were lovely, Robin!"

"Robin Hurst!" said Betty, suddenly. "You never had one yourself!"

"Didn't I?" answered Robin, innocently. "Well, that was an oversight on my part. Never mind, I really don't much like squashed cream-puff. Next time I have the chance of—er—abstracting any, young ladies, I shall endeavour to pack them more neatly."

"Oh, that's a shame, Robin—when you ran all the risk. What beasts we are! And I had three!"

"I had all the fun—except what Ruby had," laughed Robin. "It was worth it. And Ruby did enjoy herself so. Own up you're beaten, Ruby, and eat that puff!"

"Cave!" said someone, in a sharp whisper.

There was a faint sound in the passage. Robin shot the empty suit-case under the bed, and in a moment every girl's head was meekly on her pillow, as the door opened and Miss Stone's portly figure appeared. She switched on the dormitory light. Behind her, Miss Bryant's face showed, worried and anxious.

"Girls, what are you doing?"

There was profound silence.

"I heard your voices—you need not pretend to be asleep." The principal's angry glance swept the long room. "Joyce Harrison—what have you been doing?"

"Talking, Miss Stone."

"And what else?"

No answer. Mild surprise was visible on Joyce's innocent face. Talking in bed was against the rules—to admit to one breach of regulations seemed to her sufficient.

"You need not try to hide your guilt from me," boomed Miss Stone, in tones of concentrated wrath. "I am very certain of what has been going on." She moved from one bed to another, peering with short-sighted eyes. "What is that on your pillow, Ruby?"

She made a hasty step forward, and her foot caught on a trailing blanket. Stumbling, she put out her hand, to save herself. It came down squarely on Ruby's neglected cream-puff. Triumph mingled with disgust as she regained her balance, cream dripping from the hand she held aloft.

"I thought as much! A towel, if you please, Miss Bryant—quickly! You wicked, deceitful girls! Which of you stole these cakes from my pantry this afternoon?"

The profound silence that greeted this question was broken by a smothered burst of irrepressible laughter from two beds at the end of the room. The scene had been too much for Robin and Betty. They ducked their heads beneath the clothes, whence gurgles proceeded.

It was all that was necessary to fan Miss Stone's anger to white heat. Words failed her for a moment, while she rubbed furiously at her sticky hand.

"You will find it by no means a joke, young ladies," she said, bitterly, her voice shaking. "Ruby Bennett, what do you know of this theft?"

"I didn't do it," said Ruby, sulkily.

"The cake was on your pillow—do you think I am going to believe that you know nothing of it? Answer me!"

"I never touched your cakes—and I never ate any," Ruby gulped. Fear of Miss Stone's wrath mingled with fear of her schoolfellows, should she tell all she longed to tell.

"Did you put the cake on your pillow?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then who did?"

"I—I—"

Robin Hurst sat up in bed, her hair a vivid flame round her pale face.

"Oh, Ruby doesn't know anything about it, Miss Stone," she said, her voice faintly bored. "I did it all. None of the others had anything to do with it."

Joyce, Betty, and Annette bobbed up with Jack-in-the-box effect.

"We were in it too, Miss Stone!"

"That's not true!" flashed Robin. "I took them by myself."

Miss Stone surveyed them bitterly.

"I had guessed you were at the bottom of it, Robin Hurst," she said. "No other girl in the school would lower herself by the actions in which you find pleasure. I warned you last week—this time I shall certainly make an example of you. Do not go into school in the morning; you may come to my study at half-past-nine!" She swept majestically from the room, leaving silence and consternation behind her.

CHAPTER II

NEXT DAY

THE school hummed in the morning. Before breakfast it was known that a row transcending all other rows had occurred in the night, and that Robin Hurst, who had figured in so many scrapes before, was liable to "catch it" this time with unexampled severity. Fearful stories of the wrath of Miss Stone circulated among the juniors. It was reported that she had fallen into a basket of stolen cream-puffs, rising in a condition of messiness and fury most terrifying to contemplate. That Robin had been foolish enough to laugh at the wrong moment was readily believed—it was the kind of lunatic thing that Robin would do. As to her punishment, the school palpitated amid the wildest guesses. Expulsion was hinted at by a few, since ordinary penalties seemed feeble, considering Miss Stone's anger. The whole dormitory was to suffer—except Ruby Bennett, who, having instigated the crime, had refused to share in its fruits. Ruby found herself ostentatiously cold-shouldered.

Whatever thoughts or doubts mingled in Robin's mind, she gave no hint of them to anyone else. Before breakfast, she risked further trouble by a whirlwind visit to the kitchen, for the purpose of making her peace with the cook.

"I'm afraid I gave you an awful lot of trouble, Cook," she said, breathlessly. "It wasn't that I really wanted the blessed things, you know—but it was a dare, so I had to get them. Please don't be cross with me!"

"Some day you'll take a dare once too often, my young lady!" said Cook, affecting sternness, and grinning in spite of herself.

"I'm not sure that I haven't done it this time," answered Robin, with a sigh and a twinkle. "There's going to be an awful row. Well, I don't care if I am sent away—except for Mother. She'd hate it. If I'm only a red-haired memory to-morrow, Cookie, darling, think of me kindly and remember I loved you. And they were scrumptious cream-puffs!"

"They say you never tasted one of them," said the cook. For gossip travels swiftly in a school.

Robin tilted her nose.

"Well—no," she said. "I don't snare things to eat them myself. It's different, you see."

It was hardly a lucid explanation, but the cook saw.

"Well, between you an' me, I rather any day they went to you young things than to the droring-room," she said. "I 'ope she won't be too 'ard on you, my dear, for 'twas only a prank—but 'er state of mind was fair 'orrible, Elizer said, when she saw them Fancy Mixed biscuits I 'ad to send in, instead!"

Robin gave a low chuckle.

"It would be," she said. "Well I must run, Cookie dear, for it will be the end of all things if I'm caught. But I had to tell you I was sorry!" She flashed a smile at the cook, and was gone.

Breakfast was eaten in unhappy silence: the weight of disgrace that lay over Number Four dormitory was felt by all the boarders, and many surreptitious glances were stolen at Miss Stone's grim face, striving to forecast the extent of the penalty to be exacted from the chief sinner. In the playground, afterwards, Robin found her three allies banded together by a high resolve.

"We're going in with you," Betty stated.

"To Miss Stone? Indeed you're not, my children!"

"We're just as much in it as you are," said Annette. "We knew all about it beforehand."

"I never heard such rubbish," said Robin, laughing. "I was the only criminal, and now I'm the only one asked to the party. You can't butt in without an invitation—it isn't polite!"

"Bother politeness!" Betty's voice was almost tearful. "It will be ever so much better if she has four of us to deal with, Robin, dear—she can't expel four of us."

"She isn't likely to expel any one," Robin answered, in cheery tones that hid her own forebodings. "But if she is, I'm the one, and you three have nothing to do with it."

"It isn't fair for you to put on that 'Alone I did it!' air," said Joyce. "You were only the catspaw; as Annette says, we knew all about it, so we're just as guilty. I think all Number Four ought to go in with you."

"What—Ruby too? Wild horses wouldn't drag her, and you know it."

"Oh—Ruby!" Joyce's tone was scornful. "She doesn't count. Anyone else would have whipped that beastly cream-puff under her pillow, but she just let it sit there to give us all away. She's an outcast!"

"She'll emerge with a perfectly good halo, in Miss Stone's eyes," said Robin, laughing. "I can see Ruby as a prefect before long, ruling us all with a rod of iron. But truly, girls, you can't come with me. I've got to take my gruel alone."

"You can't stop us," Betty said, stubbornly.

"It will only make things worse," Robin pleaded. "Miss Stone wants a victim, but she doesn't want four: she will be madder than ever if you all march into the study. And it isn't fair, no matter how you look at it. I'm the Knave of Hearts who stole the tarts, and if I have to be beaten full sore, well, it's just. You can't get away from it, that it is just."

"Justice is all right, but Miss Stone can be such a pig," said Annette. "If she hadn't such a down on you, already, Robin, we wouldn't mind. We're coming, and that's all about it."

The big bell clanged out, and from every quarter the girls began to hurry towards the schoolroom.

"Well, I must go," Robin said, straightening her shoulders. "Trot off into school, my dears, or you will be marked late." She smiled at them, turning to go.

"We're coming," said the three, in an obstinate chorus. They formed round her, and marched across the playground and into the house, while Robin protested vainly. She was still protesting when they reached the study door and Joyce tapped gently.

Miss Stone's eyebrows went up as they filed into the room.

"I summoned Robin only," she said, stiffly. "Why are you all here?"

"We were in it too, Miss Stone," Joyce said. "It doesn't seem fair to us for Robin to take all the blame."

The principal looked at them indifferently.

"Possibly I have not understood fully," she said, with cold politeness. "You mean me to believe that you were concerned in the robbery yesterday?"

Joyce flushed angrily.

"We knew Robin meant to take the things—if she could."

"Quite so. And you were willing to let her do it?"

"It was only a joke—another girl had dared her to do it."

"But you did not help in this very peculiar species of joke?"

"No. But we would have, if Robin had wanted help."

"They had nothing whatever to do with it, Miss Stone!" Robin interrupted, hotly. "It was entirely my own affair. It's quite ridiculous for them to come in with me. I'm the only one who should be punished."

"I am glad you realize that," said Miss Stone, smoothly. "Everyone who helped to gorge upon what you stole is worthy of punishment, and will certainly be dealt with in due course; but you were evidently the ringleader, as you have been so often before in every kind of lawlessness. Since your companions have chosen to burst into my study with you they may remain to hear what I have to say to you."

"I wish you would send them away," muttered Robin.

"I daresay you do. But it may hinder them from following in your footsteps if they are enabled to form a clear idea of how such behaviour as yours is regarded by people with ordinary ideas of honour."

The colour surged over Robin's face, and ebbed as quickly, leaving it very white. Betty O'Hara uttered a choked exclamation.

"Miss Stone! Robin's the honourablest girl——!"

"Is she?" Miss Stone smiled faintly. "I fear that does not say much for the others—if I accept your view, Betty. But then, I do not." She paused, and took off her pince-nez as though fearing they might be a handicap to her eloquence. Then, very deliberately, she proceeded to avenge her wrongs by dissecting Robin's character.

The three who listened carried away no very clear idea of the long oration that followed. They heard the smooth voice rising and falling in waves of scorn and condemnation; but most of their attention was centred on the white face of their companion, who listened to the recital of her own misdeeds in utter silence, infuriating the principal by the shadow of a smile that lurked about the corners of her mouth. Miss Stone was a woman of an evil temper: she had never liked Robin, and she had chosen to consider herself humiliated. Now she forgot that the girl before her was little more than a child, and her anger grew as she lashed her pitilessly with her tongue. She searched an ample vocabulary for the most stinging words: her voice was bitter as she spoke of deceit,

theft, dishonour, meanness, greed. “If Robin had been a murderess she couldn’t have been more beastly,” said Annette, tearfully, later. And Robin listened, and the little smile did not fail.

“I have not made up my mind whether I can permit you to remain in the school,” finished the principal, as breath began to grow short. “The disgrace to your mother weighs with me, of course, though I cannot expect it to weigh with you: but I have to consider your contaminating effect upon my other pupils. For the present you will remain entirely apart from the others, studying, sleeping, and taking your meals alone, and debarred from all games. Later on——”

There was a knock at the door. Eliza entered, visibly nervous at finding herself in the hall of justice, yet able to send a look of sympathy at the criminal in the dock.

“I told you I was not to be disturbed, Eliza,” said Miss Stone, angrily.

“Sorry ma’am. But it’s a telegram, and it’s marked “Urgent.” So I thought I’d better bring it in.”

Miss Stone took the envelope from her hand, and tore it open hastily. Her face changed. She looked at Robin uncertainly.

“This—this alters matters,” she said. “It concerns you, Robin.”

All the defiant carelessness died out of Robin’s face. She sprang forward.

“Mother!” she cried, and her voice was a wail. “It isn’t Mother!”

“No—no. Not your Mother. She has telegraphed for you to go home at once. There is bad news for you, I am afraid.”

“Then she is ill! Tell me, quickly!”

“It is not your mother at all,” Miss Stone answered. “It is your uncle. He—he died yesterday, my dear.”

Robin stared at her, helpless in her overwhelming rush of relief.

“Oh—Uncle Donald!” she said. She gave a short laugh, and caught at Betty to steady herself, forgetting Miss Stone altogether. “I—I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to laugh. But I thought it was Mother!”

CHAPTER III

MERRI CREEK

IT was late on the afternoon of the following day when Robin Hurst changed from the main line and entered the narrow-gauge train which marked the final stage of her journey home. The little line was a new one, opening up a great stretch of bush country that had hitherto been almost unknown, save for scattered farms and sawmills, where plucky settlers earned a hard enough living among the giant hills. Robin had not travelled on it before: it was still under construction when she had left home after the May holidays. She remembered her drive to the station then, over twelve miles of bad road, in torrents of rain. She and her mother, half-smothered in heavy black oilskins, had tried to be merry as they urged the slow old horse up and down the hills: she had a sudden very vivid memory of her mother's face, still determinedly cheerful, when the train that they had only just managed to catch puffed out of the station. Mrs. Hurst had stood on the platform, tall and erect, the water dripping from her hat and coat, and forming a widening pool round her: and though her smile had been gay, Robin had never forgotten the loneliness of her eyes.

Now she settled herself in the corner of an empty carriage with an unwonted sense of relief. She did not for a moment pretend to herself that Uncle Donald's death caused her the slightest grief. He had been her father's brother, very much older than the big, cheery red-haired father whose death, three years before, had left his wife and child alone and almost penniless. Until then, their home had been in the Wimmera district, and they had scarcely known Donald Hurst: but when everything was over, and he realized the helplessness of their position, he had offered them a home.

They had taken it gratefully enough, and through the years that followed they had tried to please the hard old man: but it had never been a happy home. Donald Hurst's wife had died many years before, and there had been no children; he was alone in the world, and he had asked nothing better than to be alone. He lived in a house much too big for him, with an old housekeeper as hard and dour as himself, and made the most of his small hill-farm; it would not have been enough had he not possessed a small private income as well. At first Mrs. Hurst had tried to teach Robin herself, for there was no school within five miles. Then, realizing that the girl was beyond her powers of teaching, she had come to an arrangement with her brother-in-law, by which she took the place of the housekeeper, and with the money thus saved he paid Robin's expenses at a school near Melbourne.

It was a very profitable arrangement for Donald Hurst. The housekeeper had been wasteful and lazy; had demanded high wages and had cooked abominably. Now he saved her wages and "keep," as well as that of Robin; and if he groaned heavily over the school-bills, he knew well that he was a gainer by the transaction. Mrs. Hurst made his house run on oiled wheels: his meals were better, his monthly store-accounts less. Most of the house remained shut up, but the rooms they occupied shone with a cleanliness they had not known for years. The old man chuckled in the depths of his calculating old soul.

It pleased him, too, to be without Robin. He hated all children, and Robin, with her red hair and her overflowing high spirits, reminded him sharply of the younger brother he had never liked, and of whom he had always been jealous. She was constantly getting into

trouble; it seemed almost impossible for a day to pass without a brush between her uncle and herself. Robin had never known anything but happiness. It puzzled her, and brought out all that was worst in her nature, to be in a house where there was no home-like atmosphere—where grumbling and fault-finding were perpetual. She grew reckless and daring; dodging her uncle's wrath when she could, and bearing it with a careless shrug when to dodge was impossible. Even though losing Robin condemned her mother to ceaseless loneliness she was glad to see the child go.

Holidays had been rather more bearable, although the long Christmas vacations had strained endurance more than once to breaking-point. Robin thought of them now with a surge of dull anger against her uncle that suddenly horrified her, seeing that he was dead, and could trouble her no more. How she and her mother had longed for a tiny place just for themselves during those precious weeks! Even a tent in the bush would have been Paradise, compared to the gloomy house where at any time the loud, angry voice might break in upon them with complaints and stupid grumbling. And now it could never happen any more. "I don't care if it's wicked," Robin muttered to herself. "He was a bad old man, and I'm glad he's dead!"

The train crawled slowly out of the junction and wound its way between the hills she knew. Robin looked out eagerly. Below her wound the road over which she had often travelled behind slow old Roany: she could see that it had been made freshly, most likely to assist in the construction of the railway. Its smooth, well-rolled surface struck an odd note, remembering what seas of mud they had often ploughed through on their journeys to the township. Slow and toilsome as those drives had been, she looked back to them as the brightest parts of her holidays, since then they had known that for hours they would be free from Uncle Donald's strident voice.

It was early September now. The winter had been unusually mild and dry, and the hills were gay with wattle-blossom, which shone in dense masses of gold along the line of the creek in the valley below. Already the willows were budding: the sap, racing through their limbs, turned them to a coppery glow against the sunset. "Early Nancy" starred the grass in the cultivated fields with its myriad flowers: Robin almost fancied she could smell their faint, spicy fragrance. She longed to lie in the deep, cool grass, forgetting the long months of Melbourne dust and the school that she had hated. Ayrshire cows, knee-deep in marshy pools, glanced up lazily as the train puffed by, too contented to allow themselves to be disturbed: once a huge bull stared defiantly, his great head thrust forward, the sunlight rippling on his beautiful, dappled brown and white coat. Robin drew a long breath of utter happiness. Soon she would be home: and there would be mother waiting, and before them would stretch the long, quiet evening, with no harsh voice to mar its peace. Surely it was not wicked to be glad!

Gradually, as they left the township farther and farther behind, the farms became fewer and more isolated, giving place to long stretches of rough hill-country. Here there was little dairying land, and scarcely any cultivation; the holdings were only partially cleared, ring-barked timber standing out, gaunt and grey, from the surrounding undergrowth. There was evidence of the ceaseless war against bracken fern and rabbits: paddocks littered with dry, cut ferns showed a fresh crop of green fronds starting vigorously to replace them, and among them were innumerable rabbit-burrows. Already the evening was tempting their inhabitants to appear: as the train came round curves, a

score of grey-brown bodies went scurrying over the hillside, and a score of white tails gleamed for an instant as their owners dived into the safety of the underworld.

They came to a little siding presently, and pulled up for a brief halt. There were no station buildings: the tall timber came almost to the railway line, save for a clearing where a sawmill had established itself, gaunt and hideous, with huge piles of giant logs waiting their turn at the shrieking saw, and great heaps of brown sawdust bearing mute testimony to those which had already met their fate. Now, freshly cut, and still fragrant with resin and gum, they waited for the trucks that should bear them to Melbourne—stacks of smooth timber, among which played the half-wild children of the mill encampment. Here and there were the tents of the workmen; their wives, thin brown women, looking almost like men, came hurrying out to greet the train that made the great event of each day. The guard flung upon the ground beside the line the stores brought from the township: sacks of bread, boxes of groceries, meat in blood-stained bags. The children came running to get them. Robin, leaning out, offered them the remains of the fruit and sweets the girls had packed into her travelling basket that morning—pressing them into grubby brown hands, whose owners hung back, half-shy, wholly longing. Then the engine-whistle made the hills echo, and the little train drew away—to be swallowed up in a moment by the tall trees.

There was a hint of dusk in the evening sky when they drew into the terminus, a tiny station in a more cleared area. Robin had the door open before the train had come to a standstill. There was the tall figure waiting, just as she had dreamed—waiting with her face alight with the joy of welcome. Robin flung herself at her mother, holding her with strong young arms.

“Oh, Mother!—poor old Mother!”

“Oh. I’m glad to have you!” breathed Mrs. Hurst, with a deep sigh. “I had to get you, Robin—I couldn’t wait.”

“I should think not! Has it been very dreadful, Mother, darling?”

“Pretty dreadful.” The tall woman shuddered slightly. “Never mind—I’ve got you now. Let us get home as quickly as we can.”

There were friendly hands to lift Robin’s trunk into the battered old buggy outside the station, and warm, kindly words of welcome; all the farmers about Merri Creek knew Mrs. Hurst and the long-legged, red-haired girl who used to run wild over their paddocks, and their wives had proved Alice Hurst’s kindness in a hundred ways. They looked at her this evening with an added touch of respect and sympathy. Old Donald Hurst’s rough nature had made him an unpopular figure in the district, and the weary life led with him by his sister-in-law was no secret. They knew she had been a drudge, unpaid save for her child’s school-fees; but hard work was the daily portion of most of the women of the bush. They pitied her, not for that, but because of the ceaseless bitterness of the old man’s tongue. It had been no easy thing, to live upon his bounty.

Robin and her mother climbed into the buggy, said “Good-night,” and took the road that wound along the valley. The horse jogged slowly, and Mrs. Hurst let him take his own pace. She drove with one hand resting on Robin’s knee, apparently unwilling to talk, only glad of her nearness; and Robin, after one glance at her worn face, was silent, too. They understood each other very well. When Mother felt that she could talk, Robin would

be ready.

When they turned in at the gate of Hill Farm, it was almost dark. Roany jogged more quickly up the track that led to the stable-yard, where a big, awkward lad waited, grinning cheerfully.

“ ‘Ullo, Miss Robin! Glad to see y’ back.”

“Hallo, Danny!” Robin jumped out lightly, and shook hands with him. “How are all your people?”

“Good-oh, thanks, Miss Robin. Jus’ you leave the ol’ horse to me, an’ I’ll bring your box in presently. Kettle’s near boilin’, Mrs. Hurst, an’ I lit the kitchen lamp.”

“That’s very good of you, Danny.” Mrs. Hurst’s voice was utterly weary, but she forced a smile, and the big fellow beamed in answer. Robin gathered her light luggage, following her mother to the house.

The kitchen was bright with lamp-light and the glow of the fire. Robin put down her burdens and went to her mother, taking off her hat and coat as if she were a child. Then she looked at her deliberately.

“Ah, you’re just dead-beat, Mummie!” she said softly. She gathered the tall form into her arms, holding her closely, patting her with little loving touches; and Mrs. Hurst put her head on the young shoulder, and shook with sobs that had no tears. So they stayed for a few moments. Then the mother pulled herself together.

“Oh, it is just beautiful to feel you are home!” she said. “Come to your room, darling—you must be so hungry and tired. Tea is all ready, except for the toast, and that won’t take three minutes.”

“It won’t take you any time at all,” said Robin, masterfully. “You’re going to do as you’re told, for one night, anyhow, Mrs. Hurst!” She led her into the dining-room, and put her firmly on the couch: in spite of her protests she took off her shoes, dashing to her room for a pair of soft slippers.

“Now you just lie quiet,” she ordered, as she lit the lamp. “Oh, you’ve got the fire laid!—how ripping! It isn’t really cold, but I’ll put a match to it, I think, don’t you? a fire’s so cosy when you’re tired. What a jolly tea, Mummie! that cake is just an extra-special, and you had no business to make it, but I’ll eat an awful lot. Oh, and I’ve been getting into a most horrible row over cakes!—they were cream-puffs, and I’ll tell you all about them presently. Feet warm?” She took off the slippers and felt her mother’s feet, proceeding to rub them vigorously. “They’re just like frogs—when the fire burns up well you’ll have to toast them; I’ll just get you a rug for the present.” She covered her gently, dropping a kiss on her forehead as she straightened the rug. “Now, you lie still and don’t argue—remember you’ve got a daughter to bully you. I’ll have the toast made in a jiffy. Shall I make Danny’s tea in the little teapot?”

“Yes, please, darling,” said Mrs. Hurst, smiling faintly. “But it’s too bad for you to be working after your long journey. I can quite well——”

“Never saw such a woman to talk nonsense,” said Robin. “Lie quiet, or I’ll have to sit on you, and then we’ll never get tea—and I’m so hungry!” She went swiftly into the adjoining kitchen, leaving the door open, and talking cheerfully while she cut bread and poked the fire. “Isn’t it splendid to have the railway at last! I was quite thrilled to travel on

it for the first time, and to think how often we'd jogged along that dreary old road. It's so lovely to be back, and to see hills and paddocks again, after months of dingy grey streets: and the wattle is just beautiful all the way out. That you, Danny? come in. I'll have your tea ready in a moment."

"I put your things in your room, Miss Robin," Danny said. "Got plenty of wood? I got a lot cut outside."

"I'll want a big log for the dining-room fire after tea, thanks, Danny."

"Right-oh. I'll go an' 'ave a bit of a wash." He went out clumsily, and Robin finished her preparations.

"There!" she said at length. "I'll shut the door, and we'll be all cosy and comfortable. I can hardly realize that I'm back, unless I keep looking at you all the time! Let me bring your tea to the couch, Mummie, dear."

"No, indeed," said Mrs. Hurst, with decision. "I'm not so bad as that." She got up and came across to where Robin stood, smiling down at her. "Let me wash my hands, and I shall be able to enjoy the luxury of sitting down with my daughter."

"If only Miss Stone regarded me as you do, how happy she might be!" remarked Robin. "She has a total lack of appreciation of my finer qualities." Over their meal she told her mother the harrowing story of the cream-puffs, and had the satisfaction of making her laugh more than once. To anyone who knew Miss Stone the mental vision of her plunging into Ruby Bennett's discarded delicacy was not without humour.

"I don't approve, of course," said Mrs. Hurst. "It was really naughty of you, Robin, and you are old enough to know better. But I think I can leave that part of it to Miss Stone."

"You can, indeed," Robin assured her. "Her remarks left nothing to the imagination."

"I suppose I would have been distressed, but nothing seems to matter much now," said her mother. "For school is over for you, I'm afraid, dearest. You can never go back to Calton Hall."

"Mother! Say it again!"

"Ah, it isn't a joke, beloved," said Mrs. Hurst. "It is a great grief to me. You are not sixteen: I had so hoped for two years yet at school for you."

"I wouldn't be anything but a dunce if I went to school for twenty years," stated her daughter, with shining eyes. "I know enough now for life in the country, and that's what I'm always going to have. Oh, Mother, I'm so glad! I'm sorry you aren't, but I can't help it: I'm just glad all over!"

She stopped abruptly, looking at her mother's white face.

"Now, you're just going to lie down again while I clear the table and wash up," she said. "Then I'll put a big log on the fire, and you're going to tell me everything."

CHAPTER IV

PLANS AND PROBLEMS

"THERE isn't so much to tell you," Mrs. Hurst said. The room was tidy, the kitchen work done; Robin had made up the fire and pulled her mother's couch close to it. She sat on the hearthrug near her; so near that Mrs. Hurst could put out her hand and touch the shining red hair.

"I don't know anything, you see," Robin answered. "Was he—was Uncle Donald ill long, Mummie?"

"Only about ten days. He had been very trying for over a month: his temper was worse than ever, and nothing I could do seemed to please him. I think the poor old man must have been suffering, but he would never tell me anything, and there were times when I was almost in despair. Then one night he would not eat, and when I took him some nourishment after he had gone to bed he flew into a violent passion and shouted at me until even Danny woke and came running to see what was the matter."

Robin set her lips.

"I suppose I ought to be sorry that he's dead," she said. "But I can't be, Mother—I just can't. He was a bad, cruel old man. That anyone should speak to you like that—!"

"I think he was sorry afterwards. The fit of anger ended in a violent coughing attack, and at last he fainted. I sent Danny to the village to telephone for the doctor, but he was away in the hills and could not get here until the next day, about noon, and I had a terrible time trying to keep Uncle Donald in bed: he would try to get up and dress, but he always fainted. When the doctor came he became more obedient. The doctor told me from the first that there was no hope."

"You should have got me home," breathed Robin. She found her mother's hand and held it tightly.

Mrs. Hurst shuddered.

