

GOLDEN FIDDLES



MARY · GRANT · BRUCE

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

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

Title: Golden Fiddles

Date of first publication: 1928

Author: Mary Grant Bruce (1878-1958)

Date first posted: Feb. 10, 2019

Date last updated: Feb. 10, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190219

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

STORIES BY
MARY GRANT BRUCE

Published by
WARD, LOCK & CO., LTD.

"Mrs. Bruce has a story to tell, and she sets about doing it in her own straightforward way, without resort to padding. Her style is never laboured, it matches its subject in its naturalness. Smiles and tears, humour and pathos, blend in her books as they do in life itself."—*The Queen*.

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



“ ‘Kit, old girl!’ said Elsa, greatly alarmed, ‘What’s the matter?’ ” (Chapter XV)
Golden Fiddles [Frontispiece]

GOLDEN FIDDLES

**BY
MARY GRANT BRUCE**

**WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE**

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

Loud sang the souls of the jolly, jolly mariners,
Crying, "Under Heaven, here is neither lead nor lee!
Must we sing for evermore
On the windless glassy floor?
Take back your golden fiddles, and we'll beat to open sea!"
 "The Last Chantey" (Rudyard Kipling).

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I THE HOUSE OF BALFOUR.	9
II THE ONE GREAT DAY	31
III SHIRTS AND CIRCUMSTANCES.	54
IV STICKING IT	76
V OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES	89
VI THE RECKLESSNESS OF THE BALFOURS	98
VII THE HORIZON WIDENS.	115
VIII THE GOLDEN FIDDLES PLAY	125
IX OUT OF THE CHRYSALIS	141
X THE GROWTH OF THE BALFOURS	154
XI BOB DREAMS	172
XII THE WAKING OF KITTY	191
XIII THE IMPRUDENCE OF BRIGGS.	208
XIV THE BRIDGE.	222
XV REALITIES	233
XVI THE NEW HOUSE OF BALFOUR.	247

GOLDEN FIDDLES

CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE OF BALFOUR

“I WOULDN’T give it another minute,” said Mrs. Balfour earnestly.

“I think it’s done,” said her daughter. Her tone was breathless, her face a study of concentration. “At all events, it’s coming out. Shut the oven door—quick, Mother! And please don’t speak to me for a minute, or I’ll lose my nerve.”

“Don’t get fussed: I won’t even look at you,” said Mrs. Balfour, smiling. She closed the door of the oven as Kitty backed away from it bearing a pan in which a delicately browned sponge mixture brimmed. Followed a tense moment. True to her word, Mrs. Balfour gazed intently at the kettles, while smothered gasps from her daughter punctuated the final moments in the career of a sponge roll. She heard the quick tap that told of the reversal of the pan on the table, with an agonized “It’s sticking!” from Kitty: she thrilled a second later as the empty pan clattered to the floor: then, despite her own counsel of calmness, she held her breath, following in spirit the lightning movements of jam-spreading, the last harrowing uncertainty of rolling-up. Not until a triumphant “There!” showed that the operation was complete did she look round.

“Oh, a beauty, Kitty!” she said. “I don’t think you ever made a better one.”

“Not a crack,” said Kitty, regarding the roll at all angles. “Rolled like a dream, Mother. Just one awful moment when I thought it wouldn’t turn out, and then all was well. Do you think it’s too brown?”

“Not a bit,” said her mother. “I don’t like pallid sponge rolls: if I were judging I would always give the prize to a well-cooked one—they’re so much harder to roll without breaking. Well, that one won’t disgrace you, Kitty. Wrap it up quickly, dear, and get to your scones. I’ve washed the mixing-bowl.”

“You’re a dear,” said Kitty gratefully. She folded the roll in a spotless towel, put it on one side, and plunged at the flour-sifter. “The oven’s just perfect, thank goodness. Not that I’ve any chance with scones; there are always at least twenty entries. But ten-and-six is worth trying for—or tenpence-halfpenny. Just fancy if I won it, Mother! I wonder how I’d feel if I had a whole ten-and-six of my own!”

“I should like you to know the feeling,” said Mrs. Balfour, with a little sigh.

“Wonder what I’d do with it?” said Kitty, measuring cream-of-tartar with a wary hand. “It’s a lump of money, isn’t it? Gloves for you, you old blessing, and ties for the boys—Norman’s best tie is a tattered string, and he does hate it so. Pencils and fiddle-strings for Elsa, of course; or a drawing-book: after all, Father generally manages to get her fiddle-strings. It’s his one extravagance. I dare say Bob would rather have a knife than a tie, but he needs the tie more.”

“And what for yourself?”

"Oh, I don't know. We'd see what was left over. It would be tremendous fun spending it. Mother—Father wouldn't make me put it in the Bank, would he?"

"No—he promised me he wouldn't, if you won any prizes."

"That's a relief," said Kitty, sighing. "It nearly broke my heart when the money for the little pig had to go into the Bank. Because that was my own little pig, that old Mrs. Barnes gave me, and Father had nothing to do with it. I suppose it was wise. But thirty shillings in the Bank seems so useless, and it would be such dazzling wealth to spend."

"It's safe where it is," Mrs. Balfour observed.

"That's the sort of thing Father says, and 'You'll be very glad of it some day,'—as if I didn't know that already! But I want to be glad now. Oh, well, it's no use worrying. I'll go off and earn my own living when I'm twenty-one, and then I'll be like the Prodigal Son and never put a penny in the Bank—but I'll have a good time." She cut her light, bubbly dough into neat squares with quick, deft movements: everything that Kitty did was accomplished with the same effortless swiftness. "You'll back me up, won't you, Mother? You'll let me go?"

"Yes, I'll let you go, if your father will agree," said Mrs. Balfour, with a sigh. "The place won't seem the same without you, but I wouldn't keep you here. It isn't life, for a young girl."

Kitty put her scones into the oven and began clearing the table.

"I wouldn't mind being poor," she said. "There aren't any rich people about here. But I'd like to be poor cheerfully—not to fuss and worry all the time, as Father does, and always making the worst of things. Why, he looks as if the world were coming to an end when any of us want new boots, till it makes one ashamed of having feet!"

"But he has to find the money, you must remember."

"Yes, and he always does find it. It just means having a little less clearing done, or selling a few sheep before he wants to—but he can always manage. Then why can't he do it cheerfully? After all, we're never hungry, even if we are shabby. But I'd willingly go hungry now and then if he'd only make a joke of it."

"But you don't understand his anxieties, Kitty. There is the mortgage: the Bank is not easy to deal with. Father has to bear it all." She was loyal, even though she ached in sympathy with the beating wings of youth.

"Well, if he'd tell us everything and make mates of us, it would be different," said Kitty stubbornly. "We'd all be glad to help if he didn't act as if we were leeches. Much we get out of being leeches, anyhow! Oh, well, it won't go on for ever, and if you weren't such a darling I wouldn't care—but you are, and so you get the worry from both sides. At any rate, it's Show Day to-morrow, so we'll have one day's fun. And look at those scones! They've risen nearly to the top of the oven!"

Mrs. Balfour laughed.

"Well, I haven't been able to do much for you, Kitty, but you'll always be able to earn a living as a cook," she said.

"A good, plain cook," added a cheerful voice, from the door, as a tall boy of seventeen, in blue shirt and dungaree trousers, appeared. "Especially plain! No, I say, Kit, I didn't mean it, if those scones are for tea. May I have one now?"

"They're my Show scones, Norman Balfour, and don't you put a finger on them," said his sister swiftly.

"Rippers, too; they'll take some beating," said he. "But what about that poor little three-cornered offsider? You couldn't show him, could you?"

"No, I suppose you can have that," agreed Kitty. "Half a minute, and I'll butter it for you. My goodness, I am hot! Cooking for a Show isn't any fun, in November. Yes, it is fun, though, but it's hot all the same. What have you been doing, Norman?"

"Putting a last bit of polish on the bull," said her brother. "We've hosed him and groomed him, and rubbed up his horns, and all he wants is a bit of blue ribbon. And with luck he'll get that to-morrow. I don't think there's an Ayrshire to touch him in the district. Now he's in the shed, and Father is looking at him in dreamy pride. Finished your cooking, Kit?"

"Yes—I made my other cakes this morning. Norman, if you get the vegetables dug I can wash them for you."

"You're a brick," said he gratefully. "I was just going to do them, and milking will be late as it is. Besides, I want to give Bob a hand with his pony when he comes home—poor old Nigger will want plenty of extra grooming if he's to have any chance to-morrow. Sure you've got time to do it, Kit?"

"Oh, yes: I've only got to iron my frock and some shirts, and they won't take long. Elsa can help Mother when she comes in. Here's another scone—he didn't cook evenly."

"More luck for me," said Norman, accepting the scone. "He tastes evenly, anyhow." An expression of bliss overspread his good-looking face, and he paused, his mouth full. "Kitty Balfour, you'll come to a bad end in a workhouse. You've put jam on this fellow as well as butter!"

"Oh, well, Father isn't here—and little boys need nourishment when they're growing as fast as you," laughed Kitty. "Hurry up, now, and be sure you don't break any of the parsnips' tails when you dig them. Leave everything on the back veranda, and for pity's sake shut the yard gate or the calves will get in and devour them."

"After which, the next step would be Father devouring me," said Norman lightly. Kitty followed him with her eyes as he went out. They heard him whistling on his way to the kitchen garden.

"I do think Father might have let him show the vegetables in his own name," she said, a pucker between her brows. "Goodness knows he does all the work of the garden, and plenty besides, and he never has a penny. It would have been such an encouragement to Norman."

"I did suggest it, but your father didn't seem to see it," admitted Mrs. Balfour. "He doesn't see any need for Norman to have money when there is so little cash. After all, as he says, he had none at Norman's age."

"Well, a boy needs encouragement," said Kitty sagely. "And such a little would give it. Father's hard to work for, you know, Mother. A bit of praise doesn't cost anything, but he doesn't give that either. I suppose he has got so used to being economical that it affects his tongue! Norman won't stand it for ever, you know: when he gets a bit older he'll go away, and then Father will find out that he has lost a jolly good helper."

"Ah, don't, Kitty," said her mother sadly. "What shall I do if you both go?"

"I'm a pig," said Kitty, in swift contrition. She draped a freshly-ironed shirt over a chair and dropped a kiss on top of her mother's head. "I didn't mean to worry you, truly, darling. But it would be better for us to go: if we stay on the farm things would go on as they are for ever and ever, but if we go we'll earn money and give you a better time somehow. And meanwhile Elsa and Bob would be growing up to take our places. There's not room for us all on this one-house little place."

"And what would you do?"

"You said what I'd do, a while ago," said Kitty stoutly. "Cook. I wouldn't have any frills, Mother: I'd take a place as cook, and in every bit of spare time I'd go to one of those working colleges and learn advanced cooking and fancy touches. Before you'd know where you were I'd be getting a huge salary as a chef."

"But, my dear—you'd be a servant!"

"Well, it wouldn't hurt me. All the old Balfours for hundreds of years back might be turning in their graves, but I wouldn't be there to see! Let 'em turn! I want money, and I'm going to get it with the only talent I've got."

"Money isn't everything, Kitty."

"Well, Father has brought us up to think it is. And it does make the wheels go round, Mother. I want to be independent, and I want to see something beyond a hill farm in Gippsland. Look at that!" She held up the frock she was ironing. "My best dress—nice serviceable gingham, and I've had it for my best for two years! What a mercy for Father that I stopped growing when I was sixteen!"

"I did want you to have a new frock for this Show, Kitty. I tried, but——" Mrs. Balfour stopped, biting her lip.

"Of course you did, darling. Do you think I didn't know that? And Father nearly hit the roof in his agonized astonishment. I'll bet you anything he said, 'Hasn't the girl got a dress already?' Own up, now—didn't he?"

Mrs. Balfour hesitated a moment and then broke into laughter.

"Kitty, you're a disgrace," she said, "I ought to be cross with you, but——"

"But you aren't going to be," said her daughter cheerfully. "You might be if I couldn't laugh over Father's little ways, but then I can. We're all able to do that, and thank goodness you can't help laughing too. I daresay we'd sulk if you weren't such a dear, you know, Mother. But we know it comes hardest on you, and yet you keep young and you laugh at all our idiotic jokes, and we'd lie down and let you wipe your boots on us if it would do you the least good. It doesn't take me a very long while just now to count my blessings, though I expect I'll have more some day. But to the end of my life the one at the head of the list is going to be that I had a mother who could play the fool!"

"It doesn't sound quite the properest qualification for a parent," said Mrs. Balfour, smiling, though her eyes were moist.

"Well, you ask Norman and Elsa and Bob. They know," said Kitty, nodding wisely. "There, all the ironing is done, and I think I'll go to see whether Norman's finished. I might be able to give him a hand over picking the peas. Sure you don't want me for anything?"

"No, I'd like you to go to Norman—he looked tired."

“That’s not to be wondered at, for he was out before five this morning,” said Kitty, who had not been much later herself. “Mind you make Elsa set the table—if she begins at that old fiddle she’ll forget all about it.” She kissed her hand to her mother and was gone.

Outside, the November day was still hot and airless. The green of the Australian spring lingered yet in the lush grass of the paddocks and the dense orchard foliage: but the flowers in the tiny front garden were hanging their heads wearily, sighing for coolness and rain. It was a very little garden, because the Head of the House of Balfour saw no use in flowers. Not that he disliked them: theoretically, Walter Balfour admired flowers as he admired paintings, sculpture, or—rather more practically—music. Had not Kitty borne witness that he afforded Elsa fiddle-strings? But flowers were unprofitable; worse than that, to a poor man, they represented time diverted from other things: time which might be made to earn money. Therefore the flower-beds were strictly limited, and would not have existed at all had not his wife and daughters tended them.

But the kitchen garden—that was another matter. There, rows of vegetables stretched luxuriantly, in orderly profusion, until they came to the long lines of fruit-trees; and their weedless perfection was mute evidence of the diligence of Norman’s hoe. They furnished no small part of the weekly income, though Mr. Balfour had found it hard enough to spare time for their cultivation until Norman had left school, when the post of gardener had been conferred upon him. Norman hated them with a hearty hatred. He had not liked school overmuch, though it had represented a certain amount of fun in games and companionship; but it had been better than the ceaseless war with weeds and slugs and the innumerable pests that afflict vegetables. The farm was well enough: he wanted to learn its work, because it was only by qualifying as a farm worker that he saw any way of future escape. But carrots and beans and celery—how were they going to get a fellow any further? He was young and fairly docile, however, and not without a certain feeling of what was due to his father: a feeling that would have made him cheerfully shoulder any burden had that father been easier to deal with: and being blessed with a nature as happy as Kitty’s no day’s work was really irksome. But there were moments when he stigmatized the growing of vegetables as “only fit for a Chinaman.”

Kitty could see him as she came round the corner of the house, bending low over a bed of peas. Already a pile of root-vegetables awaited her on the back veranda, and she had seen at a glance that the tapering points of the huge parsnip roots had not been broken: but she left them and went on to join her brother. He greeted her with a friendly grin, straightening his tired young back.

“Didn’t you see the rooty things? I took them up.”

“Yes, but I’ve plenty of time to do them while you milk. I can pick these.”

“Not you; besides, I’ve done the peas, and now I’m going after broad beans.”

“Well, I’ll pick those.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Norman said. “I know all the best pods, and you don’t. There’s one whopper I call Horace, that’s as long as a wet week, only he’s a retiring chap, and you might miss him. And there are Albert and Cyril and Algernon: all friends of mine that I’ve been massaging for weeks, to develop their muscles for the Show. I couldn’t trust the beans to anyone. You go and tub carrots.”

“Oh, don’t be a duffer, Norman! What about the lettuces?”

"Picked, and in water. And the rhubarb is tied up in bunches, and the French beans and cauliflowers are done. Tell you what, you can get nice little bunches of herbs for the collection if you like—you know, mint and sage and thyme and parsley and all those measly little things. That's a nice girl's job."

"Very well," said Kitty, accepting the insult meekly, and hurrying to the corner of the garden sacred to herbs. She finished her task as Norman came over from the bean-rows, bearing a heavy basket.

"Horace hid," he announced, waving a giant beanpod. "Dear little chap, he was shy and didn't want to go to any beastly show, but I caught the flick of his tail as he dodged behind a leaf. Isn't he a champion?"

"I wish they were all like him," said Kitty, peering into the basket. "But they're a very good lot, for all that. Any others I can get?"

"No; only wash the roots, and be sure you use plenty of soap," he grinned. "It's a great help, truly, Kit: you, I mean, not the soap. I was afraid I wouldn't be ready when Bob brought the cows up, but he's only just in sight."

He nodded across the paddock where a boy and girl on ponies could be seen between the trees, driving some cows slowly before them. It was always the part of Elsa and Bob to run up the milkers on their way home from school; a necessity which Bob deplored, since it meant no chance of cricket with other boys when lessons were over. To-day, however, he had needed no spur to hurry him home: his beloved Nigger was to appear in the showing to-morrow, and Norman had promised to help him with the final grooming. There was no one like Norman for putting an extra touch of polish on a horse's coat and making mane and tail like rippled silk. Elsa's pony was entered too, but that was only because, as an exhibit, he had a free ticket into the Show-ground. Father was a member of the Agricultural Society, and could make as many entries as he liked without paying; and it was better for a pony to be in the grounds than tied up to the nearest fence outside. But no one seriously thought of putting old Barney actually into the ring. Barney's best days had been over some years ago, and Bob had been very thankful when Norman's leaving school had promoted him to riding Nigger. Some people hinted that Nigger was past his first gay youth, but to Bob he was the finest pony that ever looked through a bridle; and if the judges did not think so to-morrow—well, it just proved that the judges didn't know their job.

The cows were in the milking-shed when Norman came out of the yard, and Bob was trotting up the hill ahead of Elsa. He was a sturdy, square-built boy of thirteen, with a freckled, honest face and a shock of fair hair that never would keep tidy for a moment: a matter that did not trouble Bob at all. He hailed Norman with a shout.

"Hullo, Norm! Will I come and help you milk, or would you rather I started grooming?"

"Better get on with the grooming, I think," Norman answered. "Give him a good wash-down and get his legs clean, and then you can work at the mane and tail until I come. Wash Barney too, while you're about it."

"Aw, what's the good of wasting time on old Barney? He's got no chance."

"He's going to the Show, so he has got to look decent," said the big brother firmly. "Can't disgrace the family by sending him in looking like a worn-out doormat, especially

with Elsa riding him.”

“Well, why can’t Elsa groom him?”

“Not if he looked like forty doormats,” said Elsa, arriving. She slipped to the ground wearily as she spoke—a tall child of fifteen, very slender and with brown eyes too large for her delicate face. “Goodness, isn’t it hot? The road is nothing but dust, and I thought it would never end. Norman, you don’t really want me to groom him, do you? I don’t mind a bit if he’s dirty, and I’m so tired.”

“You look as if you’d had about enough,” Norman answered, eyeing her with some concern. Kitty was his chum, but the little delicate sister was very near his heart. “No, of course you’re not to touch him: Bob and I will clean him up.” He took the bridle from her and unstrapped her heavy leather school-bag from the saddle. “You clear inside and get something to drink; and just take it easy, or you’ll be like a wet rag to-morrow.”

“A wet rag might be cool, anyhow,” Elsa said, smiling at him. “I don’t feel as if I would ever be cool again, or as if I wanted to see the Show or anything else—except a bath.”

“You won’t think that to-morrow,” said Norman wisely, while Bob gaped at the amazing folly of which girls were capable. Anyone who could even dream of not wanting to go to the Show was, in Bob’s estimation, not right in the head. But girls were always queer, and Elsa especially so: he had long since given up trying to understand her. A girl who looked on a pony as simply a necessary means of getting from place to place—who liked messing about with drawings and evoking weary wails from a battered fiddle——! It was beyond Bob.

He led the ponies into the stable-yard, unsaddled them and exchanged their bridles for halters, which he left trailing on the ground: they were tired and were not likely to move, and Bob was never wont to go to any unnecessary trouble. Then he looked about for a bucket.

There was usually a bucket nearer the stable tank, but to-day it was not to be seen. Bob looked through one ramshackle shed after another with a slowly-rising irritation: just his luck, he reflected, on the very evening that he had no time to lose. Some one *would* go and hide the bucket just because he had to wash two ponies. The door of the last shed was shut and barred: he wrestled with the bar, grumbling aloud, so that he was not conscious of a deeper grumbling within. The bar came out, and he flung the door open.

Something big and menacing loomed in the gloom of the shed before him—Cicero, the great Ayrshire bull, already in a thoroughly bad temper from the indignities that had been inflicted upon him through the afternoon, ending in solitary confinement in a dark and stifling shed. He put his head down and charged, and Bob, galvanized into horrified action, dodged only just in time, and fled into the nearest doorway. The bull gave a savage bellow, bursting into the open. Nigger and Barney were placid ponies, but they knew an angry bull when they saw one, and they did not wait. They raced madly from the yard, Cicero at their heels. He cared nothing for ponies, or for boys either: but freedom lay before him, with the cool shade of the trees round the big water-hole at the end of the paddock, and it drew him like a magnet. He lumbered down the hill at a heavy gallop, roaring as he went.

There was no need for anyone to explain to the unhappy Bob the full horror of what he

had done. There was Cicero, all ready for the Show, glistening with polish from horns to hooves, a thing of gleaming white and brown representing hours of work—and it was he who had let him out to where dust and dirt and mud awaited him. The pony that might have saved the situation had gone too, fleeing in terror before him. To pursue was fairly hopeless, but it was the only thing to do. He snatched his bridle from its nail and dashed wildly from the yard, his speed heightened by a sound far more terrifying to him than Cicero's roar—his father's voice, raised in a shout of fury. From the tail of his eye Bob saw him hurrying from the house, and the sight lent him wings as he scudded down the hill.

Some one cut across the grass to meet him: Norman, with a set, flushed face.

"By Jove, you've done it!" he uttered. "Here, give me the bridle." He snatched it from the boy's hand and went racing on; and Bob followed, not from any hope of helping, but because to turn back was to run into the lion's mouth. If Cicero had got to the water-hole it seemed to Bob that he might as well go there too and drown himself.

The ponies had not gone far, finding that the bull was not seeking their lives. They turned aside, watching him thunder past, in mild amazement that any animal should so needlessly be moved to gallop. Nigger gave a whinny of greeting as Norman ran to him. The boy exchanged the halter for the bridle with a swift movement, flung himself on the pony's back, and was galloping before he had gathered up the trailing reins.

Old Nigger knew what was required of him in a moment—the memory of other days came to him, days when he had known the glory of cutting out bullocks on a cattle-station. Then he had been familiar with every twist and turn of the delightful game; and years of jogging to school along dusty bush roads had not robbed him of the old craftiness and the old dash. He stretched himself out in pursuit of the bull, scarcely needing the incentive of Norman's shout and his drumming heels. They did not follow directly—there was no sense in chasing Cicero into the water-hole. The only chance, a faint enough one, was to get round him and head him off, and they took a line that would enable them to wheel and face him.

Behind them, Bob had caught Barney, and was scrambling on his back when a hail from his father gave him pause. Mr. Balfour was running towards him, stockwhip in hand, and for a moment the boy thought that his punishment was upon him. The sense of his iniquity was so crushing that he faced it without thought of escape. He trotted towards his father, shutting his lips tightly.

But Walter Balfour had no thought of vengeance at the moment. He thrust the stockwhip into the boy's hand.

"That pony won't carry me," he said quickly. "Get that to Norman if you can—he can't turn him without a whip." And as Bob wheeled, flailing Barney into a gallop, another shout came to him—"Tell him not to hit him if he can help it!"

That almost made Bob laugh, had laughter been possible to him at the moment. To give a fellow a whip to head a bull, and yet not to hit him—it didn't seem sensible. Still he knew what it would mean to Cicero's appearance in the show-ring if long weals marred the perfection of his grooming—angry marks that would show so clearly on the pink skin underlying the fine white silken hair. The inclination to laugh turned into something like a sob.

Far ahead, the bull had dropped into a heavy trot that grew momentarily slower. The water-hole was very near, a still, gleaming sheet of quiet coolness; he knew just how delightful it would be to wade into the shallow end, where gum-trees met above, making a patch of dim shade free from flies and other troublesome insects. There was deep mud there, soft and squashy clay; how often, on hot afternoons, he had wallowed there, hock-deep in its delicious caress. Pleasant, kind mud: it caked on the legs as it dried, making a protective covering, fly-proof and lasting. He would make straight for it—nay, more, he would lie down in the clay-bottomed shallow, forgetting all the horrors of the afternoon. Humans might dare to affront a bull with brushes and swabs for a time, and if you had a copper ring through your nose it was wise to appear to submit. But he would show them who was master in the end. He would show them what he cared for their swabbing!

Then, just as the water rippled almost at his feet, came drumming hooves and a ringing shout, and Nigger dashed between him and the pond. Dust flew from the dry mud bank as the pony propped; one end of the halter shot out and brushed the side of his head, and the bull half-turned, trotting aside with an angry bellow. It was better luck than Norman had hoped for, only possible because he had taken the foe by surprise. Now his one chance was to follow it up, and he rode at him, shouting.

But a full-grown angry bull is an awkward matter to tackle on a bare-backed pony, with no better weapon than a soft halter. Cicero sized up his aggressor in a moment. Who was this yelling boy, to turn him from his just desire? He knew, and scorned, old Nigger; he knew halters, and that they could not hurt him unless they were passed through the annoying copper ring that had been riveted through his nose while he was yet too young to know it as a badge of slavery. But it was free now, and he could afford to despise the halter. He ran for a few yards, from mere force of habit. Then he stopped, and when the halter struck him again it merely added to his wrath. He planted his feet firmly and lowered his head, uttering a deep rumbling growl. Norman pressed as near to him as he dared, well aware that he must give no chance of the pony's side—the stout half-curved horns were all too ready for action. He shouted again and again, whirling the halter furiously round his head. "You old brute—if I only had a whip!" he yelled.

As if the bull fully understood the words he advanced slowly, and Nigger gave back, dancing before him. It was clear that they could not stop him, but Norman was too blind with anger to be always cautious, and he struck his heels into Nigger and dashed straight at him. It was almost a fatal dash. Cicero bellowed and charged, and though the pony slipped aside like an eel, the wicked horn ripped through the leg of the boy's loose cotton trousers and made a long graze along the pony's flank. Then he was past them, and into the water. He waded in knee-deep, plunging his hot muzzle into the cool ripples, triumphantly careless in his victory.

"Ow!" It was a long wail from Bob, arriving an instant too late. "The old beast, he's in! Has he hurt Nigger?"

"Not much," said Norman, between tight lips. "Good business—you've brought a whip! I guess I'll hurt *him*, or I'll know the reason why." He took the whip and trotted round the pool. "Bob, you be ready to keep him going if I can get him out—but don't get in front of him. He's in a savage temper, and you can't dodge on old Barney."

Bob flung himself to the ground, picked up the halter his brother had dropped, and was back on Barney in a moment. "Right-o!" he called back. "I say, Norm, Father said not to

mark him if you could help it.”

Norman laughed shortly.

“I’d like Father to have the job of getting him out without marking him!” was all he said.

Cicero saw his enemy ride into the water in front of him with deep annoyance. He had thought these troublesome gnats were finally brushed off; but here they were again, disturbing his new-found peace, as if they understood that a bull finds it difficult to charge in water. Then the whip sang suddenly and flicked him painfully on the ear, and he made a rush at them. Nigger dodged; but even as he dodged his hoof found a deep hole and he slithered sideways, tried to recover, struck another hole, and finally went down on his side, kicking furiously and sending Norman under the surface.

Whatever steps Cicero might have taken cannot be told. He would certainly not have faced the flailing hooves, but it might have gone hard with pony and rider as they struggled to their feet had it not been for Bob. Wholly desperate, the boy thrashed Barney, all unwilling, into the water, and in a moment the bull found himself confronted with a new enemy—a maddened urchin who screamed and shouted hoarsely, aiming blows at him with a whirling halter. None of them took effect, but the determined fury of the onslaught checked the bull. There was a shout, too, not far off; a man’s angry, anxious shout. Mr. Balfour was running through the trees. Then Nigger was up again, and Norman, drenched, but still armed with the whip, was on his back, pressing towards the fray.

“Get back out of there, Bob, I tell you!”

The whip cracked like a pistol-shot. There is extra power of stinging in a wet lash, and the blow that fell across Cicero’s nose was exquisitely painful. He backed, bellowing: the whip spoke again, falling in almost the same place, on the soft nose-tip that is to a bull what the heel was to Achilles. It was too much for Cicero. He wheeled, splashing through the muddy water to the bank. Behind came the two ponies, both riders shouting, the whip-cracks in a fusillade of rapid fire, not hitting him, but as devastating in their moral effect as though the blows had actually fallen. Cicero capitulated. The odds were too strong, he told himself as he trotted obediently up the paddock, the ponies jogging in his rear. He growled as he went, savage and uneasy, but the fight was gone out of him, and the great head never turned.

Bob held the yard gate shut as Norman shepherded the captive into the shed. They put up the bars and looked at him.

“Not much damage, is there?” the younger boy asked nervously.

“Hardly any. His legs’ll have to be washed, of course, and he’s a bit splashed, but that’s nothing—there’s not a mark on his body. Mighty luck. You were pretty mad to ride in like that, Kid, but things would have been a bit awkward if you hadn’t.”

“That wasn’t anything,” said Bob gruffly. “I got an awful scare when you went under. Thought he’d get you.”

“Might have, too, but for you.” The big boy’s hand rested on Bob’s shoulder for a moment. “Well, let’s have a look at Nigger.”

Nigger was marked, but not badly. There was a long weal across his quarter, but the skin was unbroken. “I s’pose that spoils his chances to-morrow?” Bob asked, with a catch

in his voice.

“Not necessarily, I think,” Norman said doubtfully. “The judges could be told. Anyway, it wouldn’t spoil them in the school-pony class, and you know he hasn’t got much chance at the best of times in the hacks. Well, we’ll do the best we can to make him look well. Tell you what—you’d better go and finish the milking. Goodness only knows where I dropped the milk-bucket when I heard old Cicero bellow, but it’s somewhere about. I’ll have to help Father with him before the mud dries on his legs—then I’ll tackle the ponies.”

“All right,” said Bob. “I’ll hurry all I can.” He turned, and then stopped. “Here comes Father,” he said, and shrank against his brother.

Walter Balfour came with long strides into the yard, his face wearing its habitual expression of sternness.

“Is the bull marked?” he asked shortly.

“I didn’t touch him with the whip, except on the nose,” Norman answered. “Apart from that there’s nothing we can’t clean up in half an hour.

“H-m—that’s as well. As for you, Bob——”

Norman broke in:

“It was every bit my fault as much as Bob’s, Father,” he said stoutly. “I ought to have warned him the bull was in the shed—how on earth was he to know?” He took his courage in both hands. “Indeed, you might have warned him yourself. And if it hadn’t been for Bob charging him on old Barney, Cicero would have got me in the water, as sure as fate.”

“It was a near thing—I saw it,” admitted Mr. Balfour. His face lightened, and he looked at his younger son with a half-smile. “All right, Bob—I wasn’t going to punish you, anyway.” Suddenly his voice changed. “I say, Norman—you’re hurt!”

Norman glanced at his leg. Beneath the torn trouser, now nearly dry, were glimpses of skin half hidden beneath a pleasing mingling of caked blood and mud.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said indifferently. “He caught me and Nigger, but we’re only grazed. I’ll wash it off when we get done.”

“You’ll go and wash it now, and get it tied up,” commanded his father sternly. “Don’t frighten your mother, that’s the only thing.”

“There’s an awful lot of blood,” said Bob uneasily. He was on his knees, examining the damaged leg. Norman laughed down at him.

“Oh, you go and milk!” he said. “My leg’s all right. I say, Father, don’t try to handle Cicero before I come back. He’s not in a pretty temper. I’ll be as quick as I can——” And he ran towards the house, whistling.

CHAPTER II

THE ONE GREAT DAY

IF you have never lived in the Australian country-side you cannot hope to realize the thrill of "Show Day."

Even in the little towns, though it is the great day of the year, its full glory cannot be felt. Township folk have other thrills: there are parties, the never-failing interest of shops, the bustle of an occasional election, the surge of trains that pass and stop, with motors buzzing round the station and new faces in the streets. There are moving pictures, even in the tiny places that can boast no cinema theatre—to them, out of the blue, come men with cars, equipped with little machines, once a week, or perhaps once a fortnight; and after dark the buzzing and thudding of the engine outside the wooden township hall wakes delightful anticipation, and the rows of hard benches are packed with country-folk to watch the faraway world flit by. Very knowledgeable are the township children about Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford and a host of other film stars. Life can be full of interest wherever there is community living, even though that community be small; and so when the Show comes along it is but one among many breaks, though it be the chief. But to the people on the lonely farms—ah, you must have lived there to understand.

On many of those little farms one day is the same as another, week in, week out. Sometimes Sunday makes a break, but very often there is no church near enough—for people with cows to milk and young children to tend. The work must always be done, even on Sunday, when tasks are cut to a minimum. Often there are no neighbours within visiting distance: more often the mothers are too busy to visit even when neighbours are fairly near. Father may ride to the nearest township occasionally, since men have business with banks and stores and auctioneers, and there are cattle and sheep sales to attend: and those expeditions bring a flutter of excitement to the household, from the moment that Father, unwontedly shaven and tidy, rides off in the morning, to the evening hour when he comes home, with news of the outer world and with saddle-bags bulging with groceries. There is always a smothered feeling of anticipation over his return, for no one knows what he may have heard or seen in the haunts of men; perhaps, if things have gone well, there may be a woman's magazine for Mother, a few cheap sweets for the children—sticky bull's-eyes or "mixed drops," handed over with—"There—now you youngsters, clear out and let me talk to Mum!" Then Billy and Gladys and Tommy retire to the great wood-heap in the back yard, counting the treasure and sucking in measureless content, while Mum nurses the baby and refills Dad's cup, and listens with hungry ears to all he has to say. You might not think it very interesting, you who dwell in cities, but it is wonderfully heartening to Mum.

Now and then there are family trips to the township, but not often; when the distance is long it is no light matter to get the work done and the children tidy, and to drive the long miles over bush tracks in a jolting buggy or a rough spring-cart, with just time to rush through necessary shopping and get back again in time to milk. Great days for Tommy

and Billy and Gladys, no doubt, but wearing for Mum; and when the children are young there are many mothers who do not leave the farms half a dozen times in the year. Letters and papers come occasionally, left in the box at the gate by passing mail-men: now and then there is the excitement of a stray visitor—generally an agent coming to inspect sheep, in whose honour Mum cooks a special dinner, hoping that enough pudding will be left for the children when they come home from the bush school. The weeks and months go by quickly, for time flies when people are busy packing as much work as possible into the waking hours of each day; and nobody expects anything but work. But just one day looms from year to year, the great shining occasion that every one shares; and that is Show Day.

Show Day, to the township, begins sometime before lunch. On the farms it rarely waits for daylight and it was not five o'clock when Bob Balfour came out into the yard to cast an anxious look at the sky. There had been ominous clouds the night before, but they had vanished during the darkness, so that the morning promised nothing but sunshine and heat. Bob gave a whoop of joy and raced over to the stable where Nigger had enjoyed the unwonted luxury of a night under cover and a feed of chaff—such distinctions as may fall to a pony who is to face the show-ring and possibly carry off a ribbon. The black head showed over the half-door, and you might almost have said that he greeted his master with a smile. Bob slipped a halter round his neck and led him out into the open, quivering with anxiety as to the effect of Cicero's horn.

"Doesn't show much," he muttered, running his fingers lightly over the glossy quarter. "Anyhow, it 'ud only be a fool of a judge who'd call it a blemish. I think I'll give him a bit of a rub-up." He sought a brush, and spent a satisfying ten minutes in putting on a little more finish, which Nigger bore with the resigned surprise of a pony who rarely knows grooming. Mr. Balfour's voice interrupted Bob's serene enjoyment.

"You can't spend too much time over that pony, Bob—he looks well enough. Hurry up and bring in the cows."

Bob obeyed sorrowfully, leading Nigger back into the stable. He had no intention of taking any fire out of him by riding round the paddock: that was a task Barney might well accomplish on a Show morning, though on ordinary days Bob scorned him as a mount. Norman came down the hill with the milk-buckets as he drove the cows into the shed, and they hurried through the milking and the feeding of pigs and calves.

"I'll wash the separator and the buckets," Norman said. "You go and brush up Jess and put the harness on her, and I'll come along and pack the vegetables."

Jess was the bay mare who went with equal docility in the plough, the cart, or the buggy. Bob caught her and gave her the smallest amount of grooming that would pass muster. He was a youth who believed unnecessary work to be mere foolishness—and who was going to look at old Jess? He grinned privately to find that his father was oiling Cicero's horns afresh, having brushed the bull until no more brushing was possible. Jess was harnessed and tied up under a wattle-tree with a feed of hay, and Norman appeared: the boys ran the long-backed buggy out into the yard and packed it with boxes and baskets of vegetables, carefully covered from the sun. Mr. Balfour's horse, already saddled, shared the shade of the wattle-tree with Jess, and soon Nigger and Barney were ready for the road, for Elsa and Bob were to ride with their father in charge of Cicero, who could be heard grumbling horribly in his shed, clearly demanding of the world why a bull should be thus torn from the peace of his paddock. Presently Mr. Balfour hailed them from the

veranda.

“Hurry up, boys! Bob, you’ll never be ready in time. That bull has to be on the ground at nine o’clock.”

“Cut along,” Norman said. “I’ll finish here.” And Bob fled like a hare.

He scrambled into his best suit, deeply resentful when his mother appeared to insist upon the need of soap and water. Breakfast was ready, and his father was at the table, uttering gloomy prophecies that every one would be late. Kitty and Elsa were packing lunch swiftly, and Mrs. Balfour had a score of tasks to accomplish in the intervals of cooking. They gathered round the table, eating with hurried preoccupation, the girls jumping up every minute to see to some forgotten item of preparation. Mr. Balfour finished his breakfast and pushed back his plate. He took an envelope from his pocket.

“I had better give you the entry cards for your exhibits,” he said. “Here are yours, Kitty—don’t leave them behind. Scones, sponge roll, small cakes, biscuits, six sorts of jam—is that right?”

“Elsa’s drawing and ornamental writing,” reminded Kitty.

“Oh, yes; here they are. Put them in one of your baskets at once, and they won’t be forgotten. Here are the vegetable cards, Norman. By the way, I entered the Collection in your name—you can have the prize if you win.”

Norman flushed deeply.

“I say, thanks awfully, Father,” he said in a low voice. “For the Bank.”

“Half must go in the Bank, if you win it—it’s a guinea, and that’s too much to throw about. You haven’t won it yet, anyhow,” he added grimly. “Bob and Elsa, I’m off in five minutes—are you ready?”

They were not ready, but they managed it, with the united aid of Mrs. Balfour, Kitty and Norman, who ran hither and thither, seeking for hats, whips, clean handkerchiefs and other details. “I haven’t had half enough breakfast,” Bob groaned, as he fled. “Do bring heaps of lunch, Mother!” She stood a moment to watch them mount. Norman was at the shed letting Cicero out, while Mr. Balfour, on his horse, waited to turn him down the track. The great bull came angrily, pausing to mutter and paw the ground; but three riders were ready for him and Norman behind him, and he decided that it was easier to be docile than to try to break away. The sun flashed on his dappled white sides and on Nigger’s smooth blackness as they went down the hill.

The mother waited for Norman as he came back to the house.

“I’m so glad about the Collection being in your name, Norman,” she said. Yet at the back of her mind there was an ache. It would have been so easy for Walter to tell them from the first—to give the boy the extra inducement in his work. He had yielded to her, and she was grateful: but what need was there to keep the concession a secret until the very last morning? If he would be kinder to the boy—more of a friend. The ache pricked sorely.

Norman had no such thoughts, however.

“Yes, jolly decent, isn’t it? By Jove, won’t it be a lark if I win! But he wouldn’t give me any money, Mother. I asked him just now if I could have a couple of shillings, but it was no go. He doesn’t seem to think a fellow ever needs a penny to spend.”

"I'm sorry," she said, her face falling.

"Oh, I didn't really expect it," the boy said, smiling. "I'll have a good time without it. But it does make one feel a bit small, when all the other boys have money. Don't you worry, Mother. What's the next thing to do?"

"You might help Kitty," she said. "Take her exhibits out to the buggy, and the lunch as well: I think it's all ready. Kitty has been going hard for hours, and I don't want her to be tired."

Kitty showed no signs of being tired. She sang cheerfully as she flitted about the kitchen putting away the breakfast dishes as she dried them.

"Oh, you are a dear to help!" she told Norman. "Yes, everything is packed. Handle that box of cakes carefully, Norman, and don't put anything on top of it. The jam is all by itself in a candle-box—goodness knows how many pots will survive the bumps on the road! Mind that billy, it's got all the cups inside it. I won't fill the milk-bottles until the very last moment, or the milk will certainly be sour by afternoon tea-time. This is going to be a blazing day."

"It is: and the sooner we're on the road, the better, for Jess won't hurry herself," Norman said. He went to and fro rapidly until everything was in the buggy, by which time the kitchen was neat and shining.

"All your clothes are on your bed, Norman," Kitty told him. "I ironed your tie, and it really doesn't look so bad. Now I'm off to dress. Wish I had time for another bath!"

"Well, you haven't—and don't spend long in making yourself beautiful," he warned her.