"I would not have had you here for anything. He was very difficult to manage—his temper seemed to get quite beyond his control. And all the time he hated me, Robin—he just hated me. You could see it in every look he gave me, not only in the bitter things he said."

"And you had no help?"

"I tried to get a nurse, but there were none to be had. Some of the women about here came when they could, and Danny was a great comfort. There was really very little to be done for the poor old man. But it was a very heart-breaking thing to see him dying like that—hating everyone, and with his heart full of malice. Thank God, at the last the evil spirit seemed to leave him. For it really was an evil spirit, Robin: something that seemed to take possession of him, and to control his mind."

"And it left him?" said Robin, awed.

"Twenty-four hours before he died. He woke up from a long sleep, very weak, but

quite rational and quiet. The first thing he said was to tell me to get the lawyer out from the township at once—Mr. Briggs. Fortunately, Danny was able to get him on the telephone and he came out in a car immediately, with his clerk. Uncle Donald got him to make his will, and they propped him up while he signed it. It was all very distressing, for he was so weak, and we feared he might die at any moment. After the business was done he seemed to grow stronger, and talked to me quite kindly.”

“I’m glad he did,” said Robin. “It would have been awful if he had died in that wicked mood.”

“Yes—it would have been terrible. He said once, ‘You’ve been very kind to me, Alice, and I’ve been very hard on you.’ And he asked me to forgive him—poor old man! He seemed to want to have me with him after that, and he liked me to hold his hand. I was holding it when he died, very early the next morning.”

“I wish you had got me sooner,” said Robin, very low.

“I did not want to get you until—until everything was over. The funeral was this morning. And after that I felt as if I could hardly wait until you came.”

Robin put her cheek against the hand she held, and for a while they were silent.

“You must be just worn out, Mummie,” the girl said, at length.

“Oh, I shall be quite well in a few days. I think I did not know how tired I was until I saw you. Then I seemed to go all to pieces.” She smiled at the bent head. “It was feeling that I had someone to lean upon, I suppose.”

“Well, you’d better just lean hard,” said Robin, sturdily. “You’re going to be an invalid for a few days—I mean to keep you in bed, and make you forget everything: we’ve got such heaps to talk about. Mummie, are we going to be very poor?”

“Are you afraid of being poor?”

“Not a bit. We’ve never been anything else, have we? As long as we are together I don’t mind anything at all.”

“We shall be very poor, my girl. Uncle Donald left me all he had, but it is not much. Most of his income came from money he had sunk in an annuity, and that, of course, died with him. The farm is not valuable. I consulted Mr. Briggs about selling it, but he thinks there would be no chance of that, and that we should get very little, even if we were able to sell.”

“But we can’t work it, can we? I’ll do anything in the world to help, Mummie, but I know two women can’t run the place.”

“No, we couldn’t possibly work it; even if we employed a man it could hardly be carried on, and wages and keep would eat up the profits. Properties are hard to sell just now, Mr. Briggs says; people are afraid of the difficult life on the hill farms, with the constant struggle against rabbits and bracken. He thinks he could let the land to one of the neighbours: the Merritts need more land, he says, now that the railway has come and they can get their produce away more easily. He advises us to let the paddocks, retaining the house and the few acres round it. With very great care I think we could live on the income we should get. But it would mean looking at every penny twice.”

“Well, you know best, Mother, darling. What could we do if we didn’t let the land to

Mr. Merritt?"

"I think we have very little choice. Selling is out of the question, for the present, at any rate. We might try to let the whole property, with the house; if we could do that I might get some work in Melbourne that would add to our income. But work is hard to get, for anyone of my age; and I should hardly know what to do with you."

"I think that's a perfectly hateful idea!" Robin sat up with a jerk. "You mean to go slaving in some beastly shop or office, I suppose—wearing yourself out altogether! Don't you think we could manage to stay on here, Mother? We could live on awfully little—I can shoot rabbits and catch fish, and we hardly need any clothes out in this lonely place! And it would be so lovely to be together again—just you and I. You know how we used to ache to be by ourselves somewhere, in the holidays."

"Do you think I don't want it as much as you do? I have thought of nothing else. Oh, I think we may venture to try it, Robin—even if it were only for a year or two. I wouldn't want you to stay here too long: when you are eighteen I should like you to learn typewriting and shorthand, so that you would have a profession to fall back upon."

"I don't seem to care what we do in a couple of years," Robin said, laughing. "But at present I want to stay here, in this jolly old place, and feel that it's our very own, and that no one can turn us out of it. It is such a dear old house, and we could make it so pretty. We'll have a scrumptious garden, Mummie: I can do the digging, and you'll supply the brains. I don't see why we shouldn't sell vegetables, because of course we can never eat all we grow!"

"That might be an idea," said Mrs. Hurst, thoughtfully. "Now that the railway is here it would be easy to send fresh vegetables into Baroin once a week."

"We'll make heaps of money," said Robin, with the gay confidence of nearly sixteen. "And rabbits, Mummie—isn't it a mercy that Father taught me to shoot, and that we have his gun? Nice young bunnies ought to be very saleable—and think of the skins! they are worth ever so much. Danny can teach me to prepare them. We'll have to do without Danny. I suppose?"

"Yes—we have no chance of keeping a boy. The cows must be sold. I thought we would keep the little Jersey: she has a beautiful calf a week old. She will give us more butter than we need, but I can sell it at the store in the village."

"Well, I can milk her," said Robin.

"That will be my job," said her mother, with firmness.

"Certainly, if you get there first!" rejoined Robin politely. They laughed at each other, and Mrs. Hurst gave a great sigh of happiness.

"Oh, if you knew what a difference it makes to have you!" she said. "Everything looked black to me, and I was sure I could not manage to make both ends meet. And I'm not sure now: we are certain to have a hard struggle, with plenty of anxiety and care, but nothing seems to matter so much now."

"I don't see how anything *can* matter much, if we are together," said Robin, simply. "We're both strong—at least you will be after you have had a good rest—and you're nearly as young as I am—"

“Robin, what nonsense!”

“Indeed, you are—you know Father married you and ran away with you when you hardly had your hair up! and you’ll grow younger every year, because we’re going to make a joke of everything, and there will be no one to be cross with you any more. At least, I shall be very cross with you if you try to do foolish things like milking cows—but you’ll soon learn that it isn’t safe! And everything will be tremendous fun, even if we have to live on turnips and buttermilk. I think we’re the luckiest people that ever owned a farm!”

“I think I am a very lucky mother,” Mrs. Hurst said, quietly.

“Indeed, Miss Stone wouldn’t tell you so. Mother, darling, I’ve come home with a horribly bad character—Miss Stone thinks I’m absolutely no good in the world. I was always getting into scrapes and sinking lower and lower in the form. I didn’t mean to be so hopeless; but I seemed to get into rows without any effort on my part, and at last I just didn’t care. I’m awfully sorry now, ’cause of you. But it really isn’t a school that makes you proud of it, and no one trusts Miss Stone. I’m just glad all over that I need never see her again!”

“Do the girls trust you?” Mrs. Hurst asked.

Robin’s head went up, and she coloured hotly.

“Yes,” she said, shortly. “They know they can.”

“Well, I am not going to let Miss Stone’s report worry me,” said her mother. “I’m sorry you have got into trouble, and I wish you had worked better, especially as you have no more chances of learning. But you and I are facing the real things of life now, and school scrapes, big as they seem at the moment, will soon be forgotten. We’re partners, my daughter, and we have to trust each other in all things, and work together.” She sighed. “I do hope it won’t mean that you will get none of the joy of life while you are young. I had always hoped to be able to give you a good time—such a time as I had myself before Father, as you say ‘married me and ran away with me’.”

Robin hugged her enthusiastically.

“If you only knew how I’m loving the bare idea of being partners!” she exclaimed. “I never dared to hope for anything so lovely: all the way in the train, even when I ached with joy at seeing the country, I was aching in a different way at the thought of going back to school! I’d never have done any good there, Mummie—you don’t know how hopeless it was. Now we’ll be working together, in our own home, and sharing everything. I’m blessed if I want more joy of life than that is going to mean!”

She sat back on her heels, the firelight dancing on her vivid face and her mop of red hair.

“And to think,” she chanted, “that they’ll be getting up in the morning at the sound of the same old bell, and ploughing through the same old stodgy lessons all day, and eating the same old awful meals, and walking in the same old crocodile down the same old dusty streets! And I’m free and independent and here——”

“Milking the same old cow!” laughed her mother—looking suddenly as young as she.

“In the same old cow-bail,” Robin flashed back. “And I wouldn’t change my job for

all the tea in China!”

CHAPTER V

TWO MONTHS LATER

ROBIN HURST came out upon the veranda of Hill Farm in the early dawn. It was an exquisite November morning. Mists were rising slowly from the gullies, revealing the tops of giant tree-ferns; above them, invisible in tree-tops still shrouded in white clouds, cockatoos shrieked a morning chorus. A pair of kookaburras perched on the gate-posts and looked wisely at Robin: they were old friends, christened Sally and Sam, so tame that they came regularly to find the scraps of raw meat that she left for them whenever meat occurred in the Hurst household—which was not every day. They preened their feathers, puffing them out until they looked ridiculously fat, the first sunbeams making them glint with a metallic blue and bronze. Then they broke into a wild duet of laughter. The echoes ran round the hills, “Ha-ha-ha! Hoo-hoo-hoo!” and were answered by other kookaburras beyond the creek. Robin put her head back and imitated the call—a proceeding that always puzzled and delighted Sally and Sam, who waited politely until she had finished, and then laughed as if it were the best joke in the world.

Robin waved her hand to the cheerful pair, and went off round the house—a workmanlike figure in blue shirt and khaki breeches, finished with home-made leggings of khaki cloth. From the first she had discarded skirts for country wear; and fortunately, Mrs. Hurst had put by a stock of breeches belonging to her husband, which her nimble fingers had altered to suit Robin’s requirements. The Jersey cow was waiting near the shed, where a shining bucket was up-ended on a rough bench, beside a three-legged stool. Robin petted her for a moment, and then sat down in the open to milk her—there was no need now to affront Bessy with the indignity of a bail. This done, she fed her, gave breakfast to Daisy, the calf, and to two small pigs that roamed at will in a tiny paddock; and, taking a hoe, went off to the vegetable garden.

Everything was very neat about the Hill Farm house. In front was a rambling old garden, ablaze with flowers. A trimly-cut lawn, shaded on the west by a row of Cootamundra wattles, took up much of the space; and there were winding walks and cool, quiet nooks where rustic seats invited you to sit down and rest, looking down the smooth green slopes towards the creek. Creeping plants and climbing roses made the wide verandas into bowers of scented bloom. Beyond the well-kept back yard came the vegetable garden, the pride of Robin’s heart.

Danny had dug the garden for Robin, refusing any payment. It was, indeed, difficult to exclude Danny from Hill Farm: the fact that he was supposed to be working for his father did not prevent him from appearing at odd moments, not at the house itself, but wherever any job waited that required extra muscle. Thus, Robin would find the cow-yard or pigsty swept and garnished: a heap of wood split and stacked, or a broken fence mended. “Aw, I just gotta spare hour an’ nothin’ to do in it,” Danny would say, bashfully. It was evident that he still looked on the Hursts as his responsibility.

Mrs. Hurst worried over the fact that it was impossible to make him take any money—the mere mention of which threw Danny into painful embarrassment. She consoled herself by knitting him socks, and by keeping on hand a stock of the brown gingerbread that

never failed to delight him. Danny regarded himself as the guardian of the family, and would have been content with his position without either gingerbread or socks.

The vegetables stretched in neat rows, and, to Robin's mind, represented unlimited wealth. The season had been kind to her: rain had come just when it was needed, and everything had flourished amazingly in the rich virgin soil. Long lines of potatoes were in flower: peas, beans, turnips, and all their brethren made a heartsome sight; and there was a little corner Robin loved, where thyme, sage, marjoram and parsley lent their old-world sweetness. Not a weed was to be seen anywhere. Daily the gardener made her way, hoe in hand, up and down each row; and in face of this martial pilgrimage no weed dared lift its head. Robin declared that her motto was, "A hoe in time saves nine."

Already she had preparations in train for disposing of her crop. Baroin boasted a good greengrocer's shop, and Robin had made friends with its proprietress, who had agreed to take a weekly supply of vegetables from her as soon as they were ready. Eggs and chickens were to be a side-line. In a netted pen a dozen cockerels fattened in happy ignorance of the advance of Christmas, while three or four broods of fluffy chicks roamed the hillside beside their fussy mothers, and young ducklings swam gaily in the creek. Robin yarded them all carefully every evening, for there were many foxes in the bush, a terror to every country poultry-yard.

The months since the death of her uncle had been, for her mother and herself, a time of absolute happiness. They were busy, but never oppressed with work. The house was much too large for them, but most of the rooms had been shut up, after undergoing a rigorous spring-cleaning. They slept on the veranda, and took most of their meals there; the bathroom served them as dressing-room, so that housework was reduced to its lowest possible terms, since there was no dust and no one to make the place disorderly. Together they worked in the garden, kept everything spick-and-span, and made a joke of each hour's toil as it came. There was time for play, too: they fished in the creek for trout and blackfish, and took long walks over the hills, where many a rabbit fell to Robin's gun.

The peaceful, happy life had wrought a great change in Mrs. Hurst. She looked years younger already: there was a new light in her eyes, a new energy in her movements. Colour had returned to her white face, and wrinkles had vanished. Robin was desperately proud of her. "When I make you wear breeches like me and have your hair shingled," she declared, "everyone will think you're my young sister!" To which Mrs. Hurst responded that she preferred the dignity of age.

The bell rang just as Robin reached the end of her last row of peas, and she fled to answer it with a haste that proclaimed hunger. When, after washing her hands, she appeared on the veranda, Mrs. Hurst was waiting for her. Robin attacked her porridge and cream ravenously.

"Isn't it a good thing you brought me up not to take sugar with porridge?" she remarked. "Sugar costs a lot of money, and we can't possibly grow it ourselves. The girls at school used to think me perfectly mad when I said they turned their porridge into a pudding. Oh, I am hungry, Mummie, and the runner beans are up, and I got three weeds. Small weeds, but healthy. We can have radishes for tea to-night. More, please."

Mrs. Hurst disentangled these mingled confidences with the calmness of long practice.

"My phlox seeds are up, too," she said. "What wouldn't come up, in weather like this?"

Finish the cream, darling: I don't want any more. I've made the butter, and there will be three pounds to take down to the store. Bessy is behaving nobly."

Robin let the thick yellow cream trickle slowly over her porridge.

"Yes, isn't she? Mr. Merritt was a brick to let us graze Bessy and Roany in the creek paddock—poor dears, they're so used to it that they would have hated to be the wrong side of the fence!"

"It means a great deal to us," Mrs. Hurst remarked. "Mr. Merritt is very kind: he said he would use Roany occasionally, to pay for their grazing, but I don't think he has had him in the plough three times."

"No, and it would really be better for Roany if he did use him—Roany is getting disgracefully fat and lazy. I think he'd be frisky if it weren't so much bother. What is the heavenly aroma of cooking, Mummie?—you haven't been extravagant, have you?"

"Only potato-puffs," said Mrs. Hurst, emerging from the kitchen with a covered dish. "You were up so early, Robin, and you really need a good breakfast."

"I always have a good breakfast," stated her daughter. "Catch me going without! But those puffs are awfully exciting, Mummie." She gazed fondly at the crisp golden balls as they smoked on her plate. "I wish I could fry things like you. No, not like you—you know what I mean."

"So you will, when you have a little more practice. You are doing very well as a cook. What are your plans for this morning?"

"I am going to finish painting the front fence. I thought one coat would be enough, but it would be a better job with two. Isn't it a mercy Uncle Donald bought paint by the gallon? I've enough to do ever so much more. What are you going to do, Mummie?"

"Mend sheets—there is a pile waiting for me. I think you had better go to the store with the butter after lunch, Robin—if you take your gun you may get some rabbits, coming home."

"That's a good idea," agreed Robin. "Won't you come, too?"

"No, not to-day—I want to get all the mending out of the way when once I begin it. Replacing house-linen will be an expensive matter: we can't afford to let things go at all." A faint line appeared between her brows.

"Now, you're worrying about money again, Mummie. And you promised you wouldn't."

"I do try not to worry," said her mother. "Now and then I can't help it, especially when I wake up at night. If I could only get a little reserve in the bank, Robin—something against a rainy day."

"But the rainy day may never come."

"It's far less likely to come if one has something in the bank. I don't know why, but it is so. We did save a little, and then my horrible dentist's bill ate it all up. The idea of illness makes me afraid—supposing I fell ill, and you all alone here, without money!"

"You—you aren't feeling ill, Mother?" demanded Robin, anxiously.

"No—not a bit. But it may come." She laughed at the worried face. "I really didn't

mean to talk like this; but I had a wakeful night, and all sorts of bogies came and sat on my pillow. I would do anything if I could earn some money—something to put by.”

“I don’t see how we can do more than we’re doing,” Robin said, knitting her brows. “Remember, the vegetable money will begin to come in soon, and I’ve quite a lot of rabbit skins, already. Oh, I’m sure we’ll manage quite well, darling!” She went to her mother, putting her lips to her hair. “If you begin to worry, things will be sure to go wrong. And we’re so happy!”

“Yes, indeed we are,” said her mother, holding her closely for a moment. “Well, I will try to scare the bogies away from my pillow; and after all, there is nothing like happiness for that. Come and help me to clear up the kitchen—we’re being disgracefully idle.”

Her sewing-machine was humming steadily when Robin passed the window an hour later—a truly remarkable figure in blue denim overalls that had belonged to the late Mr. Donald Hurst. They came to her insteps, ending in an artistic fringe where superfluous length had been ruthlessly shorn. She wore an old felt hat which had also been the property of her uncle. It was an outfit reserved for painting; many white splashes testified to the fact that its use was no unnecessary precaution. She carried a can of paint and a large brush, and sang cheerfully as she went. The strains of “Why Did I Kiss That Girl?” mingled with the chatter of cockatoos in the tree-tops.

Mrs. Hurst looked, and smiled, and sighed. There was no doubt that Robin asked nothing better than her present existence. She seemed to have put away all the childish irresponsibility that had made her school career a series of mad pranks, throwing herself into her unaccustomed work with whole-hearted vigour and complete happiness. But it was more a boy’s life than a girl’s—not the life that Mrs. Hurst had longed to give her. And there was no prospect of anything better. Money anxieties were not the only bogies that had disturbed the mother’s pillow in the night.

Robin was blissfully unconscious of any troubling thoughts. She painted all the morning, using her brush with a fine slap-dash effect that bespattered her overalls even more generously. The spirit of the late Mr. Hurst might have writhed to see the lavishness with which his paint was used. The job was nearly done when Mrs. Hurst came out to warn her that dinner was almost ready. The fence gleamed white against the deep green of the garden, and Robin was by the gate, marking a board “Wet Paint” in letters large enough to warn the most unwary trespasser.

“Just done,” she said, gaily. “Doesn’t it look scumptious, Mother? I think I’ll paint the side-fences, too: it would give the place an almost regal effect, don’t you think?”

“It’s always the way,” Mrs. Hurst said, shaking her head with affected gloom. “I have known many other cases.”

“Cases of what?”

“Paint-fever. You might call it paintitis. They’re very painful.”

“Did you say paint-ful?”

“Agonizing was what I said, I think. The patient begins by painting a curtain-rod, or a book-rack, and that leads to the kitchen-chairs, and then to a garden-fence. After that, she can’t stop. Everything she sees presents itself in a new light—something to be painted. The worst cases go on to decorate the Jersey cow, and the horse, and the pigs. They

brighten a property very much, but they're expensive!"

"This case has already painted her uncle's pants, and she'll paint the house red if she doesn't soon get dinner!" laughed Robin. "Come home—it's horrid of you to jeer at my artistic instincts, just as they're developing!"

"It was indeed, and I think the fence is beautiful," said her mother. "And yes, I do believe it would look better if it were done all round. Robin, our little home is beginning to do us credit!"

"Isn't it?" agreed Robin, looking affectionately at the white cottage nestling in its girdle of blossoming garden. "What a pity it is we can't fill it up with poor youngsters who never see anything but streets. How I do hate streets! Tell you what, Mummie, when I find a gold-mine in the hills——"

"When you do!"

"Why, of course I'm going to—the kind all stiff with nuggets, like plums in a pudding! Then we'll get little convalescents from the Children's Hospital and put them in all the empty rooms. Plenty of blankets, aren't there?"

"Plenty—not that that need trouble you when you have the plum-pudding gold-mine!" said her mother laughing.

"No, of course—I forgot that. Well, I'll buy eiderdown quilts. And we'll give them all a glorious time. Isn't it a jolly idea, Mummie! I have heaps of ideas like that while I'm working, and even if they never come to pass I'll have had all the fun of planning them. They taught me at school that 'to travel hopefully was a better thing than to arrive,' or something like that. Well, I haven't done much arriving yet, but there's a lot of fun in travelling hopefully!"

Mrs. Hurst looked at the eager, merry face.

"You are certainly a hopeful traveller for one's journey-mate," she said. "And now, I am going to give orders, for once. I have sat still almost all the morning, and need exercise, whereas you have worked since sunrise without a break—and that is not good for young muscles. You will therefore take a book out to your bed on the veranda and lie down for at least two hours——"

"And leave you to wash up! Not if I know it!"

"To please me, Robin."

They smiled at each other.

"But I have to go to the store with the butter——"

"Half-past three or four o'clock will be quite time enough for that. You know quite well that you won't get rabbits early in the afternoon. Run away and get your boots off; I shall begin to be worried if you are not lying down in five minutes."

Robin stood up, conscious that her shoulders ached badly.

"Well, I'll go, because you are mean enough to appeal to my better nature," she said, laughing. "But lie down, yourself, for a bit, Mummie, darling—you won't work at that old machine all day?"

"Very well—I promise, if you will do as you are told." She began to gather plates and

dishes swiftly, and Robin went with an unwilling step. But when her mother came softly to the veranda, half an hour later, her book had fallen beside the bed, and Robin lay with her cheek upon her hand, fast asleep.

CHAPTER VI

ROBIN FINDS STRANDED WAYFARERS

A BIG grey touring-car came slowly along the narrow track, feeling its way round blind corners and hairpin bends. It was not a pleasant road for touring, especially to people accustomed only to the smoothness and width of city streets. The road that led out from Baroin had been metalled for only part of its length: after five or six miles, winter had put a stop to road-making, and the good surface ceased abruptly. Then with each mile as it wound into the hills, the track grew worse. It clung to the steep sides of the rises, a grey ribbon undulating between walls of bracken fern, barely wide enough, in many places, to carry a car: above it the sheer rise: below, a drop of anything from ten to a hundred feet. Sometimes the trees near it had been cleared: more often, they crowded it on both sides, so that the road ran between walls of slender trunks and tossing tree-tops. This gave variety, because any turn might reveal a tree across the track. On the other hand, the trunks might catch a car that went over the side—a helpful possibility, at the narrowest bends.

One drove along the hill-road, hoping earnestly that one would not meet any other vehicle. Should this occur, the proceedings were slow and complicated. A jinker, or a light cart, was nothing, provided the horse did not play up: the steed could be taken out of the shafts and the cart backed until a space was reached wide enough to allow of passing: which might not be for a mile, or perhaps two. Still, it was simple. More harrowing were the times when one motor encountered another, or a team of twelve or fourteen bullocks dragging a heavy waggon. Then might be seen the spectacle of a car feeling its way painfully in reverse gear, along the way it had come—a way sufficiently exciting to drive on the forward journey. Nervous passengers were wont to get out and walk. Pitt-street and Collins-street may have their terrors for the motorist, but they lack the thrills provided by a Gippsland track.

To avoid, so far as might be possible, the dangers of these untoward meetings, the grey touring-car crawled like a snail round bends, and made haste where haste did not seem suicidal. Its driver was a middle-aged man, tanned and weather-beaten, whose ordinarily cheerful face was set, just now, in anxious lines. His wife sat beside him, little, and plump, and pretty. She said nothing, but occasionally emitted short gasps of horror. To ease her feelings—it was clear that she did not ease those of her husband—she leaned forward constantly and pressed the button of the horn, so that their advance was preluded by a succession of piercing shrieks. Occasionally the driver said patiently, “I wish you wouldn’t, Milly.” To which she invariably responded:—“But you mustn’t take a single finger from the wheel, dear, and somebody *must* hoot!”

The third member of the party occupied the back seat, amid a litter of luncheon-baskets, cushions, rugs, and fishing-rods. He was a thick-set boy of fifteen, whose dark face betrayed nothing but boredom with his surroundings. The bush through which they travelled did not interest him; a motor-car was, in his view, a means of moving swiftly through space, and to crawl along a mountain track at the pace of a bullock-waggon failed to appeal to him in the least. His mother’s nervous gasps moved him only to faint scorn. Finally he produced a paper-covered book from his pocket, and became lost in its pages.

Fate contrived to make Mrs. Edward Lane press unusually hard on the button after a period of silence very grateful to her husband's nerves. The ear-splitting hoot that ensued made him swerve a few inches—at a spot where there was, unfortunately, not an inch to spare. The bracken, growing thickly from below, hid the fact that the edge of the track had broken off. Bracken, however thick, cannot support the weight of a six-cylinder car. There was a moment's sick suspense as the big Buick toppled sideways, slid for a few yards, and came to rest, wedged against a huge tree.

Mrs. Lane shot head-first over the edge, landing in a patch of fern, while her husband and son saved themselves in some miraculous fashion. The bottom of the car received them, amid the flying pieces of the shattered windscreen. Considerably astonished at finding themselves alive, they climbed out and hurried to the assistance of the lady of the party, who sat among the ferns, holding her ankle. She had taken her own meteoric flight in silence, but she screamed as she saw their faces.

"Oh, you're hurt!" she cried. "Barry!"

"Only scratches, Mother," said Barry Lane, gruffly, his face white under streaks of blood. "Are you hurt?"

She leaned back against her husband's arm.

"My ankle," she said. "Something has happened to it. But not much, I think. Are you sure you are not injured, Edward?"

"Quite sure, dear—just scratches and bruises." He felt her ankle tenderly, while she winced. "No bone broken, thank goodness! Sure you're all right, Barry-boy?"

"Rather!" said Barry. "A bit of glass just missed my eye—luck, wasn't it?"

"Then, if neither of you are hurt, I'm glad the suspense is over," declared Mrs. Lane, with surprising energy. "I knew it had to come, only I was sure it would be where there was a clear drop of half a mile! Now it's happened, and we're all alive!"

"I like your philosophy," said her husband. "It doesn't deal with the problem of how we're to get out of this outlandish place, with a damaged car, I suppose?" He was removing her shoe and stocking with deft fingers as he spoke. "Only a bad sprain—poor little woman! Are you perfectly certain you are not hiding anything else?"

"Not a thing," she assured him, hastily. "I'm scratched, of course, but who wouldn't be? bracken is such scratchy stuff. Just fancy, if there had been a log in it, what a bump I would have come! And how is the poor car?"

"I'll look presently. Barry, get the table-napkins out of the lunch-baskets and climb down to the creek—soak them well, and bring them back as quickly as you can. That's the best we can do for the ankle until we can find a house."

Barry dived at the car and in a moment was plunging down the hillside. Dr. Lane took out a pocket-flask.

"Drink this," he said, giving her the little silver cup. "No, I don't care if you don't want it—you're to have it, Milly. There's a certain amount of shock about a tumble like this, even if we do happen to be all alive. I'm going to have a drink myself. Now I'll make you a bit more comfortable." He salvaged a rug from the car, folded it, and arranged it so that she could sit on it, leaning back against a tree: and lifting her as if she were a child,

placed her upon it, with a cushion behind her and another supporting the injured foot. Barry returned, panting, with a handful of dripping table-napkins, with which his father bandaged the ankle scientifically.

“That’s ever so much easier,” said Mrs. Lane, smiling at their concerned faces. “How wise it is to take a doctor when one goes for hair-raising trips!”

“I wish we’d taken an ambulance as well!” said her husband drily. “But we’ll get help somewhere. Now, let’s have a look at the car, Barry. You might have washed your face when you were at the creek!”

“Hadn’t time,” said Barry, with a grin. He was poking round the car, pulling away the undergrowth into which it had settled. “I say, Father, she hasn’t come off too badly, I believe!”

“No, I think not—thanks to that providential tree. We should all have been mince-meat, but for it. One wheel is hopeless, of course, and the petrol-tank is badly bashed—but I don’t think there’s much wrong with the engine. Stout old car, and no mistake. But getting her up will be no end of a job.”

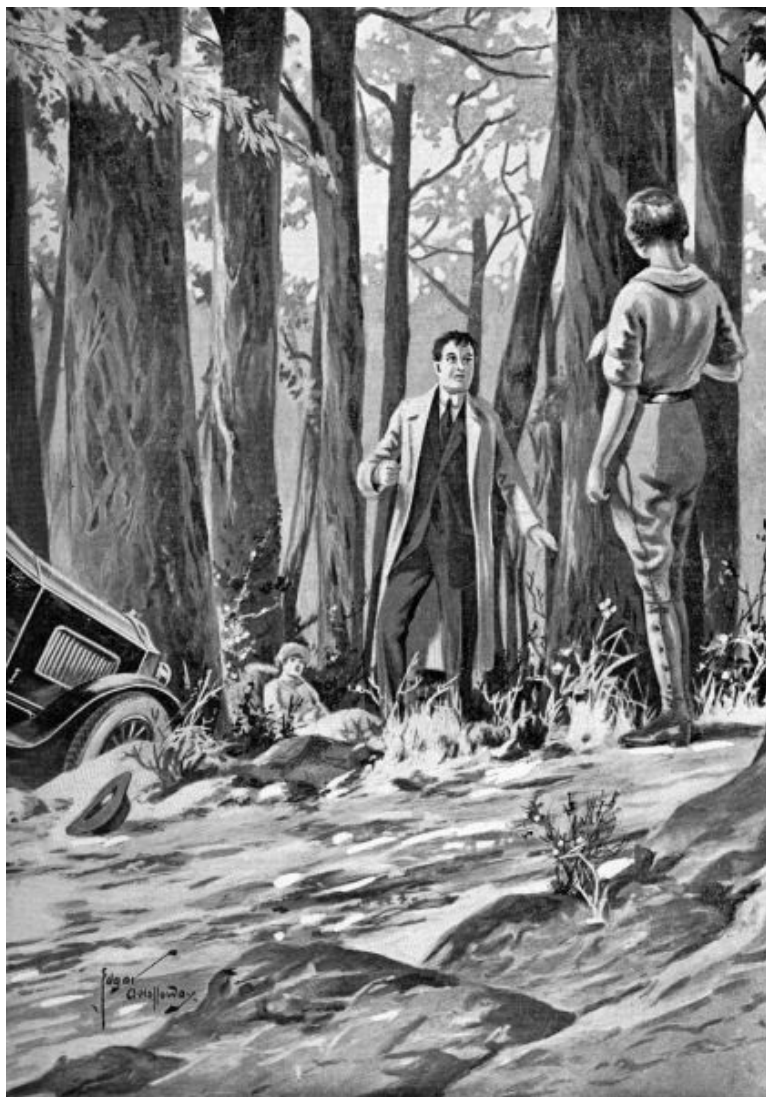
“Oh, these country people make a regular living from hauling damaged cars out of difficulties,” said Barry, with the air of a man of the world. “A fellow at school says there’s one place on the Prince’s Highway where the people water the road regularly every night, and keep a team of bullocks handy to pull the cars out of the mud-holes next day! I expect we’ll have the kindly natives along presently.”

Dr. Lane glanced up, and whistled softly.

“Well, there’s the first native, and armed to the teeth, too!” he remarked. “But she doesn’t look as if she could do much pulling, I’m afraid.”

“Well, she’s found game, so we shan’t starve,” Barry chuckled. “Talk about ginger hair!”

Robin, bare-headed, was coming along the track above them—a sufficiently unexpected figure in her blue shirt and khaki breeches, with her red mane glinting in the sun. She carried her gun over her shoulder: a pair of rabbits dangled limply from her hand. Just as the boy spoke she caught sight of them and stopped in amazement. Then she put her gun against the hillside, dropped the rabbits, and plunged down towards them.



"Is anyone hurt?"

"Is anyone hurt?"

"Not badly," Dr. Lane said, taking off his hat. "But we're pretty well stranded, as you may see, and my wife has sprained her ankle. Can you tell me where is the nearest township?"

"Merri Creek is nearest, but it is only a village—one store and a blacksmith's shop. You're more than twelve miles from Baroin. That is the only place where there is a garage—and a doctor."

"The garage interests me most—I happen to be a doctor myself," he said, smiling at her. "We are staying at the hotel at Baroin; we came out this way for a day's fishing. Twelve miles—h'm! It's a long way at this time of the evening."

"Merri Creek has a telephone; you could easily get help for the car to-morrow," said Robin. She was thinking rapidly, her thoughts running upon the state of the larder at Hill Farm. She remembered the rabbits with a throb of relief. "And there's bacon and eggs," she murmured, half aloud.

"I beg your pardon?" said Dr. Lane, staring.

Robin flushed.

"I was only pondering ways and means," she said. "You must come to our house, of course; it isn't more than a mile away. My mother will be very glad to do all she can for you. I can run home and bring our horse and buggy."

"Is it a quiet horse?" spoke Mrs. Lane, for the first time. "I do hope it is really quiet!"

Robin laughed outright.

"When you see Roany you won't be anxious," she said. "He's long past his wild youth. The difficulty is to make him raise anything but a jog!"

"That's just the kind of horse I like," Mrs. Lane answered, with a sigh of relief. "But are you sure we shan't be putting your people to horrible inconvenience?"

"There is only mother and I," Robin said. "And we have plenty of room. Mother wouldn't dream of letting you go anywhere else. Indeed, there isn't anywhere to go—ours is the only house near the road." She turned, and went up the hillside lightly. From the road she hailed them again.

"Can I bring back anything to make the hurt ankle comfortable?"

"It's well bandaged with table-napkins, thank you," Dr. Lane answered. "I think it will be all right until we get to your house."

"That's a lass with a head on her shoulders," he remarked, as Robin gathered up her gun and her rabbits and disappeared round a bend in the track. "We're in luck's way, I fancy. One would not expect to meet a girl of her type in this wild place."

"I was picturing spending the night in a splitter's camp—and glad to get there," his wife answered. "She looked so nice and clean—far cleaner than I feel! I wonder what the house will be like."

"It's any port in a storm for us to-night," said Dr. Lane, regarding the wreck of his car ruefully. "Merri Creek must be that little place we saw below us a mile back—the railway terminus. It wouldn't be a bad idea, Barry, if you got down there and telephoned to the

hotel. Tell them to send out things for the night—your mother might as well be comfortable. If you explain what has happened they can send them with a car from the garage, and the garage people can size up the damage of the Buick, and see how we're to get her in."

"Right-oh!" said Barry. "But I say—we don't know the name of the people here. How am I to tell them where to send?"

"By Jove! I never thought of that," his father said.

"Just ask the people at Merri Creek," said Mrs. Lane, practically. "I'm certain there can't be two girls with hair like that walking round these hills in breeches! If you describe her, they will be sure to know."

"But if a car comes out," said Barry, "why shouldn't we go back to Baroin in it?"

"Because your mother isn't going to drive twelve miles over these tracks after being shot out once," said Dr. Lane, concisely. "Hurry up, or they'll never get here before dark." And Barry went off, wishing that he had a chance of washing his face, on which the blood had dried uncomfortably.

It seemed a long while before they heard the rattle of buggy-wheels and saw Robin driving along the track. She greeted them cheerfully.

"I'll have to drive on a little way," she called: "there's no room to turn here. I won't be more than a few minutes."

"Then I may as well get you up to the track," said Dr. Lane to his wife.

It was not an easy business: both were panting, and Mrs. Lane's face was very white, when Robin reappeared.

"Mother put a mattress on the floor of the buggy," she said. "This is what we call an express-waggon, and there's lots of room behind; Mother said it would be more comfortable than sitting on the seat, with your foot hanging down."

"Your mother's a wise woman," said Dr. Lane, thankfully. He braced his muscles, and lifted his wife into the back of the buggy, where she sat enthroned upon the mattress with the injured foot sticking out stiffly, and declared that she was perfectly comfortable—a manifest untruth, which impressed neither of her hearers. They unloaded the car of all that was portable, and Dr. Lane climbed up beside Robin.

"Ready?" she asked. "Oh—where's the boy?"

"He has gone to telephone from Merri Creek."

"But he won't know where to come afterwards."

"I fancy he'll find his way—Barry generally gets where he wants to go."

"I had better drive back for him after I land you at home," said Robin, without enthusiasm—visions crossing her mind of evening duties among the live stock. There was milking to be done, animals to be fed and poultry to be housed for the night. She had no mind to risk her ducklings among the foxes for the sake of a boy who had looked distinctly cross. Then she remembered his blood-smeared face and mentally rebuked herself for being a pig.

"No need for that, I think," Dr. Lane was saying, pleasantly. "I can drive back, when I

get Mrs. Lane to bed, if you will be kind enough to let me have the trap—I'll promise not to send it over the edge, as I did the car!"

Robin brightened visibly.

"Certainly you can," she said. "Old Roany will take you safely over any of these tracks—they're really not fit for cars." They jogged peacefully homewards.

"I hope I'm not jolting you very badly;" she said, presently, turning to look at the passenger in the rear. "The road isn't wide enough to dodge the holes—I can only go slowly."

"But I'm quite enjoying myself," said the lady on the mattress. "Only, I want to be introduced, because you aren't a bit what we expected to meet in the country! Our name is Lane, and we came from Melbourne yesterday for a holiday."

"I'm Robin Hurst," the girl told her, smiling down at the pretty face. "Mother and I live at Hill Farm."

"But you haven't always lived here?"

"Oh no. But I hope we're always going to."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Lane, weakly. "It seems a strange hope!"

Robin laughed softly. Dr. Lane decided that he liked the sound.

"You have had an unlucky beginning," she said. "It really isn't fair to judge our country when you try to kill yourself on the very first day. Wait until you see the bush in the early morning, before the mists rise—"

"Never!" said Mrs. Lane, firmly. "I dislike seeing anything before breakfast—and not too soon after! I like well-paved streets, without precipices, nicely furnished with electric trams. I can't see any fun whatever in driving along a mantelshelf on the side of a hill. It makes me afraid: and it is so lowering to one's pride to feel afraid!"

"But if, before you had the shelf on the side of the hill, you had no road at all, you would look at it differently," said Robin, laughing. "We regard our road with respect and affection—especially the metallated part!"

"Is there a metallated part?" queried Mrs. Lane. "I hadn't noticed any. It seemed to me all a terrible series of bumps and pot-holes."

"You expect altogether too much when you come to the country," her husband said. "It would do you good to lead the simple life for awhile. I'm sure Miss Hurst could show you how."

Mrs. Lane shuddered.

"We are giving Miss Hurst and her mother quite enough trouble as it is," she said, hastily. She gave a sudden gasp. "My dear, have you had measles?"

"Yes." Robin looked surprised at the sudden query. "Why?"

"My boy has just had them—his quarantine period is almost finished, but they don't want him back at school before the holidays. And my husband's eyes had been giving him trouble, so we decided upon a long holiday."

"What—in Baroin?" asked Robin. Baroin, to her, was the most uninteresting of townships: she could imagine no reason for spending a holiday there.

"The fishing was the lure," Dr. Lane said. "I have been hearing wonderful things of the trout in the streams here; we thought we could put in a few weeks exploring them, with Baroin as our headquarters. Don't tell me that the report is only a rumour to catch tourists! I certainly have failed to rise a single fish to-day."

"There are trout, and big ones, if you know where to go," Robin told him. "Mother and I often fish."

"And catch fish?"

"Why, of course." Robin's eyes twinkled. "We're busy people; we haven't time to fish just for fun, like—like tourists!"

"That's a fair hit," Dr. Lane said, laughing. "I will certainly dog your footsteps if I see you going out with a rod."

"But wouldn't you like to go out yourself this evening?" Robin asked. "There are two or three good holes in a little creek not far from our place. And the evening rise is the best, unless you get down really early—about dawn."

"Would I like!" Dr. Lane suddenly looked like a schoolboy. "Can you come too?"

Robin shook her head.

"I can't come this evening. There is a good deal to do. But I can easily show you where to go."

"Don't let him get lost in the bush," spoke Mrs. Lane. "He is only a tourist, you know!" She turned her head as they came out of a belt of timber. "Oh, what a charming house!"

"That is our place," Robin said.

Hill Farm had indeed a look of charm in the evening sunlight. Against a sky tinged faintly with rosy pink the white house nestled in the deep green of garden and orchard, ending in the snowy gleam of the newly-painted front fence. The slope before it stretched to the creek, over which they crossed on a rough-hewn bridge: behind it cleared paddocks stretched upwards merging into the stately timbered hills.

"I'll have to take you round to the back," Robin said, as old Roany walked slowly up the little hill. "The front gate is too narrow: besides, I painted the fence only this morning, and when I paint anything it takes two or three days to dry. So please be careful, Dr. Lane, if you go out that way. There's Mother."

Mrs. Hurst was waiting by the back gate, tall and fresh-looking in her simple grey frock. She greeted them pleasantly, exclaiming with sympathy over the poor, bandaged foot: and presently Mrs. Lane found herself installed in a wide room, smelling faintly of lavender, and exquisitely clean. The windows overlooked the western stretch of great, tree-covered hills. A quaint old-fashioned paper covered the walls, bright with little trails of roses; there were fresh roses on the dressing-table and mantelshelf. A dainty tea-tray stood on a table covered with a snowy cloth.

"I have everything ready for doctoring the foot," Mrs. Hurst said. "But I was sure you poor things would like a cup of tea first."

Mrs. Lane heaved a sigh of contentment.

"I could almost weep at the sight of a teapot," she said. "My husband made me drink

whisky, which I hate—I tried to get rid of the taste by eating a gum-leaf, so that my mouth is now a miserable blend of alcohol and eucalyptus! No, no sugar, thank you. Dear me, how good that is!” She looked rather like a mischievous child as she smiled at Mrs. Hurst over her cup.

Dr. Lane stirred his tea reflectively.

“I think we chose the place for our disaster very judiciously,” he said. “Certainly, no stranded motorists ever fared better. Are we putting you to very great inconvenience, Mrs. Hurst? My son has gone to telephone to the hotel to send out our things—we could go back in the car, when it comes, if——”

Mrs. Hurst interposed.

“But that isn’t to be thought of! We shall love to have you; Robin and I live so quietly that to have strangers is quite exciting and delightful, and if you can put up with our bush ways——”

Dr. Lane interrupted in his turn.

“Your bush ways, as you call them, seem ways of smoothing out difficulties for people in distress,” he said. “And frankly, I am not anxious to give Mrs. Lane a jolting drive. She has had a considerable shock.”

“You must all be feeling it, I should imagine,” said Mrs. Hurst. “Please don’t think of hurrying away: we shall be glad to have you for as long as you care to stay. I am sure that ankle needs rest, and the Baroin hotel is not a cheerful place to rest in.”

“Indeed, no!” said Mrs. Lane, with a faint shudder. “My window only opens for about three inches, and the smells—! And the bar is always full of noisy men. But perhaps there is a private hospital where I could go for a few days: I don’t want to spoil the holiday for my menfolk.”

“Oh, I believe there is—but I don’t think you would like it. You are not ill; a couch on our veranda would be better for you than any place in the township.” Mrs. Hurst smiled, as she gathered the tea-things together. “Let us see how you feel in the morning.”

“*What* a nice hostess!” breathed Mrs. Lane, as the door closed behind her. “Now, do leave me just as I am, dear, and go to find Barry; he may lose his way.”

“I don’t think he’ll do that,” Barry’s father said. “But I don’t want him to walk too far; he is not really strong yet. Sure you will be quite comfortable until I get back, Milly?”

“Oh, perfectly. Just give me a book, so that I need not watch the scenery all the time—scenery is so unchanging! And do take care of yourselves on that horrible hillside. If that horse should shy at a snake, or anything, where would you be?”

“I should be lost in astonishment if that steed shied at anything whatever,” said her husband, laughing. “If ever there were a town mouse—!” He arranged her pillows, gave her a book, and went off with long strides.

Barry was encountered sitting on a log by the wayside. He greeted his father with something of relief.

“Jolly good of you to come back,” he said, climbing into the buggy. “My legs aren’t what they were before I had measles. Mother all right?”

“Oh, yes—it is not a severe sprain. We came off uncommonly well.”

"I expect she's pining for home," said Barry. "Is the farm very awful? I can't imagine Mother in a farm-house."

"Wait until you see it," Dr. Lane chuckled. "We fell on our feet, Barry—you'll have to mind your manners."

Barry sniffed.

"I expect my manners are good enough for this part of the world," he said, loftily. "The hotel people were very decent: they said a car with our things would be out pretty soon. Gee, I could do with a cup of tea! I found a bit of a pool and washed my face, but the water didn't look good enough to drink. Have we far to go?"

"We're nearly there." They came in sight of Hill Farm as Dr. Lane spoke. Above them, in the little paddock near the house, could be seen Robin, carrying in each hand a kerosene-tin bucket, and surrounded by an excited retinue of little pigs and a Jersey calf.

"There's the ginger-haired girl," said Barry, indifferently. "Regular farm-hand, isn't she?"

"I shouldn't wonder if she could teach you a thing or two, old man," said his father.

"*Me!*" There was ineffable scorn in the boy's tone as he climbed out to open the gate. "I don't think I'll worry any of the wild natives for lessons, thanks!"

CHAPTER VII

A BUSINESS ARRANGEMENT

"I COULD ask Mrs. Hurst, of course," said Mrs. Lane, doubtfully. "I wonder if she would be offended?"

"Not a bit likely, I should think," her husband answered. "She strikes one as far too sensible a woman to be offended by a simple business proposal. And it might suit her very well: I gathered from something she said last night that they have not much money."

"And you would not be bored—you and Barry?"

"Barry and I want to fish," said Dr. Lane. "And here we're right in the midst of it. I might have explored round here by myself for a week without finding that little creek young Robin showed me last night—and you wouldn't have had trout for breakfast, my dear!" His eye kindled at the recollection of the previous evening. "Nearly three pounds, the biggest fellow weighed; and four others of quite a respectable size! After failing to get a rise all day it was almost exciting, I tell you, Milly!"

"Yes, dear, it was lovely for you," said Mrs. Lane, with wifely sympathy. "And how perfectly Mrs. Hurst cooked them!"

"Couldn't have been better. It was a cheerful contrast to the greasy chops at the Baroin hotel. Of course it will be dull for you, dear, I'm afraid: but not so dull as it would be in the township, I'm certain. If you would let me take you home—"

"That is not to be thought of," interrupted his wife. "Why, you have not had a holiday for two years!" She smiled at him. "And there is Barry, too."

"Yes, there's Barry. I want him to be quite fit before he goes back. He's keen on the fishing, too, and I must say I should like him to learn something besides city ways. It's too bad that he's over fifteen and doesn't know one end of a rod or a gun from the other. If Mrs. Hurst would have us here, there would be no twelve-mile drive night and morning along that track you dislike so much—"

"That would decide it, if there were no other advantages!" spoke Mrs. Lane, briskly. "I'll ask Mrs. Hurst, dear: after all, she can hardly be offended. I'll put it very nicely."

"I have always remarked that when you are truly tactful you are hard to refuse," said the doctor, gravely. "So I'll hope for the best. I do hope you won't be horribly bored, dear; it's all very rough on you. You have plenty of books to go on with, haven't you? Of course I can order anything you like from Town. We can get the mail every day."

"Oh, I shall manage famously," she said. "Don't think of worrying about me. I shall write all the letters I should have written ever so long ago, and read all the books. And I daresay Mrs. Hurst and that nice red Robin will come and talk to me."

"We seem to be taking it for granted that Mrs. Hurst will consent," her husband remarked. "It will be rather a blow if she won't have us."

But Mrs. Hurst, handled tactfully, proved responsive. At first she felt a quick flush of pride and of outraged hospitality; to make money out of these stranded people who were

her guests, seemed an impossible thing. Then common sense came to her aid. The Lanes, also, had their pride; clearly, it was unthinkable that they should remain without making any payment. And their wish to remain was very evident: Mrs. Hurst liked to see it.

Then, too, came in her own urgent need of money. Despite her promise to Robin not to worry, the thought of their tiny bank balance was never out of her mind: it was so flimsy a barrier between them and disaster, should bad times come. Dr. Lane's offer was a generous one—more, she knew, than he would have paid the hotel in Baroin. She protested against it.

"It is too much for simple farm-house accommodation," she told him, when he came to join in the discussion. At which he laughed.

"If you saw our stuffy rooms in that hotel—!" he said. "This is luxury; your delightful, airy rooms, and the clean freshness everywhere. It would be ten times the holiday for us. Think, too, of all I shall save in petrol, apart from the joys of the mantelshelf road which your daughter says I must not malign. And my wife cannot help giving you some extra trouble, until her ankle is better."

"But you do not realize our limitations," she said. "I can't always get good meat out here—I have to put up with whatever the travelling cart brings, three times a week. And there are other difficulties. Robin and I live so simply that we do not notice them, but to you—from Melbourne" She paused unhappily, and he laughed at her again.

"As it happens, meat does not matter much to any of us," he said. "Fish—such trout as these—is a treat to us, and so are rabbits, which we dare not touch in Melbourne. Barry and I can shoot and fish for the pot, which will give us an extra incentive to do well. Try us for a week, Mrs. Hurst, and see if we give you too much trouble."

Mrs. Hurst had agreed, with some misgivings, and inwardly wondering how Robin would view the matter. But Robin was frankly delighted.

"Why, we'll make heaps of money!" she said. "And it will be rather fine, Mother, to have people about: I don't much like the boy, but his father and mother are dears."

"Why don't you like the boy? He seems civil enough."

"Oh, he's civil," said Robin, tilting her nose. "But he thinks too much of himself, and he looks at my hair! He has a kind of lofty manner, as if he thought it was very nice for the country that he came to stay there."

"Poor Barry!" said Mrs. Hurst, smiling. "Aren't you a little hard on him?"

"Well, I may be," admitted Robin. "But I haven't much time for boys, especially town ones. Danny is worth a paddockful of them! I say, Mother, are you sure it won't give you too much work?"

"I shan't mind it at all. I must drop other things, more or less: but the garden is in such good order that it won't suffer. The sewing can wait."

"Well, of course I'll do all the rough work," said Robin, sturdily. "I can be housemaid and slushy, and you can be head cook and lady-of-the-house. 'Tisn't everyone could double those two parts, but you could cook with one hand tied behind you! Now, if anyone speaks to me when I'm frying fish, it's all up with either me or the fish! I can run errands for Mrs. Lane, and carry out her trays—we'll make her live on trays out on the

veranda, shall we, Mother?"

"It sounds uncomfortable," smiled Mrs. Hurst. "Still—"

"Oh, you know what I mean. We can fix her up in a jolly corner with a couch and a little table, and she really won't be much bother! I suppose Dr. Lane and Barry will be out all day—that means cutting lunches: I can do that all right. Mother, hadn't I better go down to Merri Creek this afternoon and telephone to the store in Baroin for things? We haven't nearly enough groceries."

"Yes—and you must tell Mrs. Hawkes I shall not be able to send her any butter for awhile. We shall have to plan things, Robin; it won't do to be caught without food, if fish and rabbits fail."

"Lucky I was commissariat department at school," said Robin, with an impish grin. "There are four or five fowls that can be killed." Suddenly her face clouded. "Mother, I could get Danny to do the killing, couldn't I?"

"Yes, indeed," said her mother, hastily. "You didn't think I would let you do it?"

"I ought to want to do it, and save money," said Robin, still looking distressed. "But I couldn't kill my chooks, unless I really had to. Rabbits are different, though I don't enjoy dealing with them, either. Still, they're strangers to me, and the chooks are intimate friends. I should feel like the lady who suggested cutting her baby in half for King Solomon!"

The arrangement, begun with many misgivings on the part of Mrs. Hurst, worked with remarkable smoothness. Never, she declared, were paying guests less trouble than hers: they appeared to enjoy everything, never grumbled, and gave as little trouble as was possible. On the other hand, the Lanes rejoiced in the peace and freedom of Hill Farm. The food was simple, but it was well cooked and daintily served: succulent grills and savoury roasts were not, indeed, to be procured, but Mrs. Hurst had the skill of a magician in making the indifferent meat of the travelling cart assume appetizing forms, and Dr. Lane was frankly bewildered by the variations in their meals, and assured his hostess that she was a perpetual surprise. The freshest of vegetables, the yellowest of butter, the thickest of cream—all were delightful to people accustomed to eating food long past its first freshness. "If I have eggs for breakfast here," said the doctor, "I am morally certain that the hens have scarcely finished cackling over them before I have eaten them! I am growing disgracefully fat!"

Barry and his father fished and shot early and late, comfortably certain that no one minded erratic hours for breakfast and tea. Dr. Lane had at first made a heroic effort to be punctual, and had protested when Mrs. Hurst assured him cheerfully that it was not necessary.

"But what does it matter?" she had asked. "Robin and I have no servants to hamper us: it does not trouble us at all if you do come in late. And we know what it means for you to have the morning and evening rise for fishing; how stupid it would be for you to miss them on account of mere meals! As for the rabbits—if you want them, you simply *must* be out in the evening. I can't give you dinner at night, but you can have a meal whenever you choose to come in."

"But the trouble to you—"

"Why, there isn't any trouble. I make my preparations beforehand, and all the rest can be done while you are taking off your boots or washing your hands."

"But it is keeping you on duty all the time. If you had heard the frigid warnings of the hotel in Baroin as to what we might expect if we got home after six—!" At which Mrs. Hurst's head went up.

"But I am not the Baroin hotel, Dr. Lane. You must recognize certain differences between Hill Farm and that haughty establishment." Dr. Lane had laughed at the twinkle in her eye.

"I thank my lucky stars for them every day," he had responded. "Well, if you are really sure that it does not make things too hard for you, it is certainly delightful to feel that one can carry on with a free conscience. I'm the slave of a time-table in Melbourne: it is sheer rest to know that at Hill Farm time does not seem to exist."

"Only so far as you wish it to exist," Mrs. Hurst had answered. "We want you to enjoy yourselves, Robin and I."

Mrs. Lane had shaken down to captivity with surprising philosophy. Her husband had devoted his first morning to the manufacture of a makeshift crutch, by means of which she could move about a little, giving her a feeling of independence that added greatly to her cheerfulness. She laughed delightedly at her own clumsy efforts at movement, even while the pain made her wince.

"I was always taught by my mother that grace was essential to a woman!" she said. "Dear me, if she could see me now! Robin, you bad child, don't laugh at the afflicted—you should be full of sympathy."

"I am; but you would make anyone laugh," Robin defended herself. She was standing by, ready to help the guest's progress towards the veranda. "Do lean on me a bit, Mrs. Lane—I know it's hurting you horribly, and I don't believe Dr. Lane would approve."