"Me?" uttered Kitty. "My old frock is what it was last year, and you can't spend time in prinking when you've nothing to prink with. I'll be ready in two twos."

Mrs. Balfour came to Norman as he was putting on his coat. She cast a critical eye over him, with an inward sigh for the baggy shapelessness of the cheap country suit. A good-looking boy, this tall, lithe son of hers: she had dreams occasionally of seeing him dressed as some of the squatters' sons dressed, in clothes bearing the stamp of a Melbourne tailor. But these were dreams she kept to herself. She pulled down his tie and straightened his coat, in the manner of mothers.

"Norman, here's a shilling," she said. "Yes, you're to take it—and I've got sixpence for Bob. I hate your being penniless."

"Oh, Mother, you're a brick!" he said delightedly. "Sure you can manage it? Won't there be a row?"

"Of course not—it's my private hoard," she said, laughing. The children knew as well as she did that there was no money in the house of Balfour except the meagre supplies doled out for necessities by its head. The private hoard was an old joke—the mysterious dream-fund that was some day to supply motors and aeroplanes and new clothes beyond belief. It was part of the game of "let's pretend" that she had always played with the children.

"And won't you need it?" he asked. "Sixpence would be enough for me, truly, Mother."

"Certainly not." She pushed him towards the door. "Don't spend it all on sweets."

“Sweets—not much! I want it for side-shows. There was a ripping glass-blower in a tent last year, and I couldn’t go in. The boys said he was a wonder. And—I suppose I’m an awful fool, Mother, but I do love a merry-go-round. I’ve only been on one a couple of times, but I feel just like a kid when I go near one!

“Well, be a kid as long as you can, my boy,” she said. “Now we’re all ready—lock the door, Kitty; and hang the key in the walnut tree, and we’ll be off.”

Early as it was, there were many people on the tree-fringed bush track. People who had exhibits for the shed had to be in before ten o’clock: people who had none wanted to be there to see the exhibits staged and make shrewd forecasts as to prize-winners. There was no sense in not making the day as long as possible: it came but once a year. The Balfours were passed by motors and by buggies with horses faster than old Jess: they passed in their turn spring-carts and crowded drays—all crammed with happy people dressed in their best. Scarcely a soul could have been left at home on the farms. Little boys, uncomfortably glorious in best suits and white collars: little girls with stiffly-frizzed hair: grave fathers, smoking contentedly as they drove, and comfortable mothers holding babies and bundles and keeping an anxious eye on the small fry in the back seats. The crowd thickened as they drew near the town and came in sight of the Show-ground, where flags fluttered from the long wooden hall known as the Shed—the heart of the Show for women, where all household exhibits were staged. People were pouring in at the gate, foot-passengers dodging motors and buggies, while restless horses pranced in the crush and perspiring officials shouted directions which nobody heeded. The noise of animals in the pens rose over the light-hearted chatter of the crowd: sounds of sheep and cattle, and from time to time the shrill neigh of a thoroughbred horse.

“Well, I’m glad to be through that gate,” Norman remarked, as he drove into the ground and pulled up beside the Shed. “Worst of old Jess is, you can never be sure she won’t go to sleep just when a motor is about to bump into her! Only half-past nine, so we didn’t do too badly. I’ll carry your things in first, Kit; come and tell me where to put them.”

The long hall was like a hive and heavy with the scent of flowers. Already they made a brave show, arranged on the tables running down the middle, and more were being constantly added as exhibitors hurried in. They sought despairingly for space to arrange them and ran backwards and forwards, bearing water-cans and vases. On shelves along the sides were displays of cookery, with jams, jellies, pickles, home-cured bacon, and mighty erections of butter, that even now showed signs of feeling the heat. There were long lines of fruit and vegetables and farm produce; a bewildering array of every variety of needlework known to woman; sections for children’s school-work and sections for “Art” and photographs, and sections for everything else that busy hands could make. Stewards with rosettes of ribbon on their coats dashed here and there, showing people where to place their exhibits and trying to answer fifty questions at once and to find room for fifty exhibits where there was space for only twenty. Women were greeting each other in the crowd with the delighted interest only possible when the meeting comes but once a year. Over all was the feeling of hurry and excitement, for the Shed was supposed to close for judging at ten o’clock—not that it ever did!—and every one wanted to see the display before the dense crowd of the afternoon would fill it to suffocation.

The Balfours knew just where their exhibits should go, so that it was not long before

their empty boxes were packed away in the buggy and they were free to mingle with the crowd. Norman had had enough of the Shed, and he went off to leave the buggy in a conveniently shady place for their picnic lunch and then to wander round the wide grounds, already full of thrills for any country boy. The ring in the middle was still empty, for the judging of horses had not begun; but in long rows of pens sheep and cattle and pigs were to be inspected, to say nothing of sheds where frantic barking and cackling indicated the massed bands of dogs and poultry. Motor salesmen were eloquently urging the merits of their cars on crowds who pressed to see them: machinery in action clanked and thudded. And there were the side-shows, dear to every country heart: fat women, skeleton men, snake-charmers, negro boxers, mammoth pigs and midget ponies, all housed in tents in front of which their proprietors rent the air with appeals to the public: "Walk in! Walk in and see the Greatest Wonder of the World!" The merry-go-round was in full swing, grinding out a jiggling tune while its brave steeds and gaily-painted cars whirled round, packed with laughing children and excitedly screaming girls. And there was everybody Norman had ever known, to say nothing of hundreds of strangers; and at every few yards seemingly benevolent men begged that he would purchase three darts for a penny and throw them at a board, so that they might present him with rings and tie-pins and magnificent brooches. It was small wonder that his shilling vanished like a snowflake in a volcano.

But he was back at the Shed door when it reopened after the judging, and fought his way with a beating heart through the surging crowd within. Old See Ying, the Chinese market-gardener, was just in front of him: he also showed vegetables, and so did Miss Berrill, who owned the finest farm on the Creek. They were both rich—See Ying was reported to have untold gold hidden in his frowsy hut—and didn't need the prize as he did, but he was horribly afraid of them: Miss Berrill had sea-kale in her collection, and salsify, and other queer things that nobody else grew. Then he was suddenly aware of Kitty's face, a study of delight, and she had brushed past the Chinese and caught his arm.

"Oh, you've won, Norman! You've won!"

"Go on!" he gasped, hardly able to believe his ears. "What?"

"The Collection! And beans and parsnips and second for pumpkins! Come and look!"

They battled to the shelves. It was really true—there was the blue card with gold lettering and his own name scrawled in pencil. "Best Collection of Vegetables—Norman W. Balfour." It was unbelievable: he looked again and again, hardly daring to trust his eyes. Then he drew a long breath.

"By Jove!" Suddenly a thought came to him. "What about your things?"

"Haven't looked," said Kitty, laughing. "I wanted to see this first."

"Oh, Kit!" was all he said. But he caught her arm and piloted her through the crowd with such determination that they reached the cookery section in a wonderfully short time. And there was more glory—for blue cards with Kitty's name leaned negligently against her biscuits and sponge roll, and the red card for second place sat upon her scones, which reduced Kitty to such imbecility that she could only gape through the wire netting that now guarded the exhibits and laugh and quiver. When she had recovered some measure of sanity they discovered that one of her entries for jam was first; after which, dazed and drunken with success, it seemed only natural to find that Elsa's drawing had also scored.

Indeed, Elsa was there to see, regarding her blue card with the air of one who dreams dreams and sees visions. Then it was necessary to join forces and battle round the hall once more to make certain that nobody had made a mistake; after which the three hurtled from the Shed and dashed, pell-mell, across the grass to find their mother.

Mrs. Balfour was unpacking luncheon-baskets. She had declined to face the crush in the Shed. But no one knew how many anxious glances of nervous impatience she had cast towards the long brown building. "If only they could each win just *one* thing!" she breathed.

Then she saw them racing to her, and she knew that only winners could run with such abandonment of joy. But when the full glory of the results was shouted at her by three voices at once she could do nothing but gasp.

"Not all those prizes! Oh, darlings, I can't take it in! Tell me quietly—you, Kitty."

But they couldn't tell her quietly. Kitty tried, but the others broke in, laughing and excited, and drawings, parsnips and jam mingled in a jumble of bubbling words: until finally she found a scrap of pencil and made a list of the successes on the back of an envelope.

"Fancy being able to make a list!—and I had hoped for two or three, if we were very lucky!" she breathed. "Isn't it wonderful? And how rich you'll be!"

That sobered them, and they added up prize-money. A guinea for Norman, eighteen shillings for Kitty, five shillings for Elsa!—you have to be as completely penniless as the young Balfours to guess at what it meant. They fell to planning the spending of it in a hundred ways.

"Doesn't seem fair that Kit gets less than I do, and with four prizes against one," said Norman. "But, then, she can do what she likes with hers, and half of mine vanishes into the Bank. I hate the Bank!"

"I wish they'd pay the money to-day instead of weeks ahead," said Kitty. "Mother, do you suppose Father would advance us a little of it? We'd pay him back."

"I don't know." Mrs. Balfour hesitated. "He may not have any to spare. But we can ask him. I wonder how Bob has got on?"

"No luck," Norman answered, shaking his head. "Nigger was turned out of the ring quite early in the judging of the hack ponies. But, of course, he's still got a chance in the school-pony class. Tell you what. Kit, if Father will advance us any of our money we'll each give him a shilling. That will help to console him."

"Yes, and I'll give him sixpence," Elsa put in. "That's more money than Bob ever had in his life—or me either," she added thoughtfully and ungrammatically. "Now, if Father has only won with Cicero, everything will be beautiful." She gave a long sigh. "Isn't it exciting to be rich? I've often wondered how it must feel to put your hand in your pocket and find money there!"

"Well, you can't do it yet," said Norman practically.

"No, but I know it's coming true. Here's Father, and he looks quite cheerful. You tell him, Mother."

Mr. Balfour was unusually good-humoured, for Cicero had been placed first. He smiled upon his family's delight, and heard the tale of the Shed successes with real

pleasure.

"By Jove, that's good!" he said. "Well done, children! The Balfours have scored to-day, and no mistake. Well, we can do with a bit of luck—it isn't very much that comes our way."

"And we want some of the money now, Father," put in Elsa, striking while the iron was hot. Elsa could always do more with their father than the others. "Just a little," she added hastily, seeing him frown. "We'll pay you back. Every one has a little money to spend on Show Day. And Bob hasn't won, and we want to give him some."

"You'll only fritter it," he said.

"Ah, they don't get a chance to fritter much, Walter," Mrs. Balfour begged. "Just a couple of shillings each. I think they deserve it."

"Well, they do," he said. "They've worked hard, I'll say that for them." He felt less at odds with the world: not only had his bull won, but a man from another district had made an offer to buy him at a price that tempted him to sell. He put his hand in his pocket and brought out some silver, looking at it as though he found it hard to let it go. "There's two shillings for each of you—and for Bob too," he said. "You needn't pay it back, either. But don't imagine this is going to happen every year!"

"I say, you're jolly good, Father!" Norman said, while the girls uttered incoherent thanks. The marvel of the shining coins almost took away their breath. Money! And theirs to spend without question! This was indeed a dream-day.

"That's all right," Mr. Balfour said gruffly. "Now we'd better hurry up and have lunch. I want to get back to the cattle-pens."

"I'll go for the hot water," Norman said eagerly. He took the tin billy with its little bag of tea and hurried to where a great copper boiler of water bubbled over a fire and a man was filling tea-pots and kettles and cans for scores of picnickers. Even there he found something of the joy of the winner: a farmer said, "My word, you can grow great parsnips up your way, sonny!" And Miss Berrill, whom he had hated for her sea-kale and salsify, leaned from the car where she was eating sandwiches and congratulated him. "You beat me fairly, and I'm glad you won, Norman," she said. He thanked her awkwardly, feeling that he had been a brute to call her "old Miss Berrill"—why, she didn't look old at all, and she beat him in generosity. "I'll give you some sea-kale roots for next year, if you like," she called after him. No one but an awfully good sort would have made an offer like that. He went back to the buggy with a glowing face.

The afternoon went by on wings. The wonderful glass-blower was again to be seen, and Norman took his mother to watch him working in his hot little tent. It was the first time in his life that he had been able to pay for her, and the experience gave him a strange new pride. As for the pride of Mrs. Balfour, there are no words to depict it. Had the glass-blower been the sorriest failure imaginable she would have watched him with delight as eager. The two happy faces caught the eye of Miss Berrill.

"I never knew how young and pretty that Mrs. Balfour was," she told her brother. "She looks like that big boy's elder sister."

"Poor soul, she can't have much of a time," he said. "Balfour has a hungry bit of country, and they must be deadly poor."

"She has a rich look this afternoon," Miss Berrill said quaintly. "Something has made

her happy. I'm glad I didn't win that guinea."

Norman and his mother and the girls wandered among the stock-pens after the glass-blower's show was over. There were plenty of people admiring Cicero, whose blue card was tacked to the fence of his pen, round which the great bull moved restlessly. Everywhere they met people they knew, and stopped to talk, and there were more friendly congratulations. They found places near the ring, to watch the horse events, hacks, trotters, harness-horses and jumpers, in a long succession. Miss Berrill made them join her party for afternoon tea, and that in itself was a great event. Norman was uplifted, though he felt shy and awkward, conscious that his suit was not like the clothes of the other boys who clustered round the car, joking and laughing. But it made him proud to see his mother's quiet ease, despite her shabby frock. She was as good as anyone there, and Kitty and Elsa didn't seem a bit embarrassed. Some one said in his hearing how pretty Kitty was, and it gave him a little thrill. Some day, he vowed inwardly, the girls should have a chance—decent clothes, and a car, and a chance to mix with the right sort of people. It was not clear how this miracle was to happen, but one never knew.

They were still grouped round Miss Berrill's car when the school ponies came into the ring. It was always a popular event, and every one crowded to look. This was the chance for all the good old pony-friends that had no hope in sections where breeding and soundness and freedom from blemishes counted: the school ponies were judged for their general fitness for carrying children, and each must have not less than two riders. A neat bay went round, bearing three little girls in white frocks, and people buzzed with admiration: there were many others with two jockeys, several with three, and one sturdy cob had four. Norman looked anxiously for Nigger and Bob.

Bob had not sought his family much during the day. He had hosts of friends of his own age, with whom he had had a royal time, merely appearing at intervals to be fed. His unexpected accession to wealth had rendered him speechless for a time: but he recovered, and it is safe to say that no money expended that day on the ground had given more delirious joy than Bob's two shillings. It was all gone now, but the memory of its going would last him for many a day.

He had selected his riders carefully: there was no lack of applicants for the honour, but Bob had his own ideas as to size, weight, and common sense, and the choice had taken time. At the last moment one boy had disappeared, and to find him had not been easy: so that all the other ponies were in the ring when he rode up to the gap in the fence at last—Nigger bearing himself nobly under the weight of four small boys. Others ran beside, encouraging the quartette to victory.

"There he is at last," Norman said. "He's got a good set of little chaps. Wonder what he's waiting for."

Bob had checked Nigger at the entrance to the ring. His face had fallen. He had thought Nigger would be the only pony with four riders—and before him, trotting sedately round, was a wretched brown cob, also with four. He groaned. Then, like a good general, he acted swiftly.

Near him, running alongside, was a tiny boy, the brother of one of his other riders. Already he had begged to ride, and had been scornfully refused, but now greatness was to be thrust upon him. Bob whistled to him, with a quick call to a bystander—"Give him a leg up, will you?"—and in a moment the little lad had been sandwiched in between Bob

and the second boy. There was a roar of laughter from the crowd as the much-enduring Nigger trotted into the ring with five small boys on his back.

Bob recked nothing of laughter. Nigger could manage it, he knew: he *should* manage it, anyhow, and he stirred him with his heel and spoke to him—"C'm up, Nigger, old chap!"

Nigger did not like it. Two, or even three, riders were no new thing, but never before had he been draped with boys from neck to tail. It annoyed him; it excited him; and old as he was, the fire of youth came back to him and he would gladly have "pig-jumped" and rid himself swiftly of so unreasonable a burden. But with all the will in the world, it is difficult to pig-jump with five riders, and Nigger found he could not do it. Still, the curbed longing had its effect, lending a vigour to his paces that fairly amazed Norman.

"I say, that's a great pony!" said Ralph Stratton, a squatter's son whom he knew slightly. "He goes as if he *liked* having five on his back!"

Norman was shaking with mirth.

"It's just because he doesn't like it," he laughed. "He's in a thundering bad temper, and he'll get rid of them all if they don't look out. Bob's only hope is that the judging will be over quickly."

"They're calling them in," said Ralph. "Look at the little beggar—he goes as if he were on springs!"

It was, indeed, with the energy of offended majesty that Nigger cantered across to the judge among the other ponies, and stood still to ponder on his next move. He had almost decided to lie down and roll, to get rid of his load, when his plans were checked by the judge, who came and stroked his neck while he talked in a friendly fashion to Bob and patted the head of the youngest jockey, who was by this time flattened almost out of human likeness, but still was bubbling with joy. They seemed interested in him, so Nigger decided to postpone lying down for a moment, until the judge had moved away. Then some one tied a piece of blue ribbon into his bridle and gave Bob a blue card, and a red one to the brown cob: and suddenly Bob's heel roused him, and before he knew what was happening he was cantering round the ring again, with the brown cob behind him, and the three little girls on the bay pony behind the brown cob. There was cheering and laughter and clapping: sounds that put the finishing touch to Nigger's irritation. Just as they completed their round of the course he paused, made a great effort, and flung his heels high in the air.

Four mothers shrieked as one: five small boys left their perch and shot skywards. But small boys are hard to kill. The five picked themselves up from the grass and bolted out of the ring, while the crowd rocked with laughter and the judge scratched his head and remarked to a steward that if that had happened three minutes earlier the blue ribbon would have gone elsewhere.

"I don't know," said the amused steward reflectively. "It's a handy thing for a school-pony to be able to get rid of too many riders."

"Possibly—but one doesn't give him first prizes for it," said the judge, with some bitterness. "However, it's too late to worry now."

Bob was well aware that it was too late, and there was nothing but triumph in his heart as he scrambled to his feet and ran after Nigger. That sage pony had trotted quietly out of

the ring and was grazing peacefully in the outer ground, his annoyance forgotten. Indeed, he looked almost apologetically at Bob when he arrived, and stood in lamb-like fashion to be saddled. The four other riders clustered about them, drunk with joy, and recking little of the green grass-stains on their best suits; the crowd patted them all impartially on the back, chaffing them on their downfall. Norman, Kitty and Elsa arrived, excited and triumphant. Beyond doubt, it was a great day for the Balfours. In the midst of his glory Bob felt a sudden hunger for his mother, and he mounted and rode in search of her.

It was nearly five o'clock; already people who lived at a distance were preparing for departure. A long string of buggies and motors moved slowly towards the gate. At five the Shed closed to all save exhibitors, and the wire-nettings were taken down so that they might retrieve their possessions and claim the precious prize-cards that would long be treasured in many bush homes. The girls hurried to the Shed, to collect everything, while Norman went for the boxes. There, everything was hurry and bustle and interest, with much merriment and talk going on over the packing. Flowers, no longer needed by their exhibitors, were pressed on township women who had no gardens; cookery triumphs changed hands, Mrs. Brown bearing home Miss Smith's sausage-rolls, while Miss Smith packed Mrs. Brown's biscuits, to be eaten slowly and reflectively with a view to finding out the secrets of their composition. Miss Berrill paused for a moment beside Kitty, looking kindly at the flushed, pretty face.

"That is a beautiful sponge roll of yours, Kitty. I never get them like that—mine always crack dismally."

"Do take it, Miss Berrill." Kitty pressed it upon her, eagerly. "Please—I'd love you to have it."

"Well, if I do, you must have my plum-cake. It didn't win a prize, but it's not a bad cake, if I do say it myself."

"Oh, I couldn't," Kitty said. "A roll is nothing—but a big plum-cake like that, and such a beauty! It wouldn't be fair."

"But I've nothing else to exchange, and I do want your roll. Why, it's a prize-winner, and my old cake wasn't even mentioned! Rubbish, my dear—of course you must take it!" She packed it into Kitty's basket decisively, smiling at her doubtful expression.

"I didn't want any exchange, Miss Berrill."

"I know you didn't. We haven't exchanged—we've given each other a present. And anyhow, I hate plum-cake!" She smiled at her very kindly. "Come and see me sometime and bring that nice brother and sister with you."

Kitty flushed.

"I'd love to come," she said. "But——"

"Oh, don't talk 'buts.' I'll arrange it some day soon." She nodded good-bye and rolled off down the shed, her tall figure conspicuous in its smart tailor-made coat and skirt, her jolly voice constantly raised in friendly greetings. Other women were stopping to congratulate Kitty on her prizes: the school-teacher, the post-mistress, half a dozen farmers' wives. Little Mrs. Green, whose husband ran the local newspaper, came up with a plate of cheese-straws of surpassing quality. "Pop them in—you've a long road home, and they'll be nice to nibble," said she. She was a tiny woman, with a heart as big as all outdoors: never too busy to help, never too hurried to be kind. Norman, arriving at the

moment, shouted gleefully.

“Good business!—and I’m driving! Nobody makes cheese-straws like you, Mrs. Green. Where’s your car? I want to put some of these vegetables in it.” He brushed aside her protestations, striding off with his arms full, and Mrs. Green relieved her feelings by helping Kitty to pack jams—contriving to slip into the box some of her own pickles, for she was a mighty housewife.

“There seems more there than there ought to be,” said Kitty, surveying the box with a doubtful air.

“And if there is?” said Mrs. Green loftily. “Here, Norman—this is ready.” She saw him carry it off, and disappeared with a laughing “Good-bye—more luck next year!”

It was all over at last, and they were in the buggy and through the press at the gate. Ahead on their ponies were Elsa and Bob; to them the final touch of ecstasy lay in the fact that Cicero had been sold, so that it would not be necessary to drive him home, crawling at a foot’s pace behind him when every nerve was urging them to gallop. They raced ahead with a dozen other excited youngsters—you would have said that old Nigger was fully aware of the blue ribbon knotted into his bridle.

“Well, it’s all over for another year,” said Kitty, with a long sigh. The thought of the drab home life ahead smote at her suddenly, but she put it from her with resolution.

“All over,” said Norman. “And to-morrow I clean out the pigsty. But hasn’t it been a day!”

CHAPTER III

SHIRTS AND CIRCUMSTANCES

“SHIRTS!” said Kitty. “How I hate the very sight of one! Why will men wear them?”
“Well—it’s customary,” said Mrs. Balfour vaguely.

It was Saturday afternoon, and they were sewing on the veranda. On a home-built table stood the sewing-machine Mrs. Balfour had used for twenty years: an old-fashioned hand-machine, now somewhat loose in its joints and inclined to give trouble whenever it had an opportunity, but still capable of yeoman service. Earlier in the day great quantities of striped blue material had billowed about the veranda, for it was an economy to buy stuff in dozens of yards and make it up into shirts for the three men of the family; now most of it had been cut out and seamed, and finishing touches were being added. Kitty was making neckbands and collars. Elsa worked steadily at button-holes, for which she had, Kitty declared, an uncanny affinity. It was not pleasant sewing: the material was stiff and harsh, cumbrous to hold and uncomfortably hot, especially on a sultry December afternoon. But ready-made shirts were forbidden luxuries; they cost much money and they soon wore out, not possessing the generous turnings and cunning reinforcements of the home-made variety. Therefore, shirts, like most other clothing, were made at home in the Balfour family.

“Mother, you’re awfully patient,” Kitty said. “You never grumble.”

“Why, no,” said her mother cheerfully. “What would be the use?” She snipped a thread. “Give me that neckband, Kitty, and I’ll stitch it.”

The machine whirred swiftly for a minute.

“Well, you didn’t expect to have a life like this. You know you had a good time before you were married. Don’t you ever feel like grumbling?”

“I don’t think of what I can’t get—at least, I try not,” Mrs. Balfour said. “It would be stupid. And my good times weren’t only before I was married. I have had plenty since.” She smiled at her girls. “Four rather nice children, for instance. Of course, one would prefer to have fewer worries. But I dare say they’re good for me.”

“I like that!” Kitty exclaimed. “As if you needed to be—you know——”

“Chastened,” said Elsa solemnly.

“Yes, chastened. One would think you imagined you had a black soul!”

“Well, I dare say it has its murky patches,” said her mother, laughing. “I would be a horribly idle and luxurious person if I could.”

“Would you, Mother? Isn’t she a dear to let it out, Elsa! What would you do if you were rich?”

“I’d—never—make—another—shirt!” stated Mrs. Balfour distinctly.

“Me, too,” said Elsa. “Nor blacklead another stove. Nor patch pyjama-trousers. There’s no garment I hate like pyjamas that some one has sat through!”

"Oh, you two can only think of the things you wouldn't do," Kitty cried. "That isn't a bit interesting. Of course we wouldn't do a single one of the things we hate. But think of all the new possibilities—if only we were rich!"

"I'd have the beautifullest violin that ever was made," said Elsa dreamily. "And another, not so good, until I'd learned to play. And I'd get the best lessons, and——"

"And we'd build you the beautifullest shed at the end of the garden to practise in!" laughed Kitty. "At the farthest end."

"I wouldn't care where you built it. And I'd play and play until I was satisfied that I *could* play. And that probably wouldn't be until the end of my life, but I'd have had a gorgeous time!"

"It seems limited——" Kitty began.

"Limited! Don't you believe it! I don't think life would be long enough, if I found that I was really any good." Elsa's face, usually serene, was suddenly glowing, her eyes sparkling. Mrs. Balfour looked at her with a half-sigh.

"Your father used to have that ambition," she said. "He always wanted music—that is why he scraped and saved as a boy to buy the old violin that you have now, Elsa, and to have a few lessons. But his father had no sympathy with him: he hated the idea of his son's being a musician. Then they lost all their money, and after that there was nothing but hard work. And we were imprudent young people, and married very young. Perhaps if we had waited a few years life wouldn't have been so uphill ever since—but you don't see far ahead when you're young. And I was alone, and all the world had crashed when my father died."

"Poor old Mother!" Kitty murmured. "It must have been jolly hard for you."

"Well—yes, in a way. But it wasn't as if I had loved your grandfather very much. You see, he was always wrapped up in books, and he was a stern, silent man——"

"Like Father," put in Kitty.

"Oh, much more so. You don't know what Father could be if he were not always worried. He has had twenty years of struggling and bad luck, and it has made him silent, but he wasn't like that once." Again she sighed. "But my father was naturally stern, and after my mother died he shut himself up with his books. He was never unkind, and until his bank failed he was glad to give me plenty of money and think no more about me. Then the money went, all in a week, and it was too much for him—he was dead in three months. So there we were, two penniless engaged young people, without a relation in Australia. It really seemed the simplest thing to get married. But it didn't prove so simple after all."

"And were you always terribly poor?"

"Yes, but it didn't seem to matter so much at first. I had huge quantities of clothes, and our wants were very few: we were happy with so little. I learned to cook and to manage a house—dear me, how often I burned my fingers!—and we laughed at our difficulties. We used to try to forget them all in the evenings, and I would sew while Walter played the violin, and we would pretend that it was all a picnic. But bad seasons came, and expenses mounted with the babies—and one can't pretend for ever."

"Poor old Mother!" Kitty repeated. "And don't you ever feel inclined to kick?"

"If you kick too hard against the inevitable you're apt to bruise your toes," said Mrs. Balfour, laughing. "As far as wishing that things were different—yes, of course I do. I want to give all of you a better chance: I can't bear to see your father grow old before his time. But one must make the best of things. And I always try to believe in the luck turning. Things may be better some day." She laughed. "Remember, there's always Uncle Joseph's Hundred!"

"Oh—that!" said Elsa. "That's dream-money."

Uncle Joseph's Hundred had loomed so long in the misty future that the Balfours had ceased even to expect it, and it had become a family jest. Uncle Joseph, who was really a great-uncle, lived in Scotland, where the young Balfours believed that he existed on oat-cake and probably herded sheep for a living. All that they knew of him was that he was poor and alone. Years before, he had written to his niece, demanding an address which would always find her, since he had left her a hundred pounds in his will; it seemed that he expected to die at any moment. But he had continued to live with what Kitty and Norman considered undue tenacity. Each year Mrs. Balfour spurred herself to write him a dutiful letter—it seemed only civil to do so, when he had remembered her existence to the tune of a hundred pounds: each year a cold, stilted letter came in reply. Invariably he said that his health was good, and alluded to the high cost of living, which was apparently a heartbreak to him. He generally added that he trusted she was bringing up her children in ways of economy, not in riotous living: a point on which she endeavoured to set his mind at ease. Nobody knew how old he was: indeed, nobody knew anything about him, and to the young Balfours he was a remote and tribal figure, crowned with a misty halo of a hundred sovereigns. But they had waited so long that the halo had grown more and more misty, so that it had almost faded away.

"What would you do with it, Mother, if you got it?" Kitty asked.

"Just give it to Father."

"Oh—Mother!" Two pairs of rounded eyes looked at her in dismay.

"Did you think we could live riotously on it, beloveds?" she asked. "We couldn't do that—not while we are in debt. It's the horrible old mortgage on the farm that keeps us poor; each year it seems harder and harder to find the money to pay the interest. A hundred would ease that considerably: it would give Father a sense of security for a time."

"So the old farm would just swallow it up!" mourned Kitty. "I've always dreamed of having *such* a time when it came. You know—perhaps a trip to Melbourne for us all, and new clothes, and to see a theatre. It must be wonderful to go to a theatre and to see a place like Melbourne. We were the only girls at school who had never been there. Oh, well—perhaps it will never come, so I'll just keep on dreaming. You get a lot of fun out of dreams."

Mrs. Balfour sewed two buttons on a shirt before she answered.

"Sometimes miracles happen and dreams come true," she said. "So we'll keep on hoping. It would be rather fun to show Melbourne to you: I used to know it so very well—once; but I suppose I would find it changed. Twenty years is a long while—certainly it has changed me. You wouldn't imagine what a cheerful young person I was twenty years ago."

"I would, easily, because you're cheerful now," Elsa said. "You always seem about

seventy years younger than Father.”

“Only three,” she said.

“You say so, so we have to try to believe you. But that’s only our politeness. Father is so old that he’ll never get any older, and you’re really about the same age as Kitty! Nothing can make you old—not even a large family and making shirts. Oh dear, I am so sick of button-holes!” She crumpled a finished shirt in a bundle and flung it from her. “Chuck me over another, Kit.”

“ ‘Seam and gusset and band,’ ”

intoned Kitty:

“ ‘Band and gusset and seam,
Till over the buttons we fall asleep
And sew them on in a dream’ —

“which we’d better not do, by the way, or we might sew them in the wrong places. Norman will be so peevish if he finds buttons on his shirt-tails. Tell us more about Melbourne, Mother. What sort of times used you to have?”

“Oh—very gay. Balls and parties and races, and heaps of tennis. You girls would have laughed at our clothes; tight-fitting under-things, all tucks and frills and embroidery, and dresses with stiff bones sewn into the bodices, and tiny waists. Mine measured eighteen inches. We had high, high collars kept up with bones that often hurt horribly, and huge sleeves shaped like a leg of mutton, enormous above and very tight below. And our skirts reached the ground and were about seven yards round the hem.”

“But could you move in them?” Kitty gasped.

“Bless you, we played tennis in them. I don’t know how, but we did. We went long walks, too, holding the wretched things up: and when we danced we draped them gracefully from our arms by a silken loop. Very nice we looked, too.”

“It sounds like a nightmare,” said Kitty, wrestling with a gusset. “Dash, I’ve pricked my finger! Tell some more, darling.” She sucked her finger and regarded her mother with interest. “I’m trying to imagine you with an eighteen-inch waist.”

“Indeed, then, I might be able to show you it—given suitable appliances,” said her mother modestly. “The years haven’t made me fat! We rode too: always on side-saddles, with very tight habit-bodices fastened with about fifty buttons and with very long skirts. But we rode hard and straight, all the same.”

“I’ve never seen a side-saddle,” remarked Elsa. “ ‘Scuse me, Mother, but didn’t you look awfully funny?”

“We didn’t think so. We would have thought you girls perfectly scandalous, riding astride in breeches. I remember there was a dreadful rumour that one girl smoked cigarettes in secret, and quite a number of mothers hesitated about inviting her to their houses. But we wore our evening frocks much lower at the neck than any girl would wear them to-day. And if you were scraggy you padded yourself and hoped everyone would think it was natural. But we should probably have fainted in groups at the bare idea of mixed bathing.”

“But it’s all topsy-turvy,” Kitty said. “Don’t you think people are more sensible nowadays, Mother?”

“Yes, in some ways. Not in all. Those were good days in many respects and we had a great deal of fun very simply. Everything—except clothes—is more complicated now, and I dare say it’s a good thing I can never go back to the old life, because I should be like a bewildered old Mrs. Rip van Winkle.” She broke off, looking down the track. “There’s Father coming. Run and make tea, Elsa dear: we’ll have it out here while we work. It’s cooler than in the house.”

Walter Balfour rode past the house without a glance at the veranda. He turned out his horse, and came slowly from the stables. Even in his shabby clothes and with his stooped shoulders, he was a fine-looking man: tall and well-built, with keen, sharply-cut features. To-day his wife glanced at him anxiously, seeing an extra shadow on his face.

“Shirts?” he asked, with the ghost of a smile, glancing at the littered veranda.

“Yes—we’ve had a great day’s work. Elsa is getting tea; it will be ready in a minute. Tired, Walter?”

“Oh, a little. It’s a hot day, and there was a big crowd at the sale-yards. No, I didn’t buy any sheep—prices too high. There’s no money in sheep at the figure people are asking for them.” He sat down on the edge of the high veranda, flicking his boot with his whip. “Where are the boys?”

“They have been cutting ferns all day, but I suppose they will soon come home to milk. Yes, there’s Bob now: I suppose Norman has sent him on ahead to get the cows.” She pointed down the paddock, where, between the trees, Bob could be seen on Nigger. Apparently he was in no hurry to find the cows. There were tempting little logs scattered here and there, and he was galloping in and out of the timber, jumping every log that came in his way.

Mr. Balfour screwed up his eyes, looking at him.

“The young monkey is having a good time, but I don’t see where the cows come in. Is he riding without a bridle, Kitty?”

Kitty gave a quick glance, and laughed.

“Oh, Bob never bothers about a bridle when he rides Nigger in the paddock,” she said. “He carries a bit of string and twists it round Nigger’s nose in a sort of halter. But I don’t believe he really needs it: they have a regular track among those logs, and Nigger would jump them all without even a string. He and Bob almost talk to each other, you know. Bob has only to whistle in a certain way and Nigger will come trotting to him from the farthest corner of the paddock.”

“No, will he?” Mr. Balfour’s tone was absent.

“Rather! He told us the other night that he could get him in the dark, and we wouldn’t believe him. So we went out, and he whistled, and presently Nigger came out of the darkness in a great hurry, and ran to him just like a big dog—as if he knew something was wrong to make Bob whistle at that hour and he had to hurry up and see what was the matter. Bob was terribly proud. He was always proud of Nigger, but since they won at the Show he’s worse than ever. He told Elsa he’d love to have him in the stable and sleep there with him!”

To this Mr. Balfour made no answer, and Kitty, looking at his sombre face, told herself that she was an idiot to talk so much when her conversation was evidently wasted; and returned to the making of gussets in haughty silence. This was unfortunately broken

when she jabbed her finger severely with the needle and ejaculated "Blow!" with great force—after which she popped the finger into her mouth, looking at her father with round eyes of apprehension. Usually Mr. Balfour was quick to hear and rebuke any word so inelegant, but on this occasion it passed unnoticed and Kitty resumed her sewing, much relieved. There were now and then compensations in having Father in a black mood.

Mrs. Balfour asked a few questions about her husband's day in the township, receiving only monosyllables in answer: so that presently she gave up the attempt and silence lasted until relieved by the appearance of Elsa with the tea-tray. But the meal was not cheerful, and when it was over Mrs. Balfour spoke decisively.

"Put the work away, girls—you have done quite enough. Elsa, you might fill up the teapot; the boys will be in very soon and fern-cutting is thirsty work on a day like this. They will come clamouring for tea before they milk."

"Anything else after that, Mother?"

Mrs. Balfour smiled at her, knowing perfectly well what lay behind the question. There was only one recreation for Elsa, and it never failed.

"Yes," she said, and drew her pretty face into comical lines of severity. "I think you have neglected your violin to-day shamefully."

"It's the shirts," said Elsa, in a confidential whisper. "When I see a shirt waiting for button-holes I just can't keep my hands off it. Shirts are my besetting sin." She lifted the nearest shirt deftly on her toe and sent it through the window with a flying kick; then, pouncing upon the tea-tray, she fled with a clatter of cups that threatened imminent destruction to the whole load.

Mr. Balfour drew out his pipe, filled it slowly, and lit it. Kitty gathered up the hated shirts and disappeared; and Mrs. Balfour sat sewing in silence, glancing now and then at her no less silent husband. Presently the notes of the violin came softly from an inner room. Elsa had had no teaching beyond what her father could give her, and the instrument was a poor enough one. But, childish as it was, there was in her playing something of the divine spark; something that, given its proper chance, might yet turn the bow into a magician's wand, able to conjure up delicate fancies and laughter and tears. As he listened the lines smoothed themselves out of her father's face; while Mrs. Balfour sighed, as she had sighed a thousand times in secret, to think that the magic gift must lie for ever undeveloped. Then she heard the boys' voices, and, knowing that it was better to leave her husband undisturbed, she went softly to meet them.

Bob was flushed with pride over Nigger, who, it appeared, had jumped a log higher than he had ever tackled before.

"Jumped it clean, too, Mother; he never laid a toe on it!" he cried, the fervour of his utterance unchecked by the fact that his mouth was full of scone. "An' he went the whole course, more'n a dozen logs, like a bird, an' nothing on him but a bit of string!"

"Weren't you on him?" Norman chaffed.

"Oh, you get out! Mother, I'll bet I'll enter him for the jumping pony next Show. If I keep on training him he'll have a jolly good chance. He's got such good judgment, you know: he takes off just at the right second an' he never makes a mistake. Logs are great training, you see—not like a light fence. He knows he can't hit a log without hurting himself, so he doesn't run any risk. Mother, you'll let me jump him at the Show, won't

you?"

"Why, of course I will, if Father says so too," she told him, smiling at the glowing face and dancing eyes.

"There, I told you she would, Norm! He tried to make me believe you wouldn't, Mother—said you'd be afraid. As if you would!"

"Oh, it doesn't do for mothers to be afraid," she said. "It would make pussy-cats of boys. You train him carefully, Bob, and I'll do my best to get Father to let you ride him. When you think he has had enough log-jumping, I'm sure Norman will help you to put up a hurdle, because he will want training over that too. We'll have great fun watching you."

"I say, you are a brick, Mother!" the boy said. "You'll help, won't you, Norm?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Norman, laughing. "Much work we'll get out of you on Saturdays now, I can see!"

"No, truly I'll work, if you'll help. It 'ud be a jolly shame not to train him when he's showing such good style, wouldn't it? I'd rather win once with him over hurdles than fifty times as a school-pony—any kid can win that. You're always saying he's old, but it's just because he isn't so very young that he has so much sense. He's the best pony ever I put my leg over, anyway!"

"And that says a heap, doesn't it?" Norman responded, laughing. "Look here, we'll have sense if we get the milking done before Father finds us loafing in the kitchen. Hurry up, and if we're finished in time you can show me how he takes that big log you're making such a song about."

"My word, I'll show you!" uttered Bob. "Come along—I'll race you to the cow-yard!" He seized a scone and fled from the kitchen. The rattle of milk-buckets died away in the distance.

Bob was still glowing when they all gathered round the table two hours later. The trial over the logs had duly taken place: he had told his mother all about it, excited and happy, as he washed his hands. Even Norman, who had pretended at first to be scornful, had been convinced. "He said Nigger went like a bird, Mother, an' you know Norm doesn't say a thing unless he means it. I mean . . . well, you'll say a thing sometimes to buck me up"—he rubbed his tousled head against his mother's arm—"but Norm won't. Not about important things like this, anyhow. He really thinks I'd have a chance, and he said I rode him all right. He advises me to go on jumping him bareback, 'cause of course it's easier for Nigger to have less weight, especially as he isn't very young. You'll ask Father to enter him, won't you, Mother?"

"Oh, you needn't worry about that," Mrs. Balfour said. "Father will enter him if you train him well."

That was all Bob needed for complete happiness. Hunger kept him quiet for a little while at the table, but he broke out afresh when Kitty suggested, as she filled his plate with fried potatoes for the second time, that he had better be prudent and begin to get his weight down. "You won't have much chance at the next Show if you're over fourteen stone, you know," she told him, with a twinkle. "Nigger would lean up against the hurdles and groan!"

"Nigger'll carry all the weight I'm likely to be next Show," Bob declared indignantly. "Those little hurdles at the Show won't worry him: they'll be nothing to what he'll be

jumping out here before that. I'm goin' to start training him regularly, and you'll just see!"

"What's that?" Mr. Balfour asked, coming out of a reverie. "What about next Show?"

Bob quailed a little. It might have been more prudent to make sure of his father's approval before talking so much. But he faced him squarely as he answered.

"I'm goin' to enter Nigger for the jumping, if you'll let me, Father. Mother says I may if you don't object. He's been doing just ripping jumping in the paddock. I didn't know he had it in him, but he has. Norm'll tell you. Do let me enter him, won't you, Father?"

Mrs. Balfour had been watching her husband's face as the hurried words tumbled over each other in Bob's excitement. Something about it made her heart sink, she could not tell why. Then he spoke, kindly enough, shaking his head.