"Certainly he wouldn't—but then, men are so fussy, aren't they?" responded the afflicted one. "And I won't be more helpless than I have to be. Just be handy in case I stumble. I shall be much more accomplished to-morrow; this third leg of mine isn't really broken-in yet." She reached the couch in safety, and collapsed upon it with a sigh of relief.

"There!—I did it! Just lift the old ankle up for me, my dear, and put that horrid implement where I can't see it—not out of my reach, though. I may feel the need of exercise later on."

"I don't think you ought to feel any such thing," said Robin, much concerned, although it was impossible not to laugh at the cheerful sufferer. "See, there's a little bell on your table, Mrs. Lane: do ring if you want anything. I shall be just round the corner."

"What are you going to do?"

"Thin my turnips; they're crowding each other out of the ground."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Lane, looking at her respectfully. "You and your mother are people of many activities. I wish you would sit down and be restful for a few minutes: I know I saw you pass my window at five o'clock this morning."

"Very likely," Robin said, smiling. "I hope I didn't disturb you, though."

"No: I was awake. Do sit down: I know I'll need something in about two minutes—I

don't remember yet what it is, but it will come to me! So it would be a pity if you went. That's right; now I can feel more restful myself. Tell me, why do you and your mother live in this big place alone? I know I'm very inquisitive, but I was born so."

"Well, we must live somewhere," Robin laughed. "And Uncle Donald left the place to Mother. He was an old widower, and he hadn't anyone else to leave it to—that's why we got it."

"And did he live here alone?"

"Yes, but for a housekeeper. He bought the place very cheaply: of course, he didn't use it all, but it was so cheap he didn't mind that. Uncle Donald never could resist a bargain. He used to buy things at sales, just because they were cheap; the house is full of queer old things he picked up." Robin grinned. "I was the worst bargain he ever made!"

"Did he get you cheaply?"

"He got me for nothing, but he thought I was dear at any price. It was mostly my hair, I think: it had a most irritating effect upon him. Goodness knows, it's burden enough to carry a flame-coloured head through life, without one's uncles objecting to it. I thought it should make me an object of sympathy, but Uncle Donald seemed to fancy that the sympathy should be given to him!"

Mrs. Lane chuckled delightedly.

"Then you didn't get on very well?"

"Well—not exactly," said Robin, demurely. "We disapproved of each other. I could have put up with that, but I couldn't stand the way he used to speak to Mother. He really wasn't a nice old man, Mrs. Lane. You would have said so yourself!"

"He doesn't sound nice," said Mrs. Lane. "But I like his house. Don't you and your mother find it very lonely, though? I can imagine being happy here for a few weeks—but to live here! I should want more civilization and fewer cows!"

"Oh, we're never lonely. There is too much to do, and we're so glad to be together. You see, I was away at school for two years, and we both hated that." She jumped up, suddenly, as her mother appeared, bearing a tray. "Mother, you ought to have called me to carry that!"

"I thought you were in the garden—but I'm very glad to find you sitting down," said Mrs. Hurst, smiling at her. "Just a cup of eleven o'clock tea, Mrs. Lane. I hope Robin has been looking after you."

"Excellently—and I have been shamelessly keeping her from her work. But she begins so early!"

"Indeed she does—too early. I was just going to call you in for your tea, Robin."

"Do have it out here with me," begged Mrs. Lane.

Mrs. Hurst twinkled.

"I'm not sure that that would be correct behaviour," she said. "Is it done?—the farm-workers intruding on the guest—?"

"Don't be horrid!" pleaded the guest. "I am an invalid, and I need special treatment. Robin, dear, do bring your Mother's tea and your own, and let us have a party. Cheerful

companionship is what my ankle needs.”

“But—Madam’s luncheon?” laughed Mrs. Hurst, sitting down, obediently.

“Oh—lunch!” said the afflicted guest, scornfully. “Madam can eat a boiled egg. She consumes nourishment in your house at such frequent intervals that when her ankle is better she’ll only be able to waddle! You bring out to me trays loaded with food, and I strongly suspect you both of perching on the kitchen-table and dining on bread-and-butter.”

Mrs. Hurst shook her head.

“I might,” she admitted, “if it were not that I have Robin—just as Robin certainly would, but for the fact that she has me.”

“Not me!” said Robin, firmly. “I want full rations.”

“She certainly needs them, for she works very hard,” said her mother. “So I make a point of having meals properly served: it is good for us both, for it’s easy for women living alone to get into slack ways. We don’t perch on the kitchen-table; we eat very respectably, on the veranda.”

“But how nice! May I come there, too, when my silly ankle is better? I won’t ask you when Edward and Barry happen to be at home, for I know you would hate to have the whole party there—”

“I would!” Mrs. Hurst smiled, frankly.

“But when it is just we three? At home I have lunch alone every day—it suits Edward better to lunch at his club, and Barry is at school. I hate the sight of the lonely table.”

“We should like to have you very much, if you can bear lunching with people in working clothes. No human power can get Robin out of breeches until the evening, and not always then!”

“I should think not,” said Robin, warmly. “Fancy getting into a frock when one has to feed pigs!”

Mrs. Lane shuddered delicately.

“I don’t know how you do it—and manage to remain so nice!” she said.

“Oh, it’s all fun,” Robin answered. “I haven’t yet managed to see the fun of skinning rabbits, but it has to be done: no doubt the humour of it will strike me in time. Mrs. Lane, when you are better, aren’t you going out with your menfolk? You’d have an awfully good time!”

Again the guest shuddered.

“My dear,” she said, confidentially, “I was never made for the country. I can be quite happy while my men-folk are enjoying themselves, so long as they don’t ask me to join them: I simply loathe a gun, and as for dangling a worm on a fishing-rod, nothing bores me more, unless it is casting a fly, which I find actively irritating—cast as I will, the abominable insect never goes in the right place! I think your veranda is delightful, as long as no one asks me to look at the scenery or to gaze at live cows or chickens—or pigs! All, to my mind, are better in their inanimate forms. You won’t ask me to admire ducklings, will you, Robin, dear?”

“Never—unless cooked!” said Robin, laughing.

“Oh, then I can admire them whole-heartedly. What an understanding child you are! No—I really don’t want my ankle to recover too quickly: then I can lie here with an easy mind, read and write, and realize that civilization is really not far off whenever I see a motor crawling painfully along that awful track below. I can also be devoutly thankful that I am not in it! Life is full of compensations to the injured, I find—especially in a place like Hill Farm.”

“It is very cheering that you can take it that way,” said Mrs. Hurst, smiling at the merry, mischievous face—there were times when it seemed ridiculous to think that Mrs. Lane was really the mother of a boy of fifteen. “I hope your husband and Barry are as happy.”

“My dear, they’re in ecstasies! Edward says he has never been so delighted with a place—as for Barry, he shot two rabbits yesterday and caught three trout and an eel, and apparently life has nothing more to offer him. We are only haunted by a fear that you will find we give you too much trouble, and send us back to that appalling hotel!”

Mrs. Hurst laughed outright.

“Why, you’re no trouble at all! Dr. Lane brings in all his game ready prepared for the table—I wonder does he dream how Robin and I bless him for it!—and as for you, we give you a bell which you never dream of ringing. I caught your husband chopping wood yesterday, much to my horror. He wasn’t in the least impressed by my protests—in fact, he sent me away, and he and Barry brought the wood in, and filled the box!”

“Don’t dream of interfering with his pastimes!” said his wife. “He chops wood at home when he has had an unusually aggravating patient—it seems to work off his pent-up feelings.”

“I hope he has not any feelings of that kind here,” spoke Mrs. Hurst, with some anxiety.

“Oh, no—it’s just the joy of living, in this case: it has to find expression somewhere. Barry works his off by singing in his bath, and as his voice has not quite finished cracking, the effect is blithe, but peculiar. We’re just a very fortunate family, Mrs. Hurst, and we hope you’ll keep us a month!”

Robin rose with an air of determination.

“In that case,” she said, briskly, “I’ve simply *got* to go and thin those turnips!”

CHAPTER VIII

MAKING FRIENDS

"WHAT are those things?" asked Barry, lounging at the shed doorway, hands in pockets.

"Rabbit-skins," answered Robin, shortly. She was kneeling by an open box, packing what looked like piles of envelopes of parchment.

"Don't look much like rabbits."

"I don't suppose our skins would look much like us if they were pulled off inside out," Robin responded, grimly practical. "Ten—eleven—twelve!" She tied a string round the bundle she held, made a note on a piece of paper, and proceeded to count a fresh dozen.

"Where'd you get them?"

"Shot them." Robin looked ruefully at a much-punctured skin which had apparently been shot at too close quarters, hesitated a moment, and then, with reluctance, decided to reject it. Barry sniggered.

"Gave him the whole cartridge, didn't you? Did he sit still while you walked up and potted him?"

"Yes—ours always do. Haven't you noticed? I thought that was how you managed to shoot the two you got."

Barry flushed. He was grimly aware of the number of cartridges he had expended. Apparently this provoking farm-girl knew something about it, too. He decided to pursue the matter no further.

"What do you do with the skins?"

"Send them to Melbourne."

"What—are they worth anything? We never keep ours."

"Don't suppose you do," said Robin, carelessly. Her tone classed Barry finally among the people who toil not, neither do they spin: and somehow, Barry fully understood that it was not a compliment.

"Never thought of it," he responded, equally carelessly. "Who gets yours ready for you?"

"Myself. Seven—eight—nine," counted Robin.

"You don't skin rabbits?"

"Yes, I do. Why not?"

"Didn't think it was a girl's job, that's all." Barry whittled a stick with an unconscious air. "Of course, I suppose country girls are different."

"How do you mean different?"

"Oh, well, town girls simply couldn't do jobs like that."

"Because they wouldn't know how?"

"Partly. They wouldn't like it, either."

“Well, country girls don’t exactly revel in it,” responded Robin. “But we don’t make a silly fuss about doing necessary things. We’ve got more important things to think of than town girls have.”

Barry sniggered again.

“That’s a good one,” he said. “I’d like some of the girls I know to hear you. They’d be amused.”

“They’d be welcome to their amusement, poor things!” said Robin, in a tone of lofty pity. “By the way, do you mind moving out of the light? Thanks—eleven—twelve.” She tied up a new dozen, and Barry felt the warm indignation of a very small boy who has been told to run away and play while older people work. He took up a position on the other side of the wide doorway, whistling more vigorously.

“Ever been in Town?” he asked.

“Oh, yes—now and then. Why?”

“I was thinking it would be rather a surprise to you, in some ways.”

“It is,” said Robin, with surprising meekness. “Awfully exciting, crossing the streets, don’t you think? I get terribly scared.”

Barry assumed the patronizing air of a complete man of the world.

“I suppose you would,” he said. “All the country people do. Awfully funny to see them at Show time—they always get on the wrong trams, and try to talk to the drivers.”

“Nearly as funny as the Town people out at the Show,” said Robin. “Ever seen them trying to understand a disc-plough? And they talk about a horse’s back-foot.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” queried Barry, unwisely.

“Well—if you don’t know. . . .” Robin smiled with extreme sweetness, and packed another dozen.

Barry pondered uneasily for a moment, and decided to seek information on the matter from a more sympathetic source. He sought to change the subject, but no inspiration presented itself except rabbit-skins.

“How d’you get those things into that flat shape?”

“Stretch them on bent wires. There are some hanging up,” said Robin, nodding towards a corner of the shed, where skins hung in a dismal row.

“Must need a lot of wires. Do you buy them ready-made?”

“No—catch us wasting money that way! Danny made me those.”

“Oh—that big lout from over at the next farm?”

The gunpowder stored beneath Robin’s red thatch exploded suddenly. Barry, had he not been somewhat overwhelmed by the concussion, might have congratulated himself on having drawn blood at last.

“Don’t you talk like that!” she said, sharply. “I’ve got to be polite to you, ’cause your mother and father are so nice, but if you think you can sneer at our friends you’re jolly well mistaken, Mr. Barry Lane! Danny a lout, indeed! Danny’s got more sense in his little finger than you, or any other town boy, have in your whole body! He could show you the way about everything that really matters, only he wouldn’t be seen wasting his time over

you!" She whirled past him, scarlet with anger, and left him to digest her words.

"Whew-w!" whistled Barry. "I put my foot well in that time, didn't I?" His dark skin had flushed hotly. "Scissors, can't she flare up! And all over that big farm-chap. He looks a lout, anyhow. But I suppose, living in the country, she doesn't notice it." He pondered the matter rather uneasily, realizing, somewhat to his own disgust, that he had transgressed his own code. When you were staying with people you did not abuse their friends. Apparently, that was what he had done.

He strolled round to the front of the house, disconsolately. Dinner was over: before him stretched a long and lonely afternoon. The mail, arriving in the middle of the day, had brought with it a request to Dr. Lane for a paper on some abstruse medical subject for a learned society: the doctor, groaning heavily, had shut himself up in his room, to write until evening. Barry was left to his own resources, and at the moment they seemed to him insufficient.

Mrs. Lane was on her couch. The injury to her ankle was a week old, but she declared that the joint still needed rest, although, to the unprejudiced eye, it looked much like the other. She greeted her son with a quick little smile. He sat down on the edge of the veranda near her.

"Bored, Barry-boy?"

"Oh, no. I'll go fishing, I think."

"Then what is wrong?"

Barry grinned at her, recognizing the detective eye. They told each other most things.

"I've been cheap," he said.

"And nasty?"

He nodded. "Yes, a bit."

"To Robin?"

He nodded again.

"Want to tell me?"

"No, I don't think so, Mother. Not worth it. But I came to the conclusion I was cheap."

"When that happens," said little Mrs. Lane, looking like a wise mother-bird, "the only thing to do is to get back to the level where one belongs. Otherwise one remains marked-down, like the damaged goods at a sale. You'll find a way. I would go out, if I were you, and show Father you can catch trout without him." She smiled at him.

"Right-oh!" he said, rising. "I'll get my kit."

He came out again presently, in a scout shirt and knickers, with stout wading boots, looking younger than in his customary long trousers.

"I had never thought to see your knees again," said his mother. "I thought they had disappeared into trousers for ever!"

"Father knew what he was about when he made me bring shorts," said Barry. "They dry in no time after wading—and you can't fish these creeks without wading half your time. Great pair of knees, aren't they, Mother?"

"They're like a cross-word puzzle, with scratches. How do you manage to knock them

about so?"

"Oh—blackberries, and wild raspberries, and prickly-Moses, and other affectionate plants," he said. "They all seem to cling to me. I'm as clumsy as a bear in the bush—never manage to dodge anything. Father says one doesn't develop the sense of moving in the bush all at once, so I can only hope it will come."

"But you like it, Barry?"

The boy's dark face lit up suddenly.

"Oh, I love it," he said. "It bored me stiff that first day, but now it grows on me more each time I'm out in it. Father's an awfully good mate, you know: he shows me ever so many things I'd never see for myself. He's jolly patient too—I make a fool of myself in heaps of ways, but he never seems to mind."

"He tells me you are developing a good deal of common sense with your gun."

Barry beamed.

"Does he? I'm jolly glad. I know I did a lot of idiotic things at first. I nearly hit him the second night—did he tell you, Mother?"

Mrs. Lane repressed a shudder. But her voice was quite calm.

"No, he didn't tell me, son. I don't suppose he would tell me that sort of thing. Was it—very near?"

"Oh, well, I hit a tree about ten yards from him. But that wasn't the point—it might just as well have been Father, because I didn't know that the blessed thing was going off. I thought it wasn't cocked." He looked at her ruefully, and found her smile very comforting.

"As you didn't hit him, it was probably a very good thing it happened," she said. "It would teach you a good deal, Barry-boy."

"That's just what it did," he said. "I thought I knew all about it before, and it just showed me what an utter fool I was. Mother, I don't think I'd ever be that particular kind of idiot again. I just shook for about ten minutes. And he was such a brick about it. I was scared he'd say I mustn't use a gun again, but instead he said that was just the time to go on using it—so that I wouldn't be likely to forget. I guess I won't, either!"—and Barry set his jaw in a hard line.

"Your grandfather believed in that," said Mrs. Lane. "When I was quite small—yes, I know I am small now, but I was still smaller then!—I used to ride a great grey mare on which I felt rather like a pea sitting on an elephant. I fell off her one day, and was sure I was killed—I believed grandfather thought so, too, until he had picked me up and discovered nothing worse than bruises. Then he caught the grey mare and put me on her at once, while I howled vigorous protests, assuring him that I would fall off again at once. But he only laughed, and said, 'Not you, Milly!' "

"And did you?" Barry asked, much interested.

"Certainly not. I stuck on, and we galloped home in triumph. And I rode that mare for years, and never had another toss: more than that, I was never afraid again. And you never will be in doubt again as to whether your gun is cocked or not, Barry—you'll know it is not cocked unless you want to fire!"

"I believe I won't," he said. "But I won't be cock-sure, Mother! Gracious, wasn't that

brilliant, for me, and I never meant to say it, either! I think I'd better go fishing, or I may make more puns." He took off his cap as she blew him a kiss, and went striding down the hill, his rod over his shoulder.

Luck was kind to him at first: he hooked a trout in a long stretch of rippling water, and managed to land it after five minutes' highly unscientific play, trembling all the while for fear of making a fatal mistake; quite certain that no rod could stand the strain of being bent like a whip, with a leaping, fighting fish at its delicate end. When he finally managed to net it, after two unsuccessful attempts, and had killed it with a swift, merciful blow, as his father had taught him, he laid the still-twitching body on the grass and fairly gloated. The sunlight rippled on the golden-brown sides, spotted with scarlet. It was a fine fish, nearly two pounds. Barry felt that he had made a definite step towards manhood.

"Lucky for me you were hooked so firmly, old chap," he said. "I'd have lost you for a certainty if you'd been lightly hooked. Golly, I am glad I got you!" He cleaned the trout and stowed it in his bag.

After that the goddess of Luck removed her face from him, and he fished pool after pool in vain: growing somewhat impatient as the afternoon wore on, and no new capture had gone to join his first prey. Still, it was jolly in the quiet stillness of the bush, where only bird-calls broke the stillness: even if the fish were shy there was fresh excitement in trying each promising bit of water, and always failure was solaced by the comforting weight of the bag—he could go home and show them that a town boy could hook and kill a decent trout unaided. The red-haired girl evidently didn't think much of townsfolk. Well, he would show her! And then he grew a little less cheerful, for when the red-haired girl was concerned Barry was still feeling cheap.

He was thinking of her when suddenly he came upon her, as he rounded a scrub-covered bend. Ahead was a wide pool with a little rushy island in its midst: he had fished it with his father, and had looked forward to getting to it again, for it was a good pool. But Robin had got there first: a fine trout on the bank beside her, almost as big a fish as his own, showed that she had not wasted her time. As he came, she flicked her spinner across the water again—and uttered an exclamation of annoyance as it caught in a little bush in the island.

Robin tried to twitch it free, but it was evidently held strongly, and she dared not risk breaking her rod. She laid it down on the bank and pulled and jerked the line—all to no purpose. The bush swayed, but the hooks of the spinner clung closely.

"Well, you are a pig!" said Robin, heartily. She glanced round and saw Barry.

"That's hard luck," he said. "What will you do?"

"Wade, I suppose," she answered, shortly.

"Easier to break the line, wouldn't it?"

Robin looked her scorn of this suggestion.

"That's a new spinner, and the best cast I've got," she said. "I can't afford to waste tackle." She turned from him and looked doubtfully at the water.

"Is it deep?" he asked.

"I'm not sure; it might be better to swim than to wade. It might be snaggy—you never

can tell, in these pools, what snags may have floated down and sunk. Oh, I'll chance wading: if it gets too deep I'll have to go home and get bathing-togs and swim."

"I'll swim over for you," he offered eagerly.

"It's all right, thanks," was Robin's stiff reply. Evidently she had not forgotten their encounter after lunch: she would not accept any favour from him. She waded out into the pool, while Barry watched her uneasily. The water, swift and brown, seemed to him altogether too deep for wading—especially for a girl.

"I wish you'd let me swim," he called. "Here, I'll get my boots off: it doesn't matter if I get wet."

He sat down on the bank and unlaced his boots hurriedly, heedless of the fact that Robin had not answered. The socks followed the boots, and he stood barefooted on the bank, again begging her to come back. But Robin's "red-haired streak," as her schoolfellows had called it, was uppermost, although she began to realize that the water was too deep for wading. Had she been alone, she would have turned back to the bank: but not before the supercilious youngster who had called good old Danny a lout. "I'll give it a yard more," she muttered to herself. "It may not get any deeper than it is now."

A stone turned under her foot. She lurched forward uncertainly in the knee-deep water, saving herself from falling only by taking a long step. Her foot went down—down: there was no bottom anywhere, and no drawing back. She gave a little choked cry as the water closed over her red head. It was a cry that expressed exasperation more than fear.

She kicked downwards as she sank, to send herself up to the surface, and something closed like a vice upon her foot. Something that held and clung, tantalizing her with a swing that felt as though it were yielding, but never releasing its grip. She knew what it was, as she struggled in sick fear: knew how the old, water-logged gum boughs lie along the bottom, spikes driven into the mud holding the crooked, forked limbs that swing and sway with the current, never released until they rot away and mingle with the stream. She knew how little time she had to fight. Already her lungs seemed bursting with the effort of holding her breath: already her limbs were heavy and helpless. And the grip was no less tight.

On the bank, Barry had uttered an exclamation of dismay as Robin disappeared. He was not alarmed, for she had spoken easily of swimming: still, he knew that no girl likes an involuntary ducking. He waited for the red head to bob up again, prepared to shout sympathetically to her. Fifteen seconds went by: thirty: and suddenly the boy found his heart beginning to pump like an engine.

"She's been under nearly a minute!" he muttered. "Something's wrong." He blessed the impulse that had made him kick off his boots, as he dived into the pool.

The water was muddy with Robin's struggling, but he came upon her quickly. Sinking down, his hands encountered the imprisoned foot, and he grasped the bough. One of his feet, as he kicked, found a moment's purchase upon another snag; it held as he put all his force into a desperate tug, slipping off just as the bough broke short at the fork. An inch less, and it would still have gripped Robin's boot. As it was, Barry saw her float slowly upwards.

He was after her like a flash and drew her into the shallow water: she had not lost

consciousness, but was capable of only the feeblest paddling. They reached the bank, and she lay down on the grass, still gasping.

“Swallow any water?” he asked, anxiously.

She shook her head. Under water, Barry Lane was entirely capable: on land he became a rather scared boy, without the faintest idea of what to do for a half-drowned lady in distress. So he rubbed her hands very hard, and uttered disjointed words of encouragement, such as “Buck up, old chap!”—which perhaps was as effective as anything he could have done. At any rate, Robin presently sneezed violently, gave a feeble grin, and sat up.

“I was nearly a goner that time!” she remarked, inelegantly. Her voice shook, and Barry frowned.

“Better lie down again,” he counselled. “I vote you keep quiet and I’ll run up and fetch Father—and some brandy.”

“No—I’m all right. At least I will be in a minute or two,” she shuddered. “Ugh, it was awful down there—I thought I’d never get free. Never would, either, if you hadn’t come. However did you do it?”

Barry grinned feebly.

“Oh, it was easy—I was born in Queensland, and I could swim under water almost before I could walk. We used to have competitions to see who could stay under longest and pick up most things. Only this water was so jolly muddy that it was hard to make out anything.” He sat back on his heels and looked at her. “Sure you’re all right? Golly, you gave me a fright!”

“I’m all right, but I’m awfully cold. I think I’d better move.”

“Let’s help you up,” Barry said. He hauled her ungentle to her feet, and she promptly staggered and caught at his shoulder. In a moment her head steadied.

“Now I’m better,” she said. “I’ll just walk home slowly.” She turned, but stopped as he moved towards the creek. “What are you going to do?”

“Just get your spinner,” he said, carelessly. “You go on—I’ll catch you up with the rods.”

“You aren’t going back into that beastly creek!”

“I’m not going to waste your tackle,” he said, laughing. “Don’t worry—I’ll look out for snags.” He swam across carefully, keeping his body almost on the surface, and freed the spinner from the clutches of the bush. In a moment he was back on the bank beside her.

“I say—do go on!” he protested. “I’ve got to get my boots on, and you’ll certainly get pneumonia or something if you stand there with your teeth chattering.”

She stared at him without speaking for an instant. Then she turned and walked unsteadily away, while Barry forced his wet feet into his boots and gathered up the rods and fish. He caught her up in the next paddock.

“Feel all right?”

“Oh, yes—right enough. Just a bit shaky, but nothing to matter.”

“You want a good rub-down and a hot drink,” counselled Barry. “I hope your mother won’t be scared.”

“She won’t, ’cause she’ll see I’m alive,” said Robin, with something of her usual twinkle. It was a washy twinkle, but Barry was relieved to see that it was there. “But we’re a lovely pair, to be coming home!”

“Better wet than dead!” grinned her dripping companion. “And anyhow, we’ve brought home our breakfast!”

“Yes, and you saved my tackle. That was awfully decent of you. You saved my life, too, but you might have felt you had to do that—but there was no need for you to go back after that spinner. I—I’m just awfully obliged to you.” The speech was an effort, and she hurried on, squelching in her wet boots.

Barry might reasonably have felt bewildered at this peculiar distribution of gratitude, but he saw nothing to criticize. He was oppressed by the necessity of making a speech himself.

“I was no end of a swine this morning,” he said, flushing. “What I said about Danny, I mean. It was a low-down thing to say—I’m sorry, Robin.”

She flashed a smile at him.

“That’s all right,” she said, with embarrassment. “I was rather a pig, too. I won’t be again, if you won’t.”

“Rather not!” said Barry. They squelched companionably towards the house.

CHAPTER IX

THE MERRI CREEK FALLS

"I THOUGHT, a week ago," said Dr. Lane, "that my son and your daughter intended to remain for ever in a state of armed neutrality. They bristled at sight of each other, like two terriers, and politeness was all that restrained them from combat. There were even indications that the politeness was wearing thin. And look at them now!"

He waved a hand towards the little flat below the house, where Robin and Barry, mounted on ponies borrowed from Mr. Merritt, had erected a brush hurdle and were taking turns in jumping. The ponies were awkward, and the riders not highly skilled; when they succeeded in making the steeds face the hurdle they did not always get them over; when they got them over they rarely remained in the saddle. These minor defects did not chill the ardour of the riders. Shouts of laughter echoed up the hill, mingled with mutual comments that lacked nothing of frankness. Beyond doubt, the partnership was firmly established.

"This seems to be the result of impromptu mixed bathing," said Mrs. Hurst, laughing, as her eyes dwelt on Robin. "I still shiver at the thought of my girl's danger—but I am not altogether sorry it happened. They are very happy together. And it is so good for Robin to have a friend. She did not realize how lonely she was."

"She didn't suggest loneliness. I think the companionship between you was very delightful, and she will find it so again when Barry has gone. But youth calls to youth. As for Barry—it has always been our regret that he has no sister. To be friends with a girl like your Robin is very good for him."

"Barry doesn't in the least regard Robin as a girl," said Mrs. Lane, from the couch where she was generally to be found, in spite of the fact both silk-clad ankles were equally slender. "He told me this morning that the best thing about her was that she was just like a boy. 'No silly girl-tricks!' said Barry. 'I can't stand girls!' And he was quite sure he meant it."

"And yet he has many little chivalrous ways with her that he certainly would not show for another boy," Mrs. Hurst remarked. "I do not think he even knows he has them. But they are there, all the same."