"I'd let you, but I'm afraid you'll have to give up the idea. The fact is, I've sold Nigger."

Had a bomb fallen into the middle of the table the effect could hardly have been greater. Mrs. Balfour said "Walter!" sharply, and then bit her lip and was silent. The others stared blankly at their father, and Bob flushed a deep crimson.

"Not—Nigger?" he said in a low voice.

"Yes. I'm sorry to take him from you, but I had a good offer for him. Jim Craig saw him at the Show, and took a great fancy to him—his little girl is just beginning to ride to school alone, and he has been looking for a steady pony for her. He offered ten pounds and then raised it to twelve, and of course it's more than the old pony is worth: I wouldn't get anything like that if I put him into the sale-yard." He passed up his cup, but Mrs. Balfour did not refill it immediately. She put it down, still looking at him.

"An' what'll I do?" Bob said. It was very clear that at the moment he did not care what he did: the words came automatically.

"Oh, you'll have to double-bank with Elsa on old Barney until I can pick up a cheap pony. I'll get one in the yards for three or four pounds: that was all I paid for Nigger as a three-year-old. I'm sorry to part with him, but he's going to a good home. He'll have an easier time than he has here."

"He doesn't want an easier time," Bob said sharply. "He's up to all his work here, an' a lot more. And he's mine—you always said he was my pony!"

"I said he was yours to ride. He is mine to sell. And I can't afford to let a good chance slip." Mr. Balfour spoke with unusual patience.

"I'll work for him," Bob pleaded, trying to command his voice. "I'll do anything you like—before an' after school, an' on Saturdays an' Sundays, an' all the holidays. Norm said I cut an awful lot of ferns to-day, an' I can keep all the wood chopped, an' hoe ragwort an' things. I'd soon earn my keep. Only do let him stay, Father. He's the only thing I've got!"

Norman said, "Oh, Lord!" under his breath, pushed back his chair, and went out, his face dark with anger. Mr. Balfour frowned and spoke sternly.

"Don't be an ass, Bob. You can't do very much more than you're doing now; and anyhow, nothing you could do would bring in ready money. I'm sorry, but there's no help for it. In any case, the matter is settled: Craig gave me his cheque, and I banked it. He's coming over for the pony to-morrow afternoon."

That settled it, as Bob knew: once the mysterious Bank closed its jaws over money it disappeared for ever. The flush died out of his round face, leaving it curiously white under its freckles.

"Well, it isn't fair!" he stammered. "It's—it's mean—he's my pony an' he loves me. You—you might's well sell me, and be done with it. I'll never get another pony like him—never!" His self-control wavered, and suddenly he knew he must get away—away from people who looked at him. "I—I hate you!" he muttered. He scrambled to his feet, sending his cup of tea flying across the tablecloth, and ran violently from the room.

"Bob!" said Mr. Balfour, in a voice of thunder.

"Oh—let him go," Mrs. Balfour said wearily. She filled her husband's cup and passed it to him. Bob had not turned. They heard his feet racing over the rough gravel of the yard. Then the gate slammed.

"That young man will have to be taught manners and common sense," said Mr. Balfour angrily.

No one answered. There was a few moments' uncomfortable silence. Then Kitty caught Elsa's eye, and they slipped away. Mr. Balfour, glancing at the half-emptied plates, realized that nobody had eaten anything since his bombshell had been cast into their midst. The realization did not improve his temper.

"Well?" he said, looking at his wife. "Every one thinks I'm a criminal, of course—and you too. You sit there looking like a ghost."

"Was it necessary, Walter?" she asked. "It is a very hard blow to Bob."

"Necessary!—to accept twelve pounds for a pony I can replace for three! Surely you, of all people, don't need to ask that," he said, in astonishment. "I don't know where to turn for money—it was a godsend. You ought to realize that, Anne, and back me up instead of openly disapproving. It doesn't make my position easier, I can tell you."

"If you hadn't flung it at him as you did," she said, a catch in her voice. "If you had taken him into your confidence—told him gently—let him think he was helping you. Bob is generous enough to respond."

"But I did tell him it was necessary."

"When he knew the pony was gone. It isn't fair, Walter—it isn't kind. They are good children, ready to do anything to help, but you keep them at arm's length until they are afraid of you. And Nigger is everything to Bob. Oh, it was cruel of you. You don't know how cruel you can be at times. Just as he was bubbling with pride over the pony—so happy! Could you not see? And he is such a little boy, with so little to make him happy."

He stared at her. Never, in their twenty years together, had she spoken like this.

"You make mountains out of nothing," he said slowly. "They are old enough to understand our position: I can't hedge round to make things easy for them, any more than I can play the fool with them as you manage to do. That has all been knocked out of me. I have to work and worry from morning until night, week in, week out."

"And haven't I?"

"No one ever worked harder," he admitted. "But the worry is on my shoulders, and it's a tough load, I can tell you." He spoke with the calm certainty of the man that money matters are his province alone. "I've got to find the cash to keep everything going, and I

must get it where I can. It's hard enough at any time—much harder when you make me feel a brute for taking a chance of easy money.”

“Money!” she said wearily. “How I do hate the very sound of the word! It isn't so much doing without things: I hate having to think of money constantly, and to talk about it, and to make it the chief thing in life for the children. That's the worst of being poor—not the poverty itself. And the hardest of all is that you are letting it build a wall between you and the children: such a high wall that you don't see things and you don't care. You might have eased Bob over this business, and he would have been proud to help you by selling Nigger. Now you have done something that he will never forget, and the wall is so much higher.” She stood up, looking at him uncertainly. Then she gave a little hopeless gesture and went out, leaving him staring at the disordered table, where Bob's overturned tea made a dull brown stain across the cloth.

Norman was leaning over the back gate. She went to him, and they stood together, looking across the fast-darkening paddocks.

“Where is he?” Mrs. Balfour asked, at length.

“Somewhere down there with Nigger, I expect. He went past me like a redshank—he didn't want to speak to anyone. I say, Mother, it's rough on the poor little kid!”

“Yes—too rough,” she said. “I would have done anything to prevent his hearing it like that.”

“You didn't know?”

“No. Father had not said a word to me. I knew something was troubling him from the time he came home—not that he will admit that it is hard on Bob.”

“He wouldn't admit anything like that,” said the boy contemptuously. “He's hard, Mother. There isn't any need for him to be as hard as he is with us. I don't mind much for myself, but Bob's only a kid. I suppose there's no way out of it?”

“No; Mr. Craig is to take the pony to-morrow. We'll have to make a plan to get Bob out of the way, Norman: he mustn't see him go.”

The boy nodded.

“All right,” he said. “Not that it matters much, poor old chap: he'll have to see him every day at school, with that fat lump of a Craig girl riding him. She's got a seat and hands like nothing earthly: Nigger'll have a sore back half his time.”

“Oh—poor old Bob!” she uttered. “I had not thought of that.”

“I'll bet Bob has. It isn't going to be easy for him—and to have to ride old Barney behind Elsa. I hope to goodness Father will get him another pony soon, even if it is a screw. Every one will chaff Bob. By Jove, Mother, isn't it brutal to be poor? I'm going to make money some day or break my back over it. There isn't anything I wouldn't do to get away from this hopeless screwing!”

“Except run off the straight,” she said.

“Oh, I suppose so. But I do believe that want of money would send a fellow into anything in the long run.” He gave a short laugh. “For instance, I felt I could cheerfully kill Father and Jim Craig to-night, and I guess Bob does too!”

“Well, I don't fancy that would help much,” she said, with an attempt at a laugh. “Try to think gently of Father, old son. He has so many worries.”

"Well, they might have taught him to let a little kid down gently," said the boy rebelliously. "Father's only got himself to blame if Bob thinks he's a bugbear."

"Promise me you won't talk to Bob like that—or to the girls," she begged. "It does no good, Norman—only harm."

"I won't, to Bob," he promised. "But as for the girls—well, they're just sizzling-mad. You should have heard Kitty, out here. She and Elsa are nearly ready to put powdered glass in his porridge!"

"Ah, it's no good to be angry—no good," said Mrs. Balfour miserably. "The only thing to do is to try and help him, and be sorry for him."

But she knew that she was not sorry for her husband as she left Norman at the gate and went into the dark paddocks in search of her boy. She knew that she was only full of resentment. Bob was her baby, and somewhere in the shadowy gloom he was breaking his heart over the friend he loved: and she could not help him. That was the hardest thing to bear. The time had gone when she could heal his hurts: now the grip of their poverty had caught him, and he was beyond her healing. She saw ahead the dreary years when he would begin to fight against their life as the elder children were fighting now—little Bob, who was always merry and careless: and the thought wrung her as with a physical pain.

"He needn't have made it so hard," she whispered to herself. "He is the only one of us who has any power—he need not have used it to hurt."

Then she came upon Bob, in a corner of the paddock. The moon was rising: she saw him, motionless, his arm over Nigger's neck, his head hidden in the pony's mane. She came up beside him gently, putting her hand on his shoulder. The boy glanced up quickly.

"Oh, Mother—you shouldn't have come out in the dark!" His voice failed, and he leaned against her with a choking sob.

"I wanted my boy," she said, holding him closely. They stood together in silence, and Nigger nuzzled against them. His mane was wet where Bob's face had been.

"There—there isn't any hope, I s'pose?" he whispered presently.

"No, my son. You have just got to stick it like a man. It is hurting me nearly as much, Bob."

"I knew it would," he said. "Oh, Mother, I never dreamed of such a thing happening. Why didn't I know he might sell him? I thought he was my very own."

"I don't suppose Father ever expected to sell him," she answered. "But he can't afford to let such a price slip. You understand that, don't you, dear heart? We're so poor."

He gave a great sigh.

"Oh, I s'pose so. He'd have to sell anything if he got the chance. But I never thought it might be Nigger—my old Nigger!" His manhood fell away from him, and he broke into the bitter crying of a child. Mrs. Balfour held him to her, and there were other tears that fell on the rumpled fair hair. But she let him cry out his grief, saying nothing until the hard sobs died away.

"I'm sorry," he choked. "I didn't mean to be such a fool, Mother—but it knocked me all of a heap. You—you won't tell the others I was a baby, will you?"

"No, I'll never tell them," she said. "A boy may be a baby sometimes, just with his mother, in the dark—a boy who has had a hard knock. But you'll be a man to-morrow,

Bob. We won't let other people see what we feel. And you must not be angry with Father—you must remember a son sticks up for his father, no matter what happens."

There was no response, but she felt the little body stiffen. The wound was yet too raw.

"We'll go off by ourselves to-morrow, you and I," she said. "I want to go over and see Mrs. Mackenzie, and you shall drive me. We'll have dinner quite early and get away so that you can have a long afternoon with the Mackenzie boys."

"You're a dear," he whispered. "I don't want to stay on the place to-morrow."

"No. Neither do I. So you will just take me out for the afternoon. And now you must come in, my son: it is past your bedtime. Will you ride Nigger up, and I'll walk beside you?"

Bob shook his head at that.

"No," he said. "I'll never ride him again: I told him so when he came trotting to me when I whistled. It 'ud only make it harder."

He put his face into the black mane for a moment and then turned resolutely away. The pony gazed after them wistfully as the darkness swallowed them.

CHAPTER IV

STICKING IT

BOB woke on Sunday morning to a dull sense of misery. For a moment he wondered what was the matter with him. Then he remembered, and turned his face into his pillow with a groan.

Norman came in, bearing a cup and saucer.

"Time you were up, old chap," he told him gently. "Here's some tea for you—mind that scone, it's on the tilt." He was careful not to look at the young brother, and Bob was grateful, though he could only mutter awkward thanks. Early tea in bed was an unusual luxury. He knew why it had come his way that morning.

"Hurry up and run the cows in," Norman said. "I'll get the feed ready." He went out, and Bob finished his tea and dressed quickly. Old Norm was a brick, he told himself.

He trudged after the cows on foot, glad that he had been able to get away from the house without seeing anybody. Sunday was the late morning of the week, when he and Norman were the first up; they always lit the kitchen fire on Sundays and carried tea to the others, but to-day Norman had done it all himself. The horses were under the trees by the water-hole: he fancied that Nigger looked towards him with a puzzled air, expecting his usual whistle. It cut Bob like a knife to see the logs over which they would never jump again. But he set his lips and walked on. He had told his mother he would "stick it"; no one should see him make a fool of himself.

Breakfast was a very quiet meal. Bob was late; he had dawdled purposely over washing his hands, and he slipped into his place without a word. There were the things he liked best on the table: little crisp fritters that Kitty knew he loved, and his favourite jam. That also he understood. And nobody talked to him or seemed to notice his heavy eyes. He had wondered, with a dull carelessness, if punishment would be coming his way for his words to his father the night before: but Mr. Balfour said nothing, and was the first to leave the table. There was relief in seeing him go; the tongues were loosened.

"Have another fritter, Bob, old man," Kitty said. "Look, there's a wee crispy one—I gave it an extra turn in the frying-pan for you." She slipped it on his plate, and though Bob did not feel hungry he ate it to please her. Elsa had made fresh toast, golden-brown and smoking hot: she put it by his side, with the jam-dish within easy reach. They talked of plans for the day.

"Bob is going to drive me to the Mackenzies'," Mrs. Balfour said. "Just us two: we're not going to invite anyone to come with us, so you needn't all rush. Some one must stay with Father, but two of you might ride over to see Miss Berrill; she asked you at the Show, you know, Kitty."

"I'll stay," said Norman, without any undue delight at the prospect.

"No, you won't—I'll stay," Elsa said. "I get all the riding I want, five days in the week. I'll have a long afternoon at the fiddle, and soothe Father to sleep. He brought me

home a new string yesterday, so I suppose he wants music.”

“I think that’s the best arrangement,” Mrs. Balfour said. “I would like you to go, Kitty: you haven’t been away from the house since the Show. We’ll have dinner quite early, because Norman must be home to milk. Will you help him, Elsa? Bob and I may be late.”

Elsa nodded.

“Right,” she agreed. “Don’t hurry too much, Norman: I’ll get the cows in and start in good time.”

“I won’t be late,” he said. Norman hated to see girls in the cow-yard, though it was sometimes necessary to accept their help.

Bob finished his morning work, and went out into the paddock alone. He whistled, and Nigger left the water-hole and came trotting gently to him. Bob did not mount him. He laid his hand on his neck and they walked to the stable-yard together, two friends. Clearly, Nigger thought, this was another Show, for Bob brought brush and curry-comb and groomed him from nose to tail until he shone.

“I won’t let those beastly Craigs say you hadn’t been looked after, old man,” he said between his teeth, brushing hard at the rippling mane. He went over him again and again, lovingly. From the veranda Kitty and Norman saw him and raged unavailingly at the pitiful sight.

“Just look at the poor little kid,” Kitty said. “He’s preparing the sacrifice. It just made me ache to see him at breakfast, with his poor old eyes all red and swollen. And his mouth was a straight hard line, and it generally turns up at both corners. I’d love to tell Father what I think of him!”

“Much good that would do,” Norman said gloomily. “Anyhow, I guess he has a pretty fair idea. No one is exactly falling on his neck this morning.”

“That won’t worry him. He’s getting his beastly twelve pounds, and nothing else matters to him. I do think he might have said a kind word to Bob.”

“I hope he won’t,” Norman answered quickly. “It would about finish Bob just now. I say, let’s move away—I don’t want Bob to think we’re watching him. You can see he’s made up his mind to be unconcerned, and it’s taking him all his time, poor kid.”

They moved out of sight. Bob had brushed Nigger until he could brush no more. He led him into the stable and gave him a generous feed of chaff.

“That’s the last thing I’ll ever do for you, old boy,” he said. And then he hugged him for a moment, rubbing his cheek against the pony’s cheek, and said, “Oh, Nigger—Nigger!” under his breath: and, shutting the half-door, he walked slowly to the house, his mouth a very hard line. Passing the veranda, he said carelessly:

“Norm, you might let Father know that Nigger’s ready in the stable.”

Norman said, “All right, old chap, I will,” without looking up from the boot he was polishing. He muttered things that were not for Bob’s ear, and his brush moved as though the boot were a personal enemy. The straight little figure was moving up the passage when a thought struck him, and he sent a shout in pursuit.

“I say, Bob—don’t you worry about the buggy. I’ll get it ready.”

“Thanks,” Bob said. The door of his room closed behind him, and Norman heard the click of the lock.

He did not reappear until the dinner-bell summoned him, and then he was carefully dressed to go with his mother. It was hard to get through dinner, because the vision of Nigger seemed all the time between him and his plate. Nigger standing idly in the stable—he would have finished his chaff long ago, and now he must be wondering why his master did not come for him: Nigger jumping logs in the paddock: Nigger at the Show, sending him and his four companions skyward with one indignant kick. All those visions, and many more: and then Nigger being led away by Jim Craig, and Nigger coming to school with fat Clara Craig on his back. And he must stick it. Easier, though, to stick it in his room—where he could walk up and down and bite on a piece of shanghai rubber, and force his hands to be occupied. The dinner-table was another matter: food choked him, and though the faces round him were kindly he could not bear them to look at him. There was an ache at the back of his eyes: a sick dread in his heart that at any moment his control would slip, disgracing him.

“If you have finished, Bob, I would be so glad to have my shoes polished.” It was his mother’s voice, calm and polite as if she were addressing a stranger. Not at all pitiful or troubled for him, making him sure that his struggle was visible: just polite. He shot her a glance of utter gratitude as he muttered assent, getting up from the table.

Then, in a few minutes, it seemed, they were in the buggy, and driving away. He was not often allowed to drive—his father said he was too careless to be trusted with anything beyond his own neck: so that it was pleasant to feel that he was looking after his mother, who seemed to have no anxieties while he was in charge. She had a story for him which seemed to come suddenly into her mind: rather a long and funny story of a scrape into which she had fallen when she was about his age. It held his attention—made him almost forget the thought of the stable where a black pony stood waiting. The story lasted a good while, and they laughed over it together.

“Will I go the short way?” he asked, when they came to the cross-roads.

“Oh, we’re early,” she answered. “It’s nice, driving, isn’t it? I think you get more pace out of Jess than Father and Norman do. Let us go the long way: it’s ever so much prettier.”

So they went the long way, and it was not dull. He did not suspect that she was fighting for him with all her might, helping him to save his pride. She talked and told more stories, and encouraged him to think of beautiful things that might happen in the future; they generally hinged on his winning a scholarship and so getting to a good school and the University and becoming an engineer. Engineers did wonderful things: built bridges and canals and marvellous tunnels; they made large fortunes and the King knighted them. It was thrilling to plan what they did for their mothers when this happened. The dull weight lifted from his heart as they planned. And somehow she made him feel that it was not only fairy-tale dreaming: that the possibility was really there, if he chose to try.

“Other men have risen from very small beginnings,” she said seriously. “And you have brains and good breeding and pluck. Poverty is only a stone in the way to be kicked aside if you have those three things, Bob.”

The brave words made his heart glow.

“I’m going to try,” he said. “I’ll hoe in like fury at decimals to-morrow. And I’ll ask

Mr. Blair what scholarships there are—what I might have a chance for if I worked. It's not too soon to begin, is it?"

She laughed gently.

"Scholarships are won on the work of foundations, not the top story," she said. "And you know as well as I do that it's never too soon to lay good foundations."

The planning lasted until they came to the Mackenzies'—an astonishingly short time, it seemed. Things were pleasant there: the Mackenzie boys suggested a swim in the creek and the time flew until the bell rang to summon them to tea, when Bob found that he was surprisingly hungry. Then came the long, quiet drive home, with more talk and dreams of the future. It was easy to talk, sitting close together in the quiet dusk, with no one to interrupt or hear. Mother never laughed at any of his dreams—only helped him to dream more.

Norman came to meet them as they drove into the stable-yard.

"We began to think you were lost," he said. "Everything all right?"

"Quite all right," Bob said. "We've had a ripping time, haven't we, Mother?"

"Yes, a ripping time, my son," she said.

He was so tired that he went to sleep quickly. But he dreamed of Nigger; a joyful dream, in which they were jumping at the Show, Nigger clearing the hurdles with yards to spare while the people cheered and clapped and the judges were faint with admiration. A proud dream: it was hard to wake to the realization that Nigger was no longer there.

He caught Barney and saddled him after breakfast. Mrs. Balfour said good-bye to him in the house: it was the first time Bob could remember that she had not stood on the veranda to watch them start for school. He knew why, and was thankful. When you have ridden for years on a pony who always welcomed you as master, ready to start with gay little jumps and other signs of high spirits, it is not easy to swallow riding meekly behind a girl on an old slug of a half-bred crock—as Bob mentally described the unoffending Barney. He knew what he had to face at school; that ordeal could not be dodged. But no one watched him leave home, except his father; and Walter Balfour, seeing, from his work in the paddocks, the sad little trio go down the track, bit hard on his pipe-stem and muttered curses on ill-luck and poverty. The thought of Jim Craig's cheque burned in his soul. He was by nature neither cruel nor hard, and he loved his children and was proud of them. But care and worry had made a crust over his heart. After all, he said to himself, turning again to wield his slasher at the stubborn tea-tree, they all paid toll to the ceaseless demands of Life. It was time that Bob should learn that he must pay too.

Bob paid. Elsa was very decent: she wanted him to ride on the saddle, in front. He declined that, hotly: it was bad enough for her to be forced to have him behind, making Barney's slow paces slower yet. He had hoped they would be late for school, but they were not, and a hail of chaff from the boys greeted them as they jogged up. Bob met it as airily as he could. He'd sold old Nigger, he said: Father was going to buy him a younger pony. But the boys were keen, and it may be that Clara Craig had bragged—already Nigger was in the school paddock, and to Bob it seemed that he looked at him with pained inquiry in his eyes, asking why this thing should have come upon him. It made Bob savage: too savage to bear the chaff with sustained carelessness. He had three fights in the dinner-break, and carried home with him a magnificent black eye. It was some solace that

Jim Daly had carried home two.

Never had there been so weary a week. Bob tried hard to throw himself into his work. He consulted Mr. Blair about scholarships, and the master, much uplifted at finding ambition budding in careless Bob Balfour, encouraged him to his best efforts. He shot to the top of his class, thereby incurring the enmity of other boys; disgusted at being beaten in school, they sought to annoy him in the playground, and it was easy to find his sore spot. He had to bear hearing Clara Craig daily congratulated on her handling of Nigger, until that fat damsel fairly oozed with conceit. "I always thought that pony was an old crock when Bob Balfour had him," Joe Clark told her, publicly. "But he goes rippingly with you, Clara. It's all hands and riding after all!" And Clara sniggered, and the school grinned. There seemed always a crowd to see them arrive and depart on Barney, and the laughter and rough chaff never failed. Elsa suggested, after the second day, that he should let her start home alone in the afternoon, picking him up after the first hundred yards; that would at least ease the moment of leaving school, the prospect of which haunted him all day. But Bob declined obstinately. They could rag their heads off, for all he cared, he said. Fights were of everyday occurrence, so that Mr. Blair, a city-bred man and gentle, began to marvel at the scars of battle among his boys.

The long week dragged away, and he faced another as dreary. On Monday, indeed, things were especially bad, for Bob had fought with Sandy Mackenzie, who was his best friend, and had never really meant to hurt him by a careless word that Bob had taken up hotly, so that fists were flying in a moment. Bob knew Sandy had not meant it, and he was sore in body and in mind as old Barney crawled over the long road home. Elsa had tried to cheer him, but his gloom had been too deep, so she gave it up, and they rode most of the way in silence. There were letters in the box nailed to their paddock gate: he stuffed them in his school-bag when he had shut it.

"You take this up, Elsa," he said. "I'm going after the cows."

"Well, we'll ride for the cows," said Elsa. "Or you take Barney and I'll walk up to the house."

"I'm sick of the very sight of him," Bob said drearily. "I'd rather go on foot, truly. There's plenty of time." He turned across the grass, and Elsa jogged towards the house with a cloud on her pretty face.

Bob drove the cows before him to the yard, trailing moodily through the long dry grass. A black snake slid out of his way: he killed it with a stick and left the still-writhing body on the ground, though as a rule he would have brought so big a snake as it was in triumph to the house. To-day it did not seem worth the trouble. He yarded the cows and went slowly to the kitchen, where he knew a cup of tea would greet him. Mr. Balfour and Norman met him in the yard. The father glanced at the boy's bruised face and stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"You've been fighting again, Bob," he said sternly. "It seems to me there's a good deal too much of it lately. You'll have to stop it."

Bob gave him a sullen look.

"Then you'll have to stop the whole beastly school ragging me for double-banking with Elsa on old Barney," he said. "There'll be fights as long as they do it." He twisted away from his father's hand and slouched into the kitchen.

Mr. Balfour took an angry stride after him, but Norman spoke quickly.

"Ah, don't go for him, Father," he said. "The poor youngster has had a brute of a week: Elsa says they don't give him a moment's peace. And he's breaking his heart over Nigger."

"Oh, I suppose so," Mr. Balfour said impatiently. "But I can't help it. He's not the only one who didn't like selling the pony." But he turned and went off to his work, and Norman breathed more freely. To have punished Bob for impertinence just then would, he felt, have been about the last straw. And something like pity for his father came over him as he watched the tall, striding figure with the stooped shoulders. He couldn't be any older than Mr. Mackenzie, who looked like a young man and was always cheerful: and Father was bent and beginning to turn grey. There was no doubt, he had a tough time. For once Norman did not whistle as he went for the milk-buckets.

It was a hot evening: they gathered on the veranda after tea, when all the work was done. Elsa and Bob lay on the grass of the little dried-up lawn; near them Norman plaited a lash for a stockwhip, using long strips cut from the hide of a kangaroo he had shot in the scrub. Presently Mr. Balfour spoke.

"There were no letters to-day, I suppose? I expected one from an agent, about those sheep."

"Yes, there were," Bob said. "Two or three: I put them in my bag. Didn't you take them out, Elsa? You brought it up."

"I forgot all about them," Elsa said penitently. "Sorry, Father: I'll get them."

She jumped up and ran into the house, returning in a moment.

"Two for you and one for Mother," she said, distributing them. "Christmas sale-list, I should think, Mother: it's a funny, long, fat one." She went back to the grass, humming a tune. Letters rarely came to the Balfour family, and were never of any interest to the children.

Walter Balfour read his letters, which did not seem to give him any pleasure, judging by his frown as he folded the last one up. He glanced at his wife. She was reading a long typewritten document with a queer puzzled expression. As he looked, she put it down and picked up a shorter one, knitting her brows over it. Kitty spoke suddenly.

"What's up, Mother? You look awfully queer."

Mrs. Balfour read to the end of the long sheet without answering. The hand with which she held it began to tremble violently.

Kitty was on her feet beside her.

"Mother! What is it?"

Mrs. Balfour had turned very white.

"It's—it's Uncle Joseph——" she began.

The young Balfours sprang into galvanized activity.

"Mother—not his Hundred!"

"He hasn't died at last, has he, Mother?"

"I believe he has," Elsa cried—"and the Hundred wasn't there after all! I always thought it wouldn't come—it was dream-money. Do tell us, Mother—is he dead?"

“Yes, he’s dead,” Mrs. Balfour said. “He died three months ago—poor old man.” She seemed scarcely able to speak. Mr. Balfour leaned forward. Like the children, he had long ceased to believe in Uncle Joseph’s Hundred.

“Never mind, Anne,” he said. “We never really counted on it, you know. We’ll manage without it. Don’t worry, dear.” He put a kind hand on her knee. “Hang the letter!” he said—“it’s been a shock to you. I wish you’d never heard of the old man and his dream-money. Cheer up, Anne: you know I always told you it was ill waiting for dead men’s shoes!” He smiled at her. “Let me see the letter.”

But Mrs. Balfour clung to it, looking at him in a dazed fashion, her face quite colourless. He got up suddenly, believing her about to faint.

“Norman—get your Mother a glass of water!” he said sharply.

“No—I’m all right.” She found her voice and managed to smile. “It took my breath away for a moment. I had to read it twice, to make myself believe. I—he——”

“Then he *has* left you the Hundred after all!” Kitty cried eagerly.

Mrs. Balfour shook her head.

“He has left me eighty thousand pounds!” she said.



“‘He has left me eighty thousand pounds!’ she said.”
Golden Fiddles [Chapter IV]

CHAPTER V

OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES

IT was quite true, though it took the dazed Balfours some time to believe it. Only when the letters and documents from the Trustee Company in Melbourne had been read and re-read a dozen times did they venture to think it might not be all a dream.

“And we thought he was an old shepherd in a plaid. With a crook!” gasped Elsa.

Mr. Joseph Dalgleish had been anything but that. He had chosen to live alone, save for an old housekeeper, in a gloomy little house in the country—so they found out later. But he had possessed coal-mining interests, shares in shipping companies, factories: his wealth had piled up year by year, while he sat and watched it grow. A shrewd old man; he had caused his agents to make inquiries in Melbourne, to find a Trustee Company that could be trusted to handle all the complications of the vast estate for Mrs. Balfour. There was a curt letter from the old man himself, written before his death.

“You will do better to leave it all in the hands of the Company to administer,” he said. “They will advise you, for I never knew a woman who could be trusted with business. And I know nothing of your husband. Use it prudently, for money is harder to get than to spend.”

It was easy to picture the dour old man, hating to let all the money go; torturing himself with visions of his hoard being flung to the winds by happy-go-lucky Australians. Only the strong Scotch feeling of clannishness had made him leave it all in the family—and there was no one left of that family save Anne Balfour, his brother’s child. The letter showed some slight satisfaction that she had married a man of Scotch blood. But there was no kindness in the dry words. Clearly Uncle Joseph had not been a man to love. It was beyond human possibility that the Balfours should regret him.

But on that first evening the stupefied family utterly failed to realize the thing that had befallen them. When you have never handled money it is a very vague thing: eighty pounds, to the children, was almost as great a sum as eighty thousand, in its powers of spending. Besides, it was in the grip of a Trustee Company, which was the same as being in a Bank—and they knew what that meant! Banks swallowed money, and though it was supposed to be yours you didn’t see it any more. Bob voiced their feelings when he asked:

“Will you be able to have some of it, Mother? To spend?”

“Why, yes, sonny. Of course, I shall—at least, I suppose so!” She was half laughing, half crying. “It must be all ours. Walter, there can’t be any mistake, can there? Oh, do read everything carefully! Make sure it’s true.”

“It’s true enough,” Mr. Balfour said. “You can’t want anything more definite than the Company’s letter. Eighty—thousand—pounds!” The words dropped from him slowly. “It’s—it’s like a miracle.” And then he turned to his younger son with an exclamation that went far to wipe out bitterness. “By Jove, Bob, old man, I wish I hadn’t sold your pony!”

Bob gave a great jump.

"Father! Could we buy him back?"

"I should think so," Mr. Balfour said, laughing. "Jim Craig might take something on his bargain."

"Oh!" said Bob. "Oh! Mother, we might get him back! Oh, wasn't it *beautiful* of Uncle Joseph to die!" He turned three rapid somersaults on the lawn, ending right side up with his hair full of dry grass. "Can we try to-morrow?"

"We'll see," said his father. "There will be other things to see to first—this will mean a visit to Melbourne for me, I should think. Indeed, I don't know that you ought not to go yourself, Anne."

"Oh, no!" She shrank visibly. "I don't know anything about business; and I have no clothes fit for Melbourne. You must go, Walter."

"There are documents for you to sign, but I can take them," he said. "Apparently some of the money is there already: you see, the Company say you can draw on them for what you wish." He gave a short laugh. "Anne, it's incredible. 'For what you wish'—can you take it in? I can't."

"Walter!" She sat up with a jerk. "We can pay off the mortgage!"

"You can—certainly."

"And you can let the other contract for clearing and draining—the one you couldn't afford. We'll drain the back flat!"

"We can get a car!" said Kitty explosively. "Say we can, Mother!"

"Oh, Mother!" Elsa's face suddenly glowed. "Would there be a chance for me to have a fiddle—a good one?"

"We can have decent horses," Norman uttered. "Horses like the Strattons'. And new saddles; mine is dropping to bits." He put a brown hand on his mother's knee. "And you'll have a servant, won't you, Mother? You won't work any more? We'll see you in decent clothes, going to the township in your own car. My hat, isn't it going to be a lark! Money!—and our very own! I suppose we haven't all gone mad and dreamed it, have we?"

The thought was in all their minds. But the sight of the long envelope, the crackling typewritten sheets, was reassuring.

"If it had been a thousand we'd have reckoned our troubles were over for life," Mr. Balfour said. "If it had been ten thousand it would have been beyond our wildest dreams of money. But eighty thousand! One can't take it in."

"I suppose I'm ungrateful," Mrs. Balfour said. "But I can't help thinking what it would have meant if Uncle Joseph had let us have a little of it before. All the long years of struggle. He knew how poor we were. A little—even a thousand—would have made such a wonderful difference. A thousand is not so very much out of eighty, but it would have been wealth to us."

She stopped, thinking of all it would have meant. Freedom from anxiety; a better chance for the children. Walter would not have been an old man at forty-three. And the strange old man in Scotland had hoarded it all. The pity of it!

But Mr. Balfour did not see it in the same way.

"Oh, one couldn't expect that," he said. "A man wouldn't want to give away his money to people he had never seen. It's hard to part with money. We must not be foolish

with this, you know. It will have to be invested very carefully. The Trustee Company will know all about good securities.”

“But we’ll have some to spend?” Kitty asked anxiously. “None of us have any decent clothes, and my stockings and Elsa’s won’t hang together much longer—they’re more darns than stocking now. And you know you do need a new overcoat so badly, Father.”

“We’re a mighty down-at-heel family,” said Norman. “But I’d hang on to my old clothes for another year if I could have a decent horse. What do you think about it, Mother?”

“I?” she answered. “I think we can have everything we need. Only I don’t know how to begin to think about spending. Once I knew—but I have lost the habit!”

“You’ll find it easy enough to learn,” her husband said, a little grimly. “Don’t go too far, once you begin.”

“There’s a good deal of spending in eighty thousand pounds,” she said. “Walter, will you bring some of it back from Melbourne? I want to see it—to feel it—to make sure it’s real. Do bring some back!”

He smiled at her.

“Why, you stupid woman, you’ve only to go to the Bank in the township. I can let you have some; nearly all the next interest for the mortgage is there, and we shan’t need to worry about it now. Besides, if you showed this letter to the Manager, he’d be only too ready to give you all you wanted. Your account is going to be worth any Bank’s having.”

“Could I get some to-morrow?” She looked like a child, her eyes dancing.

“What do you want it for?” The words were the custom of twenty years; never had she asked for money but he had demanded the reason, even though he knew it went only on barest necessities. They looked at each other a moment in silence, the same thought in both minds. Then he laughed awkwardly.

“I ought to beg your pardon,” he said. “Never mind what you want it for; of course you can have it. You’ll have to get used to the idea that you have money of your own—and so shall I.”

“But it’s all yours, just as much, Walter,” she said quickly. “It doesn’t matter whose name it is in: you will have to manage it.”

“Oh, I expect you’ll give me a job as manager,” he said, smiling. “Anyhow, there can be no harm in your having some money to-morrow: I’ll write you a cheque in the morning. You’ll want your own cheque-book now, I suppose?”

“Good gracious, no!” said his wife hastily. “I never wrote a cheque in my life!”

They talked while the darkness came down—disjointed talk, sometimes excited, sometimes merely dazed. To the bewildered children new possibilities seemed to open with each moment. There were long pauses, when their minds raced in silence, while frogs croaked in the water-hole and a mopoke called steadily from a distant tree. It still seemed all a dream: they had so often planned wealth in jest that it was not possible to realize that the dream had come true. Bob gave a great yawn at last.

“I’m so sleepy!” he remarked. “And Elsa Balfour—we haven’t done a single one of our home-lessons!”

“Good gracious!” ejaculated Elsa, in horror. “I never thought of them. Bob, we’ll get

into the most awful row.”

“It’s my fault,” said Mrs. Balfour, for a moment as horrified as the children. “Or it’s Uncle Joseph’s. He shouldn’t have given us such a shock.” Suddenly a brilliant thought came to her. “Children, don’t worry. You can have a holiday to-morrow.”

“Mother!” came in two delighted yelps.

“Now, Anne, that’s not wise——” began her husband.

“Oh, just for once, Walter. It’s such a great occasion. We’ll make a Sunday of to-morrow. We’ll get up late and do only the necessary work, and we’ll all go into the township when Father goes to the train.”

“And—spend—some—money?” Kitty breathed.

“Yes, we’ll spend some money. Quite foolishly!”

“Anne!” said the deep voice.

“Oh, Walter, let me be foolish for once. I’ve been wise so many years!”

“It’s been only a film of wisdom, I’m thinking,” he said, laughing. “Anne, don’t go losing your head—and letting the children lose theirs.”

“I won’t,” she said. “We’ll be very sensible after this. But I do want to feel I can spend a little—just a very little—money without worrying over every penny. You can go off to Melbourne, and the children and I will have afternoon tea at the baker’s——”

“With sticky buns?” Bob demanded.

“Yes, lots of sticky buns. And we’ll spend our money afterwards. Perhaps a whole pound!”

There were unbelieving gasps of joy. But Mr. Balfour frowned in the darkness.

“If you’re going to begin frittering your money——” he began.

“If I fritter a pound we’ll still have seventy-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine left!” she retorted. “It sounds almost more than eighty thousand, Walter. And I’m quite sure that not one of the other pounds will give us quite as much fun as the one we’re going to fritter to-morrow. Ah, don’t be sensible—not to-night. I want to feel I’m rich. I want to feel young again—and careless—and idiotic! Afterwards the cares of wealth will hold me down, and I’ll be just as wise as an owl.”

“Well—if you’ve set your heart on it, there’s no use in talking sense to you,” said he. “But go steady, that’s all. I’m sorry to be a wet blanket, but to tell you the truth, the bare idea of wasting money simply gives me a pain.”

“Well, you won’t see us waste it,” said his wife practically. “And I don’t know that it will be waste; it will be only like taking a very pleasant tonic. We’ll all feel ever so much better after it. Children, just fancy prancing down the main street in Tupurra with a Whole—Loose—Pound!”

That they fancied it was amply evidenced by the incoherent sounds from her family. They hugged her in the darkness.

“I’m hungry,” Bob announced. “Can I get something to eat, Mother?”

“We’ll have supper,” declared Mrs. Balfour, in the voice of one who puts economy behind her with a decisive gesture.

“Supper!” cried four voices.

“Yes, supper. Cocoa, I think——”

“Oh, Mother!” said Elsa faintly. Cocoa was a luxury, kept in case anyone needed feeding-up after a cold.

“Cocoa—and we’ll put cream in it. And we’ll eat all the Sunday cake. Come along, Kitty, and we’ll get it ready.”

“Anne!” said Mr. Balfour. But his voice was lost in the general clamour. They streamed into the house, all talking at once.

“Cocoa!” Bob was heard to murmur in a pause. “I haven’t had a cold for ages, an’ I’ve nearly forgotten what it tastes like. Now I know we’re rich!”

CHAPTER VI

THE RECKLESSNESS OF THE BALFOURS

THE morning flew by, for everybody was busy. A trip to the township always meant preparations in the house; while on the farm Mr. Balfour had to explain to Norman various matters that must be left in his hands. It was nearly time for their early dinner when Mrs. Balfour went to pack her husband's bag, finding him in his room.

She drew it from the recesses of the cupboard in which it had lain for many years. There were not many bags of its kind used now, but she did not know that—nor would it have troubled her if she had. A weightier matter was suddenly upon her mind.

"Walter!" she gasped. "You have only one shirt ready!"

"Won't that do?"

"Why, no. You must have a clean one to go and see the Trustee people. Well, you'll just have to buy one."

"But that's rubbish, Anne. I've got plenty of shirts, haven't I?"

"You have three," stated his wife. "Besides working shirts, of course. But only one is ironed."

"Can't you iron another?"

"The stove takes so long to heat the irons; and we have very little time."

"Well, I'll make one do."

"But you can't, Walter. You forget how dirty a long train-journey is. You mustn't go to the Trustees with grubby cuffs."

"Much the Trustees are going to worry about my cuffs!" said Mr. Balfour scornfully. "Anyhow, I'm not going to waste money on a shirt I can't afford——"

Mrs. Balfour sat down on the edge of the bed and began to laugh helplessly.

"Walter Balfour, you have eighty thousand pounds, and you say you can't afford a shirt! For goodness' sake, pinch yourself and wake up!"

For a moment he looked bewildered; then he grinned sheepishly.

"Gad, but it's hard to break the habits of years!" he said. "All right, you purse-proud woman. I'll go out early in the morning and buy one."

"And see that you get a good one," she said severely. "Not a shoddy thing. You had better get a tie while you're about it—your best one is at least ten years old, and looks it. I'd like you to get socks too."

"No, you can stop there," he said with firmness. "I've got to change my shirt after breakfast: I'm hanged if I'm going to change my socks too. The Trustees will never get past the glory of my new tie. Now you had better see about dinner—if you stay here while I dress you'll remember forty other things I ought to get. And I warn you, I'm not likely to get the habit of flinging money about."

Already Mrs. Balfour was beginning to think she might acquire the habit easily

enough. A wave of inspiration came to her while she busied herself in the kitchen. It came while Kitty was audibly wondering what they would have for their evening meal. "There's only just enough meat for dinner," Kitty mourned. "Oh, well—the boys are fond of dripping-toast, and we can make a lot of that."

"Kitty," said her mother, in the low tone of a woman who dares much, "don't worry about it. We—we'll buy something. Something nice, like tinned tongue!"

"Tinned tongue!" said Kitty faintly.

"Yes. And fruit. Lots of fruit. All the kinds we never get. And chocolates. You children have never had a box of chocolates in your lives. I'll buy one."

Kitty and Elsa collapsed on kitchen chairs. They looked at her as though they doubted her sanity.

"Mother, there never was anyone who got rich so beautifully as you!" Elsa said, when words would come. "But will the pound run to it all?"

"I'll get more pounds!" said her mother loftily. "What's a Bank for?"

The amazing prospects were confided by the girls in excited whispers to Norman and Bob—with the result that the corned mutton of dinner seemed as turkey to those who shared the secret. They kept it a secret because instinct warned them that their father would frown upon such unheard-of extravagance. There was comfort in knowing that he would be safely in his train before the orgy could begin.

Then they were off: the boys riding, the others packed into the rattling old buggy. And the dusty bush road was a way of glory, with every mile filled with anticipation and joy. New visions danced before them; old spectres of care and poverty shrank away and hid themselves. Old Uncle Joseph was a fairy godfather: a magician who, dying, had waved his wand and transformed pumpkins into glittering chariots. As yet they were too bewildered to look into the future to see what changes would come. To-day was theirs, the most wonderful day that had ever dawned in their simple existence. That was more than enough for the young Balfours.

The Manager of the one Bank in the township was courteous, if a little patronizing. He was always sorry for Walter Balfour, considering him a good fellow and a gentleman, kept down by bad luck and a wretched farm. But his greeting was tempered with reserve. If Balfour had come to see about raising money he would have to be instant in his refusal, he knew: Head Office was rigid just now about poor farmers' overdrafts, and Balfour's farm already carried a heavy enough mortgage. The change in his expression when the Trustees' letter was laid before him was almost ludicrous.

"But—but this is colossal!" he said. "My dear Mrs. Balfour, I congratulate you. It is indeed a wonderful windfall. You'd like to open an account in your own name?" He laughed jovially. "I hope you will, at all events!"

"I—but I haven't the money yet, you know, Mr. Frayne," she stammered.

He laughed again. Never was there so cheerful a man.

"Oh, that needn't worry you. You can have all you want."

"Can I?" She looked at him, her pretty face flushing. "Really?"

"Oh, quite. My personal security, if you like, until your Trustees transfer the money."

"But I can let you have what you need, Anne," her husband said, a little impatiently.

"What we wanted was to tell you we should like to pay off the mortgage, Mr. Frayne."

"Of course, if you like. I'll make the arrangements. But I suppose Mrs. Balfour would like the feel of her own cheque-book. It's quite a comforting feeling, you know, Mrs. Balfour. Shall I get you one?"

Mrs. Balfour's eyes began to dance.

"Is it quite simple? I have never had one, you see."

"The simplest thing in the world," said the man of money. He opened a drawer and took out a long book—beautiful blank cheques, slips of paper fraught with all kinds of delightful possibilities. "I'll make one out for you, and show you where to sign, shall I? What shall we say? You'll be wanting some money to spend, I suppose. Twenty?"

"Ten pounds," said Mrs. Balfour faintly.

"Anne!" said her husband. But she did not heed him, and the Manager did not seem to have heard him. His nimble pen flew over the blank spaces in the cheque and he laid it before Mrs. Balfour with a flourish.

"Just sign there—and you must put a specimen signature in our book." It was done in a moment; a clerk brought in a little sheaf of notes, and she gathered them up with trembling fingers while the Manager chatted pleasantly. "Banking is the easiest affair in the world, Mrs. Balfour, when you've got money."

"I haven't struck that side of it very often," said Mr. Balfour grimly.

"Oh, you have had a great deal of hard luck. Never mind—that is all over now. Yes, I'll make the arrangements about the mortgage and let you know. Just off to town, are you? I suppose there is plenty of business to arrange. Well, I must not keep you." He opened the door of his little sanctum. "Good-bye—and my heartiest congratulations again. I wish *I* had a fairy-tale uncle in Scotland!"

"Different from my last visit," Mr. Balfour said, as they walked down the little main street. "That was the time I tried to raise the money to buy those sheep of Thompson's—and didn't get it. He couldn't help it, of course: Frayne is a kind-hearted fellow. He'd have let me have it, if he could. I say, Anne, why did you want to take out all that money? I told you I could manage it."

"It just came over me suddenly," confessed Mrs. Balfour. "I wanted the feel of it—my very own money. I would be afraid of any that came out of the mortgage interest: it's silly, I suppose, but I can't help it." She patted her little bag, where the crisp notes crackled in response. "This seems my very own."

"But you're never going to spend all that!"

"Gracious, no! But I like to feel it's there. It may make me realize that the whole thing is true. Ten pounds! And it's all mine, and it doesn't matter what I do with it! Walter, it just makes me dizzy."

"That's what I'm afraid of," he grumbled. "Of course, it's all right if you're sensible. Well, for goodness' sake, don't go losing that bag of yours in your excitement. I'm half scared to leave you—you look no older than Kitty, and much wilder!"

"Oh, you needn't worry," she said, smiling at him. "I shall be very sensible when I am with the children. At present, I feel like electrifying Tupurra by dancing a jig down the street—but I won't."

"I wouldn't put it past you," he said. "Well, here are the youngsters coming, so you had better begin to look sedate—if you can. It's about time I went to the station, too."

They all walked up to the station, where the afternoon train was nearly due. Mrs. Balfour was ahead with Norman, and as they drew near the railway gates, she quickened her pace.

"Hurry, Norman!" she whispered. "I want to get Father's ticket."

"You!" he said, astonished.

"Yes—I've got my own money." She hurried into the tin-roofed booking office, where a shock-headed clerk in a striped football jersey looked at her dully through his tiny window. This particular client had to make two efforts before she found her voice.

"Melbourne, first class, please," she said.

"Did you say first class?" demanded the shock-headed one.

"I did," said Mrs. Balfour crisply.

"Twenty-three an' tenpence," stated the clerk unbelievably. He watched her fumble with the clasp of the shabby bag and push the notes under the wire grille. "Right you are, Mrs. Balfour. Nice day, ain't it?" She gathered up the ticket and the loose coins, turning from the window as Mr. Balfour and the girls appeared.

"I've got your ticket, Walter!"

"Have you? Well, that was sensible, at any rate," said he, relieved to think that at least so much of the ten pounds was dedicated to necessary expenses. "Thanks, Anne." He held out his hand, smiling; she looked so like a child delighted at making its first purchases. Then his brows came together. "First class! Anne, what foolishness!"

"Indeed, it isn't," his wife responded, though she quailed a little. "I won't have you travelling second class. There's no need, Walter."

"There's never any need to waste money," he said severely. "I'll go and see if they'll change it."

"Walter, you mustn't! I couldn't bear you to do that," she said quickly. "That wretched little Billy Dickson hardly believed me when I said 'first,' and if you changed it he'd tell the whole township. And there's no need, Walter."

"Well, I'll keep it, then," he said unwillingly. "But it's rank extravagance. I tell you plainly, I won't come back first class."

"I hope you will," she said. Then the train came in sight, and in a moment he was in the lonely splendour of a first class carriage. Just as the engine whistled its starting note, Ralph Stratton's father came running across the platform and jumped in.

"You travelling, Balfour? That's good luck," he said pleasantly. "How are you, Mrs. Balfour?—you're not coming?" His eye glanced over the shabby group on the platform, and there was a shade of surprise in it: it was a group that would have looked more natural round a second-class door. Then the train moved off slowly, and the irresponsible section of the Balfour family was alone, with the world before it.

Of the delirium of that afternoon, who shall fittingly tell? They went up and down the main street, looking at the little country shops, all full of gay Christmas displays. That was a yearly dissipation, but to-day, for the first time, they looked as possible purchasers, and the difference made them feel as if they were in another world. There was no talk of

actually spending, at first: it was enough to look and linger, and come back to look again. Delightful, too, to feel that there was no hurry—that all the time was their own. Usually they expected Mr. Balfour to appear at any moment, striding down the street in search of them, caring no whit for any shop-window; hurrying them home to the evening work. To-day, that could go hang: cows must be milked, certainly, but it would not hurt them to be late for once. For the rest, they would take home food in tins and picnic merrily.

“I’ve always wondered what the grub you get in tins tasted like,” Bob said. “I’ve only had sardines, and they were scrumptious! Can we get sardines, Mother?”

“You can all choose,” she told them recklessly. “It will be an amazing meal of mixtures.”

“But how lovely it will be!” Elsa breathed. “I’ve always thought meals ought to be exciting, but you can’t get excited over mutton all the time. It does take so long to eat all up and down a sheep after it’s been killed.”

“We’ll buy steak for to-morrow,” said her mother. “I don’t know when I last tasted steak.” And they all thrilled afresh.

“Let’s go and have afternoon tea before we spend anything,” suggested Kitty. They had paused before the window of the one baker of Tupurra: a bewildering array of buns and little cakes and big cakes covered with icing for Christmas, with little red figures of Santa Claus atop. They trooped joyfully into the room behind the shop, where there were long tables covered with shiny white oil-cloth and flies buzzed round the tall glass sugar-basins, trying unavailingly to get under the netted mats that covered the lumps. There they feasted royally on sausage-rolls and sticky buns, with tea in thick and heavy cups. There was nothing as good as Kitty’s cooking, but when you have never paid for a meal outside your own home, the first occasion is a thrill not to be forgotten. When even the boys could eat no more, Mrs. Balfour opened her hand-bag.

“I’m going to give you each ten shillings,” she announced—and her voice shook in spite of herself.

“Mother!” Four voices echoed as one. “Not to do as we like with?”

“Yes—just as you like. Mind”—she caught at remnants of caution—“this is just for a special treat. For our first day. You mustn’t think it can happen every time we come into Tupurra.”

“As if we would!” Kitty gasped. “Once a year would be exciting enough. Oh, Mother, I saw silk stockings in Buncombe’s window, and they looked such beauties. Three and elevenpence. I’ve always ached for silk stockings. May I——?”

“It’s your money,” said her mother, laughing. “Come along.” She paid the bill without a tremor, and they surged up the street.

“I’m going in here for some music,” declared Elsa, pausing at the stationer’s shop. They watched her buy, looking with fascinated eyes at the lordly ease with which she produced her money. Then it was necessary to obtain purses, to hold their wealth. Neither Kitty nor Elsa had ever possessed a purse, which would have been singularly useless equipments for them: they hovered now over a tray of delightful ones at eighteenpence, taking long to make up their minds before they decided on a blue and a brown. They emerged from the shop, glowing: Elsa clutching the precious roll of music as though it were a talisman.

"If you're going into a draper's, Bob and I want to go and buy pocket-knives," Norman announced. "Drapers' shops are no use to us. We'll come back for you." They tore off, utterly unable to walk steadily.

The silk stockings were bought, a pair of shimmering glories for each girl. Kitty handled the parcel lovingly.

"What next, Mother?"

Mrs. Balfour was peeping into the show-room, a curtained recess at the end of the shop. There, displayed on simpering lay figures, summer frocks met her eye—pretty, girlish things, just what she had always dreamed of for Kitty and Elsa while she stitched at their cheap prints and gingham.

"Very cheap frocks, Mrs. Balfour," said the saleswoman. "We've a special line for Christmas—nice Fuji frocks at a guinea."

Mrs. Balfour fingered her bag, and the notes called to her gallantly again with their pleasant rustle.

"Come here, girls," she said. And they gasped anew and followed her.

Mr. Buncombe glanced after them, a little uneasily. Nice woman, Mrs. Balfour, he thought: a perfect lady, but every one knew her husband was nearly on his beam-ends. He hoped Miss Dormer wasn't going to tempt her to buy things she couldn't pay for. They had never before bought anything as extravagant as silk stockings: but the girls were evidently growing up, beginning to want things, and he knew what that meant. Next thing, they'd be wanting to open an account instead of paying cash as they had always done. That wouldn't do at all: he had quite enough of shaky accounts on his books already. He hovered near the curtain, unhappy in his mind. Mrs. Balfour was the last woman he'd want to refuse credit to—but——

Miss Berrill was in the show-room, buying an enormous gardening hat. She greeted them warmly.

"How do you do, all of you! Come and see my new hat, Kitty. Ready-to-wear, trimmed and all, for four and elevenpence. Won't I look a dream in it?" She clapped it on her head and poised before the mirror, the rush hat a comical contrast to a frock that spoke of a city shop in every well-cut line. "I like its size: I spend nearly all day in the garden, and it's time I began to consider my complexion! Yes, it's beautiful, Miss Dormer: I'll take it with me. I have the car outside."

"Oh, I'll send a boy out with it, Miss Berrill," said the saleswoman deferentially. "Is there anything else?" She scribbled the entry in her book.

"No, nothing else. What are you looking for, Mrs. Balfour? I can recommend my line in hats, and I won't be a bit nasty about it if you wear one like it!"

"I want frocks for the girls," Mrs. Balfour said, smiling.

"Oh, exciting! May I stay and watch you shop? I love to see girls in pretty things. That pale green is just the colour for Elsa. And Kitty, that blue might have been made to match your eyes. Do try them on."

"I could slip them on in a moment, Miss Balfour," said the saleswoman insinuatingly. She brought out an armful of frocks from a cupboard, and the girls hovered over them with little exclamations of delight. Behind the curtain, the anxious Mr. Buncombe

trembled.

"Pretty things," said Miss Berrill, sitting down ponderously and pulling Mrs. Balfour into a chair beside her. "No, not the frocks, I mean—your girls. You've brought them up with nice manners, my dear—and that big boy of yours too. I was so glad to see them on Sunday, and though there were swarms of people there, I thought they looked nicer than any of them. They're simple and natural, and that's what you can't say of many of the girls I know—I'm a mere worm in the sight of my own nieces, unless they want to get something out of me. You must let them come over often—and Elsa, too. That child looks like a tall lily in that green frock."

Elsa had come out of the tiny fitting-room for inspection. Her fair hair waved round her delicate, flushed face. Miss Berrill's simile of the lily was not inapt.

"Do you like it, Mother? I love it!" she said, in a half-whisper. She stroked the soft silk lovingly.

"Yes, it's just what I like, darling. Oh—and, Kitty, that does suit you!" Kitty had pranced out in the blue dress, a figure of ecstasy.

"May we really have them, Mother? Oh, glory! Come on, Elsa, we're going to keep them!" They disappeared, followed by the smiling Miss Dormer.

"You couldn't have chosen better," said Miss Berrill approvingly. "Elsa took my breath away. And Kitty tells me she plays the violin delightfully. You must let me hear her. There's something in my old bones that responds to the merest scrape of a fiddle. So few girls play anything nowadays—it's all gramophones and wireless and jazz."

"Oh, but Elsa's playing is very childish yet," Mrs. Balfour protested. "She has never been taught, you see, except by her father. But I hope to get lessons for her now." She hesitated. The longing had suddenly come over her for another woman's sympathy. Should she tell the wonderful secret to this nice, jolly woman, whose own wealth had never made her anything but simple and kindly? "I—I would like to tell you," she said, dropping her voice—"you have always been so good to me and the children, Miss Berrill—I think you would care to hear—I have been left some money very unexpectedly . . . an old uncle in Scotland. Quite a great deal of money."

"Well, if that isn't as pleasant a piece of news as I've heard this year!" Miss Berrill exclaimed. She beamed on her companion, and, seizing her hand, shook it as though it had been a pump-handle. "My dear, I'm delighted! You deserve good luck, if ever anyone deserved it. An uncle in Scotland—what a splendid person to have concealed in the family!"

"Well, he concealed himself very thoroughly," Mrs. Balfour said, smiling. "We all thought he was terribly poor—as poor as we ourselves. It has been a great surprise."

"And how long have you known about it?"

"Only yesterday. Indeed, I can hardly take it in yet—it is too good to be true. But my husband has gone to Melbourne to see the Trustees. I suppose I will begin to realize it soon, but at present I'm merely gasping."

"And so you've come to buy pretty frocks for the girls with your first gasps? Trust a mother!" laughed Miss Berrill.

"Do you know," said Mrs. Balfour solemnly, "that I have never bought them frocks before? I have made every stitch they have ever worn."

"And you always turned them out looking well," affirmed the other. "Always neat and pretty and well groomed—and in my opinion, to be well groomed counts for very much more than expensive clothes. It's the gift of the gods. But how you must be loving buying them frocks, for all that! I must have a hand in this, so you needn't snub me, even if you *are* rich!" She bounced up, and calling the saleswoman, dashed at a case of trimmed hats. In five minutes Kitty and Elsa, speechless and laughing, were equipped with hats to suit the new frocks.

"That's my fairing for you both," said Miss Berrill. "Yes, my account, Miss Dormer. Now I must go: my unfortunate brother has probably gone to sleep in the car. He says it's the only thing to do when I disappear into a shop. Good-bye, all of you—come over to let me see how you look in the new outfit, girls." She lowered her voice near Mrs. Balfour. "And thank you for telling me, my dear. Come with the girls and we'll talk over your plans; I don't suppose you'll stay in this district much longer, that's the worst of it. But I can't blame you." She vanished behind the curtain and they heard her tramping down the shop.

"Isn't she a dear?" breathed Kitty, her eyes shining. "Mother, what are you thinking of?"

Mrs. Balfour roused herself with something of an effort.

"Partly that Miss Berrill is a dear and partly that you two will certainly need new shoes," she said. "Your old shoes would utterly kill the effect of the new hats and frocks and stockings." At which the two girls took each other's hands and executed a war-dance, greatly to the edification of Miss Dormer. It was abruptly ended when they found that Mr. Buncombe had come in and was elaborately failing to notice them, though clearly embarrassed.

"I hope you've been well suited, Mrs. Balfour," he murmured suavely. "Miss Dormer has shown you our Christmas frocks?—just right for your young ladies, I should think."

"Mrs. Balfour has bought two frocks, Mr. Buncombe," explained Miss Dormer.

"That's right. Now, what else can we show you? Something for yourself, perhaps. No? Oh, shoes—I can certainly please you there: our buyer has sent us a very fine assortment. Perhaps you wouldn't mind stepping this way. We'll charge the frocks to your account, shall we? It's really less trouble for you to settle monthly."

And Mrs. Balfour found herself and the girls whisked away to the shoe department, where Mr. Buncombe's insistence that she should be shown something really nice made his salesman jump—since he was accustomed to selling Mrs. Balfour only the sturdiest and stoutest of leather footgear.

"Now, is there anything else, Mrs. Balfour?" Mr. Buncombe urged. He had hovered about them, proffering suggestions with a mingling of affability and deference. "House-linen? Fancy goods? No?—well, we shall see you in before Christmas, I hope. Enter the shoes to Mrs. Balfour's account, Jones, and have the parcel ready to be put into her buggy. Good afternoon, ladies!" He escorted them to the door and held it open for them.

"Mother," demanded Kitty as they walked away, "will you tell me what has come to old Buncombe? He's generally hardly civil, and now he's behaving as if we were all Queens of Sheba!"

"I think," said Mrs. Balfour dreamily, "that Mr. Buncombe has been standing very

near the show-room curtain. And that he has long ears.”

“O—oh!” said Kitty, understanding. “Then you told Miss Berrill? I thought you had.”

“Yes. And she was nearly as pleased as—as Mr. Buncombe!”

They met the boys, who proudly showed knives of a splendour previously unknown; and then they wandered from shop to shop, making little purchases until they were all draped with parcels. Finally, they raided the grocer’s store, where they bought strange and tempting foods in tins and glass jars; after which, drunk with happiness, they took their way homewards. The sun was setting, the bush on either side of the road heavy with scents brought out by the evening dew. Ahead, the boys raced home to get the milking done: the buggy followed, old Jess jogging in lazy peace while the girls sang and Mrs. Balfour dreamed.

She dreamed long into the night, although she did not sleep. They had had a wild and merry meal, sampling all the grocer’s delicacies; and then, worn out with excitement, the children had gone to bed—with most of their new possessions carefully displayed where their eyes would fall on them as soon as they woke. When Mrs. Balfour went to her own room, she found on her table four packages, each with a name—handkerchiefs from Kitty, scent from Elsa, a picture from Norman, and from Bob a very terrible vase. Never had there been seen such a vase—but she held it to her cheek as though it were a live thing, caressing it.

“Oh, my bairns!” she whispered—“my dear bairns! Please God, the hard times are over for you now.” Like the children, she arranged the presents near her bed: and then lay weaving plans and dreams, until the summer dawn crept in at the window.

CHAPTER VII

THE HORIZON WIDENS

WALTER BALFOUR returned from Melbourne two days later with full confirmation of the wonderful news. The Trustee Company had received him with the courtesy due to the husband of an important client. The documents were all in order, arrangements made to invest the money; the income would be paid into Mrs. Balfour's account in Tupurra. The Head of the Company had expressed a hope that Mrs. Balfour herself would visit them before long. Mrs. Balfour listened to the dry details with as convincing an air of intelligence as she could assume.

"And will there be money in the Bank now?" she demanded eagerly.

"They're arranging to send the mortgage money, as I told you. Then there are odd sums, not yet invested: they suggested paying them in to your account. I said they might as well. You spoke of the draining and clearing, you know. We could do a good deal to the place."

She nodded, absently, and her husband gave her a keen look.

"Or had you any other ideas?" he asked. "It's your money, Anne."

"No; it's ours," she said. "Don't ever forget that, Walter. But—yes, I have ever so many other ideas."

"Well?" he said. The tone was not encouraging.

Mrs. Balfour went to the window and looked out. The children were all on the lawn, deep in talk. She came back to her husband.

"Walter, we're rich," she said. "So rich that we can't realize it yet. But one thing is quite plain to me. I want to leave here, as soon as ever we can."

"To leave here? But you talked of draining the flat—of improvements——"

"Yes, but I hadn't taken anything in then. Now I have."

"But what would we do?"

"I want to go to Melbourne. I want to live in a city again—for a time, not for ever. To come out of the backwater we've lived in all these years—to meet people, to go about, to give the children a chance. They have never had a chance yet. It isn't too late. Elsa and Bob can go to good schools: we can let Elsa have the best music, the best teaching. You would love that too."

"I would be like a fish out of water," he said. "Melbourne would be no good to me now."

"That wouldn't last long," she pleaded. "You would soon make friends. A club, music, golf, a car—there would be all sorts of things to occupy you. We could get a nice house with a big garden."

"And what would you do?"

"Me?" she asked, her eyes dancing. "Oh, I can hardly hold myself in when I think of

it! To get the children away from here—to give them the good time they have never had—it would be too wonderful! And I want to have a good time myself.”

“You’ve earned it,” he said.

“We have all earned it. We need not stay in Melbourne all our lives. But I want it for a while. And never, never to see this place again!”

“Do you hate it so much?” Walter Balfour asked half sadly.

“I hate it with every bit of me. It has taken our youth and our hope, and it has never given us anything but trouble and hard work. It has been like a vampire, sucking our blood. Walter, I’d like to go out of it to-morrow and never see it again—never think of it.”

“And if I don’t want to go. What then?”

“I do not think you will refuse me,” she said. “After all, why should anyone live in a place like this if it could be avoided? There is no pleasure in it—no chance of ever making it a home such as we would like. We could get a better property if we want to go to the country again. But for a while—I want a bit of my old life, Walter. I want Town!”

“And you’ll waste money there,” he said. “And teach the children to waste it. They have a certain amount of common sense now, but they’ll lose it quickly enough if you let them fling money about.”

Her pretty face was like a child’s, looking up to him.

“Ah, I would be sensible, Walter. I don’t think it would be waste, to give them a good time for a while. Think how little they have had! And there is so much money. Don’t you want to see them enjoying things that other children have? Wouldn’t you be proud to see them well turned out, happy, making nice friends? Why, I fairly ache to get them away, and I can’t believe that you wouldn’t enjoy it as much as I should.”

“I believe I’m afraid of the money,” he said slowly. “Upon my word, Anne, I can’t think clearly about it. If it had been less—five thousand, or even ten—I would have been off my head with joy. But this great mountain of money. . . I tell you, it scares me.”

She looked at him pityingly.

“That is because the hard years have crushed you,” she said. “Twenty years of bitter struggling; it’s no wonder wealth dazes you. But you won’t feel like that for long. We’re young enough to enjoy things yet, together, as well as to see the children enjoy them. Walter, I hadn’t taken in the possibilities until Miss Berrill spoke to me on Tuesday. I told her about the money—I couldn’t help it, she was so kind. And she said almost at once, that she supposed we would go away. Until then I had never thought of it. Like you, I was too dazed: I could only think of paying off the debt and draining the flat. The flat! Who cares for it now? Let’s leave the old flat to drain itself—let’s get away!”

“Well——” he said hesitatingly. For the first time his face showed signs of yielding: he was like a tired man who lays down a burden. “What are your plans? I suppose you lay awake all night making them?”

“That’s exactly what I did,” she said gleefully. “Let us put the farm up for sale at once—as quickly as the auctioneers can handle it. We want to take nothing away. Then we can go to Melbourne, buy good clothes, stay at a good hotel while we are finding a house—it will all be such fun! We need not even wait until the place is sold—why should we? It would be easy to put in some one to take care of it.”

"The cows, Anne!" said Mr. Balfour in a stricken voice.

"Walter Balfour, I won't be hampered by cows! Send them to the sale-yards—next Friday! What does it matter what they fetch? I'll dance as I see them go! Why should we work any more, unless we wish? Why should you slave in the paddocks, or Kitty and I cook and scrub and clean?"

"Well, of course, I thought you'd get a servant now," said her husband feebly. "But ——" He began to laugh. "Oh, I suppose I'm a slow-brained idiot. But I tell you I'm still dazed. Have it your own way, woman, for the present, at any rate. I'll go and make arrangements with the auctioneers to-morrow." He stood up, straightening his shoulders, feeling in his pocket for his pipe. Suddenly he put it on the table and came to her. He put his arm round her shoulders with an awkward gesture of tenderness—such tenderness as the years had crowded out.

"If ever anyone deserved a good time it's you, my girl," he said. "Carry on: I'll try not to be a drag on your wheels. Anne, I'd like to see you in a pretty frock again!"

"I'll promise you faithfully to give you the chance," said she, and rubbed her head against his old coat. "We'll all be like butterflies—we've been grubs so long." She gave a great sigh of complete happiness. "Now we'll tell the children."

"You haven't said anything to them?"

"As if I would, until I had talked to you!" she said reproachfully. "But I haven't known how to wait, I admit. Come along—they are in the garden." She caught at his hand and tugged him out upon the lawn, where the children sprawled in attitudes more or less graceful, planning their own plans. A large box of chocolates lay within easy reach of all: they dipped into it now and then with sighs of satisfaction.

"Oh, come on, Mother!" Kitty said, making room for her. "Have a chocolate. Father: they're scrumptious. We've been wondering, Mother—of course, we don't know what you'd think. It might be too expensive. But would there be any chance of our going down to the sea, sometime while the hot weather lasts? It isn't very far to Inverloch, you know, and every one says it's lovely there. We have never seen the sea: it would be so exciting. And, thanks to the creek, we can all swim."

"H—m. . .," said Mrs. Balfour, affecting to consider this proposal.

"Of course, there are the cows," said Norman quickly. "We didn't forget them, Father. But Dan Reidy and his wife are both good milkers, and they're jolly poor: he was telling me the other day they'd be glad to take any work. They could easily come. Mrs. Reidy is a good cook too: we thought she might come over every day and do the rough work for Mother. There isn't any need for Mother to slog in the kitchen now, is there?"

"No, son: no need at all," said Mr. Balfour. He felt a pang of self-reproach that the boy had been the first to plan to ease the mother's burden.

"Oh, good!" Norman said. "Well, let's get her over at once, shall we? I could take a message to-night, quite easily. If she got into the way of the place, Mother wouldn't mind going for a little trip to Inverloch—perhaps in the Christmas holidays."

"Just think of it!" Elsa breathed. "The sea! Just when all the paddocks are drying up and the house is always hot, and the butter oily and the milk goes sour before midday! The sea is always cool, even in summer, isn't it, Father?"

"Yes, quite," he said, laughing. "It seems queer to think you youngsters have never

seen it. I should have to teach you all to dive—the creek was never deep enough for that.”

“Yes, and handle a boat,” Norman said eagerly.

“And fish,” put in Bob, wriggling with joy. “Dugald Mackenzie caught twenty whitening last Christmas at Inverloch!”

“Do you mean whiting?” asked his father.

“I d’no. Something like that. It doesn’t matter—they were fish, anyhow. Dugald says fishing’s the rippingest thing about the sea. Can we truly go, Mother?”

“There’s a sea in Melbourne—or near it,” said Mrs. Balfour.

Kitty sat up with a jerk.

“Mother!” she said. “You—we—we aren’t ever going——?”

“Not to *Melbourne*?” breathed Elsa.

“Would you like to?”

“Like to!” Words failed them. They gasped feebly.

“We thought—it might be managed.”

“To see a city!” Kitty uttered. “Big streets, and huge buildings, and theatres and shops! Are they much bigger shops than Buncombe’s, Father?”

“Somewhat,” he said, with a dry smile. “You could lose yourself in some of them, Kitty. You think it would be fun to go?”

They stared at each other. Was it Father speaking? Never before had they heard him suggest such a thing as fun.

“It would be heaven,” she said solemnly. “Oh, Mother, you aren’t joking, are you? Are we really going?”

“We are going away from here altogether,” Mrs. Balfour said. Words tumbled from her lips excitedly. “For ever and ever! We’re going to a big hotel in Melbourne—one near the sea, so that you can bathe as often as ever you like—and we’ll see everything that is to be seen: theatres, concerts, pictures. Good music, Elsa—all the music we can possibly find. And then we’ll get a house, and a car, and servants: and Elsa and Bob can go to the best schools. No more hard work, and no more worry.”

“If your late Uncle Joseph could hear you,” said her husband, “he wouldn’t be merely turning in his grave. He’d be rotating swiftly!”

“I wouldn’t mind,” she said defiantly. “His money is going to bring more happiness now than it has ever brought. Well, dear hearts—is it a good plan?”

But there was no need to ask that. A babel of delirious questions fell upon her, a jumble of exclamations and suggestions in broken, excited jerks. Only Bob seemed to ponder.

“Won’t you like it, Bob?” asked his father, eyeing him curiously.

“Oh, it’ll be fun,” Bob said. “But I don’t know about a Melbourne school: I’ll be a stranger, an’ here I know every living soul. This is a jolly good place, I think. I’d as soon be here as anywhere, I believe—if I had Nigger back.”

“We’ll see about a pony for you, old man,” Walter Balfour said quickly. “You’d soon have outgrown Nigger, you know: and he is old. Something about fifteen hands would be better for you now—and with a bit of breeding. Old Nigger hadn’t much of that, though

he's been a good enough pony."

Bob's face fell.

"I'd never care for any pony as much," he said. "Nigger and I are real chums. I thought we were going to buy him back."

"Well, if you still want him when we have another place, I'll do my best to get him for you," Mr. Balfour promised. "I said I would, and I'll do it. We'll leave it for the present, though—even if we've all gone suddenly mad, we can't have Nigger at a Melbourne hotel."

"No, I s'pose not," Bob agreed. "Right-o, Father. I'll like Melbourne all right if I can have Nigger."

"What Nigger will think when he sees trams and buses and thousand of motors is quite another matter," his father said. "I fancy he may long for the peace of Gippsland. Indeed, I wonder if we'll all long for it!"

There was an outcry of dissent.

"Peace is the last thing I'm longing for," Norman said. "I can do with a little stirring-up—or a lot. Father, may I go to some place where they teach you all about a car? I don't mean just driving, but all the inside part. I do feel such a juggins when I look at the box of tricks that sits under the bonnet of a motor!"

"I think we'll go together," said his father. "Horses I do know something about: but where a car is concerned I'm an infant in arms. And I won't drive one until I've learned all its secrets. That will be something to fall back upon, Norman, when the clatter of a city makes us homesick for tea-tree and bracken fern and cows!"

"Which are three items I can do without for ever," said the boy, laughing. "I've had 'em all my life, and I'm quite prepared to say good-bye to them without a tear. Not that I won't always like to see a good cow—providing that somebody else is going to milk her. I say, shall I run over to Reidy's and see if Mrs. Reidy can come to-morrow?"

"No, I'll go myself," Mr. Balfour said. "I want to have a talk to Reidy: we may as well employ them both. Shall I tell her to come early to-morrow, Anne?"

"As early as she likes," Mrs. Balfour said. "Kitty asked me the other day what I would do if I were rich, and I said I would never make another shirt. That was all I could think of at the moment, but now I can go a step forward—if Providence and Mrs. Reidy will permit, I'll never again wash saucepans!"

"I hope you won't," he said. "Well, I'll do my best to catch the lady for you." He stood up, looking at them all for a moment. There was a new spring in his step as he walked away.

"Mother, wasn't he dear?" Kitty said. "Not a bit cross—just understanding. It made me realize what a horrible lot of worry he has had. And now it's gone, and he'll grow quite young again, I believe."

"And that is the very best of all that Uncle Joseph's money is going to bring us," Mrs. Balfour said softly.

"Oh, and heaps of other things," Kitty exulted. "I can't begin to think of them all—my head is just whirly. Mother, you are going to get new clothes for yourself the very first thing—you didn't buy a single pennyworth the other day, except for us."

“But you bought for me,” she said. “All of you—with your very first money.”

“Oh—that was rubbish,” Kitty told her. “Now you are going to buy lovely things. Nothing useful—only pretty. How I do hate useful clothes! Mother, we’ll go to a theatre soon, won’t we? I just feel I can’t hold myself in until we see one theatre! And will there ever be dances? We’d have to learn, but I suppose that could be managed.”

“I think all your dreams are coming true,” Anne Balfour said, fondling the dark head on her knee. “What about yours, Elsa? You are very quiet.”

“I was thinking my best dreams,” said Elsa. “I want all that Kitty wants, but most of all—music. I seem to hear it all the time. Such music!—I think they’re golden fiddles, Mother!”

“Golden fiddles!” echoed her mother softly. “Let’s think they are going to play golden music for us all.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE GOLDEN FIDDLES PLAY

THE train drew into the Melbourne station on a hot summer night, pulling up slowly at a long platform where bored-looking people were waiting to meet country friends, well knowing that country trains will always be late. A line of red-capped men shouted "Porter! Porter!" as the travellers darted from the carriages, like ants scurrying from a nest, almost before the train had come to a standstill. In a moment the platform was a seething mass of hot humanity, mingled with piles of luggage. People pushed hither and thither, trying to find their friends, and, when they found them, fell upon their necks. Men with suit-cases struggled to get by them, giving and receiving glares of wrath as they bumped their slow passage towards the ticket-gate. Over all, the blaze of electric lights and the roar of the city beyond the barrier mingled with sharp ringing of bells and the hooting of innumerable cars.

In the midst of the uproar five people stood uncertainly by the door of their carriage. The four young Balfours, indeed, had no wish to move. Such a crowd, such a scene as this, meant the beginning of the wonderful world which they knew awaited them; and unless you had seen in all your life no greater town than Tupurra, you could not hope to realize their feelings. They gaped, in fact, like young chickens newly hatched.

It was Mrs. Balfour who had the responsibility for their further movements, and at the moment it weighed heavily upon her. The sale of the farm had been completed very quickly: a buyer was conveniently anxious for the place—which, as Mr. Balfour grimly remarked, would certainly not have been the case had the need for selling been urgent. The clearing-sale of furniture and effects was to be held in a few days, and for that event it was neither necessary nor desirable to keep the whole family back. So they had been sent off as an advance guard, while he remained with Reidy and his wife for the sale. "You'll manage to prowl and shop very well without me," he had said. Mrs. Balfour had written to a big city hotel for rooms: when he came they would move to Brighton or St. Kilda.

They had left Tupurra in a state of wild excitement, and the journey, while the daylight lasted, had been all wonder and delight. Then had come some hours of darkness, which had taken some of the edge off their spirits, since even the marvel of being in a train for the first time may pall when it is impossible to look out of the window. But Melbourne's first glimpse had revived the children. They thrilled at the gleaming electric signs as the train neared Prince's Bridge; the roar and bustle of the station renewed the thrill. But to Mrs. Balfour had come a sudden wave of nervousness. It was so long since she had travelled: everything was so new and strange. She glanced round helplessly.

"Porter, lidy?" A red-cap was at her elbow: a fat man with a cheerful countenance.

"Oh, yes—yes!" she stammered.

"Right y'are!" said the red-cap, who was not unused to nervous country-folk. "'Eavy luggage in the van, I s'pose? 'Ow many things?"

"No—there's no heavy luggage. This is all." She pointed to the two shabby bags at her

feet. The Balfours, indeed, had left home with scarcely anything beyond the clothes in which they stood. The remainder had been left as a legacy to the dazed Mrs. Reidy.

"That all? Train to the subbubs, lidy, or a keb?"

"A taxi," she said. Walter had told her there would be taxis. "The streets are full of them," he had said. "Yellow and black—like big wasps. No one uses horse-cabs now." It was strange to her, who remembered only horse-cabs—heavy wagonettes and swift hansoms; she recalled the sharp clip-clop of the hansom horses' feet down suburban streets on dark, quiet nights.

"Taxi, lidy—yus," said the red-capped one. "I'll get one in a jiffy. You foller me." They hurried after him through the crowd. There was a moment's horror when they lost him near the exit-gate: then he reappeared, grinning cheerfully at her anxious face, and put the bags on the footpath while he whistled to a taxi. The wide street, stretching east and west, reduced the young Balfours to speechless wonder. Never had they imagined such buildings as confronted them—such lights, such movement.

The taxi was there, the bags stowed by the driver. To the red-capped porter it seemed that this shabby country family had gaped long enough.

"There y'are, lidy," he said firmly. He put them into the cab with the air of a man who can bear no more. A poor job, he reflected ruefully: this down-and-out crowd would not be good for more than sixpence. "Where'll I tell 'im to go?" he asked.

"Menzies'," said Mrs. Balfour.

"Wot?" The red-cap was startled out of his composure. For Menzies' is Menzies', and it is known up and down the world. He fancied he had not heard aright. "You didn't say Menzies', did you, lidy?"

"I did," said Mrs. Balfour calmly. Once in the taxi, her moment of stage-fright had left her. She was back in her own Melbourne: and Menzies' had been the only hotel she had known when she was Anne Dalglish. She dropped into the red-cap's hand a coin that completed his mental rout. He had scarcely breath enough to stammer the direction to the driver, who was leaning out, wrathfully demanding if he were going to sleep. The taxi moved off into the traffic, leaving him staring at the half-crown in his hand.

"Well!" said the red-cap. "Must be the Duchess of Woop Woop, an' me after thinkin' she'd be lookin' for a job!" He examined the coin hurriedly, and, finding it genuine, drifted back to the platform in a bemused condition.

Mrs. Balfour leaned back, smiling faintly, unheeding the excited exclamations of her family as they turned from one wide, brilliant street into another. To them all was magic, from the flashing signs to the cable-trams that pursued their dignified way, ringing warning bells. But to their mother it was home. Changed it might be, in the twenty years since she had seen it, but the broad streets were the same, and it seemed to her that each corner shouted a welcome. She had not meant to give the porter a foolishly large tip: but the impulse had seized her—was he not the first person in Melbourne to speak to her on this night of return? She would have liked to drive for hours through the dear, familiar streets. It was with a start that she realized that the car had stopped before a wide doorway. A smart page in uniform was flinging open the door of the taxi.

They trailed behind him into the hotel entrance and to the office, where the clerk stared at them curiously. The page put down the battered bags, his whole being radiating

protest at having been required to carry luggage of so degrading an appearance—he, who had borne magnificent burdens for Melba, for Chaliapin, for dukes and lords and famous men. This queer party had evidently strayed into the wrong hotel. He stared at them with open scorn. Then he caught the eye of Norman—a blazing eye of wrath. Norman was well aware that he was shabby—but he had no intention of allowing any uniformed Buttons to look at him or his mother as if they were worms. The page hurriedly averted his gaze.

“Did you want rooms?” the clerk was asking coldly.

“I wrote for rooms,” Mrs. Balfour said, with equal coldness. “My name is Balfour. I sent you a cheque.”

“Oh, yes—I beg your pardon,” said the clerk hastily. The cheque had been large, he remembered; they had booked good rooms. Still—they were an odd lot, even though the cheque had been cashed promptly. He looked squarely at Mrs. Balfour, and suddenly felt a very small young man. About this pale, badly-dressed woman there was a quiet dignity quite independent of shabby clothes.

“Yes, of course,” he said awkwardly. “Had a long journey, haven’t you? You must be tired, Madam. The page will take you up. Perhaps you would like me to send coffee to your rooms?”

“If you please,” said Mrs. Balfour with a slight smile. Again they followed the page, who led them into what appeared to be a very tiny room: very much smaller, Kitty reflected, than she had expected to find in a place like Melbourne. A door clanged behind them and the room suddenly shot into the air. Kitty and Elsa gave a simultaneous yelp of horror and clutched at the nearest object—which in Kitty’s case happened to be the page.

“What——?” she uttered.

“No danger, miss: it’s only the lift,” said the page haughtily. Whereat Kitty, blushing rosily, released him and endeavoured to look dignified, with a total lack of success. The page decided in his mind that they had newly arrived from the South Pole, where, presumably, lifts were unknown.

Never had the young Balfours seen such rooms as those that awaited them. They were spacious and lofty, with dainty papering in stripes of grey and silver. There were deep arm-chairs and massive furniture: the beds bore eiderdowns of pink and grey. They explored every corner, finding new wonders. Then Elsa discovered a white button near the door, and investigated it.