"I'm glad to hear that you have noticed that," said Dr. Lane. "I thought I had, too: but I was afraid it might be only desire to think so on my part!"

"Oh, no; I have seen a dozen little proofs. Why, I found him cleaning her boots to-day!"

"That is indeed a proof, for it is hard enough to make him clean his own when he is at home," said Mrs. Lane, laughing. "When Barry cleans a boot he declines to perceive that it has any back. Oh, look!—his pony jumped the hurdle without knocking it down, and he didn't fall off! My Barry will be a jockey before he leaves here."

"I only hope we shall return him to you undamaged," said Mrs. Hurst.

For it had been settled that Barry should stay another month at Hill Farm. Business

was calling Dr. Lane to Queensland, and his wife insisted that he should not go alone: but Barry hated the hot weather of the North, and was so happy in the bush that his parents had begged Mrs. Hurst to keep him. Barry himself welcomed the suggestion with delight; anything was better than to grill for weeks in Brisbane in midsummer; and Hill Farm, where he had settled down as though it had always been his home, was a very lucky alternative.

The partnership between him and Robin had deepened into a firm friendship. Barry's feeling of natural superiority as a boy had quickly vanished before the girl's leadership in all bushcraft. He was a clumsy new chum where she trod with the sure, quick step of one who has entered into her kingdom. The dense scrub that puzzled him was to her an open book, for she had that instinctive knowledge of direction and of unconscious observation that marks the bushman born. It irritated Barry, now and then, that she should know so much. "For, after all, you haven't been here so awfully long yourself," he would say. Robin could not explain it. "I feel as if I'd been born knowing the bush," she would answer, half apologetically. "But you're getting on splendidly, Barry, so don't worry."

Already the month for which the Lanes had asked had gone by, and Dr. Lane was, as he said, "screwing-out" a few more days before he and his wife must go North. It had been a very happy month; everything had gone smoothly, the Lanes had been the most cheerful and considerate of paying-guests, and Mrs. Hurst marvelled at the ease with which she had managed her big household. There was satisfaction in that, as there was in the thought of the comfortable little balance mounting up in the bank: solid satisfaction, too, in the knowledge that she and Robin had made good friends. The Lanes declared that nothing should prevent their visit being a yearly one, so long as Hill Farm would have them: they had exacted a half-promise that Robin and her mother should visit them in Melbourne. The vision of the future, when Robin must go to the city to learn typing, lost half its terrors for the anxious mother now that she knew that her child would not be friendless.

On the flat below, the riders decided that their ponies had had enough tuition in jumping—perhaps induced to this conclusion by their own bruises. They came cantering up, passed the house with a gay shout, and presently appeared on the veranda, flushed and hot.

"What have you done with the ponies?" asked Mrs. Hurst.

"Taken them back to their own paddock: Mr. Merritt wants them to-morrow. Oh, Mother, we've had fun!"

"You seemed to be enjoying life," Dr. Lane said. "I hope the ponies enjoyed it too."

"Oh, they were quite happy. They knew ever so much more about it than we did—but we managed to get the same point of view after a while. Jumping's great sport," Barry ended.

"When you stick on?"

"Yes—or even when you don't. The grass is so thick down there it's like falling on a carpet, and if we fell off the ponies always stopped very kindly and began to feed. It must be much more disheartening to fall off and see your horse disappearing into the distance: I like them trained to pause, like these."

"I never had the luck to ride a pauser," remarked Dr. Lane. "When I quitted the saddle they invariably quitted me, at the rate of knots, and I had to walk miles before I found them. Hence, I prefer motors, which do not run away——"

"Not even down a hillside?" asked Robin, wickedly. "I knew a Buick——"

"The very thing to prove what I was saying," returned Dr. Lane. "Even when the wicked tracks of Gippsland let a good car over the edge, what does the good car do? Somersault to the bottom? Certainly not. It hastily finds a tree, and leans up against it, waiting for its master!"

"Uttering gentle bleats, to attract his attention," finished Robin, softly. "That's what I noticed about the car I mentioned. And everyone seemed so pleased with it!"

"It played us a very good trick, at all events," remarked the doctor, shaking his fist at her. "Think what a holiday we have had because it chose that spot to fall over the edge, and what a hideous time we should have had if it had gone peacefully on its way to Baroin. I refuse to hear one word against my car. But there's something else I want to consult you about, Robin. Do you know the way to the Merri Creek Falls?"

Robin knitted her brows.

"I've never been quite to the Falls," she said. "I did go a good deal of the way with a camping-party more than two years ago. We gave it up: I was young then, and they were all soft, and the going was certainly very bad. I believe there is a better track now. Why, Dr. Lane?"

"Well, I'd like to go there," he said. "A man I met fishing yesterday told me they were well worth seeing. It's a bit of a rough trip, he said, but we could do it in the day if we made an early start. I thought you and Barry and I could tackle it, if your mother were willing. I have got permission from my headquarters"—he nodded meekly towards his wife. "This fellow told me there was good fishing in the creek below the falls. He had been camping there."

"I am quite willing, but I should strongly advise against fishing," Mrs. Hurst said.

"The track is exceedingly rough; I don't think you realize what a nuisance rods would be to you on a long walk in such country: and fish, if you got them, would be an added burden on the way back."

"That sounds common-sense," said the doctor, regretfully. "Well, after all, I have had better fishing here than I ever hoped to have, so I may as well put it out of my head. But I would like to see those falls. Feel inclined, Barry?"

"My Aunt!" said Barry, eagerly. "It would be a ripping day!"

"And what about you, Robin?"

"Oh, I'm always ready for an excursion," she said. "But I warn you, it will be rougher walking than anything you have done about here. We shall have to wade the creek ever so many times; I remember we walked in the creek itself for a good way, but perhaps the track will save us that now. When would you like to go, Dr. Lane?"

"To-morrow, I thought; it's beautiful weather, and I have so few days left."

"Do you think we could get breakfast at five o'clock, Mother?" Robin asked.

"Five!" exclaimed her four hearers in various notes of horror. But Robin only smiled.

"I've tried to get to those Falls, and you haven't," she said. "I'm all for an early start, to get as far as we can before the day grows hot. We can always rest on the way—and we'll want to!"

"I'm beginning to think this is a more serious expedition than I had imagined," laughed the doctor.

"Oh, I don't know that it's serious," Robin answered. "But it *is* rough, and I warn you that I don't know any short cuts."

"Could you get lost?" demanded Mrs. Lane. "If so, I shall hang bells on all three of you before you start!"

"You wouldn't be up," said Barry, solemnly.

"I should rise to the occasion," was his mother's lofty reply. "But tell me, Robin: I am going to enter a protest if there is any fear of your being bushed."

"Oh, we can't get bushed if we stick to the creek," Robin said. "There are short cuts, I know, that make the distance much less, but of course, it wouldn't be safe to tackle them. So we must be prepared for a long day. I could get breakfast ready to-night, Mother, and pack the lunch."

"Yes: I will help you. You must all eat enormous quantities of eggs and bacon before you start—then I shall feel more easy about you," Mrs. Hurst said.

"If anyone, a month ago, had told me I could devour eggs and bacon at five o'clock in the morning, I should have thought him mad," said Dr. Lane. "But I feel now that I could tackle anything that was offered me, at any hour. That's the result of Hill Farm, Mrs. Hurst!"

Even though it was almost midsummer, it was chilly enough in the deep gullies when they set out the next morning. The mists had not yet risen: ahead of them the bush was dim and mysterious, and every bough dripped with moisture. For the first few miles they were able to keep above the creek, following sheep-tracks through the hill settlers' country: they walked steadily, anxious to get as far as possible before the real fatigue of the journey began. Then they came to the last of the clearing. Before them ranged the tall rounded masses of the hills, covered with dense scrub and giant trees.

"Now we'll have to stick to the creek, unless we can find a track," Robin said.

They went down the steep hillside, and were lucky in coming upon a narrow path that followed the windings of the creek. It was not easy travelling: the track was so narrow, the greedy march of the bush so swift, that the undergrowth brushed their faces, and often they were forced to hold it apart while they forced their way through. Sometimes it curved sharply round the butts of huge trees, leaving only the barest footing, where one went, clinging to any stray shoot of musk or hazel as a support: sometimes it dipped into waterworn gullies where brambles disputed every yard of the way. But still, it was a track; and Robin, at least, was duly grateful for it. Below them the creek sang and rippled on its way: occasionally they caught glimpses of the brown water, gurgling over its boulder-strewn bed. But for the most part the scrub undergrowth hemmed them in, and they went in single file, seeing nothing but the dense green wall on either side.

It was past nine o'clock when the track suddenly ended in an enormous fallen tree, the butt of which, six feet high, made a grey wall before them. Its roots, now intertwined with

scrub, stretched down to the creek. They followed along its great length, and the pale shadow of a track seemed to them to stretch away northward into the bush. But Robin, looking at it, shook her head.

"It might be our track," she said. "And then, again, it mightn't. I don't like trying experiments in this sort of country."

"No experiments for me, thank you," Dr. Lane said, briskly. "The creek is definite: we'll stick to it." He looked at his companions. "How are you two feeling?"

"First-rate," said Robin and Barry in chorus.

"That's good. Still, I think we'll have twenty minutes' spell, not because we are tired, but because the wise man rests before he is tired. Let us climb round this large vegetable which is blocking the way and get down to the creek."

They fought their way round the fallen tree—it took them five minutes to do it: and so came to where the brown water gurgled and chattered over a bed of huge rounded stones. Barry lay down with his face in a pool, and drank as a dog drinks, inelegantly, but thoroughly.

"My word, that's good!" he said. "Have some: I left plenty for you!"

"That was kind of you," said his father. He produced from his pocket little collapsible aluminium cups, and screwed them up, offering one to Robin.

"These are handy things," he said. "Sometimes they collapse at the wrong moment, and it is very awkward, especially if you are drinking coffee in a railway carriage. Here, we should probably enjoy it, so they won't collapse. Sandwiches—yes, please Robin, I think that is a very good idea."

"I made a little parcel for our first halt," said Robin. "We ought to have lunch at the Falls, if we have any luck."

"I could eat an enormous lunch now—and at the Falls, too!" said Barry. "This is a hungry stroll we're taking!"

"Supplies wouldn't hold out," said Robin, practically.

They lay on the soft grass just above the water's edge and nibbled their sandwiches economically, to make them last longer. Below them a great veil of maidenhair fern trailed downward to the stream that washed its fronds: above towered the tall brown shafts of tree-ferns, their spreading crests mingling with sarsaparilla and clematis. Just across the stream stood a clump of Christmas-bush, already a starry mass of white. There were birds everywhere among the bushes, happy and unafraid; bell-birds chimed ceaselessly in the tree-tops far above them. Once, a wallaby hopped upon an open space on the farther bank, looked at them serenely for a moment, and then hopped back into cover.

"You were right, Robin," Dr. Lane said. "We have not seen any bush like this—nothing so quiet and utterly undisturbed. It makes one feel oneself an intruder."

"We'd see lyre-birds if we could stay here long enough without moving," Robin said. "Look—there's a platypus!" She pointed to a tiny promontory across the creek, where a queer flat creature, furry and with a bill like a duck's, paused for a moment before sliding head-first into the water.

"First I've ever seen," commented Barry. "My word this is a jolly place! I wish we

could have a camp here.”

“We’ll think about it next year, when we come back,” said the doctor. “Meanwhile, I’m afraid we had better move: we don’t know how rough the going will be after this.”

They were soon after to prove the melancholy truth of the foreboding contained in this remark. There was no track at all to be found near the creek, and the banks were so overgrown that each yard of progress had to be fought. So they took to the water, a slow process, since it was necessary to follow the creek through all its windings: a laborious one, because most of the way was over smooth and slippery stones, where each foothold had to be tested. All were wearing rough spiked boots, which gave them more security in treading; but they also made walking tiring, when heavy with water. The creek rarely rose above Barry’s knees: but it was swift, the power of the current increasing as they mounted higher and higher into the hills; and it was hard to gauge the depth of the pools. There was more than one moment when Dr. Lane asked himself doubtfully if they should give up the attempt to reach the Falls.

The children, however, scouted the suggestion indignantly. To have come so far, and then to turn back, seemed to them an unthinkable idea.

“I had to do it once, and I’ve been sorry ever since,” Robin declared. “And I wasn’t fourteen then. We can’t be so very far from the Falls now.” She peered ahead into the dim tunnel of greenery—it was long since they had seen the sun, shut in by the trees as they were. “Look—I believe it is a little clearer ahead. We might have another try at walking on the bank.”

“Let’s see,” said Barry, eagerly. “Gee, but my feet are sore from these old stones!”

They waded on as quickly as they could. As Robin had thought, they came upon a break in the dense wall of undergrowth. There were signs of old axe-marks on some of the trees, and many felled stumps, now rotten and overgrown with creepers and moss.

“Probably some old prospector lived about here ages ago,” said Robin. “He’d have to clear a way down to the water. This is most likely his old track.”

“Did they ever find gold here?”

“No—at least, only the merest traces. But there are always fossickers about in the hills who believe they will hit on gold some day. Some people think that these hills hold all sorts of things—marble, and limestone, and valuable clays, and even oil. I suppose they’ll be discovered by-and-bye.”

“What a lark if we found an oil-well on your place!” said Barry. “How does one look for oil, Father?”

“Other people do the looking, and then they make you buy shares, my boy,” said his father, gloomily. “I’ve lost more than I care to think of in that way. The last oil-well in which I was interested spouted only hot water instead of oil, and so, much of my hard-earned money went up in steam. I’ve given up buying things I can’t see. Let us try the old prospector’s clearing, and see if it leads us to anything. We won’t go far from the creek, though.”

The clearing was so overgrown that to speak of it as cleared was only to distinguish it from the impenetrable scrub on either hand. Still, it was possible to find a way through it; and presently, to their delight, they came again upon the track, and saw, through a rift in

the timber, that they were not far from the head of the gully where the creek came down. They forgot fatigue as they hurried onward, making light of the many difficulties in the way: anything was better than wading over the smooth round stones that hurt the feet so cruelly.

Presently, as they went, a sound came to their ears: a low boom which at first they took for the southing of a far-off wind coming across the tree-tops. It grew louder as they advanced, almost unnoticed by them: one does not lend a very attentive ear to sounds, when one is fighting every step of an uphill climb. But at length, in a moment when the going was easier, it suddenly brought Dr. Lane to a standstill.

“By Jove!” he said, with a touch of excitement unusual in him. “I believe that is the noise of the Falls!”

They halted, listening. The sound was a dull, steady roar that never varied. Wind and sea have light and shade in their stormy note, but falling water comes with a ceaseless and unalterable boom: a roar that has lasted since time began, and will last down the ages when the little races of men are dust. There was no doubting the sound now.

Barry gave a joyful cry and dashed ahead. They heard him shout again as they hurried after him.

The path ended in a wide space clear of trees. On their left, the creek had broadened out until it was a great pool; a whirlpool of wild water that boiled and foamed and eddied, before it rushed away over the stony bed between the walls of scrub. Behind it the hill rose sharp and rugged, a mass of grey rocks, where mosses and lichen clung, and stunted bushes struggled for a foothold. A huge, rough mass showed near the top, fifty feet above them: and over it, in a smooth and glistening curve, lit by a dancing rainbow where the sun’s rays struck it, poured the waters of the Fall.

Half-way down, the wonderful wall of shining water was broken by a fang of rock that jutted from the hillside. The fall split upon it, shooting out on either side, to meet again, lower down, so that the united curtain flung its whole weight into the boiling waters of the pool. But where it was cleft by the jutting rock, a dancing curtain of spray hung like a misty veil before it, catching the rainbow light from above and multiplying it into a myriad gleams of flying colour. One might fancy one saw all the fairies of air and water dancing in the opal mist.

“Oh!” said Robin—“oh!” She sat down on the grass, hugging her knees, and stared up as though she were worshipping. It was long before any of them spoke.

“Well!” said Dr. Lane at last—leaning near her, because of the roar of falling water. “It was worth the walk, don’t you think, kiddies?”

They nodded: there was awe on each young face.

“Come along,” Dr. Lane said. “We can’t afford to wait too long, considering the track home; and the billy must be boiled. Let us get a little farther back, where we can watch the Falls and hear ourselves speak as well.”

But no one seemed to have much wish to speak: the wonder of the Falls held them all silent. They boiled their billy and ate lunch under a big tree at the edge of the scrub, saying little, but watching the dancing mist-rainbows on the face of the water, and the splendid curve above, like polished black marble. Robin sighed heavily when at length Dr.

Lane gave the word to march.

“Well, I was always sorry that I didn’t see it,” she said. “But it was worth waiting for. It’s like a dream, to take home for keeps. If only I could make Mother see it too!”

“We don’t know what is going to happen next year,” Dr. Lane said, wisely. “If we managed to camp where we halted to-day—and found a man who could tell us more about the track—and got the two Mothers into hard condition by judicious exercise—who knows what we may not arrive at! At any rate we’ll have a try. Red Robin!”

“Barry, I think your Father is the nicest ever!” said Robin, solemnly.

“Tell us news!” was Barry’s lofty response.

CHAPTER X

THE HUT IN THE SCRUB

THEY were somewhat thoughtful as they turned back into the scrub: a little awed by the wonder they had seen—perhaps a little sober at the remembrance of the long, rough journey home. But there was something of triumph in Robin and Barry, for they had succeeded where others had failed. Many tourists set out each summer for the Merri Creek Falls, but the majority gave up the journey, voting no waterfall worth the trouble of getting through the forest in which this particular fall chose to hide itself. Few of the residents of the district had reached the Falls—being a busy folk with small leisure for scenery. And they had won through! It was small wonder if Robin and Barry felt a throb of exultation.

They reached the place where they had rejoined the track after their long wading in the creek. Dr. Lane halted.

“I wonder if it would not be better to keep to the track for a bit,” he said, rather doubtfully. “If we could save ourselves even half a mile of that unpleasant wading it would be something. What do you think, Robin?”

“I don’t fancy we should risk losing our way,” Robin answered. “It must be the only track, even if it seems to bend to the north; there is no settlement of any kind out here.”

“Do let’s try it for a bit,” begged Barry. “My feet won’t stand too much of those beastly stones; I’m sure I’ve sixteen blisters already!”

“Well, we can try it for a while,” Dr. Lane said.

They followed the track, which almost immediately became more definite. There were signs that it had been used; light scrub had evidently been roughly cut, and once or twice Robin, who was leading, thought that she could make out a footprint. She pulled up, presently, and pointed out a faint mark to Dr. Lane.

“Don’t you think a boot made that?”

“It looks uncommonly like it,” Dr. Lane answered. “There may be someone camped near here: a prospector, or a fishing enthusiast. It would be luck if we could find someone who could tell us if we were going out of our way.”

“It might be a track left by the man you were talking to,” Barry suggested.

“Oh, he was here last summer; no track of his would be visible by this time. That mark looked fairly new. Hullo—!” He broke off suddenly.

The path had swung sharply round a dense patch of dogwood, and they saw before them, in a little open space, a rough bark hut. It stood among a clump of wattles, the trunks of which had been used, so far as was possible, as supports. No more crazy-looking building had ever formed a home: it seemed to lean this way and that, and where the heavy slabs of iron-bark had warped under the weather it was patched with whatever material the bush afforded, and daubed with creek mud. Dr. Lane gave a low whistle.

“We seem to have found our prospector,” he said. “I hope the good man is at home.”

“Man!” said Robin, staring. “It isn’t only a man. Look there!”

She pointed to where a rude clothes-line, made of twisted stringy-bark, hung between two trees. Something fluttered from it: a woman’s dress of faded blue, patched and torn. And as they looked, a woman suddenly came round the corner of the hut, and, seeing them, cried out and ran forward.

She was a very young woman, but her face was lined and worn in a way that was not good to see. Her faded hair was strained back from a face so thin that it looked almost like a mummy’s; her eyes held a world of horror in their sunken depths. Robin gave a gasp of pity and went quickly to meet her, and the poor soul put out a trembling hand, touching her sleeve with a kind of incredulous delight.

“A girl!” she muttered. “I thought I’d never see a woman again!”

“What is it?” Robin asked gently. “Can we help you?”

“I’m just desperate”—the low, strained voice could hardly be heard. “I thought no one ’ud ever come.”

“You are not alone here?” Dr. Lane asked sharply. She shook her head.

“Me husband’s there. He’s dyin’, I think—he’s been ill for weeks. We’d both have been dead pretty soon.” Then she swayed, and would have fallen, if they had not caught her. They gave her a mouthful of brandy and water, and in a minute she made herself sit up and answer questions.

Bit by bit the sorry little story came from her halting tongue—long before it was finished, Dr. Lane had gone off with long strides to the hut, feeling for his pocket medicine-case as he went. She and her husband had come to the district as “married couple” on a farm: they had heard wild stories of gold to be found by fossickers and prospectors along the Merri Creek, and when they had saved a little money they had given up their job and come out into the bush. A farmer who knew the track had brought them up on horses, a packhorse carrying what outfit and stores they had been able to buy.

From the first, bad luck had dogged them. They were of the feckless kind that should never leave a township; and the immensity and the silence of the bush, and its impenetrable nature, had filled their very souls with fear. “We hated to look at it,” she whispered—“only there wasn’t nothing else to look at.” They had managed to burn down their tent, losing a good deal of their property. It seemed that they had expected, in a vague way, to live chiefly on fish and rabbits—and had found neither easy to get. Not a speck of gold had rewarded their pitiful seeking, although they had worked together with aching backs and blistered hands, cheering each other on with visions of “striking it rich” any moment. And then, just as they realized the uselessness of their efforts, Jim, the husband, had fallen ill.

“I don’ know what was the matter with him,” she whispered. “We didn’t have no medicine—it was all burned, the little bit we had. He couldn’t eat nothing: I got a rabbit twice, an’ once I caught a fish, but he didn’t seem to fancy none.” For the last three days he had scarcely moved or spoken, and she was afraid to leave him. There was no food left: there had been none for thirty-six hours. “I knew he was dyin’,” the weak voice whispered. “I just thought I’d lie down an’ die too.”

“Robin!” The doctor’s voice was urgent, and the girl ran to him as he stood in the

doorway of the wretched hut.

“Have we any milk left?” he asked sharply.

“There is a bottle in Barry’s haversack,” she said; “and a few sandwiches we kept for the way home. Oh, and I’ve a cake of milk-chocolate. I didn’t dare offer her anything until I spoke to you. She’s starving, you know.” Her voice caught in a sob. “Is he . . . is her husband . . . dead?”

“No, but not far off. Thank goodness I had my medicine-case; and the milk may help to pull him through. But it will be touch-and-go. Get Barry to light a fire and heat some water; we’ll make some chocolate into a hot drink for her. I want all the milk for the man. Don’t give her anything solid yet.” He turned and went back into the hut.

Twenty minutes later Robin had the satisfaction of seeing a little colour coming back into the blue lips as her patient sipped the hot chocolate. She fed her with a spoon, afraid that she might drink it too quickly. The woman’s eyes had gleamed wolfishly at the sight of the drink, but she was too weak to be anything but docile.

“Jim,” she muttered. “Is Jim gettin’ any?”

“The doctor is looking after him,” Robin told her, pityingly. “He is a very good doctor: he will do everything he can for him. We have a little milk, but we are keeping it all for Jim.” And at that the starved creature had given a great sigh of relief, and tears had stolen weakly down her face; it seemed that she had scarcely strength left to weep. Robin made her lie down when she had finished the chocolate, promising her food soon. She pointed, as she lay, to the torn blue dress hanging from the stringy-bark line.

“Couldn’t get me washin’ in,” she muttered, as if in apology. “I rubbed it out in the creek a week ago and hung it up. But every time I put up me arms to get it down I fainted right off. So at last I just leave it stay there.” And at that, Robin, who had been very calm and self-possessed, suddenly burst out crying, to Barry’s infinite alarm. She recovered herself in a moment.

“Sorry I was such a fool, old chap,” she said, gruffly. “It seemed to knock me all of a heap.” She went forward and unfastened the poor little frock—it was pinned to the line with thorns of prickly-Moses—and folded it carefully: and the woman on the grass watched her with wondering eyes that were yet not wholly sane.

Dr. Lane called Barry and Robin to him after he had examined the wife briefly.

“She’ll do: her heart and pulse are not bad,” he said. “The man is a different story, but I’m not without hope. Give me every scrap of food or chocolate that we have.”

It was a very little store, and Barry groaned over it.

“To think we were gorging, not half a mile away!” he uttered. “I didn’t want my last three sandwiches a bit, only it seemed a pity to leave them. If only we’d known!”

“It was a mighty good thing we knew as soon as we did,” said his father. “To-morrow it would certainly have been too late. And now, their main chance depends on you two.”

They looked at him enquiringly.

“I won’t leave them, of course,” he said. “The man’s only hope lies in my being with him, to give him medicine and stimulant at the proper intervals.”

“And we’re to get help?” Robin asked eagerly.

“Yes. You’re sure you can get back alone? I hate letting you go, but there’s no help for it.”

“Rather!” said Barry and Robin, together.

“I wonder if this track is all right,” the doctor said, uneasily.

“The woman says so. She told me twice, pointing to it, that it was the track the horses came. We’ll watch very carefully, and there’s always the creek to guide us.”

“Yes—if you can get to it through the scrub. Well, I can only hope it is safe: you’re a better bushman than I am, Robin. If you have not sent help out by this time to-morrow I’ll start in myself, by the way we came. Here’s a list of what I want—telephone it into Baroin at the earliest possible moment, and have the things sent out by car. Merritt or some of the other farmers will help you about getting stretcher-bearers: we’ll need two stretchers to bring them in, and plenty of relays of bearers, in this awful country. Make them start as early as they can; and you’ll have to arrange for the ambulance from Baroin to come as far as it can to meet the stretchers. That young fellow at the garage has sense: he will help, if you can get on to him. Sure you understand?”

Robin nodded. “We’ll send out food and fresh milk with the stretcher party as well as the things you want from the township,” she said. “You’ll be terribly hungry yourself by that time.”

“By Jove!” said Barry, staring; “it’s pretty awful to think of you having nothing to eat, Father.”

“Oh, I’m well fed,” said the doctor, lightly. “No need to worry about me. Now be off, you two—and remember, I won’t have an easy moment until I know how you have got on. For goodness’ sake, don’t lose the creek!” He smiled at them, letting his hand rest on his boy’s shoulder for a moment. Then he watched them as they hurried into the bush.

For a time the track was plain enough—steep and stony, with sudden drops that made them wonder sharply how men were going to carry a stretcher down it—but not densely overgrown. They were able to make good progress. Then they came to a place where a fallen tree had smashed across it, and it was quite difficult to find the path again in the mass of far-flung limbs; they hated the loss of time while they cast backwards and forwards. When, three or four hundred yards farther on, the track seemed to fork, Robin pulled up.

“I don’t like it, Barry,” she said. “There may have been stray cattle here, making a second trail, and how do we know where it may lead us? The creek is beastly to walk in, but at least it’s safe. I think we’d better get down to it.”

“Right-oh,” said Barry. “But can we?”

Robin put up her hand, listening.

“I think I hear it, don’t you?” She looked at the thick wall of scrub as one looks at an enemy. “Come on: I guess we can worm our way through.”