“This must be something to do with the electric light,” she told Kitty. “Father said it worked with a sort of button affair. I’ll try.” She tried, with the immediate result that a tap came to the door and a smart maid followed the tap.

“Yes, miss?”

“I—I——” said the dismayed Elsa. “Did you want something?”

“You rang, miss,” said the maid patiently. Her glance, surveying Kitty and Elsa, was very like that of the page.

“Well, I didn’t mean to,” said the culprit. “Does this thing ring a bell?”

The maid struggled for speech. Kitty and Elsa broke into helpless laughter, and the girl, after a moment’s pause, giggled sympathetically. Country people were often funny, but not so funny as this, she reflected. Their clothes were like nothing earthly—but

weren't they both pretty! The maid was human: she explained the mechanism of bells and lights and showed them the bathroom belonging to their rooms. She called these a suite: a word which puzzled the Balfour girls exceedingly. They hid their ignorance, resolving to find out from their mother what it meant.

The maid left them in the bathroom, returning to tell her companions of the arrival of a family that had apparently lived only on a desert island. She left them in the bathroom because it seemed probable that they meant to spend the night there. Cold tubs had been an unvarying part of the Balfours' daily life. You pumped a large bucketful of water and carried it into an outer room which also served as laundry and box-room and lumber-store: an unlined wooden room, with cracks in the walls through which the winter winds whistled merrily. In a corner sat a round flat tin bath like a huge dish: you poured in the water and took your bath, scrubbing with yellow household soap: after which you stood upon the well-washed wheat-sack which did duty as a bath-mat, rubbing yourself dry with a cheap cotton towel, your movements hastened, if not cheered, by the aforesaid winds. But you took your bath.

Now, for the first time confronted with a real bathroom, a place of white tiles and gleaming nickel, where a cork-covered seat stood by a blue bath-mat of soft rubber beside a huge porcelain tub, no marvel that Kitty and Elsa gaped. They fingered the glittering taps reverently, inquiring their uses: the hot and cold water, the different showers, the escape: they examined glass shelves, hot pipes for warming towels—a luxury at which they giggled shamelessly—and wanted to know if it were a serious matter to waste water. It had, they explained to the maid, been a very serious matter indeed in the Tupurra district. There, indeed, added Elsa, you saved every drop of your bath-water and poured it round the cabbages. It was at this point that the maid withdrew.

Kitty and Elsa were not sorry to see her go, although she had been a useful source of information. They wanted to bring their mother and Norman to see the wonderful bathroom. It was chilling that Norman treated it with lofty scorn. A fellow could get clean in any old tub, he declared: he saw no sense in blue bath-mats, in taps that would be one person's work to keep clean. Those were fal-lals, only fit for women. He agreed that a hot bath before bed would be a cheering experience after the long journey: meanwhile, there was the more serious matter that a huge tray had been brought by a man in a queer kind of tailed black coat, and that he was hungry.

Somewhat dashed, Kitty and Elsa found that they were hungry too, and they went in search of the tray. It was disappointing to find that the man in the curious clothes had gone; they imagined, from Norman's description, that he must be arrayed in some kind of fancy-dress, probably peculiar to Melbourne. However, he had left coffee and sandwiches, which, after all, was the main thing. They fell to with country appetites, and demolished every crumb.

"Think I ought to take the tray down?" asked Norman. "They may want it for some one else."

"I think not," said his mother, smiling. "Bed, all of you! To-morrow is going to be our busy day."

The young Balfours woke before six o'clock, roused by street noises. Peeping from their window, Kitty and Elsa decided that the day must be well advanced. They had no watches, but trams and motors were hurrying below them, and there were many people in

the street—more than you'd see in Tupurra in the middle of the day, Kitty remarked. "We'd better hurry," she said: "they may not like it in the hotel if we're late for breakfast. I'll go to my bath first and call the boys on the way."

Norman and Bob, however, were already up and dressed—also in fear of being late for breakfast. Norman came into the girls' room when they were ready.

"I've had a peep at Mother twice, and she's fast asleep," he said. "I don't think we ought to wake her. She may have had a bad night."

"I wonder would they mind if we brought her breakfast up to her?" Kitty suggested. "We could easily do it, if they would give us a tray."

"We'll ask, anyhow," Norman agreed. "Wonder where the kitchen is? I vote we go downstairs and have a scout round."

They went, in a body. No one was near the lift: they glanced at it askance.

"That's an unholy contraption," said Norman. "I nearly yelled myself last night when I felt it begin to shoot up. Stairs are exciting enough for me. Isn't the place quiet? I suppose everybody is having breakfast."

They went down innumerable flights of softly-carpeted stairs, meeting nobody on their way. The hall below was deserted save for a couple of men in green aprons who were wielding mops and polishing cloths while a strange machine stood near. It caught Norman's eye and he forgot breakfast. "I say, what's that?" he asked the nearest man.

"That's an electric cleaner, sir," responded the man, with some show of surprise.

"What does it clean?" Kitty asked.

"Floors, miss; furniture; walls. Great labour-saver. You—you haven't seen one before?" He permitted himself an open stare at the Balfours.

"You don't say so!" Kitty uttered—mindful of long years of toil with brooms and dust-pans. "May I see how it works?"

"Certainly, miss," said the man faintly. He switched on the current and set the machine working, and the Balfours spent the next five minutes delightedly cleaning the hall of Menzies' Hotel. The memory of their sleeping mother made them desist regretfully.

"I'd like to try that again," Kitty said, relinquishing the nozzle. "It's a great dodge, isn't it?" She smiled at the man in a friendly fashion. "Where's the kitchen?"

"The—the kitchen, miss?" he stammered. "Did you want to see the kitchens?"

"I want to see the cook," Kitty explained. "You see, my mother is tired: we don't want to wake her. I thought if I spoke to the cook she would let me take breakfast up to her." A thought struck her—an anxious thought. "I hope we're not too late. Breakfast isn't over yet, is it?"

One of the men gurgled and retired abruptly to a corner. The other stood his ground, though once or twice he strove for speech in vain.

"But—but it isn't six o'clock yet, miss! Breakfast is on from eight to ten, unless, of course, you're catching an early train."

The four Balfours looked at each other and broke into a shout of mirth.

"We thought it was quite late," said Kitty, when she could command words. "You see, we're used to getting up early. Why, yes, there's a clock—just six! Oh, well, it doesn't matter. When can I have a word with the cook?"

"The chef doesn't come on duty this long while yet, miss," said the man, his voice taking the note of reverence due to a person of remote splendour. "And it wouldn't be his business, you see. He don't deal with the upstairs breakfasts. But you've only to give your orders, miss, whenever the maids are up. Your maid'll bring you a meen-you, and anything you'd fancy'll be taken up to you."

"I—see," said Kitty faintly. "I'm afraid we don't know much about the ways of hotels. You see, we have never been away from the bush before." Her half-ashamed smile was rather pitiful, and the hotel man instantly forgot all desire to laugh.

"Oh, you'll soon know all about it, miss," he said, in a fatherly fashion. "You ring your bell for anything you want: there's no need to do an 'and's turn for yourself in this place. You'll need morning tea, too: I'm sure you won't want to wait two hours before you've anything to eat. It's a bit early yet, but you could get it soon."

"I could do with it now," stated Bob definitely. "We always have it before six at home."

"Suppose we go out for a walk?" Norman suggested. "That would put in some of the time."

This was unanimously voted a good suggestion.

"We'll have to get hats, I suppose," Kitty said. The cleaner put down his mop.

"I'll take you up in the lift, miss," he offered.

"No, thanks," Kitty uttered hastily. "I like stairs best." But she paused after she had gone a few steps.

"That's silly, I think. We'd better get used to the lift when we have a quiet chance. I suppose they use them everywhere?"

"Everywhere, miss," said the cleaner, who by this time regarded himself as the robin appointed to look after these babes in the wood. He led them into the lift and explained its working, which so entranced the Balfours that they insisted on shooting several times from the bottom to the top of the hotel and back again. Then, feeling seasoned travellers, they dashed for their hats while the man held the lift waiting for them: and so emerged into the street, full of triumph. The cleaner hurried back to his work.

"Hope to goodness I get done before the boss comes along," he said. "'J'ever see anything like it, Bill?" And Bill said earnestly, "Never! Nor no one else, in Menzies'!"

The Balfours were unconscious of anything unusual in their behaviour. They took their way westward up the broad footway of Bourke Street, and, coming to where it ends at Spencer Street, were entranced by the spectacle of trams finishing a run and changing ends. They charged into the middle of the street and stared down the slot in the track in the hope of seeing how the cable worked, thereby attracting unfavourable notice from a nervous gripman. However, they smiled at him so cheerfully that he became interested, and as his tram was not due to start for a few minutes, he left his stand and endeavoured to explain to them the whole mechanism of cable-trams, finishing by letting them all experiment with the grip. They bade him and the conductor good-bye and watched the tram crash off on its leisurely way, feeling that the sphere of their knowledge was considerably extended.

"Doesn't one meet nice men in Melbourne?" remarked Elsa. "So friendly!"

The whistling of many engines and the roar of trains attracted them, so they crossed the street and, much to their astonishment, found themselves at the entrance of another huge station, evidently the starting-place of many country trains. Cabs were arriving with piles of luggage, porters and travellers rushing hither and thither, while newsboys yelled their morning papers. There was no street barrier here, so the four explorers followed the throng into the long outer hall, where they stood entranced by the busy scene, and especially when a porter swept by them on a queer little motor that trailed a string of luggage-trolleys. They followed his glorious career with wide eyes. Then a clatter of cups near them attracted Bob, and he peered through a glass door. He returned quickly.

"I say—there's a big refreshment-room here, and I'm starving!" he announced. "What about morning tea here? You've got money, Kitty, haven't you?"

The idea seemed heaven-sent to them all; it was after half-past six, and that was fairly late in the day for the Balfours: much too late, certainly, to be unfed. They invaded the refreshment-room with a sense of infinite daring and devoured tea and buns recklessly. Nearly three weeks had passed since Uncle Joseph's bombshell had exploded among them, but it was still wonderful to think that money was a thing they might possess and spend—even to the extent of buns and tea in a railway refreshment-room. "I wonder will I ever arrive at believing that it doesn't matter!" Kitty murmured, as she drew out her little Tupurra purse to pay the bill. "Over three shillings! That's more than we used to spend in a whole year. I know I'll wake up some morning and find that it was all a dream, and I must hurry and clean the stove!" And they all shuddered and looked at each other fearfully, as if her words were about to come true.

But the momentarily increasing bustle of the station was very real. Trains from the suburbs were arriving, adding streams of city workers to the baggage-laden people leaving for the country. It was all as thrilling as a theatre to the young Balfours; they watched the ever-changing crowd with fascinated eyes until Norman caught sight of the station clock and jumped.

"By Jove, it's a quarter to eight!" he exclaimed. "Mother will think we're all lost. Hurry, or she'll have the police looking for us!"

They hastened back to the hotel, where they found Mrs. Balfour dressing. She uttered a relieved exclamation.

"Oh, there you are! I was beginning to feel worried. Wherever have you been, children?"

"Just exploring the world," Norman said. They told her their adventures excitedly, breaking in upon each other in their haste to relate the wonders of Melbourne. "I never imagined a city was such a marvel of a place!" Bob exclaimed.

"And you've only seen the top end of Bourke Street!" said Mrs. Balfour, laughing. "You'll find there's quite a lot more to see."

"You weren't really worried, were you, Mother?" Kitty asked.

"Oh, I thought you must be safe enough, if you were all together. But you must be very careful in crossing streets. You don't know the way of the traffic yet." She thought of the main street of Tupurra, where carts and drays and an occasional bullock-wagon strayed slowly along, and farmers' buggies pulled up in the middle for a friendly chat, letting other vehicles get past them as they could: where children played with their balls,

and dogs and hens and perhaps a stray calf or two wandered aimlessly about. That was all they had known: and even that glimpse of dizzy life had not been theirs often.

“Oh, the traffic’s nothing to worry about,” Norman said loftily. “We didn’t find it a bit difficult!” At which his mother laughed and remarked that it was not yet eight o’clock.

“And we meant to come back and order tea for you,” said Kitty, with a pang of self-reproach.

“I had it,” said Mrs. Balfour calmly. “I woke at seven and leaped up, thinking it was high time I had the kettle boiling; then I remembered, and I rang the bell with a firm hand and got back into bed. To think of it—the first time I have rung a bell for twenty years! I don’t believe my hand *was* firm, after all: I think it simply twittered on the bell. But I was able to pretend it wasn’t a great adventure to order tea: I don’t fancy the maid suspected it. I said, ‘Tea, please!’ in the most refined way.”

“And she was meek?” laughed Kitty.

“She was quite meek, though I rather think she eyed my nightdress with scorn. Possibly she doesn’t see many like it. She said, ‘And toast, Madam?’ And Madam agreed. So she went, and when she came back I didn’t let her see any nightdress: I had pulled up the sheet, so that all she could inspect was one commanding eye!”

She gave a great sigh of enjoyment.

“Such fun!” she said. “Such good tea and toast, and so beautiful to think one needn’t cook breakfast! Oh, *how* I am going to enjoy being rich! And what about breakfast? Will you be able to eat any?”

“Why, we’ve only had morning tea,” said Bob, affrighted. “Can’t we afford breakfast too, Mother?”

She gave him a great hug.

“Oh, yes, we can afford breakfast,” she said. “Heaps of breakfast. And then we’ll go out and storm Melbourne.”



“‘That’s an electric cleaner, sir,’ responded the man, with some show of surprise.”
Golden Fiddles [Chapter VIII]

CHAPTER IX

OUT OF THE CHRYSALIS

THE Balfours were amongst the first breakfasters in the huge dining-room of the hotel; and that was, perhaps, as well for their peace of mind. Many were the curious glances that strayed towards the shabby party round the table in the corner. There was no woman in the room who did not size them up with sheer amazement.

"They're nice-looking enough, too!" said one girl to her companion. "But, my dear, did you ever behold such a collection from the Back o' Beyond! How did they ever manage to get in here?"

"Don't ask *me*!" rejoined the other. "It makes me feel faint merely to look at that big boy's suit."

Kitty and Elsa had suggested putting on the frocks bought in Tupurra. But Mrs. Balfour had only the ideas of twenty years back, and to her the notion of wearing silk dresses, however plain, in the morning was inconceivable. So the girls were in home-made print: clean, certainly, but tumbled and creased from packing in the old portmanteaux, and faded from many washings. For herself, she had steadily refused to buy anything: her dress was ten years old, and she wore it with a little air of defiance, knowing it was for the last time. It was worth waiting for Melbourne, she told herself: her plans were all cut and dried in her mind. But she felt the amused glances—knew that the very waiters looked them over with eyes of derision. It was a relief when the meal was finished.

They came downstairs a little later, ready for the street. As they left their rooms they encountered a group of maids, and Mrs. Balfour knew that they noted every detail of their appearance—even to the darned cotton gloves. She held her head high, but there was a scarlet spot in each cheek as she led her family through the hall below, now thronged with people. Everybody looked at them: she heard a giggle from a party of girls close by. She spoke sharply to a page.

"A taxi, please," she said. It was with a sigh of relief that she went through the great doorway—away from the eyes.

The cab bore them swiftly down the hill. It was only a little journey: in a few moments they were at the door of the shop to which she had directed the driver. Twenty years had changed it greatly, but there was a sense of home-coming in entering it again. She smiled to herself, thinking how different it had been in the old days—how different she herself, when every one in it had known her as Miss Dalgleish, who had plenty of money and knew how to spend it. Now she was a shabby woman from the backblocks, and she had forgotten how to spend. But she would learn again, she told herself. It was not too late—at forty. Forty was not so terribly old, after all.

"Mother, what a shop!" breathed Kitty. The girls were gazing, open-mouthed, at the great place, lofty and brilliant, with its bewildering array of beautiful things. "You said it was bigger than Buncombe's, but I never dreamed of anything like this!"

"Can I direct you anywhere, Madam?" It was a shop-walker, his manners too good to

show anything but courtesy, even to so poverty-stricken a group. Mrs. Balfour smiled at him.

"You have a hair-dressing department, I think," she said. "I would like to go there."

"Certainly, Madam—ladies' or gentlemen's?"

"Oh—both!" she said, and then laughed. "I have not been here for a very long time. The shop is—changed."

"Yes, Madam. You have not been here since it was rebuilt? Let me direct you." He took charge of them, and in a moment the boys were left to the ministrations of a barber, and Mrs. Balfour and the girls were being interviewed by an amazingly brisk young person in a trim uniform.

"Shampoo and dressing, Madam? Certainly—we can take you at once, it is so early. You would like the young ladies shingled?"

Mrs. Balfour had vowed to be up-to-date, but this was more than she could digest without preparation. Shingling was a new thing—there had been no cropped heads in Tupurra. She had a mental vision of her husband's face, should he encounter shorn daughters on his arrival in Melbourne.

"Oh—no," she said hastily. "Just an ordinary dressing." At which the brisk young woman permitted herself to smile.

"Shingling is ordinary now, Madam. But just as you please." She flitted off to make arrangements, and Kitty and Elsa fell upon their mother.

"What's all this for?" they demanded. "Can't we wash our own hair? We've always done it."

"Not this morning—there's no time, and I want you to look nice," she said. "Wait here for me when you are finished."

"But it will take ages!" Kitty breathed. "You know how long it takes my great mop to dry."

"Not with the electric drier, Miss," said the brisk attendant, returning in time to hear this wail of woe. "It will be done very soon." They found themselves hustled into tiny rooms full of contrivances that seemed to them like black magic. Slaves of the lamp took charge of them. As their heads disappeared into basins of foaming froth the girls for the first time reflected that there were disadvantages in leaving the bush.

Mrs. Balfour was finished first, and she pinned her shabby hat on glistening coils and hurried away. The boys were waiting patiently, shorn, but somewhat resentful.

"He wanted to rub smelly stuff on our hair!" Norman said indignantly. "I told him I'd rather be dead. I'd sooner have your hair-cutting any day, Mother. You do it ever so much better."

"Oh, I'm the only barber you have ever known," she said vaguely. "Never mind—he has made you look quite nice. Boys, there's a department all gramophones and wireless: I'm going to leave you there for a while—you won't be dull."

"Oh, quick!" Bob cried. "I've only heard a gramophone once in my life. Will they play one for us, Mother?"

"I shouldn't wonder," she said. She saw them happily browsing in a world of machine-made music, and made her way to the office. A clerk came forward.

"Is there any senior person here?" Mrs. Balfour asked. "Some one who was here more than twenty years ago?"

He looked at her curiously.

"There is Mr. Hewitt," he said. "And Mr. Strong. I think they have been here longer than that, Madam—before my time, and I go back eighteen years. Would you like to see Mr. Hewitt? He is disengaged now."

She found herself in a room with an elderly man who rose to receive her.

"I want to open an account," she said—and fancied she saw a shadow of doubt cross his face. "I had one years ago—twenty years," she went on. "Then I was Miss Dalgleish."

His face changed instantly.

"Not Dr. Dalgleish's daughter?" he said. "But I remember you very well—you married soon after your father's death."

"Yes. I bought my trousseau here." She smiled faintly. "I have bought very little anywhere since. But now——"

"Sit down, Mrs. . . . oh, yes . . . Mrs. Balfour," he said. "You want to come back to us. We shall be very glad. We have a great regard for the old names."

"Yes, I want to come back," she said. "And I want help."

She found herself telling this kindly business-like man of the wonderful legacy. He listened, pleasantly sympathetic.

"It is very delightful, Mrs. Balfour. Very happy for us as well. But I do not quite see where the help comes in."

"It is just this," she said. "I want you to lend me one of your best assistants to help me buy. I have been buried so long, Mr. Hewitt—I should make hopeless mistakes. And what I buy must be the best, and correct in every detail. Can you let me have a woman who will be not only dependable, but understanding?"

He nodded, smiling.

"I can put the very woman at your disposal," he said.

He gave an order through the telephone on his desk, and presently there was a tap at his door.

"This is our Miss Piper, Mrs. Balfour," he said. "Miss Piper, you will remain with this lady as long as she needs you: she has purchases to make in several departments, and she wishes for advice in buying." He bowed them out with old-fashioned ceremony.

"Where would you like to begin, Mrs. Balfour?" Miss Piper asked. She was a grave person of about thirty: efficiency in every line. Mrs. Balfour looked at her and decided that there was human sympathy as well.

"At the very beginning," she answered her, laughing. "Miss Piper, I have two daughters, two sons, plenty of money and no clothes at all. And I am utterly ignorant: it is twenty years since I saw a city shop. I want advice in buying the very best outfit you can show me. Everything—from top to toe—for us all."

Miss Piper heaved a happy sigh.

"Then I am going to have the morning of my dreams!" she said solemnly.

They planned their campaign. To outfit the boys was a comparatively simple matter,

and had better be disposed of first. This, in Miss Piper's view, was merely clearing the decks for action. So they collected the scattered family and invaded the tailoring department, where Norman and Bob were provided with ready-made suits and measured for others: since, as the salesman declared, suits, to be really creditable, must be made to order. To the boys, resplendent in clothes such as they had never worn before, this seemed mere foolishness, and they said so very plainly—finding their opinions brushed aside as things of no moment. Mrs. Balfour brooded happily over the selection of material: over the buying of hats, shirts, footgear, and other minor details. Then the boys were returned to the wireless and gramophone hunting-ground, where they cheerfully declared their willingness to spend a week; and what Elsa and Kitty termed the really exciting shopping began.

In after-days, when clothes had become an ordinary matter, the Balfours were wont to look back to that first morning of delirious buying and sigh for the thrill that could never come again. That Miss Piper was an artist in her calling was evident from the first: she knew what should be worn, what suited Kitty's dark colouring and merry face, as well as what was best for Elsa's dreamy fairness. Nothing would induce Mrs. Balfour to buy anything for herself until the girls were transformed in appearance.

"Oh, me?—I can wait," she said, brushing aside the suggestion of a dress that Kitty declared had been made for her. "I want to see you looking like other girls first."

Miss Piper said nothing: the task of dressing the girls was pleasant enough, though she was merely biding her time. But when Kitty and Elsa, flushed and happy, had been supplied with frocks and hats, she turned her whole attention to their mother, and fell in love with her task. Miss Piper had the seeing eye. The careworn face, the hands, seamed and worn with rough work, told her their own story; and yet, here was a woman, still young and pretty, who carried herself with a gentle dignity that poverty had failed to conquer. She would repay dressing, were the right things chosen. Miss Piper resolved that they should be very right.

She threw her whole heart into the business of selection. Dressmakers and saleswomen flew hither and thither at her bidding. Stuffs were brought, models studied, styles carefully worked out. Ready-made frocks there must be, of course, for the moment. But when Miss Piper planned the dresses that were to be made she was as an artist under inspiration.

Finally, she produced a great idea. The girls had wandered away to a corner of the show-room: she was alone with their mother.

"Do let me dress you up," she begged Mrs. Balfour. "The young ladies will not know—they are interested in looking about the shop. I want to surprise them."

"Me?" Mrs. Balfour looked her amazement. "But I'm much too old to do you credit."

"You are going to look anything but old in that frock," Miss Piper said, handling reverently a dress that had just been selected. "Such luck that you are a stock size! But let me bring you shoes and stockings—a hat. I know just what will go with it. May I?"

"Well——" hesitated Mrs. Balfour.

"Then I may," uttered Miss Piper swiftly. She fled from the fitting-room, gave a saleswoman a hint to keep Kitty and Elsa occupied—no difficult matter—and enlisted others to help her. In a surprisingly short time they were back: and Mrs. Balfour was as a puppet in their hands. They were pleasant girls, full of delighted interest: it was easy to

submit, to find herself quickly endowed with dainty things such as she had almost forgotten. They would not let her look at a mirror until they had finished: not until the milliner who had arrived with a boxful of hats had carefully placed the chosen one on the soft hair to which the earlier dressing had given a new softness and burnish. Then they stood back, a laughing group, to let her view herself. A soft colour rose in her cheeks as she looked.

“It isn’t me at all,” she said. “It’s some one entirely different. Some one young and very foolish. But—dear me, how nice she looks!” At which Miss Piper gurgled happily and went to find Kitty and Elsa.

“Your mother would like to see you, Miss Balfour,” she said. Her voice was prim, but her eyes twinkled.

It was some one all in palest grey who waited for them. Grey folds, soft and silken, in lines that were all grace: dainty shoes and silk stockings of grey, and a little grey hat with a lining of delicate blue that brought out the blue of the eyes that were like Kitty’s. She looked tall and slender and young: a little nervous, as she saw them stop and catch their breath.

“Will I do, children?”

“Mother!” they said. They fell upon her, and hugged her, regardless of possible damage to the new finery: they turned her round and round delightedly, with little incoherent exclamations.

“But I think it’s too youthful,” she protested. “I wanted black, or at least navy-blue. It doesn’t seem right for an ancient matron.”

There was a chorus of indignant dissent.

“That’s the loveliest part of it,” said Elsa. “You’ve always worn such dull things. This is so beautifully *perishable*!” Whereat Miss Piper and her assistants dissolved in helpless laughter.

Never was there such a morning! Under Miss Piper’s skilful handling Mrs. Balfour became the merest wax: there were dresses for the morning, for the afternoon, for the evening: shoes to match all, stockings in glimmering piles of filmy silk, hats, gloves, summer wraps. They bought until the girls were reduced to incoherent twitterings at each fresh purchase. There was such underwear as princesses might wear, Elsa thought, if they were really lucky princesses; dainty, exquisite things over which her mother hovered lovingly. There were tiny embroidered handkerchiefs, silken scarves, delicate chains of beads, softly-coloured hand-bags.

“All our own!” Kitty murmured. “All our very own! And two days ago we were at Tupurra: and a month ago we didn’t know anything about Uncle Joseph’s money! Mother, don’t you ever feel scared of such happiness?”

“I believe I’m getting over being scared,” said Mrs. Balfour. There was a new light in her eye.

It was nearly time for luncheon when they said good-bye to Miss Piper, who was by that time weary but triumphant. She looked with pardonable pride at the three figures over whom her magic wand had been waved.

“I do so hope you are pleased with everything, Mrs. Balfour.”

"Everything is delightful," Mrs. Balfour said. "You have been very patient with rough country-folk, Miss Piper. We were very fortunate to find ourselves in your care."

"I have loved every moment of it," said Miss Piper sincerely. "And you all look so nice—I've never had such a morning! You will let me see the dresses when they are fitted, won't you, Mrs. Balfour?" She took them to the lift, and returned to tell her companions that there were compensations in the life of business.

The boys met them in the music department. That is to say, the boys passed them with an indifferent glance, utterly failing to recognize their own relatives in the three changed figures who approached. A gurgle from Kitty made them swing round: and to the end of her life Mrs. Balfour will not forget the delight that flashed into Norman's face.

"Oh—*Mother!*" he said. "Mother, you are pretty!"

"That's what we tell her, but she won't believe it," said Elsa happily.

"She's the youngest of us all," Kitty said, "and she has been quite mad all the morning. It has been a most beautiful time, because it's so interesting to watch one's mother growing young and mad. Bless Uncle Joseph! Did you ever see anyone look so nice as she does, Norman?"

"Never," he said. He glanced at his sisters, but his eyes went back quickly to his mother. "You girls look all right, too—but she takes a fellow's breath away. Mother, wear that always, won't you?"

She laughed, well pleased.

"I think this must be for very best," she said. "As Elsa says, I am perishable. But there are other things, and you will like them too." She looked at them all, proudly: all dressed as she had dreamed of dressing them. There was no doubt that they were goodly to look upon.

"Father will take a fit when he sees us," stated Bob solemnly.

"I think that is horribly probable," his mother agreed. "But we will make him get new clothes too. Come back to lunch, children. I want to flaunt into Menzies'!"

They flaunted. It was amusing to behold the expression on the faces of the people in the hotel—the scornful page, the lift-boy, the maids they met in the corridors. The waiter who had eyed them superciliously at breakfast now leaped to do their bidding. People at other tables looked at them with interest, and they bore the glances cheerfully. Yet at the back of the cheerfulness was a little scorn that mere clothes should make so great a difference.

"It's rum," Norman stated, voicing their thoughts. "Every one looked at us as though we were crawling grubs this morning; and now they seem to think we might be decent people. And we're exactly the same, it's only clothes. Makes you feel a bit small, I think. As if it mattered what one wore!"

"But it does," said Kitty wisely. "I feel as if I were a grub that had crawled out of its old skin and burst into a butterfly. And it's ever such a cheerful feeling!"

Bob snorted.

"It's awful rot, if you ask me," said he. "S'pose we'd come back in our old togs, only each of us brought one of those silly wax figures they have in that shop, dressed up in these. An' stood 'em beside us here. Well, they'd see we had the good clothes all right,

wouldn't they? But who'd be looking civilly at us then?"

"It would be interesting," said his mother, laughing. "Not to say exciting. I think the hotel manager's views would be well worth hearing."

Kitty glanced with satisfaction at her pretty frock.

"Well, it doesn't matter much what strangers think," she remarked. "It's what we feel. And I feel tons and tons better than I ever did in my life, and I simply love looking at all of you. So why worry? What are we going to do this afternoon, Mother?"

"No more clothes-shops!" begged Norman hurriedly.

"No—we need not even think of clothes now," his mother said. "That had to be done, but it is finished. I think we'll get a car and drive down beside the sea—quite a long way, to Sandringham or Black Rock."

"O-oo!" said the young Balfours, as one voice.

So they drove away from Melbourne, down the great avenue of St. Kilda Road, between its palms and flaming trees of flowering gum; and round the sweep of the Esplanade, suddenly coming to the sea. To-day it was all blue and silver, with little waves that danced shorewards, with long ripples on the beach where bare-legged babies played happily. There were white-sailed yachts scudding about the wide spaces of the Bay. Beyond, the smoke trailed from a red-and-black steamer: farther out a great sailing-ship was coming home. The sun flashed on the fairy-like structure of her tall masts and towering sails, turning them to silver. The young Balfours held their breath, seeing, for the first time,

"The beauty and mystery of the ships
And the magic of the sea."

"Oh!" said Elsa. "Oh, Mother, to think there was this, and we never knew! May we come often—every day?"

"Whenever you like," Mrs. Balfour said.

The light of the sea was in her eyes as she looked at the rapt faces of the children. All the bad times were over. Poverty and care and trouble were put behind them, ghosts that should come no more. She could see only happiness ahead. To her it was as though the gold of the bitter old Scotchman lay before them, a shining highway: and in her heart the golden fiddles played.

CHAPTER X

THE GROWTH OF THE BALFOURS

ELSA came down the steps of a tall grey house in a quiet street with her violin-case in her hand. By the pavement a long blue car waited, the chauffeur drowsing in his seat. He glanced round at the sound of the closing door and came to life hurriedly, jumping out.

"Ready, Miss Elsa?" He took the case and opened the door of the car.

"Yes, I'm ready, Briggs. I hope I haven't kept you waiting very long."

"Oh, that didn't matter," he said. Briggs liked Miss Elsa. She might keep him waiting, but she never failed to realize the fact. Most young ladies seemed to think a chauffeur was as much a part of the car as the magneto, and no more to be considered.

"Home, then, Briggs, please. Or have we to call for Miss Kitty anywhere?"

"Yes, Miss Elsa. At Mrs. Stratton's."

"Oh, yes—I forgot. She did tell me there was a bridge-party. Very well, Briggs."

She leaned back as the car gathered way and moved silently down the street, turning presently into a wider one, full of hurrying home-going traffic. It was nearly six o'clock on an exquisite spring evening: the cars flying along were full of women and girls in light frocks, the trees bordering the footpaths wore the delicate green of young leaves. On either side trim gardens showed a blaze of early flowers. It was Melbourne at its best, before the hot winds brought the Northern dust to dim its beauty. A soft wind blew across from the Bay, and Elsa drew a long breath; it was restful to be in the swift-gliding car, feeling the caress of the breeze after a long lesson in a stuffy room.

Yet what a lesson! She was tired, but it had been worth it. Never had the Signor been more exacting: never had she struggled so hard to give him what he wanted. She knew she had almost succeeded, in the end, and the peppery little Italian's words still echoed in her mind, making her glow with delight.

"You will play—oh, yes, you will play!" he had said. "Some day—not now, of course. Do not think it is now. But it is there, it is coming. See, now—I will show you."

He had picked up the fiddle and played the last movement himself, slowly, dreamily, watching her while she listened with flushed cheeks and parted lips.

"You hear it sing? Well, I too heard it when you tried it the last time—just an echo of the song. It stirs in your heart, it comes. Now you will practise, practise, pr-r-ractise! So?"

Then he had put the fiddle in the case decisively.

"And you will eat too, Miss Elsa—yes, large meals, and drink much milk. The music devours you, so you must devour much. And you will go to bed early and sleep late, and take fresh air. We must keep you well, for it is worth it."

He had laughed at her laugh.

"Oh, yes, it is true. There are some of my pupils to whom I do not care if they never eat—if they live or die. They do not matter. Unfortunately it is those who have the

constitution of the buffalo. You are different, and you must be watched—or in starving yourself you will starve the violin. And your violin must not be starved, for some day he will sing to many people.”

The words echoed still. It was the first time he had ever given her praise. He had been kind always; even though he might tear his grey hair and utter floods of impatient Italian at her failures, she had never made the mistake of thinking him unkind. That was merely a safety-valve, she knew: and he liked her all the better because she understood. Now, after nearly two years, he had suddenly waved Hope, like a banner, before her. It was no wonder that the thrill yet lingered, making her forget everything else.

She was still lost in dreams when the car stopped before a huge building, raw and new, that dwarfed all the houses near it: a mighty block of flats as gorgeous within as it was hideous without. People were coming down the steps, chattering and laughing. A girl recognized Elsa and came to speak to her.

“Hullo, Elsa! Music again?” She glanced at the fiddle. “Kit says you practise about thirty-six hours a day.”

“Kit isn’t there to hear,” said Elsa, laughing. “She takes good care of that. Is the party over?”

“Yes. We’re about the last to leave: Paula has been showing us her wedding-presents. I’d be afraid to have them there, if they were mine: flats are always being burgled, and some of the things are exquisite. Here comes Kit now. She says she can drive me home.”

“Yes, of course,” Elsa said, opening the door. “Jump in, Vera—I’m sorry I let you stand there.” She made room for her, putting the violin-case carefully out of the way: then she leaned out of the car. “Hurry up, Kitty—you know dinner is early to-night.”

“So it is,” said Kitty; “I’d forgotten.” She detached herself from a knot of girls and came quickly to the car, a slim, blue-clad figure. “See you all to-night; don’t be late!” she cried, waving her hand. “Home, Briggs—only stop to put down Miss Charteris.” The car shot away.

“Had a good time?” Elsa asked.

“No, not very. I lost, of course: I always do. Mine is not a bridge mind, I think. Rough on my partners, but I suppose I will learn some day to remember what cards are out. Now old Vera, here, plays like a book.”

“I can’t afford not to,” Vera Charteris said, shrugging her shoulders. “Bridge is a serious matter to me, but you’re one of the lucky ones who needn’t care if they lose.” They plunged into a discussion of the party which lasted until the car stopped to let Vera get out. “Thanks, ever so,” she said. “I won’t say good-bye.”

“No; be sure to come early,” Kitty said. She gave an impatient little movement as the car went on.

“Ugh, I’m tired!” she said. “I don’t know why I go to those shows: the room was close, and everybody was smoking, and the air was perfectly blue. That’s why I play so badly, I believe: my head thickens with the atmosphere. You’re lucky to be out of it, Elsa. Lesson go well?”

“Yes, very well, for me,” said Elsa. “He was quite civil to-day. He really seems to think I may play some day, if I keep on as I’m going.”

"The Signor? Silly old thing—I could tell him you can play," said Kitty scornfully. "Mrs. Travers heard you the other day and she was quite excited about you. She wants you to play at some party at her club."

"Can't be done," said Elsa lightly. Her nose had wrinkled a little at the mention of Mrs. Travers' name: she had a very clear idea of the worth of the praise of that extravagantly worded lady. "I'm never going to play in public until the Signor says I may, and that won't be for ages yet—if ever."

"I don't see why you should wait for him to give you leave," Kitty said. "That is, if you want to play."

"But I don't: not for forty Mrs. Travers," said Elsa firmly.

"Oh, well, it's just as you like. But you can't stay buried for ever, you know, Elsa. You're going on for eighteen."

"Oh, eighteen's a long way off yet," responded Elsa hurriedly. "And my fiddle is good enough for me. I can't practise if I start dances and bridge-parties and all that sort of thing. Mother says I can please myself."

"Well, I would want to get more fun out of life than practising all the time," Kitty observed.

"I believe I get as much as you," Elsa answered, laughing. Kitty stared at her.

"Why, I like that!" she uttered. "You can't be dragged out anywhere, unless to a concert, or very occasionally a theatre. You simply live in your old fiddle-case. Might as well be a snail in its shell, it seems to me!"

"Oh, well, I suppose the snail thinks its shell is the best shell ever," said Elsa. "It's happy, and so am I. So don't worry about me—because I really do believe I have a better time than you do."

"Quite mad!" said Kitty, looking at her in perplexity. "I always thought the fiddle would turn her brain, and now I know. She'll end in a Home for Incurable Fiddlers, and we'll all come to see her once a fortnight."

"What a funny place it would be," said Elsa, giggling. "All little sound-proof rooms, like a gramophone shop, and every inmate fiddling like mad. One might do worse."

The car suddenly turned from the wide street, passing through a gateway leading into a drive, on either side of which Cootamundra wattles blazed in glory of gold blossom and silver foliage, fronting a deep belt of shrubbery. There was a little stone lodge at the gate, and on a bench by the door sat a small boy in jersey and minute knickerbockers, who greeted the car and its driver with a shout of "Hullo, Daddy!" Briggs did not permit himself more than a grim smile at his son; but the girls waved their hands to the little fellow as they sped past. Kitty leaned forward and spoke to the chauffeur.

"Tommy is looking better, Briggs, don't you think?" she asked.

"Oh, he's pickin' up fine, Miss Kitty," Briggs answered. "He'll soon be as well as ever he was. Young monkey—I've told him time an' again not to yell at me when I'm drivin', but it's no good. His mother says there's no keepin' him in the house when he's lookin' out for me to come home."

"As if it mattered!" said Kitty. "We are all glad to see him about again, I like to hear his jolly little voice: we missed it all the time he was ill."

The hard-featured chauffeur looked almost gentle for a moment.

"Well, it's a weight off one's mind," he said. "Still, a kid has a right to do as he's told, Miss Kitty."

The screen of wattles ended and the drive curved between flower-beds and skirted a broad, sloping lawn, ending far away in shrubs and a high, clipped hedge that completely shut off the outer world. It was a very beautiful garden. The roses of spring bloomed everywhere, on prim standards and great sprawling bushes, with masses of ramblers, red, pink, and yellow, trailing over summer-houses and on trellises that shaded garden seats: and between the roses the ground was carpeted with gay masses of bedding plants. A fountain played softly over a pond of pink and white water-lilies, where gold-fish swam lazily among the broad floating leaves. Nothing was out of order, nothing untidy. No weed showed in the beds or upon the red gravel paths that wound away between the gay banks of flowers to lose themselves in the shrubbery. It was a place of colour and fragrance and peace.

The car edged round a great circular bed blazing with phlox in a score of colours and came to rest before a shallow flight of wide steps leading to a veranda eight feet wide, where flowering creepers twined on every pillar. The house it shaded was old and grey and solid: a heavy mansion of stone, with balconies and a squat tower. At one end rose a long hot-house, where gigantic ferns and palms could be seen through the dim glass and a little sound of trickling water came all day long. As the car drew up Mrs. Balfour came out of the hall door, smiling at her daughters.

"Oh, here you are!" she said. "I thought you were never coming. Hurry—the men have finished the ballroom, and I'm aching for you to look at it."

They followed her into a long and lofty room with a glittering polished floor. At one end a low platform in a wide bay bore a grand piano and chairs and stands for musicians, half hidden by a screen of fern and flowering azaleas: another bay was carpeted and furnished with easy chairs. Scarcely anything could be seen of the walls, for they were all roses, trailing so naturally that one might almost have thought them growing: and above, the ceiling was hidden by criss-cross streamers of asparagus-fern, in which swayed gleaming balloons of silver and pink. Tiny electric bulbs were concealed everywhere, to flash into radiance later on. Elsa exclaimed with delight:

"Oh, it's lovely, Mother!"

"I think it will do," said Mrs. Balfour contentedly. "What do you think, Kitty?"

Kitty was looking about her with a critical eye.

"It's awfully pretty, of course," she said, with a shade of hesitation. "Still, I think they might have hit on some newer idea than balloons—they've been done almost to death, don't you think, Mother? I thought that new decorator-man was simply bulging with fresh notions, but this is very like a dozen schemes I've seen before."

"Then you should have stayed at home to consult with him," said her mother cheerfully, though some of the pleasure had died out of her face. "You must remember I've hardly seen you for a week, Kitty. As a matter of fact, he had some other ideas—jazz notions, he called them: but to me they seemed rather vulgar, and I didn't care about them. Father and I are very well satisfied with this."

"Oh, I like it," Kitty said. "Only I wish it hadn't been quite so like the room at the

Grevilles' last month. One must have something new if one is to stand out at all."

"My dear, you make life into one hideous competition," said her mother, laughing. "I'm not going to fret myself into fiddle-strings trying all the time to go one better than the last person. When you feel like this you ought to go and sit down in a quiet corner and think solemnly of Tupurra and the cow-shed where you so often shone!"