They wormed—if that term may be given to a struggle that left both breathless. Sometimes they tore aside stiff clumps of dogwood twined thickly with creeping plants: sometimes squeezed through the closely-growing hazel and blanket-wood, stepping downwards upon heaps of slender, long-fallen trunks, so rotten, under their covering of

ferns, that at any moment a foot incautiously planted might sink down past the knee. They climbed over huge fallen trees, deep-brown with damp moss or slippery with wet—trunks on which it was no easy matter to get a footing; where, once gained, the slightest misstep might end in a long slither and a broken ankle. They could not see a yard ahead, in most places: only, when they paused a moment to wipe their dripping faces, the song of the creek could be heard, far below, but always coming a little nearer. Often it was easier to crawl beneath a dead giant than to climb over it, even if they had to dig a way through. Nettles, tall and venomous, stung their hands and faces: brambles and wild-raspberry, and all the other hooked enemies of the scrub tore at them unceasingly. When at last they gained the creek, and, plunging in thankfully, sat down on two boulders, they looked at each other and laughed.

“We’re a pretty pair of scarecrows,” said Robin. Barry chuckled.

“We are—if I look like you!”

“You’re worse,” Robin assured him.

“Couldn’t be!”

Their faces were almost unrecognizable with heat and dirt and the brown dust of fern-seed. Their clothes, torn in a hundred places, hung about them in soiled tatters: long, bleeding scratches showed beneath many of the rents. They looked at each other, panting, and laughed.

“At least we can have a drink and a wash,” Robin said. “What a comfort to think we needn’t mind getting wet!” She knelt down in the nearest pool, and as the stone on which she had chosen to kneel decided to turn completely round, she fell sideways into the water with a yelp and a stupendous splash. Barry shouted with laughter. She emerged, dripping, with an air of pained surprise.

“I said I didn’t mind getting wet, but this is wetter than I meant,” Robin said. “Oh, well, I’ll dry soon, and it’s very refreshing.” They scrubbed their hands and faces, dipping their heads under the hurrying water, and coming up with gasps of satisfaction; then they rubbed wet earth into their burning nettle-stings, already showing like angry weals upon the skin. Then, for they dared not linger, they set off upon the toilsome journey down the creek.

It was as well that they had shortened it by keeping to the track above, for their feet were still sore from the wading of the morning, and from being all day in soaked boots; and each step was soon a torment. They had not time to pick their way: the thought of the three whom they had left in the lonely camp whipped them forward, so that they plunged recklessly over the slippery stones, often losing their footing altogether. They had joked over it in the morning, but there was no joking now: it was hard enough to keep from wincing or crying out as the stones pinched and bruised their swollen feet, while their bodies ached with the perpetual effort to retain their balance.

“I think it’s nearly over,” said Robin, as she saw Barry lurch sideways, biting his lip to restrain an exclamation of pain. “Buck up, old chap—I believe we’re almost at the tree where we took to the creek first this morning.”

“Jolly good thing,” said the boy, trying to speak lightly. “You must be pretty sick of it, Robin—your boots are lighter than mine.” He forced a grin. “Wouldn’t this be great

country for an aeroplane!”

“Rather—except when you wanted to land.” She looked ahead, and gave a joyful whistle. “There’s our tree!”

“Well, they say all things come to an end, but I was beginning to think that stretch of creek had no finish,” said Barry, as they climbed thankfully up the bank. “It’s all plain sailing now.”

“Yes, thank goodness—and we can hurry.”

It was already evening as they made their way along the rough path—rough as it was, it felt smooth and grateful to their aching feet. Robin led the way, keeping well ahead, so that the lash of the held-back branches should not sweep Barry’s face. They did not speak until at length they came out of the timber and saw, ahead, the cleared hills and valleys that meant home. Then Barry caught up.

“What should we do first, Robin?”

“We must scatter,” Robin said. “You go over to the Merritts’, Barry—you know the way. They will pass the word round among the farms in the hills on that side of the creek; it will be best for the men to meet there, for it’s the place nearest to the Falls track. They are sure to start as soon as it is light in the morning.”

“All right. Will you go home?”

“Yes; I’ll get Mother and Mrs. Lane to drive down to Merri Creek at once: Mrs. Lane can telephone for the things your father wants while Mother is telling the people there. Then I’ll cross our creek and get over to O’Rourke’s.”

“It’s nearly dark,” Barry said, looking anxiously at the sky. “Will there be time to get enough people?”

Robin laughed.

“The whole district will know before morning,” she said. “All the men about here know what it will mean to get two stretchers down the Falls track.”

“Where will I go after I’ve told the Merritts?”

“Home—and get those boots off as quickly as you can.”

“But it’s doing so little, Robin. Can’t I go on somewhere else?”

“There won’t be any need,” Robin said—“unless, of course, Mr. Merritt and the boys are away. But they won’t be: they’ll be milking. Oh, and tell them I’ll be over to give the girls a hand with the cows in the morning after the boys have gone. They will send word on everywhere—one place passes it to another, in a case like this.” She looked at the boy’s dead-beat face, and patted his shoulder. “You needn’t worry, Barry, old chap. They’ll all know you’ve done your bit.”

“I?” said Barry. “I haven’t done anything.” He turned to go. “You won’t be long, Robin?”

“I expect to come straight home from O’Rourke’s,” she said. “Don’t hurry too much—there’s plenty of time to get things ready by daylight.”

But the men of the district did not wait for daylight. It was not long after midnight when the first relay of twenty men set out—men who had no cows to milk, or having

cows, had wives and children who could milk them. They carried food and the drugs that Dr. Lane had ordered, and they went on horses, so far as horses could be forced through the scrub. They were men who knew the track to the Falls—knew that it was not necessary to wade the creek as the Lanes and Robin had done. They left their horses when the going became impossible, and pushed onward on foot, making the way clearer for those who should follow: the sound of their axes echoed through the quiet night, and their hurricane lamps sent weird shafts of dim radiance to startle the furry folk of the bush, who only move after day has gone. It was scarcely dawn when old David Merritt halted them.

“We’re not more than a quarter of a mile from the Falls,” he said. “Eight of us’ll go forrard now: you other chaps stay here and get your breath. We’ll want all the breath you’ve got, I reckon.”

Back at the settlement, riders had gone to and fro all night, and men had climbed where there was no footing for a horse in the darkness: and always when the message was given men made haste to pass it on, and women packed food swiftly, catching their breath to think of the woman who had fought for her man’s life in the awful loneliness of the wild bush. From the little towns the lights of cars and buggies gleamed in a long, broken procession, toiling up the hill tracks with men, and yet more men. Hill Farm was the central point: the cars and buggies and horsemen turned in at its gate unendingly, until the little flat below the house was black with vehicles. All night the house was a lit hive of humming activity. Robin and Barry slept the dreamless sleep of worn-out children on the veranda, heedless of the passing feet; but in the kitchen Mrs. Hurst and Mrs. Lane, with other women, gave out great mugs of tea and parcels of food, and the men ate and drank swiftly before flinging off their coats and following the figures that streamed, ant-like, into the silent hills. There were none left when dawn had come. Even the men who had cows had yarded them at two o’clock in the morning, and, their milking done, were on their way before the sun turned the eastern tree-tops to copper and scarlet.

The first men who carried the stretchers did not last a quarter of a mile—old David Merritt’s estimate had been over-sanguine. Two hundred yards was enough, and more than enough, for the strongest man in that terrible descent through the bush, with the dead weight of a helpless burden: feeling with every step for roots and stumps in the track, bending to avoid the clutching branches, bracing each muscle suddenly to avoid shock for the silent forms they carried, when a sudden drop in the slippery path flung them forward. They fell, more than once: it was beyond human power always to retain footing under their loads. But even when they fell they did not try to save themselves—only to ease the fall for the stretchers. And one burden knew nothing, wrapped in a heavy, drugged sleep: and to the other, neither falls, nor weariness, nor hunger mattered any more.

“Both all right?” had been the eager question when the second relay had hurried up in response to a whistle. David Merritt’s headshake had been answer.

“The man’s gone, poor chap. Died in the night. The woman’ll do, the Doc. says.” He dropped his voice. “She don’t know he’s gone. The Doc.’s put her to sleep. I’d say carry her gently, boys, but it’s no darned use!”

It was no use, on that mountain pathway. They changed bearers every hundred yards, while those who were not carrying went ahead to make the way easier with their axes: and still, it was a journey of horror until they had accomplished the first abrupt descent, and of

the twenty men, not one but was thankful to sit down and rest. Dr. Lane, heavy-eyed after his night of watching and fasting, glanced beneath the blanket that covered the woman's face.

"She'll sleep through, I fancy," he said. "No need to hurry now, boys: the hurry was for the poor fellow yonder." His tone bore the sadness of a man who has failed. "I could have pulled him through if I had found him twelve hours sooner, I believe."

"We got here as quick as we could, Doc.," said a big, loose-limbed fellow.

The doctor's eye kindled.

"You were marvels!" he said. "I'm hanged if I know how you did it in the dark—I didn't expect you until hours later."

"Aw, that's nothin'," they said, awkwardly. David Merritt lit his pipe and pulled at it hard.

"Those youngsters," he said, "They're good plucked 'uns if you like—both kids, an' one of 'em a girl! That boy of yours, Doc.—come up to my place limpin' and runnin', with his boots near cut from his feet, an' the blood runnin' out of them. An' him a town kid. It was hard luck they didn't know the track; it would 'a' saved them miles of that cruel wading."

"No joke, that wading isn't," said someone.

"No, it ain't any joke. Gave his message quite clear, the kid did, an' then wanted to go on to the next farm."

"Did he go?" asked Barry's father.

"Not if I knew it! All our work was done, an' there was plenty of us to send messages. I put him on a pony an' sent him acrost to Hill Farm—he'd done enough for any boy of his size."

"Miss Robin's the same," said big Tim O'Rourke. "'Twas all I could do to make her go home from my place. Gad, you should 'a' seen her: clothes cut to ribbons, an' her feet bleedin' like the boy's. I wanted her to ride home. 'No,' says she, 'you've only got one pony an' you'll need him!' True enough, too, but I reckoned she needed him more. But she off down the hill before I could so much as get a bridle."

"Town or country, I reckon them two are darned good Aussies!" said a returned soldier. A murmur of assent went round the group.

David Merritt put his pipe carefully into his pocket.

"Time for another shift, boys," he said.

It was mid-afternoon before the last relay of bearers came steadily across the Hill Farm paddock towards the motor-ambulance that waited—brought by a cunning driver over ground where it is safe to say its builders had never dreamed that it could go. There was a little crowd about it: a silent crowd, for word of what they bore had gone before them, and if there were pride in the life snatched from the bush it was hushed into speechlessness in the presence of Death. The men took off their hats as the ambulance moved off slowly: here and there a woman sobbed. Big Tim O'Rourke, who had been first and last to carry, stretched his great shoulders.

"Poor chap!" he said. "He done his best. Well, boys, I reckon it's about time to get

home to milk!”

CHAPTER XI

CONCERNING THE END OF A PIG

"COMING out, Robin?"

"Too hot, I think," Robin said, lazily. "Where do you want to go?"

"Oh, anywhere. What's the good of staying in the house?"

"I don't see much good in going out, either, in this weather. There isn't a trout in the creek that would rise, on a day like this, and you know you wouldn't get a shot at a rabbit until the evening. Unless you want to be like all the other tourists, and shoot parrots and jackasses!"

This was a calculated insult, and Barry responded by a well-aimed cushion. Robin caught it deftly and tucked it under her head.

"Thanks: I just wanted that. Barry, why can't you read a book nicely like a good little boy?"

"Because I'm not one, I expect," said Barry, truthfully. "I was one, once, before I came here—but two months of your society have had an awful effect on me. And I have read all the books I want to, and—I say, Robin, how about a swim?"

"Well, that is not such a foolish idea," Robin said. "In fact, it seems the most possible thing to do, since you won't let me read quietly. But I must get afternoon tea first."

"I'll help you," he said. He disappeared violently from the veranda, and she heard the clatter of the kettle against the kitchen tap.

January was nearly over, and Barry was still an inmate of Hill Farm. Indeed, he could hardly be called a mere inmate, so much had he become a member of the family. His father and mother had returned from their Queensland trip, and had kindly invited him to return home, but the invitation had not been a command, and Barry had begged that he might remain where he was. Melbourne in mid-January made no appeal to him: nearly all his friends would be out of Town, having fled to the hills or the seaside, and he saw a dreary vision of hot streets with dusty tram-cars crawling up and down them. If Mrs. Hurst would have him—and Mrs. Hurst had nobly refrained from making any objection—why might he not stay at Hill Farm until school once more drew him into its relentless clutch? And since Dr. and Mrs. Lane had no sufficient answer to this query, at Hill Farm he had stayed.

Robin and he were inseparable chums, on a purely boyish footing. There was rarely any question of leadership on Barry's part: he had learned from the first that he had to defer to Robin's superior knowledge, and to adapt his days, if he wanted her companionship, to her occupations. It was fortunate for him that these occupations were rarely of a feminine nature. He was too active to remain unemployed while she worked; therefore it came about that while she milked Bessy he fed pigs, and while she trained runner beans in the way they should go, he dug potatoes—since, if they were to have time to play, work must be done first. Because they were young, and often very feather-headed, it was true that the work was not infrequently scamped; the garden was by no means the

place of shining neatness that it had been in November, and it was possible, with the naked eye, to find weeds flourishing among the rows of vegetables. The painting of the garden fence had never been completed. The allies had, indeed attacked it, taking each one side, and had worked until the eastern half was done; then it had seemed a rather dreary prospect to begin upon the western half, and by mutual consent the work had been put aside until there was nothing better to do—a period that did not seem likely to arrive while Barry remained at Hill Farm. There were always so many things more interesting that clamoured for their attention.

They got into mischief, too, sometimes, and played pranks which called for intervention on the part of Mrs. Hurst; it was not to be expected that the “red-headed streak” in Robin would remain dormant with a companion as light-hearted as herself. Things that should have been done were forgotten, and there had been one or two occasions when the mother had been angry—such as the night when they had slipped out ’possum-hunting at midnight, had lost themselves in the gullies, and had not managed to get home until long after breakfast-time: when they arrived, penitent, but with an irrepressible air of having had a good time. But it was all straightforward mischief; and even when Mrs. Hurst was annoyed, it was with a half-hidden sense of relief that Robin was not growing old too soon. There had been something almost unnatural in the Robin who had worked early and late, had never forgotten anything that she should remember, and had been quite content to adapt her life to her mother’s standpoints. After all, she was only a child, still; and Mrs. Hurst was one of those who believe that childhood cannot always sit up and behave prettily, if it is to develop on the right lines. She had sorrowed because Robin seemed likely to have none of the ordinary irresponsible joy of life. Unquestionably, she was arriving at a good deal in Barry’s society.

Then, too, it would not last. Barry must soon go, and then there would be nothing for Robin but to slip into the old routine, finding most of her enjoyment in work about the place. Then, probably, the western half of the fence would receive a seemly coat of paint, and Hill Farm would no longer look lop-sided; hours for meals would become splendidly regular, the garden would be weeded, and the milk-bucket be polished again with monkey-soap until it resembled silver. There would be no more pranks and mischief: no gay shouts echoing over the hills. “And I shall wish all the time that she had a playmate again,” Mrs. Hurst admitted to herself.

There was another inmate now at Hill Farm—the forlorn little widow of poor “Jim,” who had ended his ineffectual life in the camp by the Falls. Polly had been nursed back to health in the hospital in Baroin; but with physical health full mental balance had not returned, and she would probably go through life gentle and uncomplaining, but never with complete realization of all that had happened to her. Public sympathy had been excited over her case: a subscription for her benefit had resulted in a fairly large sum, and kindly women had united in supplying her with an outfit of clothes. She did not know that her Jim was dead: that was something the hurt mind failed to grasp. He was away, she told people: gone away prospecting into the hills—he would be back for her as soon as he found gold. She did not seem to worry about Jim. But from the moment she had regained consciousness in the hospital she had begged for Robin.

She did not, of course, know who Robin was—did not even know her name, or why she wanted her. “The red-haired one,” she entreated, again and again, until the Baroin

doctor, in despair, had motored out to Hill Farm and brought Robin to the hospital—when immediately the poor thing was content. Probably it was because Robin had been the one who had run to meet her at the camp: the first person who had brought a ray of encouragement to her hopeless misery. She remembered how the girl had fed her with a spoon; she told the story again and again to the nurses. When Robin went away she was restless and uneasy, asking for her continually. The matter had been finally settled by the Benevolent Society, which had agreed with Mrs. Hurst to take charge of her for a small weekly payment: and so Polly had come for three months to Hill Farm, where she potted happily all day at small tasks, perfectly content if Robin now and then spared her a cheery word, and always watching for a chance to do her some small service. She liked Mrs. Hurst, and was always gentle and docile with her. But Robin was the sun of her existence.

Cool weather had ended with Christmas. For over a month no rain had fallen, and the paddocks had dried up rapidly, changing from green to yellow within a few days. All the creeks were shrinking, with the exception of Merri Creek, which, fed from its mysterious source above the Falls, had never been known to fail: the others were mere chains of holes, so that there was no water in some of David Merritt's paddocks. It was a hard season for a district that depended mainly on dairying. The milk-yield began to fall off, so that the cheques from the butter-factory dwindled even as the water dwindled in the creeks: the gardens suffered, and the farmers whose houses were not well equipped with tanks were already carting water for their households—a strenuous task in country so hilly and rough.

Here and there, fires broke out during the last week of January: but settlers were fully alive to the risk they ran, and every outbreak had been fought and beaten before it could spread. Back in the ranges, however, fires were burning: the men of the district watched them anxiously, with grim predictions of what might happen should strong winds bring the blaze down towards the valleys. There were deep-voiced threats against any man who should dare to burn off his cut scrub, with the whole country as dry as tinder and dead grass as thick as a crop in every paddock. "If a fire does come our way," David Merritt said, "there'll be no earthly use in fighting it. It'll be a case of make for the nearest hole in the creek, and be thankful if you get out of it alive!"

"But they always talk like that," one farmer's wife said to Mrs. Hurst. "There've been other years as dry, with the grass as thick: but even if a fire started they always manage to stop it. And most prob'ly rain'll come soon." That was the comforting belief: that rain would come soon. But the sun sank each evening in a sky of angry red; and day after day of breathless heat succeeded nights that, for Gippsland, were extraordinarily hot: Gippsland being a place where hot nights are almost unknown. And still rain seemed as far off as ever.

The afternoon when Barry had been so uncomfortably full of energy was a stifling one: and though his suggestion of a bathe in the creek was enticing, Robin viewed with no pleasure the prospect of the walk across the paddock. However, since he had rushed off to put on the kettle for tea, she felt that she could no longer lie down: and as the bed was hot and her book one that she had read twice before, she was able to be the more philosophic about getting up. She went out to the kitchen to find Barry sitting on the table discoursing to Polly, who greeted her with a delighted smile.

"Hullo, Miss Robin. Isn't he a funny boy?"

“Rather!” said Robin. “What has he been doing now, Polly?”

“Been telling me stories,” said Polly. “Funny stories. I like your stories best.”

“Of course you do,” said Robin, laughing at Barry’s disgusted face. “I’ll tell you about Cinderella after tea, if you like—when he is out of the way.” For Polly loved stories, and would listen to the simplest fairy-tale, told over and over, with the most perfect delight. It was no unusual thing for her to crouch near Robin as she worked in the garden, listening, with parted lips and shining eyes, while Robin told her “The Three Bears,” or some other nursery classic, between strokes of her hoe.

“I never saw such rotten taste!” said Barry, disgustedly. “I’ve been telling her a gorgeous yarn I read about some Boy Scouts who got off with an aeroplane—but I believe it’s all double-Dutch to her.”

“Yes—double-Dutch!” said Polly, chuckling to herself over the phrase. “Funny little boy!”

“Here, I say—who are you calling little?” demanded Barry, justly indignant.

“Double-Dutch little boy,” crooned Polly, softly. “Double-Dutch little boy!” The words pleased her, and she drifted out of the kitchen, still singing them softly. Barry laughed, but there was pity in the laugh.

“Poor soul!” he said. “She’s just awfully funny, but what a shame it all is. She’d be a jolly nice little woman if she hadn’t had that cruel time.”

“I think she’s that now,” said Robin. “There never was anyone kinder, and she’s very capable and sensible in lots of ways. Only, just like a little child.” She sighed. “You know, I can’t bear to think of her after she leaves here: they are going to put her in some Home or other, and she’ll simply hate it. She can’t stand being within four walls—do you notice she always wanders out of a room after a few minutes? She told me once that something would hurt her if she stayed in a room.”

“Queer idea,” said Barry.

“Yes, isn’t it? And she loves the hills: she often sits on a stump in the paddock and looks at them for an hour at a time. I wonder does she think Jim is in them?”

“I wouldn’t wonder—poor soul. She never asks for him, does she?”

“No—she just says he’s coming back when he finds gold. But she will hate to be in a place with high walls in a city. I think she may begin to fret for Jim then. Mother and I wish we could keep her here, but I suppose it’s out of the question.”

“It would be a tremendous tie,” Barry remarked. “You could never leave her alone.”

“No: it hasn’t mattered yet, but of course it might be a difficulty. Anyhow, we couldn’t afford it. What a blessed nuisance money is! it’s always interfering with what one wants to do. If I could find a gold-mine Mother and I wouldn’t have any worries.”

“You’d have to manage the miners, and they’d always be going on strike,” said Barry, wisely. “Anyhow, you get a heap of fun out of life, without a gold-mine. There! that old kettle is boiling at last: I was getting so hot I thought I should boil before it did! When I strike my own mine, Robin, I’m going to have an electric plant put in here, so’s you can cook by electricity instead of that hot old wood-stove.” He filled the teapot, and then discovered that he had not put in any tea, at which he was justifiably annoyed.

"Your mind is too set on high projects," laughed Robin, preparing the tray swiftly. "Never mind—you boiled three times as much water as we need; pitch it out, and the teapot will be as hot as Mother likes it to be, which is one good thing. Cake or biscuits? You can't have bread-and-butter, 'cause all the butter is down the well. It was fast turning to oil this morning, so I put it down the well in a Mason jar."

"Cake and biscuits, please," said Barry. "Where's your mother?"

"Lying down—she promised me, after a heated argument, that she would lie down until after five o'clock. I'm going to take this tray to her." She went to the door and called softly. "Polly! Are you there?"

"Yes, Miss Robin." Polly came hurrying, her face alight.

"Here's your tea. Would you like to take it into the yard, in the shade?"

"Yes, please, Miss Robin. I like the yard."

"All right. There's a big piece of cake for you, and two biscuits—don't let that funny boy get them!" Polly laughed delightedly, and scuttled into the kitchen; and Robin went off with her mother's tray.

"We're going for a swim, and we want to try to get some rabbits afterwards, Mother," she said. "Does it matter if we're late for tea? I'll get it when we come in."

"It doesn't matter at all," said Mrs. Hurst. "I don't think anyone will be in a hurry for tea on such an evening. But don't knock yourself up, dear."

"Oh, no. Anyhow, we won't be really late, because there is so much smoke about that we shan't be able to shoot once the sun goes down. So I need not milk and feed until we come in. You won't do it yourself, you bad old mother?—promise! Barry will help me."

"Very well, I won't," Mrs. Hurst said. "Is Polly all right?"

"Yes—I'll tell her not to go out of the yard. Well, I must go and get my tea, or Barry will have eaten all the cake." She blew a merry kiss to her mother, and disappeared.

They set off presently across the paddock, Polly straining wistful eyes after their retreating figures.

"Whew-w, it's hot!" whistled Barry. "Queer, wicked sort of heat—makes a chap feel all anyhow. This is the first day I've wanted to be back in Melbourne. Not that I want Melbourne: I don't—but I want the sea."

"Then I don't see why you want the old Melbourne sea—that's only the Bay." Robin made disdainful answer. "It's all used-up water. I'd rather have the Ninety-Mile Beach; great tumbling breakers as far as ever you can see each way, and a big lovely stretch of sand."

Barry disagreed with this.

"I know it's good," he said. "But I want a place where you can dive. I like to get high up above the water and look right down into it, and then just shoot below! And then have room to swim under water: you can dive in some of the creek-holes, but the mud below spoils them. There's a jetty at Inverloch where I used to dive—gorgeous place, with a good stiff current racing past, out to sea. That's fun, if you like!"

"Thanks, I like mine without currents," Robin laughed. "Anyhow, you will have to put

up with the creek this afternoon, 'cause its all we've got."

"Lucky to have it," was Barry's comment "I'll race you in!"

They had arrived at their swimming-hole, a deep still place where the creek widened among lofty grey rocks. One formed a shelf that jutted over the deepest part: and when Barry had emerged from his dressing-nook he ran out upon it, standing bare-headed, a muscular, sturdy figure in his scanty swimming-suit. He sent a defiant crow in the direction of Robin, who had not yet appeared, and then bent forward, cleaving the air in a neat dive. A mighty splashing startled Robin, as she ran out, and she looked down to see him swimming wildly across the pool. Gaining the nearest rock he pulled himself out, and gave an excited shout.

"Don't come in! Ugh! I dived on top of a snake!"

"Barry! It didn't bite you?"

"No. I scared it too much." He was scanning the water sharply. "There it is—see him, Robin? He's swimming towards that little patch of sand between the rocks."

"I see him," Robin said. "Nice of him to come out my side, if only I can get a stick in time. Watch him, Barry—don't take your eyes off him." She scrambled down the rocks, wincing as sharp edges caught her bare feet; and then turned back to her dressing-hole. "The gun is quicker," she observed, in answer to Barry's impatient shout.

She ran out on the ledge with her gun just as the snake crawled out of the water upon the warm stretch of sunny sand. He liked the feel of it, and decided to stay a moment: a decision that was immediately his undoing. The report of the gun shattered the stillness, and what was left of the snake writhed feebly.

"Good man!" said Barry, happily. "That fellow won't go bathing again."

"Neither will I, until we have a good look round," said the lady with the gun. "No fun in bathing with snakes. Get your boots on, Barry, and we'll make sure his mate is not about." They beat the bushes with sticks, poked into every crevice, and finally decided that to bathe was safe; and being, by this time, extremely hot, bathed for a very long while, without giving another thought to the possibility of snakes—which, indeed, would scarcely have ventured into the excited waters of the pool when people as energetic as Robin and Barry were disporting themselves in it. Finally, having dressed with reluctance, they pondered on what should be their next step.

"Too early to shoot," Robin said. "There won't be many rabbits about, anyhow: the heat and the smoke will keep them in their burrows. That fire up in the ranges must be getting bigger, Barry."

"The smoke is certainly worse," Barry remarked. "I hope the old fire stays where it is, that's all." He dived into the little canvas bag in which he carried his cartridges, and produced something wrapped in paper. "Know what that is, Robin?"

"No," said Robin: "I don't. Rum-looking stuff. What is it, Barry? Soap?"

Barry regarded with a proud eye the stick of putty-like substance he had unwrapped.

"Soap!" he said, scornfully. "I don't cart yellow soap about with me, you silly! That's gelignite." He tossed up the plug and caught it, and Robin gave a cry of alarm.

"You idiot, Barry! Do take care—it might go off."

"So might you," was Barry's impolite response. "Gelignite doesn't go off like that—you've got to have a detonator, and fuse. I've got 'em, too." He took from his bag a length of thick black cord, and a small tin box, handling the latter with considerable respect. It contained an innocent-looking little copper tube, closed at one end.

"That's the detonator," he explained. "You stick the end of the fuse into it and nip the tube with pliers so's she can't slip out. Then you shove the closed end of the detonator down into the gelignite, and everything's ready."

"But how does it go off?"

"Why, you put the gelignite where you want to blast things, and light the fuse: it burns at the rate of about a foot a minute. Soon as she begins to sputter, you know she's properly alight, and then you scoot as hard as you can lick. And then—bang!"