"Ugh!" shuddered Kitty. "Well, come and we'll look at the supper-room."

It was a room almost as large, bowered in clematis and crowded with little tables laden with good things. Bob was standing in the doorway, surveying it solemnly. He had shot up into a tall boy, but his broad good-humoured face and his shock of fair hair were very little changed.

"Golly, what a spread!" he remarked inelegantly. "Well, there'll be one good part of the evening, at any rate."

"Bob, you've got to dance," Kitty said swiftly.

"I hate dancing," he said. "Silly rot—pushing a girl round and round a room. And I'll bet no girl likes dancing with me. I'm all feet!"

"That's rubbish," Kitty answered. "Miss Macrae told me you were one of the best pupils she had, if you would only let yourself go."

"Let myself go!" he jeered. "As if anyone could let go in the funny old processions she calls dancing! And it's worse in a crowd—all you can do is to walk a few yards, and back a few yards, and give two twirls and bump into some one sixty-five times, and then it's over, and you try to say 'Thank you' as if you'd enjoyed it. I don't see where the fun comes in."

"Ah, but you will dance, Bobby, won't you?" Elsa begged. "There will be five or six girls to-night about your own age, or very little older: I counted on you to help them have a good time. Joan and Patty Darnton—you like them. And several others."

"Oh, Joan and Patty aren't bad," he admitted grudgingly. "They can ride, and they've got some sense. Most girls talk such awful rot. Oh, all right. I'll dance a bit, I suppose, if they can't get anyone else. I say, there's dinner!" he added, as a gong suddenly boomed in the hall. "I'll be there in a minute, Mother—got to go and wash." He went upstairs three at a time.

Mr. Balfour was already in his place when his wife and daughters came in.

"Bob will be here in a moment, Walter," Mrs. Balfour said, sitting down.

"I heard him," remarked her husband, wielding a carving-knife rapidly. "One is apt to hear Bob when he goes upstairs. Where is Norman?"

"He won't be in to dinner. He telephoned that he was dining in Town, but he will be home in time to dress."

"Norman treats this house more and more as if it were a place to lodge in when he felt like it," said Norman's father, frowning. "I never know where he is or what he's doing."

"Oh, he has been playing golf with Jack Greville, and they went back to Town together," Mrs. Balfour said.

"And they'll come out at forty miles an hour, I suppose. Well, Norman will lose his licence if he is stopped again."

"I don't think he will risk it, Walter," Mrs. Balfour said. "The last time he was fined

really made him see how silly he was: he has promised me to be careful. All these boys think it is very clever to go fast and to try to dodge policemen, but when there is a danger of losing their licences they learn sense.”

“He has plenty to learn,” said Mr. Balfour dryly.

“Oh, he’s scared stiff of not being allowed to drive,” Kitty said lightly. “He won’t run any more risks. Father, Mr. Stratton wants you to play golf with him to-morrow at Sandringham. Will you go?”

“I may as well, I suppose,” her father answered. “I like playing with Stratton: we’re about on the same level, and then, we talk of bullocks as we go. Other men talk of stocks and shares, which leaves me cold. Am I to ring him up?”

“Yes; I told him you would. Ralph and Paula will be here, but you can’t depend on their remembering a message.”

“Not after a dance, certainly,” Mr. Balfour agreed. “I’ll telephone after dinner. Poor old Stratton likes to get down to Sandringham for a day; he can’t stand living in that flat of theirs. It’s a poor life for a man.”

“But peaceful for his wife,” Mrs. Balfour remarked. “She has never any peace in a house: she can’t get maids.”

“You can get them,” he said.

“Oh, touch wood, Walter! I’m one of the lucky ones, I don’t know why.”

“Well, you treat them properly, for one thing,” her husband said. “I believe that people who remember that servants are flesh and blood will always get them. You manage to know all their histories, down to their sisters’ husbands’ aunts, and you talk to them, and give them a decent room to entertain their friends in; and the result is, they fall over themselves to come here.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “I’m very ordinary—perhaps that is why they like being here. I know too well what work is like to be unsympathetic about it.” She stopped, as the trim maid re-entered the room. They hurried through the meal, and, as soon as it was over, scattered to their rooms to dress for the dance.

The sharp hoot of a motor sounded as Mrs. Balfour went upstairs. She hurried to the balcony in time to see a low-set single-seater car shoot up the drive, with Norman at the wheel. He looked up and waved to her—no matter at what pace he took the drive, he never failed to look up for his mother’s greeting. She smiled, going back to her room as he whizzed out of sight on his way to the garage: and in a moment heard him springing up the stairs. He tapped at her door and came in: six foot two of clean-limbed strength, well-featured and merry-eyed. He greeted her gaily.

“I’m not late, am I? And was he cross?”

“No, not cross. A little—well, uneasy,” she said, smiling at him. It was so difficult not to smile at Norman. “He worries, you know, Norman, since the last time you fell foul of the police. I tried to make him see that you had learned sense. Have you, do you think?”

“I’m chock-full of it,” he said gravely, though his eyes twinkled. “I simply crawled along St. Kilda Road, and smiled lovingly at the sweep of a policeman who took my number last time. Then, of course, when I got out of the way of watch-dogs I had to hurry. You look tired, Mother. I suppose you’ve been working all day.”

"Oh, no," she said. "These professional decorators and caterers don't leave one anything to do: I could only stand about and watch them, because it interested me, but I might almost as well not have been there. I'm not sure that it wasn't more fun when I was a girl, when we made a working-bee at a house where there was to be a dance and fixed the decorations ourselves. But Kitty would think that was barbaric."

"Well, I don't see any point in fagging yourself if you can pay other people to do it for you," Norman said. "I'm with Kitty as far as that goes."

"You and Kitty are becoming professional idlers," said his mother, laughing.

"Oh, you know I'm going to find a job some day, Mother. Trouble is, I don't seem to have time to find it," he told her cheerfully.

"I wonder will you like work when you do get it," she' pondered. "Well, you must run away, my son. It is almost time I was dressed—I have to be ready to receive people."

There was no doubt that the dance was a success, she told herself, a few hours later, looking about the crowded rooms. Everybody was there who counted: a party from Government House had come, and there were people whose names mattered more than a Government House contingent. It represented her high-water mark of achievement—the position she had set herself to build up nearly two years ago. Hard enough the task had been, but she had faced it doggedly, resolved that the children should have all that they had missed in life until the turn in Fortune's wheel had come. There had still been a few people who remembered her: with their aid and with the mighty lever of Uncle Joseph's gold she had fought her battle. To-night she knew it was a battle won.

Near her Kitty was dancing with a young Englishman, aide-de-camp to the Governor, a tall young Hussar whose pink-and-white complexion had not yet had time to take the Australian tan. Beyond, with Ralph Stratton, was Elsa, tall and slim in white, with a sea-green fillet binding the fair hair she had steadfastly refused to shingle, despite all Kitty's persuasions. To Mrs. Balfour's eye—and it had learned to be critical—there were no girls in the room so good to look at or more perfectly dressed. Norman came by, towering over his partner, smiling at his mother; even Bob had accepted his fate with a good grace, and was dancing with Patty Darnton as though he liked his job. In the card-room she knew her husband was playing bridge contentedly. People had come up to her again and again to compliment her on the decorations, on the moonlit garden where a thousand electric lights, swinging from tree to tree, made trails of coloured fire among the leaves. Soon they would all troop in to supper, and she knew that all was planned with the same touch of perfection. Yes—she had indeed soared high since the day when they had blistered their hands over the making of working shirts on the tumble-down little veranda at Tupurra.

"Well, my dear—you should be feeling satisfied," said a brisk voice. She turned from the long window in which she had been standing and smiled at Miss Berrill.

"I think it is a success, Mary," she answered. "Every one seems happy, so far as one can judge nowadays."

"We showed it more in our time, didn't we?" Miss Berrill said. "Dancing now is a solemn affair, compared to those old days. We laughed and chattered as hard as we danced, but this generation takes its dancing as a serious thing. It's a change in manner, that is all, though I can't help wondering if they get the same fun out of it. But then, I'm hopelessly old-fashioned—my nieces tell me so every time I meet them. Still, so far as a

success goes, Anne, you have certainly scored. It was very good of you to ask me to look on: I like to see one of these big affairs now and then."

"Oh, your name was the first I put down—I couldn't have done without your moral support," laughed Mrs. Balfour. A sudden memory of Kitty's words when she had written the name came to her. "Old Miss Berrill! Oh, Mother, what's the good of asking *her*? We don't want old people." She had held her own with the quiet decision which even Kitty recognized as adamant on the rare occasions on which she encountered it. Between her and sturdy Mary Berrill there was a very real friendship.

"I don't fancy you need much support from anyone, my dear," Miss Berrill said. "But I was very glad to come. And your garden is a dream, Anne. I have been wandering round it, bumping into young couples who evidently looked on me as a moon-struck old nuisance."

"The garden is Walter's hobby," said Mrs. Balfour. "He spends most of his time in it, in the oldest clothes he can find. But for that and golf, I'm afraid he would be rather lost in Melbourne. He does not make many friends."

"I sometimes wonder how he likes his new life," observed Miss Berrill. "It was a great transplanting, Anne. Almost—shall I say?—a shock."

"Yes, it was. But a restful shock. I know, of course, that the freedom from ceaseless money worry was good for him; and he was working far too hard. Still—sometimes I think . . ." She hesitated. "Oh, well, I have found that it was foolish to imagine that the possession of money saves one from every worry."

"That's a crop that always grows, Anne. But yours should be lessened."

"Oh, it is. I wanted everything I could get for the children, and I have got it. But—well, they don't belong to me as they used to belong once. They have so many interests that they do not share with me. It hurts, Mary, even though I tell myself I am foolish to let it hurt."

"Well, doesn't that come to every mother? Young things grow up and spread their wings—the old nest won't hold them. And times have changed in more ways than one. You have their affection still."

"Oh, in a way. Bob and Elsa are still my babies—when Elsa is not lost in music. And Norman is delightful to me—when I see him. But sometimes I think I am only an incident in Kitty's life. She has shot ahead more than any of us. I see myself as the ancient mother of a very modern young person."

Miss Berrill concealed within her shrewd old heart the fact that she had often been seized with a desire to shake Kitty.

"Oh, she was the oldest, you see," she said comfortingly. "She was swept into the whirlpool—it's easy enough with a pretty girl of eighteen, suddenly given freedom and money. But Kitty is sound. I believe that many girls of to-day seem to drift away from home-ties and apron-strings at first. But very often they come back, Anne, my dear."

"I should like to see her heading for home, then," said Mrs. Balfour, laughing. "Generally she seems to be heading away from it—as fast as a car will take her. They are all speed-maniacs, Mary, except Bob. He still regards a motor as a contraption not worthy to be mentioned in the same day as a horse."

"More power to him!" said Miss Berrill. "He tells me old Nigger is pensioned off."

“Yes—he has quite outgrown him. He is going to be as big as Norman. So Nigger has been found a home out at Dandenong, where he will end his days in peace and idleness. And Bob has a hunter—my little Bob!” She laughed, gently. “Both the boys hunt.”

“And you harden your motherly heart, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes: it is foolish to let oneself be nervous. Indeed, I would rather they rode to hounds than broke speed-records in cars: it seems more natural. I have taken up riding again myself, Mary.”

“You? How do you find time, in your whirligig of a life?”

“Easily enough. I did it so that I could go out with the boys: it keeps us together. And I really believe even Norman likes taking his old mother out. I haven’t lost my seat and hands, Mary, and a tailor has done his best for my middle-aged figure: I am told I still look creditable on a horse!”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Miss Berrill, casting an affectionate eye over the tall, slender figure in its delicate mauve frock. “They’re lucky young men to have you. I like your Bob, Anne. We had a dance together—did you know? At least, Bob kindly excused me from dancing—I think it was the Heebie-Jeebies, or some such dainty name—and we sat out in the garden and talked of Tupurra. He has an astonishing affection for it.”

“Yes. He was too young to know much about the worries, and he hates Melbourne. All the same, I wonder would he like to go back to spending his Saturdays in milking and fern-cutting? I hae ma doots, Mary!”

“I have none,” said Miss Berrill, laughing. “All the same, his heart is in the country, and he will go back to it some day, you will see. Here comes Kitty, looking for you.”

Kitty came quickly, a little frown on her smooth brow.

“I’ve been hunting for you everywhere, Mother,” she said sharply. “Didn’t you know it was time for supper? Do hurry!”

“Dear me!” said Mrs. Balfour, conscience-stricken. “That is what comes of gossiping, Mary: you have made me neglect my duties. Come and be fed.” She slipped her hand into Miss Berrill’s arm and led her into the house.

CHAPTER XI

BOB DREAMS

“IF you ask me,” said Briggs sourly, “there’ll be trouble with that young man some day.”

“How d’you mean, Sam?”

“Well, ’cause he’s makin’ straight for it. Ain’t that evident enough? Ain’t he out day and night, tearin’ round Melbourne an’ everywhere else, cuttin’ whatever capers he likes? I’m blessed if I know why the Boss gives him such a free hand. He’s only a kid, when all’s said an’ done.”

“That’s true enough,” said Mrs. Briggs, pausing to adjust the shirt she was ironing. “The cook was telling me the other day he isn’t twenty yet.”

“No. An’ in some ways young Bob has more sense than he’s got. Bob’s got his head screwed on his shoulders all right, even if he does hate cars. Better for young Norman if he hated ’em too.”

“Well, he drives beautiful,” said Mrs. Briggs, who liked Norman.

“Oh, he can drive all right. Understands a car too, he does: he learned pretty thorough, and he’s never above pickin’ up a tip from me, I’ll say that for him. But he’s got no sense with it. Speed’s all he thinks of. He knows his old man’s got money enough to pay for any damage he does. Take that case I told you about last week, when he smashed up a buggy on the Cranbourne road. Well, that never got into the papers, an’ no policeman heard anything about it, or young Norman ’ud be without a licence to-day. An’ a dashed good thing if he was.”

“But he paid up,” Mrs. Briggs said.

“Of course he paid up. Cost him a pretty penny too—or, rather, his mother. She’d give him anything he asked for. I dare say the Boss never heard a word of it.”

“Did he kill anyone, Daddy?” piped a small voice. Briggs jumped.

“Lor, I didn’t know the kid was there,” he muttered. “Look here, Tommy, you hold your tongue about what you hear Mum and me say, or I’ll tan you good an’ proper. D’you hear now?”

Tommy nodded.

“I never says a word to anyone,” he answered. “True’s life, Daddy. But did he?”

“No, of course he didn’t. He had a bit of an accident, that was all, like I might have any day. So you keep your mouth shut about it. An’ remember one thing, Tommy—don’t you show your nose out on the drive. I’ve told you time an’ again you’re not to play there, an’ yet there you were yesterday when I came down with the car.”

Tommy looked down his nose guiltily.

“I scooted in,” he said.

“Don’t I jolly well know you scooted in! But not quick enough for me to miss seeing

you. An' some day Mr. Norman or some other mad-headed young feller will come whizzin' round that curve an' you won't scoot in quick enough for them to miss you. An' then there'll be trouble. You remember now, Tommy, if you don't want to get lammed. Now you clear out an' play in the back yard. I'm talkin' to Mum."

He watched the small boy trot off obediently, and relit his pipe, which had gone out.

"I had a right to have tanned him for it at the time," he said. "Would have, too, if he'd been real strong again. But there seems so darned little of him since he was ill, doesn't there, Jess."

The mother nodded, her face anxious.

"He ain't half the boy he was," she said. "No life in him, like: he'll sit an' mope half his time, 'stead of playin' about like he used to. You mustn't hit him, Sam."

"No—and how's a man to bring up a boy without usin' a strap?" demanded Briggs, who held old-fashioned views. "But he'll pick up soon, Jess. That stuff the Missus brought him'll make a difference: she said it was wonderful for raisin' an appetite."

"Ought to be," she observed. "Costs a guinea, Sam; it's on the label of the jar. We'd be a long while before we could buy it, but the Missus says he's to have another bottle as soon as he's finished that."

"Well, she's got so much money she don't know what to do with it," Briggs said. "She'll never feel buyin' it."

But this was more than Tommy's mother could let pass.

"Indeed, there's mighty few rich people that go out of their way to help, the way the Missus does," she retorted. "You know that jolly well, Sam. If Tommy had been her own son she couldn't have been kinder all the time he was ill, and the Boss too. Payin' for a nurse to sit up with him every night an' settlin' the doctor's bill—an' him the best children's doctor in Melbourne. An' nourishment an' everything he wanted sent down from the house. If Tommy had died she'd have felt it real cruel. Every one of them, from the Boss down, 'ud have done anything to make him well. You know they wouldn't let you leave the place, too: Mr. Norman done all the drivin' for you."

Briggs had the grace to look ashamed of himself.

"Oh, well, you needn't get wild, Jess," he said. "I know all that, of course, an' I don't forget it. They were jolly good. But all the same, it does make a fellow sour to plug along for wages an' see a youngster like Mr. Norman flingin' money about with both hands and makin' a wholesale show of himself. Fair gets my goat, it does."

"Oh, he'll settle down," said Mrs. Briggs. "If all the gossip is true, he had to work hard enough until they come in for their money. It's no wonder he goes a bit gay now."

"He'll go gay once too often," growled Briggs. "I wonder do they know what time he comes home, four of five nights a week? Out at that there Pally dee Dance, or some of them other dancin' places, an' goodness knows what else."

"Sam, he ain't drinkin', is he?" Mrs. Briggs looked uneasy.

"I d'no. If he ain't, it's only a matter of time till he does. There's many a morning he looks queer enough for anything. Real haggard, if you know what I mean. He's too young to stand it. Worst investment ever his mother made was givin' him that car of his. A boy of his age hadn't ought to have a free hand with a car—leads to all sorts of trouble."

Mrs. Briggs nodded agreement.

"What he wants," she said, "is a jolly good job of hard work. It 'ud be the makings of him."

"Much chance a job's got of seein' him!" scoffed Briggs. "All the work that young feller'll do is workin' real hard at makin' a fool of himself. That young Greville he's always about with is no good to him either: I would trust that chap as far as I could throw him. His people haven't much spare cash to give him, if all people say is true, an' he's quite cute enough to know how to manage a silly youngster like young Norman, as is sufferin' from a rush of cash to the head!"

Mrs. Briggs giggled appreciatively.

"You do put things funny, Sam," she said.

"Well, ain't he?"

"Oh, he is, too right." Mrs. Briggs wrapped up her ironing-board and put it away behind the kitchen door. "Ah, well, it isn't our business, after all. We got a jolly good place here—best ever we struck, Sam; an' you couldn't have nicer people to work for. Don't you go talkin' about Mr. Norman to anyone else. Things get about quicker than a person expects, an' if the Boss or the Missus heard we'd been passin' remarks about him we'd get our walkin' tickets quick an' lively."

"Oh, I keep me mouth shut outside of me own door," he said. "An' just you watch young Tommy, Jess; he's had me all of a shake half a dozen times, runnin' out near the cars. What with the big saloon an' the tourin' car an' Miss Kitty's little pip-squeak of a thing, and this car of young Norman's—well, this drive's never safe. Leave alone all the visitors drivin' in from the road. I wish the Boss 'ud put us up a little fence in front. It wouldn't look bad if it was painted white, with a green gate, say."

"Mightn't look too well, just alongside the stone wall an' them big iron gates," reflected his wife. "People think this lodge looks real stylish the way it is. Pitcheresque, I heard some one call it the other day."

"I could do with less pitchereskity if I felt safer about Tommy," said Briggs glumly. "I suppose I'm a fool about him. Fact is, I've never got over him bein' so ill. Ain't you that way too, ole girl?"

"Me?" she said. "Don't I wake up every night an' get up to feel him, just to make sure he's alive!"

"Tell you what," said Briggs. "We'll save all we can, and when it gets a bit hotter, you an' he can go off to some country place by the sea. Do you both a world of good: you're just about done up, old girl, what with nursin' an' worryin'."

She drew a long breath.

"My, wouldn't that be A1!" she said. "Town ain't goin' to be any good to Tommy once the hot weather comes. Think we could manage it, Sam?"

"We'll manage it somehow. The Boss 'ud advance me money if I asked him, I know. So just you keep your mind easy, or I'll be havin' you ill next. We'll have him back lookin' as fit as a fiddle."

He rose, looking about for his cap.

"Well, I got to go up an' wash cars," he said. "The Missus isn't goin' out to-day: not

drivin', that is. It's young Bob's birthday, an' she an' him are goin' for a ride. So it's my chance for a quiet polish-up. Tommy can come with me, Jess: it'll keep him happy."

He called the little boy and they went up the drive together. On the veranda they could see Mr. Balfour in a long chair, smoking as he read his morning paper, while Norman lounged in a hammock close by. Mrs. Balfour and Kitty were in the garden, walking slowly towards the house. As they came to the veranda, Mr. Balfour put down the newspaper with a sharp exclamation.

"Is anything wrong, Walter?" Mrs. Balfour asked.

"Something I'm very sorry to see: and you'll be sorry too, Norman," he said. "Young Greville has come to grief pretty badly."

"What!" Norman sat up with a jerk that sent him flying from the hammock.

"I heard a rumour of it at the Club three days ago, but I knew the matter was being hushed up—at least, that his people were trying to hush it up. So, of course, I didn't say anything. Stratton knew all about it. The young fool has been getting into difficulties—betting, I suppose—and he managed to help himself to some of the Excelsior Company's money."

"I don't believe it!" said Norman angrily.

"Oh, it's true—Stratton told me he had admitted it. His father had been trying everywhere to raise the money, and had managed it—but, you know, the Grevilles have been living beyond their income, and he had trouble enough to do it. His Bank wouldn't help him, but some of his friends paid up. But the Excelsior people have had two or three cases of that kind before, and they refused to hush this up. They're going to prosecute."

"Oh, Walter! How terrible for his people—his poor mother!" Mrs. Balfour cried.

"It's cruel for them. The Grevilles have held their heads pretty high. This will be an awful smash."

"But, Father——" Norman was staring at him wide-eyed. "Do you mean—Jack won't have to go to jail?"

"He has been arrested already," Mr. Balfour said quietly. "Here's the paper: you can see for yourself."

Norman snatched it from him and read the paragraph, horror deepening on his face.

"Well, they're beasts!" he exclaimed, letting it fall. "The Company—they'd have got their money all right. Why do they want to ruin Jack?"

Mr. Balfour looked stern.

"There are some pretty dour old Scotchmen on the Board of that Company," he said. "Maclaren and Watt and Menteith: I believe they made a vow the last time they concealed an affair of this kind that they would never do it again, no matter whose son was the culprit. There's too much betting and wild living among the young men on small salaries who have been brought up in good homes. I think, myself, it is time to make an example of some one. And I never liked Jack Greville, you know, Norman: I always said he wasn't the type of young fellow I cared to see about the house."

"He's my friend, anyhow!" said the boy savagely. "You needn't run him down to me."

"I think the papers and the world will do all the running down that is necessary," was his father's dry answer. "You can't get over the fact that he is a confessed thief."

Norman started as if he had been stung. He began to speak—then, shutting his lips, he flung away and disappeared in the house.

“Poor old Norm!” said Kitty softly, and followed him.

“This will hit him hard, Walter,” Mrs. Balfour said. “He has been very fond of Jack Greville.”

“It’s a friendship that has never been anything but an anxiety to me,” he answered. “When a man six or seven years his senior takes up a boy like Norman and makes a boon-companion of him there’s something under the surface. I’d like to know how much money he has had out of Norman: and you know he has used the boy’s car as though it had been his own. He has simply made use of him, and Norman has been too much of a child to recognize it. I hope it will teach him a lesson, that’s all. He needs one.”

“I think you are inclined to be hard on Norman,” she said.

“Do you? If I said——” He stopped himself with a visible effort. “Well, I won’t say any more,” he finished, with a queer half-smile. He picked up the fallen paper, and began to read it, as Bob came hurtling out of the house.

“When will you be ready, Mother?”

“Going out so early?” Mr. Balfour asked.

“Oh, this is Bob’s birthday party,” she said, smiling. “Such a queer party, he chose: just to ride up into the hills with me and have a picnic by our two selves. Kitty wanted to have a dance for him, but he almost fainted at the idea!”

“I should think so!” Bob uttered. “It’s only a fortnight since the big dance, and one show like that in a year is enough for me. Do start soon, Mother. What about lunch?”

“Oh, Cook will have that ready.”

“Right. I’ll get it,” Bob said. “Will creek-water be good enough for you, Mother, or will I carry something in a bottle?”

“Creek-water will be quite good enough for me, my son, thank you,” she said. “I know just how much you like carrying bottles on Redleap.”

“Oh, I could do it all right if I took a valise,” he urged. “Do say if you’d like it, Mother.”

“But I wouldn’t; and riding with a valise is horrid,” she said. “See that Smith has the horses ready, Bob. I will be out very soon.”

“They’re ready: I did them myself,” he said. “I don’t often get time to do any grooming, but I don’t want to lose the hang of it.”

They rode down the hill a little later, Bob on a well-made bay, lightly built and full of fire, and his mother riding Norman’s hunter, a big and powerful brown mare with perfect manners and paces. They turned eastward, and, after some miles of slow travelling through the scattered outer suburbs of Melbourne, reached the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges, where metalled roads gave place to quiet lanes, and the only houses were fruit farms half hidden among miles of orchard trees. There were long stretches of good cantering ground, where the way led between thick belts of light scrub with tall ironbanks towering over lesser growths, and late-flowering wattles made clouds of gold among the green. Very few people were on those quiet roads. Now and then they met a child on a rough pony, or an unwashed, mud-spattered buggy passed them, full of country people

who looked with interest at the two well-bred horses and did not notice their riders at all: more seldom, a car went by, bumping over ruts and pot-holes, the driver clearly anxious about his springs. Bob knew all the byways. He led his mother off the road at one point, following a faint track among the trees.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Just to show you a bit of a view," he answered. "It's only a minute or two away from the road."

They came out of the trees upon a cleared space where the ground fell away abruptly to a deep gully. Far ahead the ranges showed, mounting in a blue haze: between them and the height whence the horses had come to a standstill were long billows of hill and gully, clothed with trees on whose tops they looked down. The wind blew softly among them, tossing the feathery leaves with a little rustling sound. An eagle hovered high above, motionless in the serene blue: the trees near them were full of the notes of invisible birds. No other sound broke the peace of the bush, save now and then axe-blows that rang from some hidden gully, like the beat of a deep pulse.

"Like it?" Bob asked, after a few minutes of silence.

"Like it!" she said. "Oh, Bob, it is just—rest. Can we stay here for lunch?"

"Wouldn't do—there's no water," he said practically. "But I've an even better place for lunch, down near a creek. I thought you'd like this, though, Mother."

"I don't know why I do not come here more often," she told him, when they rode away, a little later. "Only—that I might not want to go back. Do you know it all, Bob?"

He nodded.

"I come out here nearly every Saturday or Sunday," he said.

"By yourself?"

"Oh, often some of the other fellows come too. But I'd nearly as soon be alone, and I do come by myself pretty often. It's rather jolly after mugging all the week in school, and seeing only streets. I like watching the birds, too, and you can't do much of that if other chaps are there: they always kick up enough row to scare away every bird within five miles."

She looked at him, realizing how little she knew of his inner life. To them all, in the busy whirl that filled each week, he was the only member of the household who needed no thought, no consideration: the big quiet boy, who dashed off as soon as breakfast was over, returning from school when lessons and games no longer claimed him; whose evenings were spent in his own den among his books and tools and wireless equipment, while they, more often than not, were away from the house. So long as he had a horse to ride at the week-ends he asked nothing more. His school reports showed that he did at least a satisfactory amount of work: it was no longer necessary to worry and fret over examinations and scholarships. She had not troubled about him: he was happy in his own way, always loving and gentle with her, though he might quarrel with Kitty and Norman. But quarrelling was not unusual, nowadays. She had looked on him as still a child. But as she watched his grave face she suddenly realized that he was leaving childhood behind.

They rode on almost in silence for a couple of miles, following a narrow cart-track. Then Bob turned in through a gate made of saplings, and they went in single file along a path that wound in and out in dense scrub, finally descending a long hill. She could see

nothing but the trees, thickly twined with clematis and convolvulus; but presently the sound of water came to her, and after a few moments they found themselves on level ground, where the native grasses grew thickly and the scrub opened out. Ahead of them a little creek leaped over a low fall and then ran brawling along a stony bed fringed with long ferns and maidenhair. There were smooth rocks scattered on the bank and logs so long fallen that they were grey with mosses and lichen.

"This is a pretty good place to camp," Bob said.

"I don't think you could find a better," Mrs. Balfour agreed. She dismounted, and Bob took the horses, unsaddling them and tethering them in the shade of a great blackwood. Then he came back to his mother. She had taken off her hat and was sitting on a log by the edge of the creek. The boy flung himself full length on the soft grass, and for a long while they watched the little fall and the hurrying water, and neither spoke.

"Melbourne might be a thousand miles away," she said at length.

"I always make believe it is when I come here," Bob answered. "And I do hate going back." He rolled over, looking up at her. "Mother, wouldn't it be rather jolly to build a little shack out here, and come out for a few days now and then? Just you and me. I'd do all the work, and you could just take it easy. You could fish if you liked—there are good blackfish in some of the pools. And we could ride about and explore the hills: I know dozens of places as good as this. And there wouldn't be any streets, or trams, or cars, or telephones. I don't believe you'd be dull."

"I am very sure I would not," she said, smiling at him.

"Oh, I'd love it!" he said. "Do you think it could possibly be managed, Mother?"

"I don't see why not. Suppose we have lunch, and plan it out?"

"Mother, you are a brick!" Bob uttered. "You never turn down any idea, even if you think it silly. But I don't see why this one should be silly—not if you would like to do it. It would be ever so restful for you, after the way you tear about in Town."

They planned while they ate their sandwiches: as Bob said, even if it were only a dream that would not come true, it was jolly to plan. Just where they would put the tiny house, built of rough timber, with one big living-room and tiny bedrooms opening on one side, and on the other a kitchen and bathroom. There would be an oil-stove in the kitchen, Bob insisted, to make cooking simple: but he would build an open-air fireplace where much of the work could be done. "Chops are miles better cooked out in the open," he said. "And if you don't mess up a house, well, you don't have to clear it up afterwards." They agreed on that.

"The big thing would be the veranda," he said, sitting up and waving a half-eaten sandwich to illustrate his points. "Very wide, and running all round the house, if that wouldn't cost too much money, Mother. We'd nearly always sleep on it, unless the weather was perfectly beastly, you know. We could build bunks on it—good wide benches that would make jolly seats in the daytime. Of course, I'd have a spring mattress for yours that I could carry out at night. The wooden bunk would be all right for me."

"You might even have a spring mattress for yourself," she told him gravely. But Bob shook his head.

"No, it would make me soft," he said. "I'm always horribly afraid of getting soft, living in Melbourne all the time. We'd close in part of the veranda with wire gauze, to

keep out mosquitoes; it would be an open-air room, where we could hang a lamp at night and sit out. I'd build all sorts of dodges—benches under the trees, and a hanging meat-safe, and a little bathing-shelter for you near the creek, and, oh, lots of things. My hat, Mother, wouldn't it be fun!" He appeared to realize that his sandwich was in his hand, and finished it at a bite. It was a large sandwich: it was a minute before he could speak again.

"It would even be fun in the winter, you know," he said eagerly. "It's jolly up here in the winter: not nearly so cold as it is in Town. We'd have a whopping big fireplace in the living-room, Mother—not like our measly little grates. A big fireplace where we'd burn four-foot logs; and two jolly chairs—we'd have great yarns by the fire at night. I hardly ever seem to get a real yarn to you nowadays." He did not see how the words stung her.

"D'you remember," he said, "the day we drove over to Mackenzies'? The day after Father sold old Nigger to Jim Craig? When you and I went off, just on our own?"

"I remember," she said.

"I'd never forget that day," Bob said. "You were so jolly good to me, Mother. It was the awfulest day of my whole life—I was in a beastly funk of making a fool of myself before every one. Nearly did, too. And you took me away, just you and me, and we had a perfectly ripping yarn. I've never forgotten one word of it. You made me believe I could do all sorts of things, if I only bucked in."

"Oh, Bob," she said, in a low voice, "I was so sorry for you. I couldn't tell you, of course; it wouldn't have done. But there wasn't one bit of me that was not aching for you."

He rubbed his head against her knee.

"Well, you made all the difference," he said. "You gave me something to think about, and I've never forgotten it. Then, of course, all the money came, and there didn't seem any sense in slogging for a scholarship and passing exams, and I know I've just slumped along. You didn't care any more——"

"Not care!" she cried. "Bob—I not care!"

"Oh, Mother, I don't mean that," he said hurriedly. "I mean, of course, you hadn't the need to worry about my being an engineer and all that sort of thing; at least, you never said any more about it. And I don't believe I've brains enough to pass the exams, anyhow. But, Mother, I don't want to slack about Town longer than I can help. All the things you said that Sunday stuck, you know. It isn't only being an engineer that would count, is it? I thought it meant having something ahead to hang on to—to plan—oh, you know what I want to say."

"You mean—any ambition?"

"I suppose that's it. Only it's too swanky a word when I'm only a kid. But I've got a plan, all the same."

"Tell me, Bob," she said.

"I want to get back on to the land when I leave school," he said. "No sense in my going to the University if I'm not going in for a profession, is there? It would be only waste of time."

"What would you like to do?"

"I thought," he said slowly, "if I went on to some place for a few years, just to learn

about land and stock, that perhaps you could let me have some money to buy a place. A little place, just to start with. I'd pay you back when I got it going properly—true, I would, Mother. Would there be a chance? Of course, if you couldn't manage the money, I'd just work until I'd saved enough to rent a place. But there is a lot of money, isn't there, Mother?"

"Yes—plenty," she said.

He looked relieved.

"That's luck! Well, I lie awake at night and think what I'd do with that place. I'd clear it and improve it, and have really good sheep or cattle—haven't made up my mind which, yet—and I'd irrigate it so's I wouldn't have any need to be scared of droughts. I'd have everything just up to the knocker! And a decent little house, where you wouldn't mind coming up to stay with me. Perhaps I could run to having a housekeeper, so that you'd be really comfortable. Wow! Wouldn't it be fun to meet you at the station and bring you out and show you everything? And you'd have to bring riding kit, 'cause we'd have to ride round every inch of the property. You would like it, wouldn't you, Mother? You'd be interested?"

"I don't think anything in the world could interest me so much," she told him. Her eyes reflected the sparkle in his. "Oh, Bob, I'm so glad you have the ambition. It really isn't too swanky a word at all, you know. Yours is a very fine ambition."

But Bob shook his head.

"Well, it isn't like building bridges and railway lines and canals," he said. "That would have been a big thing. This is only for myself, so it isn't much. But to be an engineer would take years, even if I could manage it: and I could go on the land pretty soon, couldn't I? I'm fifteen now, you know, and my muscles are jolly good. I'm always working in the gym. to keep them fit. Couldn't I start in a year or two?"

"In two or three years, I think," she said. "I will talk to Father."

"He'll let me, I'm sure," Bob said confidently. "Father doesn't like Town any better than I do, you know."

"Does he tell you so?" she asked quickly.

"Not exactly. He doesn't say things—not in so many words. But I sometimes feel he doesn't. I expect he'd come up to my place too, sometimes, and teach me a bit. I was only a kid at Tupurra, but now that I'm bigger, I get on better with him. Father's pretty interesting when you get to know him a bit!"

She broke into laughter, and he joined her.

"I love to see you laugh all over your face!" he told her. "Well, I suppose it was a fool of a thing to say to you—but you know we didn't always find him interesting. We were too jolly scared of him. But he's different now. We have yarns sometimes, when all the rest of you are out in the evenings, and I like it. Mother—do you think there would ever be a chance of you all coming to live in the country?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Balfour said slowly. "Norman and Kitty have so many interests in Town now. I'm afraid Kitty would never be happy to go back to the country."

"Well, Kit's getting pretty old now," said Bob hopefully. "She's twenty. P'r'aps she'll get married soon, and then she'd be off our hands!"

“Dear me, I hope not!” said Mrs. Balfour hurriedly. “I don’t want to lose her.”

“Might do her good to get married,” said Bob, wrinkling his nose. “Kit is all frills these times: she hasn’t nearly as much sense as she used to have. And Norm would be better if he’d work a bit. If they both got married, and had houses and kids to look after, they’d be better off, I believe!”

Mrs. Balfour gave an astonished gasp. Then she went off into a peal of laughter that considerably startled a Kookaburra sitting in a tree close by. He spread his wings and flew away hastily.

“All very well to laugh,” grinned Bob. “But you think it over, and don’t you discourage them if they want to get married. And then you’d be free, ’cause Elsa would go and live in Timbuctoo if she could take her old fiddle with her. But even if they don’t, Mother, you’ve promised to come and stay with me on my place, haven’t you? You won’t go back on that?”

“No, indeed, I won’t go back on it,” she said. “It will be a lovely thing to think about and plan for. We’ll talk it over ever so many times, Bob, and have all our arrangements made, so that when you can leave school there will be no time lost. We can learn about different districts, and decide which you would like to go to.”

“Oh, you are a dear!” he told her. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you about it for ages, only there never seemed a chance. And I was a bit afraid of what you might say. But I might have known you wouldn’t let me down. You’ve never done that in your life, have you?”

“Haven’t I?” she said half sadly. “Sometimes I think I have, in these last two years.”

He stared at her unbelievably.

“You!” he said. “You! If anyone else said that I’d knock his head off. Why, Mother——!” He hugged her suddenly. Then he subsided again upon the grass.

“You shouldn’t say silly things,” he said reprovingly. “Especially when everything’s just perfect. Golly, I wish the next two years would hurry! After that I’ll never wear a stiff collar again!”

CHAPTER XII

THE WAKING OF KITTY

KITTY turned from the long mirror in her bedroom, a little satisfied smile on her lips.
“Like it, Elsa?”

Elsa, sitting on the window-ledge, looked her up and down, carefully.

“Re-volve!” she ordered, and Kitty obediently pirouetted.

“No, slowly, stupid: I can’t tell, when you spin round like a teetotum. Stand still, now: I want to get the effect of the back. I like backs more than fronts.”

“This one ought to suit you, then. Madame Perraud says the back of a race-frock ought to be even more telling than the front, because people look at it so much when you’re parading up and down the terrace. She gave this back profound thought. Well, do you like it?” She faced Elsa again.

“Yes. A wee bit fussy, I think, but it’s a gorgeous frock.”

“Oh, one has to be a bit extra for Oaks Day,” said Kitty. “All the best dresses come out to-day. I hope it isn’t fussy, though. Vera was with me for the trial fitting, and she said it was perfect.”

“Well, Vera knows heaps more about frocks than I’m ever likely to know, so I suppose it’s all right,” Elsa answered. “Anyhow, you look rather a dream. I like your hat, too.”

“I wish you and Mother were coming,” Kitty observed, picking up a frilly sunshade. “It’s ever so much more fun if we all go.”

“Not me, thank you,” said Elsa placidly. “I went out on Saturday, and that’s enough for me.”

“And you’ll stay at home and practise all day, when you might be at the races! It’s beyond me,” said Kitty. “You’d rather be here, doing exercises!”

“I would. Lots rather.”

“Well, of course, you’re hopeless. But I do think Mother might have come. You know,” Kitty said thoughtfully, “I don’t know what’s wrong with Mother. She hasn’t been a bit like herself for the last week.”

“You don’t think she’s ill, do you?” asked Elsa anxiously. “But she has been going hard all the time, just as usual.”

“No, she looks quite well. But she’s always dreaming—I’ve come on her several times, thinking so hard that she didn’t notice me. Then she comes to attention with a sort of jump. I believe something is worrying her, but she won’t tell me anything. She doesn’t look as happy as she might, that is certain.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her to-day,” said Elsa, with decision.

“Norman’s in the blues too,” said Kitty discontentedly. “He has been like a bear with a sore head since Jack Greville went smash. He actually told me he wouldn’t have gone out

to-day if Father hadn't wanted to go. Fancy Norman missing a day's racing!"

"Have they gone?"

"Yes, they started half an hour ago, in Norman's car. Briggs is driving me into town: I have to leave my suit-case at the Club."

"Oh, you're dressing at the Club after the races?"

"Yes—a lot of us are dining at Menzies' before the theatre. It ought to be rather fun," said Kitty languidly.

"And then you go on to the Rennicks' dance! And what time will all that's left of you get home?"

"Oh, sometime in the small hours."

"What a life!" remarked Elsa. "And you were at a dance last night and the night before. I don't see how you stand it."

"Well, I nearly did cut the dance last night," Kitty admitted. "I longed for my little bed. But it doesn't do: people think you weren't asked if you don't turn up. And I had a good time, of course, when I got there. Oh, well, I suppose I'd better start. Be a good girl, and keep your eye on Mother."

She looked into her mother's room to say good-bye, and went out upon the veranda. The car was not there. Kitty strolled down a winding path that led to the garage, where Briggs, a trim liveried figure, was bringing out the big car. Tommy was perched beside him. The chauffeur looked a little disconcerted at her appearance.

"I was just bringin' her round, Miss Kitty," he said. "Ten-thirty, didn't you send word?"

"Yes—I'm a little ahead of time, Briggs. It doesn't matter."

"Cut along, Tommy," said Briggs, in a low tone. The small boy had already scrambled out of the car. Kitty patted his curly head.

"Why not let him come, Briggs?" she asked. "The run would do him good."

"Well—if you wouldn't mind, Miss Kitty." The man's face brightened. "But he ain't dressed proper."

"Oh—stop at the lodge and let Mrs. Briggs put on his coat and cap. You would like to come, wouldn't you, Tommy?"

"My word, I would!" said Tommy with fervour.

"Then hop in again," she said with a smile. Tommy needed no second bidding.

"It's mighty good of you, Miss Kitty," Briggs said, holding open the door. "It's real Christmas for Tommy to get a run."

"He might just as well, with a big empty car," she said carelessly. "Don't come straight home after you drop me, Briggs: take him along one of the beach roads for a breath of sea-air."

"Ow!" said Tommy, turning round with great round eyes. "Ow, Miss Kitty!"

The thought of the pleasure in their faces, of the delight of Mrs. Briggs, was curiously warm at her heart as they sped into Melbourne. It was queer, she thought, how a little thing like that seemed to give her more satisfaction than the thought of the long day ahead, packed with incident and excitement. She decided that she must be tired: certainly the

pace of pleasure in the racing season was fast enough to tire anybody. "I'll cut out things a bit next week—if I can," she murmured to herself as the car stopped before her Club.

"Take the suit-case up, please, Briggs," she said. "I'll stay with Tommy until you come back." She chatted with the little fellow, smiling at his excited delight in the hurrying traffic all round them. Tommy was the true son of a chauffeur: he knew the make of every car they saw, and had shrewd comments to make on most of them. When he drove away with his father a few minutes later, he looked up at him with shining eyes.

"Look, Dad! See what Miss Kitty gave me." A bright half-crown lay in his small palm.

"Lor!" said Briggs.

Kitty was early for her appointment. She crossed Collins Street and strolled slowly down The Block, exchanging many greetings as she went. The broad pavement was thronged with people lounging in the sunshine: women in dainty frocks and well-dressed men with race-glasses slung over their shoulders. A group of girls hailed her near The Australia, and she joined them.

"Come along, Kitty. We're going in to have a cocktail."

Kitty shook her head.

"Don't like them," she said.

"Oh, rubbish!" responded Vera Charteris. "Don't be a spoil-sport, Kit."

"I'm not, but I hate cocktails."

"Then you ought to be educated up to them," said somebody. "Very sustaining on a race-day."

"I'll come and watch you being sustained, if you like," said Kitty, laughing, "but I won't have any. No, I'm not being good, but really, I would just as soon drink hair-wash. I'm certain most of them are made of bay-rum and olive oil!"

"Ugh!" said Paula Stratton, shuddering. "What pleasant ideas you have. I'm not sure that we'll let her come in—shall we, girls?"

"Oh, she may learn sense if she comes. We'll let her have malted milk or Benger's, and she can watch us being cheerful!" They drifted into the café, where they had some difficulty in finding seats in the palm-fringed outer room. People were hurrying through on their way to early lunch; waiters ran to and fro with orders. It was always a merry place on race-day, with plenty to see. Time flew by until Kitty glanced at her watch and jumped up hurriedly.

"Goodness, I'll be late for the Warings! See you all again presently." She hurried out and made her way as quickly as she could through the crowd. The Warings' car was already there. Mr. Waring, a fussy little man, who disliked being kept waiting, was looking annoyed.

"Oh, there you are, young lady! Late, like most girls," he said. He cut short her apologies. "Well, jump in. We shall be ever so long on the road if we don't get ahead of the crowd."

Kitty took her place, feeling ruffled. As a rule, she rather prided herself on her punctuality; mentally, she abused herself for having been so stupid as to forget the time. But Mrs. Waring and her daughters made her welcome; and it was difficult to sustain

ruffled feelings on the way out to Flemington on that perfect day of early November. Hundreds of cars were spinning along the splendid width of Flemington Road, passing gaily-coloured chars-à-bancs, packed with people. The air was full of excitement; women clustered at the doors and windows of their houses to watch the crowd flash by. Now and then they passed sheeted racehorses, pacing slowly out to the course with midget boys on their backs. There was an incoming stream of cars and great green buses, tearing up from Geelong, their passengers eager to reach the railway-station whence trains ran express to the course. All the road had been watered to prevent dust: it glittered in the hot sunshine, reflecting the gleaming motors. Every one was in a hurry, every one gay and happy-go-lucky. Whatever horses may win, nothing can prevent an Australian crowd from making a racing-day into one vast picnic.

They turned from the broad highway into narrower lanes, where it was necessary to slacken speed, moving in a solid procession of cars—which made Mr. Waring fume impatiently and urge his chauffeur to find gaps which were not there. But very soon came the end of the journey, and they left the car in the motor-paddock and came up the steps and on to the tessellated marble of the great terrace before the line of grandstands. Above them towered the Hill, black with people: in front, beyond the green ribbon of the running track, lay the smooth level of the Flat, where the crowd was a moving mass from which hoarse shouts echoed. Already there were lines of women in the stands, early comers anxious for good seats: scores of others strolled on the terrace or the lawns below, where trailing roses and gay flower-beds filled the air with colour and fragrance. At every moment, from the fast-arriving trains or from hundreds of cars, people streamed on to the terrace.

There was no Balfour that did not love a horse; if Kitty had been free, her inclination would have led her to the saddling-paddock, where, she knew well, her father and Norman would certainly be found. But Mrs. Waring and her girls cared nothing for horses until they actually appeared on the course; to them the saddling-paddock, with its parade of splendid thoroughbreds, did not exist. They liked the lawn and the stands, where they would meet their friends and be able to watch the dress-parade up and down the terrace. Kitty resigned herself to the inevitable, and was the gayest of the party outwardly, although there were moments when she wearied of the ceaseless chatter and yearned for a closer view of the horses.

Mrs. Waring had invited a large party to luncheon in the rosery, where all the tables in the flower-covered arbours were crowded, and servants hurried about, and the air was full of light-hearted talk, mingled with the popping of corks. Below, a band played softly on the lawn; the ceaseless murmur of the crowd on the Hill and the Flat made a deep undertone. Kitty had eaten scarcely any breakfast, and was hungry; the meal gave her new energy. But a chance word put a drop of bitterness into her cup.

“Do you like my frock, Vera?” she asked, aside, of Vera Charteris, as they left the rosery and were strolling back to the stand.

“Oh, awfully pretty,” the other girl rejoined carelessly. She glanced at Kitty and felt suddenly envious: her own allowance was very small, and it took thought and planning and many small sacrifices to enable her to keep up with the set in which she moved. And Kitty, a girl who had come from some mysterious place of which nobody had ever heard, simply rolled in money: could have everything she wanted. A small, feline impulse stirred

her.

“Though I don’t know that it’s quite your colour, Kit, when I see it in the daylight,” she added. “It’s a little hard. And I do think she’s overdone the trimming rather. I should make her simplify it, if I were you.”

That was all, and they drifted apart in the stream of people. But Kitty’s confidence in her dress was gone. She remembered that Elsa had hinted that it was “fussy.” Mrs. Balfour had trained her to a horror of being overdressed: for the rest of the afternoon she fancied she saw criticism in every passing glance. She was glad when the last race was over, and they were in the car again, moving slowly back to Melbourne in the dense press of cars. She had won on two races, and the Warings declared she had brought them luck. But the money meant so little to her: there was never any excitement in winning. She decided in her own mind, even while she joked and laughed, that the afternoon had been a failure.

A hot bath at the Club refreshed her, and she dressed for the dinner and dance with more spirit. There was no doubt about this frock, she knew: it was perfect in its severe simplicity, and the colour was the delicate shade of blue that suited her best. A taxi took her up to the hotel, where dinner, with a new set of people, in the great room crowded with race-goers brought by the carnival from every State in Australia, was altogether cheerful. Captain Treherne, the young Hussar from Government House, was there, paying her more attention than he gave to any other girl. He sat beside her afterwards in the theatre, and they laughed their way through the musical comedy. The place was packed, the theatre gaily decorated: the actors and actresses had caught the spirit of race-week, so that the play went on a mounting wave of laughter and applause. When the curtain fell for the last time, blotting out a stage where the players were almost hidden behind baskets of flowers, they trooped out to the street. It was Kitty’s final little note of triumph that Captain Treherne had asked if he might drive her out to the Rennicks’. Where young men were concerned Kitty was a remarkably level-headed person. Still, there was no doubt that a brand-new A.D.C. counted for something.

The rush through the cool night air, along the smooth surface of the river-drive, was refreshing, and her spirits rose higher and higher. The young Englishman looked at her in open admiration.

“You Australian girls are wonderful,” he said. “Look at the pace you go: I don’t see how you ever get any rest. Upon my word, Miss Balfour, between dances and theatres and races, I don’t seem to have had ten free minutes since I landed, and I have to be pulled violently out of bed to wake me every morning! But you seem to get fresher as you go.”

“Oh, this is our worst time,” she told him, laughing. “After Cup week we slacken. I’m looking forward to beginning a rest-cure next week myself.”

“You!” he said. “I never saw anyone who looked in less need of one.” They turned in to the Rennicks’ avenue and whirled up to the house between glittering lines of electric lights hung in gaudy Chinese lanterns. Cars were pausing to drop their gay burdens at the steps, then moving on into the shadows. Kitty and her companion were caught into the press of people that swept into the hall.

Beyond doubt, it was her evening. The trouble of the day, the weight that lay too often now on her spirits, had passed from her: like every one else, she was excited, merry, bent on making the very most of the flying hours. She was besieged for dances, flattered,

complimented on her frock. For three hours Kitty danced as though the day were only just beginning, her spirits as nimble as her feet. When at length reaction came, it was complete.

A wave of fatigue seemed to flood her whole being just as she finished a dance. Her partner was a boy she knew well, and she caught at his arm.

"Oh, Edgar, I'm so tired! Do take me out to the veranda."

The boy glanced at her anxiously.

"You look seedy," he said. "Hang on to my arm—it's only a few steps."

The night air revived her. She sank into a long chair and looked up at him with a little smile.

"Sorry I frightened you," she said. "The room is hot, and I have been going pretty hard. I think it's time I stopped."

"So do I," he said bluntly. "You did scare me, Kit: I thought you were going to faint. You looked so white. But I suppose that was chiefly powder! Anyhow, if you ask me, you ought to chuck dancing for to-night."

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "It's not very late."

"Late enough for you, Kit. I'll drive you home, if you like."

"Oh, I wouldn't take you away from the dance, Edgar," she said. "Thanks, very much, all the same. Besides, I promised Captain Treherne I would let him drive me."

"That's just like all you girls," grumbled the boy. "None of us have a chance beside a new English Johnny! Well, you stay there, Kit, and I'll get you something to drink."

He was back in a few moments with a glass of claret-cup, and she sipped it thankfully. They heard the music begin again in the ballroom before she had finished it.

"There's the next dance," she said. "Do go in, Edgar—you can't keep your partner waiting."

"She's Vera Charteris, and she won't wait long for me if she can get anyone better," said the youngster. "I know her! I don't like to leave you, Kit."

"Oh, nonsense!" she said reassuringly. "I'm quite well now—I was only tired. But I'll rest here for a little while. Run on, Edgar, and if you meet Jim Macleod or Billy Atherton, tell them I'm cutting the next two dances and they must find other girls. And don't tell them where I am, or they may come and worry me."

"Right-o," he said. "I'll come and see how you are after the dance."

Kitty sat still after he had gone, sipping her drink slowly. She felt better, but the idea of going back, of dancing, was each moment becoming more impossible. She realized that she had reached her limit: although the faintness had passed, weariness seemed to clog every limb.

"I'll sit quietly for a while," she thought. "Then if Captain Treherne is not ready, Edgar can drive me home."

The music ceased: then came the clapping of hands, and an encore began. In a few moments, she knew, it would be over, and people would pour out into the veranda. They would see her: there would be questions, a fuss made.

"I'll get out of the way," she decided mentally.

Round the corner of the veranda there was a shadowed corner, screened by a bank of tall palms growing in tubs. She found a chair and dragged it into the darkest part of the shade, almost out of sight. It was very cool and peaceful there. She watched dim couples pacing to and fro on the garden paths.

“Silly to get so tired,” she pondered. “But the whole thing’s silly, I suppose. One doesn’t really get a whole lot of fun out of it—not going at this mad pace. I believe Elsa has a better time after all.” She leaned back. The music began again, sounding fainter and far-off. Kitty’s tired head drooped, and in a few moments she was asleep.

She woke with a start. Voices were near her, and her first impulse was to spring up. Then, as consciousness came more fully, she restrained the movement. It would be rather awkward: she did not know how long these people had been there, and they might not believe that she had been asleep. She would keep still: they would be sure to move on in a moment.

They were sitting on the edge of the veranda: she could not see who they were. But the first words she caught told her: the lazy English voice was very different to the quick, clipped Australian.

“The younger sister’s awfully pretty too, don’t you think?” it said. “Quite a type. I thought she was a picture at their dance.”

“Oh, yes, she’s pretty.” The answering voice was that of Vera Charteris. “She’s by way of being a genius, they say, though I don’t know that it will come to anything.” She laughed. “People will turn her head. It won’t be the only head turned in that family.”

“Oh—really?” the Englishman drawled.

“They’re really very funny, you know,” Vera said. “They are our champion instance of successful climbers. Of course, Melbourne is full of people who have made a pile and climbed up on it, but I don’t know any others who have managed it so swiftly.”

“Ah?” The well-bred voice was faintly interested. “What did the pile grow out of—beer? It’s generally beer in the Colonies, isn’t it?”

Vera laughed in appreciation of this witticism.

“Oh, you mustn’t be too hard on us,” she said sweetly. “There are plenty of good families out here, though, of course, my father and others of the old English stock declare that Society has gone to the dogs. It wasn’t beer, I fancy, though I don’t know for certain. It came from some mysterious source, and they sprang up like a mushroom in a single night.”

“But where did they spring from?”

“Oh—from the Back o’ Beyond. Some wild place in the Cow country.”

“Oh—a station, you call it, don’t you?” the Hussar asked.

Vera giggled.

“Oh, very different,” she said. “No, a little dairy-farm—all cows and pigs and mud, don’t you know.”

A sudden cold wave ran through Kitty. She tried to get up: but something seemed to hold her fast. She must be wrong, she told herself. Why, Vera was her friend! It could not be that she——

Vera was speaking again, soft amusement in her voice.

“That’s what makes it so funny, you see. Down there, people really live rather like cows and pigs. There isn’t anything else in life. Paula Stratton’s father had a station some distance away, so I heard about it from her. Now that they have this great mountain of money, you’d never think that they had lived anywhere but in Melbourne, and they certainly have learned how to splash money about, though, of course, every one laughs at their ideas of taste. But on the farm—well, I believe Kitty and Elsa knew more about milking and cow-yards than anything else, and simply revelled in cleaning out a pigsty!”

“You don’t say so! Ha, ha! That’s awfully funny, isn’t it?” the Englishman said with a chuckle. “I was always told that the ups and downs of life in the Colonies were rather sudden.”

Vera echoed his laugh.

“Oh, well, they won’t keep up long, I’m afraid,” she said. “The boy is getting rid of the money as fast as he can. I only hope for Mrs. Balfour’s sake it will last until she gets the girls married—the poor thing is so anxious for that, every one can see.”

It might have been wiser if Kitty had remained in her concealment. But the last words put her beyond prudence. The speakers started at a movement behind them, glancing round. But when the light fell on her white face they could only stare in silence. She looked curiously childish, but there was dignity too.

“I cannot let you speak of my mother like that,” she said.

Vera Charteris found her tongue.

“You have been listening,” she said, with a little venomous laugh.

“Yes, I listened. I would have spoken sooner, only I didn’t realize you were speaking of—us. You see, you were my friend. You have pretended to be fond of my mother.”

Captain Treherne had risen, and was standing stiffly erect.

“Miss Charteris, may I take you back to the ballroom?” he said coldly.

They moved away together. Vera broke into hurried speech.

“What beastly luck!” she said. “But fancy sitting there and listening! Well, that just shows you, doesn’t it? People with any breeding don’t do that sort of thing. I——”

They had reached the window of the ballroom, and her companion stopped.

“You will excuse me, I hope, if I ask you to let me off this dance,” he said icily. “I am going to apologize to Miss Balfour. Not that any apology can make me feel less of a cad.” For a moment he looked at her contemptuously. Then he was gone, and the realization of extreme folly came home to Vera Charteris. She ground her teeth. The idiot that she had been to let her tongue run away with her in a burst of jealous spite! There would be no more making use of the Balfours—of their house, their cars, their entertainments. There would be nothing more of Government House, except the big, dull shows to which every Tom, Dick and Harry were asked: Captain Treherne’s frigid courtesy, far more biting than rudeness would have been, had made that very clear. The story would get about, as such stories always did; she would be cold-shouldered by all the people who liked the Balfours.

“I wish I’d bitten my silly tongue out before I spoke!” she muttered, making her way to the cloak-room. She could not face the ballroom again.

Kitty was standing where they had left her when Captain Treherne came striding back. She looked at him without speaking. The Englishman was not a very wise young man, but

his breeding and training had been good enough to fill him with honest disgust of himself and his partner.

“Miss Balfour, may I beg your pardon?” he said. “I can’t tell you how utterly ashamed of myself I am—how I regret that you heard all that awful rot.”

“But a good deal of it is true,” she said, looking at him steadily. “I have milked in a cow-yard—yes, often! And if I haven’t cleaned out pigsties, it was only because Norman was there to do it——”

He brushed her words aside.

“Do you think that matters?” he said impatiently. “I’m not such a fool as not to know what it is to be poor—I’m poor enough myself, goodness knows. But it matters to me awfully that I listened to—to that twaddle, and let myself laugh at it—and I’ve been a guest in your house! I’d rather clean out a pigsty than feel a cad, as I do at this moment. I don’t suppose you can forgive me, but I do beg your pardon.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Please don’t worry. After all, I suppose it is only what everybody says.”

“No, I’ll swear it isn’t!” he cried hotly.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t know. I thought Vera was my friend.” She pushed her hair back, looking vaguely perplexed. “I’m very tired, I think. Good night, Captain Treherne.”

“But you’ll let me drive you home?” he exclaimed. She gave a little shiver.

“No—please. It isn’t that I’m cross—I’m rather sorry for you. It has been horribly unpleasant for you, and you are a stranger. Edgar Harrison will take me.” She let a cold little hand rest in his for a brief second, and slipped away.



“ ‘That’s just like all you girls,’ grumbled the boy.”
Golden Fiddles] [Chapter XII

CHAPTER XIII

THE IMPRUDENCE OF BRIGGS

THERE had been rain during the night, and all the garden was moist and fragrant next morning when Mrs. Balfour came out after breakfast. Far away, in a corner, her husband could be seen, digging vigorously. She strolled over the lawn and watched him for a moment.

"You look as though you were doing that because you liked it," she said, smiling.

"Well, so I am." He turned a deep spit of earth scientifically and patted it down. "I don't get half the satisfaction in results if Jenkins does the spade-work. Also, it keeps me from getting fat."

"I don't think you need worry over that," she remarked, looking at the lean athletic figure.

"I don't know. Slack, anyhow, if not fat. One is as bad as the other—indeed, the slackness would be worse. Where are the girls, Anne?"

"Elsa is getting ready to go to her lesson. She tells me you are going to drive her in. I think I will come too."

"Do," he said. "It's a lovely morning for a drive. We might go for a run afterwards. What about Kitty?"

"Oh—Kitty is lost to the world," said Mrs. Balfour, with a smile. "I don't know what time she got home from the Rennicks', but it could not have been before three; there is a notice tied to the handle of her door, saying, 'Don't Call Me.' I hope she will sleep very late: there is another dance to-night, and races again to-morrow."

"She's going too hard," said Mr. Balfour. "She will lose every bit of her freshness."

"Oh, you know what Cup Week is," his wife said. "There will be a lull next week, and she can rest. I don't care for this rush any more than you do, but it is hard to avoid it: she likes to be with her set."

Mr. Balfour muttered something under his breath, and went on with his digging.

"Why did not Norman go last night?" he asked presently.

"I don't know," she said. "Norman is not in good spirits: I think he feels the matter of young Greville very much. It has been a great shock to him, Walter."

"That may be just as well," he said. He struck his spade into the ground, looking at her steadily. "I'm not easy in my mind about Norman, Anne. I made up my mind long ago that I would not interfere, but something has got to be done. The boy can't go on as he is."

"Why—you don't think, Walter——?" She hesitated.

"I don't think he is doing anything very desperate, if that is what you mean. But the life he is leading is not good for any youngster. Surely you see that."

She nodded.

"Yes. I have been meaning to talk to you about him—about many things. But I

thought I would wait until the rush of this week was over.” She stopped. Elsa was coming across the lawn.

“Father, have you forgotten the time?” she cried gaily. “Once you see a spade you are hopeless! Briggs has brought the car round, and I’ll be late for my lesson if you don’t hurry.”

“By Jove!” ejaculated Mr. Balfour, glancing at his watch. “Anne, I’ll give you exactly two minutes to get your hat on!” He hurried towards the house.

“You coming too? That’s good.” Elsa slipped her arm into her mother’s as they followed. “Don’t hurry—he can’t possibly be ready himself in two minutes. If we start in five we can do it.” Mrs. Balfour went upstairs, and Elsa got into the car and drove it slowly round and round the great circular flower-bed in first gear, while Briggs watched her anxiously, standing by the steps. Briggs held the fixed view that beginners should learn on a hired car. Agony showed on his face when she twice tried to change gear, producing only a horrible sound of grinding ironmongery. At the third attempt she succeeded, and immediately ran over a begonia, which expired in a painful state of squash.

“Now you’ve done it, Miss Elsa!” said Briggs, running forward.

Elsa stopped the car after some amazing zigzags, and looked back at the desolation in her track.

“Dear me, so I have!” she said. “Just you tell Jenkins about that when we have gone, Briggs, and get him to put in a new begonia or two. Perhaps three; there are plenty in the conservatory. Then I will tell Father about it on the way in, and when he comes back it will all look tidy again.”

“P’r’aps you’d better let me take the car back to the door again,” suggested Briggs. “You might run her over the steps, Miss Elsa, an’ they don’t squash as easy as plants.”

“It might be as well,” Elsa agreed, relinquishing the wheel. “I think I ought to practise driving in the paddock, Briggs. It would be nice to feel a good wide space all round one. This drive seems to cramp my style.”

“You do, Miss Elsa,” said Briggs, accepting this proposal with enthusiasm. “An’ get Miss Kitty to let you learn on her little car. A six-cylinder in a narrer path ain’t what you might call ’andy when you’re new to the job.”

He saw them start, gave the message to Jenkins, who accepted it with a growl, and then reflected that it was eleven o’clock, and that the cup of tea which his wife generally brewed at that hour would not come amiss. No one needed him at the moment: the house was quiet. Norman, the only member of the Balfour household in sight, was reading a paper on the balcony. Briggs departed to the bosom of his family.

On the way he met Tommy, slowly coming up the hill, encumbered with a parcel.

“Hullo!” said Briggs cheerfully. “What have you got there, son?”

“A cart lef’ it for Miss Kitty,” Tommy said vaguely. “Dunno what’s in it. Mum said I better take it up to the house an’ pay Mrs. Thompson a visit.”

“Well, don’t let her go stuffin’ you with all sorts of things,” Briggs warned. Mrs. Thompson was the cook, and between her and Tommy there was a firm friendship, which was apt to lead to the offer of delicacies more or less fit for a small boy.

“Mum said I could have one bit of cake an’ some bren’butter,” said his son.

“Well, you keep to that.” They exchanged a friendly grin. “An’ don’t stay long enough to be a nuisance in the kitchen.”

“Mrs. Thompson says I ain’t never a nuisance,” said Tommy stoutly. “I help her no end. I stoned cherries yes’day.”

“Good man!” said Briggs. “Well, cut along, and don’t drop that parcel.”

He found his wife busily preparing dinner, and in a cheerful mood: she had taken Tommy to be weighed, and the grocer’s scales showed that he had gained a pound. This joyful news was in itself sufficient to create a holiday feeling in Briggs: after he had finished his tea he decided that no work called to him urgently at the moment, and that a man might be worse occupied than in helping his wife. Mrs. Briggs welcomed this view, and produced a basket of peas that awaited shelling. Briggs lit his pipe, and they settled down to a peaceful hour in the little kitchen.

On the lounge on the balcony Norman finished his paper and tossed it aside. There had seemed singularly little of interest in it. He lit another cigarette and wondered what to do. The house was wrapped in silence: Mrs. Balfour had given orders that no sound should be made near Kitty’s room, where, she hoped, the girl was sleeping off the effect of long hours of dancing. He thought of golf, but put the idea aside—too hot, and too much fag, he reflected. All his ordinary pursuits seemed a bore. Norman had been thinking very hard for a fortnight, and his brain felt dull. He was trying to arrive at a decision unaided: and that is apt to make the mind woolly when one is not yet twenty—and very much afraid of being laughed at. There would, he knew, be many who would laugh at him if he worried out of this slough of indecision on the side that led away from them.

He stood up at length, flicking the end of the cigarette into the garden.

“Oh, well, I’ll get the car out and go for a spin,” he muttered. “A good run out into the country might clear my silly head. I’ll have a talk to Mother to-night.”

He found his hat and ran downstairs. The garage stood open: his little car, the high-powered single-seater that he loved, stood ready—shining and beautiful. He investigated it, and found that there was plenty of petrol and oil. It did not occur to him to leave any message as to his whereabouts before starting; they were used to his coming and going as he pleased.

He was still in a brown study as he settled himself behind the wheel and ran the car out. She came to life with the silent effortlessness that, as a rule, never failed to give him a little thrill of pleasure, but this morning he did not notice it. He pressed his foot on the accelerator as he gained the drive and spun round the curve in a flash, the engine leaping to high speed. Before him the long clear stretch of the drive showed empty, the gateway at its foot. Briggs was just coming out of the lodge doorway, turning to call something to his wife.

Tommy had paid a long visit to Mrs. Thompson, and had been honoured by being allowed to help her seed raisins and sift flour; after which she had interpreted in a liberal spirit his mother’s views on the amount of cake and bread-and-butter which he might be given. Thus the time had passed pleasantly and swiftly, and only the striking of the kitchen clock had reminded him that it might be time to go home. He had bidden the cook an affectionate good-bye, tucking into his blouse a package of raisins which were not to

be eaten until Mrs. Briggs had certified them as fit for consumption by a small boy still compelled to take tonics and remain away from school. "I'll come an' give you a hand again to-morrow!" he had called back to her as he ran off.

He did not take the usual way home along the drive. That was for the occasions when he set forth under observation: at other times he had a track of his own, which might only be followed when the eagle eye of Jenkins was not upon him. Jenkins disliked little boys heartily, believing them capable of unlimited mischief in a garden; he would certainly have prevented Tommy from his chosen path. It led behind a big rose-bush, across the corner of a flower-bed where, by treading warily, stepping under plants and scuffling to remove the tracks of small shoes, it was quite possible to leave no tell-tale evidence behind; and so one gained the belt of shrubbery bordering on the drive.

Neither Jenkins nor anybody else would ever have guessed what might be found there. It was dim and cool and shadowy among the thick-growing shrubs. Sometimes Tommy was Robinson Crusoe when he wandered into its recesses; sometimes there were tigers and giraffes, or even a hippopotamus, lurking behind the trees, where a hunter had to be cool and clever in stalking them, though they always fell to his gun in the end. It was a wood somewhere in France on occasions; a wood swarming with Huns, and he alone was there to uphold the honour of Australia and Britain—fortunately armed with bombs and trench-mortars, so that he left a trail of dead behind him. The fight would always last until the very end of the wood, where a grateful British Field-Marshal would pin the Victoria Cross upon his triumphant breast. And sometimes it was just a wood where fairies danced on swaying leaves, and though there were ogres and giants too, they had no power to hurt him—the fairies took care of that. But whatever form it took, it was Tommy's own wood; a place of dreams that he shared with nobody in the world.

To-day it proved full of adventures. Bunyips and boa-constrictors closed round him directly he entered it, and only by desperate valour did he fight his way out. Indeed, a particularly venomous boa pursued him even after he had cut it in half with one well-directed blow of his sword, and the sight was so uncanny that his instinct warned him that here was black magic, and he must fly. He dodged through the trees, aching for the comfort of the sunlight; the foe just behind him, headless and horrible. The shrubbery ended, and he dashed out recklessly, just as Norman shot down the drive.

Norman's shout was echoed by an agonized cry from Briggs. The brakes jarred on, and the car skidded wildly on the slope. Then a little figure hurtled into the bushes and lay still.

Before the car had fully stopped Norman put his hand on the edge and vaulted out, leaving it to its fate. He took the drive in two strides, his heart sick within him. Below, Briggs was running silently, desperately, his face hopeless.

"Oh, I've killed him!" the boy groaned. "I've killed him! Oh, Lord, I wish I'd killed myself!"

He bent over the child, afraid to touch him, afraid to know the worst. Then Tommy wriggled, turned on his back, and lay looking up at him, dazed, but fully conscious. He grinned.

"My word, I nearly run into you, Mr. Norman," he said. "I'm sorry!"

The relief was overmastering. For a moment Norman was speechless. Then he swung

round, shouting.

“He’s all right, Briggs!”

Briggs came up, grey-faced and gasping. He caught at Tommy, who had scrambled to his feet; feeling him all over, struggling to speak. Tommy grew indignant.

“Here, lemme go, Dad! I ain’t broke anywhere. He never touched me.”

“But—but I saw you—I saw the car hit you,” Briggs gasped.

“No, you never. Mr. Norman just dodged me. I scooted, an’ my foot caught, an’ I went head-over-tip into them bushes, an’ it fair knocked the breff out of me,” Tommy said. “An’ now I s’pose I’ll get lammed for goin’ on the drive!” His lip quivered.

Norman was leaning against a tree, shaking. But he uttered an exclamation.

“You won’t punish him, Briggs! It was altogether my fault.”

Briggs did not seem to hear. He was still holding Tommy closely.

“You’re dead sure you ain’t hurt, son?” he asked.

“How’d I be hurt? I might ’a’ been, if Mr. Norman hadn’t been so quick. I did think meself that I was goin’ to be killed, but he dodged. All I got was a buster into a bush—true’s life, Dad!”

“Well—you go to Mum,” Briggs said sharply.

He watched the little fellow run off, searching him with his eyes as if he could not yet believe that he was alive. Then he turned and came up to Norman slowly, his face setting in grim lines. A badly frightened man may very quickly turn to an angry one, and Briggs was blind with anger—too blind to see the boy’s white face and shaking hands, or to care for them if he had seen.

“I always said you’d do it some day,” he said savagely. “It ain’t your fault you haven’t done it now—he was as near dead as makes no difference.” He caught his breath in a dry sob of fury.

“I’m sorry, Briggs,” Norman said quietly—his own voice unsteady. “It was the worst minute I’ve ever had. I’d have smashed up the dashed car a dozen times rather than hurt the little chap.”

“Much good bein’ sorry would have done!” Briggs flung at him. “You ain’t fit to be trusted with a car. You come down that drive full-rip, an’ you know darned well you never sound your horn. You’re that proud of yourself an’ your money an’ your car, an’ what’s it matter if you kill a kid or two? I s’pose you’d have offered me a cheque to keep me quiet, if you’d hit Tommy. Money!” He spat contemptuously. “You’re all money, and that’s all there is to you. You *smell* of money! It’s about time you heard what people think of you—decent people, as works honest, not dressed-up young loafers like you an’ your pals. I’ll learn you to try to kill my kid, anyhow. Take that!”

He hit out suddenly. Norman was standing below him, and he was taken by surprise: he had no time to guard himself. The blow went home on his face and knocked him down cleanly.

He was on his feet in a moment, as blind with anger as his assailant, and rushed at him. Then came a cry, and Mrs. Briggs and Tommy had flung themselves between them.

“What you hittin’ him for?” Tommy shouted. “He never hurt me. You let him alone, Dad!”

"Sam—you're mad!" Mrs. Briggs caught at her husband's arm and held it desperately. Briggs tried to fling her off, but she clung to him, uttering incoherent words.

"Let him come, Mrs. Briggs," Norman said, between his teeth. "He won't knock me down twice."

"I won't let him come!" She was sobbing, but she held on. "Fightin' like that—an' the Boss might turn up any minute! Go away, Mr. Norman, do! Sam, you idiot, we'll have the police here!"

Briggs dropped his arm and stood back.

"Well, I gave him one," he said with satisfaction. "That's something to be thankful for, anyway! All right, all right, Jess!—you needn't go into a fit. You'd better come home, both of you." He turned away and went heavily down the hill, and Mrs. Briggs and Tommy followed him, crying noisily.

Norman stood very still for a moment. The blood was running down his face; he took out his handkerchief and mopped it automatically. His eye fell on the car, which had come to rest with its bonnet in a bush, and he examined it closely, finding it undamaged, save for a few scratches. He ran it a few yards down the hill, stopping it at the edge of the drive. Then, finding that his cheek was still bleeding, he walked slowly to the house.

No one was about to see him: he was thankful for that. In the cloak-room downstairs he washed his face and hands and brushed his clothes. His cheek was cut: he found some sticking-plaster and doctored it as well as he could, drawing the edges of the cut together. When he had finished he sat down on a chair in the cloak-room and smoked a cigarette through, slowly and deliberately. It helped him to think; to swallow his pride and make up his mind to what he had to do. As the last trail of blue smoke curled up he rose and went down the drive.

In the lodge Briggs had heard clearly what his wife thought of him. It was not often that Jess spoke out, but prudence was lost in her alarm and unhappiness. "It wasn't his fault—you know jolly well it wasn't, Sam. Didn't the kid run right out in front of him?—he says himself he did. An' didn't Mr. Norman do all he could to dodge him, an' done it, too? It was a fair miracle how he missed him."

"Them miracles shouldn't be risked," said Briggs stubbornly. But the anger had died out of him, and something of justice had come to take its place. He remembered how Norman had let the car take its chance, had dashed to Tommy. And he had hit him unprepared—that was beginning to rankle. He hadn't given him a square deal.

Other things were rankling with his wife.

"Look what you've done for us all with your fool temper!" she shrilled. "Good places aren't so easy to find, and you've often said yourself we never had such a place as this. Just you remember the time we had before we got this place—you trampin' for work all over Melbourne, an' no one lookin' twice at a chauffeur as had a family. We were fair down an' out when Mr. Balfour took you—an' look at the time we've had since! Just you think what they did for us when Tommy was sick—you know as well as I do. You've been an' bashed Mr. Norman like a jelly, an' it was Mr. Norman who did your work for you then. Well, we've seen the end of our good times; it's a week's notice for you as soon as the Boss comes home. An' that means livin' in one little back room in a hot street again, an' you huntin' work, an' me goin' out to wash. Where's Tommy's nourishment

an' tonics comin' from then? You tell me that, Sam!" She broke into bitter sobbing.

"Oh, I know I was a fool," Briggs admitted. "But I was clean out of my mind with fright, Jess. I thought he was killed—I was dead sure he was." He drew his breath sharply.

"Well, an' when you found he wasn't, you had to lose your temper an' hit that boy! An' he could have given it back to you when he got up, if he'd liked—he's bigger than you, an' you know he can fight. Ain't he been trained to box?—you know jolly well he has. But he kept himself in hand, an' that's more'n you did. Oh, well, it's no good talkin'. I might as well start my packin' now—the sooner we clear out the better. I'm not keen on facin' the Missus, once she hears. She's always been so jolly good to us."

"We ain't goin' away, Mum, are we?" Tommy demanded blankly. "Not away from here?"

"You bet we're goin' away, son. Your Dad has seen to that."

"We'll find another nice place, old chap," said Briggs heavily. The penalty of his anger was heavy upon him as he looked at his pale-faced little son.

"But—but I don't want to go. I like being here. We don't have to go, do we, Dad?"

"Yes, we do, son. I hit Mr. Norman, an' that means the lot of us'll be cleared out quick and lively." He sighed. "It don't do for workin' people to lose their tempers, Tommy. No one 'ud keep me after that."

"That's a mistake, Briggs." Norman had walked into the little cottage in time to hear the last words. He stood up before them; very tall and straight, with the line of sticking-plaster across his face. Briggs stared at him.

"You—you mean you ain't goin' to tell the Boss——?" he stammered.

"No, I don't mean anything of the kind. I'll certainly tell him. But I'll tell him my own way. And you aren't going to get sacked over it, if that's what you mean."

He gave a grim little laugh.

"You hinted that I was due for a lesson, and I guess I've got it," he said. "Not when you hit me: I expect that was pretty natural, and it will be easy enough to forget. But I'm not likely to forget, so long as I live, the second when I thought that Tommy was under my car. That's going to stick. I came to beg your pardon—and Mrs. Briggs's too."

Briggs got to his feet, his face working.

"It's me as ought to beg your pardon, Mr. Norman," he said. "I—I'm darned sorry I hit you. I've got a brute of a temper, an' I was scared clean mad."

"I don't wonder," Norman said dryly. "Well, will you shake hands on it, Briggs?"

They gripped each other firmly, and little Mrs. Briggs watched them, the tears running down her face. Tommy piped up joyfully.

"Then we ain't goin' away, Mr. Norman?"

"Not much!" said Norman. "We couldn't spare you, Tommy—or any of you. Don't worry, Mrs. Briggs—it's all right. Just forget all about it—I'm the only one who need remember."

Briggs followed him to the car and stood awkwardly while he got in.

"Sure you're all right to drive alone, Mr. Norman?" he asked doubtfully. "You ain't lookin' any too fit."

“Oh, I’m all right,” Norman answered. “I’m going somewhere into the country—fresh air’s good for a broken head, Briggs!” He laughed at the chauffeur’s dismayed face, and the car moved away.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BRIDGE

OUTSIDE the gate Norman swung to the left and soon left the suburbs behind him. There was not much traffic on the roads at that hour, and he knew a succession of short cuts that brought him out upon the main highway to Gippsland. At Dandenong a cattle-sale was in full swing. He stopped by the yards, where he spent a little time looking over some pens of young bullocks—country-bred beasts, uneasy and restless, resenting the crowded yards and the people who stared at them and kept them constantly moving. It was pleasant to Norman to look at cattle again, to hear the shrewd comments of the country men and the sale-yard talk of prices and stock. But a man he knew slightly came up and greeted him.

“Been having a smash?” he asked, glancing at his damaged cheek. “You seem to have been in the wars.”

“Oh—ran my head against something,” Norman answered carelessly. The other gave a knowing laugh.

“Must have been something hard and sudden,” he said.

“It was,” Norman agreed. He decided that it would be better to get away from the possibility of chance acquaintances and inquisitive remarks, so he went back to the car and headed eastward.

His head was aching rather badly—his mind ached too. A confused whirl of thought troubled him. The problems of the last fortnight mingled with the happenings of the morning: and over and over again he relived the ghastly moment when he had thought Tommy under his wheels. He could not lose the sick horror of it. For what had happened afterwards, the fury of Briggs and his own downfall, he cared nothing: Briggs, in his opinion, had been entirely justified. There was a streak of hard justice in Norman, and while he sat smoking in the little cloak-room he had put himself in the chauffeur’s place and tried to realize his feelings. It was no question of the relationship of master and man, but of a mad driver and a father who thought he saw his son killed. “I’d have gone clean mad myself,” he had thought. The knowledge had made it an easy matter to pocket his pride and ask the chauffeur’s forgiveness. It was the only thing to restore even a shred of his self-respect. That he had managed to miss Tommy meant very little. He knew too well that it had been only a matter of an inch or two that had saved him from being a murderer, and he shuddered at the thought, hating himself.

The quiet country road helped to soothe him. It was a very broad road, smooth and easy, with wide stretches of grass on either side where trees flung deep stretches of shade across the path of the car. To right and left comfortable homesteads showed, where cattle grazed in knee-deep yellow grass or lay contentedly under giant red-gums, peacefully drowsing. Very few people were to be seen. Once, a heavy cloud of dust ahead resolved itself into a big mob of sheep, ewes travelling slowly with half-grown lambs, in charge of three men. They were leading their horses, walking behind the sheep, scarcely visible for

the dust that coated them. Norman pulled off the road to let them go by, and watched the silent, quick-moving dogs that ranged backwards and forwards, keeping the mob moving. One of the men thanked him with a nod. "Hot day, Boss," he said. "You've got a better job than we have." He paused by the car, looking it over with interest. "'Fraid we're putting a bit of dust on this pretty thing of yours," he added.

"I believe I wouldn't mind swopping you jobs for a bit," Norman said. He offered the man a cigarette, and the drover took it with a glance at the heavy silver case.

"You!" he said, with a dry smile. "I guess you town chaps wouldn't stand much of this sort of slogging." He looked Norman up and down, not rudely. "Ever been on a horse?" he asked.

Norman grinned.

"Well—now and then," he said. "But I don't know as much about sheep as I'd like to, that's true. All the same, I wouldn't mind taking you on at cutting bracken. I used to be pretty good with a fern-hook."

The change that came over the drover's face was laughable.

"By gum!" he ejaculated. "An' me takin' you for a real towny! Shows a feller hadn't ought to judge an apple by its skin, don't it? What part of Gippsland have you been in, if it's a fair question?"

"We were in the Tupurra district."

"I know that part," the drover nodded. "I was workin' on a dairy-farm there—Bill Woodley's. Ever met Bill?"

"Rather—knew him well," Norman said.

"Good chap, Bill. I heard he'd got married," said the man, evidently glad of a little conversation on his long road. "But I couldn't stand life down there for long: too much cow in it for me, an' too little horse. I never could see any points in sittin' under a cow, makin' a milkin'-machine of meself. Bill was milkin' forty, an' there was only three of us, an' doin' our own cookin' at that."