Robin regarded the expert in explosives with something akin to reverence.

"How did you find out all about it?" she asked.

"Oh, I used to see the men blasting when they were making a new railway line one year when we went to Queensland," said Barry. "They'd always let me watch until just before they lit the fuse. I found this outfit in one of the sheds, high up on a beam—it was in an old biscuit-tin. Must have belonged to your Uncle Donald."

"What would he do with it?"

"Oh, lots of men use it for getting rid of old stumps and trees. So I collared it, because I had a great idea!"

"What?" demanded Robin. "Tell me, Barry!"

Barry regarded her in silence for a moment, his head on one side, like an inquisitive bird.

"I thought we could have no end of a lark with it," he said. "I've seen the men using it so often, and I've always wanted to have a bit myself."

"But isn't it awfully dangerous?"

"Not a bit," said Barry, airily, "if you know how to use it. Of course, in any ordinary place, and with the country as dry as it is, it wouldn't do. But you know that rocky place up at the head of that gully—" he jerked his hand towards the hills. "There's nothing but rocks there and mossy stuff and bare earth—not much earth, either. A few ferns sticking among the lumps of rock. It would be perfectly safe there. Let's go and try it!"

He sat back on his heels and looked at her with an impish expression of joy in his plan.

"I suppose it would be safe," Robin said. "The walls of the gully are so steep, and there is no grass there to be set on fire—only a few clumps of bracken, and we could watch them." Her eye began to kindle. "It would be rather a lark!" she said. "But I wonder what Mr. Merritt would say. He rents that part, you know."

"Oh, it won't hurt him. We'll hunt any of his cows out of the gully, if they're there. If he hears the bang, and says anything about it, we'll tell him, of course. I expect he's used any amount of the stuff himself, blasting out stumps." Barry jumped up. "Come along, Robin, old chap!"

"All right," Robin said, recklessly.

“Hurroo!” cried Barry. “I knew you’d be a sport. You’re nearly as good as a boy!” He capered down the rocks ahead of her, and they set off on their way to the gully.

It was an ideal spot for such a lawless enterprise. The gully was a short one, running back between two great rocky hills that were almost bare of timber. At the closed end the walls of rock were very lofty: they could be fairly certain that no flying fragments of stone could reach the top. No stock were to be seen: all the ground was littered with half-buried boulders, among which patches of withered bracken clung. A few rabbits scurried away as they came in sight; but the children were far too excited to think of shooting. The sight, however, gave Robin a flash of common sense.

“We’ll leave the guns and all our cartridges here,” she said, halting beside a big tree near the entrance to the gully—the only tree that grew there. “Put them on this side, and nothing will be likely to touch them when you blow that old cliff to bits!”

“All right,” Barry agreed. “I prospected this place yesterday, you know; there’s a sort of cave between those two great rocks over yonder, and we can hide there while we’re waiting for the bang. Nothing could hit us—it’s as safe as a dugout.” He pranced along, almost running, to the end of the gully, where they halted—two little figures under the walls of frowning grey rock. “That’s the bit of stone I want to shift,” he said, pointing upwards.

Robin looked. A big square rock jutted sharply from the face of the cliff, with a mass of loose boulders under it.

“I’d give my hat to blow that big chap out!” declared Barry, excitedly. “There’s a cleft right behind him, on top—I can just get my hand in, up to the elbow. Gelignite shatters downwards, you know: I want to get the plug well down into that cleft. It’s a perfectly gorgeous place for the charge!”

“Well, it couldn’t do any harm, that I can see,” Robin said. “As long as you’re sure we have time to get out of the way.”

“Oh, whips of time! How do you suppose the men manage when they’re using this stuff every day?”

“They know more about it than I do,” was Robin’s sage comment. “But I suppose it’s all right: I’m game to chance it, anyhow. Carry on!”

She climbed up beside him, and explored for herself the hole where the charge was to go, and watched him place it in position.

“Now, you clear!” he told her. “No sense in our being in each other’s way when we’re scrambling down these rocks.”

“I suppose there isn’t,” she said, unwillingly. “But oh, Barry, do be careful! Suppose you slipped and hurt an ankle or something when you’re getting down?”

“Much more likely to do it if I’ve a girl blocking the way!” said the lordly male. “But I’m not going to do any such fat-headed thing. I know what I’m about. Cut, now, Robin, and I’ll set her going!”

Robin scrambled down the rocks, noting, with some relief, that the way was easy. Further she would not go, alone: she waited, with her heart beginning to beat heavily until Barry followed her, with amazing speed, and together they ran like frightened hares to

their “dugout.” As they passed the largest patch of bracken they heard a quiet, satisfied grunting.

“Wonder if that’s a wombat?” panted Barry. “Well, he’s going to get the shock of his life!”

They reached their cave and crawled thankfully into its shelter. A split in the rock gave them a peep-hole, and they looked out anxiously. As they did so, two plump forms emerged from the ferns, still grunting.

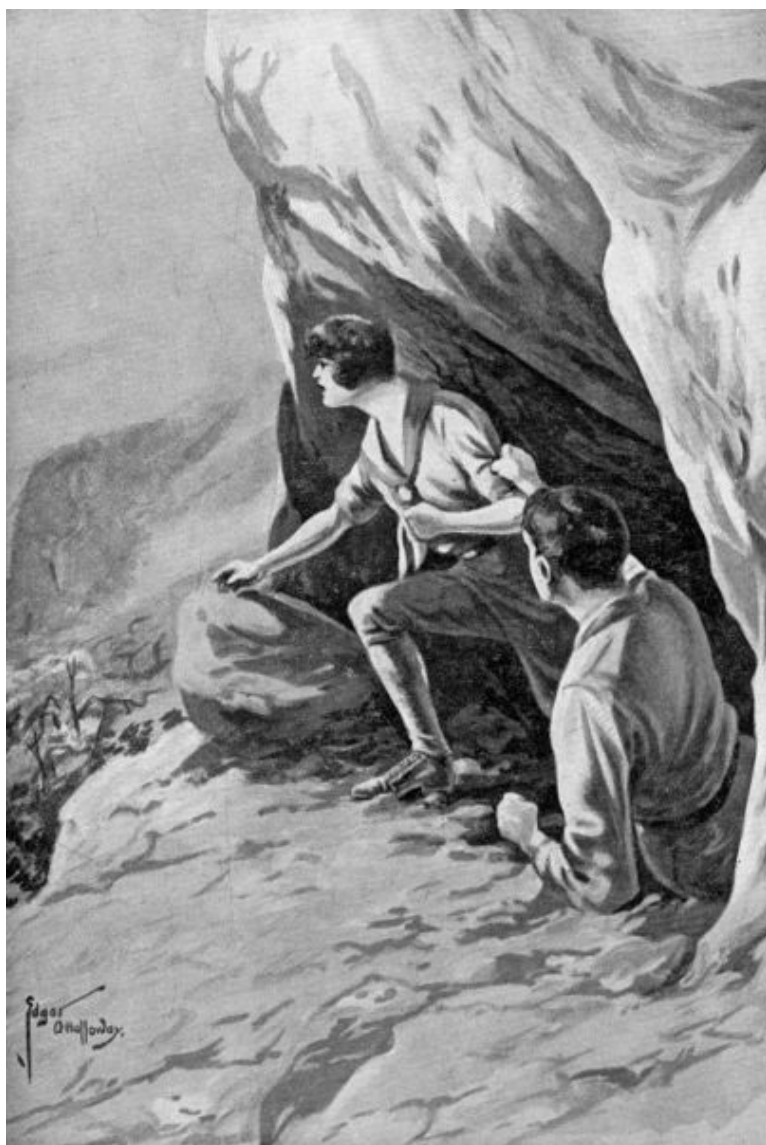
“Oh, my sainted Aunt!” groaned Barry. “Robin, they’re Merritt’s young pigs!”

“Barry!” screamed Robin. “I’m going to hunt them!” She wriggled back, and the boy caught her sleeve in a tight grip.

“You silly ass!” he panted. “Keep back! I wouldn’t let you go out there for fifty pigs! Keep your head down, I tell you, Robin, you old——”

Bang!

The explosion burst upon their ears with shattering force. Never was such a noise—the walls of the gully, closing it in, seemed to rock with its deafening thunder. The great mass of rock shot from the face of the cliff, flying into a hundred pieces. Shattered fragments strewn the ground, banging and clattering on their protecting crags. One little pig uttered an ear-piercing shriek, and fled for the open country, his shrill notes of protest dying away in the distance. The other disappeared beneath a hurtling mass of stone.



"Keep back!"

Barry burst into a shout of excited laughter.

“Oh, my goodness, Robin, did you see him! Won’t there be a jolly row! A big bit of rock just sailed through the air, and absolutely flattened him—he never knew what hit him. And the pig was not! Just listen to his brother—he’s got shell-shock!”

They scrambled out of their hole, and gazed at the slab of stone, from which protruded a melancholy curly tail. It was mercifully clear that the deceased pig could not have known what hit him.

“Now you’ll have to tell Mr. Merritt,” said Robin.

“Yes, of course. I’ll pay him for poor piggy. Well, he shouldn’t have hidden in that bracken until it was too late. Anyhow, he died gloriously on the field of battle, and it’s better than living to be made into pork sausages. Wasn’t it a topping blast! Come and see what it has done to my rock.”

The smoke of the explosion still lingered about the head of the gully, mingling with air already murky with bush-fire smoke; but they could see that the charge had done its work very thoroughly. Not only was the big rock gone, shattered to pieces, but the whole face of the rocky wall, for many feet, had been split off: the new, clean-looking stone showed curiously against the weathered and moss-grown stretch on either side. They looked at it respectfully.

“Well, we’ve made our mark,” Robin said, at length. “No sign of burning anywhere, is there, Barry?”

They searched carefully, but found no trace of fire: the explosion had confined itself to the head of the gully, save for the flying fragments. Mr. Merritt’s pig remained the one sacrifice.

“’Told you I knew all about it,” said Barry, triumphantly. “I vote we go home now: shooting rabbits would be too tame altogether after a bang like that!”

“All right,” Robin agreed. She looked curiously at the stretch of newly-exposed stone.

“Isn’t that pretty rock?” she observed. “It’s got such queer colours and markings.”

“Just what a girl would say!” was Barry’s scornful rejoinder. “It’s only old rock: I don’t see anything pretty about it. But the bang was gorgeous, if you like! I’m going to be an engineer when I grow up—they always have lots of blasting rocks in their jobs!”

“Do they always kill pigs?” asked Robin, cruelly.

CHAPTER XII

STRANGERS

IT seemed to Mrs. Hurst that the evening grew hotter as sundown approached, and the atmosphere more oppressive. The blue haze drifting slowly down from the ranges made all the air heavy: it had spread gently over the landscape, so that distant objects were misty and indistinct. Since this was not unusual in summer-time, when fires were constantly burning in the distant ranges, it had caused no anxiety to the settlers in the valleys below. But as Mrs. Hurst strolled out into the garden, weary of the hot house, she cast an apprehensive glance upwards.

"I believe it is thicker than it was this morning," she said, half aloud. "I wonder—if the wind should get up—" She did not put the partly-formed thought into words.

Even in the garden the feeling of being shut in oppressed her, and presently she opened the white gate and strolled slowly down the slope towards the road. There was a log close to the fence; she sat down on it, looking across the paddocks towards the green line of wattles that marked the winding course of the creek.

"I wish the children would come home," she said.

From the hills a loud booming noise came as if in answer, and she started violently, while the echoes ran round the gullies: laughing at herself as they died away.

"Only the road-gang blasting somewhere," she said. "I believe I am getting nervous. This long spell of dry heat makes us all jumpy. If only rain would come—!"

A sharp creaking sound, faint at first, but gradually drawing nearer, made her look round; and presently, a bend in the road showed a queer, unwieldy object looming through the haze. It revealed itself, coming closer, as a light cart, drawn by an old chestnut horse that hung its head, shuffling wearily through the dust as though its load had drained it of every particle of energy it had once possessed. Piled high on the cart was furniture: stretchers and bedding, a kitchen-table, a battered meat-safe, and a few rough chairs, with wooden boxes filled with hastily-packed odds and ends. Two dirty children of five and six years old were perched in corners among the load. Beside the horse—it was clearly not necessary to guide it in any way—walked a woman, covered with dust, and carrying a younger child. She stumbled often as she walked, never lifting her face. At intervals she said, mechanically, "Gee up, Bawly!"—a remark which had no effect whatever upon the chestnut horse.

The creaking that had first attracted Mrs. Hurst's attention came from the off-wheel. The sound was rapidly growing more acute, rising to a long-sustained screech that was the clearest possible demand for more oil: but the woman trudging by the horse's head did not seem to notice it. A step sounded near Mrs. Hurst, and she glanced round, to meet Danny's friendly gaze.

"Evenin', Mrs. Hurst," he said. "I jus' come over to see if yous was all right. Been a cow of a day, hasn't it?—an' the smoke's thicker than ever. Wonder who them travellers are? They'll have a hot axle if they don't watch it."

"I was just thinking that, Danny," Mrs. Hurst said. "Poor things, how tired they look!" She opened the gate and went out into the road.

"Good-evening," she said, gently. "Your wheel is very stiff, isn't it? Won't you rest here for a few minutes while I get you some oil for it?"

The woman had started violently at her voice. The chestnut horse pulled up thankfully, and dropped his nose yet farther earthwards.

"I been thinkin' it wouldn't get us much farther," she said, dully. "Trouble is, I don't know how much farther we got to go."

"Have you come far?"

"Out of the hills," she nodded vaguely backward. "We been on the track all day. Any township near here?"

"Not for two miles."

"Two mile!" It was clear that it might as well have been twenty, by her hopeless look. "Well, we got to get on. Gee up, Bawly!"

"Oh, but you can't!" Mrs. Hurst cried. "You—are you going to friends?"

"Oh, no. We don't know anyone round here. We come out of the hills."

"Then you are not going any farther," Mrs. Hurst said, quietly. "Just turn your horse in through this gate. Will you open it, Danny?"

Danny had it open before she had finished speaking.

"Better not try 'n' get the load up the hill before I grease that axle," he said. "I'll slip up an' get some grease." He took the rein, and led the tired horse through the gateway.

"But we can't stay here—four of us," the woman said. "I thought there'd be a pub somewheres: I got money, y' know, Missus."

"Why, I wouldn't let you go another yard!" Mrs. Hurst answered. "You look just tired out, all of you. Sit down on this log for a few minutes before you walk up the hill."

The woman sank on the log with a sigh of relief, and the heavy baby in her arms woke and cried. Mrs. Hurst leaned down and took it out of the mother's arms. Danny had already lifted the children out of the cart: they stood by the wheel, holding each other's hands, too shy to move, and half-inclined to cry, too.

"My word, it's good to sit down!" said the woman. "You're awful kind, Missus. It's too bad, loafin' on you like this."

"It would have been too bad if I had not happened to see you," replied Mrs. Hurst. "There—isn't she a good baby!"—as the baby, deciding that she liked the change of arms, ceased crying and looked about in an interested way. A half-smile flickered on the weary mother's face.

"She's been jolly good, considerin' she ain't a year old," she said. "But it's been a long day for all of 'em, an' I was afraid to stop long anywhere. It's a bit rough, when you don't know the country an' you ain't got any idea where you're goin'. Is this near Baroin?"

"Oh, no: Baroin is twelve miles away. But you need not worry any more: you can stay here until you are all rested. What brings you and the bairns alone on the track?"

"Me husband made us come. He an' his brother have a sawmill back there; jus' got it well goin'. But we got fair scared of the fires: they been creepin' nearer and nearer, an' if the wind changed they'd be down on our camp before you could say knife. I'd 'a' stuck it out with them if I'd been by meself. But there's the kids."

"Is there no one near you?"

"No. There'll be a road up after a bit: there's only a track through the bush now, an' the timber's awful thick all round us. Great timber for millin', of course, but you'd be roasted alive if a fire come through it. There ain't nowhere to get to, you see. There's a bit of a creek, but it's that small it 'ud be no use to you."

"But your menfolk? Is it safe for them to stay?"

"Safe?" was the dull answer. "No, it's darned unsafe. Y' wouldn't catch me leavin' but for that. I didn't want to go, anyhow. But Mick made me. 'Bill an' I can put up a fight for the mill,' he says, 'but I'm darned if we can fight for the kids, too. So you got to clear out with the kids,' he says. 'You take the furnitcher an' the kids, an' you clear out o' the timber.' An' I knew that was sense, so I done it. But I tell you straight, Missus, I'd like to dump the kids somewhere an' go back!"

"You can't do that," Mrs. Hurst said, gently. "Your husband would only be more anxious."

"An' what about me?"

Mrs. Hurst had no answer for that question. She glanced away from the haggard misery of the other woman's eyes.

"Just come up to the house, all of you, and let me take care of you," she said. "The wind may not change, and we may get rain at any time—why, your Mick might be down looking for you in a day or two. Come and I will make you some tea."

"My word, I could do with a cup o' tea," the woman said. "The poor kids, too—!" She beckoned to the two small boys, who had never stirred. "C'm on, you two. They been awful good, an' it's been a tough day."

"It must have been a very tough day," Mrs. Hurst said. "They will like some milk, and I have plenty."

"Milk! My word, they ain't seen milk f'r a blue moon!" said their mother.

"They shall have all they can drink now. Can you fix the wheel, Danny?"

"Would 'a' had a job if the ol' cart 'ud gone a hundred yards farther," said Danny, who had jacked up the wheel, and was busy over it. "Dry as a bone, an' near jammed altogether. Oh, yes, I'll fix it all right, Mrs. Hurst." He grinned sympathetically at the woman. "Don't you worry, mum—I'll bring the cart up to the house presently."

"Will you put it into the big shed and turn the horse into the creek paddock, Danny? I'm sure Mr. Merritt would not mind."

"Not 'im," said Danny. "Right you are. Mrs. Hurst. Don't you bother about anything."

"Gimme the baby, Missus," said the mother. "She's too heavy for you to carry."

"I think she is lighter for me than for you," Mrs. Hurst answered, smiling. "And I like her—she is such a friendly baby." She held the dusty bundle closely as they went up the

slope.

“Oh—a garden!” said the woman from the tall timber. “Oh, what a lovely garden! Missus, I ain’t seen a flower for near six months!”

“Then I must show you all mine—when you are rested.” Mrs. Hurst put her into a big chair on the veranda. “Just sit quietly until I bring you some tea. No—baby is coming with me.”

“Lor’, it’s like meetin’ an angel from ’eaven!” said the weary creature. She sank back, with a long sigh. “Micky an’ Joe, don’t you touch them flowers!”

“They can’t do any harm—please don’t trouble about them,” Mrs. Hurst said. At the door she looked back. Micky and Joe were standing before a huge sunflower, their faces a study of rapt wonder—never had they dreamed that the world could hold so great a marvel. There were tears in Mrs. Hurst’s eyes as she hurried to the kitchen.

The baby, made happy with a drink, and with hands and face hastily sponged, was placed in an upturned box, where a string of empty cotton-reels threw her into a very ecstasy of joy: she was clearly an unexacting infant, to whom much attention was a thing unknown. There was a kettle boiling: in a very few minutes Mrs. Hurst carried out a tray. Her visitor tried to rise.

“No, you are to sit still. Baby is quite all right. Drink that—don’t try to eat until you feel like it.” She poured out two glasses of creamy milk and put them, with a plate of bread-and-butter, on the edge of the veranda. “Come on, boys!” But Micky and Joe held back, even when their mother called them, overcome with shyness.

“They’re like wild things—they ain’t hardly seen a living soul ’cept ourselves for ages,” said the mother, apologetically. “They don’t mean to be bad-mannered, Missus.”

“And they are not bad-mannered—we’ll be great friends by to-morrow.” Mrs. Hurst smiled. “They will be happier if I go away. Just look after them and yourself, and don’t worry about Baby.” She retreated into the house, and presently, peeping through a curtain, had the satisfaction of seeing Micky and Joe attacking their first drink with faces that began by being doubtful, and ended in pure bliss as the glasses were set down empty.

“You can ’ave more,” she heard the mother say, filling the glasses with a hand that shook. “Drink ’em up, Kids. An’ you be good boys, now, or your Dad ’ll want to know the reason why when he comes!”

“When’s ’e comin’, Mum?”

“Lor’, if I knew that I wouldn’t be near off me ’ead this minute!” said the mother.

Robin and Barry came in a little later, in a frame of mind divided between triumph and depression; pride in their unlawful exploit having become damped, as they neared home, by melancholy forebodings on the subject of Mr. Merritt’s pig. They were trying to calculate the probable value of the victim to its owner, should it have been spared to arrive at the dignity of full growth, when upon their astonished eyes burst the vision of a crowded kitchen. At the table were seated a haggard woman and two small boys—the latter shining from the effects of a recent and thorough hot bath, and clad only in clean shirts. Mrs. Hurst was moving about, plying them with food; while Polly, in a corner, her face alight with happiness, fed an equally-scrubbed baby. The baby sat on her knee, dipped its fingers in its food, and clawed its nurse’s face with them, while the nurse

beamed, and uttered incoherent words of pride. Danny was filling kettles with the air of one who insists on joining in a general upheaval.

Robin and Barry stared—not with more amazement than was shown on the faces of the strangers, as the new-comers, guns in hand, halted in the doorway. Mrs. Hurst looked up and nodded brightly.

“Why, there are my warriors!” she said. “Any rabbits? I hope so, because I shall want some badly for to-morrow. We have guests, you see.”

The warriors looked at each other blankly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mother,” said Robin, in a voice of tragedy. “We haven’t got one!” Resolve seized her. “Come on, Barry—we’re sure to get some on the flat by the creek if we hurry.” Her face fell. “Oh, and we haven’t milked!”

“I done all the feedin’ and milkin,’ Miss Robin,” spoke Danny, grinning.

“Danny, you’re a brick! Hurry up, Barry—it’s nearly dark already.” They dashed from the kitchen and clattered across the yard.

One of the visitors uplifted his voice in the first remark he had made since his arrival at Hill Farm.

“Ain’t that feller got ginger hair!” said little Mick.

CHAPTER XIII

BLACK SUNDAY

ROBIN woke early, after an uneasy dream, in which Mr. Merritt's pig had been flattening her under a great slab of rock, while its brother exploded plug after plug of gelignite close by, apparently with the hope of killing her. To breathe under the rock was extremely difficult, and she was much relieved when the final explosion removed not only the stone, but both pigs, and left her swimming down the Merri Creek Falls. By great good luck she avoided the jutting crag that divided the main fall, and swam placidly down, using the breast-stroke very slowly, and not at all inconvenienced by being in a vertical position. This lasted until she reached the whirlpool at the foot, when the water immediately took charge of her, whirled her round like a cork at great speed, and washed her out upon a slope, quite dry, which was curious, and very breathless, which was what might have been expected.

She woke, and rubbed her eyes, wondering, half-sleepily, why she should still feel the sense of breathlessness that had followed her throughout her ridiculous dream. Her bed on the veranda overlooked the long stretch of narrow valley between the creek and the foothills, ending in a great spur of the range that towered into the sky, covered with mountain ash-trees. It was a view she loved: her first glance was for it every morning, and she turned towards it now.

There were no hills to be seen. The valley lay peacefully, looking just as it always did, save that it was hazy, as though a soft, transparent grey veil had been drawn over the familiar outlines. But the hills had vanished as completely as if they had been wiped out.

"Whew-w!" Robin whistled, sitting up. "Those fires in the ranges must have come down a good bit." Her thoughts went to the mother of Micky and Joe. "Poor little Mrs. Ryan will be more worried than ever. I do hope that Mick and Bill of hers won't stay too long trying to save their mill."

She got up, and, putting on kimono and slippers, went into the garden. All the hills that ran to north and south of the creek valley were blotted out, as if the valley had, in the night, become a kind of island, ending in nothing. Although the sun was well above the horizon, it was invisible. Somewhere behind the curtain it was mounting, already giving promise of a day that should be hotter than any they had yet endured—there was something sinister in its steady, unseen force. The air of early morning had no sense of refreshment and coolness. It was heavy to breathe, and profoundly still. Not a flicker stirred a leaf in the garden. And Robin suddenly realized that the busy chatter of awaking birds was altogether absent. They were hiding in the trees; there was no merry flutter of wings, no cheery call of cockatoos beyond the creek. The utter silence sent a little thrill of discomfort through her.

"This is too quiet altogether, even for Sunday morning," she said, with a half-laugh. "It feels uncanny. I think I'll call Barry, and we'll get the work done early."

Barry came into view as she turned to go.

"Hullo, you up?" he said. "Isn't it a beastly morning? I woke up feeling as if I had

been eating smoke.” His black hair was tousled; he rubbed his eyes, looking, in his pink-striped pyjamas, rather like an aggrieved child. “I don’t think this is going to be at all a nice day!”

“And that’s no bad prophecy,” Robin said, laughing. “I think we’ll spend most of it in the swimming-hole: it will be the only place fit to live in. I was just going to call you: we might as well get the outside jobs done before it gets any hotter.”

“Good idea!” Barry responded. “I’ll go and get some clothes on. Don’t go into the kitchen, by the way, Robin: I passed through there, and Polly’s terribly busy making tea, to surprise you.”

“All right, I won’t,” said Robin. Her air of delighted astonishment sent Polly into a flutter of joy when, a few minutes later, she brought her a steaming cup.

“Why, how lovely of you, Polly! I wanted to get the milking done early, and you’ve saved me ever so much time. Toast, too! No one ever makes me early-morning toast but you. I must take a cup to Mother.”

“No—I want to,” Polly begged, her big, dog-like eyes dwelling affectionately on the merry face, and on the shining red hair. Polly loved Robin’s hair so openly that its owner used to declare that it almost made her reconciled to its colour. She put out her hand now, and touched it gently. Her greatest delight was to be allowed to trim it—they had discovered that she possessed extraordinary skill with the scissors—and Barry declared that she treasured all the clippings!

“Nearly time I cut it again, Miss Robin,” she said.

“Yes, I think it is. All right, Polly, you can go at it any time you like. Well, you take Mother her tea, and give her my love. Tell her I’ve gone to milk.”

“Yes: good-oh!” said Polly. “Then I’ll sweep all the rooms.”

“You mustn’t get tired,” Robin warned her. “The Doctor will be angry if you do—and so will I.” At which Polly laughed as if it were the best joke in the world. She loved to work about the house, especially when she fancied that by doing so she could save Robin; the Baroin doctor’s warning that her heart was not strong enough for much exertion had no meaning for her. Robin and her mother had to watch her carefully lest she should overtax her powers.

“Two rooms only, Polly—promise me, or I can’t go and milk.”

Polly made a laborious mental calculation of rooms.

“Four!” she begged.

“No, two. Then we’ll do the others together when I come in.” This was a bait that never failed, and Polly succumbed.

“Good-oh!” she said, beaming. “I’ll go and get that tea now.” She went off happily, and Robin departed in search of Bessy.

When she came back, a bucket in each hand, Mrs. Ryan was standing on the back veranda. The baby was in her arms: Micky and Joe, still tongue-tied with shyness, pressed against her skirt.

“I hope you slept well. Mrs. Ryan,” Robin said. “You needed a good rest.”

"No, I didn't sleep much," the woman said. "It was hot—and I kep' thinkin' of them back there at the mill. It'll be a bit of a terror, you know, if that mill goes: we put every penny into it, an' we got a first-rate lot of timber cut, waitin' for the road. It's been hard scratchin' to live, but we done it somehow, knowin' we'd get a good cheque when we sold. But if the fire comes——." She shut her lips tightly.