"It's not much fun," Norman agreed. "I've done my bit at milking, and it isn't cows I'd like to go back to."

"That's right. Cow of a game, if you ask me. Sheep are different, though it isn't exactly merry to be travellin' lambs on a day like this."

"They're a nice lot, though," Norman said. "Shropshires did well down our way: they can stand the wet."

That small touch of professional knowledge went far to unloosen the drover's tongue, and for ten minutes they discussed sheep and their peculiarities.

"Well, I'd better be canterin' after the other chaps," said the drover at length. "They'll be thinkin' I'm lost—not that there's much need for three on this stretch of the road, when you've got good dorgs. And ours'll take some beatin'—that little black an' white dorg of mine won the Sheep-Dog Trials at a Show last year. He's got more sense than most men." He shaded his eyes to look in the direction of the mob.

"Ah, they've camped," he said. "I thought they'd be stoppin' to boil the billy pretty soon: the lambs are due for a spell, an' this is about the best place—plenty of room for them to scatter an' lie down. I won't say no to a drink of tea; this dust makes a fellow's

throat like a lime-kiln." He glanced a little doubtfully at Norman. "I suppose you wouldn't care for a cup?" he hesitated. "We've got plenty of grub, an' the other chaps 'ud be glad to see you."

"Thanks awfully; I'd like it very much," Norman said. He was surprised at the pleasure the invitation gave him. "Sure I won't be in your way?"

"Oh, we'd like it. Dull work draggin' along all day, an' we don't see many people to yarn to. I'll canter on an' tell 'em you're coming." He mounted his horse and rode swiftly away along the grass by the road, and Norman turned the car and followed slowly.

The other men received him with a quiet, off-hand courtesy: it was clear that his original friend had given him a character good enough to make them forget his city clothes. They ate bread and cold chops under a huge gum-tree, and drank scalding billy-tea with plenty of sugar and no milk. There were only three pannikins, but one was given to him, and two of the men took turns in using another, despite his protests. "'Tisn't the first time Bill an' me have shared a mug," said one. The dogs lay near them, watching every mouthful and snapping at the pieces tossed to them: now and then, one, at a curt word from his master, would get up and trot round the straying sheep, heading them off the road. After the meal was over and the fire carefully stamped out, the ashes quenched with the last remnant of tea, they stretched out in the shade and talked until the drovers regretfully decided that it was time to get the sheep moving again.

Norman thanked them, and they responded warmly, with many strange words, that that didn't matter. It was with some difficulty that he managed to make them allow him to divide his cigarettes among them. He had noticed that two were out of tobacco. But they protested as he snapped his empty case.

"But that leaves you cleaned-out, mate."

The word gave him a queer sensation of pleasure.

"Oh, I can easily get more. And you fellows have given me a jolly good time. I've enjoyed the yarn as much as the dinner."

"Us too," said Bill. "Jolly good luck for us to fall in with a chap that had acksherly seen the Cup run. Well, so-long, an' good luck."

"So-long, and a good trip," he said. They shook hands all round, and parted. Nobody had appeared to notice his damaged face, nor had they asked him his name.

They were good chaps, he reflected, as he turned the car and travelled eastward again. Decent and kindly and simple: the kind of men you met everywhere in the country, who took you on trust and didn't care what you had or where you came from if you were friendly and decent too. It had been restful to be with them: the horror of the morning had died down, leaving only a dull weight. He had liked the country talk, the peaceful influence of animals all round him, the simple interests that made up their lives. As the miles fell behind the swiftly travelling car he realized that the little interlude had helped to crystallize the thoughts that had been surging in his brain for weeks. Bill and Dave and Joe—he knew their names, if they did not know his—would have been mildly astonished had he told them that they had been factors in making up his mind.

The thought of Jack Greville came to him—Jack, with his handsome face and his careful clothes and his quick tongue. He drew his breath with a sigh. The memory of his friend never failed to hurt.

"He'd have been all right if he hadn't tried to make the pace too hot," he muttered. "A fellow doesn't get much of a chance, once he's in with the wrong set. I was in it, too, just as much as Jack was. Well, it's about time I pulled out. I've had two lessons in the last fortnight. There's no sense in going at full speed until you land in the mud."

He made his plans while the car whirled smoothly on, through little townships and over long stretches of bush-fringed road.

"I'll have a good yarn to Father and Mother to-night," he thought. "I'll tell them I'm fed up with knocking about Town. They won't be sorry, I'll bet. Father could easily get me a job as jackaroo on a station; that would do for a start, until I got my hand in at work again. By Jove, it won't be bad to get back to the country! It needn't be fern-cutting and cows—I've had enough of them, like Dave. But anything else would be jolly. And when Bob leaves school we might get together and run some kind of a place. I don't want Bob to fool round as I've been doing. Not that I believe he would. He's got more sense."

The thought of Bob gave him a new pang of self-reproach.

"I've done mighty little for him," he thought, "and I knew all along he hated Town. I could have given him more fun. Old Bob has just slogged along by himself all the time—while I've been making an ass of myself. But I know he'd be glad to join up with me later on. We'd have no end of a good time if we got some country of our own and worked it together."

It was all settled, and suddenly he felt the weight lifted from his mind. There was no need to bother any more; all the details could be arranged quickly, and the old pages would be turned down for good. As his spirits mounted he began to take an interest in the country through which he was passing. He was on a flat stretch of road: just ahead, a considerable township showed, scattered over hills and hollows.

"By Jove, that's Warragul!" he exclaimed. "I never thought I had come so far—I believe I've been half asleep." He glanced at his watch. "Half-past four! Well, I'll have a cup of tea there, and get back quickly. I'll be able to make good time on the way home."

He drove into the town, pulled up at a garage for petrol, and went on into the shade of a tree near the station, where he left the car and foraged for tea. That was quickly found, and he hurried back to the car. He recrossed the railway bridge and took the long road westward, driving carefully at first. Then the quiet track tempted him. There were very few vehicles of any kind on the road: and it was wide, with a good surface and plenty of room. It was hardly to be expected of human nature that a boy with a high-powered motor should amble along like an old lady in a "tin Lizzie."

"I'll let you out a bit, old girl," he told the car. "We won't have many more chances of driving—the worst of this jackaroo idea is that nobody is going to want a jackaroo to have his own 'bus. I'll see what you can do along this track."

He pressed the accelerator, and the car leaped forward, gathering speed in an instant. Norman tossed his hat to the floor and bent over the wheel; and so they whirled along the smooth gravelled surface that seemed to purr gently under the flying tyres. Where townships appeared he slackened speed a little, hooting as he swept past the houses: once out in the open again he flung caution to the winds, taking curves at racing pace and shooting like a glistening arrow along straight stretches. Over bumpy patches of ground they rocketed so swiftly that the car seemed to leap from one ridge to another. The trees

rushed by in a gleaming line; the cars they passed were only dim blurs that roared for a second and were gone. There was a wild thrill in whizzing round the curves, between the trees, not knowing what was ahead, but feeling only the certainty of holding a perfect machine in perfect control. The car took the long hills as though she loved them, skimming up the steepest ascent in effortless flight: on the top she seemed to hover a moment, and then the downward rush would be like the swoop of an eagle. Mile after mile; with Norman's lips parted in utter happiness, and his eyes glowing. The wind screamed in his ears and blew tears from his eyes; but his gaze never left the road, and the only sound of which he was conscious was the steady purr of the engine that seemed as happy as himself.

He slackened speed at last, with a throb of regret. There was a mob of cattle on the road ahead; the long dash was over, but he still thrilled with the joy of it. He found his hat, for the sun was still hot, although he had not known it; and spoke to the car as though it were a living thing.

"Oh, you beauty!" he said. "You beauty! I don't see how I'm going to leave you behind me. Wonder, after all, if they'd take a rouseabout with a car on a station? I wouldn't mind going to the farthest corner of Queensland if only I could take you too."

The thought filled his mind: he debated it carefully, and it was not hard to come to the conclusion that to have a spare car on a way-back station might very possibly appeal to his prospective employers. It might even make them more inclined to put up with the deficiencies of a new hand. All those places, he reflected, had innumerable outbuildings: it would not be hard to find garage space among them for a single-seater, even if she did happen to be very lengthy in front. He would drive her up from Melbourne, perhaps thousands of miles of open road with no troublesome police lurking in corners, ready to pounce upon the driver who defied speed limits. It was a joyous prospect.

He turned from the main highway presently, seized with the idea of finding new cross-country tracks home, and ran swiftly along a road where there was so little traffic that the grass from the side had grown half across the gravel. There were plenty of pot-holes and ruts, but it was easy to swing in and out among them and still make good time. Norman whistled gaily as he went. The long burst at high speed had blown all his cobwebs away.

A line of willows marked a creek that wound across a paddock and crossed the road half a mile ahead. There was a bridge over it, raised high above the bank—evidently it was a creek liable to wide flooding, and the engineers had taken no risk of having the bridge submerged, for they had made a long embankment with stout fences that ran for some distance on either side, sloping outwards, before the bridge itself began. Norman liked such bridges when he was driving: you ran up the incline and swooped down the farther side with a delightful sensation of being on a switchback.

To-day, however, he saw that he must take it slowly, for there were people ahead—a man and woman with three or four children, probably returning from a picnic, for they were laden with baskets and a well-blackened tin billy. They walked as though the children were tired. He slackened speed, swerving well to his side of the road, and they looked back, and, seeing him, moved aside also: the man in the rear, with two boys, his wife ahead, leading a little girl by the hand. They had all seen him, and there was plenty of room. He passed the man and accelerated slightly to take the little ascent to the bridge, the woman and the little girl still a few yards ahead. With an impulse of caution that was

unusual to him he pressed his hooter, giving a faint note of extra warning.

Possibly it was the sudden sound: possibly merely the impulse of a tired child, whose movements are often unreasoning and unexpected. No one could tell. But suddenly the little girl ahead twisted her hand from her mother's, turned, and bolted across the road like a rabbit, right in the path of the car.

There was no time to use brakes: already, it seemed, the radiator was almost touching the tiny, running figure. Norman heard the mother's scream and he made his choice instinctively. He swung the wheel round with all his force and headed straight for the fence a few yards away.

The stout rail held a moment, cracked, and splintered. For a moment the car seemed to hang above the drop, and the man behind shouted and dashed forward as if in the mad hope that he might hold it back. Then it gave a sickening plunge forward, tilted and turned completely over as it crashed to the ground twenty feet below. They saw Norman flung clear—a huddle of clothes, motionless on the edge of the creek.

He was still conscious when they got to him: conscious enough to give his father's name and to try to tell the address. But there endurance gave out. "Don't scare Mother," he muttered, and drifted to the mercy of insensibility.

CHAPTER XV

REALITIES

THERE was a party that afternoon, a very large and important garden-party, to which Walter Balfour had unwillingly consented to be dragged. He was waiting on the veranda, miserably conscious of a tail-coat and a top-hat, when his wife appeared.

"You look very fine," she told him approvingly.

"I might say the same of you," he answered, "only that this beastly hat almost deprives me of the power of speech. Never again, Anne!"

"Oh—you always say that," she said, smiling. "Never mind: you'll forget all about it when you're there."

"Will I!" he retorted grimly. "Well, I suppose I have to stand it, so it's no use grumbling. But I do feel a perfect fool in it. Top-hats were never meant for Australians. Where's Kitty?"

"She is not up, Walter, and I don't like to wake her. The 'Don't Call Me' notice is still out. I went out on the balcony and peeped into her room, and she seems fast asleep. Poor child, she must have been very tired; and probably she did not get to sleep after she first went to bed."

"Then I certainly wouldn't call her," he said decisively. "Kitty will be ill if she goes on at her present pace. A day off will do her good; and you said she had to go out again to-night, didn't you?"

"Yes—there's a dance. I wonder will she be angry at being left," pondered Mrs. Balfour.

"Well, you'd better risk that. If the notice is on her door, she can't blame you."

"Oh, she might think it was time that I disregarded that. But I mean to chance it. I'm sorry, too, for I know she wanted to go to-day. I must just make her apologies to Lady Grainger."

He nodded.

"Norman's too, apparently. He has disappeared into space, leaving no message." He turned, as the big saloon car came up to the steps, with Briggs at the wheel. "Did you see Mr. Norman before he went out, Briggs?"

"Yes, sir," replied Briggs; and flushed a little.

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"No, sir; not exactly. He mentioned that he was off for a run in the country." Briggs shut his lips and looked uncomfortable: the memory of Norman's pale face and bruised cheek had remained with him all day. He would have been glad, though he scarcely could have said why, to see him safely home.

Mr. Balfour noticed nothing unusual in his expression, however, for Briggs was never of a joyous cast of countenance. He turned back to his wife.

"Oh, well, we must just go alone. Have you left a message for Kitty?"

"Yes. Elsa will be at home, and she will see that she gets something to eat when she wakes. I think we had better start, Walter; I have visions of Kitty's dishevelled head appearing over the balcony railing and entreating us to stop while she gets ready."

"Then we'll fly," he said hastily. The car moved off. Upstairs, Kitty turned over with a sigh of relief at the sound of the wheels crunching the gravel and gradually growing fainter in the distance.

"Thank goodness, they've gone!" she muttered. "I was horribly afraid Mother might think she ought to wake me. But I couldn't face people to-day. I don't feel as if I ever wanted to face anyone again."

She flung off the sheet and got out of bed, a weary figure in crumpled pink silk pyjamas. It was many hours since she had slept, and her eyes felt dull and heavy. She roamed about the room restlessly. It was a long room, daintily furnished, and full of such pretty things as girls love. But at the moment it was a desert to Kitty.

She picked up a book, and, flinging herself into an easy-chair, tried to read. But the book was dull, or so it seemed: it failed to hold her attention. She tossed it aside presently, with an impatient movement, and it clattered to the floor. The immediate result of this was a discreet tap at the door, and Elsa entered.

"I thought I heard you," she said. "Oh, you're up! We were hoping you were asleep. They've gone to the garden-party without you—do you mind?"

"No; I didn't want to go. I heard them, but I kept quiet."

"Are you all right? You look—well, rather anyhow."

"I'm a little tired. I was pretty late last night."

"Your hair looks tired," stated Elsa, surveying the tangled mop. "Every hair is standing a different way. I'll brush it for you, if you like."

Kitty assented to this without any enthusiasm, and Elsa brought a brush and wielded it for a few minutes without speaking. There was a hint of magic in Elsa's hair-brushing: she touched the head with a gentle firmness that brought rest in every stroke. Kitty closed her eyes presently and yielded herself to the soothing influence. She was sorry when at length the brush stopped.

"There—that looks better," Elsa said. "You really have rather nice hair, Kit, did you know? I wish you hadn't cropped it. Don't you think a cup of tea would be a good thing?"

"I do," Kitty agreed. "But I must have a bath first. I feel horribly frowsty."

"Well, I'll turn on the bath-water for you if you like, and order tea to be ready in a quarter of an hour. Will that do?"

"Thanks," Kitty said. "But nothing to eat, Elsa. I'm not hungry."

Elsa reserved her opinion on this point, prudently recognizing that argument was undesirable at the moment. She gave the maid such directions as seemed good to her: and when Kitty appeared a little later, fully dressed, tea was ready at a table on the balcony.

"I'm going to have mine with you," Elsa remarked. "That is why there is food. But Jane has brought more than I can eat, so if you feel like nibbling a bit of toast there's no reason why you shouldn't. It's good toast, too." She ate a piece reflectively. "'Member when we used to make dripping-toast in the old days? I suppose Jane would faint with

horror if we ever had it here.”

“It used to be jolly good,” said Kitty. She drank a cup of tea thirstily and gave her cup to Elsa to be refilled. The toast looked tempting: she took a piece and nibbled it, and presently, finding it gone, took another. Elsa forbore to notice this, and chattered on with reminiscences.

“You know, even if there was no money we used to have some rather good times,” she said. “I often think of them. The bathes in the creek were very good fun, and so were the picnics we had in the bush. Nobody ever cooked as well as you, Kitty. Do you ever think it might be rather jolly to do some cooking now, without having to worry about how many eggs and things you used? Cream, too—do you remember how we used to steal cream for cake-fillings when Father was out of the way? We could have it by the bucketful now, and it wouldn’t matter.”

“It might be jolly,” Kitty assented listlessly. “But I think I’ve forgotten everything I ever knew about cooking.”

“Oh, it would come back to you. Let’s try, some day when Cook is out.”

“I might,” Kitty said. “The best part would be that nowadays there would be some one to clean up everything afterwards. How I did hate washing dishes! I remember I had made a fine art of cooking with the smallest number of bowls and things possible, to save washing-up.” The toast was finished: she helped herself to a piece of sponge-cake, finding a plate temptingly near her. They talked of Tupurra and the old days. Time had drawn a veil over the hardships and the dullness of that long-ago life; looking back they seemed to remember many good things.

“All the same, it was a hard life,” Kitty said, at length. “And yet, we were pretty happy, even if we used to grumble because we were so poor. The queer thing is that I believe we were happier then than we are now, when we’ve got everything we ever longed for. But that’s ridiculous, of course.”

“I don’t know,” Elsa said slowly. “Some things were better then. For one thing, I don’t remember more than about three times that we ever quarrelled.”

“No,” said Kitty, in a surprised tone. “I don’t believe we did, when I come to think of it. I suppose we were all so busy we didn’t have time to fight.”

“Yes, and we were terribly sorry for each other, you see. So sorry for each other that we never bothered to be sorry for ourselves: and we all fought each other’s battles. We don’t do that now.”

“No,” Kitty admitted. She flushed. “At least, I know I don’t. I bit off Bob’s head the other day because of some silly little thing he’d done—it wasn’t really anything—and he told me I had the temper of a Tasmanian Devil. And Norman and I are always snapping at each other, and we used to be enormous pals. You’re about the best of us, I think, Elsa.”

“Oh, I do my bit of snapping,” said Elsa honestly. “I’m as bad-tempered as anyone, if anything interferes with music. But, of course, people generally leave me alone, because they think I’m just a poor mad thing; and I can’t be snappy with my fiddle. But truly, Kit, if I hadn’t my fiddle, I wouldn’t be fit to live with. You see, I would never have anything to do.”

“But you would come out with us?” said Kitty. It was a feeble suggestion, and she knew it.

Elsa shook her head.

"No, I'd never do that," she said. "I'm not made for it. It all seems so horribly dull to me. No, if I hadn't music, I think I would have to find a job of some kind—kindergarten teaching, or nursing. Something, anyhow."

"But—you don't need to work," Kitty said.

"I know that; at least, not for the money. But—but—— Oh, well, I don't know, only it seems to me we all need work, more or less. Not like we used to have, perhaps, but something."

"I—wonder," said Kitty musingly.

"You see," Elsa went on, leaning forward—"we didn't know anything except work. Every day, year in, year out. And it got to be a part of us, just as much as our noses. Then Uncle Joseph sent an obliging wave of money right over us, and it blotted out everything and washed us up, high and dry, in Melbourne. There wasn't any need to be busy any more. But you see, we had the habit, and we couldn't drop it."

"But we did drop it. Dropped it with a thud!" objected Kitty.

"Did we? We dropped farming and cooking and scrubbing and making shirts; but we took on other jobs."

"How do you mean? I don't see——"

"Well—take each of us. The house and making all sorts of plans keeps Mother busy. Father works like a nigger in the garden; if he didn't I think he'd go crazy, because he hates Melbourne. Bob has school and his horse, and I have music: we both work pretty hard. And you and Norman——" She paused.

"Well, what about me and Norman?" asked Kitty, forcing a smile.

"Oh, you work harder than any of us. You never have a spare moment, either of you, because you're working most frightfully hard at having a good time. Like two cats chasing their tails. And the cats never catch them, and sometimes I wonder if you and Norman have such a wonderfully good time after all. But you work."

She stopped, half afraid of what she had said. But Kitty did not seem to mind. She sat for some time, thinking deeply.

"What has made you begin to think of all this?" she asked suddenly. "I thought you had almost forgotten Tupurra—you never speak of it, as a rule."

"We all think of it, I believe," Elsa answered. "It was too much a part of us to forget. But—oh, . . . one doesn't often want to talk. I don't know why I did. You looked tired and blue, and I wanted you to eat something, and I just began to talk of anything that came into my head. It was dripping-toast, and it led on to all sorts of things. You did look blue, you know, Kit. Was anything wrong?"

The result of this question was surprising. Kitty flushed scarlet and looked away. Then, suddenly, she put her head on the arm of her chair and sobs came—bitter, choked sobs.

"Kit, old girl!" said Elsa, greatly alarmed. "What's the matter? Do tell me. I knew something was wrong. You're not ill, are you?" For the Balfour girls had rarely cried in their lives, and tears, to them, were as alarming as they were unexpected.

Kitty sobbed for a few moments, while Elsa patted her and rubbed her shoulders—

having no idea of the correct treatment, but vaguely conscious that something should be done. It was with immense relief that she saw her sit up presently and hunt about her person for a handkerchief.

"Here, take mine—it's clean," said Elsa, thrusting it upon her. "Now you lean back and don't talk unless you want to. Only tell me if I can get you anything. Would you like some brandy and water?"

Kitty began to laugh feebly.

"No, you duffer, I wouldn't," she answered, with a pathetic sniff. "I'm all right—sorry I made such an ass of myself."

"You aren't ill? Or anybody else, and you're trying to break it to me?"

"No, of course not. It's—it's only that I had a horrid time last night, and I've been in the blues all day."

"I think you had better tell me about it," said Elsa. "If you let concealment feed upon your damask cheek——"

"What?" said the amazed Kitty, forgetting her sorrows.

"I learned that at school," Elsa explained, "and I've always wanted a chance to say it. And now that I've got one, I've forgotten some of it. Something about a worm, but it doesn't matter. Tell me, Kit, and never mind about your damask cheek."

"It sounds like a bad word or a tablecloth," said Kitty. "Anyhow, I'm sure I haven't got one. But I'll tell you, if you like; I've been wanting to tell some one all day, only I was too miserable." The tears came into her eyes again, but she forced them back heroically—it was clear that tears had too alarming an effect on Elsa. "It's all horrid, and I don't see why I should worry a kid like you about it, but——"

"Don't worry about me being a kid," said Elsa firmly. She settled herself comfortably to listen. "Go ahead."

Thus encouraged, Kitty told her sorry little tale. It was received by her junior with the utmost scorn.

"And you let that make you miserable!" she ejaculated. "Well, I thought you had more sense, Kitty Balfour!"

"But, Elsa, you don't understand. I simply can't bear the idea that people are saying that sort of thing about us—about Mother."

"If I thought they were, I'd be as furious as you could wish," Elsa said. "But they aren't—don't you believe it. Just because that poisonous little cat Vera Charteris has a mind like—like a cobra, do you think everybody else is the same? People are too decent. I've always felt that Vera wasn't to be trusted a yard. She shows too much white in the eye!"

"But if she says that sort of thing to Captain Treherne, she must say it to other people."

"Not she!" Elsa returned shrewdly. "She chose Captain Treherne just because he's new and doesn't know anybody: and she was jealous and spiteful because he had been nice to you. If she told other people that kind of tosh they'd merely be disgusted. Do you think anyone who ever even *looked* at Mother could dream of believing she was that sort of person?"

"But he—but he laughed." The memory brought a choke into her voice.

"You know," said Elsa, with decision, "I believe I'm really much older than you! He laughed because—oh, well, because he had her on his hands, and she was trying to amuse him, and he really didn't know much about what she was prattling. A man"—sagely—"has to do that. I can't say I thought much of Captain Treherne when I saw him, because he's too pink-and-white and pretty. But at least you can't deny that he behaved decently when he found out that you had heard. And he must have shaken off Vera as if she had been a scorpion."

"You're rather comforting, you know, Elsa," Kitty admitted. "And he was nice; I'd never liked him half as well. I was really sorry for him. But the whole thing has given me a shock, I think. Because, you see, there was a certain amount of truth at the bottom of all Vera said."

"I don't see that," Elsa rejoined hotly. "As if anyone could really think that Mother _____"

"Not about Mother, of course. That was simply silly, like all the specially poisonous bits. But I know well enough the parts that were true. We *have* climbed, Elsa: I've been desperately anxious to get into the very best set and to go one better than anybody else. I've schemed and planned for it, and I've egged Mother on. She was keen enough herself, poor darling, but she would have been content with much less. And I've seen for some time that she was getting tired of it all, but I kept her up to it. Oh, I've been a selfish pig."

Elsa studied this for a moment in silence.

"I think you're right, to a certain extent," she said. "But don't make too much of it. Remember, Mother has been ever so anxious to give us the best of everything, and it made her happy to think she had done it. And she has enjoyed it for herself, too."

"Yes, but it went too far, until it has become only a struggle. She's tired now, and she is worried. There was quite a lot of truth in what Vera said about Norman." She broke off suddenly. There was a quick step in an inner room, and Mrs. Balfour came out on the balcony.

"Oh, Kitty darling!" she said. "I'm so glad you are taking things quietly. Did you have a good rest? Yes? That's right. And did you mind that we went without you? I couldn't bring myself to wake you up."

"No, not a bit, Mother," Kitty told her. "I didn't want to go."

"Lady Grainger was very sweet, and quite understood," Mrs. Balfour said, sitting down. "She told me to give you her love. And Captain Treherne sent messages. He made me feel quite a young thing again—he fluttered round me and insisted on taking me to tea. Quite a pleasant lad, and such good manners. Everybody was there, of course: wonderful frocks, and the grounds looked lovely. And I believe Father enjoyed himself, in spite of his top-hat. He and Mr. Stratton and Mr. Harrison and some other men got into a corner, where they probably talked bullocks—but I noticed that Lord Grainger joined them and stayed quite a long time."

"Probably he likes bullocks too," suggested Elsa.

"Very likely. He seemed quite happy, at all events. Kitty, you look very tired. Must you go out to-night?"

"No, I'm not going, Mother. I'll telephone that I can't."

Mrs. Balfour was scanning her face closely.

"Something is wrong, Kitty," she said quietly. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing," Kitty began. She paused, her lip quivering.

Elsa broke in firmly.

"Now, Kit, you're not going to cry again! I can't stand it. Look here, you tell Mother about Vera, and see if she doesn't agree with me that there's nothing to worry over."

"Oh—if it's Vera!" said Mrs. Balfour with relief. "I don't think anything about Vera can be very serious." But she looked into Kitty's eyes and saw real trouble. She rose. "Come into my room while I change, and tell me."

She heard the story in silence, and then gave her verdict.

"I'm sorry you didn't let them know you were there from the first, though I can see how it was. That cannot be helped, however. As for the rest, it was a silly girl's spiteful talk, and I do not see that it need trouble any of us. Our real friends don't have those ideas, and the rest don't matter. But, as you say, Kitty, there is some truth. I don't think the life we are leading is good for any of us; and most of all I am worried about Norman. And I have been trying in my mind to adjust matters for Norman and to be fair to you too, and I have not seen how to do it. You love Town, and all that it means, and I have loved to see you happy——"

"I'm not so awfully happy," Kitty said dully. "Elsa says I have been like a cat chasing its own tail, and I think it's true. I—I'm a bit sick of it, Mother."

There came a light into Mrs. Balfour's eyes.

"Then—if we went away—if we took Norman out of all this—you wouldn't mind?" she asked, a little breathlessly. "Kitty, he's so young. I am so afraid for him, especially since we heard about Jack Greville."

"And you have been letting me stand in the way! Mother, what a pig you must think me!" Kitty made a quick movement, flinging an arm round her mother's shoulders. "We'll go back to Tupurra to-morrow, if you think it would be best."

"Oh, there would be no need for Tupurra. But if we bought a station somewhere—in the Western District, perhaps; not too far away, for Elsa would have to come to Melbourne for her music-lessons. But that could be managed. I have been dreaming of it all. Not to be buried, as we were at Tupurra—somewhere with nice people near, and plenty of fun, but occupation for us all, too. Father is growing old for want of work."

"He was growing old from too much before we became rich," said Elsa thoughtfully.

"Yes—that's quite possible. But I believe—I *know*—that that is less dangerous than having too little. You can't turn a man like Father into an idler and think that digging a garden is going to fill his life."

"Wouldn't Bob yell with joy!" Elsa ejaculated.

"Yes—my poor old Bob! He would have to be a boarder at school for a few years, but that would not matter—think of the holidays! And I hope Norman would settle down and be happy to work with Father. Kitty, are you sure of yourself? Your life was very hard in the old days—I have so wanted you to have a good time."

"I'm quite sure," said Kitty steadily. She looked into her mother's eyes and smiled. If there were any doubts in her mind she put them resolutely from her.

"Then we'll tell Father," said Mrs. Balfour happily. "Oh, you don't know, girls, how

much I want to tell him! Come and we'll find him now."

She sprang up, looking like a girl herself.

"There he is—coming upstairs," she said. "Let's get him in. Walter—we want you!" she called. "Family conclave!"

Mr. Balfour came in hurriedly.

"Walter!" she said. "We've got such plans—such lovely plans. We want——" And then she saw his face, and she caught her breath. "Walter—what is it?"

"You must be brave, Anne," he said gently. "We must all be brave. Norman—there has been an accident. We must go to him at once."

CHAPTER XVI

THE NEW HOUSE OF BALFOUR

“THE trouble with us was,” said Elsa solemnly, “that we bit off more than we could chew!”

“Which means——?” asked her father, bending an inquiring eye upon her.

“Well, that we had an overdose, if you like that better, Father. Don’t you think we had?”

He considered a while before replying.

“Yes, I think you are right, Elsa. We had too much, and too suddenly. And it disagreed with us.”

“I’ve always heard,” Bob remarked, “that fellows who’d been lost and had done a perish had to be fed like a canary when somebody found them. We’d done an awful perish for money in Tupurra. I suppose it ought to have been doled out to us in sixpences after Uncle Joseph died, instead of getting it all in a lump.”

“Well, it seemed easy enough to stand the lump at first,” said Mrs. Balfour. “I would not lose that memory for something. Children, will you ever forget that first wild afternoon when we racketed round Tupurra with a whole ten pounds?”

“What a day it was!” Kitty said. “And our first shopping in Melbourne. Oh, Mother, wasn’t it a time?”

“But there was nothing ever half so good again,” her mother said. “Those first thrills could never come twice.”

It was a warm Sunday afternoon, and they were all grouped under an oak-tree that screened a corner of the lawn from the December sun. There were long chairs for every one except Bob, who scorned chairs when there was grass to lie upon; and there was, as well, an empty lounge made inviting with rugs and gaily-striped cushions. About them all was an air of expectancy. Mrs. Balfour’s chair was placed looking towards the drive, in which direction her eyes constantly strayed. For Norman was coming home to-day.

There were lines on her face that had carved themselves in the fortnight following the accident; two terrible weeks when she had watched beside him in the hospital where he had been carried, when no one could say whether he would live or die. Even when he had struggled out of the long period of unconsciousness he had hung for a weary time on the very edge of death. The lines had grown deeper as she had watched him suffer. Then had come the turn, and Hope had lifted its head, ever so little at first, but gradually strengthening. And now the long agony was over, and he was coming home: and there was no room for anything but thankfulness and peace.

Their plans had taken quick shape during the last fortnight, for the doctors had ordered that Norman was not to remain in Melbourne. Country air was necessary to complete his cure, and he had begged that, if possible, he might go to the new home. Therefore had Mr. Balfour spent a strenuous time in the clutches of land-agents, motoring here and there to

inspect properties, and had returned two days earlier to announce his success. It was not, perhaps, all they wanted, but they could take possession soon, and that was the main thing. A few weeks by the sea, while Norman gained strength for the longer journey; and then the house would be ready for them, and the new life would begin.

There was deep contentment on Walter Balfour's face this afternoon. Between him and his children, during the last six weeks, had grown a friendship such as they had never known. For the first time they knew him as a companion, neither stern nor standing aloof: and he was growing young under its spell. They talked to him as freely as though he were one of themselves, and both sides were acquiring new points of view. To-day, as they waited for Norman to come, they were discussing why Uncle Joseph's money had failed in the purchase of complete happiness.

"I often blamed myself for letting things go on as they were—especially with Norman," Mr. Balfour said. "But I don't mind telling you now that I had made a sort of resolve. I knew life had been hard and dull for you all: I knew I had been not easy to get on with. No, you needn't contradict that"—as a note of protest rose from several places. "I could not help knowing it. Even when the money came I could not take the same joy in it that you all did. But I made up my mind that I wouldn't be a drag on the wheels. Later on I saw that I must take a hand with Norman. But I meant to keep my resolve for two years."

He stopped, and a smile lit his grave face.

"But the two years aren't up," he said, "and I haven't had to do anything except to buy a station when I was told. And now I'm really going to begin to enjoy Uncle Joseph's money!"

"Me too," said Bob. "Oh, Father, be a sport and let me leave school next year!"

Mr. Balfour shook his head.

"It wouldn't be sense, old man. But you won't find the time long—the holidays will keep you going. And your job will be ready for you when you come."

"Oh, all right!" groaned Bob. "Thank goodness I'll be in the second eleven next term!"

"And I'll often be in Melbourne, Bob," Elsa put in. "We'll have some fun together."

"I'll have some respect for your old fiddle if it brings you up and down," he told her. "But don't you bring it out to the School when you come to see me. The fellows would yell!"

"Let them yell," said Elsa placidly. "I'll sit outside and play till you appear!"

Mrs. Balfour had been thinking deeply.

"You hit the right nail on the head when you said we had an overdose, Elsa," she said. "We tried to do too much. I was wrong, I know: but I did want to see you all getting the very best. I am afraid I was a very foolish sort of mother."

"It was my fault," Kitty put in. "I thought it was very fine to make a big splash, and I kept you at it. But it's a poor game to try always to run when you're only used to walking. You don't get much fun out of it, after the first. I've never had the wonderful feeling I had at the Tupurra Show, when I won eighteen shillings in prizes and had two whole shillings to spend. That was a day of glory, if you like, Mother! Do you remember?"

"Do I remember!" she said. "And the first presents you ever bought me—the little

things with your first share of Uncle Joseph's money. I have Bob's vase still."

"Have you?" said Bob, looking up with interest. "Pretty awful thing, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I believe so. But I shall always have it." She smiled at him, and he rolled over with his tousled head against her foot.

"So it all goes to show that we're just simple, homely farmer-sort-of-folk who want to take our pleasures mildly," she said. "We thought it was magic money, that would change all our natures. Do you remember how you seemed to hear the golden fiddles playing, Elsa? Well, we couldn't keep up to the tune we made them pipe!"

"Only Elsa," said Kitty. "And she plays her own golden fiddle, so she's all right."

"Well, there's one tune we mean to play," Mr. Balfour said cheerfully. "Mother and I have talked it over, and we decided it last night. We're not going to sell this house: when we take our furniture to the new place we're going to fit it up properly and give it away!"

"Give it away!" echoed his children, in three different keys.

"Yes. We mean to make it into a convalescent home for children—a place where poor youngsters can come for a few weeks after they leave hospitals. I like this place, so long as I haven't got to live in it; it would be rather jolly to be able to come out here and see hordes of youngsters enjoying it. It's going to make us a good bit poorer, but there will be plenty left to keep the wolf from the door, especially when Norman and Bob make the new place pay." There was a twinkle in his eye as he looked at his younger son.

"It is a thank-offering," said Mrs. Balfour softly.

"For Norman, Mother?"

She nodded silently.

"A thank-offering in two ways," Mr. Balfour said. "Because he was given back to us: and because when he found himself in a tight place he was able to choose quickly and show the stuff that was in him. The man and woman whose child he saved told me that no one on earth could have blamed him had she been killed; she was almost under the car, and it was her own fault. But, thank God, he saw the only thing a man could do, and did it."

The silence that held them all was broken by the hoot of a car in the drive. It brought them to their feet hastily.

"There they are!"

The ambulance came slowly into view, stopping by the lawn, and the doctor, who had insisted on being the one to bring his patient home, jumped out.

"Here we are, and a first-rate journey!" he said briskly. "The patient doesn't think much of the speed of this car, but that is a detail. Is that lounge for him?"

"His room is ready downstairs if you think it would be better, Dr. Graves," Mrs. Balfour said. "But we rather hoped you would allow him to be out here for a while."

A voice from the interior of the ambulance spoke with decision.

"Take that doctor out of the way if he's foolish, somebody. I've had enough of four walls!"

"Hear that?" said the doctor, with a chuckle. "A little inclined to wander, isn't he? I suppose I had better be meek and let him stay."

They carried the long, helpless figure to the couch, and settled him comfortably, and he lay and smiled at them all.

“By Jove, it’s good to be home!” he said. “Doesn’t the garden look jolly—and all of you! Doctor, I’m sure I could walk across the lawn. When may I try?”

“When I give you leave, young man, and not a day before,” said the doctor firmly. “That leg of yours has given unoffending people quite enough trouble; I’ll thank you to regard it as my property for the present. The nurse will be here in an hour or so, Mrs. Balfour. She’s the only person of whom he is afraid, and I’m glad to say he’s well under her thumb. She’s very small, and I have always noticed that a small nurse has great powers of inspiring respect in the unruly.”

“Thank goodness, I’ll have you now, Father!” Norman grinned. “A fellow has no chance in a hospital full of women—they like to bully you when you’re down and out.” He put out a big hand and held his mother’s.

Two maids came from the house, bearing tea, and beaming with welcome. They were followed by the cook, who had seized a plateful of cakes as an excuse for joining in the general greeting, and hovered about Norman, pressing everything eatable upon him. Never had there been so merry a meal. The ambulance had gone, with its uniformed attendants—the last suggestion of the hospital. And the big fellow on the couch, with the strangely pale face, usually so tanned, was the merriest of all. No schoolboy let loose was ever so glad to get home as Norman.

The doctor rose when he had smoked a cigarette after tea.

“I must be going, or my wife will wonder what has become of me.”

“Can we drive you anywhere, Doctor?” Mr. Balfour asked.

“Thanks, but my wife has our car quite near here—she came in to see her sister. Better wait until Nurse comes before you take this fellow in, Mr. Balfour: she’ll show you exactly how he should be lifted. He’ll be glad enough to be bullied by her to-night, for all that he’s so uppish now. Well, I’ll see you to-morrow, old chap.” He said good-bye, and Mr. Balfour accompanied him to the gate. He came back, smiling.

“Briggs and Tommy are hovering in the drive with longing in their eyes,” he said. “Feel fit to see them for a minute, Norman?”

“Rather!” Norman said eagerly. “You didn’t tell him, Father?”

“No; we left it for you. I’ll go and fetch them.”

Briggs and his small son came with exaggerated quietness, and the chauffeur gripped Norman’s hand as though he were afraid of breaking it.

“It’s jolly good to see you back, Mr. Norman. Place ain’t half what it used to be without you—it don’t seem natural, somehow. We’ll have you tearin’ about on that new model of yours pretty soon, an’ then it’ll be real old times again.”

“I haven’t seen the new car yet,” the boy said. “Do you like her, Briggs?”

“Oh, she’s real good,” Briggs said. “Just the same as your other to look at, but there’s some improvements. You’ll like her all right.”

“I’m bound to do that. She’d have to be good, though, to beat the old one, Briggs.”

“That’s right. Pity you had to smash her, Mr. Norman, but it couldn’t be helped.”

“No,” said Norman, with a half-sigh. Even the knowledge that the new model waited

for him could not quite still the regret for the car he had loved. He changed the subject. "Is Mother well, Tommy?"

"Yes, she's awful well, Mr. Norman," Tommy said soberly. This was an unfamiliar Mr. Norman, with a white face, who lay horribly still. Tommy was quite sure he liked the old one better.

"Tommy don't pick up much," Briggs said. "This hot weather ain't the best thing for him."

Norman glanced at his father.

"We're going away, Briggs—did you know?" he asked.

"I heard somethin' about it," the chauffeur said guardedly. But Tommy was not guarded.

"Mum's awful sorry," he said dismally. "She says we'll never get a place like this again."

"You keep quiet, son," commanded Briggs sharply.

"He's all right," Norman said. "There's rather a jolly little cottage on the new place, Father says, Briggs. Four rooms and plenty of ground round it. We thought it might be a good place for you there, if you cared to come."

Briggs opened his mouth: and apparently finding that speech would not come, shut it again. He glanced at Norman.

"Better for Tommy than Town, you know," the boy went on. "There's a school not far off: he could have a pony and ride there every day."

"Me?" said Tommy faintly. "Me, Mr. Norman?"

"Yes, rather, Tommy. Would you like it?"

"Me—an' a pony!" said Tommy ecstatically. "Oh, Dad, can we go? Say we can go!"

"We should be very glad to have you, Briggs," said Mr. Balfour, laughing.

Briggs found his tongue.

"It's jolly good of you, sir—and Mr. Norman. I never dreamed you'd want to take us all that way."

"Well, there'll still be cars," Norman said. "You wouldn't have as much car-work as here, Briggs, but——"

"I'd do anything else," Briggs put in hurriedly. "Gardenin', or all-sorts. I'm pretty handy with a horse, too—I was with the Light Horse in the War, you know. There's nothin' I wouldn't turn me hand to, to get Jess an' Tommy to the country."

"Oh, we'd keep you busy," Norman laughed. His eyes twinkled. "You might be able to put me up to a thing or two about boxing, in your spare time, Briggs!"

Briggs turned brick-red.

"Aw, now, I say, Mr. Norman!" he protested. He caught Norman's twinkle, and a slow grin overspread his features.

"I'll be there when you want me," he said. "'Scuse me now, Mr. Norman—Tommy an' I got to nick home an' tell Jess."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Golden Fiddles* by Mary Grant Bruce]