"It may not come, Mrs. Ryan. Try not to worry too much," Robin said, pityingly, knowing, as she spoke, how useless were her words.

"You an' your mother have been awful kind, miss," Mrs. Ryan said. There was a flash of gratitude in her dull eyes. "I'd never forget it. But it's hard not to worry a bit."

"Was the fire very near, Mrs. Ryan?"

"Not so very near. We hadn't been worryin' ourselves much about it. But it got hotter an' hotter, an' the smoke come down more an' more, an' Mick got thinkin' about the wind changin'. If it did—well, did y' ever see a fire travel in the ranges, miss?"

"No. I've only seen very small fires."

"Please God you'll never see a big one. In the ranges, with a wind behind it, it don't travel—it races. Gets into the tree-tops, an' jumps a mile at a time. There's no fightin' it—you can't burn breaks in that big timber. Men might have a chance to save their lives, but never kids. That's why Mick sent us off. But I wish't I could 'ave stayed. Only for the kids I'd 'ave stayed, too, an' let 'im talk. But kids are an awful big argument."

She paused, trying vainly to look into the hills.

"Mind y', we haven't been fools. Mick an' Bill know their way about. We've cut every stick as far as we could, all round the camp, an' burnt off all the undergrowth: we been livin' on a big patch of bare, burnt ground for weeks. It's awful livin', of course—I jus' give up tryin' to keep the kids or anything else clean, 'specially with the only water half a mile away, down a big hill. Took over twenty minutes to carry up a bucket, an' half of it would be splashed away before I got up. You get mighty savin' with water when you got to carry it like that!"

"I should think you did," said Robin, under her breath. Bush girl as she liked to think herself, she realized that there were phases of life she did not comprehend. This little woman, with her quiet face and anxious eyes, was only one of many, struggling and suffering quietly in the lonely places. "How did you manage for stores, Mrs. Ryan?"

"Oh, not too bad. Mick or Bill took a day off every fortnight or three weeks, an' brought things back from the township. I've got a camp-oven, so I can make bread all right. I ain't been off the place meself for six months, 'cept for one day, an' then it was on'y 'cause Baby was sick, an' I had to take her to a chemist. That's what gets y' down, miss: when the kids gets sick, an' y' don't know what it is. An' of course they don't get the right sort of food for kids. But they got to manage on it somehow."

She gave a short laugh.

"I got a sister—works in a big shop in Melbourne. She come to see us once when she had her holidays, but it fair scared her. She come for a week, but she on'y stayed three days—my word, an' I'd looked forward to havin' her, too, an' I'd got the camp like a new pin. Wasn't Bill mad, havin' to knock off work again to take her back! She said she didn't know how I lived. Like animals, she said—never a soul to speak to, an' no goin' out to

pictures or darnces or things. Well I reckon I know all about what it means not to have a woman to talk to now 'n' then. But she can keep 'er pictures an' darnces: I wouldn't change my job for hers, bad 'n' all as she thinks mine!" Her head went up with a queer little flash of pride. "Bill an' me reckon we're doin' a job that counts!"

"I should think you are!" Robin said, slowly. "And you have your three splendid kiddies."

"Yes—we got them." She put her tanned cheek against the baby's soft face for a moment. "But when you got to choose between your man an' the kids—" Her voice died away; and Robin had no words to offer.

Breakfast was a meal for which no one had much appetite, except Micky and Joe, who wore an air of awe-struck bewilderment at a world which held so many new and unexpected things to eat. The heat increased with a kind of bitter intensity. No animals were to be seen in the scorched paddocks: they had all sought the creek, where they stood with hanging heads, in dumb protest at the breathless stillness. Robin and Barry agreed that it was too hot to walk to the swimming-hole, with the prospect of a worse walk back, to destroy the effect of a bathe. Everyone seemed restless and uneasy; people jumped at a sound, without knowing why they jumped. It was as though the still air was charged with something mysterious and uncanny.

And, at eleven o'clock, came the wind.

It came with a far-off sighing, like the sound of breakers on a distant beach. They heard it for what seemed a long while before they felt it; but at the first sound Mrs. Ryan got up hurriedly and went into the yard, where she stood gazing towards the hills that she could not see. Nearer and nearer: and then it was upon them. The trees in the orchard bent suddenly, and one old pear-tree snapped with a sharp crack: Mrs. Ryan's thin skirts whipped round her legs: an empty kerosene-tin was blown rattling and banging across the yard with the first wild gust. A burning wind, like the breath of a furnace: it caught the house and shook it, and, racing on, whirled the dust from the road into a dense, eddying cloud. They shut the house against it, closing every door and window; and the wind howled and moaned as it eddied among the chimneys, and swelled to a full-throated roar, sweeping down the valley. So it blew, unbroken in its scorching fierceness, for more than sixteen hours.

Borne on its fiery breath came the smoke: such smoke as made the valley settlers realize that the earlier haze, by comparison, had been but as a light morning mist. It came in a dense, unbroken cloud, blotting out the country, until it was impossible to see more than a hundred yards in any direction. The sun, a great ball of angry orange, seemed to hang framed in it. Like a wall of dull yellow the smoke marched across the land, turning every familiar object into an unreal ghost. The very flowers in the garden lost their colour before it: Robin's crimson dahlias showed a dull flame-colour, the blue of the plumbago flowers a dirty grey. And ever the roar of the wind grew louder and louder, and its breath more laden with fierce heat.

They could not stay in the shut house. Even though the hot gusts parched the skin and choked the breath—even though they could see nothing but the dense smoke-wall that shut them in—no one could bear to remain indoors. There was worse yet to come, they knew: danger that must be watched for, out in the open. And presently, in the garden,

came the first messengers from the burning ranges: ashes, falling thickly, charred fronds of bracken, half-burned twigs, and fragments of bark. No fire lived in them, but many were still hot. They came more and more swiftly, until the coverlets of the beds on the verandas were black with them: blown so fiercely that many were forced underneath the pillows.

The scorching wind grew wilder until it was a very hurricane of heat. A new sound began to mingle with its fury; a dull, far-off roar that made the Hill Farm watchers look at each other in voiceless fear. As they stood by the fence, they heard galloping hoofs, and David Merritt raced up on a sweating horse.

“That you, Mrs. Hurst? They’re bringing people here—the Gordon family and the Watts and Duncans. There’s no earthly chance for their homes. You must be ready to make for the creek.”

“Is the fire very near?” Mrs. Hurst asked.

“God knows where there isn’t fire! All the ranges are burning, on both sides of the valley, and the fire is coming down fast. There’s no fighting it, in this awful wind. Eh, Robin, that’s a good sight!”—for Robin had slipped away, returning with a long tumbler of cool drink. He drained it thirstily.

“Every man in the district is out, doing what he can—it’s chiefly getting people away from the lonely farms back in the bush, and from the sawmillers’ camps. They’re sending cars out from Baroin to take refugees in there. I think your place is safer than most, for it’s surrounded with green—but you can’t tell. Every bit of woodwork is hot to the touch today, and if a burning branch lodged on a shed roof or under the veranda, the house would go.”

“Yes—I see that,” Mrs. Hurst said. “What should I do, Mr. Merritt?”

“Keep a close watch, that’s all. There’s no safer place than the creek down below your paddock, for there are good holes with no trees near them to hold the fire. That’s the worst—the trees: the grass and ferns go like a flash, but the trees burn so long, and shower fragments everywhere. If the house catches, or if you see flames coming from the hills behind the smoke, make for the creek—take blankets with you to soak and put over your heads. And don’t leave it too late to go! There would be men here to watch your place only that we don’t reckon you’re in as much danger as most of the places.”

“We do not need anyone,” Mrs. Hurst said, calmly. “But is there nothing any of us can do?”

“Can’t I be some use, Mr. Merritt?” Barry struck in. “I could help the men!”

“No, my son, you can’t. We want only men who know every yard of the country. Be ready to do all you can here—you had better take it in turns to watch, or your eyes will soon give out—three men are smoke-blind already. You might have food and drinks ready, Mrs. Hurst: I’ll tell any of the men they can get a bite here, if I may. They may not have the chance, but if they do it will be a help.”

“It will be a comfort to do it,” Mrs. Hurst said. “I’ll have boracic lotion made, too, for their poor eyes.”

“That’s a real good idea. Well, I must be off.” He swung himself into the saddle, and then spoke again. “We’re pretty anxious about Danny Sanders; his brother’s splitting rails

over near Gaunt's Crossing, camping alone, and we heard by telephone that there's a big fire there. Danny went off at once on a horse—but he has five miles of awful country to get through, and by the look of it the fire will be across it before he is. Well, it's a black day for Gipp'sland!" He wheeled his horse, and in a moment was swallowed up by the smoke.

"We must all work," Mrs. Hurst said. "Robin, will you and Barry watch, for the present—one in front, the other at the back. We will get food ready: and all of us must eat something, for we'll need all our strength." They battled against the raging wind, fighting each step across the yard.

"I'm blessed if I'm going to let the house go without putting up a fight!" declared Robin.

"Same here," Barry returned. "I say, Robin, I'll get boughs ready for beaters at every point, and put buckets of water handy. Gee, aren't your eyes sore!" He rubbed his own furiously, as he hurried off for an axe.

It was a comfort to work, even though work was terrible, in the blinding heat. Together they put the house in a state of defence, as well as they could; and then, an idea occurring to Robin, they dug a hole in the garden and buried whatever money and small valuables the house contained, wrapped in an old mackintosh. Now and then Mrs. Hurst or Mrs. Ryan took their places, and they went in to snatch a morsel of food, to bathe their smarting eyes, or to help in preparing food and drink. In one of the bedrooms Polly played happily on the floor with the three little Ryans—only leaving them to make sure, occasionally, that Robin was not far off: when she would stand by her for a moment, perhaps stroke her sleeve, and then would return contentedly to her charges. Mrs. Ryan worked in utter silence, her face stony in its self-control. And as the dull roar from the ranges mounted on the rushing wind, no one dared breathe to her a word of hope.

Dazed people began to arrive at Hill Farm: mothers carrying little children; old men and women; boys and girls sick with excitement and fear: all of them stumbling in, half-blind with smoke, and stupid from the fight through the gale. They scarcely realized that in all probability the little homes, so toilfully reared throughout years of grinding effort, would be heaps of ashes when they next saw them—some things are mercifully beyond realization. They carried just what they had been permitted to save as they fled: little articles of value, bundles of clothes, clocks that still ticked sturdily: and one childless mother held in her hand the little shoes her baby had not stayed long enough with her to wear out. They sat about in pitiful groups, grateful for what the Hursts did for them, too dazed to speak much. Men came out from Baroin in cars, to take them away.

"Safer there than here," said one man. "Though goodness knows, the township would go like a flash if a blaze started anywhere—there'd be no stopping it, in this wind. What a hurricane! a bit of charred messmate bark fell on my lawn, and there's no messmate forest within ten miles of us! And there are no men left to fight in Baroin—every man in the place is out fighting somewhere. The fire-bell rings a new alarm every little while—some fresh outbreak reported from the country. The post-office people have been doing great work telephoning—but half the telephone-lines are down now, brought down by falling trees."

"Are there fires between here and the township?" Mrs. Hurst asked.

“Half a dozen have started, but they’ve managed to stop them—there are men all along, to keep the track clear. I had a narrow shave in one place: a burning tree came down across the road, and missed the car by inches. But a miss is as good as a mile! They’ll have the tree cleared away when I get back with my load. Sure you wouldn’t like to come in, Mrs. Hurst?”

She shook her head. “I think we are safe here—and there is the creek.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be a joy-ride,” said the man from Baroin. “One fellow met a wall of flame across the track near Heathfield: he made his passengers duck down and cover themselves all over with a rug, and he went through it at forty miles an hour. Got through all right, but the rug was blazing. Nobody even singed, however. Your house had a narrow shave just now, hadn’t it?”

“Mine?” She looked at him questioningly.

“Didn’t you know?” he asked, astonished. “Just as I got up to the back, it was. Bit of burning wood must have lodged against the wall, high up, over the veranda: it was beginning to smoulder. That red-haired young daughter of yours was up with a bucket of water, putting it out, before I could get there. It’s quite all right now, so don’t worry.” He went off to gather his passengers, and Mrs. Hurst continued to cut sandwiches with a calmness that surprised herself. Robin was safe, evidently: and the food was needed. She must not leave her job.

There was no word of Danny Sanders. The fire had raged at Gaunt’s Crossing, wiping out a sawmill and a road construction camp: but of Danny and his brother nothing was known. Cars could not get through, for the only track was blocked by enormous fallen trees, still blazing fiercely: one had been tried, and had encountered a sudden shower of sparks and flying coals as a tree came down—the car had been blazing fiercely in a moment, and the men in it had staggered out of the fire-zone on foot, glad to find themselves alive, their shirts charred rags. No one knew whether Danny had got across the blazing spur to his brother. The men who spoke of his chances shook their heads doubtfully. There were sad hearts, for everyone liked big Danny.

The slow afternoon crawled on. There were no more refugees now; all who were not still clinging to their homes, refusing to leave while there was a chance of fighting, had been taken in to Baroin; and rumour said that the township itself was in grave danger, from a fire approaching from the east. All the men of the valley were fighting to save their homes. The wind had eddied, swinging from one point to another; or long ago the blaze from the hills would have swept down across the creeks. It roared above them, the lashing tongues of flame leaping half a mile at a time; their sullen raging sound, and the mighty crashing of forest giants, loud above the howling gale. Even on the flats, limbs were twisted and flung many yards away, and great trees crashed down before the fury of the wind; two men had been badly hurt, and had been taken away, insensible, to the hospital. The men, strung out below the foothills, raced from place to place, as burning fragments from the mountains fell into the long grass—beating savagely at the blaze that sprang up almost before the fiery messenger had touched the earth. Women fought with superhuman strength beside them, or staggered from one to another with buckets of tea—men and women alike choking and crying with the smoke. And all the while the cruel, scorching gale howled, and they knew in their hearts that, sooner or later, they must give up the

unequal fight and think only of saving their lives.

A dozen times the sheds or the house of Hill Farm had caught—but always Robin or Barry had been lucky enough to see the first licking tongue of flame and to quench it before it had fairly taken hold. Polly worked with them, as quick to see as they: as the day wore on she seemed unable to let Robin out of her sight. Whether Robin beat out a springing flame, or worked at preparing food, or toiled across the paddock with cans of tea, Polly was beside her—careless of the blistering heat, always ready with a faint little smile when the girl looked at her. It was useless to beg her to remain inside: she merely shook her head obstinately, still smiling. And there was no time for argument on Black Sunday.

It was four o'clock when David Merritt, with blackened face and red-rimmed eyes, raced to the house again.

“Get to the creek!” he shouted, trying to make himself heard above the shrieking of the gale and that deeper roar that came behind it. “It’s coming down like a wall—there’s no fighting it! Take blankets—and hurry!” He struck his spurs into his horse, galloping to the next farm.

They were all prepared: like disciplined soldiers they made their way out and filed down the slope, leaving Hill Farm to its fate. Only Robin hung back a moment, calling to Barry. They flung the water in their buckets over the verandas.

“Not that it’s much good,” Robin muttered—“it dries almost before it falls, in this wind. But it’s our last kick! Grab your blanket, Barry, and run!”

They trotted after the little procession ahead—already dimly seen through the smoke.

“One of the men told me he doesn’t think the house will go,” Barry said. “So much green all round it, and no big trees that will burn. And he said it was the very fierceness of the wind that would save it, for the fire will go past it in a flash. It’s flying fragments that are the danger.”

“Well, goodness knows there are enough of them,” Robin answered, stamping on a smouldering piece of bark that fell almost at her feet. “No, I guess it’s the finish for poor old Hill Farm, Barry. And we’ve been so happy there!” She raised her voice as she saw Polly hanging back uneasily before them. “All right, Polly—go on, I’m coming!”

“And it was only yesterday,” said Barry, in a voice of wonder, “that we were worried because we’d killed Mr. Merritt’s pig! Doesn’t it seem queer that it ever seemed to matter!”

“Poor old Mr. Merritt hasn’t a pig left,” Robin said. “Dick Merritt told me when I took him a drink that they had all died of the heat and smoke.”

“By Jove!” said Barry, staring. “And I’ve never had a chance to own up about the one we finished. Well, I can do it to-morrow—if any of us are alive.”

“Oh, we’ll be alive, I expect,” said Robin. But in her own heart she did not feel so sure.

It seemed strange to find themselves at the creek, with nothing to do. The day had been all toil and agony: now there was nothing for them but the last effort ahead—of saving their own lives. They all plunged into the water, rejoicing in its cool touch on their

suffering bodies: the little boys kicked and scrambled in the shallows, with shrill cries of delight. The hole that they had chosen was wide, and bare of overhanging trees; there was a little rocky island in the middle, and here they placed the basket of food that they had carried, and covered it with a wet rug, held down by a slab of stone. And then there was nothing to do.

Nothing but to watch. Already Hill Farm was only a misty outline through the smoke. Behind it the roar of the fire drove on the hurricane, each moment drawing nearer: embers fell and sizzled on their soaked felt hats, and spluttered as they struck the water. They saw fleeing animals, kangaroos and wallabies, that leaped past them, blind with terror: near at hand a splendid crimson lory suddenly flashed downwards through the smoke and fell dead beside them. The very air was full of terror and death.

Then, for the first time, behind the smoke they saw the wall of flame that leaped down from the hills like a hungry animal. High above the trees it towered in rushing tongues and solid roaring sheets, while the hills shook and echoed with the noise of crashing timber. Nearer it came—nearer yet

A shrill, pitiful sound pierced the gale—a horse’s neigh that was half a scream. Robin glanced round sharply.

“Oh, it’s Roany!” she cried. “He’s trapped in the next paddock—Dick Merritt was using him. I’ll run and open the gate, Mother—it will give him a chance, at least. I can’t let him burn!”

“Robin—come back!” Mrs. Hurst’s agonized cry was lost in the screaming wind. Barry pushed past her in the water.

“I’ll go after her,” he said, between his teeth. Already the slender, running figure was dim through the smoke.

Mrs. Hurst caught his wrist and held it as in a vice.

“No!” she said. “You are all they have—and you can do no good. Oh, pray for her—pray that she may be quick!”

Roany was at the gate, pawing, uttering terrified whinnying. Robin flung it open, the iron latch scorching her fingers, and the horse galloped madly past her, the thudding of his hoofs dying away towards the creek. Robin ran back, more slowly than she had come. She knew that she was very nearly done.

Then the smoke seemed to split in two, showing the fire as it whirled down upon Hill Farm. Behind the green of the garden the immediate blaze died away: but on either side a wall of flame rushed through the long grass and the dry bracken, driving with hurricane speed towards the creek. The hot breath of its coming blinded and choked her. She knew the creek was near: knew that she was staggering uncertainly, her sense of direction gone. Then dimly, through the dense smoke, she saw a running, silent figure: Polly, carrying something, and smiling as she ran. Only for a moment, for Robin’s eyes could see no more. She fell, blind and helpless, in the path of the rushing wall of flame.

The scorching blast touched her. Then came a sudden weight of coolness and darkness, exquisite in its relief. She drifted under it into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST

"MOTHER, are you there?"

"Yes, dear heart. Don't try to move."

"I can't see you."

"No—and I cannot see you, Robin. We are both blind, from the smoke. But it will soon pass."

"Where am I?"

"You are in your own room, dear."

Memory was coming back to Robin—and with memory, fear.

"Mother—the fire! Is the house safe?"

"Quite safe—the fire has gone. It missed the house, Robin—nothing is burned, except the grass. The wind changed in the night, and everything is safe now."

Robin wrinkled her brow under the wet bandage that hid her eyes.

"I can't remember," she said. "We were in the creek, weren't we? Oh, and I ran to let Roany out, and the fire came—and I saw Polly running, and I knew she shouldn't run. Is she all right, Mother?"

Mrs. Hurst was silent for a moment.

When her voice came, it was trembling.

"Yes—Polly is quite all right, now," she said. But Robin had caught the hesitation and the tone that quivered. She felt blindly for her mother's hand.

"You're not telling me something," she said—and found that her own voice was beyond her control. "I—I wish I could see you. Tell me, Mother. Is there something wrong?"

Mrs. Hurst found the groping hand and held it tightly.

"There will never be anything wrong for Polly again," she said. "She gave her life for you, my darling. No—not burned—" she shivered at the horror in Robin's cry. "She was scarcely scorched—her wet clothes and hat saved that. She flung a wet blanket over you, when you fell, and went down herself: the fire was over you both in the flash of a moment, thanks to the wind. You were only unconscious, when we got to you. But Polly—" her voice broke. "The doctor says that her heart just stopped."

"Oh, Mother—Mother!" Robin whispered.

"The doctor thinks she could have felt nothing from the moment that she fell." Mrs. Hurst said, holding her closely. "Don't cry, Robin."

"She was smiling when she ran to me—I can see her face now!" Robin said, after a choked minute.

"She was smiling when we found her, like a happy child. No one could think that she

had felt either pain or terror. We believe that she died in triumph, because she knew she had saved you: and the doctor says we ought to think that it is best for her, Robin."

"And she has got Jim again," whispered Robin.

"Yes—and they have found gold together."

Little by little the horror of Black Sunday came to be known; in that wild and scattered district it was impossible at once to discover the full extent of the havoc the fires had wrought. Polly's was not the only one whose life had gone out as a sacrifice. There were men who had been killed by falling trees: who had died fighting for their homes: wives who had perished battling beside their husbands, and whole families whom the fire had trapped in the forest. There were communities in which every living soul was blind from smoke. Hundreds were homeless and penniless; townships were blotted out, farm-houses reduced to a heap of ashes and twisted iron. Starving stock roamed the blackened country, seeking vainly for food. In the towns where they could gather, the refugees huddled, clutching the few poor possessions they had been able to save—dazed and bewildered, while the doctors worked day and night, tending their burns, and kindly homes gathered in the sick who had fallen by the way.

And then, with the spreading of the news, came the swift response of the country. After the first gasp of horror the rush of help followed. Women ransacked their homes to send clothing, linen, blankets; children gave their toys for the children who had lost their all: the tide of money poured into the coffers of the relief funds until it mounted day by day in a wave of gold. Men who were slow to give in ordinary circumstances gave gladly now. The whole world heard the pitiful story, and shouted its sympathy: there were offers of help from every State, and from far beyond Australia. From the King's whole-hearted message of grief to the quick help of the Chinese in Victoria, there was no heart that was not wrung by the story of the fires. The sufferers, dazed and homeless, as they squared their shoulders to begin anew could feel that, at least, their country stood behind them to help.

In the neighbourhood of Hill Farm many houses had escaped, the fury of the gale having swept the flames along too swiftly to let them fasten on homes where gardens were green or where fire-breaks had been made and undergrowth cleared. Merritt's farm was safe, and O'Rourke's, and Sanders': and to the joy of everyone, Danny appeared, badly burned, but safe, having ridden through five miles of fire in time to rescue his brother. Merri Creek village had been reduced to a heap of ashes, and for miles the new railway showed nothing but blackened and twisted rails; but no lives had been lost, and no one despaired. In the hearts of everyone was the same quiet determination—to build up all that had been lost.

Dr. and Mrs. Lane appeared on the third day and took firm possession of Mrs. Hurst and Robin, carrying them bodily off to Melbourne. Mrs. Hurst did not resist. She knew that the terror of Black Sunday, and the shock of Polly's death would cling to Robin until her full strength returned; while she herself longed to be out of sight of the blackened hills and valleys, with their fearful memories. Only one consideration held her—Mrs. Ryan, who went about whatever work she could find to do, or tended her children, in tight-lipped silence. No word had come from the lonely sawmill she had left in the forest. It was almost beyond hope that any good news could ever come.

But on the fourth day, sitting on the veranda, she glanced up to see two gaunt and ragged men walking up the hill: and at the same moment a dish clattered to the floor in the kitchen, and Mrs. Ryan, clutching the baby, fled past her, racing down the blackened slope; with Micky and Joe at her heels, yelping joyfully. Big Mick Ryan gathered his family into his arms.

"You were awful good to 'em, Missus," he told Mrs. Hurst, a little later.

"Good?" she said: and laughed. "We were all in the same box: it was a comfort to be able to help. But I'm so sorry your mill has gone!"

"Oh—darn the ol' mill!" said little Mrs. Ryan.

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[*From a letter from Robin Hurst, Hill Farm, to Barry Lane, Melbourne.*]

"We had a good journey back, though it wasn't half as interesting in the train as it was in the car. The Ryans had all the place in beautiful order. They are still here, but the Relief Committee is going to fix them up with a new sawmill soon, and they say they will be just as well-off as they were before the fire. I don't know how well-off that was, but it seems to satisfy them. The boys will talk now, and the baby is beautiful. So are Roany and Bessy and the calf.

"Everyone asks after you, and Danny came over and showed me your gun. Why didn't you ever tell me that you gave it to him after the fire? He is terribly proud of it, and expects to make a large fortune out of rabbit-skins.

"All the country is green again, except for the blackened trees. They look dreadful, but everyone is so glad to be alive that nobody worries. And lots of them will sprout out—the trees, I mean, not the people.

"The Merritts say that Mother and I are quite fat, so that shows what a splendid time you gave us in Town. I always hated Town until this time, but now I love it, and I'm ever so glad Mrs. Lane has asked me to go again some day. The worst part of it is that one can't go about there in breeches and a shirt; but I suppose everything has to have its drawbacks.

"Now I have a perfectly wonderful piece of news, which I left to the last on purpose, because it's so exciting. After you wrote to Mr. Merritt and told him the sad story of the gelignited pig (I had to pause while I looked up gelignite—I thought it began with a j)—he went down one day and had a look at the place where we blasted the rock, just out of curiosity. You know where the big stone split off from the face of the hill—I said the rock looked pretty, and you said that was just what a girl would say. Well, it was pretty, Mr. Barry, and it is pretty still. And it has every right to be pretty, because it's marble!

"Mr. Merritt knew a good bit about marble, because he used to work in a quarry, and he hadn't any doubt: but rather than excite our hopes he said nothing, but he sent a lot of samples to Melbourne and had them examined. And the report was better than he had hoped it would be. And then he got an expert down, a man he could trust, to look into the matter, keeping it all very quiet. But the expert says there is no doubt at all, and that it will probably be a most

valuable quarry, and bring us in heaps of money. So we won't have to look three times at a penny next time we want to spend it.

"I have always wondered what I would do if I had a lot of money, and now that there seems a chance of it, I really don't know. I want a car, of course, and some really topping horses, though Mother won't promise that we'll ever get them. But best of all is knowing that Mother won't look worried any more. And next best is the thought that I shan't have to go away from Hill Farm and learn shorthand and typing. How dreadful that prospect was no one could ever know.

"Just fancy if old Uncle Donald had known that wealth was shut up in one of his hills! And if he could have guessed that the red-haired niece he couldn't stand would go out with a rude little boy from Melbourne and use his own old gelignite to find it! But he'd never have had any fun with it, and I'm sure we'll have lots. We're going to begin by getting some poor little youngsters from Melbourne, who have been sick, and have only slum-homes to go back to, when they leave hospital. I'm sure they will like it. But I'll make quite certain they don't find any gelignite!

"Mr. Merritt says that he thinks his pig was very lucky to die when it did. So do I. But he is ever so pleased with the two little pure-bred Berkshires you sent him. I have offered him the first slab of marble as a suitable monument for the pig we slew. You might think up a poetical inscription.

"And don't forget to come next summer, Barry, because, even with the marble quarry and all the excitement, it's dull without you.

"Yours truly,
"ROBIN."

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Robin* by Mary Grant Bruce]